Starcatchers
Final Report

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see theatre: play theatre

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Summary

The Starcatchers project has achieved:

1 **Three original pieces of work (*Little Light, My House* and *Peep*) and development phase for a fourth (*Archaeology*)**

2 **150 performances for 1492 children and 1233 parents or carers**

3 **79 visits to nearby day-care and crèche facilities**

4 **An International Symposium and two presentations at major events in Scotland**

5 **Performances of *My House* at the Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro Festival, Bologna Italy, the largest festival for Early Years Theatre in Europe**

6 **Six creative artists who have become more skilful, knowledgeable and creative at working in theatre for 0-3s**

7 **A project manager who has gained production and management skills as well as knowledge and understanding of early years practice**

8 **An established organisational structure for early years theatre in Scotland**

9 **A theoretical framework for early years theatre which is distinctive to Scotland**

10 **A theoretical framework for early years theatre which makes links with contemporary interdisciplinary performance art**

11 **An approach to researching early years theatre which is embedded in practice and formative**

Summary

1 Three original pieces of work (*Little Light, My House* and *Peep*) and development phase for a fourth (*Archaeology*). All were suitable for under 3s. *Little Light* and *My House* were more suitable for the older end of this age phase. The final piece, *Peep* was considered most suitable for 1-2 year-olds and very suitable for children across the whole age phase, thus fulfilling the project aim of devising work appropriate for the birth to three phase.

2 150 performances for 1492 children and 1233 parents or carers. The performances mostly took place at North Edinburgh Arts Centre, bringing local communities in to the centre. Some of the pieces were performed elsewhere at festivals and on mini-tours.

3 79 visits to nearby day-care and crèche facilities. Successful partnerships were made with two local childcare settings where artists went to work with the children. One setting brought children in to the Arts Centre on a regular basis.

4 An International Symposium, two presentations at major events in Scotland and performances in Bologna, Italy. These events raised the profile of the project nationally and internationally. They informed and developed wider understanding of theatre for 0-3s. Further events and dissemination are planned beyond the life of the project.

5 Six creative artists – Andy Manley, Vanessa Rigg, Heather Fulton, Greg Sinclair, Katy Wilson, Ximena Vengoechea – who have become more skilful, knowledgeable and imaginative at working in theatre for 0-3s. The project supported the development of these attributes among the artists by providing:

- opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue about practice
- dedicated professional development
- an environment where new ideas and innovation could flourish
- opportunities for international networking
- an extended period of continuous time for creative work

6 A project manager who has gained production and management skills and increased knowledge and understanding of the early years theatre field. Rhona Matheson's role changed over the course of the project, starting as 'education officer' and then increasingly taking over full management of the project. Equipped with this experience and knowledge, Rhona will continue to develop this professional pathway. Successful development of early years theatre will depend upon entrepreneurial managers with a portfolio of relevant skills, knowledge and experience.

7 An established organisational structure for early years theatre in Scotland. Starcatchers now exists as a project accommodated within Imaginate that is dedicated to the development of early years theatre. As yet emerging. Starcatchers is being well supported by its links with other organisational structures dedicated to early years theatre [Imaginate, Polka Theatre and Small size].

8 A theoretical framework for early years theatre which is distinctive to Scotland. The research strand adopted a theoretical approach which is derived from the work of Prof. Trevarthen at Edinburgh University. The analysis arrived at a proposition for two forms of engagement for children aged 0-3 in theatre: absorbed engagement and interactive engagement. These forms of engagement informed the creative artists in the design stage and gave them a lens through which to interpret the young children's participation. These ideas might be communicated to wider audiences in a more accessible form as; 'see theatre; play theatre'.

Summary

9 A theoretical framework for early years theatre which makes links with contemporary interdisciplinary performance art. Ideas of interactive installation initiated in the project proposal were developed through the project to culminate in the performance piece, Peep. These ideas can be theorised through reference to contemporary writing on installation art and children's play.

10 An approach to researching early years theatre which is embedded in practice and formative. Traditions of arts evaluation and current emphasis on evidence-based evaluation tend to emphasise an external, end-point, objective approach to evaluation which can only benefit the project at its conclusion. This evaluation/research sought to connect with the process of practice in an interactive way in order to support the development of the work. New processes for researching children's theatre were initiated in this project which can be applied in future projects.

The main challenges faced by Starcatchers project were:

1 **The financial difficulties experienced by North Edinburgh Arts Centre**

2 **A tension between in-house work to develop performance pieces and the work in local settings to connect with the community and to action the research brief**

3 **Tension experienced by the creative team between exploring and developing ideas and arriving at a completed project. No room to fail.**

1 The financial difficulties experienced by North Edinburgh Arts Centre resulted in a period of instability mid-way through the project. The organisational difficulties at NEAC were absorbed by the project manager and thus were buffered from impacting significantly on the project itself. However, it created a period of stress for the project manager.

2 A tension between in-house work to develop performance pieces and the work in local settings to connect with the community and to action the research brief. As is commonly the case with project briefs, it had ambitions on several different fronts and these were less easy to bring together in practice. The project went through a number of re-adjustments to manage these differing and sometimes conflicting dimensions built in to the original brief.

3 Tension experienced by the creative team between exploring and developing ideas and arriving at a completed project. Creative artistic activity inevitably contains this tension between creative exploration and selecting and deciding to arrive at the final piece. The creative teams expressed frustration at the short time available. However, the subjective experience of 'too little time' is perhaps always the case in creative processes.

1 Introduction

The Starcatchers project was a two year pilot project funded by NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) and the Scottish Arts Council which aimed to explore the creation of theatre for children under the age of three with their parents or carers.

North Edinburgh Arts Centre undertook this project in three ways:

(1) by engaging an in-house creative team of theatre practitioners and artists to devise theatre-based installations consisting of drama, storytelling, dance and song;

(2) by establishing relationships with national and international theatre companies who helped to bring innovative theatre styles and techniques to the project;

(3) by developing a research team who worked alongside the project to help explore the nature of the work and propose its potential impact on young children.

Context: National

Since the turn of this new century interest in providing theatre experiences for very young children has expanded rapidly across the whole of the UK. This interest has been driven by a number of different influences which began to connect and flow together. Ideas of the competency and agency of babies and very small children, new concepts of theatre arts, increasing concern over community cohesion and social disadvantage and a new value placed on creativity and cultural activity provided the right mix of conditions in which new types of theatre for babies and very young children could emerge. These ideas are briefly described in the sub-sections below.

Revised conceptions of babies and toddlers

In the 1990s advances in brain scanning techniques enabled a wave of new studies exploring the brain activity of babies and very young children. The results of these studies challenged prevailing assumptions that babies were merely unfeeling and unperceptive and did little more than sleep and feed. These studies fuelled ideas that babies need stimulation and interest to develop greater capacity and that there is a window of opportunity in the earliest years when the brain develops through environmental stimulation. Thus ideas of early intervention took hold and alongside these ideas the belief that enriched environments for targeted populations can help to overcome disadvantage caused by the social inequalities of poverty. They also offered the possibility for individual parents to enhance their child's development; to hurry it along. It should be said that there are also many who challenge these ideas of early intervention calling it the 'myth of the first three years' (e.g. Kagan, 1998).

New thinking from the sociology of childhood has also resulted in revised conceptions. Childhood is no longer seen as something 'natural' but as a period of the lifespan constructed by societies and determined by cultural context. In other words, how we see and understand small children is as much determined by social conventions as it is by biology and psychology. Childhood is being seen as valuable in its own right, not merely a preparation for adulthood, and children are considered to be active agents in the making of their own lives even from birth. For example, the 1989 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child article 31. affirms the right of children (0-18) to leisure time and the enjoyment of arts and cultural activities. Therefore babies have the same rights to experience theatre as 18 year-olds.

These contemporary ideas of the competence and agency of under 3s are reflected in policy changes to raise standards in the care and education of very young children such as the Birth to Three guidance in Scotland.

Increasing gap between rich and poor

The recent years of New Labour policies have resulted in a growing disparity between rich and poor, with increasing numbers of children living in circumstances of poverty and experiencing associated disadvantages. There is increased concern with poverty and finding ways to compensate, particularly through forms of intervention and amelioration. Many criticise the deficit view such approaches contain – that the implicit model of a 'good' childhood somehow looks remarkably like a white, middle class childhood – and also criticise the focus on individuals rather than social structure and the redistribution of resources.

Creativity

Fostering creativity is a major priority in contemporary developed societies. Creative thinking, innovation and excellence are seen as essential components of social and economic growth, and new ideas and solutions are the keys to survival in a rapidly-changing world. The arts and cultural activity offer distinct and stimulating ways of nourishing creativity.

Children's theatre in Scotland

Over the past decade, performing arts for children has become a thriving and successful area of activity in Scotland; notably through the success of Imaginate. Imaginate is an arts agency that promotes and develops the performing arts for children and young people in Scotland, producing the annual Bank of Scotland Imaginate Festival. It has invited from Europe and other International countries some of the very best international work for young audiences and paid increasing attention to programming theatre for younger children.

Starcatchers is now pioneering 0-3 years work in Scotland. In England there were already some companies developing theatre for very young and preschool children – Oily Cart for example – and theatre for this age phase is much more widespread in Europe.

Child drama and play

There is a long history of the recognition of the importance of play and the fact that while it opens doors to the art form of theatre, it is also a key feature of early human learning. Play forms the backbone of early years provision as inscribed in new curriculum documents to support early years provision in Scotland (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2005). Theatre in Education or drama in education has often been conceived as an extension of children's play.

Applied theatre/Theatre in Education

The belief that the arts, and particularly theatre, can be a mechanism for individual change has been a strong element of theatre in education, applied or community theatre. Personal change suggests associated social change. There are longstanding traditions of applied and community theatre in the UK.

Theatre in Education, however, has a clearer purpose in using theatre as an educational tool. Interactive theatre processes are designed to assist the educational process. In this respect, some aspects of the emerging field of early years theatre can be defined as 'educational' if they are intended to support processes such as language development, the improvement of communication and social skills.

Contemporary performance art

There are interesting contemporary developments in performance arts, in particular parallels between installation art and theatre. Installation art uses sculptural materials and other media to create an experience in a particular environment. Rather than art being separated from the viewer, installation art takes in to account the viewer's entire sensory experience in interaction with the installation. Both installation art and theatre play to a viewer who is at once both immersed in the sensory and narrative experience of theatre or ritual that surrounds her and yet also retains a certain separateness as the viewer.

