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A Note from the Editor

This is our 9th Edition of the Sutradhar magazine.
Recently Delhi was fortunate to have a Mentorship workshop by Barbra Kölling.
It was hosted by Katkatha Arts Trust. The participants came from all over India. The difference was that the onus was on the theatre companies working for Children’s Theatre in India who were invited to participate and send their team-members.

The Mentorship workshop was 4 weeks long, broken into two with a gap of intense research preparation and mentorship in between...with a commitment of creating a “work”. The response to this model from this community was very encouraging and the results have been valuable.

Material Theatre is unique in its honesty and depth. The Indian Theatre Community and its young practitioners are taking baby steps in the field.

The 8 short performances that came out of this project are being performed regularly impacting audiences, educators and adults alike. This shift in the directionless world of “Children’s Theatre” (Puppet Theatre included) was documented by Manjima Chatterjee (drama explorer, educator), Priyanka Borar (photographer) and Dr. Atul Sinha (animator, video documentor). This issue of Sutaadhar takes a close look through interviews with the Master and her students and personal accounts of the participants.

Sutradhar continues to enjoy the support of the Publications Division of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. We are thankful for it.

By the next issue Unima India hopes to invite an editorial board and expand its pool of writers from among academics, hpractitioners, observers and followers who are beginning to take keen interest.

Ranjana Pandey
President
Unima India
When I look back at December 2017 and January 2018, I am filled with absolute wonder. It all began with a video of a show called H2O that I saw in 2010 as a researcher in puppetry at Deutsches Forum für Figurentheater und Puppenspielkunst e.V. (dfp), Germany. It lead to a trip to Helios Theatre in 2010 where I saw for the first time Material Theatre for toddlers. If I had not watched the children who were watching the show I would not have believed the power of the form. In fact, before that I had never seen children aged 2-3 years watch theatre. It began as a series of events. Firstly, I met the dynamic duo who co-founded Helios Theatre, Barbara Kolling and Michael Lurse, then in 2014 Barbara came to India, invited by UNIMA India to do a masterclass and the show H2O travelled across cities in India.

Barbara’s masterclass was very well received but it felt like we needed a longer and deeper engagement with her and the form. So another conversation with Barbara began. In the beginning the plan was to invite her to direct a performance for Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust but soon it felt like we needed a different model of working, a newer and wider approach.

What if the larger theatre and performing arts community could be included in this engagement? Would puppeteers be interested in material theatre? Would actors be interested? Would there be enough takers for toddler’s theatre? Could a significant movement in theatre for the very young be created by involving a much larger community?

After many long conversations with theatre companies and those who work with children and with colleagues from the puppetry community it seemed that the best idea would be to have Barbara mentor young directors and performers to create their own Material Theatre pieces for very
young audiences. While in a masterclass model the key elements are immersion in the master’s technique, philosophy, narrative and overall way of viewing the art form, the Mentorship model looks at participants learning technique and form through their own explorations, closely guided by the artist mentor. Additionally, Barbara would work with one director in each group.

Thus eight groups/companies of performers joined the mentorship program, namely, Tadpole Repertory, Katkatha Puppet arts Trust, Gillo Theatre, Tram Arts Trust, One Plus Educational and Cultural Trust, Simran Sachdeva and Ganesh Kumar, Gunjan gupta and Dhruv Rai and Ihab Tallameh from Palestine. The group came together for 10 days to understand Material Theater focused on the very young, instructed by Barbara but left for long periods to research material and evolve their own improvisations. Towards the end of this period each group had one material that they had chosen to work with and some good ideas for a show. Barbara then left the groups to work on their own show for 10 days. In the interim period the groups prepared their shows. Then Barbara returned to the groups and guided them, especially the director to ask important questions about the show. In this period the sharing with children and each other intensified. At the end of the 10 days the shows were presented for school children and the public at India International Centre, New Delhi.

Barbara’s system of working roughly covered the following aspects

1. A step by step system of engaging with material. With each exploration she takes participants deeper into the meaning of material, this is the Research stage.
2. Watching each other’s explorations (where the Research leads to a presentation) and reflecting on each others work through very detailed observations. The group says what they saw not if it was “good” or “bad”. This regular practice slowly built a powerful and nurturing community that gives critical feedback that helps to actually make a good performance.
3. Barbara’s feedback at critical times of performance making, where she asked always the right question or tweaked a component in the performance to change its future course. Needless to say that this is her genius. I can only hope that it can be imbibed in time!!
4. Documentation by her assistant where each group’s process, growth, all feedback are recorded. All of these have been feeding into her methodology.
5. Sharing their show at several stages in front of an audience of children.

The outcome of this Mentorship has been the true wonder.

Now there is a community of theatre groups who have become each other’s sounding board. They go to each other’s shows and give feedback that nurtures the artistic processes. Eight new shows have been created for toddlers and the very young audiences!! At least five of these are still performing and from the look of things will continue to do so all through this year. They have been invited to festivals and school and are also doing public shows. A whole buzz has been created around the theatre for the very young. Further pushed by the initiatives of ASSITEJ India (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People) and the recent workshops organized by them.

At the same time many smaller parallel processes have been unfolding. We organized a Teacher’s Program which coincided with the end of Bar-
bara’s Mentorship Program. Nine pre-primary school teachers from six schools across the city enrolled in this program. They began by watching the final Material Theatre shows of the eight theatre companies mentored by Barbara. Each teacher had to watch the shows twice, once as an audience member and once watching the children watching the shows. They made detailed observations about the children. They also saw Helios Theatre’s show Woodbeat on video, along with a research film shot about the reactions of the children and the behavior of accompanying adults responding to these children. The key focus was to enable teachers to look at themselves as observers of children before being teachers. This was followed by a hands-on session of researching material and homework on Research. Over a few weeks the teachers sent us videos of their research and received feedback from us. When they were ready they presented their short shows to the children ending in a moment where the children would begin to play with the material, thus leading to more observations about both material and children. They filled observations forms and came back to the Katkatha studio with feedback about their experience. Their key observations were the following.

1. The children connected immediately to material. They “got it” where as, their own colleagues could not understand what they were doing.
2. Once they began to perform in class, the response was unexpected, sometimes the children laughed which was unnerving. The children were not used to seeing their teacher like this. A new relationship had started to be created in class. Old boundaries were broken. The power dynamic had changed. When we speak of alternative education in classrooms we have to ask the crucial question of whether we are ready to relinquish our power status in the classroom. Are we ready for a new relationship? And what is this new relationship?
3. The teachers are now currently asking the critical question – Can Material Theatre be used to teach? Teach What? Can it relate to core curriculum questions?
4. In August, the teachers will present papers about their journeys and discoveries to other teachers and educationalists at a seminar.
5. Katkatha is in the process of creating a web page to support pre-primary teachers in using the performing arts in class.

 Needless to say, all of these possibilities would not exist without the mentor herself. Not every artist, however talented, skilled or experienced can teach a Masterclass or mentor other artists. Very special qualities are required to be a mentor. A larger vision for the world and the performing arts in it, a real interest in the next generation and a deep immersion in one’s own form but with the ability to break it down for others to reinterpret are some of the key qualities. Barbara Kolling is all of these and more. This was key to the success of the mentorship model.

Anurupa Roy heads the Kat Katha Puppet Arts Trust, New Delhi, India.
Beginnings

In Germany, 15 years ago, theatre for the youngest – for children 2 years and below – was rare; performances would usually be meant for children who were at least 4 or 5 years old. Before Barbara Kölling began to research theatre with materials, she had already directed several performances that were improvised on a theme. She realised that in her style of working, she would not always need a written text, but often objects, puppets, light and sound would be used to improvise with the actors or puppet players or musicians. Given the task to curate a festival, Barbara travelled around and saw some amazing work happening for the youngest of children – the 0-3 years age group. The work she saw resonated with her.

“I thought I would really like to do this kind of work – I would like to speak to them as an adult artist,” she says. “I like little children a lot, but it was not as though I had a particular agenda. I simply wanted to communicate with them. My particular question was, how abstract could I be?” One of the first surprises for her was the finding that she could speak with very little children in a very abstract way, and still be understood.

“Everybody knows how little children look at shapes, and how they play with different balls, or stones, trying to bring them together, for a very long time. So, when you are sitting or standing in front of them, and you know how children work, you really can find a way to do the most abstract things, and, if they are connected with you, they will follow. And my interest just grew from there because I found the freedom and the possibility to engage in my own research.”

She worked closely with a puppeteer whose interest was in material – he went from the puppet to the object and then to earth, and wood, and then water – and together, they began working with materials. They explored the differences between materials; for example, what are the differences between sand and water? With each exploration, the ideas became bigger and bigger: through natural materials, they arrived at ecological questions, and realised that the smallest of
things had the possibility to say something very important for the world.

In the initial phase of the work, even as she worked with puppets and dance and music, Barbara studied the arts movements of Europe in the 1920s, particularly the Weimar Republic, which featured a significant amount of interdisciplinary work. After working for a few years at a large theatre company, she moved away to found a “free theatre”, in order to work with a small group of like-minded people. As her interests fused and the focus of the work began to change, the group made a conscious decision to work with professionals who understood children, “…so that I could just focus on my work!” Barbara laughs.

Children as audience

Another important decision that the group made early on was to have trial audiences of children coming in as early as the fifth day of preparation. This has not only helped the actors to figure out what works, but also to explore further possibilities. Barbara explains:

“When we first made H2O, the show did not begin with the drops of water. But then, when we had the little children over, we realised that the acoustics of water were very important to them. We realised that if we didn’t focus on the single drop, and the sound of it, then all the children got a little bit weird, because there are just too many things going on. So that single drop, and the sound of it, helped to focus their attention right at the beginning, and this came from the children.”

This has also helped overcome the performers’ own apprehensions in some cases.

“When we were preparing for Woodbeat, we found that if we were to stay honest to our research, at some point we would need to introduce an axe. Because, there are many things you can do with wood, but at some point, if you were to build something, you would need an axe. But we weren’t sure how little children would respond to it – would they begin to cry, would they fear the axe?”

