

Thinking Theatre

Enhancing Children's Theatrical Experiences Through Philosophical Enquiry

Matthew Reason

Abstract

A marker of quality in a cultural experience is its enduring resonance as it engages its audience intellectually, imaginatively or emotionally. This is certainly the case with theatre that is made for adults and we should have the same ambition in theatre made for children. It is worth acknowledging, however, that children might need to be actively invited to take their engagement with a theatre performance further and provided with the time, skills and structures through which to do so. This paper presents the findings of a piece of research commissioned to explore the potential of using Philosophy Enquiry for Children (P4C) as the structure through which to deepen and enhance children's engagement with theatre. In doing so it explores what happens when theatre is used as the stimulus material for a philosophical enquiry, providing insights into both the nature of the theatrical experience and the nature of P4C.

Key Words

Theatre; Philosophy; Children

Short Author Biog

Dr Matthew Reason is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Head of Programme for MA Studies in Creative Practices at York St John University, UK. His work explores themes relating to performance documentation, audience research and cultural policy, with particular interest in theatre for children and young people. In 2006 he published a book, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance* (Palgrave). Email: m.reason@yorks.ac.uk



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Introduction

A piece of children's theatre lasts, typically, no more than 60 minutes. After that it is over. Those sixty minutes can be viewed as a self-contained entity, separate from the rest of the child's life and from both their educational and imaginative activity. This is perhaps the position that children's theatre has for many schools, providing entertainment that is bused into halls for special occasions or one-off treats. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. If an audience is entertained for 60 minutes, if the children experience pleasure, then that is fabulous.

However, for many of those involved in producing theatre for young people this would be to neglect the richness and playfulness of the responses that can emerge when the children *do* take the narratives or characters or techniques or emotions that they discover in a theatrical performance forward for themselves. It would also be to neglect how such increased engagement marks a deepening and extending of the children's knowledge and ownership (creative, imaginative and technical) of the performance.

One organisation that very much takes this perspective is Imagine, an arts agency that promotes and develops the performing arts for children and young people in Scotland. Motivated by this objective Imagine not only programme high quality performing arts activity for children and young people, such as the annual international festival for theatre for children and young people in Edinburgh, but also run professional development opportunities for teachers designed to support them in using the performing arts as an inspiring resource and as a starting point for reflection, inquiry, discussion and exploration. The rationale for this is that theatre and the performing arts are about more than just the moment of the experience and that teachers and other arts professionals need support in order to most profitably guide and extend children's experiences.

A key term for Imagine is its focus on 'quality' experiences. Quality in the arts is a term often avoided due to its resonances with ideas of taste, subjectivity and elitism. Quality is also difficult to measure. Quality, however, *is* central to all arts experiences. A marker of quality in a cultural experience is its enduring resonance as it engages its audience intellectually, imaginatively or emotionally. This is certainly the case with theatre that is made for adults and



we should have the same ambition in theatre made for children. Perceived in terms of ambition, quality in children's theatre demands art form experiences that are rich, distinct and that seek to provide pleasure and establish resonances that endure beyond the moment of the performance itself. Quality is about having respect for the abilities of the child audience and consideration for what they can bring to a production as active spectators and interpreters. It is worth acknowledging, however, that children might need to be actively invited to take their engagement with the performance further, indeed they may need to be given a kind of tacit permission to do so, and provided with the time, skills and structures through which to do so.

It was for this range of motivations that Imagineate were interested in the potential for using Philosophical Enquiry as the structure through which to deepen and enhance children's engagement with theatre.

The Research

This paper is based on research commissioned by Imagineate that set out to explore what happened if a school theatre trip was followed up with discussion in the format of a philosophical enquiry. In particular the objective was to explore the potential of using Philosophical Enquiry for Children (P4C) as the structure through which to deepen and enhance children's engagement with theatre.

The research was conducted in collaboration with Morag MacInness, a P4C practitioner who (amongst other activity) teaches a number of classes in philosophy at Fairisle Primary, Kirkcaldy, Scotland. Two of these classes from this school took part in the study with children taken to see productions in the Children's Festival (more on which later). In their school the children then participated in a number of philosophy sessions exploring the productions seen. The younger group of P3/4 (7/8 years old) pupils had been conducting philosophical enquiries with MacInness since the beginning of that school year. For the older group P4/5 (8/9 years old) pupils this was their second year doing philosophy. Neither group of pupils had any significant background experience or knowledge of theatre. The intention was that as far as possible the sessions exploring the children's theatrical experiences would be run in a similar manner to those normally conducted.

As researcher I first observed MacInness leading philosophical enquiry sessions with both classes. I then attended the performances with the pupils and observed the following enquiry



sessions (three for each group). Throughout this process I had ongoing informal discussions with MacInness about her work and also with the class teachers, which informed my own observation of the sessions. My own background is in theatre, with particular interests in researching audience experiences and responses, and it is this perspective that I brought to the study.

Applying P4C to Theatre

This paper, therefore, explores what happens when theatre is used as the stimulus material for a philosophical enquiry. Hopefully along the way it will also provide insights into both the nature of the theatrical experience and the nature of P4C. While it is obviously not possible to re-articulate here everything that went on in the classroom during the study, this paper examines and analyses some of the children's discussions about the productions that they saw. In particular the discussion explores what lessons might be learnt about the relationship between P4C, the children's experiences of the theatre, and how this experience might be deepened.

