



International Association of Theatre  
for Children and Young People



**THE REP**  
Birmingham Repertory Theatre

# Charting Antarctica

Another stepping-stone  
across the landscape of  
early years theatre

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## Conference Report

Let's Pretend Early Years Creative Forum  
Birmingham Repertory Theatre  
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 **Birmingham City Council**  
Family Learning Services

[www.birmingham-rep.co.uk](http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk)

*“If Theatre for Young People in general is an undervalued area, then theatre for the under 5’s is like Antarctica - uncharted, rarely visited, and with a singular lack of local resources. But those who have been there return with marvellous stories of its bold and elemental wonders.”*

Sian Ede, 1989





*"I have come away knowing not only am I  
going in the right direction, but also why"*

Let's Pretend Conference Participant, 2007



# CHARTING ANTARCTICA

In 1989 Sian Ede, then Drama Officer for the Arts Council addressed the Children's Theatre Association conference on Theatre for the Under Fives: *"If Theatre for Young People in general is an undervalued area, then theatre for the under 5's is like Antarctica - uncharted, rarely visited, and with a singular lack of local resources. But those who have been there return with marvellous stories of its bold and elemental wonders."*

That gathering proved to be a pivotal stepping-stone in the history of theatre for early years. Around 60 theatre practitioners workshopped, talked, played, debated, analysed and dreamed. Uniting them was an interest, an enquiry and most evidently a belief in the enormous value and potential in focusing our theatre-making practice specifically for young children we then termed as "the under 5's".

It would be wrong to suggest this was the genesis of early years theatre in the UK, but it spawned a new wave of creative energy and commitment to exploring and meeting the needs and interests of this very specific audience through writing, directing, producing, performing and programming.

Eighteen years later and another stepping stone; 120 theatre practitioners and early years educators gathered with families for *Let's Pretend*, a two day event at Birmingham Repertory Theatre to observe work, share good practice, exchange ideas and examine what the future may hold for early years theatre.

Few would have predicted back in 1989 the scale of development in early years provision. Children's Centres, Sure Start and massively increased nursery provision have significantly increased the number of children in pre school education. Births to Three Matters and the Foundation Stage Curriculum - merged into the Early Years Foundation Stage from September 2008 - have provided a framework for curriculum development.

*"As a nursery practitioner it is great to see play receiving such high status and being acknowledged for its importance in terms of children development and well being."*

## Early Years Theatre

There have been developments, too, amongst the theatre sector. Our definition of what constitutes early years theatre has extended to include babies. Back in 1989 theatre for this age in the UK would have been unthinkable. Far from being unusual, its now become a programming feature of venues up and down the country to present performances for the very young. A number of small-scale companies, including Oily Cart, and Theatre lolo have even developed a specialism in early years theatre.

Regional theatres such as Birmingham Repertory Theatre have demonstrated their commitment to lifelong learning by redefining relationships with young children and their families. Their REP's Children project has provided every baby born at Birmingham's City and Sandwell Hospitals in October 2004 with a free theatre experience every year for the first ten years of their lives. Meanwhile, some companies and venues are being less age-specific. There's a tendency to promote theatre for "family audiences", alongside a belief, shared by many, that a respectful and sensitively created piece of theatre can be enjoyed and experienced on many levels through the expressive diversity of theatrical form or "language".

There is a wider variety of productions to present, and an established expertise amongst theatre artists and companies dedicated to this area of work. Some exciting

*“I came out  
exploding  
with ideas”*



scripts have been written or commissioned; playful, experiential, multi-sensory productions have toured. Installations have transformed spaces and places; puppetry and object theatre have broken new ground and visual experimentation has embraced digital technology, shadow play and projection. This diversity of approach was clearly represented and valued at *Let's Pretend*; one delegate reflected that there was “a kaleidoscope of styles, processes and starting points. From cardboard boxes to sophisticated creations”.\* Theatre for early years seems to push the boundaries of creative possibility.

## Further Afield

Early years theatre in the UK has been influenced by the work of European companies. Individuals and companies from the UK have been accessing a broader variety of work, by travelling overseas or by engaging in it here at festivals, conferences or seasons. Notable amongst these is Take Off in the North East, which has provided regular opportunities to see French, Belgian and Italian work for the very young. *Imagine*, producing the annual *Bank of Scotland Children's International Theatre Festival*, has brought over some of the very best international work for young audiences and paid increasing attention to programming theatre for early years. Other festivals have played their part too, Arad Gogh's *Opening Doors* event in Aberystwyth, *CIAO!* in the South East and *Spark* in the Midlands. Most recently, Sticky Fingers Early Years Arts organisation, based in Newry, County Down, produced the first-ever international theatre festival for early years in Northern Ireland.

Theatres have been playing their part too; Polka, Unicorn and the Lyric Hammersmith in London, Lakeside Arts Centre in Nottingham, The Lighthouse in Poole and The Egg in Bath have all programmed individual plays or seasons with quality European work.

