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48. THEATRE FOR BABIES

A New Kind of Theatre?

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Theatre for the very young has garnered the interest of numerous artists, investigators and parents. Over the past few years, the words “theatre for babies” and “baby theatre” have echoed in new productions in different parts of the world and been discussed in theatre conferences.

When learning of this new kind of theatre, many artists, researchers and parents ask why it is so relevant to discuss or even make theatre for babies, given that one can entertain a baby with pretty much any action. Or why turn to theatre when one can capture a baby’s or very young child’s attention by an action as simple as revealing and then hiding an object? Interestingly enough, one could say that this argument echoes the same thinking or prejudice that many people have regarding theatre for children in general: “why do children need theatre? Why, when they can be entertained so easily?”

This writer understands theatre for babies as professional theatre led by adults performing for an audience of babies from months old to toddlers approximately one and a half to two years old accompanied by a parent or adult companion. Babies usually sit on their caregiver’s lap or in a stroller, and watch a play - usually between 30 to 45 minutes long - designed especially for them.

Given theatre for babies’ newly emergent and contemporary status, it seems too soon to write its historiography. But one can say with confidence that theatre for babies productions emerged in Europe during the 1990’s in places such as Italy (La Baracca), Sweden (Unga Klara troupe), France (Acta-Agnès Desfosses) and the United Kingdom (Polka), among others. Small Size, a European Network for the diffusion of performing arts aimed at early childhood (0–6) “aims to promote an awareness of the significance of performing arts for early childhood…..” At International theatre festivals for early childhood audiences one can find entries such as “Visions of future, visions of theater” (La Baracca, Bologna, Italy), “Rompiendo el cascarón” (Teatro Fernán Gómez, Madrid, Spain) and “Theater von Anfang an!” (Dresden, Germany). In Argentina, two-year olds have attended theatre for children productions for many decades.

Theatre for babies productions tend to follow the aesthetics and manners of local TYA. In Europe, for example, one can see abstract productions with non-linear plotlines, audience members are received onstage, and performers play with objects such as water, shoes or musical instruments. At times, audiences are invited to interact

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with the performers, as they did in Norway’s Teater Fot production “De røde skoene” (The Red Shoes) and Swedish Unga Kara’s “Baby Drama”.

Another thing happens in Argentina, where two years old have been brought along to theatre for children for many decades. In “Chiches” (Toys), one of the few local productions intended for babies, there is a simple storyline, conflict, defined characters, songs, no use of microphones and no interaction with the audience. This production pays special attention to the stage and audience area settings and to avoid over stimulation from loud music, blackouts and infantilizing the characters. During the production process the company worked on understanding the special audience they will face: babies in strollers or sitting at the adult’s laps, adults “explaining” what is happening onstage to their babies, no verbal response, crying, etcetera. As the variety of theatre for babies productions illustrate, there is no single one way to design theatre for babies. One can also observe that the baby-caregivers audiences also respond differently in each part of the globe.

Production play processes are similar around the world: recalling the actors’ personal experiences (as infants or with babies), watching baby videos, observing babies in relationship with their parents and/or conducting workshops with baby and caregiver audiences that are filmed and adults are asked for feedback.

Many theatre productions for babies include in the play development process perspectives and experiences from both artists and scholars from the psychology and pedagogical field. Suzanne Osten (director) and Ann-Sofie Bárány (writer and psychoanalyst) from Swedish troupe “Unga Klara” respond to criticism that babies are too young to understand:

“...part of the message is that we underestimate the intelligence of the newborn. ‘If you can speak to a three-month-old baby and get laughter from them, you must be able to write an interesting play for them,’ said Osten.”

But a significant question persists among some theatre practitioners and theatre researchers: is theatre for babies theatre? French semiologist Patrice Pavis stresses that the word theatre comes from the Greek word Theatron that translates as balcony or vantage point. Theatron manifests a fundamental feature of this art, which is contemplation: it is the place where the audiences observe an action that is presented to them in another space (Pavis, 1998, p. 425).

According to Argentinean scholar Jorge Dubatti, there are three moments of internal structure that must be present in an event in order for it to be considered theatrical: the convivial event; the poetic event (theatrical poíesis/theatrical poetics), that is, the artistic production, what happens onstage; and the expectatorial event (poetic and convivial expectancy), the role that the audience plays (Dubatti, 2007, pp. 35–36).

Theatre for babies corresponds with Dubatti’s theory: there is a convivial event, a poetic event and an expectatorial event; a vantage of a certain (artistic) event. But Dubatti also states that there is an ontological leap between the convivial event (that is, real life) and the poetic event (the artistic parallel world that is being presented to the audience). Like the fictional pact in literature, in theatre, audiences know that they are facing something that it is not real. Through convention (Pavis, 1998,