

The Puppet Theater and the Audience of Tomorrow

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Abstract: *Children's theater is a complex and sensitive means of education. It represents fantasy, creativity, and play for children. The young spectator learns here, alongside the characters, a certain way of life, with the characters positively influencing the feelings and character traits still being formed. A children's theater performance cultivates a taste for beauty, teaches them what is good and what is bad, provides role models, and contributes to their intellectual development. It also opens the universe of imagination to children, with stories evoking feelings toward the noble and good heroes on stage. Friendship takes on meaning, and truth and goodness are always victorious. Children's theater opens young spectators to the world of culture, enriches their imagination, serves as a means of personality development, teaches them a positive behavior model, and is a means of communication.*

Keywords: *Children's theater; Education; Imagination; Emotions; Scenography; Morality;*

Introduction

In the life of a community, theater, with its various functions of knowledge and education, holds a significant place derived from its capacity to influence and sensitize. Even more important is the role of animation theater, which is aimed at children. The role of theater has a dual function: the educational function and the aesthetic function. The aesthetic function is particularly important in shaping the spectator of tomorrow. The child learns from their parents the language and the first elements of ethics and conduct. At school, they complete their scientific education about the world, building on a solid foundation of moral principles.

1. The Role of Theater in the Formation of a Child's Personality

The art of theater plays an important role in the development of a child's personality, as they absorb the great truths of life through the mediation of emotions. The young spectator is extremely open to what they see on stage, often identifying with the characters in the play, and the story becomes, in their imagination, their own adventure. Children's theater not only captivates them but also shapes their thinking, feelings, and behavior, preparing them for the realities of life. The child's willingness to be enveloped by the theatrical act is much greater than that of an adult spectator, as children have a heightened sensitivity and curiosity that makes them more receptive. Children's theater – both puppet and actor-based – has an aesthetic mission that can only be fulfilled through an appropriate repertoire, with increasingly valuable performances. Such a repertoire should be based on original plays, works of great classics of national and universal literature, adaptations, or new dramatic interpretations, all of which are a guarantee of success. Through the diversity of themes and the complexity of approaches, theater can deepen the child's understanding of the world and help them form their own values, morality, and aesthetic taste. “Moreover, theater provides the child with a space in which they

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can experience powerful emotions, learn about human relationships, and better understand social realities, all in a way that is accessible and age-appropriate”².

2. Expressiveness and Scenography in Puppet Theatre

Equally important is the mode of expression in performances. To achieve this, there is a constant effort to discover various means of expression and to explore new and impactful ways of creating characters and the scenic environment. By experimenting with new forms of theatrical interpretation that maintain a modern understanding of the childhood universe through nuanced stage effects, the young spectator discovers the beauty of theatrical art and learns to appreciate its subtleties. Thus, theatre becomes a window into a world full of imagination, where learning is intertwined with emotion and poetry.

Puppet theatre, in particular, relies on refinement and essentialization to reach metaphors and symbols. The performances in puppet theatre are complex and fascinating. In these productions, various arts such as music, dance, and visual art blend harmoniously and essentially in a variety of ways to bring the puppet character to life. „Through captivating scenic images, the poetic nature and meanings of the play (whether original work or adaptation) are expressively conveyed, inviting the audience to explore deep themes through a simple yet incredibly effective language”³.

