

Human beings in a theatre made for them: the child's voice in contemporary theatre for young audiences

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Abstract: This article explores the challenges of including the child's voice in an artform dedicated to children, Theatre for Young Audiences. In 2020, The International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, ASSITEJ, launched a manifesto to bring the voices of children and artists to every country in the world. However, the experience of children of this theatre made for them is often that their rights are elided with or subordinated to those of adults. A model for addressing this and some examples of practice suggest possibilities for change. This article examines the capacity and capability required to realise such possibilities within a precarious industry. Committing to hearing children makes demands on those making theatre and those making policy alike.

Keywords: Children, Theatre for Young Audiences, arts policy, capability, capacity.

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Introduction

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) is a broad category of performance initiated and developed by adults working as professional artists, creating cultural and aesthetic experiences for children (Junker 2012; Nicholson 2011: 87; Schonmann 2006). Adults decide who attends and what they can watch (Omasta & Adkins 2017: 8). During performances, children are homogenised as ‘a captive audience’ (Klein & Schonman 2009: 67; Maguire 2012). Their behaviour, particularly within a school group, is policed by adults, including what Danyah Miller identifies as the ‘Shushing’ Teacher who ‘expects them to listen in silence, demands their best behaviour, asking for the same conduct that she expects in her classroom’ (2016).

Such characterisations suggest TYA is something done by adults *to* children, in which they have little stake and even less say. This manifests ‘the adult construction dilemma’, where adults identify and serve the rights of children without recourse to them (Tobin 2013: 413-14). It raises a central issue of children’s agency in this art form: whether it is made *for* them, *with* them or *by* them (Zeder 2015).¹ Where, typically, the child’s experience of TYA performance is constructed and policed by adults, these prepositions focus the issue of who is best placed to serve the rights of the child articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989).

The UNCRC guides the commitment of The International Association of Theatres for Children and Young People, ASSITEJ,² to recognising the child as ‘a human being, not a human becoming’, affirming that children’s rights are dependent on their interests, not their capacity (Ross 2013). It responded to the challenges of engaging with the voice of the child, most recently in a manifesto published in September 2020. In this paper, the expectations that ASSITEJ’s Manifesto raises will be set against a specific model (Lundy 2007) through which the voice of the child might be heard. I will identify how the sector is moving and might move further towards engagement with children as full rights holders. Key examples demonstrate that this relies on the capacity and capability of the adults who work in this sector.

¹ Even these distinctions may be blurred in practice.

² Although this derives from the title Association International du Théâtre pour l’Enfance et la Jeunesse, the organisation is most commonly referred to by the acronym.

Adults and children's best interests

In many sectors, the focus in Article 3 of the UNCRC on protecting children's best interests allows adults to set aside the exercise of children's own autonomy and agency (Peleg 2013: 527). This is despite correctives to such relegation of children's agency within other articles of the UNCRC: Article 13 identifies the child's 'right to freedom of expression'; Article 29 emphasises on the development of the child's 'fullest potential'; and Article 31 protects the child's right 'to participate in cultural life and the arts'. David Archard also identifies the intrinsic value of listening to children (2020: 11-12). Equally important are examples which demonstrate that children know things that adults do not. I will focus on two of these in TYA as an illustration. The first concerns the aesthetic judgements made by adults that inform what is best for children. The second relates to judgements exercised by adult gatekeepers in deciding what children should be allowed to see.

It is increasingly common to invite children and young people to act as critics for venues and festivals. This is framed as an opportunity for the participants to learn how to judge work as adult critics do (Woodward 2016). However, as empirical research has demonstrated, children are already competent from an early age in understanding theatre (Mor & Shem-Tov 2021); and they exercise very different aesthetic judgements from their adult counterparts (Klein & Schonmann 2009). This is not because children do not know the difference between 'good' and 'poor' performances: rather that they apply different criteria in evaluating performances (Klein 2005). Children know what they value, but are subjected routinely to adult preferences.

