



ArtPlay Artist Learning Summary: Make it Strong

Date: Tuesday 25 September, 9.30am-5.30am

Venue: ArtPlay

Artist: Sue Giles

Presented by: [ArtPlay](#)¹ and [Melbourne Fringe](#)²

Background

When making work for children of any age, our goal is to make the central concept as robust as possible. How do we do that? Why does it matter? What does it mean? In this day-long workshop, Sue Giles and 23 artists from a range of creative and pedagogical backgrounds explored how to identify a driving idea and see how it works for an audience of children. They tested concepts from multiple angles, asking 'What makes it strong?', 'How quickly does it fall apart?' and 'How differently can an idea be explored?' They talked about form and audience relationship, played and tested things out on the floor with children as collaborators. These notes document the process and outcomes of the workshop.

Introduction

Sue began the session with an introduction to the philosophy behind Polyglot Theatre's work, which involves three different types of collaboration with children:

1. Work which is made from children's encounters with materials.
2. Work where experiential/participatory/interactive theatre techniques encounter a dramaturgical concept (e.g. the adult/child relationship)
3. Work that is devised in workshops with children as co-creators.

Warm ups

Next, Sue led us through a range of stimulating and often hilarious warm up games which we used to reflect on devising and collaborative art making.

Chair swaps

Chairs are scattered around the space, with one less chair than people in the group. All participants but one sits on a chair. They are instructed to swap chairs with another person by first making a silent, non-verbal contract with them. The person without a chair tries to steal one of the momentarily empty ones.

¹ <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/arts-and-culture/artplay/Pages/ArtPlay.aspx>

² <https://melbournefringe.com.au/>

The value of the game:

- Although it can get rough, it also instigates energy and captures engagement.
- The non-verbal aspect focuses attention on body language. It therefore works well with young children and Deaf children.
- It facilitates contact with strangers, forces people to trust each other and banishes self-consciousness.
- It creates a sense of commitment, even though nothing is really at stake.
- The low stakes also make people relaxed about 'losing' the game.
- Players become aware of both personal judgement and patterns of shared energy.
- The game is very accessible and, with minor variations, can be played with most people.
- As a director, Sue uses this game to look for the instinctive shapes that children make while in motion.

Collaborative drawing

A long roll of paper is unfurled along the length of the room. Each person chooses two 'cool' or 'warm' coloured oil pastels and arranges themselves sitting around the paper, roughly according to the colour palette.

Instructions are issued, including:

- Draw circles
- Swap hands
- Draw with your eyes shut
- Draw the biggest circle you can (people apologised to each other as they broke into each other's personal space)
- Draw fast circles, then draw slow circles (these instructions resulted in a strong change in atmosphere)
- Stand and move to another place
- Draw lines: fast lines, slow lines, long lines, short lines
- Stand and move to another place
- Add to whatever is in front of you (this resulted in deep focus from participants)
- Individually, draw a human figure that covers the entire piece of paper, keeping your pastel on the paper as much as you can (this caused much laughter as people wordlessly negotiated the task)

The sounds the pastels made on the floor were a significant element in this exercise. Listen to [the sounds of pastels](https://www.dropbox.com/s/qgfvw3eagzh3w17/Sounds%20of%20pastels.m4a?dl=0).³

³ <https://www.dropbox.com/s/qgfvw3eagzh3w17/Sounds%20of%20pastels.m4a?dl=0>



Group reflections:

- The task makes everyone conscious of each other's personal and visual space. There is a sense that boundaries are being negotiated, which is the essence of collaboration.
- The task engenders movement between conscious and unconscious states of mind.
- It is pleasurable to 'make your mark' but at the end, individual contributions are consumed by the whole.
- Responsibility to make decisions is taken away from participants. The resulting freedom is pleasurable, especially for people who are terrified of 'getting it wrong'.

