

Children's Theatre and Aspects of Childhood

Introduction

Children's theatre may be able to creatively portray issues which are relevant in children's lives and help them make sense of their world. This can be done in obvious to less obvious ways, through symbolism, metaphor, dialogue as well as using components of theatre such as sound and choreography.

Children's theatre affords children many possibilities in terms of learning opportunities and development across all domains, including cognitive, social, emotional and physical. Quality theatre may have different levels and depths so that different children experience something according to their developmental stages. Woods (1999) writes that in the same way children need books that appeal to their world, pleasures, fears and experiences, they also need theatre which can "open doors to a new world of imagination, excitement and thoughtfulness" (p.6).

Children's theatre needs to be of high quality in order to be worthwhile to its audience. This is true whether it is educational or entertainment. As adults, we don't want to pay money to see poor quality theatre productions. Therefore the same should apply to children. Woods (1999) asserts that in order to trigger children's imaginations, emotionally engage them and give them an exciting and memorable experience, which is both educational and entertaining, the production should be of excellent quality.

Kim Carpenter, Artistic Director of Theatre of Image is one of Australia's leading directors and designers; he is a NIDA graduate and has an impressive biography (TOI Education Kit). He chooses to work in children's theatre. He is aware of the importance and value of quality children's theatre. This is displayed by the workshops undertaken and involvement of children's input into the production. Theatre of Image creates visual theatre that incorporates actors, singers, dancers, dialogue amazing costumes, sometimes puppetry, light, sound and multi media technology including onscreen images. Its main goal for children is to create a space, where regardless of the child's background, they experience a wonderful live performance that "enriches the spirit, emotionally and intellectually, leaving indelible images to fire the imagination and ignite creative expression" (TOI Education Kit, p.6). Furthermore, this style of theatre uses abstract sensual means to present life and death issues, in a subtle, imaginative way which may assist in a child's awakening or understanding of the world (TOI Education Kit).

Creativity and Imagination in the Mass Media

It is optimistic to see some awareness about creativity and imagination brought to the attention of the general public through the medium of newspaper. The two recent articles, published in the Sydney Morning Herald, below reflect upon some of the inner aspects of human existence that seem to be neglected and forgotten about as many adults get caught up in what some refer to as the 'illusion' called life.

Sunbeam Nursery, Alexandria, 1938 by Nick Leys

This article (see Appendix 1) refers to the richness and the loss of the imagination through the analogy of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The article highlights the part in the story where the author is emotionally crushed by the adults around him who cannot see what his drawing represents. Furthermore he is given advice from those adults to learn about subjects that are important in life, such as geography and arithmetic (Leys, 2001). It seems to be a familiar childhood memory of many adults in which certain harsh words from their elders have impressed upon their minds.

YOU'LL NEVER BE A!!!!

Within the story of *The Little Prince* is also the life journey of maturing and learning about the world and those that live in it. The boy travels from his planet until he finally reaches earth and comes across the pilot in the desert. Along the way he encounters many different types of beings and learns important lessons that help him to understand the world of grown ups. Like a child, he is naïve and innocent. Within he has courage, strength and beauty that somehow keep him safe and moving along his path.

Jake and Pete is also about growing up and learning about survival in the world from the perspective of two innocents. Through their

sometimes fearful and sometimes very funny experiences, they come to realise certain truths about the world and those that live in it.

Stories for the Soul by Peter O'Connor

This article (see Appendix 2) describes society as being in a time of imaginative famine in which we seem to have been taken over by the accumulation of facts and rationality. The writer stresses the obsession with the material realm and the lack of the creative arts of story telling and mythology that is needed to feed the imagination. He claims that the language of mythology has the power to free the imagination and evoke feelings from the heart that move and touch the listener. Therefore there is a connection between imagination, image making and feelings.

Story Telling

Children in Australia come from various cultural backgrounds and as such their storytelling experiences will vary. It seems that the way children make sense from stories and relate their contents to knowledge about the real world can be seen as just one way of doing this (Brice Heath, 1982). Consideration should be given to how children have learned to respond to stories in their environment. Story telling in the lives of children and their responses are integral to emergent literacy and also part of a child's creative and artistic expression (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997). Likewise, in theatre children can respond differently according to their experience. Wood (1999) states that some may be frightened by noise levels or when the lights dim, whereas others may be thrilled by a scary character.

