

From interactivity to intra-activity in performing arts for children

Lise Hovik

Abstract

This essay introduces dilemmas and experiences of making interactive theatre for children based on findings from the SceSam Project. This artistic research project bridged artistic practice and theoretical perspectives on interactive dramaturgies in the context of cultural politics, interdisciplinary, and participatory art. Further developments in our critical times of mass extinction and climate change, have turned our interest away from the focus on human interactions towards the intra-actions of more-than-human agents of performing arts for children: space, environments, nature, and material entanglements. The Animalium project will serve as example of how this might look like within theatre for the very young.

About the author

Lise Hovik is professor of drama and theatre at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, professor II at OsloMet, and a drama pedagogue since 1990. She is the artistic director of Teater Fot, making and researching theatre and art for the very young since 2004. She has recently been head of research in the Lydhør i Kongsgården project (2019-21), a site specific artistic research project with kindergarten kids, pedagogues, artists and researchers together with trees, plants and natural materials of the actual place.

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Theatre connects deeply with how we relate to one another as human beings, both as artists and audiences, how we are able to imagine new human and non-human worlds together, and how entanglements and sympoiesis create a community of differences in the theatre space.

(Quote from conference presentation)

This essay is based on an online keynote speech at the Join In-Conference on participation and interactivity in theatre for children and youth, hosted by Syv Mil AS at Cornerteatret in Bergen Oct. 1st, 2021.

My online presentation at the conference provided an interesting starting point for writing this essay. The feeling of being a keynote speaker lost in virtual space, disconnected from the conference participants, the coffee, chatting, the anticipation of interesting after talks and discussions on the conference program was lost, and the whole idea of “joining in” was heavily disturbed from my point of view. But it made me think, and the poor situation invited me to elaborate my thoughts about interaction in this written essay.

Working with the very young children audience, kindergarten teachers and early childhood education, it must not be a surprise that digital interaction is not my favourite way of communication. The digital interaction experience is poor compared with the bodily presence of actors in the same space. The presence of being together in real life, time and space and to work "on the floor" with bodily, sensuous and affective ways of playing and communicating is, and will always be, a more complex, rich and creative process. My artistic work as a theatre director in the field of theatre for the very young is based on playful theatre acting methods with body, movement, sound and materials. From this very affective and co-creative point of view, my academic works explores the post qualitative and performative methodologies of art based and artistic research.¹

¹ Hovik 2014-20: Publications on artistic research within performative methodology.

From Interaction to Intra-Action

The title of this essay points to a change in our concept of interactivity and interaction, and the aim is to widen our understanding of what this can entail in performing arts for children.

The movement from Inter to Intra means to shift focus from what is going on between two (opposite) parts towards what is going on inside and within a situation. This shift is based in Karen Barad's theories of agential realism of the physical sciences, which has influenced many academic approaches to the performing arts in later years.²

Together with my theatre company Teater Fot, I started in 2017 the artistic research project *Neither Fish nor Fowl*, with an explicit aim to enter the post humanist perspectives of ecocritical thinking and more substantially explore the intra-actions within a performance process.³ Together with a group of artists; actors, musicians and one visual artist and a lot of more-than-human agents of children's theatre the *Neither Fish nor Fowl* project has developed and is still exploring new formats. Connected with Barad's understanding of materiality, and the agency of matter, with costumes made of recycled animal print clothes the company explored and played with movements, materials, sound and musical qualities, searching for expressions beyond the human/animal distinction.

Human interactions are almost always in the centre of drama and theatre work, so this project has been and still is challenging a lot of conventions in the field of performing arts for children. The project produced a number of different performances, always changing and searching for new connections. The latest outcome of this project was *Animalium*⁴ which developed through workshops, stunts and happenings in theatres, art galleries, libraries, kindergartens and outdoor events. The intra-actions between actors, places, spaces, materialities and objects created new forms of improvisational skills and maybe also new forms of performing arts for children.

² Barad 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

³ Teater Fot 2017, "Verken Fugl eller Fisk".

⁴ Teater Fot 2020, "Animalium".



Animalium poster, 2020. Photo: Lise Hovik

The *Animalium Project* will provide this essay with some visual examples of what intra-action in performing arts for children might look like.

Interactive dramaturgies in performing arts for children.

So what about interactivity? The theme of the Join In conference was summed up in the following questions:⁵

- What can the young audiences learn from the art experience itself?
- How can interactivity and active participation in theatre make way for new art forms and expressions?
- Can involving the audience stimulate to stronger democratic processes in society?

The questions entails that interactivity is deeply connected with the art experience as active democratic involvement and audience participation. I will elaborate on these questions by giving an introduction to the dilemmas of making interactive theatre for children based on findings from the SceSam Project.⁶ In this project we explored the concept of interactive dramaturgies in performing arts for children during our research period from 2012-2016, and we touched on all the questions above.

⁵ Join In 2021.

⁶ SceSam 2017a, "Scesam".

