

A Child's Play

Making Theatre for Children

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The third bell rings and the house lights go down signalling the start of a show. Sounds of Shsh...shush can be heard over the excited voices of the children. Parents and teachers alike try to quiet the children with little success. As darkness engulfs the audience, the booming voice of Girish Karnad does the trick. Adults are reminded that mobile phones must be switched off. The children settle into their seats breathing into the space just as my fellow actor swings into action with his kazoo. Claps, squeals and laughter follow. The show has begun.

(Chippi, the Chipkali, Ranga Shankara, 2018)

Purpose-built spaces for children are a part of a city's overtures towards its young citizens. In Bangalore, these spaces include school compounds, children's libraries, bookshops, play areas in city municipal (BBMP) parks and residential complexes. In addition, Bal Bhavan in Cubbon Park and *Makkala Koota* in Chamarajpet are examples of larger spaces in the city which were dedicated to children and childhood.

Public or private, indoor or outdoor, these bright painted spaces are part of the city's invitation to its children. Children's theatre can be described as a large umbrella with diverse activities including theatre performances (theatre primarily for an audience of children whether performed by children or adults), workshops, storytelling, school performances, puppet shows, pantomimes and more. Conducted in English, Kannada, Hindi or a mix of these and other dialects and languages, they are expressions of the multicultural character often attributed to the city. In the face of significant odds, children's theatre is sustained by a small group of theatre practitioners passionate about theatre and its transformative possibilities for children. Uppermost amongst the challenges that theatre makers face, is the absence of affordable spaces for performances.

Purpose-built public spaces for children, which might be thought of as the natural home for theatre performances with regular programming, have fallen into a state of disuse over the years. Added to this, purpose-built *theatre* spaces in the city offer limited

programming for their young patrons. Young audiences are not factored in when these spaces are designed, making them unsuitable for a range of performances. Hence, theatre performances for children in the city are infrequent and accessible to few children. And while Bangalore fares better than most other Indian cities, it is far from providing a majority of its children a consistent and regular fare of theatre experiences.

Children's theatre productions, by which (for the purposes of this essay) I mean theatre productions designed and performed by adults exclusively for children below 12 years, have steadily grown in number over the past decade and half in Bangalore (excluding the past two pandemic years). In 2004, Ranga Shankara in J.P. Nagar, opened its doors with the promise of a play a day. A performance space dedicated to theatre, Ranga Shankar was set up to cultivate the theatrical life of the city by Sanket Trust, a non-profit organisation established in 1992 by a group of eminent theatre personalities in Bangalore.



Figure 1. A buzzing bee mesmerizes Chippi
(Source: Ranga Shankara)

Recognising the challenges for children's theatre, Ranga Shankara launched its *AHA Theatre Festival for Children* in 2006. Spanning two weeks each year, performing troupes from all over the country and across the world, arrive in Bangalore to introduce the city's children to rich theatrical traditions. The shows are for a range of audiences - from toddlers to young adults.



Figure 2. Does the Piggy tail look good on Chippi?
(Source: Ranga Shankara)

For the two pandemic years, the festival was held online, providing a different experience, but in June 2022 the festival returned to the familiar physical spaces at Ranga Shankara. And with the start of 2023, Ranga Shankara has committed to having theatre performances for children two Sundays each month for the entire year.

In this essay, I look at two performances - *Tsuuinn Tapak* (2018) and *Chippi, the Chipkali* (2018), that I was part of as theatremaker and performer respectively to examine the nature of children's theatre performance. *Tssuinn Tapak* (hereafter *TT*) was devised by Ashish D'abreo, Bhamini Nagaraju, Mario Jerome, Mayura Baweja, Mirra, Samudyatha Jayanthi, and Anish Victor (Director). *Chippi, the Chipkali* (hereafter *Chippi*) was a culmination of a puppetry and performance workshop with guest director and puppeteer, Gertrude Trobinger, held at Ranga Shankara in 2018. Anil B, Mario Jerome, Mayura Baweja, Punith and Surabhi Vasisht were the participants.

These two performances share some commonalities - they are devised, non-verbal and incorporate elements of participatory theatre and live music. These choices have allowed children from diverse backgrounds with varying language abilities to enjoy them. Although



Figure 3. Queue for an 11am school show (Source: Ranga Shankara)



Figure 4. *Ee Gida Aa Mara* - for the youngest audience
(Source: Ranga Shankara)

considered best suited for children between ages of four and six years, older children have also found them to be engaging.

My understanding is that specific programming for children signals to its young audience that theatre space and time belongs to them which in turn constitutes the child audience (with the accompanying adults) as a specific entity with its own rhythms and responses.

The foyer, the café and the stairways leading up to the theatre - the young audience fills these spaces like cake batter. Conversations and memories of previous theatre shows mingle with the anticipation of what to expect. Five performers weave their way in and out of the gathered guests, inviting children to play a game, solve a puzzle or marvel at a magic trick. Multiple posters of upcoming shows for children, artwork from the summer camps with children and installations that speak the child's language free the children as they explore the multiple spaces as their own. (TT, 2018)

An awareness of this extended space and time, where little happenings can unfold and small bites of theatre magic foreground what follows after, is essential for creating theatre for children. Early discussions amongst the devising group for *TT* led to choices that focused on creating a whole experience of the event, rather than the defined beginning and end of the show in the designated performance space. These playful encounters might have appeared disruptive as children ignored the calls of accompanying adults to stay in line or quiet down.

