Flight Paths and Theatre for Early Years Audiences

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Abstract

This article proposes using the holistic play-based goals and model of co-inquiry discussed in Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework (2014) as a way to interpret very young children's responses to theatrical experiences as theatre criticism. The process encourages wondering and reflecting on multiple possible meanings of children's embodied, vocal, and play-based responses. Through an exploration of documentary evidence from The Urban Wildlife Project, our immersive theatre research outlines how the early childhood education processes can be adapted to a theatre context to listen to children's responses on their own terms.

Keywords: children's rights, democratic, dramaturgy, early childhood education, play, theatre for early years

Introduction

When very young children experience theatre, their responses, both during and after the performance, can be read as a form of theatre criticism and as dramaturgical feedback. Yet, just as learning the languages of drama is a sophisticated skill (Simmons 3), interpreting young children's expressions of their responses to a theatrical experience is complex. In our immersive theatre research with audiences aged 2–4, we explore ways the Canadian province of Alberta's rights-based early childhood education framework, called *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al., 2014), encourages a powerful reflective process that can be used to interpret what children express through their bodies, words, and play.

The framework for our research is a document Alberta early childhood educators (teachers in pre-kindergarten classrooms and childcare settings) use to guide their relationships with children, curriculum development and to facilitate communication with children, parents and educators. Adapted from *Flight*, our research approach incorporates *Flight's* three-part cyclical process that amplifies and helps interpret children's responses, as theatre criticism, and examines how young people's responses to our workshopped theatre performances can provide dramaturgical feedback that influences the development of a meaningful final product. We ask: How could we better understand audience engagement in the early years demographic by using the framework's holistic play-based goals (play and playfulness, communication and literacies, well-being, and diversity and social responsibility), to interpret children's responses to theatre experiences?

Very young children's responses to theatrical productions can be read as theatre criticism. Theatre criticism is more than a description of a theatrical event. Patrice Pavis argues that it is an "immediate response to a particular production" and also a reflection that depends on "working conditions," and the "aesthetic and ideological position of the author" and the writer's "implicit conception of theatre and mise-en-scène" (390). For children, the working conditions would be the context in which they experience a performance (for example, with family, with educators, in a theatre space, in their classroom). Children present responses during the performance itself, and also, during the after playtime offered by many early years theatre makers.

While children will make meaning out of a theatrical experience regardless of whether or not after play is offered, that after playtime is valuable for three powerful reasons: one, it gives young theatre goers a chance to deepen their experience with the ideas, materials, and even performers associated with a production; two, playtime honours the idea that children build their conceptual knowledge through concrete experiences within their social world—that is to say that they build knowledge and aesthetic response skills through social interaction with other children during playtime; and three, it gives adults an opportunity to observe their responses—as expressed through play—immediately following a performance. As *Flight* says, "children's play is central . . . as an active, exploratory, creative, expressive process, deeply embedded in children's everyday experiences and through which children participate in, learn about, and creatively make sense of the world" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 12).

Children respond to the production based on their lived experiences and their social interactions with others, and they make meaning from the production by exploring ideas they have and materials they can access through what are known as "multimodal literacies." The approach *Flight* takes to multimodal literacies suggests that in early childhood children are becoming familiar with the symbols and practices of various literacy modes (language, art, mathematics, music, and drama), and that each mode emphasizes constructing meaning through sign systems in preferred ways: drama "emphasizes gesture, posture, and speech" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 106). As they grow in familiarity with these modes, children learn to interpret the symbols, and how to use the signs themselves. They use multiple modes (language, art, math, music and drama) simultaneously and transform knowledge from one mode to another. By communicating and making meaning in these ways, they present both aesthetic and ideological responses to theatrical work. But just as children choose how to make meaning from a theatrical experience, adults need to reflect on multiple possible meanings of children's play-based responses as they move between "the world as it is," the world as a performance presents it and "the worlds they create" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 99).

As we will explain, by using the *Flight* framework to interpret children's responses, we are able to read their multimodal explorations in complex and nuanced ways. Our interpretations envision the child as a mighty learner and competent citizen, aiming to avoid stereotyping

children's actions and reactions, and making facile assumptions about their responses that support narrow ways of viewing children and childhood. In other words, we are using *Flight* to make meaning out of children's meaning-making.