From the 1990s artists became increasingly interested in the active participation of viewers/audiences and installation art became increasingly interactive. An interactive installation is generated by the activity of the audience/viewers on it and the possibilities afforded by the installation materials as they are arranged in time and space.

Context: European

Early years theatre is more established in some parts of Europe than in the UK. Ball, Belloli, Burn and Wynne-Wilson (2007) writing an overview of early years theatre in the UK describe how early years theatre in the UK has been influenced by the work of European companies. They explain how individuals and companies from the UK have been accessing a broader variety of work, by travelling overseas or by engaging with it in the UK at festivals or conferences. Imaginate, based in Edinburgh, has invited some of the very best international work for young audiences for its annual festival and paid increasing attention to programming theatre for early years. Other regional festivals have played their part too. Ball et al (2007) also describe how theatres, particularly those which specialise in children's theatre have programmed individual plays or seasons with quality European work. Thus these festivals and showcases have offered the opportunity to see work, network, seek inspiration and extend partnerships. They have provided a wider benchmark, shared points of reference and cohesion for early years theatre practitioners in the UK.

European work, being more established than work in the UK, provides models from which to learn. The Glitterbird Project provided a direct inspiration and model to Starcatchers at the planning stage. Glitterbird was a three-year project running from 2003-2006 funded by the EU Programme of Culture 2000. Six countries participated: Denmark, Finland, France/Italy, Norway and Hungary represented by a theatre company or academic centre from each country. The project members came together for three annual seminars in which work for children under three years of age was presented and discussed.

At the same time, however, it should be recognised that European companies are working in different contexts for theatre for the very young, at all levels from the social and cultural down to the more mundane aspects of funding and accommodation. The influences from European theatre tend to be theatrically orientated rather than theoretically, educationally or socially orientated. There are some workshops and seminars, increasingly so at festivals such as Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Tetatro in Italy, but these are focussed on practice and watching theatre pieces. Looking at the discussion papers that emerge, it would appear that discussion (not unexpectedly) is couched in the traditions of European approaches and philosophies of early years practice. Perhaps as a consequence of this influence, most of the activity in theatre for under 3s in the UK is tending to be orientated towards performance projects.

In some of the discussion of children's theatre – from Scandinavia in particular and also I notice from a new German project – there are certain perspectives on childhood and children's culture underpinning the ideas presented. These reflect changing theoretical outlooks known as the 'new' sociology of childhood which has its roots in the work of sociologists in Scandinavia and the UK. Continental and Southern European thinking tends to be rooted more in philosophical ideas of childhood and developmental psychology harking back to Piaget in which children are seen as essentially following the same developmental pathways marked out by ages and stages. The sociology of childhood emphasises not the similarities, but the differences between children, and explores the cultural contexts that influence how they grow up. Since current UK – and Scottish – early childhood practice and policy are strongly influenced by these sociology of childhood ideas it is more appropriate for Scottish theatre practice to take notice of Northern European thinking around theatre for early years. Moreover, as Selmer-Olsen has written, articulating these perspectives has been important in gaining support for the work (2006). He writes, "as a researcher I had been engaged in describing children's own perspective, children's culture and the way we look upon children and childhood in our Scandinavian societies. What I mean is that we had to prepare the ideological base for the project very thoroughly to convince people in general and the Art Council of Norway in special." This need to provide convincing rationales is very similar to the situation in the UK.

What the preceding discussion suggests, in conclusion, is that while the European context provides valuable performance models, the philosophy and theorising which underpins the work needs to congruent with both local policy and cultural contexts. While there may be some examples – I would suggest the Scandinavian examples – where theorising can provide a valuable model for Scottish theatre, it is still important for Starcatchers to be able to evolve and be able to articulate its own set of principles, theories and perspectives appropriate to the contexts in which it is working. Thus this report and its work seek to provide some of those principles, theories and perspectives.

2 Theoretical Perspectives

Studies of theatre 0-3 years

Prior research studies into young children's theatre, particularly theatre for under 3s are almost non-existent. There are descriptions of theatre practice and these may make links with theoretical positions in developing ideas and offering interpretations, but these have not been based on evidence collected and analysed in a systematic way. The written documents which emerged from the Glitterbird project are mostly of this type.

There are evaluations of young children's theatre projects in the UK. These evaluations usually serve requests from funders for the work to be monitored and assessed. These conventionally offer some background to the project, a description of what happened and feedback from participants, typically through questionnaires. The evaluations are usually carried out by external consultants who remain relatively disconnected from the project, delivering their evaluation as a final commentary. Also, the evaluations tend to focus on the kind of detail traditionally collected by theatre and performance companies as part of their internal monitoring and audience feedback procedures – such as performance attendance numbers and views and opinions expressed by participants. They are thus less focussed on the nature of the work itself, the creative process in developing the work or in attempting to understand the nature of the experience for the children.

A small piece of research was carried out in 2003-04 taking the form of a case study of what was a new venture in to theatre for babies by Oily Cart theatre company who specialise in work for young children and children with complex disabilities (Young, 2004). Framed as research rather than evaluation, this study was based on detailed observations of a number of performances. The analysis of observations sought to identify the 'active' features of the work which enabled the babies to engage. The study came to the conclusion that the ability of the actors to respond sensitively and interact dialogically with the babies within the loosely structured frame of the piece was key to its success. It also concluded that the role of the parents or childcare practitioners in supporting their child's interaction was central to understanding theatre with this age phase. While some parents entered easily into the role of play partner, other parents found this a less comfortable role to adopt. These parents may have particular perspectives on parenting borne of cultural or class differences. The contemporary model of middle class, white parenting as being a play partner with their children is not universal. Children's theatre (and other performance experiences) are often constructed around an assumption of this model of parenting.

A recent study of a theatre project for early years (spanning birth to four) linked with children's centres in Somerset took a wider lens view than the Oily Cart study, looking at not only the nature of the experience for the children, but also at participation by parents and the role of venue education staff in supporting early years theatre (Young, 2008). These three foci [Developing artistic activity, Developing audiences and Developing partnerships] were determined by the project design and aims. In this study, free-flow workshop activities based on theatrical elements of light, shadow, creating characters and non-verbal story-telling preceded a performance by the Travelling Light theatre company presented in theatre spaces to seated audiences of children with adults. The observations of the free-flow work sought to identify those elements that contributed to its success in both theatrical and educational terms. Again, the role of adults in facilitating the theatrical experiences for the children was found to be crucial.

The Oily Cart study had adopted a theoretical framework derived from contemporary studies of early infancy. These proved fruitful in developing an understanding of the babies' and toddlers' engagement. Since significant work in this field has emerged from Edinburgh University under the academic leadership of Professor Colwyn Trevarthen, adopting this theoretical framework promised not only a valuable and insightful set of interpretations for the project, but also one which belongs uniquely to Edinburgh. Trevarthen's work is also widely known within the early childhood field, particularly in Scotland, and is influential in the models of practice being promoted in policy documents and training programmes (e.g. Scottish Executive Education Department 2003). Thus there were additional and wider benefits in adopting this particular approach. The following section sets out this theoretical field.

Studies of early infancy

Research over the last few decades has found that babies respond in a coordinated and purposeful way to the communicative expressions of people who engage with them (Bateson, 1971; Stern, 1985; Locke, 1993; Beebe and Lachmann, 2002). Babies also show that they are aware they are the 'centre of attention' – in other words, that they are the focus for the communicative behaviour directed to them. They are also sensitive to the shifting emotional states that underlie these communicative behaviours and they have the ability to express their own motivational and emotional feelings. This provides evidence for the theory that babies possess what is called, innate intersubjectivity. They are sociable. They can tune in to others and with them mutually construct social interactions. The babies are not just passively receiving the communicative expressions of others nor responding merely on reflex, but actively contributing to exchanges which are shared equally and 'co-constructed'. Intersubjectivity, in turn, leads to cultural learning (Trevarthen and Hubley, 1978; Trevarthen, Murray and Hubley, 1981); the ways in which babies and young children learn to become members of their family and community.

The following five conditions play a part in the development of intersubjective communication in babies and very young children:

1. Changes in the ***physiological state***. How aroused and alert the babies are.
2. The ***seeking motives*** in the baby and caregiver. These are 'coupling impulses' in both baby and caregiver that enable them to tune in to one another by organising their movements and focusing and directing their attention.
3. The ***stimulation of interest*** in the baby. This is necessary for learning new ways to communicate.
4. ***Attachment emotions*** in both baby and adult. These express affectionate concern for well-being or states of pleasure or distress, in the other.
5. An additional ***Companionship Motivation***. This encourages baby and caregiver to share interest and take pleasure in activities centred around objects and events in the present world. They share and communicate the same intentions in small shared activities.

Trevarthen defines the overall process behind intersubjectivity in infancy as follows:

> "Babies try to engage with the consciousness of other persons, and they offer significant messages in the ways they regulate orientation to events around them in response to other persons' interests. They make efforts to share experiences and purposes and, before many months, they take up other persons' meanings through communication with their feelings and interests, fitting into the activities of others' minds by an imitative sensitivity to the expressions of their bodies." (Trevarthen, 1994 p. 219).

Gratier (2003) points out that these early communications take place within specific cultural contexts and, even at this early stage in development, babies are absorbing cultural rhythms and styles into their communications.

It appears that parent-baby communication is greatly facilitated by the mutual co-ordination of rhythmical, temporal patterning of vocal sounds. When babies make vocal sounds, the 'tuned in' parent will reply with something that picks up the same tone, timing and contour of those vocal sounds. There are innate, communicative mechanisms, which enable the baby to be aware of, and interact with, other people in phrased expressions of a mutually regulated 'narrative time' (Malloch, 1999; Trevarthen, 1999, 2001). Thus, it is not just that the parent replies, but the baby also realises intuitively that the reply matches their own vocalisations across these fundamental parameters of timing, phrasing and so on – a time-based structure which is like a mini-narrative. These mechanisms coordinate motivational, sensory, motor and intersubjective systems and they operate within a cultural framework to which they are sensitive and from which they learn. The vocalisations offered by the parent will have syllable sounds, rhythm and phrasing which lean towards their cultural style. So, for example, parents talking with a Scottish dialect will inflect their voices in a very slightly different way to English parents, even with the same syllable sounds or words. It is possible that the salient acoustic features of baby and parent vowel sounds have evolved to highlight the rhythms of emotional narratives, and to coordinate temporal aspects of communication in ways that facilitate cultural learning. Thus learning to communicate is not a simple one-way process or simple absorption of syllables and language sounds it is often considered to be, but a much more complex dialogic process, sensitive to fine tunings of rhythmic patterning, pace and inflexion.

