**Writing plays for children and young people: the construction of sheltering and belonging spaces**

By Cleiton Echeveste

Playwright, director, actor and producer

Rio de Janeiro - Brazil

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I appreciate the opportunity to share some aspects of what I consider most relevant in dramaturgy for children and young people. However, before addressing the theme proposed in this Seminar, I would like to acknowledge the initiative of the *Qorpo-Santo Dramaturgy Biennial* to include among its activities a meeting dedicated to the arts for children and young people. Unfortunately, this is not yet as common a reality as we would like it to be in Brazil. We still see countless events in the sector that exclude the Performing Arts dedicated to childhood and youth. And here is the question, which starts my contribution: why does this happen? If it is true that theater, dance, oral narrative, music, for young audiences have their own specificities, it is also true that Art and its enjoyment are intrinsic demands on the human person, regardless of age, gender, origin, sexual orientation or ethnicity. Thinking this way, any form of distinction between one person and another, for whatever reason, needs to be questioned. Why do we still accept that arts for children and young people are put on the back burner? Why do we accept that spaces for training and reflection receive little proposals for this audience? Why do we accept that the resources earmarked for research, creation, production, circulation of artistic works for children and youth are proportionally inferior to those destined for the same purposes when we talk about art for adult audiences? What is the place of children and young people in our training spaces for artists who dedicate themselves to acting, directing, dramaturgy, visuals, music? How much has our adult-centric culture contributed to the consolidation of patriarchal, capitalist and colonialist values? And to what extent is our adult-centered view of society founded on these same values?

Having made this introduction and these first reflections, I think it is relevant to address the place where I speak from, as an artist, as a researcher and as a citizen. I was born in Santana do Livramento, state of Rio Grande do Sul, far south of Brazil, on the border with Uruguay, where I started to do community theather as an actor, in 1987. Since those first experiences, something already quite evident guided my search: the group, the collective. Shortly after, I went to live in Porto Alegre (capital of Rio Grande do Sul), moved by the desire to study and to be in a place where, in the eyes of an 18-year-old gay man from the lower middle class, there was a pulsating and extremely attractive artistic activity. The city brought me unique experiences that will mark me forever: I arrived there in the first year of the administration of the then-mayor Olívio Dutra, of the leftist Workers' Party; in a year I was already onstage and obtained my desired professional record as an actor; after three unsuccessful attempts and a quick passage at the undergraduate course in Language and Literature at Rio Grande do Sul Federal University (a well-regarded state-run institution), I entered the undergraduate course in Performing Arts at the same institution; I became an avid and curious spectator for everything that I had not had access to in my childhood and adolescence: local, regional, national and international theater and dance performances - thanks, especially, to the *Porto Alegre em Cena* International Performing Arts Festival; and, last but not least, I had my first romantic relationship, not by coincidence, with a theater artist. After twelve years, a couple of attempts of starting a theater group, more than a dozen shows, two weddings and some unfulfilled dreams, I moved to Rio de Janeiro.

Here, since 2006, I managed in some way to achieve at least one of these dreams: to have a theater group, within the possible parameters for a city that is pure appeal to conviviality, traffic, flow, but not so much to encounter and continued exchange. My company, *Pandorga* (kite, in English), is dedicated exclusively to theater for children and young people. With a trajectory of almost 20 years as an actor, in my company I ended up discovering other possibilities of being in the theater: as a playwright, director, producer and researcher, more specifically in an investigation on urgent or taboo themes in theater for young audiences.

At this point, I need to take a short break from this personal account to honor a key person in my career: my dear Vera Karam (playwright from Rio Grande do Sul, who died in 2002). A talented, creative, intelligent and canny friend and colleague, with her I was able to experience, closely and for the first time, as an actor in the original stagings of her first plays, the intensity of the creative process of a person committed to writing for theatre. Without my realizing it, with Vera I had an introduction to the universe of dramaturgy and, for that, I am immensely grateful to her. I pay this brief tribute to her because I consider it very important to recognize and value, as the American director Anne Bogart says, the “shoulders on which we stand”, in the construction of our identities and artistic trajectories.

