

”Theatre for the very young”

March 5th – 11.30 am – 1.00 pm

Keynotes

Reviving our sights

by Charlotte Fallon – Théâtre de la Guimbarde, Charleroi – Belgium

Searching without stopping

by Roberto Frabetti – La Baracca/Testoni Ragazzi, Bologna – Italy

And we all fall down

by Graziano Melano – President Assitej Italia, Torino – Italy

Theatre for Little Humans

by Anne Nøjgård – Teatret Lampe, Copenhagen – Denmark



Reviving our sights

by *Charlotte Fallon*

It occurred for the first time some 15 years ago. In a crèche in Dieppe, Brigitte Maisonneuve from Anthenor Theatre presents her show called “Câlins” (*Cuddles*) to a dozen children.

Seated in front of a transparent basin filled with water, and clad in white, she rocks white linen, plunging them into the water while singing peculiar lullabies and recitatives. She barely looks at the children, apparently deeply busy with this strange ritual: the bath, the cuddles...

The bond between her and the children is so strong that they don't look away for a second. They sometimes get up and sing with her, they sigh, lie down, respond to her language with other small sounds.

What is happening between them, when just an hour ago they didn't even know each other?

So much intimacy, so much emotion, so much pleasure.

What touched me so much? The beauty of the show?

The emotion and pleasure shown by the children? Or the 'theatre', the successful encounter of a show with its audience?

This is how I started this journey in «terra incognita», aimed at meeting the “small population” of babies.

Who are they?

To know them, I meet with them, for instance in crèches. Yes, but what can I do?

And why doing it? It is simpler, just being there is enough, taking the time to observe, to respect distances before getting to know each other and trust each other.

Yet it is not enough because they don't think like us, who name, select, associate, reason, in order to understand and order our world. As far as they are concerned, they discover the world, feel it, are moved and through recurrence slowly build their references.

This is a perfect occasion to question my origins, from fusion to autonomy: the discovery of balance, self-consciousness, consciousness of others, the beginning of speech, the discovery of the first marks, the beginning of thought...

By following them close, I re-do the journey of our evolution, and have pleasant encounters with other professionals: psychologists,

specialists in psychomotricity, philosophers,
nursery nurses, teachers.
This audience makes me think.
Another question: what can we perform for
"these little ones?"
"Share with them what we marvel at"
Joëlle Rouland used to say.
At this time in my life, what do I want to tell
them, what fascinates me, what could I share?
By observing them in the laboratory of their
everyday life, I am surprised by their
behaviours, their movements, the way they
approach materials and objects. Which
painter, dancer or musician do they make me
think of?
Can I talk about everything?
Is finding the way, the sensoriality, the
simplicity, the rhythm... enough?
Am I respecting them or using them?
Does what I offer them help them in their
development?
They inspire me.
It is up to me to amaze them.
How to play for them?
Closeness seems obvious and if the actor
really accepts it, he is there without protection
in front of an audience of little ones who do not
barricade their emotions.
It is a responsibility.
It is not always easy to play without "doing", to
be there, to give without invading, to give
space and time to children to feel, to receive
their emotions without dwelling on.
It is a play that requires honesty, availability
and stability.
The question is still open: are we
seducing them?
From one question to the next, the work
evolves, is refined and centres on new angles,
bringing me towards new thoughts and new
projects.
Toddlers are unifiers. We should open
theatres and museums to them; their presence
transforms our attitudes.
With them, I take the time to live; their curiosity
stimulates mine.

What a pleasure to be curious!



Searching without stopping

by Roberto Frabetti

When I talk about young children, I often start
from their silence.
The silence of young children is real silence.
It is complete silence.
Silence and big eyes.
I love that silence.
But I also love the one of the older ones,
which is often combined with young words.
I cannot deny it.
It is hard for me to tell whether I prefer doing
theatre for the very young, for the older ones
or for teenagers.
They all are just one, big universe.
This is the reason why I do not want to keep
theatre for very young children and theatre for
children in general, separated.
I think, however, that theatre for very young
children can, at the moment, offer theatre for
children in general many useful ideas to reflect
upon.
Among those that are now wandering in my
mind - some randomly and some not - I have
stopped the ones that can last 15 minutes.
They are 4, not in order of importance.

