

## Drawing the Theatrical Experience

How children watch theatre

Matthew Reason

## Background

Early experiences, not least through school, are widely perceived as crucial to an individual's long term enjoyment of theatre, with children learning how to imaginatively engage with theatrical illusion and gaining skills in spectatorship.

Theatre and the arts also play an important role in the broader development of children, contributing directly to both formal aspects of the education curriculum and informal areas of child development. Engagement with theatre is seen as part of the process of 'educating the whole child'.

Aside from these utilitarian or long-term objectives, however, theatre is primarily an immediate aesthetic and emotional experience to be enjoyed in the moment.

And yet while we know all about *why* we think we should take children to the theatre, we know little about *what* they make of the experience themselves or *how* they engage with the theatrical performance.

The project presented here set out to discover how children watch theatre.

## The participants

The study is based upon data gathered during 11 visual arts based workshops. These were conducted in three primary schools (in Edinburgh and West Lothian, Scotland) with a total of 98 children participating (47 boys, 51 girls). The children took part in whole class groups and ranged from Primary 1 to Primary 5 (ages 5 to 10). The participating schools were selected to provide a range of levels of theatre-going experience amongst the children. The research was conducted in collaboration with Imaginate and funded by the Scottish Government Education Department.



*Them With Tails: The Blacksmith and the Basilisk* by Nasra



*Pst!: Puppet pulling a box* by Fraser.

'Children are not the audience of the future. Rather, they are citizens of the here-and-now... An 8-year old is not a third of a 24-year old, a quarter of a 32-year old, or a fifth of a 40-year old. Being 8 is a whole experience ... there are understandings and meanings particular to being 8.'

Martin Drury

## The study

'Drawing the Theatrical Experience' sought to discover how primary school children watch theatre.

The project was interested in a number of questions, such as

- how children respond to different levels of theatrical illusion;
- how they perceive the live performer and interact within an audience;
- and the manner in which they identify and construct theatrical narrative.

Other questions explored in the study included whether there were any gender differences in how children watched and remembered theatre performances.

Recognising the need to connect with children in a manner that was both age appropriate and engaging, the project used **drawing and painting** as its primary research tool.

In collaboration with Imaginate, the research was conducted in schools shortly after the children had been taken to the theatre. Following introductions and warm-up exercises, the children were then provided with paper, pens, crayons, scissors and card and asked to draw something they remembered from the play they had just seen. As the children drew the researchers engaged them in conversation, asking them about their drawings and about their memories of the play. Another interest of the study was what impact this intervention – of drawing, talking and listening – had on the children's experiences.

This report tells the story of this research study.

IV [interviewer]: So what happened to make things end happily?

BEN: Can't remember.

IV: You can't remember. Well maybe if you carry on drawing you might start to remember more...

BEN [a moment later]: I remember now.

IV: You remember now, what happened?

BEN: I'll remember it ever and ever... I'll remember it ever and ever...

## The productions

The research was focused around specific theatre productions that the children had been taken to see. The children's responses, therefore, were to these particular productions and the concrete and immediate experience of theatre, rather than to theatre in general or in abstract. The productions were:

*Martha*, by Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, Scotland (right). This was a narrative-driven production about a relationship between a lonely and angry woman (Martha) and a goose (played by a puppet).

*Them With Tails*, by Tall Stories, England (facing top). This was a cross between improvisation, stand-up and storytelling, with two performers telling a series of magical, mythical stories.

*Psst!*, Teater Refleksjon, Denmark (facing bottom). This was a piece of intimate puppet theatre with little dialogue. It was largely episodic rather than narrative driven and based around a series of circus characters (jugglers, ballerinas, clowns).

Most readers of this report will not have seen the productions for themselves. Instead you will have the pleasure of seeing them through the children's drawings and memories.



*Martha*: Telling the goose to 'go away' by Sean.

## Drawing the experience

The methodological approach adopted for this project was motivated by the need to find a way of initiating and continuing a conversation with young children that would be engaging, reassuring and appropriate for their levels of understanding, their interests and their particular skills and abilities.

