How do we take care of our audiences in interactive, immersive and one-on-one performance?

Jennifer Essex

Teesside University

I'm Jennifer Essex, a senior lecturer in dance and performance at Teesside University and also co-founder and director of Fully Booked, a company which creates interactive theatre for children.

Today I'm going to talk about how we can best take care of children in interactive performance environments. To do this I'm going to draw from my own experience creating Space Rebel Princess, an interactive dance theatre show for children and families which toured to festivals across the UK last summer.

I'm going to address three major themes:

Creating for and with children: how do we make theatre that, to borrow from Beth Juncker's writing, treats children as Beings rather than becoming and acknowledges their culture of play?

Creating a safe space: how to set up engagement expectations to ensure children (and adults) feel safe and sure of their success

And finally, checking in with The Good Child Report, which brings together the views of 30,000 children to see if the theatre we're making works for them.

Beings not becomings

There are some traditional social views of children in the west can be challenging when making work that we're hoping children will enjoy (not work for the future adults these children may one day become). For example in her paper, *Culture for or by the Child*, Katya Johanson says children have sometimes been seen as a social threat, in need of discipline and constraint, or as vulnerable people in need of our protection. Children are vulnerable in many ways – but the problem with these descriptions is that they contextualize children in terms of the behaviour they require from us as adults.

Is part of caring for children treating them as themselves? Creating theatre that is made for their culture and aesthetic values, that treats them as beings – the present tense of themselves - rather than the adults they may someday become?

Beth Juncker says: "Professional performances for children are not intellectual exercises for beginners. Professional performances have not been produced in order to make children healthier, more tolerant, more democratic, well-bred or literate. Professional performances for children and young people have not been produced and performed to serve the pedagogical developmental work in daycare institutions. The meaning of this particular art form is not to contribute to the schools formal teaching, not even to teach children about art. The meaning

is to make laughter bubble, the roof of the theater symbolically rise, tears burst, to make silence noisy." (Juncker, p.4, 2012)

So while children are vulnerable people, they are also people, with their own culture and preferences. They are our audience. They are who we want to make laugh and cry and generally get rowdy.

So, what is the culture of our audience? Juncker describes a fourth aesthetic-symbolic dimension as the Alpha and Omega of children's culture. "It raise, when you are playing, laughing together, when you are absorbed by a book, a performance, a film, a concert, an exciting discussion. When you stop playing, reading, listening, discussing, it fades away. . . Cultural reality is only present as a fourth dimension, while you are running, jumping, swinging, singing, playing, listening, reading, talking, laughing. A way of life connected to the moment, the here and now." (Junker, p.2, 2009)

We tried to keep elements of the show improvised to keep alive the cultural reality which is connected to the moment, the here and now. The playing, running, jumping present moment. In order to take care of our child audience, we needed to listen to them. This meant the show might change. But this also was the only way to keep the show alive. We listened to the children during the show, we watched their bodies and copied their dance moves. We used the techniques of making that children have been observed using themselves. Miriem Giguere observed that the most used creative process among the children she studied was repetition. She often observed a pattern of creation that involved improvisation, repetition, and modification. We used this method both in the making of our show and also in the live performance, trying to get closer to the language used by our audience.

We are not children, but we once were. We remember that culture of play, but sometimes we need a bridge back to that land. For Space Rebel Princess, we invited some children into the room to participate in a very early version of the piece. Children don't tend to have the developed social masks of adults and tend to react with intense and vocal enthusiasm or complete refusal to participate. The experience of testing our show with our audience helped us re-design it, taking out overly long narrative descriptions that the children didn't need. As a 5 year old boy once said to Beth Juncker: "When you eat sweet cold soup, you are turned into a butter cookie". She comments: "In children's culture, you can be what you eat. It is a culture, which constantly deals with transformations." (Juncker, p.1, 2009)

Over the course of the summer we had the opportunity to perform Space Rebel Princess over a dozen times. Each one helped us refine it to work within the culture of our audience. They loved running around with boxes on their heads, they adored the alien who couldn't spell "Hello" and needed their help. They liked making stupid noises into the microphone. But, at first, they didn't want to put on the amazing alien head boppers and come onto the stage. And they didn't want to come on stage and help us build a rocket. Why was this? And how could we create a space that made them feel safe enough to enter into our world?

Creating a safe space

Bim Mason, author of *Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance,* identifies two main ways of attracting an audience: The Barker, the "step right up right this way" call to gather, or relating one to one. Mason says that while the "Barking" technique has a danger of

keeping people at a distance or even scaring them away, this second technique creates curiosity, people can hear laughter and are drawn to it, they naturally want to become part of the group. It's not intimidating: as Mason says "People are quite happy to watch someone else being entertained because they are excluded and therefore have no fear of being drawn in or confronted themselves." (1992, p.91-92).

