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TOWARD AN ETHICAL PRACTICE:
CHILD PERFORMERS IN
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE
FOR ADULT AUDIENCES

SARAH AUSTIN

ABSTRACT

This article responds to the recent and rapid rise in the practice, within contemporary theatre-making, of creating new performance work for adult audiences featuring children as performers and collaborators. Within this work there is a tension between the desire for a representation of the authentic voice and lived experience of the child performer and the poetic function of the performance. This question of the place of authenticity in work dogs much performance work created by professional artists with children for adult audiences and can shape the way artists approach the rehearsal process with child performers. I examine the creative and aesthetic strategies of creating work with child

performers, and consider the pedagogical frames of actor practice that underpin this process, asking what an ethical dramaturgy for contemporary performance with children for adult audiences might look like.

The last ten years has seen the rapid rise of contemporary and experimental performance works that feature children on stage as performers and collaborators, and that are created specifically for adult audiences. We have seen children giving haircuts to adults, children in performative conversation with detained refugee children in Nauru, a political party created by children to address children's policy concerns, one-on-one performances with children in small rooms, and children enacting epic biblical fables. These are all performance works that have had successful (in some cases award-winning) seasons in Melbourne over the last two years. These works are critically acclaimed, some are made by Australian artists and all stage ideas of childhood and children that challenge or intervene in the way we are conditioned to perceive childhood.

As a practitioner working in this space for over a decade, I find myself responding to these works with questions regarding the ethics of creation, including how child agency in the process is approached and balanced with the ambitions of an adult artist who is responsible for the dramaturgical frames that surround the child performer. From the perspective of creative practice, the question of how artists approach the task of working with children as performers in experimental works for adults is pertinent, and it seems timely that

scholarship considers what might constitute an ethical practice for these works. There are also important considerations about the value placed on the ‘authentic’ voice of children in these works, which I will briefly examine, and the tension between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘staged’ that speaks to the dominant discourses and representational practices of childhood.

In this article, I will begin by looking at prevailing conceptions of childhood and children and how these ideas inform representational practices in theatre that features children. I will then provide some overview of historical practices involving children in theatre and provide context for the phenomenon of children performing in contemporary performance for adult audiences. To illustrate my argument on ethical practices for this work, I will look specifically at two recent case studies of performances featuring children and created for adult audiences.

The first example considers the Melbourne theatre troupe The Rabble’s performance *Lone* (Arts House, June 2018), which featured a series of one-on-one performances by child performers for an adult audience member. I use this case study to consider how this performance frames the child performer and intersects with prevailing notions of childhood and children and problematic ideas of ‘authenticity’.

For the second example, I reflect on my observations of the rehearsal process for Melbourne-based theatre company Fraught Outfit’s award-winning performance work *The Book of Exodus I*

(Theatre Works, May 2017). I look specifically at how the creation process this company used to devise the work engaged in the ethical questions regarding agency and power in both the collaboration and framing of the work.

CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

There are a number of different ways of approaching an analysis of how dominant thinking around childhood and children will shape our understanding and interpretation of them in performance. Childhood is a concept which has been articulated and defined by artists, social commentators and theorists throughout history. The understanding that childhood is not simply a biological reality but a cultural construction was articulated in 1960 by French historian of childhood Philippe Ariès.¹ More recent childhood scholars point to increasingly conservative and anxiety driven attitudes towards the vulnerability of children,² and it is possible to argue that these understandings have been used by artists to exploit our collective anxieties and concerns. In their book *Theorizing Childhood*, sociologists Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout (1998)³ scrutinise and analyse the social discourse around children and childhood and bring together major developments in the study of childhood and social theory. While they identify models of childhood dominant throughout history they also acknowledge the dynamic nature of the field and the problematic nature of positioning children as ‘other’

while speaking on their behalf. They argue that the ‘colonised child’ is a child defined by adult concepts; that children have been spoken for and about by a growing field of professionals and have been forced to accept their position as a moral imperative.⁴

