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Theatrical competence, communication and 'Cargo'* among young audiences: how do they figure it out?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of aesthetic qualitative research conducted in Israel for the purpose of increasing the understanding of the reception process among kindergarten children (aged 5–6). The paper focuses on the link between Theatrical Communication, personal 'Cargo' young audiences 'carry' upon attending a theatrical event and Theatrical Competence. We argue that the encounter between theatrical cargo and theatrical communication form the theatrical competence of the audience at this young age.

KEYWORDS

Reception; theatrical communication; young audience; meaning making

When attending a theatrical performance as researchers of TYA (Theatre for Young Audience), observing the children's spectrum of reactions, each age group in a separate row, many questions arise: do they have the theatrical competence to decipher a performance? How is this competence created? What does it consist of? What are the affinities between the process of theatre reception and the theatrical competence components at such a young age? Indeed, TYA research is evolving, and more theatre researchers throughout the world are writing about issues concerning young audiences (Sedgman 2019a). We lack knowledge about young audiences and their reception of a live performance, a one-time event presented for them on stage, even though some scholars, such as Klein, Schonmann Maguire and Reason have made contributions to the field. These scholars have formed the basis for this article.

This paper presents the findings of an empirical study conducted in Israel, for the purpose of increasing the understanding of the reception process among kindergarten children (age 5–6).

The initial assumption is that the reception process is comprised of three dimensions, which are related to three theatrical communication mechanisms: decoding Sign Systems, understanding Conventions, and focusing on the correct Aesthetic Distance. We argue that the complex reception process is possible at this young age,

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*The term 'Cargo' in this paper refers to the social-cultural, emotional and cognitive baggage [in a positive sense] children use for deciphering a performance.

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since the young audiences have three sorts of capacities and knowledge that assist them in creating theatrical communication. We call them 'Cargo': Socio-cultural Cargo, the theatrical knowledge acquired through socio-cultural activities; Emotional Cargo, intensification of enjoyment on the way to the theatre and while attending a performance; and Cognitive Cargo, the act of deciphering and understanding the performance.

The paper focuses on the link between Theatrical Communication (Elam 2002) and the personal 'Cargo' of young audiences and argues that their meeting point creates Theatrical Competence (Maguire 2012). The relationship between cargo and dimensions of reception is mutual and evolving. The deeper and more complex the cargo is, the more complex the theatrical experience becomes and, at the same time, as the children attend additional performances, they develop and deepen their cargo, and hence their theatrical competence.

The term 'Cargo' refers to an evolving pre-existing capacity, repertoire and knowledge that shape the young child's theatrical experience but is in turn shaped and changed by that experience. Children's cargo evolves and becomes richer as they develop, both physically and mentally, and they acquire a deeper general knowledge of the world that surrounds them. Children acquire theatrical knowledge through experiences, such as socio-dramatic play in the kindergarten; performances they attend or participate in; TV series; films in movie theatres and more. In fact, the cyclic movement created between the three theatrical communication dimensions that absorb and enrich the three personal types of cargo is part of the theatrical competence design (Maguire 2012; Reason 2010b).

In the paper, we introduce the conceptualisation of the theatrical experience and the process of reception and highlight the three dimensions of theatrical communication and theatrical competence from theoretical literature. After presenting the research methodology, we present the intersection between the three dimensions and the children's cargo in the process of the audience achieving theatrical competence.

Reception process: theatrical experience and theatrical competence

The theatrical experience in a theatre performance is a complex process, based on the individual's emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic background that responds to the 'reality' presented on stage. While experiencing the performance, the spectator must perceive, decipher, and make meaning out of the illusion created for him (Bennett 1997; Eversmann 2004). In TYA research, scholars refer to the different ways theatrical experiences are developed, perceived, and retained. Nellie McCaslin (2005) argues that the theatrical experience is achieved both by watching a theatrical performance and by acting in it (creative drama). In the spirit of Dewey (1934 [1980]), Schonmann (2006) argues that the theatrical experience occurs only while the performance lasts and has no other evidence apart from memory. Reason (2010a), on the other hand, makes a distinction between two types of theatrical experience: the one experienced while watching – immediate, intuitive, unconscious, and the other experienced after the performance, when thinking about it, talking about it and/or participating in research about it. Taking the psychological point of view, Klein (2005) defines the imaginative aesthetic experience as an internal cognitive-affective process of intra – and interpersonal

meaning making which occurs during performances and an external product of judgmental response as expressed verbally after performances. Furthermore, Scollen (2012) argues that at seven years of age, children can discuss the plot, the characters, their favourite moments in the production, and the intellectual morality of a play. Moreover, her research shows that not only children understand the play, they are also able to explain the modes of meaning-making.

The theatrical experience is based on theatrical competence, which encompasses capabilities, knowledge, and expectations (Jauss 1982) that enable the spectator to comprehend the theatrical performance. Researchers (Prendergast 2004; Reason 2010b; Maguire 2012) argue that children have the theatrical competence to experience complex theatre performances as well as have a broad horizon of expectations which include the spectator's cognitive hold on the theatrical frame, his knowledge of texts, and textual laws and conventions together with his general cultural preparation and the influence of critics, friends, and so forth (Elam 2002). They believe it is our duty to encourage the children to expand them. If we actively encourage young audiences to engage in a performance, they will gain the impact of expanding their knowledge and acquisition of the field in a way that activates creativity, imagination, emotion, and capabilities in the present and in the future.

