

# A Small Festival for Small People: The WeeFestival as Advocacy

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The WeeFestival, English Canada's first performance festival dedicated to children from ages 0 to 5, acts as an advocate for the early years demographic and for the artists who create for them through three key elements of festival structure: programming, space, and creative/artistic exchange. Engaging with research by Ben Fletcher-Watson, Lise Hovik, Matthew Reason, and Adele Senior, this article uses company archives, artist interviews, and the writer's personal experiences to analyze how the WeeFestival temporarily establishes an alternative public sphere that challenges policy-makers, funders, and artists to rethink relationships between arts, very young citizens, and urban life. Even though very young citizens may not initially know that they want to experience art, the festival attends to the interests and responses of young people, demonstrates respect for their capacity to be emotionally and intellectually engaged by artful and thoughtful productions, and establishes festivalized spaces that put an alternative public sphere into action, gesturing to the possibility of real social change. Taking into account the significance of programming for artists, educators, and policy-makers alongside the significance of meaningful audience-artist exchange, the analysis suggests that events like the WeeFestival have the capacity to gently shift how urban dwellers perceive very young children and the way they interact with the arts in daily life.

*Le WeeFestival, le tout premier festival de performance consacré aux tout-petits de 0 à 5 ans au Canada anglais, défend les intérêts de son jeune public et des artistes qui s'y adressent en créant pour eux une structure festivalière à trois composantes : une programmation, un espace et un lieu d'échange créatif et artistique. Dans cet article, Heather Fitzsimmons-Frey s'appuie sur des travaux de recherche réalisés par Ben Fletcher-Watson, Lise Hovik, Matthew Reason et Adèle Senior, et fait usage de pièces d'archives, d'entretiens avec des artistes et de ses propres expériences pour examiner comment le WeeFestival réussit à créer un espace public qui incite les décideurs, les bailleurs de fonds et les artistes à repenser le lien entre les arts, les citoyens en bas âge et la vie urbaine. S'il est vrai que les très jeunes citoyens ne savent pas toujours qu'ils souhaitent vivre des expériences artistiques, le festival est à l'écoute des intérêts et des réactions des jeunes, respecte leur capacité à être interpellés émotivement et intellectuellement par des productions artistiques bien pensées et crée des lieux à l'intérieur desquels une sphère publique parallèle peut se mettre en œuvre et faire croire que le vrai changement social est possible. Fitzsimmons-Frey montre l'importance de la programmation destinée aux artistes, aux éducateurs et aux décideurs, de même que celle des échanges pertinents entre le public et les artistes. Son analyse laisse entendre que des événements comme le WeeFestival ont le potentiel de transformer doucement la façon dont les citoyens perçoivent les très jeunes enfants et comment ces derniers interagissent avec les arts au quotidien.*



Launched in 2014, the biennial WeeFestival,<sup>1</sup> presented by Theatre Direct in Toronto, Ontario, is English Canada's first performance festival dedicated to the very young (under six) demographic. While other English-Canadian performance festivals<sup>2</sup> and individual theatre companies<sup>3</sup> also cater to younger members *within* their scope, the WeeFestival programming content, ambiances, artist exchange, and community engagement concentrates entirely on the early years. Besides catering to smaller citizens, the festival itself is small: 5000-6000 people attend each year, and individual performances have audience capacities that range from topping out at one hundred to as few as eight. Combined with the intimacy possible with small size, the narrow focus means the WeeFestival is well-positioned to operate as an advocacy hub for early years citizens within the City of Toronto. Advocacy occurs through three key elements of festival structure: programming, space, and creative/artistic exchange. The WeeFestival temporarily establishes an alternative public sphere that challenges policy-makers, funders, and artists to rethink relationships between arts, very young citizens, and urban life.

In dedicating its programming to early childhood, the WeeFestival is an English-Canadian contribution to an international trend that engages with very young children as artistic and creative citizens, rather than relegating them to a sideshow "family stage." Worldwide, this work dates back at least thirty years (see Fletcher-Watson et. al) and includes festivals and companies such as Québec's Festival des Petits Bonheurs (launched in 2004), Australia's Out of the Box Festival, Scotland's Starcatchers, the international networking facilitated by the European Small Size Network, and Italy's La Baracca-Testoni Ragazzi.

My understanding of the WeeFestival comes from three different types of sources. First, it's personal: I have attended all three Toronto WeeFestivals (2014, 2016, and 2018) as an artist-scholar, as a member of the WeeFestival Advisory Board, and as a parent of very young children.<sup>4</sup> Second, I have had thought-provoking conversations with artists and artist-scholars who attend and present at the festival along with interviews with Artistic Director Lynda Hill. Third, the WeeFestival administration gave me access to a range of audience responses and letters in their archive that offer insights into participant experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond my own observations and the testimonial letters in the WeeFestival archive, I did not conduct any direct research with young children. Even when audiences are young, there are multiple ways to study their experiences: Lise Hovik's The Red Shoes Project is practice-based arts research with professional dancers and 0-3 year olds (Hovik "The Red Shoes Project: Theatre"); Matthew Reason studied five- and six-year old spectator experiences using children's drawings as a conversation tool (Reason); Starcatchers regularly partners with the Scottish government for multi-month long studies on arts, creative skills, and wellness (Starcatchers.org.uk/evaluation); and at Australia's Out of the Box Festival (for ages three to eight) a research team interviewed parents and ran focus groups with children and caregivers (Tayler et al. 12). Since advocacy is relational, and meaningful if advocates are acting on behalf of vulnerable citizens in ways those people want, future research directly with young WeeFestival attendees would be appropriate. However, for this article my objective is to consider how festival structures enable it to operate as a site of advocacy.

