Investigation of the Missoula Children's Theatre process and how it promotes the aesthetic development of children

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AN INVESTIGATION OF
THE MISSOULA CHILDREN’S THEATRE PROCESS
AND HOW IT PROMOTES
THE AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Funding for the arts continues to be a struggle. Simultaneously, the need for the arts in the lives of children is recognized more and more. There are various means of filling this ever widening gap: dramatics in the classroom, increased opportunities for children to watch performances, and extra-curricular activities ranging from taking acting classes to performing with a youth theater. Missoula Children’s Theatre (MCT) is an organization that offers a unique way of filling the need throughout the country. MCT sends out tour teams composed of two actor/directors who take 50-65 children in a community, work with them on a show, and then perform with them at the week’s end. This process does more than simply put the child onstage. It offers the child an experience, which translates into an aesthetic event. Through the interaction with the experience, the child’s aesthetic attitude and sensibilities develop further.

Aesthetics is an appreciation of the communicated, qualitative properties in a work. In other words, nature’s beauty has qualitative properties, and one’s aesthetic sensibilities help in the appreciation of that beauty. However, such an experience cannot be labeled as pure aesthetics, since there wasn’t a communication or the sharing of an experience. However, appreciating the grace of a high jumper at a track and field meet is employing an aesthetic attitude towards that event, since through the grace of form, speed, and rhythm one person’s meaningful experience is shared with another. This, then, is referred to as “aesthetics of everyday life.”

MCT’s process furthers aesthetic growth in children through: the development of the feeling, perceiving, and making systems; interaction with the elements of a work of art (the show); and through the evolution of life-skills, which contributes to a greater beauty in everyday living, thus heightening one’s sensibilities in the aesthetics of everyday experiences.
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CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Children & Theatre

In 1970, Jim Caron was on his way to a friend's wedding in Oregon when his VW bus broke down in Missoula, MT. That one event led to the formation of Missoula Children's Theatre (MCT), a professional, non-profit organization that specializes in producing shows for and with children. Founded that year, the first tour (to Miles City, MT) came four years later with the show, *Snow White*. During that tour, since the original production back in Missoula used seven local children as the seven dwarves, it was decided that, rather than bring the children such a long distance, especially during the school year, the actors would cast seven children in Miles City and rehearse with them for a week before performing. They had the residents advertise hoping to pull in an adequate amount of auditionees. When they arrived, they encountered over two hundred children trying out for the seven parts. This gave Caron the idea to send touring actor/directors to rehearse local children in a production and then perform with them at the end of the week.

Thus, MCT began its commitment to offering children the chance to be on stage, if just once in their lives. MCT believes this experience teaches life skills to the children they encounter. As MCT's Mission states:

The Missoula Children's Theatre (MCT) is dedicated to quality education, entertainment and enrichment through the performing arts. . . . MCT's mission is the development of lifeskills [sic] in children through participation in the performing arts.
This mission is evident in each project MCT undertakes. Involvement in MCT's activities is challenging, demanding and fulfilling. MCT offers to each community that it visits the chance for children to develop important lifeskills such as teamwork, self-confidence, mastery over a new situation, and new communication skills. MCT presents the opportunity for a recognizable success to all who participate...not a few...all.

The skills are obtained from the entire process of auditioning, rehearsing, and finally performing. Many children today don't get that extra boost of success; many don't even have the opportunity to succeed. MCT offers that opportunity.

However, what MCT offers is just one type among the many booming efforts in children's theatre today. To better understand the uniqueness of the MCT process, one must first take a look at the other efforts that both the past and recent years have seen in the fields of children's theatre, creative dramatics, drama-in-education, and other theatrical opportunities for youth. We look at these, not only to set MCT apart, but also to illustrate how it has benefited from the rush of activity in this area.

In 1984, the "new techniques in drama and theatre education" included: participation theatre, where the audience becomes involved verbally, even physically, with the performers; developmental drama, which combines the use of other fields such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy with drama to study human developmental patterns; and drama-in-education, which focuses more on the understanding which dramatics can create rather than the actual process of play-making itself. Already, in just over ten years, these "new techniques" have become more established and accepted than considered radically different in today's society. However, this hasn't always been the case, nor is this evident even at the present time when one considers certain aspects such

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as financial support. Funding for the arts in the U.S., both at the community and educational levels, has been and continues to be drastically reduced. Furthermore, the perceived artistic value of children's theatre can still be quite low. In her article for American Theatre, theatre critic Misha Berson sums up what was, and still is in many places, most people's impression of this art form:

I admit, too, that I nursed a cynical distrust of anything that labeled itself "children's theatre"—and don't tell me I'm alone in that. Leaving out some captivating work in Europe, the more sophisticated and dazzling forms of puppetry, and a lot of enjoyable times under the circus big top, much of what I'd seen of that designation had been well-intentioned but artistically lame—and sometimes, well, immature.\(^2\)

Conversely, in other countries such as China and Russia, Theatre for Young Audiences is highly respected. Whether it's the high value placed on the growth and development of youth in these countries, or simply the great respect held for the minds and intellects of children, "only the best actors and actresses [are] allowed to act for children."\(^3\)

However, in spite of budget cuts and low impressions, children's theatre is thriving in the United States. Sondra Pearlman, of Oregon Children's Theatre in Portland, notes that the dramatic increase of children's theatre companies is not just unique to her area (the city currently boasts four thriving children's theatre companies), but is actually a national trend.\(^4\) Indeed, if we take a look at changes in both the aggregate attendance and the number of performances in the Children's Series of 68 sample theatres across the United States, we see a steady increase in the popularity of this art form. In 1989, 333 children's

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series performances were given with an attendance of 149,000. In 1994, we see that increase to 648 performances bringing in 176,000 audience members.\(^5\)

Just north of Pearlman's theatre, in Seattle, an abundance of performing arts opportunities exist for children including: a handful of professional acting troupes, typically performing for adults, bringing original shows on various contemporary issues into the local classrooms; the Seattle International Children's Festival, bringing in performers across the world such as juggler Michael Moschen, the Eskimo group Naa Kahidi and the Peking Opera of Chonging; and the nation's second largest equity house children's theatre, Seattle Children's Theatre. With such richness in cultural opportunities and depth in exploring social issues, how could Smurfs and Barney even compare? But the question better to ask might be:

So why has this bounty of youth-oriented performance developed in Seattle? How, in a period of declining funding for arts across the board, did the Seattle Children's Theatre manage to build a handsome new, centrally located, well-equipped, $10.4-million playhouse last year—a two-stage house many adult companies would covet?\(^6\)

Berson posed that question to some of the leading artistic heads in the Seattle area and found an assortment of answers:

**Peter Donnelly**, executive director of Seattle's Corporate Council for the Arts and former producing director of Seattle Rep, says the children's theatre movement began in Seattle decades ago with the Junior Programs, a community-based, volunteer-run project designed to introduce children to the arts. . . . Notes Donnelly, "After the three years of federal funding ran out, this was the only state to continue the program on its own. Consequently, we had a generation of kids who grew up on the Junior Programs, on regularly going to the Rep, to the ballet and the symphony. And later they wanted the same kind of thing, of the same quality, for their own children."\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Berson, 27.

\(^7\) Ibid., 27-28.
[Seattle] Rep artist-in-residence Ted Sod... believes Seattle "is a really-family oriented place, which is one reason there's such a market for good kid's theatre here."

Linda Hartzell, the deeply committed artistic director of Seattle Children's Theatre, ... [explains,] "This is a populist theatre community... There isn't a pretentiousness about theatre here. There's a sense that it should be for all people, regardless or age of background."

The greater embracing of children's theatre seen in Seattle is also reflected across the country. In the theatre capital itself, New York City, an $11.4 million renovation of the New Victory Theatre made it the city's first full-time performing arts center for children, serving as a home for such companies as Theater for a New Audience, Theaterworks/USA, the Metropolitan Opera Guild, and Cirque Eloize. Disney's burst upon the Broadway scene has generated many varying opinions on the legitimacy of what it brings artistically. But what can't be denied is the success it has had among children and families with its Beauty & the Beast. Nor can one question that, in order to draw more families to it's new resident location, the New Amsterdam, it has been chiefly responsible for the major clean-up involved on 42nd Street. Just recently, two new programs have been developed to introduce children to the theatre and, hopefully, build a future audience base. January 28, 1996 marked the inaugural "Kids Night on Broadway," which allowed children to attend any one of 22 Broadway or Off-Broadway productions

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8 Ibid., 28-29.
9 Ibid., 28.
10 By children's theatre, I shall refer to those productions performed for "children" of all ages, by both professionals and amateurs, children and adults, or any combination of those. MCT would fall into this category, since it utilizes professional adults performing both with students and for students, other children, and their families. Others that would be classified as "children's theatre" range from Seattle Children's Theatre to the Children's Theatre in Minneapolis, from a touring production of Aesop's Fables by a local university to the performance of Once Upon a Mattress by middle school students for their peers and relatives.
free when accompanied by a paying adult. The League of American Theaters and Producers is sponsoring a “Broadway Kids Club” giving such benefits as ticket discounts, special seating, a newsletter and a chat room.\textsuperscript{12}

The Children’s Theatre Company (CTC), however, is recognized as the flagship of North American children's theatre. Located in Minneapolis, CTC has dedicated itself to advancing the art of theatre for families and young audiences since its founding in 1965. They firmly believe that early experiences with the arts will have a profound effect on children's participation in the cultural life of their communities. Over the years, the Theatre has developed an international reputation for staging innovative original works and spirited adaptations of the best in children's literature. They were the first to obtain the rights for Dr. Seuss’ \textit{How the Grinch Stole Christmas}. They’ve been honored with the American Theatre Association's Jennie Heiden Award and the Sara Spencer Award and they are the only theatre for young people, and the only theatre in the Midwest, to receive the Margo Jones Award for excellence in regional theatre. Like many of the other groups bringing theatre to children, they seek and give high caliber theatre to young people.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course that high caliber must start in the written form. While those theatre companies are seeking higher quality in terms of production value, they must also seek higher quality scripts with which they may work. Writing \textit{about} children, rather than \textit{for} children, Suzan Veder puts on stage topics such as the pain of divorce told from the child's perspective. Most people are very surprised that they are seeing “children’s

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\textsuperscript{12} Carol Diuguid, “Producers Go Goo-Goo for Broadway Babies,” \textit{Variety}, 21-27 October 1996, 193. \\
\end{flushright}
theatre” when they watch her plays. Understanding that children pick up on things much more quickly than many adults, Veder’s plays “give credit to children for being extremely intuitive and intelligent, particularly when it comes to recognizing truth on a stage.”14 Other top playwrights, such as Jose Rivera, are now being commissioned to write shows for children in the hopes that the quality and depth found in their “adult” plays will be just as evident in plays for younger audiences. Rivera asserts that “you can’t start soon enough being exposed to good theatre. And since our theatre population is getting so old so fast, this is a way to connect with the next generation.”15 Similarly, each year in Utah, the Sundance Children’s Theatre commissions a number of leading stage and screenwriters to create plays that help “build a bridge between theatre and young audiences.”16

However, the Sundance Theatre Programs not only help the children to be exposed to good theatre, they also assist them in writing good theatre. Sundance provides observerships to young playwrights that “immerse them in the world of theatre development.”17 The students are able to observe the workings of a new play, while having their own plays read and discussed with top professionals in theatre. A closely related program, the 52nd Street Project in New York City, has been so successful with giving at-risk children the skills and opportunities to write plays that it’s being replicated across the country in such cities as Macon, GA; Roanoke, VA; Hastings and Buffalo, NY; Tuba City, AZ; and Santa Monica, CA. In all of these projects, professional, adult actors are brought in to

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14 Cotter and Snowden-VanValin.
17 Ibid.
portray the characters in the plays the children create. By transforming the play into a
*professional* production, the child is shown "that his or her words are worthy of respect
not only among peers, but in the larger community as well."  

This is just a sampling of what is going on across the country. Nonetheless, the
question still remains, "Why is this torrent of youth theatre developing?" There are many
theories and valid reasons why drama for children—which I shall use to encompass all
fields pertaining to youth and the dramatic arts—is bursting upon the scene. One reason
cited frequently is purely economic: children are our future audience base. With that in
mind, professional companies put much into their Children's Series, Touring
Productions, and Outreach Programs. By getting kids interested now, they hopefully will
develop into a substantial foundation of theatergoers further down the road. But even
right now, they are already a substantial financial foundation. Understanding that most
parents want to provide their children with "the best" possible, even at the sacrifice of
their own wants and needs at times, many organizations offer a wide range of theatrical
opportunities for youth. Parents who can barely afford to pay their monthly bills will still
provide their children with ballet lessons, piano lessons, or voice lessons; they enroll
them in youth theatre productions, take them to plays, or send them to performing arts
camps. And when a younger child is in a production (whether it's a play, dance recital or
concert), *many* of his family members will be in attendance; when she sees a production,
she will go with her family. All of this means more tickets sold and more profits made.