Freshwater (2009) and Maguire (2012) argue that the audience is not a single entity. Maguire refines the perception that an audience consists of unique individuals and opposes Piaget's age distribution as a means of defining age-group performances. When watching a live performance, children will respond in different ways, both individually and as an audience because each individual has a different horizon of expectations, different abilities to understand and interpret conventions, and different modes of perception. Based on the Theory of Mind, a developmental contemporary theory, Laor-Blasbalg (2012) shows the development of children's ability to interpret pretense. She notes that children of different ages perceive pretense differently, and this reinforces the position presented here regarding individual perceptions of the performance in terms of both the developmental stage, the horizon of expectations, and the personal cargo the children possess while interpreting a theatrical performance. On the one hand, every child has an individual reaction depending on the cargo they come with. On the other hand, reactions of individuals in the same age group have many similarities among them.

Theatrical communication: semiotics, conventions, and aesthetic distance

Theatrical communication takes place between the stage and the audience during a theatrical performance through three dimensions: deciphering the Semiotics, understanding Theatrical Conventions, and creating Aesthetic Distance. These three dimensions enable the spectator to form meaning out of the fiction presented to him on stage.

- Deciphering Semiotic Sign Systems

According to Elam (2002), semiotics is used as a way to 'read' the theatrical text by the audience. Following other semiotic theatre scholars (Aston and Savona 1991; Esslin 1993; Pavis 1985), researchers in the field of children's theatre refer to semiotics as a suitable theory in their study (Aram and Mor 2009; Mor 2015; Reason 2010b). Schonmann

(2006) refers to semiotics as what one places on the stage so others can interpret and close the gaps between reality and fiction and create reality on stage. According to Klein (2005), deciphering and understanding determines the concentration of the children's investment at any given moment in the performance. Reason (2010b) refers to semiotics as an appropriate theory in the study of children's theatre and argues that although children are not interested in the theory of semiotics, the action we may call 'semiotic analysis', reading the meaning from the signs, is not beyond their perception. Various taxonomies of classification have been developed to enable semiotic analysis (Esslin 1993; Fischer-Lichte 1992; Pavis 1985). Tadeusz Kowzan's taxonomy from (1968), a classification with thirteen categories of signs was chosen by the current research as most suitable for research with young audiences. It provides four sets of sign systems, which distinguishes between the acoustic and visual signs created by the actor, and those created outside him. The actor becomes a central representative of the text. He chooses to emphasise one system or another, thus allowing these groups of sign systems to influence the formation of meaning, by producing a certain 'reading' of the signs. (Aston and Savona 1991).

- Understanding Theatrical Conventions

Conventions are the agreement between the creators and the audience, according to which the creators compose and perform the work according to well-known and accepted rules, whether implicit or explicit, and create the illusion of theatre (Pavis 1995). They express the readiness to name and accept a certain phenomenon and behave accordingly (Ben-Perez and Schonmann 2000).

As we present, the findings of the study confirm Schonmann's assumption that children attending a theatrical performance must understand and accept the reality performed on stage as reality while, at the same time, being aware that it is an illusion (Schonmann 2002, 2006). The child must function in between the real world and the fictional world. They must understand the artistic foundation, which is a key to the aesthetic experience, and be able to say accordingly, 'This is happening now'. However, the child needs to be able to say simultaneously, 'I am in the theatre and this is only imaginary'. Understanding this paradox means understanding the core of the theatrical art. Following this paradox, Schonmann (2006) points out that it is a difficult cognitive task to comprehend the convention of make believe and stage reality and doubts a child's ability to understand the conventions as understood by the adult. If the child does not understand, and there is no adult to explain, the convention will not fulfil its function.

Controversially, Klein (2005) argues that children do not come to the theatre 'tabula rasa'. They know theatrical conventions from watching movies, TV, and role-playing games. At any age, the audience chooses whether to suspend their disbelief. Reason (2008a, 2008b) emphasises that contradictory responses to believe or disbelieve, engaging in the displayed arts or the illusion itself signify children's complex theatrical abilities.

- Creating Aesthetic Distance

Mental distance according to Bullough (1912) is a conscious or unconscious psychological phenomenon which occurs while watching a natural factor or a work of art. Mental

distance enables the aesthetic experience: the pleasure of this observation. Aesthetic distance in theatre portrays the spectator's presence in a conscious range between complete identification with the reality on stage and the point of blurred boundaries between reality and fiction up to complete detachment and alienation from the theatrical situation.

Similar to Bullough's variability dimension (1957), Schonmann (2006) describes three levels of involvement in a theatrical performance: 'Low' distance in which the children are so immersed in the fiction that they cannot separate the imaginary world created on stage from their real lives; 'High' distance in which the child is completely detached from the performance and is not involved in the fictional world created; and 'Optimal' distance in which the child shows involvement in an appropriate measure that results in artistic-aesthetic pleasure. According to Schonmann, what determines the degree of concentration in the performance by the children and maintaining optimal aesthetic distance is their relationship with the stage set by the actors' abilities (Schonmann 2006). Nevertheless, optimal distance is not a stable state, but a psychological mechanism propelling emotions and thoughts back and forth like tidal waves while experiencing a performance (Klein and Schonmann 2009).

Methodology

In order to shed light on the reception process of very young audiences, an aesthetic qualitative reception study was conducted among Israeli kindergarten children (five to six years old). The research dealt with several questions concerning the reception process of kindergarten children, the role of theatrical communication in the aesthetic experience and the theatrical competence of young audiences at such a young age. This paper will concentrate on a research question that emerged while the research progressed: what is the 'cargo' that structures theatrical-cultural competence and what sources construct it. In order to explore the interplay between the conditions from which varying individuals go about making sense of a performance (Sedgman 2019b), research methods were carefully designed and accommodated.

