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The Project

Qualitative : Case-study : IPA : MPhil

Theatre for Early Years (TEY) is live performance designed for an audience aged under 6. It is often immersive, multi-sensory, and can be relatively abstract in content. I wanted to explore how parents and toddlers (12-36 m/o) experience such a novel aesthetic offer together. As it was 2020 I observed parent-child dyads attending an online show, *Up and Down*. I then interviewed the parent participants two weeks later. These interviews were the key data, with audio and video recordings supporting analysis. I took a qualitative thematic approach using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Up and Down

Interactive Zoom theatre for under 5s

Up and Down was commissioned by Starcatchers, Scotland's Early Years Arts Organisation, in May 2020. The aim was to offer a shared, joyful experience for extended families separated through the pandemic. The adults (parents, grandparents etc) were complicit in providing some pre-planned objects that helped maintain connection and provide magic.



Troggle, who lives underground, meets her friend Mira, who lives in the sky, to share discoveries, songs, stories and snacks with their new friends.

Resulting Themes

From analysis of data

Unfiltered Response

Missing Live Performance

Human Connection



Zoom theatre went some way to mitigating the feeling of loss from the cancellation of live events. The most successful moments came through creative application of the unique possibilities of the new medium. Thoughtful comparison to in-person events however drew out the unique and powerful aspects of live, communal, artistic experiences.

Agency was a key concept, for the child and to some extent the adult too. TEY provides a safe, pleasurable opportunity for the parent to watch their child respond to something new. Being 'behind the mute button' gave some additional freedom.

A 'shared experience' was felt by some, but not all, who connected through the screen. Playful, affectionate connections between parent and child together were observed, reported and supported. There was significance placed in the arts bringing children to our wider culture and shared values.

Summary and Questions

Online TEY is possible but cannot replace the real thing, particularly when it comes to audience-performer connection. The principle of **invitation not instruction** is important for supporting an authentic response. TEY can create conditions where parents connect empathetically with their very young children

- What are the implications for pedagogy in the role of child agency in TEY?
- How can theatre makers respond to greater understanding of the parent perspective?
- What can be learned from researching the other relationships present in a live, in-person encounter?

PhD

University of Strathclyde: School of Education

This study will inform my doctoral research into TEY audience experience. The subject matter proved rich for exploration and reflection on the use of IPA found it to be a useful method for this context.

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