By specifically gearing shows towards children, a theatre can then offer a more

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diverse selection throughout the season. California Theatre Center, a professional children's theatre company during the school year, also performs as Sunnyvale Summer Rep once school is out of session. Performing shows like Love's Labours Lost and The Contrast, in an area already saturated with summer festivals (California Shakespeare Festival, Shakespeare Santa Cruz, Festival Theatre Ensemble, etc.), the theatre's audience base isn't very large. However, new audience members emerge every year, and no matter how much the Summer Rep may lose financially, it more than makes up for that with the appreciation it gains from the community for its cultural contributions. Fortunately, not only does it have the school year earnings of its touring and in-house children's theatre productions, it also offers a summer conservatory for students around the Bay Area that, by itself, can subsidize the adult program.

This strategy also works within children's demographics. As mentioned, many family members will go to see their son/daughter, brother/sister, grandson/granddaughter, and nephew/niece in a production. However, as time goes by and it becomes less of a novelty and more of a routine for the child to be performing, fewer family members attend. As noticed with Peninsula Youth Theatre, a production of Little Mermaid for ages 8-13 will have greater financial success than the simultaneous production of Crazy for You for ages 13-20. First, more students will participate in the former production, bringing in more registration fees. Then, most family members will not only come "en masse" to the show, they will also come more than once. Finally, a family not associated with either show, looking in the paper would be delighted to bring their two younger children to see a popular fairy tale on stage. However, this same family probably won't
bring those younger children to watch a Broadway-styled musical; nor would the parents, by themselves, want to necessarily watch teenagers perform that show. Consequently, The Little Mermaid funds Crazy for You and so allows the company to still offer performance opportunities for youth of all ages.

To present the image that theatre companies think of their audiences solely as dollar figures would be grievously wrong. The desire to develop the artistic growth of our future generation, to pass on the passion of the arts, to give the gift of an aesthetic experience occupies the hearts of many arts organizations. Many would think that bringing 2,800 nine to eleven year olds to an all-Stravinsky concert at Carnegie Hall sounds noble, but would doubt the effect the concert realistically could have on children, aside from possibly teaching them that talking at the symphony is unacceptable. But Link Up!, Carnegie Hall’s classical music education program, with the cooperation of the New York City schools, turned that type of experience into one that had a very positive effect developmentally for most of those students. For five months prior to the concert, musicians visited assorted schools to ensure the success of the experience for the children. Teachers were trained in workshops on how to integrate the music through lessons and activities. Members of the orchestra appeared at each school to perform a suite from one of the pieces and demonstrate how each musical instrument works and sounds. Finally, at the concert, dance was integrated by members of the Nikolais/Louis Dance Lab to make visible the shapes and dynamics of Stravinsky’s work. This constant integration is the foundation to Link Up!’s philosophy. Carnegie Hall’s director of education, Phyllis Susen, explains that the integration is meant “to reinforce the fact that
music lives in a mortal context, not in isolation.” Also, for further development artistically, Link Up! engages the students in activities that hone their skills in time management, analysis, critical assessment, problem solving and other areas involving the capacity for expression.\(^{19}\)

Back in Seattle, the Intiman Theatre Company’s Living History Program enables students who might not learn in the traditional manner to learn experientially. Even among those “traditional” learners, Living History sparks interests, challenges ways of thinking, and generates new ideas. And through it all, the students are learning via artistic means. The philosophy behind this is that drama will present the student with the chance to either reaffirm or even discover her values and beliefs. Daniel Renner, who began the program in 1986, “hopes that ‘beyond the initial artistic experience, they leave with an itch in their heads. It’s about showing people how to lead an artful life.’”\(^{20}\)

However, the dominating contributors to this surge in the arts are educators who have taken to the use of creative dramatics more readily and believe in the value of arts in education more unconditionally. The influx of such teaching and developmental theories as Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences and his analyses of the arts and creativity, or even further back to Piaget’s assumptions of child’s play, has figured prominently in this growing perspective. And the recent push for reform in education has led to even more implementations of drama and greater uses of creativity in the classroom. Further, as more and more educators have redirected their focus towards the arts and art education,

more programs are created, more theatre seats filled from an increased appreciation at the
student level, and more recognition is given towards what was once thought of as
simplistic and juvenile.

One very pertinent thread in the current education reform begins with the idea of
active learning. Just as it sounds, the students are learning more actively than passively;
they engage in experiences rather than listen to lessons. This leads to collaborative
learning, learning within a group of peers. With this type of instruction, “instead of
relying on simple memorization skills, the students must engage in higher-order thinking
and inquire into a problem to work out a variety of outcomes.”^21 Kentucky education
reformers then took it one step further. Understanding the advantages of group efforts,
and knowing students learn at different speeds, they have eliminated grades one through
three. Instead, children are taught collectively, and allowed to progress individually.
This form of instruction is known as outcome-based education (OBE). Reformers note,
“OBE instruction allows students to work at different paces, as long as they strive to
perform a set of predetermined outcomes.” Along with the individualized pacing, other
methods in an outcome based education “include grading portfolios of a student's creative
performance and the assessment of the student's ability to make decisions and theorize
within an experimental process.”^22 The effects of current developmental and educational
theories on the maturation of aesthetics will be discussed in the following chapter.

However, it becomes evident that with the onset of more “reform” programs and new

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^21 Andy Carvin, “Collaborative Learning,” Exploring Technology and School Reform, 1997; located
^22 Ibid., “Outcome-Based Education,” Exploring Technology and School Reform, 1997; located at
learning theories, the ability for the child to experience, to create, and to express becomes much more of a central focus. And many in the field of education are quick to realize how well the arts, and in particular, drama, foster these traits.

At the national level, Gordon M. Ambach, Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers, issued the decree, “we must ensure that the arts are at the center of American education reform.” He further goes on to list the five major areas of education reform in which the arts should play a key role:

1. in establishing new goals for learning and creating standards as best practices;
2. in developing new assessments for measuring progress toward these goals;
3. in promoting higher-order learning through interdisciplinary studies and self-discipline;
4. in applying the wizardry of technology to learning, using imagery and sound to communicate as never before; and
5. in living the motto, *E pluribus unum*, “out of many comes one,” celebrating both diversity and unity through the arts.23

This pronouncement is more than a simple plea to add more drama classes or buy more musical instruments; it’s a manifesto for truly *educating* the students of today. Goals and standards are much more than theories and minimum requirements. In business, “standard” means best practice; in education, we should provide the youth with what will not just prepare them for the future, but enable them to be their best. Rather than help them to follow, let’s teach them to create. “The new industrial environment requires workers who can grasp complex material and organize their own work so that they are more productive.”24 That the arts develop higher order learning is not debated. The

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24 Ibid., 9.
rising recognition of such beliefs, however, is what contributes to the new awareness and, subsequently, new actions.

The National Alliance of Business has urged educators, administrators and anyone who would get involved to support the foundation an arts education brings. William H. Kohlberg, President, admits that it is not the role of business to determine school curriculum. He does state, however, that “those of us in business believe that education reform should start from, and build on, what people need to know and do in non-school settings.” He later specifies:

Through art, children learn to learn. Because art is, by and large, a hands-on activity, it holds the promise of increasing the learning ability of our future work force. . . . The creative genius of America is the result of our investment in our creativity. Our large businesses depend upon it, and our small businesses will surely close their doors if they can’t compete through innovation.25

Those in the position to see what the nation needs for economic success, for continued growth, are quick to point out how, in addition to educating the children in the arts, we should be emulating those same children’s natural artistic instincts ourselves. Many of the ways a child sees things, with awe and fascination, without set limits, are now valuable assets in both people and companies. In fact, many companies will agree with Robert Fulghum that all we really need to know we learned, not in graduate school, nor in business seminars, but rather in kindergarten. We should live “a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.”26

Unfortunately, at the community level, the ideal, even the necessary, doesn’t always come to be. The Commission on the Humanities published a report commenting on how public education was being weakened by the neglect of the humanities, including the arts. It dispatched the following recommendation:

As an integral part of their commitment to quality in public and private education, local administrators should maintain in every elementary and secondary school a strong, well-structured curriculum in the humanities and arts. Continuously and step by step through the three major levels of learning, the curriculum ought to integrate training in expository, critical, and aesthetic skills with a firm factual base in cultural traditions.  

Challenging those who think the “basics” are all that are needed in education, Oscar Brockett makes the assertion that, whereas reading, writing, mathematics and other “basics” are necessary tools, they are tools that must be used to their maximum potential. That potential, he claims, comes from many of the “enrichment” classes, that are just as necessary as the “basics,” and which include drama. He insists that without “additional intellectual, attitudinal, and psychological motivation and learning, the basic tools will probably remain unused or will be used minimally.”

Nowadays, many school districts and State Boards of Education have followed suit. The Washington State Schools put out a “Visual & Performing Arts Curriculum Guideline” and in the introductory message, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Frank Brouillet, explains the mandate to include the arts in the core curriculum. He recalls the Basic Education Act of 1977, the goal of which is to provide students with the skills necessary for learning. The skills include the ability:

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1. To distinguish, interpret, and make use of words, numbers, and other symbols, including sound, colors, shapes, and textures;
2. To organize words and other symbols into acceptable verbal and nonverbal forms of expression, and numbers into their appropriate functions;
3. To perform intellectual functions such as problem solving, decision making, goal setting, selecting, planning, predicting, experimenting, ordering, and evaluating; and
4. To use various muscles necessary for coordinating physical and mental functions.

He claims that "Properly taught, the arts embody and develop all of these skills."^29

In North Carolina, the Arts Education Standard Course of Study Frameworks was developed by four committees, each representing the different subject areas of arts education: dance, drama, music and visual arts. However, the most recent version of this implemented some interesting changes of focus in certain areas. Just as arts education reformists are calling for the arts to be integrated within the other subject areas, as well as stand on their own, the new frameworks not only recognize the importance of subject areas outside of the arts, but actually attempt, when possible, to integrate those subjects within the arts. Some of the changes proposed include these:

• There is a strong emphasis on communicating, reading, writing and, where plausible, math throughout each arts curriculum. • Integration of learning both among the four arts areas and among other subject areas is stressed. • Since the ability to do critical and creative thinking as well as complex problem solving and to use intuition are inherent parts of the arts process, importance has been placed upon the development of these abilities throughout the entire study in each arts area. . . . • The ability to use knowledge, skills and processes learned in the arts and apply them to other disciplines and to life beyond school is reinforced.^30

The frameworks are then broken down into workable sections among a division of the grade levels: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Regarding the specifics of the Theatre framework,

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29 Brockett, 2.
the committee gives the following foundation as their basis:

Theatre, the imagined and enacted world of human beings, is one of the primary ways children at an early age learn about life - about actions and consequences, about customs and beliefs, about others and themselves. They learn through their social pretend play and from hours of viewing television and film. Children use pretend play as a means of making sense of the world; they create situations to play and assume roles; they interact with peers and arrange environments to bring their stories to life; they direct one another to bring order to their drama, and they respond to one another's dramas. In other words, children arrive at school with rudimentary skills as playwrights, actors, designers, directors, and audience members; theatre education should build on this foundation. This framework assumes that theatre arts education will start with and have a strong emphasis on improvisation, which is the basis of social pretend play.\(^{31}\)

But again, while it is promising that the arts are considered to be important in the eyes of administrators and educators across the country, the actual ability to carry out the ideal arts education program waits to be seen. In 1994-95, a survey of 679 elementary schools and 697 secondary schools was conducted regarding the arts in education. One way in which the arts fall behind in comparison to their ideal implementation is through the assimilation of arts programs into other subject areas: dance is taught in physical education classes; creative writing and theatre are taught in the core English classes. Thus, we have teachers instructing in an admittedly vital area, while having little or no training or expertise in that field. As we can see, drama on the whole is considered very valuable, but is mostly used as a tool through dramatic games and activities within other activities within other subjects or is a unit of study within the English program (figure 1).

Fairing slightly better in the secondary system, drama is taught in at least half of the schools as a separate subject, but this, too, is a dishearteningly low percentage (figure 2).

Thus, the need becomes even more urgent to offer supplementary experiences in drama, whether through the school itself, in the form of extra-curricular activities; through some community program that offers opportunities in drama; or through the offerings of a company such as Missoula Children's Theatre. This high appraisal of the arts existing in
the philosophies, although not the budgets, of school districts across the country, explains the resulting increase in children's theatre activity.

All of these statements, decrees, and even demands are encouraging in regards to a widespread belief that arts are important in the education process. The final step is to address specifics on how to implement this belief, what programs should be taught, and how in depth to take the children. Do we let children create characters in dramatic play but not let them wear costumes for fear of external objects making their choice for them? Or is it all right to wear costumes but not actually perform before an audience since performance is considered to be an aspect best encountered in their later years? Like the many theories on which style of acting should be taught, there are as many, if not more, outlooks on the use of drama with children.

