

## **The Reason Preventing The Production of High Quality Theatre for Early Childhood<sup>1</sup>**

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### ***I am an Individual***

*I am an individual.*

*I have dignity and worth.*

*I am unique.*

*I deserve respect and I respect others.*

*I am part of the human family.*

*I have something special to offer the world.*

*I am committed to a peaceful world for all of us.*

*I make a difference, and so do you.*

*I can accomplish whatever I set out to do, and so can you.*

*I am the key to peace.*

***Naomi Drew (1987)***

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In theory, the age of the audience in the theatre should not matter in terms of quality; however, in practice one sees that as the age of the audience gets younger, the quality of the plays generally decreases. There is a common thought that very young audiences are not able to receive the plays in theatre. Children in early childhood who are younger than five are included in this group. While a play is being staged, the biggest concern generally is whether the children can understand the play. Therefore, the quality of theatre is generally seen as secondary. Since doing research in theatre for very young audiences is not common, the art of theatre as well as how very young children receive aesthetic it not well-know. There is only a minority of people believing that very young children have a special reception ability to understand the plays in the theatre. Even though very young children are seen as valuable members of their communities in a few societies, making quality theatre for younger audiences is not very widespread yet. Younger audiences, unfortunately, have only a secondary position in the theatre; thus, the focus on quality of the plays for this audience group is also secondary. When the theatre for the audiences who are under five years of age is made, the quality appears to be problematic.

The poem above is an expression of the silent cry of very young audiences who deserve to experience high quality theatre. This poem is used as a starting point to address the reasons preventing the production of high quality theatre for younger audiences. Even though there is no need to discuss whether the youngest children need theatre, the criteria governing quality theatre for very young audiences needs to be discussed. Here, it is necessary to ask a question “*What is quality?*” in theatre for young audiences. According to Reason (2010, 35), quality in theatre for young audience means:

*“Quality in theatre for children might be considered wholly or largely subjective, a matter of taste or fashion. Quality might also be applied, not insignificantly, to the physical and material standard of a production. Quality might alternatively, but more problematically, be related to the effectiveness of theatre for children at delivering various instrumental benefits whether to individual children, to schools or to communities as a whole. Quality might, therefore, be related to some universalized and timeless judgment of taste or reduced to the specific needs and requirements of a particular audience at a particular time.”*

As it can be understood above, there are no certain indicators to determine the high quality theatre for young audiences. However, in order to have an idea what makes theatre quality or poor quality, the factors contributing to and damaging the quality of play needs to be explored in the staging process. Even artists working in the theatre do not have certain fixed rules for making a

play a quality play. What Moses Goldberg says can be a starting point to eliminate the negative factors preventing the production of high quality theatre for early childhood. As Moses Goldberg (1974, 98) states, “*High standards’ in children’s theatre means basically the same thing as does ‘high standards’ in the adult theatre.*”, the discrimination between theatre for adults and theatre for young audiences or the very youngest needs to be eliminated regarding the quality.

This article uses as its methodologies the analysis of theatre theory as well as the careful critique and observation of plays at theatre festivals for young audiences in Germany, Denmark, and Turkey. The aim of the article is to make clear the ways to improve the staging of plays for the young audiences so as to ensure their quality. Although there are many reasons preventing the productions of high quality theatre for very young audiences, the three biggest issues in the theatre will be addressed in the article. The main obstacle to the creation of quality theatre for very young audiences is that very young children are not truly seen as individuals. Additionally, artistic skills in theatre are not enough to create high quality plays for very young audiences. Theatre for very young audiences also needs to be more experimental in order to understand how the youngest audiences receive theatre.

The main issue causing the lack of quality in theatre for very young audiences is that very young children are not seen as individuals. In order to improve the quality of plays, firstly, the status of young children needs to be strengthened. If adults give importance to children’s perspectives, the age of children will not matter at all. Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide (2010, 13) highlight the significance of children individuality and perspective:

*“...Regardless of voting rights, all citizens are equal members of society – inequality stemming from ethnicity, sex, social group, or age is unacceptable to a humanistic perspective. In this view, although young children do not match adults in terms of competence or experience they are still considered their equals. In relation to a child perspective, the principle of child citizenship should be adjusted to take children’s perceptions into account. Incorporating children’s points of view may help adults acknowledge them as equal citizens. Additionally, the child perspective is an aspect of the strengthened democratic status of the child: an appreciation of the child as an inviolable person whose thoughts and opinions matter and whose interests must be protected.”*