It was for these reasons that the workshops conducted for this project used drawing, combined with talk about drawings, as tools through which to engage the children and explore their recent theatrical experience. Drawing is an age appropriate means of expression with which children are very familiar and comfortable. Drawing is a different kind of activity for children than it is for adults. Children themselves consider all children to be competent at drawing, which they perceive as an ordinary rather than specialised activity. This is broadly reversed amongst adults, who learn from around 10 onwards that they 'can't draw'.

## The workshops

The workshops began with some warm up drawing games – such as getting the children to 'take a line for a walk' or draw portraits of themselves without taking their pen off the paper. The researchers joined in all these games, using their drawings to model to the children examples of different drawing styles and abilities and provide an opportunity to explain that we were not concerned with the relative quality of their drawings, but rather with them doing their best.

Only rarely did we face objections to drawing, and then only from the oldest group (9-10 year olds) participating:

MARC: What happens if we're not good at drawing?

ZOE: That doesn't really matter

JODI: You just do your best.

JACK: Yeah!

ROBBIE: Just take your time.

The bulk of the workshops consisted of a period of largely unstructured free drawing, which was intended to provide the opportunity for the children to produce pictures drawn from their memory of the theatre performance. We began with a deliberately broad opening request, asking the children to **'draw something you remember from the play'**.

As the children drew the researchers moved around the room, talking to individual children as they worked, or as they finished a particular drawing, and asking them to tell us about the performance and about their drawing. These conversations were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.



A workshop in progress. Photo: Brian Hartley

## Why drawing?

- 1) Drawing is an **age appropriate** way of working with young children.
- 2) Drawing is immediate, yet also allows **time for reflection**. The time and effort required to finish a picture provides scope for new insights to emerge.
- 3) A drawing is a trace of an experience and assists in the **ordering of sensations**, feelings, ideas and **memory**.
- 4) Drawing requires that we really think about what we have seen and **aids observation** and **interpretation**.
- 5) Drawing develops ideas, from embryonic stage to form. Through drawing we have **the power to change** and **own** our experiences.

## Asking questions

At its simplest, therefore, the objective with this project was to create the atmosphere and circumstances through which young children would be willing to open up to us and discuss their experiences and perceptions of the play they had seen. The idea was to use drawings as a 'way in' to starting these conversations.

Although the overall plan was fairly straightforward, it is important not to neglect the subtleties required to successfully achieve these objectives, particularly in terms of the nature of the questioning and conversation that were adopted.

When asking children questions it is all too easy to slip into conventional 'school' modes, where teacher questions and child responds. One particular instance of this that occurred in this project was slipping into a mode of 'testing' the children's memories of the performance and rewarding them with praise when they got a particular detail or recollection correct. This form of questioning may be fairly benevolent but it is also relentless, reinforces the adult/child divide and limits children's ability to provide narrative, multi-word responses that articulate their experiences from their own perspective.

It is not always easy getting any kind of response! The blunt negative, unthinking positive, changes of subject, statements that 'I can't remember' or even complete silence are all ways in which children attempt to counter unequal adult/child power relationships.

**IV:** Why did they decide to go to the moon?

**CLAIRE:** I dunno.

**IV:** Do you think they didn't want to be in the circus any more?

**CLAIRE:** Nuh.

**IV:** Any reason why?

**CLAIRE:** I dunno.

**IV:** And what did the fat man think about the ballerina?

**CLAIRE:** I dunno.

**IV:** Can you have any guesses?

**CLAIRE:** No.

## Sample questions

Open-ended, non-leading questions:

**Tell me about your drawing?**

**What is going on in this picture?**

Playful, imagination stimulating questions:

**How do the people/animals in this picture feel?**

**If they could speak, what would they say?**

**What title would you give your drawing?**

Asking children 'How did you know...?' in relation to an aspect of their drawing can also be interesting, revealing the skills and abilities that children employ when responding to a performance.

Generally aim for open-ended wh- questions – what, where, how, who. 'Why' questions can also work but sometimes become a kind of test, seeking some kind of explanation. Asking 'why did you draw it like this?' can also produce post-event rationalisations that do not reflect the actual process of creation or thought.

