

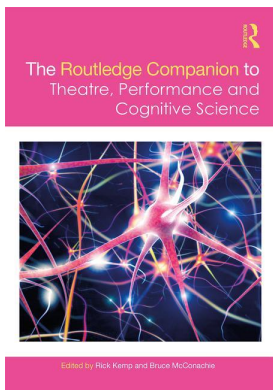
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7

APPLYING DEVELOPMENTAL EPISTEMIC COGNITION TO THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Jeanne Klein

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) provides artistic productions for young people, ranging in age anywhere from one through 18 years, with works involving one or more young protagonists that serve as metonymic representations of respective age groups. However, when staging works for elementary students, too many TYA companies operate from misguided assumptions and implicitly childist beliefs (Young-Bruehl 2012) about children's 'short or weak' attention spans and 'limited' comprehension abilities that disrespect and denigrate their actual cognitive competencies (Goldberg 2006, 184–89). Companies also cling to romanticised beliefs that children have vast imaginations through which they 'suspend their disbelief' and 'identify' with child characters, often performed by adult actors who exaggerate childish behaviours simply to make children laugh (Nolan 2007). Such tacitly derisive caricatures of childhood are especially deleterious because child spectators do not necessarily recognise prejudicial discriminations directed against them, and critics are often led to pre-judge such productions for children as 'inferior' to theatre for adults.

In order to optimise child spectators' aesthetic experiences, I have long argued that TYA practitioners need to create artistically driven productions from children's cognitive-affective perspectives (Klein 2005). In my view, optimal experiences occur when spectators recognise, articulate and apply artists' intended meanings in performances to themselves and society. However, all too often, TYA practitioners presume that the emotional behaviours of children during performances (e.g., silence, restlessness, giggles and laughter) support their intended meanings, without actually knowing, asking, discussing or necessarily caring whether their intended meanings coincide with children's interpretations after performances. Whilst such behavioural evidence clearly demonstrates embodied minds in action during performances, children seldom have public opportunities to share their private meanings after performances unless teachers, parents and actors provide adequate time for post-performance conversations. Unlike published reception studies, enactive theories in cognitive science alone do not fully account for children's subsequent meanings constructed after performances (e.g., McConachie 2015). Furthermore, theory of mind evidence during early childhood presupposes second-order continuities through middle childhood, without considering how cognitive epistemologies change over lifespans, as Iordanou (2016) reviews. Likewise, cumulative evidence regarding the impact of theatre education in elementary schools (Winner, Goldstein

and Vincent-Lancrin 2013) has yet to integrate the impact of screen media on young people from infancy through adolescence (e.g., Anderson and Kirkorian 2015) to help explain the cognitive mechanisms of dynamic spectating systems in theatre.

In this essay, I seek to counter childist practices and pervasive myths regarding young minds, specifically aged 6 to 12 years, by applying the theories and developmental evidence of epistemic cognition to TYA. As producing director Moses Goldberg advises, 'The more one understands the stages of a child's development, the more one can provide suitable stimuli, moments that reach out to that level of aesthetic understanding' (2006, 94). Given the ephemerality of one-time performances, artists need to seize their present opportunities to create favourable and long-lasting memories that may persuade adults to bring children back to venues, rather than subscribe to the myth of turning children into future audiences in our digitally mobile worlds.

Epistemic cognition

When TYA practitioners claim to know children by prejudging their minds, they tend to accentuate their cognitive deficiencies in comparison to adult norms. Instead, they need to consciously recognise how their own thinking habits and epistemic beliefs coincide with children's inferential ways of knowing theatre during all production phases. Epistemic cognition may be defined broadly as any thinking related to knowledge about particular domains, and specifically, as metacognitive knowledge, procedural strategies and criterial standards used to evaluate and justify claims and epistemic beliefs in action (Iordanou 2016, 108).