## Advocacy, Festivals, and the Very Young

Festivals have long been associated with movements for social change (Sharpe 219) and the concept of festivals as advocacy is not new. Many popular festivals originate from and retain an explicit advocacy mandate, such as Pride Festivals (sites of advocacy for LGBTQ+ folks) and the RUTAS festival run by Toronto's Aluna Theatre (a festival that is "connecting the Americas through the arts" from a company founded "as a response to the misrepresentation and under-representation of cultural diversity on our stages" [Aluna]). According to British advocacy organization seAp (support empower Advocate promote), all forms of advocacy seek to ensure that people have their voices heard on issues that are important to them and have their views and wishes genuinely considered when decisions are being made about their lives. seAp also states that "advocacy is a process of supporting and enabling people to [...] defend and promote their rights and responsibilities." An advocate may seek to support an individual (or individuals) in a particular moment, or may seek broader social change for a larger group. Yet, as E.K. Sharpe points out, the idea of festivals as vehicles for social change has been criticized because festival practices may reproduce dominant power relations or may "poorly represent the interests and values of the community they purport to represent" (219). For the WeeFestival to be an advocate of social change it has to place very young citizens at the centre of all its decision-making.

The WeeFestival's primary constituency is its very young audience. As seAp points out, advocacy is particularly important for those who are "most vulnerable in society," and very young children certainly belong in this category. Limited in terms of life experience, speech, and even mobility, very young children may not even know that they need access to art, and cannot advocate for themselves.<sup>6</sup> The WeeFestival also serves as an advocate for educators and families of very young children, and below I'll address how it engages young children from underserved communities by reaching out to their caregivers. In addition, the festival also advocates for artists doing creative work for early years: bringing artists together to share with one another inspires further creative work and particular opportunities for artists in an emergent field.

Making professional performances for the very young remains "contentious" (Fletcher-Watson et al. 130), and within the English-Canadian context, works created for very young audiences are often treated with scepticism. For example, a 2016 report on cultural participation by young people in Canada describes "the relatively recent emergence of activities and works for even younger children—those under three years old or even babies!" (Daigle/Saire 67). The incredulity implied by the exclamation point is echoed elsewhere in the document by the tacit dismissal of such endeavours as a "trend" or "a decided fad" (59). Such attitudes illustrate the need for advocacy for both the very young people who benefit from this work and the artists who make it.<sup>7</sup> The WeeFestival challenges critics to reconsider their doubts by presenting professional work for the very young and putting it at the centre of a festival. While artists making early years performances are clearly not "vulnerable" in the same ways that very young children, and especially socially excluded young children are, as long as creating work for the very young is considered to be a fringe activity or a "decided fad," then asserting the value of the work and the artists who make it is a significant act of advocacy.



**Audience members joining in to play with bits of wood during exploratory playtime after Magnet Theatre's *Knock!* WeeFestival 2018. Photographer: Dahlia Katz.**

Events like the WeeFestival respond to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which states that children have the right “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities *appropriate to the age of the child* and to participate freely in cultural life and arts” (emphasis added). The WeeFestival joins a worldwide movement, extending from international associations like the Small Size Network to companies like La Baracca-Testoni Ragazzi, in promoting the belief that access to arts and culture is a young child’s fundamental right. Reason argues that any conversation about cultural rights needs to consider what is or is not to be included in the definition of culture (26) and that “the right to culture[...]depends on the fulfilment of a right to knowledge and personal empowerment” (29). One way to address Reason’s concerns is to invite local communities to define cultural rights. Working with families and young children, the artists of La Baracca expanded Article 31 into a *Charter of Children’s Rights to Arts and Culture*, and then translated it into twenty-seven languages. The charter includes the rights “to experience artistic languages as “fundamental knowledge”(2); “to be part of artistic processes that nurture their emotional intelligence helping them to develop sensitivity and competence in harmony” (3); “to enjoy high-quality artistic products, specifically created by professionals for each different age-group” (5); “to have a relationship with arts and culture as sensitive and competent ‘subjects’ not as consumers” (6); and “to share the pleasure of the artistic experience with their families” (9).

Philip Pullman influentially argues that children “need to go to the theatre as much as they need to run about in the fresh air [...] and that the difficulty with persuading grown-up people about this is that if you deprive children of shelter and kindness and food and drink and exercise, they die visibly; whereas if you deprive them of art and music and story and theatre, they perish on the inside, and it doesn’t show.” And of course, grown-ups are essential if very young children are to get to the theatre. Although families often serve as advocates for the

