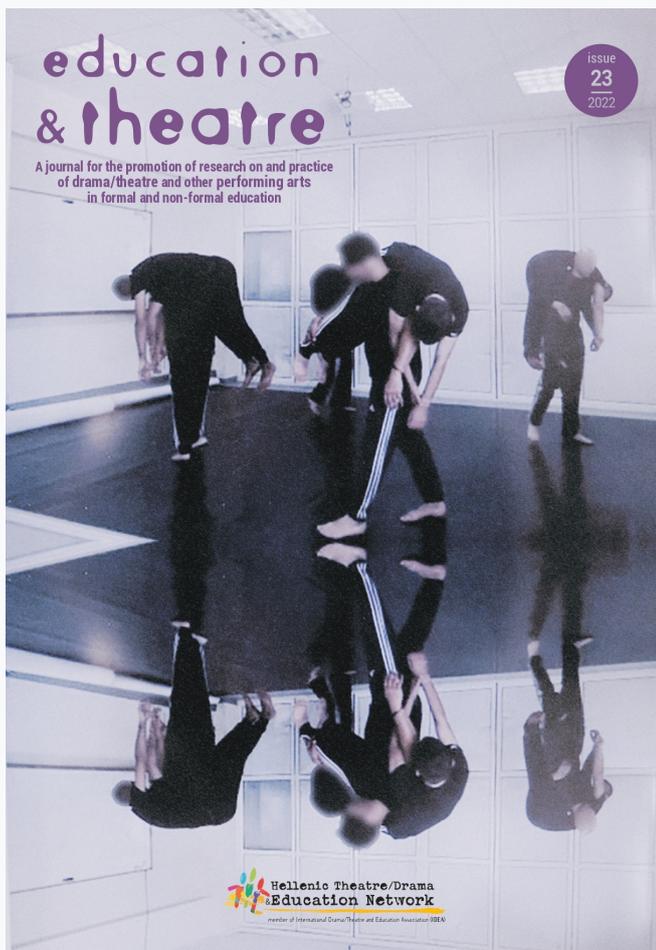


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Theatre in Education: Children as human beings in their own right

Betty Giannouli

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Theatre in Education: **Children as human beings in their own right**

Chris Cooper in conversation with **Betty Giannouli**

Introduction

Chris Cooper discusses with **Betty Giannouli** the historical evolution of Theatre in Education (TiE) as a particular form of theatre art with a distinct pedagogical approach and methodology. He highlights its social and political aspect from its very beginning at Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, UK and outlines the trajectory of TiE from its heyday to its gradual decline. He also talks about his personal journey as the artistic director of Big Brum Theatre in Education Company, his work as a playwright as well as his unwavering focus on the fundamental principles of TiE. He refers to his relationship with ancient Greek dramatists and his choice to not avoid challenges when writing plays for children and young people. Finally, he comments on his fifteen-year experience in Greece within the framework of his cooperation with Porta Theatre and, more recently, with the National Theatre's Young People's Stage.

The interview was given to Betty Giannouli, a member of the Editing Committee, in Athens in May 2022.



Betty Giannouli: *Let's start from the beginning, not the very beginning... from 1988, when you started working as a TiE actor-teacher.*

Chris Cooper: 1988, yes.

B.G.: *What made you be involved in the TiE movement, as you used to call it in the UK? What was the path that led you there?*

C.C.: The theatres had their own TiE companies and there was a lot of significant support for that work in universities and colleges. Rose Bruford College was the most significant, of course, providing generations of actor-teachers and other TiE workers to different theatres up and down the country, the Belgrade Theatre, of course, where it all started in the mid '60s, but also other companies such as The Cockpit, Greenwich Young People's Theatre (GYPT) and the [Bolton] Octagon.

B.G.: *I see... the history of the early years of TiE.*

C.C.: That's right. I always had a passion for theatre at school, and I made up my mind to be an actor when I was six, apparently. I would stand at the breakfast table, and I would say that I was going to be an actor and therefore didn't need to go to school anymore because they didn't teach it there, but my mum didn't fall for that, so I was sent to school and told I had to wait until I was old enough. Then I went to Newcastle Polytechnic, which is now University of Northumbria, where they had a Creative and Performing Arts BA course. A lot of people didn't go to London or didn't go to the Rose Bruford or many of the big colleges. Newcastle Poly produced quite a lot of people who had a specific interest in Drama in Education and Theatre in Education. In the Northeast, at the time when I went up there, we also had Dorothy.¹ She was still teaching at Newcastle University. Gavin² was down the road, at Durham University, and there were many people who had taught drama in the Northeast in the '70s, people like David Davis, Geoff Gilham and many figures that are familiar to this world. One of my lecturers was Tony Goode; he introduced me to the *SCYPT Journal* in my first term, and he got me reading about all of these TiE and YPT companies and all these people. I'd always wanted to do theatre that was political, and I suddenly said, "Oh, this is it". So, I left university in 1986, doing various things for two years. Then The Dukes TiE in Lancaster invited me for an interview, which is about 50 miles north of Manchester in the northwest, so I became an actor-teacher there in 1988.

