

ITYARN Mission and Board

ITYARN, the International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network, is the international research network of Assitej International.

ITYARN aims to further research on theatre for young audiences (TYA) in collaboration with the University of Agder (Norway),

the University of Hildesheim (Germany), Arizona State University (USA), College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA),

the University of Ankara (Turkey), Korean National University of the Arts (Korea)

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ASSITEJ 2011

DENMARK: 17th ASSITEJ World Congress . c/o ASSITEJ Denmark . Farvergade 10, 5th floor . 463 Copenhagen K . DK

SWEDEN: 17th ASSITEJ World Congress . c/o ASSITEJ Sweden . Kaplansbacken 2, S-112 24 Stockholm . SE

Context - a Discussion about Ambiguity

"... to reflect on the diversity in contents, expression and relevance on a global scale..."



ITYARN
International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network

INTRODUKTION



In June 2009, Niclas Malmcrona and Michael Ramløse, the organizers of the XVIIth Assitej World Congress and Festival, approached ITYARN, the International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network, with the following proposal: what if ITYARN gets involved and provides short contextualizing entries to the productions invited to the 2011 festival? The idea was simple: the conference planners wished to invite only original productions, that is, no adaptations, and only ones conceived in the 21st century, so primarily new works. They also aimed to cast their nets widely and invite productions that would be diverse and represent as many different countries and cultures as possible. Because of the vast cultural differences in both the generation of these productions by the artists and the perception of these productions by the audiences, Malmcrona and Ramløse thought it would be helpful for the international audience at the Congress and Festival to have some cultural and material context related to the original creation of these productions, and an idea of how these productions would be perceived in the original culture.

Niclas Malmcrona sent a letter to each of the invited international companies to explain the idea and to ask for the companies' cooperation. Subsequently, ITYARN identified scholars in each country and asked if they would be willing to write a 700-1000 word entry on the specific performance invited to the festival. In these letters the authors were asked to focus on the following:

Within the socio-cultural context under which this production is conceived:

***How does this production relate to young people?**

***What makes this a TYA production?**

***How does this production reflect the culture of its origin or speaks against it?**

The contextual entries in this booklet are edited in English, in US spelling. They are not edited on content, and we made every effort to keep the original flavor of the individual author's writing style. The essays reflect the culture through their content and style, as well as the authors' choice to highlight specific points in the performance, in TYA, or in the socio-cultural circumstances in their respective countries. Together these entries form a rich background to the performances you are about to see.

A discussion on the experiment to solicit and provide these entries will be held in Malmö, in the Malmö Stadtsteater on May 23 from 16:00-18:00. We welcome your insights, comments, and suggestions.

Manon van de Water, Chair ITYARN, Editor

Mary McAvoy, Editorial Assistant

Niclas Malmcrona, Secretary General XVIIth Assitej World Congress and Festival

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2-Dimensional Life of Her

Fleur Elise Noble/Insite Arts

By Fleur Elise Nobel, Australia . Australia



The advancement in technology and the “post-human” movement in the theatre has seen multimedia theatre experiences for young people at a high-point in Australia’s TYA movement. The effects of the present and future possibilities of multimedia theatre within TYA in Australia can assist in securing new audiences. 2-Dimensional Life of Her provides an opportunity where generations can meet, experiencing art as a community. No only does 2-Dimensional Life of Her seem a perfect piece to attract new audiences, but it simultaneously stirs up discussion about the category a company or production is placed into when producing a show for mixed audiences. Perhaps the lady in 2-Dimensional Life of Her achieves what Australia’s TYA has been trying to do since the mid 1990s: transformation and universalism.

In Australia, being branded a TYA company is not enough to equate it with high-quality. Shows for young audiences need to be entertaining, but they also need to be relevant, take into consideration the wider community, pursue success in a highly competitive industry, and acquire ongoing funding. There are other successful productions by companies for mixed audiences that are not necessarily a part of the traditional or contemporary theatrical narrative of TYA per se in Australia. However, productions such as 2-Dimensional Life of Her purposely embrace young audiences as a present and important theatre member, keeping the traditional TYA movement in Australia mindful and therefore “on its toes.”

Transmediated Theatre

Technology has changed how our society interacts and lives. Inside the theatre doors, art and technology perform side-by-side and are welcome, whereas outside, technology can divide generations and cultures. Technology is about the fast and the now, and, those who cannot keep up are often left behind.

Within the transmediated theatrical experience of 2-Dimensional Life of Her there is no fixed perspective that the audience can place onto the theatrical canvas. Instead, the eye becomes an ever-moving organ with no place to rest, and in return, the brain is charged with new ideas that are immediate and limitless. The unsure roaming of the viewer’s eye is a reflection of technology’s power over society’s progress which can be fast-paced and unmerciful. 2-Dimensional Life of Her manipulates technology with theatrical and aesthetic rewards via its image-driven narrative, emphasizing that theatre has found important resources for creating dramatic productions in technologies such as radio, film, television, and other electronic media

Technology has come a long way and especially in the theatre young people are at the forefront of its influence. More often than not, the lure of combining diverse art forms via technology attracts young people because of its endless capabilities in the theatre. Transmediated and multi-projected theatrical works such as 2-Dimensional Life of Her bridge the gap between generations and cultures by using art forms and telling stories that are image-based rather than narrative.

Transmediated work in the theatre may seem original, modern, or even normal to the high-tech savvy audience who own techno gadgets such as iPods and iPads and have access to YouTube. What is interesting in 2-Dimensional Life of Her is the colliding of organic materials with technology, such as creating characters from paper, using primary materials and projecting them onto screens via animation. 2-Dimensional Life of Her suggests a return to Dadaism, crossing stable boundaries such as playing with art as an aesthetic lure and then scattering the spectator’s attention just like the roving eye of the voyeur.

Similar to Dadaism, 2-Dimensional’s story, via its art works and images, is neither this nor that but rather both and the (in) between, like a child playing in a sandbox or painting at the easel. Everything and anything is possible.

Images

2-Dimensional Life of Her appeals to a diverse audience. The production’s dramatic structure is image driven and avoids language, breaking down cultural barriers. An image can represent a thousand words. On the other hand, the various cut-out caricatures, puppets with obvious strings attached, and the breaking through and peeling away of the adult-made layers creates political and social messages. Perhaps 2-Dimensional Life of Her is social art? Not only an aesthetically interesting transmediated theatrical art work, but a subliminal force that bubbles away at the spectator’s unconscious via its fractured and evocative narrative where image and surface unite.

At one point in the production, a puppet dips its head in ink and creates portraits. The puppet does this by beating its head against the paper, smacking it down, producing numerous line drawings. Is this illustrating the artist suffering or perhaps the confusion youth communities undergo when art is viewed secondary to knowledge?

Presenting a theater production via images is an alternative way of articulating ideas, themes and subtexts. Expressing stories via images pushes the audience to seek new meaning behind the artworks as well as the various underlying political messages. The fascinating and numerous images displayed in 2-Dimensional offers the audience hints, but they have to use their imagination to complete the picture.

International

2-Dimensional Life of Her challenges young people to forget about the expectations of the adult world, highlighting a fantasy version of life and the overwhelming need to escape the restrictive patterns of a predictable world, or to boycott adults’ unrelenting expectations for children. The performance has the potential to give a lasting experience that encourages the impossible to become possible. The everyday object becomes a work of art through hours of crafting, manipulating, and focus. Art, as a maelstrom of differing forms converged via a transmediated process, takes on a new meaning for young people. Young people are encouraged to take risks, to seek new heights of expression and to make new connections.

The contemporary TYA movement has struggled for many years to be viewed as equal to adult theatre. Productions such as 2-Dimensional Life of Her offer a new kind of struggle, which celebrates theatre for mixed audiences via a sensual and visual exploration.

Leningradka

Cube Theatre . Russia



Leningradka (Russian for a “female inhabitant of Leningrad” as the city was called in Soviet times, now St. Petersburg) is produced by KUB (Cube) theatre-studio named after the producer of the project Salam Kubailat. The directors of Leningradka, Boris Konstantinov, Alexey Shishov, and Denis Shadrin, and designer Viktor Antonov usually work with the Karlsson House Company, which became famous after their staging of *Cheerful Man with a Propeller*. Karlsson House Theatre differs from the usual Russian repertory theatres; it was one of the first theatres in St. Petersburg that would function similarly to European theatre companies. Their repertory mainly consists of productions for a very young audience performed in small spaces by actors engaged for specific projects. Their productions are often didactic (e.g. *Theatre Lesson on Russian Language*) where actors communicate with little spectators as if they came to visit Svante «Lillebror» Svantesson from the story by Astrid Lindgren: artists will pay attention to everyone in the audience, greet them personally and exchange a few words about the work they saw after the performance is over.

Cube theatre’s Leningradka is one of the rare productions of this company that was created not only for young children but also for their family viewing. The plot of the production centers on the memories of an old lonely woman who, as a girl during WWII, survived the 872 days of hunger and cold of the blockade of Leningrad by the Nazis thanks to a “Domovoi,” a house spirit in Slavic folklore. To lighten children’s perception of the grim reality of Leningrad’s blockade during World War II the production is cloaked in magic. This performance is in fact one of the very few about the World War II that children may watch with honest interest.

Since WWII, Soviet and later Russian drama theatres have produced theatre and film works dedicated to the Great Victory almost every year in the beginning of May. The state still encourages productions on this theme in the arts. The Great Victory in World War II remains one of the key consolidating elements of the collective memory in now ethnically and religiously diverse Russia (according to sociological research on national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union).

In St. Petersburg the traces of the bombing from 1941-1944 and warning signs saying, “this side of the street is the most dangerous during artillery bombardment” have been carefully preserved. Almost everyone living in St. Petersburg is a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter of those who personally experienced the blockade and the war, though their number is decreasing each year. It is no wonder that this 2008 performance was created in St. Petersburg.

For a little spectator the events of World War II seem to be as distant from real life as a fairy-tale is. The stories of their great grand parents’ life become more clear and closer when all characters, even inanimate objects, are given personality traits. For instance, a bomb grieves because it didn’t reach its aim and hit the enemy, a doll takes a job at the factory, and a well-fed rat becomes a black market dealer.

The authors of Leningradka chose the genre of parable but do not aim to create a didactic performance which illustrates simple truths. The performance is educative but it educates indirectly, focusing on historical memory. Horrible events of World War II should not be forgotten—this is a guarantee for peace in the future. This makes Leningradka an excellent production for families as it offers an opportunity for parents and their children to talk about their ancestors.

This production becomes particularly important now, when the subject of history in the school curriculum remains the most vulnerable in the post-soviet education system. Russia and other former Soviet Union countries are going through the process of revising history and giving it new interpretations free of communist ideology but dependent on current political trends. Until now there has been no consensus on many historical issues.

