"It's not the object which is important, but the way it is lived by the spectator"
Helio Oiticica

The Emancipated Baby
by Ben Fletcher-Watson

Theatre and dance for the very young emerged in the late 1970s in response to perceptions of babies as excluded from culture (Speyer, 2004). Post-Marxist ideologies situated children as powerless within a commodified capitalist society, leading to the formulation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which explicitly grants the right to participate freely and fully in cultural life and the arts. This right acted as an inspiration to arts organisations around the world to create dance, opera, theatre and music for the youngest audiences, forming a distinct genre now defined by radical and avant-garde practices (Fletcher-Watson, 2013).

Babies and toddlers, along with their parents and carers, are thus welcomed into spaces which accommodate their needs, encourage their capabilities and stimulate their creativity without requiring an understanding of theatrical semiotics. In place of the pedagogic, instrumentalist ideologies which drove children's performing arts through the twentieth century, a belief in equality – of presence, of intelligence, of aesthetic reception, of creative impulse – marks out productions designed for infants. As Rancière has stated, "the dramaturge and the performer do not want to 'teach' anything. Indeed they are more than a little wary these days about using the stage as a way of teaching" (2007, p.277). Artists tend to propose an autotelic arena in which children deserve access to culture on exactly the same basis as adults - an aesthetic experience of the highest quality, l'art pour l'art (Fletcher-Watson, 2015). Productions exploit multisensory stimulation within a safe space, a rejection of linear dramaturgies, abolition of the 'fourth wall', participation and
exchange as core values: "the pleasures of heightened perception, stirred by an artwork’s appealing sensory qualities, are part of what makes it stand out from the ordinary flow of perception as a special aesthetic experience worthy of the name of art, an experience that so absorbs our attention that it also constitutes an entertaining distraction from the humdrum routine of life" (Shusterman, 2003, pp. 303–304).

Sensescapes joins a nascent movement of dance for babies in which choreography is enjoyed in close proximity to the audience, and is responsive to them at all times. Some works, such as the influential Oogly Boogly (England, 2003), De Rede Skoene (Norway, 2008) and This (Baby) Life (Australia, 2011), employ improvisatory modes, sometimes 'mirroring' children’s movement to challenge the artist’s status as elite performer; others, including How High The Sky (Australia, 2012), Prassel (Sweden, 2013) and Innocence (Scotland, 2013), trouble conceptions of contemporary dance as 'inappropriate' or 'difficult' by blending choreography and participatory moments.

Sensescapes builds on this by situating dance inside an installation. This space, like other immersive environments, "surrounds audience members, makes use of cleverly structured interiors and ingenious invitations for them to explore, addresses their bodily presence in the environment and its effect on sense making, and teases them with the suggestion of further depths just possibly within reach“ (White, 2012, p.233). Here, large-scale objects, such as a suspended woollen net and a fabric patchwork ‘organism’ with several tails, disrupt the theatrical convention of a fixed spectatorial gaze, emphasised by dancers who move among and around the audience. Aromas of lavender and mandarin fill the air. Music emanates from speakers hidden inside objects such as the ‘voice cocoon’, permitting a three-dimensional perception of the score as spectators move through the installation. The child is thus 'decentred' within the space, and activated as a perceiving, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching subject of experience. Claire Bishop has noted that such installations confront the visitor with the realisation that "there is no one 'right' way of looking at the world, nor any privileged place [as by gender, race or ideology] from which such judgements can be made" (2005, p.13). As in the work of Mary Kelly, multi-perspectivism becomes emancipatory, overturning hierarchies and hegemonies.

Jacques Rancière describes emancipation as "the process of verification of the equality of intelligence" (2007, p.275). For very young children, whose intelligence(s) are often called into question, artworks which revolve around participation, immersion and interaction can provide a space free of judgement, where any and all reactions are welcomed. Their proto-scientific investigations into the properties of objects – experimenting via hands, feet, mouths, noses, eyes and ears – are imbued with legitimacy within this non-judgmental zone. Thus performing arts for the very young frees its audience from the codes and signs which Pierre Bourdieu has claimed govern artistic engagement, where "a beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason" (1984, p.3). Indeed, psychologist Alison Gopnik differentiates between ‘spotlight’ and ‘lantern’ consciousness (2010), defined as the focused attention developed by adults as opposed to the messier, uninhibited simultaneity that characterises infant attention. Installations could be said to privilege lantern consciousness, both as an aesthetic where proposals are offered in place of externally imposed meaning, and as a social space which encourages mutual attention and participation. Phenomenologically, audience members, whether baby or adult, "do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live it
from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.178).