A key role is played by the scenography, which, through its beauty, suggestiveness, inventiveness, functionality, and refined aesthetic sense, plays an essential role in fulfilling the aesthetic and educational mission of children's theatre. Scenography not only helps create an appropriate setting for the story, but also communicates a powerful and coherent message, helping children understand and deeply feel the theme of the play. Thus, each visual element becomes a metaphor for the experiences and emotions that the child will learn and experience throughout the performance. The scenography of puppet theater performances is fundamentally based on the same theatrical synthesis concepts as the scenography of drama theater. However, a clear distinction is made in terms of the techniques and visual purposes. This scenography is characterized by the theatricalization of the visual aspects of the performance, bringing to life visual elements that are essential for conveying the message of the play and creating an atmosphere that is both captivating and accessible to children. In puppet theater, the role of the scenographer as a „theatrator” (a term used by theorist Ion Sava) is significantly more prominent than in dramatic theater performances. The scenographer does not simply create a set, but takes on an educational and symbolic function, ensuring that every element of the scenography deepens the meanings of the play and reflects the states and emotions of the characters. Thus, the scenographer becomes a true visual storyteller, who, through their ingenuity, contributes to the development of an imaginative world full of significance. Furthermore, scenography in puppet theater is constantly adapting to the needs and particularities of the play, always in search of new ways to capture the attention and imagination of young audiences.

3. Theater for Children and Youth – A Success Story

The Constanța Theater for Children and Youth has had and continues to have the privilege of collaborating with one of Romania's most important set designers: Eugenia

² Emil Verza, & Florin, Emil. Verza, 2017. *Child's Psychology [Psihologia copilului]*. Bucharest: Three Publishing House. p. 240.

³ Ursula Șchiopu. 1981. *Artistic Symbolism in the Ontogenesis of Types*. Bucharest: Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, p. 243.

Tărășescu Jianu, a designer whose creations are distinguished by innovation both in visual design and technical construction. She is the set designer who eliminated the classic screen from theater and created the puppet with legs, a significant step in the evolution of puppet theater. This revolutionary moment was marked by the production “The Child from the Stars” – a dramatization of Oscar Wilde, directed by Geo Berechet, with set design by Eugenia Tărășescu Jianu. The production was widely awarded at national and international festivals, being appreciated for its innovation in puppet design and the creation of a captivating visual setting. Recently, Mrs. Eugenia Tărășescu Jianu created the set design for another remarkable production by the Constanța Theater for Children and Youth, “The Little Seahorse – What a Wonderful News”. This performance tells the story of the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ and was received with great emotion and joy by the young audience. The message of the performance, filled with sensitivity but also profound lessons, was fully realized thanks to the puppets and set pieces created by Eugenia Tărășescu Jianu. Her contribution to the overall atmosphere was essential in creating a world full of magic and symbolism, which brought the performance closer to the hearts of the little ones. Thus, her talent and vision continue to inspire both the audience and young theater creators, solidifying her place in the history of Romanian theater.

4. The Impact of Theater on Children's Development

The puppet theater addresses a special category of audience – children – and plays a crucial educational and formative role. This ancient art is characterized by the focus on specific means of expression, being a form of spectacle always open to revaluation and discovery both in form and essence. Thus, puppetry remains an effective means of learning and development, adapting to the needs and curiosity specific to the age group. The child spectator of puppet theater easily grasps theatrical conventions due to the daily games, which are based on a clear structure, helping them understand and recognize theatrical conventions with ease.

Children's and youth theater represents the first contact of a future member of modern society with the artistic phenomenon. How this first contact unfolds is decisive for the further development of their aesthetic perception and understanding of art. Children's and youth theater must respond to the natural questions of its audience's age and create an accessible and captivating language. The characteristics of a performance aimed at this audience must have a sense of proportion and the ability to talk about complex matters in a way that is accessible and easily understood by the child spectator. A child, having a much more developed visual memory than their age-related understanding, retains much better what they see rather than what they are told. In this regard, theater offers them a lively, spoken, and moving image that impresses, creating new perceptions and teachings.

The “Căluțul de Mare” Children's and Youth Theater has a diverse repertoire, catering to different age categories: preschoolers, schoolchildren, teenagers, and young adults. The selected repertoire has a great power to influence the developing sensitivity of younger generations, shaping their thinking and perceptions about the world. Fairy tales not only retain their charm for the child audience, but they also have great educational power, carrying moral virtues. “The child’s thirst for the fabulous, the fantastic, the beautiful, and the good finds immeasurable satisfaction in staged fairy tales, which provide a form of profound education but also an escape from the everyday”⁴. The fairy tale can be either classic or modern, with certain preferences, but always relevant to the sensitivity of the child and, why not admit it, to

⁴ Jean Piaget. 2022. *Genetic Psychology Problems. The child and the Reality*. Bucharest: Three Publishing House. p. 75.

that of the adult as well. For example, what is Jean Giraudoux's "Ondine" if not a fairy tale for adults? Thus, children's and youth theater remains an art form that influences and shapes, offering both a life lesson and a valuable aesthetic experience.

