

With Not For, the Future of Children and Theatre

Darren O'Donnell

The future of theatre for young people is a theatre created in direct collaboration with young people, as they are young welcomed into our organizations to guide, inspire, and lead, making us all better and stronger. The performance world is placing higher and higher value on civic engagement to produce projects that trigger actual, real experiences between people as a function of the aesthetic. And that aesthetic experience can be surprising, even subversive. Working with children does not necessarily produce visions of sugarplum fairies, adorably awkward performances, or earnest skits about the issues of the day. Collaborating with children can also produce edgy – and often funny – boundary-pushing, politically charged work.

The quality of this work is due, in part, to the atypical but strong artistic skills of the children. These skills lie in the realm of spontaneous expression, play, and their ability to pretend, to invent complicated worlds, and to ask challenging and often unanswerable questions. These are all skills that artists need, but only the best manage to acquire. Kelly O'Brien's beautiful film *How Does Life Live*^[1] is a great example. Created in collaboration with her daughters, Emma and Willow, the film is simply a series of questions that the two children have posed to O'Brien over the years: How does life live? Why don't worms have faces? Why don't boys let their hair grow? Making quality, complex work with child collaborators is a function of simply refraining from making work about sugarplum fairies and, instead, engaging with complicated, challenging ideas. In short, not underestimating the intelligence of the kids.

But beyond a deft incorporation of the participation of children as co-creators, collaborating with kids can deploy their presence in even more subversive ways altering the way we are together. Children are naturally well-suited to these powerful collaborations because of their position within the social structure: they are weak. But that weakness, when deployed artistically as strength, can have reality-bending effects. Even just their presence poses challenges to the very idea of equity, since they are always at risk of being deprived of legal

standing. Because of this lack of official standing, where they might otherwise possess something with which to leverage power children force adults into a fascinating corner where adults are denied all but two options. An adult can negotiate with the children in a non-hierarchical way, listen to the kids' concerns, and work together in a way that is agreeable to all. Or, conversely, adults can resort to commanding the children usually framed in terms of two motivations: expediency and for-their-own-good. Expediency and for-their-own-good have too long governed the actions of adults in relation to children. The addiction to expediency and for-their-own-good, the little lies we tell kids to make happen the things we're convinced must happen, are defining traits of our society. Deploying them is something we do constantly, shamelessly, and often with a shared chuckle among the adults present. It is evidence of our love of speed and our love of our own interpretation over what is right and the respect for multiple viewpoints, our embrace of convenience and ease even as it is often clearly unhealthy or unwanted, our constant drive toward efficiency and the perceived supremacy of our view of the world over that of others: children. Because of the lack of avenues for negotiating with children – we don't allow them to work and make their own income, for example, which would provide things around which to structure a negotiation – those are the two options that children tend to present adults. Children force adults to be either anarchists or authoritarians. By collaborating directly with children within our organizations we must have the courage to accept their particular qualities, we must slow down and create artistic frames, methods and performances infused with an ethic grounded an understanding of all people as always childlike, always vulnerable. The inclusion of children has the potential, then, to alter the way we function with each other, ushering in a kinder world, and banishing the neurotic and punishing demands that tend to fuel our industry.

^[1] O'Brien's video can be viewed on the New York Times website: <https://nyti.ms/2ny6cDe>

Darren O'Donnell is an urban cultural planner and director. This is adapted from Haircuts by Children and Other Evidence for a New Social Contract, Toronto: Coach House Book, 2018.