Geertz (2000) says that we make sense of the world by constructing stories or narratives about everything we experience, and that these narratives are the expression of culture. He suggests that the mind and the culture it develops in are completely interwoven. Our brains or minds develop in a particular culture and that then becomes a factor determining the way the mind thinks – mind and culture are context dependent, 'complements' of each other. With this in mind, it is therefore particularly important that a cultural expression of 'Scottishness', whatever that might mean, is fostered in early years theatre practice – but Scottishness, not in a static, fossilised image, but one that is shifting, dynamic and forward-looking.

Fogel et al (2000) carried out research with 6- and 12-month-old babies to trace the development of smiling behaviour in typical baby games such as peep-bo. They found that at 6 months, babies showed appropriate differential smiling in response to different parts of tickling and peep-bo games. These games are played within a narrative framework in that they have a period of 'setting up', increasing excitement and then arriving at a 'climax'. Baby smiles expressed enjoyment in expectation of exact moments in the games they shared with others. This shows that emotional expression in babies is neither chaotic nor simply a reflex response, but is anticipated in dramatic narratives – little games – that have been learned.

Narratives are most commonly known as 'stories' with referential content but from the familiar example of peep-bo we can see that the term 'narrative' might also describe other forms – time-based structures that are part of socially shared playful activity. Narratives can be defined as events – vocal or gestural – which are linked together in a predictable sequence, unfolding across time and which gather in meaning as they unfold. These events can be linked in several ways, such as semantically, emotionally or rhythmically. Babies may not understand the semantic content of a story, but they may still enjoy an emotional or rhythmical narrative that takes them through familiar and expected series of sounds and/or actions, organised in familiar patterns of 'set up', 'excitation', climax and 'resolution'. There will be an understanding between a baby and their mother of the focus or 'aim' of the game and their actions and interactions will be related and have meaning in terms of the particular game that they are involved in. This ability, to look for narrative sequences, be able to perceive vocal and non-vocal events as being related to one another may help babies to make sense of things that happen around them and to anticipate what might happen next – in other words, to make sense of significant events in their world.

The research for Starcatchers took these theoretical ideas as its basis – that babies are born with the ability to seek out, perceive, understand and engage with narratives in human vocalisation and action at a basic, emotional level, and that this helps them to predict and anticipate narrative patterns.

Rhythmic vocal games – or vocalised narratives - clearly create a link between pre-verbal communication and the development of language and it may be that vowel sounds play a central role in creating this link. They provide vocalisations with a varied playfulness. This could have a simple functional purpose for the baby in that they are given an attractive and memorable structure in which they can practise and expand their own vocal range. More than this, however, playful narratives in songs and games allow babies and their caregivers to be involved in activities that are fun and playful. Music and play therapists know of the therapeutic benefits of this type of enjoyable activity (Jernberg and Booth, 2001). Playful interactions appear to increase the opportunities for mutually satisfactory interactions because they require a close coordination of timing, purpose and understanding between partners (Reddy, 2002). Rhythmic expression in vocalisations and in the emotional narratives of baby games are used by mothers for two purposes. Mothers use nursery rhymes to regulate 'state of arousal' or 'alertness', and 'stress', promoting a mutually satisfying relationship between baby and adult that aids learning and brain development (Shimura and Imaizumi, 1995; Trehub et al, 1997; Rochat, 1999).

As babies mature, toward the end of the first year and in to the second, nursery songs and rhythmical games attract the baby's awareness and thinking to joint cognitive interest in actions and objects, facilitating the learning of culture-specific rituals and skills, including language (Stern and Gibbon, 1980; Trevarthen and Aitken, 1994; Morgan and Saffran, 1995; Trehub et al, 1997; Kuhl, 1998; Jaffe et al, 2001; Rochat, 1999). It seems likely that creative and artistic performance could provide a similar medium through which children under 3 can participate in fun, creative and imaginative experiences, which will encourage and support their emotional, social and communicative development.

3 Research Aims, Design and Methods

Starcatchers was a developmental project and so, as such, was breaking new ground. The project brought many new challenges. In addition, no project stands alone but is connected to the ever-widening circles of social, cultural and political contexts – in Edinburgh, in Scotland, the UK and Europe. The proposed research design therefore suggested a 'systems view' which is inclusive of these widening circles – defined as four strands.

Strand 1: The Participants: children, childcare practitioners and parents/carers

Strand 2: The artists and the art form

Strand 3: The arts centre and locality

Strand 4: Wider practice and policy contexts

The strands are considered separately, but they interrelate and impinge on each other.

The original proposal to NESTA had suggested the research aim would focus on an assessment of long-term impact on the children. This might have been possible if a stable group of children participating across the two years had emerged from the project plans; but continuity with a stable group could not be achieved. The research team observed participating groups of children in as close detail as possible but could not obtain data about continuity or change over long periods of participation in theatre experiences. However, what has been possible through close analysis of the children's participation is to explore the ways in which they are engaged. Arriving at a well supported and theory driven analysis that could get close to the actual experiences of the young children and babies, and their engagement, seemed to be crucial. This would be an analysis that could provide material to theorise the relationship between theatre practice itself and the experiences of 0-3 year olds.

The research, therefore, focussed on identifying the forms of participation and engagement. For the purposes of this project 'engagement' (based on Stern's [1985] theory of attunement) is defined as the moments when the baby or very young child shares intimate and mutual awareness with another person (in this case the performer) or is focused with others on a shared interest (the performance). 'Disengagement' is when attention moves away from any element of the performance. These ideas of engagement and forms of participation were then cross-referenced to existing research in order to make inferences about long-term impact and potential benefits. So while not arriving at conclusions of longer-term benefit from direct empirical evidence, the research can make proposals linking with existing research findings.

There are two further reasons why a process focussed research brief was suggested as more appropriate for this project[1]. Firstly, a research design which sought to assess long-term impact must apply systematic, quasi-experimental procedures and these procedures would have been likely to distract the work from its main purposes and priorities. Secondly, the assessment of long-term impact would direct the research towards final outcomes rather than seeking to understand the detail and complexities of the project as it evolved. For a project with an explicitly developmental purpose such as Starcatchers, an understanding of process was going to be informative both to the project team as they developed the work and to the field as a whole. It enabled an iterative process of research in which findings were fed back to the project team to inform future work both within the project and beyond. At a time when change and progress in the field of early years, the arts and creativity is rapid, providing a quick turn-around of emerging findings will always be important.

1 The adoption of a process focus was discussed with Prof. Colwyn Trevarthen at the outset of the project who agreed that it was the most suitable approach to the research.

The research was therefore based on principles and processes known broadly as action research. Research in this mode aims to understand, inform and improve as a formative process. It is less concerned to arrive at summative judgements about success or impact (as is conventionally required for evaluations). Action research includes systematically collecting, reflecting on and interpreting information in an ongoing way through the life of a project. The interpretations are fed back in to the project as it unfolds and converted in to practical action when and if appropriate. Advantageously, such an approach enables the adjustment of work and adjustment of research process as it is underway.

In the current 'evidence-based' climate, there is pressure on arts organisations to adopt rational methods of research to provide so-called hard evidence of impact and outcomes. Academic researchers argue that a focus on impact and outcome necessarily raises questions about the nature and quality of the work itself and its underlying values that cannot – should not – be glossed over or ignored (Biesta, 2007). In addition, it is important to consider the particular challenges that the arts pose to methods of collecting and analysing data – including difficulties in the identification and measurement of experiences which are participatory, sensory, physical and also unpredictable. Such experiences do not subject themselves to the kinds of exact measurements that will provide the hard evidence so sought after. While arts organisations appear to chase increasingly after the holy grail of hard evidence to prove impact, academic and theoretical activity in applied arts education research is moving to develop approaches which are process focussed, rooted in artistic activity, imagination and engagement, suggesting that these processes are more meaningful in generating insight and, importantly, closer to the artistic process *per se*. For this project the methods adopted provided a means of exploring and understanding spontaneous expressions and responses from children in a dynamic and natural situation.

The four strands of the research were framed by initiating questions set out in the sections which follow:

Strand 1: **The participants: children, childcare practitioners and parents/carers**

Question

How do the children, childcare practitioners and parents/carers participate in the project events?

Children:
Children (aged 3 and under) participated in the project events in a variety of ways. In the second part of the project, the Starcatchers Creative Artists developed short performance pieces using themes and ideas taken from routines and activities they observed in the North Edinburgh child care settings. The pieces were performed to children within the nursery setting.

Children from the following three age groups participated in the event:
0-1 years 1-2 years 2-3 years.

Larger, mixed-age groups of children and their parents were invited to participate in two sharing events (Peep 1 and Peep 2). These sharing events were developed using visual art, music and performance elements.

Childcare Practitioners:
Childcare practitioners supported the work of the Creative Artists in the nursery settings. They brought children into the performance space and sat with them while they watched and participated in the events. Two or more practitioners came to each event and supported the children in participating, sometimes by directing attention or encouraging them and sometimes by attending to their practical needs. The Creative Artist talked to the practitioners about how they felt the children were responding but no formal feedback was collected.

Parents:
Parents did not participate in events carried out in nursery settings. As stated above, they were invited to bring their children along to two sharing events. Twelve parents filled in a questionnaire providing feedback on the first sharing event (Peep 1), and 57 on the second even (Peep 2). These questionnaires gathered in information and views on how they felt their children had engaged with the performance.

Collection of data during events

A range of observational methods were used:

- video recording of events and creative activity sessions (one fixed tripod camera and one roving camera);
- observation notes, drawings of the set-up and use of space;
- photographs to record spaces, equipment, installations etc.;
- informal discussions after performances with parents/carers;
- short post-performance questionnaires to parents;
- artists' notebooks and semi-structured interviews at key times during project lifespan.

Procedure

To understand children's engagement with project events two levels of analysis were carried out. Table 1 below provides information about the types of analysis carried out and its aims.