- Other people's work constantly prompts new ideas.
- There are endless variations possible e.g. drawing white on black paper.
- This was a very quiet group, but the task is usually much louder with children as they vocalise their energy.
- The task can also be used to encourage relaxed conversation within a group.
- The final piece can be used to embed children's voices within another artwork (e.g. as a banner, landscape, scenography, masks, puppets). This validates art created by children as having a purpose and function.

Movement portraits

Pieces of A3 paper and felt tip pens are placed in a line at one end of the room. The group divides in to two. Group A sits behind the paper, facing the other group, who are scattered around the space. Group B begins to move around the space (this can be done with or without music). Each person in Group A silently chooses a person in Group B whose journey around the space they will 'map' on the paper. Each person in Group B silently picks two people from their own group and names them person 1 & person 2. They then move around the space, trying at all times to keep person 2 between themselves and person 1. Group A shows their 'movement-portraits' of Group B members.

Group reflections:

- The drawing is very free and enjoyable in this exercise because Group A participants cannot look at their paper. Exercise 2 prepares participants well for this exercise.
- Group B participants can decide how diligent they want to be about the rules, but after a while, a sort of rhythm or order seems to emerge anyway (like Chaos Theory)
- Participants often carry out this task in silence.
- By focusing on one person, Group A participants miss out on the choreography of the whole group movement, so it can be valuable to have a third group who observes both groups.
- Each walker and each drawer have a unique style that is reflected in the drawing.
- Group A participants tend to choose to follow Group B participants who are wearing bright colours.
- The results are particularly interesting when several Group A participants map the same person in Group B, and this could even be engineered by the facilitator.
- This can be done with a small or a very large group.
- The exercise is particularly good to do with families, with parents drawing their children (of any age, even babies) because parents are free to observe their children without the responsibility to direct, mediate or interpret the experience. They can therefore see their children's creative decisions.

Brainstorming

After a break, Sue divided the group up into groups of four, to discuss and write ideas on these four topics:

1. Why collaborate with children?
2. What is important when collaborating with children?
3. What ideas do we already have in process?
4. Why is it important to make a concept strong?

Questions and comments arising from these discussions:

- Which is more important - the process or the product?
- What is a product? Can this word have various meanings, according to the needs and aims of each work?

- How does working with children make theatre better? Does it? Is there any point collaborating with children if it doesn't make the work more interesting?
- We often strive for 'authenticity'? But what does this mean? The power relationships between adults and children can challenge this aspiration and conflict with the product.
- Who has authorship in collaborations between adults and children?
- What is the effect on the adult artist to collaborate with children?
- What is the sustainability/legacy of intergenerational artistic exchanges? What are the conversations that persist afterwards?
- Collaborations with children are an ongoing process of trying new questions, ideas and ways of working, and of incorporating these into our work.
- How do we value collaborative art with children and how is it valued by others? It is often not valued by people who are not artists, parents or teachers. How do we draw such people closer into this work? How can collaborative work with children be universal?
- Children are brought to art experiences by adults, so the work needs to address the relationship between adults and children. When adults encounter art through their children, they can become convinced of its worth.

Strong work:

- has a central driving question or concept,
- has multiple layers,
- is not impervious to change: 'strong' can also mean 'flexible' and 'open',
- has multiple entry points (which may mean that it draws on multiple artforms) and
- has the potential to challenge and transform our collective practice.

Common words used in this discussion:

- Collaboration
- Authenticity
- Child voice
- Intention
- Frameworks
- Engagement
- Flexibility
- Experiment
- Interactive
- Power
- Conversation
- Refreshing
- Time
- Evolution
- Participation
- Status
- Reflection
- Validation
- Fluidity
- Brave

Post-break warm up

After a break for lunch, the workshop resumed with another drawing exercise: each participant drew a cat with their eyes closed. The responses included:

- 'Having your eyes closed means that you can't take the drawing too seriously.'
- 'I'm ridiculously proud of what I drew.'
- 'I'm surprised at the result.'
- 'You get a product, but you don't know what it will be.'

Sue explained that the value of this exercise is that it levels the playing field between adults and children because everyone is bound to make a mistake. The drawings are often charming and full of character because uncertainty creates interest. The exercise is fun, which generates energy.

