(RE)LOCATING THE BOUNDARIES OF CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN
SINGAPORE- A CASE STUDY ON I THEATRE LTD

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

Children's theatre in Singapore has been present for many years and has enjoyed complexity and diversity over time. Increasingly, children's theatre has risen in prominence in many countries worldwide. However, children's theatre in Singapore is almost an unexplored territory and is often given a mere token acknowledgment of its presence in the local theatre landscape. As such, theoretical discourse is limited when it comes to children's theatre due to the lack of research work.

In Singapore, we face a paradoxical situation in which the boundaries of children's theatre are constructed through the eyes of adults and their perception. This paper discusses how children's theatre is treated and has been packaged as a pedagogical product with a checklist of characteristics for it to be validated as "good theatre". In this thesis, I propose that watching, participating and engaging in children's theatre should first and foremost be a process that foregrounds the value of communication in theatre. More specifically, the boundaries of children's theatre should be pushed to include the communication processes between the performers on stage, the adult and children audiences.

This paper also aims to challenge the preconceived notions and views of children's theatre and provide a debate on how by (re)locating the existing boundaries, we can raise further questions on the artistic, educational and cultural communicative function in children's theatre that might be pertinent to the broader study of theatre. In doing so, this thesis challenges how the boundaries in children's theatre can also grow from the children's' concern: their own ways of seeing, responding and understanding theatre. Equally important, this thesis also raises issues such as the validity and limitations of evaluating such categories.

Chapter One- Setting the Scene:
A Synoptic View on the Complexity of Children's Theatre

In June 2010, I undertook the role of Production Coordinator for I

Theatre Ltd. as part of its *ACE! Festival*[1]. Part of my job was to

coordinate the international productions as part of the festival. This gave

me the opportunity to be present during the performances as well as to

gather feedback from the audience.

During the festival, I was in the theatre watching one of the productions,

Antoine and the Paper Aeroplane[2]. It was a matinee and the audience

consisted of mostly children. The performance was about Antoine de

Saint-Exupéry's three-day desert sojourn after his 1935 plane crash

which prompted his writing of *The Little Prince*. I noticed that unlike

other children's theatre productions that I watched which focused on

narration and story-telling to propel the plot, this production had no

dialogue. Instead the performers were speaking in gibberish while the

solo musician on stage played the guitar and hummed unfamiliar tunes.

There were not any colourful costumes, song and dance or elaborate set

used, which I had expected of a typical children's theatre performance

often observed in Singapore. Instead the performers used physical

movements, mime and simple puppetry made out of everyday objects as

its presentational mode. I glanced around the audience and saw some

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[1] This festival provided a platform offering a variety of activities ranging from children's workshops to theatre performances which coincided with the school vacation. That year, the company collaborated with the *Children's Season* by the National Museum of Singapore as part of the festival to expand its repertoire. Due to the collaboration, this resulted in an extended pool of resources which in return, enabled a showcase of both local and international productions during the festival.
[2] This was performed by a *Blak Wulff Productions*, a production team from the United Kingdom. This was performed by Kristina O. Sorensen, Rachel Warr and Budam. Directed by Myro Wulff

adults frowning, while the children were staring intently on stage motionless.

After the performance, I stood outside the theatre to usher the audience out. A parent approached me and commented that the "performance was not suitable for children". When I asked for the reasons for such a statement, she said that she 'expected it to be more spectacular with clear moral values'[3]. She also further reiterated that it was not suitable for children because it was 'difficult to understand the story'. Her daughter, who was beside her, looked at her and said, "I liked the show!" When I probed for reasons for her enjoyment, she said without hesitation, "Because I could piece together my own story"[4].

It was a pity that the girl could not elaborate on her reason due to the lack of time and her mother having to rush off to another appointment. However, at that moment, it struck me that a gap existed between the perception of an adult and a child audience in a children's theatre performance. How then do adults and children view children's theatre? What are the differences in their viewing experience? Are there criteria set by adults in assessing children's theatre? At that instance as an adult audience, it made me aware that I too had certain expectations about children's theatre prior to watching that performance. These questions prompted me to further examine children's theatre because the differences seemed to exist in accessing children's theatre since there is a difference in audience response and the need to explore children's theatre emerged from the fact that there is something that cannot be

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[3] Quote from an informal conversation with a mother and her accompanying a 7 year old daughter after the performance. (21st May 2010)
[4] Ibid

answered readily and easily. The above encounter made me realise how children's theatre as a marker of a cultural experience that engages with its audience intellectually, imaginatively and emotionally, has a complex nature. More specifically, I posit that there is value in the difference in responses between the lens of an adult and a child audience.

Brian Seward, Artistic Director and founder of I Theatre shared with me that he was doing research on children's theatre as part of his post-graduate degree, but gave up due to the "lack of material in the field". He added that this "phenomenon is also evident in the UK". He says:

> I've been in Singapore for almost 15 years and it is the same as the UK. People treat children's theatre as second-grade theatre. There is very little research done on it because people treat it as child's play. To them, it is less important than adult theatre. There is a lot of stigma and cynicism around children's theatre. In Singapore, children's theatre is used more for education. You can't escape that fact[5].

The above statement raises three issues. Firstly, there is lack of research done in children's theatre. To quote Dr Aileen Lai-Yan Chan[6] , she describes the existing view of children's theatre across the world "as nothing but a sideshow, a genre that is noticed by only a few...marginalized, and neglected[7]". This points to the fact that children's theatre is still a marginalized area that has yet to be fully explored. Secondly, I posit that the reason for this "neglect", as Seward mentioned, is due to the

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[5] Interview with Brian Seward, 3rd March 2009.
[6] Dr Aileen Lay-Yam Chan is a senior lecturer at School of Continuing Professional education at the City University of Hong Kong. Conference of Children's Theatre Arts in Asian, Hong Kong: 2010.
[7] Quoted from Dr Aileen Chan's Panel Speech Conference of Children's Theatre Arts in Asia, Hong Kong: 2010.

"stigma and cynicism" that surrounds children's theatre. Similar to Swortzell's observation, often when looking at children's theatre at a glance, adult audiences tend to dismiss this area by instinctively associating it with "the amateur, the playfulness, and the lack of seriousness in this area of discipline'" (Swortzell, 1990: 2). As a result of this perception, it appears that the stigma associated with children's theatre is that it is often seen as less important as compared to its adult theatre counterpart. Finally, from Seward's statement, there is an expectation that children's theatre is used as a teaching tool. As seen from the varying response from her child in my opening analogy, the mother expected the performance to have a "clear moral value". However, her daughter seemed to have a different view of the performance. Clearly, there was an objective and expectation from the mother in bringing her daughter to the theatre. The key concern here is the nature of spectatorship and the relationship between the theatrical experience and the individual's reception processes in reacting, watching and experiencing.

This thesis first aims to investigate how the existing boundaries of children's theatre in Singapore are formed through the views, expectations and preconceived notions of children's theatre. More so, I aim to raise issues of the validity and limitations of evaluating children's theatre as a category since these boundaries are created through the lens of the adult. Through I Theatre's productions[8] as case studies, I will also evaluate how children's theatre is used as a teaching tool and the limitations of its approaches to provide a debate on how the existing boundaries of children's theatre should expand to include the reception of the child's audience. Finally, I hope to raise further questions on the artistic, educational and cultural

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[8] I will discuss the reasons my choice in using I Theatre's production later in the chapter.

communicative quality in children's theatre that might be pertinent to the broader study of theatre. Through this, I hope to challenge how the boundaries in children's theatre can also grow from the children's concern: their own ways of seeing, responding and understanding theatre.

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Locating the Boundaries of Children's Theatre[9] in Singapore:
Assessing the Definitions, Current Status and Expectations

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<u>Children as Heterogeneous Audience</u>

In setting the boundaries of children's theatre, using age to categorize children's theatre is often the main consideration. In publicizing children's performances, children's theatre companies in Singapore tend to set a recommended age range as an indicator to parents and educators on the suitability of the performance. For example, in the publicity brochures, it often states "recommended for children 2-6 years old" or "aged 8 and above[10]". This point to the fact that companies approaching the term "children" already subconsciously homogenize the audience by assuming the suitability of the performance based on age. If setting the boundaries of "children's theatre" is problematic, using age to draw the boundaries of children's theatre can be equally problematic. I would like to point out that using the tentative age-limits for the term "children" can be blurred.

In Singapore, the term "children" varies according to its context. The age of majority applicable in Singapore is 21 years old as provided by common law. However, there are different definitions of "a child" stated in various legislations for

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[9] The definition of "children's theatre" is not definitive and has been interpreted according to the context of its reference and study. This includes children's theatre as a study in classroom learning or children as subjects performing for other adult and children audience. The term "children's theatre" in this thesis refers only to a theatre for children where performances by adults are directed towards an intended child audience.

[10] Source taken from Singapore Repertory Theatre's (SRT) The Little Company brochure of *Bear and Chicken Get Ready for School* and *I Theatre Ltd brochure of The Girl in the Red Hood.*

specific purposes. According to the Children and Young Person Act (CYPA) 2001, a "child" is a person below the age of 14. A "young person" means a person who is 14 years of age or above but below the age of 16 years. A "juvenile" means a male or female person who is 7 years of age or above but below the age of 16 years. The Employment Act adopts the same definitions as the CYPA for a "child" and a "young person". The Women's Charter 1997 defines "a child" as a "child of the marriage who is below 21 years", and a "minor" as "a person who is below the age of 21 years and who is not married, or a widower or a widow[11]". One can say that even within the boundaries of the term "children", this definition cannot be pinned down. Hence, using age as a definitive tool to define children's theatre is not the most effective way in trying to define "children's theatre". From the above, using age to define "children" is not reliable. However, more often than not, the term "children" is homogenized as a category, which in turn homogenizes children's theatre as a genre.

Also, what needs to be pointed out here is that we need to acknowledge that the mental age of the child does not always correspond with the biological age (Schonmann, 2006:10); therefore we should be very cautious and not assume the homogeneity of the term "children". One has to bear in mind that an audience of children within the same age group can have varying responses and reactions. Perhaps what distinguishes children's theatre from adult theatre is the fact that it consciously addresses itself to be specific to child audience. Directors, educators and parents often make assumptions about the developmental needs and capabilities of its audience and these developmental needs are often associated with the age and maturity of the children's audience. Moses Goldberg proposed that plays and performances should be

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[11] Source from Singapore Children's Society website. (Accessed: 14 September 2010)

fashioned, both in content and artistic integrity, to match the stages of child's

psychological growth (Goldberg quoted in England, 1993: 5). He divides the life of a

child into four phases.

> Children under seven are active, curious, idealistic optimistic, use other
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> children merely as catalyst in their playing, enjoy trying out roles in
>
> recognisable settings, and have short attention spans. The theatre they need is
>
> visual participatory; its favourite subjects: fantasy creatures and animals.
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> Children from seven to nine are preoccupied with rules and roles. Social
>
> norms become important and 'fairness is at a premium. They like the 'good'
>
> and 'bad' clearly defined and distinguished and are strongly involved with
>
> stereotypes...Children from ten to thirteen do not merely try out roles but
>
> examine them in order to make choices. Individual count for more
>
> than right and wrong and social recognition is what matters now....Young
>
> people of fourteen to eighteen also need recognition but also need to accept
>
> the limitations of being human (England, 1993: 5).

By categorizing the appropriate-ness or suitability of children's theatre, we

need to ask ourselves the basic questions on age in relation to theatre. From what age

is a child able to enjoy a theatre performance? More importantly, how effective is it in

using age to draw the boundaries of children's theatre? To add to this complexity, an

audience composing of all males or females children react very differently from a

mixed audience in the same performance. Similarly, the child audience reacts very

differently when there are adults present in the audience as well. Hence, this again

highlights the arbitrariness of using age to draw boundaries. As Goldberg mentioned,

we need to move beyond the stereotype that "all boys love adventure and girls

romance" (Goldberg quoted in England 1993:5). More specifically, I would like to point out that every audience is unique and they react very differently to the text, actors and content of the performance. Here, I would like to highlight that while it might be useful in determining what is appropriate for the various age groups, one needs to acknowledge the subjectivity and arbitrary nature of using age as a tool to define the boundaries of children's theatre. Hence, children's theatre should not address the child audience as a homogeneous audience; neither should the analysis in children's theatre be generalized.

The Educational Expectations of Children's Theatre and its Current Stigma

Over the years, most research done in the field of children's theatre operate within the educational and pedagogical perspective. For example, Neelands' main focus on children's theatre is on the purpose of creating and structuring work for young people (Neelands, 1991: 4). His focus is to encompass all forms of creative imitative behaviour from the spontaneous imaginative play of children to the more formal experience of the play performance by actors for an audience (1991: 5). He also shares how theatre as a platform can be an 'instrument for teaching and learning' (1991: 54). Similarly, Goldberg focuses on the age of the children's audience and discusses how to achieve the "best theatrical experience for the child audience" (Goldberg, 1974: 27) and the focus is on the learning aims and the experience of teaching through drama (Goldberg, 1974: 24). What is clear is that since these viewpoints are often from drama educators and the common concern shared among these practitioners is often on the educational function of children's theatre. My concern is that the relationship between children's theatre and its audience is rarely

perceived as a simply a matter of enjoyment but always made intentional in the area of learning and education.

In Singapore, many adults have made imperative connection between children's theatre and learning explicit and turn it into formalized education and schooling[12]. This phenomenon goes back to the "myth" of childhood, where the central motifs include innocence, need for nurturing and protection in the formative educational years. As childhood became constructed as a phase in the development of people, this "myth" of childhood was soon identified by education and learning (Schonmann, 2006: 35). As such, the focus on the overlapping frames of education, teaching and learning in theatre for children is very different from adult theatre where it is often discussed more in terms of its aesthetics and art form, and hardly perceived as educational. In this respect, the ambition of a trip to the theatre or watching a theatre performance in school is to provide the young audience with a wide range of experience outside formal classroom learning.

The official policy in art and education in Singapore also shows that the current boundaries of children's theatre are constructed mainly around the educational uses and its benefits. For example, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has reported that it will increase its funding for speech and drama activities for primary schools and also increase its workforce and facilities to increase "learning opportunities for the students" (The Straits Times: 1 Sept 2010). This also includes endorsing Arts Education Programmes such as 'assembly plays' which are half-hour skits designed to suit the school's weekly assembly programmes. These performances are usually designed to suit occasions such as Racial Harmony Day or carry environmental messages. Schools that book these shows are usually subsidized by the Tote Board.

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[12] This is will be discussed in Chapter 2

This implies that there is focus on the possibilities of learning through the arts. That is, learning that is enhanced or delivered through using the arts as a tool of its instrumental effectiveness in aiding learning. This is the perception from the state that engagement with the arts is beneficial and that there should be a form of investment in this area. While there has been increasing support in the arts for the young, the actual perceived educational and developmental benefits of children's theatre have not set out to prove or measure these benefits. Instead, local governing bodies like the National Arts Council (NAC) has been primarily interested in describing the policy discourses and debates that frame children's theatre provision without actually exploring the interrelation between arts participant and academic achievements.

