TABOOS IN *TYA*: AN INTRODUCTION

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First I would like to say that I am thankful and honored to open up the first International Theatre for Children and Young People Forum on taboo topics in theatre for children and young people. We look forward to some very stimulating days with exciting presentations and discussions on taboos from theoretical, practical, and personal perspectives. For this opening presentation I start by giving a historical, cultural, and material overview of taboos in TYA from a variety of angles. I end with the discussing a production that tackles taboos in theatre for children and youth directly. This presentation is not meant to give answers, or argue a specific case, but rather to offer a variety of angles and perspectives to enter the discourse on the topic of the forum, taboos. For that reason, I start out with the core: what is *taboo*?

The word *taboo* comes from the Polynesian "tapu" or "tabu", "set apart, forbidden" and was imported in the English language in the late 18th century (Online Etymology

Dictionary: "Taboo"). The online Oxford American Dictionary defines *taboo* as "A social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidden association with a particular person, place, or thing.". What is considered taboo, then, is specific to culture and society, although some taboos seem more universal, including incest, cannibalism, and intentional homicide. Many taboos, as we will hear in the course of these days too, have to do with sex, violence, and language and are rooted in moral and/or religious belief structures, which makes them ideological constructs. Following Terry Eagleton's assertion that ideology "persuades men and women to mistake each other from time to time for gods or vermin" we can infer that this mistaking is socio–culturally codified (and justified). *Taboo*, then, is a highly ideological concept that is to a great extent determined by the dominant ideological beliefs of a specific cultural group. It is, therefore, impossible to speak about *taboos* in TYA without considering the specific cultural material contexts under which these taboos are generated and perceived as *taboo*.

Taboos have been linked to *Theatre* from the earliest times. In western society Plato, in his work *The Republic*, warned against the dangers of theatre and the stories that make up theatre, especially where the "young and tender" are concerned: "our first duty [...] is to set a watch over the makers of stories, to select every beautiful story they make, and reject any that are not beautiful" (Book II: 377). Plato also defined what he considered "beautiful" and what should be rejected, including stories of "gods making war

or plotting against or fighting other gods", "the fights of the giants and other many and varied strives of gods and heroes with kinfolk and friends", and the "binding of Hera by her son or the hurling of Hepheastus from heaven by his father, when his mother was beaten and he tried to defend her". On the other hand, "if we can in any way find stories to persuade them that no citizen has ever hated another" then these should be told by the storytellers, "[for] the child is unable to discriminate between what is allegory and what is not [...] we must do everything in our power to contrive that the first stories our children are told shall teach virtue in the fairest way" (Book II: 378). Plato's idea that certain stories and plays could corrupt the tender soul is also reflected in other cultures and societies —although it must be acknowledged that this is to a great extent influenced by colonial enterprises from Western Europe.

Plato's thoughts on what a child should and should not see or hear is one of the first recorded cases of censorship for children in the western world. However, Plato's other idea, that the "right" stories can instill virtuous behavior, has also been recognized throughout time and space, in particular by religious educational institutions. From Hroswitha von Gandersheim in the 10th century, who rewrote the works of Terence to give them a Christian veneer with strong and virtuous Christian women; to the Jesuit dramas at schools in Western Europe and Russia; to the works of Comptesse Madame de Genlis, tutor at the French court in the 18th century; to the Dramatic Dialogues of Charles Stearn in the US; and, finally, to the theatrical

derivatives of the above by the many imperial missionaries —all this work is rooted in virtue, morals, and/or religious zeal. Most histories of theatre for children and youth that I am aware of cite efforts to educate children, religious or otherwise, as the start of professional TYA in their respective countries. It is therefore no wonder that theatre for children and youth in particular is historically rife with taboos, even if what is taboo in one socio–cultural, ideological, and political context may not be the same as in the other one.

