

The recent Review of Theatre for Young People cites Patch Theatre as one of the most admired and child friendly companies in Australia. In previous issues of Lowdown we have explored their processes of evaluation. Here, the Artistic Director of Patch, Dave Brown, outlines its approach to creating new work for children.

not process anything very well. Children need a reassuring environment and concrete support for conceptual ideas. They can only absorb meaning in relatively small chunks. Arts for children should refine, clarify and extend their experience. Our goal? Simple yet wondrous, mysterious and fantastical stories that are deeply rendered at a child's level of comprehension and perspective. Elegant simplicity!

Reference

Children construct new understanding on the basis of what they already know (referred to as 'constructivism' in learning

Our assumptions are informed by the work of Bruno Bettelheim ('The Uses of Enchantment'), Joseph Campbell ('The Power of Myth') and Clarissa Pinkola Estes ('Women Who Run With Wolves') and are complemented by the early childhood insights of Steiner, Montessori, Piaget and Emilia. We use our analysis of the psychological impact of stories to support our theatre-making choices. Our objective is to structure and layer deeply resonant performance experiences for children.

Ultimately, our artistry comes from rendering familiar content in ways that provoke and inspire 'emotional connection',

Reference, Assemblage And Interactivity

Over the last three years, Patch has undergone an ambitious re-invention and emerged as a focused, multi-layered, early childhood arts organisation, delivering quality performing arts experiences to 4-8 year old children and their carers across Australia and overseas.

This re-invention has been built around three prongs of artistic exploration that recognises children's theatre as a highly specialised and exacting field of artistic endeavour and not just a simplified version of adult theatre. Children are not little adults. They are evolving beings passing through the most complex and rapid developmental phases of their lives, during which two thirds of their potential, as humans, will be hard-wired!

We consider very seriously indeed our contribution to that development.

Absorbing Meaning

Four to six year old children are developing language; beginning to see the world beyond 'me' and beginning to solve problems more independently. They are learning to sequence events and are starting to make sense of the concepts of time and place.

Children up to the age of eight are also right brain biased and co-exist comfortably with fantasy and play. It's their place to be. It is our role to help them stay there by making it as rich, wondrous and mysterious a place as we can. 'All children are artists, the challenge is to keep them so', says an insightful Pablo Picasso. Unfortunately, contemporary pressures and misguided educational priorities push children out of their right-brain period far too early and to their detriment.

Elegant Simplicity

The most common error of judgement in producing work for young children is a lack of awareness of their way of comprehending their world. A confused or scared child will

theory). It is not possible for children to assimilate new experience without having some structure from previous knowledge to build on. To this end, our work is strongly referential. We source our content from literature, folklore, art or other areas of relevant childhood experience, which allow opportunities for prior connection, reflection and revisitation of the ideas presented in our productions.

However, we don't want children to passively consume a familiar rendition of the story. To avoid this, we use visual,



The Boy and the Bamboo Fire
Photo: Alex Mackay

physical, musical and aural parameters to shift the story from the literal rendition they are familiar with. This shift prompts the brain to make the connection between the experience of the story they know and the new experience. The term I use to describe the shift is 'oblique referencing', the 'oblique' rendering of familiar content. This suggests that there's some 'quirkiness', some 'off-centredness', that engages children's imaginations, requiring them to 'create' meaning.

The most powerful impact of good stories happens at a deep psychological level and this is especially the case in a child's first eight years. The metaphorical intonations and symbolism of a story need to be in sync with the experiences and pressures children are feeling. Hence, we pay great attention to the way we believe our stories of choice impact psychologically on a child's development.

'imaginative engagement' and 'creative play' in children.

The Art of Assemblage

Patch has been examining the impact of theatrical assemblages of stories on children. Assemblages, because they comprise a collection of short theatrical works that support children's comprehension by providing accessible chunks of experience. They also allow variety and flexibility within the one production, a factor that supports children's engagement and understanding.

The exploration of assemblage is very challenging, particularly in the process of discovering the unifying elements and the resonances of the whole. Our progress in expanding this form has been expressed in the four assemblage productions generated to date - 'Aesop's Fables', 'Who Sank the Boat?' (previously called 'PoM pOm'), 'Pigs, Bears and Billy Goats Gruff' and 'Keep Ya Hair On!'

The content of each of these works came from children's literature ('Who Sank the Boat?' and 'Keep Ya Hair On!') and folklore ('Pigs, Bears and Billy Goats Gruff' and 'Aesop's Fables').

The 'palette' for each of these four productions was distinctive. 'Aesop's Fables' was a language lean, mask, mime and live music piece. 'Who Sank the Boat?' was in an eclectic vaudeville-esque style using traditional theatre forms including black theatre, hand puppets, cutouts, pantomime, music hall, operetta, dance and parade.

