INTERVIEW

Barbara Kolling

by

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(Barbara Kolling is a German Theatre Director who specialises in performances for infants and toddlers. She is the artistic director of Helios Theatre, Hamm, Germany)

Q. What got you interested in working with materials?

A. Before I began to research theatre with materials, I had already directed a lot of performances that were improvised on a theme. This is important because I realised that in my style of working, I would not always need a written text, but often objects, puppets, light, sound would be used to improvise with the actors or puppet players or musicians. Because my experience is that you cannot be as good while writing at your desk on your own as sometimes improvisations can be, as you come to points that happen fluently that you may not be able to imagine otherwise.

Q. So you were already exploring improvisational theatre for about 20 years before shifting focus to materials?

A. Yes. In Germany 15 years ago theatre for the youngest was really not known – theatre for 1-year-olds, 2-year-olds, which is now all over Europe –we would usually play for children who were at least 4 or 5 years old. Nobody really trusted that theatre for younger children was possible. Then I was asked to curate a festival, and I travelled around and saw some amazing work happening for the really small ones. The work I saw really resonated with me, and I thought I would really like to do this kind of work – I would like to speak to them as an adult artist. I like little children a lot, but it was not as though I had a particular agenda. I simply wanted to communicate with them. My particular question was, how abstract could I be? And one of the first surprises was that you can speak with very little children in a very abstract way, because they perceive the world in a very abstract way. Everybody knows how they look at shapes, and how they play with different balls, or stones, trying to bring them together, for a very long time. So, when you are sitting or standing in front of them, and you know how children work, you really can find a way to do the most abstract things, and, if they are connected with you, they will follow. And my interest just grew from there, because I found the freedom and the possibility to engage in my own research. I worked closely with a puppeteer, and his interest was in material – he went from the puppet to the object and then to earth, and wood, and then water – and we developed first one and then, two years later, another performance. We found that this kind of piece worked really well with children, because it is so close to their way of experiencing the world. We explored their differences, for example, what are the differences between sand and water? And as we explored them, the ideas became bigger and bigger: so, as we explore nature material, we come to ecological questions, and at the same moment, even as it is very small and central, it has the possibility to say something which is very important for the world. And so my own interest has stayed in this area. We keep talking amongst ourselves, about whether we're still interested in this exploration with material, but it is still alive.

Q. What would you say comes first for you – the desire to work with abstract ideas or the desire to work with children?

A. I have always worked with theatre for children, from the time I began my career. I started to work with a group of friends while I was still at school, and even then, the desire was to work with children. I have also enjoyed working with and for adults, and I love it most when they come together and both groups can find possibilities and joy together.

Q. Yes, in a show like H_2O*, adults and children were watching with the same kind of excitement! So I guess that goes some way to mark the differences between the way we think we need to tell our stories and the way we actually enjoy them! But tell me, it must have been quite a big risk even in Germany to attempt this kind of theatre. How did you go about it?*

A. It was very funny! When I first started to work professionally, I found that my interest lay more in working with puppets and dance and music than with text. This changed a lot over the years. In the beginning, I really didn't go into materials, but I know that I would have to go inside the piece, because my interest in visual arts was always very strong, and I studied a lot of the arts movements of the 1920s in Europe, before the Second World War, when there was an amazing amount of inter-disciplinary work. I found so many interesting things that are now not really discussed in Germany. So, it was very clear to me that this was where my interest lay. Also, I was always clear that I wanted to found a free theatre, work with a small group of like-minded people. I had worked for some years as an assistant in a large theatre company, and I knew that I wanted to move away from that. So, it was not so hard. Doors were beginning to open for this kind of work. So, we began to work together with good and interested people, and things started to happen one after the other. We also worked closely with professionals who knew about children, so I didn't need to think about the children, and just focused on my work.

Q. But you do have audiences of children watching the plays before getting ready to stage them.

A. Yes, sometimes I have children coming in as early as the fifth day of preparation. This is to help the actors see what is working and how, but also to explore further possibilities. For instance, when we first made H_2O, the show did not begin with the drops of water. But then, when we had the little children over, we realised that the acoustics of water were very important to them. We realised that if we didn't focus on the single drop, and the sound of it,

then all the children got a little bit weird, because there are just too many things going on. So that single drop, and the sound of it, helped to focus their attention right at the beginning, and this came from the children.

