

**ASSITEJ SA FORUM on DIRECTING FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES
23 MAY 2009**

PRESENT:

NAME	ORGANISATION
Bandla Nombewu	IKHWEZI Comm Theatre
Lindelwa Kali	IKHWEZI Comm Theatre
Xolani May	Cape Township Entertainment Association
Daniel Robinson	UNIMA
Gerhi Janse van Vuuren	Freelancer
Kseniya Filinova	WBHS and Freelancer
Yanga Mkonto	NATA and Freelancer
Mzoxolo Komani	Stars of Today
Vincent Meyburgh	Jungle Theatre Company
Janni Younge	UNIMA
Joy Mills	Theatre Grottesco
Cindy Mkaza	UNIMA
Phakamile Xaso	Phakamani
Bridget McCarthy	MORE Theatre
Rouxnet Brown	UNIMA
Mzikayise Ndzuzo	Stars of Today
Michelene Benson	Freelancer
Nkosinathi Gaar	Freelancer
Unathi Dikani	Stars of Today
Nontlahla	Stars of Today
Jaqueline Dommise	UNIMA
Yvette Hardie	ASSITEJ SA

Yvette Hardie, Chair of Assitej, welcomed the group. Each of the forum guests was introduced briefly and then each presented a short description of their work: Jaqueline Dommise, Bridgit McCarthy, Vincent Meyburgh.

JAQUELINE DOMMISSE – HEARTS AND EYES THEATRE COLLECTIVE

We are the music makers, we are the dreamers of dreams, wandering by lone sea breakers, and sitting by desolate streams; world-losers and world forsakers, on whom the pale moon gleams: yet we are the movers and shakers, of the world for ever, it seems..... – William Edgar O’Shaughnessy

Theatre maker from Hearts and Eyes Theatre Collective, Out the Box, Cape Town Edge... But spent 90’s making theatre with own company, *Puppet People*, travelling to schools with original productions– lots of energy and very little money.

She prefers the term “**theatre maker**” to “Director” as it speaks to broader processes than just what happens with the actors in rehearsal, and encompasses the conceptualisation, the values and ideas that underlie the decisions that are made, etc. For her, children’s theatre needs an emphasis on **STORY** – and theatre for its own sake should be accepted as an holistic and educational experience. It needs not be educational in theme or content, but rather needs to be “a simple story beautifully told, or a beautiful story simply told”...

Stories grow out of our lives, they give us a **window** into other cultures, our own cultures and languages. “in the best tellers, the stories grow out of their lives like roots grow a tree. The stories have grown them, grown them into who they are.” – Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Diversity: our cultures and languages

She likes to explore stories from non-dominant cultures, so that the myths and legends can form a window and facilitate understanding of these cultures.

Stories are the basic tools invented by the human mind to uncover meaning. “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” – Ursula le Guin

What story does and story is for us human beings. Tales are a healing art. Stories from less dominant cultures like South America or the aboriginals.

Quality is of paramount importance, (production values, the time spent) and this starts with how we as theatre makers value what we do. Why is there such excitement around auditions for adult performances, but not for children’s shows? Money, time, resources are all spent on performances for adults, but rarely on theatre for children and young people. What does this say about our own perception of our work?

Need to invest in making the theatre as deeply as possible.

Need to lobby to claim our piece of the pie.

Need to prepare children for theatre

To see a high class theatre show, the only option is, adult theatre.

Children are not a critical audience – so this gives us a huge responsibility not to take advantage of their open, vulnerable and creative selves.

Children have an amazing ability to suspend disbelief and engage, so we should only be providing them with pearls, solid, sound, thought-through experiences.

Children are also the next generation of theatre goers: we have a responsibility to theatre in general. What kind of audience are we breeding?

Age and Age appropriateness –

Intended audience is often not the actual audience of the play, or the company has not done their homework sufficiently. They are disrespected by the fact that some audience members are too young and others too old, so intended audience is not able to focus. Can we truly say 2 to 99 is the age-range for a piece?

Also, she gets offended by work which tries to add slightly adult jokes in order to cater for the adults in the audience. The work should be for the child and the adult will relish the engagement of the child.

Companies need to do intensive research into child development, into how children engage, into who we are serving and with what means. We need to know the educational curriculum so that we know what kinds of methods and content are being taught to kids at that stage of development. We need to meet children where they are at: 4 year old can't read (parents fear they might fall out of a tree); 14 year old chatting on mix-it (fear they will fall pregnant) – vast range of experiences/perceptions.

Waldorf (Steiner) system is very focussed on doing this and research has proved that what is true when the system was developed, is still true today; the context may have changed, but children are still at particular stages of development which need to be accommodated.