I return to my account pointing precisely to an element that has constituted me as an artist, which is the exercise of writing within a collective, in rich and challenging collaborative processes. Being “in company” allows freedom and a sort of safety net. But things are not always smooth and easy. There is conflict, there is disagreement, there are preferences, there are choices. And here is a point that I consider fundamental when addressing dramaturgy for children and young people: although many people continue to reinforce this mistaken thinking, children and young people *do not live* in a world apart, dissociated from the so-called “adult world”. For this reason, the playwright committed to this audience equally needs to be connected to the world around them and reflect: what are the burning issues of contemporaneity? which tensions can advance philosophical, social or political issues with my audience? which perspectives remain silenced or invisible in the arts for children and youth? This is a point - commitment - which can often sound vague or idealized when we talk about childhood and youth. For me, it is a structuring issue to think: how will this I'm taking to the stage serve my audience? This content, this approach, will it make my audience think, be moved, question, take action? Or maybe will it make them think “that’s the way things are”, and that it is not worth fighting for changes?

Children and young people, each under different aspects, are their own becoming, their own transformation. What today is, tomorrow may no longer be. What matters today, tomorrow may no longer be of interest. What today pulsates in one direction, tomorrow may pulsate in the opposite direction. Addressing these challenges is very unsettling and destabilizing. And after all, is this not exactly what we seek in art? Disquiet, destabilize, to find other possible balances, even if impermanent, to glimpse other possible universes? Committing to this instability, to this “becoming” is like stepping on very uneven ground. But it also means making oneself available to risk, after all, what is theater if not the art in which everything was done to go wrong? There are so many variables in the equation of a theatrical encounter, such is the need for adaptability and flexibility, that the theatrical event is almost a miracle, always involved in countless risks that generate, on the other hand, its radical potential for transgression and transformation. Speaking of “right and wrong”, which audience allows us to relativize this duality if not children and young people? Underneath this commitment, however, there is an essential element, whose absence or falsification, children are not usually condescending to: honesty, which I would translate as the integrity of putting oneself at risk, without tricks, without illusory artifices, without preconceived ideas.

In order to approach the theme proposed for this meeting more carefully, I would say that dramaturgy for children and young people brings the urgency of engagement, empathy, openness to the unexpected, of a constantly changing creation process. Without intending to delve into personal analysis, I confess that this is very exciting for me in particular, a person with the sun and the ascendant in Gemini, for whom communication, knowledge sharing, curiosity and intellectual exchange are fundamental elements. Therefore, I realize, throughout my practical experience, that research is a key point when talking about this dramaturgy. The audience is absolutely thirsty to learn and to go deeper. It is up to us, generators and proponents of new possible universes, to offer “a line for this kite to fly” - using an analogy that is very dear to me, even if it incurs self-reference. Observing, absorbing and reframing the world around us and not denying it to children and young people, proposing other perspectives, is our primary duty, I would say.

On the other hand, affection and a sense of responsibility need to guide our choices, our actions and our projects. About our audience, we can never think: “They are not my children, they are not my students”, as if we could exempt ourselves from a pedagogical function that is a core element of our art. When talking about pedagogy, I need to bring the name of Paulo Freire2 and specifically his work *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (Pedagogy of Autonomy), which may very well guide the principles of a humanistic, supportive and ethical vision for the art we produce for children and young people. Respecting the audience's context and experience, provoking their critical thinking, shedding light on the oppressions to which we, in the Global South, have historically been subjected, helping them to glimpse new contexts, are for me fundamental attributions of the artist who creates new content for childhood and youth.

Alongside the pedagogical perspective that I see as essential to this dramaturgy, I also want to highlight its reparative role. And I do this by addressing a fundamental aspect not only in dramaturgy, but in the arts in general for this audience: hope.

