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Performance For/By/With Young People in Canada

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Article abstract

This special issue examines the advocacy for and significance of discussing performance for/by/with young people in Canada. It asks how thinking about young people as audience members, creators, and co-creators can expose ideas about who they are, what they want, and what adults believe is good for them. The nineteen writers who contributed full-length articles and forum essays to this special issue demonstrate how attentive consideration to young people complicates creation ethics, aesthetic choices, affective impacts, content decisions, approaches to training, working conditions, and ideas about risk in connection to the performing arts. As the authors discuss how young people imagine, witness, train, and perform, they are simultaneously advocating for the young people they write about, for the specific issues that concern them, and for these perspectives to expand and invigorate broad conversations about Canadian performance for all ages.

Performance For/By/With Young People in Canada

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This special issue examines the advocacy for and significance of discussing performance for/by/with young people in Canada. It asks how thinking about young people as audience members, creators, and co-creators can expose ideas about who they are, what they want, and what adults believe is good for them. The nineteen writers who contributed full-length articles and forum essays to this special issue demonstrate how attentive consideration to young people complicates creation ethics, aesthetic choices, affective impacts, content decisions, approaches to training, working conditions, and ideas about risk in connection to the performing arts. As the authors discuss how young people imagine, witness, train, and perform, they are simultaneously advocating for the young people they write about, for the specific issues that concern them, and for these perspectives to expand and invigorate broad conversations about Canadian performance for all ages.

Keywords: for/by/with, young people, Canada, Canadian, performance, theatre, ethics, advocacy



Heather's Story

My introduction to performance was through the Alberta Children's Creative Dance Theatre with Joyce Boorman, Sally Carline, Jan Vallance, and, later, Ann Kipling Brown. My thirteen years of dancing with them shaped how I understand how bodies communicate and instilled in me a belief that I could make creative contributions to the world. I went to visit Boorman in 2016, and she told me that prior to teaching each class she said a little prayer: that she could disappear so that the child could appear.

Sandra's Story

My story in performance did not begin with my children, but my children's work in performance returned my story to me. I remember when my youngest child, around the age of six, performed in his first recital with Arts Umbrella Dance in a large professional venue. His class was made up of only boys, barefoot, dressed in neon green T-shirts, blue shorts, and wearing

swimming goggles. They ran onto the stage vibrating, waiting for the music signal to begin their piece called “Bugs,” and though only six dancers, they filled the five-hundred-seat theatre with an explosive energy. My son came to the front and began to rub his legs and arms together, in a sort of manic yoga pose, with a wide smile that brought the older dance students in the audience to their feet, cheering. The boys, encouraged by the reaction to their own joy in the dance, gained more energy as they bobbed and weaved across the whole stage, each one getting his turn at the front. I sat back in the audience and thought: yes, there it is, the joy that comes from creating art that brings the joy back to you. The reaction to my youngest’s performance planted a seed that directed my graduate studies.

Advocacy

We have both had the privilege of seeing, and occasionally being a part of, innovative performance work created for, by, and with young people. Provocative, moving, demanding social action, or aesthetically breathtaking, we have often wondered why this work is frequently peripheral to discussions in the academy about performance. Today, even before he said “good morning” or rolled out of bed, Heather’s five-year-old asked her, “Do you want to play that we’re elements?” What an unexpected provocation. Playing “as-if” is a pleasurable—and powerful—way to reimagine the world.

We conceive of this special issue as advocacy: drawing young people’s performance work and performances created for them into mainstream conversations about theatre and performance studies. In encouraging attention to the work, we also aim to advocate for the artists, artist-educators, and young people who make it. The authors in this issue employ critical language to discuss work for/by/with young people that respects context and takes ethical issues into account while considering the artistry, aesthetic choices, risk-taking, and affective impact of the work. Devoted to artists and educators creating work for and with young people, and to the young people who train, imagine, witness, and perform, this special issue, as Boorman put it, gets out of the way so that the young people appear.

Performance work for, by, and with young people says a great deal about what a culture, community, or artist imagines young people are, want, and need, and it also expresses that artist’s, that culture’s, or that community’s deep concerns about the present and hopes for the future.

