Audience participation in children's theatre performances

by Sinje Kuhn

Three European impressions

I.

The gardener picks up a fir cone and rolls it through the quiet room straight towards a small child in the audience. Either the child leaves the fir cone lying where it is, or perhaps picks it up. Perhaps the child will later roll the fir cone on towards another child. Or make a gravel track around its mother. Maybe the child kneels down beside a bed full of branches and twigs and feels the material. And maybe it will later join the gardener in making a rhythm by knocking sticks. Whatever the case the child will decide.

The interactive installation described above, entitled “Le jardin du possible” (The Garden of Possibilities) and created by the French “Association 16 rue de Plaisance” presents a particular form of theatre for the very young. In this theatrical installation – a room full of sensual experiences made up of tactile, movable and playable organic materials – an adult actor encounters an audience of very small children (18 months to five years old) and their grown-up companions. In complete quiet they interact individually with the material and with each other in this “Garden of Possibilities”. Thus a common experiential space and a meeting place for the adult actor and the young as well as the grown-up spectators is created.

II.

“Take a card from the box and find your place!” Even before they reach the door to the playing area this instruction is whispered in the ear of every single child in the audience at the start of the performance in a gymnasium. The children have just removed their shoes and now they are allowed into the playing area one after the other. Three coloured blankets mark the places where the children gradually sit down. After this, games are played between and on the blankets. At first it is the performers who play. Then the children in the audience play the performers’ games. And finally they all play together under the direction and rules of the “former” audience.

The production entitled “Leg” (Danish for “game” or “to play”) presented by the Danish company “Carte Blanche” is part of a three-phase concept exploring communication, interaction and participation in theatre for children. Each of the three parts has its own particular focal point which is then theatrically explored. The focal point in “Leg” is the meeting of actors and spectators without recourse to theatrical means like lights, costumes and sets. The theme of the game in the production is not only a
focus of content but a formal focus. As such it is also a framework of preconditions for involving the audience. The spectators are successively drawn into the game played by the actors at several levels, and at the end it is the spectators who lead the game they all play together. In the course of the performance actors and spectators merge to such an extent that they become a single community of players.

III.

“This is not a theatre play. Today the theatre is a time machine that we want to test with you together. Everybody in this room will conduct the experiment.” declares the woman on the stage, who is a performer and a researcher into time at once. The children in the audience have already taken part once in researching into time: recently, when two researchers visited their class to experiment and discuss things with them. In the first part of the performance project the children have explored their own life-time and their school time, their perception of time and their entirely subjective feeling for time. Now, in the theatre space, the children probably recall this when they see pictures of themselves and their fellow classmates in video projections on the screen showing them chatting and working together “recently”. Thus they can experience themselves as part of the performance now taking place around them and with them.

“Schuluhr und Zeitmaschine” (School Clock and Time Machine) is a two-phase research and performance project created by the “Fundus Theatre” in Hamburg. In the first part, the “School Clock Workshop”, the theatre performers visit a school class as researchers into time. In the classroom they undertake exploratory studies in a playful manner into the theme of time in general and school time in particular. The second part, the “Time Machine Performance”, is made up of a visit by the school class to the theatre. In terms of content the performance continues to deal with the theme of time: the results of research into school time are presented as a theatrical production with the living and medial participation of the spectators. The “Time Machine” experiment uses the research community of actors (as time researchers) and children, the latter being experts in respect of their own (life) time.

**Audience participation in the performance**

Performances emerge out of the spatial, temporal and physical encounter of actors and spectators. The descriptions of the performances given above are drawn from three very disparate, contemporary theatre productions for children: three productions for different age groups: and, what is more, from three different European countries. In all three productions however – and the descriptions have probably revealed this already – the children play an integral part in the performance. With their own actions they have a considerable say in deciding the course of events.