The practice of creating experimental and contemporary performance brings all these potent symbolic and political representational notions around children to bear and echoes the more recent paradigm shift in childhood studies that posits children as ‘socially and biologically unfinished bodies’⁵ towards children as agents who are shaped by but also have the capability to shape society.⁶ Performance studies scholar Isis Germano argues that the current interest in child performers by theatre and dance practitioners provides a fertile ground to examine childhood’s complex relation to the production of normalcy and strangeness regarding the human.⁷ Childhood itself is a material social practice shot through with the effects of the social, political and environmental context. A child in a performance context intersects with (and therefore sometimes frustrates or alters) representational practices and can destabilise some of the underlying neoliberal and heteronormative logic that underpins their image. For example, the common image of the child as ‘a hope for the future’ imagines the child as part of a temporality that progresses in a linear fashion; the child is an unfinished being, in a process of becoming and existing in a vacuum outside of history and outside of adulthood.⁸

Childhood studies scholars have more recently suggested that the child as a discrete category is disappearing as representa-

tions of children move from simple to sophisticated and reflect the acknowledgment in international law that children are not merely *becomings* but *beings*.⁹ These notions situate childhood as an affected material and social practice. Further, the colonised child and its particular symbolic potential can extend to the child performer. As scholar and theatre practitioner Natasha Budd has pointed out, over the last twenty years childhood in a performance context has been overwhelmingly represented as a ‘potent symbolic tool for the communication of particular adult concepts with little or no reference to the realities of their own lived experience’.¹⁰ Budd suggests that we can not know about children or childhoods except through representational practices.¹¹

CHILDREN IN THEATRE

The historic involvement of children in the entertainment industry has been reliably surrounded by controversy.¹² In the mid-1800s, prior to the introduction of compulsory education, children were employed in a broad range of roles across the entertainment industry: in pantomimes, dramas, ballets, musicals, circus and cabaret acts, and in street performances.¹³ Audiences of this era expected to see and delighted in seeing children performing in the theatre, and performance troupes featuring children were immensely popular. During this time, audiences saw the rise of the famous child actors and, as a British theatrical trade paper of the time noted, this was

‘an age of juvenile prodigies ... juvenile musicians, juvenile acrobats, juvenile reciters and juvenile actors and actresses’.¹⁴ It is important to also note that contemporary theatre scholarship argues that the theatrical work in which the children were participating in Western cultures, including Australia, in Victorian times framed the child actors as possessing adult levels of insight and understanding that ‘contradicted reformist ideas about acceptable childhood experience’.¹⁵ The performances were often playful, bawdy and sexual in nature, and the child performer was fetishised and constructed around adult anxieties and concerns. Notions of childhood innocence was both enacted and undermined in these performances.

Popularly, the framing of children in these works was as either ‘naughty or nice’ or both, thus emphasising the symbolic potential of the child to be either wicked or innocent¹⁶ and demonstrating the profound ambivalence about the bourgeois ideology of childhood vulnerability. Noted theatre studies scholars and historians Gillian Arrighi and Victor Emeljanow, in their wide-ranging 2014 book *Entertaining Children*, chart the relationship between the often exploited nature of the child as both performer and as consumer in the entertainment industry from the nineteenth century to contemporary times.¹⁷ They position the child performer in early nineteenth-century stage drama as an historically visible site of cultural tension sitting somewhere between precious object and exploitable entity.¹⁸

While children have been employed variously as skilled performers and ‘scenic adornment’¹⁹ in a range of artistic practices

over the decades, their function is often as a symbol of innocence or wickedness, or they serve as reminders of our own mortality or as placeholders for possible futures. These opposing dominant imageries of wicked and innocent obscure many complex realities and instead symbolise broader social ideals relevant to the particular context and political climate.²⁰

In contrast to children working as performers in the entertainment industry, the idea of theatrical outreach to young people has a long history within Western cultures, either as part of an educational context, or as an applied creative strategy for personal or community development, or even as an approach used to develop future theatre audiences and patrons. Beginning with the pedagogic instrumentalism of Theatre in Education, its transformation into Theatre for Young Audiences and development into the more democratic and collaborative practice known as Youth Arts, these systems and institutions all underpin any approach to ethical creative practice with children in theatre and therefore provide a relevant contextual landscape to the contemporary phenomenon of children in performance for adult audiences.