In addition, children's theatre is perceived to generate less income, because ticket prices are necessarily lower to ensure access and affordability since they are often sold in bulk to families and schools for its educational purpose. This puts pressure on the production to cost less, re-enforcing perceptions of that children's theatre is of "second division". For this, there is a deep-rooted and continuous presumption that theatre for children is somehow marginalized. As Seward pointed out, children's theatre at least in Singapore is often seen as "child's play" and "less important". I posit that another strong reason for this perception of children's theatre as "child's play" is that the content or "story" has been always associated with children's literature. To quote Billington, "if you relied on the British Theatre solely for your information about children, you would assume that they loved only furry animals, fairy tales, glove puppets, gingerbread men, dwarfs, giants and audience participation" (Billington, quoted in England, 1993: 8). This phenomenon is similar in Singapore. Children's theatre is often staged based on stories like *The Gingerbread*

Man, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Little Red Riding Hood*[13], which often stems from children's literary texts. Peter Hunt argues that "childhood is after all, a state we grow away from" (Hunt, 1999: 1). Sharing the same sentiments, England Young has argued that children's theatre is a related branch of "traditional fantasy treated in theatre for the young, that of myth of legend that has been trivialised" (England, 1990: 113). He argues that children's theatre will always be seen as "play and nothing serious" (England, 1990: 6). More specifically, children's theatre cannot escape the stigma that it has to "protect children from the fullest and harshest disclosure of unrelenting violence" (Postman, quoted in England, 1990: 222). This leads adults to believe that the innocence of the child's view has to be protected. Thus, children's theatre distinguishes itself from adult theatre that it is often self-conscious and targets an audience that is not yet matured. Leading on to this, there has been a dismissive attitude within the industry towards productions for children viewed as "school theatre" and seen as settling for lower standards.

As a result of this status that often labels children's theatre, the recognition of children's theatre in Singapore has also affected the level of respect of the art in the field. Within the field of children's theatre, many artists, producers, and educators in children's theatre have been taken for granted and not given the due recognition with regards to its adult theatre counterpart. Actors who perform for children's theatre are often thought to be there because they are unable to get a role in the adult theatre. Similarly, graduates from Performing Arts colleges in Singapore use children's theatre as a stepping stone to network into "serious" adult theatre.

Specifically, there is still a lack of respect not just from the public but also the profession itself, from those who view children's theatre as "child's play" in

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[13] These performances are put up by local children theatre companies such as I Theatre, The Little Compnay and Uplayers Theatre.

comparison to their own work in adult theatre. Having sat through the rehearsal processes of I Theatre's productions, I observed that the most difficult issue for any actor to come to terms with in children's theatre is the seriousness of the story. As I have mentioned, children's theatre often employs fantasy stories to engage its children's audience and new actors of children's theatre do not take the content seriously, thinking it is another fairytale. As a result, the biggest impediment to the success of children's theatre is a misguided assumption that the play must be performed with jollity or gaiety and ironically, serious issues must not be presented in a serious tone.

On the part of newspapers, it appears that the genre of children's theatre is frequently overlooked. Reviews on children's theatre are often omitted from the review section of the newspaper. As a result, review on children's theatre is rare and again, creates an impression that children's theatre is less important. Occasionally, children's theatre companies do get a token mention in the newspaper. For example in 2010, *Young Starts for Arts* (Chia : 20 June 2010) took stock of how children theatre companies are slowly focusing on creating theatre programmes and performances for children. The article also gave an overview of the various children's theatre companies in Singapore and discussed the pragmatic approaches on how children's theatre is used as a platform to generate more revenue for its adult theatre counterpart. Even within the current boundaries of theatre in Singapore, it is clear that children's theatre has yet to ascertain its position. What sets the boundaries of children's theatre is the fact that it consciously compartmentalizes itself into an isolated genre. As a result of this, children's theatre has not been given the due journalistic attention and it often only regarded purely for its main function of teaching and learning[14].

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[14] This will be discussed in Chapter 2.

I would like to point out that these concerns and criteria are constructed by adults according to what they think children theatre should be. In this respect, the adult here comes first as author, maker, performer and the child comes after as a passive audience. As Slade mentions, there is a constant anxiety among these educators and parents to "teach" since children are seen as "audiences of the future" (1973: 270). In my opinion, the greatest factor that separates children's theatre and adult theatre is the issue of choice. In "adult theatre", adult audiences have the freedom to choose what they want to see whereas in the boundaries of children's theatre, children do not always get to choose what performance to watch, but are brought to the theatre by parents and educators. The result of this is that child audiences are rendered powerless and have not much choice but to watch what has been designed for them. Hence, in deciding what is "good" for them, parents and educators often subconsciously ascribe attributes onto this term based on their own pre-conceived notion on what "good" children's theatre should be and its educational benefits. This is of course considered wholly or largely subjective since it often boils down to a matter of taste, personal and social preference, as seen in opening anecdote. Here, what is "good" is often applied to the physical and material standards of the production. Often these attributes are associated with the form and content in children's theatre. This also raises questions on how appropriate the themes, content and styles are, and what qualifies as suitable for children. Hence, what children's theatre is "for" can be said to be created based on what corresponds to the adult constructed "needs" of young audiences by creating a checklist of their expectations in children's theatre.

As a result, these parents and educators might feel that the responsibilities fall on them in deciding the type of performances that are beneficial for the children. This

means that theatre for children is a product made for children. While the counter-point is that children are deemed neither mature enough nor have economical powers to purchase these tickets, my suggestion is that children are included in the decision process. As such, the accessibility of the theatre therefore needs to be actively negotiated by these young audiences through a process that can become a form of self socialization, affirmation and choice. I will discuss how this communication process should be relooked at later in the thesis. As a result of such a top-down phenomenon of children's theatre being created "for them", this prompted me to reconsider and critique the efficacy of such approaches of children's theatre, education and learning.

From the above illustrations, the existing boundaries that separate adult and children's theatre are based on adult expectations and intended agendas of what children's theatre is "for". Hence, the paradox in children's theatre is that they will always be based on adults' expectations. I would like to argue that children's theatre needs to depart from these existing boundaries in order to change our perception on how we can view children's theatre through the eyes of the child audience themselves.

Like any other form of theatre, I would like to state that children's theatre is a shared experience of engaging and participating. What children's theatre provides us is a platform of seeing. A child can obtain pleasures from the theatre experience from more than just watching the performance. It is through an immersive engagement and experience that possibilities of learning and creativity can be achieved. Rather than shrugging off its association with the amateur and childish, one should focus on the vital issues and valuable debates that children's theatre is able to raise.

Why I Theatre Ltd?

The immediate association one usually has with children's theatre in Singapore is the company Act 3. A reason for this is that Act 3 was the first formal institution for children's theatre and with its new directions as Act 3 Theatrics, it prides itself as the "first children's theatre company[15]". In 1984, the company pioneered the genre, children's theatre, in Singapore and remained the driving force for decades. Based on this reputation, the company, which has been around for more than 20 years, has been actively creating performances for children. Besides that, Act 3 has also a second platform, Act 3 International that focuses on bringing in international children's theatre for a local audience. Besides Act 3 (International and Theatrics), there are three other theatre companies specializing in children's theatre in Singapore. Another company, The Players Theatre, is a non-profit Children's Theatre Company with youth outreach as their focus - especially to the disadvantaged[16]. In addition, there is The Little Company, which is a division of the Singapore Repertory Theatre that produces quality plays specifically for children aged 2 - 12. Their focus is on helping children develop socially, mentally, and emotionally and that children deserve quality theatre as much as adults[17]. Finally, I Theatre, which has been established for 10 years, focuses on producing only children's theatre for the public.

Natalie Koh reported that in recent years, there is a rise in children's theatre companies in Singapore due to the realization that "children's theatre can actually be a money-making business" (The Business Times, Arts, 15 July 2011). Similarly, as Chia mentioned, companies such as The Little Company is used as a platform to

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[15] Source taken from Act 3Theatrics Website. (Accessed: 12 Nov 2010)
http://www.act3theatrics.com/indexflash.htm
[16] Source taken from The Players Theatre website(Accessed: 12 Nov 2010)
http://www.theplayerstheatre.org
[17] Source taken from the The Singapore Repertory Theatre website(Accessed: 12 Nov 2010)
http://www.srt.com.sg

bring in revenue to sustain and support its main stage productions first and foremost (Chia : 20 June 2010). Here, we see how children's theatre such as The Little Company is used as a platform to further support its adult theatre. Hence, the focus of such subsidiary companies is often for pragmatic and economical reasons. As Slade observes, while the attitude of children's theatre is still seen as educational, it cannot escape "underlying this propaganda the word 'box office'…theatre is run as a business" (Slade, 1973: 270).

While I do not deny the fact I Theatre also runs as a "business", one reason for choosing I Theatre as a case study is that it focuses solely on producing performances for children. While companies like The Little Company also do produce children's theatre, it relies on a different business model which is not the aim of this thesis. Nonetheless, this implies that the perception of children's theatre is an "add on" rather than something integrated with the rest of the company's work (Clark quoted in Reason, 2010:34). In this respect, children's theatre becomes a "business" first and foremost for the company rather than exploring the benefits of the discipline. Similarly, Act 3 International does not produce local productions but bring in international productions from around the world for the local audience. In this light, it is also not my main focus to explore international works and its impact on the audiences.

Having been around for 10 years, I Theatre has been actively producing local productions. This means that the company uses local actors, composer and dancers for its performances. To quote Seward, rather than conducting workshops and assembly shows for the public as a source of revenue to support the company, it chooses only to create "quality productions" and produces "serious children's theatre". This means I Theatre uses its resources as well as local talents to solely focus on children's theatre.

In this respect, it implies that the company has experience and expertise in creating "serious" and "quality" productions. Hence, in using I Theatre as my case study, this is in line with my research focus in investigating children's theatre within the local context and also what it means to produce "quality" work.   Through this, I will be able to explore this aspect from the company, teacher's and audience point of view, thus offering various perspectives on children's theatre in Singapore. In addition, by solely focusing on producing children's theatre, it suggests that the company is aware of the values and benefits of it and is dedicated to push this agenda.

What also interests me is that while the three companies mentioned above brand themselves as children's theatre companies or focuses on producing theatre for children, I Theatre Ltd does not. Instead, I Theatre brands itself as a theatre company that produces "family-oriented theatre". That said, this does not necessarily mean that I Theatre is not viewed as a children's theatre company. Rather, it suggests that there is clearly intention on the company's part to deliberate depart from this category of children's theatre. To quote its vision, the aim of the company is to "produce theatre experiences that will be as accessible and challenging, funny and thought-provoking to an adult as to a child" and as a result, it claims to "hold a unique position within the local theatre scene"[18], in trying to move away from entirely "educational". Perhaps based on the discussed stigma about children's theatre in Singapore, this could be a reason as to the company's deliberate choice of branding and its shift away from the existing status of children's theatre.

Specifically, this unique positioning of the company is indicative that there is a movement towards audiences of mixed ages, often with the entire families attending plays together. Rather than setting an appropriate age limit targeted for children, the

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[18] Source taken from I Theatre website (Accessed 10 Nov 2010)
http://www.itheatre.org

publicity materials often put "recommended for everyone age 4 to 94" or "6 to 106". Furthermore, discounts are given based on various categories such as "adult/child, family package and big family package". This is a clear indicator that the company is deliberating targeting both adult and child audience. In doing so, it suggests that its intention might be to depart from the current status and stigma of children's theatre in Singapore. This is in line with what Klein states: "the best theatre is one that adults and children can enjoy simultaneously" (Klein, 2005: 52). Bearing in mind that one difference between adult theatre and children's theatre is that while adult theatre consists mostly of adult audience, children's theatre audience is made up of both adult and children, perhaps in deliberately positioning itself to include both adult and child audience, the more comprehensive term of "family theatre" and "family entertainment" now appears to be more suitable. Hence, another reason for choosing I Theatre as a case study is to first investigate the meeting point between the traditional stigmas of children's theatre's being performed for child audience and the use of the term "family entertainment" today. Also, with adults accompanying children to the theatre, this will allow me to investigate the how the presence of accompanying parents and educators play a part in influencing and impacting the viewing process of the children which is a major section of the thesis.

Research Methods: Observing Children's Responses as a Mode of Enquiry

During both my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, I worked with I Theatre in the capacity of a production coordinator and stage manager for several of their performances. Being part of the theatre scene as both an insider of the company as well as a researcher has been extremely beneficial for this study. As an insider, this gave me easy access to the production phase where I could observe the creative

process in developing the performance. From a pragmatic position, this gave me access to the actual performances where I could observe both the children and adult audience responses during the performance. These responses and observations served as a relevant and important primary data for the purpose of this study. However, what was more valuable was that being part of the company made me part of the scene of children's theatre; I was part of the environment, which helped me gain greater awareness of my position and the perceptions that surrounded children's theatre from my point of view. This also allowed me to situate I Theatre in the context of not just within the field of children's theatre but also as a broader landscape of theatre in Singapore.

This provided me the persona to conduct informal interviews and hold conversations during the production, performances and post-performance phases. As a result, I did not need to adopt another guise in order to gain access to the perspectives, opinions and behaviours of the company staff, actors and audience members. For these reasons, most audience members and the company staff were candid in their replies and there was often little censorship as they considered my presence and questions posed to them as part of my research.

However, this position had its challenges. It was difficult for me to remove myself entirely from the field since I had to fulfil my responsibilities and obligations to the company. At the same time, my engagement was too personal and could not be studied at length from a critical and an objective stance. As a result, I attended my concerns as a practitioner of the scene first and foremost. I then documented the interviews, personal encounters and surface patterns during observations as journal entries to be used later on as part of the thesis. This process of documentation was

during the phase of my practice. There were questions surfaced during this phase but they could not immediately addressed.

Finally, upon fulfilling my obligations towards the company, I took a step back from the scene by removing myself from the company during the final stage of research and writing to avoid being affected or persuaded by the company's opinions and my personal views. It was then upon reflecting on these documentations and viewing them in relation to the larger field of children's theatre that my position as a researcher surfaced more questions that could be analysed. In addition, this also allowed me to address questions that I previously had in the practice phase. This provided me perspectives and insights of both the audience responses as well of my own understanding of these responses as an individual in the space. It was through the reflections of these observations, that I discovered insights that were worthy of analysis that could further push the boundaries of children's theatre. As a result of the nature of data collected and observed, it was critical to use my own experience to analyse my own observation and the children's responses. This requires interpreting both the "said and the unsaid" by the audience (Neuman quoted in Fischer 1997: 384-385).

Reason states that "qualitative audience research sets out to uncover, analyse, present, richly detailed descriptions of how audiences experience live performance" (2010: 15). He has also pointed out the limitations of such an approach of qualitative research because it is "impossible and also unethical if we start second guessing and reinterpreting participants' statements-they may have said this, but actually in our superior wisdom as researchers we know they meant that" (2010: 16). Adopting this approach, I have first located the existing boundaries of children's theatre through a process of enquire through interviews with practitioners and various literature reviews

as seen in this chapter. While adopting such an approach served its usefulness for part of my research, it was essential that I had to go beyond that in order to try and understand that experience. Thus, I have chosen a phenomenological approach in order to understand the lived experience of the audience and also my own experience during my practice and research phase.