In a message released in 2019 by the International Association of Theater for Young Audiences (ASSITEJ), of which I am a member through the Brazilian Center of Theater for Young Audiences (CBTIJ), the president of ASSITEJ, the South African theatre producer, writer, director and educator Yvette Hardie, makes a very accurate report:

*“Recently, The New Victory Theater, in New York, released the results of a five year study into the benefits of theatre for children and young people. One of the key unexpected findings was that exposure to the theatre gave these children greater hope for the future. These results were contrasted with a control group, where those who were not exposed to theatre performances and workshops over the same period, experienced a diminishing sense of their future possibilities in terms of study and work opportunities.*

*Why is hope so important? Hope creates positive energy which translates into self-assurance, willpower, resilience and finally into concrete actions to make a difference in one’s own life and in the lives of others. Every child needs to have hope.”*

In that sense, having had contact with the work and thinking of Canadian playwright Suzanne Lebeau was one of the happiest encounters in my career. In her book “*Suzanne Lebeau: las huellas de la esperanza*” (“Suzanne Lebeau: traces of hope”), Spanish playwright and researcher Itziar Pascual points out:

*“Lebeau's writing is concerned with themes and issues of high political and social value: the construction of walls of shame, the condition of child soldiers, the sexual abuse of minors, poverty and, in particular, childhood poverty, madness, loneliness, disability, euthanasia, incest. Situations and themes that for Lebeau also concern children and adolescents and, consequently, the dramaturgy that is written for them.*

*It is important to note that the main characters of her works can be affected by these situations. But in her characters, among whom there is no lack of children who practice resilience, there is always a spirit of struggle, of overcoming to go beyond their circumstances. Lebeau's protagonists face hostile means and circumstances, have a direct experience of pain and suffering, but face that head-on, with the dignity of knowing that their status quo can be transformed. That’s why they believe in transformative action and practice it.”*

Talking about hope in today's Brazil, in which central power holders openly adopt denierist, racist, misogynistic and homophobic policies, should make us reflect whether, as artists, we are in fact committed to building a sovereign, supportive nation, one with social justice, based on ethical and humane principles, which places children and young people, their needs and interests at the center of its decisions.

Still on the work of Suzanne Lebeau, the Spanish researcher highlights the root of her engagement and the forces that drive the change she proposes:

*“From this attitude, from a force to fight against indignity, the hope that marks the resolutions of her works is born. Even in those who could present us with tougher milestones for a child's life, hope is not the result of the imposition of a happy ending, of a* Deus ex machina *who would bring peace to consciences, but of a concrete project for change. And this implies consequences, real and symbolic, very important in the political discourse.*

*Among the forces of change, there are undoubtedly two of enormous power: culture and love. Culture takes shape through school, the relationship with books, writing, inhabiting the experience of teaching and learning. Learning is not just the acquisition of new technical knowledge, but an impulse for the development and growth of the individual. Love, in its different manifestations (filial love, love between grandparents and grandchildren, falling in love), allows us to live an experience of protection and fulfillment.”*

At this point, I meet again the young person I was more than three decades ago, who, in the midst of a storm of feelings and questions, left his hometown in search of space to exist. It was through theater, and everything it has provided me, that I found a sheltering space, a space of belonging. It was in theater that I felt I was in my element, not only professionally speaking, but also in terms of identity, sexuality, politics or cultural activism.

This space I found is what motivates me to continue writing theater for young audiences, so that they may also get an opportunity to have encounters as meaningful and transforming as the one I had. Where, how, when, for how long these encounters will take place or last is beyond our control. Providing children and young people with such opportunity, though, is within our reach, with the pertinence, poignancy and affection with which we are able to do it.

I end with a quote from the Italian writer Gianni Rodari, who in his book “The Grammar of Fantasy” wrote:

“’All uses of the word to all’ seems like a good motto, utterly democratic. Not exactly because everyone is an artist, but because no one is a slave.”

Echoing Rodari's words, I conclude saying that we need not only to give a voice, but that we need to listen to children and to young people.

1 http://bienalqorposanto.org/

2 Paulo Freire (1921-1997) - Brazilian [educator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Educator) and [philosopher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher), who was a leading advocate of [critical pedagogy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_pedagogy).