Twenty-four kindergarten children aged five to six, from four Israeli cities participated in this study. Two kindergartens from each city were chosen.[1] The kindergarten teachers were instructed to choose three participants from each class who were sociable, verbal, that will not shy away from the researcher. Each of the participants attended two professional theatrical performances for children, produced by adult artists in repertory theatres for children (three participants at a time). The productions were selected using the criteria for quality established by the Ministry of Education in Israel: A reproduction of Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, a musical adaptation of Frank Baum's classic book, invites the audience to an encounter with a successful adolescent journey, following brave friendships and the power of kindness and innocence. The other production was an original play, *The Shtuzim*[2] *Warehouse* by Datia Ben-Dor, based on her poems for children. The play invites the young audience to the warehouse of Datia Ben Dor (an Israeli writer and composer for children), where the Shtuzons are waiting for them: Shtuza, Shtuzit and Shtuzi Tapuzi. They will teach a pizza

delivery man to invent nonsense rhymes. The delivery man meets characters from Ben-Dor's poems and stories, hiding inside the crates of the warehouse full of surprises.

Ethical issues were taken into consideration. The Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education gave approval, the parents approved, and each child was informed about the research and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any time.

None of the children expressed any objection to participating in the study. All the participants were happy to accompany the researcher[3] to the theatre hall, usually grand cultural halls, sit with her on the bus and in the hall, attend the 'theatre talks' (see below, p. 8) and participate in the interviews. Sedgman (2019a) points out the willingness of the audience to participate in research and seize the opportunity to reflect upon, rate and critique the performance. The children in the current research were happy to share their feelings and thoughts with the researcher:

> Sometimes, during the performance they turned their head towards me to see my response to the performance, to see what I was writing in my notebook ('I could see you wrote in the darkness'), or referred to my writing during the observations ('Write down that … '). Sometimes they even held my hand. It seemed like they felt privileged to participate in the research (from the research diary).

The children were aware of the researchers' presence, and it might have made them become more engaged in the situation. Nevertheless, the same responses were formed when their parents were present, or when the researcher was not sitting with them.

The participants attended two performances each; the first with their kindergarten teachers and peers and, the second, with their families. After each performance, four research tools were used for data collection in order to create a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and to increase the reliability of the research:

Observations were made in the theatre halls. Children's physical and verbal responses were collected. Theatre Talks, a research tool developed by Sauter (2000) for assessing the theatrical experience of adult audiences, was adapted for research with children: three participants from each kindergarten took part in a theatre talk after attending a performance. During the theatre talks, an additional research tool was implemented – Drawing – which gave the children a chance to tell stories, convey metaphors, and present their worldviews, using both what they depicted in the drawing itself, and their explanation of the drawing (Malchiodi 1998). The participants were asked to draw and share their experience. The drawing turned out to be a very efficient tool in breaking the ice and creating rapport, and also functioned as a tool for data collection. Matthew Reason (2008c) used drawing and painting in research in order to connect with children in a manner that was both age appropriate and engaging. There are additional practical reasons: unwillingness to cooperate with the researcher due to fear of sharing feelings and thoughts with a stranger; insufficiently developed verbal capabilities to express the experience; and/or the possibility of being influenced by their peers' opinions.

One day after each theatre talk, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each child. The interviews were based on themes that emerged from the theatre talk, the drawing, and the participants physical and verbal responses during the performance. Following Reason (2010b) and Sedgman (2019a), the research tools gave the children the opportunity to process the experience and verbalise it; in this manner, it became their knowledge for the future.

The data was analysed using textual ('discourse' or 'theme') analysis which is, as Saldaña (2011) defines it, discussing words and descriptions used by the participants to reflect their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge in order to reveal fresh insights of what was observed and discovered about the human condition. Theme analysis focuses mainly on the text as a window that enables a glance into the human experience (Shkedi 2011). Deductive and inductive approaches were used in current research analysis: there was an attempt to find relevant content from the theoretical framework within the collected data, and at the same time, there was an attempt to create an inclusion from the empirical material that was collected (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, and Lieblich 2008). The analysis units in the observations were the child's verbal or physical responses while watching the performance. The analysis units used during the theatre talks, the drawings,[4] and the interviews were verbal phrases: a single sentence or a few sentences that expressed one main idea (Ayalon and Tsabar Ben-Yehoshu'a 2010). ATLAS.ti[5] software for qualitative data analysis was used to facilitate this stage.