It must of course be recognised that "every artwork - even the most 'open-ended' - determines in advance the type of participation that the viewer may have in it" (Bishop, 2005, p.127). However, this may apply less strongly to audiences with knowledge of (and thus inhibitions due to) theatrical semiotics; babies react in many differing ways to performance, from withdrawing to the comfort of parents to engaging boldly to physically inhabiting actions or micronarratives in order to understand them. Max Herrmann has described this desire to participate as "secret reliving, in a shadowy replica of the actor's performance, experienced not so much visually as rather via bodily sensation, in a secret urge to perform the same movements" (1930, p.153). Think of the child spectator who rises from her seat in eagerness, leaning forward in kinaesthetic harmony, maybe even jumping into the air. In traditional dance performances, the caregiver pulls her back, telling her not to disrupt the performance. Rancière proposes a solution: "He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting... what must be pursued is a theatre without spectators, a theatre where spectators will no longer be spectators, where they will learn things instead of being captured by images and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers" (2007, p.272).

Towards this end, Sensescapes offers a shifting panoply of propositions, inviting interaction and observation in equal measure. Immediacy is heightened by the unpredictability both of the dancers' movements and the babies' physical responses. Indeed, "all forms of physical encounter between people stimulate interactions even if their shape is not always plainly evident... you cannot not react to each other" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.43). A dancer's encounter with their audience may take the form of an intimate moment of direct interaction or simply a glance, a 'checking-in' of mutuality, but in all cases, the reactions are equal, generating a collective experience. One notable collectivising element within the sensorium offered by Sensescapes is the stimulation of babies' sense of smell. Aromatherapy diffusers are placed around the performance arena to perfume the air with lavender and other calming odours. This remains an under-used mode of engagement for dance and theatre, despite powerful evidence for positive outcomes: lavender oil can "reduce stress and anxiety, improve engagement levels, and enhance sleep in very young infants and their mothers... Therefore, using lavender as a specific scent during a performance may have a positive effect on both mother and infant" (Drury and Fletcher-Watson, 2015, p.9). Like the artistic experience as a whole, sensory and kinaesthetic stimulation can be shared by adult and child concurrently.

Agnes Desfosses highlights this unique spectatorial encounter when she discusses the 'triangular audience' (2009); unlike the linear interactions between performer and (adult) spectator in conventional dance, attention is shared jointly and intimately between baby, parent and performer, each looking to the other for social reassurance or in delight. Installation spaces open up the triangular model further: babies watch babies, parents observe other parents, babies watch other

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1 "…heimlichen Nacherleben, in einer schattenhaften Nachbildung der schauspielerischen Leistung, in einer Aufnahme nicht sowohl durch den Gesichtssinn wie vielmehr durch das Körpergefühl, in einem geheimen Drang, die gleichen Bewegungen auszuführen."

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parents, parents look at other babies, and dancers observe the community in an interconnected network of attention.

The interrelational ecology which emerges from the placement of children and carers within a safe, immersive environment creates a community which itself reflects and embodies the performance aesthetic. As noted earlier, the aim of productions such as Sensescapes is to highlight the partiality of experience, rendering each child’s perception of performance as equally valid, equally legitimate. The audience becomes a collective of actors in their own story, emancipated from the fixed viewpoints and semiotic codes of conventional dance. "[B]y externalising their emotions and experiences, fantasy and real" in participatory play and performance (English, 2005, p.182), babies are freed to construct their own identities. Space, action, reaction and perception are reconfigured to encourage agency, and thus emancipation.

References


Fletcher-Watson, B., 2015. ‘More like a poem than a play’: towards a grounded dramaturgy of performing arts for Early Years. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.


