BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences documents a four-year European cooperation project exploring how listening can transform theatre for children and young people. Co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme and realized with partners across Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the project connected artists, festivals, researchers, and cultural organizations in a global dialogue on cultural citizenship, diversity, and intergenerational exchange. Through workshops, festivals, and collaborative research, BABEL positioned children not as "future citizens" but as active participants in the present, whose voices, perceptions, and cultural rights must be acknowledged.

The book offers reflections, interviews, and case studies from international partners, providing both a record of lived experiences and an "artistic dictionary" – entries on concepts such as listening, atmosphere, attention, curiosity, and diversity – that serve as tools to rethink artistic processes and cultural exchange. By focusing on listening – to audiences, to artists, and across cultures – BABEL affirms theatre's role in fostering empathy, participation, and cultural rights.

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The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences

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THE ART OF LISTENING IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES - Research and Reflections from Performing Arts Festivals

Pendragon

THE ART OF LISTENING IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

EDITORS
Wolfgang Schneider
Nicola Scherer

Research and Reflections from Performing Arts Festivals

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Research and Reflections from Performing Arts Festivals

EDITORS

Wolfgang Schneider

Nicola Scherer

BABEL or The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences,
A Cooperation Project Co-Funded by the Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union.

QR-Codes to Photo, Texts and Video database of the BABEL Project

BABEL Website

On the Babel website, you can find translations of the book's main analyses and reflections into the other 10 languages of the partners.

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BABEL YouTube Channel

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2024, November
Sabadell (Spain)
photo Søren K. Kløft

Greeting from ASSITEJ President

Sue Giles

I am honoured to offer some words in greeting to the readers of this fascinating publication of the journey behind an extraordinary project: *BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences.*

The art of listening – what a wonderful provocation in this noisy world.

BABEL reached with both arms open wide to connect with and include children and artists, Festival partners, researchers and academics, ASSITEJ International and National Centres and cultural organizations. It reached not only European countries but Jordan, Indonesia, Brazil, Cuba, Pakistan and South Africa. It is an ambitious, truly international, partner-driven project with a focus on child voice and agency, diversity, curiosity, intergenerational attentiveness and cultural understanding. It ultimately promotes profound, sophisticated and accessible art for young audiences and participants as a cultural right.

BABEL enabled ASSITEJ International to greatly extend one of our key projects – Regional Workshops – as well as the engagement of young and emerging artists and the creation of new members. I have witnessed workshops in Jordan and Italy and I was at the very first *BABEL* workshop in Java, Indonesia, where artists who were new to the world of theatre for young audiences were supported to come together from all across the immense archipelago. The *BABEL* support, combined with inspiring local passion and expertise, created a wave of activity in performance made specifically for a children's audience – something that hadn't existed in Indonesia before. It is true to say that this event also encouraged the creation of ASSITEJ Indonesia. What an extraordinary moment in time.

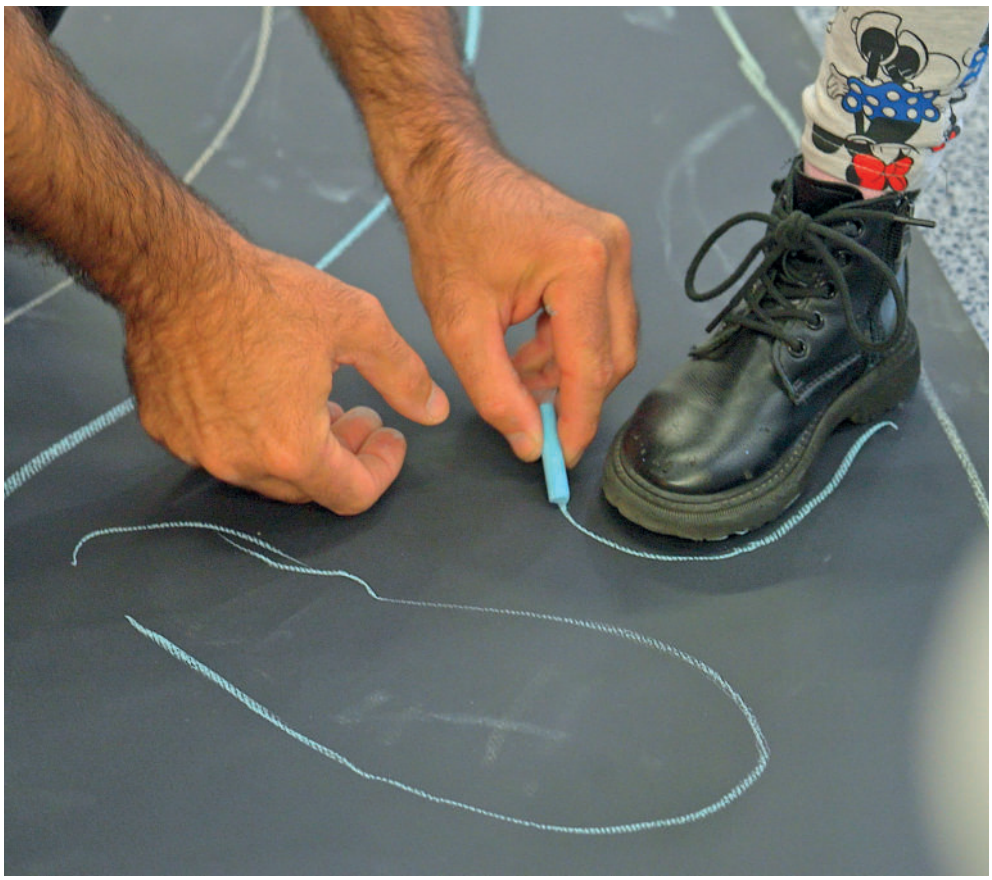
The art of listening is both an artistic practice and a political act.

The *BABEL Project* is democratic; working in many languages and also in no spoken language, investigating communication, listening to children and allowing this to affect aesthetic choice, inviting pluralism and deep reflection. It is ambitious. It asks us, as practitioners and as advocates, to address social realities of division and tribalism. The attention given to voices that are often unheard or diminished illustrates the commitment to the audience and to children as cultural participants and leaders.

The insistence on dreaming, on curiosity and aesthetic learning, is powerful throughout this project. Theatre and performance is claimed as influence and provocateur for change, *because* of its intangible qualities. Strength lies in the flow of ideas and unspoken connection between people, if we listen to understand.

ASSITEJ International is proud to have been part of *BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences*. I know this publication will inspire, intrigue and encourage listening to understand in our global community.

Listening to the Young Audience. The Mission of the BABEL Project



2023, November
Sabadell (Spain)
photo ElPetit

Seeking and Leaving Traces. Why a BABEL Book

Yannick Boudeau,
Roberto Frabetti

Translated from Italian
by Letizia Olivieri

And that's why I have to go back to so many future places, to find myself and constantly examine myself, with no witness but the moon and then whistle with joy, ambling over rocks and clods of earth, with no task but to live, with no family but the road.
(Neruda, 1972, 93)

Going back to so many future places....
We believe it's nearly impossible to express with absolute clarity the relationship between memory and vision, between roots and aspirations. We are referring to memory that is not about celebration, but rather about selecting all that is useful to carry with us. All that is worth sharing, worth leaving behind for the next passerby.

The idea that sharing – knowledge, collective exploration, and the creation of active and potentially innovative cultural policies – is useful, underlies many projects funded by the European Union's cultural programmes.

Certainly, these ideas accompanied the birth of *BABEL: The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences* – a project that, in both its creation and development, sought to highlight the value of the Performing Arts in their relationship with Childhood and Adolescence.

Writing about a European project is a real challenge. It's demanding, but also a lot of fun if you find the right synergy with your fellow project designers. This has certainly been the case with *BABEL*. Creation is the phase where everything seems possible, where even potential obstacles seem to have ready solutions.

The development of the project – its actual journey – has been something else entirely.

Perhaps just as enjoyable and rewarding, but certainly more complex and not as smooth running. During implementation, when imagined experiences take on real form, you begin to understand what kind of impact the project is having or could

have, whether the expected results and objectives are within reach – partially or fully – whether something has hit a dead end, or whether unexpected new paths are opening up.

The project takes on its own vital rhythm by moving through its weaknesses and drawing strength from becoming a collective, living experience. An experience that, over time, has tangibly involved many different human beings, of many different ages – those who were once only on paper, anonymous "target groups" without a face or a name.

The path of *BABEL*, over its four years of life, though it moved along the route laid out in the original plan, constantly had to navigate the many variables encountered in the real-world process of making it. And this, time and again, led to adjustments, pauses and fresh starts. And gradually, as it unfolded, *BABEL* carved out a path of its own. It was less smooth and linear than the one imagined on paper – but it was certainly more real, more tangible and, above all, richer in traces.

Paths and knowledge cannot be shared if they haven't been marked out – if no signs or footprints have been left behind. These are traces of memory that point the way for those who pass by, that highlight a particular moment, that shed light on a detail. They are traces of memory that we believe are essential for sharing knowledge and understanding – because no one owns them. This is even more so in cultural processes, where invention is intangible and constantly evolving, and where it's almost impossible to pinpoint a single originator or inventor, because so many influences are at play.

We do not believe in the idea of the "creator"– because no one invents anything entirely from nothing. Perhaps the person recognised as the "inventor" is simply the one who managed to find a synthesis – the right balance of elements already known to many. The "inventor" brings a journey to a close – a journey that others have carried to that point. And then others will follow, and another "inventor" will come along to create new syntheses and take new steps forward.

This is why knowledge and understanding cannot be copyrighted – because only when they are shared, revisited and transformed do they retain their full vitality. Traces of memory that intertwine the paths of the original project as well as the one that came to life, reveal the fabric of its transformation.

The interplay between the imagined/planned and the realised/completed is a surprising one, because it is incredibly rich in creative potential, offering inspiration for new projects to come.

These possibilities can be easily picked up by those, such as the *BABEL* partners, who have lived the experience, or by those who shared part of the journey, including artists and practitioners working in theatre for children and young people.

But unless the direct experience is critically analysed, leading to the creation of a shared memory, these possibilities risk being missed or not even noticed by those who didn't have the opportunity to take

part in the project's activities or who only experienced them in a limited or occasional way. A shared memory, which intertwines with the personal recollections of the partners or of those who took part in the project as artists or practitioners, is useful not only for them but also as a critical tool that allows for a re-examination of the experiences lived, with the aim of building an accessible archive. An archive to be left for anyone who might wish to "consult" it – for future projects, to better understand the context in which we operate, to better grasp the many "whys", and to deconstruct and reconstruct the story of an experience.

From this need arose the idea of creating a process of critical observation and research, carried out over the four years by Wolfgang Schneider and Nicola Scherer[1] – and which, like the book itself, we have called "A Catalogue of Inspirations".

To conclude this preface, we believe it is important to clarify what the purpose of this book is – and what it is not. It is not a diary, and it is not an evaluation report. It does not examine the progress of the *BABEL Project*, nor whether the expected outputs were achieved, nor the results of the various work streams. It does not measure outcomes or short-, medium-, or long-term benefits. It is simply "A Catalogue of Inspirations". As such, its aim is to offer meaningful suggestions for the creation of new artistic and cultural projects, while also providing space to reflect on the many layers of meaning within the *BABEL Project*.

It is dedicated to artists, practitioners, researchers, project designers, students… to those who work and study in the field of theatre and the performing arts for children and young people.

It is dedicated to those who believe that memory – true memory, not the kind that gathers dust – is important. Memory and vision are essential elements in human evolution. Losing memory is unacceptable. And it is even less acceptable to lose it because we are in a rush to consume, or because we have forgotten how to leave traces that others might one day follow, or because we no longer think it's worthwhile to search for the traces of those who came before us.

"A Catalogue of Inspirations" is a research journey – born from the need to search for and leave behind traces.

Works cited

Neruda, Pablo. 1972. *Fine del Mondo*. Milano: Edizioni Accademia.

1 Dr. Wolfgang Schneider. Professor Emeritus of Cultural Policy Research, University of Hildesheim, Germany and Dr. Nicola Scherer, University of Applied Science Niederrhein, Mönchengladbach, Germany.

An Imagined and Imaginary Story. How and Why BABEL Was Born

Yannick Boudeau,
Roberto Frabetti

Translated from Italian
by Letizia Olivieri

BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences originated within the fundraising group created by ASSITEJ International (the International Association of Theatre and Performing Arts for Children and Young People) after the 2017 World Congress.

The project began after an initial meeting in Copenhagen in October 2018. It then developed rapidly and by the following year, even though it didn't yet have a formal name, it had taken a structured form and was presented at the ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering in Kristiansand, Norway. The intriguing title proposals – "Dreaming to understand", "Are you listening to me?" and "A comprehensive journey through languages and Performing Arts in TYA" – particularly the first one, reflected what would become the two main objectives of the project.

The first objective is to provide ASSITEJ with the means to support its activities and especially some major cultural projects, such as the Regional Workshops (opportunities for meetings and exchange between artists from neighbouring countries), the Next Generation Residencies (short formative residencies for artists and operators in TYA, under 35), and the growth of ASSITEJ's member networks (especially those involving performing artists).

The equally important second objective is to develop the artistic exploration of language barriers, which is one of the points of the ASSITEJ Work Plan. In this sense, the concept embodied in "Dreaming to understand" is essential because, in multiple ways, it allows a focus on the theme of *understanding*: taking responsibility for understanding others, or, more precisely, being concerned with comprehensibility, which is not a matter of simplification, instead, it entails:

- not only testing the level of understanding but also its quality, and therefore the distortions,

misunderstandings, and re-elaborations;

- knowing how to communicate your interest in communicating, in creating a shared connection with the other;
- at the same time, positioning yourself to understand, to open yourself to comprehension; and
- trying to approach what is being communicated without anticipating or assuming the meaning based on your own biases.

The idea of "Dreaming to understand" envisages a project that, through artistic work, reflects on communication and the flow of understanding in general. As such, it delves into topics related to intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for other cultures – areas such as:

- the languages of other ages, of children and young people, and of any specific cultural diversity;
- language and problems in interlinguistic communication;
- barriers, misunderstandings, and the limitations of vocabulary;
- European languages and inter-European communication; and
- new citizenships – the encounter between cultures and languages.

The project is designed to highlight the potential and unique qualities of the Performing Arts. It applies especially to Theatre and Dance for children and young people, where performers are constantly engaged in establishing a strong connection with their target audience – children and adolescents who approach theatre free from conventions and cultural preconceptions.

From the very beginning the four *core activities* of the project were quite clear. While all activities were of equal importance, the most significant from an economic standpoint was the one focused on Festivals. Therefore, the project's Partners were the Festivals of Performing Arts for children and young people, each one bearing an international dimension.

Festivals: The economic dimension of festivals ensured an adequate level of co-financing for the project, but more importantly, the festivals became the "town squares" of the project – the places for meetings, exchanges, and sharing. These were the places where most of the project's events took place – from artistic and cultural events to those dedicated to the relationships with the Partners.

Workshops: Then there were the Creation Workshop Groups. There were 16 artistic workshops for performers from the Partners, the ASSITEJ Professional Networks, and the Next Generation Community, where artists, guided by two facilitators/artistic directors, had the opportunity to collaborate on stage on the themes of the project. Eight working groups were able to meet twice in week-long workshops held within the festivals.

Research group: The third core activity of the project was a research group that followed the entire process, collecting traces along the way to leave behind a record that could be useful to anyone interested.

Pathways: Finally, there were the intertwined Pathways, which saw the creation of extra-European events. These

consisted of three things: Regional Workshops in collaboration with international festivals in six different regions of the world; support for major ASSITEJ events (World Congress and Artistic Gathering); and assistance for the Next Generation residency programme.

In January 2020, the project was ready to be drafted and submitted to the first Call of the new Creative Europe Programme 2021-2027, scheduled for the autumn of 2020. But in February 2020, something much more significant than a Call changed our perception of time and space. Space was marked by physical distancing, and time became that of an emergency temporal dimension, a time essentially suspended. The final shaping of *BABEL* then developed online because it was the time of the dystopian society of Covid 19.

A forced long-distance creative relationship then developed between Brussels and Bologna, with a work that gradually turned into a beautiful creative game, made up of countless drafts and counter-drafts. Then, we waited for the Call to be put out by EACEA.[1]

Before the pandemic, there were two fundamental meetings. The first in Stuttgart at the beginning of December 2019 with Brigitte Dethier and Alex Byrne,[2] who agreed to be the two

Artistic Facilitators of the project. It was at that meeting that, along with defining the structure and content of the Creation Workshops, the name "*BABEL*" emerged – a clear reference to linguistic confusion. An initial version of the title began to take shape: *BABEL. A journey through the languages of Theatre for Young Audiences.*

At the end of January 2020, there was a meeting with Wolfgang Schneider[3] in Frankfurt am Main, where we defined the main lines of the Researchers' activity, and the contents and methods. We also created the "Islands of Reflection"; specific activities dedicated to reflection and in-depth exploration of the project's themes, to be held during the various Festivals.

Writing a European project is truly a creative process. The images of what could happen seem real, and behind the words and numbers, you can glimpse people who are doing, travelling and meeting. You begin to measure the details, and all the inconsistencies and flaws emerge, but so do the real pillars, strengths and particularities on which to build. And you thoroughly check that the conditions of

1 EACEA: European Education and Culture Executive Agency. This is the European Agency responsible for managing funding in the areas of education, culture, audiovisuals, sport, citizenship, and volunteering.

2 Brigitte Dethier. Directress. In 2002, she founded the *JES (Junges Ensemble Stuttgart)* and was the Artistic director until 2022. She directed the Festival *Schöne Aussicht*. Now she is a freelance Directress of theatre for children and young people.
Alex Byrne. Director and Artistic Director of *New International Encounter*, the company that he founded in 2001, which has produced national and international touring theatre for young people and adults, since 2008.

3 Dr. Wolfgang Schneider. Professor Emeritus of Cultural Policy Research, University of Hildesheim, Germany.

compatibility, *feasibility*, and *sustainability* coexist: if the executive project is *coherent and compatible with the objectives and mission* of the Partners; if the activity programme is genuinely *feasible;* and if it is *economically and operationally sustainable.*

To tell the truth, these criteria, particularly the one regarding *economic sustainability*, have accompanied the entire design process from the very beginning.

Alongside this analysis, there is also one concerning the *effectiveness of the writing.* A project can have beautiful ideas, but the problem is communicating them effectively. This is why we turned to one of the project's core elements, "*Dreaming to understand*", constantly questioning whether what we had written was understandable, whether it could lead to misunderstandings, whether it was not redundant or boring, whether it could bring out particularities and originality, and if it was simple and sincere.

During the writing process, the title *The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences* emerged, and a reading "key" was found that would allow us to reflect on the many aspects related to the overarching theme of "the quality of understanding".

The key was *the art of listening*, interpreted in various ways.

First, as a goal *the art of listening to the audience*, is important in relating to any kind of audience, but even more so when facing children and adolescents – subjects with rhythms, sensitivities, and perceptual and cognitive qualities that are extremely different from those of adults. It requires listening to the audience in search of a sensory-based relationship.

Then there is *the art of listening to the artists, the companions on stage* – the sensory-based relationship and the professional exchange among the artists themselves. This entails sharing the stage, paying particular attention to the communication difficulties involved in sharing between artists from different linguistic and cultural communities and different generations.

A primary element that set *BABEL* apart from the traditional view, which assigns the function of listening solely to the audience, was the emphasis on the idea that listening must be a two-way process in order to create a strong, sensory-based bond. It encouraged artists to reflect on their actual ability to listen – not just in an auditory sense, but in the broader, more perceptive sense, through all the senses.

Moreover, *BABEL* explicitly placed Childhood and Adolescence at the heart of its vision. This is because children and young people often live in cultural peripheries where cultural offerings are frequently lacking, both in terms of quality and quantity, and as a result, they are not guaranteed equal opportunities for cultural citizenship.

The utopian vision that one day those at all stages of Childhood and Adolescence will be fully recognized as holders of cultural citizenship – not just in theory – became the thread running through the entire development of the project, reaffirming that children and young people are not citizens and spectators

of the future, but of the present. They are human beings with a right to full cultural citizenship, regardless of their linguistic, cultural, economic or social background.

When the writing process was complete, only the waiting for the Call remained. We waited for a year and a half because the new Creative Europe Programme took much longer than expected to be released: it only arrived in July 2021, with a September deadline. It's true that the work was done, the project was ready, but the new programme presented numerous substantial and formal differences, particularly regarding the rules of the Call and the completion of the Application.

Thus, the cycle of drafts and counter-drafts resumed in the ongoing back-and-forth between Bologna and Brussels, which allowed us to revise the entire project and reach its final formulation. This was an imagined and imaginary formulation, essentially virtual, that started to take shape in May 2022 when the words began to transform into real experiences. But that, as they say, is another story.

Listening to Festivals.
Researching Practices and Perspectives

Nicola Scherer

This research, conducted within the framework of the European project *BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences*, explored the structure, practices, and socio-cultural impacts of contemporary performing arts festivals for young audiences across Europe. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, the study examined festivals in 11 European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden) as representative case studies. It also incorporated perspectives from three to five observers based outside Europe to enrich the comparative dimension.

The research design combined expert interviews, participatory observation, and content analysis of festival materials, aiming to bridge theoretical frameworks with the lived realities of artistic practice. A key feature of the project was its openness to process: rather than following a rigid linear trajectory, the research allowed for trial, adaptation and close responsiveness to the evolving cultural field. This resulted in precise insights into current practices and provided grounded knowledge for rethinking strategies in cultural policy and artistic development in a rapidly changing world.

Key areas of investigation

1. Festival spaces and participation in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)

Young audiences were found to be uniquely responsive to spatial environments – honest, intuitive, and physically expressive. The study closely observed how children and adolescents engaged with festival spaces, not only as physical locations but as social, aesthetic, and rule-based environments. It investigated how space design influences participation, how bodies move through and interact with curated spaces, and how these dynamics contribute to or disrupt the intended festival experience. Methods

included participatory observation, expert interviews (e.g., with artistic directors), and analysis of festival documents.

2. The art of listening and the dynamics of festival relationships

The research examined the communicative relationships festivals create – with and among artists, organizers, and audiences. It explored who is heard, which voices and languages are included or marginalized, and how festivals conceptualize children and youth – not as "incomplete" human beings but as fully present cultural participants. The project analysed how listening, dialogue, and responsiveness within the festival formats impact innovation and inclusivity, with particular attention to developments between 2023 and 2025. Data were gathered through group discussions, interviews with artists, mediators, and organizers, and through direct engagement at artistic director workshops.

3. Curating for young audiences: power, responsibility and representation

Curating emerged as a central topic, reflecting the increasing influence of curators in shaping the artistic direction and values of festivals. The research critically assessed curatorial decision-making, investigating which narratives and role models are promoted, and how festivals navigate themes of global society, family, individuality, and challenge. Particular focus was placed on representation and participation: what stories are being told, through which formats, and what idea of internationality is being constructed. Analysis covered interviews with curators, observation of selection processes, and evaluation of public-facing festival communications.

Key results

- **Young audiences as active cultural agents**

Young people are not passive recipients but shape their festival experiences through interaction, feedback, and physical presence. Their intuitive and honest responses offer critical insights into the quality and accessibility of festival environments. Their engagement is influenced not only by artistic content but also by spatial design, social setting, and opportunities for genuine participation.

- **Festival spaces are multilayered social constructs**

The term "space" goes beyond physical venues. It includes emotional, social, and aesthetic dimensions that define how young audiences navigate and co-create festival experiences. The study revealed that the design of these spaces significantly affects children's sense of inclusion, autonomy, and engagement.

- **Listening as a form of artistic and institutional practice**

The research emphasized the value of deep listening – both literally and metaphorically – as a practice among artists, curators, and organizers. Listening fosters responsive, inclusive communication and plays a transformative role in shaping festivals that reflect the diversity of their audiences.

- **Curatorial practices have strong political and cultural impact**

Curators play a central role in defining narratives, representation, and participation. The research identified a growing awareness of the ethical responsibilities inherent in curatorial choices, especially in relation to power structures, identity politics, and global inequities. Curating for young audiences requires a more reflective and inclusive approach.

- **Participation remains uneven despite intentions**

Although many festivals strive to integrate participatory formats, the degree and quality of participation varies widely. Tokenistic or symbolic forms of involvement often fail to meet the expectations of young participants. True participation requires long-term engagement, co-creation, and structural commitment from organizers.

- **Cultural policy frameworks lag behind practice**

Theatre for young audiences remains under funded and undervalued within national and European cultural policies. The study calls for a reorientation of policy frameworks that recognize TYA as a legitimate and vital field of artistic and social innovation.

- **International collaboration requires structural transformation**

Global and transnational collaboration in TYA is often marked by power imbalances. The project identified the need for decolonial approaches, structural allyship, and new tools to enable equitable and sustainable cooperation across borders.

Epilogue: Cultural policy, transformation, and transnational collaboration

Theatre for young audiences continues to face systemic challenges – limited funding, insufficient critical recognition, and inadequate cultural policy support. The *BABEL* research underscores the urgent need to reimagine and restructure cultural policy frameworks in order to foster greater equity, visibility, and sustainability for this field.

Central to the findings is the question of how transnational collaboration can function more ethically and effectively. The research calls for a deeper understanding of allyship within international production contexts and stresses the importance of dismantling postcolonial legacies that continue to shape power dynamics in the global performing arts landscape. Sustainable, inclusive collaboration requires new tools and structures, and also shared responsibilities.

Festivals for young audiences must evolve into resilient and participatory spaces that reflect the diverse realities of contemporary childhood and youth. This includes embedding practices of co-creation, representation, and listening into their institutional frameworks.

Beyond contributing to academic discourse, *BABEL* offers practical, adaptable strategies for cultural actors, policymakers, and educators across Europe and beyond – tools that aim to support a more inclusive and forward-looking development of the performing arts for young audiences.

BABEL. An Idea of Childhood

Roberto Frabetti

Translated from Italian
by Letizia Olivieri

The evaluation summary report that justified the selection of BABEL as one of the Larger Scale Cooperation Projects supported by the Creative Europe programme for the period 2022-2025 included the following sentence in the penultimate paragraph:

> The project has the potential to spark change and innovation with its conception of children and young people as human beings, rather than as human becomings.

This statement from the experts filled me with pride, not only because it is a concept that was expressed in a 2012 lecture by Roger Bedard,[1] which I have since adopted and passionately supported on every possible occasion, but also because in the Application Form (under "1.4 Cross-cutting priorities – Gender balance, inclusion, diversity and representativeness") we had written:

> Committed to working towards the highest levels of global inclusion, the BABEL partners – both in their longstanding cultural policies and in the creation of this project – are strongly inspired by the need to highlight how, within our social models, children and young people are not granted full social and cultural citizenship. They are still too often regarded as "human becomings" rather than "human beings," despite what is stated in Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly in 1989. This conceptualisation defines them as a minority – or rather, as a collection of minorities, given the particularities of the different age groups between 0 and 18 years. They

1 Roger Bedard is Professor Emeritus and director of the "Theatre for Youth MFA & PhD Program" at Arizona State University. The words cited are from the lecture "International Experiences", Visions of the Future, Visions of Theatre, Bologna, February 2012.

are perhaps the subject of attention, albeit not always attentive or adequate, but they are never truly included. This overlooks the fact that childhood and youth constitute a distinct and essential component of our society, as well as a reflection of a unique cultural diversity. It suggests that childhood and youth are specific social categories to which the UNESCO "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions" could rightfully be applied.

