

Why do you continue doing it?

Melanie Florschütz in an e-mail interview with the journalist Barbara Fuchs

1. What was your first inspiration to make theatre for very young children?

In 2004, we made *Hase Hase Mond Hase Nacht* Before that, for many years, we had been observing the younger brothers and sisters of the kids who came to see our plays for children aged 5 and older who had accompanied their siblings. I noticed that even the youngest children took an interest in theatre. But I also saw that after a certain amount of time (about half an hour maximum) and confronted with more severe conflicts, they would stop and drop out. So there was the mere wish to make theatre for very young children without any concrete ideas or examples. At that time in Germany, there weren't any plays for young children. It would start with plays for children aged 3 and older, and that would be reduced stories told in a linear way.

It was impressive to see pieces of colleagues from France at Silvia Brendenal's festival in Berlin at the SCHAUBUDE in 1999 and at Agnès Défosses' big Festival Premières Rencontres in 2004 near Paris. So many different artistic approaches and ways to make theatre! And it became clear to me that each play is telling of the idea the artist has of children's understanding, what they understand and what not; that we as adults first of all deal with our ideas of little children. It is a political controversy to think about the value and the competence of a young child. At what point in life should a human being start to be taken seriously? Can you talk to people even if they are still not able to talk themselves? Our society is very much based on the written word. As if there was no other language than the one communicated through words.

2. What does doing that give to you personally? Why do you continue doing it? What do the very young children give you that you do not get elsewhere?

Very young children are living the moment. The absolute "now". There is no earlier or later. We, as grown-ups, try very hard to get back to that quality. I am totally convinced that children are born with a universal understanding of the world. They want to live and survive and they want to do that now. I can admire that completely unromantically. There is an artistic challenge to it: We are dealing with an audience that is reacting very directly and immediately, that has an unprejudiced perspective and that is refreshingly undisciplined. You don't experience that with any other audience. The presence of the audience is pretty palpable!

You have to get out of your artistic glass-house and ask yourself some basic questions. The actions on stage have to tell of a necessity. L'art pour l'art does not interest most of the children after three minutes. How should we communicate the theatrical meaning of the event, of "We are watching theatre"? That question suggested to find a translation for all the naturalistic processes in the play.

Looking for translations we are already in the middle of our profession as theatre-makers. We are looking for signs and codes for a piece about the world. The children are able to read and decipher these signs when they are used clearly enough.

It is a unique communication happening in theatre, perceived with all the sensory organs. Every time, it is a challenge for us to tell a story beyond textual information. If the outcome is poetry, then it is a kind of condensation of all the thoughts we collected to a certain subject after saying good-bye to the invented ideas.

Despite all the association, theatre for very young children always needs concrete, tangible action. It is a very action-oriented theatre. "What is an interesting plot?" "When does an action on stage become interesting?" – That's what a great deal of our efforts are about. It is a kind of theatre that you cannot really make up completely beforehand because it unfolds through the action of doing it and it will only be complete when it gains shape through the experience of playing it and through the immediate reactions of the audience.

Where the dramatic composition is concerned, again and again we need to adjust it to the audience's response. Sometimes children are amused or scared at points of the play we would not have thought of as having that kind of potential. Sometimes it is just a question of changing the timing that makes it easier for the audience to understand our intentions and to make it become an event. Sometimes you need the courage to abolish everything you have in order to let your ideas get into a new order.

We had been working at *Rawums(!)* over a time of two and a half years with three different versions. *Mr. and Mrs. Summerwing* we completely revised after 10 shows because we were not happy as players. In the new version our little animal stories became a circus. It is a beautiful work to keep fine-tuning and improving our plays until they seem right for us as artists and for the audience. Never before had I thought so much about the relationship artist-play-audience.

3. Is this a correct observation: Continuity with the aesthetic means? Music, a clear and simple stage, clownish elements, magic... the use of light, paper objects...

Puppets and objects always play an important part because I come from puppet theatre. We are not working with a certain kind of puppet, though. What we are most interested in is the relationship between the actor and the puppet, the object. The way a player deals

with a puppet, how he or she brings it to life do already tell a lot.

Michael Döhnert is a musician and that definitely leaves a trace on the musicality of our pieces, be it through using live-music and sound concepts or the musical and choreographic rhythm of the dramatization. That did not come up initially by dealing with a specific audience. But working in theatre for very young children did indeed sharpen our perspective on all the elements of the play.

This process generated artistic decisions: the transparency of the employment of our theatrical means is very important to us and it determines our acting. In our productions we always reflect the relationship between the making of and the effects of an illusion on stage. That is probably where our love for hand-made magic comes from. In other words, you can see the thread that is being pulled and for example opens a suitcase filled with light. Although we do show how things are being done that does not diminish the pleasure of the illusion - quite to the contrary, our visible effort is being rewarded by its effects. And sometimes I think you can indulge more in a tongue-in-cheek kind of illusion than in a well-hidden one...

We communicate with our audience in an associative language of images. The symbolic core, the abstraction of a stage decoration, a puppet or an object often enhances the audience's power of imagination. In our aesthetics we are striving for a simplicity that carries the highest possible complexity.

While developing „Ssst!“ we directed our methods of work even more towards the exploration of visual events (thereby I also mean the capacity of the audience to not only recognize an image but also to complete it in their own imagination). The question „What do we want to tell?“ turned to „What is already telling what?“ - and how many clues are needed to exalt the imagination? A house that can be folded like a letter... A stage curtain that is moving around the actors... A white rabbit “born” out of a trouser pocket...

The rabbit is a chance hit in its creation out of a handkerchief. You can still sense the tender silk handkerchief in its essence. It is very fragile but a real character. The rabbit enters the world of the two clowns. Totally unexpected. The rabbit is there, it watches the actors who don't know what to do with it. Finally, the clowns create a little universe for the rabbit. And the more they do that, the more the rabbit comes to life and becomes part of the clowns' world.