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Title: “Eu brinco” [*I play*]: Report on a theatre performance *for* and *with* babies in Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents data drawn from research¹ carried out in collaboration with the Teatro do Biombo, a theatre company that creates performances for early childhood, based in Lisbon, Portugal. The main objective of this study is to develop and analyze interactive theatre performances for babies and children under the age of three.

This work begins by providing a brief overview of the place for children aged zero to three in early childhood education and in theatre for young audiences in Portugal.

We will then continue by presenting the creative process of “Eu brinco,” a theatre performance *for* and *with* babies, developed through different perspectives and expertise: from the Teatro do Biombo actors to its director, and from the researcher to the babies and the children under the age of three. This work will also present preliminary data on the infants’ participation in the “Eu brinco” performance, as well as on the study’s impact on the work of the Teatro do Biombo theatre company. We will conclude by considering the potential contributions of this research on both the work of this theatre company and, more broadly, on Portuguese theatrical practice both *for* and *with* babies and young children to successfully take into account their voice and participation.

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1. THE PLACE FOR CHILDREN AGED ZERO TO THREE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES IN PORTUGAL

1.1. Early childhood education in Portugal

In Portugal, as in other European countries, early childhood education has evolved through a series of different stages.

Historically, the first childcare services—in the form of taking in and looking after young children and orphans—can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries. These services were provided by institutions governed by Christian principles, whose mission was to provide assistance, fight poverty, and protect children up to the age of six (Vasconcelos 473).

Later, during the reign of the monarchy, the first private institutions started to appear in large cities, aiming to provide care to children up to the age of six and to serve as a place of refuge for them. In the 19th century, also under the monarchy, the first nursery school opened to provide education to children aged three to six (Vasconcelos 473).

It was only after the Revolution of April 1974 that childcare services went through significant development.

During this shift, the term “early childhood education” was implemented in order to design, guide and set objectives for children’s education and childcare services. Following the revolution, the profound economic, social, and cultural changes in Portugal led to the whole restructuring of the education system, with the inclusion of the right to education for young children in the framework of social rights. However, despite these changes in educational policies for young children, education for children aged zero to three was not incorporated into the Portuguese constitution. This may have contributed to the relative invisibility and lack of integration of early child education in the wider education system (Coutinho and Tomás 127).

Legislation shows that children aged above three were always at the heart of these policies: for instance, the *Decreto de 10 de Abril de 1976 que aprova a Constituição da República Portuguesa* [Decree of 10 April 1976 approving the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic], promulgated on 2 April 1976, establishes in article 74 that the state shall create a public system of preschool education (25). The *Lei n.º 46/86 de 14 de outubro – Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo* [Law No. 46/86 of 14 October – Basic Law on the Education System] and the *Lei n.º 5/97 de 10 de fevereiro – Lei-Quadro da Educação Pré-Escolar* [Law No. 5/97 of 10 February – Framework Law on Preschool Education] state that preschool education is intended for children between the age of three and their entry into primary education (670).

In 2011, with the drafting of *Recomendação n.º 3/2011- A Educação dos 0 aos 3* [Recommendation No. 3/2011 – Education from 0 to 3], some progress seemed to have been made in

terms of rethinking the education of children aged zero to three, namely through the proposal to consider the education of infants as a right and not only a need for care (18033).

The new *Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar* (OCEP) [*Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education*], released in 2016, show concern with the education of children aged zero to three and, referring to *Recomendação n.º 3/2011*, consider such education as a right, despite not being included in current legislation. The OCEP considers that there should be unity across all childhood education and that professional work with children up to the age of six should share common grounds and be driven by the same principles (Ministério da Educação/Direção-Geral da Educação [Portuguese Ministry of Education/General Directorate for Education]) (5).

1.2. Theatre for young audiences in Portugal

The development of theatre for children and young people in Portugal should also be discussed in the context of the political, social, and cultural turning point that was the Revolution of April 1974. The shift that occurred at this time marked the expansion of theatre for children and young people, referred by Caldas as “poetics of nonconformism”² (68).

