

A provocation: Researching the diverse child audience in the UK

Karian Schuitema,
University of Westminster, UK

Abstract:

Because the UK is a diverse society, practitioners aim to represent the diversity of the child audience in performances created for them. As audience research in this area is limited, the absence of a child audience perspective might be interpreted in terms of the adult following their own ideological stance, rather than engaging with the experience of children. This provocation will look at the difficulties of researching and performing 'difference' for the young audience as well as the various arguments for incorporating and representing diversity. Using Jacqueline Rose's seminal work on the myth of the innocent child, I will argue that the child, considered to be a culturally constructed concept, is believed to exist outside the political harshness of the 'adult' world and stripped of cultural difference. Inviting children to participate in research might give the child an opportunity to influence theatre created for them. In other words, to ensure that children's theatre does not prescribe diversity from an adult point of view, but engages with the cultural diversity represented by its young audience, it is important to invite the child's perspective on *their* theatre and *their* diverse world.

Keywords: Children's theatre, young audiences, representation, audience research, cultural diversity, performing difference, participation.

The UK is a diverse society. Immigration, past and present, has continuously shaped and re-shaped the ethnic, religious and cultural landscape of the people who live there (Madge, 2001: 20-24). 'Adult' practitioners and 'adult' audiences have the opportunity to create performances and purchase tickets according to their worldview, experiences and tastes and as such theatre can be seen as an expression or confirmation of their cultural identity. As some of these identities include those considered to originate from minority groups,

theatre made and enjoyed by adults, to some extent, encompasses and represents the cultural diversity of the UK. For example, Dominic Hingorani argues that because British South Asian theatre 'is a product of the syncretic notion of a 'culture of Hybridity' [...] it contests the construction of the nation as a culturally homogeneous space' (2010: 7). However, this active representation of cultural diversity or hybridity is much more complex within children's theatre because children do not often create their own theatre and are referred to as a 'captive' audience because of their limited freedom in choosing and attending theatre (see Levy quoted in Schonmann, 2006: 20-21; Reason, 2010: 17). Instead the adult practitioner creates this cultural expression for them. On the one hand, it is argued that there is not enough cultural diversity present in the arts. For example Brian McMaster's report commissioned by the government in 2008 states that 'we live in one of the most diverse societies the world has ever seen, yet this is not reflected in the culture we produce, or in who is producing it' (11). On the other hand, the adult's attempts to create theatre for children that represents diversity needs to negotiate the difficulties of the cultural exchange and avoid accusations of tokenism, essentialism, stereotypical representations, homogenisation and cultural appropriation.

Although practitioners in the UK have long been engaging the child with performances that include and mix different cultural influences (often described as intercultural theatre) and the associated issues of diversity such as racism, discrimination and identity, empirical audience research of this type of work is few and far between. This absence of a child audience perspective does not help the perception that, when adult practitioners attempt to engage with the cultural diversity found represented in young audiences, they are deemed to follow their own ideological stance rather than engaging with the experience of the child. This provocation will look at the difficulties of performing 'difference' for the young audience as well as the various arguments for incorporating and representing diversity. It will focus on the difficulties of researching the child's experience while also arguing for the need to develop audience research that better understands the expectations of children regarding their theatre. Such research must investigate how young audiences can engage with the increasingly diverse world around them through the culture they experience. Using Jacqueline Rose's seminal work on the myth of the innocent child, I will explore how the child, considered as a culturally constructed concept, is believed to exist outside the political harshness of the 'adult' world and stripped of cultural difference. More recent attempts have sought to bring out the individuality of the child by engaging with their experiences, accommodating their diverse backgrounds by including and generally encouraging multiple perspectives. However, as theatre is part of those cultural products that represent and narrate the wider identity of the UK, there is still a need to ensure that the culture presented within performance for children is reflective of the diverse culture they experience on a day-to-day basis. In conclusion, this provocation will suggest that audience research needs to engage not only with the subject of representing diversity, but also with the need to rethink the way such research can be designed to give young audiences the opportunity to influence their own theatre.