very young, the WeeFestival organizers recognize that Toronto's marginalized families and those living in underserved neighbourhoods confront systemic barriers to participation in the arts—obstacles that make it unlikely that they will exercise their rights to some forms of arts and culture. For that reason, the WeeFestival markets to families of very young children who are able to pay for arts experiences, and, with the help of funders and ticket angels they reach some socially excluded children as well.<sup>8</sup> For example, the 2018 WeeFestival included Magnet Theatre's *Scoop*, a four-performer production for a maximum of eight non-walking babies and their caregivers. Recognizing that it was impossible to charge tickets for a price that covered a significant percentage of the cost of presenting the show, Lynda Hill sought out individual donors to "buy" the show for spectators who experience barriers to attending theatre. Then, the festival invited caregivers (through organisations such as Kids Up Front, the nearby Montrose Childcare Centre, and Artist-Parent contacts) to bring their babies to *Scoop*. However, Hill also negotiated with Magnet Theatre to have one performance that artists, scholars, presenters, and cultural policy makers could pay to attend as observers. As a result, I was able to wait in the foyer with babies and carers, watch the pre-show performer-baby interactions, and witness *Scoop* and the caregiver and baby experiences from outside the intimate tent performance space. Without ticket angels, those babies and their carers would not have had that experience. Without the observer-friendly performance, cultural policy makers and funders may not have been able to appreciate the extraordinary impact and value of the production experience—and they are key to providing support to underserved communities, not to mention other very young citizens of Toronto. Ticket angels are an essential tool for sharing theatre with a broad demographic, but after the 2018 Festival Hill told me that their ticket angel initiative needs a wider reach, and needs to confront barriers beyond ticket price, such as transportation to and from the venue. Advocating throughout Toronto for very young children's cultural rights is evolving but by establishing a festival for very young audiences and incorporating outreach strategies, the organizers demonstrate that they and their funders value the early years demographic and believe that creating space for their engagement in arts and cultural activities is worthwhile.

## WeeFestival Programming and Advocacy

The WeeFestival aims to make very young children's emotional and social developmental needs and interests central to their planning, and I argue that curating with care is an act of advocacy. WeeFestival programming selections could be described as "quality" productions for early years audiences, but Reason suggests that the concept of *quality* children's theatre might refer to fashion, material and physical standards of production, or more problematically, a theatre's ability to achieve ancillary goals such as future audience development, community engagement, or specific learning objectives—or it might refer to some nebulous "universal" or elitist idea of good theatre (35, 36). Instead, Reason argues that quality should refer to what he calls "ambitions" (38) for children attending theatre. It should be respectful rather than patronising, throughout the production a child's emotional, imaginative, and intellectual presence should matter, and the art experience should have enduring resonance for the spectator (38, 39). According to Reason's definition, the WeeFestival selections must

speak directly to what matters to the child audience, rather than, for example, presenting a nostalgic idea of childhood, or aiming for overly ecstatic audience participation.

The WeeFestival features performance forms that vary depending on the artistic/creative team and/or the intended age of the spectators: some pieces have a script and/or a narrative arc; others are wordless, resembling interactive art installations; some would be called postdramatic performance if they were created for adults (Fletcher-Watson et. al 133). At the 2014 WeeFestival, I attended *H2O* (Helios, Germany) where a room was filled with a shallow lake of water. Ice blocks were suspended above, dripping into metal buckets, and lights projected on the pool and reflected onto the ceiling. Intentionally and seriously exploring the possibilities of water, at one point the performers used long straws to blow small boats across the pool. At *Flots, tout ce qui brille voit* (Le Théâtre des Confettis, Québec), my young companion and I followed a dimly lit pathway into a cozy, glowing tent. An LED light strip separated us from two middle-aged male performers who plucked a banjo, manipulated shells and sea stars, and spoke about waiting and loneliness. At the 2016 WeeFestival, when I attended *Hup* (Starcatchers, Scotland) my companions and I entered an intimate space built of illuminated Plexiglas trees spangled with paper cranes. Birdsong softly twittered from speakers suspended in the “trees.” A cellist, a violinist, and a pianist played classically inspired music, while a dancer interacted with the young spectators who were free to roam and explore. At *Nest* (Theater de Spiegel, Belgium) the audience sat on the floor around a giant wooden nest, while earth-toned and natural-fibre bird puppets whirled around the space animated by performers who also played violins and sang emotionally intense music punctuated by percussive sounds. Following the performance, children explored the nest and played with the instruments, birds, and wooden eggs. In fact, after most performances, children were invited to explore the set and props for about twenty minutes. One parent whose family attended several shows at the 2016 WeeFestival “wanted to write and express [her] appreciation for this festival and for the type of gentle, calm, engrossing, and meaningful cultural engagement it offers for little people” (Amber). Aesthetically rich, beautifully wrought work, in which the relationship to the young audience is absolutely central to the performance, these examples of theatre performances at the WeeFestival are intimate and respectful, and far from the frenetic, commercial performances of *Shopkins Live! Shop it Up!* or *Toopy and Binoo Live!* (based on toys and television shows and presented in high capacity proscenium venues such as Toronto’s Queen Elizabeth Theatre (over 1000 seats) and Sony Centre for the Arts (over 3000 seats) and requiring little if anything from their audience in terms of imaginative engagement).

Other curated festival programming is free and drop-in for attendees. Dance parties and cozy concerts featuring professional artists take place in very small spaces (such as lobbies) for intimate audiences of as few as ten dancing toddlers.<sup>9</sup> On the May long weekend, there are also interactive arts-based workshops for young children and their families. Sometimes whimsical, daring, or even challenging, these accessible and interactive events engage with very young children as creative arts participants and art-makers in their own right.

I offer these fragments of production description to help readers better imagine the type of work presented at WeeFestival. The selections exemplify Reason’s description of quality performances as those that encourage emotional, intellectual, and imaginative engagement. Festival curatorial decision-making and programming are among the most obvious ways that a festival can function as advocacy—demonstrating respect for the capacity of young people to be thoughtfully, emotionally, and intellectually engaged by artful and thoughtful productions.

