

Look! You see what is not really there.

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the method and the findings of research I carried out in 2011 among 9 and 10-year old children who observed a dance performance. I focused on their imagination and studied the differences between children who attended several workshops preceding their visit to the theatre, and children without this preparation. I found that the children who attended the workshops gave significantly more interpretive answers than the children who did not. The outcome gives rise to a discussion of how to prepare children when they attend a dance performance and how they can explore and extend their experience afterward.

Keywords: dance performance, audience involvement, empirical research, pedagogical strategies

Matthew Reason (2010), who devoted several articles to young audiences, states that early experiences are widely perceived as crucial for an individual's long-term enjoyment of theatre. By watching a performance, children learn how to imaginatively engage with theatrical illusion and gain skills in spectatorship. According to Reason, theatre and the arts also play an important role in the broader development of children. Engagement with theatre is seen as part of the process of "educating the whole child." Besides these utilitarian, or long-term, objectives, a performance is primarily an immediate aesthetic and emotional experience to be enjoyed in the moment. Reason continues, "While we know all about *why* we think we should take children to the theatre, we know little about *what* they make of the experience themselves or *how* they engage with the theatrical performance" (2010, p. 2).

Results from empirical research can inspire choreographers, programmers, and teachers, and can feed our discussions concerning choices made by them. I am fascinated by what is going on in the heads and bodies of children while watching dance. This fascination began when I was a dancer and choreographer, and later as a researcher, and resulted in *Bewogen door dans. De beleving van theaterdansvoorstellingen door kinderen* (Moved by dance. Children's experience of theatrical dance performances), my Ph.D. dissertation on this topic. In that theoretical and empirical research, I focused on involvement processes, such as:

- identification: with characters as well as with dancers (i.e. with the fictional world as well as the real world);
- kinesthetic empathy: moving along with your own body while watching dance and experiencing it through your own body;
- interpretation: do children see more than what is really visible on stage?

The empirical part of that research involved 391 children, aged 10-14, half of whom received dance education at school. They saw an abstract dance performance (*In the Future*, choreography Hans van Manen) or a narrative dance performance (*Opblaashelden*, choreography Arthur Roosenfeld). We looked at differences in involvement by age, by dance education, and by the abstract and narrative performance characteristics.

In 2011, I continued this study using the same methodology. This time we had 70 respondents and we focused only on the imagination of the children.

The title of this article is derived from *Awater*, a poem written by the Dutch poet Martinus Nijhoff (1953). “Awater” is translated as there being another realm behind the words of the poem. The aim of Dutch choreographer Jack Timmermans, who makes performances for children, is to challenge children not just to see what is really on stage, but to discover other, new worlds by association and interpretation. He is passionate about triggering young audiences to open their imaginations. In my research, I focused on what the characters and the situations in his performance *Alice* evoked in the children. We asked them about their thoughts, which had been stirred up by what they had seen on stage. This performance, inspired by the well-known tale *Alice in Wonderland*, is about a dream world, about encounters and pursuits.

I decided to select two categories of 9 and 10-year old children. Preceding the performance, the first group attended several dance workshops organized by the dance company. During the first workshop, they experienced the capabilities of their bodies. In the second and third workshop, they discovered how to translate an idea into dance; they realized that there is more than one way to do so. They also watched each other and were taught that there were various possibilities for interpretations. The second group received no preparation. I wanted to explore the differences between the two groups in their ability to make associations and interpretations.

The questionnaire

In the earlier empirical research I carried out with children, I used several methods with closed, as well as open, questions, which had been collected by talking and by writing (Wildschut, 2003). This time, I wanted to give the children as much freedom as possible to express their associations and interpretations of what they had seen on stage. Therefore, I used open questions.

I selected three episodes to ask questions about, their conditions being: “not too explicit” and “easy to remember.” I called these episodes:



Image 1. The girls meet the rabbit.
Leonor Carneiro and Jonas Furrer, dancers. *Alice*, De Stilte, Jack Timmermans (choreographer).
Photograph by Hans Gerritsen.



Image 2. The girls meet the mouse.
Katarzyna Korc, Wiktoria Czakon, Jonas Furrer, dancers. *Alice*, De Stilte, Jack Timmermans
(choreographer). Photograph by Hans Gerritsen.