The development of a diverse children's theatre in the UK

Theatre in the UK has long been inspired and influenced by 'other' cultures. Especially in early theatre for young audiences, 'Eastern', 'Oriental' and 'Exotic' settings were deemed perfect playgrounds for fantasy tales such as Aladdin or the Nightingale. However, theatre dealing with diversity also arose from the Theatre in Education (TiE) movement's desire to engage with the cultural heterogeneity they recognised in the young audience. As the aims and objectives of the TiE movement were rooted in Socialist, Marxist and Trotskinist ideologies (see SCYPT, 1980: 25-29, 28-35), an emphasis on the political power of art meant that theatre for the young dealt with serious social issues and saw young audience members as active agents able to transform their environment (Bennett, 2005: 18). As it was mainly working class young audiences that TiE sought to reach with their educational programmes (see Nicholson, 2009: 24), a small number of TiE companies began to engage with the increasing diversification of the UK and the tension this brought to schools in predominantly working class areas. Stuart Bennett explains that in 1969 Belgrade TiE embarked upon the performance *Rama and Sita* (part of the company's infant programme aimed at 5 to 7 year olds) because of the awareness of the growing Asian community working in textile factories in Coventry and the number of Asian children in schools (interview by author, 2011). The story, which was selected because it was thought to be familiar to children with Asian backgrounds, was performed with a 'head-dress' inspired by the depictions of Ravanna, masks and accompanied by a sitar (Belgrade TiE, 1970: 32). Alongside *Rama and Sita*, Belgrade TiE had other programmes/plays recognisable as intercultural such as *How Rain Came to Hweng Chow* (1968) based on Chinese legends (Belgrade TiE, 1969: 4), and *The Emergent Africa Game* (1970) created with Frances Ankoma-Sey, a drama specialist from Ghana (Belgrade TiE, 1970: 25).

A second company influential in representing the UK's diversity was Theatre Centre, which in the 'late 70s and early 80s ... gradually evolved a policy of multi-racial/integrated casting' (Tyler, 1987 n.p.). This meant that 'all performing companies would have a racial mix and that audiences would see black and white performers playing mother and daughter, best friends etc' (ibid). In addition, Theatre Centre also encouraged and incorporated the cultural influences which these actors brought to their work and, as such, the company started to create 'contemporary myths which drew on many cultural performing styles in order to entertain, whilst dealing with issues such as racism, sexism, stereotypes, identity' (Johnson and Gouveia, 1987 n.p.). Theatre Centre's multi-racial/integrated casting was recognised by the Arts Council as being 'in the forefront, not just within the field of TYP, but in British theatre as a whole' (Arts Council Appraisal Team, 1995), and their influence is still recognisable in much of today's work staged for children. However the overtly political/educational engagement with issues such as racism, sexism, stereotypes and identity, or the incorporation of the various cultural influences a multi-racial cast would bring, have been challenged by some that believe that these contentious issues are for adults and not children.

The challenge of performing difference

In an article published in *New Voices* Jatinder Verma highlighted Tara-In-Education's goal to address the perceptions of Asians in Britain and the lack of the 'Asian perspective' in education and also explained that dealing with social political issues was not straightforward in diverse classrooms (Verma 1986). Tara-In-Education's first production *Crawl* (1985), which toured schools in inner-city London, highlighted this point via a focus on the Crawling Order in 1919 'which forced Indians to crawl on their hand and knees past the spot where an English missionary had been assaulted' (ibid). Verma shares the audience feedback:

Responses to this limited effort at changing perceptions of colonialism in India? "Chip on your shoulder", "biased history" (comment from an Asian student) "why remind us... after all, it's not our fault." By and large, these students' comments, teachers echoing the feelings of the students, reminded the company of the dangers of fomenting "divisions" that were latent in the school population. (ibid)