The following discussion follows a structure adapted from Sara Stanley's description of the key stages in a P4C session (2004:28). The five stages I will group discussion under are:

- 1) Sharing the Stimulus Material
- 2) Thinking Time
- 3) Development of Questions
- 4) Selection of Question
- 5) Dialogue

1) Sharing the Stimulus Material

P4C sessions usually begin with the introduction of the stimulus material, such as a story that is read out aloud to the class (or read aloud by the class). The selection of the stimulus is clearly vital to the success of the subsequent discussion, with Joanna Haynes stating that when selecting stimuli teachers need to 'select materials carefully on the basis of their power to express ambiguity, to produce puzzlement or to evoke a deep response' (2002: 22).

The origins of P4C, particularly in America, saw the use of materials that were written specifically for the purpose: stories highlighting philosophical questions for the children to explore. For a variety of reasons the British tradition has tended not to use such material and instead employs found stimulus, particularly in the form of picture books but also other materials



such as poems, music, photographs or art objects (Liptai, 2005: 1-2). Purposely written books may limit the scope of any enquiry, and the freedom of children to develop their own questions (in a sense they present identifiably ‘correct’ questions to be discovered).

One of the objectives of this study was the exploration of the impact of shifting the stimulus material from text and story based sources to theatre. No other investigations have been done in this precise area that I know of, although Sara Liptai’s work has involved using non-text based stimuli (particularly music) and her writing is of particular relevance here and will be returned to later.

For this research, therefore, the sharing of the stimulus occurred through the participating children attended a theatre production. The two different classes attended two different productions and it is useful to provide some basic description of these in order to situate the following discussion.

The Attic Under the Sky

The younger P3/4 class attended *The Attic Under the Sky* at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, on 23 May 2007. They had a first follow-up P4C session on the production that afternoon, with additional sessions the following Monday 28th May and Monday 4th June. This production, by Carte Blanche of Denmark, was a very atmospheric piece of theatre, without a clear narrative but with many threads that could be followed or imaginatively elaborated. It was introduced to the audience by one of the performers with the interpretative guide to ‘think of it like a dream’. The production was performed as a fairly conventional front-on piece of theatre, it included one performer and one puppeteer and featured many small details and props. At the end of the production the audience were invited to come up to the stage and look at the set and props more closely.

Hansel and Gretel

The slightly older P4/5 class attended *Hansel and Gretel* at the Brunton Hall, Musselburgh, on 25th May 2007. They had a first follow-up P4C session that afternoon, with additional session the following Monday 28th May and Monday 4th June. This production, by Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, Scotland, was an extremely ambitious promenade production, with the audience lead through and around different locations in the story. Often the audience were standing or sitting in



the round, sometime within the set itself. Before starting the children were given a brief indication of what to expect in terms of the promenade staging. The cast consisted of four actors, with adults playing the children and one actor doubling up as both the Stepmother and Wicked Witch.

2) Thinking Time

One of the challenges of conducting a P4C enquiry around a theatre performance, rather than a story (or even a recorded piece of music), is that the stimulus only exists within the particular time and place of the performance itself. There is, therefore, always going to be a gap between the experience of the stimulus and the enquiry; and the original stimulus will never be available for consultation or to refresh memory. Instead everything is dependent on the children's memory of the experience.

To combat this MacInness began the first sessions with short exercises designed to bring the performance back to the children's minds. These were very simply done, such as asking the children to close their eyes and replay an imaginary video of the performance in their mind before discussing what they remembered in pairs. This was then elaborated on through conversation in a fairly freeform manner. It was noticeable that some children were at a loss as to where to start, which might have been caused by the gap between experience and enquiry or by their lack of familiarity with theatre and which perhaps suggests the need for greater structure in the developing of discussion about a performance.

The children's responses at this stage were largely conventional articulations of likes and dislikes, often involving the simple labelling of things as 'good' or 'funny' or 'scary'. In the beginnings of the movement towards a more formal enquiry, however, it was noticeable that as facilitator MacInness would not allow the children to rest with a simple statement but instead would seek elaboration in terms of how or why. What made something funny, or good, or exciting?

The movement from label to explanation here was often small, but it is significant and a marker of the process of P4C in which the children were familiar with having to delve further, to offer explanation or to provide evidence. In particular MacInness would push a little bit further with those responses that had a grain of an enquiry or problem within them. So for example, when children started to disagree about whether the production was funny or sad, or when a boy



said it was funny when the puppet shot the woman, she would ask about this. Another instance was when a boy was talking about a puppet that appeared in *The Attic Under the Sky* and said:

Adam. It was funny when the little head had the hat as a body and he went onto the glove and the [unclear] he kept changing bodies.

MM. Did that affect him in any way when he had a different body?

Ryan. He kept on moving different ways, cos when he was a brush he didn't have any legs.

In exchanges such as these there were nuggets of insightful responses that MacInness was looking for, hoping to gravitate the children towards elaborating their enquiry around these kinds of observations. The ephemeral nature of the theatre stimulus, therefore, cannot be said to have had a significant impact on the nature of the enquiries, although perhaps the absence of the performance necessitated some kind of activity to bring it back to mind (in my own work I have used drawing for this purpose, Reason 2007).

