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## **Children's Theatre: A Brief Pedagogical Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There are several theories as to what constitutes children's theatre. This diversity exists because the term is used as a literal description of theatre that involves children in one way or the other – theatre for children, theatre with children, and theatre by children. This complexity means there is a need to specify the sense in which the term is being used. There is no universal agreement within academic discourse on the parameters in which the term should be defined. While some scholars suggest age as a defining factor, others think it should be decided by the performers who design a piece of theatre based on their knowledge of the children audience. What is children's theatre? What should be the level of involvement for children? This paper is not a systematic review of the discipline and it is not an attempt to re/define children's theatre. Rather, it is about a pedagogical approach to creating a piece of theatre for children between the age of 4 and 10 that can enable them to learn and be morally developed while being entertained at the same time. In this paper children's theatre is the term that will be used throughout.*

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN THE UK**

Theatre has always been part of every culture from time immemorial. It is therefore almost impossible to suggest a particular date that children's theatre began. However, in terms of a scripted play Bennett believes that *theatre for children* started in the late nineteenth century in Europe and took the form of 'touring companies with dramatisations of folk and fairy tales (2005, p. 12) and the first widely recognized was Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) in the UK. Other successful theatre for children is Milne's *Toad of Toad Hall* (1929). There was a surge in the formation of several children's theatre companies shortly after the Second World War including John Allen's Glyndebourne Children's Theatre, John English's Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham, and George Devine's Young Vic Players (Wood & Grant, 1997, p. 9). During this time, writers began to write for a specific child based audience.

Polka Theatre is another popular children's theatre that started in 1967 as a touring company in the UK. However, following their successful application to the Arts Council England, Polka theatre has opened a theatre exclusively dedicated to children in their permanent theatre space in Wimbledon since 1979, employing various art forms to create new work for children. Polka's mission is 'to spark imagination and fuel a sense of discovery in children from every background...learning and participation is at the heart of Polka's work, encouraging children to explore and develop creatively' (Polka, 2017). In 1994, Polka Theatre won the Vivien Duffield Theatre Award, leading to a scheme called 'Curtain-Up', offering free tickets to disadvantaged schools. It is believed that over 90,000 children visit Polka every year to experience engaging, fun and exciting theatre, often for the first time.

Originally a touring company, Unicorn Theatre, founded by Caryl Jenner in London in 1947, is another professional children's theatre that is famous in the UK, performing to approximately 60,000 children a year through various extensive programmes of work, on and off stage. Unicorn is a family oriented theatre company that welcomes parents, schools and young people of all ages, believing that their performances can "expand horizons, change perspectives, and challenge how we all see and understand each other" (Unicorn, 2017). It is therefore imperative to take into account the aesthetic values of performance that includes adults as audience, having the same quality

as adult theatre. This is reflected in their philosophy: “the best theatre for children should be judged on the same high standards of writing, directing, acting and design as the best of adult theatre” (Unicorn, 2017).

Beside the aesthetic experience, education is also part of the ethos of these companies. This could be a way to meet with the Arts Council England’s policies that emphasises education or learning as one of the criteria for securing grants. This has made many children’s theatre companies to include education and/or learning as part of their philosophy and an important element of children’s theatre. This philosophy is supported by Reason who suggests that; Children’s theatre “inevitably operates within contexts of education and learning” (Reason, 2010, p. 5). The Prince’s Foundation for Children and the Arts in Britain also posits that taking children to the theatre can support their learning:

A visit to the theatre has the potential to be a life-changing experience, as well as an opportunity for a unique kind of learning. It can touch the imagination, arouse curiosity, or fire an artistic impulse. Theatre can also be an exceptional resource, linking as it does to so many areas of knowledge: history, geography, language, citizenship, and much more. Learning in theatres has its own skills-set – theatrical literacy and the understanding of dramatic conventions, a specialised vocabulary, and the ability to sit and watch a performance without distraction (The Prince Foundation, 2017).

Education or moral learning is also the main argument in this paper. However, many directors, such as Purni Morell at the Unicorn and Tim Webb’s at Oily Cart reject the idea that education and learning should be an important part of children’s theatre but suggest that aesthetic experiences should be the main focus. This paper seeks to combine the two – education/moral learning and entertainment.