B.G.: *Have you always worked in the north?*

C.C.: That's where I spent my first years. I really did not want to go to London at all, so I started at The Dukes. There were eight to nine full-time members in the TiE company. We were a free service to all schools in Lancashire. It was a huge area.

B.G.: *Were there nine members in every TiE company?*

C.C.: It wasn't unusual back then to have a similar number. We had a director, an education officer, a stage manager, five actor-teachers and a team of people, who were not full-time members, that we could draw on for design, writing, etc. So, in some projects we had more than nine to ten people involved.

It was a time of real growth and exploration. We had weekly educationals as a company, we had regional educationals for SCYPT members and we had



the annual week-long SCYPT Conference we all attended. That's when I first started to write because it was kind of expected that I would. I became one of the editors of a journal called *Theatre and Education Journal*. We only got to produce four issues, but they were extremely significant issues at the time because there was a real political and theoretical division and difficulty within the movement, which was brought about by Thatcher's Conservative government. They [the Conservatives] smashed Theatre in Education, and there were differences amongst us about how you dealt with the attack, how you tried to deal particularly with the National Curriculum, you know, the 1988 Education Reform Act which transformed state education. There was nothing reformist [progressive] about it; it was reductionist, that's what it was. An attempt to establish political control of education and take the profession of teaching away from teachers. So, teachers were no longer trusted to know their children, to develop a broad curriculum with the input from local authorities and with curriculum advisors. It became a National Curriculum taught to tests, every kid doing the same course, you know the story.

B.G.: *Just as it still is in most countries...*

C.C.: Yes. People aspire to follow us, which is quite shocking to me in every respect. So, that really brought us to the beginning of the end. In my case the local authority, which was co-founder of The Dukes TiE, cut us 100%. That was done by the Labour Party, by the way; it wasn't only the Tories [Conservatives]. It is very important for people to remember that members of the Labour Party participated in this as well – The Dukes TiE was closed and we were all made redundant, I think in 1994–95. They just closed the company overnight and that was it.



Dereliction, the first part of the Fear & Anger Trilogy, written by C. Cooper for Big Brum (2008).

B.G.: *I have heard some stories about it.*

C.C.: You will have done, I am sure. It is a familiar one and it occurred in many places up and down the country. There were differences over the way the work needed to face this crisis and how we needed to deal with it politically as well as artistically, and I would say that by the time I left The Dukes there were perhaps only a dozen TiE companies or so left that would be creating work that I would have recognised as TiE. There are many companies that say they are doing TiE, but I wouldn't say they are. I think they are doing different things. And obviously the work has evolved and there is some good work, but it's not necessarily TiE either.

B.G.: *Shall we clarify now what TiE is? There could be a whole book about it, I suppose. What would you say TiE is?*

C.C.: Yes, exactly. Let's talk about how it evolved historically, and we will take it from there. What is really important is that TiE evolved as a discrete art form with its own unique methodology, and it's now being very often integrated into the term applied theatre. There are a lot of dangers in that. For example, people will say about Museum Theatre that it is TiE. I would say that this is inaccurate. What other is Museum Theatre than theatre that is done in museums, which is often participatory and uses a lot of the discrete methodology that was developed by TiE? But they don't understand how to use the TiE

methodology. So, I'm not saying that applied theatre can't be a useful umbrella term. I'm saying that this can be a kind of a reductionist approach that, I think, is designed to suit universities, to enable them to repackage themselves so that they can sell this idea of "We can do participatory, immersive theatre in every situation". While it has a lot of value and I certainly don't have a problem with that, I think you can lose the specialism and not recognise many of the interactive or immersive or participatory methods people actually use, which come directly through Drama in Education and Theatre in Education and how it is used as an art form. So, this is a kind of explanation and I hope it is clear.

B.G.: *You said that Drama in Education is different from Theatre in Education. In Greece we use "Theatre in Education" as a general term.*

C.C.: I understand that as well, and it is more complex for me, as I also differentiate between theatre with drama in it, in the Greek sense of the word, and theatre which is empty aestheticism with no drama in it, which is very fashionable for theatre for young people these days.

