

Rainbow's Gold

A Glimpse at the Emergence of
the Performing Arts for the Early Years in Cork





The Perfect Conditions

We have come a long way in terms of early years education in Ireland. There is a National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 (www.omc.ie). There are national bodies such as the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (www.ippa.ie) and Montessori Ireland (www.montessorireland.ie) and there are childcare committees in most cities and towns which provide useful contact points for childminders and creche establishments nationwide. Despite recent cutbacks, we have begun to focus on the early years as a valid stage of development.



What we are missing, (although research has begun in a number of arts and community organisations in this area, it must be said), is a comprehensive strategy for the development of an arts policy for the early years, 0-3 and 3-6 in particular. The following brochure deals with one such possible experience, developed by La Baracca Theatre Company in Bologna, Italy, founder members of SmallSize The Net European Network for the Diffusion of Performing Arts for Early Childhood.

According to the 2006 census, 60,336 children were born in 2005. There were 242,633 children between the ages of 0-3 in the state. These are our 3-6 year olds today. A report from the final quarter of 2002 states that over 40% (73,000) of families with pre-school children use non-parental childcare facilities and the highest percentage of these are families where both parents are in full-time employment (www.cso.ie). What these figures mean is that a large proportion of our very young population is in some form of non-parental childcare facility. It is essential that there is some form of arts experience within these facilities to enrich the sensorial and emotional development of these children.



Spotting The Rainbow

Performing Arts for the 0-3 agegroup is a programme which I came across at two International Festivals of Theatre for Children in the past two years. The first, at Ion Creanga State Children's Theatre in Bucharest, Romania (www.fitc.ro) and the second at Teatro Testoni Ragazzi in Bologna, Italy (www.teatrotestoni.it). There was a member from Baboro on the jury of the first Festival and I met Lali Morris, director of Baboro International Children's Arts Festival in Galway at the second. I began to wonder if it might be possible to bring the first event of its kind to Ireland for the 0-3 agegroup. Thanks to the dedication of the partners involved, this event took place in Cork on 10th October 2008. (Clíodhna Noonan)

The Partners:

La Baracca - Testoni Ragazzi has produced and programmed shows for children and young people since 1976. In 1979 its activity was acknowledged and funded by the Italian government and then from 1982, by the Emilia Romagna region. Through its permanent activity of production and research, La Baracca has always paid particular attention to the early years. In 1987, the company started the project "Il Teatro e Il Nido / Theatre and the Creche" which aimed to create a theatrical language intended for children aged from 0-3 years. Between 1987 and 2007, 23 shows for 0-3 years and 65 shows for 3-6 years have been produced and a total of 4000 performances have been presented in Italy and abroad for this agegroup. Since 2005, La Baracca has been the project leader of Small Size-The Net, a European network for the diffusion of the performing arts for the early years.

Baboro International Arts Festival for Children is recognised as the leading Irish Arts Festival devoted exclusively to children. It is the premier festival of its kind in Ireland and celebrates 12 years of presenting a multidisciplinary arts festival to thousands of children in the West of Ireland. Baboro's mission is to explore with children the wonder of their world through the magic of creative expression. The Cork event on 10th October 2008 was supported by Baboro Outreach.

The Cork College of Commerce is the largest Post Leaving Certificate College in Ireland and is also the biggest provider of vocational preparation and training courses in Ireland. The college runs one of the largest childcare training departments in the country. The Cork event was hosted by the College of Commerce under their Centenary Celebrations programme.

Chasing the gold

What does this programme involve?

The Baboro Outreach event in Cork took place in the South Parish Community Centre which was transformed into a theatre by the visiting company, La Baracca and the staff of the childcare department of the College of Commerce. 35 children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years were present with their carers.

The Colours of Water is a non-interactive piece of professional theatre for 0-3 years audience. Beautifully researched and carefully structured, it captivates the young children from the outset. Carers are invited to sit with the children and participate in the same experience in order to be able to share the same sense of wonder, awe and amazement that the children encounter. The performance leads into an interactive sensorial session in which the children and their carers come forward and play with the elements on stage. Every moment is gentle, enquiring and educational along with being entertaining.

The piece was developed after many sessions of observation with children of this age in order to access their view of the world. These observations were translated into adult performance without losing their magic. The actors are highly skilled and professional. In order to gain the trust of the childcare community this skill and level of training is essential.

The second part of the programme involves a workshop with educators and creche workers. The focus is to bring these adults back into contact with the child in themselves. Up to the age of 3, children are not affected in general by physical inhibition. They experience the world through their whole body. The question posed is how do we reconnect with that sense of freedom in our adult lives in order to be able to play freely with these children? A core group of creche managers, professional theatre practitioners and teachers of childcare modules was present in Cork on 10th October 2008 and La Baracca lead them through a series of exercises from using the body to paint an imaginary picture to growing from a seed into a tree alone and then as a collective, to reintroduce the sense of physical freedom that a 0-3 year old feels. Every exercise could be reproduced with children in the childcare setting. In adopting a purpose - an imaginative purpose - for physical contact, workshop participants began to lose their inhibitions and see the world again through the eyes of a toddler or small child.

In an age of dvd's, computers and non-stop accessible tv, it is essential to re-introduce the magic of imaginative play to the very young. The same sense of freedom can be expressed through various artistic media - puppetry, dance, fine art, clay and pottery, story telling and performance. This workshop addresses the first step necessary along the road to the rediscovery of the imagination. The sense of wonder that is a baby's everyday existence.



Baboro Outreach in association with Cork College of Commerce Centenary Celebrations presents La Baracca's The Colours of Water, Friday 10th October 2008 11.00am South Parish Community Centre, Cork and workshop for creche leaders 3.30pm Cork College of Commerce.

"You couldn't plan it on the day - the children were simply mesmerised!"
Barbara O'Meara, Childcare Tutor,
Cork College of Commerce.

Baboró
International Arts Festival for Children





Finding the pot of gold Where to next?

In every town and city in Ireland there are creches and families with children aged 0-3 and 3-6 years. There are dedicated and innovative creche workers/parents/childminders. There are talented local artists. All of whom could participate in an initiative for the development of the performing arts for this age-group. With minimal input of financial resources, a national programme of arts for the early years could be developed and implemented. Many of the partners already exist. The next step is to introduce dialogue between them. Different geographical areas may be interested in different aspects of the programme depending on availability of resources in their own area.

Some initial events could include:

- training for early years educators
- workshops for parents
- training for professional arts practitioners with an interest in developing work for this age group
- performances for creches and families
- development of new writing for 0-3 agegroup

In the long term, the implementation of a strategy for the development of early years (0-3 and 3-6) arts benefits the children, their parents, their carers and the wider artistic community. In order for this to happen, there has to be dialogue and partnership between the arts sector and the childcare sector at the highest level. This first event of its kind in Cork was only possible due to the dedication and collaboration of the partners involved.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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