Traditionally understood as a creative process that uses drama to enhance and support classroom and curriculum-based learning, Theatre in Education (TIE) has its roots in the UK education system, but eventually moved on to broader contexts across the globe, including in Europe, America and Australia. The origins of the practice of TIE can be connected to the growth of contemporary political theatre

and postdramatic theatre practice. TIE inspired a wide range of participatory and collaborative theatre models with children and young people, designed to encourage and empower them to make their own choices and investigate things for themselves. TIE's original basic model involved trained actors going to schools and working in halls or classrooms, with either a scripted work (usually 'issues' based) or less often a participatory, devised work (also 'issues' based), and leaving teachers with resource packs to follow up the performance event with learning activities over the following week.

While this model has evolved since its genesis in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, there are still many theatre companies in Australia and the UK who continue this practice, the relative value of which is recognised by continued government investment in such school-based theatre programmes. Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) was a practice that emerged from TIE, and a number of notable companies around Australia – including (but certainly not limited to) Windmill Theatre, Patch Theatre and Polyglot Theatre – were founded with the explicit mission of creating quality contemporary performance work specifically for children and young people. These companies started deliberately seeking the active involvement of young people in the creation and evaluation of their work, and over the decades, Theatre for Young People (TYP) artists and theorists, in the UK and Australia, have engaged in an ongoing discourse that recognised the historical exploitation and limiting representations of children and young people in the theatre²¹ and child performers on stage. Resisting the mainstream

model which would position work for young audiences inside an Education arm of their programmes, rather than as part of any main season, these artists began to make work that has successfully shifted dominant opinion within the field toward an ethos of empowerment and agency of young people. This raising of awareness with regard to children and young people's right to personal sovereignty shifts authorship of theatrical works into the hands of young people, and provides a platform for their voice in the theatrical landscape.

As this growing interest in a child's cultural agency and capacity develops, in an intersecting and related field, companies such as Shopfront Youth Arts and Australian Theatre for Young People (Sydney) and St Martins Youth Theatre (Melbourne) were making new performance work under a participatory model known as Youth Arts (YA). Although existing outside of the formal education system, these creation models were informed by educational pedagogies that valued child-centred approaches and the concept of a child's independent and unique voice. Gaile Cannella argues that child-centred pedagogy, as an ideology, is difficult to challenge because it draws on progressive values such as democracy and individual freedom.²² Cannella further argues that the terminology within the practice evokes a sense of 'goodness' and is deeply embedded in current early childhood teaching practices. Across the 1980s and 1990s and into the 2000s in Youth Arts, work was being created through collaborative models that aimed to render the adult artist 'invisible' as they worked to facilitate child experience.²³

In 2007, there were 21 federally funded youth theatre companies in Australia. By 2016, and in line with cuts to the arts across all sectors from a conservative government, this number had been drastically and devastatingly reduced to four.²⁴

Over the past decade, it is possible to map a series of distinctively different creation processes in YA which start to shift away from the principles of participation engagement and its positive benefits to young people and children – and in particular, to marginalised or at-risk young people – and toward a more political dramaturgy of disruption, subversion and intervention and an emerging aesthetic that inserts the voice and perspective of the child into a context in which it is not normally seen or heard. These practices are a collaboration between adult professional artists and position children as artistic collaborators in their own right, which is a departure from traditional notions of mentorship, stewardship, pedagogy and guidance that have long been key planks of youth arts practice. The rise of these practices within YA can be linked to the simultaneous demise of traditional youth arts companies, as articulated in the quote above by Fraser Corfield, the Artistic Director of Australian Theatre for Young People, in Sydney. A tension exists between the growing desire of adult contemporary artists to work with the symbolic potential of children on stage, and the need to underpin this engagement with an ethical practice that recognises children's

rights to cultural and civic agency and engagement. In the next two sections, I use the case studies to examine how these works negotiated this tension, through both the framing of the child in performance and the process of creation itself. I also argue that performances such as Fraught Outfit's *The Book of Exodus I* and The Rabble's *Lone* suggest we are developing practices of looking at and comprehending children that acknowledge their cultural agency and seem willing to get beyond the child as the object of adults' desires and fears and to reach towards something new.

