

Applying Research to Artistic Practices: *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*

by Jeanne Klein

Youth Theatre Journal 7.3 (1993): 13-17

Abstract

The article focuses on a study in which second, fourth, and sixth graders, and adults were questioned about their perceptions of and responses to a production of Barry Kornhauser's This Is Not a Pipe Dream. Qualitative and quantitative results suggest critical applications to artistic practices in playwriting, directing, and design.

Editor's Note

This research received an Honorable Mention for the Winifred Ward Fellowship at the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., August 1991.

Many theatre producers argue that empirical studies and scientific numbers bear no relationship to artistic practices (e.g., Corey 1991; cf. Davis and Evans 1987, 15-16). However, when a plurality of children leave a theatre bewildered by meaningless adult concepts, well-intentioned producers may be creating future audiences that want only light, escapist entertainment requiring little mental investment, or even worse, these producers may be encouraging audience members not to return to theatre as adult patrons. The majority of young audience members attending theatre productions should have deeply moving experiences, hold images from these experiences in their memories, and think critically when they attend their next theatrical events. Quantitative measures of qualitative standards of excellence can help theatre practitioners understand and determine the success or failure of productions.

The research reported in this article is based on several contentions. The director's goal is to induce audiences to think and feel with characters as they experience distinctive and meaningful theatre beyond the usual, superficial entertainment found in mass media. For young audiences to value theatre they must comprehend themes and symbol systems through dramatic actions communicated by artists, and then apply and transfer these metaphoric concepts to their lives and to the cultures in which they live. Children may experience emotions superficially in contagious ways, but they empathize with characters only when they understand the actions which drive and precede emotional reactions, and when they infer characters' thoughts from actions and dialogue. Although children, like adults, may not be able to explain their emotional

experiences, asking them to reflect upon a performance text proves their comprehension abilities in an educational culture dominated by verbal assessment methods. Directors do not know how far they can stretch children's thinking until they question children.

When adult artists ignore the meanings children make of theatre, they exclude them from adult fictive worlds. Theatre means "to gaze upon." To include young audiences in children's theatre, a theatre which implies their ownership, artists must understand theatre from a "child's gaze" rather than from "adult gazes" of what adults perceive or think children will or should know, enjoy, and appreciate (cf. Dolan 1988, 14; Bennett 1990, 185). Children think differently at various stages of cognitive development. Theatre producers should be aware of each stage's characteristics so that artistic intentions match or challenge cognitive abilities in appropriate ways (Davis and Evans 1987, 59-71).

Research findings are *not* intended to create artistic rules or formulas for playwriting, directing, and designing for young audiences. Those persons who look for "guarantees" are not risk-taking, rule-breaking artists. Instead, research can illuminate art works during and after creation by determining whether or not audience comprehension matches artistic intentions. Ideally, companies should test new scripts with children through interviews *during* draft performance stages *before* publication (cf. Klein 1986). However, given United States methods of script development which tend to exclude children from creative processes, measuring audience responses after performances has become the primary means of assessing artistic work.

Young audiences are expected and assumed to "suspend their disbelief" when watching a symbolic illusion of reality with live actors performing a fictive play in a given context. By testing this theory and knowing how young audiences construct theatrical reality from their developmental perceptions, artists may create theatre more conducive to the "child gaze" and keep children coming back for more.

This Is Not a Pipe Dream, by Barry Kornhauser (1987), was chosen for production and research. It is an example of a non-traditional, "surrealistic" play which challenges theoretical assumptions about theatrical reality. This 48-minute nonrepresentational, episodic, metatheatrical play is based on biographical facts about the early life and work of surrealist painter René Magritte. Kornhauser's sensitive vision and bold risk-

taking are central to the play's theme that people must strive to attain their "pipe dreams" no matter what opinions others hold. (Kornhauser's dream to become a published playwright and the author of this article's dream to challenge artistic assumptions through research were well worth "the dare to dream.")

