

## See Me!

### ***A Discussion on the Quality of Performing Arts for Children Based on a Performative Approach***

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**Abstract:** In this article, the writer discusses and analyses what happens to the evaluation of quality in performing arts for children when we move from the notion of art as an object to art as an event. Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory on the so-called *performative turn* in the arts and more specifically, the term *feedback loop*, constitute the article's theoretical backdrop. Two audience-related episodes, the dance performance *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee* by ICB Productions (3–6 year olds) and the theatre performance *Thought Lab* by Cirka Teater (for 6-year-olds and above), serve as starting points for the theoretical discussion. By adopting Siemke Böhnisch's performative approach to theatre analysis, focusing on the terms *directed-ness*<sup>2</sup> and *contact* in relation to the audience, the writer seeks to show a dissonance (and its reverse) between the performers and the audience in the two respective performances. The term *dissonance* describes moments of unintended breaks in communication, moments of which the performers are most likely unaware. These moments, however, become apparent when the audience's reactions are included in the analysis, and we become almost obliged to consider the child audience as qualified judges of quality, as opposed to allowing ourselves to dismiss their interactions as either noise or enthusiasm.

**Keywords:** Performing arts for children, performative analysis, art for children, child participation, art as event, performativity

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'directed-ness' is a construction made by the author Nagel over Böhnisch' Norwegian term 'henvendthet'.

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## **It's All in the Telling**

In a review on scenekunst.no, a Norwegian critics' site for the performing arts, the critic Anette Therese Pettersen said the following about the dance performance *Nattsvermar*, written by Gyrid Axe Øvstengand and directed by Un-Magritt Nordseth:<sup>3</sup>

[T]he children are regularly calling out to [the main character] Lars throughout the entire performance. Even though the performance only on occasion interacts with the audience's questions, comments and instructions, this does not seem to affect the spectators, who behave as if there is no fourth wall: "What were you doing in there?!"; "The butterfly is coming!"; "She's behind you!" etc. (Pettersen, 2013, 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph)

Pettersen's description points to what I perceive as a central issue in the evaluation of performing arts for children, namely the relationship between presentation and quality. In her review, Pettersen describes very active children demonstrating their engagement in the performance in various and rather direct ways. The children do not behave any differently than one would normally expect them to in a theatre. However, the above description can be taken as an observation of a form of *dissonance* between the stage and the auditorium, for even if the children clearly desire a considerable and direct amount of contact, the actors are only *occasionally* available for direct communication. The term *dissonance* derives from music terminology, and denotes cacophony, disharmony or more specific a charged sound that requires arrival at another sound. In this particular context, dissonance is used metaphorically as a means to describe a problem in the communication between performers and the audience. In spite of the performance taking place as planned and the audience's obvious involvement, the critic describes a mismatch between the two modes of communication. It is the aim of this article to elaborate on what such a dissonance may consist of and how it comes into being.

Indeed, how should one understand the situation Pettersen describes? The behaviour described above resembles normal audience behaviour in relation to performances for children, in the sense that the children in question are engaged and verbally participating in a manner the accompanying adults are doubtless accustomed to. However, if we concede that there is in fact a form of dissonance occurring, as Pettersen's description suggests, the issue would appear to be somewhat different. This has to do with the fact that from an art pedagogical standpoint, it is quite possible to argue that the fact that the children were calling out to the performers without their voices in any way being recognized, could be understood as a symptom indicating a lack of communication between the parties involved. By acknowledging this perspective, it becomes clear that the performance may be lacking something in relation to communication. This again may lead us to the assumption that the persistent and eager utterings of the children could be understood more as a need to be seen and included in the experience, than as any real

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<sup>3</sup> The performance does not have an English name. The literal translation is *Moth*.

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experience of involvement. Conversely, an obvious conclusion for the performers to draw would be that the children are not grasping what is being delivered, and therefore are asking all sorts of questions. In addition, the performers may believe that the same children quite simply have a poor understanding of theatre conventions regarding when to shout and when not to; that they are, in other words, misbehaving.

Considering these two quite opposite views, it seems reasonable to propose that the situation appears to be rather ambiguous, and further, that this might have to do with the variations in the criteria for evaluating performing arts for children, depending on whether one argues from an arts or pedagogic point of view. However, looking at some of the leading research on performing arts for children in Scandinavia (Guss, 2000; Helander, 2007; Böhnisch, 2010; Hovik, 2011), the situation is somewhat elucidated. Here, the findings are that children seek out adult corroboration of their impressions, whether the adult in question be on stage or in the audience with them (Helander, 2007). In this perspective, the children's various exclamations can be assumed to be the expression of such a need. However, this knowledge is not widely shared, and where it is, it is the art pedagogues rather than the artists themselves who are aware of it.

