

polyglot  
*theatre is child's play*



# Separation Street

A study of the development of Polyglot Theatre and The Suitcase Royale's experiential theatre experience for children and adults 2013-2014

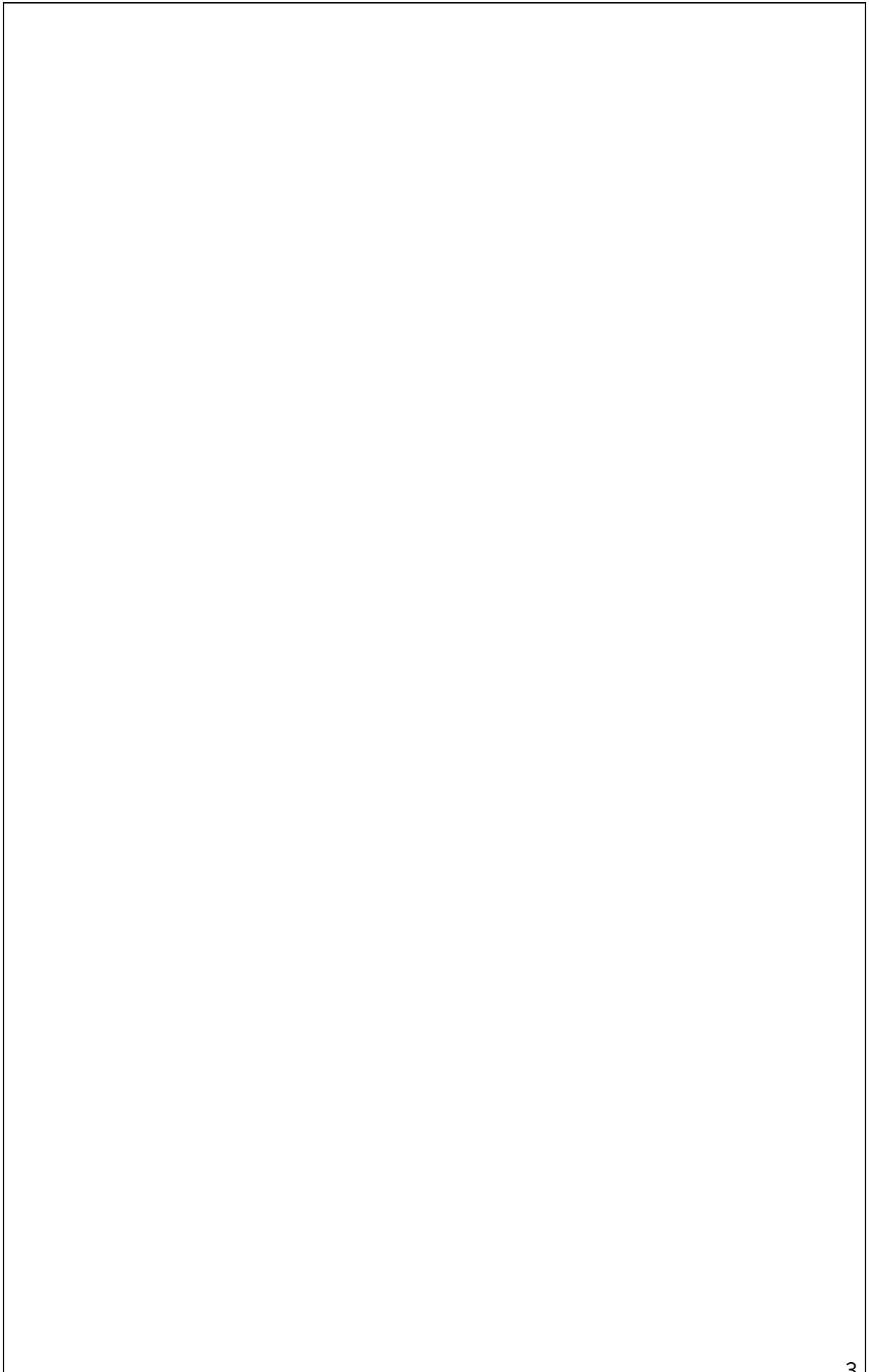
Ricci-Jane Adams PhD for Creative Knowledge Collaborations