The purpose of the research was to explore a developmental theory of perceptual skills in theatre and to understand how audiences interpret theatre conventions based on aesthetic symbol systems (Langer 1953; Esslin 1987), cognitive development (Bruner 1986; Gardner 1983), and television models (Wright and Huston 1987). To assess developmental reflections, 33 second graders, 33 fourth graders, 23 sixth graders, and 23 college students viewed a university production of *This Is Not a Pipe Dream* (1990). Children were interviewed individually one day after attendance; adults completed an analogous questionnaire. Qualitative thematic ideas or categories of responses that emerged from audience narratives were translated into numbers for descriptive and statistical analysis (Ford 1975). A summary of results suggests critical applications to artistic work.¹

Because a common assumption seems to exist in the field of theatre for young audiences that most plays for young audiences are "suitable, recommended, or intended" for grades one through six, it is important to note that there are significant differences in the perceptions and responses of audience members from the various grades. Second graders comprehended *This Is Not a Pipe Dream* in significantly different ways than fourth and sixth graders, and adults [$F(3, 108) = 15.84, p < .0001$]. Most second graders described rather than interpreted actions within the production's confines, while older audiences generated and extended more abstract concepts. Naturally, individual differences provided some contrasts to grade level findings. A few second graders had little difficulty abstracting conventions and themes, while some sixth graders and adults appeared "stuck" in rigid, concrete thinking patterns. Although the play was produced for intermediate audiences, more fourth (55%) and sixth (78%) graders rated their peers' enjoyment less than second graders (42%) and adults (30%), and they were extremely divided over whether this play was "easy" or "hard" to understand, due more to script values (60%) than to production values (40%).

Over half (63%) of all respondents interpreted the play's theme metaphorically as following one's dreams no matter what others say; 29% described René's artistic life within the text's confines; and 8% either cited unrelated ideas (3%) or did not know a thematic idea (5%). By grade level, almost half (49%) of the second graders inferred ideas within the play's content; almost one-third (30%) went beyond the text by applying René's actions to society as a whole; and 21% either reported unrelated, inaccurate ideas or did not know an answer. In contrast, the majority of the fourth (64%) and sixth (78%) graders thought more globally about metaphoric ideas outside the play's content, and fewer remained within the text's confines (33% and 22% respectively). All but one adult inferred global concepts. Asking what René learned rather than asking for the play's "main idea" increased the abstractness and

thematic applicability of children's responses.

Contrary to another common assumption in the field of theatre for young audiences, children did not suspend their disbelief willingly, perhaps in part because the Interlocutor deluded audiences with numerous examples of theatrical reality and broke aesthetic distance by interrupting René's story frequently (Klein 1992a). Instead, children searched for and found illogical actions, inauthentic objects, fantastical characters, and unbelievable events which countered their literal rules of physical and social reality. Second graders focused on the *actuality* of physical stage reality by describing what they saw and heard. Fourth graders began a developmental shift by inferring the *possibility* of dramatic actions, and sixth graders considered the *plausibility* of acting out the playwright's text (Klein 1992b; Landry, et al. 1982). However, older children voiced strong preferences for linear dramatic structures and social realism frequently in countless narratives. In fact, those children who noted social realism most tended to rate this play harder to understand ($r = .20, p < .05$). [Whether or not artists can help break intermediate children of their stereotypical, school-taught preferences for realism and linearity is a question for future artistic research (cf. Parsons 1987; Gardner 1991, 178).]

Older children focused on and judged the playwright's text for its social believability more than for production values. This finding confirms the critical importance of quality scripts, and also highlights playwrights' ethical responsibilities to base biographical and historical texts on thoroughly researched facts. For example, 43% of respondents interpreted fictional aspects as biographical facts, and over half of this group (24%) believed falsely that Magritte's father did not want his son to become an artist. Audiences were probably not harmed by this false impression of an artist's upbringing, and playwrights are entitled to some degree of poetic license; however, playwrights who adapt material from original sources should remember that many audience members, especially young audience members, assume they are receiving truthful and accurate information. When asked what the Interlocutor meant when she said that a play is not real life (Kornhauser 1987, 3), adults more than children explained that plays are fiction and therefore not true [$F(3, 108) = 2.77, p < .05$]. Sixth graders recognized acting as a key theatre convention more than other age groups [$F(3, 108) = 5.63, p < .001$]; that is, actors are people who play characters and perform sometimes unrealistic but plausible actions. Children understand the differences between fiction and life largely from a medium's formal features, as found in television studies (e.g., Moghaddam 1989).