Then, when we were preparing for *Woodbeat*, we found that if we were to stay honest to our research, at some point we would need to introduce an axe. Because, there are many things you can do with wood, but at some point, if you were to build something, you would need an axe. But we weren't sure how little children would respond to it – would they begin to cry, would they fear the axe? And it was really interesting that our performer, Michael, who was really sensitive to whether the children would show fear, as he raised the axe, the children shouted "Fear! Fear!" We weren't sure whether it was the axe, or the performer's aura that made them do it! Again, when the performer did it without making eye contact with the children, they sometimes cried. So then we changed the approach, and the performer would do it very calmly, after making eye contact with the children, with a reassuring look that it was all safe, and from that moment on, no child ever cried again.

Q. So this is very interesting, because teachers sometimes have these preconceived notions about what children fear. So, when I was watching the bamboo act (Momo and Kriti), the thought that was going on in my head was, this is too loud. I enjoyed it, but I was thinking of children and I worried that it would scare them. Do you encounter this kind of fear often?

A. Yes, quite often. In our first performance where there was a trumpet, and the trumpet player was always concerned about whether it was too loud, and scary for children. So we tried it, and I always say to the performer, "Don't stay behind. Just make your music, and then we will see." And in the end, I always think it is a matter of how we communicate it. It is not about loudness, but how it comes across: if it's unconscious, and just happens to be loud, then it can be scary. But if you communicate that it is like this and can be very loud, you will find that it isn't a problem at all.

Q. I think it's also not just about loudness, but also about the kind of sound and the feelings it evokes. Sometimes it's ok to be startled, but at other times it can evoke darker feelings and images.

A. Yes. Sometimes it is simply about a little child being with other children in a darkened space. In Germany, children who have not reached school-going age are often not used to being with others, and that itself is scary for them. So, we have these pamphlets and reading material for teachers, parents and facilitators to read outside the performance space, before the show, and we also speak to them, so that the adults can prepare themselves. We always say that if the child is afraid, you can keep at a distance and see how they're doing. I think it's very important to have this distance, and for the child to experience this fear and to know that it is ok, and can be overcome to reach a state where she's feeling safe. And if you bring this child to a new situation, where fear is the first impulse, and you deal with it very calmly, and bring the child back into the space, she will know that it's fine, and that is a very beautiful moment.

Q. In your experience, what does drama do to a very young child?

A. See, children experience the world on their own while playing. Playing is a very important skill for all human beings, to experience the world and to survive. They survive while playing, and because of playing. Because playing allows you to enter a different world, and to change that world, to change things, to be able to react to things, to be active, and this is very nice. And it is also nice to watch other people while playing, and to see possibilities in their play. I would say I think it is very necessary to survive!

Q. How much of possibility for children to interact or play do you have in your productions?

A. Yes, well you know, sometimes parents come in after watching a production and say that it was great, but the most wonderful part was at the end when you allowed them to play with the material. And I think, you know, that's great, but what about being engaged while watching and experiencing in another way? And this is something that I would really like to introduce to adults, as an artist, that we don't always have to do, that it is also possible to engage with and communicate with another person while watching and listening. So, in H_2O, at the end there is this one drop again, and the performer invites the children to feel this one drop on their hand – that was my ending. But, when the show went on tour, and there were these two male actors performing, they opened it out to children to play with the water, and

make bubbles. The children really enjoyed it, but I felt, that this was something that the children could have gone home and done, you know, with their parents in their bathrooms!

Q. Yes, so, the whole idea of opening out a part of the experience and limiting it to just that is sometimes much richer, with a deeper engagement, than just opening out the whole space to children, which can really dilute the experience.

A. Yes, and I feel that sometimes opening it all out is a bit lazy *(laughs!)* and I also feel a bit helpless when that happens, because, you know, after half an hour of sitting, if you give them the whole space, children tend to just run. Sometimes, it is ok, but otherwise, it's not fair to the performance, and also for children, to allow the space to be taken over by chaos. It's all right for children to retain the final impression and walk away with that, to have a quiet moment of reflection, if you will.