The idea that addressing issues related to diversity can have a negative impact on the classroom is partly connected to the impact of illustrating 'difference' among the young audience. Whereas attempts made by schools and teachers to address racist attitudes are genuine, children might understand these attempts as drawing unwanted attention to their difference or challenging interpersonal relationships (Troyna and Hatcher: 1992, 129). It is interesting to note here that while the divisions were indeed real (and arguably still are), Verma also suggests that challenging them and bringing them to the fore by a medium such as theatre was/is seen as a disruption to the 'status quo' (Verma, 1986). Although there is evidence to suggest that illustrating and dealing with difference might be uncomfortable, at the same time multiple studies (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000; Kenner and Ruby, 2012), organisations (The Working Group Against Racism in Children's Resources, 2008; The Platform for Intercultural Europe, 2008) and teachers (Paley, 2000) affirm the benefits of including children's cultural backgrounds to supporting educational progress but also self-development, confidence and social cohesion.

Although Tara-In-Education no longer exists as a separate and distinct educational branch, Tara Art's recent work for younger audiences continues to address issues relating to the diversity found in the community surrounding their theatre in Earlsfield, London. For example, the play *The Mysteries* (2011) stages stories from the King James Bible not just in a Western theatrical style but also drawing from other performative techniques and cultural references. The play was advertised in the Tara Arts brochure as follows:

This tour uniquely marries Tara Arts' renowned Asian theatre-making sensibility creating the tantalising prospect of experiencing the Old Testament stories through Eastern eyes.... Combining story-telling with dance and evocative props, *The Mysteries* will draw connections with other faith texts

including the Quran, Torah and The Mahabharata; with the aim of reflecting modern diversity through one of the founding texts of the country. (Tara Arts, 2011)

The play, which was aimed at six-to-eleven-year-olds, was funded in relation to the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. As such, Tara Arts has engaged with a text regarded as fundamental to 'British' culture by staging it for a contemporary diverse young audience. Some of the performative techniques were, for example, a headpiece with coloured gemstones and the bright fluorescent colours arguably used to affirm the contemporary dimension. The strong yellow and orange colours, the loose-fitting trousers (popularly termed Aladdin or Harem trousers) and the simple rhythmical music, primitive in the absence of instruments and technology, can be considered to evoke the 'Eastern eyes' suggested in Tara's description of the play.

'Counter-narratives' for the child

This idea of evoking 'Eastern eyes' might for some critics and practitioners appear controversial, as generally the idea of essentialising the 'foreign' in a series of signifiers (in this case the play's colours, props and the notion of primitive culture) for a Western audience is seen as cultural appropriation or, in other words, Orientalism. However, in his chapter "'Jewelinthecrown.co.uk": Orientalism's Strange Persistence in British South Asian Writing', Steve Barfield suggests that practitioners might use representations associated with Orientalism in their staging methods as a positive affirmation of a 'multicultural' identity that challenges the inside/outside position (2006: 117). Indeed, selecting a traditional text considered of great importance to the English canon, such as the King James' Bible or Shakespeare, and staging these using culturally 'different' performance techniques can be seen to affirm the cultural but also the religious diversity found in the UK. Post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha argues that 'counter-narratives' of the nation challenge the totalising notions through which 'imagined communities' receive essentialist identities (1990: 300). The idea of 'imagined community' is very important to this discussion as it highlights how 'cultural products' (such as art, theatre, music, literature, multi-media and film) are part of the narratives that construct communities as nations and ultimately influence who is inside, and by definition who is outside, this identity.