BRIDGET MCCARTHY – MORE CHILDRENS' THEATRE

Our work is devised, and the focus has been the telling of African fables on the stage. We feel that these stories are not heard or acknowledged and we believe in the healing nature of stories.

These stories have larger than life characters, which children enjoy.

We develop original music for the productions and while we use poor theatre techniques (relying on the actors' voices and bodies to tell the story, with nothing extraneous in the space), we also treat the audience as sophisticated. We don't patronise. We do look at making sure that the baddie is not too scary though, as children can become very scared by frightening characters. On the other hand, the baddie provides an outlet for the children, which is important.

We also use a lot of object theatre, masks and sometimes puppets.

The aesthetic is a homespun one in the sense that whatever is seen on stage should inspire children to make something similar at home. It should not be so complicated that children cannot aspire to make their own versions.

We rely on detail of characterisation and richness of language and metaphor – we don't talk down to the children, or simplify the language. Our work is largely targeting 9-11 years old.

We feel that understanding comes through all five senses, not just through hearing words, so we are able to play for a wide age range. We play to the child in everybody. We have had babies watching our shows and enjoying them.

We always have an element of surprise, and use the magic of theatre to create an experience which is healing. We believe in the power of theatre to create values and see it as a sacred space, a magical space. We can't just make the easiest choice. We need to experiment until we find the small, sensory detail which will make the story come to life.

We are inspired to be creating future audiences and theatre-makers. Children should see that theatre is not something inaccessible, but that they can make theatre too.

We do not patronise them, but allow the integrity and of intention of the story to be fully appreciated. As performers, we are really there for them, in the moment of performance.

VINCENT MEYBURGH – JUNGLE THEATRE

I started as a clown at flea markets, playing to the child in everyone. I developed skills in juggling, unicycling, improvisation. Then I founded Jungle theatre, which was a theatre company focusing on taking theatre out of theatres – it was visual theatre. In the 90s in Joburg, we were doing theatre at raves, and fleamarkets. Then I moved to Cape Town and started to work for children. I built a tent, moved around with it using different skills, taking my work to schools.

We use certain “tricks” or tools in our work. These include:

- * Visual theatre – whether it is puppets, masks, juggling, dancing, physicality – we always do it rather than saying it.
- * We also invent original music, singing along with the children and sound effects.
- * Story is very important – it is a game you set up with the audience – the switch between the storyteller who sets up the game and the characters coming to life is magical. Anything is possible.
- * We always find a character that the children can identify with – an adult playing a child.
- * Often the children become involved so that they can affect the outcome of a play. We bring the children onto stage, and they perform actions, which influences the course of events.

Whale Show – based on Heathcote Williams poem, a two hander which dramatised an essentially adult text and used every opportunity to create something visual. The children were involved in a moment of stopping the whale from being killed. Their chanting stopped the action. The children felt that they had an important role to play. We look at creating quality work – having a period of time to develop theatre from the concept to the script.

We work with funders who largely want to get messages across. Our focus is environmental work and the relationship between humans and animals, and having

this focus has helped us. We are able to perform for audiences, which have been sponsored. Also, children have a special relationship with nature, they still have a sense of wonder about it.

IFAW wanted us to tell a story about elephants getting across information about them. So we had to take a lot of boring information and turn it into a magical story. Usually I do a lot of research around the topic, then I develop character outlines, and then possible scenarios are work shopped with the actors. We create a story from that.

Backing funding from Save Our Seas, shark centre. Shark Centre paid Jungle to get the information across.

Save Our Sharks was based on a book about sharks, but we changed the central character from Sue to Thandi so that coloured and black children would be able to identify with the hero, because Jungle often goes to schools and people who normally don't go to theatre. Thandi meets the sharks underwater because the shark centre wanted the kids to learn about different types of sharks. She meets up with shark spotters, which brings another educational dimension to the piece.

We created MOYA, a play about air pollution, for high school kids, who are questioning the world, and going through an existential crisis. We asked them in the play to think about how they could change the world, and they had to find the answers. We often link our plays to the curriculum and there is a focus on social change. We work on accessing our inner child in order to find out how children are thinking.