## **WHAT IS CHILDREN’S THEATRE?**

Children’s theatre has been researched by many scholars (Maguire and Schuitema, 2012; Schonmann, 2006; Wood and Grant, 1997) and the definition of the term varies. When we say children’s theatre what

do we actually mean? Children's theatre is classified as an art form (Maguire and Schuitema, 2012) and consists of a performance of largely predetermined theatrical artwork by actors in the presence of an audience of young people (Rosenberg and Predergast, 1983). Goldberg's definition of children theatre is a "formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children. The goal of children's theatre is to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience" (1974, p. 5). Succinctly, children's theatre is a piece of performance that involves children as actors and/or as audience. Children's theatre is specifically created and performed for children audience either by children actors or professional adult actors or a combination of both. It is important to distinguish between various forms of children's theatre so as to advance the practice, artistic form and aesthetic merits.

There are various terms that are being used within academics but only three – (1) *theatre with children* (2) *Theatre by children* (3) *Theatre for children* – will be discussed here. In *theatre with children*, children and adult are actors, working collaboratively to create a stimulating piece of performance. However, in *theatre by children*, children are the actors even though the devising and directing process might be done by adults. Adults, who are often professionals, are the actors in *theatre for children*, "although a child may be used in a child's role" (Goldberg, 1974, p, 5). In recent years, university students do devise and perform for school children as part of their study in UK. The primary audience for all forms of children's theatre is children. Nonetheless, accompany members of the family can be part of the audience. This could be one of the reasons why Goldberg argues that "children's theatre" is basically the same as the 'adult theatre'.

Goldberg does not mean that there are no differences between children's theatre and adult theatre. There are many differences. One of these is that children's theatre tends to stress the perspective and thinking of the children and dig deep into their world. Children's theatre tries to trigger and hold the imaginations of its audience for it is through this that they can be taken on a wonderful adventure. Children do not need to force themselves into a story like adults. They can get *emotionally* involved. There is no need for a suspension of disbelief because children believe everything they see is real – flying dragon, speaking bears, etc. Although adult theatre also stresses the importance of its audience's perspective and the life around them, it

also allows them to make judgement, and thus enables them to contribute to any debate about the performance. The creative process for adult and children theatre is also different as practitioners may employ techniques, tools and methods appropriate to the understanding of their audience. As a result, actors for both may go through special and different training. The acting style for children's theatre is different. A melodramatic acting style in which everything, including emotions, actions, movements, storyline, etc. can be over-the-top is important in children's theatre but this may not be good in adult theatre.

Goldberg's claim that 'children's theatre' is basically the same as the 'adult theatre' is about the aesthetic merits and the level of professionalism in children's theatre. Professionalism and perfection, even if it is difficult to attain, is considered important in adult theatre possibly because of the ability of its audience to make critical judgement. Children may not be able to but accompany parents in children's theatre may make the same critical judgement. Therefore, children's theatre should be as good as adult's theatre. Stanislavsky pushes this further and suggests that the only important difference between theatre for children and theatre for adult is that theatre for children should be better. However, this view is vehemently contested by Schonmann (2006) who fails to understand the underline philosophy in Goldberg and Stanislavsky's views. While a distinction may be necessary, children's theatre is not to be considered a form of art that needs no substances that can be found in adult's theatre. Wood and Grant (1997) succinctly put this in a context:

If we are to trigger their imaginations, emotionally involve them and give them an exciting, memorable new experiences; if we are going to encourage them to enjoy theatre-going in their adult years; if we believe that theatre can be educative as well as entertaining, then we must endeavour to give them the best (1997, p. 7).

Wood and Grant charge the children's theatre practitioners to give their audience the best experience possible. Children's theatre needs to be seen as a discipline itself, and as a result, a high level of professionalism must be part of its creation by employing all the techniques and principles in theatre generally. There is a generally

accepted view that children will not tolerate 'poor' production (Klein & Schonmann, 2009). Children are open-minded. They do not sit, listen and decode the performance as adults do. They can release their feelings openly by reacting to a change in anything that interests them. Children do not pretend. They will react if they are bored. An awareness of this is therefore important for children's theatre practitioners. If we think that children's theatre is not as challenging as adult's theatre, this does not only suggest that we do not value that particular area of theatre, but that we do not value children and their experience of their world (Gardner, 2013). If we spend too much time and money in creating, writing and putting an adult theatre together, the same must be done for children's theatre.

## **UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S WORLD**

One of the ways to provide children the best experience in theatre is to understand their world. Regardless of its form, children's theatre is based mainly around the interests of children, even though it also takes into consideration the interests of the parents. The important point is that it does not ignore the interests of children and does not only take the interests of their parents or adult actors into account. Children and adult audience may have different interests. Thus an understanding of the children's world is vital to producing children's theatre that engages their audience. If we consider children's interest as paramount in children's theatre, we must delve deeper into children's world, to consider how they think, react to things in different situations and circumstances. It may be difficult to sustain the interest of children audience with a performance that does not interest them. Children cannot be forced to engage with something they do not like. The interests of children of the same age group who live in the same area or study together in the same school may still be different. In the same vein, children of the same parents may have different interests.

