

## Can it be FOR, if it's BY or WITH?

Moderators: Young Ai Choi (Korea), Paul Harman (UK).

*The forum took place in a large, elegant 19<sup>th</sup> Century room at the Oddfellow Palace in Copenhagen. 40 or more participants sat in a large circle, creating a shared atmosphere of interest in a complex topic covering all aspects of theatre created for, by and with young people.*

Chairman Paul Harman introduced the session with an account of his experience of the participatory theatre in education practice of the 1960's, in which children and young people were put into role to explore a theme led and structured by theatre professionals. Youth Theatre is the term used today in English-speaking countries to distinguish theatre created or performed by young people from Theatre for Young Audiences, usually created and performed by adult professionals. However, 'Amateur' is not a useful word. 'Non professional' is a more positive term. We need to question our definitions and assumptions and identify the values of work for, by and with children and young people.

Questions around quality remain however. Are young actors ever 'better' than adult professionals? What is 'authenticity'? Is it a question of how an adult authentically portrays a child? If work is truly to reflect young people's ideas should young people be involved in generating ideas as part of a theatre making process? Historically, the debate was how can children be involved as actors. How can children today be involved on a practical level in the professional practice of creating theatre?

*The session opened with examples of different approaches to involving young people in creating and presenting theatre offered by participants from around the world.*

### Examples

A director from Hungary working in Ireland asserted that young actors are more authentic and that there is an important value of young people seeing their own generation on stage. If stories are about young people they should be created by young people.

A Netherlands Dance company created a project on 'ideals'. Teenagers and artists collaborated in a school based project which was as aspirational as any other artistic process.

In Australia a company has young people paid to work alongside professional artists. The value is around quality of production and intrinsic values, such as socialisation and a growth in confidence, happen as by-products not as a main aim. Young people's involvement is as artists and there is no question of inferior quality. The aim is to create theatre of significance for audiences beyond school children. The question of young people's involvement as actors should be about needs of the show. Is it *essential* that a particular role is played by a child?

In the UK the public funder Arts Council England has been proactive in getting young people interested in art. Free tickets are offered to young people as part of scheme entitled *A Night Less Ordinary*. But in the city of York young people took over programming of a theatre so they became decision makers in cultural provision.

In Austria a dance company involved young people as 'consultants' by tapping into what they wanted to say. Groups performed in Flash Mobs at specific locations. Young people show they are theatre artists through their commitment and participation, regardless of technical ability.

In a project to recreate Indigenous Dance in a part of Australia, led by Jacob Boehme, children were regarded as cultural keepers. Preservation of cultural heritage through ownership of certain stories and artistic rituals was the main aim.

## Quality?

*Should we evaluate only the quality of each young person's contribution as a participant or should we take into account the wider context?*

Another example of valid contribution to professional art is in the form of scripts by children. Does this guarantee appropriate content and, when performed by professionals, does that raise the status of children's ideas?

Eva Bal of Kopergeitery in Ghent, Belgium, makes theatre with children because children are creative sources. Permanent dialogue with children and young people is essential so that the theatre becomes about shared experience and has emotional truth.

Etoundi Zeyang of Cameroun said that in his part of francophone Africa a strong distinction used to be made between professional work and young people's role in theatre. Today he has changed his mind. In Africa theatre is often a tool for social awareness and change.

Vicky Ireland of UK observed that children don't always want the content that professional artists give them. As adults is it impossible to *know* genuinely what children really want. It can only ever be what we *think* they want based on our own experience of childhood.

Cheela Chilala of Zambia questioned assumptions of authenticity. If you are not a child, how can you *know* the child's perspective? Professional artists working with children have a right to appropriate their ideas but this does not make them authentic.

A contributor from the USA cited bad examples of children involved in professional theatre where a lack of process is evident. Children and young people in this instance are tokenistic and decorative. There is a danger of professionals using children and adults putting words in children's mouths. A good process will allow ownership of material by children. In one production with two casts one adult and one child played the same role. The audience generally much preferred the young person in the role.

Theatre media are changing with the times. In Australia dance/theatre/circus forms have natural appeal to some young people and while the *stories* may not be owned by participants, engagement with the *medium* is important to them.

Dietrich Fischer-Fels from Grips Theatre in Berlin asserted the importance of (a) dialogue between child and artist, (b) truth in performance whether by adults or children, (c) commitment and (d) process. Is there evidence of work created by children being received more significantly? There is a lack of research in this area and need for robust research which takes these questions further.

## Divided Opinions

*A number of opinions on children as young actors were contributed. For example:*

- Adult actors can portray children either well or badly, as in any good and bad art.
- Should a professional artist ignore the idea that work has to be about the audience and instead pursue what speaks to them as an artist?
- There are important distinctions around appropriation and authenticity. Everyone has *been a child*, so everyone has a licence to portray that which is childlike. It is not the same as representing a person from a different culture on stage.
- You need an audience in order to understand the value of what you have created. Is it right to leave this discovery till the end of the creative process?
- The needs of a show should define its elements.

The age of children needs to be taken into account in this debate as there are huge differences between age groups in terms of their engagement, ability and the role they play. Again, more research is needed.

From Norway an observation that we are in danger of idealising children. The skill of the director is crucially important and we should be honest that the adult director uses questions to control the outcome. Often you build around what children cannot do. Working with children properly demands a lot of time.

Experience of children seeing children on stage is very important but research is needed to back this up. More than ideas, the actual human body before them on stage matters greatly to the audience.

Norifumi Hida from Japan considers that exploring and performing cross-gender, cross-cultural work is useful for children but the issue of choice is important. Children should be engaged in the process as decision makers.

Finegan Kruckemeyer, playwright from Australia, noted that most Youth Theatre shows were ensemble performances rather than fully dramatic pieces with interaction between a smaller number of characters.

## Research

*It is important to research audience reception and children's perceptions.*

Children may choose to be 'unauthentic.' Is 'authenticity' more an adult need? For example, children like to enter a theatrical world which is fantastical, surreal and escapist.

Authenticity still applies in these contexts, even in non naturalism there needs to be a suspension of disbelief.

Examples of bad child acting by professionals are still common, a big issue which cannot be divorced from the debate.

There should be support for children working with professional actors, and there is anecdotal evidence that when children are empowered to work alongside artists, they 'step up' and 'get it'.

*From notes by Paul Harman and Nina Hajjianni*