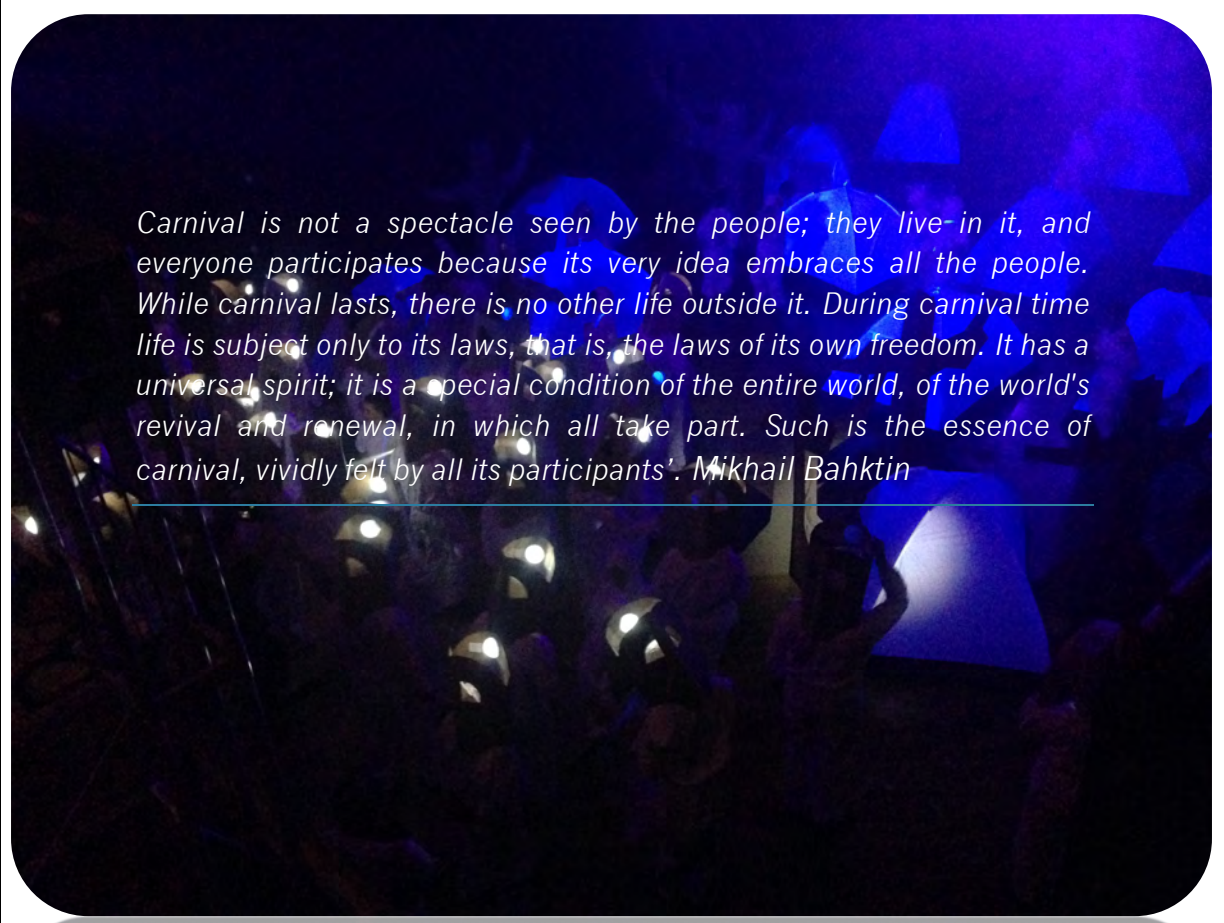
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*Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants'. Mikhail Bakhtin*

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## Executive Summary

The collaboration between The Suitcase Royale and Polyglot Theatre has pioneered a ground breaking new form of experiential theatre for children and adults. *Form* is the most exciting part of what occurs in *Separation Street*. Research indicates that this immersive, concurrent but separate theatre form for adults and children hasn't been done before anywhere in the world. The form reflects the central thematic of relationship and connection/disconnection.

Developed over the course of 12 months through in-school workshops with two schools specifically chosen for their pronounced cultural and social isolation. *Separation Street* was then developed by the original artistic team at Meat Market in North Melbourne and presented through a series of showings with test audiences. This phase focussed on the child's experience. The production was in its second stage of development in August 2014 at Northcote Town Hall, this time with particular emphasis on developing the adult journey and tested with audiences of children from two local primary schools. The production will be premiering in 2015.

