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Methods & Processes in Children's Theatre - Denmark



Children's Art-'pit' in Copenhagen Cathedral

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Travel Itinerary

November 5th – 18th 2007
Copenhagen, Zealand

Arrival and orientation
Language course at Danskbureauet
Visit to the Danish Design Centre
Variety of theatre & museum visits

November 19th 2007 – January 18th 2008
Haderslev, Jutland

Assistant Director with Teatret Møllen on The Collectors by Lotta Lottas
Rehearsals and script in Danish
Variety of theatre visits

December 12th-15th 2007
Holbaek & Copenhagen, Zealand

Assistant Director with Teatret Møllen on English version of Whistlestop devised by the company
Visit to Teatret Fairplay, Holbaek
Variety of theatre visits

December 17th, 2007
Aalborg, North Jutland

Visit to Teatret Jako Bole

January 18th – 26rd 2008
Haderslev, Kolding, Vejle, Århus, Copenhagen

Danish premiere and previews of Samlerne in Haderslev, Kolding and Vejle
Visit to Teatret Gruppe 38, Århus during 'The Trouser Button' rehearsals.
Travel home

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[Life itself is the most wonderful fairytale

- Hans Christian Anderson]

Copenhagen is a kind city to lone travellers. Clean, safe and easy to navigate it proved an excellent base for the start of my travel Fellowship. As



a director I had come to Denmark to explore professional theatre for children's audiences. The Fellowship would enable me to experience first-hand the productions and working processes of Danish artists.

Denmark is renowned for its theatre for children and young people and there is a deep respect within the children's theatre industry for the craft and quality that is involved. My intention was to gain an understanding of what makes Danish children's theatre so good and to draw on these discoveries throughout my own work in the UK.

Before leaving my hometown of Edinburgh, I had formed an assumption of sorts: Danish theatre is good because it gets lots of money. In many ways this proved to be a fair statement - the Danish arts are very comfortably supported. However, what emerged throughout my trip was how that money was being used. Initially, one might imagine that more means bigger: larger casts, audiences and production budgets that result in longer, more expensive shows. In fact, the reverse was true. Interestingly, the most successful productions are modest in scale and fairly short in duration (often around the 1hr mark) whilst maintaining all the richness of a powerful piece of theatre. They also incorporate the fundamentals of fine Danish design which further distils and augments their impact. In the highest quality performances the rules are simple: form follows function and less is definitely more. Money aside, these works reflect the heart of the Danish philosophy to life: a striving for intimate communication and a 'hyggelig' (cosy) atmosphere.

The orientation and preparation period in Copenhagen enabled me to get a sense of Danish culture by exploring the tourist attractions of the city. I was also able to take an intensive course in the language. I had been invited to work on a new production by Teatret Møllen with Gitte Kath, an eminent children's theatre artist, and although most people in Denmark can speak exceptional English, the script and rehearsals were to be in Danish.

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[Keep it Simple; as simple as possible, but no simpler.

- Albert Einstein]

Another main reason for visiting the capital, before heading to Jutland, was to spend time at the Danish Design Centre (DDC). It was here that I hoped to better understand the design elements that were so prevalent in the work for children. Although my visits to the DDC gave a note-worthy overview of the industry, it soon transpired that simply being in Denmark is the best lesson you can get. Wandering the streets of Copenhagen or soaking up the atmosphere in shops and cafes can vastly broaden design knowledge and appeal. I quickly learned that the principles of Danish design are everywhere. It resonates through the city's architecture, transport system and cultural scene and can be glimpsed in the evenings through the windows of restaurants and in people's houses. The craft of Danish design is part of the everyday routine- from the cutlery on the breakfast table to the light you switch off before you go to sleep. The trend exhibits styles that are attractive, bold and highly durable and that do exactly what they are supposed to, time and time again, with the minimum of material and effort.

I was delighted that what I discovered about design in Copenhagen was echoed in the Danish children's theatre industry: in the productions I saw (examples can be found in the final section of this report) and during the 'The Collectors', 'Whistlestop' and 'The Trouser Button' rehearsals. It became clear that in these contexts, design aesthetics had the potential to be emotionally moving and inventive without detriment to their main purpose. It is possible to create a quality artistic experience for children whilst addressing the reality of what making work for this age-group often means: a tour of up to three different school halls each day and (particularly in the UK) a very small budget. The exciting thing about this discovery is that it confirms that making work of a high calibre doesn't depend on bona fide theatres and large production budgets. It is therefore (if this is the only aspect into consideration) well within reach of artists in Scotland where the funding is significantly lower than in Denmark. In fact, even more inspiring is that Danish theatre-makers are choosing to work in this economical way because they believe it is more artistically sound.