Adults share four recursive epistemological orientations with children that include thinking as imitative realists (birth to age four), dualistic absolutists (roughly ages five to twelve), multiplistic relativists (around ages 12 and up) and evaluative critics (around ages 25 and up) (e.g., Kuhn 2005, 30–3). When constructing meanings, realists rely on perceiving the phenomenal realities of performances to assert their preferences, whilst absolutists compare the so-called 'true or false facts' within performances against their own 'real' life experiences. Relativists express multiple opinions, relative to their self-selected theories and speculative beliefs regarding artists' intentions, whilst critics evaluate performances by coordinating dynamic theories and existing evidence using critical argumentation.

From first-stage orientations, artists and spectators alike implicitly expect to use theatre for personal gratification along a transactional continuum of diverting entertainment and instructive enlightenment, which then determines how much cognitive effort they are willing to invest to construct and interpret meanings. From artistic perspectives, entertainment (*divertissement*) means diverting or distracting minds *away* from problematic concerns by generating entertaining emotions so children may feel good about themselves, whilst enlightenment (*éclaircissement*) means directing minds *towards* dramatised conflicts by clarifying emotion-driven circumstances so children may recognise their lives on stage. All artistic decisions depend on the extent to which playwrights, directors, actors and designers consciously or unconsciously intend to entertain and enlighten spectators along this highly nuanced continuum. In general, imitative and absolutist thinkers prefer to lean towards entertainment, whilst relativists and critics shift towards enlightenment.

Within the first-stage domain of aesthetic judgements, toddlers gratify themselves by engaging in object substitutions and developing personal preferences. Valkenburg finds that when 6- to 18-month-olds view screen media, they prefer animated characters and voices, physical humour with moderate to rapid movements, bright colours, peculiar sounds, startling surprises, visual transformations, music, singing and laughter (2004, 17–27). As

preschoolers engage in imitative pretend play at age three and blend distinctions between actors and characters, they enjoy clownish gestures and slapstick, but they prefer slow pacing and repetition to master meanings in stories. By age four, they take on others' cognitive perspectives, having mastered the concept of false beliefs in which they recognise that others hold divergent beliefs about observable realities and pretenses (e.g., Harris 2000).

Likewise, TYA practitioners who think as imitative realists seek to gratify mutual pleasures by making artistic decisions intended solely to entertain child spectators. To keep youngsters happily diverted, productions imitate animated media with physically humorous cartoon characters who speak with loud, high-pitched voices and move frequently and rapidly. When insecure actors hear children giggle, they tend to exaggerate their facial expressions and buffoonish gestures even further to raise their own self-esteem. Making children laugh as loudly as possible satisfies all too many egocentric desires to please children from realist orientations. In effect, when practitioners rely solely upon imitative caricatures of childhood, they tacitly position older audiences as preschoolers who recognise this patronising content as intended for 'babies,' otherwise known as 'schlock.'

When faced with adult actors portraying child characters, realist and absolutist thinkers respond to grown-ups as actual adults who do not know how to act their age when they try to imitate and exaggerate childish behaviors. Children's uproarious laughter suggests they are laughing at (not with) childish adults making silly fools of themselves in public. When asked to explain why they laughed, they may point out an actor's 'funny' behaviours but feel reluctant to label him or her a 'bad' actor for fear of hurting the actor's feelings.

Most TYA companies also operate from realist orientations when they reproduce dramatic and musical adaptations of literary and screen media, because adult ticket-purchasers desire to re-experience commercial titles associated with childhood. When staging adaptations, realist and absolutist spectators expect much the same imagery, as they compare and evaluate live renditions against the original sources they've already experienced. Any significant changes that depart from original models may be criticised for failing to reproduce initial mediations. For instance, preschoolers may wonder why Winnie-the-Pooh is 'naked' if he isn't wearing Disney's red shirt, and older children may question casting Mowgli as a girl.