CASE STUDY ONE: *LONE* BY THE RABBLE IN ASSOCIATION WITH ST MARTINS YOUTH ARTS CENTRE

In *Lone*, a work that premiered in June 2018 at Arts House in Melbourne, performance collective The Rabble collaborated with youth theatre company St Martins to create a series of bespoke, one-to-one performances for adult audiences featuring eleven child performers in eleven different spaces. Designed as an experience that allows adult audience members to enter the private, imaginative world of a child, the performance is part-installation, part-theatre and was co-designed by The Rabble artists in response to each child's particular conceptualisation of loneliness and being alone. As part of the child-safe protocols attached to this work, audience members are requested to present photo identification on arrival and are advised

that these details will be kept on file for five years. Audience members are then allocated with a number that they wear on their clothing, they line up in two rows and they enter the space one by one. This process works to create a feeling that the authority of the adult is already being destabilised. The space entered is filled with small white houses, reminiscent of beach shacks but without the colourful façades. Once you find the room number that corresponds with the number on your shirt, you are invited to place a set of headphones on, and enter the small, white house. Eleven different rooms, and eleven different performances then unfold, lasting for about half an hour. In my particular experience, I entered a space with thick velvet blue curtains adorning the walls, and a replica of a famous painting, a portrait of *The Crying Boy* from a 1950s series of Italian paintings of small, teary-eyed children. If you google this painting, you discover that popular myth believes it to carry a curse whereupon it jinxes its unlucky owner.



FIGURE 1: *LONE* BY THE RABBLE AND ST MARTINS YOUTH CENTRE, ARTS HOUSE MELBOURNE, JUNE 2018. PHOTOGRAPHER: PIER CARTEW.

Lying on the floor in front of me, springy with tension and yet apparently asleep is a small child of about eight years of age. The child is covered with a white blanket that is immediately reminiscent of a hospital sick bed. Eventually, as a soundtrack that brings together rain, classical music and the howling and barking of wild animals plays in my earphones, the child in front of me wakes, and explores his space on all fours. After prowling around behind the curtains, he leaps toward me as if he's a lion and then covers himself in the blanket, lifting it and peering at me every few seconds. It is both creepy and sweet. Eventually he sits in front of the painting, gestures for me to join him and to look at the painting. He then places the blanket over my head, disappears out

of the room as it descends into darkness, and I listen to classical piano in the dark under a blanket, enjoying the tension of being truly alone but not yet lonely for a few minutes.

My particular experience of *Lone*, and the room I visited, presented an interplay between the ideas of childhood innocence and a more sinister idea of wickedness encapsulated in the painting that dominated the room design. There was a dual operation of meaning situated throughout the work, so the experience of the child prowling on the floor in front of me and roaring at me was both playful and menacing. Throughout the half-hour experience, the theatricalisation of the child and childhood confounded the adult's gaze, making adult spectators aware of the contingency and instability of their perception and, consequently, of our understanding of ourselves as stable and autonomous knowers of the world. It created moments of rupture and contradiction that speak to queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton's argument that beneath the seemingly positive cult surrounding childhood, the ideal of childhood innocence works to establish the child as not (yet) human and turns the child into a strange and monstrous being.²⁵

There are also moments in *Lone* when the performers and creators attempt to immerse the adult into the world of the child. As the blanket is placed over my head by the child performer toward the end of the performance, I am reminded of all the blanket cubbies I made when I was sick as a child, and how my own children now do this today. With the blanket over my head, I experience both

the isolation of childhood and being somehow cut-off and lonely, and a connection with my own childhood. I have also replaced the child performer in the work, since I am now in the place where he once stood, performing the same action. The child performer has inhabited and depicted this space; rather than *acting*, they have *enacted* ‘childhood’ and ‘child-like’ and in doing so complicated representational practices by revealing what underpins them. Instead of the children and young people appearing as vulnerable, fragile or innocent, their presence in these eleven pieces throughout the work *Lone* reinstates their capability to shape the performance as they play a key part in how the work is not just produced but also received. The ideas at play in the work, of subconscious connections and heightened performance styles, are an aesthetic strategy in the performance, creating liminal spaces between adult audience and child performer in which the spectator experiences a remembering of their own childhood through the vehicle of the child on stage.