Point number one is about the
standardisation and **diversity of proposals**.
In these years, in writing plays for the very
young, I have found myself thinking about very
different structures.
There have, therefore, been very different
shows.
In turn, there has been a very different
balance between words and images.
Each show was the result of a particular
moment, in which the combination of desires
changed.
The shows became then an experimental
space where I could test the willingness of
very young children to receive very different
proposals.
Today I think I can say that there is not just
one way to play theatre for children, because
they can enjoy different kinds of shows.
Dance shows or shadow theatre, surreal and
emotional stories, tales with few or many
words, funny or romantic stories, with abstract
images or toys.
In twenty years of productions for the
youngest of children we have tried many of
these proposals.
Not all shows turned out to be what I thought
they would be, but the weak elements had
always something to do with the fact that the

show was not completely finished, or with the inadequacy of the idea.

I do not think that the problem was the "form" chosen for the show, because previously or later on the quality of the contact was different. For this reason I would like that children could enjoy different - and even very different - kinds of proposals.

It seems to me, instead, that some kind of "format" is being established in theatre for early years.

A format based on a non-logical structure, where some "poetry of images" is sought. One of the arts of the poet is to rip our imagery open, being able to shift lightly from an image to another.

During the past few years, I have seen many shows in which the link between the images was their similarity.

A long chain of suggestions.

It is a fascinating experience when the artist has got a rich aesthetic background. The association of images by similarity becomes then a visual poem, an open door that leads to the inner dimension of the artist. An open door that children can walk through and then explore...

And maybe they will feel surprised at that strange encounter with adults whose concern is not "taking care of them".

But are simply in front of them to share a piece of themselves, as well as their presence, which is able to make the simplest experiences become great.

This is what happens when we experience a "high-quality" encounter.

And theatre for children can remind the world of the grown-ups that children are "full subjects".

They are not small adults and their intelligence - both cognitive and emotional - is not a small intelligence.

But...

But sometimes the association by similarity is not made by someone who has already developed their own aesthetic sensibility.

Now I do not want to deny anybody the right to their experiences.

I am a great supporter of the importance of a path made of attempts and mistakes.

Of continuous training.

Of a widespread artistic experience that allows for new intuitions.

Of the freshness of immaturity.

Of the need to support those who are still at the beginning, even when they make mistakes that have been seen already.

What I would like to point out here is, instead, the risk that some works bring inside them the germ of standardisation.

The germ of "we do it like this because it has to be done like this".

And I do not want this to happen.

Because it means giving up discovering new routes.

And it is a way of seeing the relationship adult-child as something fully structured.

A rigid dimension, not a variable one.

Children are, instead, unpredictable, and they find it difficult to be conceived in a rigid dimension.

Alessandro, 2 years old, a nursery school in Bologna, twenty years ago.

I was building up the set in the school.

Among the scene objects, I had a wheeled dromedary-shaped model.

A wheeled dromedary.

Alessandro came to me with his little bicycle and pointing at the wheeled model he said:

"What's that?"

"You tell me. What's that?"

He thought about it a while, then he told me:

"It's not a horse, it's got wheels".

From a grown-up's viewpoint, Alessandro might have answered that it was a dromedary-shaped model, or a toy (sometimes toys have wheels), or he might as well have considered only what it represented.

After all, it was a dromedary, not a horse.

However, although Alessandro spoke very well, he was two years old all the same.

I just could not want him to answer correctly, so I told him:

"It's true, it's not a horse, it's a camel".

It is typical of an adult trying to simplify all information.

Alessandro looked at me, then at the model, and said: "It's not true, it's not a camel, it's a dromedary because it's got only one hump... it's not a camel, it's a dromedary".