When performances emerge out of the meeting between actors and spectators (cf. Fischer-Lichte, 2004) and in this sense regard themselves as joint productions, they simultaneously imply an “institutionalised asymmetry” (Pfister, 1988). The separation of the show’s participants into actors and spectators and the allocation of the functions “acting” and “watching” to the two groups result in a basically asymmetric situa-
tion. The (acting) performers are on a higher level than the (receptive) spectators. Every performance is then based on an unequal communication relationship between those on the stage and those in the audience. In the case of children's theatre this inequality is even strengthened by the generational gap between stage and audience: producers and actors of the performance are adults whereas the group of spectators consists of children. The adults act and the children watch them. It is therefore possible to speak about a “double asymmetry” in children's theatre performances.

In the history of theatre in general and children's theatre in particular, the aim of overcoming this asymmetrical relationship between actors and spectators often led to attempts of audience participation in the performance itself. Such forms of participatory theatre aim to involve spectators over and above their conventional (and above all internal) reception activities, as physical co-actors in the performance. Audience participation is intended to establish a contact between actors and spectators which opens up the possibility of an encounter on “equal terms” (cf. Schechner, 1971), thereby neutralising the imbalance.

Nonetheless there is still a tendency for the asymmetric situation to remain in these participatory forms. It is the people producing the show who lay down the structures and rules of the performance. And they decide on the “how” and “when” of audience participation. Gabriele Stöger has defined this as follows: “Participation is always about allowing other people to participate in an event that basically does not belong to them.” She continues: “The viewpoint is that of owners who wish to divide up their property without giving up their ownership rights completely.” (Stöger, 2005)

Thus the claims made by producers of such participatory formats that everybody concerned has an equal say in the performance are countered by critical voices who point out the problems of the producers’ structural powers and identify the limits of the participation. As far as theatre for children in Germany is concerned, such criticism was particularly loud with regard to participatory theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. Emancipatory theatre for children had blossomed during the 1960s and 70s as a result of a social reform movement, and in this context participatory forms were intended to strengthen the potential of theatre as a place of education (cf. Schneider, 1984). As such they had a direct connection with didactic and social-political aims and intentions: to show the children in the theatre that it was possible to change the world and play a part in reshaping it. By actively participating in the performance the children should experience in an exemplary fashion their own potential for changing society as a preview towards changing social realities outside the theatre. In this way the aims and ideals of the social emancipation movement were mediated in a playful way to the children in the audience. But since it was principally the ideals of the adult theatre-makers which were brought to bear here, and the child spectators only participated in the implementation of those ideas, such attempts at participatory theatre failed to level out the imbalance between grown-up producers and child recipients. Quite the contrary, they strengthened it. The double asymmetry inherent in children's theatre performances is therefore even more emphasised when there are didactic aims behind the idea of theatre (cf. Wartemann, 2005).
The performance descriptions given at the start of this article mark a tendency in contemporary children's theatre – even if this is surely only one tendency amongst many – to return once more to forms of audience participation. However the descriptions also show that current models audience participation are different from those which occurred in the 1970s. Instead of establishing a conventional performance situation and allowing the spectators to participate in a fictional ‘play’, these models aim at involving the audience in shaping situations jointly with the actors. They have no wish to mediate explicit contents, philosophies or ideals. Instead they put common spaces at the disposal of all those participating in the performance. Spaces for encounters and joint experiences, as in “Le jardin du possible”, spaces for collective playing action as in “Leg”, or for cooperative research as in “Schuluhr und Zeitmaschine”.

The children in the audience have an equal share in shaping and filling out these spaces and theatrical worlds as the adult actors. Thus the child visitors to “Le jardin du possible” participate in creating the continually changing installation by their actions. At the same time they experience the material nature of the objects and collect experiences with regard to interacting with other people. In “Leg”, the children are invited to take part in a playful community consisting of actors and spectators alike, whose dealings simultaneously result in a simple game and a theatrical performance. There again, in “Schuluhr und Zeitmaschine” they become a part of a theatrical research unit working on the theme of time and simultaneously researching theatre as such.

The encounter between adult actors and child spectators is at the heart of these theatrical experiments. Thus, what the children learn and experience here is simultaneously aesthetic and social in its nature. The child spectator in “Le jardin du possible” mentioned at the start, who rolls a fir cone to another child sitting nearby is thus not only participating in shaping the installation, but also making contact with another person.

References:


