

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: York St John University
Unit of Assessment: 35 (Music, Drama, Dance and Performance Arts)
Title of case study: Theatre and Young Audiences
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study describes the impact of research into how young audiences engage with and respond to live performance.</p> <p>There are two main areas of impact to this research:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enhanced knowledge about how children watch theatre. This knowledge has impacted on arts practitioners, schools and cultural policy and brought about change in the planning, delivery and understanding of theatre for children. 2. New, research-informed, theatre and education resources. Emerging from the research insights, structured resources (including print and online) have been developed and adopted by schools and theatre practitioners. These have changed how arts organisations deliver pre- and post-show activities for young audiences.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Research undertaken by Dr Matthew Reason (Reader in Theatre from 2011) is the focus for this case study. The research impact is underpinned by a number of research projects and publications, including a book <i>The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre</i> published in 2010 (see section 3.1 below) and also industry and education orientated reports and websites (see section 4). Further underpinning research includes publications which detail aspects of audiences' aesthetic experience (3.2 to 3.5) and theatre in relation to philosophy for children (3.6).</p> <p>The research has been undertaken through the support of external research funding, particularly: the Scottish Executive Education Department (<i>Drawing the Theatrical Experience: An Investigation into Children's Theatre</i>. 2007-8. £9,757) which enabled qualitative, drawing based research into children's theatrical experiences to be conducted in three schools in Edinburgh and Lothian over six months working with circa 100 participants; the AHRC (<i>Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy</i>. 2008-11. £526,493) the scope of which goes beyond the case study here but which enabled the research into young audiences to be extended to dance. The research has been conducted in collaboration with external partners, particular Imagine, Edinburgh, and the York Theatre Royal, both of whom have invested resources, consultancy and project funding into the research.</p> <p>Reason's research engages with the production and reception of theatre for young audiences and has developed specific insights into how children both receive and interpret theatre. Its focus is on the intrinsic experience (theatre as theatre) and on developing supporting methodologies to enhance young audiences' engagement in the post-performance experience.</p> <p>Reason's research utilises primary qualitative audience research to uncover how young audiences watch theatre. This includes new insights into what kinds of things they notice, how they interpret what they see and what they recall afterwards. The research describes how children enjoy engaging with both the theatrical illusion and the stage reality of a performance. It reveals that children are actively interested in and enjoy engaging with how a theatrical performance is put together (the craft of puppetry, of stage effects, of acting and so on) and that rather than spoil the 'magic' of theatre, conscious engagement with these elements can enhance the experience.</p> <p>In the context of extending the theatrical experience, the research reveals that children have strong theatrical literacies and the ability to decode a performance. At the same time the research</p>

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suggests that the experience is rarely taken beyond the theatrical moment unless actively encouraged. The research revealed that children have an active enjoyment in talking about their experiences, and identified a need for post-performance opportunities to support children to extend their experience beyond the moment of performance. Drawing on these underpinning research outputs, and in conjunction with partners in theatre and education, Reason has developed a series of resources (including print, training-based and interactive online outputs) designed to structure and facilitate the enhancement of young children's engagement with theatre.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 Reason, M. (2010) *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*. Stoke: Trentham / Institute of Education Press.
- 3.2 Reason, M. (2013). 'The Possibility of Theatre for Children' in *Theatre for Young Audiences: A Critical Handbook*, Ed. Karian Schuitema and Tom Maguire. Stoke: Trentham / Institute of Education Press.
- 3.3 Reason, M. (2008) 'Interpreting Children's Responses to Puppets in Live Theatre: Did you watch the man or did you watch the goose?', *New Theatre Quarterly* 24 (pp 337-354).
- 3.4 Reason, M. (2013) 'The Longer Experience: Theatre for Young Audiences and Enhancing Engagement', in *The Audience Experience: A critical analysis of audiences in the performing arts*, Ed. Radbourne, Glow and Johanson. Bristol: Intellect.
- 3.5 Reason, M. (2006) 'Young Audience and Live Theatre, Part 2: Perceptions of Liveness in Performance', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 26:3 (pp 221-241).
- 3.6 Reason, M (2008). 'Thinking Theatre: Enhancing Children's Theatrical Experiences Through Philosophical Enquiry', *Childhood and Philosophy* 4: 7.

4. Details of the impact

The impact of the underpinning research described above relates to: first, enhanced knowledge about how children watch theatre; second, the development of new methods to enhance and extend young audiences' experience of live performance. Both these elements have changed delivery and practice in both arts and education contexts.

