

ARTPLAY - ARTIST ESSAYS NO.7

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Fig. 1

I have been employed primarily as an artist since 2003. Prior to this I worked for ten years in education, before retraining in Theatre Arts at Swinburne University. In 2003 I established an independent theatre company, Spin Sisters. I then began to combine my passion for the arts and the concept of life-long education by exploring ways to collaborate with children and artists to generate art. In 2006 I established The Becken Project with Ken Evans - a designer and puppeteer who co-founded the internationally acclaimed visual theatre company Handspan Theatre (1977-2002). The Becken Project creates visual theatre, short films and installation in collaboration with children and artists. From 2005 to 2009 I worked at ArtPlay as a support officer. In this capacity, and in collaboration with Ken Evans, I curated and co-ordinated the annual ArtPlay Puppet Lab from 2006 to 2009. As The Becken Project Ken and I led four projects at ArtPlay including two Arts Grants projects, 'From the Shadows' (2007) and 'Points of Change' (2008). During this time we also devised four Arts Victoria Artists in Schools projects, which ran alongside the work at ArtPlay. All of these projects informed, inspired and fed into each other. Most importantly, they were all part of a line of questioning, research and practice that I continue to explore and develop today in my work as a collaborative artist with children, artists and communities, whether the work be for children, adults or both.

Collaborative work with children has formed a large part of my work since 2006. Working at ArtPlay in various capacities has informed and influenced much of the work I do with children. ArtPlay

provided productive, well-resourced studio time for myself and Ken to explore making art with young people. ArtPlay was a lab for us - a place to experiment, with room to fail and learn. It is an inspiring place to work, with natural light, brilliant facilities and quality materials with which to work. It is also a rare, precious and important place for the cultural life of Melbourne and beyond. ArtPlay was, and continues to be, a place for me to meet many other artists who work with children and take part in very rich and dynamic conversations. Being part of the ArtPlay core staff gave me access to a huge variety of practitioners and ongoing conversations with Creative Producer Simon Spain, as we all investigated this fledgling field of rigorous art practice with children. Artists whose work at ArtPlay influenced my work with children include Sue Davis, Lynne Kent, Anne Ferguson, Trudy White and Lucy Griggs. I worked with an array of artists, especially during Puppet Lab, where we worked with puppeteers and makers with an extraordinary range and level of skills and experience, from master puppeteer Rod Primrose, to the young guns from Men of Steel. Many artists had not worked a great deal with children, which also sharpened my skills in operating as a link between adult and child artists.

COLLABORATION

By its very nature, theatre is a collaborative art form. The development of a new visual theatre performance is dependent on the collaboration between the director, designer, maker and the puppeteers among others. Even though the director guides the process and often takes on a position of leadership, it is the skills and expertise of each individual that contributes to the final piece. The idea for a show usually comes from one or two people and the director will make decisions about what stays and what goes. This does not diminish the collaborative process or the sense of ownership of the piece, but rather a successful collaborative process acknowledges and honours the varying roles each individual plays in what is essentially a shared outcome. Collaboration does not always mean equality in terms of the amount of input into a project. It does, however, mean that everybody is respected equally in terms of what they offer the project.

This is the idea that Ken and I communicate to the children with whom we collaborate. From very early on in the process we articulate that we are working in a similar way to that of professional theatre makers. We explain that taking on the roles of artistic directors means we will often have to make decisions about the final piece. We explain the currency of ideas - once an idea is shared it belongs to everybody to be built on, adapted and worked with in order to contribute to our shared vision. Some children immediately and confidently take on specific roles and become key collaborators. Others who require more direction are like apprentices watching and learning as they participate. Are these children still collaborators? Yes, as they still contribute to the final piece. There are, however, varying degrees of contribution in a collaborative process, not only when working with children but with professionals too. To me this does not diminish the collaborative nature of the work. Over time we have been given the opportunity to work with many of our apprentices again at ArtPlay and they have become key collaborators as they discover their interests and strengths. During the third of our workshop series at ArtPlay, which I discuss below, we saw several participants move from apprentices to key collaborators who confidently create complex characters and intricate performances (fig. 1).

PUPPETRY AND ILLUSION

Puppetry and Illusion was a series of five workshops exploring black theatre with 8-15 year olds, and was held at ArtPlay over two months in 2006. Ken and I were interested in how we could work with children to create a performance that was as much the children's work as it was ours. We chose an art form that was very familiar to us, but we had never worked with children on a creative



Fig. 2

development process in this way before. Our mode of working was to distill the known key elements of our creative process, including the vital element of remaining open to the unknown. After all, creating new work means making something that has never been done before.

