

Baby Theatre Comes of Age



Elena Marini (upper left) and Patrick Lynch (center) in Lyngo Theatre's *Egg and Spoon*.

JILL JENNINGS

Plays for children as young as one? European artists lead the way, but U.S. companies are catching up.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

VERY MUCH WANTED THIS STORY TO OPEN with a scene-setting anecdote in which my infant son, Oliver (14 months old as of this printing), attends his first play—and either laps it up like a bottle of formula, or perhaps squirms off my lap with a spirited cry of defiance at such stifling adult conventions as sitting still and remaining quiet while others are allowed to move about and make noise.

Why, you may wonder, would I imagine that a pre-verbal (but hardly non-vocal) one-year-old might be welcome at, much less interested in, a theatrical performance at all? Because, in fact, theatre for children as young as six months old does exist, hard as it may be to conceive. Why, then, can I tell no heartwarming story of Oliver's precocious initiation into the rites and rewards of theatregoing? Because, though shows for this audience—variously labeled “early years,” “very young,” “0–3,” or more simply “babies”—have been a staple of European and Australian theatre for two decades, this trend is only just now catching on in the United States. A lot of American theatres are talking about it, but few are doing it yet.

“It really is the flavor of the month,” says Kim Peter Kovac, director of youth and family programs at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. “We all know how to do theatre for the fourth- to eighth-grade range. The question is, How do we get the really young ones? Can we create a dramaturgy

for babies? Right now there are a lot of people who know very little; the form is wrestling its way into coherence. The Europeans have such a head start on us.”

“We are about 25 years behind on this,” agrees Linda Hartzell, artistic director of Seattle Children's Theatre, where a show for one-to-four-year-olds, *The Green Sheep*, runs through Sept. 12. The piece employs Seattle artists, but was originally created at Australia's Windmill Theatre by its former artistic director Cate Fowler, who's on hand for the Seattle run. “I saw a stunning piece in Denmark in 1990,” Hartzell recalls of her introduction to the genre. “It was for 35 toddlers who came in in their little snowsuits; it was magical.”

Imports and festivals have been the ways most of this work has reached the States, but some forward-looking American theatres have been booking not just shows but artists to create new work, as well. At the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis (where *The Green Sheep* made a 2007 stop), artistic director Peter Brosius has been importing both productions and artists ever since he had his own overseas epiphany.

“Years ago, I remember seeing *The Wild Baby* in Sweden, a piece for 2-to-5-year-olds,” Brosius recalls. “It was one of those ‘aha!’ moments. I was watching an audience totally mesmerized by artists at top of their game. I'd never seen it happen with that age group.”

Brosius first invited that Swedish company, Dockteatern



LESLIE SPINKS

Malin Cederbladh in *Unga Klara* and Ann-Sofie Barany's *Babydrama*.

Tittut, to bring its show *The Cat's Journey* to Minneapolis in 2005; then he hired Tittut's director, Chris Dahl, to create a 2007 piece, *A Special Trade*, with American actors. And this past April, CTC premiered its own original toddler show, an adaptation of Djemma Bider's book *The Biggest Little House in the Forest*.

At the Imagination Stage in Bethesda, Md., artistic director Janet Stanford, inspired by work she'd seen in Europe and at the annual U.S. festival IPAY (International Performing Arts for Youth), took the plunge in January with *Wake Up, Brother Bear*, for audiences aged 2–5. She plans next to bring Lyngo, a British/Italian company, to present *Egg and Spoon* this fall, then have its members stay to adapt another Lyngo show for a January run.

"Most people are in the talking stages with this kind of work, and they haven't dived in yet," said Stanford. "Really, there's no substitute for just doing it."

But what does a play for babies look like? Can it really be called a play, or is it more like just *play*? And does that matter? As Tony Mack, an Australian artist who's developing an international database of youth arts, has ventured, "Theatre for the very young may well be on the cutting edge of theatre practice, as it asks such basic questions as, 'What is theatre?' and 'What is a human being?'"

