**When Acting Like Children Becomes Acting For Children**

**Introduction**

This paper contains reflections on two research projects documented by Rose Bruford College’s Theatre for Young Audiences Centre in 2011, its inaugural year. It is informed by my own experience as Chair of the centre and my role in developing the curricula for our new MA in Theatre for Young Audiences and the TYA[[1]](#footnote-1) modules recently added to our undergraduate Acting and Actor Musicianship programmes[[2]](#footnote-2). Full accounts of the projects can be found on the TYA Centre website; for the purposes of this paper, here is a brief outline of each of them:

1. **Acting Like Children**: a three-day event, which examined the notion of portraying children and young people in work made for young audiences. Led by Jonathan Lloyd, Artistic Director of [Polka Theatre](http://www.polkatheatre.com/) , Jude Merrill, Artistic Producer of Bristol based company [Travelling Light](http://www.travellinglighttheatre.org.uk/) and Kevin Dyer and Nina Hajiyianni of Ellesmere Port based theatre company [Action Transport Theatre](http://www.actiontransporttheatre.org/live/) . It took place at Rose Bruford College on 16th April, The Egg in Bath on 12th May and at Birmingham Rep on 21st June 2011. The events were attended by individuals and companies within the sector who wanted to explore and consolidate their practice and included contributions from leading directors, actors, theatre makers and writers working in the field.

2. **Acting For Children**: an ongoing research project led by the TYA Centre, which aims to identify the specific skills required by actors wishing to work in the TYA sector. The methodology employed involves documenting practical workshops by leading practitioners in the field. The event is disseminated through the TYA Centre, through the active engagement of participants and through the development of the curricula on our undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The first of these events, took place on 13th, 14th and 15th April 2011 and focussed on the work of [David Wood](http://www.davidwood.org.uk/), [Tall Stories](http://tallstories.org.uk) and [Oily Cart](http://www.oilycart.org.uk)

**Adult as Child**

In exploring how adult actors portray children and young people in TYA productions, we inevitably intersect the broader issue of acting for children: do young audiences demand particular skills or approaches to theatre making and performance; and if so, how should the process of making theatre and the training of theatre makers respond to this?

In the UK at present there is very little in the way of specialist training. Theatre practitioners working in the field have frequently fallen into this type of work, developing their practice as they go. Critical engagement with the sector is also patchy; with the exception of Lyn Gardner of The Guardian, very few British theatre critics regularly attend or write about anything, but the large-scale commercial work, for children and young people. Organisations such as ASSITEJ and TYA-UK[[3]](#footnote-3) have certainly helped to promote the notion of specialism, but again children’s theatre in the UK remains a polarised world, containing some of the most interesting and progressive work in the theatre sector and many pockets of bad practice.

One of the things that prompted the *Acting Like Children* event, was the very centrality of child characters in work made for young people and the bad practice often associated with their realisation. This was reflected by Action Transport’s Kevin Dyer during the opening session: “Why is it” he asked “that right at the very heart of our craft are bad performances and isn’t it time we sorted it out?”[[4]](#footnote-4) . There are of course, he acknowledged, examples of good work, but too often the portrayal of children and young people on stage is problematic. Sally Cookson[[5]](#footnote-5) cites an example of things that typically go wrong, when, as a recent acting graduate, she played a 12 year old in a professional theatre piece. Keen to manage a convincing transformation she worked hard to realise the age of the character, only to receive this devastating review from Nicholas de Jongh:

‘Sally Cookson hops around the stage like a bunny rabbit and has surely been given elocution lessons from Bonny Langford’ [[6]](#footnote-6)



**Bonny Langford** as the sickeningly precocious Violet Elizabeth Bott in the 1976 television adaptation of Richmal Crompton’s *Just William* stories for London Weekend Television

This over reliance on outer characteristics was frequently cited during the event, as a defining quality of bad work, perhaps best summed up in this extract from Kevin Dyer and Nina Hajiyianni’s response, which included a list of things best avoided by the actor:

‘Don’t fidget and do externalities. Don’t do clichés and stereotypes like twizzling one leg or putting sellotape on your glasses or sucking your thumb or twisting your hair round your finger – unless you need to do comic stereotype… some degree of physicality – a physical ‘freedom’ - is accepted and often welcomed by audiences. Especially with younger children, their tics and physical patterning can be very extreme. If these are imitated they can be ridiculous. Maybe this is because the adult actor is twice or three times as large as the original, so the gesturing can seem over-large and absurd. We know that some of the physicality of children is extreme but to just copy it and ‘play it back’ is not helpful.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

De Jongh’s review and indeed this advice to the actor, points to another problem associated with the playing of children by adults, that relates to adult perceptions of childhood. The freedom, physical and otherwise, displayed by children is often something that as adults we look back on with a degree of whimsy; it is something we may feel we have lost or indeed something from which we wish to escape, either way there is the danger that we romanticise or seek to protect and prolong the childhood of our audience, wittingly or otherwise. All the Acting Like Children sessions included an exercise which focused on the adult’s memory of childhood: we were asked to describe ourselves as children, to play with children’s toys, to look at pictures.

In this clip we see the group at the Polka session talking about photographs from their own childhoods. This act of memory, the juxtapositioning of adult and child, had a tangible effect on the group. The camera was at an unsympathetic angle, but I hope it is possible to get a sense of the atmosphere and feeling generated by the exercise:

[Polka: Child Exercise](http://vimeo.com/36768821)

Tales of Father Christmas and ill-fitting earmuffs generate audible ‘aahhs’ from the group. There was a sense of nostalgia; this dual presence of adult and child was potent. This must, almost certainly, be different for a child. A five year old, for example, may have very little sense of themselves as ‘child’. They are simply themselves. When watching an adult playing a child, they may well be happy to engage in the ‘suspension of disbelief’; an act not a million miles away from the sort of transformation they engage in and observe during fantasy play. For them, however, as with an adult audience the actor is still always present. As Bert O.States reminds us:

‘The fist thing to consider when looking at a piece of theatre is that we see both the actor and the character’

For the adult audience and indeed for the older child or young person, this act of complicite is part of the contract of the theatre event itself. We take our seat in the auditorium and we live through the play together. Actors signify and live out characters; set and costume provide codified and sensual context. To that extent we are in it together. This idea is complicated in TYA, however, as performance contexts can vary so dramatically. Work for the very young, for example, which may or may not take place in a theatre, cannot rely on the same notional contract. Aesthetic distance, which is widely regarded to be something that develops between the ages of 3 and 6, cannot be guaranteed. For the very young audience the liveness of the theatre event is a much more immediate and visceral experience. It is not just happening in front of them, but to them. In this sense the theatre event itself is a participatory experience.

The relationship between adulthood and childhood is certainly at the heart of this enquiry. Can adult theatre makers adequately reflect the concerns or perspectives of a child audience, indeed is this even something we should be attempting? There is plenty of evidence that suggests that in the UK at least we have a poor record of engaging in the experience of the child. Recent UNICEF reports point out that children in the UK fair worst, of all twenty-one industrial nations, when it comes to well-being, a fact that they link to the affect of a consumerist adult-focused culture. It would seem important, at least within the UK, for our theatre to represent and reflect what David Harradine describes as an element of our society, that along with the elderly, is ‘culturally invisible’[[8]](#footnote-8). This is certainly the intention of Tony Graham. For him the very definition of TYA is related to its ability to reflect the child’s perspective.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The endeavor for the adult maker, then is complicated; the involvement of children in the development process is a common feature of much of the most highly regarded work in the sector and yet this process of involvement is clearly mitigated by the adult maker; similarly children or young people are often performers in this type of work, but again this is commonly shaped or interpreted by adult writers, directors, funders or facilitators. On the other hand, we cannot simply hand over the theatre making process to children and young people. As Shifra Schonmann reminds us, children can be engaged by even the most kitsch of aesthetics. The TYA sector has frequently defined itself in relation to the so- called adult theatre, often in reaction to assumptions about being second best. For the sake of quality, therefore, it is necessary for adult taste and skill to be central to the process of making quality work for children and young people. In this sense adult and child are inextricably linked by the act of making work for young audiences. The process of an adult actor playing a child, therefore, perhaps offers us a useful starting point to begin an exploration of this complex relationship.