We also integrated *Flight* concepts into the foundation of our creation process for our theatrical offering about local urban wildlife (working title: *The Urban Wildlife Project*), and as a result, the project itself fosters spaces where children are able to express themselves agentically, to co-create narrative, to explore play-based experiences and to choose how and if they will engage. Ben Fletcher-Watson argues that these opportunities are essential in theatre for early years if productions are not to create tyrannical adult-child relationships. Since our theatrical work does not elicit shared responses such as frenzied audience participation, directed collective call-outs (like "look behind you!"), or even to sit still and be quiet, the project is particularly well-suited to engendering meaningful and legible responses from child audience members that can be interpreted as theatre criticism. While a production that takes holistic play-based goals into account from its inception offers especially clear opportunities to interpret children's responses as reflective process, we argue that the integrated play-based framework, along with the model of co-inquiry, suggests ways to think about young children's responses to any theatrical production and to recognize young children's words, actions and play as theatre criticism.

What is *Flight*?

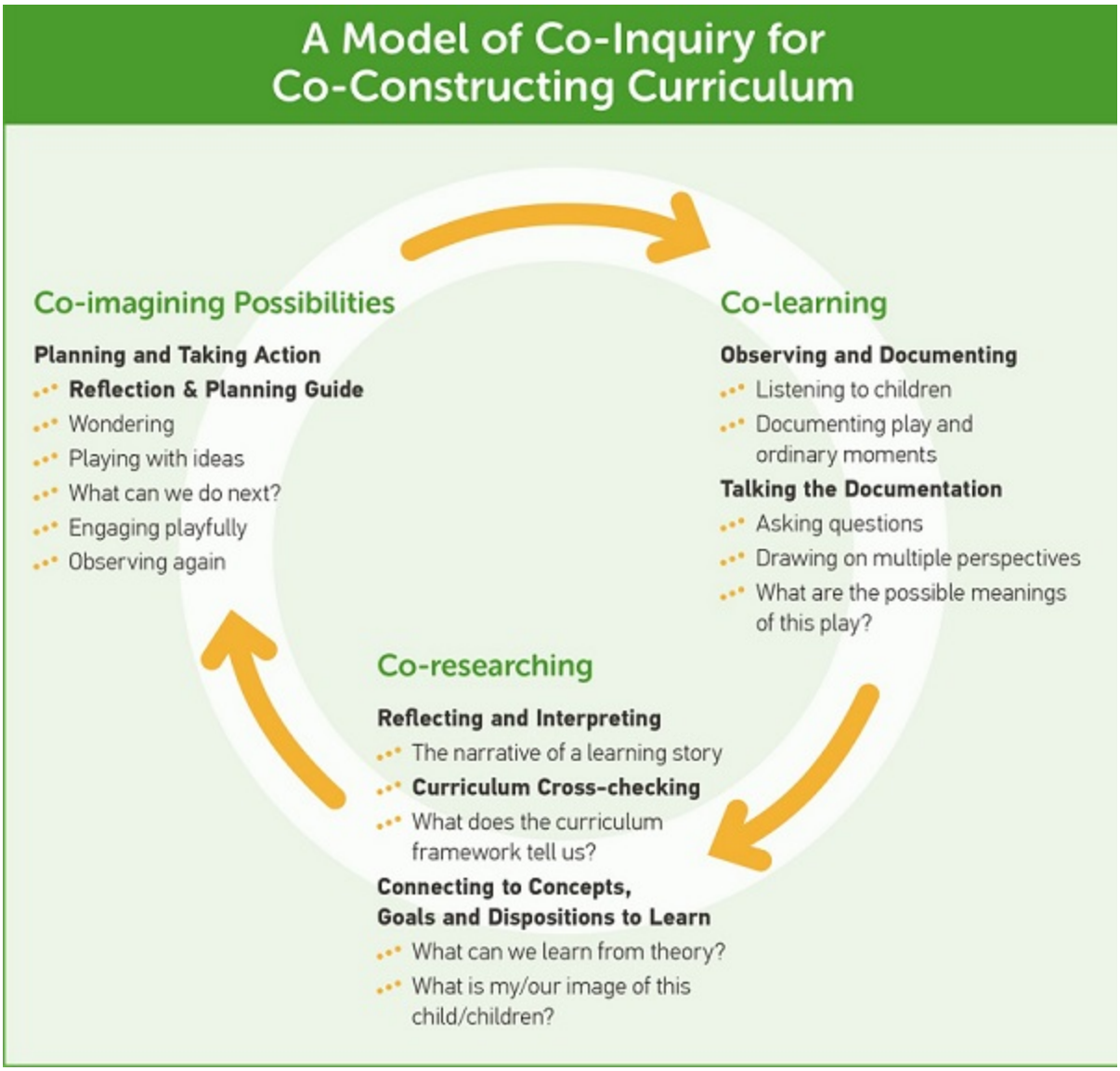
Flight's holistic play-based goals guide early childhood educators differently than traditional curriculum. Because children are viewed as competent citizens and mighty learners (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 6), children co-create and co-imagine learning experiences with their educators. *Flight* invites reflection on how young children's responses to relationships, the environment and learning opportunities can be understood. *Flight's* guiding principles and core concepts shift the emphasis from best practices to practice embedded in a reciprocal, relational and rights-based context.