The issue of planting "educational messages" in dialogue raises the ire of many who believe that theatre should not teach or preach to audiences. Showing, rather than telling dramatic actions explicitly, is the more effective and artistic way playwrights can communicate and signify themes. However, this study confirms again that explicit dialogue reinforces visual actions which, in turn, induces more critical inference-making on the part of young audiences. For children learning to infer motives and abstract themes, critical

8

thematic dialogue and where it is placed in the text—before, during, and/or after respective actions—make major differences in overall comprehension.

Contrary to past studies (Klein 1987; Klein and Fitch 1989, 1990), children in this study used more verbal than visual cues to infer the play's thematic ideas, largely because the protagonist stated his objectives explicitly ($r = .34, p < .001$). They knew René's superobjective to become an artist because he said so (Kornhauser 1987, 7) ($r = .18, p < .05$). He stated his intention to find his mother at the river twice (Kornhauser 1987, 17, 18), so most children (76%) and adults (96%) repeated this motive for his actions ($r = .19, p < .05$). He told his mother she would remain in his heart while he painted (Kornhauser 1987, 26), so older audiences in particular (30% second; 70% fourth; 65% sixth graders; 78% adults) understood her ghostly figure standing behind him at the easel as a theatrical staging convention ($r = .17, p < .05$). More younger than older children (42% second; 24% fourth; 30% sixth graders) observed that Mother was merely watching René paint.

René states the play's theme explicitly when he says, "If everything is possible, there are no pipe dreams" (Kornhauser 1987, 26). However, only 26% of the children (6% second; 33% fourth; 44% sixth graders; 87% adults) were able to interpret this propositional statement accurately, in part because the majority (76%) did not know the definition of a "pipe dream" ($r = .61, p < .001$). (The director's staging of the Interlocutor's definition within the text may also have inhibited children's knowledge of this term.) Younger children tended to focus on the second half of the proposition's negative consequences, "[then] there are no pipe dreams," to interpret that pipe dreams are not possible—the *opposite* meaning of René's intention. Older children focused on the causal, first half of the proposition, "if everything is possible," but the implausibility of this unrealistic concept proved difficult to accept. Playwrights need to remember that propositional *if/then* sentences are cognitively challenging, and that such abstract concepts need to be supported by the context of dramatic actions (French and Nelson 1985, 38-46, 86-95).

There was considerable confusion over whether or not René's Mother was dead because Father said: "René, your mother is *lost*. We've *lost* her at the river" (Kornhauser 1987, 17). Literal-minded children understood "lost" to mean that she was not dead, especially given that she was roaming the stage apparently "lost," because "dead people can't walk or come back to life." Although 79% of the children understood that Mother's veil over her head signified her role as a ghost, the remaining 21% (mostly second graders) missed this implication. Choosing more subtle words such as "lost," for artistic effect, over more frank words, such as "dead," risks losing the understanding of a portion of an audience on a critical dramatic point. More concrete word choices enable literal-minded primary grade audiences to share meanings with older interpreters.

The use of vocal recordings to imply characters' thoughts proved an effective playwriting tactic which may have induced audiences to experience the play

from René's "surrealistic" dream consciousness. Of those who remembered hearing René's recorded voice (64%), over half (52%) of the children (27% second; 60% fourth; 74% sixth graders; 61% adults) inferred that it signified René's thoughts, dreams, or imagination. Children may be learning this common convention from television, such as the unseen narrator in *The Wonder Years*. Although younger children may not always grasp the symbolism behind this convention, they do recognize vocal recordings as an attention device to signal important verbal information. Likewise, musical underscoring of key dramatic actions may also heighten and focus attention to promote understanding and aesthetic enjoyment.