These festivals and showcases offer us the opportunity to see work, network, seek inspiration and extend partnerships. They have provided a wider benchmark, shared points of reference and cohesion for early years theatre practitioners in the UK.

What's striking about much of the best European work for the very young is the delicacy and high aesthetic quality of the work, the combination of abstraction with narrative and an approach that combines simplicity with sophistication. At its best, there's also a total sense of care and attention to detail in creating the most appropriate ambiance, welcome and departure, wrapped around the theatrical experience of the performance.

Beyond that, there's been the huge impact of the Reggio Approach, based in Reggio Emilia, the northern Italian town that has become renowned worldwide for its forward thinking and exemplary approach to early childhood education. We have also seen the development of networks such as Early Arts and new initiatives such as Small Size, along with the expansion of cross-discipline projects, training and exchange programmes and research and development opportunities.

*“I found the story making  
activity very useful – it  
made me think about not  
being judgemental about  
children's ideas.”*

## The Future

Throughout *Let's Pretend*, practitioners and educators reflected on the challenges and opportunities that early years theatre presents.

After a ten-year period of significant growth in funding for the Arts, some sources are now in a decline. The Arts Council England Grants for the Arts faces a 30% cut in March 2008. There are also uncertainties about the future of Creative Partnerships, and the Sure Start programmes, which have supported a wide range of arts activities, projects and theatre productions across the country. This does not bode well for the Arts.

Theatre for all ages faces increasing competition from other leisure offers. The increase in multi-media and on-line entertainment is encouraging more and more children to stay indoors, which could be seen as a negative factor contributing towards social isolation.

Early years theatre is concerned with producing work in an environment appropriate to the age-range. The need to create an intimate and often interactive experience often limits audience size, and is contrary to the commercial pressure to get "bums on seats".

There are also challenges for schools and nurseries as even when teachers, early years practitioners and child-minders have identified funding for ticket and transport costs, the increasing bureaucracy surrounding child protection and health and safety presents time-consuming challenges when taking children out on theatre visits.

## Let's Pretend

But there are opportunities too; for example, through the networks and partnerships which succeed in raising the profile and status of early years theatre. There is real potential to re-engage the play and theatre movements. In the 1950's and 1960's there was a greater understanding of the importance of play within the drama and theatre movement. Peter Slade, whose seminal work *Child Drama* (1954 University of London Press) considered that play marks the beginning of all dramatic activity, for the child distinguishes between "personal play" (e.g. movement and role playing) and "projected play" (which is more internally focused). Since then drama education has largely moved away from this creative play approach to a more cerebral one. Yet huge opportunities exist to re-engage the play and theatre movements.

A speaker at *Let's Pretend*, Pat Broadhead, Professor of Playful Learning at Leeds Metropolitan University considered the huge potential in open ended play materials - like cardboard boxes and pieces of fabric - in supporting children's playful and cooperative explorations of their lives, experiences and understandings of the world from both within and beyond school. She illustrated the importance of recognising how young children construct narratives in their play and how, for older children this becomes characterisation and story-telling. She argued for the provision of these opportunities in schools through resource provision and knowledgeable staff showing how these opportunities for cooperative engagement are also linked to intellectual development. The worlds of play, drama and learning are inter-connected.



*“A lot of  
inspirational  
thoughts and  
ideas to try.”*

\* Productions showcased at the event were Oily Cart's *Baby Balloon*, Indefinite Articles' *Claytime*, Quicksilver's *Upstairs In The Sky* and Birmingham Repertory Theatre's *Princess And Ginger*.

This particular opportunity was explored in some depth at *Let's Pretend*. The primary aim of the event, and the aspect that many delegates found the most successful part of the two days was that it brought early years practitioners, educators and families together. In particular, the relationship between the educators of young children and the practitioners developing creative work for and with them. These two groups shared and learned from one another about the work they do and the creative possibilities of young children. It seems that for this age group, more than any other, the relationship between artists and educators can be key in developing inspirational and creative theatre. It was also felt that early years theatre work can and should take place in theatres and in early years settings. The event highlighted an apparent gap in the current events and networking opportunities available to bring these two groups together in a regular and targeted way.

*Let's Pretend* reinforced the need to recognise and value different approaches to production values. The event showcased a number of different theatre pieces for the very young from Oily Cart's high tech production *Baby Balloon* to Quicksilver's *Upstairs In The Sky* self contained within a cardboard box, both of which were very well received by delegates and children alike.

Likewise, the importance of process in creating work for young children was acknowledged; Birmingham Repertory Theatre's production of *Princess And Ginger* was the culmination of the 'Playmakers' project. Peter Wynne Willson ran sessions in early years settings over two terms in which 2 – 4 year old children and their parents became 'playmakers' and 'ideas catchers',

collaboratively creating the story for a play. Although some delegates felt a tension between process and the final product, many along with parents, teachers and most importantly children found the product to be as exciting and successful as the process.

