

# The power of aesthetics

- creating expression and meaning in preschool

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## The Role of Play and Imagination in Society

*My methods for creating with other adults are based on a kind of idea about repairing and returning to the creative ability we are born with—the essential play. This occurs within a framework that adults can accept, in a specific work seminar, such as in rehearsals. One aspect of becoming an adult seems to be the ability to control impulses. This might mean that we can choose not to pause and linger on things we could immerse ourselves in as children, with undivided focus—the very conditions of play. We have created a tightly controlled civilization built, among other things, on impulse control. The guiding principles in society and schools are knowledge and efficiency, which are deemed measurable. This seems to result in imagination and the ability to engage in play gradually being removed from preschool teacher education and other higher studies on children and learning.*

## The Role of Play in Higher Education

My Norwegian author friend, Merete Mork, shares a story that occurred while she was teaching in a preschool teacher education program. A five-year-old boy laid a small mat in front of a teacher and said:

- Sit down, and it will fly!

It was an invitation to play that the teacher didn't seem to understand. Flying away on the mat? The teacher didn't know how to respond. Apparently, she couldn't play.

I argue that preschool teacher education programs in the Nordic countries have become overly theoretical and advanced, neglecting play in the process. Adults have stopped associating with their own childhood play. Teaching adults to play is a joy for me. When I do it, the responses are usually filled with delight and recognition. But this is not always the case.

### Another Example

The Child Studies program at Linköping University has extensive experience with interdisciplinary approaches and recently invited me to teach doctoral students about theories of childhood, drawing from my expertise in creating theater for children. The students were to be introduced to some of my theater methods for creating performances for children. I was excited, and with 40 years of experience working with adult artists, teachers, and other interested professionals, I was ready to encourage them to dare to play freely—but with structure.

It turned out that the doctoral students either couldn't play or, perhaps more accurately, didn't want to. The answer was a firm no from the start. As is often the case, a few dominant voices set the tone for the group. They made it very clear:

- Don't play along!

One of the group leaders storms out, visibly offended. Every word I say afterward to set the conditions for play is challenged. Never before have I faced a group of people and received so many refusals to my invitations to play.

The simple rule my improvisation mentor and theater researcher, Professor Keith Johnstone from Calgary, Canada, outlines in his book *Impro* is to say yes to an invitation. Yet the adult world often responds with a resounding NO. This is likely rooted in discomfort and fear of the unknown. In this case, it became a power struggle. Discussing play discourses seemed more important than daring to play or letting go for a moment. Johnstone calls saying no to a play proposal "blocking." The principle of play is to accept a fictional suggestion:

- Come to my mat!

And then develop negotiations:

- Where should we fly?

This principle is one Johnstone has successfully taught to teachers, actors, and theater sports enthusiasts. If you respond:

- You don't have a mat!

That's a block. A negotiation could start with:

- I'm afraid of flying. I have a new suggestion.

I see academic play as a lonely competition among adults, where the fear of embarrassing oneself in front of others seems to prevail. I spent a day listening to the doctoral students review each other's academic texts on childhood from various perspectives. They didn't even want to play along mentally when I said:

- Now, you're the baby, and the person next to you is the father...
- No, I'm not a baby.
- But let's say you are.
- No, I want to know what you mean by baby.

At this point, I should have exclaimed:

- Perfect, you're blocking every attempt at play. According to Johnstone's rule of blocking, this is excellent. Let's use that as our starting point.

Instead, I became entirely blocked myself and felt stupid. That was probably the intention.

Children playing are skilled at continuing to untangle themselves within play. Otherwise, it ends as it does with adults—with arguments.

Such a sweaty and failed experience as a playful mediator is rare for me. But perhaps I've encountered a new sign of the times? That adults don't want to play. They don't want to try—not even when studying the play of children.