Beliefs about young people held by artist-educators and by artists (whether young or adult) drive aspects of their choices when they create performance *for* young people. The choices they make in turn have ethical and moral facets. How are the physical, psychological, and social needs and interests of young audiences, their caregivers, and educators imagined in a given creation/performance situation? These choices are also affected by whether young people or adults are the performers, and whether or not the performers and other members of the creative team are getting paid. How do artists and young people deal with difficult topics, challenging characters, or issues that communities consider taboo? How do organizations and funders conceive of production budgets and spaces to view, train, and perform? How are power dynamics embedded in creation and spectatorship relationships in these situations?

Work created *by* and *with* young people embraces or challenges those ideas and aesthetics as well, developing parallel narratives that can change how we all understand the world. When

young people are devising or training for performance, the values artist-educators and parents/caregivers hold dear are particularly evident. Perhaps they believe young people need to work with specific stories, or that young people should have platforms to tell their own stories, or even that particular kinds of stories and voices should be amplified. Maybe they value hard work, training, striving for excellence; perhaps they believe in suppressing the self in order to achieve an image of perfection. Perhaps they believe in developing skills in collaboration, community service, and safe practices. They may prioritize developing strong relationships with mentors, co-performers, or audiences during performance. They may believe that thinking through ideas with drama can prepare young people to practise hope in their own lives. These are only a few of the possibilities that creative processes with young people may promote, informed by particular cultural constructions of what it means (and what people believe it should mean) to be a young person.

The main articles and forum essays in this special issue bring complex questions about what is and is not “good” for young people into broad conversations about Canadian performance and contribute productively to analysis of performance aesthetics, content, training, and working conditions in theatre for all ages. When decisions are controversial, and especially when they address ideas about what is “good,” we need to consider who gets to make the choices: the parents? the teachers? the artists? the young audience members? the young performers? Why? Each writer featured in this special issue performs their own advocacy, offering some possible approaches to these questions as well as to those posed above; at the same time, they advocate for the place of performance for/by/with young people within the Canadian artistic landscape.

Analyzing Performance For/By/With Young People

Each of the four main articles in this special issue address performance projects that represent some of the diverse creative work made in Canada for/by/with young people. The relationship between young people and the creative work matters. Yana Meerzon and Julia Henderson engage with examples of work *for* young people, Diane Conrad addresses work *by* young people, and Kathleen Gallagher and Andrew Kushnir focus on work *with* young people.

“The Aesthetics of *Towards Youth*: Making Relations in and through Theatre” by Gallagher and Kushnir analyzes the writers’ creative process and product through the lens of James Thompson’s aesthetics of care and Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of relational aesthetics. The play *Towards Youth* is verbatim theatre, crafted from young people’s own words. The article discusses how the authors and the artists they worked with amplified the voices of their two hundred and fifty young research participants; how they *listened* to what those voices were saying; and how their creative work is the outcome of a respectful process of building relationships with young people, artists, and audiences that place young people in the centre of the creative inquiry, asking the world to adjust and respond to their observations, ideas, and dreams.

In “*Traversée*: Crossing Borders in Search of the Emancipatory Theatre for Children,” Meerzon, like Gallagher and Kushnir, discusses the specific ethical and artistic responsibilities that the article’s titular project takes on. In this case, the concerns revolve around an audience that is expected to be primarily children and a subject who is a refugee. Meerzon uses Jack

Zipes's articulation of “emancipatory theatre for children” (223) as a lens through which to read the aesthetic choices Milena Buziak made in her staging of Estelle Savasta's *Traversée*. The exploration discusses restraint, empathy, storytelling, and artistry, arguing that these elements of the production open up spaces in which young people can think critically about issues of migration and identity, and, significantly, in which young people's questions and feelings are honoured, and in which adults do not impose answers.

Julia Henderson's “Disrupting Age Stereotypes in Theatre for Young Audiences with Older-Bodied Puppets” is an example of analysis that grapples with ways adults present concepts to young people—in this case, ideas of aging and old age. Arguing that older-bodied puppets disrupt the master aging narrative of decline, she explores how two puppet-based plays may have an impact on perceptions of how to live and how to have meaningful relationships across generational boundaries. Henderson argues that puppetry can destabilize stereotypes and make “age-related issues such as loneliness, isolation, prejudice, and mistreatment” (252) more accessible to young audiences. As we write this introduction, we are all reeling from the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly devastating impact on older people. Young people thinking about how people age, and, more importantly, how older people live, is especially urgent today.

