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To cite this article: Anne Lise Nordbø (2012) Mind the gap!, Education Inquiry, 3:3, 353-370, DOI: [10.3402/edui.v3i3.22040](https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v3i3.22040)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v3i3.22040>



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Published online: 01 Sep 2012.



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Mind the gap!

Creating a community between teacher-actors and toddler-spectators in a performative event

Anne Lise Nordbø*

Abstract

This article is based on an inquiry into the framing of artistic effects in space and addresses the interactions between two-year-old children and adult performers. I discuss how the traditional communication gap between actor and audience can be surmounted. My study is a crossover between performance art and drama pedagogy, which I describe as an interactive *scenic playground*. I will discuss how toddlers can be active participants in performance art by employing the materials and actions used by skilled kindergarten teachers. Specifically, these include clearly expressing expected intentions, bodily behaviours and social interactions. The interactions of toddlers with performers challenge dramaturgy and actors. The aim of this study is to analyse staging strategies for the benefit of interaction as a participatory and democratic learning process. My empirical sources consist of video footage, observations and notes from the *actor-teacher group* that performed with the toddlers in two small groups. My results include the sensory and embodied nonverbal contributions of toddlers to performative meaning making as they interacted with both textiles and people and developed into a community.

Keywords: drama, scenic playground, performance event, kindergarten, materiality, space

Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to investigate the aesthetic interactions between toddlers and adult performers and to discuss how toddlers respond to the staging strategies of adult performers. In what I refer to as a *scenic playground*, which can be described as a crossover between performative events and drama pedagogy, I investigate how children learn about interaction through action. The scenic playground which I created during the course of my study is presented in this article as an example of such staging strategies. This scenic playground consists of actors, textiles, several objects and movements as expressive effects, and toddlers who contribute to the expression by interacting with the material and the actors. Kindergarten space, materiality and meaning making are observed in this article from the perspective of

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©Authors. ISSN 2000-4508, pp. 353–370

performance art and drama pedagogy. The term “space” is used synonymously with “stage” as a common space in which performers and spectators interact. In the title, *mind the gap* refers to the common separation between actors and spectators and the stage and the audience in theatre. Staging strategies, which attempt to ‘mind’ or bridge the gap between performers and spectators and thus create interaction, are found in performance events. The scenic playground is an example of the use of such a staging strategy to encourage the interaction of toddler spectators to interact with the performance. The opportunity to influence events on stage can stimulate a child’s perception of participating in the world, particularly with regard to being seen and heard among other people.

The embodiment of ideas in theatre and drama is manifested through space, material and body in combination with movement, light, sound and speech. During this study, I sought to identify the ways in which some of these elements can be used in staging strategies for young children. Central to the study is my search for concepts by which I understand the action and interaction that occurred in the scenic playground.

The gap between performer and audience, which is significant when interaction is an aim in theatre performance events, has been analysed by researchers such as the German theatre analyst Erika Fisher-Lichte (2008).

In this study: *How children learn about interaction through nonverbal co-acting with actors and aesthetic effects in space*, I have investigated how toddlers can be offered an opportunity for performative expression as means to allow co-play in interaction with adult performers. How can performative actions structure toddlers’ participation, interaction and urge to express themselves (and the form of this expression)?

My research questions are as follows: 1) how can a *scenic playground* be shaped or designed to ensure that adult actors can prepare a foundation for interaction with two-year-old children?; and 2) how can the performance space and performative actions provide a foundation for *interaction* between adults and two-year-old children, in which the children can actually participate? The purpose of this case study was to investigate how toddlers respond to interactional staging strategies that are designed to encourage them to influence the actions and dramaturgy of the performance.

A brief story about the ‘experiment’ of a scenic playground

The scenic playground space was a 70 m² flat floor. The scenography was long transparent fabrics of textile and plastic, and a few objects. Most of the materials were out of reach and sight for the toddlers as the presentation started. Only the two actor-teachers’ bodies, lying on the floor among light sources and three transparent coloured textiles hanging from the roof, were visible.

The kind of play in the scenic playground was mimic, copying, and simulating an ‘illusory world’ of colours of transparent textiles, lights, adults (actor-teachers) who did not talk or make sounds but moved their bodies and the textiles in familiar

and unfamiliar ways. Later more textiles, and a few objects, were introduced and all materials were handled in familiar and unfamiliar ways by the actor-teachers. All the materials were made accessible for the toddlers to touch, grab and handle.

