



## **Interview with Sue Giles: Making space for choice and reflection**

### **What is *Hear Me Roar*?**

*Hear Me Roar* is a new work in development, devised between [Polyglot Theatre](https://www.polyglot.org.au/)<sup>1</sup>, [Elbow Room](http://www.elbowroomproductions.com/)<sup>2</sup> and associate artists, and children aged 0-12 with their adults. It explores the notion of gender stereotyping and identity. It investigates the differences and similarities in children, regardless of gender identification, and creates a space in which children, the subjects of these stereotypes, are given the opportunity to make their own choices.

### **What role did choice play in unpacking the complexity of issues around identity with the children?**

#### **There was a conceptual link between identity and choice**

Choice illustrates the inner workings of a person and also the barriers to their agency. Depending on the choices that people are asked to make, having the offer of choice can show how strong someone is within themselves, or how much they depend on the opinions or support of others to make that choice. Identity is wrapped up in choice: personal notions of like and dislike, levels of confidence in making choices, and what choices for young people are offered or denied because of perceptions of who they are.

#### **These ideas were enacted in the workshop design**

Each workshop emphasised choice from the beginning. There were a variety of artforms, activities and choices in the room, drawing on different, often abstract, means of expression that allowed all skill levels to interact equally e.g. drawing, tracing body shapes, writing and choosing words, and choosing between toys, images and colours. Children were intrigued by the unusual experiences and went happily around the room to test and try, moving easily between places they were most interested in. Many were reluctant to leave.

The set up was very flexible and able to shift and change depending on the needs of the child. We also set up pathways and drama games that enabled free participation where children felt their input was valued and appreciated. At times we asked that children and adults be apart and at times we brought them closer together whether physically, or as a team, or just through a shared action. Even when feeling shy, children were encouraged to take part and have a go but if a child was feeling as if they didn't want to participate they were allowed time and room to set their own pace.

### **How did the artists and participants reflect on and make sense of the workshop experiences together and individually?**

We tried to enable observation for artists but also for parents/carers and to create spaces where self-examination could happen.

#### **Artist reflection**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.polyglot.org.au/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.elbowroomproductions.com/>

The artists emphasised conversation and paid attention to answers and observations. There were enough artists in the room to concentrate on one child if necessary. Reflection after each workshop and the collection of observations and experiences was the rhythm of each day. Having Voice Lab in the workshops for a couple of days was very illuminating. Voice Lab is a module that enables private conversation between a child and a computer generated character. The child crawls into a cosy igloo-type pod, by themselves, and meets the space as a personality called Voice Lab, which proceeds to establish a connection and ask questions of the child. This module allowed us to listen to the voices of private reflection. After the workshops, we all appreciated the time alone to absorb and discuss what we'd explored when with the children and their families.

### **Participant reflection**

Many families stayed to talk further about things that were challenging them as families; there was much in-depth or emotional feeling from adults. We felt that the program of workshops reached vulnerable places for adults especially, and perhaps too for the kids—asking for reflection around identity can be fascinating and revealing. Children were eager to talk through ideas, to contribute their personal opinions and attitudes, and they revelled in the personal attention when one-on-one with the artists.

We also incorporated reflection into the workshop experiences. For example, we did separate portraits of children—self-portraits for children and portraits by adults of their children—and then we compared them. We offered private reflection for everyone. For the children, this occurred through Voice Lab and for the adults this occurred through a version of Voice Lab that we made for the occasion.

### **What do think the value of these approaches will be for the development of *Hear Me Roar?***

What we discovered through this process was that the relationship between the adult and their conception of their child and the child's conception of themselves was the tension/link we were looking for. The children showed us their ease with flux and disruption and how much fun could be had from mixing things up. The individual approaches of each child were inventive, nuanced, complex, collegiate, flexible and personal. They gave of themselves and about themselves in a way that was very moving for the artists in the room—there was a maturity and depth of thinking around 'who am I?' from the very small to the older kids on the edge of teenage years. We learned a lot about trusting the energy of young people in the movement and shift of energy in a theatrical context—that they were willing and eager to come with us on narrative exploration, to lend their expertise to the space and make decisions, to reveal themselves and to take risks. Intensive connection with these young people during the exploration of a challenging concept made the possibilities expand and become more vigorous, less shallow, less adult-political and more personal, free-er and more joyous and fun, more unexpected and less logical.