**Blue Remembered Hills**

*Into my heart an air that kills*

*From yon far country blows:*

*What are those blue remembered hills,*

*What spires, what farms are those?*

*That is the land of lost content,*

*I see it shining plain,*

*The happy highways where I went*

*And cannot come again.*

from *A Shropshire Lad*

By A.E.Housman

As the Shropshire Lad longs for ‘lost content’, so he actively reconstructs the landscape of childhood. This idea is at the centre of Dennis Potter’s television play inspired by the poem. *Blue Remembered Hills[[10]](#footnote-10)* is relevant not only as an illustration of how childhood as a construct is shaped by culture, society and our own perceptions of past and present; but also as an example of adult actors portraying children.

In the following clip from the opening scene, we see Colin Welland as Willie. The shot reflects the act of recall: a distant figure, that we recognise as a child, runs towards the camera, playing with a large stick, only as he gets closer do we see him as both adult and child.

[**Blue Remembered Hills: opening sequence**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQzbS7oG43Y)

As the scene progresses he meets Peter, played by Michael Elphick. Both actors use physicality to signal their childness. Welland engages in child-like play, waves sticks, wipes his mouth. Elphick also: his gait slightly uncontrolled and off balance, his movements playful and at times erratic. Both of them lighten their vocal tone and are dressed as children of the 1940s, shorts and dirty knees to boot. In this sense they suggest child; but more than this: they suggest adult as child. The actors fully invest in the drives and actions of the characters. Inner life is engaged and emotionally connected, but there is a gestus[[11]](#footnote-11) at work here. We are not meant to forget that these actors are adults, indeed the dramaturgy of the piece relies on the dialogue between actor and character. In this sense this is very much a piece for adults. Peter Bradshaw, writing about the 2008 rescreening perhaps encapsulates this most poignantly:

‘When an adult truly remembers what it was like to be a child, with an adult’s perspective, there is something forbidden and almost transgressive about it. That is what, I think, Potter is getting at when he casts adults as children. It was not a stunt: it was a representation of the act of memory’[[12]](#footnote-12)

This is not the intention when we present child characters for young audiences. Here we wish to engage and resonate. We seek to reflect, represent and honour their perspective.

In this scene from *Lenny the Boy Who Wanted to be a Train[[13]](#footnote-13)* we again see an adult actor (Craig Edwards) playing a child. Here, however, the transformation is almost entirely internalised. The psycological actions, motivation and text belong to the child, but the adult physicality remains; although the intention is that it is forgotten. Paradoxically there is no attempt to disguise the adult, although in the staged version there were some nods in that direction: a satchel and pullover.

[Craig Edwards in Lenny](http://vimeo.com/36900304)

To a certain extent the work of transformation is done by the play. There is the presence of a narrator, the voice of an adult Lenny perhaps, that provides context. There is the visual signal provided by the struggle to mount the table; so clearly the action of someone small in stature. Nonetheless there is a sense of respect for the character as child. The performance somehow, honours the importance of the child perspective, where Potter points out its childishness.

That is not to say that Potter’s children are not complex or to be taken seriously. Far from it; part of the power of *Blue Remembered Hills* is its shocking portrayal of cruelty and pain; hinted at in our clip, when Willie is held down by Peter, who then spits in his face. Welland’s character cries. The camera lingers. Somehow the juxtaposition of adult and child asks us to think again about this act of petty bullying. We may dismiss the readiness of children to cry, particularly if they are boys, but here we are reminded that the tears are nonetheless real and the event no less traumatic.

In contrast it can be difficult to represent negative elements of child behaviour in TYA work. A badly behaved teenage character, may be a stereotype informed by an adult perspective, influenced by the UKs obsession with demonising adolescence; it may, however, simply be a badly behaved teenage character.