## WeeFestival, Advocacy, and the Festivalization of Space

The festivalization of spaces includes practical modifications and the manipulation of atmospheres to suit audience needs and festival goals. Establishing child- and arts-centred spaces is another way the WeeFestival operates as a site of advocacy. The WeeFestival takes place primarily in Downtown Toronto. Major venues have included the Alliance Française, Alumnae Theatre, Factory Theatre, Tarragon Theatre, the Theatre Centre, Artscape Youngplace, the Pia Bouman School of Dance, and the Wychwood Arts Barns. Other venues include the Fraser Mustard Early Learning Academy, and early childhood learning centres that the WeeFestival visits as part of their outreach into underserved, primarily new immigrant and/or socially marginalized Toronto neighbourhoods. The first five venues, in particular, do not typically cater to early years audiences and the presence and needs of very young citizens transforms them.

Marjana Johansson and Jerzy Kociatkiewicz's article "City Festivals" discusses the festivalization of urban city spaces as a way of creating "experience spaces." While the theory that they draw from focuses on the concept of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore) and city efforts to create urban identities, cater to business interests, and consider urban planning issues such as flow, their paper uses that framework to explore "ways in which urban space is staged, acted upon and transformed in order to provide an intended experience" (393). Urban city festival sites become "experience spaces" in the ways festival spaces disrupt the norm, direct the gaze, and perhaps flirt with subversive ideas and risky behaviours. As people walk through spaces altered by buskers and crowds, lounge in a beer tent occupying a parking lot, and encounter line-ups of ticket holders snaking past cafés, and as the scent of festival snacks wafts towards urban citizens, city festival planners hope that they can influence feelings about the city and its potential (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz 394-95). Experience spaces are more than the venue, and their value is in more than the product a person does or does not buy on location (a beer in the beer garden, a ticket for a show, a cookie on the festival grounds). Rather, these spaces cater to a whole memorable experience, and spending time in them may (for example) incite feelings of belonging, celebration, or occasion.

Modifying pedestrian aspects of festival spaces is one way to welcome very young children. This means ensuring the availability of washrooms with change tables, signs to indicate the venue is breastfeeding-friendly, quiet spaces for parents and young children to withdraw, and access to snacks and water. Though I called these details pedestrian, the fact that they must be addressed purposefully means that they are not ordinary. Mother-artist-blogger Claire Wyveen describes these interventions as "scaffolding of support" that make it possible for caregivers and children to experience live art ("A Child's"). By making very young children the festivalization focus, the spaces the festival inhabits are necessarily altered so that young children are not merely accommodated in an adult world: their needs, desires, presence, responses and interests are central to animating and understanding the space, and addressing them becomes an act of advocacy gesturing to the possibility of real social change.

Another significant aspect of festivalizing space to enhance experiences is the manipulation of atmospheres. Phil Jones explains that (notwithstanding a wide range of scholarly nuance) the idea of an atmosphere refers to a kind of feeling perceived in a space (318). In terms of establishing festival atmosphere there are three main elements: artistic interventions in spaces (Jones 322), anchoring events such as mainstage shows, and a central hub where

people can mingle, relax, and socialize (Frew and Ali-Knight 214). Jones also observes that “atmosphere is shared between the spectators,” but concedes that “they also experience it in different ways relating to their individual characteristics” (318). In other words, those present contribute to each other’s affective responses (if many children are excited, that influences a new arrival’s reaction to the atmosphere), but the response is still specific to the individual (if a baby is tired, they might cry regardless of how others are responding to the space). Any manipulation of WeeFestival atmospheres is influenced by the attendees, who have not necessarily been socialized to behave in so-called appropriate ways. While very young audiences are often non-verbal and even non-mobile, their physical and audible presence alters established performance venues, temporarily changing spaces that frequently exclude young children and devalue their ways of being in the world. When venues like Toronto’s Theatre Centre and Tarragon Theatre are suddenly full of young children and their families, the children’s creatively engaged presence has the potential to challenge the public’s understanding of what it means to be an arts venue, and what an urban artistic space can be.<sup>10</sup> The supporting festival structure and policy decisions put an alternative public sphere into action, which I will discuss later, but below I discuss atmosphere, advocacy and WeeFestival spatial interventions (both practical and artistic) in the three main festival elements, starting with the festival hub.

The WeeFestival’s central hub is inspired by playgrounds and gardens — two spaces where very young children encounter communities of strangers and the joy of play with caregivers and friends. In Willmar Sauter’s introduction to *Theatre Research International*’s special issue on festivals he describes a German beer festival, where people listened to music and chatted to friends and strangers, “which had no other purpose than bringing people together to have a good time” (239). He notes that some members of the International Federation for Theatre Research working group, “The Theatrical Event,” felt that type of festival experience “expressed the purest vision of festivals: a collective feeling of flow and *communitas*” (239). The WeeFestival hub establishes atmospheres that offer young children and their caregivers opportunities to experience “flow and *communitas*,” in ways that may not work for a beer festival, but do honour Toronto’s youngest citizens and have a similar function: the spaces are loosely structured, convivial and social.

