

Getting Serious about Playful Play: Identifying Characteristics of Successful Theatre for Very Young Audiences

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ABSTRACT

In their research to develop a piece of theatre for very young audiences at the University of Hawai'i, Mark Branner and Mike Poblete noticed patterns in productions that are well received by critics, parents, and the young audience members themselves. This article addresses prevailing skepticism, and makes the case for "theatre for babies" as an established and worthy artistic pursuit. It then touches on a few varied approaches to this form, and references a set of criteria for evaluating "success" within this discipline. Finally, this article outlines a list of characteristics that seem to consistently apply to theatre for very young audiences that, by the referenced criteria, are deemed "successful."

There has been some debate about whether Theatre for Very Young Audiences (TVYA), or “baby theatre” as it is sometimes called, is needed or effective. If an infant is entertained by dangling car keys, why go through the trouble of mounting a play for them? What is the point if they are incapable of following narrative or theme? Recently these criticisms have largely been answered by practitioners and scholars, such as Suzanne Osten and Ann-Sofie Bárány from Swedish troupe Unga Klara. They note that, “if you can speak to a three-month-old baby and get laughter from them, you must be able to write an interesting play for them” (Goldfinger, p. 296). They insist that babies “do follow dramaturgy—they respond to the same scenes in the same way. They follow changes in mood, themes” (Weinert-Kendt). Anna Richter offers that in TVYA, “Linear narratives are absent, but not dramaturgical elements such as tension, turning-points and dénouements” (Richter, p. 3). It is difficult to scientifically justify the necessity of this form as there has been, unfortunately, woefully little research undertaken on the neurological, cognitive and overall developmental effects of theatre on children of this age. However, there is certainly an ethical necessity: very young children have very little control over their lives, and are often not afforded the same privileges of emotional and intellectual stimulation as a result. In other words, we believe that, quite simply, very young children deserve theatre tailored to them. Some have even argued that to deny them theatre because of their age is a violation of their human rights (Fletcher-Watson, pp. 15-16).

We can tell you from our own experiences watching performances such as Amanda Pintore’s *Color Play* and Cubbin Theatre Company’s *Up and Away*, these young people are watching with rapt attention. A first exposure to TVYA with Mark’s nearly two-year-old daughter in 2013, Oily Cart’s *Tube*, still remains seared in his memory as a vital theatrical experience:

Seeing the show with her—almost literally through her eyes as I engaged in the immersive show alongside her for the duration of the performance—opened the possibilities of the form experientially. While the production certainly did not possess a linear narrative, the show did contain the aforementioned dramaturgical elements of “tension, turning points and

dénouements.” Lighting and sound changes, for example, accompanied a suggestion of “stomping elephants” outside the circular tube-like structure where the audience sat on a cushioned floor. Later in the performance, another shift in lighting and sound accompanied the arrival of translucent balls rolling in clear plastic tubes, creating an ethereal atmosphere. The cacophonous arrival of large sausage-shaped balloons rocketing into the playing space provided a joyous dénouement. We had entered a large tube, played with various types of tubes, explored the ways that things can appear and disappear within tubes, heard many types of music from tubes, and were now celebrating the fun of tubes with the arrival of the balloons. Collectively, these dramaturgical elements created a truly aesthetic experience, enthralling both my daughter and myself. Any parent of a two-year-old can sympathize with the simple and daily challenges of life at this age—getting dressed, traveling in a vehicle or public transport, eating regular meals, preparing for bed, etc. Attending *Tube* allowed for me as a parent to enjoy the reality of my daughter’s life at age two, bonding us in a way that few other experiences in my life have been able to do.

The U.K.’s Oily Cart, founded by Tim Webb, Max Reinhardt and Claire de Loon, is one of the most pioneering and, in our opinion, effective, TVYA companies in the world today, and as such we will be referencing their work multiple times throughout this article.

There are many different ways to devise a TVYA performance. Evelyn Goldfinger notes that some methodologies include, “recalling the actors’ personal experiences (as infants or with babies), watching baby videos, observing babies in relationship with their parents and/or conducting workshops with baby and caregiver audiences that are filmed and adults are asked for feedback” (p. 296). Moving past the psychology of professional theatre practitioners, artists such as Pintore work with children using dance, music, and imaginative play; incorporating their movements and ideas of the children themselves into her pieces to create theatre by children, for children. Supporting this approach, Belarussian Psychologist Lev Vygotsky wrote that, “plays written by the children themselves or created and improvised by them as they are played are vastly more compatible with children’s understanding” (p. 72). And yet there are also companies like Chile’s

La Negra Maria Teatro that do the opposite, bringing the celebrated works of their culture's literary titans from the realm of adults onto the stage for very young audiences.