Using the cited episode as a point of departure, I would assert that the qualified discussion on the subject of performing arts for children often ends up being a proprietary wrestle between pedagogues and artists, with the quality and presentation of the performance being the object under dispute. Moreover, as I have already suggested, it would seem as if the artists and pedagogues use different vocabulary and have different epistemological frameworks or "mindsets" where the latter is concerned. How we evaluate and give weight to children's experiences of a performance obviously depends on tastes and preferences, but on a professional level it also involves the research concerning artistic perspectives and the perspectives of children as spectators. There is a connection between the latter two aspects, which I wish to closer inspect in this article, for the purposes of bridging what seems to be the differences between artistic and pedagogical points of view. I will do this by examining *what happens to our evaluation of performing arts for children when we go from perceiving art as objects, works or texts to perceiving art as an event.*

## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

My theoretical framework for this discussion is the work *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008) by theatre researcher Erika Fischer-Lichte. This book, despite having been criticized by, among others, theatre researcher Niels Lehmann for being more avant-garde poetics than theory (Lehmann, 2007), has made an impact as a seminal work of reference on performative theory (Böhnisch, 2010). I will interpret Fischer-Lichte in synch with theatre researcher Siemke Böhnisch (2010), who in her thesis, "Feedback Loops in Theatre for Very Young Audiences", brings nuance to and further

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develops Fischer-Lichte's theories by proposing a fully developed performative approach to performance analysis. Whilst the point of departure for Böhnisch's terminology was a production for children under the age of three,<sup>4</sup> her suggested method is nonetheless thought of as a contribution to a new performative direction within the field of theatre and performance analysis in general. My intention in the present context is to use Böhnisch's performative approach to investigate performing arts for children from three to nine years of age.<sup>5</sup> Böhnisch is certainly not the only one who has written on performative analysis, but as far as I am aware, she is one of the few who has developed a comprehensive performance analysis framework based on performing arts for children. By following Böhnisch's proposal closely, I am able to do two things simultaneously: namely, explore her methodological approach and at the same time be very near-sighted in my analysis. As the background for my discussion, I will use excerpts from two performances: The dance performance *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee* (2013) by ICB Productions<sup>6</sup> and the theatre production *Thought Lab* (2013) by Cirka Teater.<sup>7</sup>

The excerpts will not be discussed in terms of how they demonstrate the respective productions' artistic qualities *per se*, but will function as focal turning points and examples for a theoretical discussion on selected evaluation criteria for performing arts for children. Quite intentionally, I have chosen to look more closely at two productions that are considered to be of overall good quality.<sup>8</sup> Both can be said to function well on sensory, artistic and symbolic levels (Sauter, 2000), and both productions are performed by professional artists with considerable artistic ability within their respective fields, whether they be musicians, dancers or actors. Moreover, the artists in both productions have good stage presence, and perform their narratives well. At the same time, it is possible to point out a fundamental difference between the two performances. This, however, is something neither the regular audience member nor the ordinary theatre critic is usually aware of. That is because the difference is related to children as spectators

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<sup>4</sup> Böhnisch herself uses the term "very young audiences" in her writings. She bases this on the fact that even though the target age is set at under three years, or from one to three years, very often these age limits are ignored, both with younger and older children. She also cites the European context, in which "theatre for toddlers" is understood very differently, depending on the actual country in which one is located (Böhnisch, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> "Theatre for children" is as imprecise an expression as "theatre for the very young". Confining myself to the three to nine age group should be understood as an attempt to set the limit from baby and young children's theatre downwards and to theatre for children in the middle category and above. However, age is not considered here to be a central dimension in the article's more general treatment of performing arts for children as events.

<sup>6</sup> *BZz BZz-DADA dA bee*, ICB Productions 2013. Idea, text and direction: Inger Ceclie Bertán de Lis (ICB Productions, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Thought Lab*, Cirka Teater 2013. Direction: Anne Mali Sæther, idea and text: Anne Mali Sæther and Anne Marit Sæter, song lyrics: Gro Dahle (Cirka Teater, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Both productions were adopted as part of the Norwegian Touring Network for Performing Arts' repertoire, which means that they have gone through quality control by an art council. I am myself a member of the council in question. Due to the state of affairs in the Norwegian media, where very few productions for children are reviewed, I have not found any reviews of the two productions under discussion here.

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and can be associated with a distinct area of academic research on child culture specifically concerned with how children respond to and experience theatre (Guss, 2000; Helander, 2007; Bönisch, 2010). My intention is to make this difference apparent by using performative theory as my point of entry into the analysis.

### **Art as an Event: The Performative Turn**

In recent decades we have seen a shifting of perspectives in the field of academic research on theatre and performance, resulting in an increased focus on perceiving theatre performances as events (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Sauter, 2000; Schechner, 2002). In her renowned book, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) investigates and describes what is known as the *performative turn*. This so-called turn must first and foremost be understood as a shift from perceiving art as an independent piece of work, object or text that delivers significance or meaning, to perceiving art as an event, and subsequently as something that arises from and exists in the form of a meeting between the concrete work and the audience. Fischer-Lichte (2008) states: “The performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event” (p. 35). Such a performative perspective distinguishes itself in important ways from what one could call a *work-oriented aesthetic*<sup>9</sup> and a *reception-aesthetic* (Böhnisch, 2010, p. 87). Whilst a work-oriented aesthetic perspective is connected to theatre semiotics and describes an academic analysis of a theatre production that perceives the spectators as recipients, the latter approach is closely linked to the academic literary analysis of reception aesthetics and Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the *implicit reader* (Iser, 1974), further developed and adopted by theatre researcher Patrice Pavis as the *implicit spectator* (Pavis, 1988). A reception-aesthetic way of thinking thus denotes that the production is created in the spectator’s mind and that the interpretation of the work is open and dynamic, but that the actual stage performance is considered to be static and unaffected by the audience’s individual and collective reactions.