The WeeFestival’s indoor children’s garden is a re-imagining of space that is at once an artistic intervention and community hub. In 2014, the hub concept was a reading garden

**Children’s Garden  
on Victoria Day,  
2014. WeeFestival  
Photographer.**



**Audience members  
at Starcatchers’  
Hup, WeeFestival  
2016. WeeFestival  
Photographer.**





installed in Tarragon Theatre that included a children's playhouse, comfy cushions and chairs, giant paper flowers, and numerous beautiful picture books by local artists such as Barbara Reid and Dennis Lee. In 2016, the Wonder Garden design (inspired by the art of Kinnon Elliott) was installed in the Theatre Centre, full of cushions, cuddly animals, and trees, establishing an inviting space to play, rest, nurse a baby, listen to programmed storytelling events and music, and relax and socialize "early-years" style. In 2018 Leslie Kachena McCue, from Curve Lake First Nation, designed the Biinoojiinyag Gitgaanmiwaa (Children's Garden). McCue curated Indigenous arts, singing, dancing, and early childhood workshops that would "hopefully plant the seeds for further dialogue and awareness around the importance of integrating Indigenous values in early childhood settings" (Hill, email). A garden-type space encourages children to influence the festival atmosphere, making room for laughter and rambunctious play, thoughtful and critical reflection, or cuddles with a loved one. It offers a sense of celebration and belonging and aims to provide a feeling of ownership in a festival space.

A different kind of artistic and practical intervention that influences the atmosphere stems from acknowledging that the festival experience begins the moment a child and their companions enter a venue: the entire WeeFestival operates on the principles of a "relaxed performance format." Ben Fletcher-Watson explains that relaxed performances attempt to "accommodate numerous common features of autism to create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere where the autistic theatregoer can relax and enjoy live performance" (65). Hill points out that in the early years demographic, children may have exceptionalities that have not yet been diagnosed, so all WeeFestival team members, from ushers to site animators to stage managers, are "trained to offer a warm, welcoming and calm atmosphere and to be aware of the diversity of responses young children might have to new environments and new situations" (Hill, email). Ushers help seat children comfortably, children are free to leave at any time, and in many shows they may leave and come back. One parent spontaneously contacted the WeeFestival to let them know that this gentle warmth was very effective. They added:

Your artists (and stage manager!) were just wonderful with the children, and I so appreciate them speaking to the parents beforehand, reassuring us that this show is for children and all the unexpectedness that involves. I truly believe that calming energy passes from parents to children, making the entire experience better for all. (Sam)

Creating a calm and comfortable atmosphere for children and their caregivers means that children are invited to be visible, audible, creatively engaged audience members whose responses are valued instead of hushed, removed, or otherwise marginalized. These less overtly political actions are how Sharpe aligns ideas about festivals, leisure, and pleasure-politics, noting that leisure events have the potential to be "active agents in a broader process of political and social change" (231). In anticipating the tastes, desires, and needs of the very young and their adult companions, the structure of the WeeFestival puts into action practical ways of valuing our youngest citizens by demonstrating that their responses—or contributions to creative exchange—are welcome.

The possibilities of exchange and shared experience are also essential in the main anchoring events, the curated productions. Choreographer of *Flying Hearts* (Theatre Direct's 2018

WeeFestival offering) Michelle Silagy emphasizes that besides creating an enjoyable aesthetic experience, she is making work which clearly cues all spectators that they are watching a performance, but also establishes that they “can be themselves within the space” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons Frey, “Flying” 90). That makes an impact: one parent noted, “there are not many places where babies and toddlers are wholly welcomed to be themselves” (WeeFestival Audience Feedback).<sup>11</sup> Wyveen reported that after seeing *OGO* (Théâtre des petites âmes, Québec), her three-year old declared “I want to come back here again and again and again” (“Teaching”). Helping children understand how to be spectators for a particular production while still “being themselves” is an aspect of WeeFestival advocacy that celebrates inclusive theatrical experiences for children of all abilities and invites very young citizens to meet theatrical work on terms that work for them.

Individual productions establish experience spaces differently and each early years company has its own guidelines about how children are invited to relate. At Helios’ production of *H<sub>2</sub>O* young audiences were seated in front near the “lake” with caregivers seated behind them in a semi-thrust stage format. After the performance, spectators were invited to use straws to blow boats across the water, but during the production, they stayed seated. During Starcatchers’ *Hup* the children moved around the space at will, interacting with the dancer and musicians, and at the end of the choreographed journey, the dancer (dressed as a raccoon), brought out a wagon full of props like tails that the children could try, in order to even more fully participate in and process the experience. Prior to Theater die Spiegel’s *Nest* the children and their adult companions were reassured that if it wasn’t the right day for the baby to see the show, and the baby wanted to leave, they could. At the show I attended, a crying infant stayed, and settled. Another crying infant left. After Theatre Direct’s, *The Old Man and the River* performers explained and sometimes deconstructed the puppets. Like spaces the WeeFestival designs, the anchoring events present child-centred atmospheres designed to support positive experiences for the very young.

## WeeFestival, Advocacy, Creative Exchange, and the Adults

If we agree that early years audiences and quality art created for them are worthy of advocacy, and that advocacy takes place through WeeFestival programming and the design of child-centred spaces, it’s informative to consider the festival’s role in fostering creative exchange: how does treating very young citizens as sensitive and competent subjects rather than consumers, develop the art form and deepen respectful engagement with very young citizens?