Jen Harvie highlights how traditional culture or past events can play a role in re-writing 'memories', and explains that this act of remembering can be negative as 'memories may define other communities as inherently inferior and omit or forget features that trouble the image of itself a community is striving to create' (2005: 41). At the same time remembrance can be positive and 'validate identities that have been historically marginalised or oppressed, and [this] may revise potential imbalances in power dynamics between communities' (ibid). Although *The Mysteries* could be seen to re-write the 'memory' of the King James Bible to include and validate contemporary diversity, the extent to which young audiences understand this remains questionable. The play avoids obvious

religious signs (such as a Jewish skullcap, a Muslim headscarf, the Christian cross or Hindu statues of gods like Shiva), and the textual connections between religions were not evident within the play text. As such, it becomes a question of whether the young audience needs an educational context, or the 'Eastern eyes' through which the story is told, to fully comprehend the meaning of the play. To this end, does Tara Arts reflect the diversity of the audience in a way the child can comprehend and recognise?

The child's perception of cultural difference

Empirical audience research might provide some answers in terms of how the children in the audience were able to recognise the references to other faiths and the 'Eastern' performance style. However, it is difficult to develop a clear understanding of how children perceive cultural difference. A second play, *The Cat Who Ran* (2009) can illustrate the difficulty of inquiring about the child's perception of these issues. The play, performed by the Unicorn Ensemble, was adapted by Toyoko Nishida from a popular Japanese children's story written by Naoko Kudo. On the initiative of the director Tony Graham, the play was 'transferred' to the UK where it was translated by Yuriko Kobayashi. The story, in which a cat is forced by his mother and siblings to kill and eat his dear fish friend, was originally a Japanese folk story. However, Graham in his directorial role chose not to affirm the 'authenticity' of the text by only using traditional elements in its staging. Instead, the Japan recognisable on stage was also created with contemporary cultural influences. For example the set, described as 'Zen' in a review (Lewis, 2010), featured natural materials and light colours, the costumes were made out of denim and the music included blues and a cappella singing. Without affirming the story's origin through traditional cultural references, *The Cat Who Ran* could be read as a modern and contemporary theatrical experience for the child. The production avoided the recreation of an 'Eastern' or 'Oriental' play to a certain extent, but in the process also lost its cultural particularity. Indeed, two of the children with whom I attended the performance responded with a look of great apprehension when I asked which country they thought the play came from (this research is discussed further in my doctoral thesis, Schuitema, 2012). Seemingly confused by such a question, they answered that the play was English ('of course'). When it was explained that the story originally came from a different country they still seemed puzzled and unable to guess the origin of the story. When encouraged, a boy and girl (aged eight and ten) saw no clear reasons why the story came from Japan.

There is a conception that children, especially young children, are unaware of or uninterested in events beyond their direct local environment. However research by Alexander and Hargreaves (2007) illustrates that children are indeed aware of and concerned about national and global issues. An alternative explanation might be that the reason that the two children in the audience were unable to recognise the Japanese influences in the play is the normalisation of cultural practices within the UK such as Manga, origami, martial arts and sushi. Moreover, there are children living in the UK that have a Japanese background and through interactions at schools or play centres 'other' children

might become familiar with some elements of their culture. As such, it might be argued that ideas of 'other' and 'different' cultures might be difficult to recognise for a child living in a society where the oppositions between global and local cultures are increasingly blurred. Indeed, asking children to identify difference as part of an empirical study into their perception of diversity might enforce the adult's perceptions of what is 'different' or 'other' and not reveal how children understand the world around them.

Researching the child's experience

These difficulties of empirical audience research with children are partly due to their understanding of interview questions, how capable they are of formulating an answer, and how the adult can interpret their responses. Difficulties arise when the child is 'unable to report on their conscious encounters with the world' (see Greene and Hill, 2005), because they are still developing their language skills or, indeed, their opinions and ideas. It is believed that a fundamental principle of research into the child's experience is that there will always be a part of this experience that is inaccessible to an outsider (ibid: 5). Experience is about interpretation, and the exchange through which the researcher will attempt to understand the original experience is underlined by subjective interpretation (ibid: 5-6). There is also the relationship between the adult as researcher and child as participant that is unequal in terms of power and authority. As diversity is such an emotive issue, the opinions of the researcher or practitioner might be more evidential when they approach the child in an interview or workshop. Arguably children are encouraged from a young age to answer the adult's question 'correctly' and as such the idea that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' answer might be hard to challenge.