We adults demand not to be exposed to uncertainty. We want to remain unshaken. This helps us understand the academic who desires control. Naturally, there is disappointment in those who wish to play when nothing comes of it for various reasons—perhaps out of fear, shame, or a combination of the two.

Like the boy with his mat inviting his teacher to fly, the director stands there with a handful of simple exercises that typically bring joy. Yet, the person who doesn't want to be "a baby" doesn't understand the invitation to play. It seems she has lost her imagination during her education. Perhaps she wants to demonstrate her strength and invulnerability as an adult. I find it sad that in a space where childhood is studied from various theoretical perspectives, some adults refuse to play. A few valiantly try to play with me. I eventually give up, switch to the theory of play, and leave with a head full of questions.

### *The Room of Trust*

Since I began working on theater for children with adult actors, I've been intrigued by methods that help adults grasp the essence of play. This can involve discovering something together, associating ideas, and building a sense of community. The goal is to reach different levels of creativity, to communicate with an audience beneath the text and stated intentions.

I believe theater is a persecuted art form. Many institutions, such as the church, have tried to ban this physical art form.

Over centuries, we've developed a notion of realism, a "cool film style," even though many of us have adored physical comedy and the irrationality rooted in long-standing comedic traditions. If I mention the Marx Brothers in a cabin on a ship, Laurel and Hardy demolishing a house, or Chaplin teasing villains and escaping, it evokes a flood of images and scenarios, all grounded in play.

It's worth mentioning that some adults I've encountered have never stopped playing. In a theater project about education in 2012, we played for an hour each day. I handed out various objects: LEGO, dolls, and tools. Later, I gathered the participants and asked how long we had been playing. Some knew exactly, while others returned sweaty, having lost track of time.

Many actors dread being exposed, fearing they lack imagination. Most find help through a few rules and reminders. Many have vowed as adults never to improvise, play, or connect with anything beyond what they themselves control. As a director, I have always been focused on actors' improvisational abilities. My experience tells me that play allows one to go deeper.

### **How Does It Work? Tangibly?**

My creative method resembles a therapeutic approach. It involves preparing open-ended questions for collaborators without giving directives.

Many often say to me that I'm always curious. I agree with that description but add that I'm also deeply uncertain, which compels me to ask questions. I ask others while simultaneously questioning myself. I also enjoy creating new structures and finding them in my answers.

- How is their relationship expressed in a sculptural form?

- How is the mother? I ask the actor, but you're not allowed to answer in words; you must play the mother with the daughter. Both of you return with some situations and expressions.

It's welcome to result in "inner confrontation," meaning contradictions. New answers beyond text and stories emerge and reveal themselves. I ask collaborators in the theater about their characters in the play. I observe movements on the street, interpret them, and let my imagination take over. I cut out images and sketch dreams. I suggest certain movement material for them to play with and respond to. I show artistic expressions that they can develop further. Play rules are established, just like children create. These rules can be renegotiated as we create. The answers are not right or wrong—they are correct if they bring joy or seem interesting enough to build upon.

### *Everyone is Shy - The Room of Trust*

I often ask my reference groups—both adults and children who come to see the play develop—what they feel. I try to get to know them so they feel comfortable asking us anything they want to know. I instruct them not to critique the actors; they are not allowed to say whether they are good or bad. Most visits lead to even more questions connected to the work on the production.

Often, actors are shy about performing too early in the process, afraid they're not good enough. The creative process requires a space where nothing can be right or wrong. I call this a "room of trust." Here, everyone is free to make suggestions. I try everything, but we must move forward together with what we want to tell. As the leader of the process, I aim to create both a shared vision of the story and consensus on how we can bring it to life.

The choreographer and I began working on creating flow (Csikszentmihályi 2016), a dancing flow of play where all bodies are allowed to mimic one another, to play unobserved. I film certain movements I believe we need to remember, occasionally commenting. Feedback, for me, means providing the professional with insight into what is visible. Tasks alternate, as do directions, accompanied by various music choices. The actors are guided through different tempos.