The SceSam Project was an artistic research project led by Lisa Marie Nagel as the project manager, and myself as the artistic research supervisor. SceSam aimed at bridging artistic practice and theoretical perspectives on interactive dramaturgies in the context of cultural politics, interdisciplinarity, and participatory art. The cultural politics of performing arts for children in Norway is largely defined by the framework for production and touring schools and theatres through the Cultural Rucksack (DKS), and through their political mandatory of democracy and participation. No doubt that the discourses within this framework is complex and sometimes difficult to manage. We discussed them in terms of power relations, ideas of participation and democracy in schools, the lack of arts education for children and educators and the lack of education in performing arts for children. The interest in interactivity and participation is really cross disciplinary, both within the arts and across arts and pedagogy, and the SceSam project worked to identify some of the dilemmas both inside and outside the artistic works.⁷

Within the SceSam project, the term *interactive dramaturgies in performing arts for children* worked as an overarching term to describe a broad spectrum of performance formats that in different ways invited children to participate.

As a consequence of this broad understanding, the term *interactive* was also used to describe theatre productions which did not invite children to take part physically, but instead provided for *inner* participation, or quiet and attentive listening. This way of using and understanding the term emerges in *SceSam's Working Model*⁸ as a varied array of participation formats that ranges from what we phrased as *quiet absorbed observation* of a *closed dramatic form* in one end of the scale, to *collaborative physical participation* inside an *open improvised form* in the other end. In between these two opposites we found yet other forms of participation like questionings, verbal dialogue, mirroring or active instructions, spatial installations and a variety of improvised playful forms. All of the different forms can emerge in one performance, and the categories are not at all waterproof. The working model is presented and discussed elsewhere (note 8 and 9) but has provided us with some conceptual tools for analysing and discussing this topic. In this essay the concepts will perform as a platform for further investigations in the field.

Within the interactive performing arts, there is the latent possibility of theatre *for* children becoming theatre *with* children, and sometimes also theatre *by* children, that is when children are allowed to activate their own play culture. The SceSam research was interested in how the artists handled the encounters between these three different discourses, and we analysed their choices in light of aesthetic theory, drama pedagogy and theories of children's play culture. We discovered a set of overarching dichotomies or opposite positions in the relationship between

⁷ Hovik & Nagel 2017, *Deltakelse og interaktivitet i scenekunst for barn*, Hovik & Nagel 2016, "The Scesam Project", Hovik 2015, "Din lytting skal være din sang", 193-209.

⁸ Scesam 2017b, "SceSam Working model".

- Art and research
- Theatre and drama pedagogy
- Practical and theoretical knowledge
- Artistic concepts and the socio-cultural context
- Product and process

The dichotomies will be recognised in higher educational institutions as they are well known discourses going on between the unlike cultures of art and educational practices.

Inside the artistic processes the artists were dealing with yet another set of conflicting dramaturgical issues:

- Control vs Chaos
- Compulsion vs. Liberty
- Direction vs. Improvisation

We discovered that the dilemmas or dichotomies simplifies very complex situations, and that it all depends on the perspectives involved. What seems like chaos for an adult might be playful experiences for the child. Let me give an example from Teater Fots performance Sparrow, a preproduction within the SceSam project made for toddlers 0-2 year, in which I was the artistic director. In our performance we often experience that the children create chaos in the scenes. They steal eggs and refuse to give them back when we want them. Sometimes they cry, they want to go, or they want to stay when they have to go. They have not asked to come, and they are not asked if they want to leave. The parents and the carers have to decide for them. In every performance, the actors have to improvise - not only in the artistic sense - and we have calculated with the potential collapse of directed scenes, because of the children's unpredictable input.

This might sound a bit un-artistic and risky, but for the SceSam Project it was a key question of the project to challenge the concept of interaction and risky meeting points between children and actors to be able to experiment, to investigate and to develop new insights in the performing arts for/with/by children. For Teater Fot the performance work with Sparrow provided a deepened understanding of the significance of playing and improvising as a crucial part of our artistic development and signature.



Animalium at the opening of Rosendal Teater, 2019. Photo: Rosendal Teater.

Intra-active dramaturgies - What's the difference?

As I mentioned in the introduction, human interactions are almost always in the centre of drama and theatre work, as it also was in the SceSam project. As demonstrated in the picture above, we will always focus on the child, and the environment will remain a backdrop for the anthropocentric view on theatre. In this picture, the actors turn their back on the audience to investigate the environment inside an elevator.

Moving onwards to the philosophy of Karen Barad and new materialism⁹ we have asked how this philosophical turn towards a post humanist worldview would look like in the theatre. To be able to answer we will need to look closer at the agency of more-than-human actors¹⁰ in the theatre space. This means to regard the physical dimensions, qualities and materials present in the space, as actors equal to human actors, and to work together with the environments adding a new consciousness of being entangled with, not separated from, our material world.

⁹ Barad 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

¹⁰ More-than-human refers to Barad's agential realism and new materialism in general.