A *performative perspective*, on the other hand, problematizes the concept of a work of art itself, in the sense that the spectators are projected into the event as both verbal and visible contributors with a real power to influence (Böhnisch, 2010, p. 87). The production is described as that which occurs between the performers and the audience, and the scenic action is thus perceived as dynamic and therefore in constant flux. In practice this means that when perceiving theatre as an event, it does not suffice to analyse just the performance itself. One also has to examine and include the continuous dialogical reception, which together with the aesthetic, cultural and historical context of the performance form part of the work— or rather, *event* – and in this way also constitute the event itself. Such a performative approach naturally has

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<sup>9</sup> Bönisch’s Norwegian term *verksetetisk perspektiv* literary means “work-oriented aesthetic perspective”.

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implications for the evaluation of art. When it is no longer the work itself, nor our analysis of it, that takes first place, but rather it is the event and the experience of it that counts, the focus is shifted onto the situation: The artwork comes to life when interacting with an audience, and the spectator can therefore be perceived as a real co-creator of the event, not just on an inner level (as within the field of reception-aesthetics), but on a concrete, physical and bodily level.

Even though such a view of the performing arts is no longer controversial in a Norwegian context, it seems as if this, to a certain degree, is limited to the field of adults, in the sense that a performative perspective has yet to gain favour with artists, pedagogues and critics in the field of performing arts for children. This becomes clear not only in the performances *per se*, where the audience's presence is rarely actualized, but also in the critique of the repertoire and acting style, which seldom includes the performative perspective in the evaluation of the various productions.<sup>10</sup> Where children are cited, they serve to consolidate the critic's personal point of view; their reactions rarely figuring in the analyses to any great extent. It is reasonable to assume that this is due to a fear of confusing art with pedagogy, as mentioned earlier, and also that it partly reflects a lack of understanding of how children watch and experience performing arts.

The theoretical point of departure for a performance analysis focusing on the audience as well as the performance itself can be found in Fischer-Lichte's (2008) work, which defines a collective, *bodily co-presence* between the actors and spectators as a prerequisite for a work constituting a performance. "The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance" (p.32). Further on, Fischer-Lichte describes the communication between the stage and the auditorium as an ongoing, autopoietic (self-sustaining) *feedback loop*. Fischer-Lichte coined the term *feedback loop* to describe what in her opinion occurs in every performing arts encounter; namely an ongoing exchange between performers and spectators, defined as mutually influential. She is, however, not only describing a verbalized or conscious dialogue, but also an unconscious and unplanned communication that is on-going throughout an entire performance: "performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38). Drawing from this, it is possible to argue that children's physical and verbal contributions to a theatrical event, which are often overlooked as either noise or enthusiasm, should instead be examined in the light of the feedback loop, thus shedding light on the participatory dimension of the theatre experience.

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<sup>10</sup> I function as a critic in this field, and have closely followed writings about performing arts for children over the last seven years.

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### **The BZzBZz-DADA dA bee Episode**

In the dance performance *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee*, the action takes place in a golden-yellow beehive. Two grey-clad sausage-like figures come slithering out on the floor. The thematic and visual context suggest that we are looking at two honey bees that are about to be hatched, and it is literally so: Soon they are born, so to speak, and a pair of golden, striped buzzing bees get busy cleaning the hive. They move things around and dust off everything they can find, and after a while it becomes clear that they are doing all of this in order to make the Queen bee happy; it is for her they are cleaning, and to a large degree, their dance moves are directed towards her. While the pair can be described as true busy bees, moving around quickly and working hard, the Queen moves more slowly, giving out orders and demanding attention from an elevated position. She wears a golden crown and matching platform shoes, and instead of talking, she sings the “Queen of the Night” aria from *The Magic Flute* by Mozart when addressing her minions. In the programme, she is described as a “pompous, self-preoccupied, singing Queen bee [sic]” (ICB Productions, 2013).

From here on, the performance can be described as a cyclic story of life. For, whilst the bees are washing and the Queen sings and lets herself be entertained, the two drones fall in love, collect nectar and make honey, and tidy and bustle about until the autumn of their lives is upon them, when all three of them appear on stage with beards and bad backs. In this manner, the audience has journeyed through their lifecycle, whilst at the same time having witnessed but a day in their existence. That the performance concludes with the appearance of a small girl of five years of age making her entry as the new Queen Bee, serves to round off the action and also shows that the production thematises both the mundane and universal perspectives on animal and human life.

The occurrence to which I wish to draw attention did not occur at just one particular moment during the performance I attended at Dansens Hus, but occurred several times in the course of the performance’s duration. In the first row, on the floor, the kindergarten children sat to watch the show. The production was aimed at three to six year olds, and the children on this particular day looked to be around four to five years old. Shortly into the performance, a girl in the audience caught my attention. She was kneeling, but leaning forward; the angle of her knees was 90 degrees, she was clearly engaged by the action on stage, was smiling brightly and most importantly, she was waving quite eagerly at the Queen and her minions. Then, after a while, she sat back down, resigned, before resuming the waving, leaning forward as before, and in my interpretation, hoping to be seen. On the stage, however, everything continued as before, as far as I could tell; the dancers danced, but their gaze went over the children’s heads. The Queen sang, but not even she allowed herself to make eye contact with the small spectators. The song was not directed at them, but was intended for the two bees and perhaps for some imaginary

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spectators on the back row (the auditorium was far from full). No one so much as indicated that they could see the frantic waving, despite the obvious fact that the auditorium was well lit and the girl was sitting in the front row.