For the BABEL partners, working towards greater inclusion of children and young people means working to expand the spaces for inclusion of all forms of diversity and specificity – because in childhood and youth, all diversities are present and represented.

Both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and the European Charter on the Rights of the Child (European Parliament, 1992) undoubtedly have, at their core, the idea of the "child as citizen". But when might this idea finally become reality? When will the child at last be recognised as a "citizen of the present" or a "complete human being" rather than a "citizen of the future" or a "human becoming"?

It is true that we may play with words and the many meanings that each signifier can carry. We may acknowledge that none of us has either more or less "become a human" than another, and that we are all in a state of constant transformation from birth to death. Thus, "becoming" is simply the expression of natural change, and not a notion that should be used to undermine the rights or recognition of girls and boys by denying them the right to be human in both their present and ours.

This perspective of continuous transformation is an intriguing one. I believe it can only be meaningfully embraced when equal opportunities between children and adults are fully realised, and when the current condition of stark discrimination has been overcome. Perhaps, then, it is necessary – in the present – to emphatically affirm that the child has the right to full citizenship, and to be considered a "complete human being", and that this is a right that begins at birth.

We must guard against the idea that the time required to acquire knowledge and skills – often deemed essential to demonstrate capacity for judgement and decision-making – should be used as a justification for limiting the recognition of the child's status. While it is true that the human being is in a state of constant learning, and that, as a vulnerable subject, the child has the right to care and protection, these realities must never detract from the child's status as a full citizen and a human being of *today*, not of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, in general thinking, this is by no means a given. One need only look at the countless architectural barriers that children encounter in our cities, which too often become inaccessible urban spaces for them. Or consider the

lack of cultural offerings specifically and consistently dedicated to them, and the ghettoisation of children within the narrow bounds of entertainment for its own sake.

In the European Charter of the Rights of the Child, Article 8.1 states: "a child means every human being below the age of 18..." This is a phrase that holds the weight of an oxymoron, as the word "child" encompasses the full spectrum of childhood: from the newborn in need of care to the 18-year-old ready to walk alone. It is a fascinating perspective, as it weaves together the ideas of care, and of otherness from the adult world. I value both. The idea of care, because when linked with the word "right", it implies attention and respect for all children – not only for those close to us. The idea of otherness, because it compels us to see children and young people as complete human beings at every age. Complete in their uniqueness. Complete human beings with whom we can engage in a subject-to-subject relationship. Citizens who, from their earliest years, have the right to fully inhabit the physical and mental spaces that art and culture can offer, sharing with adults a sense of closeness and belonging. Belonging to a land, a people, a city that opens itself to the world. Closeness to others and to their thoughts, within a vision of a peaceful society.

It is a matter of rights. Children and adolescents must be granted full cultural citizenship. We must show respect for the thoughts of a teenager, or of an eight-year-old child, or of a little girl who has just taken her first steps. The quality of a thought or an emotion cannot be measured in centimetres or kilos.

Perhaps we can assume that more and more adults may come to recognise the importance of a culture for childhood and support the idea that children and young people should be acknowledged as rights-bearing individuals: human beings with full cultural citizenship. But it remains truly difficult to imagine that in the near future we might begin to conceive of every stage of childhood and adolescence as an expression of its own distinct cultural identity, or to acknowledge the existence of the "Cultures of Childhood and Adolescence".

The uniqueness and diversity of all children go hand in hand with many common factors including the ways children interpret reality and experience fiction, and their inexhaustible curiosity, which nourishes their need to discover the world and understand how to face its miseries while trying, at the same time, to catch its opportunities. Children know how to suffer, love, dream, believe, accept, be deceived...

Yet they never lose their insatiable desire to imagine and shape their future. Every day they work hard to do so. They build their knowledge, gathering what life offers them and choosing what to carry with them – what might be useful to their own vision of the future. It is a way of engaging with life that belongs to an age where everything still seems possible, even that which may never come to pass. A way of wearing life, postponing

prejudice and fear of others to a future moment.

Day by day, year by year, children construct their understanding with passion and determination, at a pace so intense it is inconceivable to the intellectual laziness of many adults. The world is there to be discovered, known, explored in all its detail – both by those that belong to scientific reality and those that dwell within the realm of the imaginary. In doing so, they construct a rich, complex imaginary world, where deep reflection is intertwined with the freedom of possibility and boundless desire.

I keep asking myself: when will we move beyond this narrow view of children's knowledge? When will we give space to our own curiosity about what escapes us in children and young people? When will we begin to look at childhood and adolescence with the wonder they so rightly deserve? As adults, we must reclaim a true awareness of the otherness before us in order to truly be present with a child or a young person – attuned to their sensitivity, ready to gather and follow the many traces they leave for us. We must continue to stubbornly seek out what they already carry within themselves, recognising the uniqueness of their cultural processes.

We must learn how important it is to bet on children and young people – always and unconditionally – appreciating their infinite diversity. We need to strive to be useful to them, ensuring that their cultural processes can develop fully, without being denied or hidden.
Before us are individuals in motion, and we, as adults, are responsible for their well-being.
For this reason, we should ask ourselves very simple questions:

- Can we educate a child to inclusion if we do not care about their feeling of being included?
- Can we educate them to respect if we do not respect each and every child, in the total diversity of their being?
- Can we educate them to the complexities of these artificially crafted times if we do not respect the complexity of each child?

To begin recognising a Culture of Childhood, we must work towards becoming an educational community, not a careless and indifferent adult collective with little interest in the world of children – striving to see all girls and boys as our companions on the journey. If this ever happens, in the utopian future, that day will be a beautiful day, for them and for us.

2023, November
Novi Sad (Serbia)
photo Jovana Semiz

2025, February
Lahore (Pakistan)
photo The Little Art

Networking and Participation in Theatre Festivals

Reports from
Regional Workshops outside Europe

Funding from the European Union's Creative Europe pool helps to finance and thus breathe life into many different cultural projects in all corners of the member states. *BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences* is one of these projects and it has been running since 2022. Teatercentrum in Denmark (an institution under the Danish Ministry of Culture) is the so-called lead partner on this project, whose main activity is the holding of a number of workshops for theatre professionals all over Europe and at selected locations around the rest of the world. The following reports are from some of the "extra-European" workshops.

2024, May
Havana (Cuba)
photo Søren K. Kløft

2023, January
Vilnius (Lithuania)
photo Rokas Snarskis

Havana, Cuba. With Sophocles in the Caribbean*

Søren K. Kløft

"This building is a bit confusing for me. Can you help me?" … I finally get this request phrased in Spanish, as I have given up on figuring out which floor I have to take the elevator to so as to end up in the right place. Fortunately, the reception – dominated by tall cartoon characters punched out of cardboard – is staffed by a very serviceable lady who kindly directs me up to the right conference room on the third floor.

Cuba's oldest animation studio – Estudios de Animación ICAIC – is located in a seven-story building in the Havana district of Vedado. Cartoons, puppet movies and animated films have been produced here since 1960. And in the studio's conference rooms, workshops are regularly organized for children and young people who want to create animated films. But for three days at the end of May 2024, a crowd of 30 theatre people occupy two of the building's fluorescent-lit and air-conditioned conference rooms. Just over half of them come from Cuba, while the rest come from other places in the Caribbean and South and Central America. They are gathered here in connection with the *ASSITEJ International's World Congress for Theatre for Children and Young People* that takes place in the city. In addition to a lot of theatre performances and networking activities, a large number of workshops are held around the city.

The workshop at ICAIC is part of the four-year *BABEL Project*, which is financed with funds from the EU's Creative Europe pool. The project's main activity is to organize a number of masterclass workshops in different countries in Europe, but it also extends beyond Europe's borders to Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East,

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Translated from the original Danish text: teateravisen.dk/med-sofokles-i-caribien/

and it also reaches the Cuban capital, where one of the so-called regional workshops is being carried out on three hot days at the end of May.

The overall purpose of the *BABEL Project* is to give performing artists and theatre professionals the opportunity to unfold and explore the potential of artistic languages and thus become better at creating high-quality performances for children and young people. The project is structured as a development and learning platform where performing artists, artistic directors, festival organisers, researchers, and other industry professionals develop, exchange and build new knowledge together.

Travelling with Sophocles and Lorca

The *BABEL Project* in Havana resulted in two small workshops, where over three days the course participants were taught the art of writing drama aimed at children, and how to work systematically with telling stories for children using a number of tools from the stage-design toolkit. The teaching was carried out by university-trained teachers from Spain and Chile.

A quick look inside the room where the writing workshop was taking place assured me that the teacher – Spanish Nieves Rodríguez Rodríguez, who has a PhD in Journalism and a BA in Creative Writing – has set the bar high and demands something from her students. Nieves does not hesitate to draw inspiration from the old masters – including the ancient Greek Sophocles and the Spaniard Federico García Lorca (1898-1936). One practical writing exercise follows another, only interrupted by some explanatory and conceptual mini-lectures by Nieves. There is no pause. They work for three full hours without interruption. This would never have worked at a Danish educational institution, but here no one complains. People are inquisitive and ready to absorb knowledge.

At lunchtime the bus leaves the animation studio to go back to the hotel at the other end of the city, and I meet Spanish Inmaculada López Manzilla, who lives in Honduras and follows the writing workshop. She is a trained theatre director and actress with over 20 years of experience with a CV that includes several film roles as an actress and an ongoing university education in cultural management.

As the bus snails its way through Havana's midday traffic, Inmaculada is very positive when I ask for her opinion of the workshop:

> I love all kinds of drama, and I like to read things in all genres and styles [...] classical and modern texts. Writing myself is actually a bit difficult for me, but it is so gripping to do it, and it is important for me to get to know new methods, constantly keep up to date in the field, and be presented with new ways of approaching things. ... The only thing I might miss in this workshop is more time to go in-depth with what we do. But the exercises are very rewarding. For example, we write from photographs, and we rewrite ordinary prose text and news stories into drama.

Poetry in a matchbox

The next day I visit the workshop for stage design and scenography. Here Chilean Eduardo Jiménez Cavieres coordinates the course. He is a university professor, visual artist and stage designer with a CV that stretches back over 40 years, and he generously and enthusiastically shares his many experiences in the field. Eduardo has many examples of his own work and projects over the years, and the workshop alternates between small lectures by Eduardo combined with group work and plenary discussions. Along the way inspiration is also drawn from literature to put things in an artistic perspective.

A story by the Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014) – you can never get around him if you move in more academic circles in – was, among other things, a proposal for further work and discussion in the group. Also, a poem by the Argentinian author Maria Elena Walsh (1903-93), who has a considerable production of children's books behind her, is allowed to play a central role on the last day of the workshop. The poem comes to light when the participants open the matchboxes that they had been given on the first day of the workshop with serious admonitions not to open them until the last day of the course. The poem is called "In a matchbox", and, as a nice end to the workshop, the Argentinian actor and puppeteer Guadalupe Lombardozzi from Buenos Aires reads it aloud. It starts like this: "In a matchbox you can store many things. A ray of sunshine, for example."

After the workshop I talk to Guadalupe and get her immediate opinion on the *BABEL* workshop: "I have gained a lot from participating. The teaching has been good, and I think we have been a 'beautiful' group," she says as she drinks her Mate tea from the small calabash mug she has brought with her. You can immediately recognize, especially Argentines and Uruguayans, by this special trait when you see them in the streets. They never go far without their Mate and a little thermos container to dilute the mug's content of greenish tea. "But actually what stands out to me in particular is a feeling of great gratitude," she continues. "Gratitude [for the] fact that something like this can actually be done. Gratitude [for] the fact that the teachers are so generous and that the project makes all this possible."

***BABEL* as a project and source of inspiration**

The management and administrative arms of the *BABEL Project* are represented in Havana by Teatercentrum's director, Dorthe Skøtt Bébe, and consultant, Naja Birke. Dorthe is formally the *BABEL Project's* top manager, as Teatercentrum in Denmark is the project's lead partner, while Naja is the primary coordinator of the entire project.

Naja and Dorthe are happy to see a concrete example of the project unfolding in Havana, because in Copenhagen, where Teatercentrum is located, everyday life consists mostly of endless e-mail threads, gigantic excel sheets and extensive reporting procedures to the EU. Dorthe says:

> The *BABEL Project* is financed by a very large grant from the EU, and we are

> responsible for ensuring that it is used correctly and in a responsible manner for the benefit of all parties involved in the project. The project is just over halfway through now, and we can begin to sense the contours of the experiences we have gained along the way. As an institution Teatercentrum has not previously administered projects of this magnitude, and it provides unique opportunities to create development and change across disciplines and cultures on a huge scale. However, we have already made a number of observations about how we can make things easier and less bureaucratic in a future project of the same size, so that there can be even more focus on the actual purpose of the project.

Naja adds:

> Our participation in Creative Europe projects, and in this case as a lead partner, places us in a central position in the international collaboration. We have the opportunity to follow what is going on in the world and influence the dialogue and the development of children's theatre worldwide. And it's incredibly exciting to see how we can get these activities to fertilize our own work at the national level and strengthen the Danish children's theatre in terms of quality, development of new formats and more international collaborations for the benefit and joy of the entire performing arts industry.

Dorthe and Naja agree that it is very rewarding and educational to be part of such a large project as *BABEL* – even if they are sitting at the top of an administrative pyramid far from the specific workshop with physical exercises on the floor. Dothe concludes:

> *BABEL* is a very ambitious project that people in ASSITEJ International and thus also representatives from Denmark have spent years formulating, and it is of course a privilege to be involved in it. At the same time it is also important to be able to help shape the project, so that it both makes sense for the artists in the project and at the same time feeds knowledge and inspiration back to the performing arts industry for children and young people as such. Currently, for example, we are awaiting feedback from the two German researchers affiliated with *BABEL*; they have followed the project continuously, and we look forward to seeing what they have come up with and learning something from the research that will soon be presented to the public.

Group photography and language challenges

Back at the animation studio it's time for the final group photo of all the workshop participants. We stand together in the reception area of the building in front of all the cardboard cartoon characters. And there are smiles. And there is laughter. Among the participants is also the Cuban, Jennifer Veliz, who has been an interpreter for some of the participants at the writing workshop. The teaching was in Spanish and it was Jennifer's task – in a discreet and efficient way – to make sure that the few exclusively English-speaking, participants also got something out of the workshops. "I'm actually very tired,"

she confides to me. "I have a degree in languages, and I have also taught English, but this is actually the first time I have solved an interpreting assignment where I had to continuously translate back and forth between Spanish and English. I've taken it as a challenge, and I've learned a lot during these three days."

And then it's time to leave Estudios de Animación ICAIC for the last time. The bus is waiting for us in 32-degree-Celsius heat out on the street.

Facts

- *BABEL*, or *The Art of Listening in TYA* – is a four-year collaborative project funded by the EU's Creative Europe pool. The total budget is EUR 2 million / DKK 14 million. The project started in 2022 and runs until November 2025. It was created at the request of ASSITEJ International. Teatercentrum in Denmark is the project's lead partner, and the workshop activities in Havana were organized by one of the project's partners, the theatre La Baracca (from Bologna, Italy).
- The 14 partners of *BABEL* are: ASSITEJ International, La Baracca (Italy), Agora Theater (Belgium), Bronks Jeugdtheater (Belgium), Théâtre La Montagne Magique (Belgium), Stichting De Stilte (Netherlands), *Baboro International Children's Festival* (Ireland), Lutkovno Gledalisce Ljubljana (Slovenia), Menu Spaustuve (Lithuania), LaSala Teatre (Spain), Scènes d'enfance – Assitej France, Assitej Serbia, Assitej Sweden and Teatercentrum in Denmark.
- *BABEL* originates from a reflection on the potentials and barriers of language in the network ASSITEJ International (Association of Theatre for Children and Young People), and the project is structured as a development and learning platform consisting of a wide range of workshops that are held both in Europe and in selected locations outside Europe – including Jordan, South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil and Cuba.
- Read more on the website www.BABEL-tya.com – here you can find information about already concluded and upcoming workshops, open calls, news, research activities, calendar function etc. Follow the project on Facebook and/or Instagram (search for the project name); here you can find photo and video material from the workshops that have been organized all over the world.
- Read more about Creative Europe here: https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/about-the-creative-europe-programme
- Read more about ASSITEJ International here: www.assitej-international.org
- Read Søren K. Kløft's other stories from Cuba here (only in Danish): https://teateravisen.dk/er-det-her-magi/ and https://teateravisen.dk/scenekunst-og-netvaerkspleje-i-cuba/ or listen to the podcast 'Behind the Scenes' hosted by Søren K. Kløft, recorded in Havana in May: https://teatercentrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Jesper-Cuba-podcast.mp4

Johannesburg, South Africa. Cradle of Creativity 2023

Thembile Tshuma

ASSITEJ SA hosted African artists from a range of countries across the continent under the *BABEL* African Regional workshops at the 2023 *Cradle of Creativity International Festival* in Johannesburg South Africa from 20-27 August 2023. The selection of these African delegates included professionals and upcoming artists that specialise in theatre for children and young audiences. Selected participants were Nourouddini Mohamadou (Cameroon), John Namai (Kenya), Patricia Kayandeke aka Zoey the storyteller (Uganda), Oluwaseun Odukoya aka Aunty Shine-Shine (Nigeria), Gift Chansa (Malawi / Zambia), Yuck Miranda (Mozambique), Getrude Vimbayi Pfumayaramba Munhamo (Zimbawe), Carole Karememra (Rwanda), Herve Twahirwa (Rwanda), Michael Sengazi (Burundi), Maswaati Dludlu (Swaziland), Patricia Gomis also known as Mamby Mwaine (Senegal), and then a number of South African artists from around the country. The SA artists included Andile Vilakazi, Adrian Tony, Kagiso Kekana, Thamsanqa Kumalo, Happy Simelane, Koketso Sekatane aka Chesa, Pogwane Tsebe and Nathaniel Jacobs.

Many children and young people do not encounter theatrical stories or formats that reflect their lives and don't see themselves represented onstage, if indeed they are able to access the performing arts at all. Whilst artists in the field of TYA are committed to engaging more diverse audiences, many of them are calling for more tools:

- to approach the cultural and linguistic multiplicities of diverse young audiences,
- to develop international and intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding, and
- to establish more direct and perceptive communication between artists and young audiences.

The *BABEL Project* aims to address these gaps by focusing on the art of listening within theatre for young audiences –

listening to the other, listening to the audience, listening to oneself. While the project is largely focused in Europe, there is funding for six meetings outside of Europe to ensure that the project has a global reach and more diverse engagement. The aim of this African meeting was to engage with artists from the African context, to consider some of these challenges.

On Saturday the 19th of August, some of the African artists met at The Goethe Institute in Johannesburg and went through a robust intervention around making theatre for young audiences and how as artists one can implement the art of listening as a creator, performer or audience member.

After eight days of watching different productions from all over the world, the artists were having conversations around how best they can make their works relevant for young people in their countries.

Over the last weekend many of them were able to share songs and stories from their respective cultures at the National Children's Theatre and within other parts of the programme. The entire session of the Professional Programme on Sunday 27 August, focused on Listening and Connecting within TYA. African artists learnt about networks that they could become part of and shared their ideas for how further collaboration can happen.

The shows that were watched included *Tower and the Tree* (SA), *The Visitors (SA/* German), *Skin We Are In* (SA), *Pen(t)s Down* (SA), *Lehe la Kganyapa* (SA), *Little Kesho* (*Rwanda*), *Whistle Blowers* (SA), *Hokuspokas* (Zim), *Mwana wa Mvula* (SA), *Year of the Bicycle* (SA), *King of Broken Things* (SA), *Listen* (SA), *Wanda the Musical* (SA), *Flying Cow* (Netherlands), *We Are Instructables* (SA/Belgium), *To Hell with Paradise* (Denmark), *Dictated Democracy* (SA), *Cerca / Close* (Mexico), *Stories We See* (SA), *La Dans la Bounce* (France), *On Esta I!* (SA/Belgium), *Tiebele* (Burkina Faso/ Belgium), *How to Do Things with Words* (Switzerland) and, *Thandiwe wa Bantu* (SA).

Engaging topics

Each day, after seeing different productions throughout the day, the participants engaged in the different themes that they were thinking about. The most outstanding topics included:

1. How do you enhance the art of listening when you do not engage with your audience members? There is a need for creators to engage with their targeted audiences so that they know what affects them when creating work. In this conversation, participants were challenging themselves in how they can better create work. They agreed that they should as theatre makers work strongly on research through questionnaires, with thought provoking questions on what they wanted to find out. Another solution was for them to see what the curriculum in the schools entailed for their targeted audience, and create work in this regard, but before having a performance, to go into a school and creatively ask the learners about the content of the production, what did or didn't move them, what they would have loved to see and

whether they liked the style used. Also, because of social media, the creators could engage with young people on certain topics and see how they respond to these. Engaging with very young children through play and artistic methods was also discussed.

2. How far does language go when you are planning to tour your work? Some productions are text driven and it has always been a problem for productions to tour internationally as the language is a barrier for some countries. How then does one create work with less text without taking away the message or authenticity of the work?
This was a really complex topic as participants struggled to find a better solution. Some of them suggested the use of movement incorporated with text. By doing so, the audience members would understand the body language. “Stories we see” was one of the examples.

3. Culture has always been a barrier when creating educational productions to take into schools. Does this mean that when culture limits us from talking about some issues that affect the young people and the community, we need to indirectly send the message? What could be the best forms of acting we can use?

The delegates were split between two thoughts. One group strongly believed that there was value in respecting our own cultural beliefs and not tampering with it. Culture is most valued within our rural areas, but we know and understand that in the urban areas, culture is not taken seriously, or rather is no longer being followed that much. Most of the group members believed that even when they create their work, they still look into how they can *not* disregard or disrespect their cultural values.
On the other hand, the second group believed that the world was evolving and cultural beliefs can make us not explore some themes and topics that children are facing to the fullest.
They believed that using cultural values as a way of not talking or displaying some actions would be rather creating a production with no value at all, where some subjects are swept under the carpet because they are taboo in a certain culture. They strongly believed that if some of the cultural acts or norms were against human rights or limiting children from expressing themselves, then there was no reason to create work that challenges them in the current context.
The conclusion was that there should be a balance between respecting cultural values but at the same time, the truth should be told, topics should be explored, boundaries and myths should be broken, but it’s about the “how” part. They agreed that they will go back into their creative worlds and explore means and ways of targeting uncomfortable topics in society without looking like they are going against their cultures!

4. Who determines the age appropriateness of theatre for young audiences?
This conversation was a continuation of the previous one on culture. It started when participants were discussing how some schools have strict teachers who actually stop a show because they don’t

feel comfortable with either some words or actions. They would tell the performers that it wasn't relevant or appropriate for the children. Even when they go into communities, parents also regard the performances as inappropriate for children.
Hence now the question, who decides, because in schools the teachers block them, in the communities, the parents block them, but in all this the children are silent and yet the work is created for them. In all this, what the elders are saying is inappropriate, the children are exposed to worse things from social media platforms.
This went back to the first point of discussion, if we are to discover what children are going through, we need to go where they are, whether in real life or in the social media platforms.

5. The art of listening in TYA starts by listening within us.
We were now reflecting on how we saw "the art of listening" unfolded in the whole journey of Cradle of Creativity. Most of the participants mentioned that they strongly believe that the art of listening started with an individual. In creating work, you can sometimes tap into your own childhood. It also starts with you because of your own intuitions and believing in the process. But it also takes self-courage to invest in researching what you want to create, who you want to create it for and why you're creating it.
In a show, for one to listen to me, I need to listen to them and have a conversation, from the self, to the audience and the other way around.

It was great to see that already a start has been made to develop collaborative works within the African regions. Some of the collaborations include:

- Getrude Munhamo (Zimbabwe) and Oluwaseun Okukayo (Nigeria) collaborating on a storytelling workshop in a project titled "The art of storytelling", which will be part of *The Abuja International Theatre Festival* and Awards peace building running from the 1st till the 5th of November 2023.
- Adrian Tony is in conversations with Oluwaseun, Getrude, John and Andile for them to be part of the *Karoo Festival* happening on the 15th and 16th of December 2023 in the Northern Cape.
- In Limpopo, Kagiso Kekana and Koketso Sekatane have connected with the hope of working together around a setwork production for *My Children, My Africa* for to tour schools in Soutspansberg district.

The questions and statements stated above on the "engaging topics" will then be explored through the collaborative works that the participants will engage in moving forward.
While these ideas are still works in progress, the experience has been an eye-opening one for these African delegates and more collaborative works are in the making.
ASSITEJ SA was delighted to host these African delegates and to assist them to strengthen their bonds with other theatre makers from across the globe, while providing an opportunity to experience a range of experiences around theatre for young audiences.

Sao Paulo, Brazil. Festival Paideia 2023

María Inés Falconi

"The actor is not positioned vertically as the one who 'commands' the performance, but horizontally as the one who "proposes and accepts" the spectator's reaction."
A meeting of the *BABEL Project* took place in Latin America during the 2023 *Paideia Festival* in Sao Paulo, Brazil, from September 21st to 26th. The *Paideia Festival*, organized by the Paideia Company, had been invited to host the *BABEL* meeting in Latin America. Its organization was managed by Amauri Falseti, director of the company, with the coordination of Gabriel Macció Pastorini (Uruguay), Ramón Verdugo (Mexico), Clarice Cardell (Brazil) and María Inés Falconi (Argentina), assisted by Margot Lohn.

The modality proposed by *Paideia* focused on an open dialogue between the festival participants and the companies that presented their shows, based on the idea that drives the *BABEL Project*, "The art of listening", and emphasizing two premises:
- Mutual understanding and recurrent linguistic misunderstandings.
- What concerns you about aesthetics and language in your work with young audiences?

Three sessions were held during which about 30 people discussed the selected shows, followed by a fourth, open dialogue session. The shows that were viewed were:
- *Willy Oddó*, *El Exílio en La Voz*, Ismael Oddó (Chile)
- *João Bobo*, Paideia Theater Company (São Paulo, Brazil)
- *House*, La Baracca, Testoni Ragazzi (Italy)
- *Lovni*, La Casquette (Belgium)
- *Batu*, Basque Artefacts (São Paulo, Brazil)
- *O Poderoso de Marte*, Teatro Teca (Bahia, Brazil)
- *Coração*, Teatro da Pedra (Minas Gerais, Brazil)
- *Divagar e Sempre*, Las Cabaças (Pará, Brazil)
- *Louise/The Bears*, Pandorga Theater Company (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
- *Bobos sem Corte!*, *Intervention*, Casa Azul Xengobulengotengo (Bahia, Brazil)
- *Mbae´tata*, Trupe de truoes, (Minas Gerais-Brasil)

Sharing the process

All the shows had been seen prior to the final open dialogue meeting. We decided to work in small groups in order to allow a closer and more direct dialogue with each one of the artists. Some guidelines were agreed upon, such as being open to the opinions of others, and being clear that the dialogue was not intended to be a critique of the show or an evaluation of it but a way to find out, to enquire about those aspects that had caught our attention and for which we did not know the answer.

During the first session we reviewed the items that could be asked about (text, staging, language, ideology, context, etc.), however the predisposition of the group and the interest aroused by the shows presented at the festival made it unnecessary to take these factors into account and instead the particular interest of the participants prevailed during the dialogue.

The allotted time (approximately one hour and a half) was then divided into three
moments:
1. Presentation by the companies: context, way of working, genre approached, members of the company, etc.
2. Division into groups around each company: the participants could choose the performance they wanted to talk about. There was open dialogue with a moderator to record the talk.
3. Reading of topics discussed in each group (questions and answers addressed) by the moderator.