YVETTE HARDIE – ASSITEJ SA

Yvette gave an overview of the issues raised at the forums for Directing/Acting for Young Audiences in Turin, as part of the Assitej Italy Festival and Conference. Many of the issues raised there have already been raised by our participants in the forum today, including:

Images of children's theatre – a rollercoaster – need them to be in the car with you, not watching from the sidelines; the trajectory is the dramaturgy
Central question is “how do we know what we know?” – accessing the inner child and the child you once were (but problematic, all the audience is not you, and all the audience is in a different socio-cultural reality to the one you grew up in as a child; their environment is different; but some core truths can be gathered); from observing and interacting with our own children (but again, our experience needs to be broader than this, particularly in a country as diverse and divided as South Africa); from academic research – the child psychologists, teachers, social workers, educational theorists, ITYARN; from working with children in the research and development phases of making a production (giving them objects and asking them for resonances with those objects – creating iconography for a play); from observing children as they experience the play (warming up in front of them, meeting them in the foyer, as

examples of immediate pre-show research); from working with children after the play – getting them to reflect on the experience – drawing pictures of what they experienced, creating small dramatic pieces in response to what they have seen, question and answer sessions, teacher response... And more. Creating an ‘Observatory of the imagination’. Collect also other practitioners’ experiences, quotes from children etc.

Defining the age range for a production – different levels of comprehension, different concerns and senses of humour depending on age, recognising elements of child development BUT also recognising that children can be older than their years depending on their experience, that children are at different stages even within one age group. Need to treat children as intelligent, particularly in a world where television sees children as stupid, or as consumers; “media conducting a war against childhood”; impoverishing language, the shape of the imagination. Theatre that honours the intelligence of the child and recognises the child’s perspective and perceptions as valid.

Working with the actors to be vulnerable, to be open, to meet the children where they are at, not to propose stereotypes but to really feel the truth of the experience. To be there with them in time, space, rhythm, presence. Not being there for them at that moment is worst error. Working with actors through improvisation and game-playing to access the inner child, to let their guard down, to find their sense of humour.

Suzanne Osten’s work at UngaKlara (and others) : Baby Drama – theatre for the very young. Theatre which awakens in very young children the “lust for life”, through working with all five senses, which welcomes children to life, acknowledges their experience. Babies formed three basic audiences – the theatre lovers who were there to enjoy every moment; those who came in and out of the experience; those who were not ready for play and were afraid. Definitely they recognised some ‘playing’ in what they were viewing.

Question of the highly sensitive person/child – Dr Elaine Aaron – people who can only take in so much information/new spaces etc before it becomes too much.

SMALL GROUP WORK:

Looking at (1) what childrens' theatre have you experienced (good or bad) and what do you remember about the impact it had on you.

(2) Looking at age groups and age-appropriateness; what do we know about this age group? what work with this age group in terms of audience-actor dynamics, theatrical elements, etc?

Group discussion

Our first theatre experiences:

- amazing high-end production values, good quality productions (usually not aimed for children which indicates that perhaps there are not enough of the same quality productions which ARE aimed at children), e.g. ballets, pantomimes, Shakespeares
- Many people in the room had not seen any theatre before university level, so their attraction to the medium came through engaging in drama classes or extracurricular drama activities, making up games with theatre elements (lets pretend, scary games etc); escaping into the imagination
- young people performing for other young people (primary school kids impressed by what high school kids are able to do)
- stories not from western culture (the storytelling tradition, with mothers, aunts and grandmothers telling stories at night)
- Site specific productions, where the audience literally went on a journey and experienced along with the characters the whole story.

Discussion about age groups:

0-5

The research in child development psychology; many changes through the period
Children engage with the world – tactile, sensory, use all five senses, rhythms important

The children are at that age easily scared and threatened – need to find gentle ways of dealing with the big or difficult subjects

Also need to be sensitive to cultural values.

No boundaries between what's real and what is not.

Want to participate, make a difference, feel part of the experience.

6-9

Strong energy needing to be harnessed

Starting to conform to identities example: boy/girl

Easily engage in make-believe

Want fantasy but also feel its power – the scary and dramatic can have a big impact

A need to communicate with them

Taken into a story, on a journey, amazed and enchanted

It is possible to do very powerful theatre production, but the question is how you do it. For example, a children's puppet play about death: Goodbye Mr Muffin

(Australia)

10-13

Transition into puberty, they slowly start to prepare for adulthood.

Peer group pressure.

Level of participation might be less – worried about appearing immature

Gender split is very strong.

Enjoying contemporary music/dance; need to be pulled in

Lot of great children's literature for this age group – Phillip Pullman, Narnia etc

14-18

Extremities

Existential

Questioning authority

Very much about the here and now and not thinking about consequences of actions

Wanting to fit in – acceptance

Identity

Peer pressures very big

Breaking boundaries

Usually identify with kids slightly older than themselves

Cannot preach to this age group

Get them to ask questions

Unresolved endings

Need to impress with high production values, excellent ensemble play

Need to utilise the lingo of the age group, create round characters, that are recognisable.