



POLYGLOT
THEATRE'S

HOW HIGH THE SKY

[An evaluation of Polyglot Theatre's development of an immersive theatre experience for pre-walking babies, 2011]

[Dr. Ricci-Jane Adams]

[Commissioned by Polyglot Theatre, October 2011]

Information contained in this report is freely available for use by participating groups and other interested parties. Where information is quoted and used, the author requests that this report is cited. For commercial use, this document is copyright © 2011 Ricci-Jane Adams.

Image credits: Alan Barber

Published by Polyglot Theatre, Melbourne, 2011.

<http://www.polyglottheatre.com>

The author can be contacted at: riccijadams@gmail.com

How High the Sky – An evaluation of Polyglot Theatre’s development of an immersive theatre experience for pre-walking babies.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
Outline.....	5
Project Summary.....	9
Evaluation Outline.....	11
Methodology.....	11
Analysis	12
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The assumption that kids of any age are this, or that or the other, is something that adults make on their behalf... We started with the idea of having a piece of theatre that can experiment with that understanding and say, 'well actually they're all individual human beings, let's see how they react. Let's offer them a whole lot of choices and then observe their individual responses – without interpretation.' So that was the premise... We don't base good theatre for adults on research around what stage they're up to. I appreciate the early childhood development research, but I don't want to be limited by that. Sue Giles, Artistic Director.

This evaluation report provides details of Polyglot Theatre's *How High the Sky*, a development towards a performance for pre-walking babies. This process began in 2010 and continues into 2012, culminating in a season open to the public. Specifically, Polyglot has worked with babies in showings and developments in Victoria and Tasmania, as part of festivals, in the community, in-house at Polyglot itself and at the Arts Centre, Melbourne to explore elements of sound, lighting, props and text towards the creation of a piece of baby theatre.

Professional performers have worked with directors Sue Giles and Jess Wilson, as well as a designer, sound designer and lighting designer to create an immersive, experiential performance for pre-walking babies.

This evaluation is commissioned by Polyglot Theatre. Data for this evaluation was collected through observation and interview with the key participating groups – facilitators, babies, parents and artists – and designed to explore four central questions of Polyglot's 2011 evaluation. These questions are:

- Does Polyglot's process stimulate conversation between children and adults?
- Does Polyglot's process with children inspire, challenge and foster curiosity?
- Do the theatrical experiences offered by Polyglot encourage children's agency and self-responsibility within the specific experience (workshop or performance)?
- Does Polyglot's process contribute to a culture of creativity both during and after the experience?

The findings of the evaluation of *How High the Sky* are that the performance:

- had appeal across the age range 4 months to 18 months, as well as across varied socio-demographics;

- Was as engaging for parents as it was for the babies, and facilitated intimate connection between the adult/child pairs;
- Encouraged parents to let their children experience creatively for themselves without mediation;
- Engaged babies for an extended period of time without distraction;
- Is distinct from simple entertainment or education focussed performances for babies because of the quality of the theatrical elements including performers, set design, sound design and lighting design and as such created a truly immersive, professional theatre experience for both parent and child;
- Is highly theatrical and dramatically compelling, achieved through an aesthetically powerful transformation of space and multi-sensory engagement;
- Contributed to seeding ideas for creative engagement with babies and toddlers in the home environment;
- In and of itself contributes to a culture of creativity. In acknowledging that babies are entitled to such experiences alters the landscape and much current thinking about what babies are capable of receiving and entitled to;
- The doubling of baby as audience (receptive observer) and performer (active participant) is one of the unique and most successful elements of *How High the Sky*.

In creating a performance that is engaging for both parent and child, Polyglot achieves its aim of stimulating connection between the pairs, for both are fully present and interested. For this pre-talking age group it affords a moment of intimate connection between caregiver and child in a creative, social and unique environment, unfettered by daily stresses and concerns.

Outline

a. Background to the project

How High the Sky has been in development since 2010. Beginning with creative development funding and a commission from the Full Tilt program at the Arts Centre Melbourne, *How High the Sky* has now had multiple developments both in-house and in the community. Polyglot describes the performance in the following way:

Polyglot Theatre's *How High the Sky* is an immersive theatrical experience for babies under 12 months and their carers. In an environment that continually shifts and transforms, altering atmosphere and intention, the work explores the role of a baby as a unique element in theatrical space, inviting adult reflection of a baby's unique view of the world.

b. Participating groups

Babies Pre-walking babies are both the audience and subjects of the performance. Around 30 babies have so far contributed to or experienced the performance.

Parents Each child enters the performance space with one adult caregiver. In most cases this is a parent, although friends and family have also partnered the baby.