The process was not intended to reach any definitive conclusion but rather to highlight ideas, concerns or outstanding expectations that had arisen during the different sessions. The observations are shared below, organized into three main thematic areas: the audience, aesthetics and language, and the social environment.

The audience

- *Being attentive to the audience* was mentioned by many of the artists as a very important element during their show from different points of view. First, they emphasized the importance of the gaze, the one which addresses the individual and unique spectator, making a connection with him/her, whether he/she is a child or an adult. This spectator, with whom a link is established, modifies the actors and the action that takes place on stage. The spectator, even from his/her physical disposition, seated at the edge of the stage and not from a distant stall, is an important element for the development of the dramatic action and the actor, who, on a horizontal level, accepts, integrates and modifies himself/herself in relation to his/her stimulus. The actor is not positioned vertically as the one who "commands" the performance, but horizontally as the one who "proposes and accepts" the spectator's reaction. Does the show leave aside the authority that emerges from the stage?
- *Emphasis* was mentioned in relation to the *difference between urban and non-urban audiences*, which can be extended to the conclusion that audiences are not all the same and are modified according to their own contexts.

- The *age to which the shows are addressed* was also discussed, as either a rigid or flexible criterion, who establishes it and if the age of the audience is or is not important at the time of presenting the show.

Aesthetics and language

- Most of the companies mentioned that in order to stage their show they carried out a long research process, even just to create the story of the show. There were few works based on previous playwright`s written texts.
- In this research process, the elements, the objects, often appear as the starting point of the research, in certain cases even before the theme or the story emerges. Is the visual field dominating the textual one? Is the object prioritized over the word?
- The real stories that people live in their own contexts also serve as the stimulus and motivation at the time of creating the show.

Coordination

- The show is then based on a fusion of languages (plastic, music, drama, acting, dance) and the frontiers between the different artistic expressions are disappearing.
- The companies investigate new expressive languages they did not use before.
- It doesn´t seem to be important to define whether a show is theatre or performance.

Basically, it is not necessary for the spectator.

- The shows take the format of narrative proposals. The characters just relate what is happening on stage or what is happening to themselves and the dramatic action is conveyed by characters who speak to the audience.
- The emotional aspect is an important element in the creation and presentation of the show in addition to the traditional elements generally highlighted in children's theatre, such as play and imagination.

Social context

- In the dialogue with the different companies, reference was frequently made to the social context in which the show was created as well as in which it was presented.

Economic conditions, theatre attendance habits, available spaces, and local social and political conflicts influence the themes, the aesthetics and even the presentation formats.

- The influence that the audience has in the creation of the shows was mentioned as a contributing influence – voluntarily or not, with their own personal experiences and modifying the aesthetics of the shows.
- It was striking that many of the shows presented had been created some years previously, as if a discourse, suspended by the pandemic or the particular political conditions, had been taken up again. However, the subject of the pandemic was not mentioned during the dialogue with the different companies.
- The Brazilian companies pointed

out that in their work spaces they maintain a pedagogical activity of artistic education for children and young people. This often gives place to concerns, themes and ideas that later contribute to the company's creative process.

Finally, it should be noted that the willingness of all the participants, artists and spectators, as well as the variety and quality of the participating companies, was fundamental for the success of this *BABEL* meeting.

Once the reading was over and the debate was open to the participants, the whole group was asked to send in those questions that, in their opinion, had remained unanswered or were still a concern that could serve as a guide for future meetings or reflections. We transcribe here the ones we received:
*What does "thinking" the show from the child's point of view imply?
*How do companies define the "age" of the audience of their productions?
*What is a meaningful experience for the child?
Is "storytelling" really dispensed with in some shows, or [is] the current structure just another way of naming it?
*Why some productions choose not to have someone responsible for the dramaturgy?
*Is there a reception of the other's opinions about the result of the work, even if the proposal is for construction and enhancement?
*Is the indicative classification of a show something that is inserted from the creation process? Is there a need to have a clear division by age groups?
*Do we really pay attention to what children and young people say? Are we really open to listening when creating our shows?
*Dramaturgy for children and young people requires a special approach. Have we had the opportunity to deepen and discuss the dramaturgy of our theatre?
*What moves us to create encounters?
*Do we have a collective understanding of the objectives of *Project BABEL*?
*What are the inspirations for the choice of the theme of the next work?
*How to keep the creative processes alive in Brazil?
*What mechanisms/strategies/devices?

Amman, Jordan.

Form and Language in Children's Theatre for Young People

contribution by
National Centre for
Culture & Arts - Amman

The Jordan workshop was organized by the National Centre for Culture and Arts of the King Hussein Foundation and Mede Arts in collaboration with the Jordan Ministry of Culture with the support and participation of the European Cooperation Project *BABEL – the Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences*, funded by the European Commission.
The primary objectives were to create meaningful content by utilizing creative forms and language to produce quality theatre productions for young people in the four- to ten-year age group, and to make the plays accessible to children at the regional and national level.

The specific objectives were to:
- explore content, form and language in children's theatre for the four- to ten-year age group,
- explore how to use the best creative means and strategies of music, movement, dance and dialogue in children's theatre,
- study the diversity and differences of spoken vocabulary and dialects in the Arab countries and the impact of this on communication in children's theatre,
- produce high quality theatrical works that stimulate imagination, enhance knowledge and highlight the elements of surprise and fun in children, and
- secure the accessibility of plays to children in remote areas.

The workshop, which was conducted in Arabic, was led by four specialists and practitioners in children's theatre, each from a different country – Samar Galal from Egypt, Marianne Salamany from Lebanon, Muhannad Nawafleh from Jordan, and Nicola Zreineh from Palestine.
There were 16 participants consisting of actors, dancers, directors, musicians and writers who were interested in developing children's theatre. They were from Jordan as well as other Arab countries that were guests of the 29th Jordan Theatre Festival, which was happening at the same time. In the evenings the participants were able to attend events of the Jordan Theatre Festival, which was taking place at the Royal Cultural Centre.

Each workshop leader worked with the participants in their group on different topics related to children's theatre. Since the workshop leaders where from four different countries they could each offer a unique way to present children's theatre, which meant that the participants were exposed to a wide variety of approaches.

Participants learned a lot on how to tackle children's theatre for the specified age-group by using emotions rather than words. The participants thought that emotions can be universal, which makes emotion an essential tool to overcome the barrier of language in children's theatre. The language barrier was discussed as a major difficulty in children's theatre within the Arab region. Even though the mother tongue of most of the countries is Arabic, dialects differ within each country, and this creates a barrier for practitioners. However, workshop leaders, along with experts and participants, discussed ways of building coalitions and creating synergies between them so as to tackle the barrier of language in children's theatre.

A Panel Discussion on "Ways and Means to Ensure Access to Theatre for Children in Remote Areas" was delivered by Mr. Hakim Harb, which was attended by the participants and the ASSITEJ EC Committee member. Mr. Harb discussed his journey with the *Travelers Theatre*, and the best practices and lessons learned in securing the accessibility of plays to children in remote areas.

On Friday 11th November 2022, the workshop culminated in the presentation of four theatre scenes as a model of children's theatre for the four- to ten-year age group. Certificates of participation – signed by Sue Giles, ASSITEJ International president and Lina Attel, NCCA's director – were given to the 16 participants in the workshop.

Breda, Netherlands.

Group Interview: Networking, Methodology and Creativity in Theatre for Young Audiences

Wolfgang Schneider

Brigitte Dethier, Yves Thuwis Thuwis and 15 participants were sitting on the floor of the rehearsal room after the first hours of their workshop during the Breda Festival. What are their impressions about bringing these different artists together in the framework of the BABEL Project about the art of listening?

Brigitte (Germany): "The most important thing for every workshop is first building a group and giving trust that the space is open for everything – that we can trust each other and that we can risk things. And we are always on the search for individual experiences, so it is important that people feel open to tell stories from their own background. We have a very diverse group, with dancers, performers, theatre organizers, choreographer and actors. And we have different backgrounds, different education, different techniques."

Eve (Belgium): "For me the most relevant expectation is inspiration. Because you work with others, that means you have to have openness. People with different backgrounds come from different theatre cultures, actually have different tastes. And to be open, to accept that and work with that, work with the language you are not used to working with and try to build something together with all these different experiences. Let yourself be inspired by other ideas of making theatre and find something for yourself which pushes your interest."

Lina (Germany): "My first impression is that everyone seemed to be wanting to give the space to everyone, a good step into the workshop, a step in giving respect and asking for respect."

Marie (Belgium): "In our theatre group, if we make a new production, everyone has their own story as the starting point. I really like this way to see: who are these people and what does it mean for the creation process?"

Debbie (UK): "There are three standards that I think are really important. The first

one is the networking capabilities in a space like this where you can connect with different people from different parts of the world. I think that's quite important in terms of making work for children and seeing the different contexts – the different methodologies that consist in making work and the structures. That's the second one. And the third is the space of pure creativity. Coming not from scientific thinking, coming from artistic thinking, where you're feeling from your heart and your artistic work with passion, care and love, which are the sort of emotional factors that I think connect with children."

We are Europeans, but different

Eve: "I think we are all Europeans. And yes, we are different. Companies travel to nearly everywhere in Europe in the festivals. To talk about clashes is not our way to come together. Here we are all very willing to make our work, to create something together. That's our exchange."

Chiara (Italy): "We are all here because we want to be here. And we are open to new cultures, new ways of working … and curious about it also."

Marta (Denmark): "We are confronted with the topic of listening. As a choreographer and dancer I need to listen both to my own body and to those of other people in order to collaborate with them. It is necessary to step into each other's fields, it's really about listening in this meeting between us."

Kitty: "There is one common thing what we have. We want to make theatre for children and young people. The arts on stage are not a closed shop. The material is coming from the people. The important thing is what we want to tell for our audience. Being able to make stories, but never without the target group. We should learn that the audience is our partner."

Fabio (Italy): "The first thing for me is to be honest with the audience! We have to ask about the different ages, to see the things in different ways and learn with the differences among them."

Marta: "For me the audiences are our co-creators because they have a physical, a social and an artistic experience when they come to see a show. If I'm doing a show – for example, for three to six-year-olds – I will start introducing things and creating with them. In making mistakes and not showing them a final production, I will see what they react to and what I find interesting for the process on my way to the show. And that can take over half a year."

Eve: "You get so much from children and they're so open and there's warmth. On the other hand, working or performing for youngsters gives me the chance to be closer to the things that go on in my head because the themes mostly are more adult ideas. Sometimes the young audiences are against the performance or they are rude. But the conflict is the challenge for the development of the production. Use it!"

Let down the wall between actors and spectators

Debbie: "I also work with children with disabilities. Accessibility is a very key part of children's theatre and it needs to be put to the foreground in the Performing Arts and so does making work that's

inclusive to children who are on the autistic spectrum, or those who may find themselves deaf or blind. There are elements of making multisensory work that can incorporate work for neuroatypical children and young adults."

Fabio: "When we plan a project with La Barraca we're talking about the audience numbers in making productions for very small children. We often play also for youngsters, but in big audiences, so more than 200 seats. The last rows are completely full, where you put on your hoodie and can discover and can show that you don't want to have anything to do with this. And we come to the solution, it should be a good decision to have performances for this target group with 30 or 40 or 50 people in the audience. How runs the first ten minutes, can we open them up to the performance? Can we let down the wall they have built? How can we catch them? *Did I say, eh, put the Mobile away. Listen, look. And if you have questions, come back to me afterwards. We are here for you.* We could discuss these things, but give them the possibility at the beginning to put all the coolness away and say, *I am sitting here and I'm open for a story, for a dance performance*, for something like that. But I like the idea that the youngsters need the same as the small size audience."

Listening to the audience means knowing about the youngsters: the development of the mind and the development of the body. It's absolutely necessary to collaborate with psychologists and educators and it's very important to have this research before you put something on stage. Some of the workshop participants played in the classroom. And their experience: we don't go on stage, we move all the tables and chairs, and we just run through with movement and with music in first five minutes.

Martha: "When I work with youngsters, we think about their needs and search for a structure. We create a place for improvisation and we change the speed, for example."

Lena: "You will never know how children react, even if you play the play hundreds of times, you'll never know. It's different with adult audiences because they have learned a certain way to behave. Society has told them: that's how you react in a play. Children don't know that. And that's the most beautiful thing about playing to the really little ones. They don't know what they are expected to do. You can use a structure, but be open for improvisation. Are they getting really loud right now? Although last time they didn't! Do I need to get louder or do I need to get quieter? Do that on the spot and decide!"

Learning from the spirit of our audiences
Loretta (Vilnius): "I'm stage director for adults and also for youngsters. One audience reacts like that and another differently. We once made a performance from true stories as a kind of documentary. We did research about youngsters, we, the actors were listening to them. To understand more or better we had interviews with the youngsters. We were listening for one hour about gaming – one of their subjects. But it was more about the spirit, to know more, to understand how they live, what's important for them."

Nick (Denmark): "I'm a puppet maker. And I found that they should be part of the play

to make their experience. Get the puppets down. Talk to the audience, make them feel that they are our partners."

After different statements about listening to the target groups in theatre the workshop group started a discussion about the framework of Cultural Policy in the Performing Arts for Young Audiences. It was mentioned that every child in the world has the right to be accepted as a human being. And that all of them should have access to theatre. Kids should be educated to theatre, with theatre, but also in kindergarten and with a school curriculum. The question was: How many children are reached by the artistic performances? Who is excluded? Are the Performing Arts on the agenda of Cultural Policy and more important: Is theatre for children supported?

Eve: "The Minister of Culture of Flanders … I would ask him to be the Minister of Culture, not the Minister against Culture. Actually I would rather talk to the Minister of Education about the educators in schools becoming teachers of theatre. 'Mister Minister, please put more emphasis on the arts, give space and budgets to theatre as part of the daily life."

Aida (Slovenia): "And what is needed? A trust. A trust in children. I think what is needed is that the politicians spend more time going to the theatre and being there and experiencing together with the kids, because then they have a feeling of all the good things that are going on before and after and during the Performing Arts."

Fabio: "I say to the Minister, spend one day in a school before they go to the theatre to see a show. Stay with them and enter into the room in the theatre. Stay with them and… don't *see*, but just *feel* what happens."

Marie: "Policy should make more ways possible for cooperation between theatres and schools, to see who is behind the theatre, who's working there, who are the people? And that those people are professionals in interacting with children, in their own artistic way. But mostly teachers are still interested in a certain topic, they want to have a production for their curriculum."

Loretta: "We should ask Cultural Ministers to be also a Ministers of Children's Culture! It's worth investing the money for the future generation."

2024, September
Ljubljana (Slovenia)
photo Ida Nørfelt Lund

2024, November
Sabadell (Spain)
photo Søren K. Kløft

Exploring an Artistic Dictionary for TYA

2024, October
Galway (Ireland)
photo Anita Murphy

2024, April
Esbjerg (Denmark)
photo Jacob Stage

Listening.
Preconditions for Research in Cultural Education for the Performing Arts

Wolfgang Schneider

The oldest dictionary dates back to 600 BC and was found in Uruk, now known as Warka, near the ancient city of Ur in Iraq. Even back then, people were trying to document the most important knowledge in a reference work that listed words and their meanings. The Greeks called it a lexicon in ancient times, the French called it an encyclopaedia during the Enlightenment, and in Germany it was the fairy tale researchers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm who collected words and their meanings in the 19th century.

In the *BABEL Project*, certain terms came up again and again when it came to discussing and interpreting The Art of Listening. Even in a European project, with mostly common cultural roots, it is important to be precise when words play a role in the exchange of ideas and practices in theatre for young audiences. Kitty Morley has explored the term “attention”, Irma Unusic approaches the word “atmosphere”, Bruno Frabetti deals with the term “closeness”, Nicola Scherer discusses the manifestations behind the term “curiosity” and Özlem Canyürek attempts to create her own glossary on “diversity”.

Making voices heard that would otherwise be overlooked

When theatre deals with The Art of Listening, then art must also deal with education. For despite all the freedom of art, theatre is always also a place of learning, and it is about seeing and hearing as well as understanding and insight. Educational theories define three ways of doing this. In addition to the scientific-rational and ethical-moral approaches to the world, there is the aesthetic experience. Theatre is committed to precisely this sensory perception, as well as to the interpretation of patterns of meaning and symbolic interaction. It must be noted at this point that this outstanding aspect of theatre is not always taken seriously, that this idealistic approach to theatre is not always understood as a mission, and that this existential significance of theatre is not always consistently implemented in

practice. This is another reason why the *BABEL Pilot* was launched.

Theatre enables a special kind of behaviour: acting and watching, a kind of gathering. The order of the space itself becomes a theme, things and spaces are redefined. Theatre as an aesthetic phenomenon is at the same time experienced as a potentially critical practice in the sense that it is in the exceptional situation: in the interruption of the regularity of everyday life, that the rule can be seen.

There are theatres that see themselves as research theatres, which in all their projects do not treat practical experimentation and scenic representation as two separate processes, but rather as intertwined [cf. Peters, 2025]. Seen in this light, the work does not primarily aim to produce a work made by adults, but focuses on the process of performative research with the children themselves. Such projects attempt to break down the established and prevailing politics of exclusion, as known from classical theatre or the school environment. The aim is to make voices heard that would otherwise be overlooked and find no resonance by giving children a voice. This practice enables experiences that go beyond familiar experiences, which involve forms of knowledge sharing and generate different knowledge because it makes theatre tangible through participation.

Criticism of theatre as an aesthetic practice

Can theatre and children's exploration of their everyday world be critical per se? [cf. Westphal, 2025]. Current discourses on the critique of criticism and the crisis of science and art raise further questions, namely whether our age can still be described as the age of criticism at all. This form of cognition is increasingly being overshadowed by evaluation. Evaluation itself has shifted, in the sense of condemnation or accusation, contestation or rejection. In relation to the target audience, criticism of theatre is always also a criticism of theatre and its examination by young audiences.

It is not just about what is at the centre of theatre productions, it is about the margins, the unsaid, the undone and the unseen in what has been done, the unregulated and unfamiliar in the regulated and familiar, the unusual in the everyday. The margins do not embody another world, but rather that which is different from the existing world, that which is suppressed or even repressed by the respective practices of interpretation, yet which continues to exist as a possibility, tangible in desires, fears and fantasies, for example. This does not mean replacing the factual world with another world, but rather a deconstruction of the existing world that exposes its foundations and backgrounds and makes them permeable.

More exploratory theatre!

"What do we need to give children and young people access to theatre?" In a contribution to the conference "Research in Theatre for Young Audiences" in Hamburg, Gabi dan Droste, artistic director of Berlin's FELD-Theater für junges Publikum (FELD Theatre for Young Audiences, [Droste, 2025]), asks about the fundamental orientation and social mission of theatres for young audiences. Generally speaking,

this involves designing a programme, a schedule of performances that allows the target audience to attend productions, now often accompanied by theatre education. "The approach of conducting research in children's and youth theatre goes far beyond this; it changes content, forms of communication, understandings of artistic production and reception, and consequently the needs and resources in the structures of theatre companies" [Droste, 2025 source of quote and date]. It reflects a different positioning of these places in their environment.

Space is required, because research-based theatre goes beyond the black box of a theatre, "into the neighbourhood, into schools, daycare centres, retirement homes, youth centres, neighbourhood cafés, etc. Artists seek out people of all ages in the places where they live'" [Peters, 2025]. Research-based theatre opens up theatres, connects them, brings them into contact with people who might otherwise have little access to art and culture.

Time is needed, because research-based theatre is not solely aimed at producing plays that are rehearsed and performed in the sense of a programme schedule. "The work is much more process-oriented, based on the joint exchange between artists, scientists and experts in everyday life, which takes time to establish and implement" [Westphal, 2025].

Research-based practice rejects a logic of exploitation, trusting in the processes and their development with an open outcome or a (preliminary) result that could lead to a new question. It is about knowledge, skills and resources, because in research theatre, contacts with the environment must be coordinated, cultivated, maintained and constantly renegotiated. This requires a high degree of knowledge about the diverse compositions of our society, as well as basic communication skills and specialist knowledge about working in non-artistic environments outside the theatre.

And that is why theatre for young audiences needs more research if it takes The Art of Listening seriously, because listening is both an educational task and an artistic challenge. The *BABEL* Project has shown that the quality of theatre art depends not only on the aesthetic and content-related design of the production, but also on comprehensive knowledge of children and young people, the comprehensive participation opportunities for children and young people, and comprehensive knowledge of cultural education for the performing arts.

Gabi dan Droste
https://forschung-im-kjt.net/beitraege/forschung-im-kinder-und-jugendtheater-was-wir-brauchen-eine-wunschliste-aus-sicht-eines-kinder-und-jugendtheaters/ 1.9.2025]

Sibylle Peters
https://forschung-im-kjt.net/beitraege/how-to-perform-research-performative-forschungsprojekte-mit-kindern/1.9.2025]
Kristin Westphal
https://forschung-im-kjt.net/beitraege/teilhabe-und-kritik-als-aesthetische-praxis-in-theater-und-schule/1.9.2025]

2025, January
Vilnius (Lithuania)
photo Dainius Putinas

2025, March
Bologna (Italy)
photo Francesca Nerattini

Atmosphere.
Performance as Shared Creation

Irma Unušić

What do you feel?
What do you take?
What do you bring?
How do we co-create?
Which is the right order...
Let's start again.

Or is there an order anyway?

Air that meets all of us in the space
Space that is there for us
Already there
Who created air in the space?
Is air creating us?
Child looking
Performer looking
Child giving
Performer giving
Child taking
Performer taking
Child experiencing
Performer experiencing
Child feels
Performer feels
What do they create?
Atmosphere?

Thinking about the atmosphere surrounding Planet Earth – that envelope of air protecting life from the strong radiation of the sun and helping to regulate the climate – motivates us to think of it is a protective blanket that is covering us. Becoming aware of how much we can influence it, is a powerful realisation. Without this "protective blanket" life on Earth could not exist.

Can we think of atmosphere in theatre as a protective blanket and if so what does that mean?

You enter a room, and immediately you sense it – the atmosphere. But it is an atmosphere of another kind – the kind that we feel and create a feeling of while being in a space. Sometimes it feels good, perhaps comforting or inspiring, and sometimes we think, oh what kind of atmosphere is this! But, what did we bring to it? How can we co-create an atmosphere?

In the field of performing arts, atmosphere plays a significant role. Maybe not always as a main topic, but certainly creators ask themselves: "What does a child think? How do they feel? *Where* do they feel? Does the child even think about the atmosphere at all, or do they simply feel it? Does the child experience the flow of the space, moving with emotion, reacting with the body?" For a child, atmosphere might not be a concept, but rather a lived experience – a fluid feeling in the air that guides their every movement. The child doesn't analyse the atmosphere, but absorbs it completely, flowing with the energy of the moment. The exercises in Figure 1 and 2 help articulate the living experience of a particular atmosphere.

Figure 1: WHEN YOU ENTER THE ROOM WITH YOUR BODY, IN WHICH PART OF THE BODY DO YOU FEEL ATMOSPHERE? MARK IT. YOU CAN USE COLOURS TO DESCRIBE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FEELINGS.

Figure 2. IN WHICH PART OF YOUR BODY DO YOU BRING YOUR OWN ATMOSPHERE TO A SPACE? WHICH COLOUR DO YOU BRING?

These reflections lead us to think of atmosphere as an integral part of the shared experience. Who creates this atmosphere? The performers? The audience? Or does it emerge in the space between them? This question is central to the phenomenon of *listening*, which we explored deeply in the *BABEL* workshops.

BABEL's "art of listening" introduced an element of wordplay — a "*BABEL* bubble" where the dynamics of listening become a game – a dance of attention, understanding, and response. *What are we listening to in one another? How do we listen,* not just to the words spoken, but to the emotional currents beneath them? In this space, atmosphere is created by everyone involved, with each person contributing to its flow.

I create the atmosphere, and the atmosphere, in turn, creates me. This is the essence of collective experience. The "bubble" can serve as the previously mentioned protective blanket, providing space for listening and for cultivating a listening atmosphere – one that protects, supports, and nurtures within the collective.

Atmosphere in the context of performance is not just a passive environment. It is filled with imagination, curiosity, and shared energy. It is the space where empathy thrives, where we listen to each other and share not only words but feelings. In theatre, this becomes particularly crucial: the atmosphere is a medium for exploration, where we question, learn, and grow. It is an atmosphere of listening, of creating, of understanding, and sometimes of failure and success.

When children enter a theatre or any performance space, they are not merely spectators. They are active participants in the creation of atmosphere. In performing arts for young audiences, this idea is central: everyone, performers and audience, shares the responsibility for the atmosphere. It is not something created only by the performers or dictated by the

space. It is co-created by everyone and everything present.

It becomes an atmosphere of sharing, of listening, and of responding, which leads to empathy.

Empathy is not just an intellectual exercise; it is a bodily experience. It is the look in someone's eyes, the touch of a hand, the breath we share. It is the silent communication that passes between people, creating a space of understanding, of connection. In theatre this is heightened – we can sense the tension, the excitement, the discomfort, the joy of others in the room. And, in turn, we respond, influencing the atmosphere further. The exercise in Figure 3 helps to give tangible expression to the atmospheric experience of a particular space.

Figure 3: IN WHICH PART OF YOUR BODY DO YOU BRING YOUR OWN ATMOSPHERE TO A SPACE? WHICH COLOUR DO YOU BRING?

So, can we measure atmosphere in theatre? Can we quantify the intangible feelings, the shared emotional currents that run through a performance? Perhaps not in any conventional sense. But we can sense its presence. It is the responsibility of everyone in the space to ensure that the atmosphere remains vibrant, inclusive, and engaging for all. It is a shared experience, a collective creation, an exchange between individuals and their environment.

This text will end without an end. You will continue it with your presence in shared creation.

Enjoy this atmosphere! Let the atmosphere enjoys in it!

2023, August
Johannesburg (South Africa)
photo Mandisi Sindo

2023, June
Breda (Netherlands)
photo Hans Gerritsen

Attention.
Listening to the patterns of things

Kitty Morley

In the dimmed lights of the theatre, we hover at the intersection between feeling, thinking and understanding. The feeling of discovery is a welcome notion. Driven by curiosity we seek out, gather together, nurture expectations and create connective ideas. Those that work in theatre share much in common with the voraciously inquisitive, sensorially percipient spectators who come to experience the work. While adults have the opportunity to draw on existing knowledge to navigate and understand their encounters, children, especially those aged 0-6, are relatively speaking still busy mapping the world, consistently encountering the sensation of novelty and drawing on their powers of perception to make sense of things and people.

In this article I explore the notion of perception and the means by which we seize knowledge through sensory connection and participation. I raise questions about the bi-directional relationship between the performer and the spectator, and what it is to be a sensate participant in a performance of theatre for those in their early years.

How we participate in an event is determined by what we are ready to do. Our readiness is influenced by developmental capability, physical strength, current mood and, in the context of TEY, how we perceive a production's invitation to participate. Such an invitation shouldn't be seen as one grand gesture but rather a continuous set of small connective happenings, offered before, during and after a performance. In this way, spectators are offered multiple opportunities to connect to the work, given that moments of disconnection are a natural part of spectatorship. Creating a sense of connection is not solely incumbent upon the spectator, however, but rather it is part of the performer's drive to create a dynamic, empathetic dimension with spectators where mutual listening becomes possible.