A key value for early learning communities is democratic citizenship, which means children have opportunities to participate, make choices and express ideas. Seeing children as citizens who are strong, resourceful and capable learners "affirms each child's right to be listened to, to be treated with respect, and to participate in daily decisions that affect him or her" and "shifts the intention of our interactions from "doing to" a child toward "participating with" each child" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 39). We were inspired by Lise Hovik's *Red Shoes Project*, in which she explores the possibilities of democracy in theatre for the very young ("Red").

In her later *SceSam Project* (with Lisa Nagel), she asks if theatre where children choose whether and how to participate is, in fact, democratic, or a more heavily disguised form of tyranny ("Tyrannic"). While the SceSam team reframed the inquiry to discuss the possibility of the shared production of "magic" in the theatre (Nagel) (an idea which we enthusiastically support as well), we continue to be inspired by the idea of theatre as a space where young

children can explore the democratic practices, including (as we describe below) developing relationships and respect for others, objects and spaces, and the right to challenge, question and be heard. We embrace the play-based and relational definitions outlined in *Flight,* which position care and children's citizenship as central to how children develop democratic skills.

With this image of children as mighty learners and citizens in mind, educators use specific tools and processes to interpret children's responses. *Flight* describes a cycle of co-inquiry: observing, documenting and making meaning of what is observed (through a process called Talking the Documentation); reflecting and interpreting (through a process called Curriculum Cross-Checking); and planning and taking action. Through notes, photos and artifacts, educators document what children are doing with materials, ideas and people. When revisiting the documented moments, educators engage in Talking the Documentation. Led by the evidence, they reflect on children's responses, ask questions and draw on multiple perspectives to explore possible interpretations. As they interpret, they begin Curriculum Cross-Checking, connecting their reflections to the framework's play-based goals.



Makovichuk, L. et al. *Flight: Reflection and Planning Guide*, 2014

Flight's holistic play-based goals offer a common language for recognizing and understanding children's responses, and help educators articulate and make visible the *potential* meaning and learning opportunities an experience might have for children. Fundamental to the co-development of curriculum, these educator conversations are a way of listening to children's voices and understanding what children are expressing through play, actions and words. Next, educators make decisions concerning subsequent ways they will organize children's spaces, and the materials and opportunities they will offer, as they nurture and expand experiences for children and return in the cycle to documenting children's responses.

Observing and Documenting, Reflecting and Interpreting

Just as early childhood educators observe and document, reflect and interpret, and plan and take action, we used *Flight's* model of co-inquiry to interpret children's responses to our theatrical offering. While sources of documentation could include field notes, video and post-event discussions, for this article we chose to use still photographs to highlight how the process makes very young children's theatre criticism legible. Analysing the photographs and asking questions regarding the children's behaviour helps us to gather multiple perspectives, informing a broad view of how children might be making meaning of the performance experience.