As children enter formal schools and face social pressures to conform, they begin to think as dualist absolutists by using authoritarian either/or criteria to justify good/bad values and true/false claims. Likewise, practitioners who intend to entertain through instruction may make either/or decisions based on their childist beliefs. To satisfy teachers' expectations of curricular content, they may present educational concepts theatrically, often by breaking the fourth wall, thereby inviting eager six- to eight-year-olds to answer dialogic questions because they want to help protagonists win and conquer obstacles. However, 'preachy' dialogue, in which characters instruct and repeat educational messages unnecessarily, patronises older children who grow restless for many 'been there, done that' reasons. In addition, absolutists ignore or distort any evidence that contradicts or doesn't fit their existing beliefs (Iordanou 2016, 109). For example, one teacher criticised a production of *More of a Family* for casting an African American actor as a homeless man, the play's pivotal character, even though he also played the spouses of three white women in this double-cast ensemble.

From third-stage orientations, adolescents (and relativist artists) examine multiple criteria to assert their opinions, relative to their interpretations of self-selected theories and epistemic beliefs over what counts as contextual theatre evidence. Practitioners who intend to inform spectators through entertainment may make multiple decisions relative to their selective analyses of performative texts. Knowing they have the creative right to express whatever they think best, they rely upon their artistic instincts and justify their opinions

with explanations that fit with their beliefs about theatre and childhood. When artistic opinions clash, collaborators may simply agree to disagree when they are unable to dismantle their colleagues' absolutist claims. As Iordanou points out, the 'danger' of individuals' interpretations may 'stall in a radical relativism with the evil of subjectivity seen as overpowering the quest for any knowledge beyond subjective opinion' (2016, 114).

TYA practitioners who think as evaluative critics from fourth-stage orientations intend to enlighten spectators by clarifying arguments made about childhood in dramatisations. Whilst artists cannot control each spectator's private meanings, metacognitive thinkers can control play choices and script analyses, casting and staging, and design and technical decisions. Playwrights craft compelling conflicts that raise provocative questions regarding the sociopolitical impact of adults' power over young lives, despite absolutists' rejection of such taboo topics as child poverty, violence, death, sexuality and even sadness (Kruckemeyer 2012). Directors and actors work critically to keep minds invested in solving the mysteries of unfolding actions. Designers clarify metaphoric concepts organically with theatrical styles that range from detailed realism to minimalist abstractions. Those artists who grant children agency by including them in developing original works often discover solutions to artistic problems they might not have otherwise considered (Newman 2006, 190–98, 408–12; Elnan 2012).

Above all, critical artists take full, ethical responsibility for their artistic choices, knowing that children's behavioural responses during performance are never 'wrong' or 'inappropriate.' When unintended responses arise, evaluative actors 'lean back' and pause momentarily, until a modicum of silence returns, and then pull children back into the story's mysterious secrets. When such strategies fail, directors re-evaluate whether such problematic moments stem from the script or directing and acting choices, and make necessary adjustments to further clarify their intentions (Goldberg 2006, 142–46). For instance, during initial performances of *The Red Badge of Courage*, wise-cracking adolescents heckled Henry whenever he took off his boots. To win over sceptical audiences, the actor revealed their thinking and subverted their joking by smelling his stinky boots (Church 2017).

Evidence of epistemic cognition in action

Contextualised evidence from theatre and media reception studies explains how realist and absolutist thinkers recall meanings after adult-mediated performances. As mnemonic studies reveal (e.g., Schneider 2015), the major cognitive differences between child and adult minds involve the ongoing maturation and synaptic efficiencies of young brains that are 90 percent developed by age six, their uses of metacognitive strategies, the capacities of their working memories and their speeds of processing explicit and implicit imagery in analogical meta-representations. Visual, verbal/aural and kinaesthetic images constitute the bases of human imagination.