From a work-oriented aesthetic perspective on a production, a perspective in which the art work as work is the prime material and the audience is considered to be at the receiving end of a finished product, it is likely that any focus on the waving girl would be thought of as irrelevant. This has to do with the fact that the spectators' experiences are relevant to a very small degree in a work-oriented aesthetic analysis, as this focuses on the action on stage and not on the audience. In light of this, a girl waving without anyone on stage taking notice of her does not tell us anything about the quality of the production *BZzBZz-DADA dA* within the work-oriented analytical paradigm. Rather, the girl's reactions belong to the empirical reception and audience research, something that is considered to be quite separate from the performance itself. However, things look a little different when one adopts a reception-aesthetic perspective; in this case, the spectator appears to be a co-creator in the sense that a production comes into existence in the mind of the spectator (Böhnisch, 2010). From such a perspective, it is possible to think of the girl's waving as an external, physical expression of an inner reaction, elicited by her interpretation and experience of the performance. Her experience becomes the production, because it is in her interior that it is enacted and given existence, although she herself is not part of the physical performance event within this analytical paradigm. What one could refer to as a lack of contact between performers and audience is not the focus within the reception-aesthetic performance analysis tradition. This has to do with the fact that from a reception-aesthetic point of view, even though a performance is indeed conceived of as something open for and dependent on the spectators' interpretation, the performance itself is not considered to be subject to influence by the spectator's visual or verbal presence (Böhnisch, 2010). A performative-oriented analysis will however, in addition to examining the performance itself, look to the audience in order to establish how and in what ways performers and spectators interact.

Even though Fischer-Lichte (2008) claims that bodily *co-presence* between performers and spectators *per se* constitutes the performance, Böhnisch (2010) does not believe this is sufficient to establish a connection between the stage and the auditorium. She therefore introduces the notion of *directed-ness*<sup>11</sup> as being an important prerequisite for real communication to occur between the performer and the spectator. The concept of directed-ness, or "being turned towards the other", is subsequently divided into subcategories: the establishment and maintenance of *contact* (kontakt), *focus and attention* (oppmerksomhet) and also, varying degrees of *intensity* (intensitet). She further distinguishes between

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote 2.

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when a person (either spectator or performer) is *directly* or *indirectly* turned towards the other, and whether the directed-ness manifests itself through physical actions or perception (Böhnisch, 2010, pp. 120–127). Of course, it is possible to question Böhnisch's take on the feedback loop and directed-ness as prerequisites for contact. Another way of looking at the matter would be to acknowledge that two people in the same room are in fact influenced by each other's presence, whether they like it or not, and further, that this co-presence could also be described as contact, but perhaps of a more unconscious kind. Böhnisch's notion of contact is obviously different, concerning itself with children's attention. For my use, Böhnisch's categories are useful and relevant, but I will maintain that a feedback loop, albeit a weak and unwilling one, will come into being at the very moment an audience and performers meet in the context of a performance.

In the example of *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee*, the dancers are indeed turned towards the audience. They perform facing the spectators, who are arranged in straight lines directly in front of the stage. The dancers do not, however, address the audience directly, neither verbally nor by touching them, thus establishing the fact that this must be a case of being *turned to the other indirectly*, understood to be “the actors projecting their complete expression at the audience, talking so loud and articulating so clearly that even whispered words or small gestures can be heard and seen in the back row” (Böhnisch, 2010, p. 124).<sup>12</sup> This way of investigating directed-ness also applies to the spectators. In our example with the children watching the dance, they are initially indirectly turned towards the dancers, in the sense that most of them are calm and have focused their attention on the stage. Alongside the dancers themselves, many of the children are also actively engaging in dialogue with the performers, both verbally and physically, throughout the entire performance. The girl in the example given previously turned directly towards the dancers when waving at them, an act that is by definition a concrete physical manifestation of the desire for contact. Other children also turned directly to the stage, by means of cries and contributions of the type the critic Pettersen describes in her review of *Nattsvermar*, cited in the opening passage.<sup>13</sup> Observed from the outside, from the end of an imaginary line separating the stage from the audience, the situation could perhaps be described as follows: On the one side, a girl waving and trying to make contact, without her efforts being recognized. On the other side, three adult dancers performing, blind to the girl in question, but instead present in an imaginary space on stage in which the audience does not exist.

Just how and in what manner the spectators are turned to the performers is regulated by what Böhnisch (2010) calls *audience styles*. An audience style denotes the audience's conduct, and is,

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<sup>12</sup> In Norwegian, this reads: ”aktørene projiserer hele sitt uttrykk mot publikumet, taler så høyt og artikulterer så tydelig at selv hviskende ord eller små gester kan høres og ses på bakerste rad.”