After a couple of approaches failed, they arrived at a version wherein the performer would do it very calmly, after making eye contact with the children, with a reassuring look that it was all safe, and from that moment on, no child ever cried again. A similar solution was reached in a situation that demanded a trumpet, and the group was unsure whether the loud sounds produced by it would be scary for children.

“In the end, I always think it is a matter of how we communicate it. It is not about loudness, but how it comes across: if it’s unconscious, and just happens to be loud, then it can be scary. But if you communicate that it is like this and can be very loud, you will find that it isn’t a problem at all.”

It isn’t just the elements of performance that can be scary. Often, the very idea of being in a darkened space with unfamiliar faces can be a scary experience for very small children. The important thing to do, then, is to educate the adults, who accompany the children to the performance space, on supportive behaviour.

“We always say that if the child is afraid, you can maintain distance and see how they’re doing. I think it’s very important to have this distance, and for the child to experience this fear and to know that it can be overcome to reach a state where a child is feeling safe. And if you deal with it very calmly, a child will know that it’s fine, and that is a very beautiful moment.”
For Woodbeat, the group had made this little wooden creature – it had no eyes or mouth, it wasn’t painted, but everyone identified it as a creature, a worm – that jumps around and the performer makes funny sounds like “tu-tu!” . They often find the little ones laughing at this creature, because it just jumps and they have fun with it; but even in this case, half of the children would be amused and look on, but not laugh. Says Barbara,

“A child expert told me that they have not yet reached the distance that allows them to laugh. At their stage, everything is still a part of their world, and laughing about something means that I can identify something as funny. This distancing comes a while later, with greater access to language, which we use to distinguish between me, mine and others. So, by the time they’re approaching four, they are able to really see humour in things and laugh at them. And then they laugh so much that they can’t stop laughing sometimes!”

This is very interesting for me, because so often theatre artists feel that they have to jump around and do so much to make children laugh. Barbara finds this approach tricky.

“I would say be very careful, because they can end up getting scared of you! Children need us to be adults, because we take them by hand and lead them into the world. Sometimes, when I see adults trying to behave like children, it gets so strange! I don’t recognise them anymore – they could be very nice adults, but as children they scare me. (laughs) It doesn’t have to be about red noses all the time. Even water trickling down, or to have something and put it away, and have it again – that can be funny.”

But the most important thing to note here is that amusement by itself is not enough – children like to bite into ideas and engage with them.

“They really like to engage with ideas that are deeper, to come in contact with things, to think about them. For instance, why a bad dream is not just my bad dream, but also a bad dream for others. As I said earlier, they are very comfortable with the abstract. When a child watches the same thing as an adult, say H2O, they may have a similar thought – it is not possible to control water – and play with that. Of course, they cannot express it in words, and of course the perception is at a different level, but you can get to know this if you observe them.”

Children need to understand the world, and they seek to do so, and for this, says Barbara, the most important strategy at their disposal is play.

“Children experience the world on their own while playing. They survive while playing, and because of playing, because playing allows them to enter a different world, and to change that world, to change things, to respond and react to things, to be active, and this is very important. And it is also nice to watch other people while playing, and to see possibilities in their play. I would say I think it is necessary to survive!”

So how much of possibility for children to interact or play does Helios have in its productions?

“I would really like to introduce to adults, as an artist, the idea that it is also possible to engage with and communicate with another person while watching and listening. So, in H2O, at the end there is this one drop again, and the performer invites the children to feel this one drop on their hand – that was my ending. But, when the show went on tour, and there were these two male actors performing, they opened it out to chil-
The children really enjoyed it, but I felt, that this was something that the children could have gone home and done, you know, with their parents in their bathrooms! (laughs) I feel that sometimes opening it all out is a bit lazy (laughs!) and I also feel a bit helpless when that happens, because, you know, after half an hour of sitting, if you give them the whole space, children tend to just run. Sometimes, it is ok, but otherwise, it’s not fair to the performance, and also for children, to allow the space to be taken over by chaos. It’s all right for children to retain the final impression and walk away with that, to have a quiet moment of reflection, if you will."

We draw parallels between the relationship between performer and material to the relationship in a classroom, between the teacher and material for exploration: how much of talking is needed, how far does the interaction need to be teacher-led, and can the material be allowed to speak for itself? That’s a challenge for the teacher – at what point do you step back, and let go, and let the drama take over?

“Yes, there’s struggle to find balance. And this is the moment when the light comes in, isn’t it? When something happens that you didn’t expect.”

Structures and strategies

Much of the experience of the performance comes from little rituals that are created within the ambit of the show, a strategy that is strongly reminiscent of the earliest forms of theatre as well as modern process drama, I opine.

Barbara concurs,

“I think that these kind of performances for the little ones, especially if you do it with material, have very clear links with ritual. And then you have to decide what to do about it. This space that we somehow have created, it happens that people don’t want to leave it at first, even adults. You know, in Woodbeat, we have these lines that are made with wood – it’s a very nice stage, really! – and even adults by themselves sometimes don’t want to leave that space.”

The relationship with ritual is also something that Barbara has herself explored extensively.

“In South Africa, we had all these trainees from Magnet Theatre, who came from townships outside of Cape Town, and often from very different backgrounds. They had all been with Magnet Theatre for a few years, wanting to become theatre-makers. All of them had different issues in their lives. After working with me for a while and exploring and playing with materials and developing performances for very young children, the director of the theatre sent me feedback lines where they all wrote how helpful the process was, and particularly playing for very young children. They all said thanks because the process helped them come together on the inside, like healing. I have been trying to understand how it works for 10 years, and I still haven’t understood it! (laughs) You can’t really explain it. The response is sublim-
inal – it comes from too deep within.”

Barbara’s abiding interest in music means that most of her performances feature live music as an element of performance.

“Outside of Helios, I have done work with some of the bigger state theatres, and there I used music from outside, but most often, I work with a musician within the performance. For me, the sounds and rhythms of the performance are very, very important. The musicians are present from the beginning of the process, and so it evolves together, organically.”

“Dance is also a very nice medium for little ones, because they start to move, you know, while watching. They embody the rhythm. In the beginning I wondered whether the dance would have to be different, slower, for the little ones. But then I found out that it wouldn’t have to be. Artists can do what comes naturally, and children can follow. What is different about dance is the contact with the audience, because dance is often at a distance, and we worked on that for Traces; but we find that once the beginning is sensitively laid out before them, they enjoy the performance very much. And now the dancers have also started reducing the distance with children, and meeting them, sometimes mirroring during performances, which has made dance very accessible.”

She has recently worked with multimedia and digital material. How did that work?

“Our show, Face to Face, has a lot of film inside, and we have two cameras on stage. We worked with a visual artist and she made the programme for us. There are video screens on both sides of the stage. Children and people are seated on the sides. Two actors begin working on a ritual that they do every time – setting up, going, springing on something etc. and then they go and look into a camera and then they speak a line. Initially, they do it in the same rhythm together, and then one starts to go a bit slower, and from there it changes completely. They enter the video and things become very funny from there on. For me the starting point was mirroring: I see you and you see me, and I don’t see me except through your eyes. I’m not there if you are not there.
I was really not sure whether I liked that, because there was a lot of technique as well. And to really work out whether this works as a material, one had to be good at the technique as well. But it went well. When the actor invited the children, they had great fun with it. And now it has become our funniest performance. But there’s a very funny story about it.

We had a tryout 2 days before the premiere, with adults and children, and it was a lot of fun. So we set out to be as funny as we could be. And then the premiere audience was mostly adults, and they were looking very serious! The 6-7 children who were there were very shy in the company of these serious adults, and everyone was just looking, and no one laughed! (laughs)

How did they solve this problem?
“We made it more obvious, then it went better and better. But we couldn’t really get the adults to laugh! Because they immediately began to think and analyse and you could really see the big distance between the adults and children. It’s only maybe 20 per cent of adults who really can imagine what children are like from the inside. More often than not they are at a real distance from the children. They have to be convinced by the children.”

What’s the difference between adults and children when they watch a performance?
“When we look at children as they watch, we see so many possibilities from their point of view, because they are just looking closely and responding to each moment. They are not trying to find layers and meanings to everything.”

“Inviting” the audience

Part of the unwritten rules of Material Theatre is that the nature of communication has to be very clear, and the rules have to be very clear. Here we find similarities with process drama, and Barbara talked about the importance of settling the contract with the participants right at the beginning, to kind of agree on the rules of engagement. Is this true of a Material Theatre performance as well, to set the boundaries?...“Yes. The audience needs to know at what point it is invited, and what it is invited to do. It is very important, because the clearer this communication is, the more the public will be able to respond to the performance. And especially if you do it right at the beginning. It is much more difficult if you do it later on – if you have established nothing in the beginning, and then you want them to be very concentrated later on, it’s much more difficult. In the beginning, you always have the time to tell about the rules and then because everybody is following the flow, they are ready to accept it. In the beginning, when I started directing, I always asked the question – what are the first 5 minutes about?”

For a form that requires intimacy, Helios is always concerned with figuring out the right distance from the audience. For instance, when the group started working with Woodbeat, they had these little wooden pieces on the floor, and children would pick them up, which was disturbing for the performers. Then one of the actors made a train made of wood lines, which worked liked a boundary, and then nobody went up to the wood anymore. This, however, seemed a little too strict. Then they decided to place little shapes out of wood around the performing area, and 5 minutes before the performance, put them away, and there was a very clear line that remained. This worked to everyone’s satisfaction.

“Quite often, when I come into the space of my performance, and I see how the technicians have
laid out the benches for the kids, and I push them back a bit, because the distance from the performance also matters. A distance of 1 meter is not too much, especially if you want them to have a view of the entire performance.”

