

Review

Matthew Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and enhancing children's experiences of theatre*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2010. Pp. 180. £20.99 pbk. ISBN: 978-1-858-56450-0.

Matthew Reason is one of very few academic researchers attempting to empirically study audiences for theatre and performance. This book is Reason's latest and most extensive publication from a series of projects exploring the responses of young audiences to theatre. Two essays detailing his earlier work were published in *Participations* in 2004.

Going in, it is important to recognize that *The Young Audience* is marketed and written as a guide for practitioners. In a quote on the back cover, Tony Reekie of the Imagine festival calls the book '[a] fantastic resource for everyone interested in children's theatre'. The blurb draws heavily on language from cultural policy, particularly in discussing the book's ability to show how 'children's engagement with theatre can be enhanced, extended and deepened'.

But while cultural policy research has tended to produce 'impact' studies that limit themselves to capturing little more than demographic details and associated indices of appreciation, this book does something rather more important. As Reason points out in *The Young Audience*, people writing about theatre for children have tended to limit themselves to asking two kinds of questions: namely, *why* should children watch theatre, and *what kind* of theatre should they watch? Instead, this project explored *how* children watch and find meaning in theatre as a cultural event (p. x). From his earlier work, some of the most interesting findings came from how children responded to the act of *going to* and *being in* the theatre: in other words, from how they felt about *being part of a theatre-going audience*. This is drawn through into *The Young Audience*, which raises important questions about how children view arts participation within the context of their cultural lives. This is where the book provides a useful digression from the usual model of impact studies.

Reason works in this book to complexify common assumptions made about the 'instrumental benefits' that are very often ascribed to theatre. He points out that theatre made specifically *for* children is almost always created in a process that is *removed from* children, based on judgments made by adults about what is 'good' for them. He argues that in discussions of young audiences, discourses of education tend to be as prevalent as discourses of experience. In doing so, he provides an interesting figuration of young audiences as valued not for their present attendance but for their *future possibilities* as arts'

attendees. His study is valuable in its attempt to shift the focus away from the things children are supposed to *get out of* theatre participation and on to the *ways in which* the children who took part in his study actually watched plays, and the meanings and pleasures they experienced in doing so.

Reason notes that by focusing too closely on the 'good things' theatre can or should do to children, aesthetic discourses are often sidelined. The danger here, he suggests, is 'that without being good in its own right theatre may not be able to do good at all' (p. 13). However, Reason does not go beyond this in tackling the question of what aesthetically 'good' theatre for children might be. He does not use his conclusions to offer a set of rules for *making* theatre for children. Rather, as the subtitle of the book suggests, the assessments he offers are expected to be of use in *enhancing* the theatrical experience for young audiences. The nature of this book as a 'resource' – a guide to engaging young audiences in theatre – means that the idea of theatre as essentially beneficial goes unqueried. It is not theatre's *ability* to do good that is in question in this book, but *how this good might best be done*.

Reason draws his conclusions from the findings of a 2007 project called 'Drawing the Theatrical Experience'. This project explored the responses of groups of school children to theatrical productions at the Imagine Children's Theatre Festival in Edinburgh, which took place in May that year. Productions included *Psst!*, a puppet performance by Danish company Teatr Refleksion; *Them With Tails* by Tall Stories, in which two performers acted out a series of fantastical tales; and *Martha and the Goose* by Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, a story about a woman befriended by a goose. These were followed by arts workshops encouraging the children to draw moments that had stuck out for them from each of these performances, after which researchers asked the children to talk about their pictures. Three primary-age schools from Edinburgh and West Lothian took part in this project, with a total of 98 children participating in eleven workshops.

