

## Making Metaphors Matter

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Reception studies on children's aesthetic values can make a significant impact on international TYA artistry by offering persuasive evidence that counters prevailing myths about young minds and emotions. Across industrialized nations (i.e., Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States), 6- to 12-year old children from all socio-economic classes value eight main criteria in dramatized stories in the following order of priority: 1) comprehensibility, 2) involving dramatic action, 3) humorous entertainment, 4) informative child characters, 5) realism, 6) innocuousness, 7) violence or romance, and lastly, 8) aesthetic qualities.<sup>1</sup> *Comprehensibility* drives all other values, for as Anna Mikhailova observes, "After almost every performance children have many questions. They are driven by a passionate desire to *comprehend*" (her emphasis). While many prefer familiar stories that are "easy" to understand, they also want unfamiliar stories they "don't know so much about," as Viveka Hagnell found. Gavriel Salomon finds they invest mental effort according to the cognitive demands of the medium and their perceived self-efficacy.<sup>2</sup>

Children's second most important criteria, *involving dramatic action*, connects with their desires to comprehend meanings. They seek interesting, suspenseful, and emotionally moving events that continually involve them in finding out and predicting what happens next as they escape into fictional stories. As Johnny Saldaña and Mafra Gagliardi found, they want to participate vicariously and to get worthwhile meanings that relate to their lives. Original plays with unusual plots offer the most surprising and unpredictable dramatic actions. When recalling non-linear, episodic plot structures, they rearrange the most essential episodes into linear sequences, as Jürgen Kirschner and Kristin Wardetzky discovered.<sup>3</sup>

The next two criteria, *humorous entertainment* and *informative child characters*, depend on children's reasons for using theatre and what gratifications they expect to gain. For those who

expect entertainment, they want visual and verbal forms of humor that strike them as “fun” and “funny.” Any play that makes them feel too sad or frightened fails this basic pleasure principle unless it also offers a hopeful or “happy” ending. For those who expect to gain information from plays, they want child characters to show them how to solve their present and future problems, and they prefer child actors because only children know “what it’s like being a kid,” as Sharon Grady (and Saldaña) discovered. When producing comedies, I believe that directors need to take child characters’ problems seriously by understanding various forms of humor, because children’s raucous laughter in no way indicates the *artistic quality* of performances, as Hagnell affirms.<sup>4</sup>

The criterion of *realism* surfaces repeatedly as an aesthetically charged value throughout middle childhood. Children seek authenticity; that is, believable, credible, and true-to-life stories that show “real” things that “really” exist or can “really” happen in “real” life. They want genuinely honest depictions that don’t make life’s circumstances seem better than they “really” are. Yet they define “real life,” not by live actors performing before a live audience, but by the ability of computer technologies to create the most hyper-real simulations possible. Children in the United States rank realism higher than their Dutch and British peers, perhaps because they see less experimental theatre than European audiences. US reception studies in the visual arts confirm realism as their predominant artistic criteria because departures from representational images are easy to detect when judging artistic quality. Non-realistic forms require a tolerance for ambiguity and complexity and an understanding of metaphors that symbolize thematic concepts.<sup>5</sup>

The next two criteria vary by age and gender according to parental values. *Innocuousness*

refers to “G-rated” content that contains no sex, violence, profanity, or other “taboo” behaviors that “other” youngsters might imitate. Most children under age 8 avoid this “tainted fruit” content (especially if their parents regulate or censor their media diets), while most 9- to 12-year-olds “aspire up” to maturity by testing the “forbidden fruits” of content intended for adults. Boys are attracted to physically aggressive *violence* and sexually titillating action-adventures with athletic heroes who win competitive power struggles. Girls are drawn to emotionally nurturing relationships in *romances* with attractive celebrities who negotiate popularity through fashions and sexuality. Children use mass media ratings to signal their “graduation rites” from child to adult content.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, children seldom mention *aesthetic quality* because story *content* matters far more to them than artistic forms, as Karin Andersson discovered.<sup>7</sup> While realistic styles in fiction and fantasy are easiest to comprehend (e.g., *Harry Potter* films), I believe that expressionistic, surrealistic, and other avant-garde styles of theatre may provide more powerful metaphors and emotionally resonant aesthetic experiences for child audiences.