AROUND A DOZEN KIDS BETWEEN ONE and three stream into a multi-use rehearsal room in the New Victory Theater's Duke Theatre in Manhattan, trailing parents nearly as wide-eyed as they are. Strollers are checked at the door—including one toy model in

which a girl has brought her doll—as the audience finds its way to cushions near the center of the room. The lights are on at full work-light (or classroom) brightness, and speakers gently pipe in tunes with a music-box tinkle.

The lights don't ever go down, and I'm not sure I noticed where or when Andy Manley, the endearingly shambling performer/creator of today's piece, *My House*, made his entrance. But there he is, in shirttails and a knit cap, earnestly perched on the floor in front of his simple set—essentially a large cardboard box hand-painted as a house. He stares bluntly at his audience, singling them out one by one until they're intrigued into curious silence, and only when they're all with him does he start to explore his cardboard abode with the assistance of a piece of string, a stethoscope and a friendly melon.

Manley "resets" the show like this a few times, checking in with each child before moving forward to a new section of his wordless, not-quite-narrative journey. And as the 30-minute performance draws to a close, the audience is invited to share slices of melon and to explore the stage and

the set themselves. The show is over, but the play—the children's own imaginative repurposing of their experience—has just begun.

Manley, who performed *My House* as part of New Victory's Scottish Festival in fall 2009 (before my son, Oliver, was able to sit up reliably, in case you're wondering why he didn't come along), has done youth theatre for various ages, but this early-years niche seems to suit his earnest but inviting persona; he just premiered a new baby show, *White*, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Like many of his fellow Scottish artists, who have been inspired by fearless ensembles from Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, he approaches the work as an artist rather than as a teacher.

"I would make a terrible show if I were given an educational mandate," Manley confessed. "I don't think about this as working for 'children'; I think about what I do as working with people at this stage of their life. I start with the point of fascination—with what fascinates me—and then work from there."

Tony Reekie, the founder and director of Imagineate, a Scottish arts organization and festival, put it even more tartly in a New Victory talkback last year: "There's not an

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educational mandate—I wouldn't *want* some of the people we work with to educate my children! But to tell my children a story, I can't think of anyone better."

Such talk is clarifying, but is it the kind of thing anxious boards and funders in the U.S. want to hear? With audiences as small as they need to be for a baby show to work—as few as 15, though *The Green Sheep* somehow manages 100—the box-office economics can be a puzzle. Says Mary Rose Lloyd, New Victory's director of programming, "You have to subsidize this kind of theatre, because done right, it's done for a very small audience."

That may work for the New Victory, the nation's leading importer of cutting-edge youth theatre from around the world, but the field is going to need more to sustain theatre for such micro-audiences, says Colleen Porter, director of arts education at PlayhouseSquare in Cleveland. "If this work is going to be successfully toured or presented here, it will have to be supported by research into brain development. We need to show that the pathways of learning in the brain are connected to the live performance event. It's something I inherently know and believe, and moms and



Sarah Mixson, Connor Toms, Matt Johnston and Michaela Koerner in *The Green Sheep*.

dads and artists and teachers know it, but we need the research to back it up."

The science is catching up, according to Amy Susman-Stillman, director of applied research and training at the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development. The center has been working with Minneapolis's Children's Theatre Company on its Early Bridges initiative,

and though data are still being gathered, Stillman could offer some encouraging words.

"We're finding that the best practices in early childhood development and the best practices in theatre arts overlap a lot," Stillman said. "Some of the tasks for early childhood are done by theatre, including the development of creativity and imaginative play. Literacy skills are also coming online in

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Autumn Ness in *The Biggest Little House in the Forest* at Children's Theatre Company.

this period." Early anecdotal evidence from teachers she's talked to, Stillman said, indicates that they see children "carry this theatre work into other avenues of their play."