This project is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body, the Besen Family Foundation and the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and has been developed in the CultureLAB with the assistance of Arts Victoria and the City of Melbourne through Arts House.

The purpose of this study changed over the year or more of the development in response to the changing nature of the work, moving from a straight-up evaluation of the social impacts of the performance to a far more open and curious investigation of the new form that was emerging. *Separation Street* continually opened up on itself thematically, formally and in regards to narrative. It raised many questions for the creative team and also in regards to the social and cultural implications of the work, especially as it related to the child/adult relationship.

The development has opened up a new and potentially transformative form in the creation of *radical play* theatre, or theatre simultaneously for adults and children that physically explores relationship and connection and serves to empower the child to lead the adult on a journey of social re-imagining (I think the former works better). This is an exciting and potentially avant-garde contribution to the arena of family theatre.

Children and adults were equally excited by the possibilities of *Separation Street* and willing to embrace a physical and theatrical journey of which very little was understood beforehand. High levels of engagement and curiosity



were evident in both audiences, and whilst there was also lack of clarity, this did not deter audiences from participating enthusiastically. There is evidently a great deal of good will and positive expectation around this offering, even though it does not yet feel thematically fully realised.



## Project Outline

*Separation Street* is new work in development from Polyglot Theatre and The Suitcase Royale that starts with a separation of the children from the adults at the door; thus the adventure begins. The audience/participants each experience a story at the same time but from completely different perspectives. The children are immersed in outer space, with a lonely and desperate astronaut who believes he has found a new planet but is slowly becoming convinced that he has gone nowhere at all. The adults hear the history of the astronaut - an account of resourcefulness and success and conquering of insurmountable odds. Which story is true and which a fantasy? Can we believe what we are told and can we trust the experience of children?

*Separation Street* development began in 2013 with a series of workshops with school students from Victorian College of the Deaf and Currajong Primary School. Artistic Director, Sue Giles stated that these two schools were asked to be involved because of their innate understanding of social and cultural exclusion:

*...the idea of being separated from the world, literally and through fantasy. Being Deaf means that you are shut off from what is happening around you. Being diagnosed with something like Autism or Asperger's or even ADHD sets you apart from others. The children we worked with know about isolation [and] about being apart from and being separated from the world.*

*Separation Street* was then developed by the original artistic team at Meat Market in North Melbourne and presented through a series of showings with test audiences. This phase focussed on the child's experience. The production was in its second stage of development in August 2014 at Northcote Town Hall, this time with particular emphasis on developing the adult journey and tested with audiences of children from two local primary schools. The production will be premiering in 2015.

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## Creative Team

The Suitcase Royale is an award winning comedy-music-theatre ensemble from Melbourne, Australia that have been creating and performing work globally since 2004. The company is composed of writer/performers Glen Walton, Joseph O'Farrell (JOF), and Miles O'Neil.

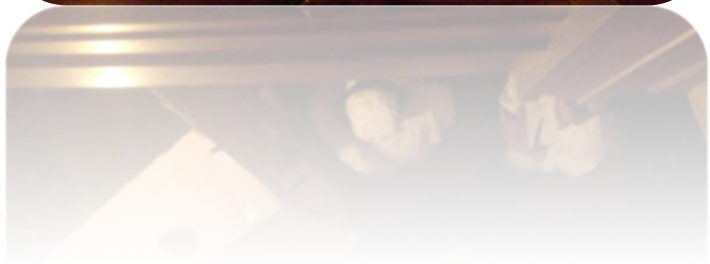
Polyglot Theatre is Australia's leading creator of experiential, interactive and installation theatre for children and families, encouraging kids to turn the simplest things into extraordinary creations.

The creative team also included Artistic Director of Polyglot Theatre, and director of the development, Sue Giles, performer Emily Tomlins, costume designer Nick Barlow, designers Marg Horwell (2013) and Daryl Cordell (2014), lighting designer, Richard Vabre, sound designer, Steph O'Hara, and production manager, Rainbow Sweeney.

## Project aims

The aims included to:

- work with primary school children to explore notions of social inclusion, separation and division
- Position children as the leaders in creative collaboration through Polyglot's workshop process
- Instil the development of confidence in child participants – in creativity, in personal choice, in sharing ideas
- And create a theatrical exploration in which artists collaboratively develop an interactive theatrical response to the workshop process with the children.



