

Clouds are made of White!

Cross-over of live-art and puppetry as an approach to post-dramatic children's theatre

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In this paper, I will reveal my experiences with post-dramatic children's theatre deriving from live-art and puppetry traditions.

My artistic background as a theatre director and author is based on two rather contrary educational trainings. Firstly, I spent a time as apprentice in a traditional hand-puppet company that toured throughout Germany and I studied directing for puppet theatre at the oldest puppetry school in Europe, the Academy of Arts in Prague, in the Czech Republic. Secondly, I completed my Drama-degree at Giessen-University in Germany, which has a special reputation for its exploratory approach, combining innovative forms of theatre and live art.

When I became director of a puppet-theatre with an ensemble of six puppeteers in Bautzen, Saxony, I tried to combine these two different traits in some of our performances. This approach was unusual but very successful in the field of theatre for small children, from the age of two years. (. . .)

My personal artistic approach to the development of a performance for an audience is not interested in story, dialogue or character, that does not like to sit on the same place for more than a few minutes and does not care for any theatre-conventions!

For my first performance for 2 year olds, I chose 'weather' as a motif to start from and invited Otmar Wagner, live-art artist, to work with us in Bautzen. Otmar Wagner invented a spatial setting that included designed objects like a man-big flower, waves cut from wood, a wind-machine or a bike that did not move. Next to these objects he arranged a model-stage that could be video-projected on the real-size stage and he put up an overhead-projector for live back-projection on three curtains to create holographic effects. He also created two-dimensional puppets out of photographs of the two involved puppeteers. Through this spatial setting he added the aspects of 'big and small' and 'material and projection' to the original motif.

The work process began with a two week phase of exploring and improvising with the material. None of us knew, and none of us wanted to know, what results the exploration would finally have. The puppeteers were of course not only animating the rudimentary puppets, but were mainly improvising with the performing possibilities of objects and space. We collected these possibilities initially without questioning their sense or nonsense concerning the performance.

As a second step the directing team thought about the dramaturgic structure. We decided to declare the stage setting to be a weather laboratory with a chief weather-scientist, Mrs. Sun and her assistant Mr. Moon. And we agreed on a four compartment dramaturgic course alongside the four seasons. The results of the improvisation were assigned to the appropriate compartment and linked to the work in the laboratory.

Concerning language and sound we were interested in using words not to convey meaning, transmit information or promote a story, but to use them in the same explorative way as the material objects. We collected sayings and folk-songs on the four seasons. And we asked Jossi,

a not yet four year old boy, to explain weather phenomena. Happily, he could explain everything we asked him about and he came up with the most poetic texts we could have wished for. "A rainbow feels wet like rain and a rainbow can eat raisins. On the rainbow I easily walk to my grandma who has died." he told us, or "Clouds are made of white."

Sayings, folk-songs and the child's contemplations were added to the course of scenic events. Thereby we created a dramaturgic structure that was not telling a story, although we invented the stage characters of Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon. Instead the dramaturgy was composed of a series of short actions or happenings. I call this a "Dramaturgy of Incidents".

In the third working phase we had normal rehearsals in which the puppeteers filled their characters, trained the course of scenic events and the technicians practiced the smooth running of the show, which we finally titled *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon create Weather*.

Having talked about the working process, I will now focus on the perception of the performance. The target audiences were children from 2 years of age. But these children do not attend a theatre show by themselves! The adults that accompany them have to be taken into account too. Other than with shows for older children, the very young audience needs even more adult attendants. About two carers are responsible for a group of not more than 10 children from a nursery school. Both parents sometimes accompany one child, especially on weekend performances. Therefore we had about one third adults and two thirds small children in the audience. A rather heterogeneous mixture:

Adults think language is an important means to convey information. 2 year olds understand an average of 150 words and talk in sentences of not more than 3 words. Adults restrain themselves, especially in public. Children expect their needs to be met at once and their emotions are shown the moment they arise. Adults know how to behave in a theatre. They do not move from their seats and they keep silent.

Children of that small age have never before been to a theatre. They have a natural urge to move and their emotional expression is mostly accompanied by sounds.

Of course there are many more differences between an audience of adults and of children. But the most important yet to mention is the following: Adults are used to having to understand the meaning of a theatre performance. Sometimes that even inhibits them to attend a performance that they esteem to be too complicated. They would rather think that they themselves are too ignorant to understand than to question the notion that a performance has to be understood. Children on the other hand, especially very small children, do not care to understand any meaning. Children care for the sensuous experience of a theatre performance and the emotions that this experience arouses. They sense the meaning of art.

We met those differences within the audience by avoiding pretence. We had a stage setting where everything was real. All the objects were clearly displayed, all use of technical equipment was openly shown, the two-dimensional photographic puppets never claimed to be alive. Through the soft use of lights there was no spatial partition between the seats of the spectators and the stage. We had real persons on stage. The two puppeteers/actors were never acting as if they were somebody else. Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon were characters that evolved

from the actors personalities. We had real time. There was no difference between the 45 minutes duration of the performance and the time on stage. We had a 10 minutes break, during which the actors and the children ate fruit together.

These aspects do not seem to describe a children's puppet-show. But the small children absorbed the whole situation happily. They let themselves be carried away by the beauty of the stage, the rhythm of language and music, the sympathy for Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon, the excitement of every new incident happening on stage, the humor and surprise. They simply integrated Mr. Moon's dance with a man-sized flower or a statement like "Clouds are made of White.", into their life experience. What was interesting was that the children's example helped the adults to adjust to a new experience. The children enjoyed themselves. And since there was not just a simple story being acted on stage, but a whole world of things to discover also for the adults, they felt free to sense their own enjoyment too.

Therefore I would like to conclude with a consideration about the special quality of new forms of post-dramatic children's theatre. Since they are perceived in a non-intellectual way, they allow adults and children a common adventure. Adults are not more capable of understanding the performance than small children. There is no need to decode any meaning. There is just the non-hierarchical sensuous theatre experience.

Rike Reiniger ist aufgewachsen in Bochum. Nach der Schulzeit arbeitete sie in einem traditionellen Puppentheater, das den deutschsprachigen Raum bereiste. Sie studierte in Prag (Regie und Dramaturgie für Puppentheater) und Gießen (Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft), inszenierte in der freien Szene Berlins und war Mitbegründerin des interkulturellen Theater-Ensembles *Kumpanya*. Nach dessen Auflösung ging sie ins Engagement an die Landes Bühnen Sachsen, das Deutsch-Sorbische Volkstheater Bautzen und das tjg. theater junge generation, Dresden. Rike Reiniger lebt als Regisseurin und Autorin in Berlin.

Sie hat diesen Beitrag als Vortrag bei der internationale Konferenz zum Thema „Puppetry and Post-Dramatic Performance“ gehalten; die Konferenz wurde ausgerichtet von der University of Connecticut, dem einzigen Drama Departement der USA, an dem Puppenspiel, -Regie und -Ausstattung als Schwerpunkt gelehrt wird.

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