Artists The artists for the **Creative development stage one** were: Sue Giles and Jessica Wilson - co-directors, Anna Tregloan - Design David Franzke – Sound Design and Andrew Livingston – Lighting Design.

This development started with two days of workshops involving babies – 4yr olds at the Carlton Central Children's Centre run by Jess Wilson and Sue Giles. This phase of the development is not included in this evaluation.

The artists for the **Creative development stage two** were: Sarah Kriegler, Nick Barlow, Sam Routledge, Penny Baron - performers. In addition, the creative team included Sue Giles and Jessica Wilson – co-directors, Anna Tregloan - designer, and Russel Goldsmith - sound designer, Andrew Livingston - lighting Designer, and Emily O'Brien - production manager.

This development involved children at the TRY pre-school playgroup.

The artists for the **Creative development Launceston** were: Sue Giles - director, Nick Barlow, Penny Baron and Trish Dunn - performers, David Franzke - sound designer, and Emily O'Brien - Production Manager

This development involved children and parents from Pregnant Young Parent Support (PYPS), Uniting *Care* Tasmania and C U @ Home Child Health and Parenting Service as well as the general public in an open rehearsal at the Junction Festival.

Sue Giles is co-artistic director of *How High the Sky*. Since Sue Giles was appointed Artistic Director of Polyglot in 2000, she has directed, written or devised ten works which have toured nationally and internationally, including *The Big Game* (Melbourne International Arts Festival, Singapore Arts Festival) and *Check Out!* (Melbourne International Comedy Festival, National Theatre of Korea).

Jess Wilson is co-artistic director of *How High the Sky*. Jessica is a director and producer of non-text based theatre. Her work is defined by its rich visual narratives and combination of multiple art forms including puppetry, physical performance and projected image. In 2004, Jessica completed five years as Artistic Director of Terrapin Puppet Theatre in Hobart where she created *The Dark At The Top Of The Stairs* which showcased in the 2004 Performing Arts Market Spotlight program, and *Frankenstein* which premiered in 2004 and performed at the Victorian Arts Centre in 2005 and the International Puppet Carnival in 2006. In 2007 she creative produced and directed *Dream Masons*, a spectacle of enormous proportions on the facade of the Salamanca Arts Centre, for the opening of the Ten Days on the Island Festival in Hobart, and *Dr Egg And The Man With No Ear*, a puppetry and stop motion animation theatre work for the Sydney Opera House, the Victorian Arts Centre and the Perth Awesome Festival. She has directed many CCD projects including *Material World* an installation in Federation Square, and most recently *Western Ring Cycle*, for Big West Festival, a series of works in where audience view, from moving buses, performances by community in their front yards. Jessica was recipient of an Australia Council professional development grant to travel to the USA and Europe in 2003 which began her international collaboration with Redmoon's Jim Lasko, and in 1998 she studied with Philippe Genty.

Sarah Kriegler is a performer in *How High the Sky*. She is freelance puppeteer and theatre director. She is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, Drama School. During 2000, she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and spent six months studying at Teatro San Martin School of Puppetry in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Since returning from Argentina, she has worked extensively as a puppeteer and in film, television and theatre. She is one of the co-editors for the Australian Puppeteer's Magazine.

Sam Routledge is a performer, puppeteer and creator of visual theatre. He has a B.A. in Communication (Theatre and Media) from Charles Sturt University, Bathurst and a Post Graduate Diploma in Puppetry from the Victorian College of The Arts. He has performed and devised productions with Terrapin Puppet Theatre, Arena Theatre Company, LATT Children's Theatre, Seoul and Kim Carpenters Theatre of Image. He initiated and co-created the object theatre production *Men of Steel*, which has toured extensively internationally and was noted in 2007 by Time Out Magazine as one of the top seven productions for children in the UK. In 2008 he was funded by the Australia Council to undertake skills and arts development with world leading Danish children's theatre company Gruppe 38, performing in their production *The Holy Night*. He is a member of *My Darling Patricia*, having initiated the Malthouse Theatre commissioned 'Africa' and with whom he is currently working on an adaption of "*Collected Plays For Children*" by Ted Hughes.

Nick Barlow is a performer for *How High the Sky*. He completed his honours degree in Visual and Performing Arts at the VCA in 2000. Since that time he has worked primarily as a puppet designer, builder and performer with Snuff Puppets, including tours to England, Singapore, China, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Hong Kong, South Korea, Germany and Taiwan. He has also worked with Polyglot Theatre (Tooth and Claw, Chookas Festival, Shopping Baby), Arena Theatre Company (The Outlookers, Gamegirl) and most recently as resident puppet designer, performer and committee member of Peepshow Inc. (Puppet Peepshow, Mysteries of the Convent, Slanting into the Void, The Hill, Aftermath). Nick also performs and conducts workshops in Japanese drumming with Toshi Sakamoto and his group Wadaiko Rindo. With this group he has performed in schools, parks, festivals and auditoriums all over Australia as well as in Fiji and New Caledonia. During this time Nick has also produced artwork and animation for theatre, film and online.