Delegates felt that the event reinforced what they were doing and that networking with other practitioners and educators made them feel "solidarity" and a shared aspiration, "a fantastic opportunity to share practice and network with like-minded people that inspire confidence and determination to keep going!" Fantastic work is happening in pockets across the country, but there was a sense that practitioners and educators needed encouragement and reinforcement as well as the opportunity to collect ideas for future development. There was a collective view that such an event shouldn't be a "one off" and that there should be further and possibly regular opportunities for early years practitioners and educators to share, network and develop practice – future early years stepping stones.

*67 out of 108 delegates completed an evaluation sheet:*

- 28 (41%) were Early Years Educators
- 33 (50%) theatre practitioners and
- 6 (9%) worked in other sectors.



*"Theatre for children should be playful, because playing with the world is the only way of understanding it"*



*Photographs by:*

- 1, 9 & 10 - Peter Wynne-Willson
- 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 & 8 - Adrian Burrows
- 6 - Indefinite Articles



## Family Playmakers - Birmingham Repertory Theatre

The REP's Early Years Worker Peter Wynne-Willson describes the innovative and highly successful Playmakers project; a collaboration between The REP and Birmingham Family Learning Service. Playmakers is a groundbreaking approach to developing theatre for Early Years, through participatory work with children. The result, *Princess And Ginger*, formed The REP's contribution to the Let's Pretend event. Peter created the concept of the project, developed the story with families and wrote the play from their ideas.

"The Playmakers project worked by taking the model of a standard Family Learning Course, (*Play and Language*) and adapting it. A *Play and Language* course comprises six two-hour sessions in a nursery, Children's Centre or school, for nine children each with a parent or carer. The courses are targeted at adults with few or no qualifications (a criterion which tends to mean a bias towards areas of social deprivation), and the 'curriculum' is usually literacy and basic skills. Since 2006, I have been supporting these courses with one-off sessions on story-making and creative play.

With Playmakers we created four specialist 'courses', where all sessions were focused on creating a story and actively involving the groups in making a professional production from the story they had written. Although the principle aim of all the groups was the creation of a piece of theatre, the work was actually funded as a life-long learning project, and success measured in terms of its educational value for the adults involved.

Within the sessions, the activities were a mixture of play, discussion, exploration, role-play, art-work and mark-making. The 'plot' to the project was that my storybook was empty, and I needed the children's help to find a new story. Their carers became the 'ideas-catchers', charged with capturing any ideas that came from their children. A website was set up, so that parents could feed ideas back to me between the weekly sessions. This website [www.familyplaymakers.co.uk](http://www.familyplaymakers.co.uk), is still there as a detailed record of the process.

Within this plot there were several other mechanisms that were repeatedly used. I was always 'forgetting' the story, and relied on the children to remember what had happened before (a very useful and simple way of repeating, consolidating and even editing the stories, through a kind of natural selection of the ideas that had most 'stuck'). As the story emerged, the focus became on details within it, and children were involved in playing out the roles of the different characters, hot-seating, and creating puppets.

The settings involved were from areas of social need across Birmingham - Castle Vale, Washwood Heath, Primrose Hill

Estate and Lozells. The children were mostly aged 3-4. The parents were mostly women, although a total of three fathers were involved at some sessions. There was also a group from the REP's Children, aged 2, that tended to be a more physical exploration of some of the themes emerging from the other settings, with less verbalising, although it shared fully all the processes of ideas-catching and playmaking with the other groups, and several key ideas in the final story came from these younger children.

By the end of the first half of the project, the groups had created a single story from which I created a draft script; my brief being to stay as faithful as possible to the desires and ideas of the young playmakers, in putting their story on stage. A brief later extended to all aspects of the production.

The second half of the project involved the children working with the actors and the designer and attending rehearsals. Finally the groups came together to watch The REP's production of their story, *Princess And Ginger* in The REP's studio. The play then toured Early Years settings.

A full evaluation of the project is underway, but it is already clear that it was notably successful on a number of levels. Parents spoke very highly of their own development through the project and that of their children, and the staff in the settings were convinced of its substantial value to individual children's confidence and expression as well as in the strong relationships developed between parents and settings. Staff have also indicated ways in which it has had a major impact on their own practice and the future practice of their settings.

*Princess And Ginger* was received extremely well; with exceptional levels of praise from the settings it visited. One audience member described it as being "better than a biscuit"! I had actively resisted any temptation to make the story 'neater', or draw into it any constructed moral or specific learning areas. The result was a play with a structure, style and logic that reflected the creative play of the children from which it grew. As a model for a way of working it was an exciting project from which much is likely to grow."

For more information contact Steve Ball on 0121 245 2000.