And without losing more time, he got back on his bicycle and into his world.

Point number two, the trend

The trend issue is strictly related to the risk of standardisation.

Until very recently, theatre for early years was something more than a marginal phenomenon.

It was almost invisible

Now it is visible, though maybe still marginal.

However, taking for granted that marginality is typical of children and of any activity that concerns them, let us focus on visibility.

First of all, it is definitely a positive aspect.

It is a statement of existence.

Now it is "normal" to talk about theatre for early years and it is increasingly less frequent to meet someone who analyses it with detachment and scepticism.

The scepticism of artists and researchers who believe that children under three years of age cannot or should not be part of an artistic event.

And that it doesn't make any sense to talk about theatre for the very young.

Actually, until fifteen years ago, it was often said that it was quite pointless to do theatre for children under six.

It was better to create situations with animation or interaction... a simple game of theatre.

Now it is no longer like that, although surely sceptics have not disappeared.

I think that the cultural movement of theatre for the very young has not only grown quantitatively, but that it has also been able to establish a very good theoretical background: reflections, analyses and pieces of research.

This is maybe because of the fact that this age group can turn out to be a real passkey to explore the mysterious world of early childhood and, in particular, the first three years of age of children.

36 months of revolution/evolution.

After a month, they can lift their head.

And when do they start to see colours? Maybe they see them from the beginning, or...

And when do they start to perceive their hands and the distance between hands and eyes?

After three months, they start to play with syllables.

After four, they can sit, but they need a support.

After seven months, they do it without any support.

After six-eight months, children start to move and to explore the surrounding space.

After twelve months, they start to utter the first words-phrases and they also start to walk.

But before that, after eight or nine months, they already understand that an object they do not see can be there anyway, so they look for hidden toys.

This is maybe one of the most important revolutions of cognitive development.

Do you know the peek-a-boo game?

In front of an object or a person that appears and disappears, children show great excitement.

When they do not see it, they know they will see it again, because it exists.

So when they see it again they are happy because the object is visible again.

But revolutions keep happening and the verbalisation process goes on.

After about eighteen months, children have a much richer vocabulary, and at the age of 2 they are able to utter increasingly complex phrases.

During the same period, their motor ability becomes stable and they are able to lift a leg without falling.

At the age of 3, children have reached a high level of motor and linguistic competence and they are aware of their identity.

All this takes place thanks to the observation of the world of the grown-ups, its acts and rituals.

From zero to three years of age, children are on a "spinning journey", and the stages come one after the other so rapidly that they create intersections.

During these first three years, children's intelligences evolve from their bodily to their semantic dimension, passing through the iconic one.

A few months ago, I had the honour to attend a conference held by Davide Donati, a pedagogue of the Municipality of Bologna, who focused on the importance of theatre for early years as an art that relies upon the triangle "body, image and word", fundamental stages in the development of language.

This leads me to say that artistic experience could become a privileged setting to observe the developmental processes of the different intelligences of children.

Until some time ago, I used to think that three-year-olds found it really difficult to use their body as a means of symbolic expression.

Now I think that every child reaches the awareness of symbolic play with different timings, and these timings have to be respected. Some children reach that awareness very soon.

Last spring we held a short theatrical workshop (3 meetings) in a nursery school.

The children were about 3. They were already "senior" children.

During the third meeting, we asked the children to stop and sit in a circle.

Then we asked them if someone wanted the others to tell a story about the sea, which was the topic of that day.

Filippo, one of the oldest children, with a very high degree of verbalisation, was the first to begin.

He stood up while the others were watching him, and only with the support of the music, he started to tell a silent story of a shark that got in and out of its sea cave.

Big, wide gestures; his hand/shark got in and out of the sea caves elegantly; legs, body, arms...

Everything with no hurry, following a precise plan...

He told us about the shark only after finishing and after he had taken our breath away.

After him, Michelle.

A younger girl, from Nigeria.

She chose the shark as well, because children are also smart and she had surely understood, from our amazement, that we had liked the shark.