In this new context, schools took on an important role as institutions that, in addition to their traditional functions, started to promote contact with new cultural activities and experiences, including the theatre. As Bastos highlights, this was an important factor in developing theatre for young audiences, “as it provided audiences and new possibilities for aesthetic enjoyment” (53).

Moreover, owing to the fact that schools gather together children from all social classes and that many teachers started their training in the arts, schools and theatre began to draw closer together, resulting eventually in a higher number of children having access to this art form (Caldas 68–69)

Over the last four decades, in the post-revolution era, several theatre companies have emerged, with some remaining active for just a short period of time while others still exist today: namely O Bando, which was created in 1974. Nevertheless, as emphasized by Bastos the majority of theatre companies focusing on children emerged in the nineties.

In general, they are small groups without a fixed structure, that seek to connect with schools through the proposals they offer and by positioning themselves in related activities and taking advantage of the cultural dynamics in play: organizing awareness-raising and educational activities for children and young people within the scope of drama, storytelling, and participating in street performances and other kind of occasional performances (...) 56.)

² Unless otherwise noted all translations are by the authors and the translator of the article

While theatre for young audiences has changed considerably over the last four decades, and not always in the best way, it has, gained a strong presence. According to Wood “theatre for children is a fully-fledged art form, having attributes that make it quite different from theatre for adults. *It is not* a simplified version of theatre for adults: it has its own dynamics and its own rewards” italics in original) (in Bastos 54).

Over this period, we also witnessed the emergence of new companies with young actors who have completed the latest training. This has opened the door to new expressive territories within the area of theatre for children.

Nevertheless, theatre companies that create theatre for children and young people are primarily focused on children above three or six years old.

We believe that, as in the realm of education, children under the age of three remain culturally unconsidered in Portugal.

1.3. Theatre for early years in Portugal

According to van de Water in the late 20th century, several theatre projects for very young children started to emerge in Europe, subsequently gaining worldwide notoriety (122). In Portugal, the first known theatre production for children under three was developed in 2003 by the Teatro do Elefante theatre company. Based on our analysis, cultural production for children under three appears to have started to increase from 2010 on. However, since the beginning of this study in 2016, new proposals to create theatre for children under three have emerged, with a seemingly increasing number of theatre companies experimenting in this field in Portugal.

Prior to this research, there was no literature about theatre for early years in Portugal. Since our research objective is not to produce a summary of the history of theatre for early years in Portugal, we do not have systematized data on theatrical practice for children under three in our country. Nevertheless, while developing our research project, we searched for theatre companies creating theatre performances for babies, contacted directors and artistic directors of such performances and watched the performances in some cases, which allowed us to increase our knowledge of the situation in Portugal in this field.

In terms of location, we discovered that most theatre companies are based in the south and center of the country. We also learned that the organizations developing theatre for children under the age of three vary and include cultural associations, amateur theatre companies, professional theatre companies, and individuals. The performances can be carried out in nursery schools, conventional theatres, and libraries.

In terms of formats, we watched performances using storytelling, with a text and a story, and performances where the body is the main vehicle of communication between the actors and the

infants. Using resources to stimulate the senses also seems to be part of this creative universe for very young children in Portugal.

Regarding dramaturgy, there were performances using narration where the dialogue between the characters tells a story. We also watched performances with a pedagogic nature, intended to teach something, including, for example, learning colors, numbers, animals, etc.

With regards to participation, we saw performances that include interactive moments during and at the end of the performance, and we also watched performances where children entered the scenic space, interacting with the actors at any moment of the performance, and this did not seem to be a problem for the actors.