The difficulties of interpreting the results of any empirical study would be the next problematic stage. Jeanne Klein, who has conducted many interview-based audience reception studies, argues that one of the aims is to 'test' the artists' intentions. She writes:

By asking children to interpret what artists were trying to do when expressing various metaphors and main thematic ideas, research can compare their speculative interpretations against artists' known intentions to determine degrees of artistic success and thereby place the public obligation and ethical responsibility of criticism on adults. (2012: 144-145)

In this sense the success of a performance dealing with diversity could possibly be the child's recognition of cultural, racial or ethical difference, as well as their development of a positive attitude toward this difference. However, what interpretations could be drawn from an empirical study that uncovers a large number of children who are not able to identify cultural difference when these are incorporated in a theatrical performance that aims to avoid stereotypical representation? If the majority of children do not recognise cultural difference, is there any point in staging work that reflects diversity? Would the wider themes and the message of validating minority identities be lost? Do plays dealing

with diversity ultimately reflect and perhaps even aid the homogenisation of cultures? Or is it counterproductive to include cultural difference on stage, as this may enforce the idea of what is 'different' and in doing so create the very issue the work is designed to solve?

Avoiding difference

These questions might motivate practitioners to avoid dealing with difference all together, both in the sense of integrating culturally varied performance techniques and in terms of a focus within the play text on the experience of being different because of culture, race or ethnicity. Indeed, there is an assumption that if children do not realise or fully understand 'difference', then the avoidance of highlighting 'difference' altogether might encourage children to consider everyone as the same. For example, journalist Nick Baker lauds David Holman's *Billy the Kid* (performed for five to eight year olds) for avoiding drawing attention to racial difference. The story follows a young black boy who has to move to the country with his mum to find new work, and fearing this new environment he has to find confidence and believe in himself. As Baker writes:

In fact the play is only tangentially to do with race. The fact that Billy and his mum are black is almost irrelevant. It's a play about racism not taking place in circumstances where it easily could, thus effectively reinforcing the natural lack of prejudice in the very young (1984 n.p.).

This idea that children have a 'natural lack of prejudice' can be seen as a recurring motif in the cultural construction of the child. Childhood is often described using romantic discourse (for example Locke, Rousseau and William Blake) as a stage of innocence in which the child is different, special and needs to be protected (Cassidy, 2009: 61). Therefore, the idea that the child can discriminate and exclude 'others' considered to be sufficiently racially or culturally different sits very uneasily when placed alongside the purity and innocence ascribed to the young. Racism and discrimination are seen to be issues belonging to the 'adult world' of corruption and suppression. In the British tabloid press this sentiment is especially present in articles that oppose reprimanding or reporting on young children who have been accused of using racial slurs (see Harris, *Daily Mail*, January 2015) or where nursery rhymes are perceived to be censored to accommodate an increasingly diverse society (see Harris, *Daily Mail*, February 2008). Often using the popular phrase 'political correctness gone mad', such media stories can be interpreted as suggesting that political concerns should not be applied to the 'innocent' child. After the decline of the TIE movement, dealing with the topics of discrimination and racism directly is often considered too controversial and political in theatre for children. Nevertheless, the idea of respecting diversity is generally embraced. As such, diversity is more frequently present in casting strategies, as first discussed in relation to Theatre Centre; but then the potential influences a diverse cast might offer are stripped from the performance. This type of casting is very common in the UK, and even 'commercial' productions for children such as *Matilda the*

Musical by the Royal Shakespeare Company will usually to some extent have an integrated/multi racial cast.