Globally, taboos have been determined by concepts of child and childhood. Although the *study* of children and childhood from a socio–cultural perspective has been primarily a late 20th century phenomenon (see Corsaro, Qvortrup, Jenkins, Zornado among others), the *presence* of childhood as a specific socio–cultural group in society is clearly not. Both the material culture of childhood (what they wear, eat, play with) and the symbolic culture (beliefs, concerns, values enforced by media, literature, stories) are, and have been, socio–cultural specific. For the most part, children are still marginalized (except perhaps from a marketing perspective) as far as agency and ownership of materials and thoughts are concerned. One of the biggest objections of certain groups in the US to the United Nations 1989 Conventions of the Right of the Child (CRC), for example, is the CRC's listing of "participation rights" for children, in particular the right to privacy, the right of freedom of thought and association, and the right to freedom of expression[1]. Article 31.1 and 31.2, moreover,

stipulate the rights of the child to rest and leisure and "to participate freely in cultural life and the arts". But the extent that children are allowed to participate *freely* in cultural life and the arts, varies from culture to culture[2].

Taboos can lead to censorship and to self–censorship. In societies that rely on school audiences and consumers for income, and hence survival, such as in the US, this is more an issue than in societies that can count on more cultural subsidies, such as the Netherlands. On the other hand, state support does not guarantee more freedom from taboos, as we see from the highly government controlled TYA in the former Soviet Union. Since, as demonstrated above, *taboo* is not universal but socio–culturally constructed, which makes it all the more complex, challenges can also be perceived or posited as being *taboo*, which may be the largest danger for theatre makers, leading to self–censorship.

Taboo can infiltrate TYA in many ways: in content, in form, and style. Taboos can be easy and unambiguous; sex, sexuality, violence, and offensive language are among the most common taboos, and often reflected in "safe" content. But taboos can also be more hidden and ideological. Absurd theatre for children and youth, open endings, non-linear story lines, associative images, and lack of a clearly

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1. http://www.unicef.org/crc/ Accessed July 5, 2010.

2. It needs to be noted that the CRC has been adopted by 193 countries, with the exception of the US and Somalia.

defined protagonists or characters to identify with is often suspect. In these cases it is not clear what the fine line is between "taboo" and "controversial" or "challenging." In countries that rely on box office incomes the tendency is to play it safe, and avoid what could be perceived as controversial.

In some countries *taboo* is political. Societies that do not promote cultural and ethnic diversity see this back in their productions for children and youth. In these cases dominant views on race, ethnicity, religion, and morals, are reflected in TYA content and form. Thus, TYA in Muslim cultures differs from TYA in Christian cultures, which in turn differs from TYA in Buddhist cultures. TYA in totalitarian cultures is not the same as in predominantly socialist cultures. And within these broad generalizations there are many more subtle differences related to national and local cultural politics.

A main factor in *taboo* in TYA is who determines what is *taboo*? Taboo as we saw with Plato above, is an adult construct and taboos for children are based on the belief that children cannot discriminate between allegory and reality. The intended consumer of TYA is often not the buyer. Here we also have to make a difference between theatre for children, that is roughly under 12 years old, who have very little say in what to attend, and youth, which is generally over 14 years old. For the younger children it is most often the parent or teacher who determines whether a production is "appropriate" or not. For older youth, some countries have a type of voucher system in which youth

can choose which particular performance they want to see. In some countries older youth is simply delegated to productions that are targeting a general adult audiences, in other countries youth 14 years and older is a specifically targeted group. Often productions for that are acceptable for this age group in the country they are conceived are considered *taboo* in other countries.

Thus the question of who decides what is *taboo* varies widely and is also culturally determined. This becomes apparent too when we look at a more recent form of TYA, theatre for the very young. Theatre for the very young has generally two audiences, the very young children, who experience the performance, and the adults, who watch the children. Interestingly, in some ways this theatre suffers less from taboos than theatre for the older age groups. As theatre that is highly associative and much less text dependent, several theatre artists have been successful in creating evocative theatre that evades the usual taboo constructs and labels. Some of the restrictions mentioned above, such as non–linearity and associative images, are not perceived as detrimental in theatre for the very young and free up the theatre maker. Physicality is also part of this theatre, and while some productions can be quite sexual from an adult perspective, it is not part of the young child's experience, or so it is assumed. Offensive language would be a moot point, since most performances have hardly any text at all. Depending on how you look at it, theatre for the very young can be liberating for artists and audience alike.