The WeeFestival aspires to influence ways theatre for the very young is imagined and created in Canada, and therefore supports creative exchange platforms for artists, early years educators, and policy makers. Integrated into the fabric of the festival is special programming for “delegates” (primarily artists, but also academics, educators, funders, and arts policy makers). There are workshops, roundtables, post-show facilitated expert “talk-backs” reminiscent of post-show discussions held for young audiences, master classes for artists, presentations of works in progress, and a symposium. In the call for papers for this special issue, Ric Knowles suggests that at many small festivals, “the conferences, colloquia, and workshops, as sites of intercultural negotiation and exchange are at least as important as the

shows” (Knowles, “Call”), and Jean Graham-Jones argues that international festivals can be “culturally transformative” (58). Indeed, after watching Starcatchers’ *Hup* and participating in the post-show conversation, one artist-delegate sent feedback to the WeeFestival. The delegate described watching toddlers experience the show, learning about the company research and development process, hearing concerns about defining the performance for potential funders, and engaging in thought-provoking conversations with other delegates and artists concerning their efforts to articulate the value of the work. The artist-delegate noted that the Scottish ideas and methods might be productively applied to a North American context. An international festival fosters exchanges like these that have the potential to influence thinking and creative work.

Like the post-show conversations at the WeeFestival, the symposia and professional development workshops contribute to the festival advocacy initiatives — not only as intercultural exchange, but as learning opportunities for artists, educators, policy makers, and caregivers. Discussions at the symposia may focus on performance research in nursery schools, experiments in music education, understandings about cognitive development and perception, digital play innovation, indigenization, strategies to create inclusive arts experiences, and children’s geographies.<sup>12</sup> Skills-focussed workshops for artists and educators, offered by established artists such as Germany’s Michael Lurse of Helios and Maryland’s Stacy Staeyert of Imagination Stage encourage international sharing and enhancement of local Toronto skills. In 2018, as a way of advocating for artists who may have encountered barriers to accessing training in the past and supporting the development of work that speaks to a diverse but local-Toronto early years audience, South Africa’s Magnet Theatre creation for babies and early years workshop was specifically offered to artists of colour and Indigenous artists. Integrating formal ways for artists, educators, and community members to develop skills and think through significant issues related to performance for early years is a significant way of advocating for the artists, and the art form and ultimately strengthens the potential for local early years audiences to have powerful theatre experiences.

## Advocacy, Creative Exchange, and the Children

While international artistic exchange is a valuable feature of numerous festivals, considering this article’s emphasis on the WeeFestival as a space of advocacy for the early years demographic, how does the festival make very young citizens the focus of creative exchange? The question brings to mind two dimensions of seAp’s definition of advocacy: ensuring that vulnerable people “have their voice heard on issues that are important to them” and “have their views and wishes genuinely considered when decisions are being made about their lives” (seAp). If the WeeFestival advocates effectively, it needs to acknowledge and address the voices of early years attendees and model ways spaces and experiences can be shaped to be respectful and inclusive.

Yet early years spectators attend the WeeFestival because adults bring them, and in most cases, adults also choose the plays to attend. Most frequently, children are, as Reason puts it, “benevolently coerced” (17) into attending theatrical productions, pointing out that undeniable power dynamics operate in the relationship between adults, children, and theatre. This

being the case, the WeeFestival must appeal to adult carers as well (in terms of advance marketing, on-site experience, and the festival organizer's understanding of carers' "ambitions" [38] for children).<sup>13</sup> Given that so much of a child's physical presence is up to adults, for the festival to advocate for the very young, children's intellectual and emotional presence at the festival must matter, in the here and now, not just for the future.

But how does that happen? When theatre for early years provides imaginative, emotional and intellectual engagement, child spectators "must have the feeling that it would have been different if they hadn't been there—that their presence matters" (Danish artists Peter Manscher and Peter Jankovic, qtd. in Reason 46). In contrast, Young People's Theatre artistic director Allan MacInnis comments that when children's presence does not matter, "I have felt them give up" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons Frey, "Dance" 35). When artist-audience communication is reciprocal it can be described as democratic. Artist scholar Lise Hovik argues that if we were to ask very young children and babies what they would like to see "and how they would prefer to watch theatre," their verbal responses would not be satisfactory, "but their bodily response is highly readable." She argues that "one of the premises of democratic exchange in this field is...to respect the small children's bodily, musical and aesthetic language and allow a listening quality in the communication between the actors and children" ("The Red"). The WeeFestival extends this responsibility for democratic listening and communication to include all festival staff. If artists and WeeFestival staff welcome children to "be themselves" then they have an obligation to take children's responses seriously. When a child's presence at the festival matters in a substantive way, their responses have the potential to influence change, making the experience democratic. Advocacy occurs by modelling ways of listening to very young children's voices and genuinely considering their wishes.

I have already discussed the WeeFestival's inclusive and welcoming strategies. Hill also explains that festival staff and artists are instructed to speak to and connect with children first, and adult caregivers second. This was particularly beautifully demonstrated at *Scoop*, Magnet Theatre's show for non-walking babies. Performers addressed each child personally prior to the performance, learned each child's name, and chatted with them, playing a little bit and listening to their vocal responses. During the show, each child's name inspired a beautiful, simple, improvised song (in three- or four-part harmony). Meaningful connection and communication not only allow young people to "be themselves" within the space, but mean that their voices, impressions, and responses are attended to. The children influence what is happening around them because they matter. Children are not silenced or asked to behave, and as a result, everyone around knows what the baby or child is feeling, and the performers' proximity to the children means they mutually engage during the show.