When I conducted the actor-teachers' performative expressions in the scenic playground, I did not prepare in accordance with the concepts and theory I apply in the analysis in this article. My study started by creating a scenic expression together with the actor-teachers, based on actors' improvisations investigating the handling of textiles in a stage-like space, aiming at engaging toddlers in co-play. My source of inspiration for the rehearsal of the actors' scenic expression was inspired by Grotowski's and Barba's writings and performances, with a special point of interest being the actors' physical presence on stage in order to correspond to toddlers' embodied behaviour. I was also inspired by Boal's interactive forum theatre where audiences are co-actors and "spect-actors". So I conducted the 'experiment' of the scenic playground inspired by embodied action and audience participation, and also by performances for children under the age of three, specifically those conducted by Blixrud (2010), and Hovik (Hovik, 2011a, 2011b), which focus on interaction.

In the content analysis of the video footage, I noticed that the process of actions and expressions called for concepts to understand this cross-over between child play and performance. I had conducted an aesthetic frame which offered certain limitations of space, materials and actions, and the results showed interaction which I characterised as both performative and social. When I observed how the toddlers – children who did not have performative skills or knowledge of staging strategies – contributed to the event, I searched for possible explanations of the relations between the 'real' and 'fictional' and the social elements of performativity in the event. Performance theory offered concepts and explanations of the 'social': relations between 'real' and 'fictional', the community and the 'in-between'-social-and-performative-event that had occurred in the scenic playground. My aim is to apply the idea of a scenic playground to early childhood education.

Theory

Performativity and its relation to play and drama pedagogy

Creating a cross-over between performativity and children's play may question to what extent concepts of performative events can be compatible with pedagogical drama and children's play. However, according to Richard Schechner (2006), play is complex to define. Play is "at the heart of performance, it is looser, more permissive and flexible than ritual, not 'real' or 'serious', and it can be revised".

/.../, if it is wrong to fence children's play off from adult play; if playing need be neither voluntary or fun; if play is characterized both by flow – losing oneself in play – and reflexivity – the awareness that one is playing; if ethological and semiotic studies show that play's functions include learning, regulating hierarchy, exploration, creativity, and communication; if psychoanalysis links playing with fantasy, dreaming, and the expression of desires; if the 'in between' and 'as if' time-space of playing is the source of cultural activities including arts, sciences, and religions ... can we ever really understand something so complex? (Schechner, 2006, p. 91).

“In between” play and performativity in the scenic playground may be categorised as “liminoid”. Victor Turner characterises arts and recreational activities in our modern and postmodern societies as a replacement of ritual, a voluntary art form “liminoid”, a space which is open to all possibilities (Schechner, 2006, p. 67). Social actions like a demonstration or rehearsed performative actions like performance art are both liminoid. In a liminoid experience a person can enter a community (as an actor, or citizen) and, after some time, re-enter ordinary life. Schechner calls it “transportations”, which can bring temporary change, or experiences of not being me but not-not me either.

The toddler-actors' play in the scenic playground was not based on performativity-skills but may be determined a liminoid experience, entering a performative community for a limited amount of time.

In my discussion I will approach play as: flow, reflexive action, power reversal and liminoid performative, conceptualised by performative and educational theory.

Interaction

Toddler audiences tend to *bridge the gap* between the stage and themselves as the audience most likely because of their lack of knowledge regarding traditional gap conventions in theatre. Toddler audiences tend to seek interaction, and a scenic playground was an intention to meet that tendency in toddlers.

The gap between performer and audience, which is significant when interaction is an aim in theatre performance events, has been analysed by researchers such as the German theatre analyst Erika Fisher-Lichte (2008), building on the works of Schechner and Turner. Staging strategies have developed which address this gap between performer and audience. As an event that is created in interaction with an audience, theatre differs from a work of art that is created and staged before being performed to the audience. The *performative turn* began in the 1960s, after which performative events have been performed in a number of different ways. The gap between actor and audience is a major challenge in theatre in general, and experimentation with this gap is attempted in many performative events. In this study, I investigate the interactive actions of toddlers and adult actor-teachers in the scenic playground by treating it as a performative event. Because my aim in this research is to discuss how the gap between actors and observers in performances for young children can be reduced and to transfer my findings in the scenic playground to drama pedagogy in kindergartens, I also seek to conceive

a plan of action, participation and democracy in learning processes. In this article, interaction is understood as a theatre concept that is linked to staging strategies; as a concept that is linked to the actions of skilled practitioners, as shown in the reading of Donald Schön by the philosopher Bengt Molander (2008) (Molander, 2008); and as a concept that is linked to action in educational democratic encounters, as stated by Gert J.J. Biesta (2006).

Three of Fischer-Lichte's concepts of performative events (i.e., *feedback loop*, *role reversal* and *performative community*) are useful tools for understanding interaction processes.

Feedback loop

Feedback loops occur when either an actor or an audience member performs an action that requires a response by the other, and this action-response sequence subsequently continues to loop between them. Thus, the audience member's response influences the actor's response and actions and the dramaturgy of the event. Fischer-Lichte (2008) states that this loop is a fundamentally new method of including audience members as participants: "The feedback loop as a self-referential, autopoietic system, enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process emerged as the defining principle in theatrical work" (p. 59).