Q. So this is also a matter of debate with educators – how much of reflection do you think young children are capable of?

A. I think that children are very clear about what they find interesting, and you can get to know if you observe them. Of course, they cannot express it in words, and of course the perception is at a different level. Say, when you are an adult watching H_2O, you might think that it is interesting as it is not possible to control it, and how it is always flowing. When a child watches the same thing, they may have a similar thought – it is not possible to control it – and play with that. So, it operates on a different level, and of course, they will not put it in words.

Q. At what point, for you, does the exploration come to a halt so that it can become a performance?

A. I always begin with the exploration of the material. I let them improvise a lot, and my job is to sit outside and to find moments that interest me because they evoke something special, or speak to the truth of the material. This really goes on for a long while, days, really, going on for about 6 hours sometimes at a stretch. And then I give the performers a structure – to go from this moment to the other, and to end there.

Q. So, the selection of the moments happens between you and the artists?

A. No. It's me. I do the choosing. *(laughs)*The artists who are on the inside, exploring, are quite relieved to have me on the outside, watching them, because, say, they don't very often remember their actions or the sequence, for example. So, the kind of democratic process of being both inside and outside the exploration simply would not work. It works as a kind of division of labour. So, I would never dream of stepping into the show and doing something in their space, for instance. Sometimes, I have a wish, and then I tell them, "Would you please go there and try it from there?" But otherwise, I really just mostly work with their material, and select and structure it.

Q. Yesterday, you were saying that there is always a story. At what point does the story emerge? Does it come from you, as a result of the director's vision?

A. No. I take it from the moments that I recognise. In H_2O, for instance, the story was built up drop by drop, but it wasn't thought of before. It emerged from the moments that came out for me. So, the moment to put the stones inside the water, so that it looks a bit like buildings – it came to a point where it started to look like Dubai or something! *(laughs)* – that came from a moment of recognition.

Q. So it is more organic?

A. Yes, very much so. When, for example, we created *Traces*, the central idea of memory was very much present. Then we talked about which material would lend itself best to the central idea, and then we came to sand. One of the first images we had was that of people walking along the seaside, in the sand, and then, later, how the contents of newspapers bring up traces of daily life. My father used to keep the newspaper of the day for when his grandchildren were born, and he passed them on to my sister and me. So I still have the newspapers of the days when my older son and younger son were born, and these make for very nice traces, as well. And there it was not always about the material only, but it was always linked to the sea. This was the next step that I wanted to try after *Woodbeat* and H_2O, which were very heavy on material research.

Here, I would also like to look at both possibilities, like yesterday, when we had the girl sitting inside the circle, next to the pile of newspapers, we had both sets of possibilities – the possibility of developing that story, and of working with the possibilities of newspaper.

Q. I think this can be quite challenging for actors – to leave your self behind and just explore the material, especially if it is material that one has explored before. How do your actors deal with that? How do they keep finding freshness in their exploration of known material?

A. I think it really is a matter of your training – if you are trained as a dancer, it is easy for you to move; a musician finds a way to make music, so if you are trained to improvise with materials, you will find inspiration every time. So, it boils down to your training, really.

Q. I guess what I'm asking is – how do you keep the freshness of the exploration going? Say, in a play like H_2O*, the first few times, say, you're not entirely sure how the material will behave and there is a certain energy. But after a 100, 150 shows, how do the performers keep the spontaneity and the energy of interacting with the material going?*

A. I tell my actors to be open to it again and again, because the material will not change, it will always be the same.The performers will therefore always need to approach the material with a fresh mind. If the performer is open, the material will always respond. I think it is, in a way a bit easier to repeat these scenes with the material than with words. Because when the material is in front, it does what it can do, and when you are open to observing it carefully, it will speak to you. But if you are using the material mechanically, it will stop speaking to you, and then mistakes and accidents will happen. In my own company, where I observe the actors again and again, this doesn't usually happen. But what I have seen, say, in H_2O, where there were 3 actors who were touring around the world – there were maybe 50 performances in-between that I had not seen – and when I saw them again, their performance had changed, because the rhythm of interaction between the actors had changed a little bit. They didn't realise it, but when I saw it, I went, "This is different from what it was before!" If there isn't an outside eye looking on for a long time, it can happen that the level of relationship between the performers comes to the forefront. Now, the audience is always looking for relationships between the performers, which can create an expectation, to which the performers respond, and then the material recedes into the background. At such times I have to step in and remind them to put the material back at the centre, where it belongs.