Metaphors matter. *All the world is a stage. Childhood is a journey not a race. Seeing is believing. Children are our future.* “Conceptual metaphors” such as these pervade how we think, speak, embody, and perform our daily actions, usually unconsciously. Theatre for Young Audiences relies on conceptual metaphors to reflect conflicts and resolutions in young lives. Yet despite the widespread use of metaphor in every facet of theatrical practice, we know very little about how child audiences understand staged metaphors, especially those in non-representational performances. In this paper, I offer some examples from my reception studies to show how children interpret verbal, visual, kinesthetic, and conceptual or thematic metaphors contained in #

expressionistic, surrealist, and absurdist plays staged at the University of Kansas in a city with 90,000 residents. This evidence suggests just how far theatre artists may stretch children's metaphoric capabilities despite their preferences for realism.

Over the past three decades, cognitive psychologists have revealed how we think and live by metaphors that affect every aspect of our social, political, and aesthetic lives. By way of definition, Lakoff and Johnson note, "*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing for another*" (their italics). Conceptual metaphors establish corresponding relationships between two different concepts, ideas, or domains of knowledge. For example, we conceptualize *Nations as Families* whereby "strict fathers" govern socio-economic policies and "nurturing parents" protect human welfare. In this instance, the first term "nations" serves as the macrocosmic *target* concept and the second term "families" serves as the microcosmic *base* concept (or vehicle) for relating how governing parents and their citizen children interact on a national scale. Linguistic constructs shown in this example demonstrate how the denotative meanings of words transfer connotative subtexts as powerful ideologies, capturing the etymological meaning of metaphor as "transfer." How metaphors transfer meanings to child audiences depends on their knowledge of theatre conventions, the kinds and contexts of specific metaphors situated in performances, and the particular questions asked of children during individual interviews after performances.<sup>8</sup>

One study involved *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*, a meta-theatrical play by Barry Kornhauser about the boyhood of surrealist painter, René Magritte, and his "pipe dream" or desire to become an artist against his strict father's wishes. This non-linear, episodic text shifts among three worlds of reality—a stage world of actors presenting a play, a biographical world of

Magritte's life, and a surrealistic dream world inside René's imagination. Our staging of these overlapping worlds employed a variety of *verbal metaphors* written in the dialogue, *kinesthetic metaphors* contained in actors' symbolic gestures and movements, and *visual metaphors* of Magritte's paintings projected on a screen and juxtaposed during staged moments.<sup>9</sup>

The first scene showed five black-suited actors in bowler hats playing peek-a-boo with the Interlocutor (or narrator) from behind a wall of windows upstage. In the second scene, the Interlocutor introduced theatre conventions by explaining the verbal-visual (and ironic) metaphor of Magritte's painting (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) reproduced above the windows: "This is not a pipe.' Well, just as a picture of a pipe is not, in fact, a pipe, neither is a play real life." We asked children what she meant when she said *a play is not real life*. Most 11 year olds described acting conventions to explain this conceptual metaphor; for example: "If it was real life, it'd be happening right then. It wouldn't be a repeat, and there would be like real people, like René would really be there, and they wouldn't be acting." "Actors try to act it out and make it as real as possible," but they "don't really get hurt in a play. Like they're doing it to show you what happened back in some time, and what might happen in the future." "Only actors do things and sometimes they show that things happened in history, but it's really not acting real." Likewise, 7 year olds also knew that "it's just people acting. This isn't a real family. It's just people pretending they're a family." Like college students, they also pointed out the fictive nature of plays in that "it's not really true. They just get it out of a book or something," "it was just a story that they made up," and "they're just trying to make you believe something that's not true."

As Paul Harris explains, children as young as age 2 demonstrate no systematic confusions between life's actual realities and theatre's illusory pretense. Like adults, toddlers use pretense to

