Wide Open Window

You’re sitting at your desk, hunched over the computer; suddenly someone opens the window near you and a wind tears in, scattering your papers on the floor. As you leap to save them you crash into the desk, bumping your shin, you spill your tea and it floods the post-it notes in front of the keyboard. Chaos reigns and you’ve left your task, the sounds from outside are in the room, you can feel the air on your skin, you have left the space you were in – even for a moment – and you are suddenly aware of alternatives.

The wide open window, and the possible risk of a disturbing wind, is an invitation to partake of the unexpected. It is an invitation to change, to shake up the routine and to accept the shift in perspective that is offered. When we work with children in collaborative practice that’s genuine participation, we open ourselves to the same sort of chaotic, refreshing shift. As professionals who ‘know what they’re doing’ we are suddenly offered a million different ways of seeing, and a challenge to what we think works for whatever reason we’ve constructed over the years.

We did a project at a primary school – a big parade event called Dry Water with kids making of big banners in the shape of boats as the culmination of a community festival. All going well until we start to rehearse the parade – hot day, dry dust bowl of a school yard, the musical director and I at our wits end trying to get kids to walk by fours in time with the music – kids bored and hot and rebellious. It’s a deathly situation. So we decide to go to the site to give everyone a sense of where and why. The site is at a community centre on top of a hill of green grass looking over a river. I’m at the river thinking ‘This is horrible, how can we make this work’ and I look around at the kids as they arrive at the site and see them at the top of the hill. In accord, without communication, they drop and all roll down the hill, in beautiful sequence, perfect choreography and with full joyous intent. What they wanted to do was easy for them - it was fun and powerful and perfect. And it was a turning point.

The collaborative practice we use at Polyglot is based on the idea of desire lines – an architectural term – the path not subscribed by authority, but the one that is the result of free choice and expedience. The adult understanding of desire-lines is often the quickest or easiest way from A to B. Unlike the concrete path laid down by the planners, it will usually cut corners and be similar to a sheep path. Architects ignore desire lines at their peril unless they want a dirt path trodden through their well ordered grass.

Children’s desire-lines are different because children don’t like to walk in straight lines. We know their desire lines will be wiggly, sporadic, random, uneven and a great many of them. Children will run, skip, jump and tumble and kick their way along a path - anything other than walking. They will balance on any wall, climb over any obstacle, pat any dog, pick up any stick, talk to any stranger. Their purpose is different and their method of ‘getting there” different too.
Because of this we know that when we follow the desire lines of children we are on the road to adventure.

*Here a simple thing you can do: get the kids to direct the way home when you’re in the car. The urge to combat their directions with the ‘right’ ones is our urge to get home as quickly as possible. Giving into their authority means you will be taken on an adventure – you might not ever get home but you will see things you haven’t seen before.*

Collaborating with children means being immersed in a different culture, where there is quickness of thought, immediate response, impulsive action, physical involvement.

To go into a classroom and put a pile of newspapers and masking tape in the middle and say, go for it – will invite chaos. Same with thousands of cardboard boxes and saying the only rule is to have fun. Anything could happen and usually does.

The chaos can be alarming but it’s like surfing - if you can surf the energy in the room and go with it, not against it, you are exhilarated not fearful.

This engagement with chaos, means you remain driven by process not outcome. The key element is trust. Children will find pattern and order - human beings crave it, seek it and are hardwired for it.

Working alongside children in the development of all our productions has shoved us into alternatives to prescriptive methods and outcomes for kids. It collapses formula, and makes nonsense of careful plans, and has opened our artistic practice to ideas, methods and aesthetic choices we hadn’t considered.