When very young children are at the centre, creative exchange also means making young perspectives central to the artistic interventions in the festivalized space. One example of the latter was an exhibit of photos by children aged seven and under ("Walk, Stop and Wonder") in 2016. Similarly, the WeeFestival presents La Baracca's Charter of Children's Rights to Arts and Culture (displayed in 2014, 2016, and 2018), in a way that attempts to dismantle power dynamics that might exclude very young children from political conversations or opportunities to theorize their own lives. La Baracca commissioned a different professional children's illustrator to interpret each of the eighteen rights, and the visual depictions enable reading and non-reading children to engage with the ideas. In my family's experience, the exhibit was



**Audience members at Magnet Theatre's *Knock!*, WeeFestival 2018.**  
**Photographer: Dahlia Katz.**

most effective as a conversation-starter in 2014, when it was housed in the open space at the Wychwood Barns and children could walk among a gallery of images exhibited on large easels. Placing very young children's rights to arts and cultural experiences in a central position in the festival frames the WeeFestival young audiences as a demographic who need creative and artistic experiences; presenting those rights in a respectfully accessible way demonstrates that very young people's ideas, opinions, and reactions matter.

When children and babies engage in WeeFestival events and spaces in especially visible ways, their interactions significantly influence adult companion festival experiences. As mentioned, caregiver viewer experience is also a consideration when curating and designing the festival: the content is not directed towards adults, yet their experience as caregivers or as people who choose to attend with their young companions is relevant. When performance scholar Adele Senior discusses child performers, she encourages people to examine the "co-authorship and novelty they [child performers] bring to the stage and the creative process" (81). At the WeeFestival, when children and babies interact with performances, this creates a double spectator experience for adult companions who both watch the production and watch the children (especially their own companions) engaging with the production. The child becomes a performer and heightens the audience's sense of all the layered implications of natality, future thinking, hope, and present-minded experiences Senior highlights. Adults can take pleasure in the fact that their young companion is a valued and respected subject.

One school teacher who brought students demonstrates how their experience of the production was mediated through focus on the students' involvement:

This was a wonderful piece of theatre for young children, with just the right mixture of charm, humour, and intrigue to keep their rapt attention, excite their curiosity, and delight their senses. The way in which the children were invited slowly and inexorably into the performance, so that they all ended up on the stage as very engaged and focused participants, was the perfect ending and a truly remarkable bit of staging. (Hillcrest Community School).

When I took my own two children to see *Hup* (Starcatchers) in 2016, I discussed the phenomenon with a company representative who told me that she was not aware of any research concerning the split-focus experience, but that she agreed that the child's presence in the production was integral to adult spectators' perception of the work. Companion children's performative participation shapes how adult companions react to the theatrical event. In a festival context where the same child may become a participant/performer in multiple performances, those provocatively influence the observer experience for adults who know and care about them most. When a festival is designed to encourage the visibility of the early years demographic, young citizens are able to make an impact on the festival atmosphere, the artist creators, and other adults around them—and adults can respond with care and interest, rather than anxiety about a child's behaviour in a society that typically marginalizes the very young.

## WeeFestival, Influencing Urban Social Change, and an Alternative Public Sphere

As the WeeFestival advocates for young children and artists, it also advocates for significant social change within the City of Toronto. The WeeFestival 2018 website notes that the festival “celebrates the importance of arts and culture in nurturing well-being, a sense of belonging and connection between parent and child and community among all who participate.” In practice this means the festival forges community, and, by example, demonstrates ways cities and the arts can be inclusive. Sharpe asserts that festivals can be avenues for social change (220) and that social change can happen because the festival enacts “interlocking community-based infrastructure that supports and expands an alternative public sphere” (231). By putting alternative practices into action at all levels of festival organization and planning, “[festivals] expand the discussion, debate, and promulgation of ideas typically subjugated in mainstream institutional arrangements and channels” (231). The curatorial decisions, the way the festival engages with the people for whom it advocates, the way arts and cultural spaces are altered and atmospheres are designed, and the way the festival organizers engage with the very young audience members are reminders that, as Sharpe puts it, leisure events are inherently political (231). By enacting an alternative social sphere, the WeeFestival becomes a site of advocacy, influencing the way very young citizens engage with art, interact with city spaces, and are seen and understood as creative and engaged human beings.

By ensuring that the programming, the space, and opportunities for creative exchange and exploration are pleasant and stimulating for the very young, their adult companions and the artists who create for them, the festival organisers create an environment that is likely to be animated by comfortable and generally happy children. But children, of course, do not always behave predictably, and putting children at the centre of any event acknowledges this. Adele Senior writes that “[r]ecognizing the potential of children in performance to ‘begin something unprecedented’ gestures towards maintaining an openness to the political and ethical contribution that theatre and performance might make more generally” (82). Obviously very young children dancing, playing, intently observing, or peacefully sleeping in the arms of a caregiver in WeeFestival spaces are not professional performers, but their centrality to all aspects of the events is politically significant. Senior argues that putting children on stage “reminds us that performance is a place for birth and appearance as much as death and disappearance: a place where we might practise, rehearse and imagine the fundamental human condition of ‘beginning’” (82). Perhaps the alternative public sphere that the WeeFestival enacts, with its emphasis on “beginning,” can positively influence social change for the city.