Yet the smaller group of children and adults arrived at their own rules for engaging with the performers and each other. In addition to the usual rituals of gathering, waiting, finding one's seat and other theatrical conventions, the children also learned to regulate themselves around others. In my view, this sets the dynamic for participatory elements of the performance.

While these early experiences are useful in anticipation of young patrons' return to theatre in the years ahead, it also reconfigures the expectations of the spectator/ audience and their relationship with the performers and the theatre performance.

The performers flow into the theatre with the audience and seat themselves amongst them. On stage is a box of different colours with a light focused on it. The announcement to switch off mobile phones is heard. The house lights come on unexpectedly. Could this be a mistake? A few children gasp as one of the performers rises from his seat from amongst them and points to the box on stage. He makes his way towards the stage with a gesture and a sound to express his excitement at having discovered this mystery box. Other performers follow suit repeating their distinctive gestures and sounds of surprise, glee and wonder, and stop when they reach the box. What happens next? (TT, 2018)

One of the challenges facing children's theatre is the need for identifiable 'takeaways' from the experience. Children's theatre often points to the familiar benefits of educational and/or moral learning and entertainment as justification for the deployment of resources that a production entails. The early exposure of children to television, film and online media means that theatre productions must bring more to the table than the retelling of familiar stories and fairy tales. As a live encounter between the performers and audience in an actual physical space, children's theatre provides opportunities that are unique and irreplicable. This understanding led the TT devising group to discard the idea of creating a piece based on story, plot and character. Focusing instead on the child's experience, the group decided to put together a set of encounters which would serve as invitations to its young spectators to be part of the action.

A paper plane lands in the midst of the audience. A child picks it up and throws it back. The performers gather round the plane and look at it. They look up at



Figure 5. Foyer and cafe, Ranga Shankara (Source: Salila Vanka)



Figure 6. Entrance to Ranga Shankara (Source: Salila Vanka)

the children. A game has been set up without any words being spoken. Magically, the mats are opened and tens of paper planes fly across from the stage into the audience space. The children pick up the planes and throw them back. The barrier demarcating the performers from the spectators has been broken. (TT, 2018)

The imagining of the theatre space as live and contiguous with the physical presence of both spectators and performers underlies the setting up of this and other encounters throughout the performance. It is a choice that embraces uncertainty and the possibility of improvisation on the part of performers in some situations. The composition of the audience and their seating often plays a part in how long sequences like the paper planes play out. The airplanes and other play experiences that are part of the show sometimes go on for a longer time as children resist settling down when prompted by the lead performer of the sequence. When this resistance is felt by the performers, they allow the children some time by continuing the play. Eventually, the children arrive at shared understanding and come to a place of pause. This pause and restraint is, I believe, an extension of the dynamic that emerged earlier in the small encounters in the foyer.

Chippi, the baby lizard and the Girl are both terrified when they discover each other. The Girl chases Chippi who finds refuge in a box. The Girl continues to beat on the box where Chippi is hiding and Chippi's tail falls off in fright. She screams in horror and runs away. Screams and laughter are heard in the audience as Chippi emerges slowly from the box and looks around for the Girl. The children are quiet as they watch her looking around fearfully. They wait for her to find out what they already know - that she has lost a vital part which has consequences for her survival. (Chippi, 2018)

Amongst the many things children learn from theatre performance - theatrical literacy, the understanding of dramatic convention and a specialised vocabulary are well known, but added to these is the ability to sit and watch a performance without distraction. This is a

laudable objective given the short attention spans that are frequently ascribed to children growing up with technology.

The tail market is bathed in colourful lights. Many animals appear to beckon Chippi to try out their tails. A cow, a tiger, a horse, a fish (yes!), a pig and a magnificent peacock tail allow her to become something/someone else. (Chippi, 2018)

This setting ignites the imagination and curiosity of the young audience. The animal is represented through its tail on stage but the image that arises in the mind is whole. Animal sounds and movement allow the children to complete the image of the animal that Chippi encounters in the market. The children embark on a journey of exploration and adventure with Chippi in the hope that she will find a way to become whole again. Unlike *TT*, *Chippi* follows a linear narrative with a story, plot and protagonist. However, the shifting of roles of the two performers, as travelling entertainers and actor-puppeteers (assuming multiple roles) stretch the conventional bounds of realistic representation in the theatre and fire an artistic impulse in the audience.

Children make honest audiences. To engage these young audiences however is not a simple matter. A theatrical performance unfolds as a perceptual encounter with invitations to experience a range of feelings. A young audience is able to appreciate the nuances of this encounter to the same extent as an adult audience. As an art, theatre mimics life to the fullest extent, incorporating the material of life (gestures, action and speech) within it. Besides affording children a unique participatory experience, it has the potential to help them develop a better understanding of themselves and a world around.

The need to respect child audiences is greater than ever if theatre has to fulfil its potential as an art form for its young members. Towards this end, theatre-makers, writers and performers must dig deep to understand the complex world of the child. The creation of universes that embody and extend the magic of a child's imagination and depictions of the complexities of their worlds are likely to find resonance and reward for both the performer and the audience. It is imperative that children's theatre speak with and to children and not down at them.

This dialogue with children as active participants, must then spark the rethinking and reinvention of the city's spaces and resources. Making space for children in our cities is essential, literally and figuratively. And Bangalore's promise to its children needs fulfilling.

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