

So What is Politics for Young People?

Is it what most adults think it is: personalities, policies and taxes?

Is it what activists think it is: a clash of theories, a power struggle between classes, or negotiation and compromise between desires and necessity?

Is it about understanding and accepting a natural order of things, supported by some form of doctrine, religious or otherwise?

If I am a child, what most affects my life?

How do I change it if I don't like how it feels? Can I change anything? Is it my fault if I can't think of a way to change things?

From the 60's to the late 80's theatre for young audiences explored every dimension of what politics could mean.

There were two or perhaps three core political positions. The First stated that politics and reality had no place in art and that stories for children should be timeless and set in a purely imaginative world. The Second advocated showing young people examples of how brutal the established order is and how it must be resisted and overthrown. The Third broad position invites children to explore the real world with an open mind and encourages them to believe they can play a part in making that world a happier place for all.

Rather than speak of politics maybe morality is the key word. Most plays for young audiences have some clear moral commitment at the core. It is wrong for people to hate each other. It is wrong that some people exploit others. It is wrong that the strong oppress the weak. It is wrong to give in and accept ill treatment.

But consider the *Three Little Pigs*. The predator wolf is outwitted rather than defeated by force. In *Cinderella*, the natural force of love, of a mother for her daughter and a prince for his bride, overwhelms the machinations of the vicious sisters and the weak-willed father. Those stories from an older tradition remind children to respect the natural forces of nature but stay awake to dangers and trust their own instincts and judgement to escape them.

The successful plays created by Grips Theatre in Berlin over fifty years have used satire to attack those who would oppress young people with rigid ideas about how society should be run. Every play shows young people standing up to authority when it patronises them and fails to recognise their potential for finding better solutions to society's problems.

Suzanne Osten at the National Theatre in Stockholm pioneered plays about serious social and personal issues: divorce, blended families, a mentally ill parent. What mattered in her plays was how children felt when facing the reality that your parent has left, taken another partner or become ill and incapacitated. What she showed was children dealing with problems – not suffering or submitting.

Two recent plays by Kevin Dyer for Theatre Hullabaloo are political in that they invite us to enter the world of a teenager dealing with intractable problems, bravely and resourcefully, within their capacity. *Angel* is about a girl who befriends a woman with dementia and *Hidden* is about a young carer. What the plays do not do is blame anyone, especially the audience, for failing to prevent or cure the problem. Those of us adults who meet such cases in our own lives and wish to help have to respond to the actual situation we encounter with whatever skills we have. That may mean anything from a smile and a greeting to popping in for a chat, doing a bit of shopping or campaigning and fundraising for professional support at a local or national level.

Kevin Dyer's plays imply that children can understand and sympathise with people caught in complex situations. In a world dominated by the assumption that individuals should focus on their own success that is a challenging position to take. It is political.

At the level of institutional politics, there is a continuing battle between different ideas about the individual's relationship to society and the state. It is played out in attitudes to crime and punishment, to immigration and diversity, to rights and responsibilities, to the distribution of wealth and common resources. In everyday life, however, everyone – adults and children – must play by such rules as are commonly agreed. To that extent it is reasonable to present plays for children, in which people are shown obeying the rules and paying a price if they don't. (Different communities may have different rules).

But the rules of theatre also apply. If you show bad behaviour enacted by the most attractive person on the stage that behaviour may be endorsed. If only those characters regarded by your community as inferior or weak uphold the moral values the show promotes, then those values may lose their authority. If there are five men and one girl in the show it is pretty clear without a word spoken which gender is considered the more important. What is seen trumps the content of what is said.

The politics of a show for children are in the honesty of the proposal, respect for the audience, quality of the presentation, relationships between the characters, accessibility of the content to the age of the audience and the depth of commitment by the creators to the topic or theme. PH