# Methodology

Using a qualitative, ethnographic<sup>1</sup> approach the research report includes consideration of the following data:

- Document analysis including artist reports and reflections and funding applications
- Observational field notes gathered at each phase of the project and at each of the sites
- Child-led data gathering including drawing
- Focus groups with child participants
- Interviews with the artistic director at the commencement of the project and throughout
- Interviews with key informants including director, artists and project staff and
- informal interview of audience at the public showings.



<sup>1</sup> ...ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or

# Mapping the field

*Performance is a way of ritualising how we see the world, and it's a way of playing. Children recognise and understand ritual and play on a very deep level, and that understanding can lead to an extraordinary synergy between the audience and the work. David Harradine<sup>2</sup>*

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The purpose of this study changed over the year or more of the development, moving from a straight-up evaluation of the social impacts of the performance to a far more open and curious investigation of the new form that was emerging. *Separation Street* continually opened up on itself thematically, formally and in regards to narrative. It raised many questions for the creative team and also in regards to the social and cultural implications of the work.

As such the focus of this report moved to a research paradigm. The following section contextualises *Separation Street*, albeit briefly, in an international context of comparative forms of theatre being made at this time and argues for the originality of the new form generated by this partnership. Secondly this section interrogates the terms of use employed by both Polyglot and other theatre-makers creating interactive work for children and more specifically families.

Clarifying the terms of use and the theories that inform them opens up *Separation Street* further still in productive and potentially energising ways. The process of researching the development also problematized these terms for me and the implications, ethics and responsibilities of involving child audiences in work such as this.

## Understanding the context

Researching comparative theatre experiences to locate *Separation Street* on the theatrical map means first defining the terms of this work. Initially this involves articulating what the production is *not*.

*Separation Street* does not invite the child audience to interact selectively with a predetermined and fixed narrative. Within the 'child' space of the performance there is little more than a few physical props introduced to the space at regular intervals to stimulate the child audience's imaginative participation. This limitlessness serves to offer the child audience boundless freedom but also to leave them to their own devices to a great extent. It does not reference classic texts such as Experiential Theatre's *Odyssey Experience* or cult classics such as Punchdrunk's *The Crash of the Elysium*. It does tap into archetypal images

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/nov/30/childrens-theatre-christmas>

and stories but this is not explicit in the child audience's experience. It is immersive, experiential and participatory but in markedly different ways to Punchdrunk's whimsical *The House Where Winter Lives*. It is often ambiguous, confusing and claustrophobic even inside the very large spaces in which it has previously been performed. It has no educational imperative and yet it is also not simply trying to be entertaining.

Rather it is requesting action and demanding that the child audience be the authors of their own experience. This is evident from its earliest stages of development in which children were invited to participate in early ideas and to stimulate the imaginations of the artists. And not just any children but some of the most socially and culturally isolated young people around including deaf children and children with a full range of neuro-diversity. The motivation to create in this way posits *Separation Street* (and perhaps all of Sue Giles' work) in the tradition of the Theatre of the Oppressed, which is itself often participatory, immersive and experiential. *Separation Street* expresses a desire to emancipate both children and adults from their own imaginative limitations and social conditioning that determines adults as the power brokers of children's lives. The work wants determinedly to undo this paradigm, and so uses 'theatre in which you must stand and take action to make your own story' as the form.

The form created however has no parallel in that it places adults and children together yet apart, but not too far apart for what would be the point of that? Nothing according to director Sue Giles, for whom the relationship created through proximity and shared sound and light, for example is an essential part of the thematic. There is nothing like it, and yet it has many echoes of other forms that are not as slippery to pin down. It is most accurate to define this work as experiential over either immersive or participatory and the definitions of these terms elucidate why this is so. Essentially it is because experiential theatre takes the audience further into the meaning-making process, positing them at the heart of it.

### *Immersive*

*'It is likely to be multi-sensory, making use of exploratory experiences of space and relationships to performers, but sometimes also in addressing the senses of touch and smell...they require the audience to move within the space occupied by the performers, a space that is replete with associations and which becomes performative in new ways in consequence of the audience's presence within it. Gareth White*

White's definition articulates many characteristics of *Separation Street* but also highlights a stark contrast between this and other works of immersive theatre. In the space of the child audience the work does not become 'performative in

new ways' as a result of the audience being within it. Without the child-authors there is, in fact, no meaning or performativity. This subtle yet radical shift underscores the unique potential of the production.

