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"Getting into the Head" of the Children's Theatre Actor[1]

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Directing the children's theatre actor calls for special psychological strategies, especially during the performance run, when actors face their uninhibited, unpredictable young audiences. Research informed by direct, postperformance interviews with child audiences can test theoretical assumptions and assist directors in their subsequent, practical work with actors.

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The major difference between theatre for children and theatre for adults lies in the audience's disparate ages. As a consequence, directing the actor in children's theatre calls for additional psychological strategies. Research into developmental psychology and postperformance interviews with young audiences can inform directors about how children respond to plays in performance.[2] From their initial text analysis through the performance of their productions, directors must dispel debilitating myths about young audiences by staying focused on the aesthetic principles that drive any production. Yet, as acting student Jimmy Ashmore wrote, "What is the fine line between being truthful and not playing down to an audience when you're dressed as a tree? The answer is in the head of the actor" (qtd. in Klein, Personal interviews). However, "getting into the head" of the actor and altering his or her misconceptions about children and children's plays poses additional directing challenges, not only during the rehearsal process, but especially during the performance run when insecure actors face their honest audiences.

Several myths surround the field of theatre for young audiences (TYA). Theatre artists have a tendency to discredit the intelligences and attention spans of children by assuming that young audiences will not understand complex characters in difficult situations or sit still for quiet, emotionally charged moments. To "compensate" for these false assumptions, playwrights often tend to write shallow, didactic, and condescending plays;

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actors are wont to exaggerate every physical and vocal nuance to get a laugh; designers may settle for rainbow-colored minimalist sets and costumes under bright, glaring lights; and directors may charge the stage with constant, frenetic motion—regardless of the richly textured metaphors and themes found in fairy tales, classic literature, and contemporary plays. To combat these destructive tendencies, playing the text and not the audience should become the director's new "mantra." Further, playing theatre director and developmental psychologist simultaneously demands two distinct yet connected modes of thinking throughout the creative process.

The first challenge for TYA directors is to find a meaningful script worthy of *any* audience. Then, playing the role of developmental psychologist, they choose a text in which the characters' dramatic actions show (not tell) the themes of the play from a child's perspective. If limited to a particular age group for performances, developmental principles regarding cognitive, emotional, and social abilities can be helpful in determining the scripts most suitable for their ages and in analyzing potential comprehension problems (e.g., Bryant and Anderson; Davis and Evans 59–71). Once a noteworthy script has been selected, artists should concentrate solely on playing the action units of the text in rehearsals. When faced with textual weaknesses, several strategies may be employed with actors to strengthen weak scenes.

Dramatic action is the foundation of theatre, particularly in children's theatre where young audiences focus primarily on what characters are *doing* visually onstage to make meaning of plays. Discussions about offstage characters and events may be ignored or dismissed unless reinforced or enacted by visual means. Conversations about abstract ideas between characters can be deadly unless characters are involved in intrinsic dramatic *actions* (*not* physical *activities*) that move the plot forward in direct ways. For example, one scene in Sergel's adaptation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* consisted of a lengthy discussion among Pooh, Owl, and Eeyore about how to rescue Piglet from Kanga, a fearful "monster" with a bathtub.[3] Eeyore created a compelling sense of urgency by pulling at Owl to hurry up and leave before Kanga returned at any minute. Physical activities for the sake of motion may distract from characters' intentions, whereas dramatic actions reinforce the "messages" of the dialogue in carrying meaning. Directors, actors, and, yes, designers, must explore ways to capture each dramatic action visually moment to moment.

For example, in Barry Kornhauser's *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*, the Interlocutor interrupts René Magritte's throughline by delivering a monologue about the masks of tragedy and comedy. To lessen the destructive impact of this break, we extended two characters' objectives from previous scenes. When the Interlocutor explained the mask of tragedy, René's mother (who committed suicide) haunted René as a ghost wearing a shroud over her face. In contrast, when the Interlocutor spoke of comic masks, René's girlfriend, Georgette, reentered blindly with a handkerchief over her face that René had placed there in the previous scene to avoid kissing her. She continued to search for him in comical ways in order to kiss him. In this way, audiences watched two characters pursue their

objectives (i.e., to haunt and to kiss) while listening to metaphoric applications made manifest onstage.