In general, what children actually see and hear on stage is what they get from performances. What actors do on stage physically, vocally and emotionally matters far more than what they think internally, because young minds process moment-to-moment actions more quickly and efficiently visually than linguistically. When 6 to 12-year-olds are asked 'how they know' 'main ideas' in performances, most rely on explicit evidence in staged enactments by describing visualised actions and paraphrasing verbalised dialogue to interpret, connect and evaluate protagonists' goal-directed actions, antagonistic conflicts and thematic concepts. Given their mnemonic focus on explicit imagery, they tend to miss any offstage characters or major events discussed solely in dialogue. As egocentric tendencies weaken between

ages seven and nine, they increasingly make inferences from implicit imagery to the same extent as adults, based on concepts they already know and those that affirm their experiences. Upon realising that theatre offers purposeful applications to their lives around age nine, they also decipher analogies between themselves and society from characters' objectives, often as moral prescriptions (e.g., people shouldn't lie) (e.g., Saldaña 1996, 81; Scollen 2012).

When evaluating performances, children prioritise their criterial values as comprehensibility, engaging enactments, humour, child characters, comparative realism within stylistic frameworks, and lastly, aesthetic qualities (Klein and Schonmann 2009). Dramatised content matters far more than artistic forms, because children are driven to comprehend meanings that, in turn, propel attentions in order to predict what may happen next. They search for causal connections between episodes in clearly connected, climactic plots (van den Broek, Bauer, and Bourg 1997) and prefer informative child characters with sufficient agency to resolve their own formidable conflicts, ideally without adult assistance. During performances, children let actors (and playwrights) know when stories stop progressing by growing restless, unlike adults who politely control their behaviours even when their attentions stray.

Rather than 'identify' with characters, as many practitioners presume, realists and absolutists dwell upon actors' appearances and actions by comparing and contrasting their physical, active, emotional, social and moral traits with themselves. Consequently, TYA practitioners are better advised to use proportionately sized puppets to portray young characters than costume actors in ludicrous anthropomorphic suits. When black-dressed puppeteers re-direct attentions to their characters by keeping their eyes focused solely on their puppets, children readily blend such couplings as shown in their drawings that often depict characters without puppeteers (e.g., Reason 2010, 66–84). However, double-casting and child-adult embodiments of the same character may confuse absolutists if they discern no plausible reasons. For example, at the end of a production of *Wolf Child*, when Joseph, the Wolf Child, exited behind a wall and the narrating Traveler re-entered on the other side, he revealed himself explicitly as the Wolf Child grown up. However, according to teachers' post-performance evaluations, some children missed this temporal transformation, perhaps because the cast included two adult actors of the same height and the playwright's stilted speech patterns spoken by the Traveler clouded understandings.

Unlike artists who take casting conventions for granted, children do not know and appreciate the historical and contemporary bases for cross-identity casting. Like any spectator who desires to see her self-identified features embodied on stage, child spectators prefer (and deserve) to see child bodies cast as child characters (Grady 1999). Age-appropriate casting not only enhances perspective-taking but also showcases child actors' competent abilities which can vary as much as adults' abilities (Magnasco 2015). Casting by gender also affects child spectators' attitudes towards young characters. Media producers have long known that most boys refuse to involve themselves with female characters and actors, unless they behave in masculine ways, whilst girls are willing to engage with both genders, likely because adventurous males dominate family films (Smith et al. 2010).

Whilst many six- to nine-year-olds find visual and aural humour hysterically funny (e.g., butt jokes and cartoonish voices), parody and slapstick involve more cognitively complex and deceptively antagonistic forms of 'adult' humour (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004, 150–52). Full appreciation of parody, such as camp in drag, requires prior knowledge of satiric and ironic intentions, and ironic vocal intonations may confuse six- to nine-year-olds who misunderstand why anyone would knowingly say something false yet not intend to deceive a listener (Winner 1988, 133–59). Consequently, name-calling of any kind not only implies prejudicial harassments but also raises teachers' ire about bullying. Children also do

not know the historical contexts of slapstick in *commedia dell'arte* wherein Harlequin used his slapstick against Pantalone to avenge his oppressions. Therefore, artists need to remember that rapid-fire rates of slapstick comedy diverts young children's attentions away from victims' tacit oppressions and also does not allow sufficient time for evaluating underlying motivations.

