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Performative Aesthetics in Theatre for Very Young Audiences

ABSTRACT

In theatre performances for children between approximately six months and three years old there exists a particular type of aesthetics, which according to theatre studies terminology, can be called "performative". These performative aesthetics include, among other aspects, a focus on the "eventness" of theatre, on the physical presence of the audience and on the materiality of the stage process. Performativity has been discussed a great deal in theatre studies in recent years. New theoretic-methodological approaches have been developed for performative aesthetics (for example: Fischer-Lichte 2004), yet only with regard to theatre for adults. The fact that these approaches have not been applied to theatre for children is because most theatre researchers still consider this field as irrelevant. In theatre studies' circles even the sheer existence of professional theatre for the very young is often unknown.

Performativity and performative aesthetics in theatre for very young audiences is the topic of my ongoing PhD project. This paper briefly presents my research design and some theoretic-methodological issues of the project, which has been conceived as a theatre studies project. As I am mainly connecting to a research context within theatre studies, I belong to the group of researchers who contribute to the child cultural system without – initially – deriving disciplinary identity from "child culture" (Juncker 2006: 94). The challenge in relating to theatre studies is obvious, since theatre for children is not (yet) recognised as an area for research in the discipline. Frequently the applicability of the chosen concepts, theories and methods to my research object is questioned. Hence, it has become decisive for the project's justification to lean upon child culture research. In that context I use Juncker's (2006) analysis of what she calls respectively "the normal" and "the new paradigm" in the child cultural system. I interpret the cited objections to my project as an expression of the normal paradigm and can thereby solve any essential challenges. At the same time, I have acquired a new challenge, i.e. the need to determine the relevance of my project in a child cultural perspective.

At the conference, I would like to discuss this challenge. The hypothesis I want to test is that the theatre studies' focus on performativity not only is productive in a theatre studies context, but also in a child cultural approach. Performative aesthetics and a theatre theory concentrating on performativity offer, for example, a new way of conceptualising the relationship between the aesthetical and the social by dissolving the classical opposition between the two spheres. That implies a view on theatre audiences as active participants and on theatre performances as complex processes taking place between everyone involved in a theatre situation. In addition, performative aesthetics highlights the perceptual and bodily dimension in this process and makes it possible to question the importance of system and interpretational competence for a successful meeting with the (theatre) arts. In short, a project dealing with performative aesthetics and the corresponding theatre theories has many connecting points to an existing child cultural discourse, even if it concentrates on theatre arts and theatre-theoretical questions, and not on children's own culture.

Fischer-Lichte (2004) *Ästhetik des Performativen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Juncker, Beth (2006) *Om processen. Det æstetiskes betydning i børns kultur*. København: Tiderne Skrifter.

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