

**ABSURDIST TRENDS IN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S THEATRE: THE CASE OF
NOODLE DOODLE BOX BY PAUL MAAR (1972) AND IN A ROOM SOMEWHERE BY
SUZAN ZEDER (1985)**

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(Resumen)

Anne Cirella-Urrutia evalúa el nacimiento del movimiento del absurdo en la historia del teatro juvenil americano. En particular, el artículo analiza el uso de técnicas del absurdo en las obras *Noodle Doodle Box*, escrita en 1972 por el dramaturgo alemán Paul Maar, y *In a Room Somewhere*, por la dramaturga americana Susan Zeder, actuada en 1985. La autora señala cómo estas obras adaptan fuentes familiares del Absurdo para ajustarse a su audiencia, con esta innovación estilística. Además, el artículo muestra los múltiples cambios temáticos, genéricos e interpretativos que Maar y Zeder ponen en acción para dirigirse a los niños.

Whenever children's theatre is mentioned, one cannot avoid reflecting on a comment by Stanivslasky, the father of modern Russian theatre, when he was asked if there is any difference between theatre for children and theatre for adults. "Yes," he answered, "children's theatre must be better" (Broadman 14). For children's plays to become better, children's playwrights had to abandon dramatic techniques adopted since the emergence of a theatre for children and integrate instead new theatrical techniques as well as serious issues into their productions. A revolution had to occur in the field of children's theatre if it were to gain a status from an often-marginalized sub-theatre to a high one. To produce Stanivslasky's "better theatre," it became crucial for playwrights to utilize theatrical innovations as experienced in adult plays and fuse them with the very ingredients which are necessary to produce a theatre that targets the child as one new entity in the audience.

Since Winifred Ward's early struggle to establish a theatre for children in the United States, many theatrical troupes have emerged and continued her task. The increasing value of children's theatre since the early twentieth century already made a step towards development on both a national and international scale. The proliferation of professional theatres for children in the United States and worldwide has fulfilled Ward's prediction that "a hopeful indication that we are faced in the right direction is the great and growing interest throughout the country in providing a theater for children." Mark Twain, one of the advocates of this new artistic practice, contended that "it is [his] conviction that children's theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the Twentieth century and that its vast educational value ... will presently come to be recognized." I will show how some plays in the repertory of American children's theatre challenged general assumptions about children's theatre and fulfilled both Stanivslasky's and Ward's early predictions on the historical and aesthetic value of children's theatre. Namely, I will pay particular attention to the innovative styles some postmodern children's playwrights promoted and how these plays go beyond Mark Twain's contentions on their educational value to produce a highly stylized theatre that addresses a global audience.

Both Paul Maar's *Noodle Doodle Box* (1972) and Suzan Zeder's *In A Room Somewhere* (1985) present an avant-garde breach in the history of American children's theatre, one similar to the one that occurred in the history of modern French Theatre under the label of the French Theatre of the Absurd, and that initiated in 1896 with Alfred Jarry's classic *Ubu roi*. Both plays demonstrate that the familiar French theatre of the Absurd has found an extension, although one that targets a new audience: the grandchildren of the bourgeois Jarry contended to attack in his Ubu plays. But before we proceed to the analysis of the aesthetic and thematic features these two avant-garde plays develop, one needs to assess some definitions of what constitutes children's theatre.

From its early forms to its present-day more sophisticated level, children's theatre is a genre that addresses children as one new type of audience (although it does not exclude audiences of parents and adults in general). Usually performed by adults (although it can admit a child as performer as well, children's theatre focuses on issues that are usually present in the adult theatre. Hence children's theatre is defined as a mode of performance, which uses techniques and principles common to that used in adult plays, but in some *special* ways and for different purposes. Children's theatre historian Moses Goldberg in his study *Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and A Method* traces a distinction between various activities and forms addressing the child audience. He distinguishes new separations between two theatrical practices such as "creative drama" and "children's theatre."¹ Whereas he describes creative drama as "an *informal* activity in which children are guided by a leader," he distinguishes children's theatre in that it is "a *formal* theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children" (4-5). Children's theatre is thus equated to adult theatre in its formal aspects although one whose main challenge is the notion of audience. In this perspective, the theatrical conventions used in children's plays are the object of a particular method based on children's *values* and which may include the integration of various artistic forms. Music, dance, techniques (drawn from specific theatrical genres like puppet theatres among others, spectacle and a plot involving some type of *dénouement*) are some of these artistic forms woven into the scenario. Finally, Goldberg identifies three essential values pertaining to children's theatre: these are aesthetics, pedagogy and psychology. Whereas adult plays separate them and often emphasize one to the detriment of the others, children's theatre fuses all three into a highly dramatized and concise form in order to engage children into making choices while being entertained. Even though fantasy, game and other devices aim primarily at entertaining, such

1. See Moses Goldberg, *Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and A Method*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 1: "What and Why." Anyone seeking to learn about the history of American children's theatre is confronted with three problems: first, the confusion as to what children's theatre encompasses. In some studies, it can mean theatre with or for children; second, the scattering of children's theatre activity throughout the fields of education, social work as well as theatre; finally the limited scholarship in the field. I thus recommend to consult Rachel Fordyce, ed. *Children's Theatre and Creative Dramatics: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Works*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1975, which includes over two thousands entries and provides an overview of books and journal articles that deal with children's theatre history.

controlling devices over the child's mind reveal a desire of playwrights to educate, to inform and to mold the child's views. In this perspective, children's theatre has often become a field of scientific investigation; what Goldberg calls "'artistic, demographic, and behavioral' research as well as pedagogical" (111). If on one hand children's theatre has developed in theatre the notion of a specific audience, on the other hand, creative drama has fostered a positive tool to develop learning skills in children. It also provides the child with a new status (except that of spectator) as artist and performer as well.² It is in the face of these definitions that absurdist children's playwrights developed a new dramaturgy that combines features pertaining to both adult theatre and children's theatre thereby creating a new bent in the history of American children's theatre. The emergence of an absurdist type of theatre for children has challenged the existing margins that traditionally separated children's theatre from the adult theatre and has confused the audience it traditionally targeted. Nonetheless, before we turn to the analysis of this innovation as such, I will address how the advent of an avant-garde in the field of children's theatre has been welcome by both historians and dramatists.

The reception of such an avant-garde school that aims at promoting stylistic innovation in the field has been rather optimistic. Children's theatre historian Roger L. Bedard states in his Introduction to Mary Melwood's *The Tingalary Bird*, one of the first innovative plays in the repertory that premiered in 1964, that absurdist techniques as the ones utilized by Melwood have the advantage to present children with "A topsy-turvy world [which] is best perceived and understood by a child audience - one that is not yet constrained by expectations of form and structure, and one that willingly suspends disbelief to follow Melwood through this fantasy" (495).

It is true that the general feature of all absurdist theatre is around a "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (xix) as Martin Esslin defines it in his Introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, a feature that becomes a positive one in the presence of a child audience. This particular theatrical and philosophical method is furthermore centered on language and the impossibility to achieve real communication. The result of this new style in children's theatre becomes a positive one, one that Martin Esslin names "presentational" or non-realistic. Thus in his advocacy for this innovation, Esslin urges that

Theatre for young people must be presentational, must be able to confront its audiences with the full range and vocabulary of styles, from commedia dell'arte to classical verse

2. Nellie McCaslin. *Children and Drama*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1985. See Moses Goldberg's article, "The Theatre: A Side View" where he defines developmental drama as comprising both creative drama and children's theatre in that "it is concerned with all theatre as it develops and evolves, and all individuals as they mature in aesthetic sophistication (...). Developmental theatre brings creative drama and children's theatre squarely into focus as part of the "real" field of theatre. Perhaps, in the long run, we would benefit if we forgot the terms "children's theatre" and "creative drama" and talk only about the development of artist and audience" (128).

drama, burlesque comedy, Brechtian alienation, or grotesque expressionistic acting (...) [and that] the young people's theatre may lay the foundation for a more comprehensive and artistically more varied adult theatre in this country. (viii)

In children's theatre the advent of an avant-garde all-presentational style, and one that is absurdist, seems to fit the child's relation to language perfectly because like children's speech, it is mainly based on arbitrariness and often perceived in terms of a game. Esslin encourages such an innovation as one that is not contradiction but logical and "opens the way to a truly rational attitude."