Table 1

Type	Method	Aims
Global Analysis	All the video data was reviewed from all events.	To provide an overall view of children's engagement with events, To help focus more detailed analysis.
Micro-analysis	Selected segments of film (1-2 minutes in length) were slowed down and viewed 5 seconds at a time.	To explore in depth engagement types that had been identified as during global analysis, To try to tease apart which key elements of events attracted children's' engagement.

Two video interaction guidance sessions (each lasting 2 hours) were carried out with Creative Artists. These sessions aimed to:

- Provide a link between research and creative practice,
- Provide positive feedback to artists on what elements of their work was attracting children's engagement,
- Support artists to understand the theoretical and developmental importance of their work.

During these sessions, small segments of film were reviewed selected from the first sharing event (Peep 1) that had been subject to micro-analysis and which highlighted positive elements of engagement. The Creative Artists used this feedback to inform their developments of Peep 2.

Collecting video data which is good enough for specific analysis from real life situations, particularly in the childcare settings, was a challenge. While some portions of the data showed the action of adults and responses of children in enough detail to allow for analysis, in other portions observational detail was entirely or partly obscured. It was decided, therefore, to collect a relatively large quantity of data during the sharing days in the arts centre using 3 cameras; two fixed and one roving. In the centre, the conditions for filming could be more controlled. This highlights some of the challenges for applied research methods in early childhood arts – how to carry out research which adheres to criteria of rigour and consistency without overly interfering with the ongoing activity.

Strand 2: **The artists and the art form**

Questions

How do the project team develop the art form?

What principles and/or elements for developing the art form emerge from the process?

Data collected across project lifespan from a range of sources:

- artists' notes and semi-structured interviews at key times during project lifespan;
- documents – e.g. CVs, project proposals, programmes;
- observation fieldnotes of performances;
- video recordings of performances;
- literature review.

Strand 3: **The arts centre and locality**

Questions

What kind of arts centre is this?

What kind of locality is this?

How does an arts centre which is adopting a particular focus on children and families develop its role in serving the community?

What can be learnt about the development of an arts centre and its links with the locality from the running of this project?

Information collected mainly from literature review and interviews:

- literature search: community arts centres and practices;
- information search: the locality;
- questionnaire survey to participating parents.

Strand 4: **Wider practice and policy contexts**

Questions

How does the project connect with and is relevant to current priorities, policies and practice directions with the under 3s in Scotland?

How does this work connect with and is relevant to current priorities and practice directions in children's theatre across Europe?

Ongoing information finding and communication with relevant parties by lead researcher, project manager and centre manager:

- literature and web searches;
- research conversations with experts in the field;
- project team discussions;
- attendance and presentation at symposia and conferences.

4 The Project and Productions

Project Timeline

September 2006	Project start
October 2006	Training workshop for artists led by members of Oily Cart
October 2006	Whole team visit to Glitterbird in Paris
October 2006 – February 2007	Artists Andy Manley and Vanessa Rigg make observational visits to childcare settings and develop two pieces of work.
February 2007	14-16th International Symposium with one week Oily Cart residency
February – March 2007	Performances of *My House* and *Little Light* at NEAC
May 2007	*My House* goes to Hounslow, Sure Start
June 2007	*My House* performed at NEAC for 2 weeks
August 2007	*Little Light* performed at NEAC for 3 weeks as part of Edinburgh Fringe Festival
October 2007	Creative Artist, Heather Fulton, joined the Starcatchers Project
November 2007	Two-day masterclass/workshop with a selected group of artists working in Scotland with Charlotte Fallon from Théâtre de la Guimbarde, Belgium
February 2008	Starcatchers Seminar at the Scottish Arts Council Cultural Summit
March 2008	*My House* is performed at the Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro Festival (La Baracca; Teatro Testoni Ragazzi, Bologna) in Bologna. Attendance by Rhona Matheson project manager and Creative Artists Heather Fulton and Rosie Gibson
May 2008	*My House* is performed at Bank of Scotland Imaginate Festival, Edinburgh
July 2008	Peep performances at NEAC
August 2008	*Archaeology* Development weeks at The Byre Theatre

Productions

Little Light

Starcatchers' first production was *Little Light* which Andy Manley and Vanessa Rigg created with designer Brian Hartley and composer Stephen Deazley. [See appendix 2 for the Herald Review.]

Their aim was to produce a piece of multi-sensory theatre that was experiential and held the young children's interest. It was designed to be performed to an audience of children and adults seated in a group as spectators. The piece moved through a series of short 'scenes' each with a theme. The use of lighting was key to creating certain effects.

Little Light was also presented in August as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and will tour Scotland in autumn 2008 with further performances at Polka Theatre, Wimbledon and the Take Off Festival in Darlington.

My House

Starcatchers Creative Artist Andy Manley also created a one-man show called *My House* with designer Claire Halleran and composer Danny Krass. This production explored textures and sounds and was aimed at children between 18 months and three years of age.

Jo Belloli on behalf of Surestart in Hounslow, London arranged for some workshops and a couple of performances of *My House* in Hounslow in May 2007. *My House* was also invited to perform at the Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro Festival in Bologna in March 2008 and at the Bank of Scotland Children's International Theatre Festival in May 2008.

My House has been received very well by audiences and theatre critics and through the performances in Italy and Edinburgh, invitations have been received to perform at festivals and venues across Scotland, the UK, and further afield.

Peep

Peep was developed by creative artist Heather Fulton with designer Katy Wilson, composer/musician Greg Sinclair and performers Rosalind Sydney and Ximena Vengoechea. Described by the creative team as an installation made up of items for active play and interaction with 'performed elements' this represented an important development in theatre for under 3s [of which more is written in a later section]. The piece included sound tracks and live music which were imaginatively produced and musically performed. [See review Appendix 4.]

Archaeology

This new work by Andy Manley & Rosie Gibson is currently under development and has received a small amount of funding from Small size and a New Work Development Grant from Scottish Arts Council.

5 Strand 1: The Participants: Children, Childcare Practitioners and Parents/Carers

"It's not that art/theatre makes children sympathetic, but that sympathy can atrophy if not stimulated" (Trevarthen, symposium presentation 2007)

The majority of the setting-based work (not performances at NEAC) took place at North Edinburgh Childcare and Stepping Stones Crèche. North Edinburgh Childcare had the advantage of offering relatively consistent groups of children across the full birth to three years age phase whose participation in the activities could be studied. The involvement of the children's carers, the day-care practitioners, and their interaction with the children could also be part of the focus. Day-care, by its very nature, does not include parents, but given the increasing numbers of children spending a high proportion of their time in childcare provision, it is equally valuable to look at interactions with day-care practitioners. The Stepping Stones Crèche provided further opportunity to explore how the work facilitated forms of participation and interaction between early years staff and children.

The Italian early years children theatre company La Baracca (Teatro Testoni Ragazzi, Bologna) whose early years practice is long-standing and has been influential on early years theatre in the UK, have paid special attention to work in daycare settings. They have pointed out that in many European countries children usually attend theatrical shows with their parents and family. In contrast, this theatre company have been interested in the relationships between children in nursery schools and the role of practitioners in relation to theatre experiences. Their focus derives from the belief that early years settings play a major role in providing creative and artistic processes for young children and that they act as cultural mediators.

The understandings developed through this research strand could potentially inform future models of training for early years professionals.

Children and parents

Parents

Twelve parents filled in questionnaires to give feedback after Peep 1. This feedback was used by the Creative Artist to develop Peep 2 but it also provides an interesting (if limited) idea of what parents thought of their children's engagement with the creative work and which elements of the performance parents felt that children attended to. All of the parents said that they felt that their child had enjoyed the experience.

"She loved it. When she's very happy or excited she bunches her shoulders up to her ears and grins. She did this a lot!"

All of the parents also reported enjoying the experience, in most instances as vicarious enjoyment because they liked to see their child happy or stimulated.

"Yes, I enjoyed how he interacted with the different things and the children".

"Yes, to see my children challenged".

"Loved it. As a parent you love to see your child stimulated and happy, but also I enjoyed watching the dancing/movement done by the female performer in particular".

When parents were asked which part of the set/performance/music had engaged their children, 9 mentioned the set or props, 4 mentioned the music and 7 mentioned the drama element. Two parents also said that it was the combination of elements that had engaged their child most.

"He loved the turf, gold tent, peep-bo tent with and without people inside, the straws and the paddling pool. He did engage with the performance at the start but then tailed off at the end".

"The music, in particular the cd with the child talking/babbling. He also liked the movement of the performer".

"He liked interacting with the girl and listening to the guy singing. Also the grass".

Three parents said that their younger children (under 1 year old) had not engaged with some of the more subtle aspects of the drama element.

"I don't think my son necessarily benefited from some of the performances' nuances such as the shoes and the feet...simply because I don't think it caught his attention".

"I liked how the children had the opportunity to engage when and where they wished – the music was fun. The shoe bit I think was lost on (at least children under two years old) – and it wasn't really obvious that it was happening".

All of the parents said that they liked the format of Peep (exploration and play followed by performance, then more exploration and play).

"Yes definitely. It creates a sense of comfort from which to explore. Loved this aspect"

"Yes. It allows children freedom during the performance and parents are less stressed if the children don't sit still. It is also a good way for a child to explore a space so that he/she feels comfortable and secure".

Children

Global analysis revealed that children at different ages responded and engaged in different ways with the creative events. There were individual differences which seemed to be linked to personality. Shy children were wary as they entered the world of the performance. It was unexpected, it was novel. There were strange and colourful objects, new textures and sounds. They clung on to their parent or child care worker, directing subtle referencing glances to see how both adults and peers were responding. Some of them cried in response to novel objects or sounds. More extrovert children ran in and immediately began to interact with the set, the props, and the creative artists. They moved around the space more freely, vocalising and/or chatting, asking questions and showing and pointing. These children sometimes laughed in response to novel objects or sounds. Children's responses to this aspect of the creative process were in some ways indicative of their attachment types and indeed, entering the performance space is similar to the 'strange situation' used to measure attachment types.