Feedback loops are not created in a presentation; rather, such loops are created in the form of an exchange in which the audience response is answered by actor-teachers. Such responses may be vocal or embodied or may assume another form of expression.

A feedback loop can halt, break or continue in changed expressions. An audience response can assume the form of vocal actions, gestures, facial expressions, touch or movement. Depending on the staging strategies and the actual audience members attending an event, the actions that are performed by the audience can involve variation in both the extent of interaction and the influence on the dramaturgy and expression of the performance event.

Role reversal

Fischer-Lichte (2008) describes role reversal as an interaction in which audience members respond visually by entering the stage, as was observed in the scenic playground for this study. In such interactions, an actor may become an observer while an audience member becomes an actor, or both individuals may become actors and/or observers. Staging strategies for performative events employ feedback loops and role reversal in a manner that can cause a performance to either continue or cease. Fischer-Lichte states that seeing and hearing are crucial to setting role reversals in motion: "The spectator is transformed into an actor even before role reversal occurs. The opposition between acting and observing collapses" (2008, p. 59).

Role reversal is a complicated endeavour using staging strategies for adult audiences, with the exception of Boal's "forum theatre" (2008). However, in the scenic

playground, role reversal was easy to establish due to the toddlers' embodied ways of being, which Gunvor Løkken (Løkken, 2000, 2004) described by applying Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory (1962) of the phenomenology of the body to her study of toddler peer culture in Norwegian kindergartens. As the toddlers absorbed the expressions of the performative event with their senses, they sent and received feedback and were transformed from observers to actors in role reversals.

Performance Community

In this study, the use of a feedback loop and role reversal as active staging strategies caused the scenic playground to become a *performance community*. According to Fischer-Lichte (2008), the development of a performative community can occur as a result of feedback loops and role reversals. This reciprocal relationship of influence through the feedback loop identifies transformation as a fundamental category of the aesthetics of the performative. Fischer-Lichte states as follows: "These short-lived, transient theatrical communities of actors and spectators/.../ highlight the fusion of the aesthetic and the social". Staging strategies exert some influence, but feedback loops between actual people are of the utmost importance.

Embodiment

My conception of embodiment stems from the reading of Fischer-Lichte (2008) and Løkken as well as my own reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body (1962). In Fischer-Lichte's reading, embodiment is linked to the development of staging the body.

Merleau-Ponty thus cleared the path for a new application of the term 'embodiment' as it is used today in cultural anthropology, cognitive sciences, and theatre studies. Merleau-Ponty's contribution to philosophy is comparable to Grotowski's to theatre. /.../ Grotowski created the conditions for a redefinition of the embodiment concept. Here embodying denotes the emergence of something that exists only as body (2008, p. 83).

Theatrical perspectives of framing bodies in space emphasise the "lived experience" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and embodied action as our means of "being in the world". These interpretations are supplemented by Løkken's interpretation of the toddler body in social interaction. According to Merleau-Ponty, we experience the world through our bodies. Meaning is not produced by a transcendental or constituting consciousness but rather is created by a "body subject" that engages in actions. In other words, we perceive the world through our knowledge of the manner in which our bodies move within the world.

Touch is a way of being embodied. Although uncommon in performances in Western cultures, touch is a common method by which toddlers interact with other people. According to Fisher-Lichte, adult performative events that attempt to use touch in

feedback loops often fail; thus, there exists a major difference between how adult and toddler audiences respond to performative events. For adult audiences, being touched by an actor can be offending or misinterpreted. As Fischer-Lichte discusses, a lack of community with regard to habits, interpretations, rituals and beliefs among audience members is a challenge for staging strategies in interactive performance events. However, the toddlers in my material appeared to demonstrate this sense of embodiment, including in situations in which they were touched and did touch other people. Because toddlers are unfamiliar with cultural codes, beliefs and rituals as staging strategies, they responded to the actual performative expressions in the scenic playground with presence.