*Children are playing in the backyard. The game’s set up and never stops being set up - who’s who and where’s the castle and what happens next and what you’re saying - keeps unfolding and unfolding; nothing starts nothing finishes. When I was in grade 6 my whole class played a game that began where it left off every lunch hour - a huge epic adventure of dragons and angels that was like a Philip Pullman novel – we must have played that for half the year. That’s the kind of flexibility and embedded creativity that we lose when we try to make full stops, not commas.*

Because the outcome is so important to adults, this practice of following the desire lines of children draws the artists into sometimes uncomfortable areas, places that feel out of control, elusive. But by collaborating with children in this way, we have an opportunity to change ourselves. As artists we enter into this sort of collaboration to learn and to discover. The kids are our cohorts, our inspiration and direction. There is cultural exchange. Our main aim is to give them confidence in their leadership through respectful attention, genuine interest and recognition of the value of what they offer.

*We were engaged in a drawing program at a school in Melbourne’s west. Big shared drawings where kids were creating city scapes using charcoal. One of the boys began to use*
the charcoal to completely black out not only his drawing but the drawings bordering his creation. Teachers dashed forward ready to censure, thinking he was being deliberately contrary. The artist recognised the block of deep black as a valid aesthetic choice and a compelling addition to the concept of city. His original intention may have been a destructive one but it was accepted as a creative one and so he came on board.

Michele Foucault wrote our innermost beings have been colonised by received opinion.

As adults we are receptacles for years and years of influence and accepted knowledge. From the moment we were born our lives have been in the hands of others. Whatever we were born with, stays with us, but is tempered and shaped by the world outside; by our nearest and dearest, by circumstance, by environment. All human beings are born creative, so when does the instinctive creative being start to become a receptacle for the world and its opinion?

All these ‘received opinions’ control us without having to control us. They are so embedded that we regard them as us being natural – ’I’m not like that, I can’t do that, I’m not that sort of person.’

*Personality tests, Herman’s Heads or Myer Briggs aim to section and understand the human traits – allowing us to better understand how people work. The tests can tell us whether we’re innately creative, or good with numbers, or work best in relationships or need straight lines. The danger is that we accept this with such relief that we become resistant to change – it becomes an excuse for not engaging with things that we are not comfortable with.*

How High The Sky was a show for infants under the age of 12 months and their adults and premiered at the Melbourne Festival in 2012, to critical and public acclaim. Making a performance experience for babies under the age of 12 months seems to many to be a waste of time. The comment ‘babies would be just as happy watching two flies crawl up a wall, why would you bother?’

Not exactly cultural citizens then. Our presenting partner – Art Centre Melbourne (and all power to Emer Harrington who fought tooth and nail for this work) was determined to challenge the prevalent attitude to baby theatre and the show’s inclusion in the Melbourne Festival that year was grist to the mill. A baby work was given status and credibility because of this and attracted media focus and public discussion around the event – a coup for those who do believe that children have plenty to contribute.

The journey into the world of the baby was metaphysical, profound and at the same time exquisitely simple. We found out the simple truths early and they transformed how we constructed the work and provided the first perspective shifts: Babies are not afraid of the dark, or sudden bangs, or of ‘scary’ music. A balloon would pop and only the adults would shriek. Humans learn these things as they learn other useful ways to get on in the world,
how to associate certain objects with hot, sharp or danger, how to get what we want as well as what we need.

The profound stuff crept in on us. Hanging out with babies creates quiet and introspection. The world is non verbal and contains less motion. It is a place where the tiny things matter and where there is also vastness. There is something in the gaze of a very young child that contains the universe. After what felt like endless passionate discussion we came to a central question for the work: is it possible for an adult to see the world the way a baby does?

Identifying this central question was vital – the artistic team was determined to create a work that had a strong central concept that explored new territory and responded to the age group in a way that respected the instinctive creativity we believe we all are born with. It also brought the adults into the work on their own level – something we wanted from the beginning.

So we had to find out how a baby does see the world. Working with babies and their parents, we set up hundreds of different situations and scenarios, played with light and space, balloons and streamers, floor and ceiling, saw how distance and focus worked, separated parent from child through tasks that kept the adult at a short distance while the baby explored, experimented with sound capture, with stethoscopes, with vibrations.