A combination of video and puppetry in Leningradka is a novelty in Russian puppet theatre and theatre for young audiences, which rarely uses video as an artistic tool and remains very conservative in comparison to Russian drama theatre. In this show, video becomes an equal element of the performance; a puppet of the Domovoi comes out of the cinematographic gates of the screen and a puppet tram appears in a “real street.” Such a combination of the two genres in Leningradka proved to be successful and in 2009 Leningradka was awarded the Golden Mask, the Russian national theatre award, in two nominations: Best Director and Best Designer in Puppet Theatre.

The performance starts with a music video of Splin, a popular Russian rock band; but this doesn’t make the production an example of mass culture. Quite to the contrary, the pacifist ending of the show displays events from current world hotspots as a continuation of Nazi invasion. “No one wants war” - insists Alexander Vasiliev from Splin while the video flickers excerpts from the latest TV news programs instead of scenes from the World War II film archives. The audience sees military actions from the conflict zones in Russia and beyond. War is posited as a universal problem of the modern time. On the theatrical stage this video becomes an art object and people’s pain and suffering on the screen simply cannot leave the audience indifferent.

Aleksey Goncharenko and Olga Perevezentseva

Dallae's Story

Art Stage San . Korea



Dallae's Story is about a family in the midst of the Korean War (1950-1953). There have been several theatre for young audiences plays in the past decade about the Korean War with the best known being *The Bridge* by Hanyong Theatre Company and *My Love DMZ* by Mokwha Theatre Company. In addition, numerous TYA productions have dealt with war or conflicts of various kinds. This is an interesting phenomenon because the other common topics of TYA in contemporary Korea are decisively brighter and lighter. However, war and conflict is, unfortunately, not an alien subject for Koreans.

The Korean War resulted in at least 600,000 South Koreans dead, the majority of which were civilians. At least 7.5 million people were permanently separated from their families, and more than 100,000 children became orphans during the three years of war. The war is officially still going on, only on hold, as a peace treaty was never signed. Because all this occurred a mere 60 years ago, there are still millions in Korea who have actually experienced this war, and there are few Koreans of the younger generation who have not heard of survival stories during the tragic event. Until two decades ago, official education for students regarding the war was inevitably anti-Communist. Even now, any kind of declaration supporting the North Korean regime could land one incarcerated. However, after the first truly democratic president was elected in 1992, a political thaw allowed Koreans to be more open about their thoughts on the Korean War. Thus, Koreans wanted to find a way to make sense of the tragedy that took place in their land and find a way to explain to their children how and why it had happened. Theatre is one way to depict the violence of war through realistic and non-realistic expressions.

Dallae's Story starts with pre-war times, when the family was not rich, but together and happy. The tragedy starts when Dallae's father is forcefully drafted by soldiers. Drafting happened on both sides of the borders, where both the North and South Korean military threatened men of all ages to join. The penalty of refusing was death. As a result, it was not uncommon for brothers or best friends to be recruited to opposite sides of the war, fighting against each other. However, the play is not just about the war. It is also about the quintessential Korean childhood, where children feel spring through the spring blossoms of jin-dallae (the pink flower from which Dallae's name must to have come), mournfully endure the monsoon season in summer, chase red-tailed dragonflies in the fall, and build snowmen in the winter. The play also shows Dallae engaging in numerous games that all Korean children are familiar with. Regardless of social class or cultural background, these are experiences that all Koreans share. Through the depictions of these events the play bridges a general Korean childhood experience with another broad Korean experience –the Korean War.

Dallae's Story was conceived from a seven-year-long workshop that explored the concept of “war” through theatre, photography, and other visual arts. The production was not intended for a young audience only; rather, members of SAN wanted to create a play that could speak to all generations and cultures. Thus they decided to not use words, and instead speak through movement, mise-en-scene, and design. Non-verbal plays are a common practice in Korean theatre, especially among companies that intend to present the play before a foreign audience. In fact in the beginning, the play was more successful overseas than in Korea because Koreans generally associate marionette theatre only with children. But as the play grew more popular, the audience demographic of Dallae's Story became more diverse. The producers call it “theatre for the whole family,” which means that it is a play that the families can enjoy together. Producers of “theatre for the whole family” in Korea attempt to bring more communication among family members through a production that speaks of a shared experience that transcends generations. Therefore Dallae's Story is not a TYA production because it was produced for young audiences, but a TYA production because a young person can enjoy and appreciate it alongside those who are only young in heart.

Joohee Park

Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking

Magnet Theatre . South Africa



Inspiration comes from a wide variety of places: from a practical necessity, to a deeply personal impulse. Magnet Theatre's *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* was born of a meeting of these, when Magnet was asked to take a production to the Festival du Theatre de Yaounde and needed a small piece to travel. Knowing they needed to create a two- hander that could fit into a few suitcases, they decided to draw on an emotional impulse. At the time Jenni Reznik was dealing with the loss of her father, and the packing away of her childhood home. She wanted to explore questions of home, and what that meant, and then what it meant to lose your home.

Out of these simple elements their hugely powerful and successful production was born. At the time of its creation the first few South African attacks on immigrants had been taking place, and the realization came that being a refugee was the most extreme form of losing one's home that could be experienced. Issues of migration and exile thus became part of the production.

And so Magnet Theatre, a highly regarded company of more than 20 years in South Africa, added this inspirational and profound show to their repertoire.

Ironically, the development of the show preceded the most horrific outbreaks of xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The show contains two incidents of fire – a destructive burning, and a redemptive burning. With the outbreak of the attacks, Reznik says it “felt as though a third burning had taken place.” Performing the show when the attacks escalated in real life was hard for the performers, particularly as the show points towards an ending of slight hope and healing, which didn't always seem possible in real life. However this was exactly when the company felt it was particularly important to continue performing, to “cling to the moment of redemption,” as Reznik puts it.

A real point of consideration for Magnet was that theatre for young people needed to engage with real issues and that nothing should be taboo. Issues of loss, and the journey to find oneself are hugely real and important to young people. Too often, the difficult years of teenagerdom are skirted around and sanitized. In the story the young girl is exposed to horrors and violence that can only cause someone to grow up very fast.

The piece was frequently performed to refugees, including their children. Reznik describes this experience and the extreme silence of the children when watching – they've learned to be quiet because this was necessary in times of fight. These children have experienced things they shouldn't be exposed to - which is why it is so important to allow them a safe space to try and deal with the issues.

Creating it consciously for a young audience, Magnet included a lot of playful elements, particularly in their use of props. The story is told from the young girl's perspective, and it is a coming of age story within its specific context, making it accessible to all teenagers and adults who are experiencing the difficult process of forging identity. Magnet's inherently physical style also lends itself to engaging audiences of all ages.

The show is performed in conjunction with workshops and an activity book created by Magnet, to try and maximize the impact of the production and use the performance as a catalyst for a deeper engagement with the issues it explores. The booklet also looks at art in many forms, and how young people can experience and engage with this for themselves.

Part of the impulse, particularly after the attacks, was to use the show to try and shift people's perceptions. They wanted to engage people with empathy and openness and encourage small shifts. Transformation doesn't happen overnight, but occasionally a flash will spark, and something will connect. Every attempt to engage and open people up to different life views – particularly young people – will have an effect on their way of interacting with the world.

The show itself has been a nomad, traveling to 13 countries in four years. Magnet wanted the show to travel particularly in Africa, in order to return the story to the countries the people in South Africa have come from. Although the response in different countries differs—audiences outside of South Africa miss some of the smaller references, but respond more strongly to the metanarrative—a big change has been the effect of time. As the incidents in the story became more and more of a reality for refugees, the show became very personal and poignant.

As long as inter-cultural clashes continue, a show like this still has a critical function to play. This show is still walking, four years later. And it will continue its journey throughout 2011.

Karen Jeynes

Variety

Gamarjobat . Japan



English, French, and Japanese zoologists were all assigned to conduct a year of research on the life of African elephants. After the year was over, they published the results of their research. This joke goes on giving the titles of each project, satirizing the stereotypical characteristics of each nationality. So, what did the Japanese zoologist write about? It was “How the Japanese people were viewed among African elephants!”

Indeed, there is probably no other nation as anxious about how they are viewed and evaluated by others as Japan. It is the same with Japanese artists. Foreign, especially western, acclamation seems to exert a stronger impact on the fame of Japanese artists than what the Japanese themselves think. Thus, the best and the shortest way for artists to gain recognition in Japan is the belief, either true or rumored, that they are recognized outside of Japan.

Among those artists who are “recognized by the people of the world” and have thus attained “deserving national recognition” is the mime duo, the Gamarjobat. Their breakthrough arrived when the October 17, 2007 Japanese edition of Newsweek featured them as “one of the 100 people respected by the world.” Perhaps more than any comment from Japanese critics, “worldwide acceptance” opens doors to Japanese audiences. Without question, the duo has profited from the unique Japanese system of evaluating artists based on what “the elephants” think. I would like to emphasize that Gamarjobat has earned the admiration of foreign critics, including “The Tap Water Award” from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Gamarjobat has participated in many festivals worldwide. These experiences have crystallized their minimalistic physical-comedy by eliminating all extraneous cultural elements that may not speak to audiences from different cultures. Also, coming strictly from street-gigs, they seldom employ complex characterization in their mime sketches. In other words, their mime has become “a-cultural,” creating its own world.

Nevertheless, while “a-cultural,” the quality and popularity of their work also coincides with trends among Japanese youth. First, in respect to their short minimalistic and yet quick repetitive approach to physical comedy without any contextual complication, I cannot help but relate its popularity to the phenomenon of keitai shosetu, or mobile-phone novels. Second, I see the duo as firmly embedded in the so-called visual-kei trend permeating Japanese youth culture.

In 2007, Japan’s fiction bestseller list was, for the first time, “dominated by books published, read and, in several cases, written on mobile telephones” and “five of the year’s most successful novels” were of this type (Parry). These keitai shosetu grew out of the popularity of mobile-phones among Japanese youth, who are almost obsessed with playing games on them, sending emails, taking pictures and surfing the internet all day long.

According to Parry, the keitai shosetsu all contain similar elements: “short sentences (essential on mobile phone screens), lots of dialogue and a distinct absence of the lengthy descriptions which characterize more traditional Japanese fiction.” These novels are intended for reading as a casual pastime while riding trains. Instead of chapters, the novels are “divided into chunks which can be read in about three minutes, the typical distance between two stops on the Japanese subway.” As the Parry article illustrates, the division of simple chunks enables the commuters to have something with which to occupy themselves for a short time without much intellectual effort.

Interestingly, while commuters are glued to their mobile screens reading short spurts of a novel, they can also view the work of Gamarjobat. Recently, the East Japan Railway Company began to broadcast Gamarjobat comedy on small monitors inside trains. The short mime pieces play between postings on the screens of the station stops. Just as the keitai shosetsu provides short spurts of written entertainment with short sentences, the Gamarjobat broadcasts provide diversionary bursts of comedy. These “mime chunks” provide the major exposure of Gamarjobat to the public in Tokyo.

