

**The Taboo of Sadness:
Why Are We Scared To Let Children Be Scared?**

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The notion of taboo conjures up the extremes of a society, those dangerous, illegal or private pursuits (violence, drug use, sexuality) which we as a population know exist, but which we – for reasons of embarrassment or offence – find difficult to discuss, whether onstage or off.

But there is another form of taboo, which works in antithesis to this. It is a taboo conjured around a very common, very known aspect of our world. It occurs when we take something normal, a basic emotion – sadness – and we present it theatrically. And of course there can be no danger in this, because we are not dealing with dangerous things... unless we shift the context. Unless we present that emotion to a people we are scared of showing it to. We present it to children.

And in this act, a switch occurs. The thing presented ceases to be the taboo – the shock to an adult sensibility lies no longer in what is presented on stage, but rather what sits in front of it. The children watching the sadness – they have become the taboo.

In writing works that look pointedly at young characters confronting human-sized problems and emotions, I try to address a dichotomy that I believe exists in much children's theatre making. Namely that our fictional children are not allowed to face the hurdles and heartaches – the sadnesses – that their real life contemporaries (so importantly) do.

Three presumptions are at play in an attempt to remove sadness from children's shows:

The first is a presumption of the world – that children, if protected from sadness in their theatre, will not encounter it anyway, in another context.

The second is a presumption of the child – that even if they are shown sad events on stage, children will not be able to deal with such themes.

And the third is a presumption of the artist – that whether or not they are able to deal, this is not the role of children's theatre – it has a different set of prerogatives to adult theatre.

So therein lie three bones of contention: the sadness presented to children is foreign; if not foreign, then it is too challenging; and if not too challenging, then it is just unnecessary.

In my works, and in the works of many of my contemporaries (though, I would argue, as absent from the works of many more), a multitude of themes coexist – those of discovery and loss, failure and redemption, unbridled joy and unbounded anger, new life and untimely death. Some are positive and some are negative. For example:

In *The Girl Who Forgot To Sing Badly*, a girl awakes one morning to find everyone in the entire world gone. In another, the heroine has not slept through the tragedy, but rather has awoken at night to find her mother sneaking out of the family home. The heartache of this departure then causes her father to leave also.

Another protagonist has felt such loneliness that he has stopped emerging from his house altogether. A fourth finds himself adrift at sea with the ghost of a friend. A fifth is made of cheese and loses both of his parents in a fondue-like inferno. A sixth lives in a dictatorial land where children work endlessly and naughty kids are disappeared to a ‘fixing kitchen’.

‘What a horrific body of work’ is a possible response, and one that I offer also when forced to collate it in this way. It truly does seem to be, and so we must pray (both for the good of the audience and the sanity of the writer) that there is method to it.

And yes, there is. What has happened is sad – sadness has entered the story. But also something more rudimentary has occurred in this chronology of lows – and it is this. The child – that bastion of ‘innocence’, the recipient of ‘mothering’ – they are without a mother. They are without an anyone. They are alone – or at least devoid of elders.

And in this position – they are truly the protagonist. They are not necessarily heroes yet (just for having been abandoned), but if a hero were to emerge, it would surely be them. And this is the point – no definable traits come about due to their sad event. All that is set in place, is a spotlight. Whatever happens, they will be the focus, unprotected from the ‘slings and arrows’. They may become the carer or the coward or the victor or the fallen, but whatever the chain of events that occur from here, it is to them that the task of navigating falls.

In *The Girl Who Forgot To Sing Badly*, Peggy O’Hegarty (whose parents were packers) looks out of her window one day, as all is eerily quiet, and finds:

The seasons had passed, and outside was a white winter’s day. Snow piled up on the windowsill, and icicles were frozen on the hairdresser’s sign across the road, and the clouds, wet and heavy with rain, were hung out along the street to dry. It was beautiful – in an ‘extra pair of long johns’ kind of way.

But as Peggy looked around, she saw: ‘There are no people’. And while I hate to admit it, she was right. In the playground, no one played. On the sidewalk, no one walked. Missing was the lollipop lady who helped people cross. And missing also was the cross lady, who sold lollipops. The city was deserted.