Viewing a performance is the quickest means to expose children to the arts. But, unless we are to revert back to the artistically immature times of recent past, there must be standards for the productions, just as there would be in any adult performance. As it has been repeatedly stressed, treating the kids with respect is an absolute necessity and is one of the key common threads among those performance groups that have succeeded with children. To achieve this, we must not think of children's drama as a "stepping stone" to better forms of theatre. If anything, it should be even better than adult dramas since what is impressed upon the children will stay with them well into their adult lives. The quality of writing, acting, and designing must be of the highest caliber. Children can be much more critical (and definitely more vocal) of what they don't believe, accept or enjoy. Add to this the fact that children now receive their entertainment (and even
information) in MTV styled, two-second bytes, and keeping their attention becomes
twice, even three times, as difficult. "Begin with the child, they say. And as you progress
through the selection of materials for presentation and the decisions about staging, return
always to the child. Theatre for children is important, not because they are a future
audience, but because they are a present one."32 Careful thought must go into not only
how a production will entertain them, but also how it will challenge their way of
thinking.

Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans provide us with some goals for which children’s
theatre should strive. Onstage, these will provide the child with:

(1) the joy of believing in an illusion as a story comes alive upon the stage; (2)
standards of taste which improve with true art experience; (3) the understanding and
appreciation of life values drawn from human experiences as portrayed on the stage;
and (4) the basis for becoming a discriminating adult audience of the future.33

For the child to believe in the illusion, the story must be told effectively, with truth,
commitment and energy. Improving their standards of taste can only be done with a
work that has high artistic values and quality; if we present them with something with a
lesser quality simply because they’re “kids,” they’ll never appreciate the higher artistic
works as adults, having never experienced them. The life values portrayed must be clear
and perceptible to be understood. All of these qualities must work together if we expect
them to learn to discriminate between the good and bad, for as we shall discuss in the
next chapter, developing children into audience members is just as critical as developing
them into performers or creators or critics.

32 Vera Mowry Roberts, foreword to Theatre, Children and Youth by Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane
Evans (New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1982), ii.
33 Davis and Evans, 41.
Probably the second most commonly used means of exposing students to the dramatic arts is actively through the classroom. This can be anything from letting the students create their own “play” from a fairy tale or other story to having the students act out a scene from *Romeo & Juliet* rather than simply reading it to role-playing the various “characters” from an event in history to better understand it. In addition to various methods of using dramatics in class, there are also multiple philosophies of what is achieved by each method. Nellie McCaslin states in *Creative Drama in the Classroom*, that the ideal use of dramatics is: an opportunity to develop the imagination; an opportunity for independent thinking; freedom for the group to develop its own ideas; an opportunity for cooperation, an opportunity to build social awareness; a healthy release of emotion, better habits of speech; an experience with good literature; and an introduction to the theatre arts. In 1977, the Children's Theatre Association of America accepted the definition of creative drama as: "An improvisational, nonexhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences." The key term here is “process” as opposed to a product. And that person teaching the children is responsible for ensuring the success of this process.

This person, according to McCaslin, is considered to be a *leader*, rather than a *director*. This is stressed to deter any thoughts of turning the process of creative dramatics into the product of a performance. It should be the leader’s goal to provide an environment where the players achieve optimal growth and development. This person

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34 McCaslin, 16-19.  
needn’t have formal training in the instruction of drama; instead, the qualities he/she already possesses that make him/her a good teacher, will also make him/her a good leader.

In other words, although he is teaching an art and should therefore have some knowledge and appreciation of it as a form, a genuine concern for the players is of equal importance.

The successful creative drama teacher guides rather than directs. She is able to work with others, offering and accepting ideas. To her, sharing is more important than showing; thus her satisfaction will come through the process as well as from the product.\(^{36}\)

Ultimately, by focusing on the process, by keeping it free and less structured than a formal production\(^{37}\), we can fortify the benefits of that category Jean Piaget labels as “symbolic play.” Piaget asserts that this area is essential to the child’s affective and intellectual equilibrium. Play “transforms reality by assimilation to the needs of the self, whereas imitation . . . is accommodation to external models. Intelligence constitutes an equilibration between assimilation and accommodation.”\(^{38}\) This is doubly important since, as McCaslin alleges, we live in a “spectator society.” Most of our experiences come pre-formatted with little room for individualization. However, when we offer the opportunity for children to participate in the process-centered creative dramatics, “we are helping to reserve something of the play impulse in all of its joy, freedom, and order.”\(^{39}\)

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 390-391.

\(^{37}\) McCaslin places creative dramatics in between dramatic play and children’s theatre. Dramatic play is the unstructured, spontaneous play of children, such as a young girl serving tea to her dolls or a young boy walking one quarter of an acceptable speed, claiming “I am a tortoise.” Children’s theatre is considered to be a formal production for an audience of children, performed by either children, adults or both.


\(^{39}\) McCaslin, 395.
Innovative ways of teaching the arts directly are also occurring more often and receiving high critical praise. Helping the students themselves see and understand how pertinent, relevant or meaningful the arts can be in their lives furthers the efforts for arts education. Kathleen Breen, an English teacher at Shawnee High School in Louisville, decided to stop teaching Shakespeare the way she was taught when she was a student. Instead of analyzing metaphors or writing about thematic elements, she puts the students on their feet. Harking back to an active learning approach, she remarks that, instead of struggling with this mysterious language, “they soon discover they can interpret and make meaning once they are on their feet. . . . I tell my students that studying Shakespeare without acting or seeing it performed would be like . . . trying to experience Beethoven by reading the sheet music.” Learning how to actually experience a work of art, rather than simply look at it or listen to it, develops those students into a much more appreciative and discriminating audience.

Even younger students can start to learn to appreciate artistic works like Shakespeare’s plays. At York Middle School, in York, Maine, a Shakespeare Festival is held for the students in conjunction with their studies of his plays. Reading a story version of the more common plays assists the students in understanding the main through-line, which will be critical once they’re given the actual text to learn. They are split into various acting groups and choose the scene they’ll later perform. The day of the performance provides them with the actual “festival,” which involves everything from replicating a marketplace scenario and a jousting competition (which they learned by visiting a local Medieval Faire) to serving an “Elizabethan Feast” for the school lunch.

40 Kathleen T. Breen, “Taking Shakespeare from the Page to the Stage,” English Journal 82, no. 4
All of this is centered on the performance of the scenes. Tony Beaumier, the organizer of the event, boasts:

The basic goal of this project is to introduce young students to the work of William Shakespeare. The festival has done much more than that. Over the years I have begun to realize the power of Shakespeare's work and the excitement it can bring to a classroom. I have seen kids who haven't been excited about anything all year come alive during the Shakespeare Festival and surprise everyone with top-notch performances. I hear Elizabethan language spoken in the halls every spring as students memorize scripts... All of this is possible because we celebrate Shakespeare, not just read him.  

However, through all of these theories and beliefs, very few talk about how to utilize performance in a genuine “production” with children (especially of the younger ages) and what the benefits are from such a program. In fact, there exist many theories on why such a program is detrimental to a student. Davis and Evans remark, “We agree that engaging them in the processes of drama without subjecting them to the pressures associated with production and performing for an audience is more important to children's development than is play production, at least until they are well into middle childhood.”\(^1\)\(^2\) Granted, they later discuss some of the methods one should use in directing children, but only of the upper grades. So if MCT nurtures aesthetic growth in its participants, what is occurring with the younger students (since MCT works with grades K-12) must be addressed. Along the same lines, McCaslin stresses:

It is generally agreed that participation in creative drama is far more beneficial than public performances for all children up to the age of ten or eleven... There are times, to be sure, when sharing is a joy and a positive experience, but is to be hoped [sic] that formal play production would be infrequent... Some leaders in the field believe that any performance in front of an audience is harmful because it automatically interferes with the child's own free expression. I should agree up to a

\(^{42}\) Davis and Evans, 40.
point, but the theatre is, after all, a performing art; and when the audience is composed of understanding and sympathetic persons, such as parents or members of another class, performance may be the first step toward communicating a joyful experience. Without question, however, very young children should not perform publicly. . . . A performance is a disciplined and carefully organized endeavor, involving a variety of skills that children of elementary school age do not and should not be expected to possess.  

So can MCT actually benefit children of all ages? Does it indeed develop aesthetic sensibilities or can it actually hinder those qualities in the student? What is mentioned above has many valid concerns and truths to it. However, the benefits presented in the following chapters aren’t meant to refute those claims, but instead they will show benefits from a different point of view or even way of thinking. It seems, though, that in order to illustrate this development, the aesthetics of which we speak need to be defined. So in the next chapter, we shall look at what aesthetics will mean in this study and how they will intertwine with developmental and educational theories in presenting the process that occurs in an MCT production.

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43 McCaslin, 11.
CHAPTER 2

Aesthetics

Before discussing how MCT furthers aesthetic development in youth, or more correctly, aesthetic attitudes, a working definition of "aesthetics" needs to occur. As Howard Gardner aptly puts it, "Aestheticians have long struggled to provide a satisfactory definition of art, and many have despaired of so doing." Since so many definitions exist from equally as many viewpoints, it would be pointless to attempt any type of in-depth survey or review of such theories. What I do propose to do is remark upon and integrate those theories that are best suited for an aesthetics within youth, education, and everyday life, since MCT specializes in the "everytown."

In order to proceed with defining what is meant by aesthetics, aesthetic properties, and an aesthetic attitude, we must first delineate the difference between aesthetics the noun and aesthetic the adjective. In this study, when I refer to aesthetics as a noun, not as a quality, I present it, in the traditional sense, as the "study of beauty." However this explication immediately comes under fire when one looks at a film such as Peter Brooks' version of King Lear, or a piece of fine art like Serrano's "Piss Christ," both of which may, according to the average observer, contain more ugliness than beauty. And if aesthetics is difficult to define, beauty is even more so. So rather than attempt a lengthy discourse on what beauty is or what makes something beautiful, let me simply denote

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beauty as being the "value" properties within a piece, properties that qualify rather than quantify a piece. Instead of aesthetics being the study of what is beautiful and what isn’t, it now becomes the study, or awareness, of what elements form the artistic value of the work of art. Thus, aesthetics is the study of aesthetic values; in other words, it is reflecting upon or appreciating a work of art with an aesthetic attitude. This definition quite obviously necessitates outlining what aesthetic as an adjective means.

When attempting to label aesthetic with one clear-cut definition, we run into many paradoxes, especially if we compare traditional theories of aesthetic attitude to what might be considered aesthetic outside of those ideologies. For example, it is said, in the Kantian manner, that when one views an object aesthetically, that person should not be concerned with the practicality of such a work. This is true in that we should not be concerned that the "beautiful" representation of a gothic cathedral onstage is really just composed of flat boards and paint and does not have the firm, physical foundation with which the genuine building materials would provide. Nor should we, if admiring a real cathedral, consider that architectural work's usefulness and thus how much money it would be worth, or how many congregation members it could hold. But when admiring this work of art, the "function" of the building, its practicality, does contribute to the aesthetic appreciation. David Cooper notes: "It is my aesthetic sensibility, as much as anything, that is offended by the staging of a circus or bingo competition within its walls, for that sensibility is not to be abstracted from my consciousness of the building's

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2 I shall refer to "works of art," but include in this such events and qualities as the rhythm of a class or a dialogue between two friends. This aesthetics of everyday life will be discussed later, but should be classified now as an artistic experience and process just as much as a painting or musical composition is.
spiritual purpose, of the prayers and acts of worship it has housed." Looking at another contrast between theory and application, if we were to pass the time by idly watching the sky and lake, observing the beauty in nature that surrounds us, as opposed to reflecting upon a painting of the similar scene, one would hardly label that action as pure aesthetics. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that an aesthetic sensibility, or attitude, is present in the appreciation of such beauty, whether man made or naturally occurring.

So when looking for the definitive description, we conclude, as Cooper does, that "it was mistaken to look for a single phenomenon, the aesthetic attitude. We should, perhaps, content ourselves with describing a motley of attitudes, united more by the range of objects . . . which tend to invite them than by a single, underlying state of mind."

This “motley of attitudes” comes in varying forms with different philosophers and aestheticians. A list I find most applicable to the study of the development of aesthetic attitudes and, as we shall later discover, the aesthetics of everyday life, comes from Alan Goldman. He gives us what he considers to be “properties and types of properties that are typically thought to be aesthetic,” including:

1. what might be called pure value properties: being beautiful, sublime, ugly, dreary;
2. emotion properties: being sad, joyful, sombre, angry;
3. formal qualities: being balanced, tightly knit, loosely woven, graceful;
4. behavioural properties: being bouncy, daring, sluggish;
5. evocative qualities: being powerful, boring, amusing, stirring;
6. representational qualities: being true-to-life, distorted, realistic;
7. what might be called second-order perceptual properties: being vivid or pure (said of colours or tones), dull or muted;
8. historically related properties: being original, bold, conservative, derivative.