*imagine* others' beliefs, desires, and emotions which allows them to "believe something they do not actually believe [and] to imagine the emotional reactions of another person who does not have such a desire or belief." Genuine aesthetic or physiological emotions "do not reflect a more penetrating insight into the fate of the another person [but] a stance that we take towards that fate: we can hold it at arm's length in the realm of the possible or the fictive, or we can allow it to come close and touch us as actual events do." For these reasons, Bullough's concept of "aesthetic distance," like Kant's notion of "disinterestedness," are *false* philosophical constructs because fiction provides all the aesthetic "distance" we need to detach ourselves from our real lives in order to engage our interests in theatrical events.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than presume that children confuse pretense with reality, Susanne Langer explains why it is theatre artists who often confuse and conflate these constructs by misconceiving spectators' relational positions toward performances.<sup>11</sup> Her crucial distinctions between perceiving a performance *as* reality (defined as "dramatic illusion") and *as if* it were reality (defined as "theatrical delusion") explain respective "virtual feelings" of emotional response. Theatre artists often elicit "dramatic illusions" by inviting spectators to imagine and enter into fictive representations *as* reality. If children agree to lose themselves in fictions by suppressing their appraisals of implausible realities, they give up self-control in order to empathize with and sympathize for actors' emotional experiences. Even within the same production, artists may also call attention to the artifices of a staged event as *objects* of pleasure through special lighting, sound, and scenic effects and by breaking the "fourth wall" through narration and direct address to audiences. These conventional factors create "theatrical delusions" that literally invite children to "make-believe" and pretend *as if* staged presentations are fictive representations.

This *delusion* of pretense has the *opposite* effect from dramatic illusion because children are made to become aware of their own and others' physical presence in spatial venues that lead them to scrutinize any *unrealistic*, "fake" pretenses they know to be "untrue." When children maintain self-awareness and self-control of these unrealities, they may *not* "suspend their disbelief" in fictive situations.

Thus, in *Pipe Dream*, children knew very well that the Interlocutor was *deluding* them into believing this play was "real life," so they did not suspend their disbelief willingly. Instead, they questioned the unreality of many theatrical delusions such as "fake" props (e.g., a foam rock), the impossibility of ghosts (i.e., Mother's presence after her death), and the implausibility of one large box serving various functions (e.g., a couch, bed, desk, coffin, etc.).

Most 9 and 11 year olds interpreted the play's thematic metaphor by transferring René's story to society at large and emphasizing that "people should follow their dreams no matter what others say." In contrast, most 7 year olds missed this social metaphor by staying inside the play's vehicular base and observing that René wanted to be a painter, in part, because the idiomatic expression of a "pipe dream" confused many listeners. Even though the Interlocutor explicitly defined a "pipe dream" as "a wish that could never come true," only one-quarter of all children knew or recalled even the gist of its meaning. Most 7 and 9 year olds took the term literally as a dream about pipes or they had no idea what this idiom meant. So when we then asked them to explain what René meant when he said, "If everything is possible, then there are no pipe dreams," those who didn't know the meaning of "pipe dream" found this counter-factual proposition (or conditional syllogism) challenging to interpret. For example, 7 year olds thought "he means everything is real because he said there's no dreams" or "there's no such thing as a



pipe dream.” Nine year olds tried circular reasoning: “If pipe dreams means like that you shouldn’t do that and that it’s nonsense, then if everything is possible, then nothing can be nonsense like a pipe dream.” Nevertheless, some children understood clearly that he meant “he could do anything if he wanted to” and “he doesn’t have to dream about painting. He just knows it’s possible that he can paint.”

Moments before René made this metaphoric discovery, his Father had given him his smoking pipe as a kinesthetic metaphor. When we asked spectators why his Father did this, five motivational reasons emerged among half of the respondents. One, most adults interpreted his gesture symbolically as “a rite of acceptance” or wanting “to apologize for what he said about pipe dreams.” A few older children inferred that his Father “changed his mind,” because “maybe now he was approving of [René] wanting to paint.” Two, some children saw his gesture as a sign “to signify he was grown up,” as if “to say, ‘You’re a man now’” or, as one African American boy put it, “so he can act like *he* can be the dad.” Three, other children regarded the gesture as a sign that René could now paint his pipe, as reflected in Magritte’s painting above the stage. Four, other children imagined that he wanted his son to keep the pipe so “when he died, it might be in the family,” “like passed down from generations” “for when his kids grow up.” Finally, others focused on the actors’ emotional expressions. Seven year olds surmised that his Father “never let anybody even touch his pipe” but “he really loved him” and “was proud of him,” so he wanted René to “feel happy because he wished he had a pipe before” and René “was very good.” Nine-year-old girls projected their sympathies by sensing that his Father “may have felt sorry for him, and he just wanted to give him some sort of present” or “he thought he deserved his pipe.”