Staging choices that visualize and focus actions are the director's most crucial means of communication for audience comprehension. Silent pauses and salient aural cues before, during, or after critical dialogue signal important information as vital contrasts when pacing actions. In this study, only 20% of the respondents (3% second; 24% fourth; 26% sixth graders; 30% adults) understood the conventional meaning of an actor's onstage costume change because the director chose to alter the playwright's stage directions for this moment. The sound of a chime may have been necessary to signal the actor's "magical" transformation into René's character. Likewise, children may have missed the Interlocutor's definition of "pipe dream" (Kornhauser 1987, 7) because the director chose to keep the focus on Father's argument with René, rather than to interrupt this action's throughline with the Interlocutor's silent freeze. Essentially, directors (and playwrights) need to highlight attention on such critical moments for comprehension with these and other tactics which beg further artistic investigation.

Symbolic actions can also prompt a wide array of diverse interpretations as children strive to abstract deeper meanings. For example, when asked why René's Father gave René his smoking pipe near the end of the play, adults (61%) more than children (13%) interpreted this gesture as Father's acceptance of René's pipe dream to become an artist. Some children (14%) focused on Father's feelings and motives for René's feelings in more general ways. Others (12%) inferred that Father was going to die some day, so he gave René his pipe to remember him by as a family keepsake. A few fourth graders (5%) figured that René could paint pictures of his Father's pipe (e.g., to create *The Betrayal of Images* or "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*"). Other children (and one adult) were more literal in their interpretations. Some (8%) thought his Father simply did not want or need the pipe anymore, or that René could smoke it; others (6%) reported that his Father exchanged it for René's broken toy. The remaining respondents attempted to make symbolic but inaccurate connections with pipe dreams from the play's title (10%), or did not know a motive (22%).

Designers might also glean practical applications from children's responses, especially because young audiences rely so heavily on visual (34%) and aural (27%) cues. Although there were few significant differences in how audience members of different ages perceived spectacle elements, production values received a great deal of reported attention. Many chil-

dren noted "magical" scenic aspects, special lighting, sound and film effects, and inauthentic props as they worked to figure out how each illusory trick of the trade was executed. However, older children in particular indicated their disdain for this production's static, minimalist setting which had no major physical scene changes in the proscenium context. Some were bothered by a large singular box used to represent a couch, bed, crypt, desk, and trap. Although they did use their imaginations and seemed to know when settings changed (to or from a graveyard, René's house or bedroom, a classroom, a fair, the river, etc.), they voiced their stylistic preferences for representational realism quite strongly.

It is not known to what extent lighting and slide projections of Magritte's paintings induced thinking from René's dream perspective—an issue beyond this study's discursive limits. However, when asked to interpret artistic motives for these conventions, less than half of the children but more than half of the adults understood or matched artistic intentions accurately. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the adults but less than one-third (30%) of the children interpreted the projections as an aesthetic means to further the play's actions or to visualize René's imagination. Many children (38%) thought the projections were intended merely to show Magritte's art, and a few (12%) thought they were for general beauty. When asked why the lights flashed during the classroom scene, sixth graders and adults (61% each) understood this as a mood enhancement of René's frustration or nightmare more than second (30%) or fourth graders (45%).

The director hoped that audiences would perceive and interpret the play from René's "surrealistic" dream-like perspective. However, only 17% of the respondents, proportionate across age groups, did so spontaneously from limited questions. Moreover, these same respondents were more likely to infer characters' thoughts ($r = .23, p < .01$) and to perceive and interpret script values ($r = .31, p < .0001$).

In summary, children's qualitative narratives combined with the quantitative developmental findings of this study suggest that theatre artists need to make production styles more explicit and organically tied to actions so that metaphoric themes become more recognizably visible and audible to young untrained audiences. One play does not necessarily fit all age groups in terms of comprehension, nor do children automatically use their imaginations and suspend their disbelief when faced with non-realistic styles.