And so, with nothing else for it, Peggy O’Hegarty headed out the front door, and into the empty city, alone.

Peggy then has a wonderful day breaking into houses, singing from rooftops, riding over cars, before the trauma of loneliness kicks in, and after that the need to act heroically. But this is not the point. The point is that a very simple shift has occurred in the protagonist – they have ceased to be the child of an adult, or a child to be cared for, or a child receiving the attention of others – which is so often a child as an adult sees it. Instead, they are the effector. They are the one impacting upon the world. They are a child... as a child sees it.

A child who – once beyond the point of infancy – is interacting with the world around them like a true frontiersman. They are mapping uncharted landscapes, purely because they are uncharted to them. They are time and again coming up against unimaginable possibilities and traumas and loves and hopes, and sadnesses. But they are continuing on – they are the heroes and heroines of their world. And it is not a safe world or an easy world or an emotionally sanitized world – but it is precisely because of this that their adventures may be great.

And if the option of initial loss, allowing entry into the terrain of sadness had not been permitted, then this next stage (that of the child claiming control of its destiny, of the child seizing ownership, whether to good or bad ends), this all-important next stage, cannot occur.

And so here we return to the trio of presumptions directed at the taboo of sadness: that the sadness presented to children is foreign; if not foreign, then too challenging; if not too challenging, then unnecessary. It is essentially a what, a how, and a why: The ‘what’ is sadness and its presence. The ‘how’ is a child’s means of dealing with it. And the ‘why’ is a blatant one: ‘why would you wish to present notions other than those of security to children?’

The first is a great sweeping statement, for it is directed at the whole of the world – that sadness will not be encountered by children offstage, so why show it on one.

And of course this is untrue. Sadness does manifest in children’s lives. As guardians, adults will raise sword and fight valiantly to ward off any tragedy that may head for their child. And the intent is a great one, but the reality is far trickier – emotions are subjective beasts, which have the power to shape-shift and take on many forms.

So a schoolyard stoush will provoke sadness, an ignored sentence will, a girl who likes another boy more, or a bus missed, or a body that feels foreign to its owner, or a sibling who can do something better, or a mood that doesn’t even have a name for itself, but that finds you at night when you wake for no reason – these are all tangible, childhood sadnesses.

In the play *Man Covets Bird*, the protagonist grows from boy to man overnight and finds that his community cannot recognize him, and more worryingly, he cannot recognize himself. He goes adventuring with his bird and soon ends up in a place the very opposite of Peggy O’Hegarty’s – where she found herself in a deserted city, the man now finds himself among a population of millions.

A city enjoys being a city. And it celebrates this, by saying who in the city is doing very well and who is very happy, who has a nice car and who can buy the best Christmas presents. It sings songs about these people, and writes signs congratulating these

people, and makes lots of other people go: 'I can't wait to visit there. I think that will be the best visiting place'.

What a city doesn't like doing (and it's not right or wrong or mean or nice – it's just the truth), is talk about the people who wake up every day living in a very small part of that city, maybe a tiny small room with just a table and a thin bed, maybe like this bed, and they have to go off every day to a giant factory that is so big it doesn't really have time to check if they are feeling happy – sorry, it's just very busy.

And in the morning those people catch a train for a long time to do a job, and in the evening, they catch the same train, only back the other way. And even if they are this man, even if they are lucky enough to secretly be carrying a small bird in their coat pocket who loves them very much, they can sometimes get a bit lonely, because they start to realise that there are a great many people doing this, and it would only take one person to slide across from the usual place where they sit on the train, and lean in to you, and whisper into your ear: 'this is all a bit funny isn't it?'

But the man found that this never happened.

This scene is sad – but it is not an all-defining sadness. Because of course a sad moment encountered in life, does not denote a sad life, just as a sad moment encountered in a piece of theatre, does not denote a sad piece of theatre. It is precisely because of the taboo nature of sadness in children's works, that a moment such as this may come to symbolize an entire play. And here we return to the earlier point:

Sadness does not have to be the absolute in a work, the one emotion which will locate the entire piece – all of the plays I have listed before, with their sad moments, also include humorous scenes, and empowering scenes, and fast scenes, and languid scenes. So often sadness can be a state passed through in the unfolding of events. And even more than this, it can be the trigger for that unfolding. Because a tragic circumstance can in a narrative journey be quite the opposite of a negative: it can in fact be a call to arms.