Much of the artistic process is quite difficult to articulate. It is practiced and well-honed, but it is an action or a thought process and not something that is necessarily easy to pin-point and talk about. It has taken Ken and I quite a bit of practice and much discussion to articulate what our process is. I developed a line of questioning for Ken, which involved him drawing on his years of experience as a theatre maker and temporarily forgetting about the fact that we were working with children. I would prompt him to articulate each new step of the creative development process as if he were working with a professional theatre company. Together we would identify the skills, techniques, materials or research we needed to proceed with the work. Then we could begin to unpack this in a way that was accessible for children. Taking time to reflect on our process is the technique we have found most valuable for engaging children in our artistic and creative practice. The process we identified included the following steps: begin with a conceptual springboard, play with puppets and ideas, explore materials, develop skills and techniques for making and manipulating puppets, stay open to ideas, develop a storyboard, design, make-play-try-remake-play, rehearse and perform.

The five Puppetry and Illusion workshops ran for three hours each and as they were spread over a couple of months there was time between the workshops for us to reflect on and respond to the process and the developing work. We began each workshop by performing a short scene that set up the protagonist Mr. Man, who was a stranger in a strange land. We performed twice - the second time without stage lighting in order to reveal all the workings of the performance. We

therefore demystified the form of black theatre and began to develop a shared language.

The children were enthusiastic after the showing and couldn't wait to have a go themselves. From there we played with the puppets, played with materials, created a rough storyboard, made things and developed the story. Each week we would respond to the children, and they to us, and slowly a performance piece emerged. We created two to three minutes of the final performance each workshop.

Black Theatre is a performance style that has its origins thousands of years ago in Asia and has become a specialty of Prague. Our interpretation used puppets informed by Japanese Bunraku, Indonesian rod and a dose of traditional Australian puppetry piracy. Performing in a black box space, using specific lighting and having puppeteers in black velvet creates an optical illusion that hides the puppeteers and reveals the puppets in a corridor of light. Having complete blackout is crucial and ArtPlay was able to provide a space where we could build a black booth to develop work and to perform it to an audience of family and friends. With loads of black velvet, a play shelf, some theatre lights and a smoke machine, we created a space to experiment and explore this specific form of puppetry. The children wore 'blacks' – a black costume that included long black gloves and hoods, which meant we were able to produce an authentic staging of black theatre.

The children were taken through a creative development process of making and performing which is very similar to that which a theatre company would use. Ken and I felt that by working with the ideas and designs of our unique and inspiring collaborators, we achieved our aim of creating a performance that belonged as much to the children as it did to us. The children had ideas that we helped them realize by drawing on our experience and expertise. We provided starting points and a framework, and we asked questions and explored ideas, whilst the children created the story, and designed and made the puppets. We all performed together as puppeteers, stage managers and sound operators. Some children watched and listened and were directed by us and the other children. Other children, such as Desi and Georgia (see below), imagined, designed, made and performed integral aspects of the show.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

PUPPETRY AND ILLUSION COLLABORATION - DESI AND GEORGIA

Desi and Georgia are two friends who participated in the Puppetry and Illusion workshops and provide a snapshot of the kind of collaborative process that we worked with. This is an example of best practice and inspired work, but of course there were also moments where things went wrong, which is also a vital part of the process. I have highlighted key elements of the realization process below.

Desi and Georgia collaborated on the design and make of the 'creature', a mythical animal that accompanied our protagonist throughout his journey. The 'creature' was a highlight of the performance and a beautifully made and manipulated puppet. This was a rich process of collaboration between the two girls, as well as Ken as maker and puppeteer and myself as director. By playing with ideas and materials, the girls developed a prototype of the creature using a clever, simple and beautiful design (fig. 2). With the speed of an experienced practitioner, Ken did a quick re-design so that it worked well as a puppet. Georgia and Desi re-made it beautifully and it conveyed real personality. The puppet had great movement and simple manipulation, allowing the girls to create a subtle, poignant and funny performance within a very short period of time (fig.3).

COLLABORATION AS A CONTINUUM

Puppetry and Illusion was the first of three long-term visual theatre based projects that Ken and I worked on at ArtPlay:

1. 'Puppetry and Illusion' (2006) - workshops and performance exploring the art of black theatre. Fig. 4.
2. 'From The Shadows' (2007) - creating a new visual theatre performance from conceptual development through to a fully staged public performance. Fig. 5.
3. 'The Man Who Loved Boxes' (2009) - an adaptation of the book by Stephen Michael King, with a focus on performance techniques. Fig. 6.