Cultural constructions of identifiable groups of young people often involve problematic, narrow stereotypes. In “Youth Participatory Action Research and Applied Theatre Engagement: Supporting Indigenous Youth Survivance and Resurgence,” Diane Conrad directly confronts damage-centred narratives of Indigenous young people and examines how participants articulate their own narratives through arts-based theatre practice. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) fosters inquiry with young people, rather than using extractive methods, and enables young people to distinguish how cultural constructions are not only related to how the adult world perceives them, but also to how the young perceive themselves. Conrad suggests that when Indigenous young people reclaim agency and strength, and assert their own stories, their creative work may “foster more constructive attitudes towards [Indigenous young people]” and offer “small steps... [towards] dismantling colonial structures” (271). Like Henderson's discussion about ways performance can disrupt age stereotypes, Conrad offers a critical approach, but in her case, rather than exclusively challenging the views of audiences, she works with young participants to reframe the notion of “at-risk youth” as young people engaging in risky behaviours and demonstrates how theatre practices can support participants' own reconstructions of themselves.

Multiplying Perspectives: Storming the For/By/With Spectrum

In order to capture the wide range of conversations created when young people are foregrounded in discussions about performance, we invited responses to the following provocation for our expanded Forum section: “How does your research and/or project challenge the current discourses on Canadian performance and on Canadian young people?”

We were rewarded with a storm of brief, provocative works that illustrate geographic and disciplinary diversity and highlight a spectrum of issues related to Canadian performance for/by/with young people.

From the West Coast to the Maritimes, our nine short Forum essays intersect in a timely manner with contemporary cultural currents. These works are a doubled form of advocacy: they advocate for performance for/by/with young people and *also* advocate for the importance of the particular focus of each essay: agency, BIPOC artists and young people, mental health, community-engaged and applied theatre projects, professional and pedagogical creation with their attendant conditions of labour (for both adult-artist and youth-artist), mentorship and training, ambitious creative expression like opera and dance, and young people's own concerns about their present lives and futures. By way of introduction to the Forum, we want to draw attention here to the ways these essays not only criss-cross the country but also address inter-sectional themes and issues in complex ways.

Young people's agency and identities, often marginalized by the mainstream, are discussed by contributors Pamela Baer; Alysha Bains; Sheila Christie; Lisa Marie DiLiberto; Caroline Howarth, Mieko Ouchi, and Kelsie Acton; and Nikki Shaffeeullah, nevada jane arlow, Jenn Boulay, and Senjuti Aurora Sarker. Depictions and constructions of family are significant in several works by Baer, DiLiberto, and Howarth et al. Aspects of education, training, and mentorship are explored by Claire Carolan, Christie, Anne Nadeau, Matthew Tomkinson, and Shaffeeullah et al., while diversity in professional theatre for young audiences concerns Bains, Howarth et al., Nadeau, and Tomkinson. Significant attention is paid to performance creation processes and priorities in essays by Baer, Carolan, Christie, DiLiberto, Howarth et al., and Shaffeeullah et al., while aesthetics and storytelling are highlighted in Bains, Christie, Howarth et al., Shaffeeullah et al., and Tomkinson. Bains and Tomkinson analyze so-called difficult subject matter such as racialization, mental health, and self-harm within productions targeted for young audiences.

The Forum section opens with a piece written by three youth artist-participants (nevada jane arlow, Jenn Boulay, and Senjuti Aurora Sarker) and Nikki Shaffeeullah, former artistic director of Toronto's the AMY Project, a performance creation and mentorship program for young women and non-binary youth. "Manifesting the Future" leads arlow, Boulay, and Sarker to reflect on art they make and want to make, the structures that influence art-making, and the future paths that lead to position change, or, as Shaffeeullah writes, "How we can shift the systems around us for collective liberation, artistic, and otherwise" (279).