David Harradine in his keynote speech for the Polka section of Acting Like Children, talked about the notion of identification, which he linked to the propensity of child characters in work for young audiences:

‘As adult theatre goers, we also choose to watch things which show us radically different ways of living and being, theatre is also valuable because it allows us to access experiences and identities that are profoundly different from our own.  At the risk of being provocative, I wonder then why it is that so much theatre for children focuses on children:  on child characters. ‘

If we accept that TYA is defined by its reflection of the child perspective, then it would follow that much of the work contains child characters; as Jude Merrill commented: ‘we do not find it odd that adult theatre contains predominantly adult characters’[[14]](#footnote-14). Why then do we so rarely see children performing these roles? One answer is of course because of practical constraints, relating to employment law and simple technical acumen. Children playing children, also comes with a different set of aesthetic baggage, which perhaps reveals more about the relationship between adult and child.

During the Polka element of Acting Like Children Johnathan Lloyd talked about the experience of watching Suzanne Osten’s production of her play *The Girl, the Mother and the Rubbish[[15]](#footnote-15)*, during which a real 8 year old is substituted for the adult actor playing Ti, the girl at the centre of the story. It is at a point in the narrative when an intervention from a social worker has resulted in her being removed from her mother’s care. The audience were stilled by this sudden inclusion of a real child, he recalls; ‘It was truly shocking’. For him the audience were, at that moment, faced with the reality of this experience from a child’s perspective. For him the ‘safety’ offered by adults playing children, is often a ‘useful barrier’ that may at times facilitates the portrayal of themes that may otherwise be problematic.

He then went on to discuss *Whose Afraid of the Bogeyman[[16]](#footnote-16)* by Mike Kenny. Here school children, under the direction of their teachers, played adults confronted by the horror of a missing child. Again the distance offered by this convention enables the audience to see the character’s actions from a new perspective:

[Jonathon Lloyd](http://vimeo.com/36769004)

It is often the case, however, that even apparently adult characters in TYA work, contain something of the child perspective. In this clip of Catherine Wheel’s[[17]](#footnote-17) current production *White*, for example, we see two characters undertaking what we assume to be adult tasks; they have jobs, one is clearly in charge of the other and to that extent there is a sense of hierarchy, one is also visibly older than the other. Both, however, one could argue are child-like, the younger, played by Andy Manley, particularly so.

[*White*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MSvhXmOSOo)

The performances would seem to conform to the rubric argued in the Acting Like Children response paper. There is no overt physical signaling, although the characters are playful. Psychological actions are played with integrity and conviction. The motivations might be child-like, but they are pursued with seriousness. It is not in our clip, but later in the show Andy’s character thinks that one of the eggs in his care is dead. The stakes for his character are high and he plays this with a delicate human truth, no different in approach to that of actors in an adult play. He is both honoring and eliciting the audience’s attachment to these objects, using techniques common to psychological realist work for adults. There is still, however, for the adult audience members a form of gestus at play here. These adult actor/characters are caring about eggs in an imagined, if allegorical, world. They care in the way that our children might care about these eggs; perhaps in the way we once cared about such things when we were children. The message, all be it unfairly trite when expressed in this context, is clear: would prejudice exist if we remained as open and consciously caring as children can be? For the adult audience, therefore, the presence of adult actor, as child is a central part of its power. In a different way, the same may also be true for the very young in the audience. The world they are invited to enter is both adult-like and child-like. The characters perform adult tasks in a child-like context. They care about things in the way that children might and experience as adults the same moral and emotional dilemmas that children do. The fact that they are adults representing children is in this sense important. The adult actor is opening up a dialogue between the adult world and the child’s perception of that world. And to a certain extent between adult and child. Certainly watching this show with your own children, as I have done, creates a tangible bond, made possible by our joint meeting in this place that contains both adult and child, but has none of the hierarchical dimensions that inform that relationship in the real world.

*White* reminds us that TYA, particularly for the younger audience, is an experience shared with adults. Be they parents, teachers, carers or extended family, the work, whilst focused on the young audience member, is also an adult creation, shared with other adults. This poses a number of well documented dilemmas relating to the adult as gate-keeper: it is they who chose the play; who pay for the tickets; the net result being that the adult perspective governs areas of the artistic endeavor, particularly with regard to the perceived suitability of material. The representation of adult characters in TYA must also, therefore, be subject to the duality explored in our examples relating to child characters.