If I go back to the original purpose of TiE, it was the idea of using theatre as a tool for learning and as a participatory form. So, it would move more or less seamlessly between performance and participation. A lot of the participatory methodology was developed and pioneered within what we call Drama in Education, particularly by pioneers like Heathcote and Bolton. But what is important in TiE is that it is not children performing, it is professional actors performing. Traditionally you had a full-time professional company developing that expertise. From programme to programme you developed your pedagogical, your philosophical and your artistic content, so form and content were intimately bound up. So, we would have these professionals that we call *actor-teachers*, which is a very strange hybrid. And then obviously you would have your own designers, stage managers, production managers and, of course, directors who had that specialism as well. The idea was to create the highest form of theatre art as a tool for learning, which tours into schools and, resources permitting, could include – as we did with The Dukes – up to five or six actor-teachers per programme. The aim would be to ensure that you are working with only one class at a time. This was the most significant thing. So, when I first started out, we could do a whole-day TiE programme with just one class. We started at 9.30 a.m. and finished at 3 p.m., including a lunchbreak of course. That would be with only 30–35 children participating, which, of

course, gave you a high actor-teacher to pupil ratio. Because if you have 5 actor-teachers and 30 kids, it means that each actor-teacher can focus on 6 kids, and that, of course, enhances the quality of experience they have as participants. So, I suppose that was the main basis of it. And, of course, at the heart of any TiE programme are the theatre elements such as a full play, or theatre episodes, or even theatre moments that are more improvised, where the actor-teachers would stop at different points and the kids – the participants – would interact with the actor-teachers and there are, of course, a range of participatory elements.

B.G.: *So, the participation of the children took place not only in the beginning or at the end, but all the way through the performance.*

C.C.: Yes. I was at Big Brum from 1999 to 2015, where we had a permanent team of three, but we always had actor-teachers who I've been working with over a decade. In two of the cases the model became so much more sophisticated that you could understand what a child was saying and decide to stop the play at any point, respond to what they were offering and explore that way. But it requires many years of practice to be able to do that.

B.G.: *You were artistic director of Big Brum for 17 years. How easy was it for you to be consistent with the principles of TiE over these years?*

C.C.: It was very difficult, but Big Brum ironically was more able to survive because it was so badly funded. I know it sounds odd but, for example, The Dukes TiE company was funded 100% by the local authority and was a free service for schools. When you lose all that money, how do you replace it just like that? Big Brum always had to operate on partial funding from the local authority, Birmingham City Council, or the Arts Council, and from different trusts, foundations, from charities and also from what it earned in its box office. It has been through many financial crises since it was set up in 1982. When I first joined in 1999 as the artistic director, there was a major restructuring of the company. I was the first artistic director the company ever had, but they couldn't afford my wage. So, I had to earn a percentage of my monthly wage by going out and selling my services to schools for workshops and projects to add to the income of the company. However, because of that sort of flexibility, Big Brum was more able to adapt to change. But still it was very difficult to sustain that. When I left Big Brum in 2015 there were nine people. Now there are only three full-time members



The Examination, Drama Rainbow Youth Theatre (Beijing, 2018).



Worlds Apart Together – 1918, the last play in the WWI *End of Reason* cycle, written by C. Cooper (2018).

and this year's two actor-teachers are on a year-long contracts, and they are not going to be permanent. During COVID, the company didn't even have two actor-teachers.

There was of course the Thatcherite, monetarist, neoliberal attack. Tony Blair was much the same for TiE; they were all much the same. A political and ideological assault, and the funding cuts that came with it, which were actually a form of censorship. It was always presented as "We haven't got any money", but of course they choose who to support. I also think 2008 was a critical change, as it was in Greece with the financial crisis, and we have never recovered from that. Obviously, we never suffered like Greece – what happened to Greece with austerity is appalling – but we experienced austerity too. The cuts to the arts have been brutal and the biggest arts organisations have been protected at the expense of the smallest. Big Brum lost its position as what we call a National Portfolio Organisation, which means that you get annual revenue funding, so you are not project dependent. Big Brum was cut 100% by the Arts Council England in 2014, the year before I left, and I have absolutely no doubt that it was a political decision beyond a financial decision. They would deny it of course, they did at the time, and I can't prove it, but I believe they did not support our values and principles, or recognise TiE as a discrete art form. It's been a real struggle for Big Brum ever since, but despite everything, it continues to do the work, miraculously.