In contrast to these interpretations, the remaining half of the respondents did not know or

could not recall a reason, while others attempted the following guesses. Most 7 year olds supposed that his Father simply did not want or need the pipe anymore, or that he simply traded it for René's broken toy. One 9 year old, admitting she "didn't get that," figured "he wanted to give him a pipe instead of him painting pipes." An 11-year-old boy speculated, "So he can quit smoking maybe. Or he was just giving it to him, because René might use it for something—like he might grow up and smoke a pipe." Thus, half of our child spectators "didn't understand what was so special about the pipe," in part, because they didn't understand and transfer the conceptual metaphor of "pipe dreams."

Earlier in the play during the school scene, René grows increasingly frustrated with the problem of words as he yearns to speak visually through pictures. To heighten the emotional tension of this scene, hot-colored lights flashed repeatedly as actors circled the center box in a whirling dervish as another kinesthetic and visual metaphor. Using a photo of blurred bodies from this moment, we asked spectators, "Why did the lights flash on and off during this classroom scene?" Many children (and adults) did not know a reason or they re-described the scene without inferring an artistic motive. A few children gave practical reasons for visibility purposes, added importance, or general beauty "so it can look pretty." Less than half inferred our intentions that the lights expressed René's frustrated feelings, signified his nightmarish dream-state, or heightened his chaotic mood. As one 7-year-old girl stressed, "They were *thinking so much* and there was like—the *feeling* just wasn't enough for that part of the play, so they had to give it a little bit more *gip, flash*, and step, or whatever." Older children concurred: "It made it look like [René] was getting like dizzy or all those names were calling in his head and he was getting real, real crazy." "His mind was going around in circles," and "He felt like his head was

going to split open and he couldn't take it any more." "They usually [start flashing lights] when someone's being driven nuts and everything." Thus, this lighting effect failed to communicate its metaphoric meanings for over half of our spectators.

Another kinesthetic metaphor occurred when René arrived at "The River" in search of his "lost" (dead) Mother. We included a film of running river water (with sound effects and music) on the projection screen as René pantomimed cleansing his hands in the "water" downstage and all the actors entered, danced, and then exited in slow, graceful movements. Given the multiple, metaphoric meanings that could be derived from this scene, we asked spectators, "What was René doing at the river?" The majority knew he was "looking for his mother" from his explicit dialogue and most connected her with the river image in some way: "He was thinking of his mother, where his mother was missing at the river, and he washed off with it, maybe thinking his mother would come back." However, many children described René's movements literally as "washing," "rinsing," "swimming," and "dancing." Only three adults took his metaphoric actions to mean "a kind of baptism; letting his inner urges guide his life from now on," "setting himself free," or "looking for a little peace of mind"—from the slide of a dove over an ocean (*La Grande Famille*).

Like the example just noted, we intended our projections of over one hundred slides of Magritte's paintings to act as visual metaphors by adding symbolic or ironic meanings to particular staged moments. So we asked spectators, "Why were Magritte's paintings (or pictures) projected on the screen during the whole play?" Three sets of proportionately divided responses emerged. As intended, many 9 and 11 year olds (and most adults) perceived these images as explicit visualizations of René's thoughts, imagination, and dream-like or surreal

mental state—to “show his way of seeing and feeling things,” to “explain his thoughts a little more,” or to “give you clues about what’s happening.” Some children recalled the actors “doing the scene that was in the picture” or showing “what they’re talking about,” “like when René was kissing the girl and he put the mask over his and her face, that picture [of *The Lovers I*] popped up.” Another third of children reasoned that a second artistic motive might be to provide more information or “*know-how*” about Magritte’s art “to show us what his paintings would look like [and] to want us to be a painter when we grow up.” His surrealistic paintings also showed that “if it’s painted, it’s like not real, and it doesn’t have to be exactly real.” The remaining third, mostly 7 year olds, either “couldn’t figure that out” or they did not provide an artistic motive. For example, one girl thought that “they didn’t want René to make a big mess on the stage if he was using real paints.”