In Charles Jones's *Monkey, Monkey*, Monkey King learns that his monkey family has been kidnapped, but Jones does not dramatize the kidnapping. To combat children's tendencies to ignore this offstage action, we added a nonverbal scene that showed the Demon of Havoc kidnapping the monkeys at play immediately before the conversational scene. This additional scene reinforced the subsequent conversation and Monkey King's motivation to rescue his family in the following scene, while proving its memorability with audiences.

Creating psychologically complex, fully textured characters when roles are written as stereotypical, black-and-white stick figures becomes the greatest imaginative challenge for both actors and directors. Actors can flesh out superficial, simplistic dialogue by imagining and creating additional given circumstances and secret biographies not even implied in the text. For example, what is the difference between Cinderella's stepmother and Rapunzel's witch mother? Could it be that one was an abused wife while the other faced incest by her own father? Complex subtexts can be scored to enhance character relationships, to create additional psychological obstacles, and to play situations more deeply than their deceptively simple surfaces.

Villainous characters in many children's plays are often written as inept fools who present no obstacles whatsoever to child heroes. Here, directors can encourage actors to play *against* the text by using the dialogue's otherwise slapstick humor to attack viciously with threatening behaviors. For example, the stage directions for the Dragon King in *Monkey, Monkey* suggest that the actor play the character like Ed Wynn, while the dialogue reads with rhythms like those of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Instead of trying to make puns funny, the actor treated the dialogue as evil, devious threats, so that Monkey was unsure of how to outwit and battle this conniving underworld creature.

Another tactic is to exploit silence during intimate scenes of emotional intensity or during times appropriate to the dramatic action. Silence can indeed be golden in children's theatre when characters engage in nonverbal behaviors for any length of time. To create tension in the opening moments of Paul Maar's *Noodle Doodle Box*, the actors spent roughly three minutes engaged in morning rituals until one character got on the nerves of the other. Near the end of the play, when Zacharias refused to share the big box, Pepper exited to find another friend. Left alone onstage for several minutes, the actor scored a lengthy, nonverbal sequence of trying to enjoy his box without his friend until he finally broke down and cried out of desperation and loneliness. Children were enrapt in both instances as the actors engaged them nonverbally in their internal subtexts.

Another nonverbal sequence was adjusted in *Monkey, Monkey* to establish the Monkey King's interpersonal relationships with each member of his newfound monkey family. The actors did not play vaudevillian games, as called for in the stage directions, but rather, after studying Macaque monkeys at a local zoo, they translated monkey movements,

behaviors, and objectives to their respective familial characters. Grandfather resented Monkey's intrusion with wise suspicion, while Grandmother picked and ate bugs out of his hair with great affection. Monkey flirted with a young female monkey, but played more roughly with an aggressive male monkey. Children related well to this family bonding scene by mentioning it frequently in postproduction interviews.

The standard Stanislavski Method may be an insufficient technique for every character analysis. In directing *Winnie-the-Pooh*, I chose to direct each actor to play a child who played with a separate stuffed animal and alternately or simultaneously to take on his or her respective *Pooh* character. Some actors had great difficulty in choosing when to play a child playing with an animal (like a puppeteer) and when to play the character at play. They struggled to create logical reasons for switching acting modes or to find motivational, subtextual causes arising from previous actions. However, children at play seldom have such sophisticated "rational" motives for switching instantly in and out of characterizations. As a result, one actor became quite concerned that his stuffed animal, the one he was manipulating with total control, would upstage *his* characterization of Rabbit.

Ultimately, "childlike" dramatic play may take precedence over Method acting techniques in many nonlinear or episodic children's plays. Like the rings of a tree that encircle the sapling's core, a child remains at the center of every adult actor (Zeder 1). The director's job becomes one of nurturing and enticing that child out of actors' atrophied imaginations by coaching them to play honestly and sincerely with tireless, uninhibited abandon. During this playful, childlike process, personal childhood memories may surface as food for characterizations. For example, one actor incorporated the image of a bear scratching himself against a tree from a National Geographic film he had seen as a fifth-grader. His fifth-grade self and the play's audience enjoyed the Bear's humorous behavior with mutual delight.