The phenomenological writing of Alva Noë, echoes child development literature in suggesting: "Perception is determined by what we are ready to do... we enact our perception" (2004: 1). I like this idea of readiness because it can apply equally to everyone in the performance space. While the spectator's position can sometimes be thought of as stationary, this should not be aligned with passivity, and neither should we conclude that a child moving through the performance space necessarily equates to spectatorial engagement.

In his exploration of what he calls "Feeling Theatre", Martin Welton, draws on the work of psychologist James Gibson also asserting, "perceiving... is an active undertaking" (2012: 85). By way of collapsing a perceived binary between active participation and quieter spectatorship, I wish to approach this exploration of perception with the assertion that onstage *action* will always be met with the *activity and activation* of the spectator. Performers must be ready to engage in an intricate flow of communication between those "in the know" and those "in the dark", in which the smallest of actions or utterances from either party can create "felt" connection, or conversely disconnection. This idea is expanded in full within Morley's theory of "the taxonomy of relative stillness" (2022: 145).

In the context of performance, spectators may not always be able to articulate their feelings through the spoken word, but their somatic body position, locomotion, eye contact, non-textual vocalisations, spontaneous clapping, hand holding and proximal or distal position relative to fellow spectators reveals their "active undertaking". As Gibson suggests, "the equipment for feeling is anatomically the same as the equipment for doing" (1968: 99). Close observation and performance analysis can reveal fascinating patterns of behavioural response, and within my own research on relative stillness (2022: 151), what I have termed the "learning paradigm" goes someway to laying the foundations for future exploration into the phenomenon of spectatorial patterns of movement. Accepting that movement and cognition develop together we understand that "[t]here is no such thing as an 'inert' or 'inactive' perceiver" (Noë, 2004:17).

Talking about the process of perception shouldn't cause unease. Perception is simply the means by which we hear, see or become aware of something through our senses. It is a multi-directional process to interpret the stimuli around us. The process of perception puts us in contact with our present surroundings and is activated through the localised senses of, for instance, hearing, sight or taste, or through the broader somatosensory sensations of pressure, pain or heat. Imagine for a moment holding a smooth stone, or a new-born chick, or spilling a cup of cold water. As we conjure these feelings we are able to draw on previous experiences to imagine or relive the sensation of these actions. We get a feel for something which might bring pleasure, humour or discomfort. We relive those sensations in recalling these interactions through memory. This is as much to say, the process of perception

is a continuous one and walks hand in hand with our sense of both novelty and familiarity. We can define the sense of familiarity as feeling safe, knowing where or who to identify as a safe place; and novelty as the stimulation vital to fire new thoughts, ideas and connections. We experience familiarity and novelty almost anywhere … at home, on the bus, in the park … and we encounter a constant flow of familiar and unfamiliar stimuli. Wherever we are, encountering something unexpected can become a golden zone of opportunity to recontextualise and expand our understanding, but in the context of performance, something fundamental makes a violation of expectancy all the more valuable.

The term "expectancy violation" describes the moment of reaction when an unexpected action occurs due to a change in the prevailing stimulus. Defying the expectations of an infant can result in shock or delight especially at a time when attachment is in its infancy and children are, for instance, establishing the rules of gravity, object permanence or social conduct. Children swiftly develop expectations about their environment and notice when those expectations are violated. Attention is captured when a pattern misses a beat, when something moving comes to stillness or when, having been the norm, no one uses words to communicate.

When a change of stimulus violates a child's expectations, the sense of surprise can result in (re)connecting the spectator with the stimulus in its altered state, or in recapturing the child's attention with new stimulus after a period of habituation. The "what" and "when" of attention (re)capture is particularly complex in a theatre full of independently active children, but patterns of response do emerge. The emphasis here, particularly for the performer, is on relishing the opportunity to "read" the audience. With limited knowledge of theatre etiquette, performance conventions, content or viewing behaviours, the term "expectancy violation" helps to define key moments of the child's spectatorial journey in an environment where they are able to apply limited expectations but nevertheless still observe and respond expectantly.

To explore the notion of surprise as a function of the process of perception, we will briefly consider instances of non-verbal communication, since they are prevalent in TEY. What we see, hear or feel as spectators can be described as a performance text created from signifiers to be "read" just as naturally as we read connotations from the actions and events of everyday life. Infants and children are instinctively driven by curiosity and investigate their surroundings between the interchangeable perspectives of observation, locomotion and tactility. Being practised at switching between these perspectives may give children, as expert meaning-makers, an ease that adults at the theatre may not immediately feel.

Let's imagine the kind of violation of expectancy that seeks to pique attention as a little bit of anarchy. A glint of playfulness in the eyes of the performer will invariably draw children into a gentle

conspiracy. It becomes a magnetic connection of "I know that you know" something extra-ordinary is happening here. This might involve the ripping of paper; spilling water; lighting a drum covered in sand to reveal a small turtle burying its eggs; drawing a picture of a mischievous black cat which suddenly scampers away and cannot be found; offering each spectator a drink of water and a biscuit during the show; watching a lump of ordinary clay broken in two to reveal a cave of sparkling blue glitter; seeing a girl drop her beloved bear out of the window and going to find him in the forest; watching a bucket swinging high above the playing space creating concentric circles of sand at the feet of the audience. These are theatrical violations of expectancy. These events create surprise and invite us to reconsider what we thought we knew, encouraging curiosity, pure pleasure or perhaps most importantly onward conversation.

As an aside, it is noticeable that when recalling recent performances in order to share examples of emotionally connected non-verbal action, most of those that came to mind involved nature or natural objects. Perhaps because a child's own tactile exploration of the surrounding environment is so entwined with the natural elements, something special occurs, for us all, when we bring nature inside, to our homes or to the directed environment of the theatre. Our visual and aural rhythms of normalcy are interrupted by a familiar stimulus, rather than something alien. When we create surprise using familiarity, and in this case, the theatricality of water, sand, cloth or clay, we offer participants the opportunity to perceive and re-connect by expanding their expectations. The natural elements have long been seen as a gold standard stimulus in TEY.

Here we are considering the perceptive processes of children who have recently learned to vocalise, to talk, to wave, to clap – some may only just have learned to walk, others are quite capable of running out of the door, some seek assurance from physical parental contact, others are happy to hover at the hinterland between stage and auditorium. Some spontaneously clasp hands with kindergarten friends, others appear gripped by the performers and track their every move. Given that children between 0-6 have an underdeveloped sense of peripheral vision and lack experience in focusing on a single sound source against background noise, the theatre has huge power and potential as a place of attention. We have something unique here for the developing child. We are able to provide an exceptional experience because of the conditions in which we work. In the directed environment of the theatre, practitioners are able to choose appropriate stimuli according to the developmental age they are working with, and the atmospheres they wish to create. The palette available to artists is scenographic, musical, textural, and made for the ear, eye, hand, and heart. Rarely do artists court simplicity, though the content often has a universality, and a slower pacing of presentation helps accommodate the child's slower speeds of cognition, enabling them to better connect to the actions and events onstage. But it is *the absence of certain stimuli* that I propose

is most significant in how TEY audiences are enabled to find a dynamic connection in theatre and in a sustained way.

The most profound expectancy violation occurs because of something that is *not present*. Due to architectural design, the fundamental starting point for most performance spaces is silence and darkness. We each have to filter a polyphony of informational stimulus in domestic life, thus, precisely because there is an absence of extraneous visual or aural stimuli within these walls, the theatre can provide a place of focus by naturally taking away so much of the stimuli that young children find exhausting to process (for further reading see Morley 2023: 23-26). Here in these special conditions, seldom replicated outside of performance architecture, we consistently witness infants and children finding it possible to lean in and perceive deeply. The theory of the "horizons of infant attention" (Mapping 2023: 106) goes someway to describing why infants and young children can so deeply connect: their spectatorial stillness and silence deepens, not because someone had asked them to be quiet, but because it has been (en)abled. This doesn't just happen as a consequence of the theatre walls editing away extraneous stimuli and allowing our horizons of attention to expand, but because a performer's meticulous perception of the audience sits at the heart of the empathetic dimension they work to create.

An infant's unique sense of enculturation, individual stage of growth and subjective sense-making will shape the nexus for any spectatorial response. How performers perceive their own role as empathetic guides will influence a child's feelings of safety on entering the performance space and how each group of individuals is helped to settle as an audience. Creating an empathetic dimension between those on stage and those in the audience, regardless of the show's content, will always be a priority for the performer because each person present in the space is a participant, and through their presence, contributes to the experience of others. Just because some speak, some watch and others move, doesn't mean we aren't all thinking. Here at the theatre each participant is sitting expectantly at the intersection between feeling, thought and understanding.

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2025, April
Kolding (Denmark)
photo Søren K. Kløft

2023, June
Breda (Netherlands)
photo Hans Gerritsen

Closeness.
Interaction through collaborative artistic research

Bruno Frabetti

Theatre for Young Audiences is a matter of curiosity and persistence, both for artists and audiences. It is a matter of shared time and space. As an artist and researcher I share some observations that are useful to clarify what "The Art of Listening in TYA" means, by combining personal experiences with *BABEL's* intentions.

Premises: The need for this reflection is emphasized by an extensive and deep exploration of the different artistic languages that are widely represented within the vibrant international network of ASSITEJ International – the leading association dedicated to theatre for children and young people worldwide. Beyond my words lies a commitment to understanding and enhancing the complex processes of communication that occur within theatre and the performing arts, particularly as they relate to young audiences. Central to this vision is the unwavering belief shared by all partners that children and young people have an inherent right to *full cultural citizenship*: a right that encompasses active participation, access, and representation within the cultural sphere. In childhood and youth, diversity is not an exception – it is the very fabric of experience, the reason for inspiring Innovative Cultural Policies.

Challenges: Linguistic, emotional and cognitive differences are not obstacles to overcome, but fundamental aspects of human development. Recognising this complexity is not only an ethical responsibility, but a deliberate artistic choice, in which artists advocate their meaningful role, and, through different Arts, can support and ask for an alliance with the world of Education, simply by being in the same room. While sharing the same time dimension, it is possible to highlight the still unexplored impact of the Performing Arts, with the aim of breathing in the same rhythm. Artists, children, care-givers, and adults who live the artistic experience alongside children

inhabit a precious moment – one that should never be taken for granted. Each phase of human growth brings with it its own rhythms, languages, and expressive forms. This understanding brings with it the need for deep, sustained listening to children and young people, not only as audience members, but as individuals with unique perspectives that can shape the artistic process itself. Only through this kind of listening can we understand their timing, their codes, their ways of expressing emotion and meaning. We can get closer and only then can the artistic acts become a space of genuine and sensitive exchange.

In Theatre for Early Years, this connection is conveyed through eye-contact, but also through long silences, imperceptible sounds, sudden excitement, surprise, unexpected laughter, and stances that display the total involvement of young people's senses. While growing, they start to formulate questions and mostly want to be sure that you will come back to visit those questions. Older children, although still very young, use the art of formulating questions to perfection, and artists and educators should be ready to listen and understand properly.

Middle-age exists also for children and it's a wild time that generates foggy questions. These are questions that hide the need to understand, or sometimes that ask for attention, or they may be surreal questions. They may be questions that make it clear, between the lines, that "we're small, but we're here, can you see us?" I will try to speak as the 6-10-year-old, I once was:

> We need complex content, not to grow up faster, but to be taken seriously. Not to become adults before our time, but because we feel time deeply, we live in it, we listen to it.
>
> We don't want truths that are rushed and oversimplified. We are not looking for easy answers, but we want to keep subjects open. We want to ask questions that help us to think without fear of being wrong; that open imaginary worlds that speak *with* us, not *at* us; questions that aren't in a hurry to end with a full stop. We don't want to be entertained, we want to be involved. We don't want stories explained to us, but stories that leave us space to enter. We don't want to be spoken to like children, but like people.

Many children don't feel in a rush to grow up, they want to share, and they often remind artists of the meaning of the verb "to play", on stage and in life. This playing together in the same room can still be accepted in adolescence, but the rules evolve as the will to change the "child status" becomes a priority. But still, the need for complicity, for being understood and included, remains. Adolescents may suddenly seem allergic to questions, but they are not – it is just that the rhythm on stage, the subjects and the dialogue should be up to date. TYA artists have to be aware of this need for closeness and mutual listening within the different age groups, which are all different in terms of listening.

Years of practice in the field have taught us that children are not passive

spectators. They are curious, attentive, emotionally perceptive, and capable of responding to artistic work with depth and complexity. This recognition is a necessary condition for entering the creative space and, without it, our work risks becoming a monologue instead of a dialogue. In this dialogue artists are allowed to formulate questions, such us how is time perceived, especially the present, for the different age groups. Children, especially the very young, grow much more rapidly in one year than adults. And yet, adult time runs much faster than a child's.

Does a time of Performing Arts exist? Does it have a different frequency from chronological time? The time of life and the time of artistic experience are different. They intersect on theatrical occasions, becoming a shared space between stage and audience, which includes the waiting, before, during, and after; the closeness; and the consequent ongoing relationship, as mutual listening and presence over the show time.

"Theatre is a game of time and space. We don't create time, we interpret it," and "Theatre must be a place where time stretches, a kind of time that exists nowhere else," as Peter Brook said. Rather than trying to "tame" time, theatre seeks to explore it, to play with its possibilities. For artists, there is also a backstage time. It is the time of creation, which includes all the artistic research that comes into the creation of an artistic experience, and also the ongoing adaptation of a show, after the premiere.

How to find the right timing for actions, scene after scene... how to find the right theatrical rhythm and choices, and also the adjustments, the mistakes, the randomness. What once didn't work and now suddenly does ... it's a matter of timing. "What matters is not the duration of a scene, but its intensity. It's about time lived, not time measured," this is again Peter Brook, talking not about the quantity but the quality of experience, a concept that deeply reflects the meaning of the Art of Listening.

Artists can't stop training, they can't pretend that they are ready for it or that they know how.
They should keep on changing together with the audience, as theatre is a live experience, but they also need occasions to do it. *BABEL* has been a rich occasion, embodied in a complex structure in which festivals opened up spaces for gathering, dialogue, and exchange. These festivals serve as living, creative laboratories, where artists and young audiences meet, collaborate, and engage in shared inquiry.

At the centre of these festivals are the Multilingual Creation Groups and Artistic Training Workshops. Each is a one-week intensive residency involving 12 artists from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, working together under the guidance of artistic facilitators.

Through collaborative performance research and open workshops, these artists interact with local young audiences in meaningful, often improvisational ways. These exchanges culminate in informal presentations, snapshots of

artistic exploration that make visible the evolving creative process and allow for collective reflection on the distance between intentions and outcomes. These moments are open to children of different ages, depending on each festival's main target audience, while sharing a common idea: children are watching us – but we, too, must learn to watch them.

The works developed within *BABEL* have been shaped by experimentation and risk, but also by these three precise core directions:

- listening to the audience,
- listening to fellow artists on common grounds, such as creative workshops, and
- listening to the new generation of artists – emerging creators who bring fresh perspectives.

It is not uncommon for this kind of process to become clearer step by step, and, after facing and resolving issues, for it to generate new inspiring and replicable models. The creative process is non-linear and rich with doubt, and it is precisely this openness that allows for genuine artistic encounters. That's why I can state that *BABEL* is more than a project: it is a dynamic, evolving platform, a space for artistic research, cultural cooperation, and intergenerational dialogue. It invites us to rethink how we create; for whom we create, and why. It insists that inclusion is not a goal to be reached, but a practice to be sustained in an ongoing act of listening, of openness, of relational care.

- To listen is to include.
- To create is to question.
- To look, and be looked at, is to participate in the shared work of understanding one another.
- Through mistakes and successes, and by keeping on trying is the only way of getting closer.

Curiosity.
Subversive practices in asking and resisting

Nicola Scherer

Create like a child and edit like a scientist.
Tyler Greg Okonma

If there is one thing that brings together the artists, festival-makers, dancers, puppeteers, directors, mediators, and facilitators of the *BABEL Festivals*, it's their shared enthusiasm for *curiosity* – that bold openness to whatever steps into the moment: the unheard sound, the untried movement, the unimagined flavour. This is something children know instinctively: what seems bold or risky to some grown-ups is, to them, a survival tool. It's an openness to what they've never seen, felt, tasted or listened to. There is a certain beauty in being naïve – exploring without the anchor of past experience. It celebrates the *inbetween*, the listening towards the coming sound. It's an embrace of scratches, imperfections, the unrevealed, and the procedural in performance.

What kind of curiosity refuses to settle for routine explanations and instead *questions* everything?

Curiosity as resistance: Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault reframed curiosity not as frivolity, but as a subversive act. He saw it as "a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a fervour to grasp what is happening and what passes". Curiosity, for Foucault, "enables one to get free of oneself" – a persistent refusal of familiar frameworks. In *BABEL Festivals*, improvisation celebrating the scratchy, imperfect, unrehearsed moment is not naivety – it is resistance against neat narratives and institutional habits. It is *resistance* and *engagement.*

Curiosity as politicalexistential inquiry: Hannah Arendt

For Hannah Arendt, the willingness to ask daring questions – *thinking without a script* – is what sustains the public and democratic sphere. True curiosity means entering the public realm and refusing silence in the face of simplification. It is fundamental to collective judgment and active citizenship . Staying present with

audiences in curiosity is thus not just aesthetic – it is political.

Curiosity as performanceinvestigation: Sophie Calle

Take Sophie Calle, who, in the process of following strangers in *Suite Vénitienne* and documenting their lives, turned her artistic tools into radical acts of observation and engagement. To Calle *curiosity* serves as performative exploration with her work modelling curiosity as a performative ritual of inquiry . Likewise, *BABEL´s* artists and facilitators approach the moment like Calle – tracking sounds, movements, and emotions … attentive to what surfaces in real time.

Curiosity in the everyday made art: Marcel Duchamp

Duchamp's "readymades": everyday objects turned art by the simple act of choice, demand that we ask: *What makes this art?* His gesture primes us for wonder in all we encounter. Celebrating the procedural, the transient, and the ordinary is a Duchampian move: simple acts that provoke deep rethinking of categories, value, and creativity.

Curiosity on a global stage: Kendrick Lamar

At Super Bowl LIX, Kendrick Lamar didn't just perform – he *posed questions* to millions. His show opened with Samuel L. Jackson as Uncle Sam telling him to "play the game," only for Kendrick to defy that directive, rap a cappella, call out corporate narratives, and reference social issues – from "40 acres and a mule" to mass incarceration – all staged like a cinema of inquiry. With dancers forming and fracturing the flag, a PlayStation-inspired stage, and a theatrical Crip Walk by Serena Williams, Lamar intentionally provoked audiences to *ask*: *not just watch*. As one critic noted, he "redefined the potential of the Super Bowl halftime show … demanding full attention and active listening".[1] Lamar didn't just perform – he made *viewers ask*: What *are* we watching, and why? His set was politically layered and culturally confrontational. His performance demanded active *judgment* and attentiveness – precisely the kind of collective curiosity that Arendt and Foucault might recognize.

And when Lamar urged us to turn our TVs off at the end? That was *curiosity as action* – break the passive loop, question your own gaze.

A curiosity throughline

From Tyler's playful invitation – *create with childlike freedom, edit with scientific rigor* – through Foucault's revolutionary questioning, Arendt's public thinking, Calle's investigative presence, Duchamp's everyday provocation, and Lamar's mass-cultural interrogation, curiosity emerges as:

- **Resistance**: eroding power through surprise.
- **Engagement**: fuelling shared judgment in public life.
- **Investigation**: making art and performance into inquiry.
- **Provocation**: transforming spectacle into questions.

1 Website: https://time.com/7214228/kendrick-lamar-super-bowl-halftime-show-analysis/?utm_source=chatgpt.com. 7.7.2025.

Curiosity, then, isn't benign – it's a strategy. It challenges structures, invites shared reflection, it is creative resistance and democratic dialogue, and it ignites cultural transformation.

In essence, the *BABEL Festivals* operate on this very axiom: to remain open, curious, accountable. Their practices reflect a lineage of imaginative resistance – from philosophical critique to street-stage provocation. They invite artists *and audiences* alike to observe, question, and *together* to reimagine what's possible.

2023, January
Vilnius (Lithuania)
photo Rokas Snarskis

2025, April
Kolding (Denmark)
photo Søren K. Kløft

Diversity.
Decentring the discourse

Özlem Canyürek

Theatre is not just a site of performance; it is a site of power. Who tells the stories, who is allowed to create and who is pushed to the margins are all questions that shape the very core of the art form (hooks 2014). This glossary is inspired by years of conversations, struggles and collective dreams shared with marginalised and racialised theatre-makers and cultural practitioners. Recognising that our social positions are different, shaped by varying levels of access, privilege and the harsh realities of precarity (Butler 2004; Bhabha 2014), our lived experiences deeply inform the way we understand, respond to and enact these definitions.

By no means does this glossary seek to define diversity in rigid terms; rather, it aims to provoke thought, unsettle long-held assumptions and offer new ways of seeing. Unlike a dictionary, which fixes meanings, diversity is fluid, relational, contested and shaped by lived experiences and power dynamics. This is why I chose to create a glossary: not to prescribe meaning, but to open up spaces for reflection, critique and dialogue. Rather than setting rigid boundaries, this glossary invites constant interrogation of the language we use to describe and make sense of our world. Each entry invites a critical rethinking of concepts too often taken for granted, exposing the underlying systems that uphold exclusion and pointing to the possibilities for structural change (Ahmed 2012; Erel et al. 2016). This glossary is not simply a collection of definitions. It is a call to question established power structures, to shift perspectives from the margins to the centre (Mbembe 2017), and to listen with care and determination. This is an act of "sowing seeds", nurturing a theatre that is plural and reflective, a space where other ways of thinking and being can take root and flourish (ruangrupa 2022; Walsh 2023).

Ability: More than physical or mental capacity, ability is shaped by the constraints that society places on bodies

and minds. Who is perceived as "able" to create, lead, and contribute? Whose needs are considered standard and whose are seen as exceptions? Ability is not just a personal trait but a social construct that imposes inclusion and exclusion.

Absence: What is missing holds as much weight as what is present. Absence is rarely incidental. It is structured, imposed and sustained. Whose voices are missing? Who is absent from leadership positions, from programming, from funding decisions? Absence is not a neutral void; it is a consequence of deliberate exclusion.

Access: Not an open door, but a guarded threshold. The key? Often in the hands of a select few. Access is more than entry. It is about who sets the terms of participation. It is about redrawing boundaries and rewriting the rules of participation. Is access a privilege granted or a right withheld? Does it invite change, or does it demand inclusion?

Aesthetics: A language of power. Aesthetics decides what is perceived to be sophisticated, what is framed as "authentic" or "exotic". Whose artistic sensibilities are universalised? Who defines what is elegant, what is chaotic, what is valuable? Aesthetic judgments cannot be norms; they are shaped by histories of colonialism, exclusion, and (in)visible hierarchical traditions. What happens when we shift the gaze that determines what is "beautiful"?

Agency: The power to act, to define, to disrupt, to say no. Agency is not just about visibility. It is about control over representation, over authorship, over decision-making. It is a refusal to be reduced to a subject of someone else's gaze. Yet, for many, this power is entangled with precarious work conditions, financial instability, inadequate social security and even the lack of legal recognition, a daily battle against a system designed to limit.

Archiving: Archiving is a declaration of value. It determines which (hi)stories endure and which are forgotten. Archives are not passive; they reflect the hands that built them, the voices they magnify and the silences they enforce. Whose stories are meticulously preserved and whose are fragmented, marginalised or hidden?

Authorship: To write is to claim space. But whose words are welcomed, institutionalised, funded and canonised? Authorship is not just about storytelling; it is about legitimacy and ownership. Who can tell their own stories without mediation? What happens when authorship refuses the confines of individualism and embraces collective, embodied or community-driven practices?

Awareness: Recognition without action is a hollow gesture. Awareness that does not lead to change is a convenient illusion. Who is expected to carry the burden of awareness and who is allowed to remain oblivious? In theatre, awareness should not be a stopping point but a catalyst. Awareness means unsettling the structures that make ignorance comfortable.

Belonging: A constant negotiation. It is the tension between being invited

and feeling at home. Belonging is rarely unconditional; it often requires compliance with the rules of those in power. True belonging does not mean "fitting in": it means having the resources to reshape the space, so no one has to ask if they belong.

Canon: A hall of mirrors reflecting the same selected faces, again and again. The canon presents itself as timeless, objective, universal. But is it? Who is absent from the canon and who was never meant to be part of it? The canon is not just a collection. It is a system of validation. What happens when we reject the narrow confines of the established canon in favour of forging new measures of artistic value that honour diverse lived realities?

Care: More than kindness. Care is an ethic of responsibility, accountability and labour. It is often invisible, expected but undervalued. Who bears the weight of care in theatre and who is free to create without it? Care is political. It must be central, not as a backstage necessity but as an artistic and institutional principle.

Collaboration: Not a performance of inclusivity. Collaboration requires discomfort, negotiation and the willingness to be altered. It is not just about who is invited to the table but about questioning who built the table, who sets the agenda and whose voices genuinely shape the outcome. Collaboration should not be a token gesture but a redistribution of power.

Community: A word too often romanticised. Community is not just a group of people but a structure of interdependence. It is responsibility, reciprocity and the recognition that freedom is collective. Real community does not erase difference; it engages with it. It is not always harmonious, not always easy, but it is rooted in shared commitment, not just shared space.

Empowerment: Not something that can be given, only something that can be claimed. Empowerment is often framed as an individual achievement, but genuine empowerment is collective. It is not about learning to survive within oppressive systems but about dismantling those systems altogether. To empower is not to integrate into the existing order but to remake the terms of existence itself.

Excellence: Who defines it? Whose stories are deemed masterful? The myth of "neutral" excellence is a tool of exclusion that reinforces established hierarchies. Excellence should not be singular but plural. It should not be a barrier but an invitation to multiplicity, complexity and radical possibility. It is a living practice that demands constant renegotiation, where every creative act contributes to an ever-expanding redefinition of what is extraordinary.

Experimentation: For some, a right. For others, a risk. Experimentation is often a privilege reserved for those who do not have to justify their presence. Who is allowed to fail without consequences? Who must constantly prove their worth? What if experimentation was not a luxury but a right, accessible to all to break down

inherited constraints, not merely shift their shape?

Expertise: Who is recognised as an expert, and who remains "emerging", "alternative", or "outsider"? Expertise is not just about formal training. It is about whose knowledge is legitimised. What if lived experience, community practice, and intergenerational wisdom were valued as deeply as institutional validation?

Festival: A momentary gathering, a curated celebration of inclusion. But what happens after the lights dim? Who is showcased temporarily and who is embedded in the theatre landscape? Is the festival a playground for experimentation or does it only reinforce old power structures in new disguises? A festival should not only be a platform for visibility but a mechanism for long-term structural change.

Funding: A game of hoops and hurdles. Never impartial. Some are given wings others are left to crawl. The question is not just who gets funded but why and what kinds of stories are considered worthy of support. Funding is often framed as meritocratic, but it is always political. What if funding shifts from selective generosity to structural reparations?

Gatekeeping: Not always a locked door. Sometimes just a knowing glance, a dismissive silence, an invitation never sent. Gatekeeping is about more than rejection; it is about making sure some people never even knock. It happens in selection committees, in programming decisions, in the unspoken rules of institutions. The gatekeepers often believe they are simply upholding "quality". But whose quality?

Inclusion: Often a performance rather than a practice. Inclusion is commonly presented as a gift, a privilege given to the excluded. Inclusion should not be about making space at an existing table but about questioning who built the table in the first place. When inclusion is conditional, is it really inclusion?