Roald Dahl's James wouldn't have sailed away on his Giant Peach, had his parents not been gobbled up by a runaway rhinoceros on the first page. Maurice Sendak's wolfish Max may not have sailed to Where The Wild Things Are, had he been getting on better with his mother that evening. Edward Ardizzone's Tim could have left it to his parents to sail over to the robber-infested Light House if someone else had bothered waking, and investigated instead.

So often it is the sad event that cries for its victim to step up, to respond, to fight. Or more passively to consider, to reflect, to self-assess. That is surely a cause for taboo, in our notions of children and their acquisition of knowledge – to take the idea that child protagonists will attain knowledge not by being taught it, but rather by deducing it themselves.

The shock to our adult sensibility is not so much the presence of children in this fearful situation – rather, it is the absence of adults.

And here we move on to the second presumption, that of the presumption of the child who, if they are shown sad events on stage, will not be able to deal with this emotion.

Again, it is surely a fallacy. A child possesses skills that make it an audience member in many ways more adept than its adult counterpart: he is a skilled observer; he is a celebrator of 'the story'; he is less knowledgeable of the constructs of the theatre and so more in tune with the imaginary world than its borders; he is adept at self-projecting and allowing himself to become involved in a work; but he is honest in his judgment – the moment the rules of the story are broken, so is his conviction. But most crucial of all is what I believe the child shares with his adult counterpart – he is an emotional tourist, who can safely navigate the character journey presented.

In the play *Helena and the Journey of the Hello*, Helena Bugosi and her father Alvarez are left by her mother, Madeline. It is night and she is readying to leave, resolving not to say goodbye. But her daughter hears her and petitions her for an explanation. This is given:

Helena's mother Madeline had two jobs. One was planting trees, and the other was picking fruit off the trees once they had grown. Planting trees was her great joy, and

she laughed for six months while she sowed the seeds. But picking the fruit was her great sadness, and for the other six months she cried and cried, and there was nothing Alvarez or Helena could do to stop her.

‘Get a fruit picker to do it for you’, said one. ‘Let me do it for you’, said the other. But she would have neither. ‘We must have balance in our lives’, she said. ‘If it is me who does the laughing I do from April to September, then it must be my tears that flow from October to March’.

But slowly something happened. All Madeline’s laughter lines (from her good months) came to join up with her sadness lines (from her bad ones), and as we all know, there is nothing as uncomfortable as a sad laugh. Eventually you don’t want to hear that person laugh at all, and even if it is only because you love them, this is an awful thing to wish. And because you feel so embarrassed about this, you don’t know where to look. So eventually you only know where not to look: which is at them. You stop looking at them.

One day Alvarez and Helena stopped looking at Madeline Bugosi, because they loved her so much.

The explanation is undeniably tragic, but the ensuing action is given to the world of the child. Madeline explains to Helena that she must leave to outrun her sadness, which only occurs between October and March. She has reasoned that to do this, she need only make October not come. And as our perception of time and its passing is denoted by the earth’s rotation, all she must do, is travel faster than the earth. Voices on phones can do this, she rationalizes, so into a phone she goes to live.

In truth, this is a mother telling her daughter that she will be absent, and so only contactable on the phone from now on, and the story is a sugar-coating of that fact. But Helena rationalizes both the truth and the untruth, and more importantly, so do the children watching. In discussions with young audiences after the performance, it has been apparent that children of varying ages gave themselves to the varying realities – the very young believed wholly in the mythical, the middling invested in both, and the teenagers saw the mother’s departure for

what it was, but appreciated her compassionate telling. What was presented to all children however, without any allusions, was the previous reading, a true dissertation on sadness and what may drive a mother to leave her child.

It is a monologue that I may previously only have dared write for an adult audience, but which I have discovered works for children also – indeed, it has been watched and responded to with the full maturity of an aware, present and honest audience – the perfect kind.