Three forms of cargo intersect three dimensions of communication

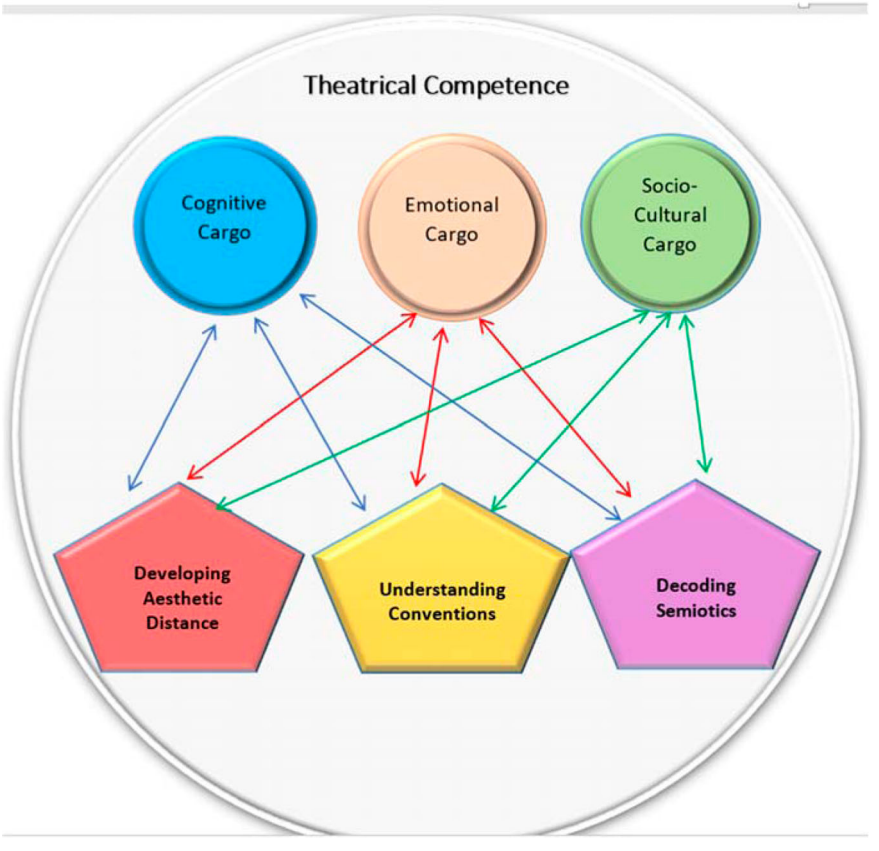
Theatrical communication, as shown previously, is constructed through three dimensions that occur simultaneously: decoding sign systems, understanding conventions, and creating an aesthetic distance. The research findings which emerged from data analysis show that these dimensions occur among young audiences, since they enter the theatre hall with three forms of abilities and knowledge we call 'cargo': socio-cultural cargo, emotional cargo, and cognitive cargo.

In this section, we focus on the connection between the three dimensions and their link to the three forms of cargo. We argue that these three forms of cargo form a foundation for the children's theatrical experience that helps the children absorb the performance, and at the same time, the three dimensions expand, develop, and refine the cargo.

The relationship between cargo and the dimensions is mutual and evolving. The deeper and more complex the cargo becomes, the more complex the theatrical experience becomes, and then develops and deepens the cargo. In fact, the cyclic movement created between the three dimensions of theatrical communication and the three forms of cargo are part of the children's Theatrical Competence.

In the next three sections, we focus on each of the three forms of cargo and provide evidence (based upon research findings) illustrating how each component of the cargo is linked with the three dimensions of theatrical communication that together shape the theatrical competence of the young audience.

Theatrical Competence, Communication and 'Cargo' among Young Audiences: How do they figure it out?



Visual model: Three forms of cargo intersect three dimensions of communication.

The socio-cultural cargo: theatrical knowledge

Kindergarten children acquire their theatrical knowledge from various sources: social interactions, such as socio-dramatic play and theatre classes in kindergarten; interactions with adults or other children; and communication and mass media, such as television series, films, theatre performances they have previously attended, and performances they have taken part in. One of the research participants revealed her sources of knowledge acquired during a socio-dramatic play in kindergarten: 'We have things [in the kindergarten] not so much like theirs [the actors] – because we do not have clothes like theirs, we do not have shoes like theirs and we do not have a curtain like theirs. We have no stage, but we can get a stage' (Hodaya, 5.9 years old).[6] This is one example of a source that reflects the reality of life from which the children derive their knowledge, their personal interest in the various issues, and their culture.

Proper previewing preparation in which adults mediate the performance for the children before they attend it is an additional source that contributes to their theatrical knowledge. The best theatrical previewing preparation focusses on understanding the theatrical language (Aram and Mor 2009; Reason 2010b). Furthermore, good preparation requires excellent quality theatre which will occupy the child's thoughts during and after the show, and necessarily prepare them for the next theatrical performance (Reason 2010b). The children themselves say that they are 'learning from the performance' (Noa, 5.9 years old).

The children revealed that media is another source that becomes socio-cultural cargo: 'And there was, in the film, when I was three, there was a stage that was higher than the stage in the performance we saw' (Yotam, 5.0 years old). Or 'We saw … this videotape before the day of the performance, and they said on the tape that it was a warehouse, so when they said – warehouse, she knew immediately it was a warehouse' (Daphna, 5.9 years old). Performances that the children have seen previously enrich their socio-cultural cargo, enabling them to decipher the current performance. During one of the theatre talks, the children were asked about the meaning of the lights that began to dim when the performance began. One of the youngest children in this study answered confidently: 'It was the beginning of the show'. When asked how he knew that, he revealed the source of his knowledge: 'Because I went to a show once' (Yuval, 5.0 years old). A comparison to television series also conceptualises their ability to evaluate and criticise current performances: 'I prefer TV programs because they are short, and then another program comes. And a theatre show is something long [in a strong and decisive tone], like three programs' (Itai, 5.7 years old).

A home that appreciates theatre will be a source of knowledge and will build a theatrical foundation for a young child: 'My daddy told me. He knows all about theatre shows' (Yoav, 4.9 years old). Familial involvement in theatre will encourage the child's interest in this medium and could influence the child's value system towards it (Saldaña 2002).

So far, we have presented the sources from which socio-cultural cargo is constructed. We now introduce the connection between the socio-cultural cargo and the three dimensions of theatrical communication: decoding the semiotics, understanding the conventions, and creating an optimal aesthetic distance.

- Decoding Semiotics

The children understand and decipher semiotic sign systems used to create the fictional world on stage. They interpret the movements and mimicry based on their social-cultural cargo: 'I know he's bad because he makes evil movements … ' (Tohar, 5.0 years old). They understand what costumes represent: 'and with his clothes – he's still the king' (Alma, 5.1 years old). The child's interpretation is based on acquaintance with fairy tales in Western culture and visual expressions of them. Therefore, gestures considered evil are identified as a witch's behaviour or an actor who wears a cloak, a crown, and holds a wand is identified as a king: 'A princess' costume means she is a princess. A clown's costume? then it's a clown, so the audience knew what it was about and who they [the actors] are … ' (Daphna, 5.9 years old). The children understand characteristic features that are represented: 'For good ones [characters], it is like this (demonstrating a glorious dress) but

more beautiful, with flowers … And [a dress] of a witch – it is only black. But hers has flowers because she is good' (Omri, 5.6 years old).

