

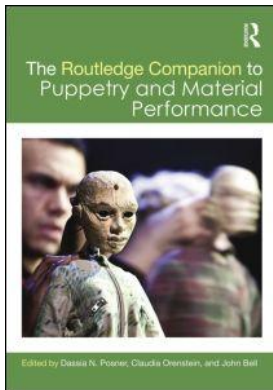
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“Clouds Are Made of White!”

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“Clouds Are Made of White!”

The Intersection of Live Art and Puppetry as an Approach to Postdramatic Children’s Theatre

Rike Reiniger

In this chapter I will discuss and analyze my experiences with postdramatic children’s theatre derived from live-art and puppetry traditions.

My artistic background as a theatre director and author is based on two rather contrary educational trainings. During the mid-1980s I spent time as an apprentice in a traditional hand-puppet company, the Hohnsteiner Puppentheater, which toured throughout Germany. I also studied directing for puppet theatre from 1987 to 1988 at the oldest puppetry school in Europe, the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. After this conventional training I completed my drama degree at the University of Giessen, which has a special reputation for its exploratory approach combining innovative forms of theatre and live art.

When I became the director of a puppet theatre with an ensemble of six puppeteers in Bautzen, Saxony, in 2006, I tried to combine these two different traits in some of our performances. This approach was unusual in the field of theatre for very young audiences (ages two and up) but very successful.

Theatre for very young audiences – the development of a new genre

Theatre for an age group younger than four years old has long been thought not only impossible but also unnecessary, since children of that small age are unable to differentiate between an artistic and an everyday experience. Nevertheless, La Baracca, a children’s theatre in Bologna, Italy, started to perform for very young children in the late 1980s. Roberto and Valeria Frabetti also organized the first international festival for this form of theatre: *Il Teatro e il nido* (Theatre and the Nursery) in 1989. At about the same time, theatre experiments for the youngest audience target group took place in France. Agnès Desfosses and Laurent Dupont, Phénomène Tsé-Tsé, and Compagnie Skappa! were some of the artistic protagonists there who also collaborated with psychologists and teachers in order to find a new theatrical language for infants. These performances in

Italy and France were the results of individual artistic efforts grounded by personal interests.

In Scandinavia, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture commissioned research into the cultural life of children, which found that small children and toddlers were living in a sort of cultural isolation (dan Droste 2011: 106). A national funding program to support art for small children was therefore set up in 1998: *Klangfugl – kulturformidling med de minste* (Glitterbird – Cultural Education for the Smallest). This national program was followed by the international project Glitterbird – Art for the Very Young in 2003. The aim of this European Union-funded project was to give children under the age of three opportunities to meet and experience art and to promote the idea that art should be a part of small children’s lives (Os and Hernes undated).

The Scandinavian, Italian, and French performances began to be seen at international festivals, especially in the field of puppetry, like the Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes in France and the FIDENA (Puppet Theatre of the Nations) festival in Germany. Theatre artists in Germany responded to their colleagues’ efforts with curiosity but did not at first meet the challenge to work in this area themselves, perhaps because German theatre has been dominated by dramatic literature since the nineteenth century and because children’s theatre had been shaped significantly by the socially conscious productions of the 1970s created by groups such as Grips Theater Berlin – which claimed that children’s theatre should depict everyday-life conflicts and encourage young spectators to develop their own autonomy.

But in 2006, a *Theater von Anfang an!* (Theatre from the Beginning!) research project was started by the Kinder-und Jugendtheaterzentrum der BRD (German National Center for Children’s Theatre) in Frankfurt. For more than two years, two state-supported theatres, two independent theatre groups, and some associated partners, together with theatre researchers and educators, studied theatre for audiences under the age of four. Two conferences, a study trip to Paris, a festival in Dresden, a book publication, and many new theatre productions were the results of this project, as well as an increasing openness to the idea of performing for a very young target group. Now, most of the children’s theatres in Germany offer performances for toddlers and small children alongside their usual programming. Across Europe, the Small Size Network for the Diffusion of Performing Arts for Early Childhood has promoted the exchange of ideas on performing arts for very young audiences ever since the organization was initiated by Roberto Frabetti in 2005. The Small Size Network connects theatres in 12 European countries, from Great Britain to Romania, organizing workshops, publishing books and DVDs, cultivating funding resources, and facilitating cooperative projects.