### *Participatory*

Participatory theatre is often used with very young audiences as it caters to the short attention span and desire to move often expressed by very young children. It does not necessarily challenge but rather fulfils expectations of what theatre for young children should be like.

### *Experiential*

*Experiential theatre integrates interaction and often-embodied participation into spectator engagements; it involves direct engagement with the world of the performance, rather than solely identificatory engagements through character perspective and thus generates an experience of performance as event. It generates a liminoid space, which sits on the boundary between the real and the imaginary. KR Adams*

The liminoid is a term coined by anthropologist Victor Turner and is defined as 'that temporary state during a rite of passage when the participant lacks social status or rank'. In terms of the thematic of *Separation Street* it is apparent that this is space is an entirely apt description of the child's experience, and the attempts to reposition the children as a result of the experience (i.e. increasing adult understanding of childhood perspectives). This definition perhaps points also to one of the issues of *Separation Street* in that there is no completion to the ritual or rite of passage. There is no overt post-liminal or post-ritual state attained by either adult or child as a result of the process, other than having moved through the experience. This point is discussed further in the final section.

### **Further areas for consideration**

Defining the critical terms serves to raise more questions and challenges that are relevant to all immersive/experiential/participatory theatre but are particularly pressing in regards to *Separation Street* because of it's desire to create change at a social and cultural level. These areas include ethics and agency and will be explored now.

### **Ethics and Agency**

*In audience participatory theatre, we might put it that there are 'repressive' and ideological' systems at work, or something like them – obvious influences that can guide participants into certain actions, and less obvious influences that will also guide, but through the way participants think of themselves in relation to the issue' Gareth White*

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Whilst speaking specifically of adult experiential theatre, entertainment lawyer and academic, Mary LaFrance points out that this kind of theatre has more potential than traditional theatre to cause harm to both audience and performer. Harm to the audience can occur both physically and emotionally, especially if the audience are not prepared for what it is they are about to experience. But even for the 'prepared' performer there can be unexpected dangers. LaFrance states of the performer in this kind of show, 'While even conventional entertainment can expose performers to harm from spectators, the interactive and often intimate nature of experiential theatre can increase the risk that unanticipated audience reactions will harm performers'.

In the 2014 showings of *Separation Street* emotional distress to a child audience member and physical harm to an adult performer were both observed. In both cases there was no long-term damage (that I am aware of) but both were unexpected results of bringing audience and performer into an intimate theatre experience. In the latter, the physical harm caused to the performer was apparently very unexpected despite having, in my observation, created the perfect storm for this action to take place. In other words, children with little or no briefing, no apparent code of conduct (as with traditional theatre), minimal adult supervision, sensory-overload and no narrative guidance were released into a wide open space and left largely to their own devices.

This turn of events speaks to White's quote at the opening of this section. Many reasons can be deduced as to why the children on that day responded in that way, including sudden removal of strict codes of behaviour normally enforced by the school that they attend. Ultimately however, the young audience could be perceived as fulfilling the subtle ideology being conveyed to them – that of ultimate freedom and release from social conventions of proper and considerate behaviour. Just because one kind of freedom is being labelled as positive by the ideology implicit in the creation of the show, why should it not also be read by the child audience that another kind of freedom, or in fact total freedom is also being proffered? This *Lord of the Flies* moment left all but the children shaken. But the responsibility sits squarely with the creators of the show and acknowledgement of the 'less obvious influences that will also guide' an audience.

The ethical implication of the narrative and thematic of *Separation Street* on the children's behaviour is a key question for the development of the show. If the door is thrown wide open on the normal rules of engagement, both theatrically and socially, and little to no guidance is proffered in its place, should we really have an expectation that children will govern their own behaviour in



socially acceptable ways? Is this behaviour simply a mark of the success of the performance that allows children a real sense of power and freedom?<sup>3</sup>

In the following section I lay down a provocation that in fact Polyglot and The Suitcase Royale could utilise a different term other than experiential or immersive to describe the new form they have generated. This term in fact would go a long way to addressing the issues raised above, and speaks to the value of play outside of an education and entertainment paradigm.



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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that this type of anarchic response has happened multiple times before in a very similar environment in *City of Riddles*.