TYA practitioners often face difficulties from adult gatekeepers when the topic matter of performances is deemed to touch on areas such as sex and sexuality that adults regard as contentious or taboo (van de Water 2012: 59-79). For example, in 2012, a schools' tour of Emily Freeman's *Along Came Tango* for an intended audience of 7-8 year-olds was cancelled by the Austin Superintendent of Schools in Texas (Zeder 2015: 15). The play was based on a report of two male chinstrap penguins who had pair-bonded and then incubated an egg and raised a female chick in New York's Central Park Zoo. The cancellation followed the judgement that, 'The subject matter communicated in the play is a topic that Austin ISD believes should be examined by parents/guardians who will discuss with their elementary school age children at a time deemed appropriate by the parents/guardians' (Faires 2012).

Although the United States is not a party to the UNCRC, this approach aligns with Article 3's requirement that State Parties take into account the rights and duties of parents, guardians and legally responsible adults. Yet such an approach is in tension with the rights of the child under Article 31 to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Smith 2013), by promoting adults as best placed to decide on the best

interests of the child. This is particularly problematic here since some adult decision-makers appeared to be working from their own heteronormative values. These adults did not recognise that individual children may already have queer identities, denied to them within heteronormative family contexts; that individual children's own home backgrounds may not conform to dominant heteronormativity; or indeed that individual children may be well-able to negotiate the experience of difference on their own terms (Spence *et al.* 2018).

ASSITEJ and children's rights

ASSITEJ has embraced two significant policy responses to such gaps created by the absence of children's voices from the sector. The first was the endorsement within the organisation's 2017 constitution of Article 31 of the UNCRC.³ The constitution thereby emphasised the cultural identity of the child as an individual rights-holder without reference to any adult as care-giver or gate-keeper. However, the emphasis on promoting the 'visibility' of arts for children and the rights of the child to enjoy arts and cultural activity does not refer to the obligations under the UNCRC's Article 12 that due weight be given to the views of the child.

A second corrective came in 2020 when ASSITEJ published its Manifesto to call for children to be heard in the processes of making decisions that affect them. It followed discussions with ASSITEJ members on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular on the ways in which adults were making significant decisions that had direct and often negative consequences on children (Maguire 2021: 1), without any recourse to children. In response, the Manifesto amplifies the imperative of Article 12 to recommend 'involving children and young people through consultation and collaboration and ensuring inclusion of their opinions and perspectives, at every possible level' (ASSITEJ 2020).⁴

How to hear the child's voice: the Lundy Model

Allowing children to give voice to their interests as urged by the Manifesto must be regarded as necessary; on its own, it is not sufficient. Working from Hart's (1992)

³ASSITEJ could not be a signatory to the Convention since the Convention's obligations fall primarily on state parties. Nonetheless, the organisation seeks to align itself with the provisions of the Convention.

⁴A significant irony in the development of the Manifesto was that its drafting was almost exclusively the work of adults: another example of the adult construction dilemma.

‘ladder of participation’, Laura Lundy described the behaviour of adults who appear to consult with children, but actually ignore their views as ‘tokenistic or decorative’ (2007: 938). Instead, she proposed a model by which the requirements of Article 12 might be implemented within educational decision-making.⁵ This model provides a structure for incorporating the voice of children within the TYA sector as a standard practice.⁶ The model focuses children’s participation in decision-making on four inter-related stages:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

(Lundy 2007: 933)

For Lundy, the concept of ‘due weight’ implies ‘that children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in the decision-making processes’ (2007: 936). That generates a requirement that when children speak, they are heard by or their views communicated to those who have the capacity and responsibility to listen and who are in a position to put them into effect. Adults may need to be trained in active listening and in understanding the many ways in which children might express themselves other than through verbal means. The final stage of the model requires that the views of children have influence. Lundy traces the impact of consideration of children’s age and maturity in generating a potential tension between protecting their best interests and giving weight to their views. This does not mean that children’s views will have primacy in any decision-making that affects them, though it might. It does mean that adults have to be transparent in how they resolve any tensions between children’s best interests and giving due weight to their views.

Meeting Lundy’s challenge in TYA practice

The alignment between the ASSITEJ Manifesto and the values expressed in its constitution with the Lundy Model appears to be clear. In the following, I draw out some key examples to illustrate the ways in which TYA practices have shifted to listen to the voices of children and the limitations of some approaches.

⁵It has subsequently been applied in a wide variety of settings and contexts. In 2021, for example, it was the basis of a *National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making* published by the Government of Ireland.

