2. Theory and Theatre for Young Audiences: Marginalization and Cultural Production

Terry Eagleton starts his book *After Theory* as follows:

The golden age of cultural theory is long past. The pioneering works of Jacques Lacan, Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are several decades behind us. So are the path-breaking early writings of Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Helene Cixous, Jurgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Not much has been written since that matched the ambitiousness and the originality of these founding mothers and fathers. Some of them have since been struck down. Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with Aids. It dispatched Lacan, Williams, and Bourdieu, and banished Louis Althusser to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. It seemed that God was not a structuralist. (1)

For those who are wary of theory, this assertion may cause a sigh of relief; after all, the relationship between theory and practice is often perceived as tenuous. But Eagleton continues to point out that the decline of theorists doesn’t mean we can go back to the age of pre-theory innocence—on the contrary, although new theorists and theories may not be visible on the horizon, we are doomed to continue to expand and apply the theories of the Golden Age: “If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever” (2).

Here Eagleton gets at the heart of a problem in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)—not only do we not have a grand theorist who even remotely glanced at TYA as an area of research, but also few and far between are the researchers that came after the Golden Age that expanded or applied these grand theories to the field of TYA. And while we may continue to maintain that theory is in service of the practice, the lack of theory and theorizing has not helped the
practice one bit, but on the contrary contributed to the marginalization of the field as something unworthy of academic contemplation.

Throughout this book, I maintain that the theory is often lacking in any discourse on TYA and its place and function in society. In this chapter, I make an attempt to narrow this gap by using, among other theorists, Pierre Bourdieu and Ric Knowles to explore a theoretical explanation of the marginalization of TYA and at the same time examine TYA as cultural production. Nonetheless, with Knowles, I believe that “theory must always be practiced and practice theorized, with theory and its application understood as being mutually constitutive and emerging from particular, local contexts” (21). Therefore, I will illustrate the theories put forth with a discussion of how the theory of TYA as cultural production plays out in different locales, particularly at international TYA festivals.

**TYA AS CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

TYA has been posited as a way to cultivate future audiences (United States), a way of emancipating its youth (Netherlands), or as a means for ideological indoctrination (Soviet Russia), as shown in chapter 1. Yet, it has never been specifically discussed as cultural production, which is, in and of itself, a contested and by no means stable concept, that I define for the purposes of this chapter as the production of cultural capital, such as music, art, theatre, literature, performing arts, including the ability to produce, trade, and perceive cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu maintains that this cultural capital doesn’t come naturally. It is acquired, one has to know the codes to acquire it, and it is connected with forms of knowledge, competences, or dispositions (Distinction 2; Johnson 7). Following this thought through, it would imply that children are inherently bereft of cultural capital—even though they are engaged in the experience of school, which is one of the premiere sites to gain cultural capital—since they haven’t fully acquired the codes, competencies, and disposition yet. Accepting Bourdieu’s notion of cultivating cultural capital, then, however arguable it may seem, gives insight in how it can be theoretically, versus historiographically as in chapter 1, explained that TYA has been placed in a marginalized position, not recognized as contributing to national cultural production. This despite all the activity going on in the field especially since the 1960s both on global (e.g., Assitej International) and national levels.

One of the inherent paradoxes in TYA is that the target perceivers (the child/youth audience) are not the consumers (the ones who buy the tickets and decide to attend the production). From generation to perception of