Intersectionality: Not a buzzword, but a framework for understanding layered oppression. Intersectionality is not just about acknowledging difference. It is about understanding how race, gender, class, ability, and other factors shape experience in ways that cannot be separated. It is about addressing how structures of power compound exclusion. Who benefits when intersectionality is reduced to a checklist?

Knowledges: Beyond what is written, archived or certified, knowledges are embodied in lived experiences, carried in memories, conveyed through songs and spoken in silence. Some knowledges are uplifted and rewarded, while others are dismissed or actively suppressed. Who decides what counts as legitimate knowledges? Who determines whose insights will shape our shared narratives?

Language: It can be both a bridge and a barrier. It does more than communicate. It confers legitimacy, shapes identity and demarcates power. Beyond words, language shapes thought, frames discourse and determines whose voices

are louder. By critically examining how language is used in scripts, dialogue and performance, we uncover the subtle ways in which language reinforces or resists dominant narratives.

Mentorship: This is a ladder that not everyone is granted the chance to climb. While mentorship programmes promise guidance and advancement, they can also perpetuate existing hierarchies by channelling people into predetermined roles. Who is steered towards the top and who is being left on the sidelines? Is mentorship a genuine opportunity for empowerment or merely another means of sustaining the status quo?

Neutrality: The biggest lie ever. A myth that serves the powerful. Nothing in art or culture is neutral. Every decision, from programming to funding, is a political act. It is always about taking a side. The question is: whose? And what is being disguised as "objectivity"? Neutrality is an aesthetic of compliance, a refusal to name the forces that shape what is seen and unseen.

Openness: Often spoken of as an ideal yet rarely practiced in full. Openness is not passive tolerance. It demands an active willingness to let difference reshape the very fabric of the space. It is not an aesthetic choice but an ethical stance, one that challenges us to embrace disruption and uncertainty.

Othering: A subtle yet potent form of violence. To be othered is to be seen as fundamentally different, to be marginalised as perpetually "not enough". Othering is not merely about exclusion. It actively constructs an artificial divide, positioning some as the default and others as permanent anomalies.

Participation: A puzzle with missing pieces. Are you truly part of the picture or just filling the empty spaces left by someone else's design? Participation is often mistaken for power, but participation means the right to shape, not just to be present. To participate fully is to question the framework itself: who built it, who maintains it and who benefits from its limits?

Privilege: Not only about what one possesses, but also about the invisible burdens one is spared from carrying. It operates as an unspoken force, a structural advantage that allows some to bypass obstacles that others must confront daily. The challenge is not to deny its existence but to interrogate how this unearned favour is wielded. Will privilege be a shield to maintain the status quo or a tool to dismantle the very barriers that sustain it?

Process: More than a means to an end, but a site of negotiation, friction and transformation. In theatre, process is often hidden behind the polished final product, yet it is where power operates most acutely. Who gets to shape the process? Whose methods are legitimised, funded, institutionalised? Process resists linearity, embraces slowness and values collective meaning-making over extractive production.

Power-sharing: It is not just about inviting others into the room but about

questioning who built the room, who owns the keys and whether the walls should exist at all. It requires discomfort, meaning those who are used to holding power have to let go, not just symbolically, but structurally. Making space while retaining control is not enough; real change lies in redistributing decision-making, resources, authorship and influence. Power that is only "shared" in moments of visibility is not power-sharing; it is optics.

Representation: A spotlight that can illuminate or distort. Representation involves more than mere visibility. It is about who controls the narrative and how stories are constructed. Whose experiences are centred, and whose remain peripheral? Representation requires that marginalised voices are not only seen but given the power to speak for themselves, confronting the superficiality of tokenism.

Silencing: It is not always loud, but always consequential. It manifests itself in subtle forms, the polite dismissal, the selective listening, the systematic omission of certain voices. It is the quiet force that makes disagreement disappear and enforces conformity. Who benefits when some voices are muted and whose potential is lost in the process? Silencing is a deliberate strategy that shapes discourse by controlling what is said and what remains unsaid.

Solidarity: Not charity, not a favour, solidarity is a shared struggle, a commitment to standing *with* each other, not just *for* each other. It is action, not words. It is knowing that your liberation is tied to mine, that justice is not a private possession but a collective pursuit. Solidarity is uncomfortable. It asks us to listen when it is easier to speak, to step back when we are used to leading. It is not performance, not symbolic gestures, not temporary alliances formed when convenient.

Storytelling: Stories shape how we see, who we trust, what we believe is possible. Storytelling is inherently political. The question is never just "what is the story?" but "who gets to tell it?" And whose stories are erased before they are even spoken? To reclaim storytelling is to reclaim the right to name oneself beyond the narratives imposed by power.

Tokenism: Not a simple checkbox of diversity but the performative inclusion of marginalised figures designed to create an illusion of progress. It is the curated image of diversity that silences dissent and masks the deep-rooted inequities of power. Tokenism reduces voices to ornamental roles, visible yet without agency and offers a false sense of representation while leaving the systemic barriers untouched.

Universality: A story that claims to be for everyone but only speaks in one voice. What if universality was not sameness, but the ability to hold many truths at once? What if, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, universality was reimagined as the coexistence of multiple, sometimes conflicting realities?

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2023, October
Sankt Vith (Belgium)
photo Daniela Micioni

2024, March
Bologna (Italy)
photo Matteo Chiura

Reflecting on the Practice of the Project

2025, January
Vilnius (Lithuania)
photo Dainius Putinas

2025, March
Bologna (Italy)
photo Søren K. Kløft

No One Is Too Small: Artistic Vision and Citizenship in Early Years Theatre

Nicola Scherer interviews Bruno Frabetti

Nicola Scherer interviews Bruno Frabetti, artistic director of Vison Festival, Teatro La Baracca in Bologna who presents a model of theatre-making that is ethically grounded, socially engaged, and profoundly shaped by the aesthetics of presence, trust, and shared experience.

Nicola: Your colleague pointed out that there is no academic programme dedicated to making theatre for early years. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Bruno: I feel the same. It›s a shared situation across many countries. There are many practitioners in early years theatre, but no academic institutions focusing specifically on it. In Italy – and I think this is true in many parts of the world – it's rare to find even general theatre academies that offer anything practical. They tend to be heavily theoretical, focused on reading, history, and analysis. But nothing that brings you into the room to work practically with this specific age group.

In contrast, in Romania, where my partner is from and trained, the system is much more hands-on. There, a week might consist of one day of discussion and five days of practical exploration. That creates a completely different relationship to theatre – and especially to theatre for early years, which is so rooted in presence and physical interaction.

This kind of work isn't about instructing or addressing young audiences directly. You can't ask them questions in the usual way. You need to find other channels to connect with them – through atmosphere, rhythm, tone, presence. It's about constantly learning from them. With time, you gather memories – things that worked, things that didn't – and you build from there. But it never becomes formulaic.

Nicola: What would your vision of an ideal education programme for this field look like?

Bruno: For me, it›s about creating spaces where people can meet, explore, and then connect those spaces internationally. We need more places like that – places where training, performance, and shared experience can happen side by side. These shouldn't only be in Bologna or Italy, but across Europe and beyond. And yes, they should link with universities, because the more we acknowledge the artistic and educational value of this field, the more it can grow.

The training should be for artists, certainly – but also for educators and caregivers. If they are aware of how powerful art can be, they can deepen their daily relationships with children, not by performing, but by being present. In Bologna, we believe this is possible and necessary.

And then, of course, festivals. They are moments of concentrated energy where people who dedicate their lives to young audiences can gather, experience new work, and carry new ideas home.

Nicola: In Germany, a sociologist recently pointed out how children are increasingly undervalued in our aging society. Would you say this is also true in Italy?

Bruno: Yes, absolutely – but it manifests differently. Culture plays a role. Here, children are not usually seen as spectators. Someone brings them to the theatre; they don't go on their own. So, the assumption is that they don't have personal taste or agency. But if you meet them often enough, you see that they absolutely do. They know what they like, they build their own preferences. But they also come to the theatre with their life experience.

I remember a friend who brought his young child to the theatre. The child was excited, but mostly he wanted to be with his father. That's what mattered most that day – not the show. And that's valid. Children aren't just spectators – they're people. We invite parents to stay with them, to physically be there and feel the show with them. That presence matters. It shows the children they are important.

Nicola: Speaking of presence: I often feel that adults struggle with being truly present, perhaps because of digital distractions or fear of vulnerability. Can theatre help adults reconnect with presence?

Bruno: Absolutely. Being present is hard for many adults. Theatre can create a space where they are invited – not forced – to reconnect. But this presence has to be shared. Children can sense whether you are with them or just watching them. That's why we work not only with children but also with their educators and caregivers. Everyone involved is learning to be present in different ways.

Nicola: If you could look ten years into the future, how would you like the *Visioni Festival* to be remembered?

Bruno: When a leadership changes, you have two options: completely reinvent everything or carry the heritage forward with innovation. We chose the second. We want people to feel that *Visioni* has a soul, a spirit that remains consistent even as each edition is different.

Each year should feel distinct – never copy-pasted. Audiences should encounter

a mix of shows from around the world, because while children have similar needs, their cultural contexts are different. And artists see the world differently, depending on where they're from. *Visioni* should be a place where all of that can meet, not just to showcase, but to research, explore, and take risks – without having to impress adults. It's a space for children, first and foremost.

Nicola: And how do current political and cultural challenges affect this vision?

Bruno: This year, one topic has been particularly important: sustainability. Not just ecological, but cultural and institutional. It's increasingly hard to get long-term support from institutions. That's why our protocol with the municipality of Bologna matters so much. It's a formal agreement that ensures access and continuity for early years theatre, even when administrations change.

It's about creating a culture where people expect and value early years theatre. If you remove it, they ask: "Why?" That's powerful. We're now sharing this protocol with other cities in Italy and even internationally.

Nicola: Do you still work in public space?

Bruno: Yes, especially in the summer. But it has become more complicated. You need permits, you face restrictions – on privacy, safety, logistics. Still, we believe public space is important. But rules matter. They aren't the enemy of art; they provide structure. If we understand the rules, we can push their boundaries more effectively.

Nicola: Does *Visioni* support emerging artists as well?

Bruno: Yes. Programmes like *Artisti nei Nidi* support under-35 artists by inviting them into educational settings to develop new work. We also run *ZeroTre Italia*, which encourages companies unfamiliar with early years audiences to experiment with work for them. These initiatives are supported by pedagogical observers who act as bridges between artists and educational communities.

We also had 37 educators take the stage in a performance this year. They're not artists – but they chose to be part of it. That's the key: creating spaces where participation is a choice, not an obligation.

Nicola: And how do you manage this financially?

Bruno: It's a constant balancing act. We receive funding from the European Union, regional and national cultural bodies, and the municipality. But we must apply again every few years – and we never know what the result will be. Our internal costs are high because we have a large, year-round team. But we believe in paying people, even if not enough, and in supporting families – offering free access to shows and workshops for staff families, for example.

We also work to ensure that women and men are treated equally, not as categories but as equals. In my ideal world, there is no bambina or bambino – just bambini. Children are citizens, not gendered targets.

Nicola: That brings us full circle. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Bruno Frabetti: Just this: research is not only about inventing something new. It's about collective memory. Gathering and preserving experiences so others can build on them. My background is in philosophy, and I believe philosophy should be for everyone – even children. If we take the original meaning of aesthetics – from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning perception through the senses – it becomes clear: this is what children do naturally. They learn through experience. Theatre, at its best, supports that.

Reflections from the Artists of the BABEL Project

Nicola Scherer

Within the *BABEL Project* – a transcultural platform for research and creation in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) – the concept embodied in the phrase: "The Art of Listening" emerged not only as a theme but as a practice. Artists, educators, and cultural practitioners from across Europe came together to explore what it means to truly listen – on stage, in rehearsal, and in relationship with young audiences. This article presents their reflections.

Listening as the core of theatre

For many *BABEL* artists, listening is not merely a skill but the *foundation of artistic work*.

Michael Nielsson (Denmark) describes listening as "the most essential component of theatre." He sees it as the primary craft through which performers build connection with their audiences – especially children, who respond not with politeness, but with raw honesty. For Nielsson, mastering this craft is fundamental: "Without listening, there is no real engagement. It's how we stay responsive, how we evolve with our audience."

Listening as a relationship and a life practice

Jacopo Desiato (Italy) deepens this idea by connecting listening to artistic identity and responsibility:

> Art is a relationship – with oneself, others, and the world around us. And for me, relationship is life. Therefore, by transitive property, art is life.
> In life – whether artistic, professional, or private – the ability to listen is fundamental. It becomes an essential key for every responsible and aware artist.
> A necessary tool both on stage and during rehearsals, two moments that are deeply intertwined.

Jacopo Desiato's reflection reminds us that listening is not just about perceiving others, but about participating in a shared

space with awareness and humility. It is how artists earn the trust of their audience – and of one another.

Listening across generations

In a more sociocultural frame, **Miha Ahr** from Puppet Theatre Ljubljana (Slovenia) speaks to the way listening shapes intergenerational encounters in theatre. He observes that children's reception of a show often mirrors the behaviour of their caregivers:

> If parents are engaged and attentive, children follow. If adults disengage, children often disconnect too. That's why it's so important that theatre for young audiences speaks to both generations. The listening needs to happen on both sides.

This insight positions listening not only as an artistic task but as a *social bridge* – a way of crafting experiences that resonate across age, culture, and expectation.

Embodied listening and performer presence

Lucía Valero, a dancer with De Stilte (The Netherlands), offers a perspective grounded in physical performance and non-verbal connection:

> "The Art of Listening in TYA," for me, means being fully present with the audience – especially children – and paying attention to how they react and feel. It influences my approach to rehearsals by creating a space where everyone can contribute and respond to each other. On stage, listening is key because it strengthens the connection between the performers and the audience, making the experience more alive and responsive.

Lucía Valero emphasizes that listening is not limited to speech – it is also kinetic, emotional, and intuitive. Through movement and attention, artists can create an *atmosphere of receptivity* that allows audiences to enter the work on their own terms.

Listening as inclusion and artistic ethics

In his essay "The Art of Getting Closer," Italian artist and researcher **Bruno Frabetti** explores listening through the lens of inclusion and artistic care. Drawing from his work within the *BABEL Project*, he writes:

> Each phase of human growth brings with it its own rhythms, languages, and expressive forms. This understanding brings with it the need for deep, sustained listening—to children and young people, not only as audience members, but as individuals with unique perspectives that can shape the artistic process itself.

Bruno Frabetti argues that without this level of attentiveness, artists risk reducing their work to monologue rather than dialogue:

> Children are not passive spectators. They are curious, attentive, emotionally perceptive, and capable of responding to artistic work with depth and complexity. This recognition is a necessary condition for entering the creative

> space. Without it, our work risks becoming a monologue instead of a dialogue.

He also highlights how the *BABEL* residencies promoted listening as a *structural and ethical practice:*

> The works developed within *BABEL* have been shaped by experimentation and risk, but also three precise core directions:
> a) listening to the audience;
> b) listening to fellow artists on common grounds, such as creative workshops;
> c) listening to the new generation of artists – emerging creators who bring fresh perspectives.

Bruno Frabetti concludes with a powerful distillation:

> It insists that inclusion is not a goal to be reached, but a practice to be sustained – an ongoing act of listening, of openness, of relational care. To listen is to include. To create is to question. To look, and be looked at, is to participate in the shared work of understanding one another.

Conclusion: Listening as artistic practice and political act

Across these reflections, one truth emerges clearly: in Theatre for Young Audiences, *listening is creation.* It is how artists shape work that resonates across languages, ages, and cultures. It is how they remain open to surprise, critique, emotion – and how they earn the trust of their young spectators.

In the transcultural context of *BABEL*, "The Art of Listening" has become more than a metaphor. It is a methodology, a value system, and an act of care – towards the audience, towards each other, and towards the art itself. It is a principle that sustains artistic excellence and ethical responsibility – and in transcultural contexts such as *BABEL*, it becomes a powerful tool for empathy, collaboration, and co-creation.

Discussion with the European Artists Who Led the Workshops

facilitated by
Nicola Scherer,
Wolfgang Schneider

Discussion during Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Galway, Ireland, October 2024.

Wolfgang Schneider: Welcome, and thank you all for being here. Together with my colleague Nicola Scherer, we've been invited to observe and research the artistic processes within the *BABEL Project*, particularly during this workshop in Galway. Our focus is on artistic directorship and how it connects to the broader theme of the project "The Art of Listening". Listening not only to children as audience members, but also to one another as artists.

Let's begin with expectations for this workshop.

Greg (UK): "I think for me, especially at the beginning of a workshop like this, it's important to focus on *doing* – on exercises, on movement, on games – more than talking. That's where the group starts to connect."

Alex (UK): "I always say – first goal: *no injuries*! [laughs] … but seriously, safety isn't just about avoiding bumps and bruises. It's about creating a space where people feel emotionally safe, where they can be honest, and vulnerable, and not feel judged. That takes time. It's not automatic just because we're all here.

"I try to make people laugh a bit – even with bad jokes – because humour opens up the room. And I have to learn everyone's name, which is part of that commitment to making people visible."

Nicola: "So you are saying safety includes more than the physical."

Alex: "Absolutely. The emotional side is vital. Participants need to feel that they're genuinely invited into the room – not just present, but welcome. We don't take for granted that people feel safe just because they showed up. It's part of our job to build that slowly and consciously."

Reflections

Eva (Lithuania): "In Lithuania, we still face many difficulties in children's theatre. There's very little support – financial or institutional – for this field. Artists who create for children are often not seen as 'serious' artists. But we *are*. And we deserve to be paid and valued the same as those who work for adult audiences.

"I try to be a voice for that. I keep repeating: Theatre for early years is *not* lesser and it's *not* easier. In fact, it requires incredible sensitivity and skill. That's why international projects like this matter so much – they help us prove that this work is meaningful and should be supported."

Michael (Denmark): "In Denmark, the quality of children's theatre is really high. The level of interaction and care in how we engage kids is excellent. But – and this is a big but – it's almost invisible politically.

"Children's theatre often happens in schools and community venues, so while it's *present*, it's not *seen*. It's not on the same cultural radar as adult theatre. And politically, that means we're overlooked. That's frustrating. But I see this workshop as a way to share strategies, to ask: *How do others tackle similar challenges?*"

Mika (Slovenia): "I come from puppet theatre, and we work mainly with very young children. One thing I've been thinking about recently is the role of hostesses – people who help manage the audience during shows.

"They're not really trained for this, but they end up playing a crucial part – making sure kids stay seated or escorting them to the bathroom. Sometimes their role overlaps with what the performers are doing, especially in interactive shows. And there can be small clashes – nothing big, but it's a question of how we think about support roles in performance.

"I didn't come here with any big agenda. I just wanted to refresh my own senses and work with new people. Being in a different collective helps shift my perspective."

Leonie (Greece): "In Greece, the main problem is funding. We've made two performances for children with my company, but it's so hard to get proper support to create something with real care and quality.

"Yes, you can do it fast and cheap, but that's not what our young audiences deserve. I'm here for the push – to feel the creative energy of others, and to find strength to keep fighting for better standards in our country."

Jacopo (Italy): "These days, fewer teenagers want to start theatre or dance courses. That really worries me. They're just so overloaded – with screens, social media, constant noise. It's very hard to reach them.

"My question is: *How do I speak to them?* How do I find a way to engage that cuts through all that background noise? I hope that by seeing how others work – how they reach young people – I can find new ways to do the same."

Artistic questions

Yorgos (Greece): "I'm a musician. And one question I always carry is: *Do I need to make music differently when it's for children?* How

different should it be from music for adults? And if it's different – how?

"I also wrestle with how much technology to use. I play classical guitar, but I use effects and electronics too. That's freeing – but also a burden when it comes to touring or connecting directly with audiences. So, there's always that tension: simplicity versus complexity, authenticity versus enhancement."

Lucia (Spain):
"I've only recently started working in dance for children – just two months into an internship. What I've noticed is that everything needs to be very clear – every movement, every rhythm.

"I still have so much to learn, and that's why I'm grateful to be here."

Mary Ann (Ireland): "My question is about *respect*. How do we show respect throughout the entire creative process – from concept to rehearsal to performance? And how do we avoid making assumptions about what kids will understand – or not?

"I worry that those assumptions can limit the work. That we'll make something *smaller* than what the children are actually capable of meeting emotionally or intellectually."

Karen (Belgium): "Theatre is about dialogue and connection. I think children teach us a lot. When I teach, I often feel like I'm learning more from them than they do from me. So in theatre, too, I believe we should listen deeply and allow their imagination to shape the work – not just deliver something *to* them, but *with* them."

Alex (UK): "One question I brought into this process is: *What do we consider appropriate to present to children – and how does that differ across cultures?* We're from countries that are similar but still very different in values. And that affects what kinds of stories we feel we can – or should – tell. I think that's an ongoing and rich conversation."

On working together
Wolfgang Schneider: "Greg and Alex, do you see ensemble work as a core aim of the workshop?"

Greg (UK): "Yes. That's really the singular focus – to bring the group together as an ensemble. To see and hear each other."

Alex (UK): "We do exercises, build trust, and ultimately, even if the final showing is rough, it will be something created *together*. That's the goal."

Mary (Spain): "Everything today is hybrid – dance, theatre, music all blend. I find that mix very exciting. When we bring those different elements and perspectives together, we can create something really powerful."

Karen (Belgium): "In Belgium, we don't really have ensembles anymore. Even in the big city theatres, actors work freelance from project to project. There's a big focus on individual artistic identity – on what makes you unique. But I think that focus can become limiting. It's good to be reminded that your identity can grow *with* others. You're not just a brand – you're a collaborator."

A Conversation with Aislinn Ó hEocha

Nicola Scherer,
Wolfgang Schneider

Wolfgang Schneider: Let's begin with the audience – particularly the younger children. In the context of early childhood, we often speak of the artistic idea behind performances and about listening to the audience. I'd like to start with your approach to listening to your audience – how do you involve children in your work at the *Baboró International Arts Festival*? Are you working directly with them, or through partners like teachers and artists?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: *Baboró* was founded on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in Ireland in 1995. That framework has been foundational for us since the festival began in 1997. The right of every child to participate in cultural life and the arts – and to have their voice heard – guides all of our decisions.

One example of how we actively listen to our audience is the Children's Panel, which we established four years ago. The panel allows children to participate in artistic decisions and learn how the festival works. They attend performances, take part in workshops, meet the team, and even contributed to redesigning our birdie logo. Their perspectives influence how we run the organization. It's a learning process, but one we're deeply committed to.

Beyond the panel, artists who work with or for children are generally very attuned to their audience. Children are honest critics – they won't politely clap if they're bored. That's why we always encourage artists to test their work during development. Even though we don't produce shows ourselves, we support this process.

We're also increasingly mindful of accessibility. For instance, this year's show *Grace* includes embedded audio description, captioning, and touch tours. Every performance is a relaxed one. We've also developed a strong focus on work for children with additional needs. These performances are often very small in scale – sometimes only six or eight children

in the audience – but the impact can be profound.

Wolfgang Schneider: You wrote in last year's festival brochure about the 2023–2027 strategy to reflect Ireland's diversity. Is that a new objective, or something you've observed evolving over time?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: Ireland has changed dramatically in one generation. It was once a country of emigration, but now it's one of immigration. When I was growing up, everyone around me looked the same. That's no longer the case, yet many public roles – teachers, actors, police – don't reflect today's diverse population. For a child to see someone like themselves on stage is so important.

We're working to address this through programming and through artist support programmes. We're reaching out to under-represented communities, encouraging them to become part of this sector.

Wolfgang Schneider: Can you tell us more about those artist support programmes?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: Certainly. One programme is called *GROW: Artist Support Program*, which runs year-round and partly overlaps with the festival. One element is *Festival Mentoring*, where emerging or transitioning artists are paired with two experienced mentors during the festival. It's an immersive experience – seeing work, attending industry events, engaging in critical discussion. Importantly, we've simplified the application process – artists can apply by video, audio, or a short written form – because we want it to be accessible.

Another initiative is our residency on Inis Oírr, a small Irish-speaking island. It's particularly aimed at artists developing work in Irish, which is also part of representing the full spectrum of Irish identity.

Wolfgang Schneider: And how is all this funded?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: Our core budget is roughly 50 per cent from the Arts Council. Box office contributes under 10 per cent because we keep tickets affordable – around €5.50 for schools, free for teachers – and many events are free. The rest comes from sponsors, grants, and partnerships. For example, the Inis Oírr residency is a partnership with the island's arts centre.

Wolfgang Schneider: Is the mentoring programme national or international?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: It's currently national, limited to artists based in Ireland due to funding constraints.

Nicola Scherer: How do you discover the shows that best engage your audiences?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: Some are developed through long-term partnerships. For example, *Antarctica* is a commission we supported over two and a half years through a separate fund (the Toy Show Appeal). Others, like *The Unexpected Gift* by Barrowland Ballet or *Fields of Tender* by Dalia Flanders, have versions for both general audiences and children with additional needs.

What I find especially powerful are performances where the audience is

part of the piece – where children are not simply watching, but being seen and addressed individually. These kinds of immersive experiences are particularly impactful for children with diverse needs.

Nicola Scherer: You've spoken a lot about inclusion and responsiveness. But as artistic director, you also have curatorial freedom. What are your artistic criteria?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: At the end of the day, it's a subjective role. But I try to offer what I love in a festival myself – variety, depth, surprise. I want children to develop their tastes, to see different styles, genres, and formats. We also have to consider practicalities: the venues we have, the age groups, language, and cultural context.

Ireland can be quite conservative about what's "suitable" for children's theatre. Teachers and parents are gatekeepers. So, we need to strike a balance between pushing boundaries and maintaining trust. We aim to challenge, but not alienate.

Nicola Scherer: Do you prefer working with teachers or parents?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: That's a tricky question! Both are crucial. But the school audience is our most important one. Moving the festival to October, during the school term, was a deliberate choice to make access more democratic. Not all families have the time, money, or interest to bring their children. Schools level that playing field.

Parents and teachers can sometimes be more conservative than the children themselves. But I believe festivals should take artistic risks. They allow us to explore difficult topics – migration, climate change, death – in a safe, empathetic way. Theatre can open up conversations that might not otherwise happen at home or in school.

Nicola Scherer: Finally, what has your experience been with the *BABEL Project* so far?

Aislinn Ó hEocha: We're very happy to be part of it. *Baboró* has participated in several Creative Europe projects, and *BABEL* has created valuable mobility opportunities for artists. Irish participants have had positive experiences.

That said, there have been challenges – especially around expectations. Some artists hoped for more practical skill-building, while the project was more focused on dialogue and exchange. Communication around this could have been clearer.

One big issue is that not all participating artists are being paid. We've managed to secure Arts Council funding to pay Irish artists, but that's not the case everywhere. In a Creative Europe project, that should be built into the budget from the start. We can't ask people to give up a week of work unpaid. That creates inequity and resentment.

Still, overall, it's been a positive and enriching experience for us.

The Artists Must Be in Contact with the Audience!

Wolfgang Schneider
interviews
Brigitte Dethier

At the centre of the BABEL programme, in parallel with the framework of the festivals, there were two workshops for artists. One was directed by Brigitte Dethier, workshop leader of the BABEL Project, who is the artistic and managing director of several theatre companies and festivals from Germany. She is interviewed here by Wolfgang Schneider.