There are many factors that can contribute to the interests of children audience, but the following two will be discussed briefly – social and ethical factors. Social factors are facts and experiences that can influence individuals' personality, attitudes and lifestyle, and this may include religion, family or wealth. The social circle of parents – who they meet, where they work and live, the club they belong to – can influence the lifestyle of the children. Parents with a high social status

may end up sending their children to schools that reflect their lifestyle. Children who frequently travel abroad with their parents on vacation may be exposed to a new way of thinking. There are some communities that are more multicultural, made up of different races, ethnics and religions, often with their own cultural values, belief systems, myths and fairytales. In some family, religion is a sensitive and serious issue and children are brought up within a strict religious practice, which cannot be compromised. The religious and global views of parents are likely to shape the life of the children, and thus play a key part in the things that interest them.

Ethical factors are things that can be seen as morally right. Ethics simply means doing the right thing. However, what is morally right for one family may not be necessarily morally right for another. Furthermore, our understanding of rightness varies. Consequently, there is no clear-cut blueprint of ethics that can cater for all children audience and their behaviour. Some ethical issues are religiously, spiritually, culturally, and socially constructed, and this varies from one family to another. How children talk and react to one another is guided by the ethical factors that surround their upbringing. All these are likely to contribute to children's interests, and as a result, should reinforce the purpose of a children's theatre. Therefore, it is vital for professional adult actors and practitioners to be aware of the social and ethical factors of a group of children so as to produce a piece of theatre that interest them. To this end, they must see themselves as researchers and not just as entertainers so that they can learn more about their audience and also improve their own practice.

## **CHILDREN'S THEATRE PRACTITIONERS AS RESEARCHERS**

In order to gain their interest and encourage an enthusiasm for theatre, children need a performance that appeals directly to their world, their pleasures, their fears and their experiences. This is certainly not an exercise in a textbook. It is a 'real' task, which Tambling (1990) defines as something that has a purpose, a deadline and a natural outcome. The starting point for a professional group of actors performing for children is to identify the purpose of their children's theatre. What do we want the children to gain from the piece? How do we communicate this to them? A project is more likely to succeed and yield a positive outcome if its purpose is clearly identified, stated and outlined. The



other task is to identify the target group – children that will benefit from that project, including their age range. With this level of differences, what is the strategy for creating a piece of theatre for a children audience? A piece of research may be necessary as to understand what interests a particular children audience. Children's theatre practitioners need to be skilled researchers. This can help them to plan the best performances and experiences for their audience.

The research methodology can be decided by the group, but an interview with the children, however stressful, is likely to lead to an honest opinion. Practitioners decide on the number of research questions but these should be comprehensive. Children are usually honest, and if given the opportunity, they will speak their mind freely. They need to approach this from the perspective of a researcher. Therefore, they should be mindful of the research ethics, thus the consent of the parents must be sought. Though children are the primary focus, a piece of research can also be conducted among the parents and teachers. Practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of the children and their current thinking by watching, listening and talking to them and their families. The nursery rhyme or fairytale books they enjoy reading or listening to can be useful in gathering the information. Practitioners also need to be skilled observers and listeners. A visit to the playground to watch how children behave in a free environment can also be helpful.

The outcome of such research can prove invaluable. A piece of theatre can then be devised based on their findings. Another aspect of the research is script development. Both the practitioners and the children can work in close collaboration on the script. This is particularly vital in *theatre with children* and the outcome, from experience, has always produced an outstanding performance. Theatre itself is a collaborative form of art work. Children can be exceptionally active when they are involved in the planning and developmental process of a programme that interests them. Clinton also shares this view:

Where young people have been fully consulted and are involved in developing a programme of arts activity their interest spans the range of art forms and their commitment is high (1993: 12).

Generally, children like to be involved in everything, especially when it

speaks to their world. They can feel empowered when they know that they are valued. They can be exceptionally active, jumping up and down, making noise, turning chairs and tables to drums, willing to go at any length, showing interest in various arts form, singing and dancing. They do so with great enthusiasm, inspiration and talent. Children are impressionable. With their minds already set at the theatre they co-developed, any moral lesson can be embedded in the piece. Moreover, almost every fairytale teaches some form of morality one way or the other.

