

Co-operative Make-Believe as Practice in Children's Interactive Dance Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Interactive dance theatre for young children will often rely upon a successful willing suspension of disbelief for both participating and non-participating audience members (commonly 'interactors' and 'non-interactors'). This is through a combination of "user freedom and system design" (Ryan, 1997 pp. 677-707). In my research, led by the instructions from performers, audiences are able to enter into a co-operatively constructed make-believe world. These co-constructed physical movement and physical actions are contained by a pre-prescribed narrative arc. In other words, the closed narrative form contains an open dramatic form. This offers audiences a satisfying story whereby the narrative arc is coherent to both interactors and non-interactors, giving rise to two distinct experiences—an active, make-believe experience for interactors and a more passive, spectator experience for non-interactors.

This paper explores how this dual narrative might be achieved; what autonomy and what limitations might exist for interactors and non-interactors in contemporary children's theatre practice. This paper also discusses some possible solutions—the role of children's creative input and the extension of collaborative practice to include co-operation between children and professional artist-makers in research and practice.

Contextually, local and national funding for the arts in England has been in steady decline for the last eleven years. These cuts currently total 37% locally and 28% nationally (*Arts Index 2007—2016*, 2017). The response amongst both Arts Council England and the artistic community at-large is to find new ways to engage with audiences that permits “iterative development and engagement [and] allows a more porous approach to decision making and helps others feel ownership” (*Cultural Democracy in Practice*, 2018). The impetus behind a culturally democratic approach to the arts is to have public input throughout the conceptual draft, design, delivery and evaluation of artistic works, “facilitating the ideas of your stakeholders and co-creating together” (*Cultural Democracy in Practice*, 2018, p.4) placing artist and patron on an equal creative footing. I believe that the most important stakeholder in any piece of children's theatre is the child, however, as Jeanne Klein and Shifra Schonmann state, “Child spectators and adult theatre critics often hold opposite views on what makes the ‘best’ theatre for young people” (2009, p. 6). “Children are being taught that self-expression is eccentric and conformity leads to success. Every effort must be made to reverse this pattern: school is where children learn to sing their own song” (*Cultural Democracy in Practice*, 2018). Against this background, I formed a children's theatre company, Fully Booked Theatre, working as a choreographer and performer and in long-term collaboration with my partner, the English poet, Harry Man who served as dramaturg.

Our latest work, *Once Upon a Wall*, is a dance theatrical adaptation of the nursery rhyme of ‘Humpty Dumpty’—a nursery rhyme like many whose precise historical origin has yet to be identified. Working from a position of informal creative input, more so than formal

co-production, with Special Education Needs (SEN) pupils at Priory Woods School & Arts College, we were able to learn from them about their expectations in terms of an audience experience—how they wanted the story to be reinvented and communicated through movement, text and sound as well as through texture, colour and environment. Over a series of eight workshops with pupils aged 9-14, we discussed creative ideas and devised movement in blocks. Our process followed from similar art-making processes such as that experienced by Liam Berriman, Kate Howland and Fiona Courage, though we were not aware of it at the time. Berriman et al. described their process as having moments where they were very aware of the fact that the “knowledge and skills gap resulted in an uneven sense of responsibility and ownership for the installation, with the young people’s participation largely limited to observing and providing occasional feedback on the design and development” (2017, pp. 139–162). We were keen to avoid a discrepancy between our own knowledge and creative ideas and what would be considered valuable input from both groups.

We asked for pupils’ help in coming up with ideas about where the character of Humpty Dumpty came from. We had a small sketch of an idea for a place called Lost Sandwiches comprised of breakfast-themed landmarks such as runny-egg rivers and baked bean canyons, but we needed their input. Offering a large canvas on which pupils could describe and draw their ideas proved to be too broad a brief, with a general disagreement in terms of the likely dimensions, role and scale of objects. It would be no different to asking two pianists in separate rooms to play something from memory and both to independently start to play Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode.” As a starting point, drawing can be part of “a symbolic transition into play, conversation, and artwork... through such articulations, they construct their make-believe worlds” (Gotz, 2005). And with some necessary facilitator intervention, the pupils began their collaborative art-making.