Presence

The theatrical concept of presence is often an assumed attribute of an actor based on theatrical skills. In this study, the presence of actor-teachers stemmed from both their theatrical skill and their professional skill as early childhood teachers. According to the English theatre analyst Cormac Power (2008), staging theatre is a way of showing presence *and* non-presence in the same performance. Power (2008, p. 3) explains as follows: “To be present in a particular place is to be simultaneous with a particular space-time environment”. Embodied presence, which manifests in the scenic playground as a performative event encompassing materials and bodily movement, is a frame in which presence is materialised in actions. If the presence of actor-teachers was theatrical at some moments, was akin to a teacher’s presence at other moments, and was perhaps even described as a social or ‘private’ presence at other times (which may be interpreted as non-presence), then this performative event was in accordance with Power’s view of theatrical presence and non-presence. Powers suggests that no performance creates an expression of complete presence because the speciality of theatre is the actors (and staging strategies) alternating between presence and non-presence. Power states that Derrida’s critique of theatrical presence, which analyses Artaud’s theatre vision, is a tool for theatre creators to use theatre to make audiences aware of presence and non-presence. This tool appears to be a type of ‘alibi’ for the role of a non-professional actor in the scenic playground as both an actor and a teacher alternating between social and performative acts, which emphasise the presence and non-presence (in a theatrical sense) cited by Power. Professionals can to a larger extent control the staging of presence and non-presence. And of course, distraction and non-presence are common elements of both toddler behaviour and adult behaviour, but a lack of life experience, imagination, curiosity and other factors provide toddlers with a more investigative and experimental embodied presence. When toddlers explore their environments, they are situated and embodied within these environments; as Power explains, their experiences are “simultaneous with a particular space-time environment”. A toddler’s presence is not linked to theatrical skills; rather, to separate a toddler’s presence from the presence of actor-teachers or professional actors,

one may posit the existence of both a theatrical *and* social presence. Alternatively, a toddler's presence may involve engaging in a *present* state of action.

In this research analysis, I apply Fischer-Lichte's concepts (2008) of the *feedback loop*, *role reversal*, *performative community*, *embodiment and presence* to assess how children interact and express themselves in the scenic playground (i.e., their strategies of minding the gaps between stage and audience and between performer and spectator). Also the concept *liminoid* (Schechner, 2006) is commented on. Subsequently, I will briefly analyse the community event in the scenic playground by applying the concepts of action in the theory of Molander (2008) and the theory of community in democratic education proposed by Biesta (2006). I will discuss these theories and data in relation to a narrative that I call *The Blue Material*, with a focus on a performative community.

Methods

This qualitative empirical case study entitled: *How children learn about interaction through nonverbal co-acting with actors and aesthetic effects in space*, was conducted in an installation called the *scenic playground* designed as a crossover between performance art and drama pedagogy. The management of a private company of four kindergartens volunteered to participate in the study and offered two skilled early childhood teachers, who were previously my students, with experience in educational drama and practice to participate as actor-teachers. The sample of 10 children was randomly selected by the kindergarten staff in the two kindergarten sections that were not the regular workplaces of these teachers. The space for the scenic playground was chosen at the discretion of Vestfold University College.

The ethical standard was accepted by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) for implementation of the statutory data privacy requirements in the research. The data were generated from field notes of the training of the actor-teachers, video footage of two encounters between the actor-teachers and the two-year-old children, my observations during the interactive encounters and my field notes after the event. Notes and field notes supplement the films as the basis for my content analysis.

Two small groups of 10 two-year-old children were exposed to the space, materials and actors. The first group consisted of five boys and one girl, and the second group consisted of three boys and one girl. The duration of each encounter was approximately one hour. The filmed interaction highlights similarities and differences between the two groups; however, I have selected only one example of a similar process that is explained in a narrative, *The Blue Material*, to be discussed below.

The performative expressions that occurred were analysed using the theoretical concepts of interaction used in the theatre analyses conducted by Fisher-Lichte (2008) and Power (2008) as explained above. The performative expressions were not analysed with the intention of understanding the staging itself; rather, they were analysed to understand the embodied, co-acting behaviour of toddlers in a certain

space as both an aesthetically framed learning process and a social-interactive learning process. The performative event-based space as stage was conducted and analysed as a means to develop a wider perspective, particularly regarding the experiential and experimental participation of children in a social context. Such contexts are interpreted as human beings (actor-teachers) offering their embodied presence in an action-based encounter and enabling the opportunity for others (e.g., toddlers) to provide responses.

The narrative below exemplifies the actions of both the actor-teachers and the toddlers and illustrates my aim for this study.

Presentation of the data

The scenic playground was presented using nonverbal actions. The toddlers added vocal sounds, but they used only nonverbal communication during the hour of the event. Before the introduction of a blue plastic material, the two groups had different feedback loop processes, and role reversals were scarce in the second group. However, a similar process occurred in both groups upon the introduction of the blue material; therefore, I chose a description of this story from the second group only. The duration of the event that is described was approximately 10 minutes, and the event then continued for approximately 15 more minutes concentrating on the blue material.