Ouri, a young participant, poetically describe the position of the stage lighting: 'The lights are on the sky of the show' (Ouri, 5.1 years old). The children display their knowledge, based on previous visits to the theatre hall regarding the set's role in a theatrical performance: 'If there is a black stage [as the set], you won't be able to see where they perform, where the place is' (Daphna, 5.7 years old). In Figure 1, there is a reference to the knowledge of theatrical sign systems: costumes of the characters, the décor, the lighting (yellow) and the curtains (green) on the sides of the stage.

- Understanding Conventions

Repeated visits to the theatre promote children's understanding of theatre conventions. The darkness convention, for example, becomes understandable and internalised, as a sign of the beginning of a performance. We can see the children's reactions in one of the observations:

> Darkness. Hubbub. Children get excited and shout: "Darkness, Darkness". Some children clap their hands; some immediately sit up straight in their seats, and instantly become quiet (part of observation).

Certain conventions are accepted and internalised by preschoolers before others. The agreed-upon cue for the beginning and the end of a play or behaviour conventions in the theatre hall are those that kindergarten children accept and understand at the age of five. Children watch television and movies at an early stage and have experience and awareness of basic conventions. The experience of routine is important in



Figure 1. (Shira, 6 years old): The sign systems on the Shtuzim's stage: the costumes, the decor, the lighting (yellow) and the curtains (green).

establishing and maintaining theatrical conventions and might occur even within the framework of a single event so that the performance itself helps to cue the spectator through specific routines within the show. As children age, they understand and accept additional conventions, such as those related to the use of accessories or decor (Klein 2005).

Another example of understanding the conventions is the interpretation of a situation, not common in theatre, in which one actor embodies two characters. These situations were accumulated as part of the socio-cultural cargo: 'An actress who plays two roles – that means she is the best in shows … . So, they give her two' (Tali, 5.5 years old). Later in the interview, Tali mentioned a show she had previously attended where the same convention was used: 'Last year I saw a show and one woman acted in two roles'.

Another convention some children related to was the midway intermission: 'An intermission is when they stop the show, we applaud, go out, buy something [moves around the room], eat; if you don't want to eat, you keep it inside the bag, walk, sit, and return to the show' [returning to the chair]. (Itai, 5.6 years old).

Itai is aware of the time frame of the theatrical event. An intermission convention understanding was built from previous visits to the theatre with his family (attending theatre in educational settings does not include an intermission in the performance).

Preschoolers are aware of the social convention of applause at the end of a play as well as the role of applause as an expression of gratitude, pleasure, and appreciation by the audience towards the actors. In the children's view, this convention plays a role of communication between the audience and the stage: 'Instead of speaking, we applaud' (Moran, 5.8 years old). In this way, the children indicate that this is the way to convey a message to the stage. Another purpose of this convention according to the children is to express appreciation at the end of a performance: 'Applause means the show was beautiful' (Moran, 5.8 years old); 'You applaud when there are favorite parts [in the show]' (Amir, 5.8 years old); 'All the time they did [claps hands]: "well done, well done"' (Elai, 5.5 years old).

- Developing Aesthetic Distance

While observing the kindergarten children in the theatre hall, it was noticeable that they could create an optimal aesthetic distance (Schonmann 2006), allowing them to experience the right amount of tension during the performance. In one of the performances, Tohar leaned forward, looking tense and sad, and said quietly, with a strained voice: 'They are so evil … ' (Tohar, 5.0 years old). She was tense, but it was clear that she understood that it was fiction and did not feel threatened. This demonstrates the link between the children's emotional cargo and the developing of the optimal aesthetic distance. It is possible that the state in which the child experiences fear along with the notion that reality on stage is fictional provides an experience of overcoming fear which becomes aesthetic pleasure. Fear becomes tolerated and even pleasant when there is an understanding or even initial understanding of the convention. An older child referred to the differences between children at different ages and their responses to conventions: 'Because now I'm a little bigger. I saw it when I was four (…) The children bigger than me are not afraid … The big ones are not very afraid. Because, in theatre it is not real' (Souff, 6 years old). It seems that Souff is aware of the differences between the

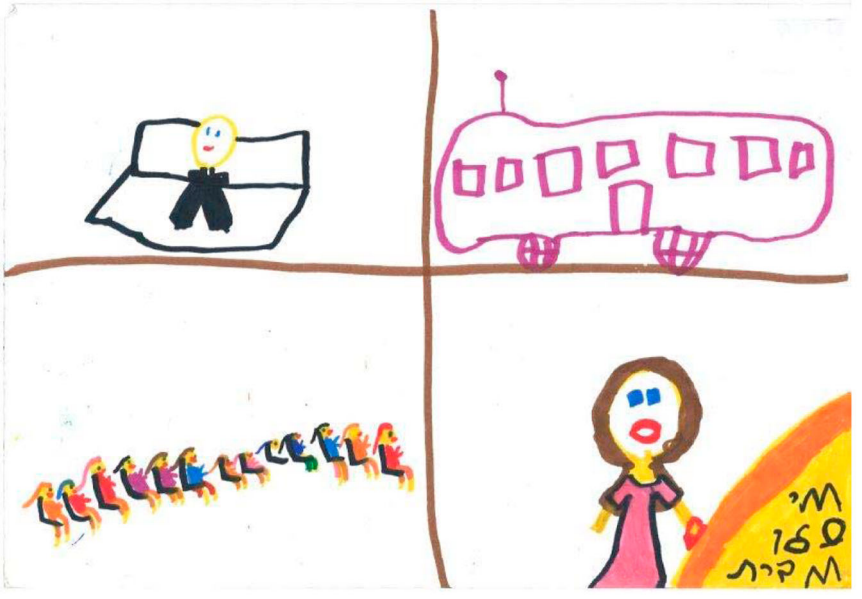


Figure 2. (Micka. 5.5 years old). The whole 'journey' to the theatre from right to left in reverse clockwise motion): the bus to the hall, the seat in the bus, the audience on chairs in the theatre hall and one of the characters on stage.