Q. I guess this is a problem with actors – they tend to move themselves into the forefront.

A. Yes. Of course, when people come from a puppetry background, it's different, because puppeteers become puppeteers because they want to stay behind the puppet and let the puppet lead. But with actors, yes, it is a struggle.

Q. In a strange way, this kind of correlates with the classroom interaction, as well. When we bring in material for exploration, how much of talking is needed, how far does the interaction need to be teacher-led, and can the material be allowed to speak for itself? That's a

challenge for the teacher – at what point do you step back, and let go, and let the drama take over?

A. Yes. And this is the moment when the light comes in, isn't it? When something happens that you didn't expect.

Q. It also seems to me to be very similar to process drama, and the work of Dorothy Heathcote, particularly the contract – the creation of a safe space with some rules that bind the group together, and then to just let go and allow the drama to play out.

A. Absolutely. And I think that this kind of performances for the little ones, especially if you do it with material, have very clear links with ritual. And then you have to decide what to do about it. This space that we somehow have created, it happens that people don't want to leave it at first, even adults. You know, in *Woodbeat*, we have these lines that are made with wood – it's a very nice stage, really! – and even adults by themselves sometimes don't want to leave that space. They stand around talking to each other! *(laughs)*

Q. Drawing back into ritual, rhythms and repetitions are essential aspects of ritual. How much of a role do they play in your performances?

A. A very strong one, as all of them are made with rhythms. Outside of Helios, I have done work with some of the bigger state theatres, and there I used music from outside, but most often, I work with a musician within the performance. For me, the sounds and rhythms of the performance are very, very important.

Q. While making a performance, are you ever driven by the music, or does it come in later, after the performance is created, as per need?

A. It always begins together. The musicians are present from the beginning of the process, and so it evolves together, organically.Coming back to similarities with drama, I want to talk about our experience in South Africa. We had all these trainees from Magnet Theatre, who came from townships outside of Cape Town, and often from very different backgrounds. They had all been with Magnet Theatre for a few years, wanting to become theatre-makers. All of them had different issues in their lives. After working with me for a while and

exploring and playing with materials and developing performances for very young children, the director of the theatre sent me feedback lines where they all wrote how helpful the process was, and particularly playing for very young children. They all said thanks because the process helped them come together on the inside, like healing.

Q. Yes, I personally found H_2O very healing. I mean, I find water healing anyway, and I know this is true of a lot of people, but somewhere this deep focus on water telling its story, it sort of helps your mind and body to align, doesn't it? I'm assuming that this happens with the other materials as well, and I can understand why some of the adults watching Traces*, as you were telling us earlier, cried. It touches you somewhere deep inside, doesn't it, somewhere subliminal.*

A. Yes, it's true. I have been trying to understand how it works for 10 years, and I still haven't understood it! *(laughs)* You can't really explain it. The response comes from too deep within.

Q. On another note, you were talking about your work with music and dance. You have done a version of Traces *with dancers. How is that different from the one with actors?*

A. Dance is also a very nice medium for little ones, because they start to move, you know, while watching. They embody the rhythm. In the beginning I wondered whether the dance would have to be different, slower, for the little ones. But then I found out that it wouldn't have to be. Artists can do what comes naturally, and children can follow. What is different about dance is the contact with the audience, because dance is often at a distance, and we worked on that; but there wasn't much difference finally. In our case, the two dancers had already done a performance for young children, so they were already aware of the concerns. In Germany, there are now many upcoming dance performances for young children, and we find that once the beginning is sensitively laid out before them, they enjoy the performance very much. And now the dancers have also started reducing the distance with children, and meeting them, sometimes mirroring during performances, which has made dance very accessible.

Q. In India, we have a very clear and agreed upon idea that dance is a very elevated art form which can only be accessedby people who have attained a certain degree of maturity. Classical dancers don't want to work with or perform before very young children, for fear of not being understood or appreciated, so this contact issue is a very important one for us in India.