Story: The Blue Material

The performative event had proceeded for approximately half an hour when the Blue Material was unveiled by one of the actor-teachers. Prior to this occurrence, the Blue Material had been hanging in a folded position in a short line under the roof. When the actor-teacher began to unfold the material, none of the children were attending to her actions. As soon as one of the toddlers heard the sound of the Blue Material, the sound captured this child's full attention. With facial and vocal expressions of awe and joy, the child attracted the attention of other toddlers before they actually saw the Blue Material unfolding. Both actor-teachers engaged in handling the material to ensure that it appeared in waves and floated up towards the roof. The toddlers appeared to be magnetically drawn into a sensation of sight, sound and touch by the movement of the material. After observing the movements of the blue material, running beneath it as it floated high above them, and seeing and feeling the material sink down upon them, all of the children joined in a common action imitation by following or attending one another's bodily movements, gestures, steps, facial expressions and vocal sounds. No words were uttered; only sounds were heard. The actor-teachers uttered no sounds but expressed surprise and awe through their facial and body movements, such as smiles and expressions, which were in tune with the reactions of the children. The actor-teachers continued to move the material. At one point, both actor-teachers lost their grip on the material and it floated away towards the back wall and sank down to the floor. All of the toddlers and both actor-teachers remained motionless as they waited for the material to complete its movement. Immediately before the material flattened to the floor, one child moved towards it, and one actor followed before all of the others did the same. The toddlers touched and lifted the material while the actor-teachers lifted it higher because of their physical height; this action created waves in the material so that air again came beneath it and 'lifted' it up. The material repeatedly rose and fell while one or more of the toddlers ran towards the middle beneath it. The children also repeatedly stood and watched while

moving their bodies and arms, and stepped into standing positions. At one point, all of the children joined in the middle under the material, and the actor-teachers released their grips on it and joined the children as the material formed a rounded shape similar to a bulb or an igloo with all participants sitting still inside it for a moment. One boy came out from under the material, fetched the light chain that he had previously examined for a long time, and brought this item into the 'igloo'. The small light bulbs shined through the material, and the people's shadows were slightly visible through the blue material. The blue material, teacher-actors and children were completely still, no sound or movement appeared. Then, the boy returned with 'his' light chain. He placed himself on the floor beside the bench, where he had been situated before playing. The others sat in the igloo for a while before the experience came to a close and the children returned from under the bulb.

Feedback loops

The feedback loop connected to the Blue Material, a thin plastic fabric, was established through an action that received an overwhelming response: the actor-teachers unveiled the Blue Material, and the first child's response, which included turning towards the sound of the material, uttering sounds and showing facial expressions of joy and interest. Building on this response, the other actor-teacher also began to participate by assisting in unwrapping the material and beginning the planned action of lifting it to ensure air flow beneath the material. The planned action was part of the staging strategies that were performed based on the knowledge and experience of the actor-teachers with the material. This experience was novel for these toddlers, and the action was adjusted based on the response of the toddlers. For example, the response of the toddlers in placing their bodies under the 'roof' of the material encouraged the actor-teachers to repeat the act of lifting the material. In contrast, the withdrawal of the toddlers from the material and their actions for several seconds received a copying response by the actor-teachers, who lifted the material and placed their own bodies beneath it (Picture 3). The material sank and covered them, and the toddlers responded by running towards the adults to attempt to lift the material before being assisted by the actor-teachers. The action of placing one's body under the material was copied both before and after the first loss of the actor-teachers' grip on the material. This action is an example of the copying of child-initiated action that created a feedback loop that was sufficiently strong to be repeated numerous times throughout the event.

Role reversal to bridge the gap between spaces

Role reversal can be understood as bridging the gap between two spaces: one space that is established for the presentation of the materials and actor-teachers and another space for the audience-like observation role of the toddlers. The two spaces existed during the investigation of materials in one-to-one feedback loops before the Blue Material was introduced. However, when the new material was introduced, the feedback loop was accelerated and the perception of two separate spaces collapsed. Role reversals concern both space and the emergence of a new perception of what an actor-teacher or

a toddler can do in the scenic playground. The new perception that emerged for the toddlers (equal to that in an audience of an adult performative event) was that a separation between spaces and actions is not necessary or desirable. This new understanding developed further and assisted the toddlers in bridging the gap between the roles of actor-teacher and toddler. The continuation of role-reversed actions was based on copying, repeating and including variations and tilts of the actions in the feedback loop. Sometimes the material itself contributed to influencing a situation, such as when the actor-teachers lost their grip on the material and thus caused it to move across the space. The response by the toddlers showed a high degree of concern for facilitating the feedback loop, role reversals and participation in building a performing community event.

The toddlers' fascination with and attraction to both the sounds and appearance of the Blue Material were essential in building this community. The other materials and objects that were presented to the toddlers did not affect the groups as a community in a similar manner. However, I believe that the feedback loops that were associated with the other textiles and objects provided the foundation for the toddlers' conception of role reversal. In this study, this particular material, in combination with the staging strategies of copying, repeating and integrating unexpected actions from the toddlers, framed the performative community event. The previous materials and actions may have been experienced as 'rules' of framing or even as types of rituals for the event that prepared the toddlers for the actions of the Blue Material.