The idea of distance from the audience, both literally and figuratively, is something that the arts are constantly negotiating, all over the world. In India, classical dancers don’t want to work with or perform before very young children, for fear of not being understood or appreciated, and in Germany, there is a slightly different problem with classical music. As Barbara explains it, “They want to reach out to children, but don’t want to dilute it, and then they don’t know how to reach out. They try to simplify it, but that doesn’t capture the truth of the material – and it’s not very interesting either! They want to build a public of tomorrow, but it cannot be only about that. It will not work.”

How, then, can we begin to move towards not just a public, but a citizenship of tomorrow? The arts are transformative – so to make them available to the youngest group, before other influences start to limit them, is a way of building a better generation, one that is more in touch with itself, with a different way of thinking and being. And that is definitely something to aspire to.

“I don’t have a solution to it, but there has to be a way of making contact. We have to find a way to reach down and touch them at the level of the gut, and then it will happen. It has only been 10 years since this kind of theatre took off in Germany. It is only 10 years since dance started reaching out to children in this way. But then, it happened. It’s still very new for the children. We have to build the audience. A few years ago, there wasn’t much happening in terms of children’s theatre in India, but it’s changed now, and that’s wonderful. There is a movement all over the world, and it is arriving in India as well, and I can really see things happening here.”
Asha Kumari, Katkatha Puppet Arts, India (Puppeteer)
Part I – December 2017

For how long have you been a puppeteer, and had you engaged with any performing arts before you came to puppetry?

I have been in puppetry for almost 10 years. I had done a bit of dance and theatre before training in puppetry.

What was it that initially attracted you to puppetry?

Initially, I had no idea what to expect. I thought maybe we would be working with Rajasthani puppets. Then, as I learnt the craft, I grew to really enjoy it.

And what do you like about it now?

I enjoy shadow work, mostly. Also, working with papier mache – everything, really.

Which aspect of puppetry did you enjoy most?

Well, initially I was mostly into making – and so far most of my experience has been in making puppets.

While making puppets with materials, had you explored the nature of the materials themselves, before coming to this workshop?

When I worked with materials before, it was always with the intent of making something, or creating something with it. I had never looked at the material for itself before this. Even in the newspaper show, we explored what it does, but we didn't really get into the material quite so deeply before this.
When you say “get into the material”, what exactly do you mean?

I mean, when you really watch the material, see what it does, explore it, you know. To get into the details and recognise its possibilities. Like, I’ve mostly worked with newspaper before, but we’ve focused on making a show, and I hadn’t really explored it for itself before this.

Could you share some of the discoveries you have made about the 5 different materials you have explored in this workshop so far?

Yes, of course. Say, for instance, sand – it can be dry or wet, and each has its own identity. Wet sand has different textures, and can produce sounds, like falling rain, but it won’t fly. It won’t spread out, like dry sand. Dry sand, on the other hand, will fly, and it will spread, no matter what you do to it. It is loose, and has a completely different texture. You can create wind or storms with it.

Do you see your approach to puppetry changing after this workshop?

I think so, yes. There should be some impact. If it were up to you alone to choose a material to create a show with, which one would you choose? If I were working on my own, I would mix them up – use different materials. But if you asked me to choose just one, I would really have to think about it, think about the show, explore, and then I’d be able to tell you.

Now that you are creating a performance with materials, do you see a difference between this and creating a performance with puppets?

Yes, you know, we have been working with puppets for so long, that we create puppetry with anything, and that’s happening even now. Our movements are such that we create puppets even with the materials we have been given, like with wool, we ended up creating this creature like thing. So, it’s not really going away. (laughs) But we can see it happening now. That awareness has developed.

Taking aside the performance, which material did you enjoy playing with the most?

Oh, I enjoyed them all! I played with everything, threw stuff at the others, got stuff thrown at me... (laughs) I think wool, and also sand. Yes, those two were my favourites.

Can you share a couple of experiences that for you were memorable in this workshop?

Well, for me the most fun experience was preparing the balloon piece that we put together for Barbara to be presented on the first day of the workshop. I had never explored balloons before, so it was great fun! And then we found this children’s book, in which some children explored balloons, and they made the exact same discoveries as us! It was spooky, and wonderful, too.

Apart from this, I really enjoyed playing with all the materials. When I was playing with sand by myself, I had only wet sand, and I had lots of fun playing with it, making things with it. Then, right at the end, I found some dry sand, which I threw, and I noticed that it had a completely different character from wet sand, and it surprised me! That was a lovely moment.

Also, you know, when we played with clay as children, we used to make these statues. We were working on these tarpaulin sheets, and I saw that the other three tarpaulins had statues, but ours didn’t. On our sheet, we had played randomly,
even thrown mud at each other – and I really liked that, that we opted not to make the same statues.

Was there an experience or something you learned from the discussions with Barbara?

I’m trying to follow everything – at every discussion I have found someone to translate for me, which has really helped! Most of the stuff I have noted has been to do with discovering the nature of the material. One thing I particularly noted was when Barbara talked about the importance of keeping the material in front while working out the structure of the performance. She said that the material must be seen and explored first, then the middle part can come in, and towards the end we can mix it up and make it enjoyable for everyone – that was something I really liked.

So this whole relationship between the material and the performer, putting the material ahead of the performer... do you have any thoughts on this?

Well, we’re puppeteers, so we’ve always put the puppet ahead of the performer, and we’re used to that. But of course, the difference is that a puppet has a definite form and shape, but material does not. It constantly changes, based on what we do with it. But then there are aspects that are universal, right? So, for instance, when anybody looks at a ball of wool – even if you’ve seen it for the first time – what’s the first thing they see? It’s a ball, right? You want to play with it. And then when it unravels, you see the thread coming out, and you recognise the possibilities, and the story forms moment by moment in the viewer’s mind. It’s like our show with the balloons, and how we found those common elements with the book. You need to look at the shape, size – just exploring it, playing with it, leads to finding the hook for a story – we need to find moments that help people to look beyond the known meanings of the material to discovering its various aspects with us – seeing its changing size, shapes, textures, possibilities for playing with it. I think that’s what we need to do – to help us to really know it.

Normally, when we prepare a show, we don’t really watch ourselves at work. But here, you have been watching each other. So, say when you watch Ihab perform, you think, “Oh, he shouldn’t stop there, he should play some more; or that was too long, stop it already”.

Does it make you think about your own work in different ways?

Well, it has made a difference to the way we think about pacing, and about creating moments of stillness. We have also learned that we could have conceptualised a movement in a certain way, but an audience member might see it in a completely different way. So, for instance, our last movement was about waves of water, but the audience saw the reins of a horse! That made us think about how to do it differently, and also to recognise that it’s possible that others will see something else. So, with a material, the possibilities of interpretation are endless, whereas with a puppet at least the puppet is definite – I know what I am seeing. That’s why it’s very important to have someone watch while we prepare a material theatre performance – what you experience and what the people watching you see are often very different.

Part II – January

So Asha, do you want to talk about the work you did over the break (3 weeks, mid-Dec to early Jan)?

Yes. We worked primarily on timing. Ihab was also with us. We divided our work into 2 halves...
of the day – we would work in the first half while Ihab watched, and then he would work and we would watch, because having someone to watch is very important. Also, when we broke in December, Barbara had told us that, while generally things were fine, we may need to “kill some of our darlings”. Initially we were really opposed to that! She had asked us to re-organise some of our stuff, and in doing that, we realised that some things no longer worked. So we threw stuff out one by one, and then new things came up, which we added. So now we have a very different show! We got our beginning done just a couple of days before the show for the Sunday Club kids, and just yesterday, there was some work with sound. So, it’s changing every day with exciting new possibilities.

When Barbara saw the show, she was happy with it, and she said that it is now coming together. We had sixteen acts earlier, and now we have only six! We have less acts now, but we are exploring each act at leisure, taking more time with it.

Has this affected the pace of your show?

Yes, I think the rhythm is in place now. Earlier, the acts were nice, but there was no link between the acts. Now, there is a logic to the flow of events. I wouldn’t call it a story – there is no definite story to our show – but there is a clear sense of the journey of the strand of wool. Earlier, there was a conflict with the arrangement of the dot and the waves in the structure. We tackled that by deciding to play with the length of the thread, increasing it bit by bit, and tying it up right at the end. When Barbara saw it, she made one more suggestion. At the beginning, we were using our bodies to ask questions to the audience. She asked us to minimise the use of the body, and use only our eyes; push the actor back even further, in a sense.

Has there been a difference to the way you were thinking about the show in December and the way you are thinking of it now?

I think I’ve come to realise that retaining everything is not that important! (laughs) The show needs to flow with its own rhythm, and have clear links between the acts. So, even if there are things we really like, if they don’t fit in the flow, they need to go!

What would you like to say about your show to a potential member of the audience?

I would say that you have always seen the finished products of wool – things made out of wool. But the material has its own character, and we invite you to come see what wool is, on its own, when it is free.

How long is the show now?

The show is about 25 minutes long.

Is the show ready now?

No, there is still a little bit of work left, some refining. Also, we need to take a call on whether we need a frame for this show. Currently, we’re using some material that Katkatha already has. After the IIC show, we’ll need to figure out whether we need to get a frame made specifically for this show, or whether we can work without it.

What are your plans for the show? (One of the team’s members, Manish, will return to Chandigarh after this workshop)

Well, Manish will probably come down from Chandigarh when we have a show. We have no infrastructure needs – just a flat ground without a carpet, and some sound – so we can perform anywhere. We’d love to travel to schools with the show.
What has been your biggest takeaway from the workshop?

I learned a lot. The biggest takeaway has been that drama can come out of anything! Also, that in puppet theatre, the story is more definite, but in Material Theatre, the possibilities of interpretation are much broader. The material itself is free, and has its own character, and that, too, is worth seeing.

What has the process been like for you? You had a bad patch in between...

Well, there was a time when I was working on it very intensively for days and weeks, and then it was like, nothing is emerging. I need to take a break. Then I came back to it, and it was fine.

Do you feel you can now work without puppets, too?