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4 Ibid., 27.
From this list, we surmise that an aesthetic property is a qualifier rather than a quantifier. These qualifiers work nicely in describing a work of fine art; correspondingly, they provide qualities that help compose the aesthetics we seek in life. More will be discussed on that later.

However, since the foundation of this study deals with both the aesthetic and educational development of children, and since Howard Gardner has focused much of his work on said areas, it seems most relevant to address his thoughts and definitions of aesthetics. In *The Arts and Human Development*, he comes up with his most definitive statement by claiming aesthetics, or art, is the “communication of subjective knowledge;” this communication occurs through the “creation of nontranslatable sensuous objects.” Gardner insists, however, that this communication must be intentional and deliberate. The aesthetic should not be accidental. If an aesthetic attitude deals with how we perceive the value elements in a work of art, how we qualify a piece, then the focus rests on the observer in having the aesthetic sensibilities to reflect upon the work and the creator in enabling the observer to do so through the communication created. Nature cannot “choose” to communicate, however an observer can choose, or at least become aware of, how he/she reacts towards the value properties of a scene in nature. So again, the action of appreciating nature is not one of aesthetics, but it does utilize the observer’s aesthetic attitude.

Therefore, aesthetic as a descriptive form, while encompassing a “motley of attitudes,” chiefly involves the *communication of value properties*. An aesthetic attitude is sustained as long as one is aware of the qualitative elements within a work of art. That

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6 Gardner, 30.
work, however, can only become aesthetic when a communication generates from it, hence the need for a “creator” of the work.

Why, however, does an aesthetic attitude need to be developed in children? Does it need help in development, or is there a greater need for it nowadays? And what importance does it hold in the overall developmental process? We have already heard a sampling of the arguments for an arts education from various professionals in Chapter 1. And we’ve heard the continuous plea for more development of the arts within the schools. However, we haven’t looked at the state of children’s development as a whole, nor have we addressed how aesthetics specifically contribute to a child’s development, in and out of the educational forum. A quick glance at the state of, not his development, nor artistic aptitude, but the child as a complete entity, apprises us of the desperate predicament he faces.

Today’s child has many more factors influencing his or her life, and thus faces greater challenges in succeeding than his or her parents did. Dr. Jane Healy did a study on what many educators and parents have felt is an actual change in children’s brains. She prefaced the study by noting the decline in everything from reading skills to mathematical abilities to attention span, and the statistics she presents are frightening. She refers to a survey conducted that revealed 36% of the businesses surveyed were offering remedial courses in reading, writing, and math, while 28% were considering such a program. And citing a special issue of the Wall Street Journal that focused on the problems in education, she writes:

[They] documented the growing incompetency of high school graduates by surveying managers who have trouble finding even minimally competent workers to hire. . . . An advertising firm in Chicago admitted that only one applicant in ten meets the minimum literacy standard for mail-clerk jobs, and Motorola, Inc., provided statistics
showing that 80% of all applicants screened nationally fail a test of seventh-grade English and fifth-grade math.7

Relaying many more instances where performance levels have dropped, she notes that most people believe “increases in television viewing and less time spent reading” contribute to this decline greatly. Also, many blame schools for “giving less homework, lowering academic standards, and using less challenging materials.”8 However, the real reason may lie in an actual change in the brains of children. A quick summary of her neurological findings shows that a waxy substance called myelin insulates the wiring of our neurons and facilitates rapid and clear transmission to our brains. However, if an area is not myelinated, it does not operate efficiently. So forcing children to master an area that is not ready to be myelinated, e.g. the association areas dealing with highly abstract thinking, such as with symbols, that are the last regions to be myelinated, can be detrimental to the learning process.9 Conversely, if the time is right for a particular form of learning, and that learning isn’t presented, then the real-life phenomenon of “use it or lose it” may actually come to pass. In fact, Dr. Jane Holmes Bernstein remarks: “And when those stimuli do not appear at the critical time, then it is likely that the brain structures that would have mediated them will not function and will die.”10

So what, if anything, does artistic learning have to do with the state of children’s minds nowadays? Artistic learning lends itself directly to experiential learning; teaching a child to appreciate the aesthetic values of a work of art means teaching the child to experience that work of art. The more aesthetic opportunities we give a child results in

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8 Healy, 18.
9 Healy, 66-67.
10 Jane Holmes Bernstein, interview by Jane Healy, October 1988, cited in Endangered Minds, 73.
more experiences for the child. And, as Dr. Bernstein points out, "Experience shapes brains, but you need to interact with the experience."11 Later we shall see how specifics like physical play and language make MCT an exceptional outlet for the interactive, artistic experience at the level needed for the children. For now, suffice it to say that all experiences that further the aesthetic attitudes in children are, by nature, interactive. This includes the experience of exposing children to a symphony or teaching them to draw, unlike however, passively sitting them in front of what deceptively might be considered an "artistic" experience. For example, the high-paced, image oriented Sesame Street might seem like an artistic program, but those same qualities tend to work against making it any kind of interactive experience. Dr. Bernstein complains:

"The Sesame Street population is actually at the greatest risk for not understanding that language is communication, a back-and-forth interaction between people. They aren't personally involved in using language to think and solve problems with. Children who have been talked to and had stories read to them are at a real advantage. They've learned how to listen and pay attention—and had fun doing it. These basic abilities are critical if a youngster is to benefit from education in the classroom!"12

Unfortunately, some of the experiences for which children thirst, are often assumed to be too "advanced" for them. This ends up being a grave underestimation of the power of children's learning capacities. While it is true that expecting a child to master algebra at age six is absurd, as Jerome Bruner points out: "One can certainly get across the idea of limits to the six-year-old, and that is an honest step en route to grasping a basic idea in the calculus."13 For Bruner, this involves a thorough understanding of how a child learns, structuring the experiences for his/her learning capabilities, and then challenging him/her to move into deeper learning. He notes: "Experience has shown that it is worth the effort

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11 Ibid., 80.
12 Ibid.
to provide the growing child with problems that tempt him into next stages of 
development."14 If those steps are taken, a *spiral curriculum* is formed and this, Bruner 
adds, will "introduce him at an early age to the ideas and styles that in later life make an 
educated man."15 With a *spiral curriculum*, those experiences that were always assumed 
to be too advanced, simply because they were consistently taught at a different age, can 
be introduced much earlier.

Another crucial factor at work inside the youth of today that many people don't see, 
acknowledge, or accept, is that while there may be detrimental factors at work in their 
learning capabilities, there is also an adaptation to these new factors through simple 
evolution. For example, information today is often transmitted similar to the camera 
techniques on MTV: rapidly while changing frequently and abruptly. At the same time, 
access to the Internet, while providing a wealth of information, allows for less and less 
human contact to take place. These children live in a world based in technology that 
communicates like a music video. To those who have lived in a more personal 
atmosphere that delights in taking the time to "tell the story," the life those children lead 
seems destined for disaster, like a race car driver using too much speed and crashing 
against the wall. However, Douglas Rushkoff likens the new generation to those children 
of immigrants landing in a completely foreign country. Just as those immigrants must 
learn the new language, culture and ways of living in the new country, we are 
encountering the exact same phenomenon through the rapid development of technology 
and how it is altering the world in which we live, even though we haven't moved a single

14 Ibid., 39.
15 Ibid., 52.
mile away. And children are the key to our success, rather than the victims we pity them being. They are the better adapters...they are simply more flexible. When a family moves to America from Thailand or Mexico or Portugal, they look to their children for the nuances of the new culture: when to laugh, how to respond, what to say. The children adapt and learn very quickly to their new environment and they will do so in this new, technological world we enter.

With a "virtual reality" approaching us full speed, it seems Rushkoff may be correct in suggesting that we have fallen from linear thinking and are now rising in a chaos theory. But again, the children are the adapters. “As in any society in crisis, it is the children who first learn to incorporate the worst of threats into the most basic forms of play. When the black plague threatened Europe with annihilation, the children sang ‘Ring Around the Rosie.’” So what game symbolizes the state of today’s society? Rushkoff claims that it isn’t even a game at all, but rather a goop—Gak. Gak has no beginning, middle or end. It has no winners and losers. It simply is. As Rushkoff remarks:

With Gak, you don’t pretend to do something else, you play with Gak. Tops and yo-yos were gravity-based toys, whose entertainment value was based in competition, endurance, or technical proficiency. Gak demands no such arc of pleasure or level of skill. It is purely experiential.

Nonetheless, although children are adapters, this doesn’t mean we ignore all that has been discussed about aesthetic development. On the contrary, offering ample experiences, both aesthetic and non-aesthetic, can provide children with even more tools to assist in adapting to today’s world. In fact, since they are adapters, they are even better

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17 Ibid., 10.
able to experience and understand with an aesthetic attitude any artistic work in which they are involved. They may not need to have a “first place, second place, there-are-winners-and-losers” mentality ingrained in them, but an aesthetic or arts education will configure them to whatever world develops around them.

Adapting and flexibility both go hand-in-hand with creativity. Gardner labels creativity as “a characterization reserved to those products that are initially seen to be novel within a domain but that are ultimately recognized as acceptable within an appropriate community.” The ability to succeed in such a rapidly changing environment as the one in which we live depends ultimately, not on how well we can perform the tasks of old, but on how well we can create the new. Applying Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, those children who were traditionally labeled as intelligent—being successful in solving logical and linguistic problems—are no longer the lone standouts. A child who may not understand the concepts of mathematics, but a has a keen sense of kinetics or music or interpersonal relationships, can now be considered a “good” student, just as the others are. However, the capacity one has in a particular intelligence won’t be as important in life as how that individual uses the intelligence.

Here is where aesthetics can further the growth of the child. Every intelligence has the capacity for being used artistically. No intelligence is inherently “artistic,” even musical intelligence. How the intelligence is used determines whether there is creativity at work or not. If the skills of a particular intelligence are used in a common, everyday manner, then the intelligence isn’t being used aesthetically. However, to use those skills

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in a creative, symbolic, or expressive fashion (such as speaking poetically or even metaphorically, as opposed to in an expository manner), then the intelligence is functioning artistically.\(^\text{19}\) Furthering the aesthetic sensibilities opens the door for furthering the intellectual abilities as well as the overall development of the child.

So let us observe this development within the child. Gardner asserts that there are three systems that contribute to the development of an individual: making, perceiving, and feeling. He states:

The outputs of the making system are acts or actions; the products of the perceiving system are discriminations or distinctions; the results of the feeling system are affects. More generally, basic units of the three systems can be called behavioral patterns or schemes. The making system concerns the schemes the organism is capable of performing; the perceiving system concern the aspects of the environment to which the organism is sensitive; the feeling system concerns the organism’s phenomenal or subject experience.\(^\text{20}\)

These three systems exist at the most basic level of any organism—an infant shows feelings, discriminates between objects, and makes, albeit uncoordinated, actions—but their integration is very minimal at the start. As the individual develops, the three systems start blending with and into one another. In fact, Gardner labels development as “a process wherein the three initially discrete systems gradually begin to influence each other, with interaction eventually becoming so dominant that each system inevitably involves the other ones.”\(^\text{21}\) And in no better place do we see the integration of the three systems at work than in the arts. For the three systems are critical not only in developing the person as a whole, but also in developing that individual into one integrally involved in aesthetics. While all three systems are important to all areas in the arts, each system

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{21}\) Gardner, *The Arts and Human Development*, 37.
specifically pertains to a corresponding region in the arts. These relations involve the following:

The critic is expected to excel in discrimination and perceiving, in discerning similarities, patterns, contrasts. The audience member is expected to feel, to enjoy, to be inspired, or to become disturbed. The performer or creator is characterized by making, acting, and exhibiting practiced skills.\textsuperscript{22}

He then summarizes:

I will speak of three developing systems, then, because they are consistent with what artists and aestheticians have maintained; because they seem compatible with gross neuroanatomical regions; because their operation, evolution, and interaction seem guided by certain principles; and, above all, because they prove useful in describing development toward a range of artistic end states and in explicating the mastery of skills.\textsuperscript{23}

To develop children into, not future, but present creators, performers, critics and audience members will continue, even increase, the demand for generating works of art. The interaction with works of art can directly further the artistic aptitudes in the children, and will start them down the paths of the critic, performer, creator or audience member. However, aesthetic sensibilities need not be reserved only for those who will walk the artistic life—although we hope that they will at least become an audience for those choosing not to create or perform. As Maxine Greene states: “At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed.”\textsuperscript{24}

It seems appropriate now to explain what is meant by a “work of art,” and to that end, what constitutes “experience,” as just mentioned by Greene. As I have discussed

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 41-42.
previously, the phrase “work of art,” in my definition, encompasses such things as a Shakespearean play, a symphony of Beethoven’s, or a painting by Picasso, as well as the grace mixed with intense power of a tennis player’s serve, the fluidity of a well-taught class, or the masterful restoration of a ’57 Chevy by a skilled mechanic. A word should be said, therefore, about including such elements in a definition of “art.” In his book *Art as Experience*, John Dewey argues against “putting art on a pedestal,” or at least relegating it to museums and concert halls as we do. He believes that by “separating the idea of art from life, we not only mystify art, but we thereby fail to recognize the pervasive aesthetic possibilities of human experience in general.” In his commentary on Dewey, Thomas Alexander refutes the arguments that some have claimed Dewey was railing against museums while others imply his theory allows even unrefined actions to be considered art. Alexander notes: “What he does say is that the origin of art lies in the capacity to develop our ordinary experiences towards fulfilling ends.” In fact, Dewey considered his task in writing a discourse of the philosophy of fine arts to be restoring the “continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” That people crave for aesthetic experiences is clearly visible when one notices how an individual, who might normally be put off by the thought of aesthetics, the thought of antiquated museums or galleries, seeks out other mediums which contain the opportunity for such an experience: films, comic strips, horror novels.