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[The structure for children's theatre that has been established in Denmark over the past thirty years or more is founded on the existence of many small theatres with different aims and diverse artistic expressions.

- Jørn Langsted, Professor of Dramaturgy at the University of Aarhus]

Something that is particularly striking about the Danish children's theatre scene is that a number of the professional companies have their own building in which they can create, rehearse and perform theatre specifically for children. They are exclusively children's theatre venues that house one producing company, although they usually program other companies as part



of their season and some include additional workshops and arts activities. During the fellowship I was able to visit venues in Århus, Aalborg and Hobæk in addition to my time with Møllen.

Teatret Møllen as the original Mill and the current Theatre



The history of many of these venues is that they were either government buildings illegitimately taken over or legitimately bought by groups of artists with a social agenda to provide a cultural centre for children. In the cases where they were bought outright (such as Teatret Fairplay) the theatre venue can run as it pleases. The company have complete freedom with how the venue is used, even though the company itself remains state funded. In other, albeit a few, fortunate cases these theatres are able to support a small sustained ensemble. Teatret Møllen, as one of Denmark's most respected and established companies, is a prime example. The company members are paid a guaranteed yearly salary, confirmed for about two years at a time. This is, however, rare, even for Denmark. The effects of the security and trust placed in the company is remarkable and means that a company like Teatret Møllen has the freedom to achieve both excellence and innovation – the key recommendations to the UK government department for culture media and sport by Sir Brian McMaster in a review published in January 2008.

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[And candles. There must be candles.

- Michael Rosen's Sad Book by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake]

One of the nicest compliments you can give to someone in Denmark is to thank them for a *hyggelig* (cosy) time. 'Hygge' is achieved during the long winter days, by bringing the light inside. A tray of candles at the centre of a round table is my first memory of arriving at Teatret Møllen and one of my first roles was to help with the English translation of the company biography:

[Since 1974, Teatret Møllen has been the regional theatre making venue for Haderslev and Southern Jutland. The company has residence in an old water mill in the centre of Haderslev and over the past 30 years has established itself as one of the most significant producers of Danish theatre for children and young people, and more recently as an exciting alternative on the adult scene. Teatret Møllen perform in theatres, schools and cultural institutions across Denmark and the work is much sought-after at international theatre festivals.



Copenhagen Cathedral

Teatret Møllen is an intimate ensemble renowned for creating theatre of high artistic quality. Productions are characterised by their visual aesthetic, illusory atmosphere and strong musicality, together with subtle theatre composition and an unusual, epic narrative style. Stage presence, an open set design and a conception of the present, all create an engaged and responsive audience.

For Teatret Møllen, telling a classic story successfully involves finding the core element – the conflict and the vulnerability. Cutting it down and cutting it out, daring to do without, and from almost nothing, managing to tell it all.]

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[I enjoy the travelling theatre, coming to a place, telling a story, leaving the place again and leaving behind only the poster which will become torn and little by little disappear – Gitte Kath]

It was specifically the work of Gitte Kath - poster designer, set designer and joint artistic director - that brought me to Møllen and even though 'The Collectors' was a piece for adults she explained that she works in the same way, whatever the audience.

During a visit to the annual Danish Children's Theatre showcase in 2006, I had my first taste of Gitte's work when I saw a performance of 'The Silk' for age 16+. The only information about the story was from the festival programme and it was very sparse:

An elegantly woven metaphor, a wonderful and thought-provoking story about different kinds of love.

Whilst watching the performance (which, unusually for young people's theatre, contained a lot of text) I couldn't understand a word and yet it somehow managed to reach me. At the time I noted down:

"you can read each thought even when it is complicated...it is full of feeling and emotion. The direction is beautiful."

It is this ability to find and communicate the 'core' of a story on many different levels that has made Gitte's name in children's theatre. The text is not the only important element and there are many other ways with which to converse with your audience. In Gitte's work her aim is to draw the audience into a dialogue by providing as many facets as possible for interaction – the poster (the very first sign), the set, the words, actions and sensations or feelings. Gitte explains:

...if the actors really feel when they touch something with their hands, then the audience will feel it too ...

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[*Stories about almost nothing and about 'everything' all the same*

– Gitte Kath]

Gitte Kath's set for 'The Collectors' by Lotta Lottas



The Collectors is a two-act play about the reclusive Collyer twins in 1940's New York. Compulsive hoarders, they locked themselves away from the world. The younger brother Langley emerging only at night to collect junk and gather food. Lotta's play imagines dark and eerie undertones and an uncomfortable childhood event that caused their rejection of the world.