Image 3. The girls meet the Caterpillar.
Katarzyna Korc and Jonas Furrer. *Alice*, De Stilte, Jack Timmermans (choreographer).
Photograph by Hans Gerritsen.

For each scene, I formulated questions that evoked an image in such a way that the child could finish the sentence, like: “At the moment the hand appeared, I had to think of ...”

The questionnaire was structured as follows:

STRUCTURE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE	
Introduction of scene 1	
Open questions:	three questions about their interpretation three questions about their arguments
Closed question:	evaluation (rate 0 – 10)
Introduction of scene 2	
Open questions:	three questions about their interpretation three questions about their arguments
Closed question:	evaluation (rate 0 – 10)
Introduction of scene 3	
Open questions:	three questions about their interpretation three questions about their arguments
Closed question:	evaluation (rate 0 – 10)
Open question:	interpretation of the performance
Closed questions:	evaluation, age, school, sex

The procedure

Children from several schools watched *Alice* together in Theater *De Stille* in Breda. After the performance, the children remained seated in their chairs. Before answering the questions, a research assistant gave instructions: the children could finish the sentence and write down even more. She stressed that there were no right or wrong answers. She then introduced the first scene in a few sentences and asked the children to recall this episode. One by one, she read out the questions while the children wrote down their thoughts.

The research group

Below, I give an overview of the participating schools, their preparation, their average age, and the number of boys and girls.

COMPOSITION OF THE RESEARCH GROUP					
school	preparation	average age	boy	girl	total
De Weerijds	no	9, 1	6	11	17
De Fontein	no	9, 5	11	26	37
De Liniedoorn	yes	10, 1	12	4	16
total			29	41	70

Coding of the answers

Did what was really present evoke another world? Did the respondents see what was not really visible on stage? To get an answer for this question, I needed to decide if what the children wrote down could be coded as “yes” or “no.” Of course, we could only judge what was written down, not everything they thought.

Independently, two research assistants and I coded all of the utterances of the children. Before we started, the rules were established, following the same method I used for my Ph.D. study, which was based on research carried out by van Meel, Verburgh, and de Meijer (1993). The coding was completed in two steps.

The first step

Independently, we decided whether an answer was an interpretation: yes or no. A “no” interpretation included: a. I don’t know, b. a description, or c. a judgment. A judgment is an evaluation: for example, “how beautiful it was.” A description means that what is described is perceivable for everybody. An example of a description is: “I thought the rabbit was running after Alice.” Interpretations can be different for each individual; the given answer is subjective. An example of an interpretation is: “I thought the rabbit was skating,” which means that for this specific child, the movements of the dancer referred to skating. Of course, thinking of a rabbit is also an interpretation, but because the rabbit, the mouse, and the caterpillar were mentioned in the questionnaire, we decided to label them as a description.

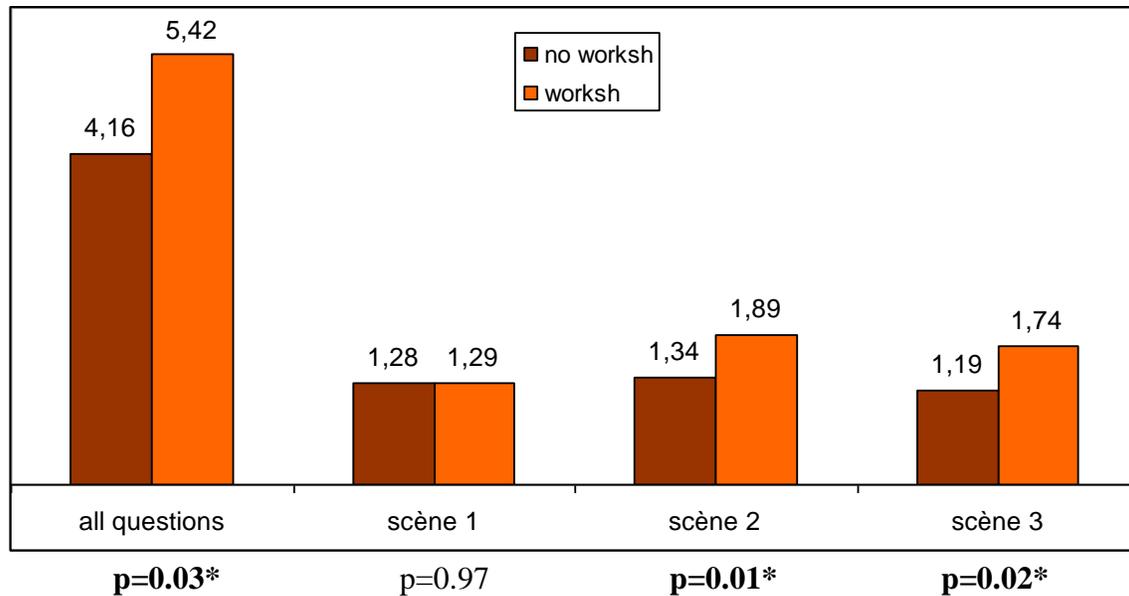
The second step. We divided all utterances coded as “yes” for interpretation into subcategories:

