

Child's Play: A Postdramatic Theatre of *Paidia* for the Very Young

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Abstract

This article argues that a turbulent and anarchic playfulness, termed *paidia* by Roger Caillois, lies at the heart of theatre for babies and toddlers. The genre of 'Theatre for Early Years' has blossomed since its beginnings three decades ago. Today, over 100 productions are staged each year around the world for audiences from birth to three years old. Performing arts experiences for the very young often permit spontaneous play as a discrete element of performance. This can be at specific participatory moments or, more commonly, in a post-performance exploratory play session. Some productions are wholly rooted in spontaneous play, whether solo, in collaboration with other children, or playing with adults as 'co-actors'. This article explores what I regard as an inherently postdramatic process that transforms the natural expression of *paidia* into a theatrical event. Here, infant play interweaves with artistic practice to create unpredictable and unrepeatable hedonic experiences. Often wordless and without explicit narrative, they seem to challenge normative modes of performance for children, but the privileging of *paidia*, I argue, simultaneously ushers the audience into a postdramatic world and returns theatre to its primæval form as co-created play.

'Theatre without drama does exist'. (Lehmann 30)

Playing lies at the heart of the new genre of theatre for babies and toddlers, also known as 'Theatre for Early Years' (TEY). Performing arts experiences for the very young often permit spontaneous play at specific participatory moments or, more commonly, in a post-performance exploratory play session. However, some productions are rooted in spontaneous play, whether solo, in collaboration with other children, or playing with adults as 'co-actors'.

This play is not *ludus*, defined by Roger Caillois as rule-bound or formalised; rather, it privileges the inverse impulse, *paidia*: 'diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety [...] a kind of uncontrollable fantasy' (Caillois 13). It

fulfils many of the criteria synthesised by playworker Bob Hughes, being spontaneous, goalless, freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, repetitious, neophilic and non-detrimental (Hughes 14). This is the natural hedonic state of being for babies, their 'rehearsal for life', where identities and experiences are continually demolished and rebuilt (English 182).

This article will explore what I regard as the inherently postdramatic process that transforms the natural expression of *paidia* into a theatrical event. It seeks to challenge adult conceptions of children as unskilled, undeserving of culture and requiring training as spectators. Positioning TEY within a postdramatic frame, in what follows I will be arguing that the rejection of traditional modes of performance may legitimise infant theatre artistically and developmentally.

Too Young for Theatre?

TEY arguably emerged in 1978 with the work of Theatre Kit (Speyer 1) and, later, Oily Cart (Brown 3–4). More than 450 productions have now been created around the world for children under three, including operas, ballets, installations, comedy and Shakespeare. However, prevalence cannot be equated to legitimation; critics and theorists remain divided on two key issues, addressed below: firstly, at what age a child possesses the capacity to enjoy theatre and secondly, whether those performance experiences deriving from play and/or lacking key elements of the dramatic paradigm (such as actors, text and narrative) can be considered theatrical.

In 1950, American children's theatre pioneer Winifred Ward stated, '[a] series [of plays] for tiny children [under 6] is unnecessary, for they do not need a theatre' (Ward 120), while UK counterpart Peter Slade commanded, 'never put on a show for an audience at this age [5 to 7 years]' (Slade 139). Modern commentators describe performing arts for under threes as 'unthinkable' (Ball et al. 4) or even disturbing to natural development (Papoušek 108). The proposed age threshold has lowered over time, but the implication that children lack spectatorial capacities remains: 'we can assume that the earliest age children are able to enjoy theatre would be three years old' (Schonmann, *Theatre as a Medium* 23).

This rhetoric makes a number of assumptions drawn from adult conceptions of childhood, rather than a child-centred basis (Lorenz 107): firstly, that babies do not deserve to access theatre as adults do; secondly, that babies have an 'innocence' that can be 'tainted' by exposure to professional performance; thirdly, that babies lack skill

in meaning-making and comprehension of illusion; fourthly, that these three deficiencies render performance to babies valueless.

However, Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the right 'to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (United Nations), which informs the foundation of much contemporary practice (see Schneider; Nerattini). This ethical riposte to the claim that babies are culturally inferior to adults signifies a shift in societal power relations. The adult no longer enjoys automatic hierarchical privilege, although it must be recognised that they are the consumer of theatre-as-business, being purchaser of tickets and chaperone (van de Water, *Theatre, Youth and Culture* 5). In addition, data from developmental psychology provide strong evidence for rich aesthetic, communicative and imaginative abilities from birth (Fletcher-Watson et al.). Indeed, some scholars argue that babies and toddlers are more skilled than adults in domains such as imaginative dexterity, improvisation and creative inter-play (Egan and Ling 95; Corsaro 90; Hendy and Toon 54). If young children possess both a right to participate in the arts and capacities for engaging with/in performance which may in some instances outstrip those of adults, then TEY's legitimacy can be posited. Yet critics still ask: is it theatre, or just play?



Fig. 1: *Multi-Coloured Blocks From Space* (2012), by Katy Wilson and Ewan Sinclair. Tramway, Glasgow. Image by Neil Thomas Douglas.

As with recent developments in contemporary performances for adults, some Early Years performances can appear more like play sessions than dramatic productions, lacking narrative, text and speech, occasionally without professional performers and sometimes highly participatory. For example, *Multicoloured Blocks from Space* (2012) places babies and their carers within a lo-fi pixelated world resembling a 1980s video game. An electronic soundtrack of beeps is the only marker of time. There is no script and no actor as intermediary between the child and various tactile, auditory or visual stimuli. Such productions may seem to hover at the fringes of performance, placing emphasis on the hedonic rather than the dramatic.

Theatre literacy, the process of training children to comprehend dramatic tropes, is often identified as the key purpose of theatre for children internationally (see Bolton 25; Schonmann, 'Fictional Worlds' 143-47; van de Water, 'Russian Drama' 163). It is claimed that 'viewing a play is different from the act of playing' (Schonmann, 'Fictional Worlds' 144) and therefore children must be made to control themselves, to sit quietly and to learn to 'read' the symbols and signs of theatre.

This goal appears to justify the argument that very young children should not visit the theatre, as their innate tendencies towards hedonism (in the form of active participation) and its converse, fear, as well as a lack of behavioural control, preclude them from separating 'viewing and doing' (144). The elimination of many traditional dramatic elements, such as narrative, illusion and even applause, seems to render TEY a form of playful 'non-theatre' which happens to take place in a theatre space.

Only by separating TEY from these assumptions can its more radical practices be truly understood. In fact, its heterogeneous forms – variously rejecting temporality, narrative, illusion, or even presence – resemble postdramatic theatre. As Hans-Thies Lehmann has noted, '[t]heatre is tacitly thought of as the *theatre of dramas*' (21, original emphasis), just as TEY is viewed as drama for babies and toddlers and thus productions that reject or subvert drama can be deemed 'untheatrical' by some theorists. However, if TEY is positioned within a postdramatic framework, in terms of intent and form, it can be argued that hedonic play-as-practice is further legitimised.

TEY as Postdrama

Like performance art before it, TEY's radical practices can seem distant from conventional theatre. Lehmann's comparison of performance art and postdramatic theatre applies equally to modern forms of TEY; both are characterised by

a loss of meaning of the text and its literary coherence. Both work on the physical, affective and spatial relationship between actors and spectators and explore possibilities of participation and interaction, both highlight presence (the doing in the real) as opposed to re-presentation (the mimesis of the fictive), the act as opposed to the outcome. Thus theatre is defined as a process and not as a finished result, as the activity of production and action instead of as a product, as an active force (*energeia*) and not as a work (*ergon*). (Lehmann 104)

Caillois' *paidia* can similarly be classified as *energeia* rather than *ergon*: as process, not product. This paradigmatic cleaving from the dramatic as the root of performance may explain scholarly difficulties with TEY. Like early critics of Robert Wilson's work, they feel 'like a stranger attending the enigmatic cultic actions of a people unknown to them' (Lehmann 70). Babies, lacking experience and thus preconceptions of performances involving play, 'are often more at home with this kind of theatre than theatregoers who subscribe to literary narrative' (31). TEY privileges the neophyte.

Indeed, some scholars propose that the imbrication of *paidia* within performance transforms TEY into 'a more sophisticated kind of game' (Goldfinger 297), rendering it other than theatre. Schechner conversely notes that 'play is what organises performance, makes it comprehensible' (*Performance Theory* 98). These opposing viewpoints nonetheless reflect a hegemonic hierarchy within art-making: adults playing in rehearsal craft drama; children playing in a theatre negate drama.