I often mix audience groups with actors when we discuss what they are about to see. We do physical improvisations. The audience should feel respect and excitement for what happens on stage, and the actors should learn that the audience wants to tell them something. The reference group is trained to adopt an attentive, nonjudgmental perspective.

We encourage imitation games. Adults are often obsessed with making things overly significant. Take the first thing that comes to mind... is another of Johnstone's rules.

- You don't have to be original or interesting—take each other's ideas on the dance floor, mimic, and admire.
- Step onto the stage. Stand near someone you want to imitate.
- The adults dance with the actors.
- And those who don't want to, stay seated and follow an actor with your gaze. Imagine that you're mimicking them.

The actors discover that our audience is rich in associations and understands the entire flow of events. In working with reference groups—both adults and children—

everyone participates and exchanges movements. Then we sit and talk, which allows the director to test certain ideas. The purpose of mixing actors and spectators in these meetings is to help everyone understand that absolutely everyone is terrified of making mistakes, of not understanding, or of not having any imagination.

When we meet this way, we repair poor education and shatter myths about who is creative and imaginative. I want my ensemble to feel joy when those who will experience their stories arrive. I also want to show the audience what we are doing artistically, which is a more extensive task. I want us to move from questioning to a freer, more association-rich communication with the audience. This can help the future audience understand and deeply respect the actors' efforts.

### **What About the Content?**

- Children can even derive a lot from things that are originally made for adults.

This is what Bert Moeyaert (Olson 2019) said in a Dagens Nyheter interview when he received the Astrid Lindgren Prize in 2019. I agree. When we search for emotionally impactful content, we read literature and test questions such as:

- Can children aged seven to nine need catharsis?
- Do children need to cry at the theater, as Aristotle believed adults did?

These questions lead to new drama. I have never shied away from cruelty and drama that might be considered adult topics. My rule has been to create powerful theater for young audiences, but to never kill the children portrayed on stage. Children on stage represent the drama's life and future. Theater, in my opinion, is ultimately in service of life. When the play ends, the actors show themselves alive, steaming with sweat, and filled with joy.

Faced with the challenge of creating catharsis, I observe how child audiences react to the performance. We record and listen to seven-year-olds laughing, and in the silences, we can hear snuffles. The adults are the ones who cry. It is the adults who want the story to be censored for children. Children coming in groups from their classes usually laugh in recognition. They respond with laughter to the physical, emotional, and dramatic moments. We create an open, "truthful" ending that the child audience immediately sees through as an adult pedagogical tactic.

- Oh, you want us to think about this afterward, not finish it completely?

The ending of our children's tragedy *Medea's Children* (Osten 2009): Mother Medea becomes a normal, sad mother. Father Jason leaves home. The children stay with the nanny Anna/Chorus: the voice of reason. A girl comments:

- It was good that the parents listened to the children and stopped arguing, but it wasn't realistic.

### *The Path to Childism and Revenge*

With the help of great thinkers, we search for a radical theory about the way adults treat children. We seek out experts who have something to say about adult power and how it is used against children. I take my childhood experiences and turn them into a public truth about children and power. For me, it is about revenge. We play our way seriously to this point, both adults and children. Then, more questions arise:

- Why do we treat children as objects, as if we own them?
- Would we treat our best friends the way we treat children?

It is about recognizing that this is a question of power. Certain uncomfortable questions arise about how we adults view children. This has proven to be a minefield for schools and adult authorities and can trigger demands for censorship. This cannot be shown or said.

Throughout history, the adult world has decided what is good for children, what can be done with children, and what can be said about children. Children's status has varied depending on their social class. They can be married off, inherit kingdoms, but never hold power. The child is powerless in all classes: they cannot choose their parents, their school, their street, whether their parents move, or if war comes.