During performance, The Møllen ensemble give carefully chosen clues – their art is one of suggestion. They also allow the time and the space for an audience to fill in the blanks with their own imagination. They provide stimulus and questions rather than fixed answers. In this way the children are empowered and feel essential to the experience because by unconsciously 'answering back' they are investing a part of themselves; a part that is being monitored and responded to by the adults on stage. Gitte refers to this approach as: *"the audience as storyteller"*.

This method often manifests in a sophisticated form of direct address that is used (although not always effectively) by many of the Danish children's theatre companies. There is a fine line between enticing a children's audience and repelling, patronising or intimidating them. It was clear from observing performances and rehearsal techniques at Møllen (and also at Gruppe 38 in Århus) that years of developing craft and practice as part of a small financially supported ensemble means that the actors are experts in this skill. There is a genuine connection between the children and the performer that is aided by the often intimate set design and low audience numbers. The performers can maintain eye contact and subtly ask the most important question of all:

"What do you think?"

The key to this method is that the adult actors don't have a 'correct' answer any more than the children do - there isn't one. However, everyone has the chance to draw their own conclusions and every conclusion is valid. At Møllen the ensemble seem unanimous in their belief that when you are presenting a show for children you face outward in the same direction – discovering the world of the performance together.

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[Why play theatre for children?...We think. We work. We seek. We sense what moves us and what moves other. We sense what is important to us. Right now. – Lotte Faarup, Actor, Stage Director and Member of the Artistic Management of Corona La Balance – the Danish National Ensemble for Children's Theatre]

Working on set



The freedom with which Møllen and Gruppe 38 are able to work is incredible. They have time, space, money and decades of experience. Above everything, however, they have a passion for their work. Gitte explains:

"we fall in love every time we work together on a new piece"

In many ways the ensembles seem to operate like a working family – inspiring, supporting and at times disagreeing with each other whilst ultimately heading towards the same goal. The artists are comfortable enough to take risks and make mistakes in order to discover new things. The philosophy during The Collector's rehearsals (Møllen's first piece for adults) was that there are no rules: we find out what to do by trying things out.

The luxury here was in the amount of time that we had at our disposal – rehearsal periods in Denmark can be up to four times longer than in Scotland. The most interesting thing however, was how the 'trying out' non-rule was applied to every aspect of the work. On some days the lighting designer would come in with ideas and play around with creating effects and atmosphere. On others the composer would bring in music to try out. One of my journal entries reads:

"Klaus is back with the music. Opening gives me shivers."

The actors were also able to work in their costumes from the early stages and the set was in place for them to inhabit and grow into as the process went on. The result of all these elements was a truly organic and comfortable feel to the performance. My brief time with Gruppe 38 working on 'The Trouser Button' demonstrated the same approach. As ideas were discussed in the studio the technicians would go away and put together some practical way of achieving them: a set of eyes projected on film; a section of warped carousel music.

I was pleased to discover that the extra funding received by the children's theatre industry was being spent on people's time rather than expensive

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products. In fact, Gitte as set designer is the best example of economy in design and she once jokingly described herself as the cheapest designer in Denmark. Her influences are distinctly Brechtian: she prefers to work with worthless materials and objects, ones with a history and a story and to somehow instil a sense of wonder in the ways in which they are used.

Bo Larsen & Ole Sørensen

One of the most interesting ways in which 'The Collectors' company tried things out, came from the performers. Ole Sørensen and Bo Larsen are two of the most well respected actors in Danish children's theatre and they and Gitte have been working together for around twenty-five years. There is an understanding that they can do anything together without judgement.



Each day the two performers would improvise afresh and always push for more ideas. They would rarely stick to one way of presenting their characters and the process was a pleasure to watch: the fun and adventure of playing together and with us. I was never quite sure where they might go next and this really brought the theatrical element alive.

Bo Larsen and Ole Sørensen as The Collyer Brothers.

Ole in particular is also able to gain an instantaneous access to his emotions – essential for communicating to any audience and even more so when dealing with children, who are much closer to feelings than intellect. Ole's skill however was not only in finding the depths of an emotion in rehearsal but in being able to access and control it for later on. Ole describes his method in terms of 'moulding' his character's journey through the play – which he then remembers with his body. Gitte too finds her way though the work in an unusual, more instinctive way and often talks of listening with all of the senses. It is their adoption of this intuitive, self-taught approach that has resulted in their success in making work that speaks to young audiences.