B.G.: *Are you still working for Big Brum?*

C.C.: Yes. I work for them as a playwright and as a consultant on various projects now. Richard Holmes, who was an actor-teacher for many years, is now the artistic director. But things have changed a lot over the last 7–8 years. It's very difficult to do a day-long TiE programme today; Big Brum stopped doing that in 2008. Now there is what we call half-day programmes, between two and two and a half hours long, which means the company can perform twice a day for two classes. But over the years the company has developed different models to keep on getting into schools. For example, I have adapted *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and also *Romeo and Juliet* because they are stories that the company has been drawn to and they are also part of the English syllabus on the national curriculum. Over the last seven years, Big Brum has managed to sustain its TiE programmes by performing to whole year groups. Richard has developed a model whereby the company will perform, say *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, to 200 kids in the morning and then *Paper Umbrella*, which is a TiE programme thematically related to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to one class in the afternoon. But the company sells both as a package and in effect used *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to subsidise *Paper Umbrella*.

B.G.: *But where is the participatory element of TiE in the performance of a play?*

C.C.: Well, in the performance of the play there isn't really. But with something like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, for example, the school gets what it wants, because the kids need to see an adaptation of the book for their GCSE examinations. The performance of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* did have elements of participation and interaction in it too. The performance was framed, it is always framed, there was also interaction and reflection with the audience too, but it is not a TiE programme.

B.G.: So, this is how things are right now.

C.C.: That's what Big Brum do to deal with the financial constraints because not enough schools will pay to have the company work with just one class at a time to sustain a whole tour. I am sure that other companies deal with it in different ways.

B.G.: I suppose most companies do not do what they did 10 or 20 years ago.

C.C.: I think not. I do not know anyone who does. I might be ignorant, but I would be surprised if I am totally ignorant.

B.G.: You gave us a very clear picture. I feel it is important for us to be clear that TiE is not the same as Young People's Theatre.

C.C.: Exactly. There are many different approaches, for example, doing a performance of a play for young people and then hot seating some characters after the performance. That is not TiE, as far as I am concerned. That is hot seating some characters after a performance, that is Young People's Theatre and it's perfectly valid, but it's not TiE. It doesn't have the frame, role, task, pedagogical, philosophical, artistic underpinnings that a TiE programme has.

B.G.: Do you think that the teachers and the students you have worked with in TiE programmes have been somehow influenced by the work? Would you like to comment on that?

C.C.: Yes. The relationship with schools today is much more transactional, and that's tragic because schools are more transactional as well. Teaching has become politically controlled, so being a teacher is often referred to as "delivering the curriculum". I have a problem with that as a phrase because I think that "delivering" is what postal workers do, they deliver things. Teachers are much more creative makers of meaning in the moment. What tends to happen now is that everything is calculated financially



Worlds Apart Together – 1918, the last play in the WWI End of Reason cycle, written by C. Cooper (2018).

rather than educationally, departments get X amount of money to spend on X number of kids, so the pressure is enormous. They need the theatre in the school to fit a very utilitarian end.

However, in the 17 years I was working with Big Brum there were still teachers who were able to do everything that was required of them by the National Curriculum (NC). Let's be honest, the NC is not complex; I mean, the GCSE Drama Curriculum is very limited, performance skills orientated and borderline incoherent. Teachers can do all the work they are required to do, such as the review of the theatre piece, some kind of stage design, etc., but they still can go way beyond the demands of what needs to be tested and develop some rich schemes of work coming out of the TiE programme so that kids also get something more meaningful. And I know that there are some teachers who developed schemes of work on the back of the education resource pack that we developed for certain TiE programmes 7–8 years ago and are still using them now with their kids.

B.G.: Wonderful. So, TiE has been supporting teachers in their work.

C.C.: That's right. In fact, what Big Brum is trying to do in the last two years is to make those materials as widely available as possible. So, if you email Big Brum or visit the website, you can access material that's both available online and also has been published in books. In response to COVID-19, we came up this idea of something we called The Monuments Trilogy. I was working on *Romeo and Juliet* when the pandemic broke out. This had to stop. In an attempt to respond to that Richard [Holmes] commissioned me to write a monodrama, which became *Socially*



The Examination, Drama Rainbow Youth Theatre (Beijing, 2018).

Distant. While this is a response to COVID, it is also thematically linked to *Romeo and Juliet* and in a way the Man in the play is an embodiment of all the adult male roles in Shakespeare's play. The Monuments Trilogy will be completed with *Over The Balcony*. I will be writing that this autumn. This play is set in the future but will also thematically link with both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Socially Distant*. The trilogy will therefore be concerned with the past, present and future. *Romeo and Juliet* has toured schools and will resume in early 2023. Due to the extended lockdown *Socially Distant* never made it into schools, but it has been made into a film that schools can access. Big Brum has also published a *Socially Distant* book with a number of articles related to the play by practitioners alongside the script and all the teacher resources for the TiE programme. *Over the Balcony* will also tour in 2023.