In contrast, Max Herrmann states that audiences co-create theatre in an act of 'social play – played by all for all' (qtd in Fischer-Lichte 32) and Erika Fischer-Lichte places performance alongside game in a process of co-action, rather than one turning into the other. In both, rules are made up, adhered to and rejected as necessary – no single spectator or performer fully controls the outcome. Eventually, 'everyone experiences themselves as involved and responsible for a situation nobody singlehandedly created' (165). Indeed, Matthew Reason has claimed that 'every child must feel – both during and after the show – that: "if I hadn't been there, the show

would have been different” (41). Theatre-makers allow babies to participate equally, emancipating them as spectators composing their own meanings from aesthetic objects, as Jacques Rancière has described for adults who watch theatre (2). Thus, artists validate the presence of a child at play: ‘[Rancière] makes it easier to recognise the value of being a spectator without changing the theatre into something else, like ritual, process-drama, or playing’ (Elnan 174).

With this recognition of the roles that very young children can play in a theatre, participation becomes not an interruption of the theatrical moment but vital to its success. In consequence, the participative act itself takes priority over any putative outcome. In *Le jardin du possible* (2002), toddlers roam among spot-lit piles of leaves, stones, sand and sticks, creating and destroying shapes in a complex web of cooperation, where touch has precedence over sound and sight (Pinkert 65). *Oogly Boogly* (2003) permits total agency to its 12-month-old participants, with professional performers instructed simply to copy every movement and vocalisation – the newly mobile toddlers seize the opportunity gleefully (Dartnell 2). *How High The Sky* (2012) features a striking sequence where all adults withdraw to observe from a distance, leaving the stage solely to babies.

Lehmann describes one aspect of postdrama as ‘the execution of acts that are real in the here and now and find their fulfilment in the very moment they happen’ (104). Text, narrative and even memory itself – another flaw in TEY, according to some critics, being a baby’s inability to remember the experience – are ranked below action. As has been noted in Oily Cart’s work for young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, ‘the focus is on being in the moment, within a temporal framework in which the [autistic] individual foregrounds the present experience and relates to the immediacy of the encounters within the environment s/he inhabits’ (Shaughnessy 242). Thus, as Rike Reininger posits in positioning her practice as postdrama: ‘adults are not more capable of understanding the performance than small children. There is no need to decode any meaning. There is just the non-hierarchical sensuous theatre experience’ (Reiniger 3).

In performances for the very young, spectators are usually placed close to the playing area: *BabyO* (2010) creates a ring of babies around a floorcloth to allow them unfettered access to the opera singers who perform the work, while *In A Pickle* (2012) exploits both traverse and promenade layouts to ensure visibility. Lehmann proposes that such proximity, or even physical contact, ‘quietly radicalises the *responsibility* of

the spectators for the theatrical process, which they can co-create but also disturb or even destroy through their behaviour' (123, original emphasis).



Fig. 2: *BabyO* (2010), by Scottish Opera. Image by Mark Hamilton.

A young child's inability to adhere to normative modes of adult behaviour is another objection to their presence in the theatre, from artists (Wood and Grant 21) to theatre architects. Both the Egg in Bath and the Children's Theatre in Minneapolis contain soundproofed booths where children causing 'disturbances' (as defined by adults) can be taken to continue watching away from their peers (see Fletcher-Watson 28). Similarly, it can be claimed that the recent introduction of 'relaxed performances' reflects a potential marginalisation of their audiences, from the very young to spectators with autism. It is clear that responsibility – either to keep quiet or to participate when required – is problematised when working with those who lack inhibition.

However, again this presumes that the performer is superior to the spectator, which is by no means generally accepted within TEY. If the child is treated as an equal, then their relationship to the action is not provocative, as Lehmann claims (104), but intrinsic and vital. Theatre-makers routinely display works-in-progress to audiences of babies, in an effort to tailor productions to their developmental needs and abilities (van de Water, *Theatre, Youth and Culture* 52; Schneider; Nerattini); reaction of even the most extreme kind is explicitly sought.