A community event is not a staging strategy; instead, such an event depends on the responses and willingness of the audience to become co-actors. The embodied actions of the toddlers, role reversals and experimental investigations facilitated such a community.

If I assume that the experiences of the toddlers in the initial feedback loops resulted in their feeling accepted, approved, seen and heard in their choices of action, then this result may explain why some toddlers easily reversed roles with the actor-teachers when the Blue Material was introduced. This assumption would also explain why all of the children subsequently followed, abandoned their seated audience positions, and moved closer to or into the middle of the event.

Power relations tilted. The role reversal had some important consequences that may have influenced the social character of the performative community. The actor-teachers' control over the event decreased while the toddlers' control over the event increased. The toddlers' initiated actions, pauses, repetitions and variations occurred to such an extent that the dramaturgy was defined by these actions towards the end of the event. The actions of the toddlers were collective when directed only towards the Blue Material, but the children did not transform the event into a co-play among themselves. The toddlers maintained feedback loops and role reversals with the actor-teachers by initiating repetitions or new actions that prevented the actor-teachers from surrendering their actor role. In turn, both the toddlers and the actor-teachers contributed to ensuring that the community remained a united

entity by focusing on the Blue Material. The actions of the actor-teachers developed into actions that assisted the children rather than simply performing or leading the event. I was initially troubled that the actor-teachers 'assisted' and thus became more social than performative. However, the actions that were difficult for the toddlers to perform were instead performed by the actor-teachers either because of their own judgement or the initiative of the toddlers. As the community developed, the actor-teachers transformed their actions into being 'positively passive', but they remained attentive and attuned to the situation. According to Power (2008), presence need not be an active state for an actor: "Theatre can be seen not so much as 'having' or containing presence, but as an art that plays with its possibilities" (p. 8). During the course of this research project, I have become aware that both presence and non-presence are ways to 'put presence into play' in a performance. What I call "passive" may be an important staging strategy that may put presence into play and increase the awareness of toddlers with respect to their own and other people's presence and non-presence in such interactions.

A performative community

Was this experience a special community of co-subjects or merely a transformation of former play relations into a new type of experience? Did the toddlers and actor-teachers develop a unique performative community by acting together, or were the first embodied action responses to the actor presentation, for example, merely common play behaviour? "This question arises in most cases of role reversal and audience participation; the answer remains as yet unclear," explains Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 40); "[a]t the same time, the question is valued differently according to the emphasis given to subject-object relationship in each performance". I argue that the interaction of the toddlers with the staging strategies in this study in combination with the actions of the actor-teachers with respect to the materials, objects and movements in the space transformed the social actions into an event that created a significantly different community than communities of daily kindergarten or home life.

Because of the role reversal that spurred the dynamic and multiple shifts in the subject-object relationship, according to Fischer-Lichte, I think that the circumstances of the performative event framed the children to experience a sense of adventure and equality with the adult actor-teachers who controlled the experimental setting. Nevertheless, power differences between the adults and children were apparent, and a strong social play element was demonstrated by these actions.

The toddlers clearly had no experiential knowledge of a performative event. The intriguing question, however, is why both the toddlers and the actor-teachers performed well not necessarily in a theatrical sense but in the sense of a performative community event that includes social action. As an observer of the two encounters, I was actually concerned that the actor-teachers were being less performative or expressive in their actions than they should have been in a theatrical sense when the

toddlers began to interact. Specifically, I recognised a potential problem in that the actions were sometimes more social than performative during the event. However, as I will further argue, the social action may actually be an important indicator as to why the interaction and role reversal developed into a community event in the scenic playground.

According to Turner's term "liminoid" (Schechner, 2006, pp. 66-72), the toddlers transformed in a marked space-time, where they were stripped of their family- and kindergarten identities, vulnerable, "powerless and identityless", until they began their actions, improvised and "performed special actions" in the community, which formed a new "identity" as co-actors in this particular time-space environment. Between and between the conventional positions of child play contra performativity in the arts in modern and postmodern societies, personal identities as a child and social categories as a performer were challenged (Schechner, 2006, p. 66).

The actor-teachers were exposed to "liminoidity" in two ways; 1. the rehearsal; and 2. the encounter with the groups of children. "The workshop-rehearsal phase of performance composition is analogous to the liminal phase of the ritual process", Schechner states (2006, p. 66). The rehearsal equipped the actor-teachers with potential power over actions and scenario, but the particular time-space environment and interference of the toddlers challenged their power. The actor-teachers had to change their plan of actions and were vulnerable concerning the dramaturgy and progression of the event. When the textiles and movements were introduced by the actor-teachers, the 'in-between' actor-teachers actions and toddlers' response was a "limen" – a threshold, passageway – to the yet unknown actions which occurred in the scenic playground.