Their physical minimalism fits this fast-paced commuter environment when no one wants to think about anything but getting home. Their mime consists of quick, successful and independent physical short gigs that attract viewers’ eyes rapidly from one moment to another. Since their acts are like a series of Commedia lazzis, viewers can enjoy and appreciate any number of acts within a series without feeling compelled to see them all. Thus, it is easy for the Gamarjobat’s mime to effectively catch the eyes of young Japanese.

Another factor in their success is their appeal to the traditional Japanese emphasis on visual engagement. Historically, “Okuni-Kabuki,” the original Kabuki performances, relied on strong visual effects and tantalizingly colorful Kimonos. These women’s “punk-looks” labeled them as “Kabuki-mono” (those who are slanted). Even today, flamboyant visual effects in set, costumes and make-up are essential to the success of a Kabuki production. This kind of visual impact is an imperative in Japanese subculture. The popularity of visual impact came to full fruition in the 1980s with a trend known as “visual-kei.” It was a trend popular with rock band members as they dressed in a mixture of diverse trendy-garish costumes and makeup. It was often said that the quality of their music was not important; instead, fans became enamored by their “Look.” Such was the phenomena of visual-kei. Although the original visual-kei faded out in a few years, the trend to “go for the Look” remains strong in many areas of Japanese modern youth culture. Currently, the definition of visual-kei has become so broad and ambiguous that almost any artists with a gaudy visual impact are now referred to as visual-kei. Indeed, Japanese youth themselves continue to become an element of visual-kei culture as they choose to dress in wild costumes and makeup just for walking in the streets.

It has disadvantaged mime artists not to be able to appeal to the public eye with the power of visual-kei. Mime’s dynamism has resided primarily in combinations of movements, not static visuals: if you look at a photo of someone performing the “trapped-in-the-box” mime, all you see is someone displaying his wide open palms for no apparent reason. Possibly the desire to create visual impact still is the reason that traditionally mimes have followed the 19th century French Pantomime Blanche (a white faced-mime) created by Jean Batiste Debreau. However, now the art of mime has gained a model for making a visual impact with the unique eye-grabbing appearance of Gamarjobat. With their colorful punk looks and black business suits, Gamarjobat has attracted the Japanese youth who may know them only through photographs. With Japanese acclaim resulting from acceptance by Western critics and a performance structure fitting the chaotic lifestyle of youth, Gamarjobat’s success also results from the spectacle, which appeals to Japan’s youth raised in a visually oriented culture.

So what awaits Gamarjobat in the future? That is difficult to predict. While their popularity seems to be growing, Gamarjobat may have to face another feature of Japanese youth culture: a fiery passion for novelty and all things new. Keitai shosetu is now confined to occasional placements in films and in manga and visual-kei bands are no more. Gamarjobat, however, is already finding ways to re-ignite youth through recruiting other members to create a larger group performance of their signature physical comedy. In this transitional phase for their physical comedy, I wait for their next project with interest.

Parry, Richard Lloyd. “it ws bst f tms, it ws wrst f tms: Japan’s mobile phone literature.”

Richard Lloyd Parry’s blog. The Times, The Sunday Times. 6 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3005052.ece>>

Takeo Fujikura

Summer Island

Creative Association “Nomadi” . Latvia



Theatre group Nomadi from Riga, Latvia was founded by Krista Burane and Martins Eihe a few years ago and by now has created theatre productions and other cultural activities, such as the International Theatre Festival for Kids “Nomadi” which took place last year in the seaside city called Liepaja.

Nomadi creates close, intimate relations between what is happening on the stage and what is happening in the audience. Actors are working with passionate enthusiasm, which sometimes appears childlike. One of the reasons how they can convey such a tender and whimsical quality in their productions is that they are not constrained by ambition which, as we might know, can produce breakthroughs as well as disasters.

Summer Island is a piece which Nomadi set in February of 2010. It is based on the autobiographical, nostalgically visionary work by Finnish writer Tove Jansson, who is highly acclaimed by Latvian readers, especially during the Soviet regime and after. It is a sort of diary, lived through by a little girl (in the shape of a winter hat) on a deserted, yet fully inhabited island. Located in the area of an antique bed, limited by the metal frame, the island comes alive through different creatures such as a creepy fox, a pair of brisk mice who gather tiny pieces of food, a bird, and little birdie. Except for fox, all other heroes are played by household objects, starting with a wrench and scissors and ending with pillows and a cork from a fisherman's net. There is only one actor on the stage, Juta Vanaga, and her delicate, yet dynamic movements bring the silent objects to life and put them into action.

Summer Island gives you a chance to reconnect with your childhood – the place where days seemed longer, where every tiny corner of your house became a place where new adventures began, and where everything by just a touch could come to life and accompany you through careless wandering in the sun.

Toms Treibergs

Shimmer the Silverfish

Thjodleikhusid (The National Theatre of Iceland)



Colorful and visually alluring, the finned black-light actors of Shimmer the Silverfish immediately attract a young audience. Infants and toddlers as well as older children enjoy the performance that includes both excitement and entertainment as well as serene beauty emphasized by classical music and vivid colors. The production is first and foremost intended for the youngest group of audiences, but the tale and the theme has many layers that appeal to all ages of theatergoers. The language is clear and humorous but has its twists aimed towards a more mature audience.

Shimmer the Silverfish is in the beginning a happy and playful fish, but he has to face mobbing and mocking which his attackers claim is because of his looks. His self-esteem is seriously undermined and in his search for a greater identity as a goldfish, he gets the most contradicting and ludicrous advice. Dealing with bullying, emotional abuse, group pressure and negative messages concerning looks and behavior, are some of the most serious problems faced by many and ever-younger children. Children can easily identify themselves with Shimmer the Silverfish and understand the pain, insecurity, and despair he is feeling.

Shimmer is not only told that he looks odd, his simple pleasure of swimming with out any purpose or aim is considered foolish. This is not acceptable to the more distinguished and popular of fish: they aim to be sought after, favored and greatly valued—even though it means ending up as a stew on a plate. Shimmer realizes that he does not want to be important or valuable: he is just a silverfish, just Shimmer the Silverfish. By rejecting devious and peculiar offers of assistance, Shimmer faces and rejoices his true identity. There is no easy solution, this he learns by himself. In helping others and seeking friendship he strengthens the belief in himself.

To stand by your own identity and origin, whether you are a child, a grown-up, a group or a nation, is an important message. Thus Shimmer the Silverfish is not only dealing with body image and self-respect, but also points out the insecurity and hopelessness that is in store for those who seek false fortune. This may refer to many a small fish in the turbulent waters of Iceland, who may have dreamt of being big and golden. Shimmer the Silverfish reminds us that not all enjoyments are marketable and true values are never afar. As for seeking an honest identity, the answer lies within.

Thorhallur Sigurdsson

Tempo

Marcelo Katz . Argentina



There are three main circuits of theatrical production in Buenos Aires: the commercial, the “official” (supported by the Government in National or Municipal theatre venues) and the independent. TYA is also produced in this manner and one can find anything from TV based theatre productions worth millions of dollars, to small plays produced by the same actors. The theatre for young audiences’ season, especially for children, usually runs around the winter vacation weeks in July, opening a month to a few weeks earlier and closing typically around Children’s Day in August. The performances are held during the weekends and every day during the winter vacations, usually offering two to three shows a day. Most TYA that is produced comes from the independent circuit and in order to survive troupes also offer their shows at schools. Ensembles that own a venue often offer their plays throughout the school year (weekends and holidays).

Independent theatre companies face the challenge of self-investing in their shows, performing for an unpredictable audience that range from 30 to 300 spectators and competing for the small subsidies that the two governmental organizations give to independent ensembles: INT (National) and PROTEATRO (at Buenos Aires city). This contrasts with the commercial theatre, which performs in venues for more than 500 spectators with official theatre subsidizing the cost of the tickets and the productions.

Tempo, created by Marcelo Katz, is a play that belongs to the independent circuit. Katz’s ensemble varies from one show to the other, often including advanced actors trained at Marcelo’s own school of clown, buffoon and mask. This variation happens frequently in independent troupes because TV commercials, movies and all sorts of better paid or more “secure” jobs often “steal” their actors. There are actors that are cast in commercial theatre and sometimes they leave right in the middle of rehearsals. Some actors decide to leave for the official circuit because the rehearsals are paid or because they get a salary. This of course affects the work and continuity of the companies.

Another challenge is to create a quality show with fair resources. Katz tells how up to 70 percent of Tempo’s budget was spent in exploring and searching for artistic situations related to the concept of “time” (with investment in props, scenery, materials) and most of it did not make it to the show. Nevertheless, this is the manner in which Katz and his company creates their plays. They know that it will consume a great portion of their budget –and their time. Katz even works together with an “inventor” (an architect and scenery creator), whose task it is to materialize the ideas. Some ideas cannot become a reality because they are highly expensive. This search for artistic excellence is not financed by any university or school and other companies in Argentina generally end up sacrificing the artistic quality because of time and monetary restrictions.

Tempo was played in a central theatre and cultural venue in Buenos Aires called Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, and, against the usual trend, this center gave some funding for the production of the show.

Katz states that he creates shows “for people, young and old”, where each spectator brings something different and understands on different levels. He does not think of it as theatre for children, or for young audiences or for the entire family. He sustains that good art can move adults as well as children. Since it does not circulate the school circuit, it does not have to tone down any part of the show (such as “improper” words or erotically charged scenes).

Since Tempo ran at night, most of the spectators were adults. The performances in Buenos Aires were held on Fridays at 10 or even 11 p.m. On Saturdays, they had an earlier performance, at 8 p.m., which also attracted parents with children nine and up. Katz sustains that he prefers the ambiance created in a night performance because in his plays a poetic atmosphere is created and, he states, there is no culture during the afternoon to watch a performance like this. During the night, spectators are quieter and more focused on the play. As he puts it, it might be the same people, but they behave differently at night. There is less chattering, no candy unwrapping noise and no crying babies brought along with older siblings. His perspective is interesting because usually the “theatre for the entire family” label is used to market the play for a wider audience in order to gain more spectators. From a different perspective, Katz sustains that this gives the parents a chance to include their children in their adult recreational activity. There are few plays that parents can go to with their 10-year old and teenage sons and daughters. And Tempo offers that. Katz creates productions in a way that, in his own words, does not exclude children. They have fun. There is even a dose of erotically charged clown scenes that are put on with good taste and in a poetic manner. Katz reflects that generating a show that parents and children can go to might be an influence of his work at the circus, which includes the entire family. As he puts it, it is a great opportunity for parents to take their children to a show that they think is good to see together with them.

Evelyn Goldfinger

White

Catherine Wheels Theatre Company . Scotland



August 2010 saw a significant initiative introduced in Scotland as Creative Scotland took over the functions and resources of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen but with a wider set of responsibilities for developing the sector. It inherited the investment commitment of the original agencies and worked to develop key priorities to broaden access to the best of Scotland's creative arts. One of the priorities is the arts and young people and the development of what has become known as The Creativity Portal in partnership with Learning and Teaching. Scotland has created a collaborative environment encouraging educators to place creativity at the heart of their practice and connect with culture practitioners in order to enrich young people's learning experiences by offering contacts and opportunities for discussion and sharing ideas. The portal also acts as a showcase space, highlighting collaborations between schools and cultural organizations, such as the Scottish Opera and the Scottish Storytelling Center.