Phenomenology's primary concern is with the "engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality; which manifests itself not as a series of linguistic signs but as sensory and mental phenomena" (Fortier, 2002: 8). Since phenomenology focuses on the individual's immediate perception, judgment and contemplative relationship with the world, this provided an appropriate framework to be used to investigate audience responses in children's theatre based on my position. As Bert O States pointed out in his book on the phenomenology of theatre, "the problem with semiotics is that in addressing theatre as a system of codes it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression theatre makes on the spectator" (States, 1985: 7). The danger of a semiotic approach to theatre is that one might look past the site of the sensory engagement with theatre. As States also mentioned, if we approach theatre phenomenologically, "there is more to be said.....not simply by signifying the world (through signs), but by being of it" (States, 1985: 20).

This additional method was crucial for my investigation because my presence in the space and "being part of it" allowed me to observe the children's response and to experience what they were experiencing. This included alternating between my positions as a distanced researcher and analysing my own reflections of being an engaged audience in the theatrical space. The child audience's engagement in theatre

"as doing" is an interesting one to watch and research on. Reason states that the audience response is something "embodied". There is something present in the audience as not just watching and listening to a performance with their eyes and ears but "experiencing it with their whole bodies" (2010: 19). Hence, in this investigation, my presence in the space with the children audience provided me as an observer of the child and an audience of the performer, fully investing bodily in the moment of that experience. At the same time, I was also part of the lived experience which provided useful data for this thesis. Reasons has approached research in children's theatre in the same manner and he states that "there is an allure to this perception, which is of something real, visceral lived, important, but it is also a description of something that might be considered wholly and essentially unknowable to consciousness" (2010: 20). In addition, this method does not aim at generalizing audience responses or creating anything definite as its objective, but rather aims at children's theatre as a research subject.

Similar to Reason's methodology in investigating audience responses in children's theatre, the presentation mode and analyses for this thesis will reflect these approaches. Part of my data will be based on the qualitative approach of observations, anecdotes and interviews to establish the context and boundaries of children's theatre in Singapore. The other part of the data will be analyzing my experiences of the actual encounters with the child audience, educators and parent in which I interrogate the fundamental question of what it means to be engaged in theatre. In doing so, this participant-observer position not only allowed me to locate the responses but also allowed me to critique the nature of my experience. Schoenmakers describes this approach of an ethnography method in providing insights into "the theatrical experiences as considered important by the spectators

themselves" (Schoenmakers, quoted in Reason, 2010: 24). In my opinion, the underlying idea is that in everything said or done by the children within the context of children's theatre has something "unsaid". Therefore, I posit that analysing and interpreting the activity of the child's responses can provide us insights into children's theatre which have not been discussed or formally researched.

Chapter Breakdown

I have begun this thesis with the presentation of the basic understandings and misunderstandings that underlie the field in order to establish the boundaries that surround children's theatre in Singapore. I have also argued that in order to first locate these boundaries; the line would be to justify the distinctions on the basis of cultural expectations and reception. In addition, I have also stated the choice of I Theatre and how my enquiry into my investigation of children's theatre will be through a case study on the company and its productions.

Chapter 2 focuses on children's theatre as an educational tool. Specifically, how teachers and parents view and use children's theatre as a tool for education. The boundaries of children's theatre will be looked at through the expectations of the adult audience and its presentational mode. Through a detailed description about my observations between "school shows" and "public shows"[19], I aim to discuss the disadvantages and advantages of using children's theatre purely as a pedagogical tool. I will also challenge what is "good" or "bad" children's theatre and what is seen as "appropriate" as children's theatre.

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[19] These two terms will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

In this chapter, I also deal with how Children's theatre addresses two different audiences, children and adult, at the same time in the same space. This can be described as a double circle of audiences; two group of people who share some points on common but also have conflicting interests. Children's theatre does not just involve a single thread of communication, such as from the stage to the audience. It expands to how children communicate with other children, how children communicate with the adult actor and how adult mediators communicate with the children and vice versa. This involves questions on perception, engagement and participation among the audience.

After setting the context of how children's theatre is used as an educational tool, Chapter 3 will discuss how we can re-locate the boundaries of children's theatre by offering an alternative framework in investigating children's theatre. In this chapter, I deal with one of most important issues: theatrical communication and responses in the context of children's theatre.

In the final chapter, I aim to argue against the general assumption of the genre itself and provide various criticisms on the efficacy of evaluating children's theatre. However, I will also provide a counter-point to illustrate that there is still value in children's theatre.

Chapter 2: Evaluating Children's Theatre as an "Educational Package"

In the previous chapter, I have asserted that there is a stigma and prior expectations of how and what children's theatre is within the existing boundaries of children's theatre in Singapore. I have also stated that differences do exist between adult and children's theatre in the existing boundaries and the main difference is that children's theatre in Singapore foregrounds an educational focus. These expectations focus mainly on children's theatre being a pedagogical tool for education and mental development for children. In this chapter, I will focus on the "teaching" approaches through analysing how children's theatre is "packaged" as an educational tool used by adults. Through this discussion, I hope to question the efficacy of such an approach in using children's theatre.

I posit that children's theatre definitely has its educational benefits and it has long been perceived as having value in a child's development. This is a perception that engagement with theatre is a "good thing" (Reason, 2010: 12). To quote Reason, "engagement with the arts seems to be invested with not just educational benefit but also moral and health giving benefits as well" (2010:13). For Goldberg, theatre for children "helps them to become better human beings" (1973: 3); while for Pullman it "feeds the heart and nourishes the soul". As such, the association of children's theatre and education have been echoed in the industry and schools today. Many professionals and teachers consider the potential for theatre to have a social and moral effect on its audience through theatre as a medium. The belief is that theatre has a direct positive impact on the child's development, mind and their relationship with the world.

While I acknowledge that there are educational benefits in children's theatre, I share Schonmann's view that children's theatre should "stop struggling to define its

legitimacy as an educational endeavour" (2006: 10). If theatre is heavily subsumed into an educational agenda, this can diminish against other aspects of the experience. What I would like to critique is that the boundaries focusing purely on using children's theatre as a tool for education are limiting. What is presented to the schools is often a "package" that is designed for adults to use for education. Due to the lack of exposure or discussion on how children's theatre is used, there has not been a fixed method on how it should be approached. As Dorothy Heathcote mentions, "no one teaches a teacher how to teach" (Heathcote quoted in Dodd, 1977: 42). Teachers and parents readily accept this "package" without critiquing or questioning its efficacy since this has been the approach adopted over time within the current boundaries. Such is the embedding of children's theatre as an "educational package" within the discourse of education in its current status. In my opinion, this has limited the exploratory process of the art form that can aid children in their further development. Consequently, children's theatre becomes an approach which advocates a "one size fits all" learning policy which ignores the plurality of dynamics and responses of the children audience. Children's theatre focuses on the educational aims and objectives, thus it is said to be task oriented. I will illustrate this point using my case studies in this chapter to demonstrate how children's theatre is used as an educational package to serve the objectives and needs of the adults.

I will first present and analyse the differences through two types of theatrical events and argue how children's theatre has been used as a "package" in the different context. The first group are those that I Theatre refers to as "educational groups" or "school shows". These shows are booked privately by schools who call the company in advance to make special arrangements. This means that the majority of the

audience are usually made of school students with a handful of accompanying educators. Since these children are often still in their school uniforms when they arrive at the theatre, it is apparent that schools hire buses to transport these students from the school directly to the theatre. These performances usually take place during weekday mornings or early afternoons, which mean that going to the theatre might be part of the curriculum of the school's timetable. On some occasions, a few performances are booked by a single school: meaning that children of various ages occupy the theatre.

The second group of audience are those which I Theatre labels as "public shows". The tickets for these shows are often sold through the ticketing agent to the public. For the sake of this paper, I will term the audience who attend these shows as "public groups". These performances comprise of children who go to the performances with their parent(s) or an accompanying adult during their free time either after school or during the weekend. These performances usually consist of a balance between both adult and child audiences as compared to the "school shows". Using my observation of these two case studies as a comparison, I will analyse how existing children's theatre has been packaged by the company into a product in which adults use for teaching. In doing so, I hope to raise pertinent issues in using children's theatre as purely an educational tool.

Case #1: Observations Collected during a "School Show"[20].

The Performance: *Ollie and The Slurge*

The Time: March 11, 2010 (Thursday) 9.15am

I was standing outside the theatre 30 minutes prior to the start of the performance. 5 school buses took turns to let the students alight at the entrance of the theatre. The teachers and ushers guided the students down the bus and brought them to the holding area in single file. The students were then made to sit down in an orderly manner according to their class. Over the next 10 minutes, more students filled the holding area as teachers continued to arrange them into orderly lines outside the theatre. As more students streamed in, the noise level increased. Each class had a form teacher who continually put her finger to her lip as an indication to the students to keep quiet. However, this was to no avail as the students seemed clearly excited and the noise level did not decrease.

Finally, when all the classes had arrived, a representative teacher went to the front, put his finger onto his lips and glared at the students. There was a shushing sound that spread across the holding area. The noise level slowly decreased as the students got the hint to stop talking. There were some nudges from other students to signal to the other students to keep quiet. After about a minute, the representative teacher points out to the children the need to keep the place clean and to remain quiet for the duration of the play. He then presented the children a set of rules of behaviour at a theatre.

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[20] Observations taken from my journal (11 March 2010)

Teacher: I want all of you to keep very quiet when we enter the theatre. Remember what I said earlier in school. If anybody makes a single noise, I will bring you out of theatre. Is that clear?

Children: Yes! (in unison)

Teacher: I want all of you to keep all your food in your bags. There will be no eating in theatre. Is that clear?

Children: Yes!

Teacher: I don't want anyone to misbehave. Is that clear?

Children: Yes!

The teacher then pointed out the location of the restrooms and the exit. Classes were brought to the restrooms in an orderly manner before being led to the theatre in single file. The students were made to put their fingers to their lips while entering the theatre which served as a reminder to them that they had to maintain silence at all times. Occasionally, a few students tried to whisper to the other students but were glared at by the teacher. They immediately kept quiet upon noticing the glare. The experience of a 'guided lesson' seem to have taken over the entire atmosphere. It appeared that the teachers had explained to the students 'the rules' associated with watching a performance.

I took a seat in the back row of approximately 200 students of ages 8 to10. Once the teachers ensured that the students were seated in the correct order, they took a seat in the back row while constantly standing up to ensure that no student left his/her seat. While waiting for the rest of the classes to settle down, a few students were fidgeting in their seats. They clearly seemed excited about

the show. However, they were again told to 'behave and sit upright' by their teachers.

As the house announcement was being played, the theatre house lights were brought down to signify the performance was about to commence. However, bringing down the intensity of lights did not result in the expected hush, but instead acted as an indicator for the child audience's' noise level to rise. This was followed by a thunderous applause and even playful screams. The noise was again reduced only when prompted by the accompanying teachers repeatedly to keep quiet.

During the performance, all attention from the child audience was focused on the stage (excluding the teachers). Teachers were constantly checking the students to ensure that they did not misbehave and sat in their seats. When the characters broke into song and dance, the children started to clap, dance and moved to the rhythm of the songs. The teachers did not stop the children from clapping but ordered them immediately to sit down when they started to get too noisy or jumped up to dance.

After the final song and dance routine, the actors took a bow to signify the end of the performance. The applause this time was less pronounced as compared to the start of the performance. Children looked at the teachers, unsure of what to do. When the light went on, the representative teacher went to the front of the theatre and encouraged the students: "Did you enjoy the show? The children responded "Yes!" "And when we enjoy something, what do we do? We clap,

don't we? So let's have a big round of applause for the actors!" and the children responded with louder applause. Based on my observation, the children apparently enjoyed the play but they did not understand the applause at the end of the performance which we find in adult theatre.

Immediately after the applause, a similar routine as the beginning of the performance followed. The teachers gathered the students by classes and led them back out to the holding area. Teachers were moving among the classes, calling for quiet, not to eat, not to shout. I observed that the holding area was heavily controlled, with ushers and teachers at every row, that it felt like a regular classroom only multiplied threefold.

Outside the theatre, I observed that the ushers were counting piles of programme booklets and resource packs. The usher explained that she was not going to distribute them to the students at that point because at that point, they would be quickly be transformed to litter and would mess up the holding area and would serve no purpose. So instead, every teacher received a stack to take back to distribute at school. In addition, they were given a resource pack each.

While waiting for the bus, the representative teacher again stood in front of the students and signalled for the students to keep quiet. Similar to before, the noise level decreased over the next minute. The teacher took out one of the resource packs and flipped it to the notes. He asked, "Are you ready for discussion?" and the answer was an underwhelming "Yes." He asked again and this time the response was slightly louder than before. I observed one student turn to another

student and responded, "This is not part of the play". The representative teacher

continued to ask questions such as "what is the moral of the story?" and "what

can we learn from the show?"The students then raised their hands before

responding to the questions. However, I observed that rather than waiting for

the students to reply, the teacher tended to impose her views on the

performance. For example, when asked what the moral of the story was, a

student responded "we need to save the world". Instead of responding to the

student's reply, she announced "the moral of the story is to stand up to bullies".

This exchange went on for a brief 15 minutes with the teacher asking questions

and prompting responses from the students.

  In the other corner of the holding area, feedback forms were only distributed

to the teachers and not to the students. A few teachers filled up the form before

dropping them into the box. Several teachers mentioned that the performance

was 'not suitable for young children'; while others mentioned that they would

have preferred more 'colourful costumes and props'.

Eventually the bus arrived and the students were led in a single-file manner up

the bus.

Case #2: Observations Collected during a "Public Show"[21].

The Performance: *Ollie and The Slurge*

The Time: March 13, 2010 (Saturday) 11.15am

Similar to the 'school show', I stood outside the auditorium 30 minutes prior to the start of the performance. Unlike the 'school shows', audiences arrived at different times. The children were also not in their school uniform which suggests that they might have come from home. The main difference between the two events was that the children were not guided and made to sit down in the holding area. There was not a formal briefing about the rules and regulations on how to behave in the theatre. Instead, parents, at their own time, brought the children into the auditorium.

I took the same seat in the back row and observed that this time there was a greater variation in the age of the child audience. Based on their physical appearance, I deduce that the children ranged from 3 to 12. Also, there were significantly more adult audience as compared to the "school show". Despite the 'no food and drinks' signage outside the theatre and the constant reminder by the ushers, parents still continue to allow their children to consume food. Some parents too refused to stop eating and instead told the ushers that they would not spill the food and drink.

Similar to the "school show", the noise increased as the lights dimmed. However, the parents did not tell the children to settle and keep quiet. Instead, they encouraged the children and clapped loudly along with them. During the song and dance routines, the parents also encouraged the children to sing and

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[21] Observations taken from my journal (13 March 2010)

even dance along instead of asking them to keep quiet. At times, parents also leaned over to their children and explained to them the activities that were going on stage, directing the children's focus on the actors, set pieces and props at different parts of the performance. This phenomenon provided more interaction between the parents and the children, creating an overall lively atmosphere among the audience.

Unlike the "school show", the actors seemed more aware that there were more adults in the auditorium. During a song and dance routine, one of the characters gestured to the adults and asked in jest that they dance and clap along and that they would only continue the show if the adults participated. Adult audience acknowledged this invitation by laughing and responded by clapping along together with the children. One can say that they performed not just for the child audience but also to the adult audience.

At the end of the play, similar to that of the "school show", the child audience did not instinctively applaud after the actors took their final bow. Again, they looked at the parent, unsure of what to do next. As a result, the accompanying parents and adults had to prompt them to clap by clapping first. Some parents even held onto their children's hands and clapped with them. When the lights went up, the adults brought the children out of the theatre.

