

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO

A return season
for a cherished
childhood favourite

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS A SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY
AND BARKING GECKO THEATRE COMPANY PRODUCTION

STORM BOY

BY COLIN THIELE
ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY TOM HOLLOWAY

24 APR - 17 MAY 2015
WHARF | THEATRE

SYDNEYTHEATRE.COM.AU
9250 1777 @SYDNEYTHEATRECO #STCSTORMBOY

"IT WAS EXTREMELY GOOD! THE PUPPETS ARE
BRILLIANT... I DIDN'T CRY THOUGH. JUST TO BE CLEAR
ON THAT." 8-YEAR-OLD BILL BLAKE FOR TIME OUT SYDNEY

DIRECTOR
JOHN SHEEDY
SET, COSTUME & PUPPET DESIGNER
MICHAEL SCOTT-MITCHELL
PUPPETRY DIRECTOR
PETER WILSON

LIGHTING DESIGNER
DAMIEN COOPER
SOUND DESIGNER
KINGSLEY REEVE

WITH
JIMI BAMI
JULIAN GARNER
KAI LEWINS

ANTHONY MAYOR
OTIS PAVLOVIC
RORY POTTER
PHIL DEAN WALFORD

COMMISSIONING PATRON

GRETEL PACKER



ImageCollider

THE TABOO OF SADNESS

BY FINEGAN KRUCKEMEYER

The notion of taboo conjures up the extremes of a society, those dangerous, illegal or private pursuits (violence, drug use, sexuality) which we as a population know exist, but which we find difficult to discuss, whether onstage or off.

But there's another form of taboo, which works in antithesis to this. It is a taboo conjured around a very common, very known aspect of our world. It occurs when we take something normal, a basic emotion – sadness – and we present it theatrically. And of course there can be no danger in this, because we are not dealing with dangerous things... unless we shift the context. Unless we present that emotion to a people we are scared of showing it to. We present it to children.

In this act, a switch occurs. The thing presented ceases to be the taboo – the shock to an adult sensibility lies no longer in what is presented on stage, but rather what sits in front of it. The children watching the sadness – they have become the taboo.

Three presumptions are at play in an attempt to remove sadness from children's shows: the first is a presumption of the world – that children, if protected from sadness in their theatre, will not encounter it anyway; the second is a presumption of the child – that even if they are shown sad events on stage, children will not be able to deal with such themes; and the third is a presumption of the artist – that whether or not they are able to deal, this is not the role of children's theatre. It has a different set of prerogatives to adult theatre.

So, therein lie three bones of contention: the sadness presented to children is foreign; if not foreign, then too challenging; and if not too challenging, then just unnecessary.

In my works, and in the works of many of my contemporaries (though, I would argue, as absent from the works of many more), a multitude of themes coexist – those of discovery and loss, failure and redemption, unbridled joy and unbounded anger, new life and untimely death. Some are positive and some negative.

In some of my plays, through one set of horrifying circumstances or another, a child will find themselves alone – or at least devoid of elders. And the events that have led to this state of affairs are sad. Sadness has entered the story. But something more rudimentary has also occurred in this: the child – that bastion of 'innocence', the recipient of 'mothering' – is suddenly without a mother. Indeed, they are without an anyone.

SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION

THE TABOO OF SADNESS (Cont.)

Via sadness, they have ceased to be the child of an adult, or a child to care for, or a child receiving the attention of others – which is so often a child as an adult sees it. Now, they are the effector, the one impacting upon the world. They are a child... as a child sees it.

And so we return to the trio of presumptions directed at the taboo of sadness: that the sadness presented to children is foreign; if not foreign, then too challenging; if not too challenging, then unnecessary. It is essentially a what, a how, and a why: the ‘what’ is sadness; the ‘how’ is a child’s means of dealing with it; and the ‘why’ is a blatant one: ‘Why would one present notions other than those of security to children?’

‘Sadness will not be encountered by children offstage, so why show it on one?’ is a great sweeping question, for it’s directed at the whole world. And of course it’s untrue. Sadness does manifest in children’s lives. As guardians, adults will raise sword and fight valiantly to ward off any tragedy headed for their child. And the intent is a great one, but the reality is far trickier – emotions are subjective beasts, which have the power to shape- shift and take on many forms.

So, a schoolyard stoush will provoke sadness, an ignored sentence will, a girl who likes another boy more, or a bus missed, or a body that feels foreign to its owner, or a sibling who can do something better, or a mood that doesn’t even have a name for itself but that finds you at night when you wake for no reason – these are all tangible, childhood sadnesses. But they are not all-defining sadnesses. Because a sad moment encountered in life, does not denote a sad life, just as a sad moment encountered in a piece of theatre, does not denote a sad piece of theatre.

My plays, with their sad moments, also include humorous scenes, and empowering scenes and fast scenes and languid scenes. So often, sadness can be but one state passed through in the unfolding of events. And even more than this, it can be the trigger for that unfolding. Because a tragic circumstance can, in a narrative journey, be quite the opposite of a negative: it can in fact be a call to arms.