And for all their disavowing of pedagogic value, Reekie and Manley and their peers have received the support of such entities as the Scottish Arts Council, premised at least in part on the implicit cognitive value of

theatrical storytelling for still-forming minds. Starcatchers, the organization that helped Manley develop *My House*, got its initial funding from Scotland's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts.

Meanwhile, psychologists studying play among animals, including humans, see it as a kind of neurological workout, a rehearsal for learning. As Melvin Konner writes in his new

book *The Evolution of Childhood*, "Research suggests that people in positive and playful moods are more open to experience and learn in better and more varied ways."

WITH OR WITHOUT THE FORMAL research, artists in this field are remapping the boundaries of theatre, play and learning with the collaboration of their eager young audiences. A few clear best practices have developed: Shows are staged in non-traditional spaces with cushions or blankets rather than proper theatre seats (many are in-the-round, though *The Green Sheep* beguilingly reverses that by putting the audience inside the sheep pen and performing around them). Shows invariably begin with the performers already moving around the space and welcoming the audience. Official running times almost never exceed 45 minutes, though there's often some time for unstructured play built in post-show, and cast sizes tend to be very small, not only for reasons of dollars-and-cents economy but because small children can only follow so many people at once. There are no sudden lighting changes, if there's any traditional lighting at all, and the pacing and sound vol-

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ume throughout tend to be a lot gentler than you might think; nothing can grab a child's attention, even well past this tender age, like an intent silence. Music tends to relax them or take them out of the moment, while dialogue typically makes them lean forward.

Perhaps most important, children's theatre, particularly for this age, must reckon with the audience's presence to a degree no other kind of theatre must (but maybe should). Lyngo's Patrick Lynch has even realized that he can be more ambitious if he thinks of his tiny audience members as part of his cast.

"What we're expecting them to be as an audience is to be children, and react as children do," says Lynch. "We don't expect them to sit still and watch. In our newest show, *What a Wonderful World*, we recreate the growth of the universe, from the Big Bang on. So we've structured the show so they can play along. If you give 40 kids little devices that make bird noises, and if when they make those noises birds come flying out—that's theatre."

You might say the field is in its infancy, but other American companies that are taking baby steps include Alexandria, Va.-based Arts on the Horizon, founded by the Kennedy

Center's former general manager for children's programming, Michelle Kozlak; the company's first show, based on the improvisatory nature of jazz, is expected next spring.

And Rosemary Newcott, artistic director of theatre for youth and family at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, just kicked off a three-year program with funding from the Goizueta Foundation to develop new baby shows, with the help of a child psychiatrist, a musician, a dramaturg, an actor, a dancer and playwright Barry Kornhauser.

THOUGH SEVERAL ARTISTS IN THIS field reverently cite an Italian cooperative called La Baracca, which operates from Bologna's Teatro Testoni Ragazzi, perhaps the most bold and instructive work of this kind was done by Stockholm's Unga Klara, whose play *Babydrama* (2006) was designed for audiences of 12–15 babies and their caretakers.

And we do mean *babies*: Playwright Ann-Sofie Barany, a psychoanalyst, designed it with Unga Klara artistic director Suzanne Osten for infants aged six months to a year old. The hourlong program, which included a preshow meet-and-greet and a lengthy intermission,

had some of Sweden's major performers enacting tales of their own births and childhood. As Barany said in a recent interview, the actors were stunned by the results.

"They thought the babies would just be like dumplings sitting in a row, but their concentration was enormous," says Barany. "The actors said there's no audience more focused, none as honest—or as tiring. They have a sort of eerie intensity, like they're asking constant questions: What are you doing? What do you want from me? Who are you? Not 'why,' just 'what what what what what?'"

Some infant viewers never got the hang of it, but Barany says it was easy to tell which ones were "theatre lovers—they would push away other babies who tried to interact with them." Babies, Barany insists, "do follow dramaturgy—they respond to the same scenes in the same way. They follow changes in mood, themes." In short, she says, "My sense of the baby audience is that they are floating in the same area as we do when we're really struck by a performance. They behave very much like a theatre audience."