Theatre of Image is aware of cultural issues and attempts to break through cultural barriers by creating a space which taps into the imaginations of children. They are free to interpret and make the imaginative leaps as per their own level of development and experience. This means that children can come to the theatre regardless of their diverse cultural differences and become immersed in the culture created by the theatre production. Thereby being enriched in some way by the story telling experience regardless of cultural diversity.

Beyond the theatre experience, the educator in the child's life, should employ the necessary means in order to make the most of their theatre experience. This is particularly important if the theatre experience has raised any issues for the child. Discussion and observation of children will also help the educator determine planned lessons and activities, building on their existing knowledge (Clay, 1991). As far as the imagination and creativity is concerned following attendance at Jake and Pete, White and Crawford (2000) found that experiences through imagination and imaginative activities where children explore thinking and emotions in a secure setting, is a valid and appropriate educational tool for learning.

Quality theatre appeals to children and their imagination on different levels. Even for toddlers attending a theatre production, their experience is worthwhile, since on their level they may experience the sensory aspects of the performance. Jalongo & Stamp (1997) write that toddlers show "heightened perceptivity that begins with sensory experiences and leads to aesthetic experiences" (p. 228). Toddlers and young children display full awareness or intense concentration in an experience and this is necessary to enrich the imagination (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997).

Jalongo & Stamp (1997) describe development of the imagination as follows:

imagination ⇔ *perception* ⇔ *sensibility* ⇔ *artistic cultivation*.

Recent discussion with a parent, whose son was 1_ years old when he first saw 'Jake and Pete' in 1997, showed that at this young age, he took home with him the concept of 'Bog' the drain boggart. He would say that Bog lived in their toilet. The child committed the concept of the character to his memory and transferred it into his own personal experience by bringing the character to life at home and in his imagination. Perhaps the child was impressed by the incredible costume Bog wore, or his tenderness with the Kitkids. Or perhaps it stayed in his memory because he was one of the last characters on stage. Either way, this young child was positively touched by the production.

Theatre of Image

How TOI works creatively

Kim Carpenter, Director of Jake and Pete, Theatre of Image

(TOI)

Kim Carpenter describes himself as a visual artist who works in the theatre. Whether it is for a child or adult audience, his way of story telling is largely visual. Automatically a story is

largely being told through visual means. Music then becomes the partner of image, because with an image, must come a sound. So music and image go together. Then the third component is the text. TOI has done adult visual theatre with no text at all. The story is told through suggestion, through actors movement and gesture. However, text is required with children, even if it is minimal, because they need signposting. Children need to be told what is happening, where they are and who these people are, in terms of location and characters.

Comparing visual images used in TOI with illustrations in children's picture books?

Kim Carpenter explains that an illustration in a picture book is literal. What you see on the page, is what you see on the page. Whereas, theatre is conjuring up an image. TOI is asking the child to use her imagination more than a picture book. Every reader interprets the book differently and each reading is a personal experience as told to them by their

teacher or parent. Yet with a theatre experience, each child understands and absorbs it according to their own particular development. With TOI they are being asked to make imaginative leaps and to fill in the gaps, even those with the most dormant imaginations.

So how is even the most dormant imagination inspired through a TOI experience?

In the theatre, as opposed to a book, an image can be made up of a combination of elements. For example, through light, object, and the way the object is used. It might be that an actor bends down, picks up something from the floor, opens his hand, and it is glitter. He throws the glitter up in the air and he says 'the stars are out tonight'. So that child then has to imagine the stars because it is only being suggested by a handful of glitter. Now that child can go home and do that too. It is about make-believe. It is about ordinary things becoming extraordinary things by the way you use them. So that hopefully heightens a

child's imagination. It is also important as a part of children's play. So nothing is necessarily seen exactly for what it is. You can turn a cup and saucer into a character. It can become something that it wasn't intended to be. So, TOI is asking children to take those imaginative leaps beyond literal comprehension.