'Pigs, Bears and Billy Goats Gruff' was storytelling in the kitchen of a mysterious old house. The live music has a '40s folksy feel - ukulele, violin, squeezebox, guitar and piano. It found distinctive ways to tell the stories using the limited scenic palette of the kitchen - a table, three chairs, kitchen utensils and a trap door. For example, the two main storytellers in 'The Three Little

Pigs' used visual imagery from the rituals of soup preparation to support the story – the 'wolf' preparing the soup in readiness to boil up the third little pig. 'Keep Ya Hair On!' used an open studio concert narrative form, with a variety of interactive styles of audience involvement, which is discussed below.

In the next few years we will be pursuing our investigation of assemblages further. We will be exploring, with greater specificity, repetition, sequencing, deconstruction, interactivity and 'extending the art by limiting the palette' in the process of unlocking the possibilities of this form

led to a major re-think about how we make theatre for children.



Photo: Amy Dowd

Theatre's new commitment to creative processes for new works that are informed by interaction with children and their carers.

Our New Stomping Grounds

From 2004 on, Patch enjoys two new relationships that will support and inform our work.

Our offices will be re-located to the Odeon Theatre, our main metropolitan venue, enabling us to establish a strong ongoing relationship with the theatre and its community. The theatre is a dedicated youth arts venue run by Carclew Youth Arts Centre for the South Australian Youth Arts

Three Prongs In the Re-Invention of Patch

and better understanding its impact on children.

'Mr McGee and the Biting Flea', a sister production to 'Who Sank the Boat?', is being created for a premiere season in August 2004. It will extend the 'oblique' rendering of familiar stories by Pamela Allen, using traditional theatre styles including: ventriloquism, black lamp theatre, object theatre, shadow puppetry, mask, commedia and slapstick.

Interactivity

We believe that children's theatre should have a 'conversation' sense about it. Even though much of a performance may be watched in silence – it is not passive silence. Children should feel the immediacy of a performance and be 'moved' to converse naturally and spontaneously in song, action, inner dialogue, outer dialogue, role-play, symbolic play or performer-initiated interactivity.

The deeper the sensory input for children, the more 'solidly' an experience will be absorbed. Interactivity enhances language assimilation and cognitive development as well as confidence and self-expression. Along with our exploration of 'referential content' and the 'art of assemblage', we have embarked on an investigation of 'modes of interactivity' in children's theatre.

Our objective is to push well beyond the 'question-response' or 'join in the chorus' modes of interaction. We made some ground in our production of 'Keep Ya Hair On!' which used audience constructed imagery, audience involvement in symbolic play and role play and audience interview as new developments in interactivity. The level of empathy those interactions created with the audience at large was exciting!

Our interactivity with children doesn't start in the theatre. We have realised over the last four years how crucial interaction with children is to our creative process. This has

The sorts of questions we need answers to, before we even start to devise a theatre work based on known content, go like this:

- What are the reference points for children in this story?
- What knowledge are they building onto?
- How does the age of a 4–8 year old child change the experience of the story?
- What are the symbolic and metaphorical elements in the story and how might a child process these?
- What is the main concept in the story and how can we present that as a concrete experience for a child?
- How can we create one-step-removed windows (oblique referencing) in the rendering of this story that beckons imaginative engagement?
- How does this story resonate with other stories in the assemblage and the themes of the whole?
- How can we interactively engage children in the sharing of the story?

The answers can only come from sharing the stories in a variety of ways with children and observing their responses and their play.

The Purple Patch

Our need to connect with children and education has spawned a new arm of our company. Purple Patch is a self-funding collective of 15 professional artists, most of whom have young children of their own. The collective is grounded by a keen philosophical and practical exploration of the relationship between the performing arts and early childhood development.

Its objective is to accumulate knowledge, experience and expertise that we use to provide in-service support for early childhood educators and parents wishing to enliven their engagement with children, through the use of story and play.

In the short space of 14 months, this team has become the driving force of Patch

Board and houses Playfull – a project that facilitates live performance for schools by SA companies. Our move will enhance Patch Theatre's visibility, increase our efficiency during performance seasons and create opportunities for partnerships in the community.

Our research, development and rehearsal processes (including Purple Patch activity) will be part of a unique relationship with the newly re-opened Sturt Street Community School, which is South Australia's first school dedicated to the care and education of children from birth to eight. The school will be a centre for innovation in early childhood education and care, with a multicultural community focus on play-based learning. Patch Theatre will have a rehearsal space within the school enabling all our artistic work to grow out of real interaction with children and their carers.

A Distinctive Patch

We are not interested in touching the surface of things then letting them go. We wish to pursue these ideas over and over – extending them, deepening them and evolving a style grounded in exploration and experience, that is distinctively Patch Theatre.



Photo: Dave Brown



DAVE BROWN