Global analysis also showed there are different ways in which children engage with creative performances. To explore this in more detail small samples of film were subject to micro-analysis. This enabled the researchers to build up a description of two main types of engagement:

- 'Absorbed Engagement' – children were transfixed, characterised by stillness of their body. Direction of gaze and orientation of their body was fixed onto the dramatic action. During absorbed engagement children sometimes moved their bodies rhythmically in time to the music but their gaze and orientation remained fixed on the performance.
- 'Interactive Engagement' – children explored the performance space. This type of engagement was characterised by more vocal communication and by more movement. Children interacted with the creative artists and with the props. They imitated the creative artists, watching how they used the props then trying it themselves.

Absorbed Engagement

As was expected children showed more 'Interactive Engagement' during the exploration and play parts of the events, and they showed more 'Absorbed Engagement' during the performance parts. Younger children (under two years old) tended to have shorter periods of 'Absorbed Engagement' which were interspersed with short periods of 'Interactive Engagement' as they explored the props and the set around them. Children over two years old tended to interact more often with subtle aspects of the performance. For example, they understood elements of humour not perceived by the younger children. They were pointing and showing, anticipating and predicting what was going to happen next.

Interactive Engagement

Discussion

If the actor is to engage babies and very young children in 'interactive engagement' the expression of emotion through vocalisations – either single words, very short phrases or vocal sounds – is central. The actor in *Peep* is a bird – trilling and cheeping, uttering single words, repeating them and at one time singing a short, wordless, lyrical melody. These expressive vocalisations are accompanied by bodily movements and facial expressions of similar quality and dynamic. There is a restraint, a care to keep the expressive qualities very clear and direct so that they are unambiguous. And at the same time to avoid anything too loud, or sudden, or too close in proximity which might hint at negative emotions. That said, there is nothing saccharine, artificial or precious about the actor's presence. This is a fine line to tread and the actor had to be skilful.

The performed action in *Peep* had been pre-designed to create a number of small, structured events. In many of these short events a 'narrative sequence' is created that has a beginning, a development, a climax and a resolution. Again, it was explained in the earlier section how babies and the very young can recognise and engage with non-verbal narratives of this kind. The bird takes a wash with a pretend bowl of water saying 'splash!' . . . 'splash, splash, splash' – and matches words with small flicking hand gestures of exact same dynamic and feel. These events often focus on an object – a banana, a toy hippopotamus, some keys, a bowl of water – everyday things which will be part of children's lives. All children must have experienced splashing water in the bath, or waited while parents search for keys to unlock the door. Yet, within these events the actor has some leeway to respond or engage with children if they initiate it, to be flexible to the spontaneous and unanticipated. Successful engagement depends on this very subtle attunement of one with another. A child who shows interest in the hippopotamus toy, can receive it, pushed gently in their direction. Another intrigued by the half-munched banana, can toddle in and discover it again under an upturned bowl.

As described in an earlier section, Colywn Trevarthen's interests have extended to thinking how the rhythms and emotions of interaction and sensitivity to temporal communicative expression may support cultural learning and the ability to be socialised (Trevarthen, 1995). More specifically, several researchers have proposed that the interpersonal dimension provides the foundations for language and meaning (see Trevarthen and Marwick, 1986). The sharing of pleasure, interest and excitement one with another is very important in the development of social collaboration, and, ultimately, social collaboration is essential to effective learning. There is evidence to suggest that emotion has a role in intelligence, and that emotions may regulate brain development, cognition and learning (Trevarthen, 1983). It is not that theatre for very young children is designed only with an eye to the instrumental – that its purpose is justified only in terms of its benefits to learning – but that in the current context, particularly in Scotland and in the UK, these priorities are imposed by those who fund, support and endorse children's theatre.

6 Strand 2: **The Artists and the Art Form**

One of the project aims was to 'seed a number of artists, musicians, designers' and to 'grow a body of work' (Jacqueline MacKay, presentation, symposium Feb 2007). The project has been in two clear phases with two artists, Andy Manley and Vanessa Rigg employed in the first phase and Heather Fulton in the second phase. While Andy and Vanessa collaborated with designers and musicians in the final stages of their work, Heather worked rather differently, inviting designer, musician, dancer and later an actor to work with her forming a collaborative, creative team from the start.

Professional development of artists

The project has prioritised the professional development of artists. Supporting artists' professional development is a strong theme in Scottish Arts Council policy which reoccurs in various documents (e.g. Cultural Strategy Document, 2003, Scottish Arts Council, 2007). The Cultural Strategy Document (2003) states that opportunities for training and continuing professional development are essential because many of those working in the sector do not have conventional career patterns and opportunities to engage in planned professional development are limited. Training frequently takes the form of 'on the job training or coaching'.

In this respect the project was also influenced by its close link with the children's performing arts organisation Imaginate which, according to its webpage, 'believes that a high quality skills development programme is the key to unlocking creativity and supporting artistic excellent in the performing arts sector'. Small theatre organisations or companies with no clear career structure and employing artists on short-term freelance contracts usually results in a lack of professional development. The Starcatchers project was thus aware of this possibility and sought to remedy it.

Early on the project included a visit to the third and final Glitterbird Festival/seminar in Paris (October 2006). This was an opportunity for the Starcatchers team to see some work and participate in discussions about work for very young children. Unfortunately, the group were disappointed overall with the standard of work which was presented. However, some Italian visual art installations were inspirational. They were highly interactive and provided a basis for the type of work that Starcatchers was hoping to produce. The visit thus provided some models as starting points for the development of work.

The seminar in February 2007 provided the next professional development opportunity. The artists attended keynote lectures, presentations and seminar discussions which gave them an opportunity to hear about work from elsewhere in the UK and in Europe and to develop their understanding of dilemmas, principles and theory underpinning early years theatre.

A later professional development opportunity consisted of a workshop by Charlotte Fallon from Théâtre de la Guimbarde. Charlotte Fallon has been developing performances for very young children in Belgium for a number of years and has an open, fluid approach to the creation of her work. Rhona Matheson had seen one of Charlotte's productions, 'Bach a Sable' (Bach in the Sandpit) at the La Baracca Festival in 2007 and was excited by Charlotte's work and her approach so was keen to invite Charlotte to come to Edinburgh to share this with artists working in Scotland. The workshop was more discussion based but had practical elements to it – as the creation of work for the very young is a new concept to many artists in Scotland Charlotte felt it was important to go back to the beginning to question why we should create the work and how this can happen.

Giving creative artists working on the project opportunities to see work being created by other artists and companies in the UK and Europe is a key area of professional development. Through the connection with Polka Theatre and Small size, Rhona Matheson and Heather Fulton visited Polka Theatre for a Small size Talk Time event around a performance of Theatre de la Guimbarde's production 'In The Garden'. This was an opportunity to see the performance and talk with other artists working in the UK and also with the company.

Heather Fulton and Rosie Gibson also went to the Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro Festival in Bologna in March 2008 to see a range of work and meet artists from across Europe.

In addition, the structure of the research as action research described in earlier sections has provided another dimension of professional development. As part of this process one artist, Heather Fulton, kept observation sheets in which she made notes on the exploratory sessions in North Edinburgh Childcare and reflected on the babies' and toddlers' engagement (see Appendix 1).

Innovation

It was a requisite of the NESTA funding that the project was designed to be an opportunity for the artists to develop new work, to explore, take risks and innovate.

However, the artists were required to produce work at key points during the project and they reported that they experienced this as pressure. The production of work tended to draw the artists away from work with the children's settings – the difficult balance within the project of keeping all the dimensions in balance – certainly the first two artists felt under pressure with short-term contracts, many expectations and restricted time to achieve them.

The Artists: creative collaboration and roles

From the start of the project it was felt that having two or more artists was important as this brought a wider range of skills to the project and allowed the artists to share and develop as a team. Due to different contractual arrangements Andy and Vanessa were not working together all the time. Andy Manley also developed a solo piece of work, independently.

An interdisciplinary approach, for artists with expertise from different arts fields to work together, was considered important from the outset of the project and supported throughout.

"I'm a director, but I'm very visual. I do a lot of the work myself. I enjoy making things. I think the thing . . um, the way we're working, well, it's difficult to separate each area. It's kind of hybrid art practice." (HF)

Peer-to-peer collaboration allowed for ideas are to be generated with others.

"K. Is the one I can bounce ideas off. We've got a shorthand – we've worked together before" (HF)

Although part of the role was to work in early years settings, the artists did not see themselves as educators. They were concerned to decide what characteristics and qualities of the work would engage small children but were less concerned with what the children were 'learning' in specific terms. The creation of original work was their priority. Yet the project aims for the children were couched in mainly educational terms framed by wider social gains – and less so in terms of theatrical/aesthetic gains. This resulted in a tension between the work in early years settings and the production of new work which was intrinsic to the original project proposal. It also relates to emphases and directions in the wider policy and social context in Scotland. Heather Fulton explained:

'What I'm interested in – uh, a nice experience for them, aha, yes, for them but for their parents too, having that experience together. Sharing that with parents and parents there with nothing else to do but share that event with their children.'(HF)

'Nothing about educating the parents to interact with their children?' (SY)

'No' (HF)

The challenge of definition

"theatre for babies must prompt basic questions about the nature of theatre"
(Wolfgang Schneider, key-note presentation, symposium, February 2007)

Developing theatre for babies and very young children goes hand in hand with ongoing discussions, debates and dilemmas about the purposes and aims of theatre for the very young. These touch on the very fundamental reasons for 'why do it in the first place?' And then, 'what form should it take?' Many of the symposium presentations and ensuing discussions focused on these questions.

Why do it?

Overcoming the scepticism of making theatre for this age phase is one of the first tasks, an uncertainty that even those closely involved in it may still hold in some small measure.

What values underpin it?

There generally appears to be consensus that theatre for young children deserves to have the same high standards as theatre for any other age phase.

What form should it take?

All the artists found it very challenging to create work for this age phase because it needs to have a focus on visual theatre with very little dialogue, if any. Lief Hernes, a member of the Glitterbird project, says that 'art for children can become a mirror of the image of the child you have in your head'. This thinking relates to contemporary conceptions of children as being independent and competent, as having rights to cultural experience on their own terms. [These ideas were introduced in the opening chapter.]

The questions asked:
Is it entertainment?
Is it education?
Is it about children meeting and enjoying art?
Is it about theatre meeting and engaging with children?
Is it about performing to young children – or with them?
What is the art, theatre, music of children? – not just what adults decide for them.