Penny Baron is a performer with High How the Sky. Penny Baron has been working extensive since 1991 as a performer, deviser and director. Penny is a long-standing member of Born In A Taxi physical theatre company, The Rhonda Movement music comedy trio and The Business clown quartet. As theatre maker and performer with these companies and independently Penny has won a total of nine awards. Most recent awards include 2010 Melbourne Fringe Festival winner of the Brisbane Powerhouse Best Production Award for *The Waiting Room*, 2008 Short and Sweet Melbourne Arts Centre for Best Female Actor, Best Production and Best Independent Theatre Ensemble for *6 Hours Later... Born In A Taxi*.

Since 1995 Penny has toured extensively to festivals in the UK, Asia, New Zealand and European Street Theatre Festivals, as well as performing regularly at home in the Adelaide and Melbourne Fringe Festivals, the Melbourne International Arts Festival and all manner of local venues and events. Penny has worked with such companies as Rawcus, Dislocate, Polygolt, The Four Noels, The Dream Masons, Shaken and Suspicious and Company 13. Most recently Penny has completely a solo residency at VUT Footscray.

Anna Tregloan is the designer for *How High the Sky*. She conceives, directs and designs her own unique work receiving public and critical acclaim. Previous creations include *Black* (Malthouse Theatre) and *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (Melbourne International Arts Festival). She also co-created *Sleeping Beauty* for Malthouse Theatre (2007) and created "*Mach*" as part of the 2000 Melbourne Festival. As designer Anna Tregloan has collaborated with a large number and eclectic mix of companies and artists. She has been awarded five Green Room Awards and a Helpmann Award. In 2006 she was awarded the prestigious John Truscott Award for Excellence in Design for Theatre. She has a Masters (with Honours) by Research in Animateuring at the Victorian College of the Arts. For two years, until December 2008, she was resident artist at Malthouse Theatre and is an Artistic Associate of the Storeroom Theatre Workshop. Her most recent productions including *Spring Awakening* for Sydney Theatre Company, *Optimism* for Malthouse Theatre/Edinburgh International Arts Festival, and *Tell-Tale Heart* for Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Andrew Livingston is the lighting designer for *How High the Sky* and a Co-director of bluebottle, specialising in lighting design and project management, from concept through design development & documentation to realisation. He is excited to be working with the Polyglot team. Bluebottle was established in 1991 as a means to support like minded individuals. Years of investigation, research and contribution within the realm of live theatre forms the foundation upon which Bluebottle continues to build. This mischievous association deploys an extensive range of knowledge and skills to influence the medium of theatre and beyond. Through Bluebottle3, Andrew has designed in creative and unconventional ways in theatres, galleries and museums. Highlights include *Headlock* (Kage Physical Theatre) and *Structure & Sadness* (Lucy Guerin Inc) amongst a huge list of credits, nominations and awards.

J. David Franzke has been involved in numerous projects as composer and sound designer including several works with Malthouse Theatre: *The Odyssey*, *The China Incident*, *Babes in the Wood*, *The Spook*, *La Douleur*, *Drink Pepsi Bitch*, *The Pitch*, and Anna Tregloan's *Black*. For Sydney Theatre Company, his work includes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, and for Melbourne Theatre Company, *Don Juan in Soho*, *The Recruit* and *Birthrights*. David's other work includes *Joyride* (Melbourne International Arts Festival 2004), *Holiday* for Ranter's Theatre, several film soundtracks in collaboration with Jonathan Mills, *Duplicate* (Danceworks), *Deep Space* with science collaborator Paul Bourke (Zendai Modern Museum for Art, Shanghai, China), and a stint as the sound designer and live mixer for the Perth International Arts Festival. David's work was nominated for best sound design at the Helpmann Awards 2006 for *The Odyssey*, and he won the Green Room Award 200 for outstanding contribution to design and technology for Anna Tregloan's *Skin Flick*.