Common practices of theatre for very young audiences

The majority of artists who perform for very young audiences have a children’s- or puppet-theatre background; a few come from dance. Some common practices can be observed in most performances.

First there is the practice of exploration. Paralleling small children in their everyday life, the performers onstage explore basic materials, simple objects, and natural principles. These explorations could involve dough, fabric, wood chips, or balls of different sizes and such concepts as the forces of gravity, light, and sound. The materials, objects, or natural principles examined form a kind of frame in which stage action can develop a very simple story.

A second common practice in theatre for very young audiences is reduction. Scenography makes use of only a few distinct colors and basic forms. Elementary music and percussion are produced visibly onstage. Stage figures are limited to positive characters and clear emotional reactions such as surprise, love, sadness, or gaiety.

A third common practice involves the performers inviting the audience to the performance space at the beginning of the show, and even onstage at the end, to play with objects or to explore materials themselves. The boundaries between performer and audience, performance and play, and art and reality dissolve.

Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather

After this general survey, I would like to explain my personal artistic approach to theatre for very young audiences. For my first performance for two-year-olds, *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather*, I invited interdisciplinary artist Otmar Wagner to work with our puppet company at the Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheater Bautzen (German-Sorbian People's Theatre Bautzen) in eastern Saxony. Wagner usually creates live-art performances, which until this point had never overlapped with children's theatre, whereas I had considerable experience with puppet theatre for children. Both of us, though, have a strong artistic connection to such historical avant-garde movements as Bauhaus and Dada, as well as to visual and object theatre. As an experimental performance artist, Wagner was immediately attracted to the idea of working for an audience that does not care for such theatre conventions as story, dialogue, or character and that always feels free to do whatever it likes: an audience of two-year-olds.

We chose the weather as a motif for our performance. Weather, as an everyday reality and an everyday surprise, would be part of the audience's horizon of experience and therefore a good starting point for our theatrical adventure. Wagner invented a performance environment that included designed objects, such as a human-sized flower, waves cut from wood, a wind machine, and a bike that did not move. Next to these objects he arranged a model stage that could be video-projected onto the actual stage, and installed an overhead projector for live rear projection onto three screens to create holographic effects. He also made two-dimensional puppets from photographs of the production's two puppeteers. Through this spatial setting he added the aspects of "big and small" and "material and projection" to the original motif.

The work process began with a two-week phase of exploring and improvising with the material. None of us knew, and none of us wanted to know, what results the exploration would finally have. The puppeteers were, of course, mainly improvising with the performance possibilities of objects and space, not simply animating the



Figure 7.1 *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather*, Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheater Bautzen (2007): performers Christian Pfützte and Christiane Kampwirth with the model stage. Photo courtesy of the author

rudimentary puppets. We collected these possibilities without initially questioning their sense or non-sense related to the performance.

In the next phase, our directing team (Otmar Wagner and me) considered dramaturgic structure. We decided to define the stage setting as a weather laboratory, with a chief meteorologist, Mrs. Sun, and her assistant, Mr. Moon. And we agreed on a four-section dramaturgic structure to parallel that of the four seasons. The results of our improvisations were assigned to the seasons and linked to the work in the weather laboratory. The opening of the human-sized flower, for example, became part of the spring section; a puppet's dive into the wooden cutout waves belonged to the summer section; the shadow projection of dry leaves and drops of rain became part of the autumn section; and a dance with human-sized snowflakes was part of the winter section.