As part of my work with undergraduates at Rose Bruford College, I have been responsible for creating shows that tour to local schools. In a recent production, *Story Drum[[18]](#footnote-18)* I was confronted with, what I imagine can be a common problem. The student playing Dora, the apprentice storyteller, had, developed during the rehearsal process, a warm, rather animated character, who was the main conduit between the audience and the world of the play. Rehearsals had included development sessions in schools and the piece, in common with a lot of this type of work, had elements of participation and direct address. The audience was predominantly school children, aged 5 to 7, but there were, of course, teachers present at every performance. As the children filed into the hall, Dora would welcome them. Often the first people to come in would be the teachers. Only in this meeting with another adult could I see just how grotesque the character had become. In engaging with the teacher Dora seemed patronising, over enthusiastic, anodyne and two-dimensional. The children, by contrast, seemed to find her engaging, sympathetic and inspiring. I was reminded of Swedish company, Theater Pero’s[[19]](#footnote-19) production of *Aston’s Stones*, which I saw at the ASSITEJ congress in Copenhagen.



Aston’s Father, Aston and his mother, from Teater Pero’s production ***Aston’s Stones***

Here a cast of three mature adult performers played both Aston, a young boy with a fondness for collecting stones, and his two parents. As the audience entered the space, we were met by Baura L.Magnusdottir, in costume, as Aston’s mother. Like Dora she was warm and welcoming, but there was an adult complexity still at play, a sense of both actor and character. She greeted child and adult alike, just as one might be greeted by an older mother at a birthday party. This may seem an unfair comparison to make: Magnusdottir is, after all, a skilled and experienced actor, working under a highly regarded and experienced director; the actress playing Dora was still in training and working within the context of a student production. For me, however, it illustrated a broader issue to do with the adult relationship to children and young people. Too often the desire to protect, to nuture and to engage particularly a younger child (the 5 – 9 year old audience), translates into an overemphasis of the lighter, comedic or fun; benign yet banal. In attempting to reflect the child perspective, we had in fact, tapped into another adult frame of perception.

Talking about his production of *Brilliant[[20]](#footnote-20)* David Harradine made the following observation about the adult perception of child characters:

‘In the devising of *Brilliant*, as with all our work, we brought a load of stuff together and simply played.  We played with light, we played with music, we played with elements of design and with fragments of narrative, we played with space, we played with movement.

Laura Cubitt, the performer who created *Brilliant* with us, is a genius at play.  Fearless, foolish, expressive, sensitive, and above all playful – all in all the perfect performer - Laura is a tall woman in her early thirties.  Throughout the devising process, we never, once, talked about her playing a child.  I spoke to Laura as an adult, and she played and improvised as an adult.  The emotions she expressed were an adult’s, the body she moves is clearly an adult’s.  So we were surprised when we started to read reviews of the show:

‘*Brilliant* follows a child preparing for bed and sinking into the dark, mysterious world of night and the imagination.   "I can see the universe and the universe can see me," says Laura Cubitt's child in a show that becomes a series of mirrored reflections bouncing back off each other.’  Lyn Gardner’s review for The Guardian

‘As a young girl settles down for the night, the curtains open behind her into her imagination’

Nuala Calvi’s review for The Stage .

‘The main character…captures a child's spirit with delicacy and delight.’

 Online review

This final quote, I think, starts to move us towards the heart of things: she “captures a child’s spirit”.  This is not about acting like a child; nor about becoming a child, as though through some regressive kind of method acting:  the heart of things is something to do with being like a child.  Not acting childish, but being childlike; not pretending to be a child, but remaining an adult who discovers a child’s spirit of openness and play.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

[*Brilliant*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5PI5vSPfN0)

For Harradine, it is openness and a sense of play that are the defining child characteristics. It both signifies child for the adult and, as Harradine went on to say, enables children in the audience to recognise the character as one of their own. Play, as a theme, was also reflected in the response paper, which detailed a number of the techniques used by directors and actors when working on child characters:

‘Play as children – using any object – over extended periods (the leCoq training method)

Use physical play to be children from birth to teenage years - pay special attention to the use of the spine

Play with the development of language – both sounds and words – from birth to adulthood’[[22]](#footnote-22)

As Harradine intimates play is both a child behavior and a common tool used in actor training and rehearsal by adult theatre makers. Let us then look at the role of play in our discussion.