Alongside this is Made in Scotland, which is supported through the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund and aims to "place a diverse programme of high quality Scottish work firmly in the festival's spotlight." This again embraces theatre aimed at young audiences and has led to the support of several productions, for example, The Songbird: A Tone Poem by Giant Productions aims to 'create inspiring, curious and unexpected arts experiences for children under 12 and their families' and White – a piece aimed at 2-4 year olds by Catherine Wheels. What these projects have in common is that they involve collaboration between a range of artists and practitioners.

There is a real interest in creating work targeted towards very young children. This specific area of work has been largely pioneered by the Starcatchers project, which again brings together a range of artists and has been developing work for the 0-4 age since 2006 when a series of pilot projects took place at the North Edinburgh Arts Centre. The initial project was funded by the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and the then Scottish Arts Council (SAC). It was also supported by action research undertaken by Dr. Susan Young from the University of Exeter and Dr. Nikki Powers from the University of Edinburgh. The last five years has seen this project grow and develop, and the Starcatchers website now includes a vision statement stating an ambition to see Scotland become leaders in this area and committing to further research in collaboration with Professor Aline-Wendy Dunlop and colleagues from the department of education at the University of Strathclyde.

The production of White comes out of this tradition in that it is a devised piece created by Andy Manley, who was also part of the Starcatchers pilot project, in collaboration with award winning Scottish theatre company, Catherine Wheels and top designer, Shona Reppe.

As might be expected in the arena of theatre for young people, the audience is at the heart of the process. The performance of White is aware of its audience and adopts a non-threatening tone throughout, making explicit use of familiar rituals that the target audience would recognize. It creates a recognizable world into which it invites the audience. Andy Manley reasons that since from the age of two many children are beginning to name colors, this creates a point of accessibility for the audience. He reveals that, accepting this, much of the development of the show itself then focused on how to create a space that would excite and intrigue the audience.

Manley explains that the idea for White came from a simple question: What happens if you introduce colour to an all white world. Although parallels can be drawn about tolerance and integration, this was not the intention for the piece and the impulse was essentially aesthetic.

The work can be placed as part of a long line of highly visual, emotionally engaging children's theatre, which has been hugely influenced by the work throughout Europe and been introduced to Scotland by the Imagine Children's Festival. It reflects the size and community of Scotland, the commitment to producing quality theatre for young audiences and the accessibility of theatre makers to one another within the country.

David Broster

Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?

Theatre an der Parkaue . Germany



“It is not the point to make political films but to make films in a political manner.” This statement by filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard is not just quoted randomly in my conversation with Sascha Willenbacher, dramaturg of *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?*. It does not appear casually for it might just be the answer to the question of how society and Carlos Manuel’s artistic work are linked. It might also serve to illustrate the link between society and the work processes of the Junges Staatstheater Berlin Theater an der Parkaue and reflect how it perceives itself and its role as the second largest children’s and young people’s theater in Germany. The Parkaue does not only consider WHAT to tell its audience but also and first of all HOW. It is a theatre that self-apprehends as an experimental space for productions that make use of new, unconventional ways of storytelling and presenting in theatre for young audiences. It is a place where not only theatre artists but also dancers, choreographers, visual and media artists are invited to strike new paths, and to explore new formats. *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?* dares to develop scientific questions and findings into a theatrical experience. The production is based on excerpts from “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (1972), the major work of Gregory Bateson, anthropologist, biologist, social scientist, cyberneticist and philosopher.

In five “metalogues,” a father and a daughter pose questions about language, communication and thinking: What is thinking? How does communication work? How is knowledge generated? Ostensibly clear, everyday commodities are challenged and x-rayed. “Metalogues,” according to Bateson, are defined not only by their content, but their content is at the same time their form. The director Carlos Manuel and the stage designer Fred Pommerohn transfer them into acting, into living tableaux, and visualize the characters’ communication without simply illustrating their exchange. In *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?*, things themselves get in a muddle. The way of talking. The things on stage. Even the stage itself. In the end, it turns around like the globe. Tables and chairs are piled up on stage, encircled with a rope that is knotted to the wall. The stage floor is circling, desks and chairs get out of place, fall down, create new formations. The stage becomes a test arrangement. The play on it, the theatre itself, becomes a test arrangement. Things are as they are not because that’s just the way they are. They are constructed that way. The audience is confronted with the artificiality of a world, a communication, a language, which are man-made, constructed, defined by their content. Language appears as a random order based on a common agreement: Every thing has its word to denote what it is.

The spectators experience this kind of thinking sensually. They are invited to muddle things themselves, to think beyond what is shown and to combine objects that are usually separated in order to reach something new and come to a new understanding of things that surround them. They are confronted with a way of thinking that draws attention to the importance of non-verbal communication and the limits of human perception.

The play stimulates and trains perception, it is a school of thought. It requires and desires a responsible spectator and it challenges and trains him at the same time. It serves to create, if this is thought through, a responsible citizen. Willenbacher writes in the material about the play: “Our claim to find a theatre which makes knowledge happen means no less than thinking theatre in new ways, also looking for new texts and forms. It’s not just about telling a story, it’s about making something happen in our minds – call it insight, call it enlightenment.”

In a talk with the audience after a performance of the production, some children want to know why the actors threw two plates against the wall after the first metalogue in *Why Do the Things Get into a Muddle?* The drama educator does not simply respond to this question but passes it back to the young audience (he will do the same with all other questions, too). An eleven-year-old girl pipes up: “Once the plates have broken into a thousand pieces, they can be glued together, but they will never be the plates they were before.” The drama educator repeats her words and amplifies that the philosophical term entropy means exactly what the girl has just explained.

Why is *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?* a production for children? It is for children, and for children and grown-ups, as well as for grown-ups. Both perspectives are given their own space through the two figures on stage, daughter and father. They encounter each other with their questions. Together, they get to the bottom of things, they try to reach a common ground and go further from there, starting from different perspectives. The father describes this as follows: “The point is, that the intention of these conversations is to discover the ‘RULES.’ It is like life—a game—and its aim is to discover its rules while, all the time, the rules keep changing and are forever undiscoverable.”

Gabi dan Droste

How Can We Tell It?

Tiyatrotem . Turkey



The year 2002 . . . We were students at the Ankara University Theatre Department who rarely saw good examples of Children's Theatre. In that year, when we saw Tiyatrotem's two performances for young people called *The Cabbage* and *We Can't Go On Like This*, we were really surprised and amazed. After these performances, we wanted to know more about the artists, Ayşe Selen and Şehsuvar Aktaş. Then, we saw their other performance called *If Such Is The World Ubu Is The King* in November 2004; an excellent performance which encouraged us to do theatre. And from that day on, we have been following Tiyatrotem.

In Turkey, most children's plays show us some stories (often including some animals) which do not touch children's worlds and their interests. Children's theatre is considered a profitable business, an opportunity to make money. Unfortunately, there is no concern about artistic/aesthetic value. So, children's theatre neither impresses nor encourages young prospective actors or authors. Young actors, authors and directors are not interested in theatre for young people. As students, we were in a minority in appreciating a Turkish performance that cared about young people's worlds and artistic values.

Since 1982, Şehsuvar Aktaş and Ayşe Selen have been working both together and individually with several theatre companies. Their credits include directing, assistant directing, acting for the stage, TV and film, screenwriting, and professional translations. Since 2000, they have been working as the founding partners of the private company Tiyatrotem, which is not supported by the government or any other organization. Tiyatrotem's artistic approach is based on the research of combining modern theatre techniques and traditional performing techniques with respect for Turkey's cultural environment. Tiyatrotem can be considered as a 'narrative theatre,' researching and desiring to do theatre of the theatre.

After the proclamation of the republic in 1923, the new Turkish government decided to follow Europe politically, socially, economically, and culturally. As a result of this change, the theatre world also shifted from a traditional approach to a western approach. This new interest in western theatre caused a neglect of traditional folk theatre. New western theatre, which desired to imitate western art, departed from the Turkish cultural/communal essence. Theatre audiences were faced with unfamiliar, bombastic, distant plays that were mostly adapted from western plays and tried to imitate European theatrical forms. A huge gap emerged between theatre and audience. Also at the present day, under the influence of this change, many theatre companies ignore traditional folk theatre in the name of being contemporary.

Traditional theatrical forms are about to be forgotten. On the other hand, sometimes, in the name of attending to traditions, traditional folk theatre forms are used today as they were used in the past, creating another type of imitation which does not meet contemporary people's demand and another gap between audience and theatre. At this point, Tiyatrotem becomes very important with their mission of bridging traditional Turkish folk theatre and contemporary theatre.

There are basically three performing forms of traditional Turkish folk theatre that Tiyatrotem is inspired by. These are: Karagöz, Ortaoyunu and Meddah. Karagöz is a kind of shadow-puppet theatre. It consists of two main characters: Karagöz and Hacivat. This pair shows verbal comedy of sharp satire. Tiyatrotem inherits the essence of conflict between Karagöz - Hacivat and also the shadow-puppet theatre technique of Karagöz. Ortaoyunu is a sort of improvisation theatre form that is not based on a text. Tiyatrotem uses improvisations a lot during rehearsal process to create their own texts on the stage. Tiyatrotem also uses many Ortaoyunu elements like wrong pronunciations, repartee and rhyme. And lastly, we can see traces of Meddah, the traditional way of storytelling, at every Tiyatrotem play. The pair of Ayşe Selen and Şehsuvar Aktaş are basically story-tellers. They tell the story and also play it. Sometimes they use these two forms (telling and acting) as a conflict like Kavuklu and Pişekar the two main characters of Ortaoyunu: 'Its name is play, so play to enjoy it. Its name is story, so tell to enjoy it.' The conclusion is always the same: play springs from story, story springs from play.

Tiyatrotem is a progressive theatre company as they use these traditional forms in a contemporary way. For instance, the relationship between 'the actor - the character - the actor as performing the character' and the new performance possibilities through this trinity, which is one of the important research topics in the theatre world, is the subject that tiyatrottem also researches in the context of Turkey's cultural reality and traditional values. Tiyatrotem bridges past and present through a new way of combining traditional forms and contemporary performing techniques. Tiyatrotem creates their own texts, but on the other hand, they also reinterpret some classical texts like Richard III or Tartuffe with a modern implication and the use of folk theater elements. So, the reason behind the invitations they have received from international festivals is obviously that Tiyatrotem is a contemporary theatre company that is nourished by traditional origins.

How Can We Tell It? includes this theatrical research through the process of a story-telling endeavor for children. Tiyatrotem is aware that children need stories which touch the children's worlds and interests, like stories for adults do. The child in How can we tell it? tries to change the story, which is narrated by the puppet called Master, to make it more interesting. What kind of a story attracts children's attention? How should we tell the story to charm children? How Can We Tell It? follows these questions through the child's fantasy.