Wolfgang: The project is titled "The Art of Listening". What is it about and what was your personal approach to this subject?

Brigitte: The topic has many perspectives. The most significant … is how we, as creators of theatre for children and young people, listen to our young audience. This is the essence of this genre: nothing is produced or put on stage without considering how it will be received by the audience.

What do we present on stage for children and young people? How do we listen to our audience? Whether it's through prior research on a topic or in participatory moments … but also starting from the moment they enter the theatre. How do we welcome our audience? How do we prepare them for what we have produced for them? How do we involve them? How open can we be when reactions come during a performance? How open is a work of art produced on stage to allow for reactions, which I believe is always necessary. A completely closed, hermetic work does not apply here; the artists must be in contact with the audience.

Wolfgang: What does it mean "listening" among the artists and how can you be attentive to each other on stage?

Brigitte: Our clear focus in the workshop was on body language. You often see in theatre that artists don't listen to each other. They don't think about what they are doing. How do I support the focus that someone has? And how attentive am I to action, placement, spoken words among each other, so that a performance gains in quality?

We have a workshop group of twelve people from European countries. We have a diversity of languages, we have a diversity of cultures. And how do we listen to each other? And even if we can't always communicate perfectly linguistically, how many forms of communication are there, how much sensitivity is needed, and how much richness does it offer?

Wolfgang: "The Art of Listening" is not just about listening, it's also about art … about theatre art. What was the artistic aspect that you worked on and developed?

Brigitte: There has been a significant change within these three-and-a-half years, within these workshops. Initially, Yves Thuwis (Thuwis) and I went there with the concept of saying, how do we develop a workshop? Our collaboration, which has experienced several productions, is that we collect material from our participants on stage. We set a theme, and we work associatively on this theme. There are movement tasks, and there are also small improvisational acting tasks. For example, on the theme of respect. What experiences do you have with respect? How much respect is there in your countries towards people? Where is respect violated? It's a broad concept. The improvisation that we notice is successful and can be incorporated into a small arc, we take with us.

Wolfgang: Improvisation is a practical method to bring the actors together, but what about the role of the directors in making decisions on stage?

Brigitte: The time of the masterclasses is over! We are dealing with artists who have already done their own work, who are already artists in their countries, sometimes at the beginning of their careers, but not always. We might also talk about how diverse the starting positions of the workshop participants were, which made it extremely difficult for us as workshop leaders. What were the expectations? But still, my conclusion would be, it is actually important to help these people find their voice. It is important to connect them.

It took a while for me to realize, and I say this openly, yes, it also had something to do with my own artistic personality. They are not interested in what I do. And this means a great generosity from the workshop leader. … I think it was often more about a moderation role, but still being alert enough to give the next artistic impulse when it blooms … to sort it out, to make decisions together with them, to talk content. Yes, that was a big learning process for me.

Wolfgang: The project was initiated by ASSITEJ. Maybe you can emphasize again the aspect that seems important to you, that this Theatre Association also has an impact in the field of the Performing Arts for Young Audiences with such projects.

Brigitte: It is really an incredible gift of the network. You get such a vitamin injection when you join a network and realize you are not alone. You work locally for your audience in different countries under different conditions. Aha, in England, they do it this way! In Lithuania, it's like this! The artistic gatherings … how strengthened you are because you know there is a

community working towards the same goals but with different paths. And that enriches and opens your perspective.

Being able to travel, being able to watch performances, being able to exchange with artists from other countries is, for me, a fundamental driving force of my work in general. I wouldn't have done my years and continued without the international aspect, because, looking beyond your own horizon, being able to develop visions together, and what really works for the participants in these workshops in *BABEL*, is another intensive way, a possibility of the network.

Festivals need space for exchange!
Wolfgang: The project was mainly supported by theatre festivals. What role do such events play for the art and the audience, and what are your experiences of what such gatherings can be useful for?

Brigitte: What I have noticed is that it was important to have our workshop hours, but it was just as important that we tried to select performances in advance that we would attend together. Having artistic talks afterwards with the creators, if possible, and being able to take [in] the whole festival context with the group. … we then also talked in the group about the performances, what worked there, how was the audience listened to, how did the artists listen to each other. Is it a festival where you have meeting points and spaces for exchange, or do you run to different places and see performances and don't really feel separated and alone at a festival?

Wolfgang: The project not only served the objectives of these theatre creators in different locations for a specific target group but also the further development of content, aesthetics, and mediation. What transformation processes were discussed in connection with the workshop?

Brigitte: To be honest, I never really had this aspect on my radar. I would say that since the workshop participants came from very different work areas, and depending on the country, there is no separation between someone who does theatre mediation, someone who performs on stage, and someone who directs. Sometimes, everything is done together.

Continue with freedom of diversity in culture!
Wolfgang: "The Art of Listening" means listening and also getting to know and ideally involving children and young people. What stories are told and how?

Brigitte: When I see child protection programmes in some countries where certain things can no longer be done or told on stage, there is still this credo, and it is something we have always advocated, even when we looked at the stories of other participants, that almost anything can be told. The question is always *how*. I don't really shy away from any topic if I feel it is relevant to children and young people, to the audience I choose to tell it to.

There are almost no taboos. But there are taboos for me as a theatre maker in how I tell something and with how much I leave my audience. We can talk about gender issues, homosexuality, death, and so on. But there is also the backward movement, the backlash we are currently experiencing.

For example, when two men or two women kiss on stage, certain parts of the audience do not want to see it for religious reasons, and there are real difficulties. What do I show from my cultural understanding? But for the diverse culture I live in, how can I continue to tell the freedoms we have fought for in our countries, such as feminism, without excluding parts of the audience?

Wolfgang: The question that naturally arises is whether the festivals, in *BABEL*, for example, have provided any ideas for the future of theatre festivals, in terms of evaluating potentials and demands on structures? What, if you can say so, has the *BABEL Project* made possible as a learning process?

Brigitte: I would say I am really looking forward to our organisational evaluation. I always asked if we would still do it because I find it extremely important. As I said, who has what information and under what rules do we meet in a room? And that has to do with the head organisation and everything. I think there is still a lot to improve. Whether they can say if their festival organisation or structure has been influenced by what the *BABEL* group gave them.

And it was so different. You noticed that there are a few creators who are there, who look at it, who accompany it, who have an interest in this project, who work on this project, and there are those who sit at the table and once said yes. And I don't know if it is monetary why they said yes or if it is about being international and putting a different spotlight on their own festival. But where nothing comes from. And I think those who were curious and participated and also exchanged with us workshop leaders, how it is going ... really great.

Support the *BABEL Project* as a Next Generation programme!

Wolfgang: You said at the beginning that the time of the masterclass is over. And that is an element that always plays a role in festivals or accompanies festivals. The question is whether there are insights from this workshop, not only to offer further workshops, but also for the festival.

Brigitte: I would say what they can get there is great. And I would also highly value the term workshop leader as moderator because I have noticed that when they only exchange ideas, it might not lead to much. I think it needs the thinkers in the background who say the weekly plan looks like this. We do this, we do that, open the units as much as possible for all currents, but then filter again and say, how do we proceed? So, it is the accompanied form, I would strongly advocate for that. And I would actually say *BABEL* was a big Next Generation programme and it is extremely important that it continues.

Wolfgang: The project was implicitly shaped by a cultural-political framework, also concerning public funding. How could it be otherwise? What positions for Cultural Policy can you formulate as particularly relevant during the workshop?

Brigitte: First of all networking on an international level is necessary for the further development of the arts. That means bringing together artistic signatures and creating something from

them... [this] is, I think, a contemporary way of working. Important is the self-awareness of theatre creators, which always serves the further development of content, aesthetics, and mediation. It could be that we must continue such Next Generation programmes to facilitate young people's entry into professional life. It is also a multi-generational programme and the possibility of joint learning, which I find is much too rare in today's times. There is always such a confrontation of positions, and I love the togetherness. And the amazement that we can listen to every age, learning from each other.

No One Owes You Anything Here: A Conversation on Theatre, Listening, and Collaboration

Nicola Scherer
interviews
Alex Byrne and Greg Hall

This interview, conducted by Nicola Scherer with theatre makers Alex Byrne and Greg Hall, took place within the broader framework of the *BABEL Project*. It exemplifies "the art of listening" as both a philosophical stance and a practical methodology – one that resists fixed identities and prioritizes relational, responsive modes of working in theatre for young audiences.

The conversation focuses on processes of co-creation, group dynamics, and the ethics of collaboration in devising performance for and with diverse participants. Byrne and Hall offer deep insights into contemporary workshop practice in multilingual, transcultural environments.

They reflect on their methodology of fostering presence and equality from the outset – deliberately avoiding traditional self-presentations in favour of immediate, embodied engagement. Their approach emphasizes shared action as a foundation for trust, particularly in international groups where participants differ in age, experience, cultural background, and language. Key strategies include non-verbal and multilingual exercises, organic leadership structures, and the intentional construction of a "safe space" that normalizes risk, failure, and non-hierarchical exchange.

The interview also addresses the tensions between process and product, the evolving role of the facilitator, and the challenges of maintaining openness while guiding towards a final public sharing. Byrne and Hall reflect critically on time management, the integration of music and narrative, and the ethical implications of representation within heterogeneous groups. They speak candidly about navigating expectations, the politics of inclusion, and the realities of artistic leadership.

Nicola: You've just begun working with a new group here in Bologna. What is

important to you when starting out with a group?

Alex: The first thing I try to do is learn everyone's name. But more importantly, I want us to meet each other in an active working environment. It's not a matter of, "Hi, I'm this person, and this is what I do." I try to create a situation in which participants present themselves to each other through a process – by doing something together. That might start with an exercise and lead to a task, which then develops into an exchange around a story, a subject, or a shared idea. The goal in those first steps is for people to meet not just intellectually or verbally, but physically, playfully – through exploration. That's how I like to begin.

Greg: Yes, that's really the key. It doesn't start with formal introductions like, "This is who I am, and here's what I've done." That kind of information comes later, more organically. Maybe you say your name, a little bit about where you're from – but then you're straight into exercises. Everyone is equal in that moment. Of course, Alex is leading, but we're all entering together, side by side. That flattens the hierarchy and helps strip away preconceptions. You don't walk in knowing who's who, and in many cases, neither do we.

Nicola: Is there anything that tends to disrupt that kind of atmosphere – like time pressure, for instance?

Alex: Not really. I think one of the first things we do is mark a kind of threshold – stepping into the room. That includes exercises that help establish safety. For example, we try to normalize the idea that failure is part of the process, and not something to fear. Everyone has to step out of their everyday lives – out of their connections, their concerns, whatever conversation they had that morning that annoyed them – and be fully in the room. The challenge is to present yourself in a way that's honest and open. And there are plenty of obstacles – internal roles, self-images, social tensions – but we work to move past that. The core is to meet each other through action. That's how people begin to listen to one another, and that's what we try to make possible.

Greg: There's always a certain amount of emotional baggage or life stuff that people carry in with them. That's just human. But I think the way Alex sets the tone helps to make that step into the room feel meaningful – without making a big deal of it. It's something that happens through doing, not announcing.

Nicola: Across the various *BABEL* groups you've worked with, have there been situations where someone holds back – where you feel that someone is still performing, not quite present with the others?

Greg: Yes, once or twice. There was one person, in one group, who seemed resistant. In a couple of workshops, we had conversations where expectations didn't quite align with what was being offered. Sometimes people arrive expecting something different, and that can create tension. But that's rare. This current group has been really open and generous from the start – ready to participate without friction or resistance.

Alex: Yes, we did have one group that felt more challenging. It ended well, but there was a certain confusion in the beginning – people wondering why they were there or what they were supposed to find. And I understand that. If you're already a working artist – if you've got a steady job in a theatre – and someone says, "You should go take this workshop," it can be difficult. You come into the room with a strong sense of who you are, and sometimes with a subtle expectation of special treatment.

But that's not how it works here. In our room, we start from scratch. No matter your experience, the only thing that counts is what you contribute in the present moment. In this workshop, we have someone who is 71 and has decades of experience, and someone else who is 26 and just starting out. They come from entirely different places, but here, they meet as equals. That's one of the essential principles – for me, and for the theatre. You earn your place through the work you do together, not your résumé.

Nicola: You mentioned the exercise of saying your name in the simplest way possible. Why is that significant?

Alex: Because it reveals so much. At the start of the workshop, I ask everyone to say their name simply – to look at everyone in the room and say, "I'm Alex," as plainly and truthfully as possible. It sounds easy, but it's surprisingly difficult. I do it first. And then everyone follows, one by one. You begin to see so much: who is guarded, who is comfortable, who is trained to perform – even in something that's supposed to be simple.

Sometimes very trained people can be the most open, because they have a grounded relationship to their body and presence. And sometimes people who work behind the scenes – administrators, producers – have a very different kind of presence. The exercise allows those differences to emerge. And every time I do it, I think, "Oh, this is hard." But I ask everyone to do it anyway. Because it matters.

Greg: You can really see it. The people who are just slightly "off" in that moment – performing, or overcompensating – they reveal something, even if they don't mean to. And the ones who can do it plainly often bring something very powerful into the room.

Nicola: One of the actors at the *Vision Festival* pointed out that there's no formal academic path to doing theatre for young audiences – that it's something you learn in the field. Would you say that this way of working – of establishing presence – is especially relevant to theatre for young audiences? Or is it just fundamental for any kind of theatre?

Alex: For me, it's fundamental. It wouldn't matter who the audience is – this approach would be the same. Of course, if you were directing *Hamlet* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, you might approach the first day differently. But in the kind of work I do – leading workshops or devising new pieces – it's always the same. Whatever the age of the audience, this is how I start.

Greg: Yes, absolutely. It›s about how we meet each other, how we communicate, how we create together. That doesn't change based on the audience.

Nicola: With such a diverse group, coming from different cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages, does that linguistic diversity help the process of communication in some ways? Or does it hold you back?

Alex: I wouldn't say it holds us back. I try to design exercises and structures that don't rely on shared language. Some of them are deliberately non-verbal, while others actively explore the language differences within the group. In some cases, those differences become part of the material itself – an element we use to build story, atmosphere, or character. So I would say there are two approaches: one is working non-verbally in structured ways, and the other is embracing and incorporating linguistic differences as creative material. These are distinct modes of working, and I probably wouldn't use both in a single-language context. But here, they are essential.

Greg: And many of those non-verbal exercises would work just as well in a monolingual context – say, with a group of English speakers or a Japanese ensemble. They're about communication and presence, not about language per se. But yes, some of the storytelling [happens] across languages – that are very particular to this kind of multilingual workshop.

Nicola: Yesterday, you worked up to the point of creating a song together. Several things were happening at once on different levels. How do you think about time and pacing in your workshops?

Alex: Yesterday afternoon felt very messy. I'd outlined a plan to you beforehand, which I then completely abandoned. That often happens. I might lay out a framework and then improvise entirely depending on the energy in the room.

Greg: Yes, it did stretch out in unexpected directions. Especially when teaching music in a large group, it can start to feel fractured. Some participants are more confident singers or more comfortable stepping into those moments. So I become aware of that divide. But it was also necessary – we had to go through the process of translating the words, singing them, and working across all the languages. That just takes time. Some people aren't in focus during that stretch, but you have to follow it through.

Alex: I actually quite like that mess. Yesterday, I did find myself thinking, "Maybe four fewer languages would've been nice." But at the same time, I felt very responsible. I wanted every version to be heard and acknowledged in that moment. Even if we don't use all of them later, everyone had to feel included. I wasn't going to postpone anything. That moment had to happen, then and there.

Greg: Yes, I agree completely.

Alex: We've done a lot of structured exercises, with a clear rhythm and flow. But then you have an afternoon like that – people writing lyrics on bits of paper on the floor, hunting for pens, rehearsing on the side. And I think that's fine. It's part of the work. I dislike when anyone in the room isn't actively working. I want everyone to be engaged – even if they're working privately. And yesterday, yes, it was chaotic, but it also reflected the complexity of what we're

doing: a kind of "*BABEL* madness." Seven languages being sung simultaneously, and we were getting all of them wrong – but somehow that was okay. Everyone seemed to accept it.

The only real crisis I had was with the Irish version – that one really challenged me culturally. But otherwise, I thought it was a productive use of time. We've had moments like that before – where everyone ends the day completely exhausted.

Greg: There's something about working with music that tends to drain people more than they expect. Even just an hour of singing can be more demanding than a full day of physical work. I think it draws on different energy, different muscles – especially for people who aren't used to performing musically.

Alex: Yes, and music can feel more unforgiving. In theatre, there's room to be loose. But in music, you're either in key or you're not. You either hit the note or you don't. That level of precision can be stressful. Of course, I allow for some looseness – it's music for theatre, after all. But yes, there's a clarity to it that can be difficult.

Greg: Even just scanning the words properly – making them fit the rhythm – that can trip people up. And any mistakes are more obvious.

Alex: Exactly. But I always work with narrative and music. It's what I do when I make a show. I don't have another methodology to offer – only this one. So that's what I bring to the workshop, limited though it may be.

Greg: And in a show, you'd usually have fewer people – maybe six actors. Here, we've got twelve. So it's simply a bigger group to manage when it comes to things like timing, rehearsing songs, or coordinating movements.

Alex: Yes, and in this first week, I feel a strong imperative to make sure that everyone is seen, heard, and has a moment when their work is in focus. In one of the earlier groups, I think I didn't manage that well. I became deeply engaged with a few stories and ended up neglecting others. Some possibilities went unexplored, and I regret that.

Nicola: Does your initial perception of the group change as the workshop progresses? Do you reflect and recalibrate your approach based on how the participants respond?

Alex: Yes, definitely. We generate a lot of material – many stories, themes, and potential paths. Sometimes we ask, "Have we really seen this person? Do we need to look more closely at what they bring?" There's also a curatorial layer: when we prepare for the final presentation, we ask, "Should this person be at the centre?" Everyone has a place in the workshop, but not everyone must carry the same weight in a performance.

We work with people from very different backgrounds – some are seasoned performers, others are composers, writers, administrators. You have to be careful not to overextend anyone. In the workshop, you ask everything of them. But when crafting a public presentation, you consider what makes sense for each person – and also,

perhaps, what will communicate effectively to an audience.

Nicola: And who is that audience? Are you thinking of the young audience? Of educators, parents, or colleagues? When does the audience become part of your thought process?

Alex: In the workshop phase I try to focus entirely on the process and leave the outcome as late as possible. But of course, when you work in theatre, the audience is always somewhere in your mind. I think I just contradicted myself – but that's part of it.

What's been interesting in these workshops is that the participants are also the audience. We've encouraged them to reflect on each other's work constantly – not just as artists, but as spectators. They're asked to share what stayed with them, what moved them, what was missing. That conversation is always present, and it's demanding. But it strengthens the process.

Greg: And when someone performs something – a story, a fragment, a scene – we talk about it. Not just what they did, but how they did it. What was effective, what landed. It prepares them to consider the real audience, whoever that may be. But for now, *we're* the audience.

Nicola: The structure of the presentation at the end – is that something you decide, or is it shaped with the participants? There are other possible formats, of course: digital, participatory, site-specific. Do you discuss those options, or is it understood that this is the way the project works?

Alex: To some extent, the format is a given – it's one of the deliverables of the project. There needs to be some kind of sharing. But within that, there's room for interpretation. This project is about listening, about crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries, and for me, that translates into live work with an audience in the room.

So yes, I decide the basic structure, but the details are shaped together. Today, for example, we had a discussion about what we might present. Earlier, in the first workshop, that conversation was more open because we were still discovering the format. Now, after several editions, we know what works and what doesn't.

Greg: The first time, we didn't know what the final sharing would look like. But after that, a pattern emerged. Now we usually say: after the first week, we'll share some exercises and stories. After the second week, we shape it more like a show. That structure helps, especially when time is limited.

Alex: Still, I wonder: am I leading them too much? Suggesting things I already know will work? Perhaps. But that also reflects the trust that's built over time. There's a tension there – between the ideal of equality and the practical role of directing. Ultimately, I carry the responsibility for the form. But I try to hold that lightly and transparently.

Nicola: But it's clear that you and Greg remain the leaders of the process, even as you create space for others to step forward.

Alex: Yes, and part of leadership is being

able to catch the group when needed, to hold them and carry them.

Greg: And if they trust us – and they do – then they'll follow. If there were more friction, more doubt, perhaps they'd push back. But they don't, because they feel held.

Nicola: A few days ago over breakfast, you mentioned learning something – but you couldn't recall exactly what it was. What do you think you've learned across these workshops?

Alex: Perhaps it's a clearer sense of what's possible – what can be achieved with a group like this. But I'm also careful not to turn the workshop into a collection of polished tricks. I want people to explore and reveal something of themselves. That's always the aim.

There's also something to be said for the innocence of doing it the first time – the naivety, the energy. The more you know, the more jaded you can become. So maybe the learning is about keeping that openness while deepening the process.

Nicola: Or maybe it's also about unlearning?

Alex: Yes, that too.

Greg: One thing we've added along the way is this multilingual song. That wasn't part of the first two workshops. We invented it recently, and it's become a beautiful anchor.

Alex: Yes, and we've started incorporating more music earlier in the process. In the beginning it was more abstract – music came later. But now we introduce it sooner. It helps unlock things.

Greg: And of course, teaching together is its own learning curve. We'd worked together before, but not like this. Teaching side by side requires a different rhythm.

Alex: Often, it's just Greg reminding me what we did the last time!

Nicola: Final question: how do the external influences – watching shows together, or the different political and economic contexts participants come from -– affect the workshop?

Greg: In one of the groups, we ended up discussing the shows quite deliberately – just ten minutes each morning. It wasn't planned, but it became part of the rhythm. Other groups didn't have that same structure, often because of scheduling or the specific group dynamic.

Alex: I haven't made a structured space in this group for show discussions, but we've seen a lot together. And informally, there's been constant exchange – at meals, in hallways, waiting in line. That's essential. The fact that we're at a festival, not isolated in a rehearsal space, adds richness. It surrounds the workshop with other artists, other practices, other questions.

The Children in Theatre are so Thankful

Wolfgang Schneider interviews Lali Morris

Barboro is an international children's arts festival, well known on the ASSITEJ calendar.

Wolfgang Schneider: After your time in Chicago as a drama teacher, you spent 14 years successfully programming and building an international reputation for the *Barboro Festival.* You were a firm advocate of writer Philip Pullman's philosophy that children "need to go to theatre as they need to run about in the fresh air". What was the starting point of your engagement in Galway?

Lali Morris: Patricia Forde had gone to other countries and seen the work that they do in theatre for young audiences. And she thought, we are way behind in Ireland. It's old fashioned, it looks like pantomime. Our idea was to bring artists from other countries and work with them to develop the skills. We started within the framework of the *Galway Arts Festival*, then a group of women took it out of that and made our own festival.

At Baboro we wanted to reach the children who are in school, who may not have parents that take them to the theatre. My experience during my time in the United States was very helpful. First of all we organized free buses for children to come up. I started to write proposals to teachers and said, would you be interested in this? But even the teachers didn't know how to deal with theatre. I was asked to work with the children as a teacher, just to see how they perform, how they react to performances.

Wolfgang: What did you expect when you were looking around at other festivals? What were your criteria for the selection of shows and companies?

Lali: I wanted to see first the differences and the similarities that might exist in Europe, and I just wanted to see the level of work because I had worked with very good companies in the States. We want to have the best shows from the festivals in Denmark, in Bologna and in Nuremberg.

On one hand I wasn't worried about the children not knowing how to respond, on the other hand I wanted to first see what they responded to, the Irish children.

And I found lovely music. Kids are born loving to hear music and so I brought in a couple of companies using instruments. Any company that had some element of live music ... was great to bring them in. The children are so thankful, sitting on the edge of their seats, clapping their hands and jumping with the rhythm.

And I also went and worked with the classes, talking to the teachers, to help them understand what was going on before they went out and had a coffee. And I created a little book to inform them about storytelling, dramaturgy and aesthetics, at least to become part of that experience.

Small size as a vision of the future

Wolfgang: The next step of your directorship for the festival was to look for performances for the very young. Why did you change the focus to early childhood?

Lali: We have lots of babies in Ireland, and I thought, oh, that's beautiful, and the first production was a dance piece. Another new experience. It was for children who are too young to come with the school, so let's have something for them. And then we started bringing in a few shows that would be part of the festival. And there was also a change in the audience: theatre with families, parents and children doing something together. Sometimes it was a kind of participation theatre. That was very popular and the families loved it.

Wolfgang: You were one of the founders of the European network "Small size", and became an active part in the exchange. How was it developing your artistic work in *Baboro*?

Lali: The Italian company *La Baracca – Testoni Ragazzi* has done great work for around fifty years. And the festival in Bologna, *Visioni di futuro, Visioni di Teatro...*, was always inspiring, giving us real visions for our work. I was introduced to dance companies, to projects for kindergarten kids, to seminars with pedagogues and to conferences about theatre production for early childhood. I could see how the audiences were responding to the performances, and they weren't all the same. They were very different.

Wolfgang: What is the secret behind the idea of "the art of listening"?

Lali: When I go to the schools before the festival arrives and I introduce a show that I would like to bring to them, we talk about it and I say, *do you have any questions*? It doesn't take long for me to teach them to respect what they are watching. I really never had a problem with them listening. I talk also to the teacher, and I say, you're very fortunate to have these beautiful shows that we want to bring, and if you really don't want to come [to where we are], we can bring the show to your school. But they all wanted to come in. It was the idea to honour and respect the artists that were performing. And one other thing is very important for me, that they have to trust the companies to do their work with a responsible attitude, knowing about the target groups, using artistic experiences, communicating with the audiences.

2025, March
Bologna (Italy)
photo Francesca Nerattini

2025, April
Kolding (Denmark)
photo Søren K. Kløft

Supporting the Future of Theatre Festivals for Young Audiences

2024, October
Galway (Ireland)
photo Anita Murphy

2024, March
Bologna (Italy)
photo Matteo Chiura

International theatre festivals as cultural policy actors: The case of BABEL Festivals

Nicola Scherer

International theatre festivals have evolved into significant cultural policy actors by shaping artistic narratives, influencing socio-political discourse, and fostering global artistic exchange. This article explores the curatorial strategies and socio-political impact of international performing arts festivals, particularly within the *BABEL Festival* network. Using examples such as *Bibu Festival* (Sweden), *Pesta Boneka* (Indonesia), and *Baboró International Arts Festival for Children* (Ireland), this study highlights the role of theatre festivals in cultural diplomacy, audience development, and social inclusion.

Theatre festivals function as temporary cultural hubs, serving as platforms for artistic innovation and cultural diplomacy. Unlike most traditional theatre institutions, festivals transcend national boundaries, enabling diverse artistic expressions to challenge dominant narratives and promote transnational collaboration. The *BABEL Festivals*, a network of performing arts festivals for young audiences, exemplify this transformative potential by curating performances that address themes of migration, diversity, and cultural exchange.

Curating as a cultural policy strategy

The selection and presentation of performances shape public discourse, reinforcing or challenging dominant cultural and political ideologies. As highlighted in the *Bibu Festival*, curatorial decisions influence the representation of diverse communities. The *Bibu Festival's* 2024 seminar on "Diversity and Inclusion in Performing Arts"[1] underscored the lack of representation of minority ethnic backgrounds in Nordic arts, emphasizing the need for policy reforms to enhance cultural accessibility.

1 Website: https://bibu.se/en/diversity-and-inclusion-performing-arts-children-and-young-people-within-nordic-context, 10.3.2025.