Although emotional recall may stimulate imaginations, actors must play themselves at play in the here and now, not their distorted recollections of other youngsters they have seen playing. Like children who play entirely for themselves with no regard for sharing their play with an audience, actors should concentrate primarily on playing *with* one another, especially in representational plays where the "fourth wall" exists. However, young audiences often want to play with actors from their loge seats, regardless of "fourth wall" conventions. Thus, children's vocal and physical responses during performances may cause actors to play *for* the audience rather than *with* the ensemble as they share fictive worlds with the children. Helping actors to understand these key differences in performance, and preparing them for audiences' playful reactions in advance—these become concepts easier said than done.

To ease actors' (and directors') fears and anxieties about whether or not child audiences will "get" their performances, it is helpful and wise to bring in a small group of children during final run-throughs or dress rehearsals. Here, actors and directors alike can ask questions that have been bubbling throughout rehearsals. Children's answers and ideas will

amaze and lay to rest many doubts about communicative efforts. But the real test occurs in front of six hundred children seated in squeaky loge seats on opening day.

Although not always willing to admit it, actors may fear facing their "strange" young audiences because children appear so unpredictable—unlike adult audiences, who sit quietly and politely throughout, no matter what they feel. Directors must warn actors away from adult expectations with "pep talks" before opening by preparing them to expect the unexpected.

During performances, artistic egos get tested to their limits when children respond in "surprising" ways. Children may grow restless during long conversations when they see that nothing is really happening to push the story forward, unless directors have solved those potential problems in rehearsal. They may whisper to friends to share insights and questions. They may laugh hysterically during a character's most vulnerable, tense moments, but sit silently through the jokes that actors found extremely humorous. Actors may begin to grow anxious, insecure, intimidated, unfocused, and self-conscious when they discover that now they do not or cannot affect or shape child responses. Their sensitive egos may deflate when they realize that they cannot keep restless children silent or make them laugh "on cue," and they may blame themselves or question what they are doing "wrong." Maintaining the play's original conceptions and restoring actors' self-esteem becomes an ongoing, psychological struggle during the performance run.

In our production of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, adapted and directed by James Still, one actor had the responsibility of carrying the whole show by narrating his boyhood experiences in flashback directly to the audience. After the opening matinee, he grew depressed at his inability to hold attention and to communicate sensitive subtexts. His director urged him to have confidence, to trust himself, and to control the audience rather than to be controlled by them. He reminded him that for every five restless children there may be twenty children attending in silence. Armed with confidence, the actor tried a control device, used often in creative drama, to his successful advantage. In a subsequent performance, when he heard a particularly disruptive group of children during his prologue, he stopped talking, stared directly at the noisy group, and waited several seconds for their silent attention, making it clear to them nonverbally that he *really* wanted them to hear his heartwarming tale.

Unfortunately, this tactic cannot be used in every situation, especially when the text challenges children's cognitive abilities. For example, in Gilles Gauthier's *I Am a Bear!*, one actor felt utterly defeated when the audience grew restless each time during his scene—the play's turning point. He had been teasing and threatening the Bear alternately with an ironic grin and a "Joe Isuzu" tone of voice—choices we had agreed upon in rehearsal. Putting on my developmental psychologist hat, I realized that his scene depended entirely on children understanding his character's verbal and behavioral use of irony and sarcasm—a form of figurative language that nine-year-olds are just beginning to decipher (Winner 133–159). No wonder children squirmed in their seats—they were trying to make sense

of his character's intentions, to determine whether or not he was a good guy or a bad guy. Once the actor understood this phenomenon, he was able to perform with greater confidence, knowing that the children's restlessness was a sign of their hard work at comprehension.