Russell Goldsmith is the sound designer for *How High the Sky*. He is a multiple award-winning Melbourne-based Sound Designer, Composer, Audio Producer, and Audio System Designer, with a diverse body of work in theatre, film, television, commercials, radio, live music, and installation art. Recent theatre projects include *Don Parties On* (Melbourne Theatre Company), *The Nest* (Hayloft Project), *A Woman in Berlin* (Malthouse Theatre), *Total Football*(Ridiculusmsus), *Elizabeth - Almost by Chance a Woman* (Malthouse Theatre), *Acacia Hills* (Browns Mart Arts), *Optimism* (Edinburgh International Festival/Sydney Festival/Malthouse Theatre), *Exit the King* (STP/Malthouse/Company B Belvoir, including the 2009 Broadway Season), *Happy Days* (Company B Belvoir/Malthouse Theatre), *The Web* (Black Swan/HotHouse). Russell has been involved in a number of cross-platform works, including *Rosie's Secret* (a City of Melbourne Laneway Project Commission), *Panic* (an audio installation beneath Melbourne's Federation Square for the Next Wave Festival), and *A Packet of Seeds* (a thirty-minute audio narrative for BBC London). Russell's work has been recognised both locally and internationally. Most recently, his sound design for *Exit the King* won the 2007 Sydney Theatre Award for Best Sound Design/Composition, and was nominated for Best Sound Design at both the 2008 Green Room Awards in Melbourne and 2009 Tony Awards in New York.

Polyglot Theatre is an internationally renowned creator of interactive and experiential theatre for children aged up to 12 years. Polyglot's theatre is inspired by the artwork, play and ideas of children and performances feature active participation from audience members through touch, play and encounter. Polyglot's artistic works respond to the childhood need for experiences that encourage free artistic expression and an imaginative interpretation of the world. Polyglot seeks to challenge, to foster curiosity and to inspire. The company specialise in puppet theatre, large scale interactive installation work and participatory workshop programs. For over 30 years, Polyglot has been recognised one of Australia's leading children's theatre companies, and in recent years the company has been in demand internationally, playing to over 60 000 children annually on four continents.

Funding Bodies Developed with the assistance of the Arts Centre, Junction Festival, the Australia Council for the Arts and the generous support of Miss Betty Amsden OAM and Daniel and Danielle Besen through *Polyglot's Ambassadors' Circle*.

Project Summary

How High the Sky operates on three distinct levels. It is simultaneously a work for participating parents, for participating infants, and for an external audience of observers. Initially participants enter an antechamber where the heartbeats of infants are recorded using digital stethoscopes and, engagement with the three performers begins. Then they enter the performance space, defined by a large and soft floor surface, providing an inviting place for the 20 parent/baby pairs to sit and lay. In the darkness beyond, there is a perimeter of 40 observers who view the work from the 'outside'.

The above description details the eventual performance of *How High the Sky*, which is currently in development. In the showing and development included in this evaluation, up to 7 parent/baby pairs were in attendance at any one time. The performance was immersive, and involved elements of sound, lighting and visual props including balloons and streamers. In both the showing and the development, the audience were seated (or lying) on the stage space, which was covered with a soft floor covering. There was no demarcation between participants (i.e. babies and caregivers) and performer. There was no official audience for the development at the Try playgroup, however the showing at Polyglot had a large number of invited adult guests, separated from the performance space by several rows of empty seats.

There are two developments included in this evaluation. The first development took place in February 2011 at a Try centre in South Yarra. Try Australia (formerly Try Youth and Community Services) is an independent, non-denominational charity focused on giving young people, individuals and families opportunities to reach their potential. The development took place with babies from two different playgroups, both aimed at targeted populations. One was specifically for African families and the other was for families vulnerable for a range of socio-demographic reasons. From henceforth I'll refer to this as the development.



The second development was at the Cromwell Street theatre, the residence of Polyglot Theatre, and was concluded with a showing to key stake holders of Polyglot. The performance involved seven babies and their caregivers with a moderate size



audience looking on from tiered seating, which was left empty for the first few rows. The babies and parents were all known to Polyglot. One of the babies, Henry, had been present for the preceding week's development process and is the son of two Polyglot artists, including Sarah Kriegler, a performer in *How High the Sky*. This will be referred to as the showing.

Evaluation Outline

How High the Sky forms part of an overall evaluation of a selection of workshops and performances offered by Polyglot in 2011. The evaluation questions identified for this 2011 evaluation are:

- Does Polyglot's process stimulate conversation between children and adults?
- Does Polyglot's process with children inspire, challenge and foster curiosity?
- Do the theatrical experiences offered by Polyglot encourage children's agency and self-responsibility within the specific experience (workshop or performance)?
- Does Polyglot's process contribute to a culture of creativity both during and after the experience?

Methodology

This evaluation is based on the collection and analysis of the qualitative data including the following sources:

- Ethnographic field notes from February and April developments
- Interviews with 2 adult caregiver participants from February development
- Interview with Mandy Asseraf from Inner South Community Health Service – Family case work counsellor
- David Young Feedback (re April showing)
- Sarah Kriegler Feedback (re April showing)
- Interview with Sue Giles
- Video recording of April showing
- Focus group with parents and artists at the April showing

Analysis

Question One - Does Polyglot's process stimulate conversation between children and adults?