The *Lutke Festival* in Slovenia integrates contemporary puppetry with socio-political themes, demonstrating how artistic curation can serve as a medium for political engagement. According to festival dramaturg Benjamin Zajc: "[A]rt is faced with the decision of whether to wrap its message in optimism or to remind us that it may already be too late for solutions."[2] This statement highlights the festival's role in reflecting global anxieties while fostering critical discourse.

Cultural diplomacy and transnational networks

BABEL Festivals contribute to cultural diplomacy by facilitating artistic exchange and dialogue across nations. The *Pesta Boneka Festival* in Indonesia, initiated by Papermoon Puppet Theatre, has established a network of international puppetry artists, promoting Indonesian shadow theatre as a global cultural asset.[3] With participation from over 25 countries, *Pesta Boneka* exemplifies how festivals cultivate transnational artistic communities, reinforcing soft power dynamics through cultural engagement. Furthermore, the *Baboró International Arts Festival for Children* in Ireland emphasizes the importance of listening to young audiences. The festival's Children's Panel actively participates in shaping artistic programming, ensuring that performances resonate with diverse cultural experiences. Festival director Aislinn Ó hEocha notes: "Artists who work with children are attuned to their audience; children are honest critics who engage only when a performance holds their attention."[4] This participatory approach not only fosters cultural inclusivity but also aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by advocating for children's cultural rights.

Audience engagement and social inclusion

One of the defining aspects of *BABEL Festivals* is their commitment to audience engagement and social inclusion. The *Cradle of Creativity Festival* in South Africa integrates performances that address socio-political issues, such as gender equality and post-colonial identity, while engaging young audiences through interactive theatre formats. This approach aligns with the festival's mission to "build a legacy of diversity, creativity, and opportunity,"[5] reflecting the transformative potential of the performing arts.

Similarly, the *Baboró Festival* incorporates accessibility measures, such as relaxed performances and audio descriptions to accommodate children with additional needs. "The impact of such performances on children who might never experience theatre otherwise is profound,"[6] Ó hEocha asserts. These initiatives highlight how festivals can serve as agents of social change by dismantling barriers to cultural participation.

2 Lutke Festival Program Book, P. 6.
3 Pestaboneka festival, 2024
4 Interview with Festival Director Ó hEocha, A., 2023.
5 Cradle of Creativity. 2023.
6 Interview with Festival Director Ó hEocha, A., 2023.

Crisis response and political engagement

Festivals often respond to contemporary global crises, using theatre as a tool for activism and advocacy. The *Paidea Festival* in Brazil, for example, facilitated an international youth congress, "Urgent Interactions," which brought together young artists from Africa, Europe, and Latin America to discuss pressing socio-political challenges.[7] Such initiatives reinforce the role of theatre festivals as laboratories for cultural policy, where artistic expressions intersect with urgent political realities.

Moreover, the *LUTKE Festival* in Slovenia addressed the resurgence of right-wing ideologies in Europe through its closing performance, directly confronting political extremism. Artistic Director Marko Bulc remarked, "We live in a world where peace has become a curse word; through theatre, we can reclaim dialogue and resist division".[8] This illustrates how festivals function as platforms for political engagement, countering oppressive narratives through artistic expression.

International theatre festivals, particularly those within the *BABEL* network, exemplify the evolving role of cultural policy actors in a globalized world. By curating performances that challenge socio-political norms, fostering transnational artistic collaborations, and advocating for cultural accessibility, these festivals transcend the notion of theatre as mere entertainment to become sites of cultural resistance and innovation. As contemporary societies grapple with crises of identity, migration, and inequality, theatre festivals continue to shape artistic and political landscapes, reaffirming their significance as dynamic cultural policy actors.

International theatre festivals function as **active cultural policy players** by shaping artistic narratives, influencing political discourse, and promoting cultural diplomacy. Unlike traditional theatre institutions, festivals operate as **temporary cultural hubs**, bringing together diverse artistic expressions and fostering transnational collaborations.

Their role as cultural policy actors is defined by:

- **Agenda setting:** Through curatorial decisions, festivals highlight certain social and political themes, influencing public debate.
- **Mediating between art and politics:** Festivals provide a bridge between artistic innovation and policymaking, advocating for cultural funding and policy reforms.
- **Creating transnational networks:** They facilitate artistic exchange, allowing global artistic trends to circulate beyond national borders.
- **Cultural resistance and innovation:** Festivals challenge dominant narratives and power structures by amplifying marginalized voices and experimental art forms.

Ultimately, international theatre festivals serve as **laboratories for cultural policy**, continuously evolving

7 Paideia Festival, 2022.
8 Lutke Festival Program Book, P. 7.

to reflect shifting political and artistic landscapes. Furthermore. international theatre festivals function as **cultural policy actors** by shaping artistic and political narratives, fostering global artistic exchange, and addressing societal challenges.

Key dimensions include:

- **Cultural diplomacy and global discourse:** Festivals serve as platforms for international cultural exchange, allowing artists from different regions to engage in dialogue on pressing global issues. They influence political and social narratives by curating performances that address migration, postcolonialism, gender, and digitalization.
- **Curating as a cultural policy strategy:** The selection and presentation of performances shape public discourse, reinforcing or challenging dominant cultural and political ideologies. Curators act as mediators between artists, policymakers, and audiences, determining the thematic and political focus of festivals.
- **Support for emerging artists and new narratives:** Many festivals prioritize emerging talents, offering residencies, networking opportunities, and international exposure. They provide a space for alternative storytelling that might not be visible in mainstream theatre circuits.
- **Audience engagement and social inclusion:** Festivals contribute to cultural accessibility by engaging diverse audiences and breaking barriers between elite and popular culture. They experiment with immersive and participatory formats to involve local communities in artistic experiences.
- **Crisis response and political engagement:** Festivals often respond to contemporary global crises (e.g., refugee movements, nationalism, climate change) by integrating them into their programming. They serve as platforms for activism and critical discourse on the role of the arts in society.
- **Institutional and financial structures:** Festivals operate within complex funding frameworks, balancing public subsidies, private sponsorships, and international partnerships. European festivals, in particular, benefit from extensive cultural funding, which shapes power dynamics in the global theatre landscape.

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Listening as Advocacy.
Legacy and Invitation of BABEL Project

Wolfgang Schneider,
Nicola Scherer

The *BABEL Project* closes with the recognition that its most important legacy is neither a single model nor a definitive method, but an attitude: the art of listening. Across four years of festivals, workshops, interviews, and research, listening has emerged as the practice that connects the diverse actors and perspectives involved. Listening is not a metaphor, but a concrete cultural practice: one that transforms audiences, reshapes artistic creation, influences cultural policy, and grounds research.

The performing arts develop school and extracurricular programmes for children, young people, and families. In doing so, children's and youth theatre, in all its artistic diversity and thematic breadth, has become an important part of the theatre landscape in Europe. Performances in drama, dance, music, and puppet theatre for young audiences, as well as performances and theatre in public spaces, are created in the independent and institutionalized performing arts.

The *BABEL Project* has shown that festivals in particular can contribute to the exchange of content and aesthetics within the various children's and youth theatre landscapes in Europe.

Professional performing arts for young audiences are cultural education per se. Artistic work with and by children and young people takes place in professional contexts as well as in amateur and school theatre. Both complement and inspire each other. Educational programmes, dance and theatre pedagogy, and projects in theatre classes at schools expand the work of theatres and create access for children, young people, and families. Children's and youth theatre fulfils an educational mandate. It is not enough to present children and young people with simple material. It is not enough to reduce complex issues to the lowest common denominator in simple language and simple acting styles with the simplest stage sets. They need serious, complex material. Education is a form of

appropriating the world, and therefore a theatre for young audiences must focus on their perspective.

The *BABEL Project* has shown that young theatregoers can train skills that can be a basic prerequisite for acquiring knowledge: namely, the ability to decipher the world as it is perceived in its current state. Theatre is a medium of signs. As the 14 festivals of the *BABEL Project* have shown, when done well, theatre can teach us to decode codes and interpret symbols. And this form of abstract thinking is a key skill that young people urgently need for their future viability.

Theatre is the extraordinary event that makes it possible to turn everything that otherwise applies upside down, to suspend the usual laws. This refers to a completely different quality from that which we usually associate with the concept of learning, which is supposed to produce a certain mastery of contexts, experiences, and objects of knowledge, provide orientation and overview, and enable us to reflectively evaluate what we have learned and relate it to the respective contexts. In children's and youth theatre, the focus is, in the best case, on aesthetic ambiguity, staging, in the best case, an overlapping sensory delight, and creating, in the best case, a space for experience that unleashes playfulness. Children's and youth theatre can complement school education as an extracurricular learning avenue. Much of what human beings have to communicate and need to communicate to each other in order to build stable social structures cannot be captured in rational language alone. From this, it follows that non-verbal communication skills must also be developed to the fullest extent possible, and these too require practice and refinement.

From the beginning, *BABEL* challenged the marginalization of theatre for children and young people. Instead of being treated as a pedagogical by-product or a secondary art form, theatre for young audiences revealed itself as cultural education per se. It combines aesthetics, pedagogy, and politics into one practice, and it demonstrates how art can train perception, cultivate judgment, and open spaces of imagination. To take this seriously means understanding that the future of cultural policy depends on how societies listen to their youngest citizens.

Listening to young audiences

Listening begins with children and young audiences themselves. The research shows that they are not passive consumers but active interlocutors, shaping performances through their presence, their responses, and their silences. The art of listening here means acknowledging their dignity, treating them as equal partners in the shared pursuit of truth.

This entails recognizing their existential realities: experiences of loss, migration, injustice, and resilience. Rather than sparing children from difficult truths, listening means offering them profound stories that do not trivialize their world. *BABEL* confirmed that children want to be taken seriously in the theatre. They want to be listened to not only when they speak,

but also when they laugh, fall silent, or shift uncomfortably. Their right to culture, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, becomes meaningful only when listening is embedded in artistic practice.

Theatre for children and young people can contribute to the development of differentiated perception and judgment as well as to the formation of artistic taste by providing sensory visual material with its multidimensional, poetic images. The significance attached to the story and its dramatic presentation alone can contribute to this. There is really only one binding requirement for plays or productions for children's and youth theatre, and that is for profound stories, i.e., stories that go to the abyss, that do not trivialize, appease, or gloss over conflicts, but rather confront children and young people with their existential significance. The lives of young people are not a walk through a paradise garden. They can be hell – and if you don't want to deceive children and young people in the theatre, then hell belongs on stage.

The *BABEL Project* has shown that children's and youth theatre, if it does not shy away from the harshness of social reality, can make meaningful use of the artistic space of the theatre as a projection surface for engaging with the world. Children and young people do not want to be spared in the theatre. They only feel that they are being taken seriously when their own borderline experiences become visible and tangible in the play on stage. This is also an experience that those involved in the project have had time and again, understanding "The Art of Listening" as a mandate for truthfulness.

Participation models, such as children's advisory panels, demonstrate that listening can directly influence curatorial choices. At the same time, *BABEL* emphasized that participation is not about tokenistic gestures, nor about turning children into decision-makers in adult ways. It is about creating spaces of recognition and care, where their perspectives matter and their voices shape the artistic encounter.

Listening by artists and curators

When we talk about art, we don't usually talk about children; when we talk about young people, we don't usually talk about art. However, children and young people have a right to art and culture, as agreed by the signatory states in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means full participation in cultural and artistic life and the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural and artistic activities. Children's and youth theatre is only one area of cultural policy, which in the best sense can also be children's and youth policy as well as education policy. Cultural education for children and young people requires special support. Creating, maintaining, and expanding infrastructure for the performing arts, especially for children and young people in local communities, means strengthening and revitalizing cultural diversity as a source of nourishment for all.

For artists and curators, listening takes multiple forms. Curators listen not only to

artistic proposals, but also to audiences, to social contexts, and to the broader cultural moment. Artists listen to the subtleties of children's responses, to silence as much as to words, and to the atmospheres generated in performance. The interviews conducted within the project revealed that many artistic leaders regard listening as their primary methodology: listening to the fragility of the child, to the border between childhood and adulthood, and to the aesthetic intensity that emerges in encounters across generations. Listening becomes an artistic stance: it means holding open ambiguity, welcoming difference, and cultivating proximity.

Theatrical art thrives on mutuality, on mutual perception, on mutual exchange. Theatrical art needs the actor and the audience. Theatrical art is always an encounter, an encounter of the senses, of reflection, of the search for meaning. And that is why theatrical art is always cultural education. Educational theories always define three paths to knowledge. In addition to the scientific-rational and ethical-moral approaches to the world, there is the aesthetic experience, the very sensory perception to which theatre is committed, as well as the interpretation of patterns of meaning and symbolic interaction. It must also be noted that this outstanding aspect of theatre is not always taken seriously, that this idealistic approach to theatre is not always understood as a mission, and that this existential significance of theatre is not always consistently implemented in practice.

The *BABEL Project* has shown that the festival organizers and workshop participants believe the time is ripe for theatre that is aimed specifically at young audiences. There have never been better reasons, never more cause for the necessity of children's and youth theatre in educational and cultural policy debates. The youngest and young audiences must become the focus of every theatre, according to the artists involved in the project. And not just at festive times, but all year round; not just for the box office, not just for the statistics. For children and young people here and now! In the spirit of the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who once proclaimed: "It has always been one of the most important tasks of art to create a demand for which the time has not yet come." And that is why, in the many discussions held as part of the project, the artists also formulated the following indispensable characteristics for further research on "The Art of Listening":

Listening in festivals as cultural policy
Festivals emerged in *BABEL* as crucial mediators of listening. They are not only sites of presentation but also laboratories of cultural policy. Festivals listen by creating platforms for diverse voices, by amplifying perspectives that are otherwise silenced, and by setting agendas on urgent social issues such as migration, climate change, or inequality.

They also embody transcultural listening. International collaborations bring together artists and audiences from different backgrounds, enacting solidarity and empathy across borders. At the same

time, *BABEL* revealed the challenges of unequal funding, postcolonial legacies, and mobility barriers. Listening here means not ignoring these structural inequalities but naming them and working against them.

The rhetoric of EU cultural projects – participation, inclusion, diversity – can easily risk becoming hollow. *BABEL* demonstrates how this rhetoric gains substance when understood as listening. The project produced concrete outcomes: festivals shared methodologies for observation and interview; children's voices were integrated into programming; research was disseminated in ten languages; and a digital archive now preserves testimonies, performances, and reflections. These are not abstract ideals but tangible practices of listening that will extend into the future.

Listening by researchers and students
Research itself became a form of listening. Observations, interviews, and case studies were designed not to impose interpretations but to hear and document multiple perspectives. Researchers learned to listen not only to what was said but also to what was left unsaid, to contradictions, and to the tensions between different actors.

Students involved in the project reflected on their role as co-learners, realizing that listening is also about questioning one's own assumptions. In this way, listening became a pedagogical act, fostering humility and openness in academic practice. The creation of the *BABEL Archive* further extends this research-based listening: it ensures that future scholars and practitioners will have access to the voices and experiences collected, allowing listening to continue across time.

Listening as democratic and ethical practice
The art of listening also emerged as an ethical and democratic stance. In meetings and reports, partners emphasized the importance of doubts, divergences, and utopias. Not every disagreement had to be resolved; not every contradiction needed to be smoothed over. Listening meant allowing space for plurality, for conflict, and for visions of futures not yet realized.

This democratic listening resists the temptation of certainty. It acknowledges that the richness of international collaboration lies in its tensions as well as its agreements. It affirms that theatre for young audiences is not a tool to produce consensus, but a space where diverse perspectives can coexist.

Festivals in the *BABEL Project*: events or intervention?

What is a festival? When three theatres meet in one place? When a theatre stages three performances? There are no standards, there are no rules, there are no obligations! The term "festival" is not protected; anyone can redefine it. Everyone has experiences, and it is these experiences that determine the construct. Festivals are increasingly shaping the cultural landscape, not only, but especially in Europe. Theatre is promoted through festivals everywhere, but occasionally the phenomenon is also criticised as

"festivalitis", and it must therefore be permissible to question, to discuss sense and nonsense, to put festivals to the test.

The *BABEL Project* has deliberately opted for a network of theatre festivals in various European countries. All 14 festivals see themselves as partners in the project, all have a long tradition and are embedded in the different theatre landscapes of the countries in which they were established. What the project has in common is its focus on the target group of children and young people and the associated mission of presenting, examining and reflecting on "The Art of Listening". Based on the mission statement, after reviewing the programmes and numerous discussions at individual festivals, many questions arose, but also the following insights that can certainly be recorded as results of the project.

Festivals are a question of strategy
The aim is to create an event, generate attention and initiate public relations through public affairs. But it is also about the theatre network, about a platform for discourse, quite naturally in competition with other theatres, and also about showcasing achievements. Festivals are also a question of geography. Where is the venue? The local scene, regional cooperation, the national forum, continental exchange or even international dialogue?

Festivals are a question of audience
For whom? Because theatre without an audience is not theatre! But who is meant? Everyone, or children or young people, and then also the theatre makers themselves? Teachers and educators, who see themselves as mediators and play an important role, especially in children's and youth theatre? Families? Who decides? Who buys the tickets? What are the expectations? And, of course, there are all those who make their living from theatre: the organisers, the marketers, the agents. A festival for theatre critics? Apparently, that has happened before! It becomes interesting when the audience is seen as a festival sponsor and revenue must also be generated through ticket sales.

Festivals as a question of aspiration and reality
It's about the effects that festivals are supposed to achieve. What does theatre do as an art form? What does it have to say, to show, to inspire? How does it affect society, the region, the discourse? Who benefits from the festival, why and how? Ultimately, festivals are always the subject of questioning themselves. A question of evaluation! What are the standards of aesthetics? How do I formulate expectations, and how can these be verified in reality? How does audience reception develop? Is there a secret to the art of spectating that needs to be explored? And how is the quality of the performances actually reflected? What works and what doesn't? What sells, what generates demand, what does the market want? Insights for the next festival?

Festivals as a question of artistic profile
Ultimately, it depends on what was defined as the artistic profile at the outset. Does a festival want what the audience wants; what can it want, what should it want? Does a festival want a commission

to decide, a jury to select after viewing, a management team to develop criteria, then search for performances and put together a programme? Or does a festival want the curator? A signature style? A subjective selection! But what are the criteria? The best, the most remarkable, the most noteworthy? Or a mixed bag: a little bit of everything, something for everyone? A panorama of the scene, a platform for diversity, a representative presenter?

Festivals as a matter of cultural education

Transparency is essential! After all, the audience wants to know why certain things were selected. Why this and not that, what is behind it, what they are being confronted with and why? This makes the supporting programmes of festivals all the more important: background discussions on theatre-making, statements of position by the festival organisers, discourse analyses by everyone. Festivals are also a challenge; they can document diversity, draw attention to developments and highlight key issues; they can promote the new, the different, the innovative; they can show what is not otherwise visible. They can contribute to aesthetic and democratic development in society as mediating agencies. And, especially when festivals receive public funding, they can understand this support as a risk premium. They also have a licence to fail; they could, they may, indeed they must try more things out (or let others try them out).

The festivals of the *BABEL Project* have shown that they can provide answers to many of the questions. At the very least, they have worked on understanding the project as a mission to address "The Art of Listening". Whether a critical debate has taken place everywhere is not really verifiable. In the best case scenario, the insights gained over the last three years will have an impact on the planning and implementation of the next festivals. Many festival organisers agreed that intensifying the exchange between artists will certainly play a greater role. And the participation of children and young people in all aspects of the respective festival, from preparation and selection to the pre- and post-production of the theatre performances, should become more important. Many festivals would like to continue to offer artistic workshops and more opportunities for the "next generation" to meet the audience. Some festivals also hope that the *BABEL Project* will have a lasting impact on sponsors and supporters, ideally leading to the continuation and consolidation of the network. Everyone agrees on the criticism of festival funding in Europe. There is still an imbalance in the performing arts between theatre for adults and theatre for children and young people. All festivals are also suffering from budget cuts and expect more funding in future from local and regional cultural policy makers and from theatre funding bodies in the federal states and the European Union in order to make "The Art of Listening" possible in the first place.

Listening to the future

Finally, the art of listening points toward the future – Listening towards the coming

sound. Festivals not only mirror the present but also anticipate cultural and political debates to come. By listening to children, societies listen to what has not yet arrived – their fears, dreams, and questions prefigure the challenges of tomorrow.

Walter Benjamin once wrote that art creates demands for which the time has not yet come. The *BABEL Project* confirms this: theatre for young audiences creates demands for justice, for empathy, for recognition that are not yet fulfilled. Listening to children is, in this sense, listening to the not-yet, to possible futures that demand our attention now.

Children's and youth theatre is also cultural education: Children's and youth theatre can be a view of life, a mirror of the times, and an impetus for an imaginative approach to reality. The plays are based on the reality of children and young people; they are about everyday stories, family, school, and leisure time. Those on stage have something to do with those in the audience.

Children's and youth theatre is a medium of social imagination: The second reality reveals, points out, and acts out, inspiring wonder and reflection. It integrates the big world into the small stage. Conflicts are named and problems are addressed openly. Rebelliousness is tried out and anger is not withheld. Many things are possible on stage: democratic behaviour, social learning, and, of course, dreaming.

Children's and youth theatre is a school of seeing: Magnificent stage sets and empty spaces characterize the productions. Costumes and masks are used, and the little finger plays just as much a part as a belt, a violin, or a spotlight. Theatre as a system of signs that needs to be deciphered. In the best case, an aesthetic experience par excellence.

Children's and youth theatre is an experience of emotions: What is friendliness, what is desire, what is anger, what is fear? A rollercoaster ride without getting wet – that's what makes a good play. Trembling with excitement, rejoicing, witnessing. Not for the sake of emotions or cheap effects, but for the sake of the story being told, for the sake of the existential subject matter. It is precisely in this context that special care is needed if children and young people are to be taken seriously.

Children's and youth theatre is the place for telling stories: In the best sense: Once upon a time. Lend me your ear. You and me and us. From then and now. In the beginning was the word. In the end is experience. Profound stories; because even the world of children is not perfect. And that is why light and dark sides belong on the stage that means the world.

The legacy of listening

The *BABEL Project* demonstrates that listening is not a peripheral skill but the very heart of cultural work. For children and audiences, listening means recognition. For artists and curators, it means openness to ambiguity. For festivals, it means amplifying silenced voices and enacting cultural policy

through practice. For researchers and students, it means humility and care in the production of knowledge. For all, it means affirming children's right to culture as a lived reality.

The rhetoric of an EU project becomes real when it is anchored in such listening. Networks have been built, methodologies developed, archives created, and languages shared. Above all, an attitude has been cultivated: to approach children, art, and society not with certainties, but with attentiveness, openness, and respect.

The art of listening is thus both legacy and invitation. It calls us to continue listening: to children, to artists, to partners, to doubts and desires, and to the futures not yet realized. In this way, *BABEL* has offered more than results; it has offered a practice that can guide cultural policy, artistic creation, and education for years to come.

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Project Plan and Actors

Project Plan – BABEL: The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences

Introduction
This document provides the project plan and documentation of the EU-funded project *BABEL or The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences* (2022–2025). *BABEL* is a large-scale international cooperation project bringing together artists, theatre institutions, and cultural organizations across Europe and beyond. Its aim is to explore multilingualism, cultural diversity, and inclusive practices in theatre for young audiences (TYA). The project is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

Objectives
The central objectives of *BABEL* are:
- To create a transnational artistic dialogue around multilingualism and cultural identity in TYA.
- To establish sustainable international collaborations through artistic gatherings, residencies, and festivals.
- To develop new artistic practices and research methodologies that respond to diverse audiences.
- To enhance the visibility and accessibility of TYA in Europe and worldwide.

Project structure
The project is structured around four main pillars:
1. *BABEL Squares* – international gatherings that serve as platforms for dialogue, exchange, and artistic collaboration.
2. Artistic Creation Groups – residencies where artists from different countries develop new works together.
3. Regional Workshops – locally anchored workshops focusing on contextual and cultural specificities.
4. Artistic Gatherings – larger events and festivals hosted by partners across different continents.

Timeline and events (2022–2025)

The *BABEL Project* unfolds through a series of key events hosted by partner organizations worldwide. The following timeline summarizes the major activities with months, years, cities, and countries:

• May 2022 – Helsingborg, Sweden: *Bibu Festival*, 1st ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering and Kick-off Meeting.

• September 2022 – Ljubljana, Slovenia: *Lutke Festival*, 1st *BABEL Square*.

• October 2022 – Yogyakarta, Indonesia: *Pesta Boneka Festival*, 1st Regional Workshop.

• November 2022 – Amman, Jordan: 2nd Regional Workshop.

• January 2023 – Vilnius, Lithuania: *Kitoks Festival*, 2nd *BABEL Square* and 1st *Creation Workshop*.

• June 2023 – Breda, Netherlands: *BRIK Festival*, 3rd *BABEL Square* and 2nd *Creation Workshop*.

• August 2023 – Johannesburg, South Africa: *Cradle of Creativity Festival*, 3rd Regional Workshop.

• September 2023 – São Paulo, Brazil: *Paideia Festival*, 4th Regional Workshop.

• October 2023 – St. Vith, Belgium: *Agora Theatre*, 4th *BABEL Square* and 3rd *Creation Workshop*.

• October 2023 – Sabadell, Spain: *elPetit Festival,* 5th *BABEL Square* and 4th *Creation Workshop*

• November 2023 – Belgrade & Novi Sad, Serbia: *Turning Point Festival*, 2nd ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering and 2nd Common Meeting .

• March 2024 – Bologna, Italy: *Visioni di Futuro Festival*, 6th *BABEL Square* and 5th *Creation Workshop*.

• April 2024 – Esbjerg, Denmark: *KLAP Festival*, 7th *BABEL Square* and 6th *Creation Workshop*.

• May 2024 – Havana, Cuba: *Voices of a New World Festival*, ASSITEJ World Congress and 5th Regional Workshop.

• June 2024 – Breda, Netherlands: *BRIK Festival,* 8th *BABEL Square* and 7th *Creation Workshop*.

• September 2024 – Ljubljana, Slovenia: *Lutke Festival*, 9th *BABEL Square,* 8th – 9 th *Creation Workshops* and informal Common Meeting.

• October 2024 – Galway, Ireland: *Baboró Festival*, 10th *BABEL Square* and 10th *Creation Workshop*.

• November 2024 – Sabadell, Spain: *elPetit Festival*, 11th *BABEL Square* and 11th *Creation Workshop*.

• January 2025 – Vilnius, Lithuania: *Kitoks Festival*, 12th *BABEL Square* and 12th *Creation Workshop*.

• February 2025 – Lahore, Pakistan: *The Little Art Festival*, 6th Regional Workshop.

• March 2025 – Bologna, Italy: *Visioni di Futuro Festival*, 13th *BABEL Square* and 13th *Creation Workshop*.

• March 2025 – Marseille, France: Bright Generations, 3rd ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering and 3rd Common Meeting.

• April 2025 – Kolding, Denmark*: KLAP Festival*, 14th *BABEL Square* and 14th *Creation Workshop*.

• October 2025 – Galway, Ireland: *Baboró Festival*, 15th *BABEL Square* and 15th *Creation Workshop*.

• November 2025 – Brussels, Belgium: *Export/Import Festival*, 16th *BABEL Square, 16th Creation Workshop* and Closing Activities.

These events mark the progression of the project and reflect its global collaboration, combining artistic creation, dialogue, and dissemination of practices in theatre for young audiences.