In terms of language and sound, we were interested in using words not to convey meaning, transmit information, or promote a story, but instead we played with language in the same explorative way as we used material objects. We collected sayings and folk songs about the four seasons. And we asked Jossi, a not-yet four-year-old boy, to explain weather phenomena. Happily, he explained everything we asked him about, coming up with the most poetic texts we could have wished for: “A rainbow feels wet like rain and a rainbow can eat raisins. On the rainbow I easily walk to my grandma who has died,” he told us, and “clouds are made of white.”

Sayings, folk songs, and Jossi's contemplations were added to the succession of scenic events. We thereby created a dramaturgic structure that did not tell a story



Figure 7.2 Mrs. Sun puppet (2007). Photo courtesy of the author

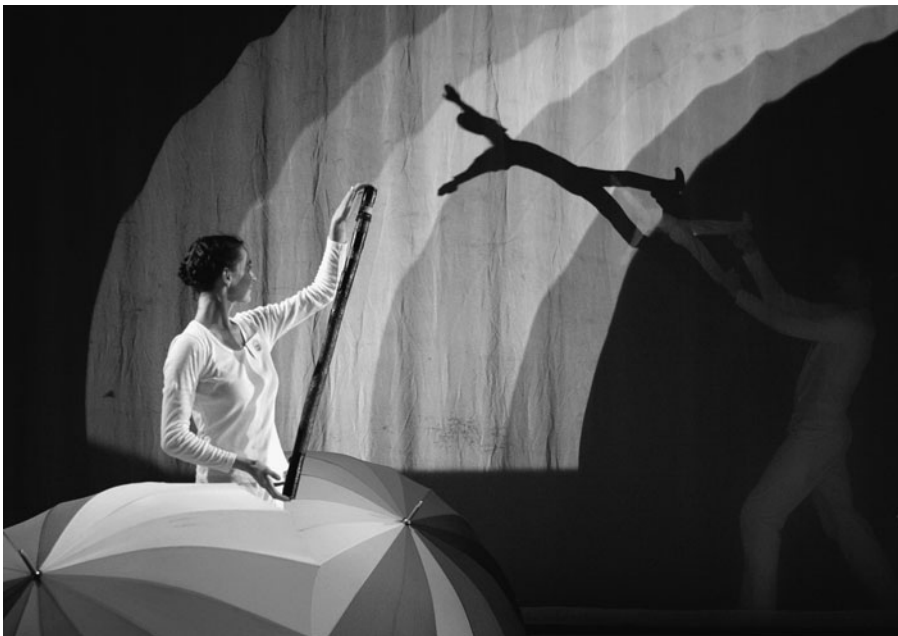


Figure 7.3 Performer Susan Weilandt and the rainbow (2007). Photo courtesy of the author

(even though we did invent the stage characters of Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon) but was instead composed of a series of short actions or happenings. I call this a “dramaturgy of incidents.”

In the third working phase we conducted regular rehearsals in which the puppeteers developed their characters and rehearsed the course of events and the technicians practiced running the show smoothly. We titled the production *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather*.

The performance and its audience

Having discussed the working process, I will now focus on the perception of the performance. The target audiences were children aged two or older, but such children, of course, do not attend a theatre performance by themselves; the adults who accompany them have to be taken into account too. Different from shows for older children, the very young audience needs considerably more adult attendants. On average, about two attendants were responsible for each group of not more than ten children attending from nursery schools. Both parents sometimes accompanied one child, especially on weekend performances. Consequently, our audiences consisted of about one-third adults and two-thirds small children: a rather heterogeneous mixture!

Adults think language is an important means of conveying information; but two-year-olds understand an average of 150 words and talk in sentences of not more than three words. Adults restrain themselves, especially in public; but children expect their needs to be met at once and they show their emotions the moment they arise. Adults know how to behave in a theatre, do not move from their seats, and keep silent; children of that small age have never before been to a theatre, have a natural urge to move about, and their expressions of emotion are mostly accompanied by sounds.