One of the main dilemmas built in to the Starcatchers Project is the extent to which theatre is concerned to 'teach' children things, to have an educational role. The focus on supporting communication and providing a foundation for learning in the project proposal came in to conflict with the artists' desire to create aesthetically pleasing work on its own terms which does not, in any kind of conventionally obvious way, contain educational elements. However, as our analysis attempts to demonstrate, by identifying the ways in which the theatre pieces engaged the babies and young children and then linking with existing research and theoretical thinking, we are able to propose, at a deeper level, how producing high quality, creative work which is aesthetically pleasing, is likely to have potential benefits to children's overall social, emotional and cognitive growth.

Developing the work

Both sets of artists spent some preliminary working time in early childcare settings in order to increase their experience of the age phase. For Andy and Vanessa, this consisted of some observational visits and a few developmental workshops, exploring ideas they were working on with an audience of children. Vanessa continued to work in the settings after the performances of Little Light, but although this work would have contributed to her own professional development, it did not contribute directly to the development of pieces of work.

Heather and her team worked more extensively in the settings in preparation for the performance pieces, *Peep*. Their work evolved around short, experimental, semi-improvised pieces which were taken in to the settings once a week. This work advantageously gave the creative teams the opportunity to explore ideas, try them out and discover the children's responses.

A difficulty emerged between the weekly visits and the considerable time it took to think up and produce these pieces and also around the ability of settings to accommodate the work in terms of space and schedules. The ratio between preparation time and the number of different groups of children who could participate in the piece once completed, was not feasible or cost-effective. Spaces were small and often taken up with other equipment (highchairs, tables etc.) and everything the artists needed had to be portable. The pieces operated as 'one offs', as theatre performances do, and not as a sequence of sessions that have some kind of continuity and progression built in to them. Again this relates to the dilemma built-in to the design of the project that emphasised arriving at completed performance pieces as 'product' and work as 'process' in the settings.

Structure

In broad terms, the structure of the Starcatchers pieces comprised a series of short events that changed relatively frequently with perhaps some thematic connection. The pieces tended not to have a strong narrative line in the conventional sense of 'story' but the short events had 'narrative' structure as explained earlier. The events were often repeated to form sequences so that they became recognisable and actions might begin to infer what followed. The events were sometimes repeated with small variations to increase interest.

The theatre pieces incorporated all the key elements of dramatic performance, but with important qualitative differences:

- Movement – physical movements, often repetitive and clearly defined
- Gesture – carrying a clear and strong intention
- Visual imagery – key objects that were used as a focus for actions, usually small, everyday objects
- Language – sometimes the work was non-verbal, sometimes vocalisations, single word or short phrases were incorporated or elements of song
- Music and sounds – were integrated to accompany movement, actions or as a consequence of actions with objects

The pace of the work was generally slow and measured. The number of elements introduced at any one time was limited to avoid overload, and there was a certain deliberateness and clarity of definition to the elements. These characteristics allowed the very young children to perceive and focus on what was happening.

The events challenged children cognitively. They may have presented the children with quizzical situations, briefly acted out before them that they need to work hard to understand. There was a high element of playfulness, humour and spontaneity in the pieces that stimulated, amused and aroused the interest of the children. Being playful with children is well recognised as the bedrock to learning and a disposition for playfulness underpins creative development.

Suitability for age

A short feedback/questionnaire form given to parents after the performance of Peep 2 collected in some basic information. On this form parents were asked to indicate the age for which they thought the performance was most suitable – 0-1, 1-2 or 2-3.

0-1	1-2	2-3	0-2, 1-2	1-2, 2-3	All ages	No response	Total
4	20	7	7	7	6	3	54

From this simple survey it can be seen that according to the majority of parents the work was most suitable for one- to two-year-olds. A very few thought it suitable for babies up to one-year-old and some for two to three-year-olds. Therefore the work fulfilled the Starcatchers project aim to design work suitable for the under 3s age phase, and also drew the age phase down to children younger than the prior pieces of work developed within Starcatchers. Andy Manley's piece, *My House*, was considered to be most appropriate for children aged over 18 months.

Fisher, writing in the Guardian newspaper in 2008 offers a valuable point. He wrote that 'the younger the audience gets, the more focused the shows have to be'. Oogly Boogly, a team creating movement pieces for babies and the very young has a window of six months. If children are younger than a year, reports Fisher, or older than 18 months, they would be either insufficiently mobile or too good at talking.

It's not that children a little older or younger than the target age phase cannot gain from performances, but that there is likely to be a small age phase of six months or a year for which the piece is the most suitable. The rapid and striking developmental changes which take place during the age phase birth to three account for this need to differentiate theatre pieces very specifically to narrow age bands.

Narrative

The issue of narrative continued to be an interesting challenge. The work tended to evolve as a series of small events that had some logical coherence within each event but did not necessarily connect one with another, save in offering variation of dynamic, pace, people, objects. Such is the need to create narrative in the sense of stories, with referential content, that the events often evolved in the artists' minds in to a loosely structured narrative, even if this was neither apparent, nor necessary to how the pieces were presented. With the babies and very youngest, the events, the interest in people and objects and watching what happened, if interesting and dynamically varied, was engaging moment by moment. Children around two years and older would have been trying to give meaning to what they see in relation to what they know and understand of their world – and they could, at a little older, recognise that the meaning may be to amuse and be funny.

Installations

In asking the creative team to describe the final Starcatchers piece, Peep, they called it an 'installation with performed elements'. Although other work for babies and toddlers in the UK has been devised around the idea of an interactive installation, dismantling the conventional spacing of performers and separate audience, Starcatchers developed the idea of installation further.

Children and parents entered a large room where the space was fluidly defined. Two areas where the 'audience' might settle, grassy verges with cushions set out, were implied, but not fixed and children were free to move and roam around the space in which a number of items and objects had been set out, partly as a kind of set, partly to stimulate exploratory play. After a period of play, the main character, a bird, performed a short series of events and then invited the children to explore again – mainly, now, a house structure with interesting peep holes and windows. After another period of exploration, some performed elements again occurred culminating in an upbeat dance for everyone to join in.

Across all the artistic fields innovative artwork is increasingly being created from mixed forms of representation, where the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic combine to create new types of art. In recent years there has been a significant shift from works of art to be contemplated by a detached 'audience' to works of art as generated within a social context. In contemporary theatre, interactive installations and performances, the 'viewer' of the work is replaced by a 'participant' in a relationship with the artists and art works.

Claire Bishop, in writing about contemporary installation art says (2005: 11) 'because viewers are addressed directly by every work of installation art – by sheer virtue of the fact that these pieces are large enough for us to enter them – our experience is markedly different from that of traditional painting, sculpture, or theatre. Instead of representing texture, space and light, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience. This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer, the audience, must walk into and around the work) and on a heightened awareness of other people who become part of the piece. Many artists and critics have argued that this need to move around and through the work in order to experience it activates the viewers, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached).'

Peep directly activated the participating group of parents and their children. The movement of the actor required the audience to shift attention and to look here and then there to track the activity of the bird. Different audience members saw from different viewpoints and sometimes may have seen only part – or missed some small events all together. Unlike conventional theatre, the 'audience' had to sometimes make a special effort to see or enable their children to see.

The design of the room also sought to set up relationships between the objects set out and the active, playful participation – privileged over detached contemplation more conventionally associated with theatre experience. In this installation the 'audience', the participants were invited to act, to play with the objects provided and, in a sense, 'to perform' play. In children's play there is artistry, there is spontaneity and imagination which become part of the piece, elaborated collectively. When yellow feathers floated down towards the end, this happening would have been nothing if the parents had not vocalised 'wow' and 'oo' and the children were not directed to look up, holding out their arms to catch them, scrambling to collect them up and play tickling games.

Peep's emphasis on first hand, direct, participatory experience produced a kind of heightened awareness of body, of self, place, the children and relationships to children. It aligned closely with contemporary, middle class (white, Western) parenting as a self-conscious, considered process in which parents expect to be play partners to their children, to enter in to their worlds and take pleasure in doing so. Play and parenting have become, in themselves, kinds of performance. Stimulating and structuring children's play is a dramatic event that contemporary adults find entertaining and enjoyable, in and of itself. One small boy, for example, confident enough to run back and forth and explore without inhibition, briefly took centre stage, drawing amused laughter from all the adults watching.

What is interesting is that the theatre is, of course, not for the children alone, but for children with an adult. While it is designed to be theatre that will be appropriate for the very young, the part played by the adults, particularly in the case of Peep adults as parents rather than day-care practitioners, is also crucial (Young, 2004). How the actors involve the parents – or not – as the case may be, and the parents response to that invitation is the interesting dimension of theatre for under threes. The parents bring their children, with certain anticipations and then during the piece they convey their own emotional responses, of pleasure, anxiety, disinterest or whatever. There are, then, many faceted, potential spaces in the triangles of parents, children and actors. Many parents reported that they were working hard to 'read' the situation, to work out what was required of them, how much freedom and control they might allow their child. There were some parents who appeared to shield their own slight anxiety by holding the child firmly on their lap, or some who took pride in their child's adventurousness and curiosity and encouraged it. A child's behaviour is always implicitly reflected back on to the parent. For some, insecure about their parenting competence, this reflection back may increase anxiety, and a display of their parenting in front of other adults may add to that stress. However, mostly parents are very proud of what their children do, their pride is increased by this 'reflection back' and they find it an endless source of pleasure and enjoyment to watch their children play. As a brief aside, while we discuss the involvement of parents, it is fair to say that the work tends to speak to a community of parents who have something in common, an interest in the arts and an interest in forms of active, playful parenting. The greater challenge is to speak to wider communities of parents whose interests align less directly with the opportunities offered by theatre experiences such as Peep.

7 Strand 3: **The Arts Centre and Locality**

After opening in 2002, North Edinburgh Arts Centre developed a strong programme of activities for children and families in Edinburgh. North Edinburgh is an area which has high indices of social poverty, yet close by are areas of affluence. The arts centre held an ideal of 'democratising the arts' and had found a gap in programming for children and families.

Millennium funding threw up buildings that were not core funded. Much money had to go in to the general upkeep of the NEAC building in an area where vandalism is widespread. The building stands as a kind of fortress. Few windows view out to the neighbourhood; light streams in from skylights and the entrance is tucked up against the wall of a library. A small garden area is surrounded by high, spiked fencing. Building an arts centre in an area of deprivation does not automatically mean that people from the nearby community access it. The middle classes will read newspapers, the internet, pick up leaflets and actively seek out enrichment opportunities for their children – and have the means and transport to make attendance possible (see also, Young, 2008).

