



Interview with Cat Sewell and Nancy Sposato

What is [The Ball Room](#)¹?

The Ball Room is a contemporary theatre performance for children and adults that was developed as part of the 2017 ArtPlay New Ideas Lab. It was interactive and participatory; indeed, the audience's sense of play became the very fabric of the performance. The audience embarked on a journey through highly theatrical environments that inspired their imagination. Performers physicalized a poetic narrative and that flowed into the audience, following the trajectory of OVER 2000 BALLS onto the stage! The work was crafted to a stimulating sound-score and accompanied by live musicians, an experience that had audiences bouncing to a beat and dreaming of ballrooms from yesteryear. The Ball Room was designed for children from two-to-eight years of age and we encouraged a one-to-one child-to-carer ratio.

What were the main aims of the original project?

- We wanted to create a space that was both safe and risky.
- We were very curious about play as a key characteristic of the human condition. We were also interested in how key lessons in childhood development, such as socialisation, emotional arousal and the processing of sensory information, continue to be fundamental in our adult years.
- We wanted to model to families that play is not solely for the sake of the child—it can also be deeply satisfying for adults.
- We used the ball to engage audience participation because it is an ancient symbol of play that is accessible across culture, gender and language. If you pass almost anyone a ball, they will understand that you are inviting them to play.

You have reconfigured The Ball Room into multiple new experiences for children and families. Why did you do this?

The original production of *The Ball Room* had an audience capacity of forty five. Large venues and festivals said they needed to be able to play to higher numbers to make their investment viable. Presenters and colleagues advised us that we didn't have to alter the work and to ensure our adjustments met our philosophy and artistic intentions, so we treaded carefully to make sure that new iterations of the work still felt authentic and gave the audience a sense of real theatrical play.

We always respond to each audience, space and setting, so we are comfortable with constant adjusting, experimenting and refining. It keeps our sense of play alive and makes sure we are working to the needs of each venue and child.

What form have these events taken? What has changed, what has remained?

When we unpacked the original work we realised we had actually developed six play installations and therefore had a menu of play experiences that we could pitch. The City of Casey requested a workshop for a

¹ www.theballroomplay.com

school holiday program and we did Ping Pong WoW. After that we noticed how aesthetically effective it was, and the logistical ease of compartmentalising the larger work. We started discussing this with presenters and the responses were very different.

Each of the different play installations is based on a different sense of play (and different balls/props), and comes with a certain energy. We can also mix and match these to fit certain scenarios. For example, in developing *The Way*, we chose the more meditative and reflective play spaces because it was being presented as a bit of an antidote to the busy chaos happening outside at Moomba, but we can also stage a high energy space next to a quieter space to create our own 'Yin/Yang' within an installation. It feels good to be able to be responsive to venues and situations, using elements that we have developed and tested in the original work.

How have participants responded to these new experiences? Are these responses different to the way they responded to the original work?

Providing time and space for children and families to be together, to play and explore is an important part of this work and participants have really loved the interactive installations. Some of these have been in a drop-in format where people can stay as long as they like, and some have been short twenty-to-thirty minute experiences. Participants often say they would like to have stayed longer in the time-limited formats so it is great to be able to offer structures where people can 'drop-in', stay for a long time and become really comfortable. We've had many people through—over the three days at ArtPlay for Moomba we had over 800 participants! We see adults and children interacting and playing together and that is a joy to watch and be part of.

Do these new versions offer children and families something new that the original version didn't?

The original show leads the audience on a long journey through many different spaces and states of play, and has many more 'framed' collective moments of participation. The new versions are simpler and more of an audience-led experience, although they are still highly crafted spaces with theatrical moments and experienced facilitators.

What did you learn from reworking *The Ball Room*?

We learnt that the numbers need to add up for presenters to take on a work so we needed some options that had a high audience capacity. We also learnt to grow, change and be flexible as a company. We learnt a lot about how to put marketing and promotional materials together, and that it is important to trust in your champions and to nurture relationships for the long-term.

With regard to the work, we have learnt that irrespective of audience numbers, families need to feel safe to be able to play. We have developed some integral facilitation moments to help audiences relax and to know how to be in the environments we create e.g. saying, "Follow your child's lead. Adults, this experience is also for you. You can join in or you can watch or both. Keep each other safe and look after the space" We also actively role model throughout the experiences.

Links:

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² www.facebook.com/TheBallRoomPlay

³ www.instagram.com/theballroomplay/

⁴ www.twitter.com/theballroomplay

⁵ www.soundcloud.com/user-874387952