To deny a child the opportunity to react to performance, expecting them to follow adult codes of behaviour, is to favour *ludus* over *paidia*. By privileging free improvisation and welcoming participation, contemporary TEY practitioners have inverted this hierarchy, helping the genre evolve into new, postdramatic forms.

Postdramatic Practices in TEY

Tim Webb of Oily Cart describes an epiphany when creating their first work for very young children, *Jumpin' Beans* (2002): 'it was startlingly apparent that the babies and toddlers themselves were our primary audience – they had been gripped by this non-verbal, non-linear, and multi-sensory piece, in their own right' (Bennett et al. 204; see also Brown 9). Intending to create a theatricalised play session, he found that play ran alongside theatre, despite lacking many traditional dramatic tropes.

Perhaps the omission in TEY most challenging to adults, compared with traditional theatre for children, is text. Children's Theatre and Theatre in Education frequently centre on versions of well-known fairy tales (Harman 4) and commercial theatre for children is often derived from media properties such as *In The Night Garden...* or *The Snowman*, whereas TEY tends to be original and non-verbal, or highly restricted in vocabulary. It rejects dramatic formulae, recognising that its audience does

not require or benefit from narrative scaffolding. Instead, multi-sensory stimuli are used to engender engagement. For example, *ETS-BEEST* (2007) melds dance, visual art, sonic improvisation and tactile mark-making. The stage is a huge piece of white paper, on which a dancer writhes and twists, drawing around her body with charcoal and encouraging spectators, aged from two-years-old, to join her. The multiplicity of performative modes is inherently postdramatic: 'words themselves [...] become just another element in a theatrical mode that militates against hierarchies in performance' (Barnett 16), placed equally or replaced with music, movement and visuals. Indeed, TEY could not be postdramatic without this challenge to the primacy of linguistic text, as 'the step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it' (Lehmann 55).

The second omission, narrative/plot, proceeds directly from this decentring. *Frau Sonne und Herr Mond machen Wetter [Mrs Sun and Mr Moon Make Weather]* (2010) has 'a dramaturgic structure that was not telling a story [...] instead the dramaturgy was composed of a series of short actions or happenings' (Reiniger 2). Postdramatic theatre is 'a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formations' (Lehmann 68), disrupting narrative in favour of movements, para-ritual and events which may lack any connection to one another. Thus, 'character and plot, the mainstays of dramatic theatre, are no longer categories that need enter the stage in an age in which the act of representation has become increasingly untenable' (Barnett 23).

The third omission, albeit rare, may seem to push TEY beyond even the bounds of postdramatic theatre: the removal of the actor. Productions such as *Multicoloured Blocks from Space* and *BabyChill* (2010) frame the baby-carer dyad as joint spect-actors, entirely lacking a performer's input. The carer takes on a role instead (Fletcher-Watson et al.). While the children can be said to 'be themselves' when playing, the behaviour of the parents/carers is 'twice-behaved' (Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* 1), both observed and observing. They perform the role of parents to their own children, flamboyantly displaying their attentiveness. Theatre-maker Agnes Desfosses describes this doubling of the spectator in TEY, noting that where an actor is present, baby and parent form a triangular relationship, each looking to the other for response (103). This can be thought of as a reformulation of Fischer-Lichte's autopoietic feedback loop where onstage action and spectatorial response impact constantly on one another to generate performances (Fischer-Lichte 39), here expanding the referents to encompass a

dyadic audience. In productions that lack actors, the feedback loop between baby and carer is heightened beyond the typical domestic level of action-response, which can be interrupted by a telephone call or visitor; when the distractions of home are removed, each reaction intensifies to form a rich proto-drama. Parents are freed to enjoy an accentuated *paidia* by virtue of their presence within a theatrical space: the lack of defined structure frees them to play publicly, meaningfully and demonstratively.

BebéBabá (2001) develops this meaningful *paidia* into a carnivalesque spectacle, inviting adult audiences to watch a part-ritualised, part-improvised music-theatre piece where babies play onstage with their parents. Overseen by professional musicians, but performed by children from birth to two-years-old and parents, *BebéBabá* creates a 'chain of shows', expanding the spectatorial triangle further to include a separate non-performing audience (Rodrigues, Rodrigues and Correia 586).