We are hopeful about the children's theatre in Turkey since there are some people who think seriously about theatre for young people. Our journey that started with a children's theatre class at Ankara University, continued with ASSITEJ Turkey and has been encouraged by people who take care of young people like Tiyatrotem does. So, we find ourselves working in theatre for young people.

How can we tell it? Well . . . we've just tried..

Elif Temuçin and Erkan Uyanksoy

Almost Nothing

Grupo Sobrevento . Brazil



In 2002, Sobrevento began *Submundo*, a production with a dense social and philosophical appeal intended for an adult audience. Now, the same themes are presented to a younger audience in a new version:

Almost Nothing.

The new production barely has dialogue, and relies on a playful, universal language that doesn't need words to communicate and touch our feelings. But regardless of this lack of words, this play is a Sobrevento mix of several lively, well-done techniques.

Almost Nothing is part of a tough and hostile reality from which joy and the will to go ahead can spring. The characters fight back with creativity, a powerful attribute in Brazilian people, which compels us to overcome our difficulties. As well, on stage, Sobrevento actors use only easily accessible materials to reach youngsters of different cultures. With very simple elements like newspapers, twine, or a handful of sand, Sobrevento develops many stories and deep thoughts using the young audience's imagination and reason, qualities that can never be underestimated.

Many Brazilian paradoxical situations are exposed in this play in a very daring and poetical way. The play's power to communicate can translate images of a reality that can be difficult to understand by not only Brazilians, but also Iranians, Danish or Swedish people. Avoiding the cliché of a joyful country, replete with sensuality, exuberance, and exoticism, Sobrevento shows us their particular view of Brazil. That's why this play can reach so far; it presents a new concept of this Latin country that challenges any already held ideas.

To a new audience, to young people all around the world, *Almost Nothing* is Brazil expressed by the hunger, pain, and hard conditions of the poor, but also by the laughter, the joy, the perseverance of being happy and continuing to dance, even when the music stops.

There is a scene in the play taken from a piece of a great Brazilian painter, Cândido Portinari (1903-1962), an artist that portrayed people from the Northeast, which is the poor side of the country because of a disastrous conjunction between rough weather and political negligence. In this region, walking several miles to reach water, job, or food is very usual. Despite this, there we can find the most popular festivals in Brazil, with dances and characteristic rhythms that infuse the country with joy. Inspired by this northeastern culture, *Almost Nothing* also shows a local artist with his typical tent doing a very comic show manipulating his glove puppets. The moments of redemption in the show lead us to the most beautiful things found not only in the Northeast, but in Brazil itself.

Brazil didn't reach the moon, but its people are able, in their imagination and their heart, to fly over the obstacles that stand in their way and to laugh when sadness takes place. Maybe this is because Brazil is a young and creative country, just like the audience *Almost Nothing* wants to reach.

MIGUEL VELLINHO

Flower and Thorn Concerto

Cia do Tijolo . Brazil



What put us together, besides the fact of being theatre actors and participants of the Assitej Festival for young audiences in Denmark? Have we ever had the same dreams sometime? Have we ever had the same crises? What kind of artists are we? For whom do we make theatre? What kind of artists should we be to create nowadays?

As Paulo Freire, one of the greatest educators of Brazil and one of the pillars of our setting Flower and Thorn Concerto, would say, “reading the world precedes the reading of the word,” or as Frei Betto wrote, “the mind thinks where the feet step on.” We are part of Cia do Tijolo (which means “Brick’s Company”) which has eleven members, does not have a head-office and that has made a very radical choice: to be a theatre group. And to talk about Cia do Tijolo and about the theatre that we make, there is nothing better than starting with the Poet Patativa do Assaré, the central character of this performance.

Patativa do Assaré, agriculturist and poet from Ceará, Brazil, only studied for six months and became known all over the world because of his poems. He was an artist that has never avoided the important questions about transforming society, a poet that has never refused to point out social injustices. He was a man that has read the world, and succeeded through his art and the exercise of his citizenship to become a conscious man. These are indispensable qualities of the theatre we make and of the artists that we want to be.

This performance is a critical reaction against the dominant culture. Using Patativa do Assaré’s poetry as its source material, the production denounces dominating practices revealing how a popular poet has chronicled one of the horrors of our history that the official culture insists to ignore. It is also an attempt to show the power of Brazilian popular culture from which we have a lot to learn.

Present society, through the wild capitalism that consumes us to death, lives twenty-four hours a day electing celebrities and making us believe that we have no power. And it makes us believe that things are like this because they are. It takes the history away from us. It determines a permanent schism between art and life, as if the art was a privilege to a few and not a necessity and a right of one and all.

When we came across this poet, who died in 2002, his work made us ponder upon every possible class of the theatrical creation: aesthetics, feature, content, internal work relation, the relation with the audience. It made us face the choice we had made long ago: to work collectively, without hierarchies, believing that eleven minds think better than one. To work on theatre, within a group is, in a way,

to believe in other paradigms, it is to build a little bit the society we believe in. We started from nothing, with no financial support, in the same way that most theatre groups begin in Brazil. In our country the investments in education and culture are minimal. As the professor Iná Camargo Costa says: it is an “action among friends.”

What urged us on was the confidence that in that moment it was vital to narrate this poet’s, this artist’s, history, and to reveal the paths that this man went through. It was not enough to remain only in his discourse and his poetry. We let the content transform not only Patativa’s paths, but also ours, the audience’s, and the performance’s paths. The performance demanded to happen in a semi-round theatre, because it can only occur in a round theatre, in a circle, where everyone can see each other, everyone can listen to each other, and everyone can build the auspicious theatrical place that we wanted for the artistic creation.

Many companies in São Paulo and Brazil work in such a way, searching for new possibilities of meeting with the audience and with the city. The proscenium stage, that exists in most of Brazilian theatres and which determines a distance between the scene and the audience, does not interest us anymore. Many groups look for a performance that is permeable, a lively exchange between actors and audience.

And it is in such a way that we make theatre in São Paulo, in such a big metropolis of almost fifteen million inhabitants. An attractive region to where many people from different parts of Brazil and from many parts of the world have migrated. In São Paulo there is an urban culture of concrete. It is a busy city with no rest. There the time is scanty, young people have many activities, many hours are lost in traffic jams, and parents and children have little time to enjoy life together. And it is during these quick meetings that emotions are shared, placed together with the practical daily problems, with the debts to pay, with the daily tiredness. To enjoy the theatre experience is almost a suspension of time. It is to open a space to let the most hidden emotions emerge. It is one possibility of breathing. And within these breaths and within this mass we make art . . . our poetry arises from it.

Flower and Thorn Concerto was not specifically conceived for young audiences. We believe that precisely because it was not conceived for young audiences that this performance is able to join young people in a wide and deep way. Flower and Thorn Concerto was built for every sort of audience, it has been raised within the bricks of the personal experiences of each member of the group, and it has been cemented with the sharp poetic perception of life by which Patativa do Assaré wrote his verses and history. Because of this reason the production invites everyone who is there—child, youth, or adult—to share emotions, to be the author of oneself, responsible for their choices, to be a creator.

Therefore, we open our process, our paths, on stage. We are not afraid of telling our histories, of telling who we are. It is here where our children and dreams were born and will continue to be born.

Fabiana Vasconcelos Barbosa, Rogério Tarifa, Iná Camargo Costa

Hatching Day

Theatre Sudenenne . Finland



At the moment, the theatre for children and young people in Finland is quite vivid. State supported theatres are asked to take the contemporary public into consideration and to organize educational programs. Thus, many cities and regional art centers for children plan culture programs for kindergartens and schools. They propose visits to museums, concerts, and performing arts events for all age groups. They hope that this will increase the amount of plays for children and young people from 9 to 15 years old. However, since 2007, the Minister of Education has forbidden schools to ask money from homes to pay for school trips related to any school-time activities. The kindergartens (children 1-6 years old), on the other hand, are under the administration of social services and they can ask parents to pay the theatre tickets. This has led to the increase of theatre performances for younger children 1-6 years old. Plays for older youth have suffered most from this reality: young teens don't go to theatre with their parents, schools don't take them, so where is the public?

The education in theatre for young audiences in Finland is based on projects from the Theatre Academy and theatre schools. In recent years, the Performing Arts Department of the Turku Academy of Applied Sciences, has educated a new generation of theatre artists who produce a lot of material for young audiences. The performances of the new generation are often talking about the world we live in, about the problems that occupy people's minds. Global warming, the rights of animals, tolerance, and empathy are popular themes in theatre for children today. The genres are often mixed; acting, dancing, puppet and object play dialogue with modern visual arts. Unexpectedness and anarchy in dramaturgy is also a characteristic.

The key word for the theatre today could be communication. This is communication between the theatre and its audience and vice versa, as well as communication between the society, the theatre makers, and the children. It also means communication from parents to children, and from children to parents. We share this world we live in, we share our experiences.

Hatching Day is a show for small children and their parents, meeting the demand for productions for this age group in Finland. Iisa Ilona Tähtinen is a representative of a new generation of puppeteers schooled in the Turku Art Academy. The way of working of these puppeteers consists of mixing different forms of performing arts, focusing on the possibilities of different materials and movement. Theatre Sudenenne has also strong roots to the Nordic theatre tradition, and Iisa Ilona has worked in Norway and in Denmark.

Surfacing, metamorphosis, growing and discovery are all concepts related to this performance and to its audience. The production is clear, simple, and precise, and the length of it is suitable for the young children. Small children notice and enjoy the little details and the presence of flowers, eggs, and insects are familiar to children. In addition, the slow rhythm, the colors and beautiful music appeal to this audience.

Hatching Day is a Finnish performance: nature is very much present in our lives, not as something mythical, but part of our everyday life. While authentic farm animals are less commonly known to children any more, flowers, trees, and insects, are part of the lives of all children and parents. Hatching Day shows that small wonders of life are shared everyday between parents and children.

Katariina Metsälampi

Open Circle

Theatre Open Circle . Lithuania



Five years ago, theatre OPEN CIRCLE appeared in the Lithuanian socio-cultural environment where direct theatre for teenagers and young people didn't exist. There were only a small number of performances in public theatres, including a few State Puppet theatres, but it seemed that no one was interested in giving priority to stage work where the target audience would be teenagers.

Theatre OPEN CIRCLE successfully filled that gap and immediately received great attention from young people as well as theatre critics and, surprisingly, adults too. Up to now, the first theatrical performance—autobiographical improvisations Open Circle remains the most favorite performance among youngsters.

In 2006, Lithuanian ASSITEJ organized the project “Bring your friend to the theatre,” which was aimed to invite those young people who had never been in theatre before. In this case, the performance Open Circle had a brilliant effect. It was a perfect way to get a first theatre encounter. The friendship between theatre and an audience without previous theatre experience, was developed through honest conversation and dialogue. There was no resistance or rejection, as often happens with young people when they are forced to go to the theatre under the ordinary educational program.

