



From Illusion to Reality

Spaces in theatre for young audiences

by Gabi dan Droste and Kolja Burgschuld

The motto of the XVIII. ASSITEJ World Congress “Facing the audience” directs our attention to the audiences and their perception of theatre. Contemporary ideas about theatre spaces for young audiences arise not least because theatre artists working for young people think a lot about the best way to shape such a space to the benefit of both actors and audience i.e. about the reciprocal relationship of communication. Like it or not the theatre space expresses a lot about how artists want to make contact with their audiences and also tells us something about their artistic understanding of audiences caught between extremes of presentation and contemplation, and also their understanding of the forms of interaction with the audience.

In this article on theatre spaces of contemporary performance art for young people we shall follow the movement from an illusionary stage space to a real space, from a closed to an open spatial concept in theatre.

The Dichotomy of Stage and Auditorium

The theatre of imaginary spaces takes place every year and in many places in the form of Christmas fairy-tales, solid stories presented on stage. Such a stage space gives the action a framework and a corresponding setting. It draws in the visual perceptions of the audience, and the lighting focuses our attention on certain specific places in the course of the action. The audience’s perception is directed at a fictional reality principally constituted by the actions of the characters played by actors who often totally identify with their roles and whose own identities disappear behind that of the character. The stage is a space for illusions which invites the audience to follow experientially the coherent story in the drama.

In the following considerations we shall go beyond the dichotomy of stage and auditorium. Over and above the spatial perspective of space we shall consider the totality of theatre as a communication space. And we shall be taking up examples of contemporary theatre forms which regard audiences as active participants in an artistic event. Today's young people are *co-creators*. They invent themselves, stage themselves and comment on themselves: this is not just since interactive media have been leaving their mark on everyday communication. Children have always been creators in play. Contemporary theatre forms and spatial concepts are taking up these visual habits and ways of perception. They are opening up spaces for young audiences to be active themselves – in the art of observation and in forms of direct participation.

The art of watching theatre

In contemporary theatre for young audiences the break with the illusion of space comes into effect via the visible and audible connection of stage space with real life. As in, for example, "Chalk about" by Performing Group / Curious Seed, (DE/UK, 8+), in "Papas Arms are a Boat" by pulk fiktion (DE, 5+) or "Genuine and other Pirates" by geheimagentur & FUNDUS THEATER (DE, 9+). Here loudspeakers broadcast children's voices, videos of them are projected on screens and the techniques are often deliberately exhibited. In these shows adult actors don't play children. Instead children's authentic statements are integrated into the presentations on stage which are aimed at audiences of the same age. How are children represented on stage? Who owns the stage? The shows answer these questions by using recordings to back up the strategy of opening up the stage space into the real world of those people addressed in the "artistic" space. Thus the theatre becomes a space of collages.

In doing so artists in the performance scene have introduced a new "gesture" into the German speaking scene of TYA. Performers in the Berlin based group Showcase Beat Le Mot throw the children's comments back into the auditorium in an equally humorous and provoking manner. The stage is not a black hole which swallows up the young people's reactions. The theatre space becomes an audience space and

the stage an all-embracing space of resonance. The production of “Räuber Hotzenplotz” (Showcase Beat Le Mot / Theater an der Parkaue / Forum Freies Theater, DE, 6+) is also an example of how theatre for young audiences exposes the illusion of reality as a theatrical construct, or merely transports it “en passant”. Instead of costumes the performers wear large sandwich boards covered in the typical props appropriate to each character. The performance gesture resembles a theatrical simulation, that deconstructs the situation in a playful manner and nonetheless treats the material seriously.

In contemporary music theatre the musicians do not sit on stage, in the orchestra pit or offstage (other forms of “non-auditora”) but are part of the events on the other side without being staged as part of an alleged theatrical act. In the dance theatre show “ROSES” (Theater Strahl, De Dansers and Szene Bunte Wähne, DE/BE/AT, 13+) spaces at the side of the stage and out-front performances open up the theatre space for a rock band. The musicians and dancers alike are able to maintain a permanent eye-to-eye contact with the audience and communicate with them, whilst dancing complex movements from contemporary dance vocabulary and presenting associative images on the history of the “White Rose” anti-Nazi resistance group. The setting is sparse and makes no attempt to conceal the real surroundings. The patina of the space, be it a factory or an old gymnasium, is visible at all times. The theatrical space not only dissolves the traditional hierarchy between sender (the stage) and receiver (the auditorium), but establishes an open communication space between performers and the audiences in which the emotional nature of the music and the bodily language can unfold.

The art of participation

Spaces which enable direct participation raise the potential for communication. Theatre becomes a public space. In the lecture performance “Liquids“ by the Hamburg research theatre (Fundus Theater, DE, 6+), about liquids and their different aggregate states, the children sit around an area of water that is simultaneously a demonstration object and a playing area. The show changes between the mode of performers’ presentation and demonstration in which they directly address their

audience, and moments in which the children themselves can experiment, touch things and talk to one another. Here the opposites of stage area and spectator area are dissolved into a common space in which all those involved can take an active part. The basic structure of the space enables the children not only to watch the performers but also one another.

In the show "Once More" by Franceschini // Droste & Co. (DE/IT, 2+) the large movable object on the stage mark out the space for the professional dancers in the show, and also the space for the young spectators after the show, when they can explore their impressions and play with the unusual objects in the room themselves. The stage becomes a space for their own movements and perceptions. Especially in theatre for the very young the design of the space is a basic reaction to the fact that very young children do not yet possess any idea of spectator conventions. The world is a stage and the stage is not yet another world.

In "h.g." the group Trickster-p (CH) takes the spectators at regular intervals, either alone or in small groups, on a tour of different separate spaces. Each of these spaces features an independently atmospheric installation on themes and locations from the fairytale "Hänsel and Gretel". Via headphones the children hear recordings of noises, sounds and sequences from the story. The spectator becomes a moving actor with no opposing player and is thrown back completely on his own perceptions.

Finally, theatre also dares to leave the theatre buildings and enter real-life situations in public places which it plays with not only in the form of texts but also as a referential framework. A good example here is the Belgian group Studio ORKA. Its show "Mister More, Lady Less" (7+) begins on a public parking lot in front of a supermarket and continues in its own specially constructed small proscenium stage. The outside environment can be seen through panes of glass. The actors include passers-by in their play or react to passers-by who intrude on the play. Thus the previously conceived play can now be opened up to everyday fortuitous events, thereby integrating itself with real life. It alienates the spectator's perception of everyday spaces and acts as a form of irritation in their perception of nontheatrical reality.

Gabi dan Droste works as a freelance dramaturg, lecturer and project developer. She lives in Berlin (DE).

Kolja Burgschuld was formerly the secretary general of ASSITEJ Austria. Since 2014 he is the head of the communication department at DSCHUNGEL WIEN (AT).



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