- 2022: Kick off meeting, 1st ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering, 1st Babel Square, 1st and 2nd Regional Workshops.
In Sweden, Slovenia, Indonesia and Jordan.
- 2023: 2nd Common Meeting, Babel Squares (2nd – 5th), Creation Workshops (1st – 4th) Regional Workshops (3rd – 4th) and 2nd ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering.
In Lithuania, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Serbia, South Africa and Brazil.
- 2024: Babel Squares (6th – 11th), Creation Workshops (5th – 11th), 5th Regional Workshop and ASSITEJ World Congress.
In Italy, Denmark, Netherlands, Slovenia, Ireland, Spain and Cuba
- 2025: Final phase with international artists' rounds, documentation, evaluation, and dissemination of results across Europe and globally.
Babel Squares (12th – 16th), Creation Workshops (12th – 16th), 6th Regional Workshop and 3rd ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering.
In Lithuania, Italy, Denmark, Ireland, Belgium and France.

Project Partners and collaborators
The Babel project was supported by 14 partners:
TeaterCentrum (Denmark - Coordinator), La Baracca - Testoni Ragazzi (Italy), Stichting De Stilte (The Netherlands), Baborò children's festival (Ireland), Lutkovno Gledalisce Ljubljana (Slovenia), Menų spaustuvė (Lithuania), Agora Theater (Belgium), La Montagne Magique (Belgium), Bronks jeugdtheater (Belgium), Rialles espectacles – La Sala (Spain), ASSITEJ Srbija, Scènes d'enfance/ASSITEJ France, Svenska ASSITEJ, ASSITEJ international.

Associated Partners:
University of Hildesheim (Germany), Performing Dialogue (UK).

Regional Workshops organisers:
Papermoon Puppet Theatre (Indonesia), National Centre for Culture & Arts (Jordan), ASSITEJ South Africa, Paideia Associação Cultural (Brazil), ASSITEJ Cuba, Little Art Festival (Pakistan).

Impact and Legacy

The project will leave a legacy in the field of theatre for young audiences by:

- Developing innovative multilingual and multicultural theatre practices.
- Establishing sustainable international collaborations and networks.
- Providing resources and research for future TYA practitioners.
- Contributing to the EU's vision of cultural diversity, inclusion, and cooperation.

PROJECT TITLE
BABEL or the Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)
CHALLENGE
Many children and young people don't encounter theatrical stories or formats that reflect their lives and don't see themselves represented onstage, if indeed they are able to access the performing arts at all. Whilst artists in the field of TYA are committed to engaging more diverse audiences, many of them are calling for more tools: • to approach the cultural and linguistic multiplicities of diverse young audiences, • to develop international and intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding, and • to establish more direct and perceptive communication between artists and young audiences.
AIM
To increase and improve the artistic, linguistic, and cultural diversity in TYA through exploring communication across different verbal and non-verbal languages in order to proactively involve the voices, needs, and feedback of children and young people in the creation of artistic works, while supporting international networking through ASSITEJ International*. By fostering intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, and overcoming language barriers, the project intends to highlight the complexity and richness of the theatrical relationship between artists and children/young people of all ages and, in doing so, it seeks to enable the better representation of a wider spectrum of identities on TYA stages. **The International Association of Theatre for Children & Young People.*

The *Theory of Change* is a dynamic tool used for planning, implementing, and evaluating the BABEL project. It is central to the Monitoring & Evaluation process led by Chris Blois-Brooke from Performing Dialogue and developed collaboratively with partners.

INPUTS		
Target Beneficiaries		
Partners, Artists, Cultural Operators, & Researchers Working In TYA		
Children & Young People, Their Families, Crèches, Kindergartens, Schools, & Community Centres		
Local, National & EU Cultural Authorities, Policy Makers, & Education Authorities		
Partners		
Project Partners		
Project Leader: Teatercentrum (Denmark) *Aprilfestival*	Agora Theater (Belgium) *Internationalises TheaterFest*	Scènes d'enfance - ASSITEJ France (France) *2025 ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering*
ASSITEJ International (Italy/International) *Ongoing Networking Events*	ASSITEJ Serbia (Serbia) *2023 ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering*	ASSITEJ Sweden (Sweden) *Bibu / 2022 ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering*
Baboró (Ireland) *Baboró International Arts Festival for Children*	BRONKS (Belgium) *Export/Import Festival*	de Stilte (Netherlands) *BRIK Festival*
La Baracca (Italy) *Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro…*	LGL (Slovenia) *Lutke*	La Montagne Magique (Belgium) *EXPORT/IMPORT Festival*
Menų spaustuvė (Lithuania) *International Festival KITOKS*	laSala (Spain) *elPetit Festival*	
Associated Partners		
Performing Dialogue (UK)	University of Hildesheim (Germany)	
Regional Workshop Associated Partners		
21st ASSITEJ World Congress (Cuba)	Cradle of Creativity (South Africa)	Festival Internacional Paidéia (Brazil)
Pesta Boneka Festival (Indonesia)	National Center for Culture & Arts (Jordan)	Little Art Festival (Pakistan)
Human Resources		
Artists		
Artist/Delegates at Project Activities	Artists Performing at Associated Festivals	Artistic Facilitators
Next Generation Residency Participants	Creation Workshop Participants (Partners'performers and Assitej Networks'performers	
Other Stakeholders		
ASSITEJ International. Executive Committee & Staff	European Commission Project Officer	Educators & Teachers
Festival Artistic Directors & Their Teams	Freelancers	Industry Colleagues & Stakeholders
Networks of ASSITEJ International	Project Leadership Team	Researchers
	Volunteers	
Material & Structural Resources		
ASSITEJ's existing Communication & Networking Channels	Database Of Project Stakeholders	Festivals' Material Resources
Festivals' Structures	Financial Planning & Reporting Systems	Local Networking of ASSITEJ National Centres
Local Networking Of Project Partners	Monitoring & Evaluation Systems	Project Partner Handbooks
Financial Resources		
Creative Europe Funding	Embassy Funding	Festivals' Attendee/Delegate Participation Fees
Festivals' Box Office & Other Incomes	Festivals' Sponsorship & Support	Government, Regional & Municipal Funding
	Independent Fundraising from Private Channels	
Places & Spaces		
Physical & Digital	Festival Spaces To Meet & Network	Meeting Spaces
	Public Forums For Presentations & Dissemination	Theatre Stages
Physical Only	Rehearsal & Workshop Spaces	
Digital Only	Newsletters	Social Media
	Websites	

METHODOLOGY		
	Tasks	**Deliverables**
WP1 Project Management, Coordination & Quality Assurance	Overall Management (T1.1)	Cooperation Agreement (D1.1)
	Co-Sharing of Artistic Direction (T1.2)	Handbook Related to Financial & Reporting Modalities (D1.2)
	Quality Assurance (T1.3)	Assessment Report Baseline (D1.3)
	Addressing Cross-Cutting Issues (T1.4)	Cross-Cutting Issues: Environment & Ethical Codes of Conduct #1/2/3/4 (D1.4, D1.9-D1.11)
		Assessment Report Midline #1/2/3 (D1.5-1.7)
		Assessment Report Endline (D1.8)
WP2 Babel Squares Festivals (The Open Squares)	Babel Squares (T2.1)	Leaflets #1/2/3/4/5 (D2.1, 2.6-2.9)
	Supporting the Capacity Building Programme (T2.2)	Reports of Conferences about the Themes & Objectives of The Project #1/2/3/4/5 (D2.2, 2.10-2.13)
	\	Reports of Seminars/Webinars about the Themes & Objectives of the Project #1/2/3/4 (D2.3, 2.14-2.16)
		Agenda of Performances #1/2/3/4/5 (D2.4, 2.17-2.20)
		Invitations to Networking Moments #1/2/3/4/5 (D2.5, 2.21-2.24)
WP3 The Training Programme: the Artistic Workshops (Multi-Lingual Creation Groups)	Elaboration & Organisation of The Workshops (T3.1)	Reports from Public Rehearsals #1/2/3/4 (D3.1, 3.4-3.6)
	Implementation of The Workshops (Artistic Aspect) (T3.2)	Reports from Micro-Performances #1/2/3/4 (D3.2, 3.7-3.9)
		Reports – Meetings/Discussions with The Audiences #1/2/3/4 (D3.3, 3.10-3.12)
WP4 The Research (Islands of Reflection)	Organising the Research (T4.1)	Records of Mosaic Pieces #1/2/3/4 (D4.1-4.4)
	Implementing the Research (T4.2)	
	Islands of Reflection (T4.3)	
	ASSITEJ Artistic Gatherings & ASSITEJ World Congress Encounters (T4.4)	
WP5 The Catalogue of Inspirations: Mosaic Pieces & the Book	Collecting of Experiences (Continuing Mosaic Pieces) (T5.1)	The Book (Final Version) (D5.1)
	Preparation & Production of the Book (T5.2)	The Mosaic (D5.2)
WP6 Intertwined Paths	Babel Regional Workshops (T6.1)	Reports from Regional Workshops #1/2 (D6.1, 6.3)
	Enhance Capacity Building for Next Generation Artists (T6.2)	Reports from Residencies for NG Artists #1/2/3 (D6.2, 6.4, 6.5)
WP7 Dissemination	Create a proper Documentation (T7.1)	Website of the Project (D7.1)
	Identifying the Target Groups (T7.2)	eNewsletter & Social Media #1/2/3/4 (D7.2, D7.4-7.6)
	Development of a marketing strategy (T7.3)	Social Media marketing strategy (D7.3)

GOALS				
	Outcomes		Impacts	
The Art of Listening to the Audience	Questioning Assumptions Within TYA	Connecting audiences from different cultures Exploring opportunities given by artistic languages to create high-quality work Focusing on sensitivity of relationships with young audiences Offering children new perspectives through performance	Accessibility & Diversity Within TYA Increased & Deepened	Children & young people better represented & heard Cultural wellbeing, inclusion & citizenship of young audiences prioritised Needs of contemporary young audiences better understood Intercultural TYA sector & audiences diversified
The Art of Listening to the Fellow Onstage		Connecting professionals from different cultures Enhancing mobility of artists & other cultural operators Extending possibilities & awareness of artistic expression & best practice Reflecting On Professional Practice		Aesthetic toolkits developed Improved standards of practice & quality set New knowledge for the sector produced Sensitivity towards understanding audiences increased
The Art of Listening to the Young & Emerging Generation of Artists		Delivering professional training & insights around artistic methods Developing networking & working relationships leading to future collaborations Expanding personal horizons Introducing a new generation of artists from different cultures		Artistic toolkits built Greater reflection on professional practice normalised New & enhanced artistic possibilities & practices in TYA explored Professionalisation of young & emerging artists achieved
The Art of Sharing Connection & Collaboration Between Partners & the Wider TYA Sector		Addressing cross-cutting issues Expanding international networks & multicultural/multilingual exchange Fostering intercultural & intergenerational dialogue Sharing best practices of engaging children		Capacities of tya professionals internationally improved International exchange of experience & knowledge enriched Networks & connections within TYA sector enhanced Stronger relationships between partners fostered
The Art of Advocating for TYA as Essential to Culture		Advocating for children's rights, particularly within new cultural policies Boosting visibility of TYA as a sector Communicating project activities & learning to wider sector Identifying & representing concerns & priorities of the industry		Collective awareness about tya deepened Evidence-based advocacy for TYA at national & eu levels strengthened Recognition of children's rights amplified TYA as important part of culture taken seriously

Short CVs of the BABEL book contributors

Yannick Boudeau
(Project Initiator and Management *BABEL Project*)
Yannick is creative producer and manager of company *la Casquette*, a Brussels-based TYA company. Co-founder and former chairman of Unušićn of Assitej Belgium, he has been appointed member of the Performing Arts Commission of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, for TYA, circus, and street arts. Concomitantly he has been working regularly since 2015 as an external expert for the EU – Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in the framework of the Creative Europe Programme. He has co-designed and co-written the EU co-funded *'BABEL – The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences'* project, in which ASSITEJ International is actively involved, and is currently in its steering committee.

Alex Byrne
(facilitator of *BABEL Workshops*)
Alex is the Co-Artistic Director of *New International Encounter*, the company that he founded in 2001. *New International Encounter* produces national and international touring theatre for young people and adults and since 2008 the company has been regularly funded by the Arts Council of England. Alex's work for *New International Encounter* has been invited to appear at young audience festivals all over the world and won prizes at numerous international festivals. As well as directing and leading *New International Encounter*, Alex has worked with UK touring Company's *Hoipolloi* and *Shifting Sands* and with *The Egg in Bath*, with *Divadlo DRAK and Dejvice Divadlo* in the Czech Republic, with *Theatre Nordkraft*, *Fair Play*, *Odsherred Theatre*, *Theatre Patrasket*, *Dansk Rakkerpak*, *Teatre O*, *Ridder Sallen*, *Det Lille Teatre* and *Theatre Mollen* in Denmark. He has also worked with *Riksteatret* in Norway, with *Ricca Ricca Festa* in Japan, with the *New Victory Theatre* in New York and with *JES* and *Theatre Mummpitz* in Germany.

Dr Özlem Canyürek
(Contributor of an article for the "Artistic Dictionary")
Özlem is a sociologist working at the intersection of cultural policy, politics and education. She holds a PhD from the University of Hildesheim, Department of Cultural Policy. Her research centres on marginalised knowledges, narratives and aesthetics in the performing arts field in Germany. Her dissertation *Cultural Diversity in Motion. Rethinking Cultural Policy and Performing Arts in an Intercultural Society* was funded by the European Open Science Cloud for open access publication. She has examined diversification processes in the performing arts for the German Performing Arts Fund (2021) and in children's and youth theatre for ASSITEJ Germany (2023), focusing on practice-informed pluriversal approaches to cultural policy.

Brigitte Dethier
(facilitator of *BABEL Workshops*)
In 2002 Brigitte Founded the JES and was the artistic director until summer 2022. During those 20 years the biennale festival *Schöne Aussicht* was organized by JES and curated by Brigitte. This festival began in 1998, and its first three editions were directed by Brigitte together with Dieter Kümmel. Before 2002, Brigitte was the artistic director in different theatres for young audiences in Esslingen, Tübingen and Mannheim. Since autumn 2022 Briggite has worked as a freelance director in theatres in Germany and Switzerland. She engages with all audiences and works with professional and nonprofessional artists. Her interest is in bringing the arts together, especially dance and drama. For many years Brigitte has been active in cultural policy to improve the artistic quality and status of theatre for young audiences. She was a member of the board of German Assitej. and from 2018 till 2024 she was the president. Together with the Belgian choreographer Ives Thuwis de Leeuw she won the important German theatre award "Der Faust" for the category best directing in theatre for young audience in 2009 for their performance *Noch 5 Minuten*. In 2014 Brigitte was awarded the "Verdienstorden (order of merit) from Baden-Württemberg" for the founding of JES and her excellent work for arts and cultural and educational policy. She has worked arts at universities in Stuttgart, Hamburg and Munich as professor of acting, directing and theatre management.

María Inés Falconi
(Regional workshop, Brazil 2023)
Playwright and writer dedicated to children and young audiences. She has been intensely involved in theatre for children and young people, presenting more than 40 plays aimed at all ages, which have been performed in Argentina and various Spanish-speaking countries, and translated into different languages. Among the awards she has received are three Argentores Awards, two National Arts Fund Awards, eight ATINA Awards and the ASSITEJ Inspirational Playwright 2020.
She holds a diploma in Stage Creation and Research from the University of Mexico and the University of Buenos Aires. She has given workshops and

lectures in Argentina and in various countries in America, Asia and Europe. She extends her literary activity to narrative for children and young people and has published more than 60 novels and short stories to date.
María Inés Falconi is a founding member and current president of ATINA (Association of Independent Playwrights for Children and Adolescents) and a member of the Ibero-American Network of Performing Arts for Children and Youth. She is an Honorary Member of ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People), having been a member of its Executive Committee between 2005 and 2011, serving as Vice-President during the last two terms.

Bruno Frabetti
(La Baracca responsible for *BABEL Project*)
After graduating in Philosophy at the University of Bologna in 2013, Bruno has been working with La Baracca – Testoni Ragazzi as actor, playwright, workshop leader for Early Years, producer, and EU project manager. In particular, he coordinates as Artistic Director of *Visioni di futuro, visioni di teatro – International Festival of Theatre and Culture for Early Childhood*, a La Baracca – Testoni Ragazzi project. He worked for the EU project Small size, performing arts for early years, 2014-2018 as accountant, and he designed and managed the Research for Mapping – A Map on the aesthetics of performing arts for early years**.**

Roberto Frabetti
(Project Manager *BABEL Project*)
Roberto is an author, director, actor and project manager for *La Baracca-Teatro Testoni Ragazzi di Bologna*, of which was one of the founders in 1976. In 1986 he started the project "The Theatre and the Very Young", dedicated to children aged 0 to 3 years. Since 2004, it has created and coordinated six European projects, five of them Large Cooperation projects, all of them aimed at the dissemination of theatre and dance for children, especially the youngest ones. The most recent one is *BABEL, the Art of Listening*. From 2004 to 2023, he was the Artistic Director of 20 editions of *Visioni di Futuro, Visioni di Teatro*, International Festival of Performing Arts for Early Years. For the Early Years project he received the "'Assitej Award for Artistic Excellence 2008" and the award "Assitej Germany 2013". He has written numerous books and articles for many anthologies, focusing in particular on theatre experiences for early childhood and for young people. He has written 71 plays for children and young people, 37 of them for the youngest.

Susan Giles
(President of ASSITEJ)
Sue is an advocate for Theatre for Young Audiences internationally as President of ASSITEJ International. Sue was re-elected in 2024 at the World Congress in Havana, Cuba, first joining the Executive Committee in 2014. She was Artistic Director and Co-CEO of the internationally renowned *Polyglot Theatre* from 2000 to 2022 introducing participatory, immersive works and the interrogation of power in the company's theatrical offerings for children, creating over 40 works. In 2018, Sue received the Green Room Lifetime Achievement Award and

authored Platform Paper *Young People and The Arts: An Agenda for Change*. In 2019, she was appointed Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her significant service to theatre for children. In 2021 she received the Theatre Fellowship for her advocacy work and in 2024 co-authored a Strategic Report on Children, Young People and the Arts in Australia entitled *Next Generation Now* for Creative Australia.

Greg Hall
(facilitator of *BABEL Workshops*)
Greg is a composer, musician, performer and sound designer. He has worked extensively in theatre and dance, with an increased focus on work for children and families. Credits include *Beauty & The Beast* (NIE), *I Will Be Everything* (NIE), *Cupboard of Surprises* (The National Theatre), *Peter Pan* (The Northcott Theatre) *Elegy for a Lady* (The Salisbury Playhouse), *My Brother, My Sister and Me* (Polka Theatre) and *Luna* (Theatr Iolo/ Theatre Hullabaloo). He is a member of Minima, one of Europe's leading silent film accompaniment bands. Greg has had numerous work featured on film and television as part of the music production company Monotwin, including Shane Meadow's *Le Donk & Scor-Zay-Zee* (Warp Films), and has also worked for the British Library as an ethnomusicologist in South Africa and Palestine.

Søren Kristoffer Kløft
(Social Media Management and Website *BABEL Project*)
Master's degree in International Development Studies and English (1997) and Diploma in Journalism (2010). Has worked with scientific research in Latin America and The Middle East. In charge of communication tasks at Teatercentrum in Denmark (Lead Partner of the *BABEL Project*) and at KLAP - Theatre for Young Audiences (aka 'Aprilfestival'). Works also as a freelance communication consultant.

Dr Katherine Morley
(Associate Researcher for small size)
Dr Katherine Morley is an associate researcher for the pan-European network 'small size' and researcher in residence at the egg, Theatre Royal Bath. Katherine received her PhD from the University of Manchester, where her primary focus was theatre spectatorship, specifically early years audiences. Funded by AHRC and a President's Doctoral Award, her thesis *Towards a working taxonomy of relative stillness* delves into the themes of aural attention, the infant-parent dyad and the relationship between pausing and expectation. Katherine contributed several chapters to the recent publication *Mapping: A map on the Aesthetics of Performing Arts for Early Years*, and recently received the Geesche Wartemann Emerging Scholars Award for her contributions as a researcher in the field of TYA. She very much enjoys close collaborations as a researcher in the rehearsal room and is a regular presenter at Early Years festivals and symposia, most recently speaking in Athens at Artika's 2nd International Festival *From the beginning*. Katherine also works internationally as a creative learning consultant and is a board member of the International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network.

Prof Dr Nicola Scherer
(*BABEL* Research Team and Editor of the book)
Nicola is a professor of Cultural Management and Cultural Work at the University of Applied Sciences Niederrhein. She studied Fine and Performing Arts, Philosophy, and Cultural Management in Braunschweig, Vienna, Salzburg, and Munich, and earned her PhD from the University of Hildesheim with a dissertation on international performing arts festivals. As a founding member of the artist collective *space ensemble*, Nicola has conceptualized and realized numerous projects as an artist, curator, and cultural manager across Germany, Austria, and the United States. Her teaching and research focus on cultural institutions and organizational change, festival studies, transformation processes in the arts, cultural leadership, performance practices, cultural policy, and transnational research methodologies. She is currently a research partner in the EU-funded project *BABEL – the Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences*, and serves as an advisor to the ITI Academy, a qualification programme of the International Theatre Institute Germany supporting transnational artistic practice. She is also involved in *Culture. Care*, a pioneering initiative promoting socially sustainable and care-oriented working environments in the performing arts, funded by the European Social Fund as part of the "Transformation of Work" programme. In 2024, she received the Excellence in Education Award from the Education 2.0 Conference in Dubai. She has also been awarded the *Gerda Henkel Visiting Professorship Fellowship* and will teach at Stanford University during the Spring Term of 2026.

Prof Dr Wolfgang Schneider
(*BABEL* Research Team and Editor of the book)
Founding Director of the Department of Cultural Policy at the University of Hildesheim/Germany, UNESCO-Chairholder in Cultural Policy for the Arts in Development (2012-2020), Member of the International Theatre Institute and the German UNESCO Commission, Chair of the National Fund for the Performing Arts and Honorary President of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. Editor of books in Cultural Studies: *Theatre for Early Years. Research in Performing Arts for Children* from Birth to Three (Frankfurt 2009), *Good Governance for Cultural Policy. An African-European Research about Arts and Development* (together with Daniel Gad, Frankfurt am Main 2014), *Vital Village. Development of Rural Areas as a Challenge for Cultural Policy* (together with Beate Kegler and Daniela Koß, Bielefeld 2017), *Theatre in Transformation. Artistic Processes and Cultural Policy in South Africa* (together with Lebogang L. Nawa, Hildesheim 2019), *Transforming Cities. Paradigms and Potentials of Urban Development Within the European Capital of Culture* (together with Kristine Jacobsen, Hildesheim 2019), *Transformationen der Theaterlandschaft. Zur Fördersituation der Freien Darstellenden Künste in Deutschland* (Bielefeld 2022), *Cultural Policy for Arts Education. African-European Practises and Perspectives* (together with Emily Achieng Akuno, Yvette Hardie, Daniel Gad, Berlin 2022),

Cultural Policy Yearbook. Resilience in the Ecosystem of Theatre. New Perspectives for the Independent Performing Arts (together with Gökce Dervisoglu Okandan, Lausanne 2025).

Mindy Stanford
(editing and proofreading)
Mindy is an editor and writer living in rural South Africa. She has been an editor of fiction, non-fiction and academic articles and manuscripts for over 20 years. She has held positions as editor of a youth magazine and of commercial publications in the IT industry. She has published two books of poetry under the name Rosamund Stanford. On the farm where she lives Mindy and her partner Robert Berold run a retreat centre for writers, artists and anyone choosing to rejuvenate their spirits in a wild place.

Thembile Tshuma
(Regional workshop, South Africa 2023)
A Zimbabwean-born multidisciplinary artist, actor, and applied theatre practitioner based in South Africa. A graduate of Wits University's Drama for Life programme, he has worked extensively across Southern Africa in performance, facilitation, and arts education. His experience spans theatre for development, playback theatre, choreography, and community arts coordination. A two-time award-winning director at the Hillbrow Theatre festival, he is committed to using the arts for social change. He has been working for ASSITEJ SA in their Kickstarter educational empowerment programme since 2014.

Irma Unušić Unušić
(participant and facilitator of *BABEL Workshops)*
Irma is a dance maker focused on creating work in the field of performing arts for young audiences. She works as a performer, choreographer, educator, producer, and organizer. Irma is the founder and artistic director of SHOOMA, an artistic organization dedicated to developing innovative and sensory-rich theatre experiences that move beyond conventional formats. While her main interest lies in performance-making, she also explores other artistic formats, especially in the field of mediation, such as the dance board game *Try Dance* and the interdisciplinary music album *The Den*. Grounded in her studies of early education and cultural anthropology, her work bridges cultural understanding, inclusivity, and creative experimentation, both regionally in Croatia and through international artistic engagement.

BABEL
or The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences

BABEL or the Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences is articulated in a wide international dimension: 13 European partners from 11 European countries, organisers of recognised international TYA Festivals, and ASSITEJ International (The International Association of Performing Arts for Children and Young People). Associated to the project are 6 other partners/ festivals covering all continents, and 2 whose work is dedicated to Research and the evaluation of the process.

All partners pursue the rights of children and youth to full cultural citizenship. In Babel, they have been investigating together with performers, artistic facilitators and researchers the opportunities given by artistic languages to create high-quality shows for children, fostering intercultural and intergenerational dialogue in the Performing Arts for Young Audiences.

The set of activities are both diverse and all intertwined. They combine great artistic events, such as the Festivals (Babel Squares), and artistic workshops (the Multi-lingual creation groups), and an academic research leading to this book (the Catalogue of Inspiration). And to leave no one behind, activities (Intertwined pathways) both aimed at young artists and professionals outside of Europe (the Regional Workshops), through sharing of the experience.

BABEL has been an ongoing process over 46 months, totalising 16 Babel Squares and artistic workshops, 3 ASSITEJ Artistic Gatherings, 1 ASSITEJ World Congress, 6 Regional Workshops, this Catalogue of Inspirations, thousands of hours of administrative and research work, and above all over 150 trained artists and thousands of children all over the world, for whom this project is dedicated.

Babel project (March 2022 - December 2025) is supported by ***Creative Europe***, *Sub-programme Culture, Category 3: Larger scale cooperation projects*, Call CREA-CULT-2021-COOP.
The Partners are: TeaterCentrum (Denmark - Coordinator), La Baracca - Testoni Ragazzi (Italy), Stichting De Stilte (The Netherlands), Baborò children's festival (Ireland), Lutkovno Gledalisce Ljubljana (Slovenia), Menų spaustuvė (Lithuania), Agora Theater, La Montagne Magique and Bronks jeugdtheater (Belgium), Rialles espectacles – La Sala (Spain), ASSITEJ Srbija, Scènes d'enfance/ASSITEJ France, Svenska ASSITEJ, ASSITEJ international.


BABEL
The Art of Listening in Theatre for Young Audiences


Co-funded by
the European Union


AGORA
DAS THEATER DER
DEUTSCHSPRACHIGEN
GEMEINSCHAFT BELGIENS


SCÈNES
D'ENFANCE
ASSITEJ-FRANCE


International Association of
Theatre & Performing Arts for
Children & Young People


ASSITEJ SRBIJA


ASSITEJ
SWEDEN


Baboró
International Arts
Festival for Children


BRONKS


deStilte
dance for children


La Baracca
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