B.G.: *And schools have access to this work?*

C.C.: Yes. If they contact the company and sign up to it, they can get all those materials both online for *Socially Distant* and physically with live theatre performances of *Romeo and Juliet* and the *Over The Balcony* TiE programme. Big Brum did also a five-year project called *The End of Reason: 1914–1918*. We started it in 2014 before I left the company. Between 2014 and 2018 I wrote five plays, one for each year of the First World War – 1914 to 1918. In an attempt to keep the dialogue with teachers going and make resources available, the company published two books, one of the play texts with commentaries and another of teacher resources related to the plays. They are also available online. If you go on the Big Brum webpage, you can download them for free as pdfs.

B.G.: *Very useful information.*

C.C.: What they've tried to do during and post pandemic, with my support, is keep that kind of intervention into schools alive, which is really fighting for some very clear principles about what learning is, what the function of theatre in society is, and not to compromise the principles, try to make the transactional a secondary question and focus on young people using theatre in order to explore what it is to be human, what kind of world they want to live in, what kind of people they want to be. I think that sums up what TiE has always been about in this country, what I try to develop in all of my time working here and what I have been trying to do in all my international work. I try to share that methodology and these values, for example, in Porta Studio in Greece and also at the National Theatre of Greece where I am currently working. For the last twelve years I have also been working a lot in China, where I have been trying to develop a similar approach.

B.G.: *You have already written more than 40 plays, haven't you?*

C.C.: I am writing fifty-one as we speak.

B.G.: *Are they all for teenagers?*

C.C.: No, actually. Around ten of them are plays for communities, a dozen of them is for youth theatre, for young people to perform themselves, and the rest are all plays for children and young people. So, I have written five or six plays now for four to eight-year-olds, some for slightly older children and right the way up to young adults.

B.G.: *Have any of your plays been translated in Greek? I suppose I would have known if there had been.*

C.C.: I do not think so, not published at least. I am hoping they will. The Porta Studio did a production of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, so that one has been translated by Xenia Kalogeropoulou. Another theatre company, Mikros Notos, also did *Frankenstein* and they are hoping to do another one next year. Three is not bad. I am kind of proud of that.

B.G.: *You are such a prolific playwright. I am amazed by the fact that you have already written fifty-one plays. Where do you derive the themes of your plays from?*

C.C.: I suppose, like anybody really, it's just from looking at the world, observing and meeting young people and the changing culture, and thinking about how to explore what it is to be human from

their point of view. So, there is always a variety. For example, the last one I wrote, which is called *The land between two rivers*, is a reworking of Sophocles' *Ajax* and it's about the war against terror in Iraq and the invasion of Iraq. I've set it in 1917, as part of the End of Reason cycle, which is, of course, when the British first invaded Mesopotamia in competition with the Turks and the Germans and established the country that we now call Iraq, which didn't exist until after 1917 and then obviously became very valuable for its oil. So, I am using that historical moment but, actually, I'm bringing together two worlds. One is the world of Sophocles, and one is the horrific reality of a post-imperialist British colonising war against humanity set in the first world imperial war.

I've got a play called *Making Mummy*. I first developed it as a TiE programme for four to seven-year-olds. It was inspired by a newspaper article that my wife pointed out to me, which is about a six-year-old girl whose mother died of cancer. The way she dealt with it was to make a mother out of cardboard boxes to substitute for her real mother. I thought that was a wonderful way of looking at death with small children. So, I dramatised the story, but I wouldn't say it's a play about grief or death. I would say it's a play about imagination and trust. I am sure you remember the case of Jimmy Savile in 2014 when there were all those child sex abuse cases that were revealed after his death. It also led to the exposure of many other cases up and down the country too. I wrote a play, *Barefaced*, about that. I wrote a play called *Virtue*, which was retelling the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece but was really exploring the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the relationship between education and democracy. So, you are always using lots of different things. It might be an image, a story, a personal event. But it's always about connecting your experience of the world with how you see children experience it.

B.G.: *I was happy to participate in one of your workshops last year at Theatre Porta. We worked on your play Splintered, which takes place during a civil war.*

C.C.: Yes, that's right.