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[We organize one of the world's biggest theatre festivals for children and young people...every actor, technician, dancer, administrator, manager is required to donate four hours of practical festival work. – Michael Ramløse, Chairman of BTS, the Danish Association of Children's Theatres]



Bo Larsen and Ole Sørensen as The Collyer Brothers.

There are over 120 professional children's theatre companies in Denmark (professional in the sense that they are supported by the state) and this is reflected in the number of productions presented at the annual festival, which tours to a different city in Denmark each year. The festival is not programmed so the quality can vary significantly, however, when the work is of a high standard it is amongst some of the finest work available for children in the world.

In this final section I have attempted to give a small taste of the variety of quality Danish work performed for children and young people in 2007. The descriptions in brackets are either from the Teater Centrum (Children's Theatre Centre) or from the company's own promotional material. The choices and any additional reflections are subjective although I have tried to cover different styles, content and target age groups. There are many more excellent productions omitted for the sake of brevity.

Puppetry, 2-4yrs – Songs from Above by Teater My and Teater Refleksion

www.refleksion.dk

[A musical and visual hymn to life, to our dreams and imagination. Related through little tales in a flow of intimate and evocative scenes.]

A calm and gentle piece that reaches beyond words to 'looking', 'seeing' and 'feeling'. A small trail of stars leads us into the space where the young audience is enclosed in a round white, self-contained set. Small surprises appear everywhere: sounds, lights, shadow puppets and tiny giggling characters and there is a performer who is open and understanding. A delightful and magical experience that is about finding joy in the simplest of things: a splash in a puddle, a wriggle in the grass or being gently teased by the people you love.

Storytelling, 5-9yrs – Nils Holgersens' Amazing Adventure by Det Lille Turneteater

www.detlilleteater.dk

[A fabulous and poetic show based on Selma Lagerlöf's book, told with all the magical effects of the theatre.]

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Det Lille Turneteater have a unique touring bus that has been converted into a fully equipped black-box theatre, another testimony to the possibility of design. This relationship between audience and performer takes the 'hygge' philosophy to the extreme. At the point where the storyteller moves animatedly with the excitement of Nil's adventure, the whole bus feels it. This piece is gentle, simple, emotional storytelling enhanced by puppetry and music.

Poetic, 6-12yrs – The Attic Under the Sky by Carte Blanche

www.cblanche.dk

[A poetic performance full of images showing the magic world of ideas in childhood. About friendship and play, death and distress. A performance about finding your way in – and finding your way home.]

Rooting through old boxes in the attic the actor finds play and fun in the strangest of place by following a lovely, winding, non-linear narrative. The most memorable thing about this piece was the brief and moving friendship between a little girl and a very small puppet: a cute character that starts life as a head in search of its body.

Opera, 7+yrs – Next Door by Teatret Fairplay/Gruppe 38

www.fairplay.dk

[A comic chamber-opera about an ageing spinster and an old seaman. She enjoys looking after him and he wants to be left in peace. Or does he? Both dream of better days in grand arias and bitter duets. Two sad, lonely neighbours who share the same toilet.]

A fun piece of incredibly distilled craft and skill on a small scale, with one of the most charming female performers I have seen.

Theatre, 8+ - Whistlestop by Teatret Møllen

www.teatretmoellen.dk

[A small station. A strange place without a name. Strange, inexplicable things happen and the train doesn't always stop. A captivating story about the choice between life and eath and the love between a man and his wife, a father and a son.]

Nostalgic, humorous theatre about the important things in life, the after-life and cheeky angels. Played in a traditional, uncomplicated style with live music. When I saw this in a school the children spent the entire performance balanced forward on the edge of their seats – they were riveted.

Installation, 8+yrs – You Must Be An Angel, Hans Christian by Gruppe 38

www.gruppe38.dk

[A long birthday-party table has been laid, and two waiters set out on the task of their lifetime: 'To wait on all the wonderful personalities that have come to celebrate the greatest fairy-tale writer of all time']

Installation of light, music and projection combined with freestyle story-telling and drama. Fabulously inventive, magical and theatrical use of technology. The audience can walk around the table and get up close to the action where characters are represented in abstract or iconic ways.

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Dance/Physical Theatre 10+yrs – Battlefield by Rio Rose

www.riorose.dk

[A performance about the battles we have with ourselves, with the people we meet and with our loved ones. Why are we so often at war with each other? Why is it so difficult to behave properly in the supermarket or towards our relatives? And is it at all possible to relate to the battles of the world while we are fighting our own?]

Moments of tenderness and brutality epitomized in a comic scene where a couple are cruelly affectionate to one another. Strong and clear choreography and a simple coherent design, where the space is often changed or defined by inventive use of lighting.