## Not knowing

When seeking to explore how children see the world – here specifically how they see theatre – it is vital to recognise the knowledge that children possess themselves, rather than overriding this with the assertion of supposedly superior adult expertise. This has been described as adopting the position of 'not knowing' and seeing the children themselves as expert in terms of the meanings and emotions that they attach to their drawings and experiences.

'I am asking children, directly, to help me, an adult, to understand childhood. I want to investigate directly with the children... I want to acquire from them their own unique knowledge.... I present myself as a person who, since she is an adult, does not have this knowledge.'

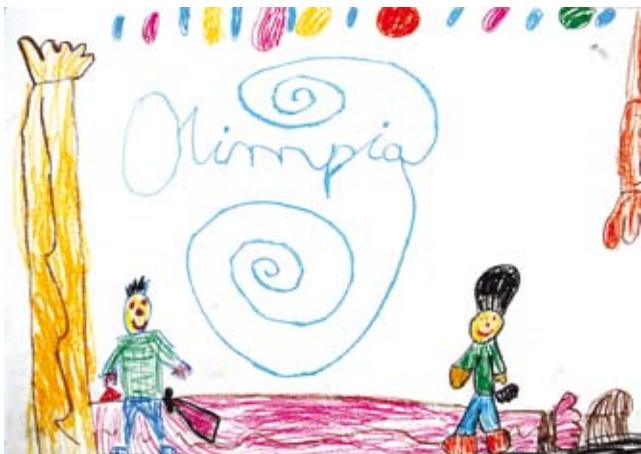
Berry Mayall

## Reality or illusion

From the outset one of the interests of this study was framed in terms of how children respond to different levels of reality and illusion within a theatre performance.

The question was founded on the understanding that in theatre the illusion is never complete, as there are always gaps between the material appearance of the stage and the evoked experience that the production hopes to construct. The *reality* of theatre relates to the actual appearance of a performance, to what the audience sees on stage – the physical appearance of painted scenery, wooden puppets, lighting effects and so on. The evoked *illusion* of theatre might be almost anything – puppets becoming alive, scenery becoming far away places, actors becoming lovers, heroes, gods or monsters.

It is possible to think of this as a tension or gap between perceived reality and evoked illusion. With different productions the character of this relationship between reality and illusion can be wildly different, but the existence of a gap is constant. For example, compare the two drawings below, which are both of the same scene in the same production.



In this picture (left), Olimpia has drawn two men standing on what is fairly clearly a theatre stage, complete with lights running along the top. One man has some kind of pink 'tail'; the other a black tail and strange black headgear. Olimpia has also included some suitcases and boxes and coloured banners running vertically and horizontally. This is a fairly accurate depiction of the action at one moment in *Them With Tails*.

Meanwhile Sophie (right) has drawn precisely the same moment from the same production. Her drawing shows a woman with long blond hair, a pink dress and an extremely long thin nose, accompanied by a strange, smaller, black and white stripy creature. They are in wood. This is also an entirely accurate depiction of the action at one moment in *Them With Tails*.



The second child, Sophie, has drawn a moment from 'The Princess and the Badger', a story about a Badger, a Princess and a magic fan that had the ability to make people's noses grow longer or shorter depending on which side of the face is fanned. Sophie, like almost all the children, has drawn the story as realised in her imagination. She has drawn the evoked experience. The first child, Olimpia, was a Polish girl who had recently joined the school and who understood very little English. When she saw the production, therefore, she had absolutely no idea what the stories were about and could only draw the material appearance of what she saw on the stage. With no alternative, she drew the literal physical experience.



*Them With Tails: 'Sunlight here as well' by Ruaridh*

### [Sunlight here as well](#)

Ruaridh's picture above, which in the original completely filled an A2 sheet of paper, depicts one moment in a story told in *Them With Tails* about a monkey and a bag of misery. At this moment in the story a monkey has escaped from a pack of dogs by running up a tree in a desert. In his picture Ruaridh has drawn a palm tree surrounded by a dense, glowing yellow:

**IV:** Hello Ruaridh, that's a very yellow drawing.

**RUARIDH:** Umm, it's the sunlight spreading.

**IV:** Ah, why is there so much sunlight?

**RUARIDH:** Because it's really really hot, because I was imagining it was in the summer in Africa.

While the story certainly did feature references to a desert and the hot sun this bright, atmospheric and entirely appropriate yellowness is all Ruaridh's. It is the product of his imaginative engagement with the production and with the creative task of having to complete visually a moment that only existed aurally in the performance.