As these examples indicate, most 7 year olds did not transfer the meanings of the play’s visual, verbal, and kinesthetic metaphors because their minds were focused on seeing and hearing literal visual and verbal dramatic actions. Even though most 11 year olds understood the play’s metaphors, they rated their peers’ enjoyment of this play *unfavorably*, because they were divided over whether this text was “easy” or “hard” to understand for different reasons. For example, “The narrator did a lot of intervening which helped” make it “sort of easy,” but it was also “sort of hard” because “You just didn’t know what was going to happen to next.” Even though one 11-year-old boy knew that the actors “were pretending like they were in different places” by taking “a couple more steps,” he thought the production was “kind of hard to follow” because we “didn’t change the scenery when the actors went to different places” (e.g., René’s home, a graveyard, classroom, fairgrounds, etc.). Furthermore, “If you weren’t listening, you might miss

something, like dreaming about being artist. If you missed this, you might not get the play.” One 11-year-old girl thought the play was “real hard” because, although she knew the Interlocutor “was like René’s conscience [because] he was the only one that could hear her,” she also knew that “your conscience isn’t really a [physical] person.” Likewise, teachers held sharply divided opinions about the meaningfulness of this experience.<sup>12</sup> Thus, despite my directorial intentions, few spectators, including college students, viewed our production from René’s surrealistic perspective.

Another study involved *Crying to Laugh*, an expressionistic Québécois play by Marcel Sabourin, about Mea (me), a child ego; Seluf (self), Mea’s inner self or id; and, Yua (you), a super-egotistical parent-figure wearing drywall stilts. When Mea’s dog (a puppet) accidentally drowns at the beginning of the play, she feels very sad, but Yua admonishes her not cry or she won’t grow up tall like him. When Mea looks into a large mirror, metaphoric tears flow from it and out pops her Seluf who feels her internal sadness. Seluf discovers Yua’s stilts under his pant legs, but Mea doesn’t believe Yua would lie to her about his height. So Seluf explains to Mea why she needs to express her true feelings by using the visual metaphor of a black balloon tucked inside her jumper: “You see, with people it works just like a balloon. . . .You’re sad and you want to cry, but you don’t cry. Where do your tears go? They go into your body, like into a balloon. And your tears and your screams are all jammed up in there. You’re paralyzed! You’ve got a balloon full of stress in your tummy. . . . You’ve got to cry it out [and] let it go!” When Mea finally sees Yua’s stilts, she jumps wildly all over the bed, expresses all her pent-up feelings, and pops colorful balloons that fall down from above in a joyful spectacle that ends the play.<sup>13</sup>

Although we did not ask children directly what the balloon metaphor meant, no child connected Mea's balloon-popping with her release of physical stress, despite Seluf's explicit explanation of this combined verbal, visual, and kinesthetic metaphor. When we asked children how they felt "when Mea jumped on the bed" during this final scene and what made them feel this way, most reported feeling "happy"—but for three different reasons. One, most 11 year olds, especially girls, *empathized with* Mea's joy by knowing she was happy *because* she released all her emotions freely. Two, many children in every age group felt *sympathy for* Mea because they *projected their own* happy feelings and thoughts onto Mea's physical and verbal actions; that is, they said that Mea could do whatever she wanted by messing up the bed and not listening to Yua anymore. In other words, they paid attention to the vehicular base of this conceptual metaphor rather than grasping the target of its symbolic significance. Three, most 7 year olds, especially boys, *distanced* themselves by imagining *themselves* having fun jumping all over the bed and breaking balloons. In other words, the spectacle of this scene literally *diverted their attentions away from Mea's thoughts* by entertaining their own contagiously felt pleasures.

At the beginning of interviews, we asked individual children "to show or tell a friend who didn't see the play what the play was about."<sup>14</sup> Quite surprisingly, only a few older children said the play was about "emotions" or "feelings." When retelling the story, adults more than children verbalized emotion labels (e.g., sad, happy, angry, surprised, afraid), emotional behaviors (e.g., crying, laughing, screaming), and internal emotional states (e.g., hurt, sick, stressed). More 11 than 9 year olds recalled that the play was about an adult (Yua) who wouldn't let a child (Mea) cry, and a Seluf who taught the child to cry so she could express her emotions freely. Yet because few children recalled that Mea's physical aches *caused* her internal conflict, many 7 and

9 year olds missed the play's "main idea" that people need to cry to release stress.