In the 1960s, my generation and I wanted change. Like all young people, we wanted to challenge the upbringing we received, filled with lies and taboos. I rebelled early against the notion of the child as something to be filled with "correct opinions." My revolt against a static view of children has continued ever since.

"Imagination to power" was a powerful slogan in 1968. Students wrote it on walls. But imagination did not reach children to any greater extent. After those brief slogans, imagination was never truly connected to respect and freedom for children. Grand reformists like Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Célestine Freinet, Janusz Korczak, inspired educators like Dorothy Heathcote, and all of us working in this field must recognize that society is governed by other priorities, and that the life and wild imagination of children are not allowed to guide our development.

Our theater and play on stage have always had a purpose for children. They aim to signal and celebrate freedom. As an adult, tamed and stressed by society, I must process this through my body to understand the liberation and play of the child. In our ensemble, we create a study circle. New questions are born within it, and we must reflect on both our history and our present. We must question all norms.

The ensemble grows increasingly knowledgeable through their portrayals and by playing.

The director in this chapter—me—plays with the ensemble, guided by my questions. We are led by various theories.

## **Inspiring Figures and Theories**

*Alice Miller*

Several childhood theorists have profoundly influenced my theater work. Alice Miller was a wake-up call for me. She writes about "black pedagogy": the act of beating a child while simultaneously saying you love them and that it's for the child's own good. Miller asks what happens to an adult who grows up under such circumstances.

In her first three books, Alice Miller describes how the gifted child listens to the adult—an adult who raises the child with harshness and punishment but calls it parental love. Her compelling depiction of the effects of this kind of child abuse, and the connections she draws between pedagogy, society, the church, and child-rearing, inspired my theater to spend a year exploring her chapter "Hitler's Childhood" (Osten, 2009) in *Childhood for Adults 1* (1984) and in a children's version with a different dramaturgy, "Hitler's Childhood 2". We began by

interviewing middle-school children in Sweden and Belgium about corporal punishment and their admiration for fascism's symbols of strength and danger.

### *The Doctor with a Baby Clinic*

The physician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott treated young children and had a significant influence on his time. His insights into children's development and his understanding of the deprived child's needs are extraordinary to read. I believe his description of how imagination develops is a key contribution.

In Pyret (1992), he recounts how he followed a two-and-a-half-year-old psychotic girl until she turned six. He played with and conversed her into wellness. It is a beautiful book about play and imagination. I think Winnicott occasionally makes absurdly Freudian interpretations, but apparently, they don't harm anyone. For me, the strength of the story lies in his description of the bond that develops between an old man, the analyst, and a young analysand. It's literature about child play at its highest level. Winnicott acts out and plays love with the little girl, Pyret, who, in her pain, also exhibits jealousy toward a new sibling and suffers terrible nightmares about an unknown "babacar." There is an audio recording where Dr. Winnicott says:

- I never realized what a babacar was.

For me, this shows that the little analysand is playing out their fear with someone who can use their body as a tool and engage with buckets, ropes, and small toys that become a train. Through his profound interest in a child's personal suffering and imagination, Winnicott establishes a connection and can follow the child.

### *Psychoanalysis with Infants*

Caroline Eliacheff (1994) takes child psychoanalysis further from Françoise Dolto (2019, dissertation in French, 1939). In her book *On the Body and the Cry*, she recounts her conversations with three-month-old traumatized infants.

Eliacheff's conversations with these very young children led me to create *Babydrama* (Osten, 2009). I thought that if she could speak with them about difficult experiences, then theater should be the place where we can establish a dialogue with a truly young audience. I began exploring how early children can perceive and enjoy theater. My ensemble and I have researched for a long time how this can be done. I wrote about and documented this on film in 2009.

### *More Examples*

Bruno Bettelheim's (1979) theories and ideas led my theater, Unga Klara, to break away from the demand for social realism for children and the requirement for an adjusted reality. Discussions during the 1970s seemed to insist on precisely that.