### [The power of drawing](#)

Asking the children to produce drawings of a performance required them to add to what was given to them by the production. With theatre not all the information or representation appears on the stage, instead leaving much to the audience's imagination. Indeed, in many instances the audience is required to lend their imagination in order for the production to make sense. With drawing this process is made visible and concrete. The children found they had to do more than depict what they had literally seen, and in doing more they also came to realise that with the performance now over they possessed a kind of playful power over the production. That is, as they made their choices in what and how to draw, their pictures came to determine the appearance of what they had seen. The power of drawing to make the experience visible invested power in the children and provided them with a sense of ownership that enhanced their experience.

## The evoked experience

The evoked experience is that which is described or suggested by the performance, or more colloquially what an audience sees in their mind's eye. In the evoked experience the stage flats become a landscape, the wooden puppet a real boy, the lighting effects the rising sun and so on.

To an overwhelming extent the drawings the children produced were, like Sophie's or Ruaridh's, 'evoked' depictions of the illusion of the performance. That is they drew the world evoked by the performance (of narrative, character and illusion) rather than the material reality necessarily seen on stage.

Of over 150 pictures of *Them With Tails* produced by children as free drawings, Olimpia's was one of only seven that depicted the production in a literal rather than evoked fashion.

## Puppets or people

It was a similar story in the children's drawn responses to *Pssst!* – an intimate piece of puppet theatre. Here, despite the fact that the puppeteers were visible on stage at all times what is immediately noticeable is that very few of the drawings feature the puppeteers. Or, indeed, anything indicating that the little people drawn were puppets at all. Of a total of 52 pictures produced through free drawing, only five featured the puppeteers in some form or other, and none of these unambiguously. It appears, therefore, that the children's drawings very much represent the puppets as little people.

Elizabeth's drawing (right) is typical. Here the puppets are realised as fully functioning people, their representation completed by legs, hands and other details that were not actually present during the performance

That the children overwhelmingly drew the world evoked by the performance perhaps affirms popular perceptions about the powerful imaginations of young children. It certainly demonstrates children's grasp of cultural rules of representation – they were clearly very aware that they were *supposed* to engage with the evoked, imaginative experience. However, it should not be taken as suggesting that children either do not notice or appreciate the literal reality of the performance.

Indeed, asked directly about this the children frequently asserted that their drawings were of puppets and that anybody looking at the drawings would see puppets. So for example at one point we asked the children what somebody who had not seen the performance would think it was about from looking at the pictures:

IV: Would they say they were people?

FRASER: These are puppets.

IV: These are puppets. And how could they tell they were puppets?

FRASER: Because we drew them very good.

One lesson here is not to try and interpret the children's pictures in isolation, but always talk to and allow the children to be the expert and first interpreters of their drawings, and through their drawings their experiences. In this instance the children's conversations, unlike their drawings, were full of discussion about the mechanical and technical reality of the theatrical performance.