Two short articles analyze aspects of professional theatre for young audiences (TYA). Alysha Bains discusses Anita Majumdar's *The Fish Eyes Trilogy* in "Expanding Conversations of Race and the Nation." Bains argues this solo-performer production expands, critiques, and includes young people in "discussions of race and the nation" as it offers a counternarrative to racializing stereotypes of youth, becoming a "site of resistance" to the ideal "coming of age" narrative found in common portrayals of the Canadian adolescent experience (285). Another solo-performer TYA production is discussed in "Staging Anxiety in Rachel Aberle's *Still/Falling*." Here, Matthew Tomkinson explores how the study guide attached to *Still/Falling* frames the production's aesthetic and conceptual ideas to mental health for young people, and he advocates for a "deeper mode of aesthetic inquiry" into the production's approach (289).

Anne Nadeau's reflection on the professional work of cultural mediators in "Accompagner la sortie au théâtre par la médiation culturelle en classe : une expérience riche pour les élèves et les enseignants" advocates for and shares details about work that enhances theatre arts experiences for students and their teachers by helping young people to creatively explore and

make meaningful reflections connected to a theatrical performance and to an opportunity to attend the theatre.

While Nadeau's article reflects on a specific creative professional *practice*, "A Conversation about *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*" is a discussion among artists Caroline Howarth, Mieko Ouchi, and Kelsie Acton (Concrete Theatre, Edmonton) about the chamber opera they developed in English and ASL, and the careful creative *processes* they needed to consider and employ in order to develop and present the work in an effective and respectful way.

Organizational structures also influence young people's experiences—and the experiences that may become possible—in the arts. In "Volunteerism and Calgary's 'infa-Moose' Community Impro Theatre," Claire Carolan discusses the work of the city's Loose Moose Theatre Company, "where no one ages out," and pays particular attention to the "overlooked benefits of theatre training for youths including volunteerism, inclusion, entrepreneurship, and generativity" (300). As Carolan reflects on a structure that aims to provide accessible training for young people, Lisa Marie DiLiberto's "Balancing Act" advocates for "increase[d] accessibility for caregivers in the performing arts in Canada" (305). As a professional artist, she discusses how the changes in one's family (specifically, becoming a parent) may be supported in performance creation processes and spaces.

Sheila Christie brings interdisciplinary research creation to the forefront with "Youth as Subjects and Agents of Artistic Research." Christie incisively details tensions between mentorship and "youth-lead artistic-creation" in a SSHRC-funded project for "youth facing challenging circumstances" (309). The project participants included youth, community elders, and academic partners in Cape Breton. As they investigated the theme of "slow violence" through documentary creation, the process revealed ways in which power dynamics, mentorship, and project leadership can influence how young people's voices get amplified. The process demonstrated, too, that a more hands-off approach may give space for young people to express themselves in ways that challenge adult partner objectives.

Finally, just as we open the Forum with the voices of young people, we close with an exploration of young people's words in "Queer Isn't a Choice! Queer Is My Family!" by Pamela Baer. Centred on lyrics co-written by young research participants who have at least one queer parent, Baer reflects on the powerful way young people used collective songwriting to celebrate and own the way they frame their families in what she describes as queer pedagogy and affective queer practice. The young people assert, "We refuse to conform to your ridiculous standards!" and, "Difference is a great thing / And we're all different in our own way" (Baer 315), responding to the broad call introduced by the young women of the AMY Project "to manifest an arts sector and world that serves all" (Shaffeeullah 279). This call and response reverberates through all the Forum contributions differently, as the essays intersect along the various disciplinary lines that comprise and contribute to performance for/by/with young people.

As noted above, the connective threads linking the Forum articles advocate for performance for/by/with young people as integral to communities in Canada; in addition, these short articles attend to the ways that young people and artists who create for/by/with youth can lead towards a more inclusive—and perhaps more dynamic—arts sector in Canada. To return to our grounding notion of a doubled form of advocacy: we consider these nine essays a framework of possibility wherein the singular young person, in any region across Canada, may engage with

performance that highlights individuality while simultaneously connecting young people to each other and to their communities. After all, as the young people assert in Baer's research, "We're all different in our own way" (315), and as Senjuti Aurora Sarker declares, "The future of performance in Canada is community" (280).

When young people appear—when we really acknowledge them, their presence, and their ideas—what they contribute to performance and performance research expands the possibilities of what we practice and experience in Canadian artistic creation.

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Contributors

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