

Learning from children's theatre; teaching children's theatre

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This paper is about actor practice. There are many schools and techniques of acting, but ultimately acting is an individualised practice. Phillip Zarrilli has written that, “Every time an actor performs, he or she “implicitly enacts a “theory” of acting that is influenced by context, history and culture” (1995, p. 4). In this paper I am going to discuss how a study of actors who create theatre in one particular context - with and for children - can lead us to a better understanding of the nature of actor practice. This has, in turn, implications for the way that training prepares actors for a creative career.

As with most professional practice, relationships are central to actor practice. Many theorists and researchers have written about the idea of a conversation between actors and audiences, often in the attempt to distinguish the lived experience of theatre from its written texts or staging. For example, in “The Transformative Power of Performance” Erika Fischer-Lichte describes how every laugh, cough, clap or moment of silence creates an atmosphere that feeds back into the actors’ performances, and asks what other conditions shape what she calls that ‘feedback loop’ (2008, p.38). As anyone who has been to the theatre knows, context is everything. The physical space, for example, exerts a powerful influence on the relationship between the audience and the actors. A main stage venue in which the two parties are physically distant from each other, and where the actors may not be able to see the audience in a darkened auditorium, creates very different relationships to those that occur in street theatre and the theatrical styles used in each reflects this. Street theatre tends to involve much more improvisation, direct address and physical contact between the actors and audience than is usually possible in main stage theatre. Theatre experiences in educational settings or as part of educational programs involve different relationships again, sometimes shaped by the physical surroundings, how much and what kind of participation is involved, and how the event is framed. The Australian research project, TheatreSpace (O’Toole, Adams, Anderson, Burton & Ewing, 2014) , found that secondary school students’ experiences of live theatre were influenced by whether or not they were positioned as competent theatre-goers, the welcoming nature of the space, the way adults negotiated their role as cultural gate-keepers

and the use of the curriculum to interpret the production. Context, form, participation and relationships are therefore all closely linked and as much as they affect audiences, they also shape actor practice.

In my PhD research, which forms the basis of this presentation, I am interested in understanding how one particular relational element may shape actor practice, and that's the presence of children. Theatre with and for children has certain characteristics that can serve as a lens for investigating practice, functioning as a sort of stress test of relationships, participation and theatrical form. I wanted to know: Why do theatre actors work with children? What values, beliefs and goals underpin their work? Do they change in response to working with children? And are they shaped differently by different contexts such as youth theatre or performing in kindergartens or in schools, in main stage productions or on the street? So far, I have investigated these questions through surveys and interviews with eight actors and I'll be following that up later in the year with observations and follow up interviews.

The first notion I had to consider was what is actor practice? For the purposes of this study I am drawing on an analysis of professional practice by Robyn Ewing and David Smith that describes it as being made up of the elements of doing, knowing, being and becoming (Ewing & Smith, 2001). The doing and knowing part of theatre actor practice is mostly made up of the skills, techniques and what has been called the artistry that actors have. Some of these are explicit skills like being able to sing well and some are tacit, like having an unarticulated 'feel' for the nuances of your fellow actor's emotional state and being able to calibrate your performance accordingly.

The being part of practice relates to the actor's identity – what are their values and beliefs about theatre? About children? About society? What motivates them to make theatre with and for children? And what do they hope children gain from it? And finally, the becoming part of practice refers to how the experiences actors have, and how their reflections on those experiences, feeds back into their practice. In other words, how it shapes what they do and know, and who they are.

I conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews with the actors and then I analysed the data using inductive and typological methods. I looked for salient information, grouped it according to the research themes, and let emerging themes feed back into subsequent

interviews and analysis. This led to a process of progressive focussing, where I tried to draw out common themes, whilst still maintaining the unique texture of each participant's story.

What I found was that the actors I interviewed are, to some degree, of a type. Whether they create theatre with or for children, or whether they perform in main stage productions, in the street or in schools, they share some common theatrical orientations. Firstly, they have a preference for collaborative ways of working, whether with each other, or with children. One participant defines her entire practice in terms of her theatrical relationships. She said,

I think my creative practice sits probably more with the people that I work with than a methodology. I feel like we are the methodology.

The actors I interviewed also tend to be drawn to non-text based genres and are all devisors of original theatre. I think these particular theatrical orientations are significant because they point to certain values and beliefs about participation and relationships that underpin their practice. The actors I interviewed have what I'd call an egalitarian outlook towards theatrical practices: Firstly, they don't accept a hierarchy of genres – which means they take popular theatre forms like clowning and street theatre as seriously as main stage text-based productions. Secondly, they don't accept a hierarchy of age – which means they believe that children deserve the best theatre experiences possible and they are keen to work with them as equal collaborators. And, finally, these actors don't accept a hierarchy of creative roles. What I mean by this is that they see both themselves and children as creative, capable beings. They see the actor as potentially much more than an interpreter of a writer's or a director's vision and this is manifested in their strong interest in telling their own stories through devised theatre. They are what British actor and theatre maker Tim Crouch calls "authorial actors." By this he means actors who want to contribute to the wider dramaturgy of the work. He says of this approach to acting,

It's about thinking of the project as a whole, thinking of the play as a whole, thinking about what is happening in the world of the play, what's happening in its relationship with its audience, the bigger scale of things, rather than what is often narrowly focused on, which is the actor's relationship with their character and the character's relationship with the other characters (O'Kane, 2012, p. 92).