Asking spectators to explain artists' intentions reveals the effectiveness of intended meanings and suggests epistemic orientations (Omasta 2011). In my *Pipe Dream* production and study (1993), when asked why Magritte's paintings were projected on a screen, many nine- and eleven-year-olds inferred these images as explicit visualisations of René's mind, whilst realist viewers thought they simply showed his paintings. When asked why red lights flashed during a chaotic classroom scene, 11-year-olds more than 7-year-olds surmised that 'They were *thinking so much* and the *feeling* just wasn't enough,' so the lights made René's mind appear 'dizzy,' 'crazy' or 'driven nuts.' However, some realists were led astray when Magritte's Father told René that his Mother was 'lost,' rather than found dead, at the river. Regarding a virtual reality production of *Dinosaurus*, when asked why artists included both screen-projected and human dinosaurs, children surmised pragmatic purposes, such as making the screen dinosaurs bigger and more realistic because people don't look like dinosaurs but actors were needed to make the dinosaurs talk (Klein 2003, 44–5).

To avoid interpretative problems that diverge from artistic intentions, artists need to remember that six- to eight-year-olds need sufficient time and slower pacing to process, connect and integrate the consequences of characters' dialogic actions, as the following two examples illustrate. In my production and study of *Crying to Laugh* (Klein 1995), the character of Seluf directly explains to Mea, the protagonist, the explicit, metaphoric meaning of a black balloon that must be popped in order to release her pent-up sadness over the death of her dog (a puppet). Twelve minutes later, at the end of the play, Mea releases her frustrations and joyfully pops multi-coloured balloons that fall from above. However, spectators' responses to collective questions revealed that no one, including undergraduates, spontaneously reported that Mea's balloon-popping signified the physical release of her stress, perhaps because I did not ask them directly to explain this metaphor. In retrospect, I realised that we had created a magnificent spectacle that diverted attentions away from this metaphor's significance. Instead, we should have first dropped one black balloon to allow Mea and spectators sufficient time to recall its meaning. After remembering that she needed to pop this balloon to relieve her stomach ache, she could then make a more purposeful decision to pop it, and then gradually pop a second and third falling balloon one at a time before releasing an onslaught of remaining balloons.

Divergent interpretations about *Dinosaurus* also reflected mnemonic and epistemic differences when children were asked what Bunk, the oil worker, 'decided to do at the end of the play' and 'what he learned' as a consequence. Eleven-year-olds were more likely than younger children to remember causally connected episodes; that is, in return for a dinosaur having saved his life in an earlier episode, Bunk decided to save the dinosaurs' lives by exploding the cave's entrance (offstage) so that no one, including himself, could ever return. As a result, he learnt, for example, 'that money wasn't more important than somebody's life' and 'you should respect other people or animals and not just try to barge into their area and their lifestyle.' In contrast, most seven-year-olds relied primarily on the director's final tableau, in which Bunk returned to the stage (the cave) and stood beside the dinosaurs. Based on this last image, they concluded that he decided to stay with the dinosaurs because 'he learned they were nice' – the opposite meaning intended by the playwrights (Klein 2003, 45–7).

Whilst many TYA practitioners would argue that mismatched meanings do no harm, these examples highlight the interdependent epistemic and mnemonic complexities involved when artists seek to clarify intended meanings. To my knowledge, no published studies have engaged child critics in arguing and justifying their divergent interpretations and relative epistemic criteria about one performance in relation to their entertainment-enlightenment goals. Unfortunately, this dearth of reception studies constrains further evaluative integrations of existing evidence with dynamic cognitive theories.

Nevertheless, TYA artists have an ethical responsibility to optimise aesthetic experiences by clarifying their intended meanings about the multifarious complexities of childhood that may remain in spectators' memories for years to come. By consciously recognising and coordinating cognitive developmental and epistemic theories with even intuitively derived evidence, TYA artists may change their epistemic orientations and criterial values when judging performances. In these ways, TYA may shed its childist propensities for the common benefit of all multi-generational spectators.

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