Unlike the "school show", there was an absence of a formal session and parents did not explain or conducted a follow-up of the play with the children. Children were not made to sit down in an orderly manner with questions directed at them. Instead, a more informal approach was being adopted and parents asked their children questions such as "did you enjoy the show?" or

"what did you enjoy about the show?" on the way out of the auditorium. Most parents also made a stop at the merchandise stand to get books.

In the other corner of the holding area, parents filled up feedback forms. However, unlike the "school show" where forms were filled up without asking the students for their opinions, parents in this case asked the children for their views and recommendation before filling the forms up. Again, there was an informal discussion between parents and children as to what they enjoy about the performance and what they would like to see in the future. In some instances, the children themselves filled up the feedback forms.

Finally, parents at their own time again took their children and left the venue.

The Expectations of Children's Theatre as an "Educational Package"

For the sake of this thesis, I define children's theatre as a package not referring to it as the final performance but rather children's theatre as the entire duration of going to the theatre. This includes the preparation phase, the actual viewing process and the follow-up with the students often done by school teachers.

Based on the two cases, the investigation of children's theatre brings us back to the fundamental concerns of what is "good" children's theatre which I have raised in the previous chapter. More specifically, how do we evaluate how educators and teachers view "good" children's theatre? In the previous chapter, I have revealed how adult and child audience can have varying views and responses on what they view as a "good" performance. Varying responses that a performance is "good", "better" or of "higher standards" suggests that there are various criteria in which audience arrive at such a conclusion and there is a need to evaluate how we label what "good"

children's theatre is. What I aim to discuss here is how adult audiences evaluate 'good' children's theatre and in order to do so, the first point of entry that needs to be investigated is the content of the publicity brochure.

Publicity brochures are often distributed to schools several months before the actual performance. Hence, in relooking at theatre performances which are targeted specifically at children, we need to ask whom is the publicity material aimed at? This is the paradox in children's theatre; the publicity needs to first appeal to parents and educators before it is accepted and licensed to be performed for children. Here, the company aims to first target the educators and teachers, in order to attract parents and teachers into bringing the children to a performance. The publicity material provides the parents and educators vital information on what the performance is about and the positive benefits in watching the performance. I would like to analyse the publicity brochure of *Ollie and the Slurge* and illustrate how it prepares the audience for what they are to expect from the performance.

The opening of the publicity brochure presents the themes and content that will be showcased in the performance:

> *Ollie and the Slurge* tackles two important issues- Bullying
> and How to care for our precious environment without
> preaching, but with loads of laughs, and maybe even a tear
> or two[22].

The brochure also states the performative appeal that one should "look out for":

- Catchy songs

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[22] Source taken from I Theatre, *Ollie and The Slurge* Publicity Programme, 2010

- Colour characters

- A strong environmental message

- A warning to bullies

- An engaging and delightful story told in a visual physical style[23]

Drama expert, Nellie McCaslin, has also identified the basic elements of a play for children, in which she believes contributes to a 'good' piece of theatre.

- A worthwhile theme

- A story that holds interest

- Characters that are believable and active

- Appropriate scenery and costumes

- Music or dance is included

(McCaslin, 1990: 574)

From the above comparison, both I Theatre's publicity brochure and McCaslin's guidelines share similarities in criteria in what children's theatre is. What I would like to question here is if there should be a fixed set of criteria to assess what "good" children's theatre is. These criteria or checklists are created by adults based on their own understanding of what theatre should be and ultimately becomes a security platform for them to fall back on to. Lutley argues that "children's theatre is theatre and not simplified adult theatre; children are not simplified adults" (Lutley quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 15). While the publicity brochure, which serves as a preparatory indicator to the teachers and parents, and sets up various criteria, it limits what children's theatre can further be. Here, children's theatre becomes packaged as a product first and foremost for adults with a pedagogical intention.

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[23] Ibid

It appears that these common qualities that are associated with "good" children's theatre are not specific in the context of Singapore but constant across the world. Jonathan Levy in his article *Theatre and Moral Education* has stated that children's theatre need to achieve "instructional-entertainment dialectic" (1997: 66). This statement points to us two aspects the company believes needs to be included in children's theatre in order to satisfy the pre-conceived criteria-*content* and *style*; "content as instructional lessons to the children, and style for entertainment". It has become a common understanding to many educators and parents that it has to fulfil both the visual spectacle and the educational objective. This method by which such criteria are determined stems from an optimistic approach, which Levy states as "seeking to establish absolute universal standards, or from a relativistic approach" (1997, 66). This means that children's theatre is often presented holistically through the perception of adult creators of what they think is "good". More specifically, these productions are created by adults who have their own ideas of what children's theatre "ought to be".

To then further relocate the boundaries of children's theatre, there is a need to critique the efficacy of this checklist approach in the boundaries of children's theatre. For researchers of children's theatre, such as Gavin Bolton, who use the term "children's theatre" in the context of education, the fundamental discussion for "good" children's theatre often meet the concerns of the benefits of children's theatre. This includes their mental and psychological development which parents and educators place a conscious focus on. More specifically the term "good" here refers to the "emotional and moral values" associated with children's theatre (Hunt, 1999:45). David Wood, in his book, *Theatre for Children*, argues that in evaluating "good" children's theatre, "quality is the keynote" (Wood, 1997: 7).

We must give children the best we can. We must fight offhand attitude

'It's only for kids'. Production values and the quality of writing and

direction must be high... (Ibid)

However, what I would like to point out here is that the term "quality" is

difficult to measure. While a marker of "quality" is often used to assess a

performance, it is difficult to find a concrete indication of how it engages the audience

intellectually, imaginatively and emotionally for it to be qualified as "quality". As a

result, to validate that a performance is of "quality", characteristics are drawn

arbitrarily to assess the performance as seen from the "checklist" approach. Firstly in

examining the "quality" of a production, the content of children's theatre needs to be

examined. Wood explains that the theme must contribute to a "wholesome" viewing

experience (Wood, 1997: 66). This means that the performance and the content need

to be appropriate and promote moral well being. These responsibilities in creating

these "wholesome" performances and providing a positive theatrical experience are

shared between the directors, playwrights of children's theatre and the parents and

educators since they are the key figures in deciding the types of performances a child

should watch. There also needs to be a clear focus on educating, edifying and

imparting life lessons and moral values (Wood, 1997: 67).

Woods also adds that besides the plot being rooted in a realm of fantasy where

children are allowed to 'imagine and invent', characters need to possess a sense of

"innocence" in this "blissful view of the world" (Wood, 1997:68); in particular where

there is lack of complicated moral dilemmas or relationships. Thus, what is presented

in children's theatre is usually a character who demonstrates good behaviour. Perhaps what makes it more readily acceptable as a platform for education then is this notion of goodness that the character portrays. For example, in *Ollie and The Slurge*, Ollie, the protagonist, tries to find ways to save the world from an environmental disaster. He does this in an honest and upright manner, demonstrating no signs of weakness or bad behaviour. As a result, these protagonist characters are often seen as flawless, making them ideal role models for children. Positive models and reinforcement can be said to be an important characteristic in children's theatre since child audience often align themselves to the protagonist. Furthermore, these performances are often framed as fairy tales or parables where a safe and stable world is presented. Using song and dance choreography from a musical tradition that prioritizes the use of spectacle to propel the narrative, the performance creates a space where these 'perfect characters' can exist. Here, songs are often used to express fervent hopes and difficult dialogue. Difficult situations are often resolved rationally with a high degree of closure, concluding with the reassurance of moral values. The lines between good and evil are often drawn very clearly so as not to provide any contradiction or ambiguity. In the case of *Ollie and The Slurge*, the main character, Ollie, saves the day by overcoming obstacles and standing up against bullies. The ending of the performance is resolved and the subject matter brought to an absolute closure. In the end, the performance reaffirms and reinforces the reliability and stability of the theme "good triumphs over evil", making it a wholesome viewing experience for both children and the adult audience.

Secondly, the ways in which the content is presented also needs to be taken into consideration. In most of I Theatre performances, the emphasis is often on the

use of the visual spectacle and images. Children's theatre often involves the use of vivid imagery and colours. Woods terms this as 'theatrical magic' where it includes colourful costumes and attractive set pieces. He also adds that this should be visually exciting (Woods, 1997:75). Perhaps the sensory qualities of the spectacle and image carry with them the necessary qualities to convey the content and children are often eager to experience these spectacular moments.

When both expectations of content and style are met, these performances are seen as quality productions that are healthy and in general are "good" for children. These performances then possess cultural authority and legitimacy for imparting values and ideals as acceptable sites of learning. In constructing a dreamlike world of security, coherence and childhood innocence through the frame of fairytales, this provides children a stable and safe place to situate themselves. As a result of these seemingly safe frames, these performances are often used as platforms for moral education by the public schools and the family to educate and edify, instruct and delight.

From the above discussion, this exiting stable structure and "checklist" form the current boundaries of "quality" children's theatre. The significant difference between children's theatre and adult theatre is the strong underlying philosophical ideal that clearly points towards the direction and intention of education. The key difference in adult and children's theatre is that the latter acknowledges the deliberate intention of the pedagogical objective and it is foregrounded in the publicity brochure. While I have acknowledged that bringing a child to watch a performance has its benefits, I will discuss later that bringing a child to watch a performance to learn life

lessons or to educate them should not be the aim to generalize the viewing experience. Teachers and educators should not assume that watching a theatre performance can immediately impart skills or teach a moral lesson, since each child audience responds differently to a performance.

In trying to fulfil the criteria of children's theatre, there is a danger that creators and directors place a greater emphasis on the spectators learning a moral value or life lesson through watching a play over the creation of children's theatre as a form of art for its own sake. The danger is that they try to predict what might appeal and is beneficial to the children. When this happens, they assume the homogeneity of the child audience and create performances based on this checklist. For example, having sat through I Theatre's rehearsal processes, I realised that both director and actors often discuss the appropriateness of what can be said or what can be done on stage. Furthermore, the director states that if there is a moral statement in the text, it has to be articulated clearly so that both educators and children will get the point[24].

Furthermore, within the current boundaries, the boundaries between theatre, drama and education have been unclear and there is a very real sense of frustration and above all, insecurity felt by the children's theatre companies who feel themselves accountable to different groups and often against very different criteria. On one hand, companies try to create works that are in line with the companies' vision, on the other in order to obtain funding from the National Arts Council, to produce "educational-oriented" works to meet the funding body's expectation is at the forefront of the companies mind. They must be accountable and responsive to meet the needs of the

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[24] Observation taken from I Theatre's *Ollie and the Slurge* rehearsal (27 Feb 2009)

council in order to get future funding since the funding for arts and education is monopolized by the National Arts Council. This means that they are the only institution that determines and funds the local theatre companies. At the same time, children's theatre companies have to appeal to the needs of the parents, teachers and children audience. Perhaps this is a reason why the criteria of children's theatre have been fixed since the arts council determines the funding amount the company receives. There is a suggestion here that children's theatre has often settled for doing nothing more. It does not interrogate the children audience responses or perceptions, and instead settle for productions that have been watched, copied and approved by these funding bodies since they have been validated as "good". As a result, there is an inherent educational expectation imposed by the state that has become part of the criteria set for "good" children's theatre instead of pushing the boundaries and extending the greater subtlety in children's responses towards these productions.

Children's theatre here becomes a product in which adults construct guidelines and criteria as a form of assessing the performance. The criteria listed in the brochure might serve as a checklist in evaluating the theatrical performance in which adult audiences use to affirm themselves that it suitable for the child audience. Can we definitively state that it is a good play for children if all the criteria are met? What I am critiquing here is not the educational intent, but rather the efficacy of the ways children's theatre is used an "educational package" by schools and parents.

How Children's Theatre is used as an "Educational Package"

I would like to point out that parents and educators should not only focus of children's theatre as only the final performance but they also need to include the "preparation"

and "follow-up" phases as part of the entire experience of children's theatre. This includes perspectives from imparting theatre rules such as elementary behavioural codes and the prohibition of eating and talking during the performance, to understanding theatrical conventions and modes of presentation, to conducting a follow-up session after the performance. Rather than assuming that children's theatre only focuses on the performance on stage, one has to take into consideration the influence of the presence of the accompanying parents and the educators not just during the performance but as part of the entire theatrical environment and experience. Inevitably, their presence will affect the children's behaviours and responses which we have to reconsider in the existing boundaries. What I would like to discuss here is the efficacy of the approaches in using children's theatre as a "package" by the adults.

In an interview with Brian Seward, I found out that he often encouraged schools and parents to educate the child before bringing them to the theatre. He believes that 'going to the theatre is not a natural phenomenon for the child audience[25]. Children need to be taught the proper codes and conducts before bringing them to a performance. He also revealed that the programme books were distributed to the schools 4-6weeks before the performance. Firstly, this was to provide the schools ample time to select the performance(s) that were appropriate for the students. Also, there was a section in the programme that "instructed" parents and teachers what to do prior to bringing them to the performance.

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[25] Interview conducted on 26th Nov 2010

This example can be seen in I Theatre's programme booklets. In the opening paragraph of the programme guide it states:

> Theatre is a great way for children to learn and to express themselves. But before your child starts acting, take them to a theatre performance and see their interest level before deciding.
>
> (Ace Festival Programme Guide, 2010)

The programme also states the tips for parents and educators:

1) Choosing the right performance for your child

    Refer to the recommended age range for each production before purchasing your ticket. Choose a production which suits your child's age to start them off. If your child has been to many other performances, we leave it to your discretion to select a suitable one.

2) Purchasing tickets to a show

    Once you have selected a suitable production for your child, read the terms and conditions of the ticketing agent. Every audience member needs a ticket to enter the theatre, even an infant in arms. You may wish to gather a few family members and purchase a family package of tickets to enjoy a greater discount.

3) Getting ready for the show

Read the synopsis of the production and share with your child the

gist of our story before coming to the show. If there are storybooks

related to the production, read the story to your child and excite

them!

4) At the Theatre

Arriving 15 minutes before the start of the show is good practice for

your child. Bring them to the washroom and get them settled before

the show begins to ensure a good experience at the theatre. Remind

your child of his/her behaviour during the show.

5) Enjoy

Enjoy the show with your child and don't forget to watch his/her

face.

6) Tell us what you think

Fill up the feedback form at the end of the production. It will help

you reflect on the show and tell us what your child and you think so

we can create better productions next time.

(Ace Festival Programme Guide, 2010)

In my opinion, the above guidelines again is first aimed at the accompanying

adult as a reminder that it is their responsibility in ensuring that the child observes

certain expected social behaviours. The focus of the "education" here is not on the

content of the performance but on educating the children on proper theatre conduct

and etiquette. Rebecca Isbell states that this is helpful for children to understand these "conventions as part of the theatrical event" (Isbell, 2007: 267). However, in my observation of the "school show", what the preparation process demonstrated was a string tendency for adults to impose what they expect or perceive as proper theatre etiquette and conduct onto the children. Based on my observation, children were herded into the theatre in an orderly fashion and were often made to sit down quietly in their seats. They were told to sit down quietly during the performance without giving the opportunity to interact.