developmental stages, and understands that when he was younger, he did not accept the convention and could not differentiate between his real life and stage reality, and therefore could not develop the right aesthetic distance. However, as he grew older, he was willing to accept theatrical conventions and refers to the play as a fictional occurrence: 'even when a show is frightening, it is also 'as if' (Souff, 6 years old).[7]

Emotional cargo: intensification of enjoyment

Emotional cargo initially begins to accumulate when children leave the kindergarten on the way to the theatrical event, expands as excitement increases on the bus ride to the theatre, expands even more while entering the halls, and fills up as the excitement intensifies from the pleasure or displeasure the children feel while participating even if passively in a theatrical performance. This cargo that contains an accumulation of excitement, serves them during the performance's reception process (Figure 2).

Emotional cargo, the concept which emerged from this study's findings correlates with Klein (2005) and Reason (2012), who refer to 'bombing of stimuli', the feelings and emotions that are awoken during the initial stage of attending a performance. The emotional cargo begins to accumulate as excitement arouses, the minute the children leave the kindergarten. One could sense the excitement they felt at leaving the kindergarten and going on the bus together. When asked about the theatrical experience during the theatre talks, the children's initial answers dealt with the bus ride: 'It was fun to see through the bus window' (Daphna, 5.9 years old); 'I had fun on the bus too' (Alma, 5.1 years old); and 'I'm drawing the bus now' (Souff, 6.0 years old). These initial responses

may indicate the role of the excitement from the journey in filling up and forming the emotional cargo, which shapes the experience. The knowledge children form when going to the theatre incorporates each aspect of their journey and experiences (Miles 2018).

The emotional cargo fills up upon their entering and sitting in an impressive hall:

> The moment she sat down, she could not stop swinging her legs (from excitement), turning around to the children from another kindergarten sitting behind her. Moves her legs so that the seat goes up. Swings her legs. 'Well, come on' [indicating that she wishes the performance would begin already] (part of observation).

The intensification process continues as the hall lights dim and the curtain rises: 'The most fun was when suddenly there was unbearable darkness'! (Ouri, 5.1 years old). It fills up and expands when the children participate in the performance: 'It's a show and it's fun to be in it' (Yoav, 4.9 years old). The emerging emotional cargo allows the children to concentrate on the performance, decipher it, and enjoy it as a repeated cycle that characterises the theatrical communication between the audience and the performance:

Hodaya:	For we enjoyed it [the performance] very much, she saw we enjoyed it
Researcher:	Yes, how did I see that, how do you think I saw you enjoyed it?
Hodaya:	Because you saw that we watched and did not talk, that we took part in the show.
Hodaya:	And we co-operated with the show [with the requests of the artists]
Researcher:	Did you like it?
Noa:	We loved the show
Hodaya:	We enjoyed it (Part of a theatre talk)

Numerous quotes related to pleasure and enjoyment were collected as part of the data. It seems that the pleasure derived from the experience is part of the mechanism of processing it. In the next three sections, we present the connection between emotional cargo and the deciphering of the performance.

- Decoding Semiotics

The sign systems the child absorbs while attending a performance, especially text and body gestures, were mentioned by the children as pleasure-generating. These intensify the emotional cargo which was activated in the initial stages of the experience, helping decipher the performance: 'Ah, I really enjoyed the whole story: that the witch turned the prince into a frog, and there were the guards, and I loved the princess who cried and smiled and got married. I loved it very very much' (Noa, 5.9 years old). And: 'At the end of Dumbo, there were lights like that, colorful, that give a good feeling in the body … ' (Ouri, 5.1 years old).

The music sign system is significant in the accumulation of emotional cargo that intensifies during and after the performance:

Tali:	The songs I liked most! the song, ah … (sings out loud, stands up, jumps) So I loved the first and last song (walks around, jumps).
Itai:	I loved all the songs (part of a theatre talk).

Emotional cargo is connected not only to positive aspects of excitement; sometimes negative emotions are formed while sitting in the theatre hall: '[I didn't like] the parts when the show wasn't on, just sitting, and just sitting, I do not like (…) I hate just sitting' (Amir, 5.8 years old).

Emotional cargo fills up and expands due to the pleasure or displeasure children experience and serves them during the reception process of the performance. The emotional intensification assists them in building the focus and concentration needed for deciphering a performance and perseveres in the future when decoding a complex situation as spectators and creating a meaningful experience.

- Understanding Conventions

Experiencing a performance provides funny, scary, happy, and sad moments, which accumulate as an emotional cargo:

> [A moment of tension in the play]:
> Souff: Moving forward raises a finger.
> Ouri: Leaning back. Puts one leg on the other.
> Alma: Hand on chest, other hand in mouth [as if frightened]. Touching the forehead, touching the hair (part of observation).

And when asked about it:

> Researcher: Do you mean when it's funny, it means [the show] is fun?
> R: Yes. (…) like when Dad tickles me … (Roni, 5.0 years old).