Nonetheless, unlike its homologue in the adult drama, most absurdist children's plays present the child with solutions (one major ingredient of all children's theatre and one that distinguishes it from the theatre for adults). Both Maar and Zeder create plots that reach a solution in their absurdist (stylistic) framework. Although similar to their homologue in the adult theater, both plays are faithful to the conventions that constitute children's theatre. This is especially true since both plays are highly dramatized: they use musical interludes, dance, fantastic situations and characterization. American children's playwright Aurand Harris summarizes well most children's playwrights' aesthetic concern behind their attempt at stylistic innovation and assesses the avant-garde in that:

I try to be innovative by writing in new styles (new to theatre for young people)... If the innovations are suitable for children and if they enhance the material, then I say I try them. But if they are just to be different, then I say they have no place in theatre for young audiences because they will only confuse the child. I am suspicious of any play praised as *avant-garde*; too often it is an ego trip for the writer or the director who shows little respect for the subject matter or for the child audience. (98)

Noodle Doodle Box by German playwright Paul Maar is such an instance. Created in 1972, the play premiered in the United States in 1979 and extends this absurdist enclave that British playwright Melwood initiated earlier in the American repertory.³ Like the French

3. See in particular her play, "The Tingalary Bird" which was first premiered with the Unicorn Theatre for Young People at the Arts Theatre in London on December 21st, 1964 in Roger L. Bedard. *Dramatic Literature for Children: A Century in Review*. New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1984. 492-540. Organized in 1964 around eighteen national centers worldwide, l'Association Internationale du Théâtre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse (ASSITEJ) is the most active association and the one that promoted various exchanges in this domain. The American repertory benefited from this international undertaking and grew out from many dramatic texts created outside its borders. Some of these texts have been translated and are considered as American. This is the case with Paul Maar's *Noodle Doodle Box* that was translated and premiered in 1979. Finally, all reference to the play *Noodle Doodle Box* is excerpted from the anthology edited by Coleman A. Jennings and Gretta Berghammer. *Theatre for Youth: Twelve Plays with Mature Themes*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1986. 122-157.

absurdist alleged they were doing, Paul Maar's *Noodle Doodle Box* focuses on existentialist themes where characters evolve in a universe free of spatial or temporal allusions. In this play, Maar voluntarily introduces children to a triangular relationship as is in the case of most absurdist dramas: on the one end the couple of clowns Pepper and Zacharias, and on the other Drum Major, a sort of malevolent agent (similar to Melwood's magical Bird in *The Tingalaly Bird*) who effects his power on the couple's existence and transforms their relationship irrevocably. Yet, whereas Melwood's couple were sharing a common setting, in that instance that of an inn, Maar opts to fit his couple into a setting that inscribes the couple's failure of communication: two cardboard boxes on stage. Hence Pepper and Zacharias live in their respective box in a horizontal dichotomy (as it is visualized in Melwood's play where the front stage belongs to the old man and the back stage to the Mean Old lady). Thus each box represents their private space: a kind of material shell that is symbolic of both character's psychological state. Soon, children are confronted with the couple's existential dilemma: each of them refuses to share his space (for obviously each box on the stage is conceived so that only one person can fit in it) or else to lend it on a temporal basis. It is thus around this theme of social alienation that Maar builds his anti-farce that will consist if introducing a live agent in this unstable universe.

Although Drum Major is presented to children as a malevolent character, he is the one who will provoke the couple (who somewhat reminds us of Beckett's couple Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*) to become aware of their tangible relationship.⁴ As Melwood's objects that are voluntarily magnified to assume this function of farcical agent, Maar's boxes assume the function of farcical agent (except that of Drum Major). Indeed, as in Melwood's iron scene, these boxes summarize the inner conflict between the couple Pepper and Zach and the power hierarchy existing between them: whereas Zacharias represents a figure of authority, a father figure, and an initiator for Pepper, Pepper instead stands for the child, the one that seems to depend the most on his partner. Thus Drum Major, as Melwood's bird Tingalaly, will sponsor a situation of instability where this hierarchical universe will collapse to be reorganized. Indeed although Drum is malevolent, nevertheless, he allows the couple to re-build their relationship: Zach like Pepper "sell" their respective house to Drum Major. Whereas neither of them could move the box, it is only with Drum's intervention that these boxes can be literally rooted out so as to disappear from their existence. Deprived of their material universe (their box) that was maintaining them separated, Zach and Pepper build a new relationship concretized on stage by the presence of a shoebox that magically becomes large enough to be able to fit both of them.

The absurdist language in tandem with the stage setting is faithful to this absurdist aesthetics where man is presented as prisoner of his environment both linguistically and socially. It is thus not surprising the children witness the couple perform a series of nonsensical actions that lead to this farcical universe. The couple's language which accompanies their acts expresses this theme of alienation, particularly in the scene where both Zach and Pepper attempt

4. See Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957.

to sing in a duet:

Zach. We can sing

Pepper. silly

Zach. You are right

Pepper. How do you mean I'm right?