With these varying approaches in mind, as well as the limited analytical and communicative tools available to the target audience, how does one gauge what constitutes "successful" TVYA theatre? Such evaluation processes have been proposed. Tony Mack, an Australia Council Fellow, believes these include such components as whether the children are watching closely, how the children and their caregivers interact after the performance, and, of course, just our generally accepted standards for judging theatre. Children are just smaller humans, after all (Mack, qtd. in Goldfinger, p. 298).

So then, working with the assumptions that Theatre For Very Young Audiences is a worthy pursuit, that there are varied approaches to this form, and that there are, in fact, ways to evaluate the success of this form of theatre, in our research at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa to create our own piece for zero to three year olds, we have identified six characteristics that we believe to be prevalent in successful TVYA productions. This list is not exhaustive, it is simply a set of guiding principles that have helped us in our own work, and we hope it will lead to further research in the emerging TVYA academic field.

1. INTERACTION

There are, of course, TVYA shows that are performed in proscenium, particularly in the United States that require large audiences to justify costs (more on that below). Spellbound's *Wink*, for example, is a show that employs enchanting scenic design to bring children into a whimsical world oriented around the concept of going to sleep. And yet these shows do seem more geared for children older than three years of age. Babies, of course, are restless explorers, and allowing them to interact with the world they are immersed in seems to be necessary. Spellbound has another show, *Babywild*, which not only features furry and glowing props to play with and explore, but interactive sets meant to recreate rooms of a home: a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. The babies, at least the ones who attended the performance we observed, may not have understood the full functions of each of these rooms, but it seemed to us that they recognized that they were given

agency to interact with areas that are usually denied to them; the glee on their faces was apparent and contagious.

2. MULTI-SENSORY STIMULI

In that vein, babies comprehend the world through their five senses. As the American Occupational Therapy Association notes, “Well-regulated and appropriately functioning sensory systems contribute to important outcomes in social-emotional, physical and motor, communication, self-care, cognitive, and adaptive skills development and maintenance” (AOTA). If babies engage with the world through multi-sensory experiences, so too must their theatre engage them in this way. In Oily Cart’s *Tube*, for example, music plays and soft, welcoming aesthetics stimulate the eyes and ears, but tactile consideration is given to glowing balls and tubes that the babies play with. Thought is even given to taste as these objects will inevitably end up in the spectators’ mouths.

One particularly delightful moment in London’s Unicorn Theatre’s production of *The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark* centered around the stimuli of taste. Midway through the action, as the main characters (owls, played by humans without any masks, puppets or costumes) searched for food, audience members were suddenly invited to come and eat. The performers placed small buckets of boiled potatoes around the immersive playing area, encouraging young audiences and their companions to partake.

Oily Cart and others have also used taste and smell to engage young audiences. Their *Christmas Baking Time* presentation centers around the baking of bread, allowing audience members to enjoy a freshly baked “Christmas bun” to take home with them. Their *In a Pickle*, a production based loosely on Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, introduces audiences to characters with distinctive smells and feel. Costumes have textures of quilting, corduroy, velvet and satin, allowing babies to distinguish between various “sheep” through the use of touch, while blends of essential oils gives each performer a distinctive smell as well. These experiences are carefully cultivated, with weeks allocated for observation, refinement and reflection to ensure that the sensory stimuli are balanced to create a holistic engagement that does not overwhelm or distract the young audience

members (Waldron).

3. A WELCOMING SPACE

As adults, we are so used to the etiquette of sitting down in a dark space and quietly taking in a performance for several hours that we almost consider it intuitive. It is, of course, not, and for our youngest audience members, to move into a space full of strange people, sights and sounds can be frightening. An effective tactic that most TVYA shows employ is to create a transitional space between the outside world and inside the theatre to welcome their audience members. For Oily Cart's *Ring a Ding Ding*, children are introduced to photos of the puppets and characters they will encounter, and are then greeted by the performers in full costume, with their parents safely close by. They are then walked through a series of hula hoops, encouraged to ring bells along the way, all in an attempt to slowly introduce the elements of the show. *Conference of the Birds*, also by Oily Cart, is a show designed for children on the autism spectrum who are particularly sensitive to changes in routine. For that show, the welcoming space is extended to several weeks before the show starts in the form of photographic and video materials being sent to the classrooms in preparation.