The fact that they are not professional actors highlights their live presence, throughout the performance, and I am very aware of my own presuppositions and expectations on this performance. I find myself asking: Has this child chosen this portrait to be in the room? Is this blanket from his home? What part of this connects to his ‘real’ experiences of childhood loneliness and aloneness? Paradoxically, however, the presence of ‘real children’ onstage can also work to obscure the fact that they are not present ‘as they really are’ but are being staged for us. Instead of accepting the presence-effect

of children as given, I argue that we need to ask what presuppositions, desires and fears lead us to accept their presence as real and natural at different points, while we may reject their performance as unnatural and untrue and therefore theatrical when they do not match our expectations.²⁶

CASE STUDY TWO: *BOOK OF EXODUS I*

During a three-month period between April and June 2017, theatre company Fraught Outfit worked with performers Sol Feldman (8 years old) and Tarana Verna (11) to develop a new work called *Book of Exodus I*. Sol and Tarana became ‘Cast A’ for the performance. From May to June over a six-week period, the company additionally worked with Malik Keegan (11) and Ezra Justin (12), who were the show’s ‘Cast B’. I had the opportunity to observe the rehearsal and production process between April and June and to interview key creatives throughout. I was looking specifically at methodologies of creation that fostered ideas of the cultural agency of child performers and utilised a rights-based approach to creation. *Book of Exodus I* is a 45-minute performance work that centres on an abstracted and poetic exploration of the Old Testament’s Book of Exodus. The performance tackles the story of the Israelites’ at times violent and bloody deliverance from slavery in Egypt and is a largely wordless two-hander that positions the oppression of the Israelites as a metaphor for oppression by the patriarchy.²⁷ The show situates

the past as an embodied and inscribed history, sometimes even metaphorically carving the story into the flesh of the child performers.

Although a very different theatrical experience to *The Rabble's Lone*, this work also presented ideas of the dominant and opposing imaginaries of childhood innocence and wickedness, and the performance also disrupted ideas about the real and the performed, acting and enacting. However, what was of particular interest in observing the rehearsal process for *Book of Exodus I* was the work that the artists put into recognising and subverting existing power

dynamics within the space, their care and mindfulness about how decision-making and informed and progressive consent with children



FIGURE 2: MALIK KEEGAN AND EZRA JUSTIN IN *THE BOOK OF EXODUS I*, BY FRAUGHT OUTFIT, THEATREWORKS, MELBOURNE, 2017. PHOTOGRAPHER: KATE DAVIS.



FIGURE 3: SOL FELDMAN IN *THE BOOK OF EXODUS I*, BY FRAUGHT OUTFIT, THEATREWORKS, MELBOURNE, 2017. PHOTOGRAPHER: PIA JOHNSON.

might be working as the performance was created. Specifically, the dichotomy of authority and subordination that would be familiar to the adult–child social relations we understand today was strategically addressed through a number of generative practices and rehearsal room routines. A key part of Adena Jacobs’ and Fraught Outfit’s process is the collaboration with Associate Artist Alex Walker, a theatre-maker and professional artist with particular expertise in working with children and young people. As Jacobs explains:

Over the years we have been collaborating with Alex Walker, a brilliant youth arts practitioner who has played a central role in the process. Through Alex’s expertise and focus, we are constantly thinking about how to create the most supportive and engaging framework for our performers. Although I have approached the work on this trilogy with the same level of rigour and creative risk that I apply to an adult cast, working with young people does require very particular skills. It has been essential for us to have Alex in the room, and part of the entire process.²⁸

As such, my observations during the creative process reveal that Walker is a constant presence in every rehearsal room, involved directly in each activity or improvisation and present at every show in the season, and the conduit function that she plays between the adult artists and child performers is critical. It is uncommon for companies

working with children in this way to identify a particular artistic role within the collaborative framework designed to bring youth arts expertise to the project. In this collaboration, Walker's role is often one of translator, working individually with each child to aid their use of lived experience and knowledge to better interpret complex requests from the director. This conduit role, a role of translation, assists in the development of a 'conceptual roadmap' for child performers by providing a range of interpretations (kinaesthetic, verbal, visual) to whatever concept or content is being suggested and by removing any barriers to understanding that may be present.

