

Why Make Baby Drama?

Reflections from WeeFestival 2023

Inspiration from the Field of Performance for the Very Young
from Co-Artistic Director Sam Tower

Creating performance for families with babies has become a defining element of my artistic practice, my relationships, and my personal politics. I have been privileged to participate in conferences, professional development, and festivals dedicated to theatre and dance for the very young – and they have each offered me essential growth in some way – but right now, I want to tell you more about [WeeFestival](#) - a creative space and festival dedicated to advancing Canadian arts and culture for the very young held annually in Toronto, CA.

I first attended [WeeFestival](#) as a delegate from the United States in 2019, again in 2022, and most recently in June 2023. At WeeFestival, I've engaged in conversations I haven't been able to have anywhere else as a maker of art for babies in North America. WeeFestival brings attention to the evolving field of performance for the very young by offering a month-long roster of touring and local artists - programming that has become a destination for families, daycares, and schools in Toronto. By programming international artists, WeeFestival offers a global lens on art for the very young, but **Executive Artistic Director, Lynda Hill**, ensures that the festival zooms in on Canadian artists and takes their needs very seriously.

I believe what WeeFestival offers is very unique to the field of performance for very young audiences in North America – a space for creative exchange that approaches our practice with dignity, research, and deep intentionality. WeeFestival is a space where skill-sharing, learning, and experimentation is valued; in practice, not just in theory.

Being an artist takes... practice.

When I arrived in Toronto in June 2023, my social muscles were feeling a little sore and my soul was a bit weary from the isolation I often feel as an artist making performance for the very young back home in Philadelphia. But the spirit of improvisation and experimentation that guided our week together was reviving. There were no stuffy pitch sessions – as this isn't a booking focused experience. Booking is an important piece of our professional lives, and there's most certainly a need to continue inventing new models for presenting performance for the very young, but WeeFestival's Professional Programme nurtures the part of our practice that comes before there's a polished show to book. It is nothing less than a revelatory experience to come together with other artists who are deeply concerned with creating art for very young children and their families – and to not begin every conversation with an explanation in defense of the work we do. Being in practice with other artists who share an

affinity and understanding of the basic tenets of my work helps me affirm truths and ask new questions about my own methods. The artists and the work I've encountered at WeeFestival have consistently helped me find words and patterns to describe my own approach to creating performance for babies and toddlers.

The marathon of making art for very young children is long and it requires a deep commitment to your audience. This work takes vulnerability and attention to detail and incredible responsive - within the performance itself, and with everything that surrounds the work (partners, funding, environments, changing cultural norms, etc). At WeeFestival, Lynda Hill shares her approach of "**Slow Pedagogy**" when creating artistic experiences designed for young children; an alternative to the hurried urgency of "school readiness" that is pervasive in education-focused approaches to performance for very young children. (This evolves into workforce readiness as the child grows up.)

What if we slowed down and released our obsession with controlling children's productivity?

Lynda's approach of Slow Pedagogy asks us to slow down when sharing space with children, stop assuming what they need or want, and create ways to meet them where they are that day.

It asks us to soften our sense of control over the outcomes. Really sharing power with a toddler could be considered very radical in a society that assigns value to obedience, quick assimilation, and conformity. In order to fully move away from "school-readiness" or "schoolishness," we have to untether performance for the very young from financial models based on earned ticket sale revenue.

Childhood is a delightful and magical time and learning is inevitable. Can we challenge ourselves to be present in the current moment of discovery as opposed to preparing to control the next moment? Children's intelligence is naturally strengthened through play and artistic exploration. We know that in early childhood, the brain is in its most elastic state, and that children are constantly making dramatic discoveries. Learning is personal for every child, and every moment that we engage children in creative space is a chance to share agency. **But I digress.** I'm much more interested in telling you about the incredible artistry that was shared at WeeFestival 2023 that has inspired me over the last year.