Theatre critic Lun Gardner (2002, 32) studied theatre for children for nearly twenty years, and observed that the theatre has been ignored and has not been considered to be an art in culture. Although there are many plays staged for young audiences, most of them however lack quality. In particular, the theatre for young audiences under five years of age is seen frequently in this state,

generally because these children are very young and supposedly cannot receive the theatre. Therefore, Gardner (2002, 33) asks the vital question: *“How is it possible to produce a theatre for children that is valued when children themselves are so undervalued in our society?”* First, everybody needs to answer the question. This is the first step to make sure that older individuals protect younger ones’ right to experience quality theatre in the early years.

The article, moreover, argues that besides having artistic skills, theatre artists must (not should) have knowledge of a child and childhood in order to ensure quality theatre for very young audiences. Whoever works in the theatre and contributes to the staging process for young audiences needs active experiences with the audiences. It means that the artists need to explore the lives of young children to be able understand children’s points of view. Reading books and articles about young children is not enough to understand children; the artists also need to spend time where young children spend time, such as parks and nursery schools. For instance, well-known children’s sociologist William Corsaro works in preschools to support his academic research on the sociological background of children. This is a great example of how academic research needs to be supported with field studies (Onur, 2007, 9). According to Corsaro, different points of view are required by adults so they can understand young children according to the children’s own characteristics. The artists creating plays for children also need to benefit from interdisciplinary studies in order to develop a positive perception of a child. In addition to the field of theatre, other disciplines such as child psychology, child sociology, history of childhood and education should have a strong connection with dramaturgical studies in theatre.

Tony Graham (2002, 36 – 41) affirms that the quality of plays for young audiences depends on the creativity of artists involved in the staging process and how the artists see very young children. Theatre artists first need to know their own creativity. If they do not know themselves and what they can do for young audiences on the stage, then it is hard to expect that they can make an effort to understand children and develop different perspectives of a child. If the artists working in the theatre for young audiences are aware of their potential and creativity, they will never undermine what they do for young children because their main goal will be to find ways to be creative for very young audiences. In this sense, creativity equals quality. Making an effort to know young audiences is the other point to provide very young audiences with high quality plays.

Additionally, the theatre needs to be experimental. The artists in the theatre need to see how very young children receive plays. There is no doubt that the children should be seen as active participants of the staging process. The first time that the artists see children in the theatre should not be the premiere of the plays. The responsibility of the artists is not only to work on and behind

the stage, but to sit next to the audiences. They must observe the children, have close relationships with them, and try artistic innovations in the areas of acting, lighting, stage design, music, and costumes with the children to see their responses to the theatrical signs on the stage. Therefore, the study of semiology of theatre can be seen as a great way to see how theatrical signs work on the stage for very young audiences.

Graham (2002, 42-45) claims that the making of experimental theatre needs more time by arguing that good works require more time. Quality theatre for young audiences requires more experiments, more training, more discussion, and more new methods as theatre for adults does. The more time, the better the plays will be. If a play cannot please adults, it cannot please very young audiences. Theatre artists should work in the staging process for very young audiences in the same way as they work for adults. This is a core feature of theatre for everyone.

Experimental theatre uses many different methods to create quality plays for very young audiences. It makes sure that plays have aesthetic features. Even though it is very commonly thought that very young children are not able to receive aesthetic, artistic innovations in the areas of acting, lighting, stage design, music, and costumes with the children show that very young children have special ways to receive plays. Nellie McCaslin believes that young children have potential to experience aesthetic in the theatre. McCaslin (2005, 15) clarifies how young children are exposed to the aesthetic experience in the theatre:

*“The performance begins: it depends on the players to hold an audience whose attention has already been captured. When this happens, the highest operation of the cognitive function of the imagination, essential to any significant work of art... I believe that this is the aesthetic experience when it happens. I also believe that this moment comes in early childhood. The imagined reality that starts in play moves an audience to identify with the protagonist and go with him or her to another place, another time, on an adventure. With it come understanding and a new way of looking at things. It is what the adult actor hopes to achieve and sometimes does. The child, on the other hand, achieves it in play, moving back and forth from reality to fantasy, from the present to the past, even to the future, and back again. The aesthetic experience begins right there.”*