Other strategies designed to address the power imbalance between child performer and adult artist included the daily institution of 'circle time' – literally the professional artists sitting in a circle on the floor with the child performers – which was used as a debrief tool at the end of each session or activity. Led by the child performers, this circle acted as an equitable and mediated space for young people to safely express their felt and intellectual experiences and responses to the devising process and to a work with trauma at its core. As a researcher in the space, I too sat within the circle during circle time and had an opportunity to witness the function of this moment from the perspective of inclusive theatre. In an interview with the children during the creation phase of *Book of Exodus I*, I asked them about what the circle time offered them in terms of experiencing that their ideas or thoughts had been acknowledged and acted upon. Tarana commented:

It makes sure that there is nothing that we don't know is going to happen. If things change, we know.²⁹

In keeping with the idea of empowering the cultural agency of children through knowledge and decision-making, every rehearsal always began with the mutual creation of a visual map that structured the day's planned activities, allowing time for some 'fun and games' with the children, and snack breaks, as well as sections that focused on content development for the show.



FIGURE 4: *BOOK OF EXODUS I*, DAY 13'S MAPPING ACTIVITY. PHOTOGRAPHER: SARAH AUSTIN.

Drawing on a large sheet of butcher's paper, Walker would create the map, beginning with the centre, and ask Jacobs what would be happening throughout rehearsal.

The key artists and children would be sitting around the

edges of the paper, creating images to illustrate each activity recorded. The map would then be pinned on the wall of the rehearsal space, each activity being crossed off by a child as it was completed and before moving on to the next one.

By creating and using this map throughout the process, a number of important things occur. First, the children are introduced to the structure of each day (which may be quite different from the last rehearsal, that could have been a week ago) and provided with an opportunity to hear the Director speak about each planned activity and to ask any questions they may have, or to give any input of their own. This means that the experience of structuring the day is understood as shared and democratic, and everyone concerned has a clear sense of the tasks ahead. Second, the map acts as a visual tool for children and artists to develop a shared language around the creation process. Rehearsal room strategies are named; for example, ‘frenetic/ crazy dance mash-up’ is collectively understood to represent a particular activity and this process of creating a shared language with which to speak about the work extends to the eventual performance text, which is also generated on large pieces of butcher’s paper, with sections named by the cast and pinned to the walls of the rehearsal room.

There is a tension, however, inherent in the process and the creation of *Book of Exodus I* and other performances like it: ultimately, the adult artists will make decisions about how material ends up and is framed in a work. While this may be done following some consultation and discussion with child performers, essentially these decisions are made when the children are not even present. Although this process would be common for adult performers in professional contemporary performance contexts, it may perhaps be

slightly different in a youth arts model of creation where creative decision-making is seen as more transparent and inclusive.³⁰

Related to these ideas of power and decision-making in the creative process, I witnessed a particular warm-up exercise used during *Book of Exodus I* that had evolved throughout the rehearsal process and was underpinned by inclusive theatre strategy and designed to subvert the power relations inherent in an adult-led creative process involving child performers. To begin work on the floor, the warm-up started as a follow-the-leader freestyle dance performance, where music – initially selected by Jacobs, but eventually including suggestions from cast and creatives – was randomly chosen and, with each change of song, a leader was selected who everyone was obliged to follow. Most creatives, and this researcher, participated in this warm-up process. Initially appearing as a simple way of getting the performers moving freely on the floor, the warm-up offered the children an opportunity to lead and define the action and to experience having control and knowledge (particularly when dance styles veered into modern pop moves) beyond that held by the adult creatives. It was an integral way, in an otherwise adult-led and controlled process, of handing over the reins to the child performers for a brief period and letting them lead the adults in whichever way they desired. As a warm-up strategy, it was used throughout the rehearsal process, and was also a key part of the preparation before every performance.