All this opened up a world we didn’t feel we knew at all - something quite alien and mysterious. We found that there was a particular ‘weather’ that a group of babies created when all together as a community without their adults. The activity in the room dropped, adults quietened, focus shifted, became delicate, like probing, the accepting gaze of the participating babies touched on floor, walls, hands and objects with absorption. Fingers touched and clutched and held to mouths – entire sensory engagement. The babies’ holistic view of the world was perceptible to those observing, and their humanity - their individual lives and personalities – their strength and being now, at this moment – was visible and powerful. The play How High The Sky became, for those observing it, an expression of human beings at their purest and most open.

One of the ways we sought to make the experience about the child, was to set up the adult role in the space very deliberately, asking them to notice what drew their child’s attention, but not to feel they had to do the same, asking them to find their own interest and enjoyment in the space and to allow their child to go where they would. This ‘breaking’ of the adult mediation over the child experience was an essential discovery in our development of the work. It was only through this that the creative choices of the child could be given room and through this the creative human being in all its individuality and diversity was clearly seen - a powerful reminder for a watching audience who had forgotten. It was also a chance for parents to relax into the moment, to accept the fact that they might miss something, and trust that their child was having their own valid experience.
These are tiny shifts in perception, but deeply important. A different way of seeing is not only about the status and value of the child, it is an opportunity to change the way we operate as adults in this world in flux.

Children live in a world constructed by adults. They are a voiceless sector, they are vulnerable and powerless. And yet they exuberantly exist and are masters of unpredictability.

The innate subversive behaviour of children in public space is a wonderful thing. They will walk where they are not allowed. They will run when they should walk. They will make noise and touch things. They will open doors and climb on walls. Our risk-adverse society hates this. We legislate against it and put up signs. We are fearful and because we are fearful we contain and we contain. We watch, we mediate and we do not trust. We use safety as a mask for control.

The issue of control is vital because the opportunity to hand some of it over might result in something wonderful.

Play, in all its forms, is entering the adult sphere more and more. And yet children are less welcome in public than ever before and their opportunities for physical and adventurous play are more and more limited. Their space is being utterly confined.  

Helicopter parents and bubble wrapped children are terms we know and recognise and have the greatest difficulty challenging as the opposite behaviour (free range kids or as I sometimes put it, benign neglect) attracts censure from other parents and from consumer marketing. Hopefully the movement is going in the opposite direction and we have to ask ourselves if this is simply not only a first world problem but a middle class problem too; although fear is a terrible virus and seems to spread to every corner of the community – a child of 8 years old in a school in Melbourne’s west explains why she’s not allowed out to play” mum reckons there’s paedophiles”.

The babies in How High the Sky showed us a wholeness and strength that was entirely reassuring. They showed us their innate resilience. Their ability to be content without constant input and interpretation or comment. The space they created around themselves was recognisable as the space we are missing so often around our own existence. People need space to be by themselves, to hear their own thoughts, to make their own choices and to form their own beliefs. This is creative space.

At what point do we un-learn our acceptance of the world?

‘Children make no distinction between the one who is lame and the one who has full use of his limbs. They will ask a boy on crutches to run here or there for them and complain when he is slow…children’s sense of humour is not restricted by adult ideas of good taste and tact. They often laughed at the spectacle of me on crutches and shouted with merriment when I
I joined in their laughter, gripped by some sense of absurdity that made a stumble on crutches a hilarious thing.’ I can Jump Puddles – Alan Marshall

I want to talk more about how we regard kids today. The concept of value has been mentioned a lot. Part of this lack of value, lies in adults developing conscious behaviour.

A group of children were asked to express their opinion during creative develop of a new show, and whenever one of them offered an opinion, the adults with them laughed. It wasn’t unkind. It was unconscious. There was a sense of ‘kids say the darndest things’ in that laughter – or perhaps it was pride in the child that needed to be qualified by laughter for the sake of other adults, or a gentle mockery in case the child thinks too much of themselves, or a deprecating laughter – whatever the reason, the adult’s laugh at the child’s observation created an atmosphere of separation, of judgement that denied respect.