They address the issue of conventions and connect it with the pleasure they felt: 'We agree to see a show, but we are not angry with them [the artists] that much that we do not agree that the show will be as if. we only know this show is as if (…) we only enjoy them (…) and their show is beautiful' (Noa, 5.9 years old).

When asked about emotions and what stimulates them, the children mention the convention that is prevalent in theatre for children, the physical gags: 'Because they always make me laugh, always […] It was funny to me that they go crazy' (Yoav, 4.9 years old).

- Developing Aesthetic Distance

> We carefully look at the stage and if we are afraid, we are afraid, and if we are not afraid, we are not afraid. Afraid, there is nothing to do (smiling), nothing to do, because maybe it is a scary show (…) That scares me for example (…) I'm really, really scared, like not really, but a little (…) scared (Ouri, 5.1 years old).

This quote may demonstrate the link between the children's emotional cargo and the developing of or self-locating in the aesthetic distance. It is possible that the state in which the child experiences fear, a state of low distance, along with the notion that reality on stage is fictional, provides an experience of overcoming fear which becomes aesthetic pleasure. Fear becomes tolerated and even pleasant, when there is an understanding and acceptance or even initial acceptance of the convention. Schonmann (2006) describes this condition as the optimal aesthetic distance.

The cognitive cargo: deciphering and understanding

As emerges from the findings, the cognitive cargo enables children according to their developmental stage, to describe, compare, analyse, connect, draw conclusions, think critically, and look at the experience from a higher perspective. In order to explain the qualities of cognitive cargo, we relied on Bloom's taxonomy, formulated in 1956 (Eisner 2000), in which three lists of learning objectives in cognitive, affective and sensory domains, are sorted as part of educational goals, and the functional qualities at various levels are indicated (Bloom 1994). Despite the criticisms on this taxonomy, some use it to evaluate a child's abilities in the context of intellectual skills and competences. In order to assess children's cognitive abilities in the context of theatrical knowledge and its use, we present the cognitive cargo using Bloom's concepts.

- Decoding Semiotics

The young audience describe the role cognitive cargo plays in deciphering the semiotics, based on scientific knowledge that begins to develop at the ages of five to six years old:

> Amir: When I see shows, then it's not the eyes that see, it's the brain that sees
> Noa: The brain thinks, it does not see
> Amir: It is the thing that allows the eyes to see; the eyes do not see the show, the brain sees it (part of a theatre talk).

The younger among the participating children showed initial thinking levels: description, definition, and explanation. Rotem, a young participant, upon being asked how she understood who the characters are, explained: 'Umm, I know because she said 'Daddy'. That means he's the king, and 'Mom' so that means she's the queen' (Rotem, 4.9 years



Figure 3. (Maya, 5.9 years old): Dorothy and Toto from the Wizard of Oz.

old). Another participant explained how he knew a storm occurred in the show: 'Emm. I hear the storm, they don't have to say it, because I hear the storm (…) with my ears I hear' (Ouri, 5.1 years old). These learning objectives can be seen among children who have just turned five. As they grow older, their deciphering abilities and their understanding match higher order of learning objectives: analysing, synthesising, and evaluating. They draw conclusions from the visual design on the level of analysis and evaluation: 'If it's a clown costume, that means it's a clown … so the audience will know who he was and what it was about … ' (Daphna, 5.9 years old). The children create the synthesis and explain why it is important to use sign systems: 'If there are no 'things', then how will they do the show? What will they do? just talk'? (Hodaya, 5.9 years old).

In Figure 3, there is a reference to the role of the lighting and décor in the performance. The projectors (blue) and the decor are attached to a metal line (brown) above the stage.

During painting Maya (5.9 years old) claims: 'the painted sky was 'as if''. She noted that in order to represent the sky, the creators used 'accessories and wires that connect them and lights'. Maya refers to the duality that exists in theatre between illusion and the mechanics that create it.

The children explain the role of the actors in the play at the analysis level: 'They explain what they are, and what is happening in the play' (Daphna, 5.9 years old). Some have used synthesis to infer the development of the plot from the characters' actions: '[from their actions] I understood the things they were doing' (Maya, 5.9 years old).

- Understanding Conventions

When children present their meta-theatrical knowledge, they use their cognitive cargo: they recognise the use of conventions and the solutions offered in the productions, and explain why they do it:

Micka:	The phone, obviously not real.
Researcher:	Why? Why "obviously"?
Micka:	Because it would ring and then everyone would right away reach out for their phones and start calling someone else (5.5 years old).

And:

'They wanted us to understand that the house was flying in the air' (Omer, 5.6 years old). They explain the actors' roles in the performance by means of analysis: 'They act, they explain who they are and what happens in the show' (Daphna, 5.9 years old). Daphna also made use of synthesis to draw conclusions regarding the plotline: 'Shtuzon [a character] disappeared? [because] they had to change their clothes. So, what happened? They had an idea: they did a gag'. They also make use of the evaluation when they assess the production's components for providing knowledge during the performance: 'First you have to see the show and then learn from the show, that the show is good and nice' (Noa, 5.9 years old).

Kindergarten children are also aware of the role that convention plays regarding dramaturgy, such as accepting artificial props as real, and scenery as signifying a place. They explain that this convention is a solution for technical issues that arise during production: 'In the show there wasn't really pizza, it was just a box of pizza, there was nothing in it' (Souff, 6.0 years old). He argued: 'You can't put real pizza on stage, because then ants

will come and climb slowly, and they'll go to the pizza'. Showing me the flyer, he added: 'Look, you can see that it's not really a pizza box'.