But her movement had nothing to do with Filippo's.

It was totally different.

A different rhythm, a different relationship with the space, a different use of joints. Filippo had been intense, all shoulders and legs, going up and down.

Michelle was poised, she played with her wrists and hands, with a slow, circular rhythm. A different idea of body, a shark in the sea, waiting for the prey.

She did not say this, but it is what I saw while she told her story and all her classmates watched her.

Then others tried to tell their story and others just watched, because theatre also means listening.

It would be interesting to transfer this vision of artistic experience as an effective setting into our work for older children and teenagers, To help them not forget that there is also an emotional intelligence.

The attention paid to the subject "child" and the willingness of learning are two of the many characteristics of theatre for early years.

These are precious characteristics that theatre for early years should try not to lose, avoiding turning into a mere trend.

Today, for some artists, doing theatre for early years may be "trendy" and open new horizons of action.

But if we do this without looking for a special and specific "poetics" and without identifying

our deepest reasons would bring to a superficial experience destined to end quickly. To avoid this risk, we should simply focus on the quality of this young audience.

Point number three, the audience

In his book *The open door*, Peter Brook says: *An audience of children is the best critic: children do not have any bias, they can become bored as suddenly as they become involved; they either follow the actors, or they become annoyed*".

I think that everybody here agrees.

Children are really a good audience.

Even the very young ones, those who started walking just yesterday or the day before.

They really enjoy being an audience, because being an audience is not a passive attitude.

To live art, does not only mean to act, but also to enjoy.

While watching a show, our eyes and ears are involved as well as our ability to process visual and acoustic information.

This is true even for the youngest of children and it is a false legend that they can only be involved by making them "act".

Acting is definitely useful, but enjoying is just as useful.

Acting and enjoying are complementary, just like communicating and listening.

And theatre needs very good listeners.

Years ago, I spent 2 days in a nursery school in Genoa.

It was a beautiful experience, organised by the Municipality, during which a very curious aspect emerged.

The Municipality of Genoa gave some theatre companies the opportunity to spend 2 days in a crèche, deciding what to do.

I was going to perform on the second day, while during the first I just watched, listened to and played with the children.

I tried, in vane, to make them sleep, while they kept asking me to tell them stories and then laughing at me because I was not able to tell them correctly.

We felt and listened to each others.

It was the first time I performed in front of children who already knew me.

I was worried because I kept wondering whether I would be able to keep play-time and performance-time separated (I think that it was the first time they watched a show).

I thought that it would be natural for them to interact with me in the same way as the day before.

On the contrary, during 45 minutes, until the end of the performance, they did not stand up and they did not call my name.

They respected a convention.

Only at the end did they come to me and said my name again, which they had, temporarily, put aside.

I still wonder why they waited until the end of the performance to start playing with me again.

Perhaps the answer is, because they feel this urgent need of being an audience.

A need to live theatre that comes from an unknown place.

As happens in all audiences, audiences of young children are composed by different individuals, each of them with a particular taste and sensibility.

They either enjoy what is shown to them or they don't.

An audience of children under 3 years of age is a kind of audience that has, perhaps, fewer conventions, because they hardly clap their hands or laugh when they are supposed to, but they are able to surprise you with their silences, sudden laughs and many, many kisses.

Children take part in shows in very different ways.

Because of the age of my audience, the number of participants is limited: 20-30 in nursery schools, 100-120 in kindergartens.

Before the show begins, I can talk to them, and I usually ask their names.

I like doing it because anything can happen.

If they are 4- or 5-year-olds, it is just chaos.

You have to listen to each and every one of them.

Pure energy.

With the youngest of kindergartens, the intensity of the sound is lower, but none of them gives up.

Some of them show you their name badge, saying "look!", allowing you to read their name.

With the children attending their last year of nursery school, you often have someone who introduces the others, but they forget to introduce themselves.

There is the "concise" kid, the one who answers the question "so guys, what is your name?" with just "Kids!", solving everybody's problem.