To eliminate the unconscious judgement of the room during How High The Sky, we asked our viewing audience to behave as if they were bird watchers, not an audience. In this way we demanded of our audience that they be respectful observers, knowing that they were in a privileged position by being allowed to see what was happening in the theatre space. This didn’t remove the joy, it moved our adult audience into a heightened awareness to the tiniest detail being played out in front of them and of their dangerous potential to change atmosphere irrevocably.

Through this tactic, we saw how, with enforced respect, the babies own view was taken more seriously and at last, the adults were listening and observing and feeling their way into understanding.

Working with children in collaborative process demands acknowledgement of culture and respect and attention for the opportunities that this new culture gives us. It gives us new languages of performance, of theatre making, of audience engagement. Its also fun! Let’s not deny the fabulousness of fun. Someone said to me once” yes he’s having fun but is it useful?” (I’m afraid it was a teacher. Teachers get such a hard rap; they are the best of times and the worst of times and they are all individuals!) Where did we get the notion that fun was not a useful thing and what is the need for constant utility? Measurement of the intangible things of life – creating lists and if something is not on the list then too bad. Play is fun; at work we call it banana time – the moment of slapstick or fart joke that stops everyone for a second to join in ridiculousness.

You can’t plan banana time.

At Furlong park school for deaf children the kids had for the most part never seen theatre of any kind – many in the deaf culture don’t for pretty obvious reasons. When we set up ‘drama’ situations with the objects, costumes and puppets they’d made from paper, they had no understanding of the separation of the audience from the “performance”. The performance became play – in and around the watchers, with the watchers becoming enrolled into what was going on and the whole thing being very transformative and entirely
in the present. It was mindblowingly beautiful and hilarious chaos and gave us artists a good solid kick up the bum to remind us that theatre comes in more than one package and that we had just witnessed something new to us. It was innate to the kids.

Interaction as a form is the other significant factor in collaboration with children. The power of interaction is its focus on choice. For human beings, no matter how old, to be put in a situation where they make a choice about their engagement with art, creates instantly a sense of personal responsibility. Projects that engage with people in the street, for free, are able to transform the way people see their cities, each other and art. The experience of finding yourself involved, the new language that is discovered in this process, and witnessing the result of the creative energy that is unleashed, allow adults to shift their perspectives of children in profound ways.

Watching the babies engage in the theatricality of the work, respond so intently to the lights, the sound the images and atmosphere and be so independent in the space created for them, was a revelation. It was then we knew that the theatre of the work was important in this exploration – the reactions were intensified, the focus so much stronger. Theatre was understood by babies – this was not a playpen, this was a work with a dynamic arc, with a beginning a middle and an end that took the very young audience into another world. At the very beginning of life, the language of expression has already begun.

And the adventure continues. The open-ended experience that is created through engagement with children as creative partners is the life force for new ideas, new forms and new energy. It is leading us down paths that demand depth of engagement, sustained relationship and the ability to change. It has given us a shot in the arm and linked us with a mother lode of creativity and invention.

And all through the simplest of recognitions – that these people are people.

The result of an over-watched childhood is that private time, time to shore up opinion and think deep thoughts, is lacking. The contemporary child in our society has too much choice and not enough time.

Open ended situations: inviting chaos into process, relinquishing control, allows for infinite possibilities.
List of reading

Theatre for early years : research in performing arts for children from birth to three. Wolfgang Schneider (ed) 2009

Century of the Child – growing by design 1900 – 2000: Juliet Kinchin Aidan O’Connor

Out of our minds – learning to be creative – Ken Robinson

Wendy Bunston – when two worlds collide – the practice and theory of infant-led work

Children hold a very particular place in our society. Safety and security are prime considerations and we are lucky in that – our children generally don’t have to work to help maintain the family, they are not used as slaves, they are protected by laws and courts and welfare services, they are expected to have a childhood and to have rights. It seems nitpicking then to demand that the adults in our children’s world should back off a bit. With the concern over safety in the first world so widespread, based as it is on a concern about litigation, with helicopter parenting one catch phrase and bubble-wrapped kids another and free-range kids on the other hand becoming a genuine movement, is the growing awareness of stifling the child a first world problem only or only something that the middle class can afford?