A. I can completely understand. In Germany, we have this problem with classical music. They want to reach out to children, but don't want to dilute it, and then they don't know how to reach out. They try to simplify it, but that doesn't capture the truth of the material – and it's not very interesting either! They want to build a public of tomorrow, but it cannot be only about that. It will not work.

Q. Perhaps it is not only a public of tomorrow, but also about a citizenship of tomorrow. We know that arts are transformative – so to make arts available to the youngest group, before other influences start to limit them, is a way of building a better generation, one that is more in touch with itself, with a different way of thinking and being. And that is definitely something to aspire to.

A. Yes, absolutely. I don't have a solution to it, but there has to be a way of making contact. We have to find a way to reach down and touch them at the level of the gut, and then it will happen. It has only been 10 years since this kind of theatre took off in Germany. It is only 10 years since dance started reaching out to children in this way. But then, it happened. It's still very new for the children. We have to build the audience. So, two years ago, when I spoke to Choiti and Anurupa, they could not tell me about little children's theatre productions in India, but now they tell me, "This is happening, that is coming up." That's wonderful. There is a movement all over the world, and it is arriving in India as well, and I can really see things happening here.

Q. You had said that your idea about children changed as you observed children. Could you share some of your observations about children?

A. I think the most important thing about children is to look at them as complete human beings. It is important not to make something too easy for them, because they really like to bite into things and really engage with them. It is the opposite of what we sometimes think

about children, and in children's theatre, as well. It's not enough to just put out something that is amusing – they really like to engage with ideas that are deeper, to come in contact with things, to think about them. For instance, why a bad dream is not just my bad dream, but also a bad dream for others. So, a performance has to be for them and with them, and there aren't any limits, really. As I told you earlier, they are very comfortable with the abstract.As they grow older, when they start to find words for things, they begin to think in more concrete terms, but at the early stages, their world is quite abstract. It's quite logical, if you think about it.

Q. So there is this saying amongst playmakers here, that to perform for children, you have to be children. What would you say to that?

A. *(laughs)* I would say be very careful, because they can end up getting scared of you! Children see adults as adults, and they need us to be adults, because we take them by hand and lead them into the world. Sometimes, I really get sad when I see adults trying to behave like children, and it gets so strange! I don't recognise them anymore – they could be very nice adults, but as children they scare me. *(laughs)* Yes, I think that everyone should be true to their stage of life – to understand what it means to be an adult and to be a child.

Q. Hmm, so that brings me to clowning, which I think is really difficult. A lot of people tend to take this up as the best approach for children, but that's kind of tricky, I find.

A. It's not the only approach, certainly. I have nothing against clowning. People who work as clowns and who have deep understanding of children would certainly make wonderful clowns. But it doesn't work when there is this distance, without really knowing, this thinking that this is all they need. I think adults have a lot of projection on children, and sometimes adults need a lot of amusement, perhaps, but children really need to understand the world. Amusement by itself is not enough for them.

Q. I remember on the first day you were talking about different age groups and that two-year-olds are really serious.

A. Yes, they are. And they are often the ones who start to cry when they see things like this. For *Woodbeat*, for instance, we had made this little wooden creature – it has no eyes or anything, it is not painted, but everyone identifies it as a creature, and as a worm – that jumps around and the performer makes funny sounds like "tu-tu!". Sometimes the audience calls him Tu-tu. There, you often find the little ones laughing at this creature, because he just jumps and they have so much fun with him, but even there, half of them will just look. And sometimes you can see the amusement in their eyes, but they don't really feel the need to laugh out loud. One day, a child expert told me that they have not yet reached the distance that allows them to laugh. At their stage, everything is still a part of their world, and laughing about something means that I can identify something as funny. This distancing comes a while later, with greater access to language, which we use to distinguish between me, mine and others. So, by the time they're approaching four, they are able to really see humour in things and laugh at them. And then they laugh so much that they can't stop laughing sometimes!

So this is also interesting. It doesn't have to be about red noses all the time. Even water trickling down, or to have something and put it away, and have it again – that can be funny.

Q. So this seems like a really important aspect of training for teachers working with small children. We probably need better understanding of the way teacher-training for toddlers are approached.

