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Presentation: The SceSam Project – Interactivity in Children’s Theatre

Abstract

SceSam is an artistic research project (2012-15) in which we have examined interactivity in performances for children (age 3-9) through theory and practice (Nagel and Hovik 2015). Organized as a team of researchers in a research group, practitioners and theoreticians have explored the complex landscape of interactive theatre for children through performances, in seminars, in workshops and in articles. Together with mentors from SceSam, four different artist/companies have developed their own interactive performances, researching different aspects of the performers’ relationships with the child audiences in workshops. Lisa Nagel is the artistic leader of the project, which she has developed together with fellow researcher Lise Hovik and producer Hege Knarvik Sande.

Keywords

Scesam; theatre; performance; children’s culture; ...

Intention

Our intentions with SceSam have been:

- To investigate interactivity in performing arts for children through a combination of theory and practice.
- To facilitate an arena where artists and academics may meet and exchange knowledge and experiences.
- To generate and distribute new knowledge about these theatre forms and the relationship between the performers and the child audience in particular.
- To contribute to the development of new and interesting interactive performances for children.

Interactivity

SceSam takes as its starting point the general situation in the field of performing arts for children, where children’s participation, collaboration and interactivity occurs in a large number of productions. At the same time, the discussions concerning the aesthetic value and function of interactivity in the same productions, is to a large degree missing (Hovik and Nagel 23.04.14).

Within SceSam, the term interactive dramaturgies in performing arts for children has worked as an overarching term to describe a broad spectrum of performance formats that in different ways invite children to participate. As a consequence, the term has also been used about productions that do not invite children to take part physically, but that instead provide for *inner* participation (Helander 2014). This way of using and understanding the term emerges in SceSam’s Working Model (Hovik and Nagel 23.04.14, Hovik 2015), as a varied array of participation formats that range from quiet absorbed observation to collaborative participation.

Within the interactive performing arts, there is the latent possibility of theatre *for* children becoming theatre *with* children, and sometimes also theatre *by* children, activating children’s play culture (Mouritsen 1996). SceSam has been interested in how the artists have handled the encounters between these three different discourses, and we have seen their choices in light of aesthetic theory, drama pedagogy and theories of children’s play culture.

It has been our desire with SceSam to facilitate the exploration of interactivity in performing arts for children through both theory and practice in order to constructively contribute to the development of this field. We also wanted to relay this knowledge to artists, pedagogues, mediators, producers and other participants in the field of performing arts for children. Thus, SceSam’s knowledge production and research findings will be made public in a textbook on interactive artistic methods and on our website.

Interdisciplinarity

The SceSam project can be understood as an answer to four different needs in the field of performing arts for children:

- The need for research from the perspective of cultural politics
- The need for interdisciplinary artistic research

- The need to research interactivity as an artistic strategy in performing arts for children
- The need for formal education

SceSam’s ambition has been to contribute to strengthening the position and improve the quality of performing art for children. The foundational idea of SceSam is that the very meeting point between practical and theoretical knowledge is decisive in terms of developing quality in performing arts for a young audience. This notion is supported in a report evaluating different projects for children supported by Arts Council Norway, where SceSam is mentioned as an example of a successful project bridging the gap between the fields of children’s culture, performing arts and arts education (Haugsevje, Heian, and Hylland 2016:74-76).

Interdisciplinarity has been an important approach in SceSam. By combining the fields of art and academia and by inviting amongst others directors, performing artists, drama pedagogues, theatre researchers and researchers of children’s culture to collaborate, we wanted to tackle interactivity in performing arts for children from many different angles.

Artistic Research

The SceSam project developed a research profile based on the differing perspectives of artistic research (that is interpretive research *ON* art, instrumental research *FOR* the arts and performative research *IN* the arts) complementing each other (Elkjær 2006, Hannula et al. 2005, Borgdorff 2012). We regard all three forms as equally valid, and recognize the insight offered from both academic and artistic knowledge production.

Thus, the research was to be carried out in close collaboration between artists and researchers. The artists set their own research questions and the academic researchers were to complement the enquiries by entering into dialogue with the artists. It was a prerequisite for participation in the SceSam project that the artist had clear intentions to research, and that research questions and concurring research methods were clearly formulated and documented. This is not always the case during an artistic production, and especially not so in the field of performing arts for children.