This series of six photographs provides information about how children critiqued and responded to one thread of the *Urban Wildlife Project* we were workshopping. The offering itself was about familiar local urban wildlife: chickadees, magpies, squirrels and hares (rabbits). We presented this work in three different ways and spaces during our development process. Young audience members were invited to choose a safe space in a variety of blanket nests that we built to encircle the performance area. Actors explored dramatic possibilities of these animals through object play, embodying animal characteristics, creating animal-based soundscapes and developing abstractions and metaphors for animal movement. To help readers understand the way children's theatrical criticism can be read through the model of co-inquiry, these photographs primarily address the hare family story, although, as readers will see, narrow interpretations of what a particular theatrical moment was "about" may not accommodate the way children were responding to the offering as a whole.

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, directed by H. Fitzsimmons Frey, June 13, 2019. Actors: Emma Abbott, Aidan Spila. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

The first photograph captures a performance moment with a focus on the actors**.** The actors animated the soft rabbit toys as if they were members of a family, playing while their parents have left them alone for a little while, and then cuddling down to sleep when their parents return. They manipulated rabbits to jump (in a gesture of joy known as a binky) and to take turns playing together on a hillside of grass, made of a green blanket. The actors modelled caring, curiosity and respectful treatment of animals and materials.

When considering young audience members' responses as theatre criticism, however, the performance revealed that children attended to and repurposed these performance elements in a variety of ways that were meaningful to them. Some children chose to quietly witness the rabbit play, and some moved their own blankets closer to the performance space. This image shows that three children left their blankets behind and drew closer to the intimate object play. Two children are on all fours, drawing progressively nearer to the action. As part of

reflecting and interpreting in the model of co-inquiry, we wondered about the children's actions and looked to *Flight's* holistic play-based goal descriptors to provide a common language to interpret possible meanings of their actions.

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, directed by H. Fitzsimmons Frey, June 13, 2019. Actors: Ayla Gandall, Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

For some children, experiencing theatrical performance was new. As they grew more comfortable, did their movements indicate that they were "develop[ing] a sense of place," "becoming familiar with the sights, sounds, rhythms, and routines of new situations" and "negotiating new spaces" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 94)? They may have been seeking connection—with the actors, with the objects of play, or even with the other children who first began to inch closer—a response *Flight* describes as "creating social spaces" and "shared narratives" (99). Perhaps they were eager to "explore and investigate" the objects the actors were manipulating (100). We also asked if the movement forward indicated a desire to enact their democratic rights by "questioning, co-constructing and reworking rules and procedures" of acceptable theatre behaviour (112). Using this questioning and interpretive process opened our minds to multiple possible meanings of children's responses to the moment.

After a few minutes, while most children continued to watch the rabbits play, three children leapt to their feet and began to “fly” around the space. The girl in the rainbow skirt stretched out her arms in full flight, while the boy in the blue shirt kept his arms bent as he flew more jerkily, like the actor-chickadees had. The girl in the crown who crept as close as possible to the performers is about to stand up and “fly” in the direction she is facing, adopting a zig zag pattern through the open space. Using the process of Talking the Documentation, we wondered if children might be engaging in different forms of representation, practicing the signs and symbols of drama (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 106) that they had seen throughout the presentation. While the actors were not flying like magpies and chickadees at that moment, *they had been*, and the children may have wanted more of that. Or their responses may have indicated that they craved something high energy that offered a chance to explore their bodies and move (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 95) and encouraged what *Flight* calls “dizzy play”: the pleasure children take “in being on the edge,” “experiencing exhilarating physical release,” “games of disrupting and restoring order,” “making nonsense,” “laughter” and “physical humour” (101).

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, directed by H. Fitzsimmons Frey, June 13, 2019. Actors: Ayla Gandall, Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

We had anticipated children’s desire for movement and “dizzy play” based on reactions during a workshop in an early learning centre (daycare) setting, with limited movement space. After watching actors “fly” (as magpies and chickadees), children soared around the

small room during the shared playtime following the presentation, using the fabric pieces we provided as wings. As theatre makers responsive to dramaturgical comment, we searched for meaningful adaptations to our performance. In order to incorporate more such opportunities, we presented our second offering in a larger space and provided more fabric that children could use during the after playtime.