Many times you find some thirty faces in front of you, who look at you and do not speak.

"Secret" names.

Then there are kids who hide their identity under an alias.

We are talking about children of 30-36 months.

Just like the red-haired one, with spectacles and a blindfold on one eye, who last year in a nursery school answered confidently:

"Spartacus".

And although all educators turned to him with their eyes open wide, when I asked "What?", he repeated "Spartacus".

I do not know his real name, but I preferred not asking him to respect his secret identity.

I usually work in very small rooms and I use very simple dramatic structures, so I have the opportunity to watch them carefully and notice their reactions.

It is incredible how much they change in a few months' time.

Every child is unique, there is no doubt about it.

However, I think it is useful to generalise.

An audience of five-year-olds is an excellent audience.

They can get in and out of the game very easily.

They let themselves go and they let the actors guide them, alternating silence and participation.

The "worst" audience, instead, are **four-year-olds**.

They just can't shut up, perhaps because they are becoming aware of their competence.

And they want to show it off all the time, trying to reveal all the "tricks" of the show.

For example:

"That's a wooden snake, it can't hurt us!"

Or: "It's you who's talking, not the cow!"

A five-year-old is not very likely to utter such sentences.

Probably because they consciously share the fiction.

After having demonstrated to be competent, however, even the four-year-olds let stories grip them,

which is exactly what happens with **three-year-olds**.

They are an excellent audience.

It is very similar to the one of nursery schools, but three-year-olds laugh a lot more and when they can interact, they do it without hesitating.

As the age of the children decreases, verbal interaction decreases as well, as opposed to silence.

The last point, “words”, has to do with silence.

It seems to me that, at the moment, the main idea is that children do not need a narrative structure, and that of words they need only the sound.

I feel a bit uncomfortable about it.

Not because words are necessary, but because if we use them when needed, when it is useful that they come out of the silence, then they can be really beautiful.

Words are a great conquest.

Not only in the history of mankind, but in the history of every one of us.

Words cannot substitute images.

Words are sound, but they are also meaning. They are an attempt to synthesise content, which is always too rich.

“Words take you only to the threshold of meaning”, suggests Leonard Peltier in his book “My life is my sun dance”.

It is a precious sentence, because it suggests that words do not have to be “understood”, but to be accepted, because it is a unique fragment, a synthesis of a complex thought. In our words, their meaning and their sound, we all leave traces of ourselves.

And this makes every word unique and “unrepeatable”.

I do not think that young children can grow up with the idea of words as a representation of a conventional code.

For every one of us it was obvious to consider verbal language as our primary language.

Children understand their function from the start.

Words are necessary to make the exchange of requests and needs quicker.

But...

But considering again the issue of intelligences, if we do not want an older children or an adult to perceive words only as the expression of semantic intelligence, to be used to substitute the bodily or iconic ones, then I believe that the artists who have reached the **“threshold of meaning”** must suggest to the children that there are also bodily words, image-words.

Words that gather and add.

Words that take us by the hand and let us into the world of stories.

The world of the endless windows, where dreams and reality, wishes and experiences, feelings and knowledge can be touched.

Young children need “good” words.

Not only that, but they do.

Words entwined with moving bodies, sounds, images and silences.

Shhhhhhh!!!!



And we all fall down

by Graziano Melano

Theatre for children as an example of the language of play that returns to the origins of the theatrical game.

A game that creatively uses the shapes, objects, sounds and sensations that directly involve the young audience.

A theatre that reciprocally relates the adult world with the child’s imagination in an everyday and affective atmosphere.

One of the most interesting aspects of Theatre for children is that it is universal and local at the same time. On the one hand, it communicates with children of all latitudes and on the other, it feeds on the creativity tied to the habits, images and customs of local cultures.

It is a characteristic that connects us to the discussion of globalization that is underway in all sectors, including theatrical activities.

In the speech I will try to develop these topics with the hope of contributing to the examination and analysis of theatre language for very young children.