3) Development of Questions

One of the key moments in P4C is the children's formulation and selection of the question that will be the basis of the enquiry. This stage often takes up a substantial part of each session, perhaps particularly with found rather than purpose-made stimulus where it is not so much a matter of formulating questions as finding them.

Following the initial discussions and explorations of the experience, MacInness then began to move the children towards the element of their experience that they might want to interrogate in the form of a philosophical enquiry. Working in pairs each child was asked to come up with questions that were recorded on a board for all to see. In response to *The Attic Under the Sky* the following questions emerged:

- How did the girl move like a puppet at the start?
- What was the girl in black taking out of the boxes?
- Why did the girl go in the boxes?
- How did the girl breathe in the box?



- Why did the girl keep electric stuff out in the rain?
- Why did the lady pretend to be a puppet at the start and then turn into a normal person?
- Why did they have a map on the floor?
- What was the puppet's name? [one response immediately volunteered by another child, the puppet was called puppet]
- Why was the lady in bare feet?
- Why did the puppet keep shooting the lady?
- Is it your imagination that makes you dream?

What is immediately striking is that the vast majority of these questions are not philosophical. P4C views the development of questions as not just a necessary stage in the pursuit of answers, but also as a fundamental part of the process of thinking itself. Fundamentally the objective is for the children to develop their own questions, but also that these questions are philosophical (rather than, as with many of the examples above, factual or memory based). Therefore, during one of the sessions observed for this study the children were asked to re-visit the questions they had developed and test them against this requirement. In discussing this the children themselves provided the following definitions of a philosophical question:

- There isn't a right or wrong answer
- It is a question that there is no answer to
- Sometimes you need to use your imagination
- You have to do your opinion, not somebody else's
- Try not to ask questions that you can answer

In another session MacInness asked the children to group their questions according to the following options:

| | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Look and see | Questions for thinking |
|--------------|------------------------|



 Ask an expert

Use your imagination

(Developed by Philip Cam)

‘Look and see’ questions are ones where you could find the answer by examining the original source (a slight problem in relation to theatre, where it becomes a questions of memory). ‘Ask an expert’ questions ones where there was a clear answer that you could obtain by asking the appropriate person. In contrast the categories on the right of the chart are areas where there is no clear right or wrong answer and where debate might be genuinely philosophical.

Discussing this aspect of the sessions and her use of the chart, MacInness described how she had been frustrated by the questions that the children had been developing in response to the performance. Few could be classified as philosophical and most had an answer that could either be found in the original material or through asking an expert. There is clearly a tension within P4C between wanting to allow the questions to emerge from the children themselves, according to their own interests and engagements, and wanting to direct them towards questions that are indeed ‘philosophical’. The teacher’s position in this is immensely tricky: between being a facilitator and a leader; between having certain objectives in mind, yet also having empowerment of the children as one of these objectives. It is also worth seeking to understand why the children might want to explore other kinds of questions and to recognise that philosophy is not the only kind of thinking.

4) Selection of Question

In the second session on *Attic Under the Sky* the children used Cam’s categorization of questions to help them select the more philosophical questions. Through this method of vast list of questions was reduced to four, which were then put to a vote in order to select which one to discuss. The four questions, and the number of votes received by each one, was as follows:

- Why did they have a map on the floor? (3 votes)
- Why did the puppet keep shooting the lady? (4 votes)
- Is it your imagination that makes you dream? (1 vote)



- Why is the puppet shooting the lady seen as violent, funny and sad by different children? (11 votes)

A similar process occurred in the sessions exploring *Hansel and Gretel*. Here the children first produced a vast list of over 20 questions, many of them overlapping. The list was then discussed and reduced to eight, which were then put to the vote. These eight questions and the number of votes for each one were:

- Did something happen to the witch when she was young so she wanted revenge? (3 votes)
- Why was the Step-mother so mean to the children? (2 votes)
- Why did the Dad listen to the Step-mother and 'lose' the children in the forest? (no votes)
- Why was the Step-mum jealous of the children? (3 votes)
- Did they go to school? (4 votes)
- Is it true that not everything is perfect? (1 vote)
- Why did the Step-mum keep the key when she wanted to get rid of them? (8 votes)

Again it is worth noting that even by a fairly loose definition, most of these questions are not particularly philosophical. Allowing children to vote to select the question for discussion also enters into this tension. Clearly asking the children to vote does directly empower them. However, it does leave the opportunity for frustration about the question that they then select to discuss. The children themselves are very attached to the notion of voting: looking forward to it and being careful to ensure that it is done fairly. Given all this does a teacher ever rule a question invalid, as not philosophical enough? Such a decision might be done explicitly, or alternatively through the teacher's more subtle leading of discussion. Either way this dilemma goes to the heart of the ethos of P4C.

The most immediate explanation as to why the children in these sessions tended to produce non-philosophical questions is that they were focused around the things that interested them most, which with *Hansel and Gretel* might explain the recurring questions about Father/Stepmother/Child relationships but not why the most popular question was about what



was a very minor plot detail. Nor is an explanation easily provided by saying that the productions did not provoke any philosophical questions. For while the exact formulation of such questions might not be as clear as with resources produced specifically for P4C, *Hansel and Gretel* could easily be used as the starting point for an exploration of the causes of evil, of innocence and childhood, or about family relationships. With *The Attic Under the Sky* questions might focus on the difference between dreams and reality, on the nature of the universe, on memory and on mourning. And indeed within the enquiries themselves there was some discussion about these kinds of things. Nonetheless the children's desire to ask such specific, plot or action focused questions of a largely non-philosophical nature remains.