Practicing a culture of listening and watching.

We're gathered in a circle. Just empty space in the middle of the studio. **Makiko Iko** starts the workshop abruptly by asking us to hand our foot to our neighbor. We oblige, and proceed to give our new neighbor a foot massage. From this beginning moment, Makiko plunges us into the intimacy of improvisation, and asks us to check our expectations and our egos at the door.

She traveled to Toronto from the Netherlands to share her performance for babies, **BB (a project of Wonderland Collective)** at WeeFestival. Wonderland Collective's work is sometimes

described as interactive dance and music for children, sometimes as improvisational performance with children, but when Makiko begins to speak about her practice to us, she describes it as **creating a culture of listening and watching**. Her method of making always goes back to senses, with a focus on doing, never on getting attention from the audience. Someone will see you or hear you when they are ready.

Throughout the rest of the week, we learn that Makiko began creating performances for babies somewhat inadvertently. She was hosting a weekly improvisational music and dance salon, and families with very young children began to frequent the event as a low-key place to enjoy art with their children. Makiko's practice of creating performance for babies grew from this natural gathering of energy and interest, and she has since sculpted a series of works that invite babies and young children to create their own worlds through play; seamlessly transitioning the child from viewer to performer.

In Makiko's artistic approach, mistakes and mishaps are embraced, and minds must stay ready to be changed. New "stages" can be created within the performance at any moment, and if our focus is too fixed, we may miss the opportunity to respond. Again, we are creating a culture of listening and watching. When we are creating performance with and for young children, we have the great opportunity to give up control. In fact, determining the meaning that children will make of our artistic offerings was never in our control to begin with.

The conversations swirling around WeeFestival were a refreshing reminder for me that children do not need to be taught how to imagine, how to play, how to be a great friend, how to have freedom or make choices. They have this agency and these skills inherently. Children are always inventing. It is not the purpose of art to control the way they interact with the image, the story, or the emotion of the work, but rather to create containers and pathways for them to simply receive, organize, and respond with their full and authentic self.

Sometimes in theatre for young audiences, we can inadvertently bring an expectation for how children will respond, and we consciously, or unconsciously, build in structures that will confirm that expectation. *"Things will happen that cannot be planned. Children have responses we could never have known ahead of time,"* Lynda remarks. *"When working with the very young, we must examine our own biases and image of the child."* The reference to Reggio Emilia's concept of "the image of the child" helps us to consider what we've come to believe about children, which has been influenced by your own experience as children and what you've been taught about children culturally.

As we create performance experiences for young children, are we embedding any expectations that the child shrink, compartmentalize, obey, or even fake enthusiasm for us? Is our work asking them to control or change their impulses to fit more neatly into what we expected from them? Are we rewarding obedience over investigation? Are we making an offer seem "open-ended", but holding on to a desired outcome? This can look like asking questions that we already know the answers to, or expecting the same level of physical participation from every child - or even asking the adult caregivers to participate to an equal degree. **Riva Lombardi**, creator and producer of immersive shows for the very young, offers a framework for centralizing

the child's agency when building a show. When creating a dramatic space for very young children that has clear expectations but also room for personal agency, it can help to ask; *“what is only possible because of the child? What are they uniquely qualified to bring to the room?”*

If we can let go of the need to force a predetermined lesson into our work, we make space for the limitless ways that learning happens naturally, and how relationships are strengthened through sharing an experience.

For me, it all comes back Makiko Ito's culture of listening and watching, a practice of being responsive to our audience. This need for flexibility and responsiveness inevitably pushes against the structures that have been created to professionalize our work and protect artists, and challenges our conventional funding models. For me, this only reinforces the need to talk openly about the kind of unique development support that performance for early years requires, and advocate for the funding, partnership and presentation models that will give us what we need to develop distinctive work.