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26 Ibid.
Art, Dewey contests, is reflective of life; it is born from the experiences of life and it communicates an experience to the audience. So if art is a product of life, there must be, by basic logic, shared qualities. These qualities that dominate the work of art are the same qualities that make an experience aesthetic. However, lest it be claimed that he professes all actions constitute an artistic event, the meaning of “experience,” or rather “an experience” as Dewey calls it, is clarified: “Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.”\textsuperscript{28} If we look at the aesthetic experience as a “movement,” one which starts with the initial interaction and culminates in the transformation of the individual, we understand the utter necessity for a completion to it. A Gershwin piece that ends on a note in the minor scale, when the entire song was sung in a major key, creates a specific experience for the individual interacting with it. So too, when one finally notices the mistaken code entered into a computer program, that completion of searching for the bug, no matter what the stakes were, consummates the experience.

The idea of an initial interaction to a final culmination suggests a continual, flowing process. Indeed, for Dewey an experience involves the seamless flow from one moment to the next, each moment building or taking from the previous one. There are no dead spaces, holes, or empty periods. There may be pauses or rests, but they contribute to the overall flow of the experience.\textsuperscript{29} The moments of inaction between the first physical attraction towards someone and the proposal of marriage to or breaking up with that person contribute to the exhilaration, nausea, anxiety, or enjoyment of the experience just

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 22. 
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 36.
as much as the moments of action. As well, those "emotions" make up the experience and are just as important as the physical events within it. And as the moments are seamless, the emotions intertwine with all other elements inside the experience. The emotions are dependent upon the actions and, conversely, if the actions maintain or change course, the emotions play a role in that.

Another requisite in the meaning of an experience is that there is a "communication" present. As outlined above, an experience is a movement; it is cumulative. Since experience is cumulative, new subject matter is added to old, old is replaced by another, and all of these continuously evolve. Dewey unites the experience, through this continuous accumulation, into a communication:

Hence experience is necessarily cumulative and its subject matter gains expressiveness because of cumulative continuity. The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience.

How, then, can objects of experience avoid becoming expressive? Yet apathy and torpor conceal this expressiveness by building a shell about objects. Familiarity induces indifference, prejudice blinds us; conceit looks through the wrong end of a telescope and minimizes the significance possessed by objects in favor of the alleged importance of the self. Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things.

Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But it is the consequence of his work—which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others. 30

When a painting is viewed, it communicates some experience to the observer. When a play is performed, not only do the words communicate to the audience, so do the colors, tempos, and dynamics, to name few of the many elements involved. And when a sprinter gets into the starting blocks, waiting with a tense awareness for the starter's pistol, that too, communicates to the spectators. Along with the communication between aesthetic

30 Ibid., 104.
object (or experience) and observer, there is also an interaction at work between that experience and the creator. As the creator creates, he/she also assumes the role of an observer, stepping back, experiencing the work, and continuing having been transformed from that experience.

With *an* experience containing communication, completion and emotion, the importance of such a "work of art" must be, as Dewey calls it, "fulfilling;" there must be meaning rooted deeply inside of the experience. So those experiences of everyday life that truly become *an* experience are those that hold meaning in our lives. The word "fulfilling" might be misleading in that there does not need to be a happy ending; reading an acceptance letter from college fulfills (or means) just as much as learning of the death of a close friend. With meaning as the root of an experience, it's no wonder why Dewey attributes the enemies of the aesthetic as being "the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an experience."\(^{31}\) Just as those who strive for excellence—not in money, nor in power, but rather in a standard of *life*—avoid such qualities as those above, interacting with an aesthetic experience conditions one against those negatives. Rather than teach with strict and rigid lectures, we invite the students to learn through experiences and involvement; instead of sitting on the couch watching television, we desire to attend an opera, camp next to a clear and serene lake, or walk with a family member after dinner. Through the involvement in *an* experience, the aesthetic sensibilities heighten and the desire for yet

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 40.
another experience increases. All of this—everything comprising an experience—is what makes art. It is inseparable from it, for in separating the experience from the art, art is then left without any foundation or starting point.

Joseph Kupfer also couples aesthetics with everyday experience. While Dewey’s focus insists our experiences are the foundation of artistic works, Kupfer centers on the converse: the aesthetics in our daily lives contribute to our experiences—they help us lead better lives. Through our interaction with aesthetic properties throughout our daily routines, our lives are enriched. However, the antithesis holds true that when a deprivation of aesthetics occurs, especially in the formative years, our lives can be less fulfilling or at least won’t live up to their full potential. Such events as a basketball game or a classroom discussion can optimally provide great benefits through the proper aesthetic elements involved in each.

A basketball game is more enjoyable when appreciated as an aesthetic whole, with its changing rhythms, its sudden grace, and its dramatic tensions finally, decisively, resolved. And classroom life is more rewarding when students experience their learnings [sic] as the climax of spirited but directed give and take. To the extent that these daily activities are charged with aesthetic qualities and relations, we experience them as fulfilling and are fulfilled.32

In elaborating upon this classroom model, Kupfer insists that learning—i.e. bodies of information and technical abilities—amounts to nothing when isolated from the experience that composes the student’s everyday life, just as Dewey insists that art and one’s everyday life cannot be separated.33 So the aesthetic experience comes full circle: To enrich our lives, we must be surrounded by aesthetics and to achieve the aesthetic

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33 Ibid., 10.
attitude needed for further enrichment, we must relate those artistic properties to our everyday experiences.

According to Kupfer, an aesthetic experience plays a crucial role in directing an individual to his or her place in social participation. In an aesthetics of everyday life, a critical element involves social skills and the ability to communicate, interact, and simply exist with others. Combs and Slaby define these social skills as "the ability to interact with others in a given social context in specific ways that are societally acceptable or valued and at the same time personally beneficial, mutually beneficial, or beneficial primarily to others." In order to have that fluid classroom environment, that graceful pairing of effective instruction and learning, or the successful completion of the communication of knowledge, an understanding must be present of what it is to be "beneficial" in a societal environment. And just as aesthetics involves communication, necessitating the workings of a dialogue, the social skills needed to complete this movement of learning emanate from both teacher and pupil. The teacher has the obligation to present the opportunities for social skills development, which in turn creates another aesthetic environment; the student must adapt to those traits valued for effective interaction in his/her social world. Tom Dowd and Jeff Tierney present us with the Boys Town's Social Skills Curriculum, which breaks these traits down into different levels and groupings with the intent to provide an encompassing field rather than a definitive

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These “structured learning skills for adolescents” include:

**Basic Skills Group**
1. Following Instructions
2. Accepting “No for an Answer
3. Talking with Others
4. Introducing yourself
5. Accepting Criticism or a Consequence
6. Disagreeing Appropriately
7. Showing Respect
8. Showing Sensitivity to Others

**Intermediate Skills Group**
9. Accepting Apologies From Others
10. Accepting Compliments
11. Accepting Consequences
12. Accepting Decisions of Authority
13. Greeting Others
14. Anger Control Strategies
15. Answering the Telephone
16. Appropriate Appearance
17. Appropriate Voice Tone
18. Appropriate Word Choice
19. Asking for Help
20. Asking Questions
21. Asking for Clarification
22. Being on Time (Promptness)
23. Checking In (or Checking Back)
24. Completing Homework
25. Completing Tasks
26. Complying with Reasonable Requests
27. Contributing to Discussions
28. Conversation Skills—Initiating
29. Conversation Skills—Maintaining
30. Conversation Skills—Closing
31. Correcting Another Person
32. Following Rules
33. Following Written Instructions
34. Getting Another Person’s Attention
35. Getting the Teacher’s Attention
36. Giving Compliments
37. Good Quality of Work
38. Ignoring Distractions by Others
39. Interrupting Appropriately
40. Introducing Others

**Advanced Skills Group**
41. Listening to Others
42. Making An Apology
43. Making a Request
44. Making a Telephone Call
45. Offering Assistance or Help
46. Participating in Activities
47. Personal Hygiene
48. Positive Self-Statements
49. Positive Statements about Others
50. Refraining from Possessing Contraband or Drugs
51. Reporting Emergencies
52. Peer Reporting
53. Resisting Peer Pressure
54. Saying Good-bye to Guests
55. Saying “No” Assertively
56. Seeking Positive Attention
57. Showing Appreciation
58. Showing Interest
59. Staying on Task
60. Structured Problem-Solving
61. Table Etiquette
62. Volunteering
63. Waiting Your Turn
64. Willingness to Try New Tasks

**Advanced Skills Group**
65. Accepting Help or Assistance
66. Accepting Defeat or Loss
67. Accepting Winning Appropriately
68. Analyzing Social Situations
69. Analyzing Skills Needed for Different Situations
70. Analyzing Tasks to Be Completed
71. Appropriate Clothing Choice
72. Being Prepared for Class
73. Borrowing for Others
74. Care of Others’ Property
75. Care of Own Belongings
76. Choosing Appropriate Friends
77. Complying with School Dress Code
78. Compromising with Others
79. Communicating Honestly
80. Concentrating on a Subject or Task
81. Contributing to Group Activities
| 82. Controlling Eating Habits                  | 103. Delaying Gratification... |
| 83. Controlling Emotions                     |                             |
| 84. Controlling Sexually Abusive             | **Complex Skills Group**    |
| Impulses toward Others                       | 146. Accepting Self          |
| 85. Controlling the Impulse to Lie           | 147. Altering One’s Environment |
| 86. Controlling the Impulse to Steal         | 148. Appropriate Risk-Taking |
| 87. Cooperating with Others                  | 149. Asking for Advice       |
| 88. Coping with Anger and Aggression        | 150. Assertiveness           |
| from Others                                  | 151. Assessing Own Abilities |
| 89. Coping with Change                       | 152. Being an Appropriate Role |
| 90. Coping with Conflict                     | 153. Budgeting and Money     |
| 91. Coping with Sad Feelings                | 154. Clarifying Values and Beliefs |
| 92. Dealing with an Accusation               | 155. Conflict Resolution     |
| 93. Dealing with Being Left Out              | 156. Consumerism             |
| 94. Dealing with Boredom                     | 157. Differentiating Friends from Acquaintances |
| 95. Dealing with Contradictory               |                             |
| Messages                                     |                             |
| 96. Dealing with Embarrassment               | 158. Displaying Appropriate Control... |
| 97. Dealing with Failure                     | 178. Stress Management       |
| 98. Dealing with Fear                        | 179. Thought-Stopping        |
| 99. Dealing with Frustration                 | 180. Tolerating Differences  |
| 100. Dealing with Group Pressure             | 181. Use of Leisure Time     |
| 101. Dealing with Rejection                  |                             |
| 102. Decision-Making                         | 182. Utilizing Community Resources |

Such skills as those listed\(^35\) are what introduce the child to the life of social interaction. With interaction and communication being a key to an experience, which, as shown, steers our lives to the more pleasing, the more fulfilling, we might then call these skills, “life-skills.” Granted, to improve these “life-skills” doesn’t guarantee an aesthetic attitude anymore than it guarantees a successful life. The improvement of our “life-skills,” nonetheless, will contribute to some form of aesthetic sensibility in the context of everyday living. In the following chapters, I will illustrate how the various components

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\(^35\) Tom Dowd and Jeff Tierney, *Teaching Social Skills to Youth* (Boys Town, NE: The Boys Town Press, 1992), 49-53.
of the MCT process develop these "life-skills" and will continue to relate that specifically to the development of aesthetic attitudes in the children.