What we managed to do, was reduce parents to view things from pre-language place, we almost turned them back into uncarved blocks and from that place, they reflected on life as a parent and the lives of their children, stretching out in front of them, vast, dangerous and full of possibility. Wow, that's actually pretty impressive isn't it? Sarah Kriegler, Performer

How High the Sky, unlike any other Polyglot production, has set out to create a performance that not only includes but also frames the relationship between child and parent. This is firstly for practical reasons in that babies cannot be left unattended for extended periods of time. As such, in order to create a piece of baby



theatre adults have to be factored into the performance. This is especially so because as with all Polyglot productions, the performance of *High How the Sky* is immersive and experiential. Beyond the practical concerns directors Sue Giles and Jess Wilson set themselves the task of developing a performance that is as engaging for adults as it

is for children. In light of this, the question above becomes particularly interesting, as baby and adult are implicated in the same performance space and both are addressed by the performance as equal members of the audience.

In the context of a performance for pre-walking babies, the idea of 'conversation' is considered here as the exchange of thoughts, feelings and ideas through pre-language means of communication. As one mother stated:

We've had a pretty tough week this week and it actually nearly brought me to tears being here and how lovely it was to have just this small amount of time that was really calm with my baby and to just really enjoy her enjoyment and my enjoyment of it.

The exchange of a shared moment of pure enjoyment between mother and child, in this example demonstrates the success of Polyglot's intention to create a performance that is engaging for both parent and child, and that stimulates connection between the pair. There is evidence to indicate in the two developments included in this evaluation that there were ongoing and animated exchanges between parent and child, specifically facilitated by the performance context. One of the reported things that happened during the showing was that the parents reported that they looked at their babies differently. The frame of the performance allowed them to see their child as if through another's eyes, and several parents noted the pleasure they felt in seeing other parent's engage with and observe their own child.

The layered, dynamic and yet very often unconscious relationship between parent and baby is specifically explored in *How High the Sky*. Drawing to light the complexities of the relationship between a baby and its parent is one of the key ideological imperatives of the work. As Jess Wilson states, *How High the Sky* is about exploring parent-baby relationship, and the desire to create a piece that is a journey for parent and baby, and that impacts that relationship. One of the requests made of parents when entering the space is to ask them to experience the work (and the world) as their babies do. This intention was affirmed by one of the parent's at the showing who commented that in 'experiencing the work together and, in particular, the shifts in the landscape, you feel as vulnerable as your child'



The showing of *How High the Sky* generated 'conversation' or perhaps better described as engagement beyond the parent/baby pairs also. The connection extended to all of the participants in the space as well also to the adult audience of the piece. This happened in multiple ways. Firstly, the parents reported that their babies were interested in and responding to other babies in the space. One mother stated that her child began to cry when she heard another baby cry, even though there had been a performer imitating the sound of crying.

As well as babies engaging other parents in the performance space, the adult audience seated outside the performance space were mesmerised by the babies. As one adult audience member, not related to any of the babies, stated it, 'was indeed very compelling to watch from the outside of the space...Watching the babies' reaction's is, in a way, the star of the show'.

The story of Peter

As I watched Peter play and dance around the small, pedestrian space marked out by nothing more than masking tape and balloons, I couldn't wipe the smile of my face. Here was a child expressing deep joy at Polyglot's offering of *How High the Sky* at his local playgroup. Unlike other developments, there was no special lighting and the room was full of the ordinary and the everyday. There was music, however, and balloons and several performers. And Peter was deeply immersed in the world that had been created for him.

Peter was older than the other babies in the space, nearly 18 months, but having been held back to let the pre-walkers have the first go, he couldn't resist any longer. Peter spent about 30 minutes in the space, laughing, calling out, singing, dancing, clapping his hands, rolling around and never once looking to his mother, who was hovering close by, for any kind of reassurance.

As the performance came to an end, I sort out Peter's mother. Even before we began to speak she appeared on the verge of tears. Very quickly she explained to me that Peter has mid-spectrum autism. He doesn't play. He doesn't interact and he is rarely cooperative. This diagnosis had come only recently, and for Peter's mother the emotions around it were very raw. In this case, she was moved to tears by what she had seen happen for Peter, and when we spoke a few weeks later she added, 'Watching my child be normal for half an hour...that's so hard to get out of children with autism. That interaction he had with the other kids it was amazing. And you guys were really gentle... You just let them do their own thing and you were friendly. It was amazing, really amazing. If you can develop it really I think it will help a lot of children.'

