

Shifra Schonmann, *Theatre as a Medium for Children and Young People: Images and Observations*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006, p. 223 + xiv.

This review focuses the discussion of young people's theatre on creative literacy. Ideas on theatre for young people (TYP) presented in the book are examined and revisited to provide a complimentary view to the conventions of literacy, which are mainly concerned with reading and writing and the pedagogical approaches toward language skills. This review adds another dimension of creative literacy with special reference to the aesthetics of TYP presented in this book under review. The discussion enriches the concept of creative literacy through the focus on TYP.

A fact remains that the actors and young audience in TYP must attain a certain level of literacy to unpack theatre performance. Basic grammatical relations and semantics, along with logic, are part of the linguistic tools necessary to understand, if not enjoy, TYP. It may be conjectured that all forms of theatre, therefore, require a certain level of literacy that encompasses linguistic, cultural and social competence, and modes of multiple intelligences (cf. Gardner 1999, Sew 2006). Cultural competence, which is part of literacy, becomes a basic foundation in the appreciation of theatrical performance for children; and children fail to comprehend abstract symbolism without proper adult intervention due to limited language and socio-cultural literacy (see also basic theatrical conventions, p 89).

We are told that TYP has a history of slightly more than a hundred years (p. 3, 35). That we have difficulty arriving at a definition befitting TYP suggests that the academic and epistemological development of TYP has not been flourishing compared to theatre for adults. The root cause of stagnation in the advancement of TYP in the past three decades, according to the author of this book, is the lack of questioning the idea that children's theatre was basically the same as adult theatre (p. 17).

The author offers valuable discussion on the missing information pertaining to the concept of TYP. TYP, a formal artistic performing activity involving professional adult actors, is meant for audiences of between four and sixteen years (p. 9-10, 32). This definition includes performance for audiences who are diverse in terms of capacity for imagination and emotional needs. But this definition excludes performances that are initiated, planned and presented by teenagers as TYP. Scenes such as those performed by secondary school students on the eve of Teacher's Day in which young actors acted out classroom routines that showed caricatures of their teachers are not regarded as TYP. Young audience, i.e., students between 13 and 16, acknowledged these theatrical forms with joy. Since the author is aware that TYP may include performance by children acting for children (p. 32), the discussion in this book focuses on a subtype of TYP.

The author evokes *mimesis* from *Poetics* by Aristotle to the discussion of TYP. It is made explicit in the book that *mimesis* is not about imitation but closer to re-creation. This could not be truer than the case of showing caricatures of their teachers by the students as mentioned above. More importantly, the author maintains the essence of theatre, involving the actor-audience encounter that adds meaning to life in the core of TYP (p. 12).

The meaning between audience and actors was very different for young audiences, who tend to associate theatre experience with unique daily experience while the actors tend to re-create an existing idea based on a theme or concept. The experience may be semantic, i.e., a familiar realisation or pragmatic i.e. a motivation to act or charge. This experience may be new, refreshed, metaphorical or parallel. A parallel experience is an emphatic bodily complex between audience and actors that reflects an imaginative response of the whole physical person (Shepherd 2006: 8-9). This parallel experience may be partially related to the concept of *identification* in TYP. Children can *identify* with a particular character with a perceived relationship to self (p. 84).

The author raises the question of whether TYP should adapt the rhetoric of adults to convey meaning or develop rhetoric of its own, especially when TYP is no longer taking the didactic approach (p. 19). The need to steer clear from didacticism in TYP is verbalised by the author by making explicit that theatre should not be an instrument of teaching and learning (p. 42). This begs the question of the existence of a children's voice, entirely free from the prototypical references that exist in the adult world. In exploring a theme for "Pastoral Care," for example, can TYP address the issues of teenage relationship without borrowing the rubrics of evaluation in the adult rhetoric?