Symbolic representation is part of children's developmental processes and often used in their own dramatic play. Described by Piaget to begin to occur around the ages of 18-24 months, where the child shows a beginning of being able to comprehend one thing for another and differentiate between the symbol and what it stands for (Flavell, Miller & Miller, 1993). These skills show a great deal of growth during early childhood, in particularly pictorial representations, models or objects and pretend play (Flavell, Miller & Miller, 1993). This is relevant to TOI because of the mediums used and the provocation to use ones imagination. Fridge was at first believed to be a source of comfort and food and later is actually a safe dry bed (White & Crawford, 2000). The fridge is what the Kitkids remember learning from Mumcat as giving food and they are surprised to learn later that it is a bed in which they have security, comfort and safety with Bog. Children may understand the various levels of meaning here dependant on their development. Nonetheless the visuals used to transform the fridge are stunning showing a sparkling blanket (White & Crawford (2000).

It is appropriate to allow the space for children to fill in the spaces created by images on stage, Patemen (1997) explains the imagination as being able to fill out or concretise something from an outline or suggesting in either text or image. He also writes about the space created in which a child can feel secure and confident to exercise his imagination. This is one of the things that TOI create for their audience.

Whilst one can appreciate the difference between illustrations in picture books and visual images used in TOI, it should be noted that picture books do exist that are more than the words displayed pictorially. Nodelman (1996) details the components of illustrations such as style, mood, atmosphere, symbolism, dynamics such as composition or location of an object and other effects such as colour, light, shadow and movement. In some ways it can be seen that images used in TOI are parallel to the way illustrations are used in picture books, as for example “the presence of illustrations adds to the suspense” (Nodelman, 1996, p.241).

Educational and/or Entertainment - What is Jake and Pete saying to its audience? Is it simply a life quest or more. The different levels of Jake and Pete. Issues that are relevant to children's lives on a personal level through to other levels such as community.

Jake and Pete is a journey of two characters. They are equal to small

children because they are kittens. Their behaviour patterns and how they have to adjust to the big wide world, is not really any different to a child. The basic instincts are the same. So they are characters that children can easily identify with, follow the journey and see it through their mind's eye.

These two kittens are dysfunctional. One cannot see very well and the other cannot smell very well. Tolerance of difference is being raised. We are not all perfect and we have to understand that. Also how do we help others who do not have the same qualities or are not as well off in whatever way. Therefore, it is about cooperation, having courage to manage and to survive, loyalty and friendship.

These different messages show how different children will gain the experience dependant on their level of understanding, knowledge and experience. However, classroom discussions and learning experiences could help children see these deeper issues and relate them to our immediate environment or wider society.

It is not really about being abandoned when Mumcat leaves the Kitkids to go into retirement. It is about lessons in life.

The Kitkids learn that nothing can be taken on face value because what seemed to be nice, turned out not to be nice. For example, the little old lady looked nice to the Kitkids but turned out to be vile. So therefore they thought, maybe something that does not look nice, is nice inside.

This message also promotes thinking and reasoning. The realisation that nothing can be taken at face value. The above message seems to be more obvious to say the deeper idea of tolerance of differences in our society. It also could be telling children that if someone looks strange or different, like Bog, then it could be they have a lot to offer given the chance. Therefore do not judge a person on physical appearance because kindness is on the inside.

Crow - the character - the impact on children

During the fleshing out process of turning the original storybook into a theatre production, much thought went into making the characters very distinctive. The characters in the book are not as developed and they don't all exist in the book. It was important that each

character in TOI represented an individual world that the Kitkids came across and visited, therefore they had to be impactful.

As a story, Jake and Pete is very linear. It does not actually have a real climax. So it was very important to sustain, on stage, that each world was really distinctive and offered the Kitkids something different from the next.

White & Crawford (2000) describe the Kitkids interactions with the characters as creating turning points because the Kitkids have to overcome challenges, in order to survive. Therefore the intention of TOI is achieved. Wood (1999) notes that characters in a play need to be strongly defined, interesting and larger than life in order to heighten the drama.

The first character they meet in the outside world is Crow. TOI wanted a character that the Kitkids were overawed by and would therefore do whatever he said. He was their guru. And it came out of the workshopping in rehearsal and improvisation that the character became more like a Goth. It was like following a guru and just doing whatever he said.

These Kitkids were little innocents who knew nothing. It is like going to a revivalist meeting and hanging on every word and echoing every word of the master, as children do when they are impressed.

The distinctive characters, along with the music and script and other theatrical components such as lighting and choreography, all contribute to the ability to inspire and touch the imagination of the audience. Since it is sometimes dazzling, fantastic and dramatic, it has the ability to impress upon the memories of the children. Therefore certain aspects may be remembered for some time after the performance.