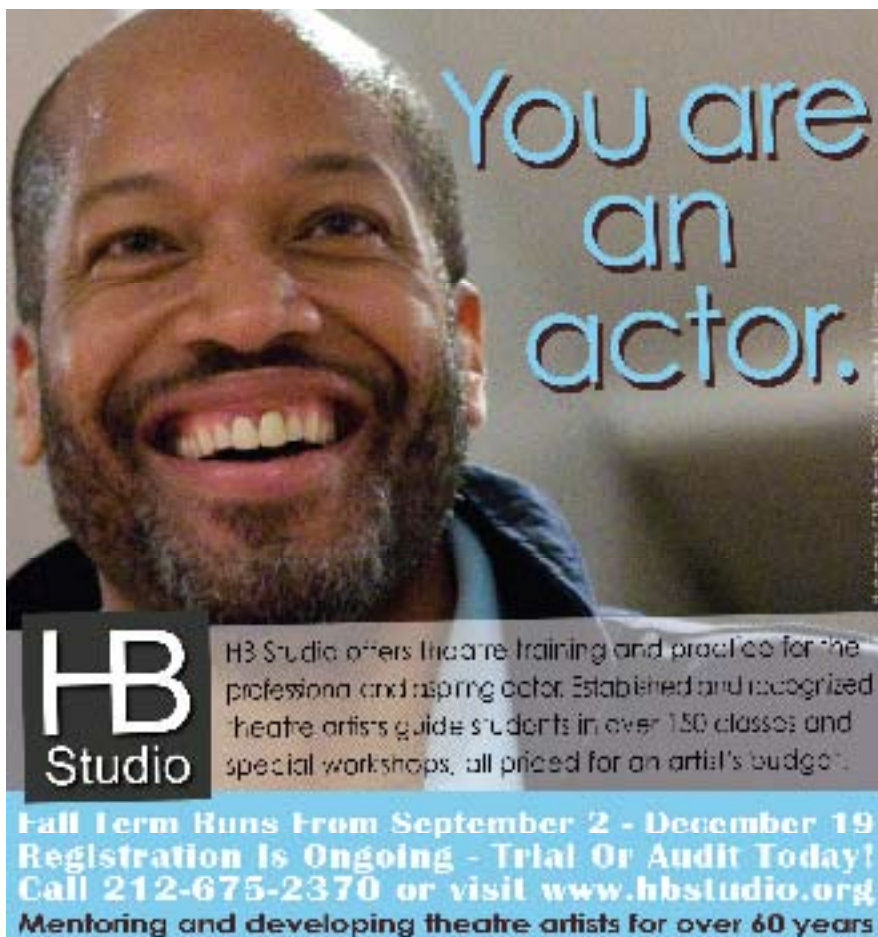
That squares with the experience of Lyngo's Patrick Lynch. "I have this theory that we have this innate ability to be an audience. It's a very natural thing for humans to do. It's an instinct that we have—not only to tell stories but to listen to them."

To Barany, the value of theatre for babies is self-evident. "They want this—they need this. I've said it many times before: I think theatre is the best way of telling babies about life. Because theatre, when it's really done in an exact way, it's like a condensation of reality. There's not a lot of noise going on; there's not a lot of focuses; it's super-clear."

Put this way, it isn't a mandate—it's a mission. As CTC's Brosius puts it, "To me, this is a social justice issue. Kids who don't get this, who don't have this cognitive experience early on, fall behind."

Chimes in Hartzell, whose hometown of Seattle has experienced a recent baby boom: "The one thing that resounds with me is this basic thought of 'start 'em early.' We're not just trying to do good theatre—we're trying to make a difference in our culture. We're trying to get people to think of art as part of their everyday lives, not as an elitist activity. We want to find a way to get theatre into every fiber of their body."

In my case, of course, she's preaching to the choir. For when Lyngo's *Egg and Spoon* comes to the New Victory in November, Oliver and I are so there. **✎**



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