A. Yes, it is very important. You know, in Germany, till about 10 years ago – and even now, really – there was this feeling that children below three years of age should be at home. You couldn't find kindergartens for young children, and this dates back to the Nazi concept about the role of the mother, and how she must keep the child close. We were the newest in Europe to embrace the concept of education for really young children. I didn't know this before I started working for this group, and then I discovered that it wasn't possible to find kindergartens for children below three. But then, around 10 years back, the trend really took off for economical reasons, because mothers had to go to work to support the whole family. It wasn't driven by understanding of children, and a lot of these kindergartens were opened, but the educators had no idea what to do with them! So, suddenly, there was a lot of research, driven by the need to find answers to this question, and now there is significant work happening.

Q. In India, we have creches and playschools. While there should be a difference between them, there often isn't any. There are very few places in Delhi which are really interested in working with the really young ones.

A. I have found in my research that this is often because of the lack of language.We tend to think of them as human beings only once they can communicate with words and verbal language, whereas before that we tend to think of them as creatures. But in my research, I have found that the opposite is true. Little children have quite a lot of understanding of the world, because they observe, they explore, and I often feel sad that once they start going to school, they lose so much. They lose their instinct of playing, of discovering. And it is very important that educators gain an understanding of this. In Germany, increasingly, children are not allowed to go outside without shoes and socks – not even on grass and sand. The feet are not just one part of your body, they are a very important part and they give you a lot of sensory stimulation, and if you don't have that any more, you are losing a whole aspect of yourself.

Whenever the children see the lake that is created in H_2O, they go "EEE!" because they see the very clear water. And they have a similar reaction when they see earth, or clay in our other productions, because this stimulates them by being in contact with different natural materials. Different materials when touched stimulate your mind and body in different ways, and if we remove contact, we're narrowing down their capacity to experience the world.

Q. On a related point, in India nowadays, there is this shift from exploration to expression. There is, increasingly, perhaps on the part of parents, a desire to have the child express and perform their learning, to make it more measurable, quantifiable, to map it. A child will be taken on a "nature walk" – shoes on and everything – and asked to return to class and draw a picture, or write a few words. The drawing or writing then becomes the expression of that experience.

A. I'm at some distance from this kind of hope – what the arts can make. In Germany, too, there is this pressure on children to learn a lot of things, very fast. Especially where parents have a lot of money, this is quite strong. And that is a big reason that we have chosen to work in Hamm, which is not a university city – it is a smaller, poorer city. We're the only theatre there. It has 1,80,000 inhabitants, so it is not a very small town: it is a city. If we weren't there, the people there would not have any exposure to theatre. And so, perhaps, we don't

have to deal with this kind of "luxury" questions, and I'm very happy about this. We now have a lot of refugees, we have Turkish people, whom we invite to come into the theatre. The population is quite mixed – we have industries and coal mines – and for me it is very important to meet the children in the theatre. So, for me, expression is not the most important thing – I'm sure they will express themselves, at some time or the other. For me, it is more important to give them possibilities, to open new rooms for ideas, to show that the world is not cast upon one line.

Expression does become important for a different kind of children, for example those who have stopped speaking. In Germany, sometimes you will find such children, who have stopped speaking, because nobody speaks at home anymore, and it is only the television that speaks. By the time they are 10, they are divided into Primary School, Secondary School and Gymnasium. So, by the time they are 11, those who get sent to Primary School know that they are not smart enough, and they will never get a job. It changes everything – it changes their possibilities in life, their relationships. I have seen this with my sons – both of them had very good friends who got sent to Primary School, and their relationships completely changed within one year. I'm still very sad about that. In other countries, the minimum age at which this happens is 12, usually 15; in Germany teachers decide this the earliest. So, at a very young age, children get to feel that they are stupid and not valued, and so they stop speaking. We like to work with these children to bring them back to learning, and expressing themselves. We make puppets with them, and create other ways to bring them back. Also, the Primary Schools have time, because the teachers don't have to follow a strict curriculum. We use this time well, and we introduce them to making and using puppets, and this is therapeutic for them, because then they can say "This puppet is mine." And the puppet is not stupid, and this helps them to regain a sense of their selves. So this kind of expression is necessary.