To summarize, aesthetics, simply put, betters our lives. It contributes to the overall development of the individual through the "three systems." Feeling, making, and perceiving are all elements necessary in the creation and appreciation of an aesthetic object; the integration of the three is what develops us as a whole. Aesthetics steers us towards a greater appreciation of formal works of art, which in turn motivates us to produce more, and this enriches the "artistic" side of our lives. Most importantly, it enriches and increases our awareness of the everyday, aesthetic experiences. And when one has the taste of a healthier aesthetic life, striving for quality becomes second-nature; the enemies of aesthetics—the mundane, routine, average—dissipate.
CHAPTER 3

The Foundation: Scripts and Philosophies

As we have been discussing the aesthetics of everyday life being an experience, it seems appropriate to classify the MCT process as an experience, since it both functions as an aesthetic event and develops aesthetic sensibilities. To this end, it is evident the process must have a beginning, middle, and end to it, just as an experience discussed by Dewey has such a structure to it, making it a completed movement. The three parts comprising the process will include the introductory audition process, the weeklong rehearsals, and the culminating performance. The MCT process assists in the aesthetic development through engaging the students in that process, which itself acts as an experience. However, there will be other ways in which the process will further the aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes of the students. The development of the life-skills discussed previously is one way. The other manner is by directly opening the artistic awareness in the children through exposure to artistic excellence or interactions with aesthetic elements. So, placing the children inside of an aesthetic experience, building the qualities needed for engaging in a more aesthetically aware life, and creating an active incorporation between the child and aesthetic properties will all three work in unison towards the overall aesthetic development of the students.

Prior to establishing the function of the process, we must come to an understanding of what MCT believes to be its teaching theory throughout the process. This foundation is
important to establish, because taking the simple actions involved in implementing the process isn’t sufficient for consistently showing the development I propose exists. For example, having the children shout out their names and ages during auditions, without a theory behind that step, is as empty as the claim that teaching a child to stand and sit is an aesthetic process. But if we understand that the child is being provided, in that instance, with something familiar, coupled with an opportunity for her to contribute within those familiar boundaries her own interpretation of a value property (joyful, sad), then that step gains more validity as one of the building blocks of the entire process.

The five key elements of the MCT teaching theory are: building blocks, economy, show and tell, focus, and discipline. (1) Everything needs to be built upon something prior, e.g. words before tunes before dances. Each new element introduced in the week has a connection with something with which the children have already interacted. (2) Using an economy of language—few words, more actions—not only gets the job done in such a short time frame, it also engages the children in active learning much quicker; the quicker they get on their feet corresponds to the sooner the learning becomes experiential. (3) Giving the students a model through example provides them with a starting point and a boost in the right direction. (4) Keeping the students focused on the job at hand keeps them aware of all elements at play and establishes a sense of professionalism in the process. (5) Maintaining discipline teaches the students that not only is an artistic activity enjoyable, but is also meaningful and shouldn’t have any less effort put forward than any other work they would want to succeed. These five elements, as the “purpose” behind each thing taught throughout the week, will transform many of the simple, anesthetic activities into steps within an experience.
Before any contact is ever made with the child, the scripts must be written to form the groundwork for the week. The aim behind the writing of each show is to provide the opportunity for success to each child, while providing a “safety net” against the failure of a production. The two tour actors are almost always on stage and have the bulk of the lines. “The scripts are structured specifically for the Tour’s short rehearsal period, and each part is geared toward the development of the individual child. Major roles are large, complex and challenging, while ensemble parts emphasize unison songs, actions and movement patterns.”¹ But even more than being a “safety net,” the written scripts are the first step in the aesthetic experience the children will undergo. Through the fusion of a familiar story, parts developed for specific ages and abilities, and an opportunity for the children to model an artistic performance after a mentor figure, the scripts thus provide the foundation on which the children experience their aesthetic development.

The original scripts are all adaptations of well-known fairy tales, from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Pinocchio*. Through the use of familiarity, much of the apprehension of the unknown is taken away. For many of these children, this is the first time they will perform in or audition for a show. As it will be noted throughout, making the process “child-friendly” assists in the overall development while not taking away any of the challenge involved. The paralyzing fear that can attack a child venturing into something new doesn’t consummate any experience; rather, it creates arrest, or stasis, in the experience, which doesn’t allow the movement to finish. Knowing the story helps the child feel more confident; intimacy with the characters prior to auditioning puts the child on a level that creates considerably less inhibitions than if he has no idea what he is being

asked to pretend. It is more likely that a young girl has pretended to be Snow White, in her own world of creative play, than Anne Frank or Helen Keller, even though the latter two are closer in age and reality than the former. With that connection made, a child will feel more confident in what her knowledge can provide and thus it is more likely for the child to open up to the start of process rather than shut it down before it commences.

Another advantage to presenting fairy tales, especially in a musical format, is in the language of the show. Since these are adaptations, many lines are verbatim from the original stories, and in these are often built the rhythmic patterns common of poems and rhymes. This, along with the natural rhythm of the musical numbers, can further the linguistic (and at the same time, aesthetic) abilities of the students. Healy expounds upon this:

Why are nursery rhymes so important? Not only do they get children “hooked” on listening to language, but they also teach valuable skills. “It’s the patterns, the rhythms,” [one librarian] explains, “the way language is put together so pleasantly. Patterns are the most important for early reading. . . .” Reading specialists tell us children’s ability to discriminate and create rhyming words, as well as their sense of rhythm, are closely related to early reading ability. A child who has absorbed over and over—through the ears, not the eyes—such common word parts as “fun, sun, run” or “fiddle, diddle, middle” as well as the melody of their language is statistically destined to have an easier time learning to read.2

An appreciation of the patterns of words, of the melodic sense behind them, is also an appreciation of the aesthetic elements in language. With the plots of the shows being simple and familiar, more is gained aesthetically, through the dialogue and songs, than intellectually or morally; the children don’t have to analyze the scene, just feel and appreciate it. And since, aside from the leading roles, no scripts are given to the children, they are truly approaching the language of the play in an aesthetic manner. They aren’t

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2 Healy, 93.
memorizing through looking at the words (which, as an act, has no artistic qualities whatsoever), but instead they remember the sounds, the patterns, and the internal and external rhythms.

Each show is written for an assortment of ages and types. Leading roles will demand more artistically, while many of the ensemble roles will simply expose the children to and involve them in an artistic experience. At the higher level, a more advanced, trained or naturally talented student will be pushed according to a higher standard and will develop higher aesthetic sensibilities and social skills. Accordingly, the more novice students will also be challenged, but at a level that introduces them to the start of an aesthetic attitude. This same belief that, as Bruner puts it: “One starts somewhere—where the learner is,” holds true for age as well as skill differences. While varying aesthetic and social skills are taught based upon aesthetic aptitudes, a different variety of those skills will be taught depending on the age of the student: the younger student learns beginning social skills and is exposed to the fundamental aesthetic properties involved in art; the older student deals with more advanced life-skills and has the opportunity for more reflection on the aesthetic qualities in his experience.

To this end, a student chosen for a lead will face greater responsibility, have the opportunity for deeper characterizations, and work more individually with her “mentor.” This student will walk down the path, if just for a brief period, of the creator/performer. The key system linked with the creator/performer is that of making. Making and creating are obviously critical ingredients in a performance, and with a more developed character already written, the desire for a stronger performance dictates a need for deeper creation.

\[^3\] Bruner, ix.
With a greater definition and individuality to the character, the student is also better able to explore the feeling systems involved in becoming that character. Gardner notes:

"It is the increasing integration of the feeling system with other developing systems . . . which causes the feeling system to play a pivotal role in artistic production and perception. The artist frequently seeks in his own work to capture a feeling or set of feelings that he has experienced, and relies heavily on his own subjective reaction in determining the effectiveness with which the feeling has been captured and communicated. The performer also seeks to embody specific feelings in his activities, and measure his success by the extent to which the feeling life of the audience has been affected."¹

As will be noted throughout the rehearsal and performance segments, these tasks develop greatly within the student's experience. However, it should not be thought that the only direction a student may travel is that of the creator/performer, and if he opts later for a different path, the experience is invalidated or irrelevant. Having been a part of an artist's process, the student is better prepared as both a critic and audience member as well. As a critic, the student will have to understand the work of art she is critiquing. A deeper understanding of the artist's process allows for deeper and more pertinent criticism. Gardner insists that the role of the critic is dependent upon all of the other forms. He writes: "The child becomes capable of adopting the critic's role in the aesthetic process only after he has passed through the stages of audience, creator, and performer."² As an audience member, he "must realize that the work is an embodiment of another individual's life, not merely a pretty object or a representation of something he likes."³ Having experienced that act of expression, he can appreciate the work more sincerely.

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¹ Gardner, The Arts & Human Development, 76-77.
² Ibid., 177.
³ Ibid., 325.
Just like the leads, the students in the ensemble roles have the opportunities to create and feel, though not necessarily as strongly as the leads. In contrast, however, the ensemble has more of an opportunity to perceive than do the leads. Operating in a truly “supportive” capacity, they are better able to create a distance in which they can observe the creation at work as the tour actors interact with the leading characters or other ensemble groups. And the development of the perceiving system in a setting that is naturally interactive will, in turn, enhance the students’ abilities to listen and observe, but more importantly, they will learn how to actively listen and observe. In addition to contributing directly to one of the “three systems,” it also contributes to the capability to learn as well as interact with others in everyday settings.

One of the biggest problems today with the capabilities of students to learn is that they haven’t mastered (or even encountered at times) the ability to listen and observe actively. They are used to being “talked to,” without much chance for interaction. The quick mini-bytes of information on television or the Web change so frequently there isn’t much chance to respond or reflect. As noted earlier, the fast paced environment of Sesame Street, although touted as a learning program, allows little chance for a young student to connect why they were just looking at the letter B right after learning that aqua probably means water—or maybe it means drink?? —while currently listening to a song about the differences in “near” and “far.” Healy defines “real” listening as “an active mental process that serves understanding and memory.” She further warns: “Classrooms where children are passively ‘listening’ to teachers who do most of the talking are a dangerous anachronism.”

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7 Healy, 96.
The important development of the perceiving system also contributes to the student's capacity for criticism and this, in turn, plays a critical role in the relationship between the student and the arts. Through stronger critical skills, the student's interest and ability in the arts might no longer diminish as has been seen over the years. Gardner claims that the chief reason behind this gradual decline is that as the student enters adolescent years, his critical capacities dramatically increase. If he has not been trained previously to perceive his work in a more critical fashion, this sudden recognition of what he now sees as flawed and second-rate can be disheartening and might drive him away from further activities in the arts. However, with increased development of his perceiving system, "he gains familiarity with the practice of criticism; he employs it himself; he benefits from it."8 If his criticism moves forward in steps, he can counter those steps with corresponding adjustments to his work. On the contrary, when that criticism leaps forward suddenly, he struggles to keep up and eventually views the effort as futile.

These ensemble roles, while involving many of the same aesthetic experiences to a lesser degree, are written with a greater focus upon the development of the life-skills, thus furthering the aesthetic attitudes of everyday life. All ensemble groups receive what I contend to be a benefit of "exactness in direction," e.g. telling a character to make a mad face or asking a group to show with their bodies "being depressed." This first step, for many of them, in realizing the impact of symbols provides a dynamic awakening of the entire creative process within each student. In fact, Gardner insists: "The capacity to create and to appreciate symbols in a medium (such as sound or gesture) or in an art form

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(such as dance or music) is regarded here as the major prerequisite for artistic development."^{9}

Nonetheless, enhancing the life-skills of each student tends to be the chief aesthetic benefit from the structure of the ensemble parts. These parts are written with a consideration for the ages involved. The older ensemble group members—typically age 12 and up—are assigned more responsibility, either offstage or on, often have individual lines rather than purely choral recitations, and interact with the other members of their group more often than the younger ensembles do. This develops more advanced life-skills such as teamwork, understanding the feelings of others, and making decisions, while reinforcing many of the basics needed in putting on a successful show as well as living an aesthetically rewarding life: following instructions, concentrating on a task, expressing your feelings, and many others. The middle-ensemble characters—usually ages 8 to 11—have various group songs and lines, deal as a complete unit with other characters onstage, but rarely with each other, and are written to allow anyone, from the most shy to the most obnoxious, the chance to successfully perform as a group, which translate to individual success for each member. Teamwork is a key skill taught here, but in the capacity of acting as a team rather than responding as a team. Other life skills enforced through the role of the middle ensemble include using self-control, dealing with embarrassment, and joining in. The youngest group—those age 5 through 7—is involved primarily with simple tasks such as a group dance, led by a tour actor; call and response in a song; and simple lines or actions—"mama" or a salute—that are cued by identical words or through contact. Simple skills are enforced here, such as listening, asking for

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^{9} Gardner, Arts and Human Development, 43.
help, and following instructions.

Providing an example is important in the artistic development of children and is the other trait intentionally written into the scripts. By providing the tour actors with the largest amount of lines, stage time, and responsibilities, they are placed, not only in a position of guaranteeing the success of the performance, but also as a constant model for the children to follow. Regarding the first benefit, by always having at least one of the two tour actors onstage, no matter what disasters may strike, the professional training instilled into those two actors will ensure that the show will continue on successfully. They are, as previously mentioned, a “safety net.” They don’t necessarily have to solve all problems, but are able to do so should the occasion arise. This allows the vantage of the challenge to still be present without the fear of failure.