The post humanist approach will try to decenter the human self, the focus on individuality and personal identity, thus question human supremacy in the world.¹¹ In a specific place or space it would mean to regard all material actors as living agents participating together as an ecological entity. When we try to open our attention towards the more-than-human, and become aware of the materialities of the theatre space, we will look more curiously at the environments in which the theatre exists; The space, the air, the light or darkness, the floor, the seats, the heat or temperature, the walls, and of course the colours, the costumes, props, scenography etc.

This material consciousness might already be included and part of a scenographic idea or reflected in the design of a specific theatre work. Some costume designers and choreographers experiment with the human appearance to disturb the humanist anthropocentrism,¹² but we will seldom find this approach in children`s theatre.

If we move further into the intra-actions of places and spaces, we will be aware that we are unaware about the natural agents of our environment, trees, seeds, plants, animals, pebbles, rocks. How are they allowed to act, or not to act? Perhaps our natural environments are suppressed under a theatre building, or maybe some green stuff are popping up in the cracks or gaps in between? What does this mean?

It means to be aware of the material world that human actors interact with. And how this interaction can expand into intra-action, where the materialities and more-than human agents no longer are subordinated human actors, but become active agents together.

It means a questioning of the subject - object relation, and acknowledging the entanglement (not the opposition) of subject and object, where both are active agents, and influence each other in mutual ways.

A simple example: The chair you are sitting in right now is acting on how you can sit on it. The chair is an active part of the sitting. It will not move by itself, but it moves you into its position. It takes part in you. The chair is an active agent, and in fact some actors know how to play with it.

Entanglements

The term *intra-action* (Barad) points to the impossibility of an absolute separation of subject and object - or the classically understood objectivity. In quantum physics it is evident that we as humans are entangled with the world, not separated. *Interaction* in Barads understanding is something that happens between pre-established bodies who participate in action with each other in a divided subject-object relation, while *intra-action* points to the entanglement of the opposites.

¹¹ Physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad, biologist and history of consciousness philosopher Donna Haraway and feminist philosopher Rosa Braidotti are prominent representatives for new materialist philosophical thinkers.

¹² As examples Ingri Fiksdal, Carte Blanche, Homan Sharifi have been working with choreographic ideas of the non-human, or non-individual dancers in a Norwegian context.

A very well known physical experiment with light discovered that light can be both particles and waves, depending on the observer.¹³ Barad explains how the observer and the observed comes together in quantum entanglements: How intra-action entangle the subject-object relation.¹⁴

It is evident, but we will still need simplifications and categories like this:

Interaction	Intra-action
Between two divided / opposite parts	Inside, together with, as part of, entangled
Subject - Object	Dynamism of forces
Physics: A person using an instrument or technology for some purpose	Physics: The person becomes part of the instrument when using it

So what would equal this entanglement in the theatre?

My suggestion: Two theatre actors perform a dialogue with a prescribed text, they are not really listening to each other, they are not connected in play. This type of interaction could be a sort of bad acting, disconnected or mechanistic. It does of course not mean that all human interaction is bad acting, but the concept of interaction might be too narrow to describe real acting. Two actors performing a really interesting and lively dialogue might rather be intra-acting. They connect with each other and at the same time they have an open awareness towards the space, the floor, the light, the audience.

One alternative scene could be an actor improvising with a piece of material, for instance a textile, transforming it into different shapes and figurations. The material acts with the human actor and performs its own dance. Textile agency; what can the textile do?

¹³ Description and explanation of the *double-slit experiment* in quantum physics: Wikipedia 2022, Double-slit experiment.

¹⁴ Pinch 2011, Karen Barad, quantum mechanics, and the paradox of mutual exclusivity.



Verken Fugl eller Fisk preproduction, 2017. Photo: Andrea Haugerud Hovik.

To be aware of more-than-human agents involved in a theatre event might also strengthen our awareness of the entanglement with the world in a more profound way. It seems to me that the theatre itself is the perfect place to rehearse the intra-activity of active material agents, objects, puppets, included humans, to invent new worlds and worldings, and to challenge the antropocentrism of our culture. The theatre space can be the place for a new intra-active and ecological awareness.

Playing in between

In the end I would suggest that intra-activity in performing arts for children might be just another word for *play*. A word for how actors and children can play together with places, spaces, nature and materials, experiencing how the material agents responds and play back. How the play is playing with the players, and how non-human agents provides a rich theatrical world for creative processes.

The Animalium project is about intra-action as play. The odd curious creatures play on the blurry borders between human and animal, between bodies, patterns and puppets. The playing breaks down stiff categories of what it means to be human, animal, alone, together or in between. Animalium intra-acts with nature, sounds, buildings, pebbles, movements, sculptures, twigs, art exhibitions and kindergarten playgrounds alike. They play in between the well known, out-worn movements and actions of our everyday life. They inspire children to learn the most useful and exquisite tool of discovering life itself: To play.

My hope is that by widening the concept of interaction into more playful and complex intra-actions we will be able to make theatre for/with/by children in closer entanglements with nature and with a better understanding of being human in a more-than-human theatre world.



Animalium film, 2019. Photo: Lise Hovik.

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