Lynda offers that performance for the very young has the opportunity to **exemplify the theatre as a populus art form**, rejecting the rigidity of a “high-brow” form that requires the audience to respond in a specific way (being quiet and reverent in an opera house, for example.) A performance for babies or toddlers must be fully responsive to its audience, with enough fluidity built in to offer real agency to the child. The show must offer an environment that is safe enough for the baby to take risks, which is influenced heavily by how comfortable the caregiver feels, as babies look to their parents' emotional responses to help them interpret and react to the world around them. **Permission is essential.**

Andrea Sacchetti shared with conference attendees the **Mapping Project**, an initiative of **Small Size Network**, coordinated by the pioneering **La Baracca Testoni Ragazzi** based in Bologna, Italy. The project maps aesthetics of performing arts for early years, and in particular, it explores the idea of “children-spectators”. Spectators of today, and not only of tomorrow. The Mapping Project pulls together scholarly articles that explore the various angles of meaning making – the relationship between image and imagination, for example. *How real is an illusion for an early years audience? How do we invest in the illusion? How are movements or physical articulations connected to emotions? Can cliches exist in theatre for early years?*

Ultimately, the drama of the baby is experiential. They are creating meaning through their senses, and we are creating a space that can hold their narrative. Our crafting of that space is not random, it is built carefully based on our understanding of developmental stages, the language of materials, the use of image and sound. The very young child will make their own meaning out of these offerings. The Mapping Project offers the idea that the **Baby at the Theatre is a Percipient Being. For the baby, the drama is in the choice-making. There is great risk and great delight involved in every new event that occurs.**

It gives me a sense of relief as a creator to remember that “meaning” or “story” can accumulate in an unlimited number of ways.

It can feel daunting to decipher how our very young audience will make meaning of an artistic experience. I found a new way to look at the drama of the baby in a presentation from artists **Heather Fitzsimmons-Frey** and **Jamie Leach** discussed the distinction between the DRAMA OF IDEAS, and the DRAMA OF LOOSE PARTS. Drawing on the "Theory of Loose Parts," they introduced how objects that do not have their own narrative meaning, or are seemingly unrelated, can provide infinite opportunities for play and creation of story. Their recent work, *Urban Wildlife*, began with elements found in nature such as leaves and branches. Our performances can engage children in the creative process - or the creative flow state - where discovery and invention is the dramatic event. Alternatively, our performances can also ask children to participate in a story where ideas and meaning is fixed. For example, a character getting dressed in their favorite outfit has a narrative meaning, whereas a loose parts approach could include materials such as paper or scarves and objects like cups, rings or blocks that engage motor skills and pattern making. **If the responsibility of the artist is to be continually investigating the experience of being alive, making meaning, and reflecting a sense of self back to the audience -- then the baby is an ideal participant in this practice, as that is the drama of their every day.**

I was deeply moved by a reading of **Elie Marchand's** English translation of their play *Racines (or My Roots)*, performed by Hilary Wheeler, directed by Lynda Hill. Through language, the play offered an embodiment of the child's journey from birth to toddler-hood. From the perspective of the child, we experience the deep emotional connection between a child and their parent and the ache of separation as the child ages. The piece brings forward the idea of “nostalgia” for a time when the parent's love felt never ending. The work bravely explores a risky idea — a dramatic, language-heavy play for early years that conjures deep feelings from the audience. This work reminds me just how perceptive our young audience is to emotional response.

As practitioners, we need community learning spaces, where we can allow ourselves to let our guard down because we aren't required to constantly “make the case” for the necessity of performance in early childhood. **At WeeFestival, artists are afforded a dignified space to learn, share and investigate. WeeFestival demonstrates that the practice of inviting very young children into our creative practices will be lifelong, and cannot be treated as a stop on the tour bus of TYA.**

My experience as a delegate of WeeFestival has propelled me forward as a maker, and made me an even stronger advocate for arts and culture for the very young.

Sam Tower, Ninth Planet Co-Artistic Director