This book includes the *adultified* child complex based on the work of Kincheloe (1998) and the disappearing of childhood innocence pointed out in Postman (1994) (p. 45). Children's issues may be uniquely relevant to a particular age group but the references are basically derived from the adult world. While the notion of affection might be simple (yet techno-complicated) in the young people's world, the issues surrounding the topic are similar to those of the adult. Safe sex in a relationship, for example, is a concern for both the young and adults (see Grady 1996:68, for a dramatic recount of teenager sex with a feminist slant).

The author reports that children applaud with enthusiasm in a performance more than their parents and teachers, which suggests a difference in overt reaction when watching the same performance (p. 57). Applause is regarded as the conventional overt participation from the audience of theatre performance, and reference to Kershaw's notion of *ecologies of performance* is included in the discussion (p. 58). Applause, hence, becomes relevant to theatre performance, although applause alone does not provide the complete picture. In fact, none of the six children in the case studies cited in this book applaud when they watch TYP for the first time (p. 76).

One of the most important literary effects of TYP is its ability to elicit oral response from the young audience. Oral response from watching TYP is observed in this book when

Nellie, one of the six children with a problematic family background, demonstrates cognitive and emotional involvement from her play-watching experience. Nellie intensely speaks to the adult beside her more than sixty questions throughout the TYP performance (p. 76):

‘In the scene where the female dog, Moff’s sister, was walking along the catwalk for the fashion competition, there were cameras clicking in the background. It was amazing to watch Nellie who was moving in her chair restlessly and looking around to find cameras: “Where are they?”...”Do you think the play is over?”...”Wow! It is beautiful, how do they do it?”...’

Active questioning is the opposite of apathy or boredom and a reflection of high curiosity of the young audience. Nellie’s seeking clarification, is a possibility for Nellie achieving catharsis from theatre performance (p. 76). Catharsis is defined by the author as a state of emotional detoxification that results in a feeling of relief (p. 71). To be actively engaged in verbal enquiry is not necessary a reflexive attribute of catharsis. A sense of relief should be reflected with remarks that are marked with words or discourse markers that indicate a sense of closure, pleasure or agreement, such as *“Finally, Fortunately, Thank God that..., At last..., Phew!, Halleluiah...”* Crying and laughing are better indications of catharsis among young audience watching TYP (p. 81).

TYP is an important medium to encourage creative literacy. TYP taps on the cultural and multiple intelligences of young people and encourages the holistic appreciation of creative literacy. TYP can be an engaging focus for young people as a source of identification, discussion, enquiry, play, make belief and catharsis. The importance of TYP as compared to other medium of instruction is the ideational collaboration between the actors and audience to identify a common meaning bounded in time through physical and verbal interchanges.

This means the teacher caricatures from my students are forms of creative literacy that combine words, gestures, and cultural context performed within the relevant time frame to celebrate a socio-cultural occasion i.e. Teacher's Day. The TYP performance reflects socio-cultural intelligence among a group of students who chose to show reverence to their teachers on stage and made the event meaningful through a holistic process of creative literacy.

In other occasions the students of my school improvised the stories of literacy texts such as *Mulan*, *Helen Keller* and *The Joy Luck Club* to showcase their understanding and ability to create the significant moments for the *Lit on Stage* learning programme. The students were evaluated on their adaptation and dramatisation of the texts. Such examples of TYP were testimonies of creative literacy that culminated in the learning experience which have implications on the parameters of evaluation for creative literacy.

This book makes a contribution to TYP of the adult-acting-for-children variety. Apart from the literature on TYP, the author examines relevant studies of children related literature and culture and relates them in the analysis of TYP. The issues raised are pertinent to the epistemology of TYP. The book opens more room for discussion and research in the area of TYP as a medium of aesthetic expression and creative literacy. This book makes a good companion for parents, writers for children, and researchers and teachers who want to understand TYP as non-didactic medium of creative literacy.

A shorter version of this review will appear in *Research in Drama Education*.

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