The specific research methods in the different productions included artistic methods where the artists themselves reflected through theatre workshops with children. They also documented their work in different media formats and styles (mind maps, reflective writing, pictures, film, conversations, interviews), focusing mainly on their own investigative process. In addition, the artists were encouraged to include the observations of the participating mentors from SceSam and observations and comments made in group conversations, as well as analyses and interpretations of the overall documentation. In order ensure methodological stringency and at the same time establish a common framework for the SceSam artists, we suggested that the artistic research process should consist of the following phases, which we expected the artists to reflect on and answer during the process:

- Intention
- Research question
- Reflection on context
- Reflexion on methods
- Documentation
- Evaluation

Education

During the SceSam project we have mapped the different discourses affecting the relationship between art and research. Moreover, we have pinpointed performing arts for children as a field where the discourses of drama education / drama pedagogy, children’s culture and adult concepts of art (first and foremost the concept of autonomy), meet and challenge each other constantly. On a more practical level, we have been dealing with challenges concerning the relation between artistic ideas and limitations offered by the practical framework for artistic productions, both in theatres and in schools. We have also dwelled extensively on profound questions concerning interactive methods and strategies.

An important insight is that artistic development in performing arts for children is intrinsically connected with the access to updated and research based knowledge on art, as well as drama pedagogy, children and childhood. In Norway there is no formal education for artists who wish to produce and perform for children. This is evident in the field, and it means that SceSam in fact bridges a gap, or fills a void, that is there, mainly due to the lack of a proper education in the Norwegian educational system.

Forms of dramaturgy

In the following, we will present the four SceSam-projects and one preliminary project. The examples will highlight some of the artistic challenges we have encountered during the project period. Moreover, the examples will serve as examples in our discussion of interactivity on a dramaturgical level, where we suggest a corresponding relationship between a set of dramaturgical strategies and different types of interaction with children during a performance. The forms of interactivity will be presented in what we refer to as SceSam’s Working Model (fig. 1). The model is an analytical tool developed by Hovik and Nagel during the research process (Nagel & Hovik 23.4.14).

Fig. 1. Interactive Dramaturgies in Performances for Children: Working Model

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Forms of Dramaturgy	1. Closed dramatic form	2. Closed narrative form	3. Closed activating participation	4. Open installation or moving participation	5. Open inviting dialogue form	6. Open improvising form
Children	Quiet absorbed observation	Participation through verbal input	Participation through mirroring or conducted action	Physical or scenographic interaction	Dialogue interaction	Creative collaboration through participation
	Content that appeals to children’s creative imagination Children may try to join in through comments or by calling out	Children are asked to help or give advice to the actors and contribute verbally	Children are asked to move or make sounds from the hall	Children are invited into the stage universe, and play a planned part either physically or spatially	The children are invited to participate in dialogue form to develop the stage actions	The children are spatially and physically involved in collaborative action. The children’s play skills are activated
Actors/performers	Monologue function	Selective function	Instructive function	Directing function	Pedagogical function	Listening and improvising function
	Full artistic control Able to listen to and be aware of, but not react to input from the children	Selectively listening Dilemma regarding what to follow up and what to leave	Must inspire and encourage, but has few dilemmas	Dilemma and unpredictability around what to follow up and what to leave	Guide and support children as part of the play Dialogue form Drama-pedagogical expertise	Improvising expertise. Risk of chaos and playful experiences Drama-pedagogical expertise

The Birdsong Trilogy

This preliminary project formed a trilogy inspired by birdsong and the listening attributes of playing. It is arranged for three improvising musicians in interaction with two actors and a dancer. The trilogy consists of the performances *Spurv/Sparrow* (age group 0-2), *Nattergal/Nightingale* (age group 3-5) and *Hakkespett/Woodpecker* (age group 6-9).¹ Each performance explores suitable forms of interaction for children of different age groups. The storyline of *Sparrow* is episodically arranged around a nest with eggs, and the children can move around freely and participate in the performance however they wish. *Nightingale* centers around a musical adventure and during the play, the actors address the children directly to get ideas for a task they need to solve. The children are also invited to join a dancing bird orchestra on stage. *Woodpecker*, which is about friendship, exclusion and bullying, introduces the performance through a dialogue with the audience. A playful form of rhythmical interaction is the central element in the performance, which ends with the children being invited up onto the stage to learn a pat-a-cake clapping game. All the performances include scenes where different forms of interaction are in play. The performances build on traditional children’s theatre dramaturgies, apart from *Sparrow*, which has an open dramaturgy that invites the toddlers to participate freely together with the actors on stage (Hovik, 2015). The artistic challenges in such an open dramaturgy would be for the actors to stay attuned and improvise with the children and each other in a very attentive and including manner. *Sparrow* works on the concept of open and improvising form (5 and 6) in the Working Model.