Each series of workshops was a development and continuation of the previous project. Unlike 'Puppetry and Illusion' which was performed for parents and friends, 'From the Shadows' was to be performed for a wider public audience as part of the 2007 Puppet Lab program. We held two series of workshops: the first to collaborate with the children to develop the conceptual content of the show, and the second to design, make, rehearse and perform. We came to the first workshops



Fig. 5

with a big idea and the children explored it with puppets, image, play and philosophical discussion. We recorded the children during a community of inquiry, which is a model of shared philosophical discussion. An edited version of this discussion formed the soundtrack for the show and was the springboard for all the image development. Although much of this first stage didn't run as we had expected, it was a rich collaborative process that did enable the children to develop the conceptual underpinning of the show.

The second series of workshops, as it turned out, was not the collaborative experience we had hoped for. We had four days to design, make, rehearse and perform the show. Ken and I arrived with the soundtrack and a storyboard, which we intended to flesh out as part of the rehearsal process using the children's ideas. We had envisaged that the children would design and make their puppets, then develop the characters for performance through a shared process with us as overall directors. We realised pretty quickly that time was not going to allow the freedom to explore and experiment. So we gave the children quite clear direction with very little room for interpretation. The children still learnt a lot from working this way and mostly thoroughly enjoyed the process, but the end result was less collaborative than we had initially hoped. We learnt that trying to collaborate with children on every aspect of the process in a limited timeframe led to an environment that was in fact less collaborative. As a result of this experience we decided to focus on one aspect of visual theatre for our next collaborative project at ArtPlay.

'The Man Who Loved Boxes' was also to be performed for a public audience as part of the 2009 Puppet Lab program. This time, however, the focus of the workshops was specifically on performance techniques. 'The Man Who Loved Boxes' involved many children who had worked on all three of our projects at ArtPlay. The subsequent shared language, skills and understanding of visual theatre meant that we were able to leap straight into performance. As the designer/director team, Ken and I worked collaboratively with the performers much in the way a professional theatre company would rehearse for a show. The children created the characters through a process of playing with the puppets and discovering what they could do. Ken designed the puppets in response

to how the children worked with them. After performing 'The Man who Loved Boxes' at ArtPlay, they knew their roles so well that very little rehearsal was required to perform again in an ArtPlay cabaret some time later. They had a body memory for what they were to do, so even though they were performing in a completely different format and setting, they adapted and presented a highly acclaimed and beautiful performance. This indicated to us that the children truly owned their role in the show, as I don't believe they could have performed as they did if they had not been key collaborators in the development of the performance.

CONCLUSION

As an artist I find children to be rich, complex, insightful and inspiring co-creators, and as an educator I find art to be a rich, complex, insightful and inspiring tool for life-long learning. I collaborate with children because art and knowledge are empowering, children grow into adults and adults can learn a lot from children. My collaboration with children aims to be rigorous and multi-layered, containing depth, time and parameters within which to create. I work towards a process where ideas, skills and techniques can flow freely between children and adult artists.

ArtPlay has inspired, informed, supported and enabled my rich artistic and pedagogical inquiry into collaborative art practice with children. Currently Ken and I are creating a theatre event to be staged in regional Victoria in November 2012 entitled 'STEAM!' We are collaborating with several theatre artists, steam engineers, members of our local community and the steampunk community from Melbourne using collaborative models developed through our theatre practice and the work we have done with children. I am also investigating collaborative practice with babies and their parents, working towards the development of theatre for babies and adults. Once again ArtPlay has supported this work with the opportunity for me to run a series of workshops for babies and their parents called 'Sonic Baby'. These explored the soundscape of the everyday, inspired by the sensory world of babies.

The work of Ken and myself in collaboration with children continues to develop and evolve. We were initially inspired by the idea that authentically and rigorously engaging children in our artistic and creative process would provide these children with insights into generating and experiencing art. Our core belief in the vital role that art and artists play in society, drove us to think about ways we could provide an introduction for children and, consequently adults, to engage in a life-long dialogue with art. Over time, working with children has become as much about their creative input into our work as it is about offering them insights into art and art making. Children's ideas, perspectives and views of the world make collaborating with them an artistic choice rather than solely being about education. This has deepened my interest and inquiry into childhood aesthetics and the art of childhood, and I have subsequently developed a continuing practice-based inquiry into the shared creative space between children and artists.