This ritual of liminality, that is, embracing the transition between spaces, has been a focus of performance studies for decades. According to Richard Schechner, "During the liminal phase of a ritual two things are accomplished: First, those undergoing the ritual temporarily become 'nothing,' put into a state of extreme vulnerability where they are open to change...Second, during the liminal phase, persons are inscribed with their new identities and initiated into their new powers" (Schechner, p. 66). There is a disarming egalitarianism in liminality, in a place of being nowhere and everywhere simultaneously, that extends to all humans. From what we have observed it is entirely possible that, for a moment, infants do not feel powerless beneath their caregivers in terms of autonomy and class; and parents, if for only an instant, are disarmed from their normal role as protector and instructor, for they too are at the whim of the performance to come. Everyone is equal in liminal spaces.

4. INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION FROM PERFORMERS

In his article “Baby Theatre Comes of Age,” Rob Weinert-Kendt describes *My House*, a TVYA performance by British TVYA practitioner Andy Manley. “He stares bluntly at his audience, singling them out one by one until they’re intrigued into curious silence, and only when they’re all with him does he start to explore his cardboard abode with the assistance of a piece of string, a stethoscope and a friendly melon. Manley “resets” the show like this a few times, checking in with each child before moving forward to a new section of his wordless, not-quite-narrative journey” (Weinert-Kendt, p. 46). In this instance, Manley is commanding the focus of his young audience simply through eye contact. Babies are stimulated by the attention of individuals, trained from birth to formulate the constraints of their world through the approval and disapproval of their parents’ gaze. Oily Cart performances can be for audiences as small as twelve spectators, but even for larger crowds, the sense of individual attention through eye contact and sensory adjustments is critical.

5. A TRANSFORMATIVE, CONTROLLED AND WHIMSICAL ATMOSPHERE

Weinert-Kendt goes on to describe successful TVYA by mentioning that there, “are no sudden lighting changes, if there’s any traditional lighting at all, and the pacing and sound volume throughout tend to be a lot gentler than you might think; nothing can grab a child’s attention, even well past this tender age, like an intent silence. Music tends to relax them or take them out of the moment, while dialogue typically makes them lean forward” (p. 45). This attention to individual detail is critical, and effective in the hands of a master performer. *Up and Away* is specifically for babies that have not yet learned to walk. The show features a very simple white tent structure, a soft floor for crawling, live singing and ukulele playing, all around the theme of lightness and elevation. Great TVYA practitioners know that their audiences are making sense of the world around them, and use that understanding to meld stimuli into an atmosphere that is safe, fun, soft, welcoming and inspiring.

6. FUNDING

All of this individual attention, unfortunately, comes at a price. While Anu Productions in Ireland can make theatre for one audience member at a time and charge a mere €20 per ticket, the smallest audience either of us have been a part of in the United States for a professional theatre production is Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell* for fifteen audience members, which went for \$125 per ticket. As Manon van de Water notes, "In countries with a vast welfare system, including supported daycare centers and/or parental leave, and subsidized art and education, theatre for the very young is both more accessible and more accepted. In countries that rely on box office income, on the other hand, this theatre is financially harder to generate and inaccessible except for the middle class" (van de Water, p. 140). With the National Endowment for the Arts under attack by the current administration (Deb), it seems unlikely that American TVYA will be a viable option for most theatre companies in the near future.

The cliché of a young child writhing out of their seat and crying during a performance comes from the simple truth that any audience member will only engage with a show if they feel it speaks to them. For our youngest audience members, that is literally true: interaction, multi-sensory engagement, a truly welcoming space, individual attention and a fully immersive atmosphere are only possible in small numbers. According to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, every young person has the right, "to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations). Without appropriate funding, we in the United States will continue to fall short of that mandate, and treat the youngest and most vulnerable of our population as second class citizens unworthy of the wonder and transformation that theatre has to offer. Still, the form continues to grow, and as the benefits of engaging the very young through the medium become more widely studied, we believe necessary increased institutional and governmental support is inevitable.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Associate Professor Mark Branner

Born in Los Angeles but raised primarily in Taiwan, Mark returned to the U.S. to attend college, whereupon he quickly dropped a scholarship from UCLA to work as a clown with the Ringling Brothers

and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He teaches courses in theatre for young audiences, puppetry, mask, and physical comedy. He has toured nationally with various groups, including Diavolo, and performed extensively in Asia, most notably in chuanju (Sichuan Opera), a regional Chinese theatre form. He and his family operate CiRCO Redempto, a community outreach program designed to benefit children from the Nosu Yi minority nationality of central China.

Mike Poblete, MFA

Originally from New York City, Mike's background is in playwriting and theatre production, having had seven full length plays and numerous one acts performed in six countries. He has a Playwriting MFA from Trinity College Dublin, and is currently pursuing a Theatre Studies Ph.D. at the University of Hawai'i. His research focuses on developing contemporary theatre methodologies as youth praxis.