In an email correspondence I discussed this with Sara Liptai, a P4C practitioner who has also conducted enquiries into music, and who could recall similar instances in her own experience. One example she provided was how following reading the New Testament parable of 'The workers in the vineyard' the children she was working with wanted to dwell at length on the type of coinage ('talents') used to reward the workers and the unfairness of all workers receiving the same payment irrespective of the length of their working day. The explanation that Liptai provides is that 'when [children] ask us for such details they want to understand the context and the rules of the genre' (Liptai, email correspondence July 07).

Liptai's explanation is particularly appropriate in this instance, where very few of the children had any significant theatre-going experience. Given this it is clearly possible to see that the children were preoccupied with first fully understanding the experience, needing to do so before they moved on to any more abstract philosophical or aesthetic questioning. The children's lack of experience or expertise in theatre, certainly compared with text-based stories, may also have inhibited their ability to interrogate it freely. Without specialist knowledge or familiarity they perhaps felt no ownership of the experience. More speculatively it is possible that the ephemeral nature of the performances added to this element, with the children first having to reach agreement and understanding of what had happened.

5) Dialogue

MacInness typically began each enquiry by asking the child whose question had been chosen to elaborate upon it or explain their thinking further. After this it was her task to facilitate a discussion amongst the children, ensuring that they listened to each other, that responses were



fair and reasoned, that the group were able to keep track of different elements of the discussion and so on.

P4C sessions consist of child-lead explorations and enquiries. As Haynes writes, the teacher, if genuinely committed to the enquiry and able to resist the natural urge to lead the discussion (and show ‘teacher knows best’), does not know the content in advance, which instead is determined by the children. This is a challenge in an education system where the emphasis is often on obtaining very precise objectives and outcomes (Haynes 2002: 28). At the same time, however, the P4C session is very much not a free-for-all, but instead takes the form of a structured enquiry focused around a particular stimulus material.

Although often very divergent and free flowing, what stopped the sessions from descending into chaos were various structures and devices that MacInness could use and had passed onto the children. As Haynes puts it, ‘The teacher models the language of philosophical discourse and introduces conceptual tools to extend or to record the development of ideas’ (2002: 12). The most basic of these understandings modelled by the teacher is of what a debate is; that it is not acceptable to simply state one’s opinion or to rubbish somebody else’s, but that evidence and argument have to be presented to support what is said.

Another device used to structure debate was that of pupils recording their agreement or disagreement with each other’s statements. Sometimes this was done through a vote of the whole group (thumbs up, thumbs down, or sideways for uncertainty), sometimes through counter statements. So a pupil might say, ‘I disagree with Laura,’ and then be required to say how and why, providing evidence for his or her statements. There were times when the children’s decisions on whether to agree or disagree appeared to be motivated by friendship or other factors, sometimes the responses were jokingly personal (one girl responding to a disagreement with ‘are you fighting with me’; on another occasion a girl said to a friend ‘that’s twice you’ve disagreed with me, it’s outrageous’) but on the whole this structure allowed discussion to be intellectual and ideas based rather than personal. Indeed, it was noticeable that on several occasions individuals would change their minds as a result of what other children said in terms of new ideas or evidence, importantly also publicly noting that they *had* changed their minds and why. This altering of opinion during the course of a discussion, and being consciously aware of how and why, was very impressive and clear evidence of engagement on a critical level.



What was striking from observing the P4C sessions in action was that the children had already internalised the codes and structures of the discussion, such as the idea of what a philosophical question is, or the notion of evidence or of structured discussion. This had come about through experience of the process of P4C, through the building up of a community of enquiry and through the examples of good practice modelled by the teacher. In this sense each philosophical enquiry did not begin with the sharing of the stimulus but was part of an ongoing process within a community. This concept of a community of enquiry is central to P4C, with ideas and values introduced explicitly at the outset but then adopted implicitly by the participants themselves.

In the sessions I observed these kinds of values – listening carefully, not interrupting, respecting each other – were implicit, with MacInness only occasionally having to remind the class of them. At times the children would even correct each other if somebody strayed from the codes of behaviour – for example it was expected that the children address their arguments to each other and not the teacher and at one point a girl corrected another who was talking to MacInness by saying ‘you’re supposed to be saying stuff to us’. This is not to say that the room was silent, with no interruptions and with careful listening at all times – indeed on many occasions the reverse – but rather that an understanding of these values was present. It is therefore important to note that the sessions observed in this study did not start raw with a group of pupils, but took place within an already established series of regular meetings where to some extent the pupils had internalised the process. This is not something that can simply be started and stopped.

The Attic Under the Sky

Why is the puppet shooting the lady seen as violent, funny and sad by different children?

The precise wording of this question emerged from discussion about a disagreement amongst the children about whether moments of the production, particularly where a puppet shot the female performer, were violent, funny or sad. The discussion included the following opening exchange:



Jamie. It was really violent, because things that are happy should be funny. It would be sad for somebody to get shot and it would be violent because to shoot somebody would be violent.

Shahd. It was funny because it wasn't really happening.

Jamie. I could just picture it [as] if it was a real gun. Then it wouldn't be a joke.

