

EDITORIAL

Drama Participation and Children's Rights

The four articles in this volume examine various forms of theatre and applied drama/theatre, including drama improvisation, interactive children theatre, ethnodrama and process drama. Although the study areas and research topics in these articles vary, ranging from theatre and aesthetic experiences, children's voices to language education, all the articles concern facilitating and enhancing children's drama participation. It is vital to the development of children's subjectivity and agency through drama/theatre exploration, expression and creation. The vitality of interactive children theatre and integration of process-based drama in the West is attributed to many factors, Article 31 of the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) is of particular importance in this respect. Article 31 confirms the rights of the child to engage in play, recreational, cultural and artistic activities. In democratic countries, the right to the arts does not refer simply to "I have joined in" or "I am watching" but a vision of the child as an independent being. The key to authentic and substantial participation is decision-making through civic engagement, a concept best represented by Sherry R. Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation". Arnstein identifies eight types and levels of participation, from non-participation to restrictive, tokenistic consultation where the powerless citizens may indeed hear and be heard, and further to the highest level of citizen participation where citizens are entitled to decision-making in partnership with the powerholders. How would these various levels of participation be like in children theatre and applied drama?

Neelands (2010) characterises a scale of drama participation that seeks to describe six types of participation in a way that echoes with Arnstein's theory of ladder of citizen participation. He points out that the naturalistic theatre either creates an illusive reality on stage for the audience or limits their appreciation of theatre by positioning the audiences as (i) observers

or (ii) passive witnesses. Rather, different modes of applied drama/theatre foster active audience participation in the forms of (iii) active witnesses, who contribute by making their responses publicly heard, (iv) framed witnesses, who assume responsibility for what happens on stage while adopting the perspective of the character in the “event” being witnessed by them, (v) social actors, who directly comment on the actor’s behaviour or even enter the theatrical space to act out what they deem as appropriate, and (vi) players, who make influential decisions in the process. In short, active participants as described by Neelands are featured in theatre and applied drama that emphasise child-centredness, process-orientedness and spontaneity. The ultimate aim is to engage children in public expression, dialogic negotiation, and to call forth collective decision, action and transformation. Hence, applied theatre and drama can be seen as a highly substantial form and practice of civic participation. Having said that, children theatre makers and drama practitioners have been concerning about ways of identifying and creating favourable conditions to achieve such substantial participation. The articles in this volume that examine and discuss the metaphysical aesthetic environments, interaction strategies, aesthetic space, and emotional arousal, would inevitably offer insights to the concern.

Drama improvisation is one way of initiating and engaging young children into co-creating drama. Carrie Ka-lee Ho’s research argues that this drama form promotes decisiveness, introspectiveness and empathy in the young children, from which they acquire aesthetic experiences. Ho emphasises the importance of both physical and metaphysical environments, the latter in particular as it makes possible young children’s free and autonomous participation. Children can improvise their own drama, interact and negotiate with their own selves, their peers and the physical environments. This, however, does not reject or neglect the roles of the adult. On the contrary, respect and acceptance of the children’s rights to know from the adults, their participation and opinions in the children’s aesthetic preferences and decisions are in fact vital to constructing and sustaining the metaphysical environment of aesthetic experiences through drama.

Recent development in children's theatre puts great emphasis on diverse modes and strategies of audience participation. Through analysing and commenting on two children theatre pieces, *Filial Piety in Action and Half Left, Half Right*, Li-yu Chang proposes ways of understanding audience-theatre interaction. Both theatre pieces positioned children as active and real audience by providing them with ample opportunities to prompt their aesthetic responses and participation in the theatre. In *Filial Piety in Action*, Chang argues that although the children cannot decide on the story plot, they can still acquire empathy and problem-solving capacities by taking on roles and tasks in assisting the main characters in the play. For the very young audience, the rich application of symbolism and different modes of representation in *Half Left, Half Right* take into consideration of children's sensory and aesthetic developments (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017), and engage them as player in the theatre process (Neelands, 2010).

Li Ding's article discusses a study of process drama in a university English class in Shantou, China. The link between process drama and language education is well supported theoretically in the whole-language and communicative approaches to language teaching, as well as in social linguistics. The simulated reality in drama offers students favourable conditions, such as purposeful communication, role identity and relationship and linguistic contexts, to acquire and practise the target language. Ding also reveals that apart from these conditions, process drama particularly helps arouse students' emotions. Dramatic tensions, for example, arouse different emotions like excitement, delights or fear, which not only engage the students in the dramatic acts, but also conduce to their public expression of emotions that would otherwise be personal and intimate to the individual students. When the emotions are expressed publicly, students would then be connected and cohere with one another into a kind of community.

It should be noted that although children theatre and applied drama present plentiful opportunities of children's participation, it is likely that even the best-intended theatre or drama lesson could be reduced to nothing but a rehearsal for adult's needs and interests. Very often, the adult has

presumptions about what constitutes the ideal child or desirable childhood, imagining them as skillful communicator, problem-solvers with great aesthetic senses, for example. Therefore, besides enhancing children's drama participation, we should also re-examine our perspective of childhood by putting ourselves into children's shoes and listening to them. Krissy Yin Lam and her colleagues analyse their ethnodrama, *Graffitiopia*, a devised theatre piece that portrays the everyday lived experiences of children in Hong Kong, which can be considered an honest and down-to-earth investigation and presentation of children drama participation. The authors reflect on how they, the creative team, played the triple role as researcher, playwright and actor/actress. Through the group-devising processes, the creative team co-created an aesthetic rehearsal space which allows them to stage the children's lived experiences in a more empathetic way.

While adults have certain stereotypical, if not rigid, imagination of an ideal child, children also have their own views, desires and cultural identities. Hence, it is crucial for us to understand the children's voices and feelings from their perspectives. In this respect, more should be done to explore, evaluate and reflect on various drama/theatre strategies and approaches so that children would ultimately be empowered to express freely, and be in charge of their own learning.

References

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