This (Baby) Life (2011) similarly enjoins the very young to participate with adults, in this case, professional dancers. Inspired by *Oogly Boogly*, it interweaves ludic choreographed sequences with moments of free improvisation and imitation. Here, the unpredictable paidic interjections of babies within choreographed action (they are permitted onstage, if not actively welcomed, during the dance sequences) creates a thrilling atmosphere which challenges notions of normative audience behaviour, moving towards a postdramatic 'experience of presence and ideally the equal co-presence of actors and spectators' (Lehmann 123).

Equality of form (rejecting hegemonies of text or meaning-making), equality of presence (placing children alongside actors as co-participants) and equality of action (granting agency to render all responses valid) defines an ideal of TEY, and affirms its postdramatic nature.

***Paidic* and postdramatic dramaturgies**

The postdramatic character of TEY may arguably extend beyond productions derived wholly from improvised play, encompassing many additional performances that seem to retain the forms of traditional theatre; instead, their dramaturgies are postdramatic. Such dramaturgies have been described as 'open-ended', as in Sarah Kane's work, treating 'structure and content as dynamic and continually to be kept in process, rather than as elements to be fixed and resolved' (Turner and Behrndt 30). These could perhaps also be described as *paidic* dramaturgies, deconstructing and reconstructing drama in turbulent, at times anarchic ways, as *energeia* rather than *ergon*.

Often cited as a key postdramatic writer (Lehmann; Müller-Schöll), Kane crafted plays that may seem the antithesis of TEY in terms of content – suicide, cannibalism, incest – but in their dramaturgy and diverse stagings, these pieces bear close similarities to many contemporary productions for the very young. Suzanne Osten's *Babydrama* (2006), a seminal TEY production, retains text, narrative flow and performers, but employs a powerfully open-ended aesthetic, which positions the piece both as *paidia* and postdrama. Wanda Golonka's production of Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* (2002) constructs a similar merging of forms, 'an integral space of playing and watching' (Müller-Schöll 46). By comparing performances, it is possible to draw attention to their dramaturgies and expressions of postdrama in practice.

These productions share a distinct resemblance, like mirror images. Both place spectators inside the performance, erasing stage/auditorium distinctions. Both resemble 'a circus or a playground' (Müller-Schöll 46-7). Both subvert the text with masks, movement, dance and, most notably, kinaesthetic disruptions which alter the audience's relationship to the space and each other. Osten encourages her audience, aged between six and twelve months, to sit in baby bouncers suspended from the ceiling, while Golonka places her audience on similarly mounted swings. Both employ considerable amounts of text, derived at least in part from psychotherapeutic practices (Höjer; Müller-Schöll). Both explore being and non-being and the journey in-between, *Babydrama* examining conception and birth, *4:48 Psychosis* confronting death.

There are of course obvious dissimilarities, aside from the target audience: Osten uses multiple actors, while Golonka stages Kane's text as a monologue; Osten's use of music is calming, while Golonka's is discordant; babies have agency to come and go as they please throughout *Babydrama*, which is not permitted in *4:48 Psychosis*. However, both productions reject the traditional theatre of dramas to revel in the possibilities offered by playful postdramatic practices.

Conclusion

This article has worked on the assumption that *paidia* is the natural state of being for babies, so productions that grant agency to the very young open up their carefully-crafted aesthetic to risk, volatility and potential destruction. However, they also recognise a child's right to push beyond adult limitations:



Fig. 3: *Babydrama* (2006), by Suzanne Osten, with text by Ann-Sofie Bårány. Perf. Malin Cederbladh. Image by Lesley Leslie-Spinks.



Fig. 4: *4:48 Psychosis*, by Sarah Kane. Dir. Wanda Golonka. Perf. Marina Galic. Image by Yvonne Kranz.

adults can preserve stale and artistically alien conventions [... Better, perhaps,] would be an audience in which adults were prepared to let the children – within civilised limits – enjoy their spontaneous interplay with what is going on before them, unchivvied, unprompted and uncensored. (England 227)

This may mean no text, no plot, no characters, no beginning and no end. Here, children are writing their own theatrical texts with their bodies and actions, reflecting lived experience of perhaps only a few months through the language of play. Practice in TEY has evolved over three decades into markedly postdramatic forms, aesthetically and dramaturgically. It is to be hoped that by positioning TEY explicitly as postdramatic, the theoretical and critical segregation between theatre for children and theatre for adults may begin to be dissolved.

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