Shahd. It would be sad if its real but it wasn't. It isnae sad when a not real [person] gets shot.

The conversation then continued, with most of the children agreeing with Shahd. In particular several children argued that it was funny because it was not real. While on one level true, with the children linking their perspective to a reason, this argument is not entirely sustainable – especially as many of the same children felt that a scene where a wind-up toy penguin stopped moving to the accompaniment of funereal music was very sad as the penguin had died, a demonstrably unreal event. In terms of their arguments, therefore, the children did not test their hypothesis that things that are not real cannot be sad or violent. However, it is possible to see a development of a different argument in some of the children's non-verbal communication. As one boy agrees with Shahd and says he thought it was funny because it was fake he physically re-performed the action from the play, copying the spurting blood, flailing arms and gritted-teeth machine gun noises that took place. Another boy joins in, together echoing the production's use of the kind of gruesome play deaths that small boys love to indulge in.

What this suggests is that in these physical re-performances these two boys 'got' this moment in far greater precision and accuracy than they were able to articulate verbally. The scene was fake, yes, but in terms of its comedy it was funny not simply because it was fake but because it was exaggeratedly fake (and because it was exaggeratedly fake in the manner of small boy's play). These two boys absolutely got this in their physical re-embodiment of the moment, but not in words. It is possible that P4C, which is almost exclusively about verbal knowledge and enquiry, does not allow space for this kind of bodily knowledge, something that I will return to later.

A while later in the discussion some of children pushed their understanding of this scene a little further. First Gemma said 'I think the noises were making people laugh', suggesting that the it was funny because of the machine gun and groaning noises being made by the performers.



Sarah then suggested that it was funny because of the actions and gestures the woman was doing. Together with the boys' physical performances, these girls have answered the question in all but name – lacking the vocabulary to talk about realism, stylisation and hyperbole.

What is worth thinking about here is how, at this point, the children had got so close to a possible 'correct' answer to the question that what they needed was some more traditional 'teacherly' help.

The ethos of P4C is that the enquiry is very much directed by the children themselves. The teacher's role therefore becomes that of 'curious facilitator' rather than 'expert instructor', encouraging discussion but very much not in the business of teaching in a formal sense. In a traditional educational context at this point the teacher would be expected to step in and introduce the words stylisation and hyperbole and suggest that to exaggerate something can be to make it comic, that it can make something dangerous harmless, that it produces laughter. Indeed, as the children had got a long way towards this answer themselves – they knew the reasons why it was funny even if they could not precisely put them into words – this might have been a particularly effective piece of teaching providing the children with knowledge about genre and giving them criteria and vocabulary in which to frame their responses. Sara Liptai suggests that when provided with this knowledge

Inquiries that move between understanding the piece's context and children's own interpretations of the meaning(s) of a work of art seem to have a liberating effect on the inquiring groups. (2005: 4)

It also could be seen as an answer to the question: the puppet shooting the lady was violent *and* funny *and* sad because the violence of shooting and sadness of death was accompanied by comic exaggeration. For while philosophical questions may certainly be ones where there is no absolute answer, much of the children's enquiries observed for this study focused on areas where (to an extent) it would be legitimate to say that right or wrong answer did exist, especially when provided with specialist art form knowledge.

To observe these tensions within the role of the P4C teacher and within the ethos of the approach itself is not to criticise either, but instead to reassert how challenging the approach can be to aspects of more traditional teaching. Indeed, it problematizes the very notion of the teacher



and even the relationship between adult (expert, knowledgeable, authoritative) and child. Given this it is not surprising that it is an activity full of challenges.

Returning to the enquiry itself, in addition to the specific observations here about exaggeration as a dramatic device what this is also all about is the nature of illusion and reality on the stage. So for example at one point Jamie stated that the scene was sad ‘because I thought she was really dead’ – although it was unclear whether he meant really in life or in the play. What the enquiry demonstrated was that the children’s thinking was already exploring perceptions of reality, and the difference between reality and more-or-less realistic representations of reality. Together the production and the P4C enquiry session gave them an opportunity to increase their experiential awareness of this issue and gain a measure of greater insight. This was limited to a significant extent by the children’s theatrical knowledge and also their levels of experience, although it would clearly be possible to see that further theatre encounters and further P4C enquiries could deepen this exploration of theatrical illusion and reality.

In the third a final session exploring *The Attic Under the Sky* MacInness introduced a slightly different question that directly followed on from this enquiry into violence and from comments made by Jamie about the nature of violence.

Although not the only child to find the production violent and/or sad Jamie was in a small minority and further isolated by his commitment to his perspective and the idiosyncratic nature of his arguments. At the end of the session he had stayed behind talking to MacInness (having ‘extra philosophy’ as he put it) about violence and particularly a parallel he drew between violence and rudeness or shouting. Jamie suggested that to shout at somebody is to be violent. It is this widening of the concept of violence that MacInness wanted to explore with the whole group the following week.