Snake Club

Kim Carpenter agrees this is about the innocents being preyed upon and taken advantage of. It is also about obeying. In a way it is their journey from the country to the city. The barn to the open road, to the outer suburbs where they meet Boot, to the inner city where they meet snake and finally, Bog on the streets of the city.

Whilst the children are impressed by the character of snake, it is the adults that would understand the symbolism of snake meaning 'a snake in the grass' being deceptive, manipulative, cunning and not to be trusted. This is because adults are more likely to have

experience of nightlife and dealings with sleazy, dubious characters.

Splat - the Death of Lizard

White & Crawford (2000) suggest that the death of lizard signifies the provision of food through the cycle of life and death. This is valid as the Kitkids learn that Road provides food. Once again 'Jake and Pete' can be taken on different levels by different children. Crow eats Lizard and this shows the interdependence in nature and furthermore is about survival, like real life.

Kim Carpenter explains that Lizard being run over was not for gratuitous reason nor for violent effect. Dramatically, it is there for a reason. It is there to teach the Kitkids to beware of Car. This is what Car does, it kills. Therefore, Road is dangerous.

By Crow being a character that is larger than life, so to speak, impresses the Kitkids so much that they learn an important lesson about danger. The lizard's death is an observed encounter of the fatal risk involved with Road. Road safety is a major issue for children, and something children are taught about from the earliest age. This may be a parallel for children who understand and heed the warning from adults about the danger of cars, as the Kitkids do with Crow. Furthermore, as Wood (1999) writes, characters who

are innocent of the world bonds them with children since they can use their superior knowledge in the story.

What kind of effect going to the theatre, and seeing these kinds of shows, has on a child.

This actually relates to the Gypsy Boy which was performed in January 2001. Kim Carpenter received feedback from a parent, who had taken her family to see the production, about how much they enjoyed it. Her 8 year old daughter was overwhelmed by it. That night and for the next three nights, the whole family had to sit in the backyard with a campfire, make a gypsy camp and they had their dinner in the backyard. When she went back to school at the end of the school holidays, she told her teacher that when she leaves school, she was going to go to university to study how to become a gypsy.

Children seem to get what they need. Whether it is entertainment because they need a good laugh and enjoy the comedic aspects of the theatre, or whether there are aspects they relate to and are able to personalise, or whether their imagination is ignited and perhaps even they are inspired in ways that are unexpected and significant in the child's life.

The importance of the audience

TOI's immediate commitment and obligation is to its audience. The audience has to be defined and it can differ in terms of age according to the piece. The common denominator in all the work TOI does is that it has appeal on different levels according to age. So an adult can appreciate it on a certain level and children of different ages can appreciate it on other levels. Jake and Pete was most successful with young children. It has less in it for adults than other pieces.

An example of this, in Jake and Pete, is the snake club which is more of an adult concept. It can be interpreted and appreciated on many different levels. Adults are more likely to have nightlife experience, as mentioned earlier, and would appreciate the humour on a deeper level than a child who sees the snake character and his behaviour.

Conclusion

Theatre of Image has shown how quality children's theatre is able to present issues relevant in children's lives in both subtle and obvious ways. This gives children opportunities to take what they need from a theatre experience. Since the productions are

multifaceted in terms of depth and levels of understanding, it is beneficial to a range of children's developmental stages.

For a lot of children, particularly in the school groups, they are probably seeing theatre for the first time. So there is a great sense of wonderment in seeing a production by Theatre of Image. Wonderment is a good way to keep children engaged and focused. The use of light and dark, the mood created by the music are some of the ways children remain engaged. For example, the surprise and dramatic effects using sound and light, then the visual image and text 'splat' of Lizard being run over by Car. Another way is when a character disappears through a small door in the wall on stage, the darkness and stillness, then waiting for something next to happen.

The age appropriateness, research and preparation of each production ensures that children have the space to exercise their imagination and follow the story. They are therefore neither patronised nor left bewildered by what is happening.

It is hoped that children have the opportunities following the theatre production to pursue their imaginative inspirations and creative expressions.

It seems TOI is providing quality theatre for young children which is very fortunate for children today. Since the productions are multifaceted in terms of depth and levels of understanding, they are beneficial across the span of childhood.

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