Speech by Christian Leavesley, Artistic Director Arena Theatre Company

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Firstly I'd like to thank the Commissioner for Children and Young People Michelle Scott and the Perth Festival for invitation to be here today. It's such a pleasure to be here in Perth, and to have the opportunity to speak a bit about our show in this year's festival, The House of Dreaming.

We began building The House of Dreaming in my first year with the Company, over four years ago. I'm sure the project began in Chris's mind well before that. The project is the brainchild of our former artistic director, the brilliant Chris Kohn. It's taken so long to build the show that Chris is no longer with the Company, though he is still the director of the show.

Chris often talks about his starting point for the show being a visit to Luna Park, and the nostalgic lo-fi interactivity of some of the attractions there, such as the magic mirrors. He talks about wanting to build labyrinthine house with a sense of the uncanny, and the feeling of wakeful dreaming. These concepts have very much remained the artistic bedrock of the show. But we've replaced the lo-fi interactivity with some high technology. It is the development of the interactivity that I'm going to speak about most today, because it is the interactive nature of the work that has driven the engagement processes with children that were such an important part of constructing the work.

The creation of The House of Dreaming marked the beginning of a new commitment by Arena to place our audience closer to the centre of our works in a range of different ways.

We are a small company of four to five permanent employees, making theatre for a large range of young people – from five to 25 years of age. As you might imagine, it's not easy for such a small company to have deep knowledge of such a broad age range. We recognised that if we were going to make our shows relevant to our intended audience, we were going to have to work harder to get to "know" who those people are. What preoccupies them, obsesses them, motivates them to invest and engage their time and energy. There is a kind of cultural and recreational war going on in our society at the moment- with organisations of all kinds recognising they need to win the hearts and minds of the current generation of children. Everybody from Bunnings to the Zoo are doing everything they can to get kids interested in what they're interested in. We felt that if we were going to compete in that environment we needed to engage more deeply with our audience. Certainly the concept of The House of Dreaming insisted that this be the case.

So, to develop The House of Dreaming, we embarked on a six month residency at a primary school on the outskirts of Melbourne. We set out on this residency with two reasonably broad based goals.

1. Firstly, our previous practice House, made from cardboard, showed us just how tricky interactive technology is to design, and confirmed that we would need a lot of testing to get it right. We needed to understand the assumptions the children would make when given the opportunity to interact using technology. We also wanted to avoid the interactions being tests of skill or challenges to win or lose. It was important to us that the interactions are about sparking the children's imaginations, and providing uncanny links into the children's own imagined worlds. The technology was only going to be successful if it worked with whatever the child brought with them, and encouraged them to work imaginatively with whatever that is.

   Of course, it was also important to get the physicality of the interactions right: height, lines of sight, lengths of the arms. All very important. Everything in the House is supposed to work best for kids aged five to eight. Everybody else is welcome, but in as many subtle and gross ways as we could achieve, we wanted the children to innately understand that the House was made for them. We thought that spending six months with the children of the right age would give us plenty of time to answer those kinds of questions, and generate the feel we were hoping for.

2. Secondly, we wanted to build the "content" of the House with the children, so that the stories and the characters and the imagined interactions that would take place in the house were all things that the children themselves had indicated to us that they were interested in experiencing. We planned to have the children give us unique and authentic data in respect of how they dreamed, what they dreamed, and what a child of their age would most like to find and most like to do if they came across a House of Dreaming.

So, we began by doing a broad range of creative workshops. We played games of body and voice in an effort to understand what kinds of physical activity inspired and triggered imaginative connections. We did open-ended creative activities, many centred on what the children remembered from their dreams. Also we did various incarnations of exercises that encouraged them to invent "dream" houses. I don't mean five bedrooms, a lovely open plan living area and lap pool. I mean houses of fantasy, with rivers running through them, ceilings made of dead birds and water slides instead of stairs. We had the kids design them on paper, or with chalk on netball courts. We had them play in their houses and report to us, and the rest of the children, on what living there was like. And what dreaming was like when they slept in those houses.

We also filmed them wearing strange costumes and ran the video and audio through all kinds of filters that we thought might be useful for content in the House. Some of those original recordings actually are in the House today.

I don't know that we always knew exactly what we were looking for. Mostly we would invent an exercise or a task based loosely on thoughts we had for rooms or experiences we imagined might be part of the house. After a while we realized that we weren't looking so much for "content," rather we were looking for useful frames

and springboards to help the children be creative – in the hope that if we could replicate certain conditions in the House, the children would likewise be encouraged to conduct their own imaginative journey through the House. After all, the House was always meant to be a place the children had agency to own and respond to in the way the children wished to. Not like a museum or an art gallery, but a place where everything is usable and touchable. That concept sets up its own set of predictable tensions, in relation to boundaries that we're still working through. Nevertheless, it's a concept we're committed to.

