

## **EDN Atelier: EDN Atelier: Dance for young audiences**

### **Report written by Annette van Zwoll**

#### **‘Children are just like people. They differ from each other’**

This comment from one of the participants of this Atelier is greeted with assent. But although this is agreed upon, the production of work for young audiences, the structures the works are embedded in and the dialogue and communication with young audiences are different than the ones for adult audiences. To develop a sustainable structure for the production of contemporary dance for young audiences in Germany, fabrik Potsdam, Fokus Tanz Munich and K3 in Hamburg have entered a long-term cooperation called explore dance – Network dance for young audiences, in which six choreographers per year are invited to create a new piece. This weekend, the first edition of the Explore Dance Festival takes place and this offers a good momentum to dive into some topics and questions related to the production of work for young audiences. I take out two of the topics that seems to be most vivid during the Atelier.

#### **To label or not to label?**

Age labeling seems almost naturally connected to the production and presentation of works for young audiences. But how obvious is it actually?

According to the statement above, the one 8-year old is not the other 8-year old. Their tastes differ, they are on different paths in their developments, they have different ways of taking in information, so why assume that a performance for 8+ actually relates to all kids of 8 years? Although generally speaking, of course things can be said about the development of a child, the participants of this Atelier seem to agree that labeling feels more limiting (for kids as well as artists) than enriching. A practical result of the labeling is that artists are faced with quiet homogeneous audience groups in terms of age, and that children experience the theatre as a place for homogeneous audiences. This impacts the dynamics of the theatre experience, and limits the potential of the work for the artists as well as for the audiences. Àngels Margarit, director of the production house (not solely for young audiences!) Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona, adds that this age labeling makes it harder for families to visit a performance together, when they are having children in different age groups.

In Mercat de les Flors they started the project Unique Size. This project states that performances are there to be enjoyed for different ages. Mercat does an age proposal, but everyone is welcome. This also creates a more equal responsibility between the theatre and the parents: the parents are co-responsible for deciding where to take their children. The context Mercat de les Flors offers is impressive. An hour before each show audiences can prepare themselves for the performance through a playful proposal from Mercat. This can be a workshop, an installation, a game, etc. For teachers, they’ve developed the ‘pedagogical suitcase’ filled with pedagogical methodologies to relate the art work to children. Also they’ve developed several festivals with a broad age range (e.g. 0-5) within their program. After ten years, this strategy proves to be fruitful.

The example of Mercat (and others presented at this Atelier) shows that To label or not to label? is not just a cosmetic question; it's essentially a question on how the approach young audiences, how to conceptualize art for young audiences, how to embed it in the organisation and how to develop long-term strategies to invite (potential) audiences. But sometimes reality makes this hard to do, as arts institutions are tangled within expectations and structures from schools on the one side and subsidy partners on the other side. For example, the project Explore Dance, wouldn't have existed without the labeling.

## **Taboos**

Is there something that cannot be talked about? Are there any taboos on stage? In life children cannot be prevented from experiences like pain or loss. Death, sickness, abuse, divorce are topics that they experience directly or indirectly, and they also encounter sexuality and taking pleasure from ones bodies. Added to their individual lives, the imagery surrounding them – on the streets, on TV, on the internet – reveals many topics that parents might consider taboo when presented in the theatre. As often when talking about this topic, it seems that parents/teachers /caretakers are much quicker in considering something taboo than children are. Usually, the children don't seem to be offended nor shocked.

And if a child becomes scarred, sad, touched, excited, how bad is that? Is the theatre not pre-eminently a safe place to explore the pallet of emotions and situations life can offer? And are we actually in the position of defining taboos? Showing a happy family on stage can also be very provocative for some audience members, someone mentions. Input of teachers, parents, caretakers and young audiences would have provided additional value in this discussion, to hear their perspectives.

Mijke Harmsen, dramaturge of Young Tanzhaus from Tanzhaus NRW in Düsseldorf, explicitly provides a place in the theatre for performances that deal with so called 'taboo subjects' like nudity, sexuality, gender, death, identity and more. One example is the performance PELLE of Alfredo Zinola that invites children and their parents to discover the body, and topics of intimacy, proximity, care and respect, through touch. A potential fear from the parents was calculated, but didn't appear. Harmsen gives several reasons for this. She considers it her responsibility to provide a frame for artists to take risks and a frame for audiences to react to that. Over the last few years, trust has been build between the audiences, the programmers and the artists based on these frameworks, therefore existing audiences trust the proposal Young Tanzhaus offers. Secondly, Young Tanzhaus facilitates resonation spaces. During the performance every response is valid; screaming, moving, hiding and no 'ssssh-ing' is allowed. After the performance there is space for dialogue and often a possibility for a somatic response is offered. Also, during the process test audiences are invited to be part of the process. Nevertheless, there has been thorough thinking on which words to use in the publicity text, in order not to provoke parents beforehand. A careful balancing act was implemented.

## **Dance in society**

Much more was discussed in the three days of this Atelier. For example the use of social media for communicating with young audiences, the role of the artists in communicating with audiences / teachers, strategies for inviting audiences in the production, the potential of VR for reaching out to children who cannot come to the theatre, the limitation / freedom of working for/with children.

*Who has a seat at the table discussing those topics?*

Like the two themes described above these topics relate to bigger questions like the shared responsibility between institutions, artists and audiences, but also to more societal questions on who decides what for whom, how do we consider children and youngsters to be and is that 'our' (the adults) role? How do we as a society value art in general, but also in the relation toward children and youngsters and how do they value that? Who has a seat at the table discussing those topics? And how does that impact the (financial) structure and hierarchy we are working in and that we need to navigate through? Big topics, that are not tackled in one Atelier.

After and in between all the talking and discussing, we get a chance to see the performances produced in the framework of Explore Dance. In a German primary school a room is dedicated to theatre. The anarchistic performance ONONON of Clement Layes is presented to two classes. The teachers let the anarchy happen and the children jump, scream, show their curiosity and are deeply involved in the work. It's a great experience, for each and every child and adult in the room, with all their differences.