# Separation Street's *Radical Play*

*In one word – as postupok – play is about life (liebensphilosophie): the everyday life of tears and laughter, of promises, loyalties, cheating and joking around, all of which contribute to one's ever-changing sense of self in relation to others. It is about the small and big things of every minute of life with others.* Ana Marjanovic-Shane and E. Jayne White

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Play for the child is not outside of the normal business of day-to-day life. It is life. It is embedded into all activity. For adults, however, play or 'leisure' as Victor Turner puts it is 'a non-work, even an anti-work phase in life of a person who also works' (67). For the child, ritual, in this case experiential theatre is both earnest and playful. It is a tool for both creating and understanding life. For the adult it is time away from the business of life. But here in lies great potential for the further development of *Separation Street*. As Turner goes on to state, 'Leisure is also 1) freedom to enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds...and 2) freedom to transcend social structural limitations'. Whilst the role of play for adults has been trivialised as a distraction from life in the post-industrial age, it can be harnessed to facilitate the reimagining of the world, in this case specifically the reimagining of the child-caregiver connection.

Polyglot also radically positions their work outside of an education paradigm for the most part and certainly for this production. Discussing children's theatre without an educational imperative as we have discovered time and time again is a radical act, especially when you are trying to sell a show.

## **Polyglot as postupok**

*We posit play as a significant and consequential way of being with others, rather than: a particular kind of a goal-directed activity, a developmental stage in life or a practice that can be harnessed to achieve the goals of educators who seek to 'pedagogically play to 'improve the quality of play... to enable children to become master players and lifelong learners' or as a teaching mechanism that positions the adult (as the inevitable authority) as central.* Ana Marjanovic-Shane and E. Jayne White

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But there is a way of talking about children and play that removes it from the clutches of education imperatives whilst still providing a concise argument for

play's value and purpose. Considered in the context of *Separation Street*, postupok seems a perfect fit to the action and intention of the production. Marjanovic-Shane theorises play 'as a special kind of interpersonal act' or to use the Serbian word, postupok, that examines play 'as a deed that transpires between between the players (of any age, often including adults) as the authors of play, rather than the characters in the imaginary situation of play'.

Elsewhere Ana Marjanovic-Shane and E. Jayne White state,

*'Looking at play through the lens of postupok among and between the players, we value the capacity of playfulness to have an immediate, agency impact on the children's social world where the 'other' plays a crucial role in defining and interpreting events-in-the-making and the player's selves'.*

Constructing adult-child relationships through this lens of positive agency, in which others are not the 'adult-as-enemy' but as one who provides interpretation of the child's own place within the performance would powerfully transform *Separation Street* into that liminoid space of rite-of-passage. The child transforms within the space provided because the subtle ideological message is that this place is available for that purpose of knowing oneself better through play. In other words the perimeters of the experience mark play as highly valued, not in danger from intrusive adult outsiders, but rather supported and nourished by the adult facilitators and absent, yet present, adult caregivers.