There is no set, just the empty space and eight actors sitting around. Step by step, while actors are telling the stories that happened in their childhood to the present day, the intimate circle opens and welcomes everyone to come in. The spectators recognize themselves in these stories, and the feeling finally appears that you are not alone with your problem. The idea about other people going through similar difficulties and solving similar problems makes them comfortable and secure. Actors speak to the audience sharing their life experiences; in particular the ones which still hurt and were unrevealed for a long time. Nothing is taught, implied, or imposed. The only intention is to reach the others within you.

Many school pedagogues and psychologists noticed the performance's educational impact and therapeutic features, even if you cannot refer to it as therapy theatre. The performance Open Circle does not avoid uncomfortable subjects and often breaks taboo themes.

Teens especially are willing to see Open Circle repeatedly, since it is not didactic, preaching or exclusively moral. Actors always try to bring up important issues and personal values. The young people are reached through a simple, understandable language, close to their speech. That's how a whole new acceptable theatrical perception is opened up, which makes the young people come back to the theatre again.

In 2006, the performance won the prestigious Lithuanian theatre award for best play in the theatre for children and young people category. It encouraged actors to continue their work, and keep it oriented to young viewers. Today, theatre OPEN CIRCLE has its individual way to speak to young people in a sensitive, genuine and creative form. The performance Open Circle, which has the same name as the theatre, stays within young actors' ideological framework and somehow reflects this in all of their other performances.

Violeta Podolskaite

WeFiction & Private Rite

Panta Rei Dance Theatre . Norway



The Norwegian TYA has developed fast over the last 10--15 last years with the establishment of a unique system of funding touring theatre for young audiences, "The Cultural Schoolbag," which gives every schoolchild the opportunity to experience theatre during school time. The creation of this new system of support for touring companies that play in schools, has resulted in both better quality and increased quantity of performances for young audiences. Over the years, dance theatre productions have become an important part of the productions presented to a young Norwegian audience. Panta Rei Dance Theatre has been part of this movement for many years, and they have toured extensively all over Norway. The founder of the company, Anne Ekenes trained at the Laban centre in London, and she brought new concepts of dance for children to the national dance scene. She works in a modern style, with great creativity and very good dancers.

With WeFiction and Private Rite Panta Rei has made a beautiful and dynamic dance performance consisting of two different choreographies made by different choreographers. It is part of their program to make short dances, not to tire the audience. The dances are often about 20-minutes long, and very often followed by a practical workshop with the audience, on the set. Panta Rei wants the youngsters to be "logged on." These two choreographies are thematically connected through the same starting point—namely memories. It is important to present the theme, but also to let the audience make its own associations. The performance is unpredictable, but not demanding. It is made with humor and closely relates to children's play, and is therefore recognizable for the audience. Private Rite pivots thematically around the yearning to create the perfect performance. It uses a great variety of physical and emotional expressions to convey this, such as impatience, joy, humor, curiosity, cooperation vs. competition, insistence vs. powerlessness. In WeFiction, memory is the common denominator for human interaction and emotions. Both choreographies are visually very beautiful, and could work as inspiration for a growing interest among young audiences in dance as an art form.

Contemporary dance is both unknown and well-known to a young audience. The physical communication in the dance speaks directly to the young people, but it is necessary for the school classes to be prepared for an unusual experience. Panta Rei gives practical workshops with the classes after the performance to make the pupils familiar with the dance language, and to allow them to express their memories in a modern dance form. The memories of children's play, of the relations between boys and girls, and of letters and secret writings are recognizable for the youngsters, and when they see it on stage, it may create inspiration for their own imagination.

There is no attempt by the dancers to act like children, but the young audience can relate to the grown-up dancers, who have a children's perspective in their dance. As the dancers treat the themes in a way that is recognizable for the audience, the young audience also tends to accept the artistic form it has been given. The performance never opens to the audience in terms of direct contact between the stage and the audience. The performance is fixed in its own aesthetics and choreography with few openings for improvisation.

The performance is created in interaction with the target group, and it tries to create a visual and kinesthetic atmosphere with themes that are interesting for the young people. A TYA production in Norway often tours in schools. This production is made for gyms and school halls, and the audience is prepared for a demanding experience.

So what makes this a TYA production? The performances appeal to a young audience through dealing with universal emotions and modes of interaction, in a direct and intuitive way. Thematically, both works deal with issues easily identifiable for young people, issues that often pertain to their own lives. The dance style and expression are easy to "read," especially in the Private Rite scenes that explicitly show competition and quarrel; while joy and unity prevail in WeFiction. Another sign of what makes this a TYA production might be found in the structure and under the conditions it is usually performed: two short choreographies, shown to a young audience in schools, followed by a workshop. The fact that themes and form all come from the interaction with the youngsters makes the production accessible for the young audience.

WeFiction & Private Rite is a typical modern Scandinavian TYA production. It is made in an international modern dance style, it deals with well known, universal themes in a humorous way and in a recognizable scenery. It does not treat any social or political problem, although on a personal level it can be seen as a comment on the social environment we, as individuals, belong to. It offers moments of unexpected beauty and of art far from the daily experiences of the young audience.

Gunnar Horn

Faim de Loup (Wolfed Down)

Ilka Schönbein, Theatre Meschugge/Le Grand Parquet . Germany/France



A fairy tale of hunger

One of the things we learn pretty early on in life is that fairy tales don't actually require fairies. On the contrary, those sweet sounding two words often stand for cruel stories filled with anger, betrayal and not too seldom death. Not much room for twinkling little magical creatures. As we come to this realization, we ask ourselves, "What ever made people think of telling these dark and bitter stories to children?" We can only blame time and its ever-changing circumstances to have led to this development. In Western European culture, which holds the roots for Ilka Schönbein's performance *Faim de Loup* (Wolfed Down), the shift from stories told to a mixed audience of both young and old listeners to a distinct child-oriented genre started early in the 19th century and can be closely connected to the collection of "Children's and Household Tales" by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Earlier traces of this cultural change can be found in the work of the French author Madame d'Aulnoy, who coined the expression fairy tales ("Les contes des Fees") in the late 17th century and already conceived of those stories as very well suited for a younger audience. So historically speaking, Ilka Schönbein's performance weighs heavy with centuries of telling stories pretty similar to the one she chose for her remarkable adventure on stage. The story of "Little Red Riding Hood," a brutal little nightmare which luckily comes to a happy ending, can to this day be considered as one of the most popular fairy tales of European origin. Schönbein's performance combines the well-known tale with the story of a young girl who, while obviously alone at home, starts her own dreamlike exploration of this old folk tale. *Faim de Loup*, a coproduction between Theater Meschugge and Le Grand Parquet, can also be read as an incisive comment on the traditional association of fairy tales as a morally educating means. It delicately intertwines the narrative of the old folk tale with the struggles of the young girl, who is constantly being corrected by the voice of her mother on the telephone who strongly cautions her to stay away from her crazy grandmother. So in connecting a widely known fairy tale with the everyday routines and troubles of a child growing up, Ilka Schönbein makes a strong point at defining the little girl's character not only as a revolting free spirit with a deep connection to her presumed "degenerated" and "crazy" grandmother (who in the words of the young girl's mother has come to a bad end) but she is also showing us a young person who is just starting to step out of her homely comfort zone into the real world.

This makes it highly appealing to a younger audience (recommended at 8+), which will find it really easy to relate to the girl's character on its way to defining her own grounds. It is a common conflict between a parent, who is generally regarded as a rational adult, and a child, who is traditionally granted its share of irrational fantasies (including fairy tales) but is still expected to learn how to act like a reasonable grown-up. Easily accessible and strongly compelling, the performance is structured by comical episodes, surreal and somewhat intriguingly scary sequences, and the convincing use of masks and puppets. A wisely chosen and precise dramatic structure not only reflects the conflict between adults and children, but also works on decamping normative structures of good and bad. The girl's excessive hunger for pasta turns her into a hungry wolf herself at one point. This scenographic move definitely blurs the lines between black and white and thereby also implements a dramaturgic leitmotif: hunger. A hunger for life. A hunger for experiences. This is what makes Ilka Schönbein's *Faim de Loup* a vivid and daring reminder of how frightening and at the same time fascinating this world can be. At the same time it is a rigorous attempt to deconstruct traditional ways in which fairy tales are often understood as a mere historical format of entertainment for children.

Bernd Mand

Berlin 1961

JES/Stuttgart/Germany . NIE/Norway



When History becomes a story

Historian and novelist Elisabeth Tuchman once wrote that the best way to write about history is to tell stories. Telling stories. Simple as it may sound, these two words also pretty much describe what theatre traditionally has been doing since its humble beginnings. From the epic historical drama to the very personal analysis of the human conditions it has always been about telling stories. Berlin 1961, a co-production between Junges Ensemble Stuttgart (JES) and the Norway based New International Encounter (NIE), is one of these examples of storytelling. Being the second play of a theatrical duet about Germany's recent history, it focuses on the destiny of a German family torn apart due to the separation of their country. Right from the beginning, story and history are tightly intertwined in this production—an onstage history lesson so to say. But then again, it is not, thankfully. Being told from a young girl's perspective, it aims straight at a younger audience (recommended at 14+) and carefully avoids too many explanations and educational finger pointing. This is a strategic move that not only leads to a suspenseful dramatic structure but also calls for at least some form of informative introduction especially for younger audience members. This bravely chosen structure embraces the risk of historical blind spots, as many of the younger viewers were not even born around the time the Berlin wall came down. This can be seen as an example of a modern approach in German TYA productions that started at some point in the 1990s and that does not underestimate its younger audiences but sees them as emancipated partners. It does not rely on a strict realism and does not feel the urge to constantly provide its audience with didactical or pedagogical information. And yet, the production is not merely taking place in a fictional aesthetic setting. Berlin 1961 does hereby definitely not walk in the footsteps of the GRIPS Theatre, which stands for a long tradition of a more didactical usage of the art of theatre, and also refuses to limit itself to a stereotypical rendition of history as some modern fairy tale and thereby translating the story into a merely synthetic fable. Instead, JES and NIE are going for a deep and personal dive into history. This production is breaking down a colossal historic situation into a more easily understandable microstructure: the family.

One family's personal history serves as a mirror for a whole political and social system on the eve of the shattering alterations that lead to the country's division into East and West Germany. The family as a well-known social structure makes it easy for teenage audiences to not only intellectually deal with historical facts but also get emotionally attached to this epochal cut in contemporary history that leads to major changes in the German society. Easy to relate to for younger viewers and very compelling too, the story is structured by a chain of narrative scenes and uses many musical and comical elements. It is an entertaining and also highly moving journey, which employs widely known clichés to provide an access for younger generations to a topic which they are mainly familiar with through history books. For example, the dramatic fragments are connected by the iconic East German car "Trabant," more commonly known as "Trabi." This iconographic leitmotif provides an easy link for younger viewers to this important part of their country's history to which probably most of them find it hard to relate. As a result of its multinational consistency of theatre workers, this collaboration of Junges Ensemble Stuttgart and New International Encounter draws on various theatrical means and elements. It is both an artistically ambitious reflection of recent historic events and a possibility for the audience to process a part of their history in a theatrical frame. This kind of artistic examination of historical events can quite frankly be considered as a steady component in German adult theatre. German productions for younger audiences, however, only recently seem to open up to more complex approaches to history and its various levels—a more than warmly appreciated development of which this production is an intelligent and persuasive representative.