Bettelheim highlights the power of myths and fairy tales. He is radical in rejecting edited pedagogical, intentional purging of strong, grim fairy tales. The images with their intensity are meant to help the child feel their way through the forest, confront themselves, struggle, and emerge strengthened for a life we know ends with death.

Images say more than words. In a talkative, overly pedagogical, and anxious world, I believe children long to guide themselves through fears in order to survive.

## **Childism - A Form of Child Racism**

Society's inability to address violence against and exploitation of children is the

cruellest of truths. When I read Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), a researcher and analyst at the Anna Freud Centre in London, perhaps best known for her biographies of Anna Freud and Hannah Arendt, I discovered the concept of child racism. She argues convincingly in her book *Childism* for the need to find a unifying term for the child racism she sees in our civilization. The book revolves around a case study. The author recounts an adult who, during therapy, describes their life as a child. The text also includes analyses of society's violence against children. I suggested to my old theater, Unga Klara, that this should be used as a foundational book. It is terribly persuasive in describing how we have persecuted and continue to persecute the child, imagination, play, and the needs of future adults.

Child racism is a dark stain on civilization and represents our collective adulthood's repression of the child's powerlessness. If we cannot see through this, what can we do with all the pedagogical theories about imagination?

Personally, I have seen art and theater as the narrow path to rescue, healing, and compensation. But the foundation must be the child's rights and adults who understand this.

### **Artists inspired by children**

I have collected images by great artists who are inspired by children's play. Here are a few examples:

#### *Sally Mann, photographer*

Sally Mann's images taught me to see that from day one, children seem to play at being adults. They play the theatre role of the child, in the eye of the beholder. They are very serious. In her pictures they look into the camera and show their question. I believe that the images convey:

We are looking for freedom. We're not trying to blend in. We are trying to understand the world and we are depending on you. You see, the child is playing to understand reality and we are very aware of what we want from the adults. We both play the child role and reveal our wildness.

It happens when I teach about childhood in the world and show my pictures that there are furious protests against Sally Mann's pictures of her children. I was in Australia in 2000 and some of the congregation shouted:

- Stop the awful pictures, pornographic!

I argue against their puritanical overprotective reactions. I take Mann's pictures as true and at the time I did not even know that the photographer's children, who were three to eleven years old when they were photographed, were themselves playing and suggesting pictures to the photographer, that is, the mother.

In Australia, I am very surprised by the furious reactions of the adult audience. I hear that the gym teacher is not allowed to physically help the children in gymnastics for fear of sexual touching. And in Australia, the most sought-after exhibit for children is a naked heterosexual couple in ceramics. The queues moved outside the museum. The Puritans children have apparently never seen a naked adult.



In her biography (2018), Sally Mann describes how she was the subject of a witch hunt in the US from the 1990s onwards. She is accused of everything from paedophilia - the children are often half-naked in a swimming lake in a vast, wild, open landscape - to the exploitation of the innocent children. Mann was caught off guard, she says, referring to an explosion of pornographic images circulating online. Her children were playing and showing their fantasies to a camera in confidence.

The images Sally Mann and her children have negotiated in play show an image of the child that is not harmonious. The images show the child's ambivalence. The children show the camera/mother their will and aggressiveness. The children are sometimes naked and in their own wild dreamscape they pose in front of the camera. They show attitudes and challenge our perceptions of children and our expectations.

Mann describes this in her autobiography and also how she stops photographing them before their teenage years.

But the image of her free children playing and mimicking adults with irony, sensuality and eroticism scared my seminar participants into shouting CENSORSHIP.

Her children played classics like Bloody Nose and, Damaged Child was another suggestion from the children Sally Mann's family album is not cute. But to me, they point to the imagination as uncensored that also dares to challenge us.

And the children stare intently into the camera at us. Mann has stated that she should have waited before making the photos public. She was unaware of what the future would bring; she didn't see it coming.