Zach. Singing is silly

(...)

Zach. How can we both sing together loud if you don't know how to sing?

Pepper. We sing together like this. You sing loud while I listen loud. (139)

Language in *Noodle Doodle Box* undergoes stylistic changes as the couple's relationship changes too: language becomes more social, somewhat more poetic. This linguistic transformation is operated by Maar in the form of musical compositions to be sung in duo (one of the major ingredients of children's theatre). These musical interludes in Maar's universe offer a rather optimistic vision in this absurdist framework (unlike most absurdist plays in the adult theatre that do not present any possible reconciliation and thus end in a state of cyclical failure) and serve as denouement to the plot.

The existentialist theme seems to be one of the major claims of some children's theatre dramatists of the 1980s, a claim that seems to echo one already ignited in *Birthday of the Infanta* by dramatists Berghammer and Casper in 1984 and that presents a new type of children's theatre, one that is political. *In a Room Somewhere*⁵ by American playwright Suzan Zeder, premiered in 1985, displays qualities of the French absurdist theatre after Second World War that emerged in the adult theatre under the banner of Jean-Paul Sartre. *In a Room Somewhere* presents a similar vision of the adult world as Jean-Paul Sartre had imagined in his play *Huis clos* when he claimed that

Les autres sont au fond ce qu' il y a de plus important en nous-mêmes pour notre propre connaissance de nous mêmes. Quand nous pensons sur nous, quand nous essayons de nous connaître, au fond nous usons des connaissances que les autres ont déjà de nous.⁶

5. See Suzan Zeder, *Wish In One Hand Spit In The Other*. Ed. Susan Pearson-Davis with an introduction and critical essays by Susan Pearson-Davis. New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1990 (1985). The first production of *In a Room Somewhere* was commissioned and created by the company *Metro Theatre Circus* in St. Louis, Missouri in 1985. It was rehearsed and performed from June 1984 until November 1987.

6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations*. Textes rassemblés, établis, présentés et annotés par Michel Contat et Michel Rybalka. Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1973. 238. The translation of this work is available in English. See *Sartre on Theater*, translated by Frank Jellinek. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Zeder in her introduction to the play warns any producers that the play should confuse the audience it targets. She insists that “[she] has seen this play performed for audiences of preschoolers through senior citizens; [that] the play works on entirely different levels for different ages.” (Sartre 433) To reach this global audience, she thus “urges [them] not to try to simplify or literalize this ‘room.’”

In a Room Somewhere introduces children with five adults caught in a deadlocked room/space. Each one must confront his/her psychological dilemma to be able to escape this no-exit universe. As with Maar, the setting presents the psychological reflection of each character's inner conflict. With special effects and techniques drawn from the Surrealist Theater, Zeder's setting becomes the agent of this anti-farce. Indeed, she presents us with a deadlocked setting operated through the visual presence of four vertical corners. Although the walls of this room do not exist, nevertheless the presence on stage of these four vertical “corner pieces” should suggest to children their existence from which unpredictable apparitions will come out. Supplementing this void space, Zeder like Maar, emphasizes the notion of time. This time notion is suggested by the presence on stage of a unique prop (except for the four corner pieces), a huge abstract sculptural piece that represents a clock without numbers and with one hand only. From this clock, an innumerable amount of objects (in bright colorful tones) that belong to each of the characters (dressed in layers of colorful, bright clothing hidden under white clothing) will be delivered throughout a system of trap doors, thus increasing the contrast with the room which color is confined to neutral tones.⁷ The presence of these objects is crucial for they embody each character's psychological crisis and his/her relation to his/her own past. In fact, these objects endowed with supernatural power will allow each character entrapped in this room to become free and exit magically.

Caught up in this purgatorial room, each one of the five characters will face his/her past. It is by confronting their childhood that each one will overcome their dilemma and will escape the room. In this setting, Zeder introduces her audience to Cat: this androgenic character that, like Major Drum in Maar's *Noodle Doodle Box*, is the most ambiguous character and the least developed one. From the beginning until the end of the play, Cat is presented as a supernatural being, covering herself thereby suggesting that once her mission is accomplished she may regain her initial condition as an objectified lifeless being in the expectancy to become live again. In fact, Zeder in her note “From the Playwright” insists that “the character of Cat

7. In *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, Cocteau uses a similar stylistic innovation that consists in making characters erupt from a camera.