Well yes, I do. I worked with wool and balloons, which were both very interesting. Another material may also work, but I would have to spend time with it, research, practise; and then I’m sure we could create another show. It takes time, too. You can’t do it in two or three days. You need time to recognise the material for what it is.

Ihab Talahmeh, Freedom Theatre, Palestine (Actor)
Part I – December

Ihab, if you could begin by telling me a little bit about your background as an artist.

I am from Palestine, from a town called Dura in South Hebron, in the south of the West Bank. In 2013, I decided to study theatre after a friend of mine from Al-Arroub refugee camp told me about the Freedom Theatre and that they have a theatre school. At that time, I was a computer man, but I was always really interested in theatre. I had a computer shop in my hometown before I went to study theatre. At the beginning of 2014, I went to study theatre. At the beginning of 2014, I went for auditions, which lasted for 2 months. I wasn’t sure I would be accepted, because I didn’t have any experience in theatre. We were 27 students, most of whom had some experience in workshops or plays with the Freedom Theatre, while I had never had any experience at all. So, I was really worried.

During the two months, as we learned the basics of theatre, they watched us carefully to see our energy in the group, how we dealt with others, whether we were on time or not, whether we were developing or not; and based on these criteria, 10 were accepted. Fortunately, I was one of them.

Then we started to go deeper into theatre basics. I am very lucky – my generation is very lucky – to have Micaela Miranda as the director and a teacher of the school. She studied at Jacques Lecoq’s School in France, and all her work is about the body and movement, dynamic movement, analysing movement, white mind, etc. Nabeel worked with us on acting. Between these two people, they gave a complete package to find a way to de-
velop ourselves to do theatre. The best thing I like about theatre is movement, analysing movement and physical theatre. My colleague, Ibrahim Moqbel – he was a circus guy for 6 years before he joined the school – he was the base and I was the fly when we were doing scenes. After every play, we worked together to create some scenes that were connected to the subject of the play. We would show it to the director, and he would suggest ways of refining and organising it. I had many workshops with different people from around the world, and learned a lot. Then I came to India for 3 months for Freedom Theatre’s tour of India, and that was the biggest and best trip of my life. It was the first time I travelled out of Palestine, and to tour India for 3 months was not an easy thing, and I could really see the difference in myself after the trip to India.

What were the major differences you noticed?

When I first came here, the food was difficult to get adjusted to, not just for me, for the entire group, really – it was full of spices! After 2 days, I fell sick, and then for a few days I survived only on bananas – I became a chimpanzee! Then, slowly I got used to the food, the weather, travelling a lot – like 32 hours on a train! Compare that with Palestine – I grew up in Hebron on the south of the West Bank, and I studied in Jenin, on the north of the West Bank, which was 5-6 hours away, and that felt like ages to me! After going back from India, I got into the car in Hebron, and in five minutes, I was in Jenin! So the perception of time really changed! This was a good thing, because I am a person who wants to travel with performances, and I don’t want to feel tired while going from one place to another.

My English became better – when I joined theatre, I didn’t speak English at all, but while travelling here and meeting and speaking to people, I grew more comfortable with it. This time, when I heard my English at the beginning it was again bad, I was shocked to hear myself! But now it has been more than 10 days, and I am again growing comfortable with it. This time I was by myself, and it was a shock for me to be here – also because it was the first time I travelled alone, and had never met any of the people before, so there was a wall between us. But then I started to break it by being with people more, and getting to know them more and be more involved, and then I grew more confident.

What made you decide to join this workshop?

When I heard about Material Theatre, I was very interested in the concept. I had worked with materials as objects before, as things that help you with a performance, but never in the way we did it here. Here, with Barbara, we are going deep into the material itself – it isn’t about what you do with the material, or what it looks like or what it can be, but about building a strong connection between you and the material. It reminds me of my nephew: you know, I have a young nephew, and if you give him anything, like paper, or just leave him alone by himself in the house, he always discovers something, because children, you know, are very curious. They always want to find out, if I do this, what will happen? So that’s already in the children’s mental make-up. I was connecting all this in my mind, and in Palestine there is no Material Theatre, so that really excited me. What also really excites me about this workshop is that it is not only about the materials we explore in this workshop, but about everything around us. Elements and materials – some small and some big – are always around us. If we try something with the big thing, it will be different from that which is small. There is always something to discover about the
materials around you. And now, after this experience, if I improvise a scene, I will have the curiosity, should I say, and I know that I will be able to do something with it, explore it, make something with it. Yes, so I am really happy with the experience and what I have learned so far, and really excited to take the next steps on this journey.

Of all the materials that you’ve explored, which one did you enjoy the most?

What I noticed is that all the materials are different in themselves. I like sand and wool, particularly. The reason I like wool is not just because I saw many different possibilities of wool, but because I want to go deeper into wool. I can carry a bit of wool around in my pocket or my backpack and at any point of time when I have children or adults, you know, people around me, I can improvise a performance.

You said that the way in which you approach materials has changed. If you were to look at yourself as a performer, do you sense that your being as a performer has been impacted in any way, or has the way in which you approach a performance changed?

As a performer! (laughs) I have been in physical theatre always – in all my performances before this, the body was my major tool for performance. There is a play called Return to Palestine, which is done on a small stage, 2 m by 1 m by 40 cm, with 6 actors and we create the atmosphere, the sea, a wall – everything – with just the body. Here, I’m still a little confused that I am a performer, but I have to give space to the material. So, sometimes I go big with my body, but then Barbara says, “Be smaller, don’t push so much, give something to the material.” So, I have to find that balance between me as an actor or performer and the material.

Well, I’m really looking forward to seeing your show!

So am I! (laughs)

I’m sure you’re working towards taking this to as many children as possible. Have you worked with children before?

Yes, I have. I conducted Playback Theatre for children in Area C of the West Bank, which is very close to the military settlements. We were visiting those areas as a part of a tour we did for children, where I was the conductor and the rest of the team were actors. The idea was to meet children, to see what kind of stories they have to tell, and improvise them.

Have you found a structure or narrative that you now feel you can enter, or are you still exploring?

I am still exploring. I have found a way into the performance, a starting point, but I still need help from Barbara to make a complete performance, because it’s different from what I know. She’s doing very well with us, and she has been giving me notes to continue and complete what I have started. I felt that the story is told in a different way here – in Material Theatre – at the same time it is the same basics of the story. It is how to play with the story, to put it in a line for a child who is 2 years old to understand it and to enjoy it.

What if you were to not think of an audience and just focus on the material and where it is leading you? Because sometimes the age consideration can be limiting, don’t you think?

Yes. I felt a strong connection with the material.
As I said before, it is about going deep into the material to explore its possibilities. I’m happy with it, you know? It’s making my imagination bigger!

Part II – January 2018

So Ihab, can you tell us what you have been working on over this break?

So, after we finished the first session with Barbara, I got an email from her with her feedback. She asked me also to create another performance with a different material. I was initially thinking of wood – we didn’t explore wood in the workshop and I thought it would be interesting to try it. But then suddenly, I found myself playing with sand. I fell in love with it. I liked it very much and I found so many possibilities! So, I decided to play with the sand, and I used to take the space after we finished working with the Kataktha group to continue discovering and conduct my research on sand. This took a long time. I was able to find many moments with sand, and I found many possibilities in it, but my problem was finding my story. I was focusing more on the story, taking moments from my research and adding it to the storyline of my performance. When I did my storyboard, it helped me a lot to select the rich moments in the bright place of the play. I performed it just 2 days ago and I’m going to continue with it.

So you have both wool and sand shows ready? Which one will you perform at IIC?

I am working with 2 materials now – separately, but they’re both almost ready. Maybe I will perform the sand now, but I will continue to work with wool, too. So, I’m going to Palestine with two performances.

What are the kind of changes that you have felt with the exploration of sand this time around?

It’s a totally different material from wool, you know! But I found that you can tell the same story with it, though your way of telling will be different, because the material has its own identity. The feeling you get from the material is different.

When you talk about the story, is the story you want to tell, or is it something the material tells as you work with it?

It’s both with me. (laughs) I found it from the material. When I was discovering it, things started to come, things started to be built, and then I picked it up and continued from there.

The material has its own trajectory, doesn’t it?

Yes, we were leading each other. The difference between the two materials is a lot – that’s the reason I chose them. With the wool, I have the ability to perform anywhere – I have the story, I have the performance, I can perform it anywhere. With sand I need to have a space – sand is not easy to carry, or easy to use just anywhere. But, for its possibilities, I like sand more. I’m using the stage for my performance right now, not a sheet; but I am looking at using tarpaulin for greater possibilities. So, I’m looking at two versions – on the floor and on the sheet. I create a circle – you know, a compass – I do this with my body, make a big circle with the sand when I do it on the floor, it looks great, but when I do it on the plastic, it doesn’t work, because it’s not straight – it has wrinkles and bumps.

What would you like to tell people about your show?

I haven’t really thought about it yet – I have to think it through and write it down. But what I can
tell you is that it’s like a struggle between wet sand and dry sand, from the beginning to the end. So, it’s like they are in a struggle and I’m the guard in between!

_That sounds really interesting. What are some of the difficulties you’ve faced while preparing the show?_

Limiting myself? Sometimes I wasn’t sure whether I should use my body so much. I am used to using my body much more as an actor, but here I need to find a way to let the material be seen more than me. So, I’m trying to be invisible on stage and at the same time let the material be more important, give it a meaning and a value. Not exactly invisible, perhaps, but to move behind the material.

Yes, the whole idea of the background and the foreground, the shift between the actor and the material – it’s the most difficult thing for everyone, I think, the need to achieve that balance.

Also, in the show I performed two days ago, I felt that need, for others. I used different rhythms, I used music, I used my body; but I was afraid of losing the spirit of childhood in my performance. Because it was kind of dramatic, and I was afraid it would not be the right thing to do. But it’s good to make mistakes – you learn from them. So now I’m trying to bring back that atmosphere for children in my work. This was my feedback, too, which was good for me, because it made things easier.