Although we had already incorporated children's prior feedback in our theatre development, we had not anticipated flying children at this moment. In leaping up to fly during what was intended to be a quiet, intimate story time, these three children may have been challenging the actors through democratic practices by "making choices in matters that affect them" and "voicing their preferences and opinions" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 112). The children probably observed their educators modelling calm observation and understood that they were expected to do the same, but they appeared to crave motion and excitement. While one option is to read their movement as disengagement or negative criticism towards the theatrical offering, *Flight* invites us to ask what else the children's choices could mean, and how we might respond.

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, dir. H. Fitzsimmons Frey, June 13, 2019. Actors: Ayla Gandall, Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

After a few moments of dizzy running, the calming, atmospheric soundscape that was playing encouraged the flying children to settle down. Although wordless, it was clear that the soft rabbit toys were about to get ready for their own bedtime. The boy in blue chose to cosy-up in the arms of an educator, another boy flopped down on his belly, still watching the rabbits play. Several children anticipated the bunnies' bedtime and began to curl up in the

blankets themselves. As the actor-manipulated parent rabbits tucked in the small rabbits, the children softly asked their educators to tuck them into the blankets until nearly all the children appeared ready to nap. While we could interpret children snuggling under blankets as "bored," and bored is certainly a valid response, there are other ways to understand the meanings in the children's unscripted behaviour. These children were reflecting on and playing with what was going on during the theatrical offering. *Flight* encourages us to position children as mighty learners and competent citizens and consider more complex forms of meaning-making. By mimicking and extending the actors' behaviours, the children created a "shared narrative" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 99), contributed to the emerging story, and demonstrated a "developing awareness of imagined and ordinary worlds" (99), which indicates a growing understanding of the symbols of drama and ways they can express these through multimodal literacies. The children's responses demonstrate that their actions were legible to one another, and that they shared the narrative with each other, as well as with the production.

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, directed by H. Fitzsimmons Frey, June 13, 2019. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

We also used the dizzy play idea of that sense of exhilaration that children exhibited during our first offering by incorporating a large piece of white silk-cloth reminiscent of snow into the second offering that wafted over the audience to bring winter to the landscape. This scene took place directly after the quiet bunny play. When the silk was lifted into the air, many dozing children jumped to their feet, ready to join in the parachute-like play experience. Not all children reacted in this way. In this image, it is possible to see one boy, still cosy in his

blanket, face turned from the giant silk action. Our cyclical interpretive process and the foundational belief that children are mighty learners invites us to avoid jumping to a simplistic view that if he was lying down, he must be disengaged: instead, we wonder if he was expressing that he still wanted to experience the quiet, intimate moment inspired by sleeping bunnies. This moment of audience dichotomy gives us an opportunity to explore different options in a production. From a dramaturgical point of view, we might choose to slow this transition down to make more space for what the boy was appreciating in that moment, or alternatively speed the moment up so that there is less time to settle into the quiet. As theatre criticism, the children's different responses highlight that they come to the production as individuals, in spite of the social aspect of meaning-making, and they may have their own, unique way of interpreting and making meaning from a production.

After the theatrical offering, like many productions for early years audiences, we included playtime for children to explore materials and objects related to the performance. Playtime provides an essential opportunity for young children to process theatrical experiences, and while it needs to be regarded as part of the offering (like an additional scene, or epilogue), during playtime children also present their own ideas and theatrical criticism in legible ways. We were fascinated to see how children echoed, repurposed and redeveloped narratives the actors had presented. For example, children used the creative offering as inspiration to gently engage in rabbit play with the soft toys, both repeating and extending the narrative that they had seen the actors perform. We recognized the children's kind and caring actions as a representation of their growing awareness about being responsible and responsive members of a community (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 109), yet the theatrical offering was not didactic. We also noticed children who had appeared inattentive during the performance, recreating moments that they had seen, reinforcing the idea that children's responses in the moment may point towards a wide range of possible interpretations.

Some profound responses to a theatrical offering may not be available until long after the end of a theatrical offering. Pavis emphasizes that theatre criticism privileges "immediate" responses to a performance, and after play allows us to read children's immediate response as criticism. But meaning-making and reflection may take place significantly after the production time as well. An extended relationship with children's families or their educators and learning centres could provide opportunities to hear and see these later expressions of meaning-making.