In this first insight into the universe of theatre for very young children, we also wanted to understand how the performances were created, identifying specifically whether the companies called upon professionals from other domains to take part in their creative process. In this respect, we noticed that some theatre companies designed a theatrical product to be sold to nursery schools, meaning they worked *for* nursery schools, and not *with* them in a collaborative effort where several voices are heard in the creative process of a performance. It is important to note, at this stage, that we were not able to contact all the groups or individuals developing theatre for early years in Portugal, thus this information cannot be generalized. However, from all the companies we did contact, the exception in terms of collaboration with other childhood professionals we found within the Teatro do Biombo theatre company, which will be mentioned later.

2. THEATRE *FOR* AND *WITH* BABIES – A NEW IMAGE OF BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

The most recent conceptions of child and childhood have led to the recognition of babies and young children as active subjects having their own voice (Fernandes; Gottlieb) and enjoying a full set of rights. Article 31 of the “Convention of the Rights of the Child” recognizes “the right of the child to (...) engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (United Nations 12), and this has also been reflected in artistic production, including in theatrical production for very young children.

Today, theatre for early years “tends to rely on audience participation even more than theatre for older children” (Fletcher-Watson, *Seen and Not Heard* 24) and “employs a multiplicity of forms to engage with its rapidly changing audience, from play environments to performative installations, from improvisatory co-creation to narrative dramas” (Fletcher-Watson, *More like a Poem than a Play* 39). During the performances, babies and children can manipulate objects, interact with the artists, enter in the scenic space, co-create, reinterpret and (Hovik; Nagel and Hovik; Young and Powers). Throughout these artistic experiences, children and adults interact and improvise together (Hovik 17).

Babies and children become actors and the actors become the audience (Fletcher-Watson, *More like a Poem than a Play* 41). Regarding the creative process, some theatre creators call upon children's participation not only during the final version of the performance, but also in its conception phase, inviting them to participate in rehearsals and observing their reactions (Fallon and Van Loo; Wartemann), while exchanging views with the people who know them the best, who look after them every day and during the performances: the nursery teachers. There are also projects with artists, teachers, researchers and children working together as researchers (Nagel and Hovik; Peters) during the whole process of creating interactive theatre performances or *interactive dramaturgies* (Nagel and Hovik 162).

Therefore, to develop the research, we wanted to find a theatre company that would consider babies and children as citizens with a full set of rights and an active voice, regardless of their age, and stage performances that allow for their active participation. We also wanted to find a company where the conception work was developed in collaboration with other professionals who work with children, namely nursery teachers or other caregivers.

Through theatrical experiences, we wanted to help promote young children's voice and their participation, specifically for infants of nursery age (from birth to age three). We also believe that by gathering together knowledge, perspectives, interests and skills in a collective process (Peters 102) – in this case in the process of creating and developing theatre performances *for* and *with* infants up to the age of three – theatre and schools can be brought closer together.

In this context and for ongoing research, we have adopted the expression “theatre *for* and *with* babies” to refer to theatre experiences developed not only *for* but also *with* babies and children under the age of three.

3. “EU BRINCO” [I PLAY]

3.1. Choosing a theatre company

For the purposes of this research, we found that the Teatro do Biombo was the theatre company that would allow us to best achieve the objectives we had set. This company set out in 2010 with a particular focus on early childhood, having already gathered extensive experience in terms of performances for babies and children up to the age of three. To create the performances, the director explored a series of proposals with babies and children under three from a partner nursery, observing how they would react. Based on these observations, she then created the performances. She would also try to develop experimental sessions before premiering the performance, to observe how babies and children would react and to listen to the nursery teachers' feedback. This was one of the dimensions that was in line with the objectives of our research.

In terms of participation, we were able to see that the company's performances included some interactive moments, where actors invited infants to manipulate objects during and/or at the end of the performance (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes). However, these exchanges happened in predetermined moments of the performance, and the free participation of infants, whenever they wanted, was not allowed.

From this initial contact with the Teatro do Biombo theatre company, we started, together with the artistic team, to consider the possibility of allowing greater freedom of participation for babies and children in future performances. The idea of carrying out an interactive performance was therefore introduced, where the participation of babies, children and nursery teachers would be taken into consideration in a more effective way.