These words may relate to McCaslin's (2005) argument that among children as well as adults, imagination is the dominant force for the audience and the actors. When the imagination is unfettered, everyone transfers to a place and time in which they believe. When a red fabric was laid out on the stage in The Wizard of Oz in order to represent a field of poppies, Souff (6.0 years old) explained: 'You can't spread poppies on stage [during the performance] because then it will be hard to pick them up and also put them on the stage. It takes a lot of time; you can't sweep them with a broom … ' He explained the convention as though he had read McCaslin, who argued that when the theatrical convention is presented in a real and open manner, children understand and respect it.

Kindergarten children explain conventions by relying on existing moral awareness: 'We agree to view a show, but we are not angry at them, we agree that the show should be as if … ' (Noa, 5.9 years old). The ability to comprehend conventions develops with age: between the ages of four to seven, children develop the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination (Klein 2005). Development is not homogeneous, Yet, halfway during the fifth year there is a significant leap in abilities and competence, and they can distinguish between reality and imagination (Laor-Blasbalg 2012). Among younger children, illusion often replaces reality, and the moment the distance is gone, illusion seems to them as real life (Schonmann 2006).

- Developing Aesthetic Distance

The body language of the children collected during observations in theatre halls reflects the tension children experience during a performance. Yet, this volume of tension is not overwhelming, and they continue participating in the performance. It indicates that they have developed optimal aesthetic distance. The children's physical reactions are compatible with what Klein and Schonmann (2009) describe as tidal waves:

> Amir raises his hands up behind his head, then sits forward, hand on the seat in front of him. Stretches and moves sideways. Turning to me worriedly, 'At the end, the princess will kiss him, right?' Swinging a bit on the seat. Leaning forward towards the seat in front of him. Sitting on the edge of the seat. Leaning on a seat in front of him. Bending down in the seat, head up, body down, face towards the stage. Nestles inside the seat. Face towards the stage. Mouth open. (part of observation)

The children themselves are aware of the tension they felt during the performance and explain the reasons for this tension: 'I thought the ending would be sad but, in the end, I saw that it was happy … ' (Amir, 5.8 years old).

With respect to their age and developmental stage, they can explain their experience: 'It is as if it symbolizes something sad [and then we know] that there is something sad, but we don't see the tears' (Omer, 5.6 years old).

The children explain the way they participated in the performance and, at the same time, enriched their cognitive cargo:

> You have to see the show in order to learn from the show that this show is good, and the show is nice, that they want us to participate in the show and then let us see their show (Noa, 5.9 years old).



Figure 4. (Neomi, 5.4 years old): The stage, the audience and the distance between them.

When you see a show, you learn from it, so it becomes your cargo, and then you can critique its quality and other characteristics.

Figure 4 might be considered as a visualisation of the aesthetic distance. Neomi drew the actors on stage, the chairs in the theatre hall, and two thick (pink and green) stripes separating between them. Although Neomi is not (yet) capable of defining the term aesthetic distance, her awareness of the physical distance between the stage and the audience may indicate her ability to develop aesthetic distance.

Summary and conclusion

In this article, we presented the significance of theatrical competence of the young audience in the TYA reception process. The theatrical experience is designed through two frameworks. The first one is connected to the performance: what occurs in real time during communication between the audience and the stage. Theatrical communication, as we presented it, is constructed of three dimensions of communication: deciphering signs, understanding conventions, and creating aesthetic distance. The second one is the theatrical competence that we have defined as three forms of Cargo: socio-cultural, emotional and cognitive. The three forms merge with each other during the reception process; Emotional cargo is initially activated on the way to the theatre hall, fills up and expands when entering the hall and participating in the performance. Socio-cultural and Cognitive cargo are expressed when the children first begin to watch the performance and attempt to decipher and understand it. When the children leave the theatre hall, the excitement connected to the emotional cargo continues to rise and they reach further insights which they can report to other children or adults. All this feeds their cargo for the next theatrical performance and accumulates as their theatrical competence.

We also presented, theoretically and empirically, the way the three forms of cargo and the three dimensions of communication construct each other. In our view, the theatrical experience is the consequence, the effect of the encounter between the three forms of cargo and the three dimensions of theatrical communication that occur during the performance. The relationship between cargo and the dimensions is mutual and evolving. The deeper and more complex the cargo becomes, the more complex the theatrical experience becomes, which then develops and deepens the cargo. This, however, is not a linear process. It is a spiral process in which the intersection of the three forms of cargo with the three dimensions constructs theatrical competence and facilitates the process of theatre reception.

This experience continues to resonate in the young spectator's mind and continues to perfect and develop the three forms of cargo for the next theatrical performance. In the next theatrical encounter between the three developed forms of cargo with the dimensions of theatrical communication, a deeper and more significant theatrical experience will be formed for the young audience.

The research literature often mentions the importance of theatrical competence in the encounter with theatrical communication. Our contribution to the field is a detailed and systematic framework which unfolds the mutual affinities between theatrical competence and theatrical communication. These affinities constitute the theatrical experience of the young audience.

Notes

1. All kindergartens chosen were part of the Israeli educational system. The participants came from similar socio-economic background, for there was no intention in this research to focus on or compare diverse socio-economic or ethnic groups.
2. Nonsense in Rhymes (in free translation).
3. Smadar Mor.
4. The initial intention was to separately analyse verbal phrases children used while drawings. however, as Johnny Saldaña, in his book about qualitative research points out, 'If preplanned methods are not working, you change them to secure the data you need' (Saldaña 2011). Eventually, after realising separation made no significance, all verbal phrases were combined.
5. https://atlasti.com/.
6. All children's quotes were freely translated to English by the authors.
7. We are using the term 'as if' in the children's quotes and not the verb 'pretend' since it represents a more accurate literal translation from Hebrew.

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