

Precis of “From Creation to Performance of an Original Multi-sensory Show for Children with Special Needs”

In this presentation titled “From Creation to Performance of an Original Multi-sensory Show for Children with Special Needs”, I share about the journey from conception to brainstorming and eventual creation and performance of the production “The Enchanted Garden”. This entire project was conceived in 2018 and toured in multiple Special Education schools in Singapore, reaching out to a diverse audience population.

The presentation covers the Overview, which touches on the different disciplines we used to make the show multi-sensory, including the inspiration behind it; the Process broken down, introducing the dramatic and narrative elements and how we incorporated music to tie them together; and finally the actual Performance, and how we prepared the stage in the different venues for our performances.

We explored various elements of multi-sensory shows for children with special needs, drawing inspiration from case studies of professional music and theatre companies who carry out inclusive arts experiences. This included companies such as Bamboozle Theatre in the UK, Music Amiga from Portugal and Seesaw Theatre in the United States. We also referenced a book by Dr. Alice Fox, Artistic Director of the ‘Rocket Artists’ and Professor at the University of Brighton, UK, which is titled ‘Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto’. This book explores the ethics and socio-cultural attitudes that surround working with people with disabilities, and also acts as a good introduction to some research based methodology in relation to Inclusive Arts. Our goal for the children who attended “The Enchanted Garden” was to be exposed to a variety of music genres from classical to contemporary in a way which is exciting, accessible and imaginative. We also included elements of drama and dance, to expose them to an interdisciplinary approach to art making. In addition, the children were encouraged to naturally respond to the musical experience, through movement and interacting with the performers and musicians.

As this show consisted of mostly original music, we made sure to compose music catering to the skills of performers involved. In our context, the piano, cello, percussion and voice were the driving forces of the show. The composers wrote music that was gentle, based on 8-12 bar melodies that were repeated with changes in instrumentation or solos for interest, with a simple 3-part harmony sung/played by various instruments over basic chord progressions. In addition, we incorporated the Flower Duet by Lakmé and the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy by Tchaikovsky to expose the audience to classical music. For the Drama aspect, we wrote a simple script which followed the journey of two friends who find a pretty flower, fall in love with it, lose it, search for it in

the enchanted garden while meeting some special friends who help them along the way, and eventually find it and celebrate. The storyline might be simple but it is engaging enough for the children to be enthralled by the different characters. For the element of Dance, one of the members in our ensemble was a Ballet dancer so we had her choreograph a dance routine to Tchaikovsky's piece as the musicians accompanied her. As we valued the interactivity of audiences with performers, we made sure to include the audience engagement element where certain sections of the performance provided opportunities for the children to play various percussion instruments and do simple movements grooving along to the music.

Music and Drama were the core focuses of our show so we used theatre to introduce classical music to the children in a friendly and relaxed manner on their terms. We wanted to make sure that the form of the music matched the structure of the story, providing more concrete meaning to an otherwise pretty abstract artform which is music. We also created focus through the use of body language, gestures and words to draw attention to various elements in the show as focal points for the scenes. As we wanted the show to be more relatable, we performed with no stage to break the audience-performer barrier.

I will now break down the structure of the entire composition and narrative. We followed the typical structure of <>, which translates to starting calm, building to a climax and ending on a high or sense of resolve, or calmness in the form of an outro. As the students were invited into the venue, music was already being played and the singers were singing gently. As the children found their places to sit, we opened the show with a welcome song which had a memorable melody that was gentle and inviting. In the second song, we wrote one that invoked fantasy and wonder, inspired by Debussy which created feelings of calmness. In this portion of the story, the girls find the flower and are enthralled by its beauty. However, they quickly lose it as the wind blows and overtakes them. The third song was the ballet dance, where the fairy ballerina dances to an arrangement of Tchaikovsky's piece. The girls enter the enchanted garden where they meet the fairy and a raccoon which lead the way to find the flower again. This is also the climax of the storyline so the music builds up in tempo and dynamics. The fourth song was more improvisatory, where the children were handed out percussion instruments to play and explore the rainforest sounds. The section was unmetered and sparse depending on the noises and sounds the children made. We also used this opportunity to hand out tactile props for the children to feel, such as leaves, feathers, crepe paper etc. Finally, we ended with a Groove song, which encouraged the children to move along and tap out rhythms with all the performers as a celebration of the journey. From the composer's point of view, she had to write the music with a limited

range, steady tempo markings, use of repetition and simple melodies and harmonies, so as to make the show accessible for the diverse population.

The performance aspect was the culmination of all the work put in during the process of research, composition and many rehearsals. As mentioned before, to achieve less of a barrier between audience and performers, which we found to be very powerful, we did not have a stage to allow for physical interaction, where we addressed the children intimately and personally, creating a more personalized experience. The children had the opportunity to touch the instruments and play along with them. As this was a touring show, and we did not have a fixed stage, we had to creatively think of ways to transform each venue into our stage so that we could create the atmosphere we wanted for the children. We used props, set design and lighting to achieve this. For props, we used pipe cleaners and papier mache to make flowers as the central flower prop, which was a simple object imbued with significant meaning. For set design, we adopted the DIY approach and used construction paper, streamers, fake foliage and vines to turn music stands into jungle trees, classroom walls into creeping vines and a pile of blue streamers into a river. This allowed us to provide more stimuli than just music and drama, as well as transport the children to another fantasy world and keep them engaged.

In summary, it was important to consider the whole journey and the various steps we took to achieve a successful production. Our approach was simplistic, had a relatively low budget and yet was effective with a lot of positive feedback. In the time of a global pandemic, live productions definitely have to be put on hold, but the approach from research, to composition, to writing, rehearsing, creating a set and performance can still be used, with adaptations put in place. Hopefully, we are able to continue creating art and adapting to the changing times to reach out to diverse audiences.