Sally Mann's point is that the children are subjects who propose their poses and themes, and I see how the child imitates us adults.

- You cannot force these images of children, Mann defends herself.

1991 became a year of WITCHHUNT, deeply painful for her as she was persecuted by preachers and moralists.

For me, Sally Mann, the chronicler of childhood, is someone who can describe wild play and the child's observations of us. And the children approved her images.

They had editorial control.

"The only way I could get the pictures I did was in full cooperation. You have to respect their needs, which I like to think I have done."

Douglas, 1994 (interview with Sally Mann)

### *Paula Rego*

I always return to the visual artist Paula Rego before every production. Rego draws from her childhood play in Portugal. Nowadays, she works as an artist in London.

Her figures—children and adults—are intense and composed of violent bodies. I am stirred by these strong, dangerous images full of power and grotesquerie, as well as by the cruelty in English nursery nonsense rhymes about children. She throws the power of the fairy tale at us. In the fairy tale, the protagonist can enter the dangerous forest, receive advice, and survive the adventure, thereby gaining

courage to face life's injustices. Her paintings of powerful women—Dog Women—have inspired my actors to play.

The images are impulses for play; they describe the courage found beyond the normative and how we ought not to behave.

### **Difficult Topics - Taboos Then?**

I ask philosophy teachers at a philosophical preschool in Stockholm which topics are the hardest to talk about with children. They answer:

- Death and sex.

Then it's time to enter the wild forest. Take the psychosis by the scruff of the neck, as I did with my mother's illness. How can my childhood struggle between illness, health, and guilt be portrayed? In a dangerous world, adults want to make things safer. They create rules about what children are allowed to hear. Our greatest fear is that children will get hurt, die, be murdered, or kidnapped.

In the past, we scared children with tales of what could happen to them. Now we censor or perhaps pedagogize instead. But portraying the truth is the task of art.

Keith Johnstone (2015) often speaks about the need to confront our imagined fictional fears. If we've said we're on a lion hunt, we need to meet the lion—not go home for coffee. I'm speaking about play here. Improvisers should, in their games, dare to continue imagining. In the wild forest, I want to do what adults forbid and overcome the challenge. Many adults cut off children's fantasies as if they are real.

Rules of play and stories are structures we can use.

We can respond and guide, like seagull parents when their fledgling is pushed from the nest: observe and throw in new impulses.

Can everything be told? Can you create a story about psychosis for children? No, absolutely not—it can be frightening. It doesn't exist. Then I'll make it exist. How? In the form of a fairy tale, I can do anything. In ghost stories reside fear and suffering, which we as children long to hear. Can you create a play about psychosis and how the child receives the message "It's not your fault"? Yes, and you should.

You can write the fairy tale for a children's audience, about the mother and her demons that try to make her forget her child, her daughter. The demons imprison the mother and twist her mind. The child doesn't see the demons (Osten, 2016), only their effects. The fairy tale prepares children for what there is to see.

Through my book, play, and film about the girl, the mother, and the demons, children are given a chance to talk about this taboo—having a mentally ill parent. They finally learn that it has nothing to do with them! I've spoken with representatives of the justice system and worried, frightened adults about demands for censorship.

At one of my shows, a boy hesitates to enter the performance. He asks me:

- Are there snakes in it?
- No, I say, but maybe you can tell a good snake story afterward.

I stay with him, and when the film ends, I ask the children if they want to make a horror movie. They do, and maybe the snake story will become a film one day. A large white snake slithering out of a pair of boots that...

The horror stories we tell, fairy tales about the dangerous realities of life, are meant to prepare us with images for life's twists and turns, aren't they? As children, we stumble along a path between vague censorship and a safety that turns out to be false.