Which brings me to the last part of this presentation. Two years ago my daughter and I were asked to translate a Dutch production by Theatre Company Max. The production, meant for audiences 10 years old and up, was conceived and directed by one of the most innovative contemporary directors in the Netherlands, Jetse Batelaan. In true Dutch fashion the text was only one part of the production, and without the video registration it would have been impossible to translate. Dealing with the question of what is right and what is wrong, the production *The Wagging Finger* is a philosophical treatise on what can and what cannot be shown on stage, pushing the boundaries of the permissible.

The production starts with one of the actors in the hallway.

Marien

(In the hall with megaphone.)
Folks, could I have your attention,
dear children, parents, caregivers, colleagues.
A few of you have probably heard already. It has been fully covered in the news, the internet, Kids TV, newspapers, kids weekly, and so on.
But for those of you who don't know yet, today we have a nation —wide work slow— down in the Dutch Theatre for Children and Youth. A national theatre silence in remembrance of all the disrupted theatre performances in the category 10 years old and up. I'm standing here in the name

of theatre company MAX, one of the seventeen participating companies and I am asking for your understanding...

After the audience is invited into the auditorium, the actors line up on stage. One actor steps forward to the microphone and starts in a solemn tone to list the disrupted theatre performances of the past few months:

BIANCA

April 23, 2007, Haarlem, Toneelschuur.
Youth theatre Rascal plays *Time Travel*.
Chatting, yelling when the lights dim.

May 3, 2007, Drachten, De Lawei.
The Blue Table plays *House of Cards*.
Chatting, two cell phones...

She continues for 15 minutes, then another actor lights the candles on an altar and the first actor comes to the microphone to hold a sermon addressing the audience:

MARIEN

Stop.
Halt.
Quit.
It's been enough.
It's happened too often.
It's happened too much.

It's happened too often and too much consecutively.
It has become too normal.
It has become too ordinary.
But dear children, dear, dear children.
Disruption can never be the norm, and disruption should never be normal.
Because if disrupting becomes norm, attention gets lost, and the bright flame dims.

This too goes on for a good 10 minutes longer after which the fourth actor ends it with a practical announcement:

WILLEMIJN

Now, the action is over. Again, thank you all for your cooperation. Of course we still have a very nice production for you. We're going to play that in a second. It wasn't the intent to depress you all. I notice a little bit of a funeral atmosphere. As far as we're concerned that's not necessary. So if you feel a little weird, just shake it off. Because it's not per definition about you, of course, it's about all audiences in the category ten and up. And you don't need to have the idea like, oh, now I have to sit straight and watch properly, like, oh, now I can't laugh. Of course you can. If you have to laugh you laugh. If you want to elbow your neighbor because you saw something funny, you

may just do that. Watch the way you want to watch. Enjoy! Because without audience there's no theatre. We're going to set up a few things and then we'll start. Thank you.

They blow out the candles, get rid of the microphone, and then they continue to destroy the set, a playground. End scene 2.

The rest of the production takes place on the destroyed playground. A mother starts making out with the father of her daughter's schoolmate. A pre–school teacher gets distracted and looses sight of her class, her kids end up on the highway. A disabled girl, the daughter of the promiscuous mom, is stuck between her mom and dad and is pushed back and forth over the debris in her wheelchair. There is smoking and alcohol. At one point the two male actors take off their pants and have a serious conversation. Finally the audience is urged to stop it all:

(Caption supertitle board descends, displays following text.)
Psssssst, audience, are you getting sick of it too? We're just all going to yell them off the stage. Are you with me?
3,
2,
1
Hello!
Very good. Can we get a little louder, not everyone

is participating. One more time:
Hello!
Perfect, keep going...
Father of Bart, pants on!
Pants on!
Father of Moniek, you too!

The prompted yelling continues until finally they yell them off the stage. The last line is still the audience's:

Lights out! Lights out! Lights out! Lights out! Lights out! Lights out! Lights out! Lights out!

The production is hailed in the Dutch newspapers as "a rare gem" (NRC), "fresh, absurd, unsettling, challenging, and very intelligent" (Golden Cricket report), and "brilliant" (TF)[3]. For me it is a production where theory, practice, and taboos come together and where both adult and child audiences are confronted with questions of right and wrong and their own moral position and values. I think this is what we all will be confronted with in the days to come.

Thank you.

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3. All reviews can be found on Max's website: http://www.tgmax.nl/

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