Equally important is that the roles allow the students to observe as well as interact with professionalism. As noted in the teaching theory, show and tell is a key element in the MCT process. Giving the students something to match in energy, characterization, and ability, provides them with a higher standard to achieve. Allowing imitation is not contrary to aesthetic learning. In fact, it equips the students with starting skills that in turn open the door to interaction with the experience. Maxine Greene writes: “Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy.”¹⁰ When the tour actors provide that energy themselves, the students have something to equal, which initiates the active participation in the aesthetic experience. Besides simply providing a level for the students to attain, the constant presence of the professional actors creates a “mini-mentorship” for the children. While not being able to spend as

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¹⁰ Maxine Greene, 125.
much time as would be ideal in a thoroughly developed mentoring program, the actors are able to teach and influence the students through their own work and performance. Since “the arts are profoundly social,” it is understandable that the artist could not “survive without borrowing techniques and images that come either from the public domain or from other artists. Teaching, imitation, and influence are common rather than rare.” The amount of exposure the children have to the actors, as written into the scripts by the company, allows for such “imitation and influence” to occur.

Having established a foundation upon which the MCT process can work, it is time to begin the movement of the experience. If the script lays the groundwork for the experience, then the audition is the initial contact for the students with that groundwork and so, is the beginning of the movement.

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CHAPTER 4

Beginning: The Audition

As the students’ first contact with this process, it is important for the audition to carry the same importance and care in detail as the performance would. This initial contact can either be the origin for their aesthetic experience or it can create stasis immediately. The old adage about first impressions is equally as true in this scenario as in any other setting. Not only will the students make quick judgements about the actors and what the week is going to be like, they will also be opening or closing their receptivity toward the experience.

The auditions actually begin the minute the first child steps through the door. As the children gather, the tour actors casually watch them interact, making mental notes as to who might “shine” and whom to keep under control. With only two hours to introduce themselves, audition the children, and cast the show, the actors must use every resource—and second—available. Since casting will not only establish each student’s place in the experience for the week, but also set the atmosphere for that week’s experience, making the right decision and creating a rewarding audition process becomes very important. Observing the students can also pay off in more ways than just casting the show. If an actor notices one particular child who seems quite disruptive, when the first round of “names & ages” comes around, she can mentally note his name so that the first time he acts up, she can immediately address him by name without even having to
face him. To that child, as well as the others, the sense that the actors are truly noticing *everything* will help instill more of a self-awareness, as well as concentration, and will initiate a number of preliminary life-skills that will continue to be reinforced throughout the week: listening, joining in, following instructions, using self-control.

The first complete interaction that occurs between the students and actors is during the introduction. Once the students have arrived, the actors request, simply and loudly, that all students sit in a group in front of them. This first instruction will manifest the efficiency needed throughout the week. By not repeating the request and simply waiting for all students to comply, the means by which the students will work becomes clearer for them. This also focuses the students on the actors’ future instructions as well as the tasks that lie ahead.

Introductions come next, and here the economy of language starts taking effect. Caron insists upon an economy of language, efficiency in speech, since a professional level production must take place in less than a week and extra words simply waste time that could be used actively rehearsing. I contend that the economy of language assists in the overall aesthetic experience for the children as well. By keeping things clear and concise, the experience remains pure rather than cluttered, as would happen with extraneous descriptions and instructions. The quicker one can convey the necessary tasks to the children, the sooner they will be working hands-on, actively experiencing the process.

Using a friendly, professional manner, the actors tell the students who they are, where they’re from, and why they’re there: “Hi. My name is Bruce.” “And I’m Kristin.” “And we’re from Missoula Children’s Theatre. This week, we’re in town to perform the show,
Pinocchio, with you.”¹ The familiar tone taken—using first names only—establishes an atmosphere of friendliness that helps prevent any hindrance to the motion of the experience. At the same time, the brevity and conciseness tells the students that instructions must be followed and respected; the lack of small talk or cute anecdotes keeps the actors in a position of authority towards the students.

From there, the expectations for the week are discussed. Emphasis is placed upon having no conflicts due to the short time frame. Responsibility and commitment are introduced here and continually stressed throughout the week. The roles are then described, giving the students a quick concept of what will be required in each role: “For the Fox and Cat, we’re looking for someone who can play evil and greedy with a lot of fun.” Quick, simple descriptions place those value properties into play in the children’s minds, so that when they are called up for those specific roles, they already have a foothold into the concept of the character. The last step before getting the children on their feet is to describe what is expected of the students in the audition. The qualities sought are labeled “the big three”: (1) how loud and clear they can be with their voices, (2) how big and expressive they can be with their bodies, and (3) how well they can follow instructions. After the first tour actor mentions each one, the second actor demonstrates it for the children which provides the children with a visual model to emulate.

The first set of “official” instructions are then given: “When I say go, and not before, I would like everyone ages 12 and up to SILENTLY form a height order line, tallest by Kristin down to the smallest by the doors. Ready...go.” Invariably there will be some

¹ All examples of the process in action will be taken from my personal experience touring the show, Pinocchio, from June 1995 until May 1996.
discussion as to who goes where or who's taller than who or even idle chitchat among friends. Even if it is reasonably “quiet,” the tour actor shouts out, “FREEZE!” and states: “That was quiet (or ‘that wasn’t even quiet’), but I asked for SILENT. Try again. Go.” No matter what the level of noise was, this informs the students that all instructions will have a purpose, and their attention must be completely undivided. Also, by starting with the older students, stopping them won’t immediately create a sense of failure or despair as it might with the younger students. In fact, the younger students have an added model to observe and help them in following the instructions. After the next two groups—ages 8 to 11 and 5 to 7—are finished, the students will have formed a square or circle, depending upon the space in which they’re auditioning, around the tour actors. This gives the students the chance to constantly observe others when they are not actively participating.²

The tour actors then explain what will be happening next by recalling the example that was shown earlier when discussing the “big three.” To start, the actors have everyone go at the same time to allow a “trial run” before each person does it individually. During the first round of “names and ages,” the only purpose is to simply be as loud and expressive, with both the voice and body, as possible. This gives the students a simple task, alleviating excessive anxiety and again making it “child friendly,” yet creates the opportunity for unique interpretations. It also takes away the burden from having to memorize a piece and possibly forgetting it; every child auditioning knows her name and age. Nor is there the handicap to some children, especially to those with

²I speak of the students “not actively participating” at times, but this is a misleading statement since, and this is stressed to the students frequently, they are constantly auditioning. When not actually speaking or learning a song or dance, they are being observed in regards to that third requirement: following directions. Thus, even during “inactive” moments, they are still actively participating in the experience.
learning disabilities, of “reading” lines when rarely will it show anything more than which student can read, not perform, most effectively.

After the first round, one or two more rounds occur, depending on how many parts need to be cast and how many children need to be seen. These subsequent rounds move into the realm of expressing emotion. However, the task prescribed isn’t simply to be happy or sad; the request is stated in a circumstantial format by asking them to show how they would say their name and age if they just won the lottery or just lost their best friend. At the same time, constant requests are made to make sure what is said is clear, loud, and understandable.

This combination of emotional expression and effective communication directly relates to what many—Gardner, Langer, Greene—have said about aesthetics and its effective application. As mentioned, Gardner stresses that for anything to be aesthetic, there must be communication involved. Furthermore, communication functions as a way to validate an experience. We live in a social world; we are meant to interact. Just as interaction with the experience is necessary for aesthetics to be effective, interaction with others is necessary for life to be effective. By creating an aesthetic work, a work that communicates, the artist is sharing his experience with an audience. If we have an experience of everyday life, communicating it, i.e. sharing it with someone else, completes the entire movement. In fact, speech is, according to Langer, the “symbolic transformation of experiences.” Consequently, emphasizing the clear transformation of experiences teaches the students that to communicate artistically, they must truly share with the audience. Never is what they put forth questioned artistically, i.e. the actor

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doesn’t critique whether the expression was truly “sad” or “elated.” In fact, often the response will be: “Good! Now let me hear you!” The students sense that what they contribute artistically is valuable, but it needs to be shared with everyone, meaning it needs to be clearly understood.

If, during the first few rounds, attention from any of the students wanes, due to whatever reasons, it becomes top priority for the actors to reemphasize the third rule of “following directions,” which of course means paying attention. In addition to keeping a controlled environment, this accentuation of focus and discipline furthers the movement of aesthetic learning. Not only is discipline a key ingredient to an aesthetically pleasing social interaction, it also, as Davis and Evans point out, develops taste. “Taste,” they claim, “is born of aesthetic sensibility and respect, which is not earnest sobriety, that inhibitor of joyful exuberance. Rather, respect arises from belief and seriousness of purpose. It is discipline and self-control.” However, the fact that discipline also keeps the environment controlled shouldn’t simply be disregarded as something for the benefit of the tour actors’ sanity. In addition to providing a clearer, more focused experience, the control also creates a safe environment, which will aid the students throughout the week as they further explore the emotions of the characters and, thus, benefit from their release.

Having seen enough rounds to pull up some students to audition for some of the preliminary leads, the actors sit everyone down, again insisting upon silence and requiring the students to repeat the action if they don’t succeed the first time. The students whom the tour actors noticed during the “names and ages” exercise as fitting the first set of roles are then asked to form a line in the middle of the square. Lines are given

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4 Davis and Evans, 42.
for the students to repeat, which they do a couple times as a group first until it appears everyone has them down. For the leading roles, the actors are looking for some of the more aesthetically advanced students, so directions can be given such as: “Using your hands and body, I want you to cast a spell on me.” Energy and intent are still maintained by the tour actor as a model, but more specifics are left up to the student at this point. After each student says a line, another one might be given or they might be sent back to their seats. Keeping it short and concise will again express to the others the need to stay actively involved in the process, since little time is wasted with second and third chances or lengthy discussions.

For the students who aren’t selected for the first “callback,” this provides them with the motivation to try harder and in turn, they will interact with the process more effectively, rather than distractedly interact with each other. One of the problems in today’s educational process, Gardner claims, is that the activities and materials aren’t among the child’s interests. He speculates that if schools build “on a child’s interest and motivation, schools might have more success in carrying out what may be their most crucial task: empowering children to engage meaningfully in their own learning.”5 The overall experience offered through MCT is most likely an interest to and motivation for the students. But even in the smaller details, this one event—watching others get selected—can interest and motivate them to strive for more in the following hour.

Throughout the remainder of the audition, the actors continue working with the students by continuously modeling the energy, enthusiasm, and abilities that will be required throughout the process. Those cast in more highlighted roles will be those who

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manifest these “positive signs”: eye contact, active listening, sustained focus, smiles, originality, sense of fun, enjoyment of others, sincerity of effort, or some nervousness. The “negative signs” that could cut a child from the cast (if there are over 60 auditionees) include: not paying attention, rolling eyes, surface gesturing, and signs of discomfort.

The qualities sought relate less to the ability of the student to become a Broadway star, and more towards how effectively she can participate in the MCT process and, ultimately, contribute to creating a quality product. In the end, all the interactions with and within the experience must result in something aesthetically pleasing onstage, if the aesthetic sensibilities are to be validated. To create a product unworthy of praise or respect will not instill any desire to risk oneself artistically; without the risk, very little will be shared, and the foundation for aesthetics—communication—will deteriorate.

Before I get to the final step to this phase, the announcement of the cast, one other word should be mentioned regarding where the focus of the students is placed throughout the audition segment. There are two tour actors, so focus needs to be evenly shared between the two. If either one appears to be more of the “one in charge,” an imbalance is created, and this will become a major obstacle throughout the remainder of the process. As noted with Dewey, qualities such as slackness, imbalance or disparity are enemies of the aesthetic. This is different from asymmetry. To encounter something asymmetrical will still result in an enjoyable experience when appreciated for its aesthetic qualities; there is still a completed, continuously flowing movement involved. The imbalance resulting from excessive focus on one actor and scant attention on the other inhibits the movement and results in an experience which stutters and stalls, thus making it not an experience at all.
At last, the cast is decided upon, the names have been written down, and it’s time to announce who’s playing what. First, the students are moved from their square and placed back into an amorphous group in front of the actors. Next, if there are more students than can be used, it is emphasized to everyone that “if you are not cast, it doesn’t mean you weren’t good; it simply means that in this show, there isn’t a part that’s exactly right for you.” We will sometimes mention how often we cast someone in the leading part for our show who wasn’t even selected the year before. Finally, each student in a group is called up and the tour actor announces what they are playing (“These are the Pleasure Isle Kids!”), applauding them for their work. She informs them of when their first rehearsal is and sends them back to where they were just sitting. As will be noted, it is very important not to sit the group down together, but to make sure they go back into the crowd.