The third and final presumption is that directed at the artist – that whether or not children are able to deal with it is not the point. The true issue is that an exploration of sadness is not the role of children's theatre – it should be lighter, less confrontational than this. This is a prevailing taboo, and it is one held by many buyers of work for children, and many schoolteachers, and many parents, and because of their collective influence, it informs many of the theatrical choices made.

But there is, I believe, a need for this tone of work. Not always and not in all performance for children – but the option must be there, to explore sad situations in the same manner we would lighter subjects. Not as tragedy for tragedy's sake, but as one of many points on the emotional spectrum of a theatrical world. I would argue that if we do not, then the absence is far more pronounced than the presence.

And of course, considerations of how the work is presented are to be made. But this is not informed so much by protecting a child's sensibilities – it is more about relevance. A story presented to children should be relative to a child's experience, not an adult's. It must use as touchstones characters and places and proceedings that the child may not necessarily know, but that they may empathise with, allowing them to derive equivalency in their life history.

And here we return to the 'why' – why tackle these sentiments in work for children?

And the answer is because this is one of the great joys, and the great values, of art – we do not empathise with Willy Loman's plight because we too have been salesmen. We do not rejoice

in Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Mr Darcy because we are 19th century socialites. We invest in these moments for the very simple fact that they conjure up a memory of something equivalent in us, in our lives. And in doing this, we are deriving our own importance from this moment, and crafting our own rationales for why things are the way they are, and deducing subconsciously in our own psyches, the small assortment of memories and opinions that we shall exit the artwork with – like a napkin of chosen biscuits that we would pocket at the end of a buffet dinner.

And in this, the theatre is a beautiful medium, because I believe two conversations are at play – that of the artist beseeching the audience ('this is the story. Enter into it and see what unfolds'), and that of the audience member's own internal dialogue ('this is what I am seeing. But this is what is conjured in me. That word or image hooked me more successfully than the others. And this is why'). It is surely the latter that is more important.

And for this wonderful two-fold process to work, the artist must trust the audience. They must not be afraid of it. They must offer up a selection of emotional experiences (joy, discovery, regret, malice, sadness) with enough breadth and enough faith that the audience may sample freely and widely.

If there are places an audience cannot go, or if sadness (so large and important a part of the emotional range) is not offered, and is hardly ever offered, is absent from so much of the theatre-going that young people do – then something is being denied the child. Choice is being denied the child. The respect to allow self-assessment is being denied the child.

And there is a final notion, a final answer to the 'why'. It is final in its context within this paper, and it is final also in its positioning in a work of theatre. The why is redemption.

If theatre is a study of the human condition, then it must put the human through its paces. It will conjure a world, and it will conjure the characters that may navigate that world. And the events depicted may be small or large, but what matters most is how they affect that character – what is triggered or repressed or exposed or railed against or rejoiced in.

And a sad event offers this – it brings a character to a point of frustration or despair, and then it chronicles the character’s trajectory from that lowest point. And there doesn’t need to exist something as simple as a ‘happy ending’, not at all. But in my works I still like to chart a protagonist’s course from that low to a point of Possibility – because if there were any moral that I would ever feel confident enough to employ, it is that life keeps going.

At play’s end for the boy made of cheese, of course his parents who perished are still gone, but he acknowledges there is catharsis in making his own way, and he flies. For the man with only a bird, he comes to meet other people, and finally himself. For Helena with the absent parents, she passes a hello around the world that finds them. For Peggy O’Hegarty in the deserted city, she sings with an unknown voice and calls the inhabitants home. And for the boy called the Lonely who will not leave his house, he falls in love.

These are myriad endings occurring onstage, just as there are myriad possibilities in life – because when we play a game of certainties, the stakes are too low. But if a child audience can enter a theatre and truly not know what will ensue, if they may feel the security of the theatrical artifice, but be offered the possibility of any emotional score – and observe in some bits and empathise in others and feel some joy and some excitement and some sadness – then the experience is truly a theatrical one.

It’s the experience we would offer an adult audience. And, freed from the worry of threatened sensibilities that is far more ours than theirs, it is the experience a child deserves also.

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