I feel that it's important when talking about the idea of setting up a space for children to create, not to overstate how much control we were giving the children. We *were* looking for particular things – we didn't want the kids to be giving us versions of their favourite films, books, video games and TV shows. Which, for the first couple of months is mostly we got. We were trying to develop an "original" artwork, which of course can mean nearly anything in postmodernity. In our case, it wasn't a situation of *any* response being appropriate for our purposes. As artists, we had our own ideas of what we wanted to make.

Pop culture academics might consider us snobby, but we very pleased when we started getting responses from the children based upon personal stories and reflections that felt close to their own lived experience. That is what we started to look for when working with the children.

All of the key creatives spent time at the school, and we built a second cardboard mock up House of Dreaming, filled with images, sound, video, stories – all taken directly from our creative exercises with the students. We spent a lot of time recording and producing material to be triggered by interactive technologies; and testing timings and workings of time and space in the House.

For a while we felt like we might continue to include some of the popular or resonant ideas that consistently emerged in our work with the children at Diggers Rest. For example, the boys often talked about cheetahs, and the character of the Cheetah Man started to gain recognition within the school. The girls would work hard to find ways for dolphins to enter the worlds they created in exercises. Ultimately though, we steered away from those ideas.

We decided that those kinds of specifics might be as hit or miss as anything else for people who had not been through the process we had been through at that school.

What we started to think about was the interesting tension in feeling the need to understand where the kids minds are going in a given situation, what interests them about a particular set of ideas, but then to take that interest to places they may not have ever thought of themselves. The challenge seemed to be to take the ideas and imaginative world further than they would have imagined if we left it to them. We decided that we needed to put the young people at the centre of the creative experience of the work, but what we hoped to provide them at the centre was inspiration in developing their own imaginative play, rather than anything they might be able to articulate as something they expected or "hoped" would be provided for them there.

Now the House is finished we feel quite strongly the tension between trying to engineer a particular kind of experience for children to have, while at the same time

giving them significant agency to work through the experience for themselves. I think the wide range of responses we are getting from children mean that the House is operating in that zone, in spite of the many rules and structures that are in place to shape the experience, and make it practical to run. The show is still very new, and we're learning new things with every session.

The future.

One of the questions that arose from the residency was, 'Would we do a residency like we did for House of Dreaming for every work Arena does?' The answer to that question is "no." Since Diggers Rest we've done a similar high school residency, in which we constructed the concept of the show from scratch. A significantly different type of project, which we will continue this year. But we won't do a long-term residency for every work because at Arena, we pride ourselves on continually evolving our creative processes, as well as the forms our performance works take.

For our next project, which is inspired by Hemingway's novella, The Old Man and the Sea, I will be trialing a different way of engaging young people in the creative processes of the show. It is my intention that we'll play the story on a boat "floating" in a huge vat of moving foam, that the child and the old man can fall into and out of, and the Marlin can spectacularly emerge from at important moments.

As part of the show development for what I'm calling "Marlin," we are going to develop a series of short immersive works that take place in small boats. Actual boats on water. We will set up some key moments from the script, and convert them into several five to 10 minute excursions onto the water. The actor will play the excerpt for the children, and possibly their family, hopefully transporting them inside the play for a short, but intense and invigorating time. The children will take a role in the piece, and be asked to perform that role in a way that puts them at the centre of different dilemmas raised by the situation. They will have the opportunity to respond to the situation in real time as part of the "scene." They will also have the opportunity to reflect afterwards at arm's length about what they just did.

I hope these short encounters with the show will help us to understand which situations most animate their bodies and their imaginations. We'll encourage them to talk about what they experienced when their encounter is over. Part of being involved in the short immersive work is the knowledge their responses will shape the eventual show in a very real way.

When we did some workshops at a high school for Declan Greene's Moth, we had the students act a series of scenes. Watching them act the scenes was actually more important than hearing them talk about the play. It was clear from their acting, which moments, which scenes spoke to them deeply, and which ones just weren't sitting quite right. Lines, phrases, dynamics that weren't well constructed were harder for the student actors to enter. I hope that by placing the children into situations in relation to Marlin, that we can observe similar things. People can be unreliable reporters of their own thoughts and feelings – observing real time responses can sometimes be a far better indicator.

Once we have made the show, I want the children to have the opportunity to literally "play" their versions of the story in the set after the show. The set will be their

playground in foam, and they can have a kick like kids used to after football matches. Watching our actors play the story is only one part of the experience – hopefully a really terrific and inspiring one – but, I want our audience to feel that it's okay for them to be spectators if that's all they want. I want them to know that I'm not expecting them to ONLY be spectators if they want to participate themselves.

To summarise a little, the precise requirements of House of Dreaming have helped us to develop some useful thinking about what it means to engage people, especially children, in art works. And the learnings from that are now embedding themselves deeply across all the forms that Arena is interested to work in.

What we've learned from House of Dreaming in this area is going to be key for all of Arena's future work.