Here, we need to evaluate the efficacy and the effectiveness of this form of preparation. As observed, these children are brought in a single file before and after the performance, and sit in a pre-arranged manner according to their classes. They are constantly told by the teachers to keep quiet and to comply with the rules of theatre. There was very little opportunity for interactions to develop since the children have to obey these rules and regulations in the fear of being disciplined. As a result of the briefing and the way the children were being ordered around, children kept quiet when they were told to do so. More specifically, the preparation session influenced and affected the children's natural behaviour during the performance in the theatre. Children stopped dancing and jumping around when a teacher glared at them or threatened to discipline them if they did not stop. They were seen bobbing up and down on the seats but were afraid to fully engage in the performance.

The Presence of Adult Audiences as Influential Mediators

I have mentioned that we often pose questions on definitions of children's theatre and sometimes get caught up in trying to see if performances meet these requirements and

expectations of parents and educators. Again, we need to acknowledge that the composition of audience in children's theatre is not homogeneous since it comprises of both the child and the adult audience and the presence of adult audiences inevitably influence the reception of the children. It is not surprising that the children's enjoyment and engagement lies in the hands of the adult mediator. Israeli psychologist, Reuven Feurerstein , states that "the quality of the interaction between mediator and the child that establishes building blocks for thinking and encourages his or her holistic development" (Feurerstein 1998: 56). Hence, it is beneficial that adult mediators are present in the space. What I aim to discuss is the efficacy of the interactive quality between mediator and child and how it impacts the viewing experience.

During the "public show" at first glance, I wondered why it was necessary to have 5 adults escorting 3 children to the theatre. Also, I observed that the accompanying adults often communicate with the child before, during and after the performance. Feuerstein states that "embodiment of the potential of a good child's development is in the interaction between the young child and the adult who communicates with him" (1998: 67). Here, the adult adopts the role as a mediator in which the committed adult places himself or herself between the child and the surrounding world, and then guides the child through the theatre experience: from bringing him to the theatre, watching the performance and processing the performance. In my opinion, this provides security, support and guidance for the child from start to finish. The assumption is that since the adult has more experience than the child, he is qualified to guide the child through the process of watching a performance. However, I would like to point out that the fact that the adult mediator present signifies that he or she might distort the authentic ways in which the child

receives the performance. Some teachers impose an authoritative approach onto the children rather than allowing them to engage and respond towards the performance and this includes stopping them from dancing, standing up and moving around for the entire duration of the performance.

As discussed earlier, the audience in a "school show", where the majority of the audience are made up of students with a handful of accompanying educators, react very differently from those in a "public show". Often, the child audience in the "public shows" behaved more naturally and unrestrained as compared to the "school shows". In the latter, the audience are often quieter, controlled and less physically responsive. A reason for this is that the educators in the "school shows" who acted as the mediators often watched over the child more than the performance. They served more as disciplinarians in ensuring that theatre rules were observed and that children remained seated at all times. During the performance when the music started to play, children stood up to dance to the music and teachers stopped the child from dancing for fear of obstructing the view of the audience member behind. In some instance, children posed questions to the teachers during the show but they responded by putting a finger to the lip as an indication to keep quiet. Hence, children's responses became restrained and did not react spontaneously.

On the other hand, during the "public shows" parents were less strict on the children and the children's responses were more varied. As observed, parents would whisper into the child's ear to explain what is happening on stage when a child turns to him or her for answers. During the song and dance sequence, the parents would encourage the children to participate by clapping along with them and even encouraging them to get out of their seat to dance. At times, parents would also ask

the child to interact with the characters when they pose questions to the audience. As a result, the atmosphere during the public shows is generally warmer and more relaxed. My observation was that most parents were very pleased with what their children did in the theatre and found it enjoyable to watch their children engage with the performance through participation. Like the teachers, parents were concentrating on the reactions of the children rather than the performance. However, this was not in an authoritative manner but was often more interactive. Perhaps with this emphasis, it is fair to say that children's theatre also speak to a community of parents who have something in common, an interest in the arts and an interest in forms of active participation. Children's theatre does not just address the child audience but also include the adults' engagement and participation. Involving the whole family becomes a social event that involves interaction and communication that might contribute to the child's intellectual and social development.

On the other spectrum, there are mediating parents who constantly describe every single detail to the child. During the performance, I observed some parents who put the child on their lap and explained to them the action on stage. This was accompanied by them pointing on stage, holding the child's hands to applaud during moments and whispering into the child's ear. In the same performance, I overheard a parent telling her child, "the moral of the story is to be good[26]". In my opinion, this illustrates the danger of the mediators conveying their own subjective interpretation of the performance to the child, rather than allowing the child to engage with the performance himself.   In curbing the child's natural response and reaction, this distorts and hiders the full potential of the child's receptiveness of the performance.

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[26] Observations taken from journal. (4th March 2010)

John E Anderson has argued that "in general, activities in which the child himself participates are more significant for development than are those in which he is a spectator" (1950: 45). Young children smile and laugh much more when participating in humorous situations than they do when they only observe such situations. The audience is apt to burst into comment, to wiggle about and to move with the characters. Hence, constant restraint from the adults might hinder their natural behaviour or instincts. Corey has also expressed that he "knows that children often see things that aren't there" (Corey quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 89). In the same way, adults might fail to see what a child sees and it comes down to a matter of perspective. What the adult audience and the child audience perception can vary greatly. More importantly, perception, particularly from a child's point of view, cannot be isolated into compartments for analysis since this often includes the entire experience.

While children's theatre is designed to be theatre that will be appropriate for children, adults subconsciously convey their own emotional responses, opinions, anxiety, and disinterest and impose them onto the child. I observed that there were some parents who appeared to shield their own anxieties by holding the child firmly on their lap, or some who took pride in their child's curiosity and encouraged the interaction between stage and audience. Clearly, how the mediators behave and respond will influence the child's response. Perhaps, one can say that a child's response is always implicitly reflected back on to the parent, since the child often looks back to his parents for affirmation and acknowledgement. Parents and educators attempt to "read" the situation on stage to work out what was required of them and how much freedom and

control they might allow their child in the engagement with the action on stage. However, these meanings may be arbitrarily imposed since these meanings are held only against the individual's background and understanding. By taking a critical standpoint, parents and educators attempt to get behind the resultant meanings of the performance. This again points out that these interpretations made by the adult audiences can be subjective and that they should not be imposed on children.

Instead, Hornbrook argues that "it makes little sense for drama teachers making meanings for children" (1998: 125). When educators and parents engage in the critical interpretation of the meaning of the performance and impose it on the children, they are often using their subjective reading and altering how the child reads the action on stage. The adult as a mediator will nevertheless participate as an influential member in the processes whereby interpretations are produced. While the mediators are present as guiding subjects to enrich the child's experience, we need to acknowledge the balance between hindering and helping the child. Reason suggests that the teacher and parents' role need them to "curious facilitators" rather than "expert instructors" (2010: 21). This approach involves the task of modelling good philosophical behaviour to the children and then stepping back to "allow their interest and thinking to develop" (2010: 21).Thus, what needs to be questioned is the extent of intervention a mediator should undertake so as to ensure a beneficial viewing experience.

It is a challenge to step back from the role of an educator and adult authority. Hornbrook adds that "teachers can demonstrate alternative ideas in an effort to encourage students to reorganise their understanding, but claims to be able to

intervene strategically in meaning formation are highly tendentious" (Hornbrook, 1998:126). While the counter argument might be it might seem unreasonable for the teacher not to play the role of the expert instructor, it is more beneficial to lead the discussion forward to enable them to reach the "correct" answers, We need to acknowledge that children's theatre is a powerful learning medium that emerges from the spontaneous reactions and interpretations of children. Children create their own happenings based on their experiences.

It is again important to highlight that every member in the audience interprets a performance differently and this is no exception for children's theatre. Hence, often when the director sometimes asks the actor "how was the performance", he is not referring to the number of audience in the theatre or the performance of the actor. But rather he is referring to the quality of the reactions from the child audience: if they were warm and genuine? Based on my experience working as a stage manager for the company, these "quality" and "genuine" responses were indicative and usually based on the loudness of the applause and the responsiveness of the child audience. It is precisely this genuine response in children's theatre that needs to be valued in the boundaries of children's theatre.

Critiquing the Uses of Children's Theatre as an "Educational Package"
During the "public show", where a formal briefing was not conducted, parents allowed the consumption of food in the theatre despite the reminders from the ushers. Accompanying parents neglected the rules and regulations of theatre and permitted their children to consume food. However, because of the absence of the rigidity of the rules and regulations that were imposed, the child audience in the "public show"

behaved more spontaneously. Children were seen jumping, clapping and dancing during the performance. Clearly, there are boundaries between disciplining or guiding the children and steering their responses. It seems that the idea of the adult controlling how and what the children should watch also differentiates the boundaries between adult and children theatre. Hence, in analysing children's theatre, we need to question the extent of control of the children's responses. From the above example, we can see that in the school show where more discipline was enforced, going to the theatre resembled more of classroom-based learning. This in return, affected their spontaneous reaction during the performance. On the other hand during the "public show", parents did not enforce such rules which in return allowed the children to react spontaneously. However, due to children standing, jumping and running around the performance, this disrupted other audience members' viewing in the theatre. While it is important to ensure that the child does not misbehave himself in the theatre, perhaps we need to consider the balance between how much disciplining and intervention is needed in allowing the child to respond naturally to the performance.

My observation of children's viewing and judging of a performance is that children are intelligent audience who are able to pick up elements in a production that an adult audience might have overlooked or might not have been aware of. They are not passive audience who mindlessly accept everything that is presented to them on stage. Isbell has argued that "there are elements that will appeal to children more than the adults and vice versa" (Isbell, 2007: 276). Their reasons and sources of enjoyment are in many ways different from those adults, and that is exactly the reason why we should be concerned about the viewing experience of the child audience. I would like to point out that while it is very true that if the child audience do not like a

performance, we might find them fidgeting, wriggling in their seats or looking restless, but their reasons for not liking the play does not necessarily emerge from it being a poor play. The opposite is also true; good behaviour does not necessarily mean that the production is "good". Parents and educators sometimes restrict children's natural responses in the theatre and a child might obediently sit quietly to avoid disciplinary action

As Geoff Gillham points out, when a teacher or parent engages at a fictional level in a performance with the children, "he or she is joining in *with* them", but at an educational or aesthetic level, "he or she is working *ahead* of them" (Gillham quoted in Jackson, 1993: 41). It is as though there are two plays going on at the same time-the play for the child and for the adult. Gillham states that they are different in respect of "purpose and structure" (42). For example, in Ollie and the Slurge, the children's intentions are, say, to have fun through the theatrical experience, whereas the teacher's objectives may be to do with the themes of environmental issues and bullying as stated in the programme brochure. One can say that the teacher is operating at a different level of meaning from the children. Hence, teachers often think retrospectively with the end product in their minds. The teacher's experience is shaped by the learning outcome in their minds while using the performance as a tool to teach and work backwards on how they want to teach it. As a result of this approach, meanings or issues become generalized rather than reflected or negotiated by the children.

Thus, as part of this approach to "teach", schools then conduct a follow-up session at the end of the performance. As observed after the performance, schools

dedicate curriculum time to conduct a formal session to follow up on the performance that the child has watched. Obviously it is beneficial for a class or an audience to reflect after the experience, but as Bolton mentioned, "the greater potential may lie in reflection during the dramatic experience" (Bolton quoted in Jackson, 1993: 42). However, as seen from the above example of the school show, these follow-up activities are conducted superficially and quickly, with the intent to impart some knowledge or understanding about the play through the understanding and eyes of the teachers. It seems that all these manage to completely obscure the artistic experience they just encountered in the theatre. Some teachers fail to acknowledge this and opportunity for reflection on and articulation about the child's experience is missed.

What then needs to be evaluated is the function and importance of processing immediately after the performance. It occurred to me that this perceptive child who voiced that the discussion was not "part of the performance" was not wrong. The "discussion" part was indeed not part of the performance but was used as a platform for the teachers to reiterate the performance for the children. I would like to question the significance of this discussion and the function of it.

The teachers were busy hushing the children who had become restless at this point in time, patrolling among the rows, and pointing threatening finger at anyone who misbehaved. This "discussion" seemed to lean towards that of a classroom lesson which had taken over that experience. During the following up phase, there are often a number of assignments such as "describe your favourite moment in the play" or "who was your favourite character" that the teacher implements onto the children. These are appropriate and relevant post performance questions. However, as

observed, rather than allowing a two-way discussion, teachers often rushed to provide the "answers" before allowing the children to respond. In this manner, teachers adopted a top-down, authoritative manner in which they imposed their ideas and answers onto the children without reflecting or taking into consideration the children's individual experience and response when processing the performance.

Also, these activities and questions found in the resource guides and packs are designed in a way that enables any teacher to apply its ideas in very simple ways. These packs typically suggest activities designed to facilitate exploration of the themes, characters and production which can be argued to link with key aspects of children's learning and development. Based on the above example, the approach transforms the viewers into instrumental spectators and places emphasis on wanting the children to learn through this function rather than taking into consideration his theatrical experience. Furthermore, I would like to point out that any approach to a "one size fits all" learning policy attempts to homogenize the children's behaviours.

Preparing these teacher resource packs itself is a challenge. They require expertise not only in the particular discipline but also in how to teach it. Furthermore, these resource packs are distributed to all schools who watch the performance, regardless of the children's mental capabilities and age. Therefore, this kind of follow-up has can be said to be reductive in trying to "teach" its intended lessons. Sharing Reason's sentiment, this approach can "make watching resemble a decoding exercise of spotting themes and responding accordingly" (2010: 113). My own perception is that reducing the performance to an activity that resembles a classroom lesson is a limiting factor. Hence, while the intention of I Theatre might be good,

perhaps the approach and the way it is tailored should be relooked so as to help both the company and strengthening the impact of good children's theatre. What then should be the focus is the meaningfulness of the theatrical experience and not about deciphering meanings for the children.

That said, there is definitely importance in the follow-up sessions. Reason states that while it is valuable to assert that audience's post performance experience might be primarily considered a reflective one, "this does not mean it has to be one that is exclusively intellectual or rational. Instead, it might also be embodied, kinaesthetic, intuitive" (Reasons, 2010:28). In this case, such responses might well be manifested through a better approach towards the child's audience's reflective and creative responses rather than imposing very fixed set of questions on them. In line with Reasons' approach, the follow-up session, should adopt a form of participatory enquiry, in which audiences are "actively engaged in the process of reflecting upon and making sense of their experience for themselves" (2010: 31). Through talking, reflecting remembering and making sense of what they saw and felt, compose the very experience itself. Participants are "making the experience meaningful to them, constituting the experience as an experience" (2010: 31). Rather than treating them as passive audience, the experience should be something constructed by themselves for themselves, as they seek to make meaning and understand the world around.

Furthermore, by simplifying the performance into various questions for discussion as observed, it nevertheless causes problems due to the superficiality of the lessons and misunderstandings regarding the basic elements of theatre as an art form. While the plays are often packaged in a predictable, compressed, and repeatable form,

a preview of the moral dilemmas he or she would encounter in life and practice in living through them correctly and honourably proves debatable. What is often presented in a performance is a clear binary of what is perceived to be acceptable and unacceptable in a society of constructed norms and mores. The audience are presented with monolithic 'truths' with simplified reasoning. This might include ascribing characteristics to what is viewed as "good" or "bad" behaviour in society. For example, children might leave the theatre thinking that disobedience is immediately associated and labelled as "bad" without reflecting on its context. This might result in children judging others who deviate from this belief system. Furthermore, might cause complexity as the message might be conditioned over the course of the performance. In line with Edminston's argument, when we judge others' actions, there is a persistent danger of moralising about what we would have done—giving advice without deeply considering why a person might have acted as they did and not in other ways (Edminston, 2000: 68). At worst they may begin to judge others, feel completely separated from them, and their actions incomprehensible. Hence, there are two conflicting issues and struggle here: one that maintains the clear division of black and white in children's theatre, and the other that prepares children for reality in society, where one is often faced with dilemmas and choices.