Peter's mother went on to say that she was deeply happy watching her son during the performance, and whilst he reverted back to his usual behaviour afterwards, she was grateful for that moment, adding, 'Thank you for making my son smile'.

The doubling of baby as audience (receptive observer) and performer (active participant) is one of the unique and most successful elements of *How High the Sky*. As a result of this doubling, adults in the audience, whilst not directly engaging with the babies in the space, are given the opportunity to observe the babies and in so doing perhaps renegotiate their beliefs about the autonomy and individuality of the human baby. As one of the artist's partners commented:

...the reflective nature of the work took you places and made you think about your life and your child's life and being a parent.

To create a space in which adults think about the world of the child and their own relationship to children is a mark of success in terms of Polyglot's vision which is driven by thematic explorations of the place of children in society.

There were also moments that appeared designed specifically for the adult participants, including the text voice-over and the notes that were handed to parents randomly throughout the showing (this did not happen at the Try playgroup development). This successfully addressed the directors' attempts to provide a compelling performance for both babies and adults. As one mother stated:

That little poem that was handed me with the balloon to read, I could have died. It was amazing.

One person in the focus group after the showing described the poem as a gift

for all the hard work of being a parent. As one father stated:

I thought the poem made it highly personalised. The stress of what parents can go through with new borns, and then being in such a calming space it's quite emotional. I can't remember the text but it was the gesture of it.

There was a general consensus around this and an overwhelmingly positive response to this small but significant gesture. By providing a textual element, as well as beautiful visual images, adult participants could weave a second layer of meaning out of the piece if they so desired. As Sue Giles' states:

[We are] looking for conceptual depth – makes it easier for adults to connect and responds more respectfully to what the babies offer.

In creating a performance that is engaging for both parent and child, Polyglot achieves its aim of stimulating connection between the pairs for both are fully present and interested. For this pre-talking age group it affords a moment of intimate connection between caregiver and child in a creative, social and unique environment, unfettered by daily stresses and concerns.

Question two - Does Polyglot's process with children inspire, challenge and foster curiosity?

In response to the second question in this evaluation, I include my observations, as well as the observations of the parents and artists, of the babies' physical and perceived emotional responses to the performance and development.

A healthy baby in a healthy environment is by nature a curious creature, so in responding to the notion of fostering curiosity in babies this will be considered through a sub-question: did the performance do anything to inhibit the babies' curiosity and innate desire to explore?

One of the most striking responses from the parents of the youngest babies was that the babies followed the trajectory of the helium balloons as they were released and floated up to the ceiling. This was not something that the parents had observed before. The immersive nature of the performance assisted in creating an environment that whilst comfortable and safe, for the most part, was also new and unknown for the babies. Using multiple planes and allowing the babies to move freely in this space (for those that were mobile) encouraged and facilitated curiosity. For the smallest pre-crawling babies this was sometimes evidenced in the startle reflex, which one parent explained is a baby trying to orient herself in the space.

All adults involved, including parents and caregivers, noted the extended length of time that the babies were engaged by the performance. This was particularly apparent in the showing at the playgroup, where the babies remained in the space for close to forty minutes. In this development there was no special

lighting and so the engagement is particularly apparent. Babies, for the most part, did not cry or require feeding or distraction.



Babies from across the age range (from 4 weeks to 12 months old) demonstrated keen engagement with elements of the performance, in particular balloons and streamers. The

multiple textures were particularly successful in drawing the babies' attention and interest. As performer's moved objects into the line of sight of babies, the babies eagerly reached for them, grasping them, placing them in their mouths, making cooing and gurgling sounds in the process. Periods of intent gazing at specific elements were matched by wide smiles and contented focussing on the self. In other words, the performance drew the babies' attention and also afforded the babies space to have quiet time without distraction. This was facilitated by the changing moods of the piece, enacted through changes in lighting states and soundscape, as well as changes in the performer's engagement with the babies.

However, the performance also steered away from simply fulfilling expectations. The piece challenged both parents and babies in simple but effective ways. For example, performers would remove items from babies as the scene changed and this created a 'subversive' (as described by one parent) element that confirmed the performance's status as a piece of theatre, but without causing distress to the babies.

The parents in the space consistently commented on feeling calmed and relaxed by the space, and very often the babies mirrored this sense of calm. A mother reported that upon waking her child is normally unhappy and crying, but as she awoke in the performance space she was instantly calm and interested in her environment. Outside observers of the first development were quite shocked with how serene all the babies appeared. This was not the case in all circumstances, however, and one mother commented that her child became more animated and exuberant in the space, exploring boldly in contrast to how she behaves at home.