**Playtime**

Vivian Gussin Paley’s work and writings about child’s play have had an enormous impact on theatre makers. Many of the methods she has developed for working with pre-school children have a theatre-making dimension. For her and many others, fantasy play is a crucial element of child development. In *A Child’s Work: the importance of fantasy play,* she writes about the need to preserve play as part of the early school experience:

‘It is in the development of their themes and characters and plots that children explain their thinking and enable us to wonder who we might become as their teachers. If fantasy play provides the nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative and social connectivity in young children, then it is surely the staging area for our common enterprise: an early school experience that best represents the natural development of young children*.’[[23]](#footnote-23)*

For Paley, close and objective scrutiny of young children at play offers a means of understanding, whilst the act of play itself is developmental for the child. Play as part of the rehearsal process or as a training methodology has similar qualities. Through play and playfulness actors often find release, developing connections that might otherwise have eluded them. Their directors and teachers in turn may observe this process, learning new things about both performer and the characters or scenarios they are exploring. As Harradine suggests when we present characters at play, children may well recognise and empathise with their behavior. In this sense it is a signifier of childness; it is, after all, a child-like quality. Does it, however, enable a reflection of the child perspective?

Whilst Paley might remind us of the serious intent behind children’s play, it is the lightness and free-flowing enjoyment that is both its predominant characteristic and its mode of operation as a tool for release in the rehearsal room. Sally Cookson’s workshop, part of the Travelling Light contribution to Acting Like Children, was an example of this in action. Her stated ambition was to promote the following qualities, which she regards as necessary when working on TYA projects:

1. Openness – both to other actors and to audience
2. Playfulness – a sense of joy and pleasure
3. Complicite – togetherness created through play

In order to achieve these qualities she asked participants to engage in a playful exercise. Her frequent instruction to the group was to find joy in the work. As a result the group found a flow and freedom that was clearly helpful in realising her aims.

Jo Bellolli[[24]](#footnote-24) reminds us, on the other hand, that playfulness is only one aspect of child behavior:

‘There’s always room for a lightness of touch and we want that variety of experience for the child audience, as we seek it for adults. But I do think that children generally are very serious. They can be really funny and have a good sense of humor, but there is generally a sense of seriousness. There’s a serious attention paid to doing things right and following the law or stepping away from those rules. It’s a serious business.’

Indeed there is a growing body of research documenting a new and worrying social trend in our young: the demise of play[[25]](#footnote-25); brought about by a range of factors including the growth in popularity of computer gaming and a reduction in opportunities for play (the result of longer working hours for parents, meaning children are often in child care situations where play is not encouraged, and the reluctance of parents to allow children to play freely in open spaces). For future child audiences, it would seem, watching adult actors at play may be their only opportunity to engage in the activity, all be it vicariously.

Adult play is different from child play. Much like Potter’s *Blue Remembered Hills* it is an act of memory. Adults engage in child-like play in order to free themselves from the constraints of adult patterns of behavior and thought. As a means of representing the child perspective it is as susceptible to projection, as our own memories of being children. That is not to say that play cannot be useful in the development of work for children. As Paley suggests, it is often through engaging with and observing children playing that we learn about how that child experiences and processes the world around them. But we must listen. Not just to the child, but to ourselves. To our own adult desires to re-frame, protect, prolong or project childhood onto our children.

**In conclusion**

It would seem, therefore, that a crucial element of any TYA endeavor is to find a means of facilitating and honoring the child perspective. This certainly poses a problem for those of us involved in training actors. The performance skills required by this sector are multifarious, are we also to add the roles of facilitator, teacher or child psychiatrist to the list of requirements? It is certainly true that a number of very successful practitioners in the field have been or have become very good teachers and facilitators. But is this a necessary skill?