The WeeFestival serves numerically small audiences of very young, often non-verbal citizens, and it may not generate urban development or gentrification, or make a noticeable impact on the local hospitality industry. Yet, through carefully curated programming, fostering creative exchange between artists and between young people and artists, the WeeFestival temporarily alters urban atmospheres thereby creating meaningful young audience experiences. It puts an alternative public sphere into action. Through the WeeFestival, artists, educators, very young children, and their families have opportunities to imagine, create, and participate in beautiful, thought-provoking, and innovative work that meets each person attending the festival in the space they occupy at the moment. These experiences are suggestive of new ways to begin to live, ways that place engaging with arts, culture, and young children at the very centre of how each person might imagine urban life. Focussed on the needs, interests, and desires of our youngest citizens the WeeFestival may gently shift how Toronto’s citizens see that very young children can creatively engage with the arts in daily life. It may alter how we are able to see and listen to young children in our urban spaces. If it does that, the festival not only offers very young children opportunities for inspiring arts experiences, it pushes Torontonians, and perhaps other Canadians, to think deeply about how they value our youngest citizens.

## Notes

- 1 After this article was written, the WeeFestival separated from Theatre Direct, and appears to be moving to an annual festival.
- 2 Canada’s International Children’s Festivals sporadically bring in work for the very young. For example, the Ottawa International Children’s Festival claims programming for ages two to eighteen, while the Northern Alberta International Children’s Festival in St. Albert describes their “Toddler Town” for ages birth to four as “a festival within a festival” (St. Albert). Most Canadian Fringe Festivals have a “Kids’ Fringe,” and on a much smaller scale, Sprouts New Play Festival put on by Edmonton’s Concrete Theatre presents scripts for children eighteen months to twelve years.

- 3 Even if early years audiences are not their primary demographic, some English-Canadian companies program and/or create theatre for early years. Examples include Mermaid Theatre, Halifax; Young People's Theatre, Toronto; Theatre Direct, Toronto; Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Winnipeg; and Presentation House, Vancouver. Several Québec-based companies regularly make work for the early years demographic, including: Les Gros Becs, Théâtre des confettis, and Théâtre des petits âmes. Le Maison Théâtre in Montreal often presents work from a range of companies for this age group. More commercial offerings, like *Toopy and Binoo, Live!* tour across Canada, but offer an entirely different kind of aesthetic experience than live theatre in an intimate venue.
- 4 In 2018 all four of my children attended at least two productions, even though some are now beyond the suggested age demographic. In 2014 my youngest two were two and six; in 2016, my youngest were one and four; in 2018 my youngest were three and six.
- 5 In the text I cite these feedback items according to the identifier used in the document (such as "Sam," "Artist-Delegate," or "parent"). They are listed in the Works Cited under WeeFestival Audience Feedback.
- 6 Today, childhood, like race and gender, is widely recognized to be a social construct, and most scholars in the humanities and social sciences agree that children should not be regarded as incomplete adults or "human becomings," but in fact, as "human beings" (van de Water 66). Artists who make work for the very young generally agree that children are not less intelligent than adults, but have different recent experiences, and "fewer incidents to recognize, compare, and use as components in composing new meaning" (Elnan 175).
- 7 In Toronto, Young People's Theatre's production for babies of *One Thing Leads to Another* won a Dora Award in 2016, demonstrating that attitudes towards theatre for early years may be shifting, even if the jury itself does not include the under six demographic.
- 8 If a ticket angel buys a show for an entire audience, the cost is about \$350 Canadian. Besides individual ticket angels, in the past WeeFestival performances were supported by The Department of Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council, The Goethe Institut-Toronto, and the Instituto Italiano di Cultura.
- 9 Musicians are selected for musical skills and ability to work with young audiences. Genres include folk, rock, soul, indie, and "world music."
- 10 In their examination of the Out of the Box Festival Tayler et al have also observed young children's impact on mainstream performance spaces and the surrounding city.
- 11 The complete note reads: "I took our daughter to Nest and what a joy it was to share my love of live performance arts with her! At first, the children were fussing and vocal but a few moments into the show, the room hushed and all the little faces were rapt. There are not many places where babies and toddlers are wholly welcomed to be themselves, and I felt that in this theatre, that peace and sweetness, but what I also felt was beautiful respect for them from the artists, and the wonder—the wonder of the children was palpable! And being in a room with children and babies who are laughing together... that is magic! Thank you for creating this special space to nourish the spirits and imaginations of little ones, and their parents. And for bringing us all together for the experience. You are doing important work" (Carrie, Parent).



- 12 In 2014, 2016, and 2018 speakers included J'net AyAy Qwa Yak Sheelth (Indigenous Education Coordinator at the Royal Ontario Museum), Columpa Bobb (theatre artist and artistic director at Winnipeg's Urban Indigenous Theatre), Ben Fletcher-Watson (Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh, researching theatre for babies and theatre and autism), Caroline Fusco (Physical Education, University of Toronto), Lise Hovik (scholar and theatre artist in Norway at the Queen Maude University Centre for Early Childhood Education), Lee Maracle (Sto:lo writer, educator, and traditional cultural director at the Indigenous Theatre School), Michael Lurse (Artistic Director and Ensemble Performer, Helios Theatre, Germany), Rhona Matheson (Artistic Producer of Starcatchers, Scotland), Nick Shim (Sago Mini), Michelle Silagy (Toronto-based DanceAbilities Instructor and Choreographer), and Dan Watson (of the transnational Ahuri Theatre).
- 13 Furthermore, adults are arts-participation decision makers, a fact Daigle/Saire used to justify adult-focussed research for their report. They explain that "Although it might have been desirable to have included the viewpoints of young people, it must be remembered that adults—either parents or school officials—are essentially the decision-makers for children's cultural participation. In this regard, the viewpoints of these decision-makers are only indirectly included in this report, primarily in the comments from the sector stakeholders interviewed" (3).

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