

# Child development influence on childrens theatre education essay



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There were many theories developed throughout the twentieth century that concern child development, welfare and education. Many came about due to health issues and social observations by doctors and psychologists, however it can be argued that some theories have developed a further recognition in later years to influence children's entertainment, such as Theatre. It appears that certain theories can be applied to different aspects of production and content to enhance the theatrical experience for the better.

Probably the best way to look at how children's theatre evolved is to start at the beginning. One of the first performance styles recognised as children's entertainment was Punch and Judy puppet shows. These puppet shows started in the seventeenth century, playing out the characters of Mr Punch and his wife Judy in different scenarios that children found amusing, usually involving some sort of trouble or mischief being added to the persuasion.

This is a good insight into B. F Skinner's theory of positive and negative reinforcement. Although his theory did not emerge until the sixties, we can understand a child's recognition of a good response following a good action and bad response following bad conduct. In this case, Mr Punch using a truncheon to hit any other character such as Judy or the Crocodile stealing his sausages is seen as a bad action which triggers a child's negative response to "Boooo!" at said character. This theory can also apply to Pantomime, another early form of children's theatre, however there is a greater identification of social development that coincides with. Audience participation is a key aspect of this form of entertainment. According to psychologists, from the early stages children are naturally sociable, however they form close attachments to adult figures such as their parents. They

become more open socially once they gain an understanding of how they are supposed to react to certain environments. Take the Theatre, for example and we can see that children establish relationships with characters, particularly those who communicate directly with them, such as the role of “Buttons” in Cinderella. He acts as a narrator for the piece and is amusing for children to watch, so they regard him as a safe role, after that they regard the “ Evil Stepmother” as cruel and feel compelled to shout out and express their negativity towards their bad conduct against a good character. As the audience collaborate during these moments children are made to feel more confident as they are not alone and build upon their personal development.

However, arguably one of the most important developments in children’s theatre was the introduction of TIE- Theatre In Education. This scheme was started in 1965 at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, England. It was part of a trial program to not only introduce the importance of teaching the arts in schools, but to also come up with an educational way of communicating moral lessons and issues of social change, for instance. Such performances are developed by companies that specialise in touring schools with the intention of homing in on particular subjects on the curriculum at the time within their play. Tony Jackson, a Professor of Educational Theatre remarks:

“ The TIE programme is not a performance in schools of a self-contained play, a ‘ one off’ event that is here today and gone tomorrow, but a co-ordinated and carefully structured pattern of activities, usually devised and researched by the company.”

This statement appears just in explaining how important the planning is that goes into such educational productions. Theorists developed the theory of Social Cognition in the 1940's however, it was not until 1962 that Social Cognition evolved from the Social Learning spectrum and was conceived as a theory by Albert Bandura. He viewed that children's behaviour was learnt from observing others, and they would develop a capacity to think about their actions from doing so. Consequently, we can understand using child development thesis, why TIE in schools seems to have proved successful in influencing the pupil's views and opinions. The ways in which a TIE theatre company develops play topic structure and performance style is key to engaging with their audiences. An example of this is Quicksilver Theatre Company's production of "Upstairs in the Sky". Just one of several plays written and directed by the artistic directors of the company for the purpose of educating children about specific issues they are faced with in life. This play encourages imaginative, interactive storytelling as well as dealing with the issues of friendship and loss. The theory of Social Cognition is relevant here is in drawing out an emotive response, in thinking about the actors' relationship as two friends, from observing them carrying out actions such as holding hands and smiling at each other. From this a child then concludes that this practice is correct, demonstrating the subtle control techniques a TIE performance can have over young mind, to benefit child behavioural patterns.

Although, one of the more therapeutic than scientific theories that was equally important to Children's Theatre in the twentieth century was the introduction of Music Therapy. For many years music has seemed to be one

of the more recognisable characteristics of a true children's production. Catchy rhythms and rhyming lyrics appear fundamental in creating a melody worthy of a child's attention. Still, these are elements that we regard now, that have advanced over the years from detailed research into how musical methods spark different or desired reactions from a child. Nonetheless, it is important to know that Music Therapy was intended for the benefit of medical and health treatments. It was only years later when we could realise that it also served an educational purpose, as well. One aspect of music within children's plays is the repeated and rhyming nature of the lyrics in songs that not only makes it easier to join in singing, but also allows the memory to elaborate. It is frequently stated by child psychologists and therapists that soothing slow music makes children fall in to a state of sleep quicker than naturally falling asleep or listening to any other kind of music. This is one of the main reasons that mothers traditionally choose to sing lullabies to their infants. Furthermore, when a child does sleep psychologists believe that they are at their optimum time to develop their memory. Therefore if a child were to listen to music and repeat back the words of the song, it appears to have the same effect of expanding the mind of a young child. As this happens, it then improves children's ability to learn and consequently retain information for their own avail. Famous composer Don Campbell says that music can:

“ Improve memory and learning, boost productivity, soothe jangled nerves, strengthen endurance, unlock creative impulses, sound away pain, and heal the body from a host of ailments.”