Yes, I think it’s true, that most often what is good for adults is also good for children – it’s like what Barbara always says: children need something to bite into. You mustn’t strip that away.

Yes, yes, that’s true. I won’t do that.

Manjima Chatterjee was the chief documenter of the Mentorship Program with Barbara Kolling. She is a drama explorer and an educator.
Barbara Kölling’s Methodology
by Manjima Chatterjee

Part 1

Is there a particular method that you follow, a bound process, for people who want to study and explore material theatre, for those who haven’t been to the Master-class, for example?

For me, once I was clear what the intent was, I was sure that everyone would need to spend some time getting introduced to the material, even those who have attended the Masterclass before this. This is always necessary – we always begin by researching on the material on our own, because without that it wouldn’t be possible to proceed. Sometimes, when I work with educators, after working for, say 3 hours – which is really not much when you’re exploring material – I ask them to close their eyes and feel everything that is around them. Even this sometimes makes them fear, or feel strange, because they don’t do this anymore – feel with their hands and some material. So this is always a starting point. Also, it helps to understand how to proceed with children. You have to experience it for yourself.

The other thing that is quite important for me is to be able to reflect by yourself. It is very important to me to understand how to reflect on your own work, how to reflect on the work of others, how to give feedback to others, how to receive feedback and what to do with it, so that performers become independent people and are not just the materials of a director.

Your process of giving feedback reminds me so strongly of Liz Lerner’s 4-point Critical Response Process – there, too, we begin with describing what was done – and it is so important to understand why that matters, and what it does for the performer.

It is very interesting, because otherwise it is difficult to reflect together and then begin a new rehearsal process. Because in this process, we are not just experiencing the material; in the same moment we are working on a kind of dramaturgy, and all the different aspects of theatre-making, and therefore it is really important that we find the possibility for concentration to be able to repeat the performance within ourselves again. And when we do this all together, we conjure up the performance in our minds again, and this is important because only then can we work on making positive changes.

So it’s kind of like a visual reminder?

Yes, yes.

Also, as an audience, I was watching the performances yesterday and thinking about the delicate balance that is needed between the performer and the material in this kind of performance. The focus keeps shifting, doesn’t it? Is that all right? It’s interesting to recognise one after the other, even though we may still make some wrong choices. I was just speaking to Choiti Ghosh and discussing that perhaps it is not the best idea to be too friendly with the children so early in the show, and to really work on the beginning in the light of the journey she intends to take. The audience needs to know at what point it is invited, and what it is invited to do.

Yes, the nature of communication has to be very clear, and the rules have to be very clear. We had talked about process drama earlier, and we talked about the importance of settling the contract with the participants right at the beginning, to kind of agree on the rules of engagement. Do you think this is true of a performance as well, to set the boundaries?

Yes, absolutely. It is very important, because the
clearer this communication is, the more the public will be able to respond to the performance. And especially if you do it right at the beginning. It is much more difficult if you do it later on – if you have established nothing in the beginning, and then you want them to be very concentrated later on, it’s much more difficult. In the beginning, you always have the time to tell about the rules and then because everybody is following the flow, they are ready to accept it. In the beginning, when I started directing, I always asked the question – what are the first 5 minutes about? How do you start – to be very careful with this.

I was thinking about Traces – H2O is very clear, but Traces begins with an invitation to the audience – you define the space, you bring them in with a trial of newspaper pieces and show them to their seats; and I wonder, once they’ve taken their places, what is it that keeps them in their places? Why don’t they jump out to engage?

I think it is because this show begins when they enter the foyer, and the space in the middle is always empty, and we ask people to sit around – they sit down on the benches, and then Michael starts to make shapes around his feet, and then around the children’s feet, and Marco starts to work with the newspaper pieces, making lines with the paper, and this goes on. This makes everyone very curious, and it is with this curiosity that they work their way in, and then it is clear that this is another space. Because they were already a part of the beginning, they are very curious to see how this will go on. Another very nice thing that happens is that the musician takes the children’s names outside and then brings them in, and after about 20 minutes, these names, with their own voices, come up again. So they make this connection that what began outside has come into this room again – not very early, but after some time, quite late, it fills the room again – and it’s wonderful how happy people are to hear their own names, and especially when they heard the educator’s name, the children were so happy! In the first performances, I couldn’t believe how much fun they had just listening to their names! And then, they also write the names down – sometimes they make it very fast, but sometimes if they think it’s nicer to write the full names – and then, of course, everything is gone, and the whole performance turns again. At first there are these names, everywhere, and then this remembering starts again, and then it’s all gone and everything comes to the circle situation, and so it happens again with the names.

I’m very interested in how the engagement occurs outside, in the foyer, where the performers invite the public to engage by drawing around their feet. Interestingly, when they walk into the performance space, they repeat these actions with their own hats and shoes, but this does not prove to be a distraction for children. It has to be about the performers’ stance, doesn’t it, about the way they are, as opposed to the actions they do?

You know, that’s true. In the beginning, with Woodbeat, we had these little wooden pieces on the floor, and children would pick them up, you know, and I felt that it’s ok, but it’s a little bit irritating.

At what point, for you, does the exploration come to a halt so that it can become a performance?

I always begin with the exploration of the material. I let them improvise a lot, and my job is to sit outside and to find moments that interest me because they evoke something special, or speak to the truth of the material. This really goes on for a long while, days, really, going on for about 6 hours
sometimes at a stretch. And then I give the performers a structure – to go from this moment to the other, and to end there.

So, the selection of the moments happens between you and the artists?

No. It’s me. I do the choosing. (laughs) The artists who are on the inside, exploring, are quite relieved to have me on the outside, watching them, because, say, they don’t very often remember their actions or the sequence, for example. So, the kind of democratic process of being both inside and outside the exploration simply would not work. It works as a kind of division of labour. So, I would never dream of stepping into the show and doing something in their space, for instance. Sometimes, I have a wish, and then I tell them, “Would you please go there and try it from there?” But otherwise, I really just mostly work with their material, and select and structure it.

Yesterday, you were saying that there is always a story. At what point does the story emerge? Does it come from you, as a result of the director’s vision?

No. I take it from the moments that I recognise. In H2O, for instance, the story was built up drop by drop, but it wasn’t thought of before. It emerged from the moments that came out for me. So, the moment to put the stones inside the water, so that it looks a bit like buildings – it came to a point where it started to look like Dubai or something! (laughs) – that came from a moment of recognition.

So it is more organic?

Yes, very much so. When, for example, we created Traces, the central idea of memory was very much present. Then we talked about which material would lend itself best to the central idea, and then we came to sand. One of the first images we had was that of people walking along the seaside, in the sand, and then, later, how the contents of newspapers bring up traces of daily life. My father used to keep the newspaper of the day for when his grandchildren were born, and he passed them on to my sister and me. So I still have the newspapers of the days when my older son and younger son were born, and these make for very nice traces, as well. And there it was not always about the material only, but it was always linked to the sea. This was the next step that I wanted to try after Woodbeat and H2O, which were very heavy on material research.

Here, I would also like to look at both possibilities, like yesterday, when we had the girl sitting inside the circle, next to the pile of newspapers, we had both sets of possibilities – the possibility of developing that story, and of working with the possibilities of newspaper.

I think this can be quite challenging for actors – to
leave yourself behind and just explore the material, especially if it is material that one has explored before. How do your actors deal with that? How do they keep finding freshness in their exploration of known material?

I think it really is a matter of your training – if you are trained as a dancer, it is easy for you to move; a musician finds a way to make music, so if you are trained to improvise with materials, you will find inspiration every time. So, it boils down to your training, really.

I guess what I’m asking is – how do you keep the freshness of the exploration going? Say, in a play like H2O, the first few times, say, you’re not entirely sure how the material will behave and there is a certain energy. But after a 100, 150 shows, how do the performers keep the spontaneity and the energy of interacting with the material going?

I tell my actors to be open to it again and again, because the material will not change, it will always be the same. The performers will therefore always need to approach the material with a fresh mind. If the performer is open, the material will always respond. I think it is, in a way, a bit easier to repeat these scenes with the material than with words. Because when the material is in front, it does what it can do, and when you are open to observing it carefully, it will speak to you. But if you are using the material mechanically, it will stop speaking to you, and then mistakes and accidents will happen. In my own company, where I observe the actors again and again, this doesn’t usually happen. But what I have seen, say, in H2O, where there were 3 actors who were touring around the world – there were maybe 50 performances in-between that I had not seen – and when I saw them again, their performance had changed, because the rhythm of interaction between the actors had changed a little bit. They didn’t realise it, but when I saw it, I went, “This is different from what it was before!” If there isn’t an outside eye looking on for a long time, it can happen that the level of relationship between the performers comes to the forefront. Now, the audience is always looking for relationships between the performers, which can create an expectation, to which the performers respond, and then the material recedes into the background. At such times I have to step in and remind them to put the material back at the centre, where it belongs.

I guess this is a problem with actors – they tend to move themselves into the forefront.

Yes. Of course, when people come from a puppetry background, it’s different, because puppeteers become puppeteers because they want to stay behind the puppet and let the puppet lead. But with actors, yes, it is a struggle.

In a strange way, this kind of correlates with the classroom interaction, as well. When we bring in material for exploration, how much of talking is needed, how far does the interaction need to be teacher-led, and can the material be allowed to speak for itself? That’s a challenge for the teacher – at what point do you step back, and let go, and let the drama take over?

Yes. And this is the moment when the light comes in, isn’t it? When something happens that you didn’t expect.

It also seems to me to be very similar to process drama, and the work of Dorothy Heathcote, particularly the contract – the creation of a safe space with some rules that bind the group together, and
then to just let go and allow the drama to play out.

Absolutely. And I think that this kind of performances for the little ones, especially if you do it with material, have very clear links with ritual. And then you have to decide what to do about it. This space that we somehow have created, it happens that people don't want to leave it at first, even adults. You know, in Woodbeat, we have these lines that are made with wood – it's a very nice stage, really! – and even adults by themselves sometimes don't want to leave that space. They stand around talking to each other! (laughs)

Drawing back into ritual, rhythms and repetitions are essential aspects of ritual. How much of a role do they play in your performances?