<sup>13</sup> According to my own notes from the production, seen at Dansens Hus in Oslo on the 25th January 2013.

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according to Böhnisch, directly connected to performing styles and the concomitant conventions of the genre. For example, in the case of naturalistic drama, the accompanying audience style could be described as the spectators sitting more or less in silence listening, in such a way that it is the focused perception, i.e. the very listening, that constitutes their directed-ness. In order to nuance directed-ness as a concept and attitude, Böhnisch introduces the subcategories contact, attention, intensity (energy) and (physical) frameworks as the parameters (pp. 130–138). Of particular interest in relation to directed-ness and audience styles is the category *the establishment and maintenance of contact*. Böhnisch writes that contact can be increased and decreased throughout the proceedings, and that it can appear and disappear, but that contact is “a prerequisite for the appearance of feedback loops” (p. 130). At this point, Böhnisch separates from Fischer-Lichte, in the sense that for the latter, the feedback loop is ever present, whereas for Böhnisch, the feedback loop might in fact from time to time cease to exist, or perhaps never come into being. In Böhnisch’s dissertation, this is an important theoretical claim.

Following Böhnisch, then, it seems to be the case that whilst directed-ness is a prerequisite for the feedback loop’s durational existence, *contact* is required for it to occur at all. This has to do with the fact that according to Böhnisch, contact requires two-way communication: “Contact is established when both parties are turned towards the other. A one-sided directed-ness can be an attempt to establish contact, but contact will not be achieved as long as it lacks reciprocity” (p. 134). It is not difficult to follow the logic of this argument, at least not if one agrees with the idea that it is in fact possible for an audience and a group of performers in a performance context to be in no way whatsoever turned towards the other. It is also, on the other hand, possible to argue that two-way communication must always happen in a performance context involving bodily co-presence, in the sense that trying to establish contact, albeit unsuccessfully, to a certain degree can be considered as a form of two-way communication. If this be so, I wonder whether it is not more fruitful to maintain Fischer-Lichte’s view of the feedback loop as immanent in all performative events, focusing instead on *variations of contact and communication*, thus making it possible to establish both a shortage of such and furthermore, to pinpoint what I have called a *dissonance* in the communication between audience and performers.

In light of this argument and our recent understanding of different audience styles and concomitant forms of directed-ness, it becomes clear that there is in fact a type of *dissonance* occurring between the performers and the spectators in question in the example of *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee*: Whilst the children act as they are wont to, calling out and physically engaging in the performance, in what could perhaps be called the audience style *children’s theatre*, the dancers, however, are bound to the genre conventions, in which audience feedback does not affect the stage performance directly and the proceedings of the performance are restricted to the stage and are not in dialogue with the auditorium. The

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question that begs asking, then, is what such a dissonance involves for our understanding of the quality of the performance.

From both an art pedagogue's and an artist's point of view, such a dissonance can be considered problematic. Any artist is of course at liberty to renounce any responsibility for their relationship to their audience, but in a production for three year olds, in which the artist is preoccupied with presenting a story and a theme, as is the case with *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee*, it is difficult to see how dissonance in the form of lack of communication could be the aim. In such a case a valid conclusion to draw would be that we are in fact dealing with an *unintended* failure to communicate. According to Böhnisch, such a state of affairs can be put down to an absence of directed-ness in sensing and perception. This directed-ness is more subtle, and can be understood as a mental attitude on the part of the performer, who puts themselves in a state in which being present in the situation and being open for impressions and expressions from the auditorium are manifested as central aspects. This type of being turned towards the audience is, according to Böhnisch, a prerequisite for the performer to be affected by the audience's reactions: "An actor who does not anticipate a (re)action cannot be affected by it and cannot align their own actions in accordance with them" (Böhnisch 2010, p.126).

In this example, it is quite apparent that the dancers in *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee* in this concrete episode with the girl only to a small degree are turned towards the audience in sensing and perception. The fact that they completely ignore the girl's waving bears witness to this fact; also, they do not look at the other children, but right over their heads.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that they are indirectly turned towards the audience, this is a sign that would suggest the dancers are not open for impressions from the auditorium, given the duration of the absence of recognition of sharing the auditorium with the spectators.<sup>15</sup> The lack of contact described has consequences for the communicative dimension of the performance and event, and as I see it, this means that the children do not get from the performers the intended experience of affinity and identification.

It is in light of this last point, which sees dissonance in relation to severe lack of contact and directed-ness from either of the parties in a performance, possibly due to differences in audience styles, that I would go so far as to claim that it is possible to interpret the girl's waving and the absence of a response from the dancers as an example of either a very weak, partly interrupted feedback loop, or

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<sup>14</sup> According to own notes from the production, seen at Dansens Hus on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2013

<sup>15</sup> One could perhaps presume that this suggests that the right thing to do for the dancer would be to wave back. This is not my point, however, as there are many different ways to establish contact. Waving is a very explicit one, and would most likely seem out of place in this particular performance. A look in the girl's direction, on the other hand, or a small gesture or candid smile indicating that her waving is noticed, would be better options in this particular context, and would quite suffice, according to research on the matter (Helander, 2007; Böhnisch, 2010).