This casting is certainly a positive attempt to engage the child with diversity, but if this engagement is only possible when there is an absence of cultural influences and direct acknowledgement of different cultural backgrounds, it raises the question as to what exactly is meant by diversity. Does this suggest that, as Baker put it above, being from a different ethnical background is 'almost irrelevant'? Or is it ensuring that children understand that ethnic or cultural difference is not threatening, and that 'others' need to be respected? Or perhaps it is less about promoting 'a message' than simply illustrating that the movement and coming together of people and global influences has made the UK a hybrid cultural society. In this case, diversity means creating and including narratives that present the UK as a heterogeneous space. Children might not often be involved in the active production of the narratives through 'cultural products' such as theatre, television and music, but they are active consumers and as such are not immune to the 'narratives' that construct identities, such as those concerning nationality. Indeed, studies illustrate that instead of the 'natural lack of prejudice in the very young', children develop their ideas (both positive and negative) of race, nationality, culture and religion at a young age (Davey, 1983; Aboud, 1988; Connolly, 1998; Barrett 2007).

The innocent and absent child

Jacqueline Rose's seminal work *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (first published in 1984), argues that the concept of childhood innocence is a myth and a projection of the desires of the adult. She uses the example J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*, and transfers the argument to the wider practice of children's literature to analyse the ultimately 'impossible' relationship between adult and child (1993: 1). It is this relationship which ultimately makes children's fiction a flawed concept, as even though books are written and published for the child, in reality it is the child which comes second, after the adult who as author, maker and giver occupies the primary position (ibid: 1-2). Rose argues that while *Peter Pan*, is an example of a story that tries to encapsulate childhood innocence (ibid: 1), this mythical innocence is there to feed the adult's desire (ibid: xii). Rose's work had a great influence on the critical world of children's literature, but also on theatre for the young. Schonmann, for example, is particularly interested in how Rose's work can be interpreted to suggest 'that the children's fiction is not an issue of what the *child wants*, but of what the *adult desires*' (2006, 20).' Matthew Reason writes: 'The impossibility of theatre for children requires us to acknowledge the unequal power relationship between adult and child, with children in our society largely constructed as powerless and vulnerable, in need of protection and needing to be spoken for' (2012, 25). This idea of children as powerless is, however, critiqued by Reason, who illustrates that in practice children can have 'agency and subjectivity over their own experiences' (ibid, 26) when it comes to the reception of the cultural products the adult creates for them. By assuming that these experiences are 'more or less impossible to gauge' (Rose quoted in Reason, 2012: 25), Reason highlights that Rose

herself is ‘perpetuating a disempowering of children – as spoken for, not speaking – while at the same time reiterating the positioning of children as a kind of unknowable other’ (Reason, 2012: 25).

The idea of speaking for children, as well as children’s fiction being a vessel for the adult to construct the child as powerless and vulnerable, could be recognised in the ‘diversity message’, albeit in two opposing ways. Firstly, that diversity – and issues of racism and discrimination in particular – are about the adult’s desire to speak to the child about their ideological perspective, with little concern as to whether this is an issue important to the child or if an opinion on the subject is already formed. Secondly, by assuming that diversity is not an issue that concerns the child and therefore should not be spoken about, the adult is continuing to assign to the child values of innocence, powerlessness and vulnerability and contributing to their existence outside the ‘political sphere’ (see Schonmann, 2006: 21).

What is also important to the debate is how theatre is often approached as a communal experience in which the audience is represented as a homogeneous unity, which ‘risks obscuring the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context and environment’ (Freshwater, 2009: 5). This singular entity is also recognised by Rose in terms of the way the adult constructs the generalised ‘child’ that is devoid of cultural difference (1994: 143). As Schonmann argues: ‘The question is not just *why* we are speaking to the child, and *what* is our investment in that process, but to *which* child we are speaking?’ (2006: 21). Reason similarly states:

The impossibility of theatre for children invites us to recognise the impossibility of thinking of children as a single homogenous group, outside of class, race, religion or gender, and of how a single identity of childhood that might seek to elide these differences could only be constructed from outside the child herself. (2012: 25)

Reason’s book *The Young Audience: exploring and enhancing children’s experiences of theatre* illustrates how drawing can be used as a medium of audience research. This research highlights the young audience’s diverse interpretation of their experience of theatre, but also how through emotional and intellectual engagement this audience can become empowered (2010: 39). Reason argues that ‘the surface stillness and passivity of the theatre audience is a public appearance that hides the specific nature of any one individual’s lived experience’ (2012: 26). Gathering the children’s experience avoids ‘Rose’s description of ideological impossibility’ because ‘the absent child’ is given a voice to speak about their theatregoing (ibid: 26).