I want to stress that when we represent people and dilemmas through drama, these are neither a substitute for discovering additional knowledge nor for discussing with children the incomplete nature of our knowledge or about people who live or lived in other times and places with complex systems of values and relations. Also, just because children can distinguish moral from immoral behaviours does not necessarily mean that they will transfer such learning to their own future behaviours.

Jonathan Levy, in his book- *A Theatre of Imagination: Reflections on Children and the Theatre*, states that "when art is used to teach, either the teaching or the art must suffer" (Levy, 1998: 8). The didactic imagination and the artistic imagination work in different ways He mentions that, "perhaps children's theatre should take many forms: aesthetic thinking should develop the attempt to find theatrical ingenuity, which will serve the imagination, not in a didactic way, rather in its aesthetic approach" (Levy, 1998:9). The biggest challenge in teaching and learning in children's theatre is trying to achieve a balance and finding the optimal experience between creativity and education. Here I would like to question then if children's theatre should mean that children hold ownership of theatre first and foremost, above the pedagogical interests of well-intentioned adults? According to Winston, "there is an underlying belief that we can come to know the world, including morality, through rational, logical analysis of a situation" (Winston, 1998: 65). Possibly, it is necessary for children to study virtues and to talk about how virtues operate in particular situations, especially in stories, so that they might understand them in more complexity and rely on them later as guides. It would be appropriate to quote Edminston, "Values are not acquired from outside us; but rather, they are forged in dialogue among people and texts" (Edminston, 2000: 68). What the theatre presents are just examples of situations in which judgements or decisions can operate. It is not realistic to say that children can learn and internalizes values immediately just by watching a performance and processing it with the teachers. Perhaps then the best approach as Dorothy Heathcote mentions is to "evoke it" and not "direct it" (Wagner, 2007: 9). This means allowing the audiences to make as many decisions and choices for themselves.

Considering the Importance of Responses and Communication in Children's Theatre

Children's theatre should be accessible to the child audience and their ability to process the content and the feeling it arouses. Goldberg explains, "because children are so receptive to the affective content of the play, it is necessary to control the relevant emotions on the play, as these will tend to side-track the child and confuse him as to the issue of the play" (Goldberg, 1984:92). Children's theatre does not just involve a single thread of communication. It expands to how children communicate with other children, how children communicate with the adult actor and, how adult mediators communicate with the children and vice versa. Children's theatre addresses two different audiences, children and adult, at the same time in the same space. This involves questions on perception, engagement and participation among the audience. In relocating the boundaries of children's theatre, we should reconsider these encounters of children's responses as points of references rather than as a homogeneous platform. This in return can provide a platform in examining the triangular communication discourse between child, adult audience and actor.

This discussion brings us back to the opening of the chapter where I suggested that problematic use of the checklist approach in evaluating children's theatre. More so, how the existing approaches used to evaluate a "good" children's performance can be reductive. Shonmann has also tried to summarise a "good" quality performance: "the communicative ability of a work of art, its ability to arouse emotions, to impart a sense of meaningfulness, its complexity (levels of meaning) as well as the technical aspect of the artistic creation, and the relevance of the themes of the play as well its sources" (2006:122). While the criteria listed above provides a solid list in evaluating

the aesthetics and the artistic of the production, using a checklist to assess children's theatre might not be the best option in determining its success since this definition would reflect a restricted concept of children's theatre. However, what Schonmann has included in her checklist, which is often neglected in the children's theatre in Singapore, is the "communicative ability". In the next chapter, I will discuss this "communicative ability" that needs to be re-evaluated within the boundaries of children's theatre. My aim here is to try to go beyond the checklist and reinvestigate the forgotten language of the communicative quality and responses in children's theatre since they often escape definitions and interrogation.

Gavin Bolton once claimed that drama is useful for "teaching about life" (Bolton quoted in Hornbrook, 1998:138). While children's theatre can function as a pedagogical tool, what needs to be constantly critiqued are the ways and approaches in which it is used. The emphasis should be on the processes of the art itself and not merely using children's theatre as an educational tool. The focus should not always lie in the construction of the performance as a tool for teaching but instead what should be appreciated is the child's engagement towards a performance. It is through this engagement that children can learn. As such, children's theatre should be accessible for teachers and parents to engage in intelligible accounts and dialogue. Through this, they can in a more engaging learning relationship with the children. As Elam states, "it is with the spectator, in brief, that theatrical communication begins and ends" (Elam, 1980: 97).

**Chapter 3: Observing Children's Response-
An Alternative Framework to Evaluate Children's Theatre**

In the previous chapter, I have examined the paradox of children's theatre by focusing on how the interest of the adult audience becomes a primary consideration of the writing and performance of children's theatre. An important perception in children's theatre can be summarized as focusing on the possibilities of learning through the medium itself. More specifically, teachers often rely too heavily on the "checklist" approach to evaluate a good children's theatre performance. As such, learning through children's theatre is often enhanced and delivered as a tool that is utilized because of its instrumental effectiveness in facilitating learning, rather than trying to engage its audience for its own sake. As a result, a trip to the theatre becomes similar to another classroom lesson, bounded by rules and codes of conduct to meet educators' pedagogical objectives. While teaching and learning has been emphasized in educational institutions in the existing boundaries of children's theatre, the methods used are often authoritative and didactic in its approaches to learning. Hence, children's theatre within the existing boundaries has taken a top-down approach in which adults align the suitability of children's theatre according to their objectives and expectations.

In the current boundaries of children's theatre, adults use their own perception and expectations to view a performance, forgetting that the performance is aimed with a children audience in mind. I posit that the problem with this approach is that it ignores this initial perceptual impression of the audience. States argues that the danger of such an approach is that we tend to "undervalue the elementary fact that theatre...is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what

they seem to be" (1985: 20). Victor Shklovsky highlights that "art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (Shklovsky, quoted in States, 1985: 21). Hence, my concern here is not how adults make meaning of a performance, but rather how the child engages with the performance through his/her own experience. This engagement refers to the child's instinctive immediate reaction and response towards the performance.

Reason also mentions that such an approach is something that has been increasingly stressed by the education departments of children's theatre companies and be thought as a result of a move away from Theatre in Education (TIE) and direct curriculum focus (2010: 11). The focus then is located in the act of watching rather than in something to be extracted and reasoned from the experience. It is most insightful to observe how a child engages in and responds to a performance. To try and understand the responses of the child audience is a very complex one since this complexity arises due to the individual's subjective response and emotional engagement with the performance. What is discussed is often a "child's active participation in the construction of their *own* knowledge" (Isbell, 2009: 14). Here, the focus is on the child's individual response. To add to this complexity, similar to adult theatre, it is important to acknowledge that in every performance, every audience's reaction towards the performance is different. This is more so in children audiences' responses since these are often more spontaneous and less restrained.

Fortier in his book *Theatre/Theory,* argues that, "theatre goes beyond the verbal and non-verbal on stage. It is a live experience" (Fortier, 2002: 12). Here, I am suggesting that observing the child's facial expression, his oral language, and the movements of his body enables us to gain an understanding of the child's experience

rather than solely focusing on the performance. One can view theatre as a system whereby this "live experience" is a web of complex network encompassing the theatre architecture, social setting, technology and bodies.

As seen in the previous chapter, the experience in going to the theatre in Singapore is often heavily guided by teachers through controlled methods of ensuring discipline and order. Instead of analysing children's theatre from the perspective as an educational "package", I propose that the focus should be shifted to the responses and reactions of the child audience. In my discussion, I will analyse how these responses can be used to re-examine the boundaries of children's theatre. My assumption is that like adult theatre, children's theatre involves questions on perception, engagement and participation among the audience, which is often neglected in the existing boundaries. In this chapter, I will take a step further in exploring how we can approach and analyse children's theatre by looking closely at the children's reception of the performance during the viewing process. This incorporates not only their final opinions and reactions about the play but also the inclusion of their responses during the performance itself. While the primary focus is still on "teaching and learning", my concern is towards "learning" that is directed towards the nature of the individual's learning through his/her experience and engagement during the actual encounters in a live performance. Connected to this, it is vital to recognize that this approach is unique because it includes the child's individualized perception and attitudes towards a performance. In doing so, I hope to provide an alternative way of evaluating children's theatre that uses a bottom-up approach and takes into consideration the child's way of seeing, responding and understanding theatre which is often not included and is differentiated from the "checklist" approach.

Examining the Applause in Children's Theatre

Kershaw, in his paper entitled *Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in the Twentieth Century-Theatre*, asked "In what ways can theatre, and particularly in politics, be better understood than through thinking of its applause?" (Kershaw quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 56). This question is highly appropriate in this context because the function of the applause differs in adult theatre and children's theatre. In the former, the applause is more of an acknowledgment to the actors and to bring closure to a performance. However, the applause in children's theatre is almost instinctive and occurs at any time during the performance; regardless of whether it is a sad or happy moment. These responses are often unexpected and occur during unpredictable points of the performances which make them intriguing encounters for analysis. In this sense, it highlights that art imparts "sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky quoted in States, 1985: 23). I will use the same performance of *Ollie and the Slurge* to illustrate how children engage in a performance. It is through this engagement that debates within the existing boundaries can be re-opened on how we view children's responses in terms of their connections of feelings, actions and thoughts in the context of a live performance. An extract from my observation of the viewing process follows:

> As with most conventional performances, the theatre lights were brought down to signify the performance was about to commence. However, bringing down the intensity of lights in this performance did not result in the expected silence that falls on an adult audience in adult theatre, but instead acted as a signal for the children audiences' volume in noise to rise. This was followed by a thunderous applause and even occasional playful screams

by the children. The noise was reduced only when prompted by adults through hushing and glaring at the children.

As the performance progressed, the applause was heard at different points. One instance of this applause was when Ollie, the protagonist, destroyed the monster. The children clapped loudly as the monster was chased off the stage. The children stood up and clapped in sync with the accompanying music that was played during the scene.

At the end of the performance, the actors returned on stage to take a final bow. The children did not applaud immediately. Instead, after some prompting (and clapping) from the adults, the children imitated the adults and started to applaud[27].

In this enquiry, it is worth noting that communication goes beyond linguistic argument, reason and knowledge. Instead, when observing the performances, there were several moments when it was apparent that children knew things that they could not say. This is evidence that children react through bodily or physical knowledge. Bernard Beckerman suggests that an audience "does not see with its eyes but with its lungs, does not hear with its ear but with its skin" (Beckerman quoted in Reason, 2010: 23)

From my observation, what struck me is that child and adult audiences applaud and respond differently even though they might be in the same space, watching the same performances. It appears that when children express their participation via applause or the lack of it, their understanding of what applause

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[27] Extract taken from my journal records during a 'public show'.

means to them may be completely different from the adult's understanding. As observed at the end of the performance, adults immediately applauded while the children did not and it was only after being prompted that they followed.

Similarly, in the performance, sporadic applause, screams and laughter were heard at different positions and points in the theatre during the same instances in a performance. For example, in *Ollie and the Slurge*, the monster character appeared onstage and walked down the aisle of the theatre, interacting and mingling with the children. During this scene, the lights were dimmed and most of the children were not expecting the interaction and close proximity of the monster. I observed that when the monster came close to the audience, the children closest to the monster screamed, while those seated slightly further away applauded and even laughed. Hence the idea of the physical distance can also be an indication of how a child responds differently despite facing the same situation. The ways children clap and react can illustrate the *meaningfulness* of the child's individual experience and engagement with that particular instance.

In order to explain this *meaningfulness*, proximity and physical distance between the action and the spectator also comes to question. Elam notes that the audience has his/her well-marked "private space, individual seat, and relative immunity from physical contact and action" (Elam quoted in Bennett, 1992: 133). The notion of space creates the first stimulus, sensation and sets the point of entry into the performance. When the action on stage transcends into the private space of the audience, this creates a division of the audience as a collective and highlights the varying response among the child audience. This emphasizes the personal reactions of the audience to the action rather than a homogenous response as a collective. As Reason mentions, "there is something particularly appropriate to this non-linguistic

knowledge in relation to theatre, which is a medium that audience experiences in person and with their body rather than through words of a page" (2010: 23).

In the same performance, I observed that children clapped their hands more frequently and with enthusiasm while the accompanying teachers and parents did not. Children applauded when songs were being sung, when the protagonist defeated the monster and when the characters prompted them to clap along. Adult audience on the other hand remained passive in their seats and only applauded at the end of the performance. Kershaw's claim that "applause suppresses differences is extreme; applause, like laughter, is the unthinking component of a system that creates oppressive or competing communities". He called this "the taming of the audience" (Kershaw, quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 59). While the prompting from adults to clap at the end of the performance might be a way to control the children's response in the theatre, the applause by children is an indication of their individual response. While the applause of the adult is intentional in order to achieve an objective, the children's applause has no final intention. Based on my observation of the "public show", the adults did not restrict the children's applauses but only intervened and restricted them when they started to stand up, danced or moved around. They then turned to the audience sitting behind them to apologize for the obstruction of view.

For the adults, the applause is a social convention sent to the stage. States points out that when we applaud the actor at the end of the play, "we imply that he 'became' the character well: we were moved by the illusion that the performance signified" (States, 1985: 119). Hence, adults use the applause as a form of appropriate expression in the theatre, to applaud the actors for a job well done. However, for

children, the applause is more of an instinctive expression towards a particular instance in the performance, rather than as an indicator to the acknowledgment of the actors' contribution to the performance.

In the case for *Ollie and the Slurge*, whenever characters broke into song and dance, the children audience showed their appreciation of the performance with their applause, accompanied by shouts, dance and laughter. Rather than only applauding at the end, these moments of appreciation by the children were observed throughout the entire performance. States explains that "we feel good when someone breaks into song. Song is only the expression of emotion...Song is lyrical: the whole body may feel the power of the song. Song does not affect identity. It is like laughter or weeping: it simply alters the composure of identity" (States, 1985: 159). This could be a reason why children jump up and dance, clap and move around whenever a song was sung or played. The applause for children works more on a sensory level in which they react from feeling what they see and hear.

Winifred Ward has declared that "children are the most genuine audience in the world" (Ward quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 58). The above example of the applause illustrates their genuineness in engagement. Children make no pretence of being interested if they are disconnected or do not understand the performance. The assumption is that, if children are not engaged in a performance, they get restless and bored. This often results in them jumping on the theatre seats or asking the accompanying adult to bring them out of the theatre. It is precisely that their reaction is so natural that we can learn much by merely observing their responses.