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perhaps rather a feedback loop tormented by ongoing interference, preventing the communication from finding the same frequency. Whilst frequency disturbances are normally external problems, in this case the stage performers are the ones responsible for establishing and maintaining contact with the audience. By failing to do so, they themselves become the interference, and as long as they maintain the performative strategies agreed on beforehand, instead of adapting to the current situation by, for instance, looking at the waving girl and acknowledging her mere existence, any in-tune communication becomes almost impossible (Böhnisch, 2010). When this happens, the feedback loop is interrupted in favour of one-way communication, both on the part of the performers and the girl, and they are left standing each on their own side of a transparent wall, devoid of the ability to meet one another in the doorway that could have materialized between them by means of a glance or other gesture.

This episode does not provide a comprehensive overview of how the audience experiences the performance. It is highly likely that other children present experienced mutual contact, and that they can be said to have entered a feedback loop with the performers. However, as an example, the episode does give insight into a way to evaluate the presentational dimension of *BZzBZz-DADA da Bee*. By definition, a more profound analysis would necessitate considering the girl's waving in a clearer comparative light with the behaviour of the other spectators. Even then, one would stand a chance of finding that the episode functions as a measure of the extent to which the production communicates, or fails to communicate, with its audience. This is all in keeping with the fact that watching children's theatre productions is a collective experience, which in practice means that it is very often the case that the experience of one child is shared with the others, whether consciously, in the form of being physically or verbally turned towards the other, or more unconsciously, in the form of a shared energy between the spectators (Helander, 2007; Böhnisch, 2010).<sup>16</sup>

## The Thought Lab Episode

In comparison, the production *Thought Lab* by Cirka Teater is an example of a production that can be said to contain an awareness of *directed-ness* and *contact* as important dimensions in children's theatre. In the present context, it is particularly the beginning of the performance that is relevant: When the audience enters the room, which is arranged just like a traditional auditorium with a small tribune facing the stage, the performance has already begun. A man playing the double bass and a woman playing the soprano saxophone are located to the left. They can both be described as actor-musicians, as they later also participate in the action as performers with their instruments. To the right of the stage, behind a

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<sup>16</sup> Böhnisch (2010) introduces the concept *the spotlight of the collective observation* in order to describe the collective focus of an audience emotionally engaged and involved in a production. She does not limit this to productions for children alone, but refers to it as a phenomenon that also applies to performing arts for adults.

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workbench, which more than anything resembles a laboratory for playful experiments, stands the production's leading role, Anne Marit Sæther.<sup>17</sup> Sæther is dressed in a beige safari jumpsuit, looking somewhere in between a scientist and an explorer.

On the back wall, which takes the form of a big white canvas, there is something happening that quickly catches the children's interest, as well as my own. A line drawing is slowly appearing and growing. First, it seems to be a drawing of a small child, and then several children appear, until it becomes clear that what is being represented is in fact a row of children sitting side-by-side on the floor. At the outset of this sequence, most of us are looking only at the images appearing in front of us. Following the development of the drawing, we then begin looking for the person responsible for the motif. After a while, we spot lead actress Sæther in her laboratory, and notice that she is in fact drawing with charcoal on a piece of paper. As she draws, the image is transferred onto the canvas in real time by means of a camera. The moment the children and I understand this, we immediately start to look alternately at Sæther and at the back wall, where the drawing is materialising.

The decisive moment occurs when the children (and I) suddenly realize exactly *who* it is Sæther is portraying. For, in the very moment she is discovered to be the drawer, she looks up and smiles at us, before coming forward on the stage, simultaneously revealing her drawing pad to the audience. She then smiles again, this time looking at us a little more studiously, before returning to the drawing, thus confirming, in a very subtle way, that we, the spectators, are in fact the subjects of her drawing.<sup>18</sup> Seen from the wing, again from the end of an imaginary line separating the stage from the audience, it might be said to look like this: The child audience (and myself) watching Sæther smilingly drawing us, we smiling back at her (many of us a little shyly) while we watch her drawing us smilingly watching her. And so it goes on in an endless cycle, in what we can perceive of as an augmented and visualized manifestation of Fischer-Lichte's feedback loop. The method used to attain this effect is simple, but it none the less creates a complex relationship between the stage and the auditorium, with the result that when Sæther's drawing is finished and she proceeds into the following sequence of the production, everyone is holding their breath, ready and waiting for what is going to happen next.

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<sup>17</sup> It is a confusing, but highly realistic fact that the production's director is called Anne Mali Sæther and the performer is Anne Marit Sæther.

<sup>18</sup> The performance continues in the following manner: From the drawing board, Sæther tells a story about the four characters Reddharen (Scaredy-Cat), Sinnataggen (Spitfire), Firkaten (the Square) and Hermegåsa (Copy-Cat), who all wish to be understood, but who experience the opposite. For the most part, Sæther tells the story whilst she is drawing, but for every new character that appears, she heads out onto the stage and *becomes* the character. Then she also meets other people and it is they who are given form by the actor-musicians in turn. The whole thing ends up with each of the four finding out about their difficulties and appearing as one of the crowd in the large group picture that Sæther drew at the beginning of the production.

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Tankelaboratoriet av Cirka Teater. Avbildet er Anne Marit Sæther. Photo by: Gilles Berger.