Fowl Play

In the physical and visual character driven performance *Ugler i mosen/ Fowl Play*, friendship is put to the test when two friends decide that the third person in their group is too bossy and has to be taken down a peg or two.² The actors relate directly to the audience in a theatrical performance format, which at certain points is open to contact between the performers and the audience. During the performance the children are directly involved in the moral dilemma of the piece when they suddenly become party to what at first seemed like playing, but in actual fact turns out to be bullying. The performances took place at a school for age group 8-10.

Fowl Play maintains a classic division between stage and audience, with a clearly defined stage area and a separate space for the audience in a central position in front of the stage. The acting style of the three actors is explicitly theatrical with big and exaggerated movements, gestures and mimes. They address us directly through eye contact and speech, but without being open to input from the children. It is only half way through the performance that the audience is invited to participate more actively. The children are then included in the moral dilemma of the audience by having to take care of some stolen objects for two of the characters in the play. This simple action makes the audience complicit in bullying the third character, and as the children realize this, they take on a decisive role in the performance: They have to choose what to do with the stolen things. This scene is the strongest part of the performance, and it probably continues to affect the involvement of the children, even though the actors close the interaction towards the end of the performance and re-establish its theatrical autonomy. This performance elaborates on different dramaturgical strategies, and moves between a closed dramatic form (1) and an open dialogic form (5).



From Hakkespett/Woodpecker. Photo: Sivert Lundstrøm

The Wizard of Oz

In collaboration with Brageteatret, director Hilde Brinchmann developed an interactive wandering theatre performance based on the well-known story about the Wizard of Oz.³ In this particular version, the mixed audience of children and adults can wander along with Dorothy on her trip from dreary Kansas to the magical Land of Oz, and together with her, the audience fight against the Wicked Witch of the West. In the performance the spectators participate »acting the part of the audience«, as Dorothy herself says in the play.

In *The Wizard of Oz* the defined starting point for Brinchmann was to investigate the relationship between an explicitly linear narrative and the audience’s opportunity to wander along with the actors throughout the performance. The wandering theatre dramaturgy, similar to a station dramaturgy, emphasized participatory forms that conveyed a feeling of group belonging, presence and closeness to the action. The main purpose was to continuously maintain the fiction of the story. However, there were some sequences that challenged the boundaries between the artwork and the audience, by making the role of the audience more than just wandering spectators. For example, in the last act the children and Dorothy try to get home from Oz, and to do so, they have to hold hands, close their eyes and shout out loud the things they miss the most from home. In this scene the children are included as collaborating individuals and they thereby transgress the role of audience. Although this scene can be described as an open, inviting dialogue form (5), the performance mainly applies the open dramaturgical concept of moving participation (4), keeping the linear narrative as the guiding principle of dramaturgy.

Kandisia

In the performance *Kandisia*⁴, artistic director Jarl Flaaten Bjørk uses the *Neda* and the *Farida* cases (about child asylum seekers who are forcefully returned to their country of origin after many years in Norway) as a backdrop for the performance narrative. The framework is the story of the fictional country *Kandisia*. The child audience is given the role of people from that country, and the children get to know the young girl *Kakadue (Cockatoo)*, who has fled with her family across the sea from the war-torn Syrimando to the promised land of *Kandisia*.

At the beginning of the performance, the children are invited to take part in well known children’s games such as *Tag*, *Copycat*, and *Red Light/Green Light*, before the performance gradually transforms into something that is more similar to traditional theatre. The actors move from playing children’s games to role play, and in this way approach the theme of the theatre performance. Flaaten Bjørk uses games as a way of activating and creating involvement around the relationship between the mundane fair/unfair and the more formal justice/injustice, centering around the questions of the value of rules in games and in life.

Flaatenbjørk Kompani’s performance stands out from traditional theatre by beginning inside children’s play culture (category 6). After a while, the children begin to notice that there is an external leader of the games: *The Voice*, who decides the rules and directs the game. Gradually, the performance develops into a sort of process drama, which could also be described as an open inviting dialogue form (5). Then the performance changes towards a more closed activated participation (3) as the actors perform the story in front of the children. This performance is a good example of how one performance can move through several forms

of interaction, ranging from open, improvising form (6) to closed narrative or activated participation form (2/3).

Run! Now!