### **CHILDREN'S THEATRE AS EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE**

There has been a lengthy debate about the claim that children learn through play, and many scholars, have contributed to this comprehensively (See Dockett, 1999; Evans, 2000; Hamilton and McFarlane, 2005; Roussou, 2004). The conclusion of these scholars is that children learn more through fun. Theatre, beside schools, can be another medium through which children can develop morally. Theatre can stimulate children to learning as music does; "music learnt at childhood is a foundation for learning social practices" (Okafor, 1989a:291). This is because children generally give their full attention to everything that entertains them. Theatre can serve as a motivator and become another medium for teaching, instructing and transmitting information to children. Theatre can teach them morality and shape their behavioural patterns and also entertain them. Therefore, if we focus on aesthetics experience only, and if we fail to realise the educational potential in children's theatre, "we may be overlooking the rich opportunities that play provides for children to make choices, develop new skills, solve problems, and make sense of the world they live in" (McFarlane and Hamilton, 2005, p. 10). However, Schonmann's argument is that children's theatre "has to stop struggling to define its legitimacy as an educational endeavor" (2006, p. 10). This is not about legitimising children's theatre as an educational endeavor but rather it is about accepting the fact that theatre can be a medium for moral development. Though a theatre can be created solely for entertainment experience, children may be able to learn new things about life since they often get absorbed in whatever they do or watch. This paper proposes to divide children's theatre into three categories; children's

theatre as aesthetic experience and entertainment, children's theatre as education or learning, and children's theatre as both. The last category will be developed in this paper.

Children's theatre can be educational (moral learning) and entertaining (fun) at the same time with consideration of the needs and desires of the audience. Education here should not be confused with a formal classroom teaching. Rather, it relates to informal learning where morals – standards for good and bad character and behaviour – are taught within the medium of entertainment. Twain posits that “the children's theatre is the only teacher of morals and conduct and high ideals that never bores the pupil, but always leaves him sorry when the lesson is over” (Twain, 2014). The context in which the children's theatre is grounded can afford the children the opportunity to learn faster than the classroom. Twain further discusses the significance of this in children's theatre:

It is much the most effective teacher of morals and promoter of good conduct that the ingenuity of man has yet devised, for the reason that its lessons are not taught wearily by book and by dreary homily, but by visible and enthusing action; and they go straight to the heart, which is the rightest of right places for them. Good morals often get no further than the intellect, if they even get that far on their spectral and shadowy pilgrimage: but when they travel from a Children's Theatre they do not stop permanently at the halfway, but go on home (Twain, 2014).

The morality in children's theatre can be more effective than the one learnt in the book. For example, the moral in a children's theatre could be that it is always good to be honest with one another. The children should be able to connect with the performance to be able to learn from it, hence the need for the entertainment value. Morality can be taught within the context of entertainment by embedding it in the conventions. Therefore, some conventions, which are vital to capturing children's attention and that, are necessary for children's theatre as both entertainment and education or in the 21st century should be employed. Some of the conventions will be discussed briefly. They can be embedded in the piece of theatre whether they are part of the storyline or not. Though some practitioners may or may not include all of them for their own reasons. They are important and must be studied

and mastered by adult performing with or for children's audience.

One of these conventions is 'suddenlies'. They are any actions or speech, which, helps to hold the attention of the children (Wood & Grant, 1997, p. 38). This can include awkward and unexpected entrances of a character on to the stage. The suddenlies are important and are vital to sustaining the interest of the children and keeping them focused. Suddenlies can change constantly so that children will always have something to focus on. There is no limit to the number of suddenlies in children's theatre and they can be anywhere within the piece. Once children's attention is captured, moral lesson can be taught. Furthermore, morality can be part of suddenlies. Suddenlies, like other elements of children's theatre, must be part of the narration because they can get the audience involved.

Narration or storyline is also vital to creating an intrigue piece of children's theatre, and moral lesson can be part of this. A good story could turn out to be a bad performance if the process of telling or narrating it is not properly and carefully planned and done. Narration encompasses a style and a set of techniques through which the performance is conveyed to the children. This may include the narrative point of view or perspective of the narrators, the presentational format and the story's timeframe in which the story is set. Narration also encompasses not only the characters – visible and invisible – who tell the story but also how the story is narrated or told. Therefore, whoever that is involved in the realisation of a story is a narrator, including the playwrights and directors. Narration advances the plot of a story. In children's theatre, plots with simple structures can be effective and easy to follow. Furthermore, a little extra help such as giving extra detail is vital in children's theatre. Although children may be able to follow a complex story, however, avoiding it can help to break the 'fourth wall'. Succinctly, the reception of a performance will partly depend on how the story is narrated.