While the images they had drawn from an abstract brief resulted in an abstract outcome, what became evident in the surrounding discussion and descriptions of what they had drawn was the demand to participate in the make-believe process. A tunnel entirely comprised of bacon, down which a giant orange might roll seemed a perfectly normal combination that we were urged, non-subversively, by pupils in

our group, to imagine. "Because they create make-believe worlds to suit their needs, interests, and desires, it allows them therefore to imagine possibilities that are beyond the realm of their real worlds," (Gotz, 2005) and indeed, that imagined world is just what our pupils created.

Unencumbered by the continual demands to memorise and make causal connections between events and ideas within the context of a classroom, our pupils were offered a chance to discuss what they had drawn and wanted to draw next gave them a sandbox for unlimited make-believe imagining. Simultaneously there was the obvious requirement for us to provide a structured way in which we could incorporate make-believe on the stage that would allow both children and their parents to be part of the same make-believe world. Even if the child's parent was not strictly in the same make-believe world, similarly to the two pianists imagining "Johnny B. Goode," they would at least have the opportunity to invent meaning for themselves. As Wartemann (2009) says, "Participation at the theatre is not merely something one demands (a right), but it is also a challenge (a duty). Audience members not only can but must work out the meaning for themselves" (p. 8). In this sense, as soon as participation is invoked within a piece of theatre, the audience must play along, whether collaboratively to help tell the story (the closed narrative form), or merely co-opted by performers for the sake of make-believe (the open dramatic form; helping to enact a given scenario). Parents tend to be more cooperative rather than strictly collaborative performers when it comes to bridging the safe space in which their children play. They must navigate between the states of being a spectator in the audience (as above, a non-interactor) and a participant on stage (interactor).

New questions, evidently arose too, such as making sure that invitations to participate, to listen to the narration, or watch the movement were indicated clearly and that we were not at risk of dividing the audience's attention. Ultimately, as Berriman et al. (2017) made the conclusion, "It requires us to be flexible in our expectations and to be open to a model of research where the majority of insights will emerge through the process of collaboration, rather than at the final destination."

Ashford describes a similar approach in devising The Last Great Hunt's *Pollyanna*, "The development tacked between, on one hand, a

bottom-up approach, devising specific, more or less self-contained interactions, and, on the other, a top-down approach, creating an overarching narrative, and then back to a bottom-up approach” (2018, p. 150). He describes the process further as “a series of tasks, puzzles, and discussion settings for each audience group, which performers would devise and then present for the rest of the ensemble to road test. Discussion would ensue, and any feedback would be incorporated into future iterations of each exercise” (2018, p. 150). This iterative approach has been very important for us in integrating the input of our child audiences. Creating tasks, puzzles, and discussions makes space for the children we work with to have an impact on our performances, while also maintaining a scaffolding that supports play.

WHAT HAPPENED IN PERFORMANCE

The performance was designed to be interactive so that the audience would have opportunities to take part within the show. Interactive theatre makes sense in delivering a story to children as it uses a device they are uniquely familiar with: make believe. As Ryan states: “In the fictional world of make-believe, participants achieve the same fusion of dramatic functions as the users of Interactive Drama: the players play for their own enjoyment, and as they improvise a role, they both ‘write’ and play their character” (p. 681). Ryan describes “Interactive Drama” as an ideal combination of “user freedom and system design” (1997, p. 681) while Fuller (2018) identifies one of the challenges of creating interactive theatre as “the need to navigate between the position of the ‘Architect’, designing and structuring an audience’s experience, and that of the ‘Clown’, sustaining a performance state which is present and responsive to the particularities of individual interactions” (p. 234).

I perform in *Once Upon a Wall* with the writer who I co-created the piece with. This means that we act as both the ‘Architects’ and ‘Clowns’ of the work, giving us the opportunity to hold the scaffolding of the interactive experiences we’ve designed and the shape of the show in our minds as we perform and engage in the ‘Clown’ state of responding in the moment to suggestions from our child audience. Being adaptive to the audience in the moment has allowed us not only to change aspects of the show in the middle of a performance to create

a better experience for the audience and ourselves as performers, but also, over time, we have allowed the scaffolding (the structure of the work itself) to develop and change in response to our growing understanding of our audiences' experience. The piece then transforms through contact with its audience, they participate directly and indirectly in the work's iterative development process.