He made this assertion as part of his composition research into what many call the “Mozart Effect” which is a concept by Dr Alfred Tomatis which he developed in the early nineties. This is the theory that classical music calms and relaxes the mind to temporarily improves the performance of the brain. As this appears to be the case according to many research studies carried out of the years, it has been more and more essential for the use of music and song to be used within theatrical productions for children. Of course, song has been part of performance for thousands of years. However, in the case of children’s theatre it has changed over the years from traditional songs in pantomime, to pop songs that children may recognise from the radio or television or songs that go alongside movement and describe the actions. In older children, popular music styles appear common to put lyrics to that have deeper meaning to them, such as social issues concerning drugs maybe. Thus proving that music remains an integral part of children’s theatre in portraying important matters, that would be performed by the likes of TIE companies in schools.

One aspect that in many ways coincides with music and sensory hearing that has become an ever-increasing factor to, not only a child’s development, but to theatre and communities, is language. Starting with the milestones that children have to overcome, we can start understanding how different speech encouragement techniques and a child’s natural development produces an outcome in the form of speech. To begin with a child will start to respond to parental voices, then as they approach twelve months they comprehend how socially important speech is to communicate their emotions with others.

According to psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the environment in which a child is

raised has a great deal to do with their development. In the case of language development, Vygotsky thought that a child's speech was derived from speaking out their inner thoughts, so in theory they start by thinking out loud.

As Vygotsky stated:

“ Learning is more than the acquisition of the ability to think; it is the acquisition of many specialised abilities for thinking about a variety of things”

Thus asserting the knowledge that a normal, healthy child has the ability to develop speech naturally as long as they are able to develop other elements such as sight and hearing at the same time. Nonetheless, foreign languages have become more focused upon over the years as an aspect of child development, as well as the mother tongue. Throughout the twentieth century immigration had a great impact upon society. London, for example, has been one of the cities with the highest influx of people from all over. As a result, London has become one of the most multicultural cities in the world. By the end of the twentieth century those considered ‘ White British’ Londoners shared the population with three other main ethnic groups; ‘ Black African’, ‘ Black Caribbean’ and ‘ Indian’. Of course, there were other residents from the likes of Russia, Poland, China, Japan, America, Germany, France and Australia, to name a few. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that language has become one of the most important aspects of child development and the school curriculum. Many educators and therapists believed that it was important for children to learn another language as well

as their own. In the early twentieth century it seemed appropriate to learn the likes of Greek and Latin for the purpose of understanding how the English language was constructed, however after this came the notion of learning German, French and Russian, mainly for political reasons concerning potential war situations. Only later in the twentieth century and into the next, would students start to learn so-called exotic languages such as Spanish, Italian and Mandarin. Probably, due to the multicultural changes happening within society. As this happened later on in the twentieth century, children's theatre companies began to discover that it would be of greater value to many children for them to explore multicultural society and languages within their shows. This was as it came to be believed that children were more influential about promoting positive multicultural knowledge than in later years. For example, more and more children's theatre companies have a lot of bilingual material that appeals to children, whose parents may speak another language. Tricolour Theatre company in London is one of the most recent to encourage children to listen to, respond to and learn foreign languages. This affirms the opinion that encouraging languages is as important now, as it was when it was first introduced to school curriculum.

Besides other key aspects of children's theatre, another important key factor is the impact of visual components to a performance that have advanced a child's development of sight, colour and shape recognition. Some of the obvious visual aspects of performances are costume, lighting, set and props. Over time it has been easy to notice a clear amount of detail added and given to each of these areas to add a great deal more spectacle to seeing