A very strong one, as all of them are made with rhythms. Outside of Helios, I have done work with some of the bigger state theatres, and there I used music from outside, but most often, I work with a musician within the performance. For me, the sounds and rhythms of the performance are very, very important.

While making a performance, are you ever driven by the music, or does it come in later, after the performance is created, as per need?

It always begins together. The musicians are present from the beginning of the process, and so it evolves together, organically.

Coming back to similarities with drama, I want to talk about our experience in South Africa. We had all these trainees from Magnet Theatre, who came from townships outside of Cape Town, and often from very different backgrounds. They had all been with Magnet Theatre for a few years, wanting to become theatre-makers. All of them had different issues in their lives. After working with me for a while and exploring and playing with mate-rials and developing performances for very young children, the director of the theatre sent me feedback lines where they all wrote how helpful the process was, and particularly playing for very young children. They all said thanks because the process helped them come together on the inside, like healing.

Yes, I personally found H2O very healing. I mean, I find water healing anyway, and I know this is true of a lot of people, but somewhere this deep focus on water telling its story, it sort of helps your mind and body to align, doesn't it? I’m assuming that this happens with the other materials as well, and I can understand why some of the adults watching Traces, as you were telling us earlier, cried. It touches you some-where deep inside, doesn't it, somewhere subliminal.

Yes, it’s true. I have been trying to understand how it works for 10 years, and I still haven't understood it! (laughs) You can't really explain it. The response comes from too deep within.

Part 2 | Children as an Audience
Performing for Children

You had said that your idea about children changed as you observed children. Could you share some of your observations about children?

I think the most important thing about children is to look at them as complete human beings. It is important not to make something too easy for them, because they really like to bite into things and really engage with them. It is the opposite of what we sometimes think about children, and in children's theatre, as well. It’s not enough to just put out something that is amusing – they re-
ally like to engage with ideas that are deeper, to come in contact with things, to think about them. For instance, why a bad dream is not just my bad dream, but also a bad dream for others. So, a performance has to be for them and with them, and there aren’t any limits, really. As I told you earlier, they are very comfortable with the abstract. As they grow older, when they start to find words for things, they begin to think in more concrete terms, but at the early stages, their world is quite abstract. It’s quite logical, if you think about it.

So there is this saying amongst playmakers here, that to perform for children, you have to be children. What would you say to that?

(laughs) I would say be very careful, because they can end up getting scared of you! Children see adults as adults, and they need us to be adults, because we take them by hand and lead them into the world. Sometimes, I really get sad when I see adults trying to be-have like children, and it gets so strange! I don’t recognise them anymore – they could be very nice adults, but as children they scare me. (laughs) Yes, I think that everyone should be true to their stage of life – to understand what it means to be an adult and to be a child.

Hmm, so that brings me to clowning, which I think is really difficult. A lot of people tend to take this up as the best approach for children, but that’s kind of tricky, I find.

It’s not the only approach, certainly. I have nothing against clowning. People who work as clowns and who have deep understanding of children would certainly make wonderful clowns. But it doesn’t work when there is this distance, without really knowing, this thinking that this is all they need. I think adults have a lot of projection on children, and sometimes adults need a lot of amusement, perhaps, but children really need to understand the world. Amusement by itself is not enough for them.

I remember on the first day you were talking about different age groups and that two-year-olds are really serious.
Yes, they are. And they are often the ones who start to cry when they see things like this. For Woodbeat, for instance, we had made this little wooden creature – it has no eyes or anything, it is not painted, but everyone identifies it as a creature, and as a worm – that jumps around and the performer makes funny sounds like “tu-tu!”. Sometimes the audience calls him Tu-tu. There, you often find the little ones laughing at this creature, because he just jumps and they have so much fun with him, but even there, half of them will just look. And sometimes you can see the amusement in their eyes, but they don’t really feel the need to laugh out loud. One day, a child expert told me that they have not yet reached the distance that allows them to laugh. At their stage, everything is still a part of their world, and laughing about something means that I can identify something as funny. This distancing comes a while later, with greater access to language, which we use to distinguish between me, mine and others. So, by the time they’re approaching four, they are able to really see humour in things and laugh at them.

And then they laugh so much that they can’t stop laughing sometimes!

So this is also interesting. It doesn’t have to be about red noses all the time. Even water trickling down, or to have something and put it away, and have it again – that can be funny.

So this seems like a really important aspect of training for teachers working with small children. We probably need better understanding of the way teacher-training for toddlers is approached. Yes, it is very important. You know, in Germany, till about 10 years ago – and even now, really – there was this feeling that children below three years of age should be at home. You couldn’t find kindergartens for young children, and this dates back to the Nazi concept about the role of the mother, and how she must keep the child close. We were the newest in Europe to embrace the concept of education for really young children. I didn’t know this before I started working for this group, and then I discovered that it wasn’t possible to find
kindergartens for children below three. But then, around 10 years back, the trend really took off for economical reasons, because mothers had to go to work to support the whole family. It wasn’t driven by understanding of children, and a lot of these kindergartens were opened, but the educators had no idea what to do with them! So, suddenly, there was a lot of research, driven by the need to find answers to this question, and now there is significant work happening.

In India, we have creches and playschools. While there should be a difference between them, there often isn’t any. There are very few places in Delhi which are really interested in working with the really young ones.

I have found in my research that this is often because of the lack of language. We tend to think of them as human beings only once they can communicate with words and verbal language, whereas before that we tend to think of them as creatures. But in my research, I have found that the opposite is true. Little children have quite a lot of understanding of the world, because they observe, they explore, and I often feel sad that once they start going to school, they lose so much. They lose their instinct of playing, of discovering. And it is very important that educators gain an understanding of this. In Germany, increasingly, children are not allowed to go outside without shoes and socks – not even on grass and sand. The feet are not just one part of your body, they are a very important part and they give you a lot of sensory stimulation, and if you don’t have that any more, you are losing a whole aspect of yourself. Whenever the children see the lake that is created in H2O, they go “EEE!” because they see the very clear water. And they have a similar reaction when they see earth, or clay in our other productions, because this stimulates them by being in contact with different natural materials. Different materials when touched stimulate your mind and body in different ways, and if we remove contact, we’re narrowing down their capacity to experience the world.

On a related point, in India nowadays, there is this shift from exploration to expression. There is, increasingly, perhaps on the part of parents, a desire to have the child express and perform their learning, to make it more measurable, quantifiable, to map it. A child will be taken on a “nature walk” – shoes on and everything – and asked to return to class and draw a picture, or write a few words. The drawing or writing then becomes the expression of that experience.

I’m at some distance from this kind of hope – what the arts can make. In Germany, too, there is this pressure on children to learn a lot of things, very fast. Especially where parents have a lot of money, this is quite strong. And that is a big reason that we have chosen to work in Hamm, which is not a university city – it is a smaller, poorer city. We’re the only theatre there. It has 1,80,000 inhabitants, so it is not a very small town: it is a city. If we weren’t there, the people there would not have any exposure to theatre. And so, perhaps, we don’t have to deal with this kind of “luxury” questions, and I’m very happy about this. We now have a lot of refugees, we have Turkish people, whom we invite to come into the theatre. The population is quite mixed – we have industries and coal mines – and for me it is very important to meet the children in the theatre. So, for me, expression is not the most important thing – I’m sure they will express themselves, at some time or the other. For me, it is more important to give them possibilities, to open new rooms for ideas, to show that the world is not cast upon one line.
Expression does become important for a different kind of children, for example those who have stopped speaking. In Germany, sometimes you will find such children, who have stopped speaking, because nobody speaks at home anymore, and it is only the television that speaks. By the time they are 10, they are divided into Primary School, Secondary School and Gymnasium. So, by the time they are 11, those who get sent to Primary School know that they are not smart enough, and they will never get a job. It changes everything – it changes their possibilities in life, their relationships. I have seen this with my sons – both of them had very good friends who got sent to Primary School, and their relationships completely changed within one year. I’m still very sad about that. In other countries, the minimum age at which this happens is 12, usually 15; in Germany teachers decide this the earliest. So, at a very young age, children get to feel that they are stupid and not valued, and so they stop speaking.

We like to work with these children to bring them back to learning, and expressing themselves. We make puppets with them, and create other ways to bring them back. Also, the Primary Schools have time, because the teachers don’t have to follow a strict curriculum. We use this time well, and we introduce them to making and using puppets, and this is therapeutic for them, because then they can say “This puppet is mine.” And the puppet is not stupid, and this helps them to regain a sense of their selves. So this kind of expression is necessary.

Hmm. Yes, so in India – and you’re right, it is a First Worldish problem – there is this need to measure, map, say, even the performing arts. I think this is something we’ve borrowed from North America, and it’s a struggle to balance this with the need to provide the drama experience – this constant monitoring, grading, mapping. It’s like the aim is measurement, and the need to reduce everything to statistics.

But you do have audiences of children watching the plays before getting ready to stage them.

Yes, sometimes I have children coming in as early as the fifth day of preparation. This is to help the actors see what is working and how, but also to explore further possibilities. For instance, when we first made H2O, the show did not begin with the drops of water. But then, when we had the little children over, we realised that the acoustics of water were very important to them. We realised that if we didn’t focus on the single drop, and the sound of it, then all the children got a little bit weird, because there are just too many things going on. So that single drop, and the sound of it, helped to focus their attention right at the beginning, and this came from the children.

Then, when we were preparing for Woodbeat, we found that if we were to stay honest to our research, at some point we would need to introduce an axe. Because, there are many things you can do with wood, but at some point, if you were to build something, you would need an axe. But we weren’t sure how little children would respond to it – would they begin to cry, would they fear the axe? And it was really interesting that our performer, Michael, who was really sensitive to whether the children would show fear, as he raised the axe, the children shouted “Fear! Fear!” We weren’t sure whether it was the axe, or the performer’s aura that made them do it! Again, when the performer did it without making eye contact with the children, they sometimes cried. So then we changed the approach, and the performer would do it very calmly, after making eye contact with the children, with a reassuring look that it was all safe, and from that moment on, no child ever
cried again.