B.G.: *A very difficult theme for youngsters, I would say, which leads me to my next question: In your plays, you seem to choose strong themes and sharp contradictions. How do these choices reflect certain principles about the way we should work with children and young people?*

C.C.: *Splintered* was commissioned by the Red Cross in Hong Kong. When I produced the play, they were kind of "Oh, that is a bit strong". Yes, being a child



The Examination, *Drama Rainbow Youth Theatre* (Beijing, 2018).

soldier is quite strong and no, I'm not going to include scenes where someone gives them a phone number and says, "It's all right, you can phone the Red Cross". Because that's not truthful, that's not quite how it works. The underlying drama strategy you are asking me about is really important, and that has to do with what Edward Bond talks about as the extreme and how drama works – and I think this draws upon the Greek tradition of tragedy. In terms of the methodology of being a dramatist now, I'm really trying to revisit what the tragic is – only the tragic in contemporary form. And for me what that does is to expose all the extremities of human experience. It's only through the extremities that all those prejudices, all those narratives that we unquestionably absorb break down. We all know that from our own personal experience. You know that when a marriage breaks down, you know that when someone you love dies, when everything that you assume to be reality is totally challenged by the extremity of the experience. I always choose to engage children in extremities because of three things; one is that I always assume that young people are curious and they want to know; secondly, I think they want to know the truth; thirdly, I think that the reason why they like fairytales is because they have a need to engage with the darkest aspects of what it is to be human, through



their fears and through all of the elements of human experience that in reality are overwhelming but in a fictional context are distant and safe enough for them to begin to see themselves and challenge their own values from a distance.

The people in the Red Cross were saying about *Splintered*: “Well, we need a psychologist to attend the performance”; and I was saying, “Why?” and they were saying, “Because children might be traumatised”. I said, “But they won’t be traumatised, because it is a story and we will frame it”. As you know, in TiE you don’t just perform the play, you give it a context, you give it a pretext and you give it a frame where they’re actually watching it with a task or purpose in mind. Of course, it is always about compromise, isn’t it? So I said, “You know what, you bring the psychologist in and then we will have a meeting. She can watch the first performance, she can see how the children respond and then you’ll be able to make your decision”. Of course, by the end of the first performance the psychologist decided that the children were absolutely fine.

I’ve been doing this for over 30 years and I think I know what I’m doing. Of course, *Splintered* is a difficult play, it is a challenging play, but there wasn’t even one child who was reduced to tears or shaking with fear from watching it. And even if that had been the case, that would tell us much more about the state of being of that particular child, about that child’s ability to deal with difficult content. If we have to put up trigger warnings in advance that “This may be this or this may be that” all the time, we might as well not do theatre at all, we can just watch Disney all the time.

Some of my most enduringly important inspirations as a dramatist have been from Greek mythology. Where can you get anything more extreme than in Greek mythology? And why is it extreme?

Because we need it. We need its capacity to engage with our darkest fears. Why do small children prefer *Hansel and Gretel* more than most other traditional stories? Because it deals with being abandoned by your parents and that is our greatest fear, and we do not grow out of it as children. We cannot try to control a child’s curiosity, micromanage it and interpret it for them and tell them what it means to be human, because no one can tell you that, because no one can tell you who you are.

B.G.: *Unless we want to have a certain kind of humans... (ironically)*

C.C.: Exactly. And this is why Theatre in Education has always been at loggerheads with authority. Now there is a huge battleground about what is and what isn’t appropriate. But for me, one of the most important things is that we have to trust the power of story and, even more importantly, we have to trust children to know themselves as social, historical, intellectual and emotional human beings, not as adults in the waiting – they are not. They are human beings in their own right, even four-year-olds. And they want to sort things out.

I remember the last time I was in Greece, just last month. In the first day I was working with a group of five-year-olds doing a very extreme contemporary fairy story that I devised with my colleagues in Big Brum many years ago, called *The Giant’s Embrace*. It’s about a giant literally devouring the planet, and the situation hits a real crisis point. I began the session by saying to the children: “The thing is”, I said, “I know the story up to a point and then I just can’t finish it”. And a child said, “Do you mean you have lost it?” “Yes”, I said, “yes, in a way I have”. And then a girl said, “Do not worry, we will find it for you”. They are so capable. The same group of children at one point said to me, “The problem with this giant is that he is eating everything, but what he does not realise is that he is eating so much that in the end there will be nothing left, and he will have to eat himself”. That is so intelligent, so perceptive and shows more wisdom than any single senior politician in the G20 does. They are not capable of recognising that a child totally gets it. Children get it and they are not intimidated by the challenge, they are not frightened by it, they need to know and they need to make sense of it.