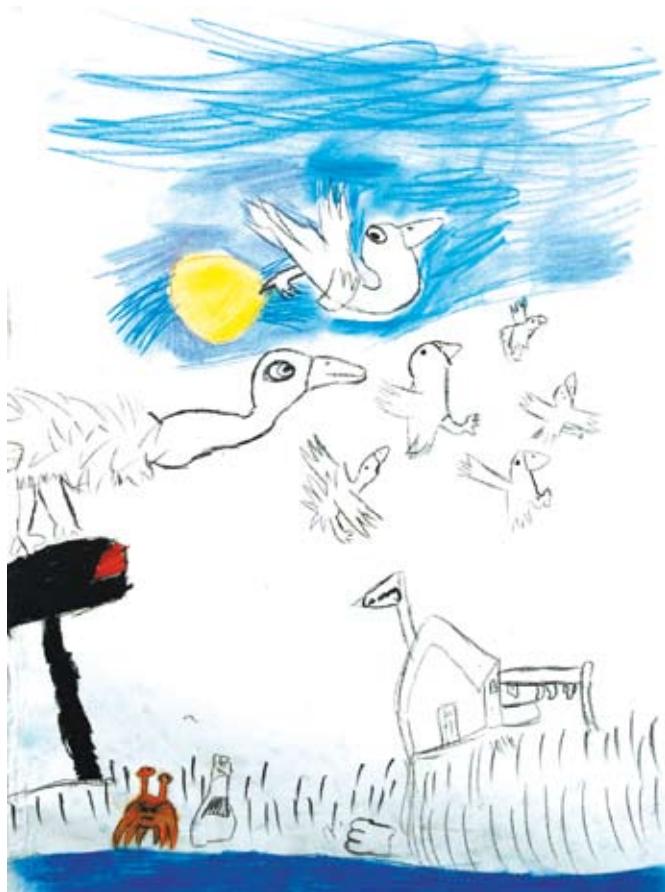


*Pssst!*: Clown and hoop by Elizabeth.

## More puppets: *Martha* and the goose

Catherine Wheel's production, *Martha*, also featured a puppet – this time of a Goose. While with *Psst!* the drawings (if not the conversations) all seemed to render the puppets as 'real' people, with *Martha* the situation was more complex and divided.

In response to *Martha*, nine drawings were made where the goose was represented in a broadly 'real' fashion, with wings or feathers or indeed flying (as in the example below left). In these instances the children have drawn the evoked experience, depicting what was suggested to them by the staging and the narrative, completing the mental picture and making the illusion concrete within their drawings.



*Martha: The Goose* by Zoe

Alternatively, in ten instances the goose is depicted as, broadly speaking, a 'puppet'; drawn accurately to its literal appearance, complete with wheels, controlling sticks and even puppeteer. In these drawings the children have depicted what they saw and reproducing the reality of the stage performance.



*Martha: Martha and the Goose* by Rory

The children, in other words, produced both literal depictions of what was seen and also imaginative representations of what was evoked. Indeed some drawings did both at the same time. These two elements were not incompatible, with part of the pleasure for the children being able to recognize how the character and emotion of the goose was created through the artifice of a puppet. So for example, several children drew the goose with wheels (i.e. as a puppet) but depicted in a very expressive posture (i.e. as a character).

These children chose to depict the goose as a puppet, but as a puppet full of expressive force, because it was this that they were most impressed with and struck by in the production. This is an example of how the children engaged with the goose in two manners: as a character that they imaginatively completed as a real goose; and as a puppet, which they engaged with in terms of how it worked and was operated.

**IV:** Did you like the way they did the goose, how they performed the goose?

**EMMA:** Yeah, the neck and stuff and how they made it move.

**IV:** How did they make it move?

**EMMA:** Well they had a bit at the top and somebody was holding it and moving it.

**IV:** And did you watch the man or did you watch the goose?

**EMMA:** I was watching the goose, cos it was funny.

## Moral or thematic engagement

For many people the potential for theatre to have a social or moral 'effect' on young audiences is one of the primary rewards of engagement with the arts. The belief is that the moral or social messages of a production can have a direct positive impact on children's minds and their relationship with the world. Such perceptions suggest that the primary objective of watching a performance is the discovery and interpretation of meaning in the form of thematic or moral content.

On the whole children certainly have this ability. For example, the children had no difficulty identifying the fairly explicit thematic message of Catherine Wheel's *Martha*, which was about friendship

**IV:** What do you think you'll remember most about the play?

**RONAN:** I think I'll remember what she was all like, she wasn't very nice at the start and she became, she became a friendly person

For young children friendship is a very immediate concern and the play's message about the importance of friends was echoed by many of the workshop participants in both conversation and drawings.

In this sense it is possible to state that the children successfully received (that is they have perceived and decoded) the meaning of the production.

Often, however, the children responded to thematic content largely in terms of recounting the experiences undergone by the characters in the production (he said this; she did that). Much more rarely was such content extracted, universalised or applied to personal experience (see right for one instance where this did happen). This can be presented as a limitation in the ability of children to apply to their own lives new thematic or moral understandings observed in drama. Instead theatre perhaps more readily provides valuable external models that affirm children's existing perceptions and experiences.