Multimedia, 13+yrs – Super-Bitch Princess by Graense Loes

www.graense-loes.dk

[There are days when you really feel like a bitch. A love story about divorces, invincibility and the hatred of dogs. A wild and visual performance with music and hormones. Don't forget your Kleenex.]

Intriguing and beguiling performance by a charismatic up and coming experimental artist. This piece lingered in my mind for a long time. A mixture of theatre meets technology in a coming of age story.

Interactive (target age unknown) – The Golden Ball by Carte Blanche/Teatro de los Sentidos/El Gran Caballo Blanco

www.cblanche.dk

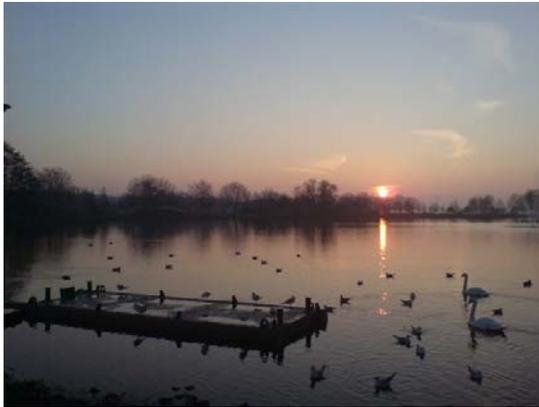
In this performance the audience of three become the protagonists in an adventure to make their secret wishes come true. The audience are taken along sensory tunnels into a variety of different spaces and environments where they meet odd characters and have to complete odd tasks. This is a unique and wonderful experience and made my group of three run across a field in delight afterwards.

Small tip for visiting the festival: After seeing a show, grab a flyer and take a moment to note down initial thoughts and images on the back to jog your memory for later on.

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[Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is exhausting for children to have to provide explanations over and over again. – The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupery]

Throughout my time working in Denmark I began to see ways that the Danish children's theatre methods and processes could be incorporated into my own work in Scotland – where the children's theatre scene also has a good reputation and has been steadily thriving over the years. In many ways the Danish have in the past fought the same battles that Scottish artists are going through – even now the Danish children's theatre industry still comes second



to the adult scene. It is of course important for children's theatre in Scotland to continue to lobby for more money so that the artists have the time that they so desperately need. Yet, it is worth noting how much can be done with what little we have. Not because we are forced to, but because as the Danish philosophy of intimacy and hygge has shown – economy and a search for truthful communication make for better

work. If we are able to have the time and space to try out ideas with people we trust and the courage within this to take risks and work with all of the senses and our emotions, then the work we make can be as excellent and varied as the work in Denmark.

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Ole Sørensen
Connie Tronjberg

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Report Sources

Books

[En Fjer I Hatten, Teatret Møllen 1974-1999 by Claus Chr. Reiche \(Danish\)](#)
(A Feather in the Hat, The Mill Theatre 1974-1999) The history of Teatret Møllen. Numerous posters and photographs help to mark the chronology. The more recent history from 1999 to date is under commission.

[Unplugged Design 2007 – Gitte Kath \(Danish with English Translation\)](#)
An exploration of Gitte Kath's poster art. Kath is also the Artistic Director and Set Designer for Teatret Møllen.

Newspapers. Journals, Papers

[Børneteateravisen](#)
(The Children's Theatre Newspaper)

[Den Røde Brochure – Teater for Børn & Unge 2008-2009 \(Danish\)](#)
(The Red Catalogue – Theatre for Children and Young People). An annual free catalogue for promoters. Lists all professional shows for the coming season. Produced by Teatercentrum.

[Impressions – Theatre for Children and Young People in Denmark \(English\)](#)
An overview of the Danish children's theatre scene with essays from different practitioners. Produced by ASSITEJ Denmark.

[Supporting Excellence in the Arts – From Measurement to Judgement by Sir Brian McMaster, January 2008](#)

Websites

UK

www.imagnate.org.uk Promoter and developer of performing arts for children and young people in Scotland
www.wcmt.org.uk Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

Denmark

www.assitej.dk Danish branch of the world theatre network of theatre for children and young people
www.danskbureauet.dk Language Courses in Copenhagen
www.danishperformingarts.info See in particular the section on Children's Theatre with links to the main professional companies
www.teatercentrum.dk Organisers of the unprogrammed Danish Children's Theatre International Showcase
www.danishplus.dk Organisers of the programmed Danish Children's Theatre International Showcase
www.denmark.dk See children's section
www.ddc.dk Danish Design Centre

For further information on locating these sources please contact
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