

Acting up is child's play

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In *Before Your Very Eyes*, seven 12-year-olds live out their lives on stage.

POLYGLOT Theatre's latest production, *How High the Sky*, is a show for Melbourne's youngest art critics: babies. It involves 12 youngsters less than 12 months old, accompanied by a parent, sitting in a theatre and, at a certain juncture, being left on their own to do as they please.

Artistic director Sue Giles says: "We stuff [our children] so full of learning, but [for a few minutes] it's our turn to stand back and think: what can I learn from you?"

It's a moment, she says, that never ceases to fill adults, who observe their children from behind a glass screen, with amazement. "You get this community of babies who create an atmosphere that's so alien [even though] it's where we've all come from. And you think, 'My god, we have this from the very start. We are these individuals who make choices and have very individual responses.' We forget that."

A show for babies, *How High the Sky*.



The project has been challenging, not least because many doubted it could work. "One mother said to me, 'Why would you make a theatre show for babies when they're just as interested in two flies crawling up a wall?'" Giles says. "They think babies aren't going to get [theatre] so what's the point of making it?" Still, she realised the mother was right. "It's true. Take a baby to the zoo and they're just as interested in looking at wild animals as they are a fence. A stick is as interesting as a giraffe. It's quite Buddhist to accept the world with such interest and joy no matter what you're looking at."

Giles saw this as further impetus to make the show.

"How do you devise work for an audience who can't talk and whose conceptual understanding of things is very different?" she says. "We didn't want to [encourage] an experience where an adult is turning a child's head to make them look at something [they consider important]. Let a child look at what they fancy even if that's the floor. Why not let a baby dictate their own speed for an hour?"

Devising the show delivered its creators to seminal questions about the role of an artist and of theatre. "All artists strive to get to that natural point where they create [work] without fear of judgment or self-censorship," Giles says. A baby is in that state without having to try.

Giles wondered: Is it possible to create a work that allows adults to see the world as a baby does?

The answer to that question emerged in expected ways. "The play is full of helium balloons, so the parents' first question was: 'Won't the babies be scared of balloons popping?' Well, no, they're not. Babies sit perfectly calmly when a massive helium balloon goes off. They don't even flinch." It was a lesson in how much we learn from those around us, and from such a young age. "The babies have such a secure, confident, mature point of view. It's the adults who shriek."

The production grew out of long-term workshops the company held with mothers, their babies and pregnant women across the state, each delving into the women's expectations of, and interactions with, their offspring.

"Human beings are pattern makers, but we start that later than we think," Giles says. "[We're] born with openness, an attraction to colour, shape, shift, intensity and drama. There's no need to [connect things]."

Slipping into their babies' head spaces, *How High the Sky* asks its adult participants to let go and stop seeing the world as something that has to be made sense of. It's an experiential journey that imagines the world as a puzzle that doesn't have to make sense.

Also at this year's festival is Arena Theatre Company's *House of Dreaming*, which invites children and adults to don hats, remove their shoes and explore an installation modelled on a suburban house. Each room features robotics, performers, projections and motion-sensitive detectors; children are encouraged to pick up objects that in turn activate lights, music, even magical flowers that bloom and change colour. Artistic director Chris Kohn likens the experience to a waking dream.

"A lot of interactive technology is tied to theme parks and science-based teaching tools, but we wanted to start with a concept that was tactile and interactive but not about learning," he says.

Kohn also had Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* in mind. "[It's] the idea that the unconscious mind is shaped like the architecture of a house. As a young child we experience corners and doors and drawers, warm spaces and cold spaces, and they shape our understanding from the world."

Audiences spend three minutes in each room and hear the tale of its previous residents. Each space, with its askew corners, doorways and lively ornaments, disorients in novel and magical ways.

"We'd never made an installation work for kids and families," Kohn says, "so it was a chance to think of theatre, music and engagement in entirely new ways."

The company carried out a residency program at Diggers Rest Primary School in 2010 during which they presented the children with interactive technology, watched how they responded and carried out various exercises that would help them express their ideas, hopes and dreams. "The idea [with every technology] was that they had to be intuitive; we wanted to see how quickly the children picked them up and used them."

The work has been four years in the making and employs Bluetooth motion sensors to turn lights on or set kinetic objects such as fans or record players

in motion. But the gadgetry doesn't come at the expense of an engrossing story, Kohn says. "The technology is just there to service the idea." *Before Your Very Eyes* gives the idea of children in theatre a unique spin; rather than adults entertaining children, or children entertaining each other, the show asks children to create a provocative work for adults. A collaboration between Belgian company Campo and German-British group Gob Squad, the production involves seven 12-year-olds living out their lives on stage: from childhood to adolescence, adulthood to old age. It interrogates the lessons we teach children and the vast chasm between what adults say and do. The children perform inside a room constructed from one-way mirrors. It's a tiny, self-contained universe in which the actors confront video footage of themselves responding to questions they were asked four years earlier. The project, which began in 2008, involved the children talking about their lives, what was important to them, how they saw adults and their parents.

"We collected anecdotes and stories that revealed how they thought about (life). They talked about things they collected, their dreams," Campo's Kristof Blom says. The cast were then eight.

"[Making the work] felt quite risky. I mean, when you're eight years old you can be devoted and interested but who knows what will happen when you are 12. They must miss a lot of school and travel to tour the work and you must build a good relationship with the parents to do this."

The confronting aspect for the children is looking back on their eight-year-old selves and realising how much, and how quickly, they've changed. The confronting aspect for adults is how piercing and perceptive a child's view of their actions can be.

"It's amazing [how from a young age] children start to form very strong views about adult life," Blom says. "Adults can find it very confronting to watch children trying to make sense of adult actions. Adult behaviour can look very ridiculous when it's imitated by a child."