Tim Webb’s[[26]](#footnote-26) contribution to our Acting For Children event offers us a reminder of just how appropriate the artist is for this task:

[Oily Cart clip](http://vimeo.com/36764159)

In order to engage his audience, he has to engaged with them. As with all theatre processes Oily Cart’s creative journey is one of assimilation. In adult theatre this process may be limited to playwright or text, actor, director, designer and the other members of the making team, but in TYA it extends to an active engagement with the audience, in the case of Oily Cart both in the development and performance of their work. A well-trained artist should be equipped to synthesise a range of stimuli into a single event or artifact. To that extent the child perspective is simply another stimulus to be considered. Angela Michaels, Associate Director of London’s Half Moon Theatre, talking about *Exchange For Change*[[27]](#footnote-27), says:

‘As artist all you can do is bring yourself to the process’[[28]](#footnote-28)

This may seem an unsatisfactory conclusion, but for better or worse, it is perhaps the best we can and should hope for. Whether acting like, with or for children we need to be mindful of how we include and reflect their perspective, for it is still the adult theatre maker who is at the centre of the endeavor. A theatre for children, it seems, is also an adult theatre. But the artistic and cultural flow has to be upstream. If we are to counter the torrential downpour of predominantly adult centred cultural output, that is turning our children into nothing more than consumers, then we have to continue to engage in practices that enable their world-view to be heard and shared. We need a children’s theatre, for it is there that we, adult and child alike, can meet each other and begin a dialogue about how we shape this world we share.