First, however, a comment about Jamie’s isolated position. Certainly his response and perspective was not typical, he often found himself arguing his corner alone (and doing so with confidence and a certain amount of pleasure). In social research and enquiry the common practice is to discount unusual or exceptional responses in order to describe the norm and to form some kind of generalisation. The generalised conclusion to the above enquiry, therefore, would be that children find the exaggerated portrayal of violence in the theatre funny rather than violent or sad. Gareth Matthews, however, suggests that we should think again:



It is the deviant [unusual] response that is most likely to be philosophically interesting. The standard response is, in general, an unthinking and un-thought-out product of socialization, whereas the nonconforming response is much more likely to be the fruit of honest reflection. (1980: 38)

While not wanting to discount the importance of exploring consensual or socialized responses (not least in order to understand that socialization) Matthews' comments are worth remembering.

When asked to think about what violence means the children first produced what might indeed be termed unthinking or socialized responses. Violence, the children suggested, means people being shot and big bombs and that; it means being pushed off something and being blown to pieces; it means being killed. Jamie was then invited to explain his argument that violence includes other kinds of 'rude' behaviour, such as shouting, swearing and calling names. These are all acts that the children are familiar with and some of them readily adopted Jamie's observations. Some disagreed suggesting that violence has to leave some kind of mark on the body or physically hurt, other children then interjected by saying that rude or nasty things can hurt your feeling. The discussion ended with the formulation of a clear question – are hurting the body and hurting feelings both violence – rather than resolution.

This formulation of what is indeed a genuinely philosophical question – rather than resolution in an area where there clearly is not any – is precisely the objective of the P4C enquiry. What I would suggest is that this particular question was produced only once the children's responses to *The Attic Under the Sky* had been processed. With this new question the production itself was not referred to at all. This perhaps marks a distinction between the use of art as a stimulus for philosophical enquiry (where the stimulus is discarded and its aesthetic complexion irrelevant) and the use of methods of P4C as a model for an aesthetic enquiry into art.



Hansel and Gretel

Why did the Step-mum keep the key when she wanted to get rid of them?

That the group who had seen *Hansel and Gretel* chose this question for their enquiry illustrates the situation described earlier of the children asking non-philosophical questions. This question in fact related to a very small, passing instance in the production: after Hansel and Gretel have been sent to bed the Stepmother takes the front door key from a hook, locks the door and then very purposefully hides the key in her bosom. The children's interests with this question were related to plot and motivation: the Stepmother clearly locked the door so that Hansel and Gretel could not get out, but if she wanted to get rid of them why didn't she simply leave the door open so they could run away of their own accord? As Liptai suggests, interest in a question such as this concerning plot and action points to a need to fully understand the thing itself before exploring other aspects.

In the course of the discussion the children offered numerous possible answers to the question they had set themselves. The most popular was summarized by Rory who said that 'she wanted to keep them in the house so they would be scared when she took them out' and elaborated with the suggestion that if the children escaped on their own accord they might 'leave to a safe place'. In other words the Stepmother did not just want to get rid of the children, but rather to actively cause them harm. This then sparked-off various suggestions as to why: including that the Stepmother was in some way related to the witch ('they were twins but didn't know they were twins') and the statement that it was the Stepmother's 'job' to be as evil as possible. In other words the children's responses to their own question involved elaborating on the story through their own imaginative engagement; they were often desperate to say things, suggesting reasons that were sometimes consciously silly or playful, or making arguments for the sake of it.

For the observer there were a number of frustrations here, for in addition to having decided to focus on such a passing and relatively insignificant moment was the 'fact' that the question had a straightforward narrative answer. In the folk tale *Hansel and Gretel* the Stepmother tries for a first time to lose the children in the forest but they make their way back by following a trail of pebbles. It was at this point, with the children returning home, that Catherine Wheels' production began. The production alluded to this earlier action with various clues –



including the Stepmother finding the pebbles and throwing them out into the forest. By hiding the key the Stepmother ensured that the children would not be able to collect any pebbles in the night (and this action was performed on stage, with Hansel trying and failing to open the door to collect more pebbles) and instead, when they are taken into the forest the next day the children have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs. These, of course, are eaten by birds, removing the trail and leaving the children to get lost and stumble across the ginger-bread cottage. This reading of the action depends partly on small details observed within the performance and also to an extent on knowledge of the fairy tale from outside of the production. A traditional understanding of the teacher's role would be to provide the information to bring the children to this point of understanding.

In the final session this group took their speculations about this scene a bit further when they wondered whether the Stepmother and the Witch were in fact actually the same person. The production had suggested this possibility through the same actor playing both the roles – although many children refused to believe this, with one boy saying that if it was the same actor 'she would have looked the same, but she never looked the same'. In addition at the end of the play there was a gravestone positioned by the exit reading 'Stepmother RIP', leading to the children to wonder when and where and how she had died. Bringing up this gravestone, Cassie presented the following argument: 'It was the witch that died, so what happened to the Stepmum? Maybe they were the same person'. Other children rejected this by providing their own imaginative answers, such as 'maybe the Stepmum got lost in the forest, she starved herself, staying out that long'. One girl, however, called on evidence from her experience of taking part in drama classes outside school to argue that she had indeed actor changed costume, put on make up and a wig because 'that's what makes actors change.... Trust me. I go to drama and I know about this.'