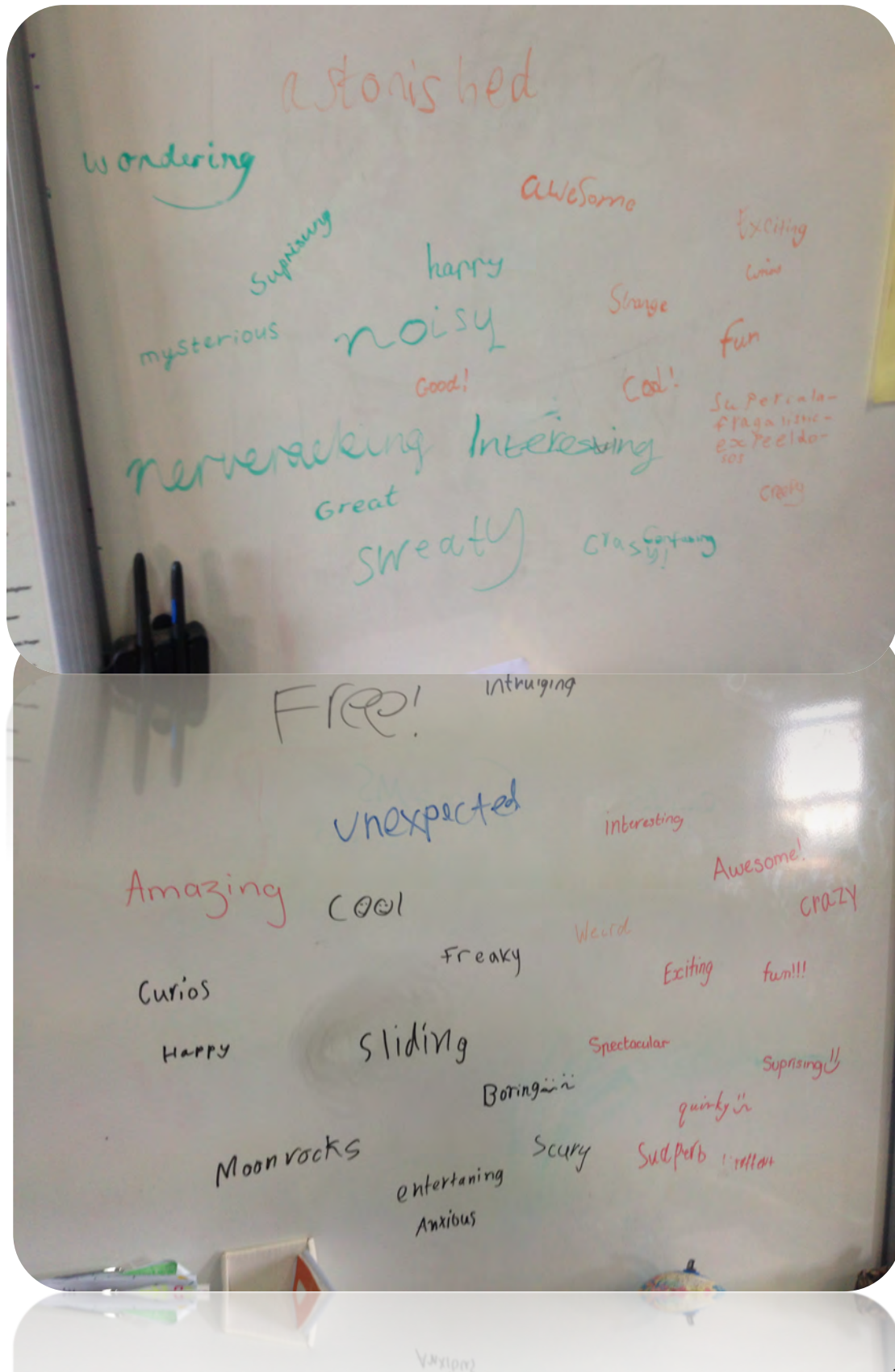
*'Thus we examine the particular dynamics of play as a route to locating oneself through evolving relationships in concert with one another. Players build imaginary worlds in which they (as characters) can conceive strategies towards, and away from, others and selves, as well as towards or away from the 'real' worlds they locate. Players thus generate tensions between (i) existing and possible worlds; (ii) existing and possible selves and (iii) themselves and all others who are not co-players. This is an especially powerful deed for very young children who do not always have the opportunity to exercise agency in the adult-oriented world of 'reality' in which they are 'being thrown often without volition'.*

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If Polyglot's new form, then, was considered as postupok rather than simply experiential, immersive or participatory theatre, it would stating up front that children's agency *aswell* as the renegotiation of the adult-child power binary is central to the work. Reimagining adult-dominated reality for children needs to be both enacted (or experiential) AND include caregivers and children. In this way, children, as leaders of the experience, draw adults into a new world view

constructed through play but no less powerful in it's capacity to change and shift reality. This already occurs in so many of Polyglot's installation works.

1. Feedback from two school groups after their attendance at the 2014 *Separation Street* showing at Northcote Town Hall







**Ideas and questions**

As this work is currently in development, and this report has not sought to evaluate but rather investigate *Separation Street*, I offer now questions wrapped up with possible ideas that may be of some use to the next phase of the project.

More broadly than the specific comments below, the development has opened up a new and potentially transformative form in the creation of Postupok theatre, or theatre simultaneously for adults and children that physically explores relationship and connection and serves to empower the child to lead the adult on a journey of social re-imagining (I think the former works better). This is an exciting and potentially ground-breaking contribution to the arena of family theatre.