So this is very interesting, because teachers sometimes have these preconceived notions about what children fear. So, when I was watching the bamboo act (Momo and Kriti), the thought that was going on in my head was, this is too loud. I enjoyed it, but I was thinking of children and I worried that it would scare them. Do you encounter this kind of fear often?

Yes, quite often. In our first performance where there was a trumpet, and the trumpet player was always concerned about whether it was too loud, and scary for children. So we tried it, and I always say to the performer, "Don't stay behind. Just make your music, and then we will see." And in the end, I always think it is a matter of how we communicate it. It is not about loudness, but how it comes across: if it's unconscious, and just happens to be loud, then it can be scary. But if you communicate that it is like this and can be very loud, you will find that it isn't a problem at all.

I think it's also not just about loudness, but also about the kind of sound and the feelings it evokes. Sometimes it's ok to be startled, but at other times it can evoke darker feelings and images.

Yes. Sometimes it is simply about a little child being with other children in a darkened space. In Germany, children who have not reached school-going age are often not used to being with others, and that itself is scary for them. So, we have these pamphlets and reading material for teachers, parents and facilitators to read outside the performance space, before the show, and we also speak to them, so that the adults can prepare themselves. We always say that if the child is afraid, you can keep at a distance and see how they're doing. I think it's very important to have this distance, and for the child to experience this fear and to know that it is ok, and can be overcome to reach a state where she's feeling safe. And if you bring this child to a new situation, where fear is the first impulse, and you deal with it very calmly, and bring the child back into the space, she will know that it's fine, and that is a very beautiful moment.

In your experience, what does drama do to a very young child?

See, children experience the world on their own while playing. Playing is a very important skill for all human beings, to experience the world and to survive. They survive while playing, and because of playing. Because playing allows you to enter a different world, and to change that world, to change things, to be able to react to things, to be active...

How much of possibility for children to interact or play do you have in your productions?

Yes, well you know, sometimes parents come in after watching a production and say that it was great, but the most wonderful part was at the end when you allowed them to play with the material. And I think, you know, that’s great, but what
about being engaged while watching and experi-
encing in another way? And this is something that
I would really like to introduce to adults, as an art-
ist, that we don't always have to do, that it is also
possible to engage with and communicate with
another person while watching and listening. So,
in H2O, at the end there is this one drop again,
and the performer invites the children to feel
this one drop on their hand – that was my ending.
But, when the show went on tour, and there were
these two male actors performing, they opened it
out to children to play with the water, and make
bubbles. The children really enjoyed it, but I felt,
that this was something that the children could
have gone home and done, you know, with their
parents in their bathrooms!

Yes, so, the whole idea of opening out a part of
the experience and limiting it to just that is some-
times much richer, with a deeper engagement,
than just opening out the whole space to children,
which can really dilute the experience.

Yes, and I feel that sometimes opening it all out
is a bit lazy (laughs!) and I also feel a bit helpless
when that happens, because, you know, after
half an hour of sitting, if you give them the whole
space, children tend to just run. Sometimes, it is
ok, but otherwise, it's not fair to the performance,
and also for children, to allow the space to be tak-
en over by chaos. It's all right for children to re-
tain the final impression and walk away with that,
to have a quiet moment of reflection, if you will.

So this is also a matter of debate with educators
– how much of reflection do you think young chil-
dren are capable of?

I think that children are very clear about what
they find interesting, and you can get to know
if you observe them. Of course, they cannot ex-
press it in words, and of course the perception
is at a different level. Say, when you are an adult
watching H2O, you might think that it is interest-
ing as it is not possible to control it, and how it is
always flowing. When a child watches the same
thing, they may have a similar thought – it is not
possible to control it – and play with that. So, it
operates on a different level, and of course, they
will not put it in words.
Bigger on the Inside: What I Learned from Materials Theatre

This is the story of our experience of playing with materials: of learning how to listen more closely, be more present, expand our consciousness, and through our play, discover what is inside both the material and our selves.

We entered the Mentorship Programme with Barbara Kolling organised by the Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust in December 2017 for two reasons: our desire to create work for children, and to deepen our understanding of the elements that constitute live performance. In our own practice as actors, we always begin by putting aside everything we’ve discovered about performance thus far, to start from scratch. We try to give ourselves a chance to discover what is most necessary for the new moment, the new context, the new game.

For us, this approach is a way of being honest and true: theatre is a self-destructive medium, so to speak, and today’s discoveries must be rediscovered tomorrow if they are indeed there to be found at all. Working in this process requires us to be present: to listen carefully to every moment, make a choice of action based on what the moment is asking for, and do what is necessary to see it through. No matter the level of skill or experience, the demand from each performer is the same: be here now. We wanted to engage with Materials Theatre because we felt that it was rooted in these principles of performance, and we wanted to go as deep inside it as we could.

Listening

From the beginning of any work, Materials Theatre asks that you ‘follow’ the material: you act upon it only as much as is needed for it to tell you something about itself. This is not something you can determine or control: you act to allow the material to speak for itself and when it speaks, you listen. Usually, one starts with the tiniest registers because they have more presence in emptiness: the tiniest actions, the tiniest sounds and the tiniest movements. The degree of listening is acute in
Materials Theatre, no more so than in any other form of performance, but in this context it is crucial. One is listening not just for noises, of course, but for any and all signals – visual, aural and kinetic. Some signals are obvious, some are subtle, and it becomes clear that the interplay between the different volumes and registers of action constitute the dynamic rhythm within a performance. For an actor, consciousness of the ‘prosody’ of a performance (and its elements) is literally substantiated.

Necessity

Starting from scratch usually means that we begin with empty space – an absence that is pregnant with presence. Everything that happens in that space is a moment in time: actions, gestures, movements, language, music and song; connected by stillness, silence and absence.

“...exploration of a material’s physical properties quickly clarifies that everything contributes to the rhythm of a play.”

Materials Theatre brings this into acute focus: exploration of a material’s physical properties quickly clarifies that everything contributes to the rhythm of a play. For instance, materials make sounds when touched (except when they don’t); they make different sounds when touched differently, and they move too; every interaction with a material has a visible effect (except when it doesn’t) - even a moment when nothing happens is a moment. Moreover, materials create images and evoke associations; they exhibit behaviours which offer visible signals to an audience. These images, behaviours and associations appear as ‘compositional’ elements, similar to visual art or musical composition. Further, these elements are tangible in Materials Theatre: through play we discover both our behaviour and the material’s, and behaviour reveals choices that we can make. Stories, then, are sequences of these behaviours; and, their telling relies on the choices we make about what behaviours we reveal and when. The most important question to consider then is of dramatic necessity.

Consciousness

One of the main differences between acting in the conventional theatre and performing in Materials Theatre is that in the former one is often practicing skills whereas in the latter, one is practicing consciousness. Following the material to learn about elements of dramatic composition, what choices are available, and how to make them, are essential dramaturgical problems that theatre-makers have to grapple with. These are
core to Materials Theatre and they remind us that what is necessary for performers is not incredible facility with technique, but rather a supple imagination and dramaturgical consciousness.

As one works with a material, one builds a relationship within which there is a human presence (the performer) and a non-human presence (the material), and the presence of the relationship between them. This awareness is acute and one feels an imperative to be present in mind and body, in time and space – without this sense of presence, the performance appears void.

Metaphysics

Between the physical behaviours of the material and the metaphorical associations they throw up, Materials Theatre accesses the metaphysical aspects of the theatrical experience effortlessly. Every physical element has a corresponding metaphorical meaning; inevitably, the material appears to stay itself while transforming into a variety of shapes and forms with their own dynamics. For instance, a plastic bottle will remain a plastic bottle while also revealing itself to be a looming skyscraper, a night-bus, a lamppost, a pool of water, a galaxy, an immaculate presence, a pathetic wreck and so on. Of course, all these impressions occur inside our imaginations – they do not exist and yet materials reveal their shape in this reality. It is as if we have fashioned a way to make the abstract world visible and accessible. As materials transition between physical states and transform their behaviours, they bring us all – performers and audience alike – into a world where flesh is transformed into spirit and back again, through play.

By its very nature, Materials Theatre appears not so much as another form of theatre but rather as an expression of its core: its most important principles and its most elusive experiences.

- Bikram Ghosh and Kriti Pant
The Tadpole Repertory
Feet stamping on the ground. Words escape from parted lips and float up in isolation. Fingers clenching into fists and slowly unravelling again. Mouths slightly agape and heads cocked gently to one side. Bubbles of laughter. Sit, stretch, recline, up on the knees, sit back down, and repeat.

These are just a few of the vivid impressions that have been embedded into my memory over the past six months, watching a range of young audiences react to the relatively new phenomenon of material theatre. From mid-sized auditoria to airy verandahs, school amphitheatres to noisy playgrounds, I have been witness to observing how strong a response can be evoked using materials that we often take for granted - and an accomplice in attempting to see if and how this kind of theatre can take the growing trend of experiential learning beyond its conceptual borders and into the classroom in concrete ways.