Workshop challenge

Sue challenged the group to find an object in the ArtPlay space to act as a stimulus for a new art work. She then asked provocative questions about our relationship to and thoughts about the objects, noting that different questions suggest different creative possibilities:

- What do these objects make us think?
- What do the objects mean?
- What are their layers?
- What questions arise from these objects that you want to explore? (NB: If you know the answer to the question, then it's the wrong one!)
- A central question can also be to articulate why we know certain things to be true.

A word association game was initiated to unlock meaning in the objects and provoke lateral thinking. The group was split up into six smaller groups and each group then selected an object and spent time unpacking its meaning, creating a central question that the children could respond to. Two possible ways of working with children were suggested:

1. Children as responders: the adults present to the children a question or germ of an idea about how to work with the objects
2. Children as collaborators: the objects provide an open stimulus for the children to initiate new ideas.

Participants chose option 1. Sue then shared some general rules for working with children:

- Observe.
- Look for the interest factor (i.e. what interests the children).
- Validate their ideas.
- Only laugh when they mean to be funny.

Collaborative art making with thirty children



Thirty children aged 5 -12 years came to ArtPlay. With everyone sitting in a circle, Sue welcomed the group, explaining that they were part of an experiment looking at ways to make art with and for children. She told them they were co-creators, helping the artists to make the work more interesting. Sue then led a warm up: without speaking, everyone gets into a line from the shortest person to the tallest person. The line then walks around the space. Six groups of three or four artists and up to four children of various ages worked together for thirty minutes to create artworks with the objects. These were then presented to the whole group, which included the adults who had accompanied the children to ArtPlay.

Group 1

Object: An umbrella

Central question: 'What can we do with an umbrella when it rains?' During the workshop this evolved to 'What does an umbrella want?'

Artwork: A game in which the umbrella was turned upside down and spun like a roulette wheel to reveal different fun challenges.



Group 2

Object: Ladder

Central question: What happens when you walk under the ladder?

Artwork: Participants were invited to come on a crocodile tour (to the ladder which was transformed by being wrapped in paper and tape) but first had to pass a 'crocodile', played by a young child who said, 'To pass you must answer the most difficult sum in the world.'



Group 3

Object: Three wooden cubes with holes in them.

Central question: What makes you want to explore?

Artwork: Standing on the boxes, the children performed silent clues which participants had to decipher, eventually discovering what was hidden in the boxes.



Group 4

Object: High visibility vest.

Central question: Order versus chaos.

Artwork: A game exploring power over others in which the wearer of the vest could issue challenges to everyone else. The children explained that, 'When you have it on people have to do what you say, but also they don't have to.'



Group 5

Object: Tissues.

Central question: Transformational change.

Artwork: The tissues were dropped from the mezzanine and caught by one child collaborator. They were then set alight to the solemn announcement of 'We have now burnt the artwork.'



Group 6

Object: Cardboard tubes and torches.

Central question: Curiosity.

Artwork: The child collaborators explained that they had been performing the artwork throughout the presentation, by 'spying' on the participants through their tubes and shining their torches around the space. One child reported, 'I saw someone scream as loud as they can.'



Reflections

Reflections were conducted first with the families and then just with the artists.

Working collaboratively with children

- The questions about collaborative practice that arose from the workshop were more important than the artworks themselves.
- Transgenerational experiences like this one challenge the whole concept of 'children's theatre'.
- What happens when you don't 'like' the kids' ideas? How do you move past the offer? Your responsibility as artists is to frame their ideas, not to judge them as good or bad.
- When working collaboratively with children, artists need to know what it is that they want to make happen but do not need to know what artwork they want to make.
- Finding a strong question is important to engage participants quickly and to offer multiple interesting possibilities for play.
- Some of the artists felt underprepared which, they felt, didn't give the children enough to work with. Others had many ideas but no clear idea of how to present them. Both these problems point to the importance of having a strong central question.
- It is challenging to find the balance between offering the children an enticing 'way in' to the work and over determining the result. Sue suggested that interesting single words can be the key to this e.g. 'secrets.'

