



WHAT IS PLAY AND WHY DO WE DO IT?

“Many of the paradoxes of creativity are embodied in play. Creative people know the rules of the game, but they are also open to improvisation and serendipity”.

Brown, 2009, p.136

I am well-versed in the language of theatre, but I enjoy playing with conventions. This is why my artistic practice is an eclectic combination of visual and non-verbal interaction, and why it frequently redefines the relationship between the indoor and outdoor worlds.

As a predominantly kinaesthetic learner, I enjoy discovery through doing. My earliest memory of play and being playful was running and jumping with my older brother William into the huge piles of plane tree leaves my father had raked up. This first vivid experience of play has inspired my practice as an artist. Now, forty years later, I live behind a huge plane tree. In autumn my daughters rake up the leaves and then we all jump in them! However, I've noticed that we appear to be the only family demonstrating this play and I've begun to ponder, “Why?” My thoughts align with play specialist Kenneth Ginsburg who states: “Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for families to engage fully with their children. Despite the benefits derived from play for both children and families, time for free play for some children has been remarkably reduced.” (Ginsburg, 2007, p.182)



Fig. 1

“AUTUMN LEAVES”

My creative practice (fig.1) has been inspired and influenced by my family, my experiences; places I have visited; and people I have encountered, observed, conversed with and collaborated with in the world around me. The artists that have inspired me include Jacques Tati, Jim Henson, Pina Bausch, Ariane Mnouchkine, Keith Johnstone, Peter Brooks, Mummenschanz, Hayao Miyazaki, Maurice Sendak, and artists at ArtPlay. Their work is all playful to some degree and informs how I imagine a child may approach the world. As Winnicott (2005) states: “It is in playing, and only in playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers itself” (p.73).

I arrived in Melbourne as an actor in 2002 when there was very little theatre being made for the very young in Australia. In 2003 Jennifer Andersen and I created Pocketfool (www.pocketfool.com) to perform intimate, exciting theatre works for children, which celebrate the power and delight of imaginative play.

Together Jen and I developed ideas and gathered materials that we found interesting to play with and explore. These included Japanese paper, feathers, a vegetable steamer, egg beaters, doilies, our children’s treasures (for example a tiny tea set, small animals and drawings) and things we found ridiculous like a fake arm and hand (which appeared in our show “Cheep Cheep”). Children’s picture books, particularly those with little or no words, also provided us with ideas to explore through a theatrical language. We wanted to convey the narrative through action and discovered that the lesser the verbal language, the more satisfying the play. Sometimes a gesture was enough, sometimes a gag, and sometimes just two words such as “All gone!” said it all. We developed four shows over the following seven years using this approach to theatrical play.

During this time Pocketfool and ArtPlay discovered each other. ArtPlay is a place where children can explore and create, whilst being inspired by professional artists. I like to think of ArtPlay as an ‘artists’ lab’- a melting pot of artists of all ages and abilities creating, discovering and playing together. The studio space and infrastructure of ArtPlay provided an opportunity for Pocketfool to develop new skills and new work through interactive and collaborative workshops/performances. Jen and I were interested in broadening our audience and promoting play for families of all abilities. We wanted to work with three-year-olds because this is generally the age when imaginative play and language begins to explode. Also, at the time there were very few, if any, theatre workshops available for preschoolers and we were curious as to why that was. Pocketfool proposed that the workshops be held on Sundays to encourage whole families to play together (fig.2).



Fig. 2

“GIDDY UP!” FIRST POCKETFOOL FOR PRESCHOOLERS WORKSHOP

The first series of workshops at ArtPlay were publicised as:

“Join Pocketfool actors Heidi Weatherald and Jennifer Andersen and be drawn into a theatrical world. Preschoolers and their families will experience the excitement and fun of imaginative play, music movement and lots of mess! But don’t worry, we’ll tidy it up for you ready for next time.”

ArtPlay program, 2008

We developed the philosophy that children are the creators of their own stories. We use play as a tool to release and develop these ideas rather than teaching how to interpret or act out someone else’s stories. The workshops provided the perfect platform for us to develop artistically as individuals and as a company. ArtPlay’s central location in the City of Melbourne broadened our audience. As actors, we had been used to a theatre space that was like a blank canvas, with little if any natural light and few materials. ArtPlay gave us access to a multi-level studio space, an outdoor public space, multidisciplinary visual art resources and support staff, thereby providing us with endless ideas to ‘play’ with. As artists, we generally work on our own, so to have access to other artists and their work no doubt influenced our own practice. Pocketfool’s theatrical language was refined through exposure to other visual arts mediums that may not have otherwise been encountered.

However, over time Jen and I began to struggle with the once a month workshops. We became unsure of how to define our role in this ‘play’. Were we performers, teachers, facilitators or directors and was this even important to define? We became dissatisfied with our approach and with the opportunities for child-led improvisation. We were exhausted because workshops had developed into what seemed like complicated forty-five minute theatrical experiences that never met our expectations. No wonder we were dissatisfied considering it could take up to two years to make a

play with just the two of us!