Inspired by a director's confidence and experience with young audiences, actors sense intuitively when audiences are with them or against them and the underlying, individual reasons for specific reactions. They learn how to manage unfocused audiences by focusing more intensely on objectives and by adjusting their vocal and physical behaviors while showing the story. They discover delicate balances between speeding up lengthy monologues without rushing, and concentrating their energies without losing relaxation. They understand differences between milking a humorous bit for self-gratification and intensifying the objective for mutual satisfaction with, not condescension to, an audience. Performing for children becomes an immediate, experiential lesson in experimental performance—monitoring a three-way focus on playing text, playing with other actors, and playing with the ever-changing, ebb-and-flow responses of young audiences.

After several performances, actors discover ways of controlling desired responses without sacrificing their original intentions. For example, during *I Am a Bear!*, children laughed hysterically at the climactic moment when the Security Guard fired the Bear and pushed him out of the factory, in part because the Bear landed humorously with his legs flying in the air. The actors and I agreed that laughter was not our intention for this tense scene. Subsequently, the Security Guard grabbed the Bear by his chest, pushed him down to the floor, and stood over him to trap the Bear's legs. Instead of raucous mob laughter, a few children continued to giggle nervously at this uncomfortable moment, but the actor refused to allow their laughter to disrupt his intentions.

When actors achieve uproarious laughter at intended moments "on cue," it can feel like, as actor Sean Gutteridge said, a "personal victory better than an encore" (qtd. in Klein, Personal interviews). Behavior modification goes into motion as children's laughter rewards actors for their physical antics. However, insecure or greedy actors may begin pushing for bigger laughs and playing games *for* the audience, rather than *with* each other, because they want to be loved, respected, and appreciated by "mere" children—never mind teachers or parents. After all, if you cannot make every child laugh, what kind of entertainer are you? Directors may watch in amazement as actors arbitrarily change their once subtle behaviors into cute posturing to the screaming delight of young audiences. When this happens, the acting focus shifts to playing exclusively for laughs, and the performance may unravel into superficial silliness that detracts from the play's themes.

In *Pipe Dream*, when Georgette asked René why he would not kiss her, René answered, "I don't know," in a very honest and offhand way. But once the audience laughed at his character's insecurity and recognizable dilemma, the actor changed it to a sickeningly sweet "I don't know," with a sheepish grin. His toes began to curl inward, and his body swayed into

child*ish*, not child*like*, behaviors for the audience, *not* for Georgette, who remained serious and firm in her resolve. In such instances, directors must persuade actors to go back to sincere reactions and forgo the rewards of louder, addictive laughter for the sake of telling the story honestly.

As veteran TYA actress Christine Scanlin notes, "child audiences do not cut actors any slack" (qtd. in Klein, Personal interviews). They demand gut-level emotions by forcing actors to go back to the basics of dramatic play and to realize what they are really feeling and thinking about themselves and their characters. They can also help actors to heighten their natural intuitions, to free up their honest emotions, and to let go of overly analytical, "talking head" performances. In turn, actors help children to empathize and to feel with characters in relevant situations as they engage audiences in vicarious arousals of emotion. Acting with, rather than for, young audiences becomes a gratifying challenge and a unique, exhilarating experience full of mutually satisfying and rewarding surprises for everyone involved.

Directors can promote and praise actors' accomplishments by instilling faith, trust, and a healthy respect for the child within us all. Knowledge of actors' assumptions about themselves as children and young audiences, together with developmental psychology principles, can enhance the director's ability to produce meaningful theatre worthy of any audience regardless of age. Nurturing actors and audiences alike fosters the memorability of theatre experiences for years to come and keeps us all young, imaginative, and creative. Getting into the head of the actor is crucial to the director's process if children's plays are to get into the heads—and hearts—of the young audience. ❒

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at the Mid-America Theatre Conference Directing Symposium, 17 Mar. 1991, Kansas City, Missouri.

[2] The author has conducted five studies with young audiences to determine their perceptions, comprehension, and memories of plays in performance. These studies inform the present analysis by applying child developmental theories to directing practices. See Additional Sources.

[3] All plays cited here were directed by the author, with the exception of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, at the University of Kansas Theatre for Young People, Lawrence, Kansas, 1988–1991.

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