Q. Hmm. Yes, so in India – and you're right, it is a First World-ish problem – there is this need to measure, map, say, even the performing arts. I think this is something we've borrowed from North America, and it's a struggle to balance this with the need to provide the drama experience – this constant monitoring, grading, mapping. It's like the aim is measurement, and the need to reduce everything to statistics. Is that the trend in Germany, as well?

A. For educators, yes. My sister runs an inclusive kindergarten, with children of different abilities, and she is constantly up against this.But the education system is varied there: the different areas run different educational programmes. There is no single educational system across the country. Now, every four years, when the elections happen, the priorities for education change. So, four years ago, there was this big focus on language – all educators had to work towards getting the children to speak more. Now, four years on, that is gone, and the focus has shifted to digitisation and making children more familiar with the digital world and its techniques. So now my sister is struggling, because she has invested in the language programme, she has sent her teachers to train in various language programmes, and now it is all gone!

Q. So, from this workshop, what are your expectations?

A. *(laughs)* Oh, so we saw the mini-performances that they brought in when they came, and we saw some of the work they did yesterday – thoughts and explorations of very little moments and things – and all of this gives me a lot of hope that we will have very interesting and very different performances in the end. I'm very happy with the kind of understanding that is there.It is good to be in this kind of group – being with each other, learning from each other, listening to each other, speaking to each other – all of this will be very fruitful, I'm sure.

Q. But what would you like to see? What would be some of the things that would make you happy about this workshop?

A. I would really like to see shows that go into the material, that are honest to the research. Works that explore the visual aesthetics and possibilities of the material and performances that are able to reach out to the children in the right way. Children need to see works that are honest, where artists meet them at eye level, that are beautiful, with possibilities for deeper understanding, and very different from each other. Hopefully, something of all of this!

Q. You had earlier taken a Masterclass in Material Theatre for UNIMA India. Could you talk about the differences in your approach to these two sessions?

A. When I was invited to do this Masterclass two years ago, there was a clear invitation to do a workshop – to introduce the people to the world of playing with material and researching on them, and there was no expectation to develop performances. The participants came from different backgrounds – there was one who worked with children with special needs, so she was particularly interested in how this kind of sense work with material affected them. And then we worked at the Crafts Museum, which was very good, and the space lent itself to a lot of exploration, and the stones and the sand and other material were already there. It was a very good and long period of research, and this was not focused on building performances. There was one young woman who was already working with objects and graphics, and after this workshop, she quit her job and began to explore more through workshops with material in Bombay. She has also developed a performance with clay and sometimes meets up with Choiti and Sananda and they think about how to do things together. But it's not so much about the performance – it's more about how it is interesting for me, or to share with children, or with other adults.

This time the focus was much more on performance. Anurupa and I talked in Germany, about a year after the Masterclass, and we were sure that we wanted to do something else. Initially, the idea was to develop a play with her group – Katkatha. But then this other idea came up from my experience in South Africa, when I was invited to work there, that it was actually possible to work with different groups at the same time and be quite effective. It wouldn't be possible to work for six weeks consistently with each group, of course, but other plans could be worked out. Then we started thinking about how it could work here. For me, it turned out that, after having worked for a long time with natural material, it would be interesting to work with plastic bottles.So this time it looks a little bit stricter, that it is going very clearly towards performances, that it will be with many different approaches and varied understanding of the performer's space in the performance – are they playing a role, or are they just performers? All these questions lead to different possibilities, which is very interesting for me, personally.

Q. Is there a particular method that you follow, a bound process, for people who want to study and explore material theatre, for those who haven't been to the Masterclass, for example?

A. For me, once I was clear what the intent was, I was sure that everyone would need to spend some time getting introduced to the material, even those who have attended the

Masterclass before this. This is necessary always – we always begin by researching on the material on our own, because without that it wouldn't be possible to proceed. Sometimes, when I work with educators, after working for, say 3 hours – which is really not much when you're exploring material – I ask them to close their eyes and feel everything that is around them. Even this sometimes makes them fear, or feel strange, because they don't do this anymore – feel with their hands and some material.So this is always a starting point. Also, it helps to understand how to proceed with children. You have to experience it for yourself.