Studies show that very young children explore life through the usage of different symbols and then symbolic expression becomes a vital part of their communication in the early years (Smidt, 2006, 60–61). For example, according to the perception of very young children, a box may not be a box; it might be a house or a shelter; a plate may not be a plate; it might be a hat or an umbrella. Real objects can naturally lose their real meaning and very young children can turn them

into imaginary objects. This is how very young children ignore the reality and use their imagination to develop a fantasy in real life. Therefore, theatre artist should benefit from the characteristics and nature of very young children in theatre. In this sense, semiotic of theatre should be an active field to explore very young children's imagination in theatre. And for the children, all real objects might lose their real meaning on the stage because according to semiology of theatre, each audience in the theatre understands the play according to their life experience and sees the objects differently. Semiology of theatre helps very young audiences use their five senses to understand plays (Kocabay, 2008, 14). Since this is a natural way to receive plays for very young children, semiology of theatre should be a significant part of experimental theatre for very young audiences. Symbols in their lives should be turned into theatrical signs on the stage. As a result, there will not be any worries about whether very young children receive plays in the theatre. Theatre artists also will not have any concerns about giving a message in the play. It can be said that the use of semiology of theatre in plays kills the direct messages while at the same it can improve the creativity and imagination in the theatre. This is the way to make a play a quality play for very young audiences.

In conclusion, in this article three main points are discussed in order to improve the perspective of how plays can be high-quality for very young audiences. Seeing very young children as individuals, the interdisciplinary studies between theatre and other disciplines giving an idea about a child and childhood, and the experimental approach towards theatre for very young audiences can be seen as solutions to the issue of quality in theatre for very young audiences. Specifically, staging quality plays for very young audiences primarily depends upon how much respect politicians, parents, and artists have for children as individuals. The perception of a child and childhood in society, cultural policies affecting and directed towards children, as well as how much a society cares for children have both negative and positive effects on the quality of theatre for very young audiences. In order to ensure the creation of truly quality theatre for the very young, it should be believed that there is no difference between theatre for adults and theatre for young audiences on the point of quality. Since being an individual does not depend on age, the quality of theatre should not depend on the age of audiences.

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## ÖZET

Bu makalede, sıfır ile beş yaş aralığındaki çocuklar için nitelikli oyun sahnelemeyi engelleyen nedenler üzerinde durulmuş, nitelikli oyun sahnelemeyi destekleyen özellikler irdelenmiştir. Çocuğu ve çocukluğu anlamak, erken çocukluk dönemi, erken çocukluk döneminde tiyatro seyircisi olarak çocuklar, erken çocukluk dönemi için yapılan tiyatronun niteliği, estetiği, oyun sahneleme süreci ve yapılan tiyatronun göstergebilimi olmak üzere yedi ana bölümden oluşmaktadır. Erken çocukluk dönemi için nitelikli oyun sahnelemenin, politikacıların, çocuklardan sorumlu yetişkinlerin ve tiyatro sanatçılarının öncelikle çocuğa bir birey olarak saygı duymalarına ve çocuğu ve çocukluğu anlamalarına bağlı olduğu üzerinde durulmuştur. Toplumdaki çocuk algısının, çocukla ilgili kültürel politikaların ve toplumun çocuğa verdiği değerin, erken çocukluk dönemi için yapılan tiyatronun nitelikli gelişimine olan olumlu ve olumsuz etkileri incelenmiştir. Toplumsal değerlerin yanı sıra tiyatro çalışanlarının sanatsal yetkinliklerini araştırma ve akademik çalışmalarla desteklemelerinin çok önemli olduğu ifade edilmiştir. Tiyatro sanatındaki niteliğin, her yaşta seyirci için aynı olması gerektiği anlayışının, erken çocukluk dönemi için yapılan tiyatrodaki nitelik sorununu çözeceği öne sürülmüştür.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Çocuk, erken çocukluk, erken çocukluk dönemi için tiyatro, tiyatro seyircisi olarak küçük çocuklar, alımlama, nitelikli tiyatro, tiyatrogöstergebilimi ve teatral gösterge.