For the parents, the calming effect of the performance allowed them space to engage with their babies in a way that was unfettered by day to day stresses and to have a shared experience that required very little of the parent. Comments included:

I felt instantly relaxed...I felt completely calm. It was just a really lovely ambiance.

So calm by the end.

It really refreshed me and it was just really beautiful.

The immersive experience including the lighting, textures, props and changing states engaged the babies very successfully. This is evidenced by the long period of time spent in the space; the calm (even if robust) mood of the babies; the grasping, tasting, pulling, dragging interaction with the props including balloons and streamers; and the multi-plane focus of the babies.

Question three - Do the theatrical experiences offered by Polyglot encourage children's agency and self-responsibility within the specific experience (workshop or performance)?

...because there is no narrative as such, you experience the work more or less, on the same level as the baby. The words Jacob used to describe the feeling of being there was "I felt stripped bare". Sarah, performer

The unique doubling generated in this performance, of babies as both performers and audience; parents as both caregivers to their children and audience members in their own right, encourages agency and self-responsibility for both parents and babies in *How High the Sky*. The benefit of encouraging this in the adults is that this potentially gives the babies more room to experience the world of the performance without mediation by the parent. Whilst this did not happen in all cases, the performance was profound enough for the parents to certainly encourage them to engage and in so doing allow space for the baby to do the same.

Encouraging adults to experience as babies do, which is as Sue Giles puts it, 'Complete acceptance of everything all at the same time', takes the parent temporarily out of the role of authorising figure in the babies' engagement with the world of the performance. It also gives the parent permission to enjoy the experience for themselves. This was something that parents at the showing expressed:

I was in a space of whether to watch what Harriet was doing and concentrate on the light with her...but I wanted to watch all the beautiful things that were happening, which she wasn't particularly interested in.

It would be nice to be involved in the actual excitement of it rather than being the guardian.

I want to share it rather than be the one who's watching.

As has been previously discussed this piece successfully generated a shared experience that went far beyond simply having baby and parent in the same space. A further benefit of this, as illustrated by the above comments, is that whilst the pairs

are having a shared experience they are also having completely unique experiences, and going on unique journeys. As Sue Giles states:

What do they take in, what do they understand? ... [F]or me that is not necessarily the most important thing about making theatre that we all understand it. People receive information on all sorts of levels, on every level.

To release babies from an experience managed by the parent into an experience that, whilst supported, is autonomous, at its best, may take the burden of responsibility off the parent in constantly trying to make meaning for their baby. There was certainly evidence of the beginnings of this happening for some parents. In a development shortly after the showing in Melbourne, Sue Giles was able to explore the boundaries of the agency and self-responsibility of the babies.

At this development, parents were asked to leave the babies alone in the space for several minutes. Sue Giles reports on this moment in the following way:

The moment when the babies were left alone in the middle of the space was wonderful. The performers and sound artist had created a simple and dynamic performance piece with balloons for the babies alone and we could all see how engaged and present they were as the images flew over them. It was a very moving moment, where for two minutes the pure personality of each small human being was strongly present, reacting by themselves, to what caught at them and made them still, or excited or whatever – their true reaction to the world around them placed in a dramatic context.

This element of the performance will continue to be incorporated into future developments and performances. This brief moment of autonomy for the babies challenges the form of baby theatre and widens expectations of what babies are capable of experiencing and enjoying.

The quality experience, facilitated by professional performers and theatre makers, for both baby and child is one element contributing to the supported autonomy for the baby participants. The safe yet beautiful and highly theatrical space is yet another part of this equation. This extends beyond the performance itself that whilst created to ensure babies can move freely, is only one part of the continuum of experience. The time in the foyer beforehand, which was big enough to accommodate prams and had seating for breastfeeding mothers at the showing for example was also an integral part of the success of the experience in the theatre. Parents were also given an entrée to the experience (without giving too much of the 'magic' away) so that they felt confident moving into the space with their child.

Question four - Does Polyglot's process contribute to a culture of creativity both during and after the experience?

What is theatre? And what is children's theatre... and what does a baby get? ...All those preconceptions and prejudices around baby theatre were

interesting as well. And because we're working interactively, the idea of creating a space that babies can effect and be part of and then creating theatre from that was a really interesting area of exploration. Sue Giles, Artistic Director of Polyglot Theatre

Providing quality, professional theatre for babies, outside of the education or entertainment paradigms, in and of itself contributes to a culture of creativity. In acknowledging that babies are entitled to such experiences alters the landscape and much current thinking about what babies are capable of receiving and enacting.

One mother at the showing suggested that *How High the Sky* would actively encourage her to adopt the same creative practices at home with her child:

When you stay at home even if you are crafty, creative everything it's really challenging to find new ways to have different spots to play for your baby, to have different things to do. Now I'm going to go home with crepe paper and balloons because it really rocked her socks. It's really good to be able to provide that for her...