At IncludFest our show was delayed due to rain. This meant we were dressed in our costumes (a very low key cloud suit and blue paper dress and crown) hours before the show began. The costumes somehow acted like a dog or a baby, they broke down social barriers and made people smile, approach us and talk to us. The state of play had begun.

This became part of how we take care of our audiences for Space Rebel Princess. Before each show we get into costume and interact one-on-one with whoever expresses curiosity about us. We have started being more methodical about what we do or talk about in these interactions. I will often get children to perform their favourite dance move or ask them if they know how to spell the word "hello" This way, when the alien asks for their help in constructing a greeting for the visiting rebel princess the child will be sure of their own success and keen to volunteer.

Interestingly, a study by Karen Rust, et al. where they worked on developing interactive performances with 7-11 year olds as design partners found that children want to remain a part of the audience, with a distinct divide between audience and performers. (Rust et al., 2014) This, they theorized was in part because their understanding of theatre, the image of it they had in their minds, was something quite traditional. By interacting with the audience before the show we wanted to disrupt this image and open the door for other non-traditional opportunities. We also started to expand our stage space into the audience once the piece had officially begun. First we would come to them, meeting them where they were, then we would invite them to us. All of these things meant that we needed to buy more alien head boppers as there was now an enormous take-up on the opportunity to work with Lord Zygon on his translation machine.

The Good Child Report

I'm going to finish off by talking about The Good Child Report, which brings together the views of 30,000 children. It asks children what makes a good childhood for them?

I'm going to focus on three of the things the children spoke about:

Having a positive self-image and an identity that is respected

Opportunities to take part in positive activities to thrive

Having choice and autonomy

By making an interactive show we wanted to create opportunities for children to take part in the activities in a meaningful and impactful way, to make choices based on their own identity. To create a theatre that is not a magical space where they are prohibited to tread, but instead a magical space into which they are invited, where their identities are respected and their choices are valued.

Among the 10 aspects of life covered in The Good Childhood Index (2012), children's happiness with the amount of choice they have in life tends to be the most strongly associated with their overall well-being. Due to their legal status, children's choice and autonomy are much more dependent on the willingness of others to grant them these things. One of the reasons for making an interactive show is to build in opportunities for children to be able to take an active part in the performance. At moments in the show we become coplayers, inviting children to play with us. As coplayers we can take turns with the children leading and following. We listen for their "offers" and build on them. Their choices enrich our show.

The children interviewed for the Good Child Report in 2012 identified being "trusted to make your own choices" as important in feeling happy. Would you trust a five year old with your show? How can we make theatre which grants children genuine autonomy and is also a great piece of theatre to watch? This is something we are still struggling with. We wanted to build in games, tasks and opportunities for children in the show that gave them the opportunities to have their voices heard, but they had limited impact on the outcome of the plot. In Karen Rust et all's paper *Interactive and Live Performance Design with Children* she found that "Our child design partners sought some aspect of control over the story, wanting to influence story narratives, but entirely new story elements and storylines themselves were rare" (Rust, p.307, 2014). This is something we'd like to try more of in the future, to see what kinds of framework and what kinds of autonomy bring the most joy in interactive performances. What is the best balance of the gratifying sense of autonomy and the safety of known plot?

Children never start activities they don't like. The best way we found of keeping children safe in interactive work is by listening to them. Listening to their words, their actions, their little shy body movements. The more we listened the better the show went. It's not rocket science. .. but then again, our rocket was made out of cardboard, so maybe we're not rocket scientists either.

Bibliography

Giguere, M. 2011, "Dancing thoughts: an examination of children's cognition and creative process in dance", *Research in Dance Education,* vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 5-28.

Johanson, K. 2010, "Culture for or by the child? 'Children's culture' and cultural policy", *Poetics,* vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 386-401.

Juncker, B. (2012). *Creativity Changes the World*. [word doc] Estonia, p.4. Available at: http://pure.iva.dk/files/34236157/Creativity_Changes_the_World_opl_g.doc [Accessed 8 Mar. 2018].

Juncker, B. (2018). *To Qualify the Moment! The Meaning of Aesthetics to Children's Culture*. [ebook] Copenhagen: The Royal School of Library and Information Science. Available at: https://www.reseo.org/system/files/pdf/event/interventions/BethJuncker.pdf [Accessed 14 Mar. 2018].

Mason, B. 1992, *Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance,* Routledge Ltd, GB. pp.91-92.

Rust, K., Foss, E., Bonsignore, E., McNally, B., Hordatt, C., Malu, M., Mei, B. & Gumbs, H. 2014, "Interactive and live performance design with children", ACM, pp. 305-308.

The Good Childhood Report 2012. (2012). [ebook] Leeds: The Children's Society. Available at:
https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/good_childhood_report_2012_final_0.pdf [Accessed 1 Feb. 2018].