Bernd Mand

In the Bush

SEKA . Zambia



A Venture into the Bush: SEKA's Kusanga

One of the African plays scheduled for performance at the 17th World Congress and Performing Arts Festival of ASSITEJ International is *In the Bush* (better known by its Zambian name, *Kusanga*), a theatre piece by Zambian outfit, SEKA Theatre. SEKA is an acronym for Sensitisation Education through Kunda Arts. The Kunda people of Eastern Zambia are traditionally subsistence farmers and hunters. However, they also have a rich cultural tradition which manifests itself through the crafts, dance, song, and the Malaila ceremony – an annual commemoration of the historic day on which Chief Mambwe killed a lion which had been terrorizing villagers in his chieftdom. During the ceremony, which takes place in the chieftdom of Senior Chief Nsefu, the Kunda people display a variety of their traditional arts.

The significance of the metaphor of the slain lion to the Malaila ceremony to some extent reflects the importance of wildlife to the livelihood and culture of the Kunda people, who live in the vicinity of the South Luangwa National Park, dubbed one of the greatest wildlife sanctuaries of the world. It is here that the famous “walking safari” was born. Kunda arts are partly characterized by the relationship of the Kunda people to the wildlife and natural resources of their environment.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the thematic focus of *Kusanga* is on the importance of appreciating natural resources and wildlife and recognizing their significance in everyday life. The play, in fact, is set in Malambo, part of the wilderness area surrounding the South Luangwa National Park. The story is weaved around a young girl who, as part of the process of her transition into adulthood, is taught the wisdom of the Kunda people by her uncle. He teaches her to understand the Kunda culture and acquire wisdom by observing the trees, animals, insects and birds found in the Kunda environment.

As Miranda Guhrs, one of SEKA's directors, and herself well-versed in the language, traditions, and culture of the Kunda people, among whom she grew up, explains, the girl “learns lessons from the cunning honey badger and honey-guide team, from the patient fish eagle, the majestic kudu, the stubborn warthog” The wisdom gained by the girl chaperones her to the chieftaincy – a position she acquires by the end of the play. Aesthetically, the play leans heavily on Kunda dance, mime, song and storytelling, although it also borrows from western theatrical conventions – which makes it a mulatto, a seamless blending of Zambian and western artistic expression.

The aesthetic qualities of the play therefore reflect a conscious effort on the part of the creators of the play to produce a work with an authentic Kunda cultural input. The play's cultural authenticity is also buttressed by the contents of the play, which epitomizes the Kunda cultural ethos. For example, the fact that the girl is taught by an uncle underlines the fact that in the Kunda cultural ethos the young are taught by people who are older (and therefore wiser and more experienced) – usually a respectable, wise elderly person. The uncle in the play therefore plays this role effectively. The play employs Kunda traditional storytelling techniques in the roll out of the story.

Thematically, the play is two-pronged: on the one hand, it encourages young people to appreciate nature, but on the other, it discourages forms of behavior that are destructive to nature, such as poaching. In Zambia, as in many other African countries, the rural youth are always faced with the lure of the fast life of big cities such as Lusaka. The urbanization of Zambia has led to the development of cities and towns that are inseparably linked to the core of the Zambian economy. Thus, the cities and towns are perceived by many rural youths to be the ultimate destination for those who want to improve their economic status.

In the paper, “Rural-Urban Migration in Zambia and Migrant Ties to Home Villages,” published in 1991 by Mitsuo Ogura, it is stated that the Zambian urban population stood at 40 percent of the entire population – indicating the fact that rural-urban migration by youths is a serious factor in the movement of people in Zambia. Most of the migration is to major cities such as the capital, Lusaka, and the mining industry in the north of the country.

The play, in this regard, encourages the rural youth to appreciate the abundant natural resources that characterize their environment. On the other hand, since the communities in the vicinity of the South Luangwa are traditionally inclined to hunting, poaching has taken its toll the population of wildlife in the park. The youth, in particular, face the temptation of getting involved in poaching in order to make quick money. The Kunda and other peoples of the Luangwa Valley, however, are no longer allowed to hunt freely because of the laws put in place to save some animal species from extinction.

Kusanga has been performed to mixed audiences in the villages of the Kunda people, as well as in Lusaka and in South Africa. Although the play is located in the environs of the wilderness of the Luangwa Valley, its message – particularly the need to appreciate and preserve nature and its resources – resonates with young people from non-rural environs. In a world where nature competes with science, technology and the human propensity to measure development and progress in terms of concrete and steel, a play like *Kusanga* brings a pertinent message to the youth.

Cheela F K Chilala

The Imaginary Book

La Baldufa . Spain



Less than one year after the so-called Gay Marriage Law had been adopted in Spain (July 2005), in the face of enormous resistance from the opposition Conservative Party (PP) and the Roman Catholic Church, the guys of La Baldufa undertook their next production, *El libro imaginario* (The Imaginary Book), based on an idea that they have had “cooking on a very low flame” since late 2004.

The gay marriage issue is not the play’s main theme, but one of its episodes shows a prince that breaks the rules when he not only falls in love with a plebeian but with one who happens to be a person of the same sex. However, this is not the only transgression in a play that is very critical of big powers and of several infamous figures in history.

A bishop, a general and a banker are a subject of parody, while Hitler and Stalin are ridiculed. All this amounts to big criticism towards huge powers; but other less grandiose, more everyday aspects do not emerge unscathed either. The grey, monotone life of a group of workers is the base from which the story develops.

The fact is that La Baldufa “reads the newspapers,” in the words of Enric Blasi, one of its young members, alluding to its commitment to real life and to values such as solidarity, tolerance and respect. The proposal was born after “many miles of driving around in a van,” that is, after hours and hours of discussion among the four members of the company. They are all parents and therefore definitely connected to children. “We were sick and tired of seeing the consumerism that has imbued them.”

That is the reason for their increasing commitment to a theatre of values without neglecting the sense of humor that has characterized La Baldufa from its beginnings in 1996.

In Spain, there is not a big tradition of youth theatre being produced by public centers; the usual way consists of grants for staging or performing. This production, however, achieved the extraordinary when it managed to involve the three administrations existing in the Spanish state: National, through the ministry of Culture (Inaem); Autonomous (Icic); and Municipal (Lleida’s city council). The Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC), the flagship of Catalan theatre and one of the main Spanish centers of theatrical production, got involved in the project too, as well as La Sala Miguel Hernández (Sabadell), the venue that witnessed the premiere (December 2006), which was followed by a Christmas season (2006) in the TNC.

As a result, the play’s production costs came to 148,000€, while the company’s previous productions had never exceeded 100,000€; that is, nearly 50% over the budget they were used to operate with thus far. One of the results was that La Baldufa went from having a regular cast of three actors to having six actors.

What they wanted to show was that having better means would allow them to offer a better work. In Spain, youth theatre usually has production costs far below those of adult theatre; the same may be said of the plays’ fees, which are much lower. But La Baldufa decided to show everyone that, although a well-done production cannot conceal a bad creation, a good work gets even better when it is staged with bigger means. There was one “unwanted” consequence of the production of *El Libro* having a higher cost: a higher fee per performance. All sums done, the play’s real cost was around 4,000€ per performance, but the market conditions in Spain made it advisable to leave it below 3,000€ per performance.

From the beginning, the company recognized the opportunity provided by being on stage at the TNC. They could not risk putting on a show that “got lost” in TNC’s immense space. This was not only a question of bigger or smaller, but also of the opportunity to give youth theatre—so seldom invited to be present on the big stages—visibility and exposure. With that goal in mind, when approaching the formal aspects of the show, they chose a rather baroque style.

In later performances, although the play is best staged in medium and big spaces, the company has strived to adapt it to smaller spaces that would seem unsuitable for the show. They accommodate because of their determination to bring theatre to every possible corner.

In the end, *El Libro* provoked some controversy due to its content (although there were more supporters than critics) and got some successes. The main one was over 200 performances that included not only Spain but also France, Portugal, Germany, United Kingdom and Italy. This May, it will not only be performed at the Assitej International Festival but also in Macau.

Homosexuality, power abuse and a critical view of everyday dullness form the plot of a play . . . for young audiences? Enric Blasi responds on behalf of the company: “Every day we like the label ‘youth-’ or ‘child-oriented’ less and less and ‘all audiences’ or ‘inter-generational’ (the denomination used by Nino D’Introna, from Lyon’s TNG) more and more. We try to put up productions with different levels of interpretation and emotion . . . because no two people in the audience, whether adults or children, are the same.”

Lola Lara



In 2005, eight actors from the Maastricht Academy of Dramatic Arts, who all grew up in the 1980s and 90s, created an unforgettable performance about the pain of growing up.

Prime is a production for everyone who has ever been eleven, or not quite that.

A brief look back at the history of the Dutch youth theatre

Over the last forty years, youth theatre in the Netherlands has developed into an autonomous art form and has become a vigorous segment of the theatre landscape, both within the Netherlands and abroad. In the 1960s, a new generation of theatre makers reacted against the traditional, production-oriented type of fairy tale theatre that had held sway on the stage up to then. From then on, social commitment was demanded from both the makers and their productions. And the children, on their part, were expected to actively participate in the realization of the productions more than ever before. “Stimulating creativity” became the buzzword in this period of the history of the Dutch youth theatre, which saw the birth of many new companies. The emergence of the emancipation movement at the end of the 1970s produced a new impulse within youth theatre, starting a slow shift in perspective and the issues addressed, from society at large to children’s more direct environment and perceptions. Fear, conflict, sexuality and falling in love were chosen as topics. Traditional roles, underlying relations and the patronizing attitudes of parents and teachers formed the basis of performances with titles such as: *When my Mother Is Cold I Have to Wear a Cardigan* (theatre group Wederzijds 1981).

In the course of the 1980s, theatre companies left the political and pedagogical trends behind them. The emphasis shifted from the communication of a message to a growing attention for the theatricality of performances. Youth theatre managed to free itself from its pedagogical image and grow into an autonomous artform. The way the audience was approached also changed. The days in which youth theatre thought it needed to come down to its youthful audience’s level had come to an end; young people were taken seriously. Freed from the pedagogical and political trends of the past and not hampered by a predominantly educational task, theatre makers had more room to experiment with form and content. It is this development that drove youth theatre to great heights and which, around the turn of the century, also seemed to blur the frontiers between youth and adult theatre.

Discussion about what can and cannot be shown to children

In 2005, the year in which eight young actors were creating their graduating performance, *Prime* (or *Priemgeval* in the original Dutch), within the shelter of the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Maastricht, something was stirring. The discussion about what can and cannot be shown to children (present since the beginning of youth theatre) was reinvigorated by a series of incidents and flared up once again.