B.G.: *It’s good to hear that. I do not know which world they will live in if they do not recognise reality.*

C.C.: It’s horrendous, because what we are doing, we’re taking resilience away from children. I would

argue that there are three elements that constitute the making of self. The first one is the ability to be an active agent of your own life. The second is the ability to develop empathy so that you can recognise the other because if you can't recognise the other, you cannot recognise yourself. The third one is resilience, the consequence of an authentic and attached self, learning how to overcome obstacles and not seeing an obstacle as a problem. An obstacle is actually the springboard for motion, the very essence of development. But somehow within our culture now we see an obstacle or a challenge as being something destructive – and it is not. Not necessarily. It can actually be how problems are overcome. The way we see things has partly to do with control and partly to do with the fact that everything, including people, has become a commodity.

B.G.: *Everything you have said about TIE is about what pedagogy should be like.*

C.C.: Yes, because at the end of the day, I think Theatre or Drama – I know it's a difficult distinction – changes our perception of the world. What else is pedagogy, if it's not that? When they see a child in *Making Mummy* showing power, sharing the cardboard mother and explaining what she did the day her mother died, the audience, participants, feel it as well as think it in a most profound way. That's actually how we learn in life, that's its connection to play, that's its connection to the most profound and highest-level psychological functions that you can only develop through the imagination and through creativity.

That's what children used to do when we used to let them play. We don't do that now. What we do is we sign them up to classes, we drive them around in 4X4 cars, we drop them off, we pick them up, they go to lessons micromanaged by other adults. We deny them their space and that denies them their resilience. When I was a kid – I do not know about you – my parents used to call me in when it got dark, used to go looking for me to bring me home. And I would be out there and sometimes, yes, it would be difficult, I had to negotiate bigger boys, tougher boys. We learned so much about our world, our place in society, our own limits, our own boundaries; we had a completely different connection to the natural world, because we had some freedom that wasn't mediated for us by adults. And I think this is very lacking in the culture now.

B.G.: *We don't seem to be going back to that, so perhaps that's why we need more than ever different ways of working with kids.*

C.C.: Exactly. Autonomy is critical. A child that lacks autonomy lacks agency and a child that lacks agency spends all their time trying to satisfy authority and not experiencing things in a way that satisfies their own curiosity.

B.G.: *I believe so too and I like hearing that from you. May I ask you something different now? You have been working for more than 10 years now in Greece, with teachers, pedagogues, theatre-pedagogues, theatre practitioners and writers recently. Would you like to comment on that or share any particular observations you have made about the work or the people?*

C.C.: I first came to Greece in 2007, 15 years now, so it's a long time. One of the things that obviously is different is that the context is very different. In Greece there is not a historical tradition of state funding and subsidising theatre arts for young people, not for performing but for using theatre as a tool for meaning making. What has also been very different here is that very rarely do I work with men.

B.G.: *Is it only in Greece that you've noticed that? What about the UK?*

C.C.: In the UK more drama teachers are male.

B.G.: *Very interesting observation.*

C.C.: It's a very feminised sort of environment in Greece. But in my experience, even though there is that historical tradition and the gender imbalance – which I do think is a real loss for kids and for adults – there is also a much healthier culture of education in general, which has to do with the value that people see and place in the power of learning. It may be quite formal and it may be quite traditional in many respects, but in terms of the engagement with the two different aspects of the culture, "logos" and "mythos", this culture of education is deeply saturated in both. So, Greece has always been a place where I feel very much at home. My theatre heroes are all in Greece. Euripides is my favourite, and I've been reading the *Bacchae* today actually. I think there is a drama tradition where there's much more respect for the child's potential. Certainly, I'm talking about within the field that I've been engaged – I'm sure within formal education it's not the case – but certainly within the people that I meet, who are really engaged in theatre, there is a real hunger for dramaturgy, for pedagogy and for how you can use these tools to work with children. And that's why I feel very much at home and why I always come back. And I always feel very humble, because



Dereliction, the first part of the Fear & Anger Trilogy, written by C. Cooper for Big Brum (2008).

I know how much commitment and investment, for example, parents have to have in these very difficult times to continue sending their children to a weekly drama lesson over forty weeks. In a situation where there's such a financial crisis, you only do that because you really want to do it, or you really want it for your child. And there is a set of values in there that I think is very strong. And that's something that I note when I meet actors, when I meet people like yourself in workshops or seminars I do with adults, but I also see it in the parents and it in the kids. I think that this is due to a historical view of the importance of learning for the sake of learning, which has been lost in the more industrial North, certainly in the Anglo-Saxon world. We were the pioneers of public education but only because we were trying to develop the workforce that capitalism needed. Now we are trying to develop the workforce that post-capitalism needs, still doing it with the 17th century model of what school is, which is just terrifying, but it is what they are doing.