5. The Role of Theater in the Emotional and Educational Development of Children

The Children and Youth Theater "Căluțul de Mare" fulfills its educational and formative mission through performances inspired by both national and universal prose and dramaturgy. This cultural treasure of all peoples is skillfully highlighted through the performances of the "Căluțul de Mare" Theater, which resonate with the essential values of each culture. As an actress of the Children and Youth Theater "Căluțul de Mare" since 2004, I have been and continue to be interested in observing the reactions of the audience through direct interaction with them, as well as through active participation in the audience during the theater's performances. Over time, I have come to understand how important the repertoire and means of expression are, depending on the target age group, in fulfilling the formative-educational role of theater. The foundation of my study is based on two performances from the theater's repertoire: "The Old Woman's Daughter and the Old Man's Daughter" by Ion Creangă and "Puss in Boots" by Charles Perrault, with preschool children as the target audience.

Expressing ideas and emotions through its specific art form, puppet theater addresses the affectivity and sensitivity, which, at the age of the preschool audience, represent the emotional support for all actions and generate an endless range of emotions and artistic experiences. These lead to the creation of deep aesthetic and moral feelings, which contribute to the complex development of children. These theatrical experiences not only influence emotional education but also the learning of fundamental values such as fairness, friendship, respect, and courage. Thus, puppet theater becomes a favorable environment where children develop not only cognitive skills but also emotional skills that will contribute to their growth as members of a harmonious society. The content of ideas in the performance, expressed in a convincing emotional form, positively influences the process of character formation in children. It is a well-established fact that in order to use art as a means of education, it must first represent an educational goal. This means that art has formative value only to the extent that it is assimilated as such. A child's engagement with art also represents the transformation of art into a means of shaping and molding their personality. The child's receptivity and sensitivity to beauty must be cultivated with patience and skill in order to become a fundamental and lasting trait of each individual's personality.

The dual aspect of theater – literature and art – contributes to a multifaceted understanding of reality. In the theater hall, the artistic emotion of the spectator takes shape as a given of social psychology. The theater hall becomes a laboratory for aesthetic education. Psychologists agree that the preschool stage (ages 3-6) is dominated by a great and perpetual curiosity. It is the period of intellectual hunger, or the "why" phase. This stage, also known as „the age of questions, serves as a highly valuable motivational factor for education”⁵. The child lives emotionally through everything they like in terms of form, color, and movement. Ethical issues take on a particular significance for the child, showing them what is beautiful and what is not, and aesthetics at this age acquire an ethical coloring: within their rich and genuinely expressed emotional core, feelings are nurtured.

⁵ Ursula Şchiopu & Emil Verza. 1981. *Age Psychology*. Bucharest: Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, p. 243.

6. The Impact of Puppet Theater on the Emotional and Educational Development of Children

Another characteristic of this age is the spirit of imitation, which must be harnessed. The desire to imitate, so specific to childhood, is also due to its impressionable nature. Lacking a developed critical mind, the child now imitates indiscriminately. Therefore, it is necessary to provide positive role models for life and behavior. Any theater dedicated to younger audiences must and should do this through its repertoire. Emotions and feelings reflect the relationships between humans and the objects or situations that provoke them. Because of this, the same situation can provoke different feelings in different people. Emotions are elementary affective processes, while feelings reflect the complex relationships between humans and their environment, especially the social environment. Feelings develop in the educational process.