We recently returned to Priory Woods to perform *Once Upon a Wall*, the show into which they'd had creative input. In performance, the children again had a role in shaping the production. At this juncture the scaffolding of the narrative framework remained fixed, and we responded in 'clown' state to the suggestions of our child audience in improvised moments within the confines of a fixed score. In The Last Great Hunt's *Pollyanna*, "group leaders had specific narrative goals to achieve: 'locate Pollyanna's diary' or 'interrogate bartender'; the means by which those goals were reached, however, were ultimately reliant on the input of the audience" (Ashford, 2018, p. 150). We have found this framework of devising goals for our audiences which leave space for them to develop their own methodologies to be impactful on the sense of achievement our audiences experience from participating in our productions. As Ryan states, "The script limits the freedom of the user, but it also maximizes the chances of a pleasurable performance. Its primary function is to convey a sense of purpose and to awaken in the user a desire to interact" (1997, p. 679). In this way we are balancing how much autonomy the interactors have with the sense of purpose they get from a strong sense of narrative.

There are many challenges in creating an interactive outdoor production for young audiences. As Watermann notes:

Children in the theatre do not focus their attention on specific events on stage—in general, on the actors' performance—because of pre-established conventions for audience members. Children, and especially these very small children, are not polite. They are attentive and focused on certain events on stage for only as long as those events are able to capture their interest. Their reactions, whether vocal, verbal, or physical, show this clearly." (2009, p. 13)

An adult audience will more often than not, out of an understanding for

theatrical convention, watch the action on stage. With a child audience in an outdoor production, attention becomes much more tricky to direct. At one point in our story, Hum-T ‘disappears’ behind the wall. However, outdoors, in an interactive production where they have been actively encouraged to join us on stage, children routinely come behind the wall, immediately destroying the theatrical magic of the disappearance. Part of our strategy for this is an acceptance that each child will experience the show in their own way, will have their own curiosities and if we can respond in ‘clown’ state to these, ie. playfully say ‘yes’ to child action which run counter to our desired narrative, then we open ourselves up to the possibilities of what Lisa Nagel and Lise Hovik call “risk of chaos and playful experience” (2016, p. 159).

Ultimately we felt that creating the interactive elements did have an impact in enhancing the sense of ownership the children we worked with had over the production. In post-show discussions they asked detailed questions about the design of the costume and set, the methodology for the creation of the work, and expressed thoughts about the meaning of the work.

One of the reasons for making an interactive show is to build in opportunities for children to be able to take an active part in the performance. Among the 10 aspects of life covered in *The Good Childhood Report 2012* (2012), children’s happiness with the amount of choice they have in life tends to be the most strongly associated with their overall well-being. Due to their legal status, children’s choice and autonomy are much more dependent on the willingness of others to grant them these things. Building in opportunities for them to feel that they are making meaningful contributions during the live performance therefore is something that is very important to us. At moments in *Once Upon a Wall* we become co-players, inviting children to play with us. As co-players we can take turns with the children leading and following. We listen for their ‘offers’ and build on them. Their choices enrich our show. The children interviewed for *The Good Child Report 2012* identified being “trusted to make your own choices” as important in feeling happy. How can we make theatre which grants children genuine autonomy and is also a great piece of theatre to watch? Our role as artist-makers has shifted dramatically from one of writing great dialogue and choreographing movement sequences to creating opportunities for children to create their own dialogue and movement.

We look at creating structures and scaffolding which supports our child (and sometimes adult) participant's play.

CONCLUSION

We are continually developing our creation processes in response to an ongoing dialogue with the children we work co-operatively with. This co-operative play allows us to iteratively develop our shows to include moments in performances in which we hope to give children genuine autonomy over their decisions and actions. This process is complex and imperfect; balancing the need for a cohesive narrative for non-participants with the desire for genuine autonomy for participants is delicate. We hope that through an ongoing dialogue with participants and non-participants—adults and children—we can continue to drive these sometimes competing goals forwards.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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