In ritual and aesthetic performances, the thin space of limen is expanded into a wide space both actually and conceptually. What usually is just a 'go-between' becomes the site of the action. And yet this action remains, to use Turner's concept 'between and between'. It is enlarged in time and space yet retains its peculiar quality of passageway or temporariness (Schechner, 2006, pp. 66-67).

In "the site of the action" the threshold contains the possibilities of actions not yet seen or performed. Reflexivity, regulating hierarchy, and communication in terms of action-based nonverbal interaction will now be discussed.

Defining the actions in the scenic playground as performative play makes it complicated to find which exact elements this performative liminoid form was made up of. "Was it a tension between the orderly and the unpredictable? Was it a struggle between two kinds of playing?" (Schechner, 2006, p. 92). In the scenic playground: 1. all the players (actor-teachers and toddler-actors) accepted the rules of the play. (Rules of: frame, materials, nonverbality, action and interaction); and 2. the flexible dramaturgy influenced the indeterminacy and changed the rules of the game at times, and therefore nothing was certain.

Quality in art is generally linked to a performer's professional skill level; however, in the scenic playground, neither the actor-teachers nor the toddlers were professionals in an artistic sense. I have searched for explanations that are linked to the participant exploration and experience of actions during the building of the community event. How did the participants decide which actions to perform? For both the adults and the children, the situation was unfamiliar; nevertheless, the improvisation with the blue material persisted for approximately half an hour, with the whole event lasting about an hour.

I assume that every chosen action that did not elicit a response was likely to be abandoned. If this assumption is correct, then the conceptualisation of inter-dependency between actions and responses must have been present. The community was an experimental setting in which the persons involved tested their own actions in encounters with the blue material and with one another, although they were unaware of the predefined meaning and outcome of the event. When the blue material moved its movement made a sound, the use of one's senses in the present, as opposed to relying on prior knowledge, was central. This use of senses applied to both the actor-teachers and the toddlers. Despite differences in prior knowledge, both the actor-teachers and the toddlers were subjects in a situation they had never encountered, and this situation was characterised by uncertainty with regard to the available choices of actions and interactions. I question how the process of choices can be explained apart from the use of performative event theory or improvisational skills.

Being aware of the unclear aspects of the concept reflection, I wish to understand the action aspect of the event in the scenic playground as an alternative to a theatrical understanding by using the concept of reflection in action that was described by Molander (2008) as "*characterised by the fact that it reshapes our thinking and our action while we are acting*".

The actions of the actor-teachers and the toddlers during the event in the scenic playground informed them throughout the course of the actions themselves. This information may explain why prior knowledge was not essential to the co-creation of the action-based community with the blue material. A variety of structures may describe reflection processes that are neither pre- nor post-reflective but represent reflection in action, according to Molander, by stating that structures may involve "a mirroring, meeting or a confrontation of a situation in which I as an agent am a part" and "meeting and confrontation with myself and my experiences" (2008, p. 13). To be an agent in the event was a structure that involved the participants' voluntary responses to a situation. These voluntary responses in the event helped construct and maintain a certain common reality. The common reality is visible in my material because all actions, movements and senses were directed towards the events surrounding the blue material. Individual actions merged with collective actions.

The frames of staging strategies that involved materials, movements, and the actions of the actor-teachers provided a foundation, but the experimental choices of

actions and the uncertainty of outcomes and responses (as in improvisation) actually constructed and maintained the event. Of course, the participants did not have a great deal of time to withdraw and halt their actions in the community with the blue material; therefore, the reflection needed to occur within the experiences of mirroring, meeting, confronting and responding. In turn, I believe that the adult and child participants held relatively equal positions concerning their experience *in* the actions. Molander uses the concept of “attentiveness” in action (2008, p. 15), which I compare to Power’s concept of “presence” (2008).

“Agent-in-the-world epistemology”

Molander argues for a non-representationalist reading of Schön in which dialogue and conversation describe knowledge as agent-in-the-world knowledge. In this study, dialogue, which was previously described as a feedback loop, and conversation, which was described as a co-acting role reversal process in a performative event, were essential to enable the performative community to appear. I observed that the continuation of the actions and responses of the actor-teachers acted as an adhesive in their conversations with the toddlers, and vice versa. If any of the participants had left the common space of negotiating the aesthetic expressions in contact with the blue material, then the community would have been divided, broken, or halted or would have taken another turn or been terminated. The event community became a structure of meaning as such:

the relation between ‘those who converse’ is not a relation between subject and object, but rather, between two subjects or between a subject and the (unobjectified) totality of which she forms a part. /.../ The work – and the formation of knowledge – involves an alternation between leading and sketching and opening oneself up to allow the sketches to talk, so that the unintentional and the uncontrolled may also make themselves known (Molander, 2008, p. 18).