While perhaps not 'philosophical' in a strict sense, this discussion certainly contains elements of an aesthetic enquiry into the performance. To an extent it is limited to simply seeking to understand what it was they did see, but implicit within this are explorations about the nature of acting and illusion that are not only central to theatre but also the groundings for wider philosophical enquiry. What is also striking is the range of devices that the children use to construct this discussion, including:



- presenting hypothesis (Cassie saying, ‘It was the witch that died, so what happened to the Stepnum? Maybe they were the same person’)
- ‘romancing’ (Matthews 1980) or imaginative speculation, playing ‘what if’, which is both pleasurable and yet also often allows breakthroughs in thinking and understanding (such as the comment, ‘maybe the Stepnum got lost in the forest, she starved herself, staying out that long’)
- identifying a problem and using deduction to construct possible solutions
- agreeing or disagreeing with each other on the basis of alternative hypothesis and/or evidence
- presenting external evidence around which to base argument, extrapolating from experience (the girl’s observation, ‘that’s what makes actors change.... Trust me. I go to drama and I know about this.’)

It is important here not to overstate the level of debate: this was not grand philosophizing about the nature of reality in theatre. But what is apparent is how the children used the thinking tools that had been made available to them to increase their own understanding of what they had seen. If a teacher had earlier closed off this discussion – by providing the factual answer about why things happened and what things were – then it is possible that the children might have gained the facts but lost their own investment in the argument.

Principal Findings

This research set out to explore the potential for applying P4C classroom techniques the children’s experiences of a theatre performance. Its conclusions therefore are partly rooted in the particular circumstances of the research but also to wider concerns relating to both P4C and theatre.

Community of Enquiry

A vital point to remember with P4C is that the approach entails children learning, internalising and utilising a set of skills and interpersonal relationships. A successful P4C class is created over time and forms a supportive community of enquiry.



The two classes participating in this project had been taking part in P4C sessions, lead by Morag MacInness, for between one and two years. The latter group of older children in particular demonstrated strong familiarity with the objectives of the philosophy sessions and an internalisation of the rules of discussion. This had been gained over a period of time. In order to establish the community of enquiry in which P4C takes place, regular meetings are required and proper space and time must be provided for the children. The conducting of a one-off session after a performance is unlikely to succeed with children's unfamiliar with the approach.

Role of Teacher

P4C seeks to redefine the role of the teacher, positioning them as 'curious facilitator' rather than 'expert instructor'. The teacher's role involves the task of modelling good philosophical behaviour to the children and then stepping back to allow their interests and thinking to develop. As the role of teacher is typically invested (by society in general and also by children in particular) with huge amounts of power and authority it can be a challenge to step back from this role. The inherited position and expectations of the teacher means that it is very easy to unconsciously direct or influence the discussion and this needs to be recognised.

In the desire to empower the children the P4C teacher is required to subvert many of the presumptions of education and adult authority. To the observer there are occasions when it seems unreasonable for the teacher not to play the role of expert instructor in instances when they do possess information or facts that the children are not able to reach by themselves. However, it is possible to see such information as both helping the children move their discussion forward (and enabling them to reach 'correct' answers when such things do exist) but at the same time as potentially ending the children's right to speculate and imaginatively pursue questions on their own. The result is that the role of P4C leader is extremely challenging, requiring great subtlety and experience.

Thinking Skills

Having been engaging with P4C over a period of time the children at Fairisle Primary demonstrated a range of skills of discussion and thinking – including the ability to structure their argument, to draw on evidence, to present hypothesis, to agree or disagree in a reasoned manner, and to change their mind in the face of new evidence. During the P4C sessions some of the



children clearly actively enjoyed the business of thinking and discussing. In particular they enjoyed the opportunity that the sessions allowed for playful thinking, which might be dismissed as ‘mere romancing’ but which at times allowed imaginative links and connections to be made. This speculative or imaginative thinking was particularly appropriate to the theatrical experiences. While this study is unable to make a comparison with children unfamiliar with P4C, the sessions observed did show the children using these skills to interrogate the performances seen.

Children experienced with P4C, therefore, clearly possess the structures and skills in thinking that they can utilise in a range of enquiries – including theatre. This includes evident enjoyment of the process and the employment of the opportunity to think playfully and imaginatively.

At the same time, however, it was clear that the children’s tools of philosophical enquiry needed supplementing with skills particular to the aesthetic enquiry demanded of theatre. That is, they needed specific ‘training’ for the thinking about theatre. Therefore, in addition to the thinking skills provided by P4C, in order to conduct an enquiry into their theatrical experiences children need particular kinds of knowledge and frames of reference.

Non-verbal or Bodily Knowledge

In these enquiries there is evidence of various kinds of thinking strategies used by the children. What it is worth recognising, however, is that these are exclusively expressed verbally and that P4C is exclusively concerned with linguistic argument, reason and knowledge. This is not surprising as language is our primary medium of communication and expression. However, observing the sessions there were several moments when it was apparent that the children knew things that they could not say. These have been mentioned in passing above but are worth drawing together here in terms of the evidence they provide of the children’s possession of a bodily or physical knowledge.

Examples include the children’s discussion of the shooting scene in *The Attic Under the Sky*. Here the discussion was often accompanied by various physical performances as children re-enacted the noise of the machine gun, the loading of a gun, both the noise and gestures that accompanied the presentation of dramatically spurting blood and the exaggerated bodily movement of the death. In these bodily re-performances there is evidence that the children knew



precisely why the exaggeration of this scene made it funny, but that they could not argue this linguistically.