### **Abstract:**

*This article claims that staging quality plays for very young audiences primarily depends on how much respect politicians, parents, adults, and artists have for children as individuals as well as on how they perceive child and childhood. The perception of a child in the society, cultural policies affecting and directed towards children, as well as how much a society cares for children have both negative and positive effects on the quality of theatre for very young audiences. In addition to studying the influence which cultural values have on the staging of quality theatre, this thesis argues that theatre employees should also be required to improve their artistic skills in the light of various research and academic studies. In order to ensure the creation of truly quality theatre for very young audiences, it should be believed that there is no difference between the theatre for adults and the theatre for children on the point of quality. The research indicates that the quality of theatre is same for all audiences in different ages.*



**Keywords:** *Child, early childhood, theatre for early childhood, young children as theatre audience, reception, quality theatre, semiology of theatre, and theatrical sign.*

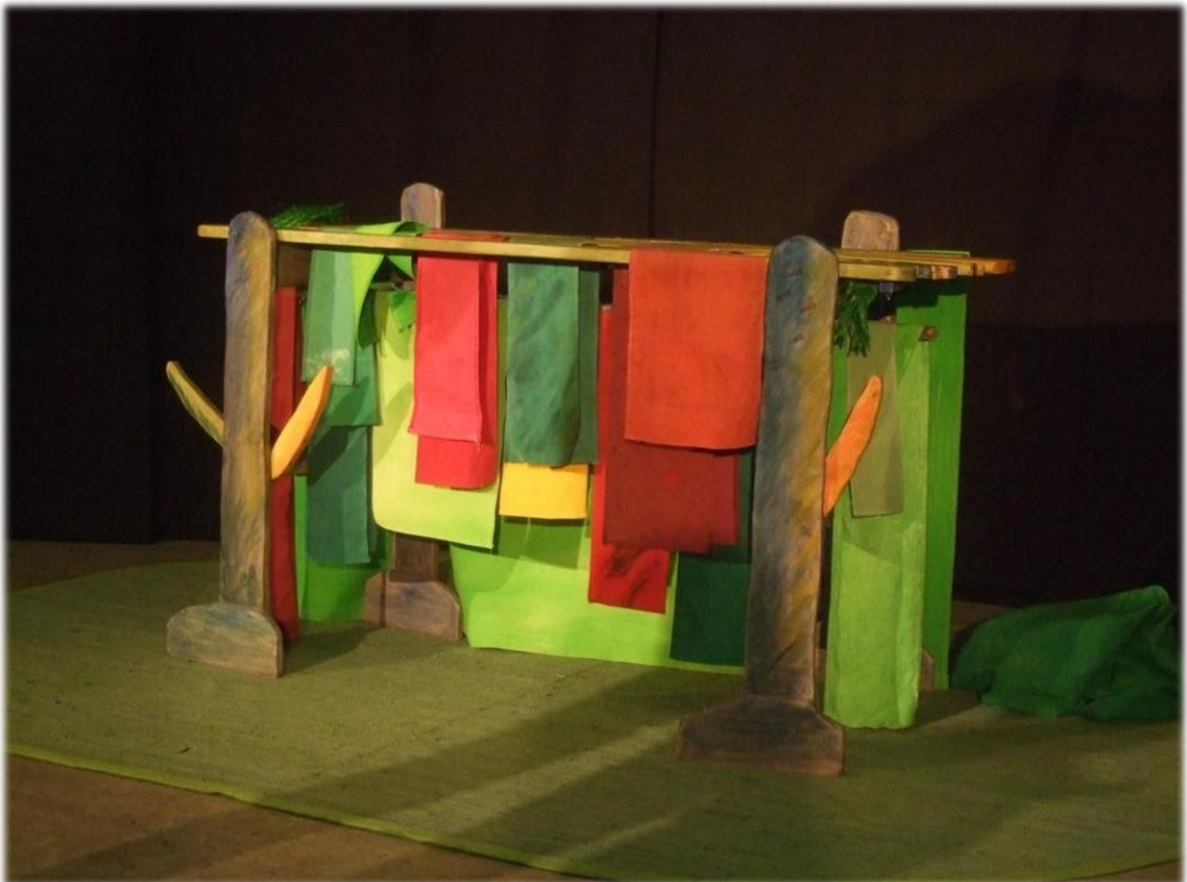
## APPENDIX

- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Audiences:** Himmelsange 2+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)





- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Quality**: Rub og Stub 3+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)





- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Aesthetics**: Rod i kunsten 2+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)





- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Symbolic Representation**: The Cubes Circus 4+  
(The photos were taken by Elad Barami.)