Tom Maguire also deals with this issue of the ‘generalised’ child, by questioning the assumption that a collection of young individuals watching a performance can be regarded as an audience (2012: 9). He argues that addressing the ‘individual spectator’ recognises the heterogeneity and the individual circumstances of the child informed by theatrical

competence and their horizon of expectations (ibid: 12). In his chapter 'There is no audience: meeting the dramaturgical challenges of the spectator in children's theatre', Maguire discusses creating a performance of *The Little Box of Wonders* to 'specifically engage with the challenge of recognising the differentiated nature of the audience' (ibid: 20). To achieve this his company aimed to ensure 'that the spectator would understand the conventions of the performance irrespective of their theatrical competence; and that their modes of accessing the performance would be addressed' (ibid: 18). This was facilitated by explicitly acknowledging the spectators' presence, repeating key information, addressing each sensory modality, and using Brecht's *gestus* to 'ensure the actors expressed the key relationships in each scene' (ibid: 18-19).

Inviting the child's voice in the creative process

Maguire and Reason provide very useful approaches to challenge the perception of the homogeneous and silent child audience, and instead highlight diversity of responses and interactions of children. Arguably, a focus on these responses and interactions is also needed to understand if it is necessary to take additional measures to engage with the child's diverse experience of the world, by including different cultural practices or by dealing with issues such as racism, discrimination or identity directly. By focusing on the process that precedes a performance, such research could aim to ask a number of important questions. If given a more active choice, would children voluntarily include their own cultural backgrounds in productions? Would they choose to experiment with different cultural performance practices and techniques besides their own? Would their performances seek to answer questions such as: who are you, who are we, and where do we belong?

The idea of taking a play's theme or concept to the young audience in the form of a workshop is common in the UK. For example, the play *Cosmos* by Dragon Breath Theatre Company (in association with Curve Leicester; Nottingham Trent University; and the CELS) responded to and included the hybrid identities of its young audience after a series of workshops in which many ideas were developed and 'tested' by the children. This performance focused on the cosmos, and introduced the young audience (between four and seven years old) to concepts of science. The way this was developed has been documented on a specially created 'research DVD', in which children are seen rolling over silver coloured material, sharing stories with plastic cups hanging from the ceiling, dancing with round paper lamps and lying in their classroom on their backs to gaze up at star projections. In this DVD it is explained that the cultural diversity of the group of participating children has a presence in the performance through various elements. For example, during the workshop the practitioners noticed that some of the children used the 'Hindu' names of the planets (Robinson, 2009). In response to this interaction they decided to incorporate *Konnokal*, a form of vocal percussion that has its origins in Southern India and was developed in relation to drumming and the dance form of *Bharatanatyam*, and which consists of spoken syllables placed together in complex rhythmical patterns (Dragon Breath Theatre, 2009).

This way of allowing children to ‘test’ a play’s concepts could be further supported by analysing the observations of the young audience in more detail and including their responses, in the way Reason invites children to draw their experience. These observations and responses should be sought during both this creative process and also after the final performance. Rather than testing the adult artist’s intentions, as previously suggested in relation to Klein, children might be encouraged to comment on the way that the artist has responded to their ideas, including if they can recognise the elements they have contributed and if they enjoyed the process. It might be that these early stages of development are considered too informal to be regarded as audience research. Arguably, researching the audience before it becomes the audience is a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, if the aim of the research is to develop an understanding of what children want from their theatre, how they perceive and experience theatre and how their diversity affects this perception, it might be helpful to start at the beginning and take the entire process of creation, performance and reception into consideration.