Kershaw tries to explain the lack of scholarly interest in the question of applause. He said that "perhaps theatre analysts do not want to acknowledge applause in the context of serious scholarship because it is perceived to be incidental to performance. Or perhaps applause-like sexual congress and laughter, is in itself a thoughtless act, maybe a response arising from a basic impulse or reflex action over which, in the end, we have no control. Hence applause fits us out of hegemonic submission" (Kershaw, quoted in Shonmann2006: 57). While Kershaw's article does not explicitly refer to children's theatre, his statement served as an entry point for my research in studying modes of participation and levels of engagement with the audience in children's theatre. My observations and analysis demonstrate how these applauses are indications of how children engage with the *meaningfulness* of the performance, according to their own feelings as the play progresses. More importantly, how the applause can be used as an index in re-examining actor-audience interaction in the context of children's theatre, which differs from adult theatre.

While I have illustrated Schonmann's claim that "children do not feel the need to be like the person sitting next to them and they do not need to imitate his/her reaction" (2006, 57) from the above analysis, my observation deviates slightly from that. While I observed that majority of the children responded spontaneously, I noticed that that some children turn to the accompanying adult audience to obtain an indication as to how to react. For example, I have pointed out that at the end of the performance several child audiences did not know how to react and only applauded when they were prompted to do so by the adults. In my opinion this form of imitation could be due to various factors such as the unfamiliar environment of the theatre, age and varying levels of literacy.

If they are unsure of what to do in an unfamiliar environment they sometimes replicate a response of another child or imitate his or her action. Aristotle also states that imitation is "congenital to human beings from childhood" (Aristotle quoted in States, 1985: 158).. Imitation is a way of learning how to become an adult. To quote States, "there is something about the imitation of another human being, about speaking in another's voice, that requires either a creatural naiveté, a touch of madness, or an invited audience" (States 1985: 58). My observation of this is that children are eager to experience these heightened moments in theatre. While sitting in the theatre they can be "lifted out of reality and drawn close together in a bound of expectancy, laughter, or sympathy through the fiction" (States, 1985:53). Children might imitate other children or adult responses in a theatrical event to feel solidarity and each child as a member of the audience becomes involved in watching the performance. While one might argue that this is seen also in adult theatre, the difference here is that children observe the accompanying adult and imitate the applause after the performance without knowing the function of it. However, in adult theatre, adult audiences imitate other audiences in the applause because they are aware of this function.

What is important to note here is that the public nature of the theatrical experience goes beyond the production. For them, it seems that the series of level of attention and inattention is not just focused on the stage but includes the various kinds of social performance going on among the audience. This includes giggling, screaming and talking to one another during the performance. It points to the fact that there is an indication of an acute sensitivity to other people within the audience and of their very close, physical and bodily proximity which seems more pertinent in the context of children's theatre. Hence, this occurrence in itself is something that is

recognized by the audience as part of the theatrical experience, since children's theatre does on rely on the set of conventions commonly used in adult theatre. For these reasons, the experience of being in a children's theatre performance is always going to be largely about something very different than simply sitting down as passive audience and watching the performance. Important however, is how this social experience is heightened by the nature of the live performance.

Understanding A Child's Perspective:
Learning Through Engagement with the Representation on Stage

The study of children engagement with the performance is a complex one since the sensitive, intense and communal environment influences that viewing experience. Pinciotti argues that children's theatre uses the "art of theatre to build and enhance participants' artistic sensitivity and develop dramatic imagination. It allows participants to imagine and reflect on experiences, real or imagined. The dramatic process is practical, immediate, and engages both the emotions and intellect" (Pincotti, quoted in Isbell, 2009:224). One of the central focuses in children's theatre is the use of fictional stories or plots as part of the performance narrative. Often, these plots are based on children's literature since these texts are considered acceptable and appropriate for children's reading and viewing. What needs to be considered is how children negotiate with the fictional world presented on stage and their own reality[28], since sometimes the boundaries are not clear to the child audience. As Peter Handke puts it, "in the theatre, light is brightness pretending to be other brightness, a chair is a chair pretending to be another chair, and so on" (Handke quoted in States, 1985: 20). This matter is often associated with our understanding of how an image or action on

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[28] I define the *fictional world* presented on stage during the live performance; and the term *reality* to be the actual environment in which the audience is living in.

stage is constructed and how we perceive it. While this is not just present in children's theatre, the boundary that separates the representation on stage and reality can be said to be mutually intertwined more so in children's theatre since the child as a spectator might not always accept the represented easily. There exists a gap between how the child audience perceive and respond to the represented world on stage based on their understanding of the real world. What I aim to discuss here is the connection between the sign on stage as what it represents to the child audience and the theatrical communication impact it has on the child. What I am raising and debating here is shifting our focus to the child's experience in the theatre and how he negotiates with what is represented on stage. In addition, through this analysis of the negotiation process, I hope to discuss the benefits of learning through these spontaneous engagements with the represented and in return develop our own knowledge about children's theatrical engagement.

By way of establishing my own perspective, it will be useful to begin with the concept of *distance* in theatre. The concept of *distance* here does not refer to the physical distance between stage and audience but rather the metaphorical distance through which the child audience receives and reacts to the action on stage. Schonmann links this idea of *distance* to "aesthetic response" that relates to the spectator's level of engagement with the action on stage (Schonmann, 2006: 107). Schonmann states that "children have the chance to be imaginative and expressive in order to develop their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual abilities. In dramatic play, they have the opportunity to explore the way their bodies move, how they can interact with others, and to make distinctions between the real and the imaginary world" (Schonmann, 2006: 107). Hence, this idea of distance refers to the

proximity between the represented world on stage that the child engages with and the temporary detachment he/she has from reality. I would like to point out that one main function of theatre is often to create an alternate space for a fictional world using this idea of *distance*. Theatre provides a platform for the audience to proceed through the construction of the fictional world which is constantly revised, negated and negotiated in the viewing process. Hence in the context of children's theatre, I would like to question how a child makes *sense* of the performance and in return, how do we make sense of this experience?

Herbaut Blau states that "an audience without history is not an audience" (Blau, 1987: 34). This "history" is associated with the cultural and social environment which in turn affects the emotional responses, behaviours and perceptions of the audience when watching a performance. For example, in adult theatre, the adult audience might cry during an emotional scene if he can relate it to his own personal encounters, or laugh at a comical anecdote. This level of engagement can vary depending on how he frames his memories and in relation to the scene on stage. While he might bring in his own past memories in fully engaging with the performance, he is more likely to distinguish between his past experience and the represented world on stage. As mentioned, once the performers take a final bow, the adult audience is able to *sense* and understand the paradox of this situation. They know that they are emotionally involved in a theatrical experience within a framework of fiction and that there is a suspension of disbelief for the duration of the performance. As such, in adult theatre, an adult spectator will not run towards the stage to stop an act or a scene if it gets too intense for him; what is performed on stage is a *representation* of the real world. It is the combination of signs and theatrical

conventions which permits the audience to distance and differentiate the represented world on stage from reality.

However, in children's theatre, this boundary between representation and reality is blurred since this concept of *distance* is not always fully realised by the child audience. Furthermore, the understanding and engagement of children's response is not a simple and linear process since children's reactions are often spontaneous and unpredictable. Children may run onstage yelling and responding instinctively to the action happening on stage thinking that encounter is in the framework of their reality. The example below illustrates how these boundaries between fiction and reality can be blurred in a performance for children:

> During another of *I Theatre's* performance entitled *The Little Green Frog*, interaction between audience and actors were part of the performance. Actors would occasionally prompt audience for suggestions and ideas as the plot progressed. In the performance, there was a scene in which Big Mama Frog asked her son, Chung Kayguri to help her with the laundry by folding the clothes. Being defiant and disobedient, Chung Kayguri refused and instead picked up various pieces of clothing from the clothes basket, crumpled it, and threw them onto the floor. This resulted in a huge mess on the stage.
>
> As part of the performance, Big Mama Frog reacted exasperatedly by begging Chung Kayguri to stop and at the same time rushing around to pick up the clothes on the floor. However, Chung Kayguri refused to and continued to mess up the clothes.

Since the performance was not performed on a raised stage but on the level

ground as the seated child audience, this made it very accessible for the

audience to enter the playing area freely. During the scene when Chung

Kayguri did not pick up the clothes, the child audience started to rush onto

the stage to help Big Mama Frog pick up the clothing and drop them into

the laundry basket. This was not part of the intended plot. Almost

instinctively, children got out of their seats and rushed onto the stage to

help. However, not all children rushed onto the stage. The children

continued to pick up the clothes and drop them to the laundry basket until

Big Mama frog (with the help of the ushers) asked them to return to their

seats[29].

What the above example illustrates is that young children can become

immersed in the world of make-believe. For them, what is represented on stage is

sometimes understood as reality instead. A possible interpretation of this response is

that their involvement during the performance is so intense that they lose themselves

in the fiction; this means that the boundaries between a real life situation and a

theatrical situation are blurred. From the example above, without explicitly asking for

audience volunteers to participate, the child audience instinctively felt the need to

assist the character on stage. Therefore when the child loses this aesthetic distance, he

threads into the 'as if' situation as though it were a real life circumstance. Children

enjoy the "as if" situations, because the play becomes so real for them. Here, we need

to acknowledge that children have their own way of experiencing theatre. At one level

there is invested engagement with the situation in front of the audience. They are

living it, feeling it, experiencing it and at the same time reflecting consciousness of

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[29] Extract taken from journal entry

this very investment. Swedish theatre researcher, William Sauter, provides a useful construction of this relationship between reality and fiction, when he describes the difference of the "referential" and "embodied" experience of theatre (Sauter quoted in Reason, 2010: 59). The embodied experience relates to the actual appearance of the performance and the referential experience is that what is described or evoked by the performance[30].

Reason states that in such a phenomenon, "there exists a kind of slippage between modes of perception, with a sophisticated and engaged spectator able to maintain mutually contradictory levels of disbelief and belief at the same time". Steve Tillis describe this as a "double vision" whereby an audience sees the character and actor in "two ways at once" (Tillis quoted in Reason, 2010: 21). There is a constant oscillation between one and the other and back again. In this context, it is the reflective and conscious experience that is particularly compelling for our understanding of the responses of the audience. Another writer who has engaged with this question is Jeanne Klein, who states:

> One of the biggest, ongoing myths about children's minds is that they have
> vast imaginations whereby they 'fill in' missing imagery on stage; however,
> the opposite tends to be true more often than not...child audiences are
> 'concrete' (literal) processors who focus on seeing the explicit visual images
> and hearing the explicit verbal dialogue presented to them (2005:46).

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[30] Or more colloquially, what audience see in their imagination

What this points to is how children can learn through their own engagement and experiences in the performance. I would like to point out here that there is no universal emotional response, and with children it is even clearer that the overt personal responses are individual. This provides a platform for extending understanding of a spectator in relation to the live experience. On one hand, we can see that children can influence others with uncontrolled laughter or cries and actions, yet on the other, there is the response of a child who has his own sense of clarification and his own sensitivity. As Simon O' Sullivan writes, "present experience- the moment-is inaccessible to consciousness. All we ever have is its trace" (Sullivan quoted in Reason, 2010: 21). This suggests that each member of the audience shares such moments of isolations and how each of them respond vicariously to his/her live experience. More significantly, we need to acknowledge that these responses cannot be taught through formal classes but are spontaneous and instinctive reactions from the child audience. They happen at that instance in that given moment. What is important is not just what happens on stage but also what happens within the minds, imagination and memory of the watching audience.

There is also a need to understand the nature of the "path" the child takes when he negotiates *sense* into meanings. Kulka states that a child's first word has no meaning but they do have *sense*. The meaning is "established as the word is incorporated into the system of language and through repeated association; the meaning crystallizes as a psychosocial entity" (Kulka, quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 91). For example, a child may not understand the relationship between the word "tree" and the actual object "tree". It is through continuous conditioning and associating the word and the object that the child will draw the link between the

words and the object. Similarly in theatre, a child uses a *sense* to regard the representation for an object. This sense stems from how the child feels and reacts accordingly to the action and image on stage. Reason states that within a phenomenological perspective, it is through value and meaning, in its own rights, and conscious reflection, that individuals can make sense and invest meaning in their experiences (2010: 21).

From another perspective, Hughes terms these spontaneous reactions as "dramatic play", in which a child experiences the pleasures of exercising his powers of mastery (Hughes, 1999: 88) and plays a role that he or she is accustomed to in everyday life and is familiar with. The represented reality provides that platform for the child to react and respond. As such, this represented world allows the child to create an alternative world allows them to engage in (Bretherton, quoted in Hughes, 1988: 91). That is, it stimulates the "as if" type of thinking that forms the basis for reasoning and problem solving. The emphasis, therefore, is not immediately on the educational or social benefits of theatre for children, but on the experiential perceptions, focusing on the audiences' immediate and instinctive engagement with the situations at present. Dansky has highlighted that these forms of "play" and creating a make-believe world stimulates children to think creatively and will contribute to creativity in his/her later stage (Danksy, quoted in Hughes, 1988: 91). More importantly, he also reveals that "play" has the most social benefits and has the greatest impact on the development of social awareness in children (1998: 92). Perhaps, these moments of spontaneous "play" should be valued and included when evaluating children's theatre. It is through these moments that the richness and playfulness of the responses emerge when children do take the narratives and

characters upon themselves. It is through "play" in children's theatre that we can deepen and extend the child's knowledge and ownership-creative, imaginative, emotional and technical-of the performance (Reason, 2010: 122).

Piaget explains that these spontaneous reactions are "real social language" of children that cannot be taught (Piaget quoted in Isbell 1998: 245). Hence, from the above example, the represented world enhances and encourages a child's engagement. These moments are often not rehearsed and reveal the spontaneous interactions between audience and actors. What we need to acknowledge then is that children can learn by participating and engaging actively in and through the performances. More importantly, the above analogy serves as an example to illustrate the benefits of learning through spontaneity that is often neglected within the current boundaries and these interactions cannot be taught through formal classroom learning. Hence, rather than using a specific and reductive approach, like the resource pack to "teach", teachers need to acknowledge that children's theatre needs to be open and involves a self-reflective engagement of ideas that involves the audience' "play", memory and transformative knowledge.

What also needs to be relooked at within the current boundaries of children's theatre is if it is realistic to expect that theatrical experience to change the child. As discussed in this chapter, it is the child's individual theatrical engagement that seems to aid his/her own learning and development most effectively. Frye believes that this kind of spontaneous reactions and experience in the "dramatic context of a particular play process in which the child is open to learning through an artistic experience" (Frye, 1990: 94). What we look at is how the influence of the theatre lies in its power

to arouse such reactions so that the theatrical experience itself is beneficial. As Ubersfield writes, "theatrical pleasures are rarely passive, 'doing' plays a larger role than 'receiving" (1982: 132). What this involves is a kind of experience not just going on in the audience's mind and body during a performance but also is what they "do" with this experience after the event. In this sense, it can be said that these approaches of informal learning will have a more impact on the children's learning, development and understanding of the world.

In this respect, children's theatre becomes an art form that has a language of its own. Through participating and engaging in a performance, this can achieve new modes of learning, which goes beyond the classroom. The essence of the theatrical experience should not just be an instrument for teaching and learning. It is the non-intentional education experience that will result in education at its best. This encourages the children to value their own experience and perspective, and make sense of it through personal reflection. In addition, it allows them to make connections and begin to formulate their own opinions rather than relying on the educators to obtain the "right answers". In this way, it is possible to argue that the meanings of an experience are only "accessible through engaging with the retrospective consciousness of the individual" (Reason, 2010: 22). Educators and parents should look beyond the "checklist" and continue to find strategies to contextualize, enhance and frame these kinds of theatrical experiences.