Another parent at the development at the Try playgroup was also amazed at how her son had reacted to the balloons in the performance and was intending to replicate this play at home. This mother was also very keen to see further work by Polyglot where possible because of the profoundly positive impact it had had on her child.

Whilst the response from parents at both the development and the showing was overwhelmingly positive, there was some criticism in the way that the development at the Try playgroup was managed. I raise these issues in this section of the evaluation as they could potentially inhibit this organisation working with Polyglot again and as such prevent the seeding of creativity at a community level.

Mandy Asseraf from Inner South Community Health Service, a family case work counsellor and one of the contact people on the day of the Try development voices strong concerns about the mismatch between Polyglot's aims and the sensitivities of the playgroup participants. The two playgroups participating were made up of vulnerable, isolated and socio-economically disadvantaged families, as well as several for whom English is a second language. Whilst there were several babies there were also many older children who were not able to participate in the Polyglot activity because they were outside of the age range.

Whilst Mandy believes that the babies and children did get something out the experience she also stated that she felt Polyglot was 'using our group to fit their brief as opposed to fitting the group's needs'. She also felt that the large number of adults brought into the space by Polyglot (including observers) was challenging for the playgroup participants:

If I was one of the children or one of the parents in the play group I would have been overwhelmed by the number of people and what was going on because it wasn't clear from the outset what was going to happen either. So all of those things would be natted out much better and I think much fewer people need to be there. It just felt for me...our families are disadvantaged, they are sort of coming to this playgroup cos they're not connected in their own ways, they don't have a network...and they have some vulnerabilities...And I think that providing them with an appropriate workshop that would meet their needs is more important than trying to meet the needs of the company.

From my own observations of this day I agree with several points raised by Mandy. In comparison to the other developments I have read about, this one appeared rushed with no time to develop a relationship with the mothers or children. There seemed to be some confusion about what was going to happen and it was apparent that whilst all the children wanted to participate many of them would be excluded from this activity because of their age. And the number of Polyglot staff present, not contributing to the performance was concerning.

The benefits of working with this group could have been realised over time, but in the short performance, without a workshop attached to it, the benefits could easily be overshadowed by the issues raised. Also, choosing a group of babies specifically would help in any future community developments. Mother's group with babies all of the same age, who meet weekly all over Victoria, facilitated by Maternal and Child Health nurses would be ideal.

The reports from parents at both the showing and the development attest to the broad socio-demographic appeal of *How High the Sky*, and its accessibility across differing communities and environments. *How High the Sky* is making a significant contribution to challenging notions of aesthetic experiences for babies beyond the education/entertainment paradigm, and contributing to a broadening of creative experiences for this age range.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This kind of profundity that a baby brings is quite extraordinary in to a space in terms of atmosphere. They create a really particular weather when they're all in a space together. When you're watching a baby watching things...it opens up another language again for analysing what theatre is and what it does, what that live experience does. Sue Giles, Artistic Director

The findings of the evaluation of *How High the Sky* are that the performance:

- had appeal across the age range 4 months to 18 months, as well as across varied socio-demographics;
- Was as engaging for parents as it was for the babies, and facilitated intimate connection between the adult/child pairs;
- Encouraged parents to let their children experience creatively for themselves without mediation;
- Engaged babies for an extended period of time without distraction;
- Is distinct from simple entertainment or education focussed performances for babies because of the quality of the theatrical elements including performers, set design, sound design and lighting design and as such created a truly immersive, professional theatre experience for both parent and child;
- Is highly theatrical and dramatically compelling, achieved through an aesthetically powerful transformation of space and multi-sensory engagement;
- Contributed to seeding ideas for creative engagement with babies and toddlers in the home environment;
- In and of itself contributes to a culture of creativity. In acknowledging that babies are entitled to such experiences alters the landscape and much current thinking about what babies are capable of receiving and entitled to;
- The doubling of baby as audience (receptive observer) and performer (active participant) is one of the unique and most successful elements of *How High the Sky*.

The recommendations are as follows:

- Based on the feedback of Mandy Asseraf, and my observations at the development at the Try playgroup in South Yarra, I recommend that more time is taken to ensure clear communication with facilitators and participants when working with targeted populations, before and during the event. The majority of the children in the playgroup were outside of the pre-walking baby age range. Working with this group without an accompanying workshop appeared to serve the groups multiple and complicated needs poorly. Whilst the reports from parents were positive, the negative response from Mandy Asseraf indicates that there were elements of the development, including communication and sensitivity to the environment of the playgroup that could have been handled better. A community liaison officer would assist with this.