The other thing that is quite important for me is to be able to reflect by yourself. It is very important to me to understand how to reflect on your own work, how to reflect on the work of others, how to give feedback to others, how to receive feedback and what to do with it, so that performers become independent people and are not just the materials of a director.

Q. Your process of giving feedback reminds me so strongly of Liz Lerner's 4-point Critical Response Process – there, too, we begin with describing what was done – and it is so important to understand why that matters, and what it does for the performer.

A. It is very interesting, because otherwise it is difficult to reflect together and then begin a new rehearsal process. Because in this process, we are not just experiencing the material; in the same moment we are working on a kind of dramaturgy, and all the different aspects of theatre-making, and therefore it is really important that we find the possibility for concentration to be able to repeat the performance within ourselves again. And when we do this all together, we conjure up the performance in our minds again, and this is important because only then can we work on making positive changes.

Q. So it's kind of like a visual reminder.

A. Yes, yes.

Q. Also, as an aside, I was watching the performances yesterday and thinking about the delicate balance that is needed between the performer and the material in this kind of performance. The focus keeps shifting, doesn't it? Is that all right?

A. It's interesting to recognise one after the other, even though we may still make some wrong choices. I was just speaking to Choiti and discussing that perhaps it is not the best idea to be too friendly with the children so early in the show, and to really work on the beginning in the light of the journey she intends to take. The audience needs to know at what point it is invited, and what it is invited to do.

Q. Yes, the nature of communication has to be very clear, and the rules have to be very clear. We had talked about process drama earlier, and we talked about the importance of settling the contract with the participants right at the beginning, to kind of agree on the rules of engagement. Do you think this is true of a performance as well, to set the boundaries?

A. Yes, absolutely. It is very important, because the clearer this communication is, the more the public will be able to respond to the performance.And especially if you do it right at the beginning. It is much more difficult if you do it later on – if you have established nothing in the beginning, and then you want them to be very concentrated later on, it's much more difficult. In the beginning, you always have the time to tell about the rules and then because everybody is following the flow, they are ready to accept it. In the beginning, when I started directing, I always asked the question – what are the first 5 minutes about? How do you start – to be very careful with this.

Q. I was thinking about Traces – H2O *is very clear, but* Traces *begins with an invitation to the audience – you define the space, you bring them in with a trial of newspaper pieces and show them to their seats; and I wonder, once they've taken their places, what is it that keeps them in their places? Why don't they jump out to engage?*

A. I think it is because this show begins when they enter the foyer, and the space in the middle is always empty, and we ask people to sit around – they sit down on the benches, and then Michael starts to make shapes around his feet, and then around the children's feet, and Marco starts to work with the newspaper pieces, making lines with the paper, and this goes on. This makes everyone very curious, and it is with this curiosity that they work their way in, and then it is clear that this is another space. Because they were already a part of the beginning, they are very curious to see how this will go on. Another very nice thing that happens is that the musician takes the children's names outside and then brings them in, and after about 20 minutes, these names, with their own voices, come up again. So they make this connection that what began outside has come into this room again – not very early, but after some time, quite late, it fills the room again – and it's wonderful how happy people are to hear their own names, and especially when they heard the educator's name, the children were

so happy! In the first performances, I couldn't believe how much fun they had just listening to their names! And then, they also write the names down – sometimes they make it very fast, but sometimes if they think it's nicer to write the full names – and then, of course, everything is gone, and the whole performance turns again. At first there are these names, everywhere, and then this remembering starts again, and then it's all gone and everything comes to the circle situation, and so it happens again with the names.

Q. I'm very interested in how the engagement occurs outside, in the foyer, where the performers invite the public to engage by drawing around their feet. Interestingly, when they walk into the performance space, they repeat these actions with their own hats and shoes, but this does not prove to be a distraction for children. It has to be about the performers' stance, doesn't it, about the way they are, as opposed to the actions they do?

A. You know, that's true. In the beginning, with *Woodbeat*, we had these little wooden pieces on the floor, and children would pick them up, you know, and I felt that it's ok, but it's a little bit irritating.

Endnote

The interview was taken during the Katkatha Workshop (December 4 – 17, 2017) and is published courtesy of UNIMA, India. The content and photo credits are duly acknowledged to UNIMA, India.

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