3.2. A collaborative creative process

Developing the "Eu brinco" performance was the result of a co-creation process with the following participants: the actors and director of the Teatro do Biombo theatre company, the researcher, the nursery teachers, and babies and children under the age of three from a nursery in the Lisbon area.

Before beginning the creative process, the researcher presented the research objectives to the actors and director, which were to be used by everyone as a basis to set their individual goals. The researcher also shared theoretical concepts with the artistic team about 'baby, child, and childhood' and 'voice, participation, and children's rights', as well as videos, books, articles, and theoretical concepts on theatre *for* and *with* babies and *interactive dramaturgies* (Nagel and Hovik 162).

The starting point for the creation of "Eu brinco" was the performance "Eu brinco, eu danço" [*I play, I dance*], previously created by the Teatro do Biombo theatre company.

During the initial development phase of the performance, we started to share ideas with the actors and the director, based on international theatre experiences associated to the research goals.

Next, we began the creation phase. This process was divided into two stages: the first was led by the actors, the director, and the researcher; and the second by the artistic team, the researcher, and babies and children up to the age of three from the Lisbon-based nursery. During the first stage, the goal was to develop the storyline, based on the idea of interactivity during the performance. The actors explored possibilities for interpretation in collaboration with the director and researcher. During this phase, the researcher also played the role of co-director, her contribution being essentially related to the communication and participation of babies and children up to the age of three (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes). The second stage was dedicated to developing the trial and co-creation process at the nursery. This process included trialling the theatrical piece that had been created so far with three groups of children aged three months to three years old, accompanied by nursery teachers and

educational assistants.³ The performances were recorded with two cameras: one was placed in front of the actors and the other one was placed in front of the children. During the performance, the researcher observed the babies, the children, and the nursery teachers. The director took notes about the performance and the actors' work. After each session, discussion groups were held with the artistic team, the researcher, and the nursery teachers. "The reflection on the reactions of the babies and children, the views and suggestions of the nursery teachers, the feedback of the actors, as well as the remarks made by the director and the researcher were used to restructure the initial storyline of the performance" (Ribeiro-Cunha 766).

3.3. A theatre performance *for* and *with* infants

"Eu brinco" is an interactive theatre performance intended to be carried out in nurseries *for* and *with* babies and children under the age of three, accompanied by their nursery teachers and/or educational assistants. The performance lasts approximately 40 minutes and is carried out by two actors/performers. The performance includes a minimalist setting that is easy to transport and assemble: a structure similar to a clothes rack, buckets with white scarves, and some colorful and black pillows that contains some props to be used during the performance, such as colorful scarves, light spheres, and plastic items.

In terms of dramaturgy, "Eu brinco" does not tell a story. It is composed of several interconnected scenes that represent the sequence of a day (from waking up to going to bed).

Regarding technical resources, the performance uses music and recorded sounds, songs sung by the actors, stage lighting and blackout (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes)

The performance also includes a time of pre-performance interaction. During this time, the actors go to the classrooms of the children who will participate in the performance and establish a connection with them through movement and music.

"Eu brinco" also has a time of briefing that includes a set of instructions given to the adults who will accompany the children.

The performance was created in order to allow different moments and levels of participation for babies and children, based on a "ladder of arts participation for the very young" (Fletcher-Watson, *Seen and Not Heard* 29) and the SceSam Working Model (Nagel and Hovik 159). In this way, babies and children can, at times, adopt closed participation (Nagel and Hovik 160), simply observing the performance, and, at other times, adopt open participation (Nagel and Hovik 161), playing an active role as performers and co-creators of the theatrical experience. The actors use movement, body and facial expression, sounds, and props to communicate and interact with babies and children. As a result,

³ In Portugal, "auxiliares de ação educativa" [*educational assistants*] are professionals who complete vocational training that enables them to assist nursery teachers in their duties.

the different moments of “Eu brinco” allow participation to span from simple observation to completely free participation, where actors and infants perform, play, and co-create. At any moment during the performance, babies and children are allowed to enter the scenic space, touch and explore the props, and interact with the actors (Ribeiro-Cunha 767).

4. METODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The research process was carried out through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, according to action-research methodology. Data was gathered through participant observation, field notes, interviews, discussion groups, and videos.

The first phase of the research carried out during the 2017–2018 academic year, as previously mentioned, covered the co-creation process of “Eu brinco”.

During the second phase of the research, which took part across the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years, the performances were carried out in different nurseries in the Lisbon area. During this phase, we observed how babies, children, nursery teachers, and actors communicate and participate in “Eu brinco”. The performances were recorded with at least two cameras in order to capture as much information as possible. After each session, the actors and the researcher exchanged views on the development of the performance. Interviews were also held with the people in charge of the classroom (nursery teachers or educational assistants) who had accompanied the group of babies and children during the performance. While the research was being developed, several meetings were held with the artistic team and the researcher in order to reflect on the research goals and the artistic process being carried out, as well as on new actions to be implemented in future sessions.

5. PRELIMINARY DATA

Analysis of the videos and the researcher’s field notes allows us to present, in section 5.1, some preliminary data regarding two performances carried out in two different nurseries. In one performance, the participants included 28 children between 3 months and 2 years old and, in the second performance, there were 17 children between 9 months and 2 years old. All children were accompanied by nursery teachers and educational assistants. In section 5.2, we will present data from the interviews held with the actors and the director while the research was being finalized, highlighting the changes in their work. Lastly, in section 5.3, we will present the main considerations in developing theatre *for* and *with* babies, according to the actors and the director.

5.1. Involving babies and young children in “Eu brinco”

Analysis of videos and field notes relating to the two performances showed that the children’s participation in the “Eu brinco” performance involved their body, voice, and emotions, mirroring the

actions of the actors, sharing the experience with their peers and/or adults and seeking for safety with nursery teachers and/or educational assistants (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes). Regarding the actors, analysis of both videos shows that, at times, the actors performed as in a monologue, without establishing physical proximity or eye contact and, at other times, they took an interactive approach. This interaction was established through their body and props. In this way, eye contact, searching for more physical proximity, touch and smile were some of the strategies used by the actors to communicate with children. The elements of surprise and humor seemed to capture the attention of babies and children (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes).

The data gathered so far suggest that the involvement of children in the performances seems to depend on many aspects, namely: the information transmitted to nursery teachers before the performance, the place where the performance is held, and the resources used by the actors (Ribeiro-Cunha and Antunes).

Data from the videos and the field notes of all the observed performances will be triangulated with the interviews held with the nursery teachers and the actors, for more precision and objectivity.

5.2. Changes in the work of the theatre company

Continuous reflection throughout the process was carried out by the artistic team and the researcher and was informed by observing the infants' reactions, and by examining the feedback from the participating nursery teachers and the actors. The results of this process were used to restructure many elements of the performance, including issues relating to space organization, the pre-performance briefing and the work of the actors.

Consequently, during the course of the study, some changes were identified in the work of the Teatro do Biombo theatre company.

While the research was being finalized, we interviewed the actors and the director. The data from these interviews show changes in their approach towards babies and young children as well as towards their work.

Regarding their approach towards babies and young children, these data indicate that both the director and the actors of the Teatro do Biombo theatre company adopted a fresh perspective of babies and young children, displaying greater acknowledgement of their voice and participation.

Concerning this new approach towards babies and young children, one of the actors explained that his work changed in that he gained a greater understanding of the importance of "reading" the reactions of the babies and children (EntAtG-03-04-19). The second actor mentioned that experiencing "Eu brinco" created "a memory that stays in the body about what this work of containment of energy is (...), and also referred the dynamic of giving and receiving between him and the infants, which has benefits for his future work (EntAtP-03-04-19).