- The interpretation was mentioned by the teacher during the workshop;
- The interpretation refers to an object, an animal, a character, an activity, or a situation, like: “I thought of a king and a slave”;
- The interpretation has an emotional overtone, like: “They were lonely”;
- The interpretation refers to something outside of the performance, which can be the child’s own life or a philosophical thought, like: “Don’t bully animals, because then they bully you.”

Differences between the two groups

Did we find differences between the two groups in their answers labeled as interpretation? In the diagram below, I first brought all 10 questions together (max.=10), followed by three questions for each scene (max.=3).

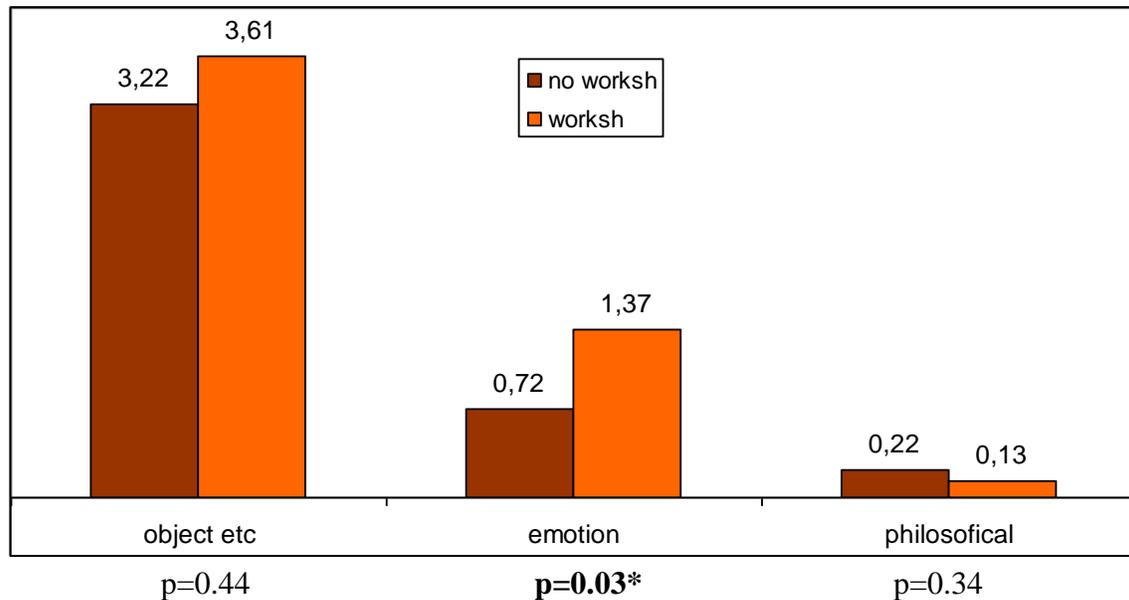
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS



I found that the children who attended several workshops preceding the performance (in orange/right) gave more answers labeled as interpretation than the children who did not (in brown/left). The difference is significant ($p < 0.05$). When we look at the results for each scene, we also see significant differences: more interpretations for the second and third scene were given by the children who attended the workshops.