Similarly, at other occasions in their discussions the children were moved to re-enact various moments of the performance. Several of the children, for example, explained what they liked about the Stepmother's performance through re-enactment, rather than words, putting on the mincing steps and flouncing hand-gestures of the character. One girl stated that she could not explain why she found the Stepmother funny but it was something about the way she walked – she then proceeded to demonstrate. At other times the children attempted to imitate the different voices of the Stepmother and the Witch in order to further their argument as to whether they were or were not the same person.

Undoubtedly children respond bodily to all kinds of stimulus and are moved to express this bodily knowledge on all kinds of occasions. However, there is something particularly appropriate to this non-linguistic knowledge in relation to theatre, which is a medium that audiences experiences in person and with their body rather than through words of a page. Indeed, many commentators have stressed the kinesthetic connection that exists between audience and performer, with Bernard Beckerman suggesting that 'an audience does not see with its eyes but with its lungs, does not hear with its ears but with its skin' (1979:150). This perspective also obviously tunes in with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

Aesthetic Enquiry

A philosophical enquiry uses a stimulus material as the springboard that is subsequently discarded in the pursuit of abstract discussions and ideas. When responding to theatre it is possible that the children's ability to do this was hindered by the particularity (and strangeness to them) of the experience. During the sessions by no means all (or even the majority) of the children's discussions could be classified as philosophical. Indeed at times their discussions focused on minor points of plot and action. The children's focus on these aspects was perhaps the result of a need to first come to an understanding of the experience in and of itself, to understand what it was they had seen. This is the suggestion made by Sara Liptai, who also notes some other significant shifts that need to be considered when utilising art as stimulus material.



The first shift that Liptai emphasises is that art works (like music in her case, or theatre here) have a ‘coherence’ or sustained existence and meaning outside of the classroom in a manner that is not the case with purpose written philosophical source texts. Liptai writes that

In conventional enquiry the (purpose-written philosophical) text is the springboard for enquiry: a vehicle, and no more than that, to convey the participants to the realm of PI [Philosophical Enquiry]. The text is not, or is not meant to have, intrinsic aesthetic qualities. (2005: 3)

Indeed, in a footnote Liptai suggests that for Lipman such aesthetic qualities would have been distracting from the business of philosophy. In contrast a picture, a piece of music or a theatre production have clear aesthetic qualities. For Liptai the significance of this aesthetic quality for P4C is that ‘A work of art refuses to be used as just a springboard for the emerging philosophical ideas and then to be abandoned’ (2005: 5).

Now potentially something similar could be said of the picture and storybooks that are predominately used in British P4C enquiries in the place of purpose written texts. However, Liptai also stresses the different kind of ‘physical reality’ of non-text based art works suggesting that these qualities ‘necessitate an approach to the inquiry that is different from the text-based one’. The primary difference can be summarized as a shift from a philosophical enquiry that leaves the stimulus material behind to an *aesthetic enquiry* that begins by digging deeper into the stimulus itself.

In developing the concept of aesthetic enquiry with children Liptai does seem to raise some tensions with key elements of P4C practice, many of which were experienced with this project and discussed above. For example, she suggests that in aesthetic enquiry ‘it is necessary to understand the prevailing cultural conventions, i.e. the rules of the genre’ and also the work’s cultural and historical environment (Liptai, 2005: 4) yet it is unclear where this knowledge comes from if the teacher continues to play the role of facilitator rather than expert. Or if the teacher has to play simultaneous roles, instructor and facilitator at once. This tension is also present in another paper on non-text based aesthetic enquiry where Liptai observes that



Some children use musical vocabulary (e.g. soft, getting louder) but most children construct their own way of expressing musical (and pictorial) meaning, unhindered by the absence of such vocabulary. However, the next stage in their development could well be moving towards a more specific and professional vocabulary by investigating the components of the musical meanings they have identified. (2004: 5)

Aside from the role of the teacher in such an enquiry, this discussion also raises the question of whether specialist knowledge is required in responses to art or whether ‘uninformed’ responses are equally valid. Liptai’s own anticipation of this question is that while it is possible to appreciate art without knowing or thinking about it such an approach does not ‘have a place in philosophical inquiry’, which is of course the subject of this study. From my own work with young theatre audiences I would also add that the ability to utilise specialist knowledge given children (and indeed adults) a particular kind of pleasure and therefore enhances both their investment in the experience and the experience itself (Reason 2007).

The final issue, therefore, is what implications are raised for P4C by the use of live theatre as a stimulus material. The questions raised can be summarized in bullet form:

- Is the performance the object of the enquiry itself or a springboard to a more abstract discussion?
- As a live and multi-sensory aesthetic form, does theatre have a force and experiential intensity that *requires* it to be the focus of the enquiry?
- Is the aesthetic/philosophical discussion of theatre dependent on specialist vocabulary and/or knowledge?
- If so, do children already possess the resources to allow them to participate in an aesthetic enquiry into theatre?

My own feeling is that what the children required following their experiences of *The Attic Under the Sky* and *Hansel and Gretel* was a particular kind of aesthetic (rather than philosophical) enquiry that would have directed, focused and deepened their own responses and experiences. In order to do this the children needed to be provided with the language of theatrical enquiry – of realism, narrative, representation, illusion, presence, acting – in the same way that they had begun to possess the language of philosophical enquiry. It is therefore valuable to make distinctions



between philosophical enquiry, which leaves the stimulus material behind, and an aesthetic enquiry that seeks to sharpen and develop insights into the stimulus itself.

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