Therefore, when we asked children what Mea learned at the end of the play and how she learned it, only one-third of 7-year-old children transferred the play's thematic metaphor to themselves or society by inferring that "It's okay to cry" by relying on Seluf's explicit dialogue (quoted above). In contrast, more 11 than 9 year olds transferred the metaphor by also inferring that "You should express your feelings" by relying more on Mea's emotional behaviors than on Seluf's dialogue. Although this play was intended for 5 to 8 year olds, its performance may not have resonated with these children because they may still be allowed to cry more often than older children who are told to "control" their emotions, as Yua did to Mea. Seven year olds may not have *needed* to compare the physical consequences of not crying against the causes of Mea's internal conflict. Instead, this play resonated most with 11-year-old girls (and adults) who perceived themselves like Mea because "sometimes I want to bottle up my feelings to make other people feel happy, even though I know I shouldn't," and "if I'm mad or angry or sad, I don't do it in front of my mom. I just hold it in and then, when I go to my room, I start crying." Girls who perceived themselves like Seluf admitted: "I like to cry and scream and yell when I have problems that can't be solved."

Most children sympathized for and distanced themselves from characters' perspectives objectively, and half empathized with Mea and Seluf from within their subjective perspectives. These results may have occurred because all three characters in this expressionistic fantasy broke the fourth wall by directly addressing spectators and thereby deluded them into thinking from self-conscious perspectives. Another reason may be that children aged 7 or 8 are just beginning to infer others' *implicit* thoughts and motives (like nascent psychologists), so they need *explicit*

visual and verbal actions to comprehend a play's conceptual metaphors best. While child spectators laughed and enjoyed the humor of *Crying to Laugh* very much, the play's conceptual metaphors affirmed what they already knew about emotional expression by age and gender.

Another study explored young comprehension of metaphors in *Noodle Doodle Box*, a so-called "absurdist" play by Paul Maar.<sup>15</sup> First, we asked 6 and 7 year olds to "pretend you're telling the story to someone who didn't see the play" and to show and tell us "what happened in the play." Despite the play's randomly structured episodes between two people, Pepper and Zacharias, who play in their respective boxes, most children retold the story by skipping the first half and jumping straight to its inciting action as follows: The Drum Major marches in playing his drum; he and Pepper hide Zacharias' box in her box; he and Zacharias push Pepper's box offstage; the Drum Major drives away in his (offstage) truck and steals both their boxes; Pepper and Zacharias get a bigger box out of the wall; and, they play in it. When we asked children, "What do you think is the main idea (or point) of the play?," many inferred the positive concepts of friendship and sharing as thematic metaphors, while a few focused on such negative concepts as fighting, stealing, lying, and playing tricks on people—all based more on the protagonists' visualized actions than on their dialogue. When we asked whether they "learned anything from the play," over one-third said they learned nothing because, as one girl noted, "I already knew it." Girls more than boys reported learning something about friendship; for instance, "If you break up with a friend, you can get them back easily if you apologize." One boy transferred this metaphor to himself by confessing that "I didn't really want to make friends with my sister, and I learned that I should." Another boy learned that in plays "they don't usually really do things that are real. They sometimes do them like pretend. Like [the Drum Major] didn't have a real truck because it



would be too big for the stage.” Overall, most children reported enjoying this absurdist play because they found it “easy” to understand.

However, teachers had vastly divergent opinions about their students’ understanding based on comments heard after performances. Although we did not ask children why the Drum Major wore a facial mask on the back of his head, some teachers explained the “two-faced” meaning of this visual metaphor to their students. Many teachers were especially outraged over the scene when Zacharias spit water from his bottle into Pepper’s face—a scene that a minority of children in our study recalled. As one teacher wrote, “Half thought it was silly and funny, and the other half were offended by the unhealthy things with the water bottle and by the way the characters treated each other. Evidently, their strong sense of the right and wrong way to treat a friend interfered with their enjoyment. The play got the desired response from them, I suppose.”

When we asked children in our study how Pepper felt “when Zacharias squirted water in her face,” the majority knew full well that she felt very sad, mad, or surprised based on their recollections of her facial, verbal, and behavioral expressions. As one East Indian American boy noted, “people don’t like being squirted with water. Well, some people like that because they think it’s fun, but I don’t like people squirting in my face.” Near the end of the play, when Zacharias won’t let Pepper play in the huge box, she finally leaves him by exiting offstage. While left alone on stage, the actor thought long and hard about his hurtful actions toward Pepper. So when we asked children how Zacharias felt during this scene, everyone sensed his extreme sadness and loneliness from his “crying” and by inferring the actor’s psychological subtext. As one boy added, “he should be ashamed of himself because he was mean to Pepper.” Thus, children clearly understood the emotional *consequences* of Zacharias’ hurtful behaviors

and thereby transferred the play's friendship metaphor to their lives. In opposition, many teachers dwelled more on the play's *causal conflicts* than its pro-social resolution and presumed their students did not appreciate its friendship themes—contrary to the evidence of our study.