[be] deliberately enigmatic” and furthermore that “to make her the obvious “therapist” in the room is to diminish her, and to deprive [the] audience of the fun of figuring her out for themselves.” Cat’s ritualistic enigmatic departure from the stage reads as follows:

She props the “dolls” up and covers them with sheets [...]. She sits, holding the final sheet, and looks around to be sure all is in readiness. She looks straight into the audience. She billows out the final sheet. It falls over her, covering her completely. (499)

As Valet in Sartre’s *Huis clos*, Cat performs the role of a guide (and also of live puppet actor) for the four guests Mason, Kurt, Michael and Dudleigh. Cat (as Drum Major or Tingalary) is the agent of this antifarce: she is the one who informs the four of their condition and makes them understand and solve their existential crisis throughout the performance of role games.

Language *In a Room Somewhere* is not absurdist as it is in Maar’s universe. Instead, Zeder’s language reflects an existentialist quest (specifically one’s knowledge of oneself through the other) symbolized in the many role games each character performs. On this language expressing a quest, Zeder superimposes musical interludes, a feature ingredient of children’s theater. Most of them as in Maar’s are optimistic and are strategies to bring out the dénouement such as when Kurt, rejected by his alcoholic and abusive father sings:

And I feel the air
On my face, in my hair,
And the worry and care
Disappear.
I dip and I sway
And the pain goes away,
And the wind starts to play
With my fear. (Zeder 477)

Thus this existential theatre is a theatre of social purgation. The use of surrealistic techniques (especially in the stage setting and the many props) is characteristic of all theatre that is *engagé*. Although *In a Room Somewhere* may be interpreted as a social satire, it nevertheless presents a psychological universe that is grounded in realistic acting (except for Cat who remains an objectified, androgenic character who cannot be separated from this universe) in a setting of antifarce.

The emergence of an avant-garde similar to the French theatre of the Absurd in the history of American children’s theatre opens a unique point of research. Although this absurdist breach operates according to parameters that are similar to those in the adult theatre, it is nevertheless one that is grounded within its historical and aesthetic framework. Although one may see this movement reaching its full maturation in the 1960s, this new type of theatre actually initiated as early as 1917 with Stuart Walker’s first attempt at promoting an avant-garde

with his play adaptation of Oscar Wilde's tale *Birthday of the Infanta*.⁸ This early avant-garde trend was a first step in reaction against the naturalist conventions that go back to the late nineteenth century Victorian era. The use of farce or such techniques from the Surrealist Theatre together by way of an either absurdist or existentialist theme have allowed these dramatists to create an antitheatre⁹ for a rapidly changing audience.

Although one may be tempted to see the techniques developed by these absurdist children's dramatists as only derivations and deviations of its homologue in the adult theatre, nevertheless the sources used by each one of them have been consciously adapted and shaped to fit the particular audience they target. However, the presence of such parallel developments suggests that these plays can be studied in conjunction with some plays in the adult theatre. The historical, technical and thematic intersections contained in this type of children's theatre confirm that children's theatre must be studied with new tools. Children's theatre cannot be marginalized or labeled a sub-theatre any longer for it challenges the existing margins between adult theatre and children's theatre and calls for the needs of an audience in an era of globalization.

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8. For a full description of Stuart Walker's attempt at an avant-garde reaction, see E.H. Bierstadt. *Portmanteau Plays*. Cincinnati: Steward Kidd, 1917, and *Portmanteau Adaptations*. Cincinnati: Steward Kidd, 1921.

9. In a way that will accommodate the children's theatre I am discussing, Martin Esslin situates the concept of anti theatre historically. I will use his definition as the most succinct one here. He says "In its rebellion against the naturalistic convention, the Theatre of the Absurd entered the consciousness of its audiences as an *anti*- theatre, a completely new beginning, a total breach with the conventions of the past. Now that the first and delicious chock effects have worn off, we can see that the absurdists merely emphasized hitherto neglected aspects, stressed some forgotten devices, and discarded some unduly inflated aspects of a long-existing tradition of drama. Far from being anti-theatre, they were in the very center of the mainstream of its development, just as revolutionary movements of the past – Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, or the Expressionists – that were regarded as the gravediggers of tradition can now be seen as its main decisive representatives." See Martin Esslin. *Refections: Essay of Modern Drama*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1969. 190.

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