On the other hand, the director mentioned that her work had changed in regard to “the attention to moments where, artistically speaking, babies can be included and taking this into account” (EntEnJC-03-04-19).

Thus, we can see that the main changes are related to this new perspective of babies and young children.

5.3. Key considerations for creating theatre *for* and *with* infants

The data from the interviews also reveals the actors’ and the director’s main considerations for creating theatre *for* and *with* infants. According to one of the actors, the following elements are required: sensitivity, containment of energy, and mastery of “body, dancing, singing and music techniques...” (EntAtP-03-04-19). The second actor also highlighted the sensitivity needed to understand what the “child thinks, feels and is telling you” (EntAtG-03-04-19). He mentioned the importance of eye contact and hand gestures to communicate with babies and children. (EntAtG-03-04-19).

For the director, the actors who work *for* and *with* babies and young children have to be truly present, communicating through touch, eyes, and objects. In this regard, the director added that the performance should include music, objects, and keywords that the children recognize, as well as interactive moments (EntEnJC-03-04-19).

Therefore, the actors and the director highlight the importance of sensitivity, physical touch, and eye contact as well as mastery of different artistic languages apart from acting, namely dancing, singing, and music.

FINAL REMARKS

Observing the reactions and communicative expressions of babies and young children, with their multiple languages, allowed for interpretation of how they participate in the “Eu brinco” performance. The preliminary data, which are not yet conclusive, show that the involvement of babies and young children happens through body, voice, and emotional expression. At times, children observe what is happening on stage and, at other times, they enter the scenic space, imitate the actors, and propose actions to the actors who then imitate them. In this way, actors, babies, children, and their caregivers are actors and spectators of one another: they observe each other, imitate each other, perform, improvise, and create together (Ribeiro-Cunha 768).

Regarding the actors, data show that the strategies used to communicate and interact with babies use the body as main vehicle, through eye contact, smile, and touch, and through seeking physical proximity and using objects. As discussed in relevant theory, physical proximity and facial expression, especially eye contact between the artists and the infants (Aristizabal et al.; Taube;

Zuazagoitia et al.), are a means of communicating intention and maintaining a link with very young children (Drury and Fletcher-Watson 4).

As a result of this study, the Teatro do Biombo theatre company has improved its theatrical practices, in particular regarding their approach towards babies and young children. This study also brought benefits both to the actors' and the director's work. Apart from greater respect for the children's voice and their participation, the actors highlighted a greater ability to "translate" their languages. By taking an open and listening approach (Frabetti; Hovik), the actors learned to interpret the infants' languages (Rodrigues et al 279). Furthermore, the director mentioned that the greatest contribution of this project was to have developed a keen concern for the inclusion of babies and children as co-creators during the whole artistic process. Lastly, the actors and director highlighted the importance of sensitivity, physical touch, and eye contact as well as mastering multiple artistic languages (dance, song, and music) besides acting to create theatre *for* and *with* babies.

During the development of this study, different perspectives, knowledge, and skills were brought together through constant reflection *on* and *in* practice, connecting the creators, actors, researchers, teachers, babies, and children. This project has united research, theatre, and early childhood education.

In summary, we consider that this connection between different perspectives and knowledge has helped to bring theatre and nurseries closer together. First, nurseries enjoy a theatrical experience specifically designed for children aged zero to three, helping to really promote the children's participation as active subjects, to improve their socialization and learning processes and also to increase their artistic and theatrical exposure. Second, through feedback from those who look after and best understand the babies and young children, the actors have had the opportunity to improve their work, adapting it to the needs and interests of the target audience.

Finally, owing to the fact that this whole process is part of a research study, it has been possible to deepen, debate, and disseminate theory in this area, helping to address the lack of relevant research in Portugal.

We believe that this work could contribute to a Portuguese theatrical praxis *for* and *with* babies and children up to the age of three, which successfully takes into account their voice and participation. We also believe that this work could inform the debate on the importance of artistic languages in the education of children aged zero to three.

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