1. When a child is separated from an adult the adventure is real, the danger is real, the play is real, the action is real. What is the danger or risk for the adult (both parent and non-parent audience?)
2. Could adults and children trade spaces at points – why are each of the spaces not occupied by adults and children at different times? This could add to the sense of seeing the same thing from different perspectives and serve to facilitate the reconnection that happens but is not yet fleshed out at the end of the show. If the children and adults experience the same journeys but at different times there is really strong grounds for reconnection and ways of communicating, as well as illustrating the very different perspectives adults and young people have of the world. ‘What did that part mean?’ ‘Oh you thought that? I saw this...’
3. What happens when children and adults reunite? Why do they reunite if nothing happens? And further, why do adults even go on the journey if there is no reconnection?
4. How do you make school showings work – two schools at the same time? Felt like the team was fighting the idea of the school audience – why not design for them? The ideal audience is a bunch of kids who don’t know each other, yet these were the minority test audience and but were the ones being created for – this tension means that lots of assumptions appeared to be being made.
5. Giving young people more sense of purpose without telling them what to do – balance of freedom and narrative signposts - could make the journey stronger. Give children a manual or short story before the show (posted to them or given to schools?). There could be online access to this. There could be 5 different stories or manuals each with a different insight into what is happening. This would mean that young people go in with different ideas to the child next to them as well as having a completely different experience to the adults. Adults



could also be given a manual that tells yet another story. Add intertextual layers to *Separation Street* would increase its appeal to the school cohort i.e. teachers (literacy etc.).

6. What are the reason and the question of the show? The form rather than the content as the strongest and most original element should answer that. My feeling is that at some point there needs to be crossover so that separation/reconnection can occur. Otherwise it is just two discrete groups in one place, two spaces, albeit at the same time with no mutual point of reference except what can be heard (which in the current development isn't actually emphasised anyway).
7. What do adults do with freedom? What do children do with narrative (or guidance)? By including adults you are inviting them to experience the world from another perspective. From this point of view Polyglot's vision is about convincing adults to take the time to see the world as their children do. *How High The Sky* achieved this. *Separation Street* actually never permits this to happen. In fact it accentuates the lack of perspective adults have on the child's worldview by giving them a narrative construct around the experience of the show. It is endorsing the dominant paradigm for adult theatre experiences.
8. The emphasis for the next stage of the development should be less on the content (i.e. narrative) and more on strengthening the form including all the elements such as lighting, sound, space and set design. This may seem counter-intuitive but if this pioneering form is strengthened and articulated then it can be replicated with different narratives. This could become Polyglot's 'thing'! i.e. postupok theatre! Until the articulation of 'why this form' is made clear, however, the narrative will fail to really engage and excite.

In interviewing Sue Giles over the course of the year it is apparent that the performance is very open to interpretation, and a mess of contradictions. The role that the adult and child audiences play for one another, if any, appears to be quite metaphorically confused. In addition, both freedom and connection are described as the most fascinating aspects of the story.

'The ultimate aim of this is that we have children by themselves that adults can't see', and yet the 'parent/adult combination is an essential part of the show.' Further, 'we love the idea of the adults affecting the children's journey but the adults not knowing what's happening'. And again, 'Let's get the adults contributing positively and dramatically to the child's journey but in ways that the child is not aware of. I find that a really incredible metaphor for parenthood'. So neither the caregivers nor the children know what the other is doing or contributing? At no point is there a ritual of reconnection. So whilst the two groups are put in the same place at the conclusion of the show, there is no opportunity for reunification albeit at a higher level, which typifies the rite-of-passage experience.

Clarity around what the relationship between the adults and children is for the duration of the performance and how connection is rendered would strengthen the experience of the performance for all.

Children and adults were equally excited by the possibilities of *Separation Street* and willing to embrace a physical and theatrical journey to which very little was understood beforehand. High levels of engagement and curiosity were evident in both audiences, and whilst there was also lack of clarity, this did not deter audiences from participating enthusiastically. There is evidently a great deal of good will and positive expectation around this offering, even though it does not yet feel fully realised.

The balance between freedom versus rules, adult versus child, recognisable cultural markers versus creation of new meaning, the tangible versus the atmospheric, prior knowledge versus none of that is something still to be found in this development. The answers reside not in the story being told but in the way the story is being told, to whom the story belongs, and why it is being told in the first place. All the elements are present including genuine need for such a form and as such the creative output is well worth developing to its fullest.



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