B.G.: *This year you run a playwriting workshop for the National Theatre of Greece. Was it the first time you did something like that? What was it like?*

C.C.: Yes, it was. I met Sofia³ online in the same group as you, when we did the masterclass using *Splintered* two years ago. She approached me; she said that she really liked *Splintered*, that she was trying to develop principles and programmes of work for the Youth Stage of the National Theatre of

Greece and invited me to become part of that journey by mentoring some writers. She also said that during the masterclass she had realised that there is a very specific set of concerns when writing for children and young people. And she is right. Obviously dramatic structure is dramatic structure. It doesn't matter who you are writing for. However, there are very specific concerns and demands that writing for young people and children requires, so you do have to approach it differently.

So, the call went out, there were 54 applications and we whittled it down to four writers and I began working online with them up to Christmas. After Christmas they started to explore some of their ideas in schools. I provided them with a structure so that they would be supported in that because, as you know, you can walk up to kids and ask them what they think, but they are not going to tell you unless you know how to ask the right questions. I bring that tradition and I also think, without sounding arrogant, I am still developing new forms; it's not just repeating something I learned 30 years ago. I hope I am, anyway; other people might think I am not. So, I brought that and I met that wonderful energy and engagement and some interesting young people.

B.G.: *So, apart from the writers, you also met some young people!*

C.C.: Yes. What we did was we had some actors from the acting company and the writers. In the first day of

the workshop, I used one of my plays as an example of how you create dramatic structure for young people. Then we tested this with the writers and the actors. After that a group of young people of the Youth Theatre came in and we did a two-hour session working on what we had worked on. For four more days, because there were four writers, we did the same, this time with their work. Each writer produced an opening scene of the play they had been developing, we worked with the actors and explored it and then we worked on it with the young people. I facilitated this part of the work. Then we reflected on what we had learned, and that was wonderful because the young people were extraordinary. What was interesting was the ability to universalise from the particular, which is something that comes from an engagement in thinking rather than from just processing information. I know that they are middle class kids with all those benefits that being middle class brings in terms of their life experience. I understand it doesn't speak for the whole population, but again it's a much less transactional relationship to learning.

I am coming back to take part in the Conference of the Youth Stage of the National Theatre of Greece and to carry on the work with the writers.

B.G.: *So, it is a work in progress.*

C.C.: Yes. And the idea is to produce the four plays as best as we can and then hopefully some of them one day will find their way into performance either at the Youth Stage of the National or somewhere else. The important thing is to try and build a tradition on the set of values about the role of theatre and young people's need to explore all aspects of what it is to be human. So, it's really about creating theatre that enables them to think for themselves rather than think what we want them to think.

B.G.: *Having this conversation with you has been very inspiring. In terms of future plans, what comes next for you?*

C.C.: Hopefully a rewritten *Making Mummy* will start touring in Beijing as a community tour for families. We are trying to rearrange it now for August because the first performance got cancelled yesterday due to another lockdown. We got 10,000 people watching online, which is wonderful, but you can't sustain a tour like that. I'm also finishing a play for Big Brum now, which is going into rehearsal in August. I have also just finished a play for a theatre company in Finland, In Vassa, called *The Clearing* exploring themes about sustainability and climate and ecological crisis. I am also finishing another play for a youth theatre in China. So, I am doing quite a lot

of writing at the moment including some articles for various publications.

B.G.: *Best of luck to all your plans and thank you very much for our conversation. Everything we talked about is very significant for us.*

C.C.: Thank you.

Interview editor: Jenny Karaviti

Notes

1. Dorothy Heathcote
2. Gavin Bolton
3. Sofia Vgenopoulou, Head of the Young People's Stage at the National Theatre of Greece (2017– today)

Chris Cooper has worked in Theatre in Education (TiE) and drama since 1988 as an actor-teacher, director and playwright. He was the Artistic Director of Big Brum TiE Company from 1999 to 2015. His Company, Accident Time Productions, works mostly in Europe teaching, training and on theatre productions that develop long term collaborations including Porta Studio since 2007. Since 2009 he has been collaborating with Drama Rainbow Education Company, Beijing, training teachers in drama education and developing theatre education. In January 2017, he became a founder member and the International Director of Jian Xue (See & Learn), which is a training, research and development NGO in the field. His TiE plays for children and young people, youth theatre and community plays have been performed in the UK, China, Hong Kong, Greece, Hungary and Finland. He has also written extensively on the theory and practice of educational theatre and drama in a variety of books, journals and other publications.