Reactions to productions such as *The Horrible Stepmother Show* (theatergroep Max), *The Nastiest most Disgusting Sandwich of the Universe* (theatergroep Artemis) and *Witches’ tricks* (Gnaffel) also spoke volumes. Whole school classes walked out of the theatres, following their angry teachers. Parents were shocked by the form and content of youth theatre. These topics, from a dialogue about a French kiss to broaching the painful problems that exist between parents, stepparents, and children, provoked overwrought reactions and even resulted in letters to national newspapers.

In the view of dramaturg Peter Anthonissen (theatergroep Artemis), these reactions of parents and teachers were not just a result of a debate about values that had become more heated. He asked himself whether this reaction could be a result of a misunderstanding about the actual place and task of art in our society: “Youth theatre doesn’t just provide entertainment. The main aim of what we are doing is different: it is to mirror and reflect on reality, even when it is not very pleasant.” Journalist Anita Twaalfhoven also looked for an explanation of the patronizing attitude towards youth theatre in “meddlesomeness” of those who see youth theatre as an extension of the sort of parenting parents themselves seek.

In 2005, Floor Huygen, the then recently appointed artistic manager of theatergroep Artemis in Den Bosch, invited a class of the Academy of Dramatic Arts Maastricht to produce their graduation performance, which had the theme of “growth,” at Artemis. This became *Prime*. Artemis stayed with the theme of growth and deepened it with performances such as *Lizzy Wants More!* and *The Nastiest most Disgusting Sandwich of the Universe*. *Prime* was first seen by the public at the Boulevard theatre festival and became a real hit. The performance was programmed twice during the *Tweetakt* youth theatre festival (Utrecht) and could later be seen at the *Oerol* festival (Terschelling), the *Fringe Festival* (Amsterdam) and in Linz and Vienna. The public, it seemed, could not get enough of this bittersweet performance that held up a mirror to children and reminded adults what it was like to be eleven.

The actors used authentic material as starting point for their performance. It is these photos of and anecdotes about their eleven-year-old selves, their own wishes, dreams and thoughts, combined with the group dynamic, that makes *Prime* the extraordinary and layered performance that it is. In short scenes and with a consistently physical acting style, it takes the child who is growing up – no longer really a child but not yet an adult – as its subject. Play, the discovery of sexuality, falling in love, feeling ashamed of or embarrassed by your parents and jealousy: it is all there, recognizable for both children and adults. During the performance they experience the same emotions, only from opposite perspectives.

In 2005, the boundaries between youth and adult theatre were slowly blurring, but still youth theatre—both within drama education and beyond—did not yet have the same status as theatre made exclusively for adults. *Prime* marked a turning point, certainly in the educational context. In creating the piece the young actors allowed themselves complete freedom. Existing codes and laws of the theatre were put aside. The letting go of existing structures had a liberating effect. It resulted in a performance that came from the heart and not, as was so often the case, from the head. Floor Huygen, who coached the actors, gave them free rein and made them feel co-responsible as the creators of this theatre piece. *Prime* is a performance in which the actor as maker is central, with all that he or she has to offer, instead of the actor as merely a character in the service of the director.

It was only in the very last stage of the rehearsals that the director, Arie de Mol, brought structure to the huge amount of material. As a result, the separate scenes were given a beginning and an end. *Prime* is a performance that captures the heart, stimulates and confronts. It deals with issues that concern and engage children, although they might not talk to adults about them. That is what youth theatre in the Netherlands, and Artemis in particular, shows.

Starved (Assoiffés)

Teatre Le Clou . Canada



Finding the Authentic Voice

In the last few years, the Quebec theatre company Théâtre Le Clou has become a mainstay in Montreal's urban and cultural life, establishing itself as a creative space geared toward youth. Producing pieces throughout Quebec, as well as abroad, the company has accrued a number of accolades, and has received several "Masques" in the theatre for young audience category from the Académie Québécoise du Théâtre. Theatre Le Clou's mandate explicitly situates it as TYA; however, the company expands beyond youth theatres (Maison Théâtre and the Théâtre Denise-Pelletier de Montréal), and also produces plays in other venues. Following the debut of Theatre Le Clou's *Assoiffés* (Starved) at the College Lionel-Groulx, the piece was first produced professionally at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, a venue devoted to Quebecois new play production and development. Though young audiences did attend *Assoiffés* at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, they were outnumbered by Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui's seasonal audience of adult playgoers. The question, then, is whether *Assoiffés* is a piece for young audiences, or whether it addresses adults in its framing as "youthful" entertainment.

According to Théâtre Le Clou's own institutional mandate as a youth theatre venue, *Assoiffés* seems to fit well within their cadre. The company boasts numerous awards and distinctions in TYA and shares close ties with venues which produce children's theatre. Yet, it seems that what interests Théâtre Le Clou in *Assoiffés* is not only its social responsibility to the young public as audience, but rather a dramatic interest in staging the threshold—the moment between childhood and adulthood—which is adolescence. In all of its productions, including *Assoiffés*, the company aims to revive the innocence and authenticity of childhood, which is either effaced or forgotten in the passage to adulthood. This preoccupation with innocence and authenticity also drives the work of playwright Wajdi Mouawad, who collaborated with Théâtre Le Clou for the first time in *Assoiffés*. While Mouawad's dramatic work is not limited to a "young public" audience, his plays stage the same desires and passions as those which guide productions at Théâtre Le Clou. In Mouawad's play *Assoiffés*, this passion is voiced in the angst-ridden diatribes delivered by the teenage Sylvain Murdoch.

Assoiffés opens with a teen hurling his ennui and sense of estrangement at the world. From beginning to end, he recites and refuses to cede the inalienable right to speak and to exist. Rude and with neither apology nor relent, Sylvain drives in his desire to feel and to sense things deeply, to awaken from the stupefying, superficial, and vacuous existence he experiences in everyday life and among his circle of friends. His voice sounds as the unrelenting and forceful demand of a generation whose voices go unheard.

One phrase returns again and again in Mouawad's plays: "Childhood is like a knife in the throat." Having removed that knife from Sylvain Murdoch, Mouawad allows the teenager to speak, to yell, to rage, to bear the weight of his own language and express his own being. Murdoch's enunciative presence dominates the play's action: he speaks of and to that which had before been silent or silenced. Sylvain Murdoch's reproaches are numerous. He attacks consumer society, the omnipresence of television, the obligation to act as expected, the everyday routine by which people rise each morning and head into work without asking why? In refusing to keep silent, he launches his rebellion against a modern society in which he does not find himself. The adult character of Boon, and his fascination with beauty, becomes a rejoinder and answer to Murdoch's vocal refusal to act like a teen, to go with the flow and fit in with a media-saturated consumer society. Boon—who with age has lost the innocence and beauty he once possessed at Murdoch's age—narrates *Assoiffés*, as he is reminded in his first encounter with the angsty teen of his own adolescence fifteen years prior. *Assoiffés* thus takes the form of a memoir, in which an adult Boon recounts an episode from his childhood in retrospect and in a recovered authentic voice. Despite the importance of Sylvain Murdoch's voice in reviving Boon's authentic speech, the ennui of adulthood remains the heart of *Assoiffés*'s intrigue, reminding those now past adolescence to remember the passion and anger that once lived and burned within them.

The play appears to be an appeal to teenagers to awaken to the beauty and authenticity inherent in their lives at this moment, to use their words to voice revolt against a world they do not understand and which does not understand them. By giving Sylvain Murdoch the right to speak, Wajdi Mouawad removes the knife and teaches the child to speak as a teenager. He who has yet to speak now has the right to express himself. The voice raised in anger becomes thus the means to fight against the ugliness of a society obsessed with media and consumption and which must be critiqued and fought. Through his voice, Murdoch affirms his right to express his presence.

Presented to a diverse public and staging the concerns of both adolescents and adults, *Assoiffés* positions itself as an intergenerational dialogue in which the divisions between its public audiences are overcome. As is often the case with Mouawad, adolescence in *Assoiffés* symbolizes a lost identity that might be recovered, an original authenticity which must not be repressed. In a play that speaks to youth of all ages, the audience is called to identify with adolescence and hear not only the voice of the other, but also that voice's anger, its revolt, its authenticity. *Assoiffés* is youth theatre, but above all it is a play which plunges the spectator into the truth and beauty of adolescence, into the truth and beauty which s/he carries within beyond youth.

Tanya Déry-Obin

Translated from French by Joanna Donehower

Tricote

Compagnie Käfig . France



Hip-hop moves contemporary dance to heaven and earth. Mourad Merzouki comes from the suburbs of Lyon where, through his vision of dance, he has elevated hip-hop to a special place. With the performance Tricote Merzouki wants to connect with young audiences – in a pedagogical way. It begins with an audition where candidates try to out-do each other and save their own skin. Step by step, Merzouki transports us into a world where hip-hop is turned on its head. Mourad Merzouki takes young and old on a journey far away from the clichés associated with hip hop music.

Children can be absorbed by hip-hop when their parents let go of their prejudices about the form. Here lies the strength of Mourad Merzouki's choreography, which offers a performance of many layers. In Tricote Mourad Merzouki has created a performance that shows the young audience what goes on behind the scenes. How one thing leads to another: for example, how we recruit dancers, how someone always wants to be better than someone else. It's a metaphor for life, where we crush each other as if in a boxing match.

Over the years Mourad Merzouki has raised hip-hop culture to such a level that institutions have to recognize this culture not as underground, but as an important part of The Culture, of Our Culture. France is like a kaleidoscope that reflects many different roots and when we mix up these tiny mirrors we get a Mourad Merzouki show: where capoeira and hip-hop embrace tango and classical music. This show re-invents the face of theatre for young people in the way that it is constructed, where different layers are represented and made accessible to the audience. It gives the key to understanding the world of contemporary dance.

Often, when children come to the theatre they see one side of the show and have no idea that behind this show there are people working in the shadows as sound designer, lighting designer, or directing assistant. This is the

way that Merzouki has built his show, a sort of anthem to all the artists backstage, and of course it's also to pay tribute to the dancers who are doing their best to get a chance to dance on stage. They fight to be in the scene. Merzouki has created the company Käfig, which means “Cage” in German and Arabic. It's this cage he wants to break with his creations: the cage of prejudice. The work he has undertaken for many years is a part of the field of cultural democratization: “Culture for all is through the need of all.”

Young audiences are not inferior audiences just as hip-hop is not an inferior culture. The aesthetics of Mourad Merzouki are simple in their confusion, in the sense that they cover every person and their differences while calling on all age groups to break down their prejudices and to look at each other as if they were looking in the mirror.

Through all of his creations, Merzouki has given credibility to the hip-hop culture that many believe to be vulgar. This is in line with the cultural politics that Mr. Jack Lang (Minister of Culture under former French president Mitterand) already wanted to establish in the 1980s—to give all forms of art the opportunity to be expressed.

Melanie Marchand