The results when focusing on the subcategories of the interpretations (e.g. an object, an animal, a character, an activity, or a situation; an emotional overtone; something outside of the performance) are shown below.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS FOR EACH CATEGORY

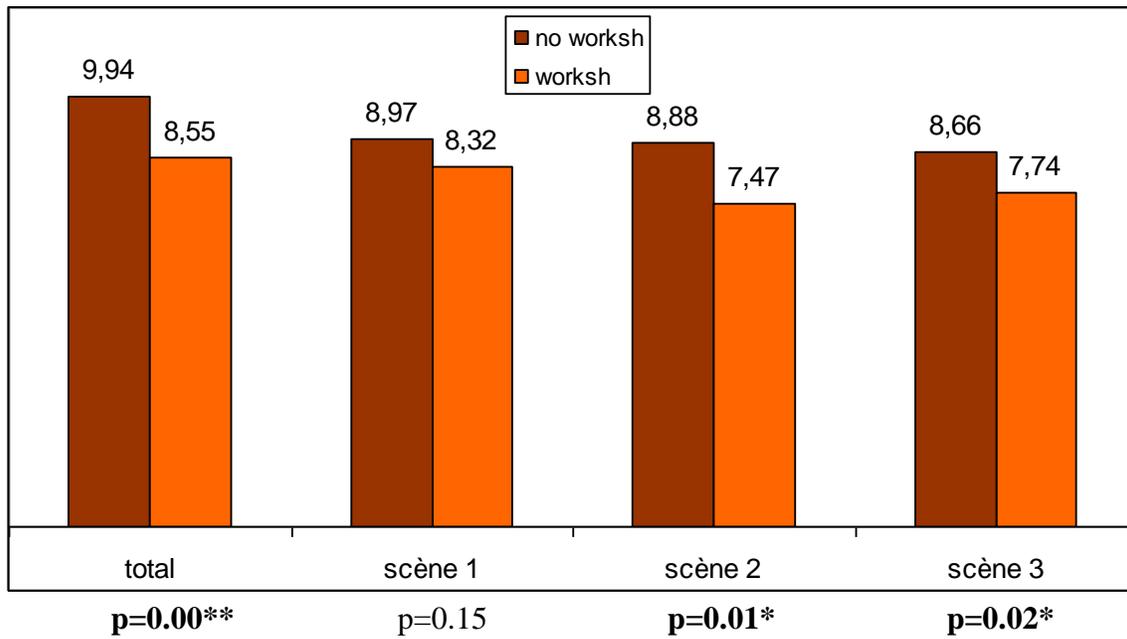


Here, I found that children who participated in workshops preceding the performance (orange/right) more often refer to an emotion in their interpretation than children who did not participate ($p=0.03$). For the other two categories (object / animal / character / activity / situation or a philosophical thought), the differences between the two groups were not significant.

Did the children like the performance?

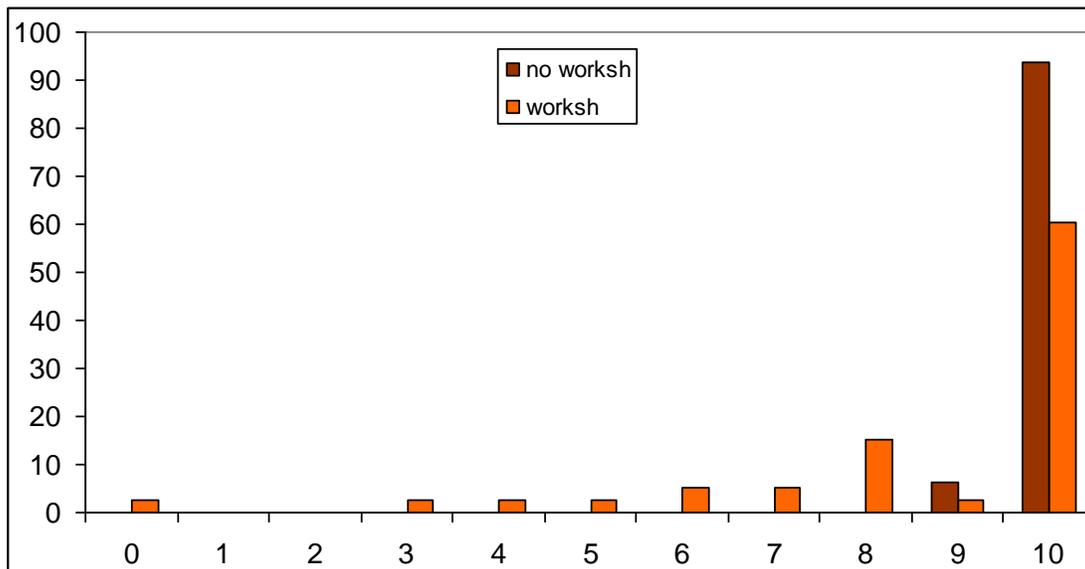
I also looked at differences in the marks the children gave for each episode and to the performance as a whole (left in the diagram). The lowest mark was a 0, and for the highest, a 10.