In another quote from this same interview with Patrick O'Kane, Crouch advocates simple staging as a way of accessing this relationship with the audience. He says,

Every time you approach a new piece of work, you must understand its demands, understand how little is required to spring that work into life so that the audience can feel they are completing and co-authoring it (O’Kane, 2012, p. 106).

The term, ‘co-authoring’ seems significant to me, because it’s resonant of the participatory relationships that the actors in my study seek to create with children. They believe that children have good ideas and see their own role as inspiring those ideas or helping to realise them through theatre. Here are some of the things they said that reflect this, each coming from a different theatrical context:

This is from an actor who has created and performed shows for babies: *What I’d hope the babies get out of it, is their sense of themselves and their agency and autonomy in that moment, in that 35 minutes of a theatrical experience.*

This is from an actor who uses the same body-centred approach with street children in Nepal as with students from some of the most privileged private schools in Melbourne: *the actor’s at the centre of it all. And so they create. So that’s what I want for the kids to do. “We’re here. We’ve got nothing. We’re going to create.”*

And finally, this is from an actor who makes performances that offer children a high degree of participation: *(our) shows leave space for the brilliance of children to be witnessed, encouraging lateral thinking and creating a place that supports a child to take a risk and trust their own creative voice.*

These quotes indicate that these actors have a strong belief in children’s creative capacities and that they have forged a practice that embraces collaboration with them, or, to return to Tim Crouch’s term, ‘co-authorship’. This is who they are; it’s the ‘being’ part of their practice. But what of ‘becoming’? Do the experiences actors have working with children actually shape their practice? Do they learn any new skills? Do their values change? Or have they just found a good platform for their existing orientations? Well, these actors certainly have found a theatrical place that they can call home, but what I’ve found is that it is constantly being refurnished with new insights and skills. One actor told me:

Working with children shifted my whole perception of art and my own place in the world.

This particular actor's life was profoundly transformed by her own initial encounters with theatre and when she saw that it had potential to make a similar contribution to children's lives she was led towards a career that facilitates expression of her strong social justice values.

On a purely technical level, all the participants said that the special conditions of working with children developed a range of skills in much the same way that training at altitude improves athletes' fitness. A common claim was that it encouraged them to embrace play and that it taught them to work quickly, to be responsive and to be better collaborators. One actor said that working with babies taught him to develop a sense of "happy, active detachment" in relation to the audience, because babies don't have any theatre etiquette and will sometimes just roll around on the floor. Some participants said that the way children give unmediated responses and don't hide their boredom has sharpened their performances and their dramaturgical skills. Interestingly, all of the actors also said that creating theatre with and for children offers them opportunities to present workshops in schools or to tour performances many times, which hones their skills in the way that only repetition can.

So, yes, creating theatre with and for children does shape actor practice on several levels, influencing values, motivations and skills but I also wanted to understand the relationship between these actors' training and the professional direction they had taken. Although several participants had obtained teaching degrees later in life, only two of the participants in my research had received any training at all about creating theatre with and for children in their original performing arts training courses. However, what I found was that all of the participants' training had focused on devising new work and/or positioned the actor's body as the primary element of theatre. One performer said that he'd been disappointed when he didn't get into one of the prestigious drama courses in Australia, but that this had turned out well because the course he ended up doing showed him that he really wanted to be a theatre maker rather than an actor. This is a revealing comment, firstly because it belies his skills and the pleasure he takes in performing, and secondly because, in separating the two terms, it suggests that actors may have a perception that they are often sidelined from certain creative conversations in theatre. At the same time as they have been exploring ways to start their own theatrical conversations, these actors have also been drawn to working with children and that apparent correlation would be interesting to investigate further, to understand if and how these two expressions of practice are related.

Somewhat depressingly, the actors in my research all mentioned that theatre with and for children has a low status in Australia, whether in an educational or a public entertainment context. In other words, children are often excluded from the ‘cultural conversation’ too. The lack of focus on children in actor training courses could therefore be interpreted as a reflection of a wider view in society of children’s art as an optional cultural extra, or as a sort of favour to young people, rather than the opportunity for creative agency and collaboration that the participants in my research say they have experienced, and that one would hope children also take from these encounters.

To conclude, then, my early research has drawn out several strands about participation and creative authorship as it relates to theatre actors and to children. Bringing these strands together suggests that actors who work with children want to exercise their creative capacities as theatre makers and want to engage in meaningful relationships with their audiences. Further research on training could explore if experiences of devising theatre and of making theatre with and for children in performance courses develops actors’ authorial capacities or shapes their beliefs about children’s culture, and how this might influence their future career choices. It’s interesting to speculate that if actors had the confidence, skills and desire to make theatre with and for children from the point of graduation, they may be more creatively fulfilled and children’s theatre may enjoy wider recognition and appreciation.

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