Both the toddlers and the actor-teachers ‘sketched’ their actions and experienced the actions of mirroring, meeting and confronting the material, the space and one another. These actions involved visual, tactile and kinaesthetic experiences, each of which ‘fuelled’ the conversation. According to Molander, reflective experience is considered a process of doing in which you either enjoy or suffer the consequences. The responses demonstrated to each individual the actions that she or he had taken during the interaction. I assume that the emotional, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic experiences that the actor-teachers and toddlers experienced during the event provided reason for reflection in action.

My reflection as a researcher differs as my reflection primarily occurred before and after the event due to my detached position as an observer. If we assume that reflection in action can only be ‘mental’ and can occur only before or after an event, then the toddlers would be excluded from reflection processes. However, if we assume

that at least an embodied action-based reflection in doing can mirror the process of choices in a community event, then the toddlers would be included.

To give one's 'beginnings' to the world and wait for a response

An encounter between actor-teachers and toddlers is a situation in which their differences –in terms of experiences, skills, knowledge, size and other factors – were apparent. In his book about democratic education, Giert Biesta (2006) understood Hannah Arendt's concept of action in terms of people who act towards another person or an actual community by offering a beginning ("*give their beginnings*"); thus, rather than asking "who am I?" in an interaction, I ask "who are you?" In other words, how will you react to my beginning? I view the actions of both toddlers and actor-teachers as "beginnings" that they offered to their performative event community; the participants could not predict the responses of the other participants but must wait for such a reaction. According to Biesta (2006), when a perception of difference and plurality is obvious in any encounter, an intersubjective and ethical space may develop. The participants in the event community were restricted in their choices of actions because only those participants who were given responses and answers by others in the social community were reinforced in their actions.

To extend the point of embodied thinking and doing to the scenic playground, I observe that the concept of embodied *actions* and *beginnings* in Biesta's interpretation of Arendt's theory may explain what I call the unskilled "social" presence, actions and interactions that led to the creation of the community. "Social" rather than skilled performativity may be understood as *subjective*. Arendt's perception of human subjectivity relates to action: "To be a subject means to act, and action begins with bringing one's own beginnings into the world" (2006, p. 133). Subjectivity is not understood as an attribute of individuals "but is understood as a *quality of human interaction*" (2006, p. 134). In my view, this perspective offers both an aesthetical and "social" human conception of action. An understanding of human subjectivity that exists only in action may consist of aesthetic actions in the performance arts and performative event communities. However, although performative events enable artists to demonstrate their "virtuosity" to an audience, as Arendt suggests, performative events can also stage action in interaction in the present rather than the "before or after" (2006, p. 134). Thus, a fluctuating event is flexible to beginnings and responsive to actions. Then, such actions can be performed by adult and toddler, skilled and unskilled people within a performative means and staging strategies to allow co-play.

Conclusion

In my project, the gap between actor-teachers and toddlers was reduced as a result of staging strategies that permitted the toddlers' embodied actions to intervene in the teacher-actors' and events' actions. My purpose in conducting this study of theatrical interactions between performers and audiences, specifically audiences consisting of

young children, was to provide a better understanding of how kindergarten teachers can assume the role of an actor in a scenic space. With materials, movement and other staging strategies that are comparable to those used in performance events, these actor-teachers experienced a flexible co-acting process with the children. Based on the results of this empirical study on toddler participation in interactive play with actor-teachers, I have discussed how children learn about interaction through embodied and emplaced action. The materials and the embodied actions of the actors and toddlers in the scenic playground are artistic effects that combine to add colour, shape, movement, embodiment, touch and sound to the performative expression. Together, the adults and children in my study developed embodied, nonverbal forms of expressing themselves. This experiential, art-based learning situation demonstrated challenges for both the adult performers and the toddlers in both performative and inter-personal ways. The event became a common task of creating a community of actions that involved the interpretation and participation of the toddlers. In the future, the manner in which toddlers act and contribute to a common task of building a community event may be further discussed in both theatre art and pedagogy by reflecting on the negotiation of meaning. In pedagogy, I find the levels of participation of interest for a democratic education. As the children experience themselves as co-actors in a role-reversal hierarchy and the option to express one self and experience other people express themselves is playful, 'real' and 'fictional' simultaneously.

In this practical, experiential, empirical and small-scale study, the results are related to the conducting. Results of potential similar scenic playground conducting may take different turns in the hands of others. I find that developing a theoretical understanding of action, interaction and community enlightened not only by performative theatre theory, but also philosophical and educational perspectives gives layers to the results, and to aesthetic participation as a democratic possibility.

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