**Exeunt Article: Taboo in Children’s Theatre**

Shaun Usher notes in his beautiful coffee-table book, *Lists of Note*, that when first released in the early 1970s, Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* caused quite a stir for one particular reason: its protagonist — a young boy named Mickey — was drawn nude. Fearful of their children seeing an innocent picture of a fictional boy's genitals, some parents and librarians took the liberty of drawing nappies on Mickey (see below); others thought it easier to just burn the entire book.

40 years later, issues regarding tastefulness, censorship and propriety (in relation to works for children at least) continue to challenge and debilitate artists in all mediums – theatre being no exception.

So what are those difficult things that we *can* talk about when making performance-work for young people? What should we be discussing with our smaller audiences? And what are those things that are better left well alone?

The reason I’m asking these questions is that, at Bootworks, we’ve just developed a show for families about the death of a mother. It’s called *The Many Doors of Frank Feelbad* and sees the main protagonist, Frank,undertake a journey to try and find his Mum (with the children in the audience adopting the role of helpers). As his journey progresses, various characters help him negotiate the five incremental stages of grieving, the culmination being that Frank is told (quite explicitly) that his Mum has died.

Tackling an issue as loaded and potentially “nerve-touching” as bereavement was always going to be challenging. Worst-case scenarios flood our heads. How will we cope if all the children burst into tears en masse? What if we’re inundated with complaints from overly precious parents? Might the audience revolt when we chop the chicken’s head off in the second act\*? Surely any potential programmer will positively palpitate at the thought of a limited capacity show for 36 people, about *dying*? Communicating the content of the performance also requires careful navigation – and when the average price of a family theatre ticket is nearing the £40 mark, you can’t blame parents for deferring to more regular fare. Cats in Hats and Gruffalos will fill rooms up and down the country because of the recognition of the well-loved characters. But, as such, children’s theatre runs the risk of peddling the familiar season after season. Perhaps it’s not so radical a proposal to suggest that kids, and their families, deserve greater diversity in their theatrical experiences.

Having now presented a number of first outings of *The Many Doors of Frank Feelbad*, with a host of invested and supportive partners including Warwick Arts Centre, artsdepot, Stratford Circus, Worthing Theatres, HOME and the University of Chichester, I’m more assured than ever of the importance of providing children with performances that spark much more complex questions, and address less trodden thematic terrain.

There is, of course, a balance to be struck. Nobody wants to subject a child to something tantamount to a traumatic episode. But neither should theatre-makers feel that they need shy away from making work that “explores the whole spectrum of a child’s emotional literacy”. Or so suggests Jude Williams of The Letter J whose work, *Grandad and Me,* sensitively addresses the paternal loss of a small girl. After all, if one of the primary motivations of bringing children to the theatre is to develop their empathetic capacity then perhaps exposure to these darker hues of human existence go some way towards furnishing that logic.

From my experience, young audiences show an astonishing capacity to process the difficult concept of loss, often proving eager to continue conversations after the performance has finished. This demonstrates an appetite (or at very least an intrigue) for topics that might have previously been deemed by some parents as “off limits”. In this sense, theatre provides a “one-step-removed” catalyst for those previously “hard to initiate” parent-child conversations. Indeed, it would seem that generally children possess a far greater ability to digest, assimilate and contextualize complex subject matter than some adults would give them credit for.

When discussing whether these topics are suitable for young ages, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that children are not (and likely never have been) as wide-eyed and unaffected as the examples found in Enid Blyton novels. That they are, in fact, relatively skilled in acknowledging and “making sense of”, the fragmented world in which they exist. That’s exactly what Purni Morrell, the artistic director of the Unicorn, suggests when she identifies that kids are “…not remotely convinced by our attempts to let them think that the world is safe because they know perfectly well that it isn’t”.

Children are resilient and eager to tackle difficult situations and challenging ideas where permitted. Presented with an appropriate contextual framework, children will invariably endeavor to accommodate whatever idea or circumstance we choose to greet them with – and likely continue to surprise us with the sophistication of their understanding, wherever the opportunity arises. In a culture where we trust “child-carers” to administer medicine to the sick, it seems bizarre that we don’t more often trust ourselves to take more thematic risks with our theatre-making on their behalf.

Whether it’s Unlimited’s *Play Dough*, where children consider the intricacies of the current financial system, or Mammalian Diving Reflex’s *Haircuts by Children*, where kids are armed with scissors and permitted to coiffure adult clients, or Sibylle Peters’ *Playing Up Live Art*, where children are asked to revive infamous performance art pieces, a number of precedents exist as a mantle to be taken up. Work which successfully challenges the cultural logic that some topics might be deemed “off limits” for our children.

Perhaps then what I’m advocating here is the idea that theatre-makers might take a leaf out of Mickey’s book from the aforementioned *In The Night Kitchen* and see what happens if we just let it “all hang out” for a bit. To take the risk of exposing some taboos with children and shine a light on those areas that some of us might presume children don’t already spend nights wide-awake contemplating.

What’s the worst that could happen? We’ll let you know.

\*Worry not, the chicken is not a *real* chicken.

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