*Martha*: The Goose crying by Karen

**IV:** Why is the goose crying?

**KAREN:** Because it is sad to leave, but it is also happy.... he's happy that he's going, and he's sad that he is leaving a friend.

**IV:** Yes, do you think there is a lesson there, or an important message?

**KAREN:** Yeah.... It's that, he really really tried to make her think of being friendly to other people.

**IV:** Do you think it's important that the play had a message?

**KAREN:** Yeah. Because, because it might help my brother and get some more friends. Because, because he's being bullied at the moment.

While children's responses to moral or thematic content in theatre are undoubtedly significant, to give them an absolute primacy is an overly narrow perception. In particular it neglects the importance of other kinds of responses, such as in terms of spectacle and play, or the possibility that the theatrical form itself may be the principal 'meaning' of some performances. It also seems to admit value to only certain kinds of plays that do convey moral or metaphoric associations.

## Reflection through play

As previously discussed, a theatre performance invariably requires its audience to actively and imaginatively work to complete the evoked illusion of the stage. At times the children took this process further, producing drawings or providing responses that began with the performance but developed that impulse or idea with elements not contained within the production itself. One example of this is Alasdair's picture of a sumo wrestler:

IV: What are all these?

ALASDAIR: Five storey muscles

IV [laughs]: Oh, huge muscles!

ALASDAIR: Muscles on muscles

.... And he's got muscles on his eyes.

IV [laughs]: Muscles on his eyes?

ALASDAIR: That's why they're green.



Here Alasdair has started from a point provided for him in the performance, but with the crucial impetus that that point was not completed in itself (the performance did not present a fully realised sumo wrestler on stage). As a result he has taken flight with the ideas and made them his own.

This was a process that was present, to varying degrees, in a lot of the children's drawings. What is worth noting is that the children's relationship with the performance often evolved through the process of drawing: that is through the time, reflection, craft and creativity that drawing requires. They were more creative and liberated towards the end of the process than at the beginning. It is this kind of playful reflection that drawing encourages.

Once children began to play with the idea provided by the production they also began to truly internalise and own the experience, using the performance to provide themselves with models of creative play. Such creative responses might not be considered factually correct in terms of recall, but often demonstrated a strong awareness of the particular representational styles of the performance and used these to create new mini-performances. This happened most frequently with those performances that left representational space in which the children could experiment.

We should value such audiences memories not despite their inaccuracies, but because of them. The transformative and playful nature of human memory being very appropriate to the creative and multiple nature of theatre.

**'In the age of electronic memory, of films, and of reproducibility, theatre performance defines itself through the work that living memory, which is not museum but metamorphosis, is obliged to do.'**

Eugenio Barba

## Theatrical competency

Overall the data produced in this research, both in the form of drawings and conversations, indicates that the children possessed a strong theatrical competency. That is they had internalised an understanding of what theatre is – people on stage pretending to be or do things – and had the skills to complete the stage spectacle as something meaningful to them. The children all had the ability to ‘get’ the performances and to swiftly decode different theatrical techniques. This is explicitly demonstrated by their drawings, where the ability to depict the evoked experience indicates the children’s willingness and ability to work with and complete the illusions evoked for them by a performance.

So for example, Nasra drew a particular scene from one of the stories in *Them With Tails* (right). Here a wolf-like creature stands on a rock in a river or pond, looking down at a crocodile lying in the water below which is blowing bubbles (schematically depicted as a series of Os). In conversation Nasra related the story behind her picture.

**NASRA:** That thing wanted to ... the crocodile wanted to trick him but he tricked the crocodile.

**IV:** And what was the crocodile’s plan?

**NASRA:** To blow the bubbles and think that he’s, that he’s the crab and then he’ll think ... and then he knew that it wasn’t the crab, he knew it was the crocodile.

None of this was actually visible on the stage, of course, instead being evoked through description and mime. Nasra, however, has not limited herself to recounting the concrete stage performance, but instead has constructed a detailed imagining of one very particular moment in a complex and convoluted story.