Roald Dahl’s James wouldn’t have sailed away on his Giant Peach had his parents not been gobbled up by a runaway rhinoceros on the first page. Maurice Sendak’s wolfish Max may not have sailed to Where The Wild Things Are, had he been getting on better with his mother that evening. Edward Ardizzone’s Tim could have left it to his parents to sail over to the robber-infested Light House if someone else had bothered waking and investigated instead.

It’s often the sad event that cries for its victim to step up, respond, fight. Or more passively to consider, reflect, self-assess. That is surely a cause for taboo, in our notions of children and their acquisition of knowledge – the idea that child heroes will attain knowledge not by being taught it, but rather by deducing it themselves. The shock to our adult sensibility is not so much the presence of children in this fearful situation – rather, it is the absence of adults.

And now to the second presumption: that if a child is shown sad events on stage, they will not be able to deal with this emotion.

Again, it’s surely a fallacy. A child possesses skills that make them an audience member in many ways more adept than their adult counterpart: they are a skilled observer; a celebrator of ‘the story’; less knowledgeable of the constructs of the theatre and so more in tune with the imaginary world than its borders; adept at self-projecting and becoming involved in a work; but honest in their judgment – the moment the rules of the story are broken, so is their conviction. But most crucial of all is what I believe the child shares with their adult counterpart – they are an emotional tourist, safely navigating the character journey presented.

In discussions with young audiences after one play, which cloaked a sad truth in a mythological fiction, it was apparent that children of varying ages gave themselves to the varying realities: the very young believed wholly in the mythical; the middling invested in both; and the teenagers saw the tragedy for what it was, but appreciated the compassionate telling. What was presented to all children however, without any illusions, was the same piece of theatre – one that I may previously only have dared write for an adult audience, but which I have discovered works for children also. Indeed, it has been watched and responded to with the full maturity of an aware, present and honest audience – the perfect kind.

The third and final presumption is that directed at the artist: that whether or not children are able to deal with it is not the point. The true issue is that an exploration of sadness is not the role of children’s theatre – it should be lighter, less confrontational than this. This is a prevailing sentiment and one held by many buyers of work for children, and many schoolteachers, and many parents, and because of their collective influence, it informs many theatrical choices made.

THE TABOO OF SADNESS (Cont.)

But there is, I believe, a need for this tone of work. Not always and not in all performance for children – but the option must be there, not as tragedy for tragedy's sake, but as one of many points on the emotional spectrum of a theatrical world. I'd argue that if we do not, then the absence is far more pronounced than the presence.

Besides, this is one of the great joys, and the great values, of art – we do not empathise with Willy Loman's plight because we too have been salesmen. We do not rejoice in Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Mr Darcy because we are 19th century socialites. We invest in these moments for the simple fact that they conjure up a memory of something equivalent in us, in our lives. And in doing this, we derive our own importance from this moment, and craft our own rationale for why things are the way they are, and deduce subconsciously in our own psyches the small assortment of memories and opinions that we shall exit the artwork with – like a napkin of chosen biscuits we would pocket at the end of a buffet dinner.

In this, theatre is a beautiful medium, because two conversations are at play – that of the artist beseeching the audience ('This is the story. Enter into it and see what unfolds.'). and that of the audience member's own internal dialogue ('This is what I'm seeing. But this is what's conjured in me. That word or image hooked me more successfully than others. And this is why.'). And for this wonderful two-fold process to work, the artist must trust the audience. They must not be afraid of it. They must offer up a selection of emotional experiences (joy, discovery, regret, malice, sadness) with enough breadth and enough faith that the audience may sample free and wide.

If there are places an audience cannot go, or if sadness (so large and important a part of the emotional range) is not offered, and is hardly ever offered, is absent from much of the theatregoing that young people do – then something is being denied the child. Choice is being denied the child. The respect to allow self-assessment is being denied the child.

And there is a final notion, a final answer to the 'why' – final in its context within this text, and final also in a work of theatre. The why is redemption.

If theatre is a study of the human condition, then it must put the human through its paces. It will conjure a world, and conjure the characters that may navigate that world. And the events depicted may be small or large, but what matters most is how they affect that character – what is triggered or repressed or exposed or railed against or rejoiced in.

And a sad event offers this – it brings a character to a point of frustration or despair, and then chronicles the character's trajectory from that lowest point. And there doesn't need to exist something as simple as a 'happy ending', not at all. But in my works I still like to chart a protagonist's course from that low to a point of possibility. Because if there were ever any moral that I would feel confident enough to employ, it is that life keeps going.

And so myriad endings may occur onstage, just as myriad possibilities exist in life. Because when we play a game of certainties, the stakes are too low. But if an audience of children can enter a theatre and truly not know what will ensue – if they may feel the security of the theatrical artifice, but be offered the possibility of any emotional score (and observe in some bits and empathise in others and feel some joy and some excitement and some sadness), then the experience is truly a theatrical one.

It's the experience we offer adult audiences. And, freed from the worry of threatened sensibilities that is far more ours than theirs, it is the experience a child deserves also.

This is an edited excerpt from a longer essay published in TYA, Culture, Society (ed. Manon van de Water). Finegan Kruckemeyer received the 2002 Colin Thiele Scholarship and, since then, has written several dozen commissioned plays for theatre companies around the world.