We were the most excited and satisfied when the participants led the play and when they made a mark. For example, if a three-year-old suggested we should dive into the sea and look for treasure, we could swim around and then perhaps make an underwater world. The times we felt most dissatisfied was when a child suggested an idea like “Let’s be tigers!” and we would play the tiger for just a brief moment. This appeared to satisfy the child player because the idea was listened to and acted upon. However, to us this short investigation signalled a ‘get it over and done with’ approach that fundamentally led the play back to our own agenda. We felt this approach was disrespectful to the child and to the play itself. Perhaps we were trying to include too many ideas within forty-five minutes when one idea could be enough. We also had to determine the kind of contribution we would ask of the children and how to make it the most satisfying experience for them. Were we asking them to decide on a narrative or were we asking them to participate within a narrative that we had already pre-determined?

We discovered that if we were able to follow the childrens’ interests, then the play would be more satisfying. With this belief, we collaborated with visual artist Geoffrey Ricardo to create the interactive operetta “Wishhh!”



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

WISHHH!

Play is an important technique for our script development. We play with various materials and concepts in the rehearsal period, then at some point we collate the most enjoyable ideas and scenarios and start to construct a script. Jen and I decided to compile a list of 'favourite moments' – activities from our past workshops that we'd discovered families liked to do most. We knew children liked to hide under things, make marks, be tigers and be silly! (fig. 3). Structural elements that seemed to facilitate a playful atmosphere included taking off our shoes, having a maximum of twenty families per workshop, the importance of landing points, having natural light, and introducing each new idea in a different and engaging way. We wanted to feel satisfied when the play had ended and allow time to reflect. We drew from this knowledge to develop "Wishhh!" which opened at ArtPlay for Children's Week in 2010.

"Wishhh!" takes children and their families on an unpredictable voyage that incorporates themes of immigration, adventure and the importance of belonging. It is also about imaginative play – the kind of transformative play that takes place in the back yard. It includes drawing, transforming a sheet on a washing line into a ship's sail, playing in a jug band and building a place of one's own (fig.4).

We wanted children to have ownership of the play but we weren't asking them to decide what the play was about. In other words, we chose the game of "Wishhh!" and invited children and their families to play in this Pocketfool theatrical world. We found various ways to give them a sense of ownership of the play. The show centered around twenty-one multipurpose suitcases made for preschoolers and their families. The average three-year-old could move them, but they were strong enough for the average family to all sit on. All the suitcases involved some sort of interaction or play and some could even be drawn on so children were able to literally make their mark.

One of the tools we developed in the workshops was what we call 'landing points'. By briefly

stopping every now and again, we were able to direct the action with clear theatrical actions, rather than shouting above sixty roaring tigers. In one of the workshops we discovered that we were able to engage participants' attention by using a red flag attached to a six-foot bamboo pole. When it was placed correctly it could be seen by everyone so they knew what to do next. In "Wishhh!" I became the tall flag with my hair in a high ponytail on the top of my head. My body became the pole, so when I stopped still throughout the action the other players automatically stopped or turned to watch my "hair flag". This gave us a chance to perform narrative elements essential to the play, or to indicate what we needed the co-players to do. Such discoveries extended our theatrical language and made it more playful at the same time.

During "Wishhh!" the families modelled their "wishes" with red plasticine and were invited to place them on a set. Slowly, through actions instead of words, we handed over the play to the families. We allowed the players to end their play when they were ready. We then quietly opened up the 'imaginative' or 'play space' to the threshold/foyer area, or what Pocketfool called the 'domestic' space. At the beginning of the play, the players took off their shoes and socks in this 'domestic' space. This kept the play space clean and indicated preparedness for play. Once back in the domestic space, a number of nonverbal actions were used to say "Good-bye", "we won't forget you" and "let's play again soon".

After this journey with the workshops and "Wishhh!", Pocketfool reflected further on the role of the performer in interactive theatre. In 2011, along with seven other international artists, we were invited to Denmark by the director of the Danish theatre company Carte Blanche www.carteblanche. There we took part in a residency that investigated interactive theatre in theatre and public spaces. The outcome was the formation of an international company: INHEPI Tribe .

From July 2012, Pocketfool will be "company in residence" at ArtPlay. We look forward to further opportunities to create Art through Play in the 'artist lab' of ArtPlay.

REFERENCES

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INHEPI Tribe: International Network of Human Encounters in performance and Installation is an international company that functions as a network for autonomous artists with the aim of supporting and developing the research of interactive installations and performances throughout the world. The aim is to create a platform for ongoing investigation and research. The experiment and the dialogue in this context takes precedence over the finished artistic product.