Of course, there are many more differences between an audience of adults and of children, but the most important yet to be mentioned is the following: adults are used to having to understand the meaning of a theatre performance. Sometimes that even inhibits them from attending a performance that they might regard as too complicated. They would rather think that they themselves are too ignorant to understand than to question the notion that a performance has to be understood. Children, on the other hand, especially very small children, do not care to understand any meaning. Children care for the sensuous experience of a theatre performance and the emotions that this experience arouses. They *sense* the meaning of art.

We met those differences within the audience by avoiding pretense. Everything was real in our stage setting. All the objects were clearly displayed, all use of technical equipment was openly shown, and the two-dimensional photographic puppets never claimed to be alive. Through the soft use of lights, there was no spatial partition between the seats of the spectators and the stage. We had real people onstage. The two puppeteer/actors never acted as if they were somebody else. Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon were characters who evolved from the actors' personalities. We performed in real time. There was no difference between the 45-minute duration of the

performance and the time onstage. We had a 10-minute break, during which the actors and the children ate fruit together.

These aspects do not seem to describe a typical children's puppet show, but the small children absorbed the whole situation happily. They let themselves be carried away by the beauty of the stage, the rhythm of language and music, their sympathy for Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon, the excitement of every new incident happening onstage, and the humor and surprise. They simply integrated Mr. Moon's dance with a man-sized flower or a statement like "clouds are made of white" into their life experience. It was interesting that the children's example helped the adults to adjust to a new experience. The children enjoyed themselves. And since there was not just a simple story being acted onstage but instead a whole world of things to discover for the adults as well, they felt free to connect with their own enjoyment too.

Current trends

A small anecdote might illustrate the fact that experimental work in a conventional German children's theatre is not always so easy. In another production Otmar Wagner and I created, *Theo Tinkerer Invents the Hare*, the title character, Theo, builds a bizarre machine that can make popcorn for the entire audience during the performance. However, the artistic director of Dresden's state-funded children's theatre (Theater junge Generation) censored this idea, claiming that we had to teach children how to behave in a theatre, where popcorn eating certainly did not belong!

Nevertheless, *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather* has been performed approximately 100 times since its premiere in February 2007. It was part of the Theatre from the Beginning! project and is documented in *Theater von Anfang an!: Bildung, Kunst und frühe Kindheit (Theatre from the Beginning! Education, Art and Early Childhood)*, an anthology edited by Gabi dan Droste (2009). Although parallels between theatre for very young audiences and performance art have often been stated (Taube 2006: 6), *Mrs. Sun and Mr. Moon Make Weather* was, in fact, one of the first collaborations between a performance artist and a children's theatre in Germany and has broadened the understanding of theatre for very young audiences.

Berlin's Theater an der Parkaue, a municipal theatre for children and young people, is currently the greatest proponent for the development of experimental children's theatre and regularly collaborates with performance artists and theatre groups such as Showcase Beat Le Mot, a group of performers (graduates of the University of Giessen's theatre department) who have designed a groundbreaking series of productions for children. The artists of Showcase Beat Le Mot usually start off with well-known children's books or fairy tales, such as "Robber Hotzenplotz" or "The Brementown Musicians," using them freely as material for playful, surprising, and provocative live-art performances that are loved by children and adults alike. Theater an der Parkaue is also devoted to the development of crossover productions of dance and children's theatre.

I would like to conclude with some observations about these new forms of post-dramatic children's theatre. The performances certainly are all individually different, but they have a special quality in common: postdramatic children's theatre is

perceived in a nonintellectual way. There is no need to decode any meaning, there are no morals to be judged, and there are no conventions to comply with; therefore, adults are not more capable of understanding the performance than small children. There is just the nonhierarchical sensuous theatre experience, a common adventure for all spectators in the otherwise increasingly more fragmented society of today.

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