⁶Even as Lundy (2018) revised her negative assessment of tokenism, following from Hart’s (2008) own reflection, the pillars of the model remain.

The most straightforward way in which children's voices might be heard is during performances. Klein & Schonmann (2009: 71) cite Moses Goldberg's view (1974: 142) that 'the response of the audience is never wrong – they are responding to what they are experiencing in the way that they must'. Noting that audience inattention indicates problems with the writing or performance, Wood & Grant suggest that children will often express their dissatisfaction by withdrawing from engagement with the dramatic world on the stage and focusing instead on opportunities for amusement within the auditorium (1997: 19). The disruption that this might cause to other spectators leads to the behaviours of the 'shushing' teacher. It means that during the performance, there are difficulties in using the auditorium as an appropriate space in which to listen to the child. Nonetheless, attending to the nuances of children's engagement during performances might allow children's perspectives to be heard as work is developed and refined over the course of a production.

An indication of how this might be done can be seen from a research project commissioned by Starcatchers in Scotland. This project developed a taxonomy for understanding the engagement of very young child spectators that allowed for such nuanced listening. The researchers identified seven 'engagement signals' and descriptors of associated observable behaviour (Dunlop *et al.* 2011: 24). This taxonomy was then used to generate data to show the extent of interaction and co-production in a number of performance pieces. Researchers were able to undertake narrative observation guided by the engagement signals; tracking pairs of children or periods of time; and scanning the whole group at intervals (*ibid.*: 15). This then is a highly sensitive approach to generating empirical data that could match key moments within the event to spectatorial engagement. This taxonomy offers a potential for a methodology for the adults of TYA to assess, alter or target performances by evaluating them systematically against such engagement signals. The values governing the production and programming of TYA might refer to the observable behaviour of children, rather than only the aesthetic tastes of adults.

One practice that has facilitated the exercise of distinctive child-driven judgements is offered by Canadian company Mammalian Diving Reflex. The company is committed to 'the full recognition of children as rights-holders who have the right to participate in all matters affecting them' (2021). Their 'Children's Choice Awards' was a project that was developed and delivered between 2007 and 2017 in partnership with a range of children's arts festivals in different countries (O'Donnell 2013). The company claimed it as 'a subversive act that refers us adults to the power relationships inherent in our conceptions of childhood, education and art' (2021). The project supported child participants to attend all the shows at a festival and then to decide together a range of awards and the format of a ceremony at which they dispense awards (Wartemann 2015). In providing this platform, The Children's Choice Awards clearly offer a clear 'audience' as identified as an essential realm by Lundy.

A final example is one which deliberately engaged with the Lundy Model and which also enabled children to become involved in the governance of an organisation, not just in feeding back on their individual experience: The Children's Council of The Ark in Dublin, Ireland. Opened in 1995, The Ark is a dedicated cultural centre for children offering performances, exhibitions and creative workshops. Aideen Howard took over as the current Director in 2015 and, a year later, initiated a strategic review of the organisation. One outcome of that review was to commit in its *Strategy 2017–2020* to, 'listen to children's view of our work and employ participative decision making by children in The Ark in relation to children's cultural needs and our artistic programme'. Following direct engagement by Howard with Laura Lundy, The Ark then proceeded to establish its Children's Council, initially as a pilot project, in March 2016. The Lundy Model process was used to engage Council members, parents and The Ark in evaluating the pilot (Horgan *et al.* 2019).

The evaluation report noted that there had been three Councils involving 78 children. Each had been a year-long experience that explored active citizenship through engagement with the arts while amplifying the voice of the child within The Ark.⁷ Council members were mentored and guided by an Artist-in-Residence with whom they worked together collaboratively over the course of the year, engaging with and responding to The Ark's programme. As one alumni boy commented, 'The job of the Council is to be a voice for children who didn't have a voice, whose opinions wouldn't be taken into account' (cited Horgan *et al.* 2019: 15). The 2019 evaluation report confirmed, 'The value of the Ark Children's Council in providing children with unique opportunities to engage with and influence arts production and policy within The Ark.' It noted that even here, however, 'participants are less clear on whether decision-makers report back to tell them how they made a difference and on their level of influence' (Horgan *et al.* 2019: 28). The report included a comment from one member of the council that, 'After a play we went to see we had to write on a sheet of paper what we thought and we had to say to the group and give feedback about what we thought about the play. I'm not really sure what happened then with that feedback' (cited Horgan *et al.* 2019:17).