*Them With Tails: The Crocodile and the Jackal* by Nasra



**‘the very limitations of theatre allow the audience to share in the acting. In fact they require the audience to pretend. It won’t work if they don’t’**

**Philip Pullman**

The drawing above is also from *Them With Tails*, this time depicting the Princess and the Badger story. As with Sophie’s picture discussed earlier this is a fully realised depiction of the story. In talking to Eleanor about this drawing and the moment depicted one of the things we asked her was how she knew what to draw. For example:

**IV:** How did you know she had a pink dress?

**ELEANOR:** He had like this, he had this little dress at the back. And it was just showing that he had a dress actually on, but he didn’t want to because he was a man.

As for why her badger is so strange looking; like most of the children Eleanor had never seen a badger and didn’t know what one looked like except that it was black and white. The resulting drawings depict various kinds of half-man, half-badger creature, as the children built upon clues provide by the performance but were unable to complete them through reference to a known object in the world. Theatrical competency, therefore, depends upon the ability to translate theatrical signs into fully-fledged real world referents.

## Pleasure in spectatorship

What was striking during the workshops, was that some of the children were not only able to unconsciously decode the theatrical performance while watching it but also had the ability (if not necessarily the vocabulary) to analyse and reflect back upon their decoding after the event. That is they had the ability to comment on and appreciate the codes and conventions being employed in the performance.

Additionally the children exhibited clear pleasure in exercising this specialist knowledge of reading and analysing the performance and it enhanced their ability and willingness to engage with the theatrical experience.

In the exchange below, for example, Robbie is asked about his drawing of a sunny day:

IV: And the sun is shining. How did you know it was a nice day?

ROBBIE: Well, I heard noises so I thought it was like a nice day.

IV: What kind of noises?

ROBBIE: Sort of seagulls and I heard a wee bit of sun. Because I hear some things a lot.



Martha: 'I heard a wee bit of sun' by Robbie

This evocation of synesthesia – ‘I heard a wee bit of sun’ – may be unusually poetical, but it is also completely factually accurate. Robbie’s perception of the sun in the performance was produced through auditory clues – sound effects of sunny-day-ness such as seagulls calling or of people having fun on the beach. These were supported by other visual signs – such as the hanging up of washing or characters wearing shorts or sunglasses – that together built a comprehensive idea of sunshine. These clues (or signs) were then translated into the drawings in a demonstration of theatrical competency. Like Robbie, however, many of the children had not only unconsciously decoded the clues but could also recall and identify the roles they played in constructing the illusion of the performance. This ability to reflect back upon this knowledge and appreciate the techniques being used shows movement towards another level of theatrical sophistication.

## In the classroom

The experience of seeing a piece of theatre no doubt entertains, enriches and inspires children in any number of ways. It is, in and of itself, 'a good thing'. As Philip Pullman writes 'Children need to go to the theatre as much as they need to run about in the fresh air.' For a variety of reasons teachers are a key gatekeeper in children's engagement with theatre and the arts. Not least because for many children their first experience of theatre will be with school. For many children it is their teacher, even more than a parent, who provides a model of artistic engagement and stimulation for them to observe and adopt. As gatekeepers to the arts it is the task of teachers to nourish children with quality artistic experiences.

Schools, therefore, can take children to the theatre – or bring productions into the school – but it is teachers who can truly engage children with theatre through the realisation that engagement does not and should not end when the production is over. After the performance teachers need to provide an active structure through which children can explore and extend their experience, perhaps by following the example of this report and getting children to draw something they remember from the performance and then listening carefully as they talk about their drawings.

This is something which Imaginate have developed through the running of Continuing Professional Development sessions for teachers where the experiences from this project and elsewhere have been used to provide examples and approaches that will support teachers in using the performing arts as an inspiring resource and as a starting point for reflection, inquiry and exploration.



### But I can't draw!

Many adults are actively scared of drawing or of being asked to draw. Many adults would instinctively assert that they 'can't draw'.

However, the role of drawing in this context is not about skill or accuracy, although it is certainly about trying and doing your best. Instead it is primarily about expression and exploring the different expressive qualities of drawing and the different insights that can be discovered through drawing something rather than talking about it.