Looking at the opening scene of Thought Lab through the lenses of the three aforementioned approaches to performance analysis, it becomes clear that the choice of analytic tools is by no means irrelevant to the understanding of the scene in question. From a work-oriented aesthetic point of view, this dimension of the production would not be relevant enough to dwell on, whereas a receptive-aesthetic standpoint would only allow us to dwell upon how the opening scene might have appeared in the children's minds. A performative approach, however, gives us the opportunity to include this significant contact between the performer and the audience in an analysis. This is of the utmost importance, as the short opening scene demonstrates with clarity that the audience is de facto an essential part of the performance, in the sense that the action on stage is intertwined with and develops in constant dialogue with the audience.

If we go to work more systematically on this, it would be fair to say that Sæther and the two musicians are turned towards us, both directly, indirectly and through gesture and attention. Sæther's directed-ness does not only stem from her function as narrator throughout the performance; her bodily co-presence exceeds this narrative function. The opening sequence establishes this very clearly, and can be defined as Sæther establishing (and maintaining) contact with the audience, in something we can define as

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a well-functioning or stabile feedback loop. The most interesting thing in my opinion is that she does this without turning towards us through words, but solely through drawing and actions. It was her look, her smile and the stage proceeding of the *drawing* that created the defining moment for welcoming the audience in as participants in the stage dialogue. We therefore needed no other messages than those given in silence: First, *Look here!*, and then, *I see you!* Interestingly enough, as far as I recall, there were no children calling out to the performers or in other ways interfering with the narrative in the course of the performance, but rather consistently directed their focus at what was happening on the stage and on the drawing board.

## **The Aesthetics of Performance and the Production of Presence in Performing Arts for Children**

Looking at the examples of *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee* and *Thought Lab* through the lens of performative aesthetics, we are challenged to revise our notion of artistic quality in performing arts for children, focusing on the *eventness* (Sauter, 2008) of a performance rather than merely on the composition of the work of art in question. This perspective on quality is also to be found in leading research on the theme in question, albeit the outset is not always performative aesthetics. Whilst Böhnisch does not elaborate on which performance styles or theatre genres she thinks may have more potential than others when it comes to contact and mutual directed-ness, her fellow researchers Lise Hovik and Faith Gabrielle Guss suggest performance theatre as a genre or dramatic style that makes for effective communication with a child audience. In her thesis, “Drama Performance in Children’s Play-Culture: The Possibilities and Significance of Form”, Guss (2001) argues that considering children’s play conventions through a theatrical lens makes it possible to find dramatic styles in the theatre that correspond well to children’s ways of expressing themselves and of understanding the world. Guss (2013) elaborates on this aspect in her recent article, “Destabilizing Perception and Generating Meaning Seeking: Modelling TYA on the Dramaturgy of Children’s Imaginative Play-Drama”, where she argues that precisely because the dramaturgy of children’s play-drama decisively diverges from the classical, linear dramaturgy, productions for children should explore the dramaturgical strategies of performance theatre, strategies that are very similar to those found in child play.<sup>19</sup>

Lise Hovik is also preoccupied with the potential of performance aesthetics in encounters with child audiences, and in her article, “Children’s Theatre and Performance Theatre” (2001), highlights the egalitarian, non-linear dramaturgy, the focus on the relationship between play/non-play, playing with the

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<sup>19</sup> Guss (2011) describes how the girl Tessa, in the game Guss has chosen to call *Wolf!* (referred to as *The wolf we’re going to catch!* in articles in Norwegian) relates to both dramatic, cyclical, epic, simultaneous and meta-fictional dramaturgical forms.

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fiction(s) and performance theatre's testing of the boundary between the stage and the auditorium, as fundamental aspects of performance that correspond to children's role-play. In her article, "The Importance of Presence in Theatre for the Very Young"<sup>20</sup>, Hovik (2011), with a reference to Fischer-Lichte, goes on to argue that *presence* must be understood as an aesthetic dimension in its own right in theatre for the very young, as well as in theatre for older children. Hovik focuses mainly on the presence of children in the theatre space and the presence that this proximity creates: "The presence of children challenges the traditional distance between the stage and the auditorium and the customary manner in which we experience presence in relations to arts" (p. 112).

The performance theatre genre is of course only one of many possible approaches to the production of presence in children's theatre. This becomes obvious when witnessing the many different productions for children in the Norwegian field alone. For that matter, I have previously argued that *theatrical theatre* is particularly suited to communicating with children (Nagel, 2008).<sup>21</sup> As to why performance theatre has been looked at this time around, it is because in performance theatre there is the possibility to investigate to what extent other spaces, other ways of narrating and other ways of relating to the audience or other styles of expression can provide proximity and pronounced presence.

### **From Work to Event – and what of it?**

One way in which to comprehend the girl's waving to the Queen in *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee* is to see it as an invitation to the performers. The girl does what she has seen other Queens do, she waves in order to signal that she sees the people before her, and that she wishes for them to look at her. It could be that she also assumes the role of Queen, mimicking through play what is happening on stage. She is prepared to let herself be absorbed by the performance, as a living embodiment of Fischer-Lichte's (2008) concept of *embodied mind*, a term which tries to portray people's simultaneous physical and intellectual experiences of art, an experience Fischer-Lichte goes so far as to associate with a sensation of happiness. Fischer-Lichte perceives this feeling to be connected to the experience of presence, and both 'embodied mind' and 'presence' are concepts that resonate in the relevant research on children's experience of performing arts, in which physical presence and the experience of a physical expression take a central position.