- The Play Analysis in the Context of a **Stage**: Guleroden der ikke ville op, 1+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)



- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Stage Design**: Snø Øjne, 0+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)





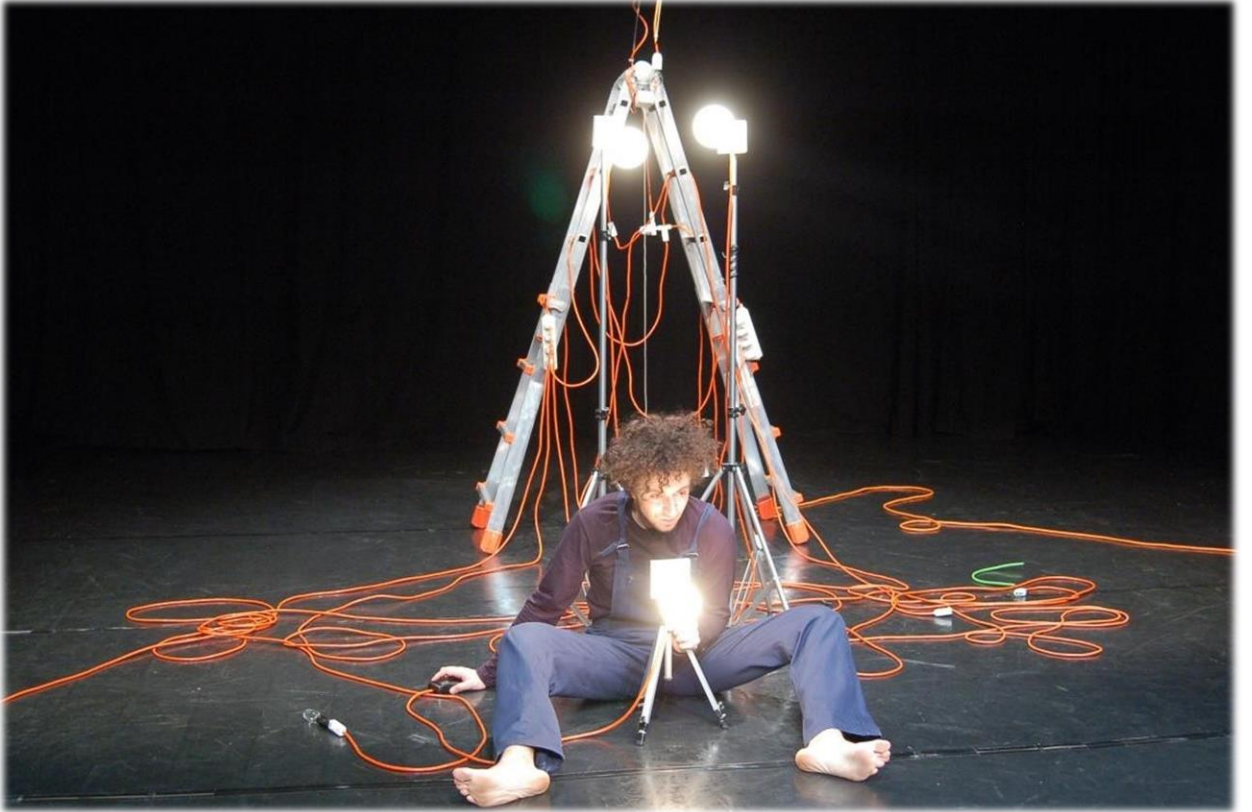
- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Stage Costume**: Anziehsachen, 2+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)





- **Stage Lighting: On-Off** (*The photos are retrieved on <http://www.testoniragazzi.it/produz.php?idproduz=1>*)





- **Stage Lighting: Spot** (*The photos are retrieved on <http://www.testoniragazzi.it/produz.php?idproduz=76>*)







- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Stage Lighting**: Anima, 4+ (*The photos are retrieved on <http://www.meridiano.dk/anima/presse.htm>*)





- The Play Analysis in the Context of **Stage Music**: Das Pferd aus Blau, 4+ (*The photos by Hanife Schulte*)