Unlike adults, most children will happily draw and will relish opportunities for free drawing using generous and rich materials. Occasionally some children will struggle – perhaps, unfortunately, they have been told by an adult that they can't draw. It is in these instances in particular that children need to know that we are not interested in the relative quality of their drawings, but instead in them doing their best. And the best way to do this is for us as adults and teachers to model our own good or not so good drawings abilities.

One of the challenges for teachers, artists and other cultural workers is to find ways of actively engaging children with the arts in a manner that does not educationalize perceptions of the art form but instead allows children to engage more deeply on critical and creative levels. Structured investigation through drawing is one possible approach.

## Drawing exercises

One useful place to begin any drawing workshop or session is with exercises that cause the participants to forget about their own particular artistic abilities (or lack of them) and simply start making marks on paper. For this project we asked the children to draw self-portraits without taking their pen off the paper. We might alternatively have asked them to draw with their 'wrong' hand or with their eyes shut. Each of these imposed limitations provides a focus for the exercise separate from the overall 'quality' of the drawing.

Other exercises have similar objectives. One involves providing small groups with a pile of newspapers. One member of each group selects a photograph from a paper and, without showing it to the others, describes what they see. The rest of the group has to draw the picture from the description alone. Here everybody has their eyes open, but is still drawing blind. Alternatively tie ordinary pencils or pens onto chopsticks or even long bamboo canes and try to draw holding only onto the end.



A workshop in progress

## Materials

The range and type of art materials available to children inevitably affects the richness and vibrancy of the artistic responses they produce. With this project we were fortunate to have a budget to provide a wide range of good quality materials, which the children were visibly (and audibly) excited about using. This included crisp A1 sheets of paper, which more than one child held up in front of them exclaiming, 'it's bigger than me!'. Such resources both promote experimentation, as children try something new, and encourage them to invest effort worthy of the materials they are given.

When funds are limited then it is worth being inventive, using things like lining wallpaper to provide dramatic long sheets. The materials provided for the children to use in these workshops included:

A1, A2 and A3 white paper; Coloured and black card; A range of felt tipped pens; Crayons, pastels, coloured pencils; Water soluble pencils and crayons; Charcoal; White and coloured chalk; Scissors, glue, tape

Nothing here is especially exotic, but it is important that where possible the quality was high, which if nothing else marked the respect we were giving to the children and their efforts.

**Drawing 'can be used as a tool of enquiry, comprehension and communication. It enables young people to order and understand their experiences, to shape ideas and to communicate their thinking and feeling to others.'**

**Eileen Adams, Campaign for Drawing**

## Resources and links

[www.imaginate.co.uk](http://www.imaginate.co.uk) | [www.campaignfordrawing.org](http://www.campaignfordrawing.org) | [www.drawingpower.org.uk](http://www.drawingpower.org.uk) | [www.nsead.org](http://www.nsead.org)

## Extending engagement

Theatre and the arts play an important role in the broad development of children, contributing directly to both formal aspects of the education curriculum and to informal areas of child development ('educating the whole child'). Implicit within such perceptions is the belief that the theatrical encounter has a beneficial impact beyond the immediate experience itself. This research suggests that this can be the case if active steps are made to extend the children's engagement.

Children have the competencies and skills necessary to understand complex theatrical performances and to engage with them on a number of levels. However, unless children are actively encouraged to take that engagement further it takes place primarily on a limited and immediate level. That is it often lasts only the 60 minutes or so of the performance. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but to settle here would be to neglect the richness and playfulness of the responses that emerge when children are provided with structures through which to take the experience further – whether through engagement with the narratives, characters, meanings or techniques of a production – something which is demonstrated by the drawings and findings presented in this report. Extending children's engagement with theatre is about having respect for the abilities of the child audience and consideration for what they can bring to a production as active spectators and interpreters.

The advantages of actively encouraging children's engagement with theatre include providing children with:

- The opportunity to reflect on the messages and meanings of a production;
- A deeper understanding of the structures and styles of a performance;
- Theatrical knowledge that will deepen future experiences;
- A sense of ownership of the experience and of the value of their own responses and opinions;
- The opportunity for creative and constructive play using the models provided by a performance.

Children's theatre can be a fabulous distraction and entertainment for 60 minutes. Or it can be that and a starting point for structured and facilitated play, reflection and investigation.

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