In a working paper at the 2010 Realities conference, Reason reflected on the value of using non-writing-based methods for research into young audiences. Reason felt that these methods were more likely to be able to break such projects away from being seen as part of 'school work', and therefore subject to the same institutional rules of tone, form and content. He also argued that these would be better placed to remove participatory barriers for less confident or academically assured children; and, thirdly, that such methods would have value in mitigating the emphasis placed by writing processes on 'narrative and flow rather than on wholeness and connectiveness' (p. 3). He notes in *The Young Audience* that in conducting this research he consistently attempted to take up a position of not-knowing, using sociologist Barry Mayall's approach to researching children of 'present[ing] myself as a person who, since she is an adult, does not have this knowledge' of childhood (quoted p. 53). In doing so he hoped to get around the methodological problem of his workshops being seen *as part of school* and therefore as expecting a particular kind of response.

This was particularly pertinent as one of the issues the book sets out to tackle is that identified by Jeanne Klein: the belief that 'we are raising generations of spectators who

perceive theatre as an incomprehensibly abstract medium intended primarily for school trips' (quoted p. 13-14). Reason's study found that most of the children who participated in the study felt alienated from theatre as a cultural activity. In his earlier articles he had explored the social event of theatrical attendance, and discovered that many students felt that their presence in the theatre was being responded to in a hostile manner by the 'grown up' attendees. Reason identifies the central problem facing theatre for young audiences as being that children tend to feel disconnected from theatre: it is an aspect of cultural production that, unlike music or television, for example, is divorced from the context of their daily lives. Reason concludes that the issue is one of *ownership*. The majority of his young participants, he found, did not feel a sense of ownership over theatre as a cultural product; they did not feel it to be a part of their cultural lives in any important way. This was culture as 'other'. The exception to this was a group of sixteen-year old girls who attended a public school in which they had been educated in theatrical production models, and those that had studied theatre as a subject in its own right. These respondents displayed a much greater feeling of confidence in discussing the productions in question, and exhibited a sense of ownership over the material.

The book thereby positions education as being a crucial tool for enriching children's experiences of theatre. It suggests that the way to engage young audiences in theatre is to educate them from an early age in performance. Quite simply, Reason believes that young children just *do not know what to do with* theatre: how to watch a performance; what to focus on; how to find commonalities between the performance and everyday life; how to talk about it afterwards; and how to reflect on and find meaning in the event. The solution, says Reason, is to educate them: to supply young children with the competence necessary for them to feel ownership over and thereby find pleasure in performances. Here Reason draws on Bourdieu's argument that 'the capacity to see is a function of knowledge' (quoted p. 85).

This study therefore provides a necessary complication of the access discourse in arts policy. As Reason succinctly points out, the *right* to participate in theatre is not the same as *wanting* to participate: and in fact, most people do have the right but just don't choose to exercise it. Education, he concludes, is a means of giving children 'the confidence and the knowledge that allows them to take possession of the cultural forms on offer on their own terms and in their own right' (p. 30).

This book undoubtedly does what it sets out to do: to provide a resource for people involved in theatre for children that explains how actual young audiences watch and respond to performances, and how their experience can productively be enhanced. Understandably, given this aim, the value of theatre in and of itself is not in question: while *The Young Audience* does show that most of the children who partook in the study did not feel theatre to be an important part of their lives, it concludes that it could *be made to be so*. There is the slight but insistent implication throughout that theatre offers a *special kind of experience* that is missing from children's existing cultural lives. While I had hoped for a more critical perspective on the value of arts participation in the context of the extensive

gamut of entertainment options for children, this book does offer fascinating insights into how children experience and how they *talk about their experiences* of theatre. Particularly interesting is the discussion of how children manage their understandings of the gaps between what is actually seen and what is represented, the common assumptions for which are very neatly unpacked. Reason, then, is one of very few academics doing the difficult and necessary work of showing the complicated processes that go into the encounter between theatre and audiences. And for that, this book should be read by a much wider audience than its target.

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Reference:

Reason, Matthew (2010a) 'Mindmaps, presentational knowledge and the dissemination of qualitative research' (Nov 2010) Working Paper #16, Realities conference: York St John University, <http://intranet.yorks.ac.uk/cmsfiles/Interactivemindmap/Interactivemindmap> (Accessed 24th Jan 2011).