In the performance *Nå løper vi / Run! Now!*⁵ Pia Maria Roll uses the children’s book *Watership Down* by Richard Adams as a backdrop for a documentary theatre performance about the Kurdish siblings Sara and Buzhan Baban’s flight from Iraq. The two explore their childhood memories from their homeland, the refugee camps and the dangerous flight, and. Roll mixes the siblings’ documentary content with physical and poetic scenes, hinting to the rabbits on the run in the children’s book classic. Historical recordings from their childhood are woven together with live music and expressive exploration, searching for the hidden stories of the past, such as a scene explaining how Sara was taught to behave in kindergarten during a bomb raid. The present situation of refugees in contemporary Norway implicitly makes the performance a part of the public debate on asylum politics.

Roll’s artistic research is about how to work with documentary material as part of fiction, and how to combine a complex contemporary political issue with performing arts for children. Roll is inspired by Brecht and considers theatre’s most powerful potential to be in the social encounter. She explores how a theatre performance can actively relate to a sense of what the audience is able to do, knows and wants: Not obediently, but actively, as in a conversation. *Run! Now!* is a personal documentary insisting on storytelling creating presence in the meeting between actors and audience, regardless of dramaturgical means such as open or closed forms or how the conversation between stage and audience is acted out.

Roll relates to interactivity in the broadest sense of the concept, a view based on the idea that all dramaturgies in one way or another are interactive. *Run! Now!* moves basically between the closed categories 1 and 2 in our working model. However, the performance has an opening sequence where the actors invite the children to participate in the making of scenographic paper elements (4 and 5). This allows the children to relate personally to the actors, to establish a physical connection to the stage set, and thereby possibly creating a sense of ownership to and confidence in the theatrical play.

Further thoughts

The relationship between art and research is crucial, albeit not frictionless. One main research finding would be that the artistic process to some degree is in conflict with the artistic research itself. As the artistic work is driven by very personal forces and ideas, it is sometimes difficult for the artists to relate to external research questions. This is mainly because the work is so dependent on their own visions and on what actually happens in the specific processes, in collaboration with other artists. Unpredictable frames of production or sudden ideas can evoke new questions and other interests during the artistic process.

In this situation, we find that we have been able to keep the dialogue between art and research productive, and the reflective writing by both artist and researchers has allowed us to thoroughly explore the various research questions about interactivity. The theatre productions have provided us with intriguing cases to analyse, and most importantly, a wide range of dramaturgical forms. Our academic contribution to the field would be to offer theoretical concepts and ideas related to artistic practice, enabling a more nuanced discussion.

Moreover, SceSam’s extensive work on children’s participation in performing arts has provided results that inspire us to continue our research within this field. We hope that the performances, the dramaturgical formations developed together with the child audience and the writings and reflections of SceSam can inspire others to works in this very interesting cross disciplinary field of art and research.

Notes

1. Teater Fot/Lise Hovik in collaboration with Trøndelag Theatre. Premiere November 24th 2012 at Trøndelag Theatre
2. Konstellasjonen / Janne Brit Rustad in co-operation with Flatåsen School. Premiere March 13th 2014 for year three at Flatåsen School in Trondheim
3. Brageteatret/Hilde Brinchmann. Premiere November 7th, 2014 at Brageteatret in Drammen
4. Flaatenbjørk Kompani / Jarl Flaaten Bjørk in collaboration with Teater Innlandet. Premiere at Teater Innlandet, Hamar, October 22nd, 2015
5. Pia Maria Roll in co-production with Brageteatret and Teater Ibsen. Premiere at Brageteatret in Drammen, January 9th, 2016

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Lisa Nagel (f. 1977): Artistic Director and Project Manager

SceSam is part of Lisa’s ongoing research as a PhD Candidate at the Norwegian Institute for Children’s Books. In her thesis she looks at interactivity in both performing arts and picturebooks for children. Her background is from drama pedagogy and theatre studies, where she specialized in performing arts for children. She also works as a dramaturge and as a theatre critic. Looking at interactivity, Lisa is interested in the connections between performing arts for children and aesthetic theories on participation and social art. She is the founder of SceSam (www.scesam.no).

Lise Hovik (f. 1962): Artistic Research Program Leader

Lise is associate professor of drama and theatre at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Trondheim. She holds a PhD on theatre for early years, and has written extensively on the topic. She is artistic director of Teater Fot (www.teaterfot.no), a small company which has produced performances for children since 2004. In her artistic and academic works she is concerned with the relation between artistic process, methodological reflection and theory. She has developed SceSam together with Lisa Nagel, leading the artistic research program.