It was, throughout this project, as implied already, challenging to create a relationship between the in-house work and theatre pieces and the out-house work. This was not for want of valiant efforts. The relationship with North Edinburgh Childcare, a more longstanding connection, remained core to the project and a new connection with a nearby Crèche was formed. While the National Cultural strategy of 2003 may state that National and local cultural organisations need to work in partnership with the community from which their audience is drawn and increase cultural participation, such aspirations are difficult to realise in practice. The objectives of arts projects such as Starcatchers that aim to work within the community are complex and sometimes conflicting, motivated as much by social as by artistic objectives and intended to address problems of social disadvantage.

Matarasso (2000) suggests that success in community-based arts work comes from long-term commitment and is likely to be built from a combination of regular, sustained and often unglamorous work matched with higher-profile, more intense short-term initiatives. Individual projects are likely to have limited value, except within the context of sustained secure programmes. There was a commitment to provide some regular work in local settings in the project, alongside the short-term productions of work. But the work in the settings mainly provided development opportunities to support the production of final pieces of work in NEAC. Nicholson, writing about applied theatre, poses some important questions about the wider role and significance of theatre in society. She writes:

'in many ways the application of drama to community contexts forces us to confront questions about the ethics and efficacy of performance which are relevant to all theatre practices but often remain at the level of rhetoric or advocacy. Today's suppliers of [applied] theatre – the producers and performers – have to cater for a diversity of contexts with very different audience dynamics, and volatile, sometimes hard-to-predict audience expectations. Often, indeed usually, the audiences are entirely unfamiliar either with theatre of any kind, or with the genre that is being applied to them. Vital for all applied theatre practitioners is a sensitivity to and understanding of the specific demands of the context and the dynamics and expectations of the audience. Equally vital, then, is having or developing a range of theatrical strategies, forms and conventions to deal with them'.

Nicholson's ideas suggest that for Starcatchers to have engaged genuinely with the locality would have made greater demands in terms of questioning its ethics and practices, and having a wider range of strategies and theatrical forms to offer. The small-scale study of participation in a children's theatre project by communities in market towns of Somerset for the arts organisation Take Art (Young, 2008) suggested that even where there was considerable support and encouragement, parents living in circumstances of social disadvantage were unlikely to attend theatres for children's performances, seeing it as 'not for them' and having little potential value or relevance for their children. Two mothers attending a Peep performance who lived close by to NEAC suggested much the same reasons when asked in interview why she thought other mothers living in the locality were not attending.

To compound these challenges, in the summer of 2007 North Edinburgh Arts faced a funding crisis and possible closure of the Centre. This was due to an unsustainable 'stand alone' approach to delivery and high staff numbers and costs. During the autumn of 2007 changes made to the financial organisation and core staffing has stabilised the situation. The building continued to house the Starcatchers project throughout this period of instability. These changes were not entirely detrimental to the project, however. The arts centre building offered excellent studio space – in the second year better even than the previous year, since it was now completely unimpeded by other activity - in which the creative team were freed up to work innovatively. Studio space has been cited as a priority for supporting the development of live practice (SAC, 2007). In this respect the building itself held a kind of symbolism as an empty space; a place to engender creativity and innovation.

The difficulties faced by NEAC were resolved during the period August 2007 to February 2008, with the Board and management addressing the longstanding financial and management issues. At the time of publication, a restructured management team are in place to work towards the continuation of this community and cultural asset for North Edinburgh residents and artists alike.

8 Strand 4: **Wider Practice and Policy Contexts**

This project has been congruent with the National Cultural Strategy (2003) and Scottish Arts Council policies in many respects. The National Cultural Strategy document of 2003 emphasises creative innovation and excellence for 'all walks of life for all age groups' and stresses that culture can make a contribution to Scottish executive priorities such as social justice, economic development, regeneration and equality. The strategy is concerned with the image of Scotland as a modern and dynamic society and states that cultural activities should be supported to achieve and sustain quality practice.

While these policy statements are broad and there is little to argue with here, arts organisations such as Starcatchers may need to tread a careful line between social intervention to serve government priorities such as social justice, economic development and the like, and retaining their artistic autonomy. New Labour policies have led increasingly to art being 'instrumentalised' to fulfil policies of social inclusion. It is a cost-effective way to justify public spending on the arts while diverting attention away from the structural causes of disadvantage and exclusion which are political and economic (welfare, housing, transport, education, healthcare etc.). Yet, as this project has demonstrated, it is difficult to operate a project on so many different fronts. To serve aims and aspirations concerned with reaching hard-to-reach community groups and offering forms of intervention, a project needs to devote considerable effort and be highly flexible. Such aims can conflict with other aims to create quality performance work in keeping with European and national standards and expectations for children's theatre. In addition, it is this instrumental view of the arts which leads to the call for research to attempt to measure wider social and educational impacts of arts activities.

At a more practical and specific level current Scottish Arts council policy includes a commitment to increasing the scope and quality of support for artists, supporting 'creative' producers and promoting international connections. All these commitments have been fulfilled in the Starcatchers project.
At the widest policy level, Starcatchers has fostered creative practice at a time when creativity is a high priority in Scottish national policy. A recent Scottish Arts Council document (2004) makes the following statement:

"Creativity, imagination and the arts are at the core of a dynamic, diverse and inclusive cultural Scotland. They have the potential to be life-changing, inspirational and engaging, belonging to us all. Creativity has high currency as an aspect of contemporary life. It is becoming an essential feature of lifelong learning as education is called upon to prepare people for a world that is changing more rapidly now than ever before. The arts, in a unique and particular way, and as perhaps the most obvious and universal expression of creativity, have an important role to play in that educational objective."

In order to activate aspirations for a 'Creative Scotland' a new cultural development body under that name is to be up and running in 2009. This body is intended to act as the catalyst for creativity across Scotland and is tasked with leading the development of the arts, and creative and screen industries across Scotland. Although it is an initiative driven largely by economics with the aim to foster the profit-making capacity of the creative industries, a nascent organisation such as Starcatchers should be well placed to benefit from its networks, organisational structures and initiatives.

In terms of early years policies, a new policy statement for Early Years and Early Intervention has been issued in 2008 jointly by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). The focus of the early years framework is from pre-conception through pregnancy, birth and up to age 8. This policy is intended to be in place for the next 10 years.

The early years framework has four themes. These are:

- Building parenting and family capacity pre and post birth.
- Creating communities that provide a supportive environment for children and families.
- Delivering integrated services that meet the holistic needs of children and families.
- Developing a suitable workforce to support the framework.

Again, these are broad and all-encompassing themes, but arts activity such as Starcatchers can contribute to each of the four themes. It supports parenting capacity post birth through playful theatrical activity which encourages communication and emotional empathy. It supports communities by contributing arts activity which can be finely tuned to the needs of local groups of families. It serves the holistic needs of children and families, for culture and for enrichment, as well as educational needs. It is developing a workforce of artists skilled and knowledgeable about working with this age phase.

In the dimension of wider national and international practice in early years theatre, Small size, the European Network for the diffusion of performing arts aimed at early childhood (0-6), was founded in 2004-5. It aims to provide a structure through which to meet, share expertise and exchange knowledge; to develop collaborative projects and disseminate information and research. Through its networking, Small size (as quoted on its website) intends to promote an awareness of the significance of performing arts for early childhood. In addition, it aims to give value to projects and events that support the development of training and educational programmes for early years educators and artists, and for producers and artists creating productions through widening opportunities for research and collaboration. Although a new organisation, Small size has already given support to Starcatchers and plans are afoot for Starcatchers to take an active role within the Small size network. The kinds of international cultural exchange and dialogue that are supported by Small size are also recognised as an important element in Scottish Cultural Strategy.

9 Discussion and Conclusion

There is no doubt that Starcatchers has achieved what it set out to do. The successes were set out on the opening pages. This research reported here tracked the project and was dedicated to exploring and understanding the experiences of the children in order to support the development of theatrical experiences for children under three. By collecting video data and subjecting this to two levels of analysis, two forms of engagement on the part of the babies and children were identified – 'absorbed engagement' and 'interactive engagement'. These two modes of engagement might be conveyed to wider audiences in the expression 'see theatre; play theatre'.

By providing space and time for artists to work creatively, the project has enabled the development of theatre for under 3s in to new realms through Peep – the 'interactive installation with performance elements' represents a new departure in arts practice for the early years which has strong links with contemporary developments in the arts. The successful piece 'My House', took a more conventional one-man performance piece to new heights where non-verbal, gestural, inferred action, strongly expressive through subtle facial inflexions drew slightly older children in to absorbed engagement for an extended period of time. This piece demonstrated that theatre for the very young can have pathos – overturning the stereotype that young children want and need happy-go-lucky, 'party-style' experiences.

There is a strong hunch that engaging in time-based creative play, particularly the kinds of engagements offered by a piece such as *Peep*, has an important adaptive function - meaning that it contributes to intellectual and social competence. In the section which presented and discussed other studies that have been carried out, creative, communicative play has been explored and discussed as a basis for language, for learning to socialise with others, for cultural learning. It is a small step, then, to suggest that engaging in theatre, in the two modes we identified and propose, 'interactive' and 'absorbed', may bring similar benefits. Of course, to have any significant influence on children's intellectual and social competence, the experiences would have to be regular and consistent – a one-off performance or short series of sessions is unlikely to make any difference. However – for certain - our education system neglects alternative ways of 'knowing' through creative, time-based processes and focuses on linguistically static and frozen conceptualisations of knowledge. And, what's more, our educational systems push young children on to these much too early.

It is also important to say that proposing an adaptive function – suggesting that early years theatre may have these kinds of benefits – does not exclude recognising that pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment are part of the experience that is equally, if not more, valuable. These are the views that would emanate from a sociological perspective on children that says they have a right to cultural experience from birth onwards, that they are entitled to theatre designed for their enjoyment. Such views are encapsulated in describing children as 'being' rather than 'becoming'. Too much emphasis, some say, is put on children's development, how they will progress and move on; their 'becoming'. This emphasis derives from the considerable influence of developmental psychology on early childhood. Everything provided and planned for them has an eye on how it will carry them forward rather than how it can enrich their lives in the here and now. It is my view that early years theatre in Scotland and the UK will find validating arguments from this relatively new field of the sociology/anthropology of childhood that are in keeping with the values, aims and principles of creative theatre experiences.