Children as research participants

Sibylle Peters has been developing work that blurs the boundaries between research and performance, and in which children and adults work alongside each other. In her article ‘Participatory Children’s Theatre and the Art of Research’, Peters writes about various projects in which children experimented with time, becoming astronauts, testing their schools and even setting up their own bank and printing currency (2013). In all these different examples children are not just representative of the young audience but have also become researchers, testing and exploring the world around them. Peters explains that the goal is not to make ‘art as a means of research’ instead, she explains, that artists ‘learned to claim their autonomy and their freedom in between research and application’ by ‘inventing tryout scenarios and performative setups, which are part of the real world but nevertheless are framed as experimental situations’ (ibid: 112). She argues that these ‘performative setups [...] are capable of generating and testing social and cultural innovations before they are structurally implemented’ and that there is no better partner for this experimentation than children (ibid).

The idea of not just researching the young audience but inviting the young audience to participate in the process of research might provide those insights into diversity that are currently missing. Such a research project would closely relate to other disciplines such as drama, applied theatre, (immersive) performance art and education. However, the goal of creating a professional performance for a young audience remains the same. Practitioners would need to find a careful balance between the adult and child participant and remain aware of the unequal levels of power, authority and (financial) gain. It would be the adult’s initiative to set up ‘experimental situations’, for example by asking children to participate in creating a play about their school, their town or even Britain. In the way children ‘test’ these communities, it would also be the adult who would negotiate what they chose to represent and how they define the identities that can be found. Ultimately the adult practitioner uses

these ideas 'freely' to create a performance, possibly incorporating 'intercultural' performance techniques and a multi-racial/integrated cast. Children would be invited to judge the success of the experiment, and their response to the end product – as well as to the dialogue itself – should be carefully reported.

Conclusion

A research project that seeks to actively engage the child with the challenging debate regarding cultural diversity might confront those perceptions of the child as innocent and devoid of cultural difference. However, as I have argued in this provocation, to not engage the child in the debate and simply talk of the 'absent child' in a theatrical production created for them might equally encounter criticism and has the potential to disengage the child as an audience member. Looking at the development of theatre and diversity in the UK, the TiE movement's attempts to reflect the increasing diversity they encountered in their working class audience related to their principles of recognising children as active agents able to transform their environment. The necessity of providing 'counter-narratives' that challenge mono-cultural representations of the UK and validate minority identities has been examined in relation to the work of Tara Arts. This provocation looked at the difficulties of staging cultural 'difference', especially when trying to avoid stereotypical or essentialised notions of the other. It further confronted the difficulties of understanding how children recognise and process these 'different' cultural influences, as the adult's idea of difference might not correlate with the child's experience of a diverse world. It was suggested that despite these difficulties, theatre practice and research should not avoid the debate but find ways to see how children can influence their theatre. In addition to the ways Maguire and Reason challenge the perception of the homogeneous child audience, it was suggested that inviting children to participate in research at the earlier stages of the creative process might give the child an opportunity to influence theatre created for them. To ensure that children's theatre does not prescribe diversity from an adult point of view, but engages with the cultural diversity represented by its young audience, it is important to invite the child's perspective on *their* theatre and *their* diverse world.

Biographical Note:

Karian Schuitema completed her PhD on the subject of children's theatre at the University of Westminster and created the Children's Theatre in the UK Research Network. She works as a module leader at the University of Westminster International Summer School and has recently taught on the MA Theatre for Young Audiences at Bath Spa University as a visiting lecturer. Next to her academic work, Karian has worked with children and young people with learning disabilities for many years and her ongoing research interests relate to this practical experience, particularly aspects such as humour, play and creative development. She is also continuing the main themes of her PhD research, which include the

representations of cultural diversity in children's theatre. Contact:
karian.schuitema@my.westminster.ac.uk.

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