1. Enhanced knowledge in theatre and education contexts

The research has had a direct impact on arts practitioners, including artistic directors of some of the most significant organisations working with arts and young people. This includes Tony Graham, Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre, London, who described Reason's research as 'inspirational' and stated that *The Young Audience* (3.1) was 'without doubt the most important book on theatre for young audiences for many years' (5.1). Tony Reekie, Chief Executive of Imagineate, described the research as:

A fantastic resource for everyone interested in children's theatre. Reason's groundbreaking research provides fresh insights into children's experiences of live theatre which are of great benefit to arts and education communities across the world. (5.2)

Helen Nicholson, Professor of Drama, Royal Holloway, details the impact of Reason's research in terms of its ability to supply:

...the cultural sector with the elusive evidence of the impact of their work that they often need to justify their funding in increasingly lean times.... [Reason] provides an excellent argument for including live theatre as part of children's educational experiences and some very useful approaches to classroom practice that will undoubtedly enhance children's experiences (5.3).

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Janet Stanford, Artistic Director of Imagination on Stage, USA, writes that Reason's research is 'that rare example of a scholarly text that can and should have practical application in the field' as it 'inspire others to experiment with similar techniques as they develop post-show lesson plans of their own' (5.4).

Examples which evidence impact include:

- Material developed by international arts festivals and organisations which directly acknowledge the impact of Reason's research in shaping their approaches to young audiences. Internationally these include the Barbaro International Festival of Children's Theatre, Galway, Ireland (5.5) and Teater Centrum, Copenhagen, Denmark (5.6);
- Continuing professional development workshops for teachers and creative education workers, conducted with Imagine, that changed how teachers understood the potential of young children's aesthetic engagement with theatre;
- Adoption of the research report as a key resource by organisations who have included it on their webpages, including: Theatre for Young Audiences UK; Young Peoples' Theatre, Canada; Imagine, UK; Forsoegsstationen, Denmark.

The international impact of the research is evidenced by Reason's invitation to speak at an Australian Research Council event at Sydney Opera House to an audience including Melbourne Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Malthouse Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company, Arena Theatre Co and Queensland's Performing Arts Centre. Reason also delivered a keynote address for the Australia Council to an industry audience on engaging young audiences (5.7). The reach of the research is indicated by its coverage in reviews, blogs and other media (including the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Huffington Post).

2. New Methods for Engaging Young Audiences

The second strand of impact emerges directly from the first, but continues from knowledge of how children watch theatre to the strategic development of methods designed to be used by arts practitioners and educationalists to enhance young audiences' theatrical experiences. This includes the development, dissemination and implementation of a range of resources (5.8) in cross-media platforms to national and international audiences.

'Evaluating the Performing Arts' is a downloaded resource pack that facilitates discussion and debate about theatre among young children. The document was written in consultation with Reason (who also wrote the Foreword) with specific sections on drawing and post-show discussions developing directly from Reason's underpinning research.

'Talking about Theatre' is an interactive online resource for schools, in which children are guided through an intuitive animated process of theatre criticism and discussion. The resource was developed through £40,000 of Co-Create Arts Funding and draws upon Reason's underpinning research.

In prompting and shaping Imagine's development of these resources, Reason's research directly impacted upon and changed the activity of a major organisation with an international reputation for the development of the performing arts for young people. These resources have since had direct and significant impact on the practices of artists working with theatre for young audiences and teachers working in the class room. Susanne Batchelor, of Scottish Borders Council Art's Development team said that the resources 'Fill a gap in terms of extending the experience back in the classroom [and are] a very accessible and fun way of engaging pupils in the critical evaluation of their theatre experiences. (5.9)

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5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1. Artistic Director, Unicorn Theatre, London (1997-2012)
- 5.2. Chief Executive, Imagine, Edinburgh
- 5.3. Review of *The Young Audience* (output 3.1) in *English in Education*. Vol 45. No 1. 2011. DOI: 10.1111/j.1754-8845.2010.01085.x
- 5.4. Review of *The Young Audience* (output 3.1) in TYA Today. Vol. 25. No. 1. 2011.
<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/book-reviews/65162681/young-audience-exploring-enhancing-childrens-experiences-theatre>
- 5.5. Babero Teachers Post Activity Pack. 'Draw and talk is a method taken from a study by Dr Matthew Reason of York St John University called Drawing the Theatrical Experience'
<http://www.babero.ie/wp-content/uploads/Teacher-Post-Engagement-Pack-2011.pdf>
- 5.6. Project by Teater Centrum (Copenhagen, Denmark) 'Theatre Experience' (2011) drawing on theatre performance which took inspiration and methodology from Reason's research. Report available :www.cblanche.dk/download.asp?id=81&fileext=.pdf
- 5.7. Keynote address to Australia Council for the Arts. 2011.
http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/hot_topics/engaging_young_audiences/program/dr_matthew_reason
- 5.8. Resources produced by Imagine drawing upon the research. Evaluating the Performing Arts: a step by step guide; Talking About Theatre, interactive online resource:
<http://www.imagine.org.uk/learn/schools-teachers/>
- 5.9. Creative Learning Manager, Scottish Borders Council
- 5.10. Associate Director, York Theatre Royal