- What happens when children get stuck on one idea, or the adult artists don't like the children's idea? Sue suggested that not every idea has to be accepted in the form in which it is originally offered, and that the artists' role is to ask if an element of the idea can be used, and to choose between different ideas.
- The peer relationships in a group can strongly influence the outcome. In this experience, neither the children nor the adults knew each other but our accepted power relationships are always at play in these situations. If more of the participants had known each other, or if the workshops had taken place over a week, the outcome would have been different.
- The small number of children in each group allowed participants to improvise and problem-solve. Working with large numbers of children (e.g. in a classroom) would offer different challenges and opportunities.
- It's important to cater to different ages and ideas. These explorations were divided quite strongly along age lines, with younger children being drawn to dramatic play, and the older children wanting to build with materials.
- There is risk and fear of the unknown for everyone.
- Adults can behave as gatekeepers. They need to be reassured about the value and safety of the process.
- Marketing an 'experiment' can be tricky but the more strong work that is made, the better the environment will be for risk-taking and experimentation.

The value of inviting children into the process as they were in this workshop

- They bring new energy.
- With no fear and no preconceptions, children bring a blank slate and new ideas to the experiments.
- It is useful to see what engages and inspires children.
- Building new relationships is always a positive outcome for everyone.
- Their sometimes-haphazard approach forces us to see that being organised is not the only useful way to investigate concepts.
- The children's confidence can reassure the adults, freeing them up to experiment.
- Working with children reminds us that we are human, makes us pay attention, and slows us down.

Working quickly

- Working quickly and fruitfully with strangers is empowering and fun. Short time frames prevent anyone from being precious about their ideas, which creates a sense a freedom.
- Making a lot of experiments very quickly gives artists the opportunity to identify how they work and what processes they enjoy.
- Warm ups should be chosen carefully because different warm ups may create different outcomes.

Concluding with a performance/presentation

- The presence of an audience changes the nature of the work e.g. Group 5 had to find a narrative flow to their work in a very short time after first establishing trust with the children and exploring their ideas. The children rose to the challenge as they wanted to do a good job in front of the audience. The elements of ritual that they chose offered them a strong structure.
- Faced with an audience each group instinctively sought a beginning, middle and an end, but all the presentations could have continued.
- The game structure was common. It is worth considering why this is.

Summative remarks

Ideas are focused through the lens of a strong central question or guiding principle, resulting in a new, strong work of art. The lens or guiding principle frames everything. For Sue Giles (Polyglot), it is participation, but it can be a broader question such as 'How do you find the truth in these materials?' It is possible to make enjoyable and competent work without a strong central question, but it will lack depth and resonance.

Useful links

[Young People and the Arts: An agenda for change](#)⁴ 2018 Platform Paper, by Sue Giles.

[Assitej](#)⁵ International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People

ITYARN: International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network. [ITYARN website](#)⁶ [ITYARN notices](#)⁷

[International Inclusive Arts Network](#)⁸

[Young Dance Network](#)⁹

[Small Size Network](#)¹⁰ European network for the diffusion of performing arts for early childhood.

[Theatre Network Australia](#)¹¹ Distributes news about Assitej and Australian theatre with and for young people.

[ArtPlay consulting with children resource](#)¹² Some thoughts from eight ArtPlay artists about the purpose, principles and practicalities of consulting with children when making performance-based art.

⁴ <http://www.currency.com.au/search.aspx?type=author&author=Sue+Giles+>

⁵ <http://www.assitej-international.org/en/>

⁶ <http://www.ityarn.org/>

⁷ <http://www.assitej-international.org/en/category/professional-networks/ityarn/>

⁸ <http://www.assitej-international.org/en/category/iian-en/>

⁹ <http://www.assitej-international.org/en/2016/08/the-young-dance-network/>

¹⁰ <http://www.smallsize.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.tna.org.au/>

¹² <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/consulting-with-children.pdf>