⁷Activities included involvement as members of the Fantastic Flix Children's Jury as part of Dublin International Film Festival, and reviewing and providing feedback on plays and exhibitions (Horgan *et al.* 2019: 12).

Policy implications: the capability and capacity of adults

Archard suggests that ‘Children can only express views if they are taught, facilitated, and supported in their expression. It is no good giving anyone a right to speak freely if they do not know how to and if they lack the means to do so’ (2020: 9). The examples from TYA here indicate that children’s knowledge of and abilities to articulate, claim and exercise their rights are necessary but not sufficient on their own. Children frequently express their views of performances already, but are often ignored, coerced or trained into deferring to the views of adults or adopting or conforming to adult standards of behaviour and judgement. Instead, adults might learn to listen to children more effectively.

This leads to a further set of assumptions to tease apart in relation to ‘capacity’. Here, it is useful to create a distinction between ‘capability’ and ‘capacity’. I use ‘capability’ to refer to the set of skills, knowledge and techniques that enable an adult practitioner to support a child in expressing themselves; to attend to what they express; and to create a process of engagement with other adults to respond appropriately to the views conveyed. These are professional attributes that might be acquired through training and honed through experience. The examples of the researchers in the Starcatchers project and the facilitator of The Ark Children’s Council demonstrate that these are not just personal attributes but professional skills. The evaluation report for The Ark’s Children’s Council notes the need for specific training in participation and facilitating children’s ‘voice’ (Horgan *et al.* 2019: 22).

The deployment of these professional skills in any encounter with a child is conditional too on the capacity of the adult with the responsibility to listen to the child to undertake a meaningful engagement and respond appropriately; something core to the Lundy model. That capacity is provided through appropriate effort and resourcing (Lundy 2018). This would include allocation of time to undertake the listening activities; to process what has been heard; and to relay that to the rest of the company. It relies too on the provision of physical spaces within which that listening takes place. For venues and festival programmers, this may require freeing up ancillary spaces within buildings. Materials may also be needed to support a range of approaches to allow the children to express their views. Work by Matthew Reason (2010) highlights the utility of drawing in understanding the experience of children in the theatre: a valuable means of listening to children’s experiences. Quite simply, children need to have access to the materials to create such drawings. While Hart (2008) and Lundy (2018) have both retreated from their initial dismissal of tokenistic engagement with children,⁸ the examples here from TYA relied on a more sustained

⁸Lundy argues that the gains made by children through tokenistic participation far outweigh the consequences of not being involved at all (2018: 346–7).

engagement between the adult listening and the children whose voices were to be heard. Circling back to the need for capability, one can see that resourcing is needed also to pay professionals with the skills to conduct and analyse this listening – at a level that is commensurate with the status to take action on the basis of what they hear.

The provision of such resourcing is, then, a significant issue of policy for funders and practice for theatre makers. The arts in general, and the live performing arts in particular, have been particularly badly affected by the impact of the global pandemic. If the aspirations of the ASSITEJ Manifesto and the model articulated by Lundy are to be implemented, a significant commitment of resourcing is required. Within the UK, funding devolved to the arts councils of the constituent nations/regions is already stretched and local authorities face significant demands on their budgets (Ogden & Phillips 2020). Third sector charities and philanthropic organisations reliant on donations also face a funding shortfall due to the impact of COVID-19 (Wood 2021). There will be choices then to be made in how the rights of children to be heard are prioritised by funders and theatre makers in using the resources available.

Conclusions

As a sector led by adults, TYA illustrates a number of the challenges that derive from the adult construction dilemma. Embracing the UNCRC, ASSITEJ has been able to lead the sharing of values that support the intrinsic rights of children to be involved in decisions about them. The Lundy Model suggests a process that might be implemented across different contexts and examples from across the globe exemplify how TYA practitioners are already enacting practices that align with it. For policy-makers, a critical challenge is to support these innovative arts interventions. This might be through dissemination and training in effective practice. It may be by tying funding to a requirement to demonstrate children's participation. For theatre-makers, the challenge is to use their resources to learn from, adapt, and implement practices that allow children to speak and support adults to listen.

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