DIFFERENCES IN EVALUATION



I found significant differences between the two groups. The children who did not attend the workshops (brown/left) gave higher marks, except for the first episode about the rabbit. Let us have a closer look at the evaluation of the performance as a whole.

PARTITION OF THE EVALUATION



Here it becomes clear that the children who did not participate in the workshops (brown/left) nearly all marked the performance with a 10, while some of them gave a 9. The children who were prepared were also very positive about the performance, but their marks ranged from 0 to 10. Their judgment was more critical.

Summary of the results

- Many children showed their ability to see more than what was really there. We noticed that for many of them, what was visible on the stage opened another world.
- The children's interpretations were mostly labeled as thoughts about objects, animals, characters, activities, or situations.
- Significantly more interpretations were given by the prepared group.
- Children who attended the workshops gave significantly more interpretations involving an emotional content.
- Only a few utterances were categorized as related to something outside the possible world of the performance. In these utterances, a connection was made between their own interpretation of what was on stage and something that happened or will happen in society, in their own life, or in the past or the future.
- Both groups were very enthusiastic about the performance.
- The children without preparation were even more impressed by *Alice* than the prepared children. Almost all of the children who did not attend the workshops gave the highest possible mark on a 10-point scale.

Discussion

The aim of this small-scale empirical research was to discover if this specific performance, *Alice*, had the ability to evoke images derived from what really took place on stage, but referred to another, possible world. This was the case with more than half of the children.

We also wanted to know whether the workshop could be helpful in opening up the minds of the children. The answer was yes. The goal of these workshops was to make them curious about the performance, and also to open up their minds and make them aware of various possibilities of expressing ideas in dance and for interpretations of dance.

Of course, choreographers or programmers can have other aims that can change the content of the preparation. The Dutch company Introdans, for example, teaches children movements they can recognize later when watching the performance. This can enlarge the kinesthetic involvement of the child, or it can make identification easier.

A result of this empirical research was that the children without preparation were even more enthusiastic than the prepared children. I think teachers can profit from these positive feelings. Normally in school, the teacher (in the Netherlands) will give their students the opportunity to discuss their experiences. In many cases, this is a mode of "testing" the children's memories of the performance. Of course, a performance can be entertainment for 45 or 60 minutes, but it also can be a starting point for reflection.

As Matthew Reason (2008) discovered in a project conducted in three primary schools in Scotland, there are ways of allowing children to engage more deeply on critical and creative levels in such a way that the theatrical encounter has a beneficial impact beyond the immediate experience itself. To achieve this, teachers need to provide an active structure through which children can explore and extend their experience. The structured investigation, used in this Scottish project, is one possible approach. Philosophical enquiry is another possibility.

Reason states that a deeper engagement happens more frequently with performances that left representational space in which the children could experiment. This is the case in many dance performances.

So, I conclude that with the challenge to enlarge the impact of a dance performance:

- We should prepare children with a clear aim in mind. The aim can be different and needs a translation in the design of the preparation.
- We should intensify and extend their experiences after the performance by giving them a structured way of finding possibilities for further exploration of these experiences.
- Of course we can see this in a larger context of dance education at schools, where expression, communication, and watching, as well as reflection, are important and intertwined.

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Since 1995, **Liesbeth Wildschut** has lectured in dance history, dance theory, and dance dramaturgy at Utrecht University. As a dancer and choreographer, she was involved in performances for young children. The subject of her 2003 doctoral dissertation was children's experience of theatrical dance performances. She is Chair of the Dutch Society for Dance Research and co-editor of the series *Danswetenschap in Nederland*. She was chair of the scientific committee for paper selection for the Dance and the Child Conference in 2006 and editor of the Proceedings. With Jo Butterworth, she is editor of the Routledge publication *Contemporary Choreography* (2009).