1. TYA – is the recognised acronym for Theatre for Young Audiences and as such will be the term used in the rest of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2011 a re-writing of the Acting and Actor Musicianship BA (hons) Programmes at Rose Bruford College was undertaken, led by Iain Reekie (Programme Director for Acting) and Jeremy Harrison (Programme Director for Actor Musicianship). Both programmes now include a module in TYA in their second years, as well as TYA elements to the third year New Writing Module. The programmes are both NCDT accredited actor training courses, following a conservatoire model of intensive vocational, practice-based learning. This move will make them the only NCDT acting courses that include a module dedicated to this area of work. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [TYA-UK](http://www.tya-uk.org/) is the British branch of ASSITEJ, an international umbrella organization representing and advocating best practice in theatre for children and young people.; TYA-UK is run by a team of volunteers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kevin Dyer introducing the first of the Acting Like Children events led by London’s Polka Theatre. Rose Bruford College, 16th April 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bristol based director Sally Cookson is one of the UKs leading directors of work for children. Her work is widely regarded as being an exemplar of good practice. She frequently directs shows for *Travelling Light*, but is more widely known for her production of *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*, an adaptation of the popular children’s book by Michael Rosen [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sally Cookson talking at Acting like Children, The Egg, Bath , 12th May 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The full text of this response to the Acting Like Children event is available from the Rose Bruford College TYA Centre [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Harradine keynote speech at the Polka element of Acting Like Children , Rose Bruford College, 16th April 2011. A full text of the speech is available at [Future Playground](http://thefutureplayground.com.) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tony Graham addressing Rose Bruford MA TYA students at The Unicorn Theatre on 11th October 2010, spoke of the impact of Suzanne Osten’s production of *Medea’s Children* for Ungla Clara. The play deals with the impact of Jason and Medea’s separation on their children. The themes explored are complex and the play remains one that challenges what is possible or appropriate for a TYA production. For Tony it helped to informed a definition of TYA itself; the play reflected and focused on the child’s perspective, and it is this focus which is what defines the form for Graham. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Blue Remembered Hills* , directed by Brian Gibson and starring Colin Welland, Michael Elphick and Helen Mirren, was first screened by the BBC in 1979. It was shown again on 5th June 2008 as part of BBC 4’s Modern Childhood season [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘gestus’ is a term coined by Brecht. It refers to an approach to acting that enables the audience to see the character as construct. It was part of his broader aim to encourage the audience to distance themselves, in order to facilitate active consideration of the forces at work on the character, which he designed to progress a Marxist framing of the human condition [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Bradshaw post for The Guardian, 5th June 2008. The full blog can be read [here](http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/tvandradioblog/2008/jun/05/tvblogbypeterbradshaw) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Lenny: the boy who wanted to be a train* was a 2007 Travelling Light production translated by Paul Harman from the play by Francis Monty, for ages 10 – 18. It went on to tour to The Unicorn in October 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jude Merrill is Artistic Producer of Bristol based children’s theatre company Travelling Light and is quoted here from her response to David Harridine’s address at Acting Like Children, Rose Bruford College 16th April 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *The Girl, the Mother and the Rubbish* is a play for ‘everyone aged 7+’ by renowned Swedish theatre practitioner and academic Professor Suzanne Osten. The play was produced by her company Unga Clara and seen in the UK at The Unicorn Theatre, London in October 2006 as part of Small Feet Go Far, a cultural event for children featuring work from Sweden. As with much of Osten’s work it challenges what is suitable content for children, telling the story of Ti, an 8 year old, trapped in a world dominated by rubbish and her mother, who is tormented by mental illness, characterised as demons Messrs Polter and Geist. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Whose Afraid of the Bogeyman* was written by Mike Kenny in 2007 as part of the Playhouse project, which is a collaboration between Polka Theatre, Dundee Repertory Theatre, Plymouth Theatre Royal and York Theatre Royal. The project encourages children and teachers to engage in theatre, through the generation of new work by an established writer. The play concerns a mother who begins to suspect a male neighbour, when her daughter is late returning from school. It was performed by Ernesettle Community Primary School, Plymouth on 11th July 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Scottish children’s theatre company [Catherine Wheels](http://www.catherinewheels.co.uk/) were the only representatives from the UK performing (*White)* at the 2011 ASSITEJ Congress in Copenhagen. Their work tours internationally. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Story Drum* is production for 5 – 7 year olds, created as part of a collaboration between Bexley Council, Rose Bruford College and [Theatre Jemilda](http://www.theatrejemilda.co.uk) a graduate company set up to tour work developed on the under-graduate programmes. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [Teater Pero](http://www.pero.se/index.php/english)’s production of *Aston’s Stones* was performed as part of the Scandinavian theatre strand of ASSI|TEJ Congress 2011, Copenhagen. The production is also part fof the programme of the [Imaginate Festival](http://www.imaginate.org.uk/FESTIVAL/) 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Brilliant* was part of a series of three pieces made by Harradine’s company [Fevered Sleep](http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk/) which focussed on the daily rituals of young children’s lives. *And The Rain Falls Down,* looked at bath time, *Feast Your Eyes* on mealtime and *Brilliant* on bed time and sleep. An extract from the show was shared at the Acting Like Children event and can be seen [by following this link](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5PI5vSPfN0) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See note 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Action Transport’s Kevin Dyer and Nina Hajiyianni’s article summarising discussions held at the Acting Like Children event: see note 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *A Child’s Work: the importance of fantasy play,*  Paley V. G. University of Chicago Press, 2004 p.8 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jo Bellolli is a leading expert in Early Years theatre, she has written extensively on the subject and is

    Early Years advisor for Polka Theatre, she is quoted here from her contribution to the Polka section of Acting Like Children, Rose Bruford College, 16th April 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Joan Almon *The Vital Role of Play in Early Childhood Education,* Hiroshima Ogawa *What is child care through play in a modern context? ,*  [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Tim Webb is founder member, artistic director and writer for Oily Cart, a children’s theatre company that specialise in work for the very young and those with complex learning difficulties [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Exchange For Change* was a three year Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded project run by Chris Elwell and his team at London’s Half Moon Theatre. Its aim was to introduce emerging and established artists to making work for young audiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Exchange For Change*: 2009 Half Moon Theatre – the event was documented and a DVD is available from the theatre or to view at the TYA Centre, Rose Bruford College [↑](#footnote-ref-28)