them. One of the best examples of a visual part of Children's Theatre is costume. Many children's characters in the past few decades have adopted bright colour costumes with extravagant features such as big eyes for monsters. It seems the brighter the colours, the more fun and enjoyable they are on the eye. Yet, the much more intelligent reasoning theatre practitioners have embarked upon extravagant costume within this time is due to child developmental theories of colour therapy and colour recognition. The later, is a natural part of the child development cycle whereas colour therapy is a method of treatment to influence the likes of late developing, mental illness, blindness, behaviour as well as other medical issues, whereas colour recognition is a natural occurrence during the early stages of child development. This simply involves distinguishing basic colours and naming them. Around the age of two a child should be at this stage, with some help. By the age of four they should be able to carry out these actions unaided according to numerous child workers. It is also around the age of four or five that children start to encounter theatrical experiences such as pantomime or the circus. Therefore, it is clear to see a correlation between these two matters, in terms of costume. At this age they will be able to make a connection between colours and shapes of the costumes and we can therefore understand how this aids the comprehension of the characters onstage. For example, if a character were to wear black a child would instinctively determine this role as a bad or nasty person, simply going by the colour of the attire. One of the other visual advances to children's theatre is lighting. As with colour therapy techniques of illuminating certain shades of colour to achieve a distinct mood, for example, the colour blue can trigger feelings of serenity and calm as well as sadness and depression.

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Lighting children's plays can influence their understanding of a scene, if a scene is lit blue and is sad, a child will comprehend this by connecting both emotive triggers from visually seeing, listening and hearing the actors. So, visual aspects appear to be very imperative to producing effective children's theatre that infants can connect to and improve their understanding of various different things such as personalities or character feelings that they may feel themselves.

Furthermore, the development of colour theory also coincides with the impact of the media upon both child development and children's theatre. From the late sixties there was a big boom on television of larger than life characters. In America, it was the appearance of 'Sesame Street' that drew in child viewers to the idea learning from bright coloured, odd and funny characters. This was the intention of the Author of the show, Malcolm Gladwell who has said to reporters in the past:

"Sesame Street was built around a single, breakthrough insight: that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them"

This shows how children's educational television advanced with the knowledge that you can capture a group of children and educate them on mass without the need of a classroom. Basic development skills could have the potential to evolve in the space of their own homes, from counting, naming shapes and spelling to safety awareness and recognising character relationships. It can be argued that this program set an example for the children's television programs to come. However, it was later on in the twentieth century that educational psychologists started to team up with

children's television producers to produce advanced educational programming for children's television. Rag Doll productions in the UK is a good example. The company was formed by Anne Wood, who believed that children's television should have the same amount of imagination portrayed as a book conveys. They came up with such characters as 'The Teletubbies' and 'Rosie and Jim'. Both programs were formed with educational factors in mind. 'The Teletubbies' was based around four brightly coloured creatures who had different characteristics for children to relate themselves to, such as the character of 'Lala' who was yellow in colour and sparked children to exercise as she encourage play in a fun and energetic way. The colour yellow as we know is shown to make a person's mood much more happy and playful, therefore the program was carefully mapped out with things such as this in mind. On the other hand 'Rosie and Jim' depicted how things worked in society, putting children's anxieties about growing up or carrying out certain actions for instance going in to a Hospital. Furthermore, programs produced by Rag Doll set a trend for other programs at the time and for years to come after these. Although, there have been many advances made to children's television to make advances to educational development, it seems that television and the media have overtaken children's theatre due to it's easy access, availability and variety all at once. Still, at the same time as this, we can also see a great advantage of the children's media take over. The more children become a fan of a particular role on television, the more they are going to want to see them in person. This has therefore created a rise in television productions being assembled for touring stage shows. There appeared to be more demand over the past thirty years for shows that children were familiar with than original material, thus proving that children

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are more inclined to watch something they recognise as they tend to seek comfort in the familiar.

Children's theatre has received a great deal of recognition since the twentieth century as a well-established form of theatre. Many would argue that this has been due to the amount of medical, psychological and theoretical advances to child development and that these factors have helped influence the productions of theatrical performances for the likes of children. However some could maintain that technological advances such as improved costume construction, more elaborate lighting effects and greater abilities to create sets straight from the designs of cartoons, as if it were real. It certainly seems as if more consideration was given later on the twentieth century towards educational development being included in programs. Whereas in the early to mid- twentieth century there was more focus within society and amongst theorists to come up with explanations as to why children behave and develop in particular ways to certain stimuli, for instance. With the theories in place we could then analyse how they could be applied. It can definitely be stated though, that children's theatre has certainly had a great impact upon the ways in which children learn from the early styles of performance to the fairly new forms like TIE touring companies. Child development theories can only apply to a certain extent nevertheless, as it is on average about the ages of three to five that children go to the theatre with their parents to sit and watch a show. Before this when many crucial aspects of child development occur, is it simply about their development and welfare, nothing else.