The theater performance immerses the child in more complex situations than those experienced through their own experience, helping them recognize the emotions that someone can feel in one situation or another. Children emotionally participate in the events that the characters go through, rebelling against the negative ones and rejoicing in the success of the positive ones. Sometimes, they intervene from the audience, offering advice to the positive characters on how to avoid the dangers threatening them or how to punish the enemy. "The reflex of imitation contributes to enriching the number of situations that can provoke one emotion or another"⁶.

In preschoolers, higher feelings are developed, namely moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings, the elements of which were only sketched in the previous period. Often, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings merge into a single positive or negative attitude toward the characters in the play. They love the positive heroes and consider them the most beautiful, while the negative heroes are not only bad but also ugly. The characters in the plays express various feelings, developing the child's ability to understand the emotions of those around them. The perception of the performance consists of an intimate complex of affectivity and understanding. In the theater hall, children are confronted with another available world, free for complex participation, convinced by characters who devote themselves until they return to the realm of reality. Through the medium of fantasy, puppet theater cultivates the child's sensitivity, their inclination toward beauty, generosity, and delicacy, stimulates their reaction against evil, injustice, and dishonesty, and aligns with the spirit of justice and love for the truth.

Without diminishing in any way the primordial importance of the dramatic text, theater has the ability to transmit ideas visually, plastically, and kinetically, in other words, to suggest through its intrinsic poetry scenic images. Puppet theater conveys the real in the form of the imaginary. The child accepts entering the game without prejudice; the game is not only for the actors but also for the spectators. The child spectator emotionally merges with a fabricated universe, so receptive, ready to absorb, blending their world of knowledge with the wonders of puppet play or masks, which they associate with events unfolding in their life environment. They replace the characteristics of characters with the behavior of those around them, all through an affective and instructive activity.

⁶ Catrinel Ștefan & Eva Kallay. 2010. *The Development of Children's Emotional and Social Competence*. Bucharest: ASCR Publishing House, p. 59.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the theater performances for children, such as *Fata babei și fata moșneagului* by Ion Creangă⁷ and *Puss in Boots* by Charles Perrault⁸, carefully crafted by directors Daniel Stanciu and Cristian Pepino, alongside scenographers Delia Ioaniu and Cristina Pepino, successfully combine the educational dimension with emotional sensitivity. These theatrical productions are designed to meet the reception capabilities of children, keeping in mind that the message should be both accessible and profound. Children identify with the characters, actively participating in the unfolding of the action, thus making theater not only a source of entertainment but also an educational tool that conveys fundamental values, such as modesty and good deeds in *Fata babei și fata moșneagului*, and courage, cleverness, and self-confidence in *Puss in Boots*. These moral lessons are integrated into a fascinating universe supported by set design and animated video projections that spark children's wonder and curiosity. Moreover, these performances not only stimulate imagination but also cultivate aesthetic and ethical sensitivity, contributing to their emotional and intellectual development. Thus, theater becomes an essential tool in early education, and its impact on shaping the character and values of children is undeniable. The Children and Youth Theater *Căluțul de Mare* fulfills this educational mission with talent and love, offering children not just a form of entertainment but also a path to understanding and appreciating the world around them.

The “Căluțul de Mare” Children and Youth Theater stands as a true landmark in theatrical art for young audiences, through its harmonious blend of educational value and aesthetic expressiveness. With its diverse repertoire, innovative scenography, and deep emotional engagement of young spectators, the Constanța-based theater offers a model of best practices that can inspire and guide the future of children’s theater across Europe and beyond. The artistic experiences it delivers cultivate sensitivity, a taste for beauty, and an understanding of universal human values. Thus, “Căluțul de Mare” becomes a cultural ambassador of childhood and education through art, proving that children’s theater is, now more than ever, a vital necessity in contemporary society.

8. References

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⁷ Ion Creangă. 2004. *Old Woman’s daughter and Old Man’s daughter*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.

⁸ Charles Perrault. 2016. *Puss in Boots*. Bucharest: Gramar Publishing House.

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