In the past, we lived as children in the presence of fear—in the river, the old man in the well, or the trolls in the forest. What are we doing to children if we remove all that is threatening from art, literature, and play for young kids? If we introduce double bike helmets and ban playgrounds from having hammers and nails for building? If we call them on their mobile phones to check if they are where they're supposed to be? Then we've done everything, right? Or have we? But we can never escape a child's realization that we all must die. This is something humanity must process in different ways. I believe we see this in small boys who fight and jump around with their wooden sticks. What they really want are swords, but the sticks might be taken away by well-meaning preschool staff.

- You shouldn't fight, boys. Shame, shame, shame, no playing with weapons.

One person who has studied this phenomenon in a preschool setting is filmmaker Ebba Theorell. She observed that there isn't violence in their play. They are playing a kind of dance game. They might be fire-breathing dragons with wings. They practice jumps, fights, and movements without touching each other. The filming mother sneaks after the children, capturing their play in the forest and playrooms. When I watch the film, I interpret it as the boys preparing themselves for life, practicing for life. The "violence" they practice is play—a physical exploration of gravity and interaction with each other.

A contemporary method of disciplining children seems to involve shame and guilt, creating a sense of security by removing things and saying no. It seems we are allowed to do anything as adults as long as we don't physically hit the kids. Is it that bad? We use our adult power to negotiate computer time—a day, a week. We hold the power, and thus we must also use it to introduce play, imagination, and freedom into children's schedules so that they can practice responsibility and freedom.

### **Good Fantasies, Lies, and Exaggerations**

In rituals and the theater derived from rituals, the message is that we can play and that we will die. Our inner being needs to interact with this existentially, but rituals and theater also portray joy and wonder. We use humor, perform tricks—so-called entertainment—and simultaneously confront only the dangerous.

As an artist, I want to be close to the unbearable on stage while also offering laughter, enjoyment, and understanding tied to reflection.

After extensive research, I created *Gränsen* (The Border), a play about the double suicide of two girls. This event occurred in France, where teachers in Grenoble believed the topic was worth discussing in relation to young people's fascination with it.

In Sweden, however, in the year 2000, everyone wanted to shield young people from encountering the subject. There was talk of the risk of contagion. Twenty years later, this once-taboo topic has become accepted. Young people are very interested in talking about death.

My play *Gränsen* (2009) contains so many opportunities for life—and humor! But we must carefully listen to the suffering and the fragile, those we should pay the closest attention to. Children need stories about the dark. The actors prepare thoroughly to answer questions afterward. When addressing the ritualistic question of life and death, we must use all our focus and authority. We are the shamans of our time. We pretend to engage with our own mortality.

### **Summary**

I work, we play with children, while I ask questions. The shared big laughter guides me. Pleasure, freedom, and the body's joy are elements I discuss. And about daring to challenge the predetermined conditions of a tough childhood. It's an intriguing thought—the assumption that a child becomes a true child through free creativity during their short childhood. The greatest responsibility lies with us to defend a proper childhood, especially in the first seven years.

Allied adults—educators and artists—have always understood and supported my work. The theme of defending imagination is about how we adults bring children into the world they are meant to conquer, improve, and live in.

We are all born with abilities. Which ones will we develop? We carry gifts that can grow. We are born with everything we need.

Babies need theater art—I have explored this. Theater has the power to save lives through its ability to create connection points. One question I posed was whether, even when a mother is absent or depressed, the baby can still derive aesthetic joy and a relationship to the story being told. My own childhood experiences of abandonment have undoubtedly been helped by aesthetic play, theater, images, films, painting, and music-making. Everything my surroundings believed in when I, as a child, was released to play, play, play.

This is about the child's deep need for art and the associative, collective storytelling that replaces a dreary, flat narrative. It is the aesthetic joy of playing, perceiving, and collectively believing in the profound meaning of life.

I believe and say that there are no topics we cannot talk about with children. We should tell them about the harshest aspects of life, but it is primarily how we do it that demonstrates how skilled and capable we are.

Children play, and they explore. I often think about how extraordinary their play could be if we allow and create the conditions for it.