Adele Senior argues in her 2016 article, ‘Beginners on Stage’, that performances featuring children prompt a rethinking of the

child's potential to generate political intervention and perform acts of political agency.³¹ Senior also considers the ethical quality of children in relation to adult performers and this research considers the creation process itself as a fraught site for power relationships that require careful ethical know-how. Although the work is created through a process that emphasises cultural agency, collaboration and inclusion, *Book of Exodus I* is not a platform for children's voices or ideas, nor is it designed to showcase the lived experiences of the child performers. Instead, the work functions as a frame for the affective and symbolic representational fields that children inhabit, from the perspective of the adult. In this way, it differs from traditional youth arts pedagogies and making practices. While the creation and rehearsal room strategies that I have detailed in this case study offer insights into only some of the process of making *Book of Exodus I*, they do provide an overview of the possibilities of an ethical practice that borrows from youth arts methodologies, inclusive theatre methodologies and contemporary practices of theatre-making.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ETHICAL PRACTICE

There is significant evidence of a trend within contemporary performance-making for professional adult theatre-makers to create work that features children on stage. These collaborations with children are often part of a mainstream aesthetic, programmed as part of

major theatre seasons and international festivals across the world, and are widely acclaimed and critically well received. In the UK, for example, *The Guardian*'s theatre critic Lyn Gardner included three shows featuring children as part of her top ten 2016 theatre shows seen on UK stages.³² These works are often created by theatre-makers of significant repute but who have never worked with children in theatre before. Situating a critical understanding of why these theatre-makers have an interest in creating work for adult audiences that features children on stage, and what processes they may be using to do so, goes to the core of the questions of ethics and aesthetics that concern this article.

The paradigm of children's vulnerability and their need for protection played a critical role in motivating the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. The convention itself goes into some detail about the vulnerable status of children and their need for safeguard and special care.³³ Importantly, however, the charter confirms the evolving capacity and resilience of children and asserts their rights as cultural citizens and for freedom of cultural expression and thought. The charter is the basis for child-centred pedagogical approaches to practice in the arts and to the evolving thinking in the youth arts and theatre for young audiences sector in Australia about children and their cultural agency.

As a practitioner working with children and young people and creating work for adult audiences, I have found it useful to start articulating my own practice in terms of current methodolog-

ical thinking in social research with children and the models of participation championed that foster ethical engagement with and by children. My practice and research take a contemporary social science approach that identifies childhood as a social construction and children as competent social agents with the rights and capacities to participate in society. This approach is known as the ‘rights-based’ model of children’s participation informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In her recent platform paper, *A Review of Young People and the Arts: An Agenda for Change*,³⁴ Sue Giles, Artistic Director of Polyglot Theatre – one of Australia’s preeminent companies making performance work for children – identifies a prevailing inconsistency between the received idea of children’s role in our society and the reality of their lived experiences. She asserts that we value the *idea* of children’s freedom and cultural expression, but in a life dominated by the two realms of school or play, there are few opportunities for cultural contribution or involvement. Simultaneously, there is a growing trend for live performances featuring children on stage that enable new forms of embodiment and (literally) speak back to the prevailing images of children in Western society. The two case studies in this article provide an insight into how the child performer’s symbolic potential can be utilised in contemporary performance for adult audiences, and how artists are working with children as a potent aesthetic material.

It is for these reasons that it is important to consider what

a rights-based, ethical practice for working with children in performance – underpinned by principles of inclusive-arts practice and a child-centred, child-led pedagogy – might bring to experiences of cultural participation and agency of children and young people.

NOTES

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- 3 Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Teachers College Press, 1998).
- 4 *Ibid* 27.
- 5 Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993).
- 6 Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).
- 7 Isis Germano, 'So Cute, So Creepy', *Performance Research*, 23.1 (2018): 44–51, 46.
- 8 J. Jack Halbertstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011); Marian Wright Edelman, 'Increasing Criminalization of Children: How Did We Get Here?', *The Louisiana Weekly*, 28 November 2005. Online: http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives_1/Increasing_criminalization_of_children_How_did_we__2312.shtml.
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- 10 Budd, 'Staging Childhood', 24.
- 11 *Ibid* 28.
- 12 *Ibid* 21.
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