Urban Wildlife workshop, Collective Creation, dir. H. Fitzsimmons Frey, February 18, 2020. Photo: R. Ayles, MacEwan University

Planning and Taking Action

The third step in the *Flight* model of co-inquiry is “planning and taking action.” Early childhood educators consider possible meanings of children’s earlier responses, as they plan activities, organize their spaces and provide materials. Wondering as they reflect, rather than settling on fixed interpretations, educators use knowledge and past experience to guide them to the most likely interpretations, while accommodating individual and diverse children’s responses and meaning-making.

As theatre practitioners and artists, we use children’s responses similarly: they are a form of criticism that helps us to understand what meaning children drew from the theatrical offering, and also, dramaturgically, how they might prefer that we shape our future development of this creative work. Because our production invited children to participate in ways that suited them, we can reflect on reactions both during the actor-led performance and during the child-led playtime that followed. While the cycle is an ongoing process, this step demands that

educators (and artists) make choices and take action, and so, we provide here some information about how children's responses will inform and shape our creative practice, and helps us to listen to children as theatre critics in their own terms.

After demonstrating their pleasure at being on the edge during performance, we asked how dizzy play could sculpt the shape and rhythm of the show. As theatre practitioners, understanding that dizzy play provides "a release of physical energy, a sense of power, and often an expression of pure joy" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 101) can embolden us to include this type of movement in our productions, knowing that children understand that the world can move and shake and still be restored to its norms. Between our first and second offerings we made changes that specifically encouraged dizzy play. In the bigger second performance space, children had more room to move, and so did the actors, who were able to model much broader, full versions of animal movements, including frenetic squirrel scrambling, explorations of how hares lope and freeze and more specific differences between how magpies glide and chickadees flutter. We provided ample additional props and costume pieces to inspire children to engage in multimodal literacies and dramatic play during the playtime following the presentation, and we knew the big, open space would invite them to fully embody some of the animals, and to explore the space in playful silly ways.

In addition, during our second offering, we wanted to explore aspects of democratic citizenship that include relationship building, empathy and intimacy. We provided cozy, clear, distinct fabric nests to help children have spaces that they could identify as safe and as their own. Actors visited children individually in the nests for some one on one playtime during the performance, communicating that the dramatic conventions of this performance encouraged direct, meaningful engagement with actors, and that direct engagement could happen in or near their own, safe spaces. While the children embraced these opportunities, the photo documentation demonstrates that the decisions also propel us towards other questions about relationships, intimacy and agency.

For our future productions, children's responses suggest several things. Controlled lighting could better differentiate space and mood and help children focus on the small bunny play rather than on the opportunities to use large motor skills that the big space offers. We accept that children may choose to respond by flying, so creating a wider area of light at specific intervals will help children to feel safe if they want to make use of opportunities to explore the space or engage in full body participation. We would also like to be able to draw their attention to certain intimate moments, and more sophisticated control of lighting would facilitate that ability.

As a creative team, we have also learned more about how to help actors read the possibilities in children's responses to creative work as dramaturgical feedback. Actors use *Flight's* common language to think through how children may be making meaning as they watch and participate, allowing actors to respond in ways that extend relationships,

incorporate children's ideas into their narratives and create a shared space where there is, perhaps, not only democratic engagement, but also the co-created ephemeral magic that Lise Hovik and Lisa Nagel allude to.

One of *Flight's* holistic play-based goals states that "children experience socially inclusive and culturally sensitive environments in which consideration for others, inclusive, equitable, democratic and sustainable practices are enacted, and social responsibility is nurtured" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 109). We were intrigued by how our production facilitated exploration of democratic practices, which the curriculum describes in ways such as "respecting the materials, equipment, and spaces shared with others," "beginning to understand their rights and responsibilities, and those of others," "questioning, co-constructing, and reworking rules and procedures" and "showing sympathy and empathy for others" (Makovichuk et al., *Framework* 112). As theatre critics, children have taught us that while we may hope to see children making meaning that resonates with these play-based goals, we must also put these practices into action. In this way, we can create shared narratives with children, join them in exuberant dizzy play, and offer moments of meaningful relationship through a theatrical encounter.

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