There is also, in my view, a danger in arriving at two-tier theatre experiences. One tier is provided in the cultural centre for the middle class children whose parents have the money, time, energy, cars, confidence to get them there, and can be about entertainment, pleasure and having fun (about 'being' in other words). The other tier takes place in the children's own settings, for children living in less advantaged circumstances for whom the work is intended to be about 'improving them', about developing communication and language skills and so on (about 'becoming'). This contributes to the tension that exists between children's theatre as art form searching for innovative, aesthetic, quality work and theatre as instrument of intervention and educational change. What lies behind this potential danger is the enormous disparity between rich and poor children in our society which is not found in other European countries to the same extent and the way in which arts and cultural experience are being 'instrumentalised' for political ends. While European models of theatre can inspire, the very different contexts of state funded childcare provision, less diverse communities of children and less childhood poverty, need to be borne in mind. The theatre pieces and the companies need to be considered as arising from certain social, political and economic contexts.

If the arts reflect a society and what it values, then this inspirational initiative to develop theatre for babies and very young children in Scotland says important things about the way our very youngest children are being viewed and valued.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Artists Observation Sheets (Summary)

Name of Piece	Aim	How piece was developed
(1) Movement with sponges and Bilibos workshop	To explore further movement built on discoveries last week	I had enjoyed myself so much and felt that both children and staff had such a positive experience I wanted to stick with the idea/theme/feeling
(2) Tomatobo	To gently capture the engagement of the children at Stepping-Stones	We had presented this piece at NEAC. Had hoped to do a piece on cleaning but we didn't have time. I also wanted to show something tried and tested – wanted it to be positive and secure
(3) Fire Fighters workshop	To explore the theme of the Fire Fighters that they are interested in at the moment	Planned the session with childcare worker – theme that children are interested in just now and we hadn't explored this before. Child care worker ordered resources (fire engine, costumes and books) – children played with these for few days before workshop.

How did children engage?

1 They engaged with the prop and enjoyed waving it high and low and using two as wings. One child did not physically engage and sat at the side and watched.

2 I was unhappy with the start of the session. We were late and so were a bit rushed to set up. This affected the atmosphere of the room and nature of performance. Children were unsettled and upset by strange adults in the room. Two or three of them cried through some of the performance and younger ones drifted in and out of focus. Think it was because we didn't give children or us enough time to settle.

3 Four out of five children were engaged. I would describe session as adult-led and highly participatory. One boy was very quiet and reserved and found it difficult to participate. The others took part and enjoyed the activities – this was displayed in their focus and willingness to follow and believe the story and the role play.

Did you make any changes in response to way children did/did not engage?

1. I was playing with introducing a short story about a dragon but felt that they were enjoying the physical and the more independent exploration of the group.
2. Ximena stopped dancing at one point as one boy was distressed. Both Greg and Ximena toned down performance after that – Greg in volume and Ximena in eye contact with the children.
3. Some of the drama was edited when I felt the children were loosing focus. I had planned for the children to throw pretend buckets of water over the fire and then throw one over the Child Care Worker but it came about that we decided to save all the buckets to throw over her as we realised it would be more fun.

Successes

1. Physical nature of using prop and the support from Dawn.
2. Quality of the work we had tried and tested before and the artists ability to work together and adapt to the children's response. Also support of Stepping Stones staff.
3. The props and the theme as they were already familiar with the children.

Challenges

1. Not feeling well and so not focused.
2. Not enough time to settle and set up Not enough time on Wednesdays before this session to plan work so the schedule will have to be adapted.
3. The lack of participation from one of the children and the use of a lot of props made me feel the session was slightly over complicated.

Appendix 2

The Herald

Shining a light for everyone's future

Andy Manley and Vanessa Rigg are used to audiences for Little Light sitting spellbound on the floor. That said, some do get very caught up and wander on-stage to touch the props they like best.

But then the audience for their performance at the North Edinburgh Arts Centre (NEAC) is usually a toddling, crawling assortment of under-threes. In the course of a colourful half-hour, they will see – and hear and touch – items that, with a gentle stretch of young imaginations, become birds, butterflies, fish and flowers. They will join in singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, then be enviably free to play with the stuff of the story.

This week, however, Little Light will be playing to an audience of adults – academics, theatre-makers, venue programmers and performers – as the NEAC hosts its first international symposium on theatre and arts for the under-threes. It is part of its ongoing Starcatchers project, a groundbreaking initiative – underpinned by £200,000 from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts and supported by the Scottish Arts Council – that aims to research and produce work for the 0-3 age group.

Given that some of this target audience can't yet talk, walk or sit up by themselves, the notion of them watching any kind of theatre seems far-fetched. But NEAC director Jacqueline McKay can provide compelling reasons why the arts are an ideal way of encouraging the imagination to develop before any words come into play. McKay, who will continue her Starcatchers connections even after she departs for the Byre Theatre in St Andrews, has seen the scientific findings that suggest empathy begins to kick in around the two-year stage. "But if there's nothing to encourage that, a child will start to grow up without being able to put themselves in someone else's shoes, and that can lead to personal and social problems," she says. "If you can draw them into a story, get them interested in joining in and then creating work themselves, you're feeding their emotions as well as their imaginations. The challenge is to find what kind of performances work best."

One lesson learned is: don't plunge the space into darkness. It can seriously spook some tots. But I can vouch for young eyes widening in wonderment as Manley and Rigg spread a gauzy sea over our heads and send musical fish – maracas and such like – swimming through the rippling waves while Little Light shines a path for captivated curiosity.

The symposium runs from tomorrow until Friday. The performances, discussions and academic papers will feed into Starcatchers' own research, and the effects of that will still be running when today's toddlers are adults themselves.

By MARY BRENNAN

Appendix 3

Evening News
THE EDINBURGH PAPER

Friday 22nd June 2007 Review of *My House* by Thom Dibdin

FASCINATING experimental theatre is alive and well at North Edinburgh Arts Centre. And judging from the audience response to Starcatchers' *My House*, they have hit the mark bang on.

This is theatre that explores the boundaries. Not in terms of what it says, but in terms of who it speaks to. Which, in the case of My House, means children between the ages of 18 months and three years. It is not an easy target group to perform to. Especially if you are intent on doing all the things which proper, grown-up theatre does, rather than just putting on a brightly coloured pantomime.

Which means all the basic things that most theatre takes for granted - like telling a story, engaging the audience in the world created on stage, building tension between characters and providing a satisfactory resolution, both between the characters, and to the plot. For a little under 30 minutes, performer Andy Manley builds a world with such a slow and gentle development that Beckett would have been proud.

He takes the barely furnished room upstairs at NEAC and simply but deliberately, builds another world there – but one which really only exists in the imaginations of its audience, mums and toddlers alike.

He first establishes what this will be about by drawing a chalk picture of a house and hanging it on the wall. And then, with a very basic style, that he will be the character – saying the only word of the script – "me" – and transforming himself by the simple trick of putting on a bobble hat.

The second character takes the form of a watermelon. Just the right size to wear a similar bobble hat. But different enough from him to be pushed away from behind his big cardboard screen and rejected while he gets on with playing with a stethoscope and using it to discover the different sounds around.

As a device to create a world on stage it works very well. Not necessarily one which all the audience will fully appreciate, but still intriguing enough for them to sit and watch, as he first listens to the sounds around him and then the sounds of his own and the audience's beating hearts.

Such a breaking of the fourth wall is its most difficult point. A brave move, to approach a toddler with a shiny and intrusive object, no matter how benign it might really be, as you could make them frightened for the rest of the show.

It is a necessary device for the play's progression, however. For he discovers that there is another heartbeat on stage. And in the process of finding out that it belongs to the watermelon, he unfolds the cardboard set to create a house, just like the one on the wall, in which he and the watermelon can be friends.

It might look like child's play, but it keeps its audience transfixed and proves that you can, indeed, create real theatre for this age group.

Appendix 4

***Peep*, North Edinburgh Arts Centre**

MARY BRENNAN

July 25 2008

Star Rating: ★★★

We're indoors but gosh, the grass is real. Some tots kick off shoes and socks to enjoy the feel of cool, fresh turf between the toes. Others, meanwhile, are staring with solemn curiosity at what else is in the room: a toy toaster that pops up perfectly browned slices of wood, a curtain of plastic strips for fun moments of "now you see me, now you don't" and a "house" with lots of cut-out shapes for games of peek-a-boo.

But just when the adults are thinking Peep is all about looking and hiding and unexpected discoveries, a chap with a cello (Greg Sinclair) starts conjuring up chirruping sounds. The next thing you know, there's a reply from the porthole in the back wall and a leg, then a hand, then a face appears. And promptly disappears.

It takes a trail of toast to coax the birdie (Ros Sydney) out of her hideaway and in among the under-threes, for whom this Starcatchers performance/installation – directed by Heather Fulton and designed by Katy Wilson – has been specifically created.

Bit by bit, more objects arrive in the space, with Sydney vocalising reactions (without actually delivering a narrative text) while encouraging the wee ones to play along – or at least poke things with the long plastic straws they've acquired.

There's a canny journey from initial merry antics to an emerging scenario of Sydney hankering to be a fully-fledged bird. Cue, from on high, a frou-frou tutu and feathers. But it's not just for her. This adorable, interactive piece allows dressing-up opportunities for all.

Playtime and make-believe only end when the smell of warm toast lures us out of the studio – it's serious crunch-time, topped with honey. A treat for tinies from first to last.

North Edinburgh Arts re-opened fully in May 2008 and is the focus for creativity in Greater Pilton. Through partnership working this award winning centre acts as the cultural hub of the community, providing a safe, enjoyable and creative environment for people of all ages to relax and develop within.

For more details go to
www.northedinburhgarts.co.uk

Starcatchers is moving forward in partnership with Imaginate, an arts organisation that promotes and develops the performing arts for children and young people in Scotland.

A new phase of work is being planned for 2009 – 2011. For more information about the pilot project or future plans, please contact Rhona Matheson, Starcatchers Project Manager at **Rhona@imaginate.org.uk** or call **0131 225 8050**

www.imaginate.org.uk