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<sup>20</sup> The Norwegian title is "Nærværets betydning i barneteater for de minste". The English translation is mine.

<sup>21</sup> In this context, *theatrical theatre* is to be understood in relation to the different acting styles of the avant-garde and modernist movements of the 20th century, focusing on the body and the presentational qualities of acting rather than on the realistic representation of life.

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## Summing Up

With the meeting between performers and audience as point of departure, I asked what happens to our evaluation of quality in performing arts for children when we go from considering art as a work or an object to considering art as an event. Achieving such a change in perspective, from a work-oriented aesthetic approach to a performative one, implicates above all that there are other aspects of the productions that come into view than just the ones that might usually be highlighted in an analysis. The audience's directed-ness, which is normally regarded as either approval, or if lacking, its opposite, could be described or understood as meaningful and as participation in its own right. This is in itself not surprising, considering that audience participation in general is already familiar territory within the academic research on performing arts. However, a change in perspective in regards to children's theatre in particular, a field in which audience participation is normally thought of as belonging to the pedagogical sphere, could have a real influence on how we see and evaluate the quality of performances. By proposing a performative aesthetics approach we come to perceive the child audience as qualified evaluators of quality, rather than allowing ourselves to dismiss children's vocal and physical interactions as either noise or enthusiasm. Normally, any focus on children's reactions would be thought of as belonging to the pedagogical sphere, whereas it now is incorporated in the event, or more precisely: It constitutes the event.

By deferring to Böhnisch's analytical approach, it becomes possible to examine in a very detailed fashion the communication dynamics between the performers and spectators, specifically in children's theatre. In the analysis of *BZzBZz-DADA dA bee*, it became clear that whilst the performers act as though the performance is in real contact and dialogue with the audience, the performative aesthetics analysis of the communication would indicate otherwise. I described this communication breakdown, or weak feedback loop, as a dissonance in the relationship between the stage and the auditorium. In the analysis of *Thought Lab*, the point was to look at the reverse situation, in which establishing and maintaining contact was a central artistic strategy.

To consider performing arts for children as events will have implications not only for how a critic or dramaturge should evaluate performing arts, but also for the artists producing and performing theatre or dance for children. It is an obvious problem for many critics to refer to children as a source for the evaluation of a performance's quality, since the norm requires that one should deliver an academically qualified evaluation based on the criteria of the academic take on art, rather than an expression of taste based on the audience's experiences and understanding. By including a performative perspective to a larger extent, it would nevertheless be a given for the critic to give value to children's interaction with a production, a value that must be in keeping with the evaluation as a whole. The same would apply to the playwright, choreographer or stage director, who without worrying about being considered pedagogical in

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their positions, can give emphasis to audience relations in their artistic work. An augmented focus on the audience can, if elevated to the status of an aesthetic strategy, contribute to artistic quality of the performance in question.

By choosing to perceive performances as events, the critic, the dramaturge and the artists involved are in fact given the opportunity to investigate what children's own experiences can tell us about a production's aesthetic and social qualities. This notion does not leave us with an utterly different or new definition of quality in performing arts for children. Rather, it raises new questions, and urges us to take into consideration and discuss for example children's taste, the aesthetics of play and the special relationship between fine art and popular culture in child culture.

## On the contributor

Lisa Nagel is a PhD Candidate at The Norwegian Institute of Children's Books (Norsk barnebokinstitutt) and follows a research education program at the University of Oslo. Nagel is also the leader of the artistic research project *SceSam – interactive dramaturgies in theatre for a young audience* (<http://scesam.no>). Her research interests include performing arts and literature for children, with a special focus on art as event, audience participation and contemporary art forms.

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## About the productions

### ***BZzBZz-DADA dA bee***

Idea/choreography/direction: Inger Cecilie Bertràn de Lis

Dramaturgy and direction: Robert Skjærstad

Composer and musician: Vidar Løvstad

Dancers: Hedda Rivrud, Anne Guri Tvedt & Mikael Rønne

Scenography: Inger Cecilie Bertràn de Lis & Robert Skjærstad

Costume Design: Lillian Baur

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Light design: Daniel Kolstad Gimle

Scenography consultant: Gisle Harr

Production and scenographic elements: Gisle Harr & Anders Hamre.

Painters at the Norwegian Opera and Ballet: Hilde Dehli & Pia Høgås

Posters: Gisle Harr

Production: ICB Produksjoner

Co-production: Dansens Hus

Photo: DH Austvoll

### ***Thought Lab***

Idea/concept: Cirka Teater/Anne Marit Sæther

Direction: Anne Mali Sæther

Text: Anne Marit Sæther/Anne Mali Sæther

Song lyrics: Gro Dahle

Scenography: Gilles Berger

Composers and musicians: Ragnhild Faanes & Erlend Smalås

Producer: Monica Stendahl Rokne

Performing arts for children, performative analysis, art for children, child participation, art as event, performativity