Eugenio Barba has argued that "the meaning of a performance is not what was happening on stage but what is happening in the minds and subsequent memories of the audience" (Barba quoted in Reason, 2010: 117). What is also worth stressing is

that audience experiences do not just reside in the moment of the thing itself but is an on-going, reflective engagement within audiences' memories, social relations and imaginative lives. A performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes the *meaningfulness* and usefulness to it. This chapter highlights how we often neglect the child audience's responses when discussing children's theatre and how there is value in this development that arises from the spontaneous reactions from the children rather than an instructive approach. Hence, what I have discussed is how the boundaries in children's theatre should emerge from the children's concern: their own ways of seeing, responding and understanding theatre. For children's theatre to grow, educators and parents need to acknowledge that children need to adopt for themselves a sense of entitlements, ownership and legitimacy as audience members. There are definitively challenges but there is potential to obtain deep and rich insights into the audience experiences.

Chapter 4: Moving Beyond the Boundaries-
The Challenges and Values of Children's Theatre

Children's theatre is indeed an art form with qualities that make it distinct from adult theatre. In the previous two chapters, I have discussed that there seems to be a homogenized idea of what children's theatre must be or should be. This is a result of adult audiences often imposing what they deem as appropriate viewing for children. Even though these performances are aimed at children, they are ultimately experienced by both the child audience and the accompanying adults. Children's theatre then becomes a primary forum in which children confront the performances through the lens of adult creators and presenters. As a result, children's theatre seems to encapsulate adult's ideas of their anxieties and aspirations about what children should learn through these performances.

Consequently, many children's theatre is being created by people who think it is their responsibility to bring about an inspirational message or to assert a particular moral lesson. While it is good to embrace moral values and teachings, writing and presenting a play to tell us will not necessarily make it so. It is not realistic to expect that a theatrical experience can change a child's attitude or teach him a lesson immediately. The best we can expect is that the play will teach us how to recite pledges of morality without stumbling. I have challenged that children's theatre should not be reduced to merely a list of characteristics that one should use to gauge the quality of the performance. Children's theatre stands between the course of theatre and education and we need to acknowledge that it is not merely a hybrid of the two, but rather a holistic entity that complements each other. Effective learning in theatre

involves a complex network of responses and communication from its audiences and not just an imposition from educators.

There are definitely educational benefits in children's theatre but how these approaches are used needs to be reconsidered. Children's theatre should be open to enhancing the perception of theatre as an aesthetic experience to raise one's social and cultural awareness and not be used as a vehicle to impose classroom lessons. In my opinion, children's theatre should not exist purely to function as a pedagogical tool; teach moral values, or to instil right attitudes. As I have pointed out, while educators and parents might have their own objectives towards children's theatre, the child audience experiences and engages with theatre very differently. One needs to remember that children do not immediately learn a particular lesson after each performance. The performance does not cease the moment the curtain drops and the children's processing and reflections continue even after it is over.

However, this assumptions and stigma still exists within the current boundaries of children's theatre. While I Theatre claims and aims to brand itself as "family entertainment" and it consciously emphasises that it produces theatre "fun for the whole family", my observation is that it cannot escape the stigma of it being a children's theatre company. By constantly targeting school children as their main audience, it subconsciously acknowledges and draws attention to itself as a company producing theatre targeted at children. To quote Brian Seward, "It will take a long time for people to stop associating children's theatre with the childish and amateur"[31].In this chapter, I will illustrate that despite the existing stigma, there are educational and social values in children's theatre.

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[31] Interview with Brian Seward 20th Nov 2009.

Evaluating the Values in Children's Theatre

In the previous chapters, I have highlighted how children's theatre is often built on traditional fairy tales, nursery rhymes, myths and legends which follow a "fixed structure and style" (Wood 1997: 26). As seen in I Theatre's productions, what is seen in a performance is a stock plot which leads to a conclusion in which a happy and moralized ending is presented (Wood, 1997: 28). For example, I have presented how the protagonist in *Ollie and the Slurge*, faces a struggle and eventually trumps over evil. One can say that there is often a sense of security and familiarity in these fictional worlds that provide a safe and stable platform for the children audience to engage in. In *Ollie and the Slurge*, the emphasis is on patriotism, a stable family, and the need for good behaviour.

As a result of these assumptions that children's theatre is safe and appropriate, audiences neither question and doubt the happily-ever-after endings nor dive deeper into the interpretations and meanings beyond that. Conclusions are made with an assumption that the stability provides no further investigation.

I would like to point out here that because of these assumptions, they create "protected" boundaries surrounding the genre of children's theatre. Performances for children are often left unquestioned and without the interference of the government since the contents are often seen as safe and appropriate. As a result, children's theatre is often left to the artistic freedom of the companies. In recent years, Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA) has stepped up its regulation and censorship rules for arts entertainment, in particular, theatre. In return, this has given rise to more boundaries across categorizations in relation to age and content.

More specifically in the category of children's theatre, which is considered a niche area in the licensing domain, there have been guidelines to govern what kind of performance can be deem to be "appropriate". The following are the guidelines that the Media Development Authority has drawn up for children's theatre performance.

- For the purposes of this Code, "children's content" refers to content which are designed specifically for children of different age groups up to the age of 14.

- Children's programmes should be wholesome and in general designed to impart a broader knowledge of the world around them as well as promote appreciation of good social and moral values.

- Children's content should not contain scenes depicting the consumption of liquor or tobacco products unless an educational point is being made, or in very exceptional cases if the dramatic context makes such scenes absolutely necessary. Swear words must also not be used in content.

- Children may not be able to distinguish real life from fiction and are likely to be disturbed by realistic portrayal of violence, horror etc. As such, children's content should not be presented in a manner which may be disturbing or distressing to children or which may in any way adversely affect their general well being.

- Content meant for younger children requires special care as they may find violence and horror scenes/programmes in both realistic and fantasy settings

to be disturbing. For example, viewing advisories should be provided to alert parents about such content which may be frightening to pre-schoolers.

- Portrayals of any dangerous or harmful behaviour are easily imitated by children and should be avoided[32].

While the government has taken great care to draw up these various guidelines and to ensure the appropriate-ness of arts performance, the greatest irony is that children's theatre is not implicated by these censorship policies. According to the source, "Arts entertainment for children aged 12 years or below, including but not limited to musicals, puppet shows and recitals of stories is exempted[33]". This means that I Theatre does not need to submit various proposals of its content and the text script. Instead, the company is free to stage these performances without the censorship board's approval. According to Brian Seward, the above guideline is "one of the greatest paradoxes despite the government's effort in raising censorship rules and regulation. Children's theatre is still left in isolation". Seward also added that "as a result of this, this gives directors, playwrights and actors to be as creative as possible without crossing the appropriate boundaries"[34].

It seems that because of the generalization about the content in children's theatre, it has become an area of common understanding that it always provides a viewing experience that is perceived as appropriate. As a result, children's theatre as a

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[32] Source taken from the Media Development Authority-Classification Framework for Arts Performance (Accessed 22July 2011)
http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/Public/public_Media%20Classification_Arts%20Entertainm
ent_Classification%20Framework%20for%20Arts%20Performances.pdf
[33] Ibid
[34] Interview with Brian Seward, 20th Nov 2010.

genre is freed from scrutiny and probing. The responsibility is thus given to the directors and playwrights of children's theatre to then create these "wholesome" performances. Hence, children's theatre is freed from the scrutiny of the authorities but rather given its own space for development and artistic freedom. One might even say that the term "children's theatre" becomes its own censorship or a protected platform from interrogation. The responsibility thus falls on the company to assess what is appropriate for children's viewing.

In my opinion, it is this "protected" nature of children's theatre that provides a platform for children's theatre to grow. As Swortzell mentioned, this is a "fatalistic paradox", since it is the "most neglected of theatre forms but also the most important as the training ground and laboratory for the development of future audiences without whom the adult theatre may not survive" (Swortzell, 1992: xiv) Hence, it is precisely this gap in which there are hidden values beneath the stigma of children's theatre.

What needs to be relooked at constantly is the preconceived mindset and expectations of what children theatre is. When evaluating the boundaries of children's theatre, we should look beyond the performance criteria and towards the audience's performance instead. It is through their behaviour and responses that we can gather new insights about children's theatre. Swortzell has argued that "the benefits come through self exploration and self expression, through interaction and socialization and through the disciplines integral to all art forms" (Swortzell, 1992, xi).

In addition, Brian Seward has also suggested a social value in watching children's theatre: "People react and respond in theatre, it's a family experience as they interact with each other and with the actors on stage. It becomes a shared experience between parents and children, and between the audience and performers"

(The Business Times, Arts, July 15 2011). Hence, children's theatre is more than just watching plays on stage but rather possesses a strong social value that the theatrical experience can provide. In Chapter 2, I have discussed how children were herded into the theatre by educators and were not allowed to talk to one another. This, in my opinion, restricts the social value that theatre can provide. Children can exhibit extremely strong awareness and interest in the whole social experience of attending a performance. The act of visiting and attending a performance can provide children platforms of engagement and interaction. This includes the benefits of being in a mixed and public audience. Dewey highlights that "teachers should provide opportunities for children to socialize because of the belief that children need to learn how to get along with each other. Children can also learn from social engagements with each other and with adults in their environment" (Dewey, quoted in Isbell, 1998: 283). For Manscher, theatre provides an opportunity for "social dialogue and understanding between children and adults" (Manscher, quoted in Reason, 2010: 50). This provides a space outside the boundaries of formal education and parenting, where a different conversation and interaction can take place. Perhaps, what children's theatre can provide is exactly this platform for children to socialize, inquire, question, experiment and most importantly, interact. The focus should not just be on the performance but on the value of nurturing of children's ability to express their ideas in a supportive environment through this social event.

Finally, I have mentioned that there is still a lack of respect not just from the public but also the profession itself, from those who view children's theatre as "child's play". However, I would like to point out that there is much value in "play". Here, I refer to "play" as being spontaneous in their reactions and more importantly,

"pleasurable" (Hughes, 1998: 2). Through playing, children have the chance to be imaginative and expressive in order to develop their social, emotional, physical and intellectual abilities. More specifically, they have the opportunity to explore the ways in which their bodies move and how they interact with others. I have illustrated in Chapter 3 how each child's response is unique. In children's theatre, children express their own feelings and interpretations towards what is represented on stage. Hughes also states that "play continuously flows from one another" (1998: 48). Hence, these responses need to be treated in fragments and isolated segments since each child "play" differently. More importantly, we need to reconsider the importance of how children learn through play.

Engaging in children's theatre contributes to intellectual and social competence. Creative and communicative interaction can be used as a basis for language, for learning to socialise with others and for cultural learning. The ways in which children use, play with and transform their cultural experiences in their imaginative lives reveal how the passive audience is in reality an active participant. Of course, to have any significant influence on children's intellectual and social competence, the experiences would have to be regular and consistent. What is heartening is that our educational systems in Singapore encourage children to experiencing theatre early. As mentioned, more resources and funding are being invested by government into schools in bringing children to the theatre. However, the approaches in which bringing them to the theatre, imposing life lessons and herding them back needs to be reconsidered for such an experience to be beneficial. Hence, the relationship between audience and theatre should never be conceptualized merely

in terms of adults' expectations but for the sake the empowerment and cultural rights of the young audience.

Children's theatre is not a matter of purely being a platform for its educational intentions. While we acknowledge that it has learning benefits, the ways in which educators and parents use children's theatre need to be evaluated. It is should not be reduced to a checklist to evaluate its success. In the context of children's theatre, the relevance of the arts to their daily lives outside the education system is particularly crucial. It should be understood that, not only in terms of content but also in terms of the form of the cultural product and the nature of the experience. While we often focus on the uses of children's theatre as a finished product; what matters is in fact an unfinished process that continuously pushes boundaries and challenges the social expectations of it. While the performance might end, the thought processes and the enquiries of the children do not. It prompts actions and enquiry and a desire for answers. This gives rise to further learning processes and responses of children's theatre.

Therefore, there is a need to examine the paradox of children's theatre. Children's theatre can be naive, child-like, complex and spectacular all within the same performance. It is a genuine art form in so far as they provide an experience which enlarges the audience's sympathies and awareness of human nature and human relationships. It is a platform that stimulates emotions, thinking and imagination and affords both pleasure and education. I hope that this thesis has created a meeting point between "children" and "theatre", allowing various points of access and assessment in exploring the benefits and value in children's theatre, which is to

ultimately offer a possibility to relocate the current boundaries of children's theatre in Singapore.

Epilogue

This thesis attempted to offer an alternative framework in which we might evaluate children's theatre by critiquing various preconceptions of children's theatre. However, since this study has been discussed through a micro- analytical study focusing on a few productions of one theatre company, there have been limitations in drawing. Firstly, the case study of I Theatre isolates and limits its examples and viewing processes to only their productions and performances. In return, this only provides an individual company's position in a greater landscape of Singapore children's theatre. The inclusion of larger samples of other children's theatre performance might encompass a greater scope which might reveal a more extensive picture of children's theatre in Singapore, which will enable a more macro-analysis of the structure, contents and other various cultural practices and issues under which children's theatre operate.

To further expand on this area of research, perhaps one could include the views of other directors and actors to gather a broader range of data, providing more depth in discussing the issues in children's theatre. Since children's theatre in Singapore has not been formally looked at, I hope that this study will provide a platform for future research in children's theatre.

In addition, in the increasingly saturated mass media world we live in, a further step into the research can include the impact and influence of children's programmes,

films and entertainment on theatre, audience expectations and reactions. As Reason states, "the concept of theatre for children situates children as the audience, which can be perceived as a largely passive and disempowered position; watchers rather than actors; observers rather than participants; spoke to, rather than speaking" (Reason, 2010:170) This perception of audience going to the theatre to be entertained is most familiar to us in the passive consumption culture associated with television, films and video games. I suggest that the existing boundaries surrounding children's theatre need to allow tensions, complexities and differences to exist to continue redefining itself in its search an increasing variety of goals and forms. This includes considering a wider cultural concern in children's theatre to shift viewing into "participating"; and seeing into "engaging".

On a positive note, there is a boom in children's art due to the growing acceptance of arts as a learning medium (Straits Times Life, June 10 2010). There has been an increase in children's festivals, workshops and even new children's theatre companies in recent years. There is a shift and acknowledgment that children's theatre is not merely a "play" but that it possesses elements of "seriousness" (just like adult theatre) that should be evaluated. The boundaries of children's theatre are extremely delicate and transparent. Ruby Lim-Yang, Artistic Director of Act 3 International remains optimistic that "the future is very positive...It has been a long time. It's perpetual because you know there will always be children, and as long as we do good quality works; works that are true to artistic integrity, this propelling for children's theatre will go on" (The Business Times, Arts, 15 July 2011).

What needs to be valued are the benefits that arise from the communication process, self-exploration and interaction which are integral to children's theatre. I believe that the boundaries of children's theatre should develop its own aesthetic and artistic form and be freed from the perception of what it "ought to be". It should go beyond the question of what children's theatre is good for. Children's theatre should be able to grow and define its own nature of excitement to illuminate the theatrical landscape in Singapore. In any case, children's theatre should be adjusted, planned and created for its unique audience. Mark Twain has claimed that "children's theatre is one of the very great inventions of the twentieth century" (Twain, quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 204). This "invention" should continue to revisit, re-cultivate and reinvent itself.

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