Character is another important element that children can connect to. Wood and Grant (1997) suggest that characters should be larger than life. Children react to conspicuous objects, and this can cause them to engage with the performance. The character establishes a relationship with the children, and this enables them to follow its actions, which can enable them to learn moral lesson the character wants to teach. Children are likely to respond to any questions that their favourite character asks them. In this vein, many moral lessons

can be learnt in a piece of theatre where there are multiple characters. Slapstick, a type of humorous acting, is another important convention that is specific to children's theatre. Actors act and/or behave in a 'silly' way in order to amuse the children. This can include falling down or throwing things over funnily and dramatically, tripping, slipping and big reactions. Children love to laugh. Slapstick sets a scene for this through humour. Humour shows the enjoyment of the audience and enjoyment is one of the core purposes in every piece of theatre be it children or adult. Within the plot of a piece of theatre, humorous jokes can be embedded, and larger than life characters can act 'silly' to create humorous situations. By using humour, the laughter of the children can create a more vibrant environment, which the actors can then build upon to carry out the morality they intend to teach.

Magic is another important ingredient of children's theatre. Magic is used in the form of fairies, wizards' witches, and spells. It is important to show that the magic is working as this is a symbol for achieving the impossible things (Grant and Wood, 1997). Achieving the impossible is particularly important in children's theatre because it has the potential to inspire the imagination of the children. Gardner (2013) posits that children's theatre is capable of firing the imagination of the children as it gives them the skills and creativity to face the world, to understand it, and in some cases change it. The use of imagination in children's theatre helps map out children's thoughts and feelings for them to be able to create stories on how they see the world. It can also nurture creativity. Furthermore, it can encourage a debate, leading to a series of questions, and deepening their understanding of the world around them.

Audience participation is another convention that can get children involved. Nonetheless, some children's theatre practitioners may decide not to use it. Furthermore, some interactive or immersive theatres in adult theatre also use audience participation. In children's theatre, it will need to be properly managed as it can easily get out of hand. This could be one of the reasons why some practitioners do not use it. It is important that the characters are in complete control. One of the ways to do this is by using a well-known song with a refrain and a simple movement with/or a clapping routine. Practitioners can identify songs that the children are familiar with through research. When children enter into the spirit of entertainment they get excited, shout and sing and this can help boost the energy level of the actors and

thus improve the performance. Another method is by using questions that have precise answers. These can create a sense of intrigue, and most children are likely to answer a direct question thrown at them by the actors. The questions must be short and simple to enable children to grasp them quickly. The simple yes or no to questions can be effective and easily managed. For example, 'Children, is it good to be greedy'? The children will relate the question to an immoral behaviour of a character in the piece and give a precise answer. In this way, the lesson on greediness is taught by the actors and learnt by the children.

## **CONCLUSION**

The pedagogical approach to creating theatre for children between the age of 4 and 10 has been briefly discussed. The argument is not that children's theatre has to be always educational. Practitioners can create theatre that entertains only. The overarching argument is that children's theatre can be educational and entertaining at the same time. Children can learn about social and ethical issues and develop some social skills through the medium of theatre, either by watching or taking part in it. Moreover, moral lessons are often part of almost every fairytale. In the same vein, moral lessons can be embedded in children's theatre in the context of entertainment. The paper also suggests that practitioners start to see themselves as educators and researchers and not just as entertainers. Through research – working, observing and talking with the target children – they will be able to have an understanding of what interests the children and plan and devise a piece of theatre accordingly. Both the practitioners and the children can learn from each other in the process. The practitioners can learn more about how children think and speak in different situations. Children also can begin to learn to develop their communication skills during the interview session. By working collaboratively, it is possible that some of the children might develop their interest in theatre and take it up as a future profession. An opportunity for children to discuss the morals at the end of the performance, talking to their favourite characters can also be part of a children's theatre. It is high time that children's theatre is taken seriously and seen as another medium through which children can be entertained and educated.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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Dr. Dennis Eluyefa is a performing artist from Nigeria. He worked for many years with Dr. Hubert Ogunde, the acclaimed father and founder of Nigerian contemporary theatre, and had in-depth training in acting, voice and movement with him. He also performed, danced and choreographed for many top musicians in Nigeria. He played the Yoruba talking drums professionally with the Nigerian Navy band 3, Sir Oladiran and His Best Organisation and Sir Akin Erifeyiwa and His Juju Dance Band. Dr. Eluyefa lived in Hungary for many years before moving to the United Kingdom in pursuance of his academic career. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in Drama at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln in the United Kingdom.