Theatre does not appear to alter children's attitudes about human situations; rather, it reinforces and confirms what they already know through experience as "truth." By empowering children to speak about their theatre experiences, producers may listen more attentively to their voices from a caring perspective based on mutual trust. By perceiving theatre from children's "gazes" and distinctive cultures, all audiences may be included in the world of theatre. In this way, idealistic "pipe dreams" about the intrinsic values of theatre may be nurtured and attained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks participating children, parents, teachers, and administrators of Hillcrest, New York, and Quail Run Elementary Schools in Lawrence, Kansas for their cooperation; college respondents; research assistants who interviewed children and coded data; and cast, crew, staff, and faculty of Kansas University Theatre.

NOTE

¹ For more complete details about methods and results, see Jeanne M. Klein, *Developmental Perceptions of Reality, Conventions, and Themes in Theatre: This Is Not a Pipe Dream* (Lawrence, U of Kansas, Department of Theatre and Film, 1992). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 344 246)

WORKS CITED

- Bennett, Susan. 1990. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. NY: Routledge.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Corey, Orlin. 1991, 29 August. Letter to the author.
- Davis, Jed H., and Mary Jane Evans. 1987. *Theatre, Children and Youth*. Rev. ed. New Orleans: Anchorage.
- Dolan, Jill. 1988. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research.
- Esslin, Martin. 1987. *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*. NY: Methuen.
- Ford, Julianne. 1975. *Paradigms and Fairy Tales*. Vols. I and II. London: Routledge.
- French, Lucia A., and Katherine Nelson. 1985. *Young Children's Knowledge of Relational Terms: Some Ifs, Ors, and Buts*. NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Gardner, Howard. 1983. *Frames of Mind*. NY: Basic.
- . 1991. *The Unschooled Mind*. NY: Basic.
- Klein, Jeanne. 1986. "Le Théâtre de la Marmaille: A Québécois Collective Founded on Research." *Children's Theatre Review* 35.1: 3-8.
- . 1987. "Children's Processing of Theatre as a Function of Verbal and Visual Recall." *Youth Theatre Journal* 2.1: 9-13.
- . 1992a. "Illusion, Reality, and Virtual Destiny: A Performance Text Analysis of *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*." *Youth Theatre Journal* 7.1: 8-12.
- . 1992b. "A Developmental Comparison of Perceived Reality in Live Theatre." Paper presented at the Eighth Biennial Meeting of the Southwestern Society for Research in Human Development, Tempe, AZ.
- . 1992c. *Developmental Perceptions of Reality, Conventions, and Themes in Theatre: This Is Not a Pipe Dream*. Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas, Department of Theatre and Film. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 344 246)
- Klein, Jeanne, and Marguerite Fitch. 1989. "Third Grade Children's Verbal and Visual Recall of *Monkey, Monkey*." *Youth Theatre Journal* 4.2: 9-15.
- . 1990. "First Grade Children's Comprehension of *Noodle Doodle Box*." *Youth Theatre Journal* 5.2: 7-13.

Kornhauser, Barry. 1987. *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*. Unpublished ms., non-participatory version. Lancaster, PA: Fulton Opera House. (Published 1992. New Orleans: Anchorage.)

Landry, Maureen O., Hope Kelly, and Howard Gardner. 1982. "Reality-Fantasy Discriminations in Literature: A Developmental Study." *Research in the Teaching of English* 16.1: 39-52.

Langer, Susanne. 1953. *Feeling and Form*. NY: Scribner.

Moghaddam, Mojgan. 1989. "Understanding Television: The Effect of Fictional and Factual Portrayals on Children's Cognitive Processing." M.A. thesis. U of Kansas.

Parsons, Michael J. 1987. *How We Understand Art*. NY: Cambridge UP.

This Is Not a Pipe Dream. 1990, September. By Barry Kornhauser. Dir. Jeanne Klein. Design Delbert Unruh. Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas Theatre for Young People.

Wright, John C., and Aletha C. Huston. 1987. "A Model of Perceived Reality in Television." Grant application. Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas, CRITC/Human Development.

Marianne Kiltroy



The Coterie Theatre's production of Wolf Child, written by Ed Mast, directed by Jeff Church, Kansas City, Missouri