Theatre for Little Humans

by Anne Nøjgård

We're born, we live and we die. We're born with everything, emotions, senses our intelligence, the full potential is there, all the little human lacks is experience. In the words

of Søren Kierkegaard: we live our lives forwards, yet understand backwards. As a contemporary image of the beginning of human life, let's say we're born with a store of empty CDs without the recorded data. Just imagine being a part of making an impression in one of those millions of unrecorded CDs that a little human contains! And when you've seen a little human wake up in the morning, so curious and happy to meet the world, you realize what an incomprehensible joy and responsibility it is to play theatre for those very little humans.

As a matter of principle I have to be personally inspired by a project in order to take on the task. It must mean something to me here and now, and tomorrow also. This doesn't have the least bit to do with age ranges. To me theatre is a magical, yet very concrete place where objects, spaces and persons can transform as naturally as when you open a door in your dreams and meet yourself. We are there to tell a story. Basically the world probably holds about 9 or 10 fundamental stories that are elaborated on infinitely. The Ugly Duckling is one of those stories, a basic story, so to speak.

At Teatret Lampe, when we told our colleagues that we intended to do the "The Ugly Duckling" many of them said that it was much too harsh and complicated a story to tell to such young kids. I completely disagreed.

"The Ugly Duckling" is a basic story that is capable of having a meaning for all people, different meanings of course, according to where they happen to be in their lives, and which experiences they've had. We chose to tell the story with a lot of humour, sometimes with almost cartoon-like comedy, because in my opinion we get the strongest sense of tragedy when it is presented through comedy. We also chose to create the show with puppets, which is something we often do when relating the really big dramas with their abundance of emotion, and even pain, to little humans. By playing with puppets or objects, and, in this particular case, quite small puppets compared to the size of the actor, we are constantly showing that what is happening is not real, it is the theatre, we are pretending.

As a puppeteer the actors must have the ability to place their concentration outside themselves, a form of stylisation or distance that all art must contain. It gives the audience

a feeling of security, which is important for them in order to be able to feel free to react. And it gives the artist freedom to take the actions and the movements a little further. We use open puppet manipulation so the actor can enter into a dialogue with the audience and help with more pedagogical matters, which can also be a part of the work. Many of the young members of the audience are in the theatre for the very first time and they have yet to learn the rules, the smells and sounds of the theatre, not to mention the darkness.

The actor's work begins, even before the performance starts, by admitting the audience into the room and getting them seated, making individual contact with them, getting their attention, believing in their ability to experience. We take great care to establish a sense of intimacy between the audience and the actors on stage, so therefore we admit only a limited number at a time when dealing with the very youngest audience.

They aren't as tall as big people so we kneel down and make eye-to-eye contact with the audience. Our entire set is constructed to give the young audience the best possible view of the show. So set design, lighting and stage movements are elements that need a lot of prior attention in theatre for little humans. Imagine being the size of an ant or a guinea-pig, then we have a rough idea of what it's like for a little human to watch a big human play theatre.

An actor's normal movements can seem extremely violent, when viewed from a short distance at next to ground level, and likewise we need to adapt our tone and volume of voice to suit the age and size of the audience. My 17 years of experience with playing over 1000 shows for this age group in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Greenland, The Faroe Isles, Pakistan, Japan and now Italy has given me a wealth of wonderful experiences. To me, it is perhaps the most gratifying age group of all. The moments of silence after a performance where the kids - some of them perhaps crying or disturbed before the show, now seated, smiling, and then slowly coming forward to the stage and giving me their hand or touching one of the puppets and then laughing - makes the all the hard work and low pay of touring theatre for children feel worthwhile.

Theatre for little humans is extremely important because it follows the pace of life, and unlike TV and film, allows the little ones

to experience the closest possible contact with stage art and artists in a personal and secure atmosphere.

A world of wonder in which little humans, too, have the opportunity of seeing, hearing, feeling and understand the classics as well as contemporary forms.

Great theatre for little humans. For the children and for the child in every adult, too.