The material theatre workshops organised by the Katkatha Puppet Trust first worked with several theatre groups primarily from Delhi and Bombay, and also including a member of the Freedom Theatre Project in Palestine. Guided by Barbara Kolling of Helios Theatre - a group that develops theatre for young audiences and has been at the helm of these experiments with material theatre - the groups worked towards developing plays that foregrounded materials like sand, plastic, wool, paper and clay. It was the fruition of their work that we first viewed as a part of the teacher training workshop - as teachers, we were directed to meticulously observe the performances and children’s reactions as objectively as possible. Looking at a child as simply a child would prove to be far more difficult than looking at a piece of paper as mere paper. And yet as weeks went by, I found simple materials transformed into captivating phenomena and children’s responses communicating much more than we often give them time for.
I / Material Theatre and the Early Years

Audience

Prior to this, my knowledge of children’s theatre in the city was limited to puppet theatre, short plays by children resulting from workshops, and storytelling ventures in various incarnations - reflecting a loosely formulated idea of children’s theatre as existing somewhere at the intersections of performance, play, and education. In all three forms, there are a few recurring elements that can be seen to specifically cater to children: a strong narrative thread, clarity of characters and if not a clear moral structure, then definitely certain didactic gestures towards navigating real life issues. There is also often the use of music, movement and humour to support performances as pleasurable and entertaining experiences. Whether or not shows are often made available to a wide range of age groups, the combination of factors above relegate the majority of children’s theatre to a stimulating intellectual engagement that favours an audience of at least six years and onward.

Material theatre, on the other hand, offers the freedom of doing away with the instructive narrative and functions more as a dramatic exploration. Tasked with presenting the material in its essence (i.e. paper), or in an array of the forms in which it commonly appears (i.e. newspaper, cardboard, tissue paper - the majority of the performances we viewed at the beginning of our workshop tended to be non-verbal, consisting mainly of a carefully choreographed series of actions that heroed a single material. And so plastic bottles were rolled, crushed and lit with torches; balls of wool ran through fingers and created a multicoloured maze; and sand flowed from closed fists and pipes to create its own landscape. What emerges from such freeform performance is a very personal and impressionistic experience for each viewer, containing triggers for a range of responses - be it verbal, kinesthetic or sensory.

In this way, young audiences that are as yet not physically trained as passive spectators were encouraged through these performances to react as spontaneously as they liked, whilst being cautioned against disrupting the overall flow of the performance itself. Augusto Boal, proponent of using games in his theatre of the oppressed, describes the role of the ‘spectactor’ in his forum theatre practice as one where the audience is encouraged to respond to what they see by incorporating themselves into the performance. Whilst material theatre does not demand participation in the same way, it creates space for children’s responses to act as a sonic and emotional score to the performance, which makes each performance that much more a unique and shared endeavour.

Adult behaviour and body language becomes a crucial factor in balancing the energy of the young audience and their responses. An important feature of the material theatre performances we saw was the adherence to clear pre- and post-performance rituals that prepared the children for what they were about to see and thereafter encouraged them to take forward their experience of the material in a hands-on fashion. During the performances, it was common to see accompanying adults disciplining children by verbally reprimanding them, in contrast to adult ushers who would instead re-direct the child’s attention to the performance, either playfully or by simply watching the performance themselves more intently. This is important because it changes the relationship from that of the adult as a distant authority to one where children and adults are watching performances together. The responses of children can have a significant impact for adults, who may be less inclined to let their
imaginations run wild when viewing material theatre performances on their own. Watching material theatre through the lens of children and their reactions can allow us all to experience the wonder in seeing basic materials be transformed by putting the spotlight on their inherent qualities.

The relationship between audience and performer also changes within the realm of material theatre, as the performer becomes less of a character than a body facilitating the continual transformation of the material. This allows two alternating phenomena to occur within a young audience member: one, a negation of the physical body that lets the material perform itself independently (somewhat like puppet theatre); and two, the identification of the child with the performer - where the child is provoked into desiring a personal engagement with the material themselves. This was evidenced quite a few times in the verbal responses of children recognising different images and naming them aloud, as well as physical responses that would often mimic the breathing patterns and actions of performers.

Combined with the continual transformation of materials onstage, material theatre takes on a very strong affective dimension - where the setting, lighting, and sound can evoke a range of emotions in the absence of speech. The fact that children are often very candid in their reactions also means that the overall mood of the receptive young audience can take over and influence the overall aesthetic interpretation of the performance itself. For example, in a performance that includes a wide range of ages where the children are exceptionally quiet, the entire show may take on a far more serious dimension for everyone present than if a large group of children in the majority were comfortable in voicing their pleasure and excitement.

II / Teachers and Performance in the Classroom

After engaging with performances built by theatre practitioners, the thrust of our teacher training workshop was to develop sessions within our own classrooms. However, as some of the observations above indicate, the performances we viewed were aided by unfamiliarity - a certain sense of formality due to new locations, a stage setting, lights, sound and above all performers who have never been met before. How does one hold attention in the same way in a school, a busy and chaotic space where children are in their element and amongst their peers? And how does one surpass the familiar image of the teacher, which comes with strong associations of maintaining discipline, to take forward a performance? Or is it necessary to do so at all? Out of a group of teachers who were hesitant at the thought of being silly in front of their students, I was one lone drama teacher - for whom silliness and humour has so far been a powerful tool in my drama classes with
the youngest ages. And so, below are some rumi-
nations on making the familiar teacher unfamiliar
through performance.

Teachers are performing all the time in front of
their students regardless of the age group - wheth-
er giving instructions, telling stories, or scolding
talkative and restless bodies. And primary teach-
ers more so for the range of activities they often
cover, not specialising in particular ‘subjects’ as it
were. Hence, it doesn’t require much for them to
be made unfamiliar - any time they initiate some
new activity they present a surprising new as-
pect of themselves to children. What is different
however is when performance is marked apart
as a separate activity - bringing with it particular
terms of engagement that often require a passive
audience. This is where material theatre becomes
useful for very young children as it allows them
to be introduced to theatre while accommodat-
ing their desire to externalise their responses
and become co-creators of meaning. Having a fa-
miliar figure like a teacher perform in school can
also work well because the familiarity means that
children already feel secure in the space and with
the person. It is however important to have an
adult present within a young audience to balance
their energies, and offer an example by watching
intently. It becomes a struggle to expect a per-
forming teacher to manage an audience as a class
unless that level of interaction is pertinent to the
performance.

Inside and out of the classroom, material thea-
tre allows children to see adults as being capa-
ble of play, which makes them vulnerable to the
children without necessarily undermining their
authority. For instance, there is sometimes a ten-
dency for adults to engage playfully with children
by assuming the physical language of clowning
and exaggeration, where the performance is very
visibly directed towards the child. In material thea-
tre, the preoccupation with handling the materi-
al removes the focus from the teacher/performer
- instead of using material as a prop to convince
an audience, negotiating the uncertainty of the
material can be an exciting shared experience in
itself. Furthermore, creating opportunities for
children to play with the material thereafter facil-
itates hands-on learning, and immersing oneself
in the midst of such an exploration gives room for
a democratic learning dynamic between children
and adults. With top-down formats of instruction
fast being rendered obsolete by increased access
to the internet and digital interfaces, designing
experiences where different perspectives and
kinds of knowledge can inform each other may
prove more useful. Material theatre is therefore
one radical point of entry that could help educa-
tors review the ways in which we as adults shape
the world for children.

End / Un-Writing

With regard to the theatre and the classroom,
one thing is clear: both are spaces that have hith-
erto often been defined by explicit rules when it
comes to how children are meant to behave in
them. “Sit down. Be quiet. Behave properly.” This
is not a problem in so far as the fact that children
do depend on clear signals to give them the con-
fidence to navigate such spaces. But over time,
their experience of the world through screens,
images, and information confines them sensori-
ally to the audio-visual, and the passive audience
also becomes an overwhelmingly desensitised
one.

However, theatre is one of the few remaining full-
body aesthetic experiences which also seems to
give precedence to design over rules, where per-
formances in their design establish the terms of
engagement in a number of ways - visually, aurally, verbally, kinesthetically, etc.

Material theatre here begins a process of un-writing by further pushing the element of careful design - from what space is chosen to how an audience is introduced to it; from how a performer engages with an audience simply through eye-contact to how adults in the audience are meant to support viewing through their behaviour; and fundamentally how an audience is invited to engage with the material itself and the internal/external conversations that are triggered in each audience member. Because material and children are both unpredictable and in a constant state of flux, what remains integral to this form of theatre is the process of intuitive negotiation that design demands. A rule will tell me what I should do and give me the choice to obey or disobey, but good design will tell me what I could do and allow me to formulate my own response - reinforcing the value of contextualising action.

Thus, un-writing the rules does not necessarily mean that conventions of watching theatre or existing in a classroom are erased, but it does involve a deconstruction of our own perspectives as adults who are imparting something to children, be it as performers, teachers, or parents. Ultimately, it gives everyone a chance to keep asking questions, creates space for dialogue, and allows children to take ownership of their opinions - and what could be a better way to learn than that?
Some Rules of Material Theatre
Culled from workshop instructions shared by Barbara Kölling

What to remember while practising Material Theatre

• Trust in the process and allow yourself to engage

• Set the ground rules for engagement – create a safe space to allow interaction with the material

• Decide how and at which point children can be drawn into the performance – this is very important as otherwise children will get distracted

• When you carve out a performance from your research, choose moments that evoke feelings; don’t try to show/ tell the audience what to see/ think

On Materials and their behaviour

• Don’t think about the material, experience it

• Every material has immense possibilities – meet the material, don’t try to manipulate it

• Let the material lead

• When the material is in front, it does what it can do, and when you are open to observing it carefully, it will speak to you. But if you are using the material mechanically, it will stop speaking to you, and then mistakes and accidents will happen.

Focusing on the Child

• While preparing the performance, explore the ideas your research has evoked – small children think in abstract ways, and have immense capacity to engage with abstract ideas

• Children enjoy concepts that they can bite into – they like to engage with ideas that are deeper, to come in contact with things, to think about them. It is not enough to want to amuse them

• Children need adults to be adults – an adult trying to be child-like can be scary for them, so be careful with your attitude and approach!

• Things and sounds are not scary by themselves – how a child perceives them is determined by how adults present them

• Playing is the child’s way of learning to survive in the world. It allows you to enter a different world, and to change that world – to change things, to be able to react to things, to be active, and this is very nice. And it is also nice to watch other people while playing, and to see possibilities in their play

• Performances for small children should not exceed 30 mins – these performances are intense, and children cannot sustain their focus for a longer period

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Notice Board

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