Teachers needn't worry about the long-term consequences of thematic metaphors because elementary students seldom remember themes from recent or past productions, as Roger Deldime and Jeanne Pigeon discovered. For example, in a very different production of *Noodle Doodle Box (Kikerikiste)* produced in France, children did not recall its themes from seeing performances several months earlier. Instead, they remembered the monumental size of the final box because “the further the phenomenon is removed from reality, the stronger the audience's member recollection.”<sup>16</sup> If we want children to remember performances over the long-term, then realistic scenography may be the least effective means of keeping metaphoric images in their memories.

In sum, the evidence from my own and others' studies confirms basic principles in cognitive development: Not until age 8 or 9 do children begin to comprehend deeper layers of conceptual metaphors beyond the confines of observable dramatic actions. As Mikhailova found, even 10 to 12 year olds tend to remain within what she calls the “plot and associative” layers of a performance's “semantic field,” and many feel “no desire to ‘apply’ [staged depictions of childhood] to themselves as the core of life in the [third] ideological layer.” Yet these conclusions should not stop artists from utilizing theatrical metaphors, for as Robert Verbrugge advises, “*The more contextualizing information you provide a child, the more evidence you will find for metaphoric competence*” (his italics).<sup>17</sup>

My dear colleague, Shifra Schonmann, poses a provocative question for us all to contemplate: “To what extent are children capable of having an artistic experience?”<sup>18</sup> I believe

that children's capabilities all depend upon how we define "aesthetic experience" based on "basic," "deeper," and "fullest" layers of theatrical understanding and appreciation:<sup>19</sup>

\* If we define basic understanding as the ability to feel another person's emotions, then infants are already equipped to sense others' emotions by gazing upon their faces and bodies.

\* If we define deeper understanding as the ability to distinguish between "real" and "unreal" dramatic actions, then toddlers have no trouble making these distinctions.

\* If we define full appreciation as the ability to comprehend dramatized themes, then children as young as age 6 are perfectly capable of discerning main ideas by describing characters' dramatic actions.

\* If we expect children to suspend their disbelief willingly, then artists need to retain the fourth wall and keep young minds fully engaged and involved inside fictional worlds.

\* If we want children to interpret and appreciate visual, verbal, and kinesthetic metaphors, then artists need to make playwrights' metaphors matter through their staging, acting, and designing practices (as suggested by examples above).

\* If we want children to transfer conceptual metaphors of childhood from the stage to their lives by perceiving themselves *as* child characters in problematic situations, then directors need to cast talented child actors. Alternatively, adult actors need to take childhood seriously by making their internal subtexts explicitly honest, believably authentic, and emotionally compelling.

\* If we want children to judge artistic quality, then critics need to consider children's artistic values from their psychological perspectives.<sup>20</sup>

\* Finally, if we want to close the aesthetic distance between theatre for young audiences

and adults, then TYA must develop its own innovative, meaningful, metaphoric forms, inclusive of all genres and styles, yet exclusive to the unique developmental needs and desires of young people for its own artistic sake, as Schonmann advocates.<sup>21</sup> While I agree with her that a child's attitude toward theatre may not necessarily be changed by an aesthetic experience, I believe that by making metaphors matter we may make live theatre matter to more young audiences.

#### Notes

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2. Anna Mikhailova, "Who Invented Theatre? or 'A Hundred Thousand Whys'," *Youth Theatre Journal* 8.4 (1994): 3; Viveka Hagnell, "Children as Spectators: Audience Research in Children's Theatre," in *New Directions in Audience Research: Advances in Reception and Audience Research 2*, ed. Willmar Sauter (Utrecht: Instituut voor Theaterwetenschap, 1988), 53-62; Gavriel Salomon, "Television is 'Easy' and Print is 'Tough': The Differential Investment of Mental Effort in Learning as a Function of Perceptions and Attributions," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 76 (1984): 647-58. See also Mabel Rice, Aletha C. Huston, John C. Wright, "The Forms of Television: Effects on Children's Attention, Comprehension and Social Behavior," in *Children and the Formal Features of Television*, ed. Manfred Meyer (New York: Saur, 1983),

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3. Johnny Saldaña, “‘Significant Differences’ in Child Audience Response: Assertions from the ASU Longitudinal Study,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 10 (1996): 67-83; Mafra Gagliardi, “A Model of a Survey on the Spectators of Children’s Theatre,” undated English translation of pamphlet, 64-70, in Lowell Swortzell collection, Child Drama Archives, Arizona State University; Mafra Gagliardi, *Nella Bocca dell’Immaginazione: Le Scena Teatrale e lo Spettatore Bambino* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2007); Jürgen Kirschner and Kristin Wardetzky, *Kinder im Theatre: Dokumentation und Rezeption von Helen Verburgs ‘Winterschlaf’ in zwei Inszenierungen* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Kinder- und Jugendtheaterzentrum in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993), summary in English, 272-75;

4. Alan M. Rubin, “Media Uses and Effects: A Uses-and-Gratification Perspective,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994), 417-36; Sharon Grady, “Asking the Audience: Talking to Children about Representation in Children’s Theatre,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 13 (1999): 82-92; Jeanne Klein, “Take Childhood Seriously,” *TYA Today* 21.2 (2007): 3; Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media,” *Media Psychology* 6 (2004): 147-67.

5. For details, see Valkenburg and Janssen, 16; Gunter, McAleer, and Clifford, 13-23; Buckingham, 217-41; Jeanne Klein, “Children’s Interpretations of Computer-Animated Dinosaurs in Theatre,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 17 (2003): 38-50; Michael J. Parsons, *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Developmental Account of Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47-52.

6. Brad J. Bushman and Joanne Cantor, “Media Ratings for Violence and Sex: Implications for Policy Makers and Parents,” *American Psychologist* 58.2 (2003): 130-41.

7. Andersson’s survey and other Swedish studies are reported in Willmar Sauter, “Fiction, Mainly Fiction: Some Surveys on the Theatrical Experience of Young Audiences,” *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 187-98.

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10. Paul L. Harris, *Children and Emotion: The Development of Psychological Understanding* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 54-55, 74. For a critique of Bullough and Kant, see Alan Goldman, "The Aesthetic," *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 189-192.

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12. Jeanne Klein, "Elementary Teachers' Evaluations of University Theatre Performances for Young Audiences," *Youth Theatre Journal* 11 (1997): 1-14.

13. Marcel Sabourin, *Crying to Laugh (Pleurer pour rire)*, translated by John Van Burek (Montréal, PQ: Centre des auteurs dramatique, 1980), 42-3; Jeanne Klein, "Reading Empathy in a Québécois Play: *Crying to Laugh*," *Theatre Research in Canada* 15.1 (Spring 1994): 58-74, and "Performance Factors that Inhibit Empathy and Trigger Distancing: *Crying to Laugh*," *Youth Theatre Journal* 9 (1995): 53-67.

14. Seven year olds used photographs of the actors as "dolls" and small replicas of the scenery to act out the story as they recalled the story of the play. This method, also used by Kirschner and Wardetzky, helps children remember details during free story recall tasks.

15. Jeanne Klein and Marguerite Fitch, "First Grade Children's Comprehension of *Noodle Doodle Box*," *Youth Theatre Journal* 5.2 (1990): 7-13. This study also used photographed "dolls" of the actors, two proportionately sized boxes that replicated the scenery, and a tiny drum.

16. Roger Deldime and Jeanne Pigeon, "The Memory of the Young Audience," translated by Robert Anderson, *Youth Theatre Journal* 4.2 (1989): 5. This article is an English summary of their book, *La Memoire du Jeune Spectateur* (Bruxelles: De Boeck-Wesmael, 1988).

17. Ellen Winner, *The Point of Words: Children's Understanding of Metaphor and Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Anna Mikhailova, "Addressing the Myths and Realities of Age in a Russian Theatre Study," translated by Maia Kipp, *Youth Theatre Journal* 8.4 (1994): 9; Robert R. Verbrugge, "Research on Metaphoric Development: Themes and Variations," *Human Development* 29 (1986): 241.

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19. James R. Hamilton distinguishes these layers in *The Art of Theater* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

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21. Schonmann, 27, 85.