For those cast in parts, this process serves as an affirmation to the work they put forth and spurs them forward for increased efforts throughout the week. It also gives them a sense of ownership. By being selected, it becomes their show. They now have that opportunity to “own,” not only the product, but the process as well. And finally, the recognition develops them further into creators and performers. To start performing, all one must do is imitate. However, becoming a better performer requires something extra—taking the audience into consideration. As has been stressed throughout, communication is a determining factor in an aesthetic activity. Without consideration of the audience, the performer is neglecting that element of sharing needed to complete his work. With his peers recognizing him, by understanding that the simple work he just

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6 Gardner, Arts and Human Development, 177.
created was seen and noticed, the path for continued focus on, not pleasing the audience, but sharing with them is drawn out.

Congratulations are quickly given, thanks are issued for participating with and supporting others, and everyone is then dismissed. For those not selected in the show, to some this experience may end in arrest, but for others it may be the consummation of the experience. By ending quickly, there isn’t time for them to have to deal with the embarrassment amongst their peers, which may turn out to be detrimental to them, but instead they can handle the rejection in a more caring, personal environment at home. Also, the acknowledgement of everyone’s efforts and explanation of why some weren’t chosen will hopefully help the children to understand that rejection can still occur in a friendly, yet professional setting, and that not all rejection means they were bad or less worthy than the others. Finally, recalling the process of where to seat those who were chosen, the act of keeping everyone intermixed averts any feelings of them being the only one not chosen. If all the cast members were sitting together, and if those not cast were smaller in numbers, then the sense of failure can be overwhelming for some of those sent away, and that is not a goal of MCT’s. So, through quickly sending away everyone before anyone can tell how many are cast and how many aren’t, the “controlled chaos” gives those not in the show a chance to leave without undue embarrassment. And after a short dinner break, the first rehearsal commences.

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7 A note about the number of cast members vs. the number of those not cast: A typical MCT show can sustain 50-65 cast members. If less show up, adjustments are made without any problems. The same holds true if a large number of auditionees turn out: around 65 are cast, and the rest are not. However, if, let’s say 70 turn out for the show, then what does not happen is 65 are cast and 5 aren’t. Instead, the number of those cast drops to increase the size of the group not cast.
CHAPTER 5

Continued Movement: The Rehearsals

Following the auditions, the typical town has nine two-hour rehearsals remaining in addition to a dress rehearsal on show day.¹ As mentioned, MCT seeks no less than a professional quality show as the end result. In order to reach that point, the students as well as the actors must follow a very specific procedure. Such techniques as those teaching theories listed earlier, as well as unique approaches to working with children, will combine to create the end product, while at the same time advance the aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes in the students.

During auditions, one of the reasons cited to the students for not being able to have any conflicts is that time is of the essence with the production. It is told to the students: “Most groups take anywhere from 60 to over 100 hours to rehearse a show; we will perform after less than 20 hours of rehearsing.” Time isn’t used as the focal point throughout the week, but it does serve as a consistent motivator for what needs to get done and how long they have to do it. This shortage of rehearsal time ends up being one of the best tools the actors can have. To begin with, putting on a show in under a week would terrify most adults. But for the children, they’ve never been told they can’t do, so they do. In fact that “freshness of spirit” tends to ease many of the tasks typically

¹ Some towns will have a shorter time frame, such as performing the first show Friday night instead of Saturday afternoon or starting on Tuesday instead of Monday. Also, depending on the progression of rehearsals, a second rehearsal on the Friday may actually be counter-productive to the process.
thought overwhelming. When a student is told to come tomorrow with all of her lines memorized, she does because she’s never been told or thought she couldn’t. When a cast approaches the final dress rehearsal having missed the previous two days of rehearsal due to a snow storm, and not having run through the entire show yet, they still succeed because they’ve never known “shows just don’t happen that way!” Granted, most of them realize that this shortness of time is not the norm, but they don’t believe it’s a prohibiting factor either. So they work hard and fast to produce a final product, confident it will work.

Working hard and quickly benefits the aesthetic process as well. The flow that is necessary in an experience maintains its course under this rapid process; there is simply no time for stagnation. And the constant flow that is generated keeps the students in a doing mode, staying more focused on the process. Often, in an 8 to 10 week rehearsal period at a school, the students start losing interest between the fourth and seventh weeks. Rehearsals still need to continue to accomplish the production; however, the more rehearsal time that is added results in less accomplished in the later periods. The students have a difficult time seeing the “light at the end of the tunnel”; they’ll definitely not have an easy time reflecting upon a process where up to half of the time is unaccounted for in their minds due to deteriorating concentration. This is not the case in an MCT week. The light is very visible—it’s less than a week away. Every minute an actor is called, he is being used in some way, whether actively onstage or as a supportive audience member. Even in the case of the latter, boredom can barely set in due to the short length—45 minutes to an hour—of each show. In terms of being able to appreciate the experience of which they’re a part, very little goes by in a week that the students can’t recall. The
experience, due to the conciseness, ends up like a material whose density has increased having been compacted—much more intense for the student, thus heightening the impact of each movement within the entire piece.

I mentioned earlier about shows still going on despite snowstorms and the like. This isn’t simply a theoretical instance, but rather a regular occurrence for MCT, seeing as how they travel all across the United States and Canada, all year round. I had rehearsals cancelled due to snow in Connell, WA and Meeteetse, WY; flooding in Sumner, Sedro Woolley, and Lopez Island, WA; and lack of children in Albuquerque, NM. So when teaching, you approach all preliminary rehearsals with the “caught in a snowstorm” attitude. The basic premise is that, even if half of the rehearsals are cancelled, the students will have been thoroughly taught the foundation of the show and could at least present a production, although it may not be “polished.” But aside from being able to present a show under any circumstances, the “snowstorm” principle provides a solid groundwork from which to work any rehearsal process.

Using the building blocks shown in Figure 3, the tour actors work each element into the process one at a time. Character, is the first concept conveyed to the students, even as early as in the auditions through the brief descriptions of each character and with the imagery given in the directions during the line readings. Children are adept at playing “make believe.” In early stages of development, this form of modal play helps a child construct the world around him to what he knows. For instance:

Countless examples can be found of the child who will seize upon an object and use it for some other function, where the only relationship obtaining is a perceived modal affinity. A toddler will make a train out of animal cracker boxes, use a paper roller as a tunnel, dress himself in leaves, or wrap a spaghetti necklace about his neck. Personification is typical, and children will talk to or pretend to be objects, dolls, or
Figure 3—Building blocks of the MCT teaching process

animals. Such fantasy for its own sake is also a valuable way of learning about the world.²

The more the child experiments with such activities, the more accustomed he will become to creating and pretending. Furthermore, this use of the imagination reveals “that the child (like the adult) finds it easier to relate to and learn about objects if he can integrate them into the categories and feelings that have already evolved.”³ Since the child is familiar with imaginary play, and because that with which he is familiar provides a reference point when adding new elements, starting with character provides a cornerstone for the remaining blocks of the process.

In that first phase, words and actions are also the first blocks in learning the

² Gardner, Arts and Human Development, 146.
³ Ibid.
show. Words are not yet considered lines because, without a script, the students are learning what the characters say by repeating back to the actors what is taught to them. There is not a sense of how the words will form lines yet, since “lines” entail more conditions than simply reciting words in an identical manner to the actor who gave them. Actions are the movements corresponding with the lines: “Stop Pinocchio with your cane as you say, ‘Money? Did you say, “Money?”’ and then lead him back in between you and Cat with the cane.”

Soon, words will become lines and actions will become blocking. As the students get familiar with the basic elements, more advanced character techniques are implemented. Instead of reciting words, the student relates her lines to those before and after, giving her a better sense of context and intent, and so, a better sense of character. Once she has gestures and placements down, the relationship between those and the lines connects and so the overall view of blocking develops, which allows her more freedom to make that blocking her own: to use it as she would see the character doing it.

At last, this all comes together to form a scene, which makes it possible now for the actor to work with the students on it as such. Instead of employing mimicry, which was valuable in creating the familiar, the actors pull from the students as much original thought as is now possible, while still guiding and even giving when needed. Changes in intent, expression, and even movement are looked at from the context of the entire scene as well as previous scenes. An actor will tell a student: “Remember what Stromboli threatened to do if you failed? How badly would you try to convince Pinocchio then?” As they run the scenes over and over and the students know what has happened, is
happening and will happen, it will become more natural (and familiar) for them to respond and react as their character would, rather than they would as themselves.

By teaching and ingraining the foundation to the show in the children’s minds before continuing on to more advanced processes, both the show and the aesthetic experience are strengthened. Modeling Bruner’s general teaching approach, the actors reach the students where they are and challenge them from there. In a week long process such as MCT’s, those new calibrations and subsequent challenges happen much quicker than in the longer, standard teaching process. But the principle remains the same. Where Bruner would add academic elements to each new challenge, the tour actors add new aesthetic elements as the students conquer each task: the basic movement patterns of blocking; the volume and speed of the voice; the expression of emotions; and even the rhythm of comic timing.

This process, then, requires a strict adherence to the correction of mistakes until they are rectified. In order to quickly move to the next building block, the prior foundation must be solid. Leaving a child with a mistake unfixed is not only delaying the ability to move on by the time it takes to fix the mistake, it holds up the process longer since an uncorrected mistake will form a permanence itself. Thus, the mistake first has to be cleaned out of the student’s system, then the correction can be taught. The corrections from the actors also serve as a guide to how the students can refine their artwork by pointing out what is working and what isn’t. In so doing, the students perceive their work through the eyes of a secondary observer. This, in turn, can instruct them how to perceive their own work with the same viewpoint the observer did. Dewey contends: “The artist
embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works." They may not be at the point of critiquing their own work from the view of an audience member, but they gain steps in the process through effective criticism from one who is mentoring them.

Although the tour actors will serve as mentors during the week, they must avoid becoming buddies with the children, as mentioned earlier. In addition to losing the important authority position needed in guiding the students, being a buddy, as opposed to being their friend, also taints the aesthetic experience for the students. Being a friend implies treating them with respect, kindness and consideration; being a buddy means the actor is equaling himself with the student. The obvious result from this is the loss of respect as an expert since the student views the actor more as a peer than a connoisseur. The other more detrimental consequence is that by getting too close to a student, the tour actor inadvertently extends the length of the student’s experience past the week’s end. Committing to too close of a relationship suggests a long-term association, which is something the actor cannot provide. And so, creating the expectation of, or need for, future contacts and interactions only to have them melt away will create an abrupt halt to an extended experience. If the experience had ended where it was intended, the movement would have been completed rather than drawn out and terminated.

Another segment of the process where building blocks are important in successfully preparing the students for the end product occurs through splitting the groups that are called for a particular rehearsal. In a standard rehearsal schedule, two groups—e.g. the Pleasure Isle Kids and Candlewick & Crew—are called at a time for a two-hour rehearsal until all groups have each had this chance. During that rehearsal, each actor takes one group and works with them for the majority of the two hours, separate from the other

\[4\] Dewey, 48.
group. Obviously this is very beneficial from a time-management perspective—get twice as much accomplished early on and there will be more time for correcting and refining. However, this also benefits the children directly from the aesthetic point of view.

By splitting them, the pressure of a performance is taken away. No one is watching them and even the tour actor is interacting, so as not to give the impression of an audience. This is necessary in the building method since the students need the familiar before encountering the later stage of performance. If they feel the need to impress or even become self-conscious of someone watching, the blocks will not be placed into the process effectively. However, by holding off that particular stage, the students can build the other stages without reservation or fear. Since they are alone as one group, the fear of being “watched” is replaced with the comfort of undivided attention. The elements that are introduced, added, and integrated are continuously applied throughout the rehearsal; a ceaseless flow is provided. At the end of the two hours, both groups are brought back together and do a “show and tell” for each other. By this point, adding an observer to the work they just completed puts the next block into place. They don’t have the unneeded burden of performing for an entire audience, yet they do have the chance to move one step further by showing a small group of “colleagues” their work. This block starts the course of understanding towards what it means to communicate and share.

Outside of the many life-skills the process develops, the greatest contributor to an aesthetic attitude is the releasing of the imagination that the process causes. Whether or not early acts of pretending can be classified as imaginative is a point of debate. Some will hold that early imaginative acts are simply acts of imitation containing little in original creation. Others will contend that the identification by children of the difference
between eating a real hot dog and pretending to do so is a cognitive awareness of what it means to pretend. Nonetheless, it is fairly well accepted that the imagination does develop. Gardner lists the birth of the literary imagination as a significant phase in the development. He declares: “The earlier play sequences of children are simply that—collections of actions which may (or may not) follow upon one another in daily life but which in any case do not constitute a narrative or story. . . . Relating a story is in itself no mean task. The child must ‘control’ one or more characters as they encounter and deal with a central problem.” Directly, this phase of imagination furthers other skills such as solving problems, understanding others’ feelings, and even maintaining a conversation.

However, as I contend, the release of the imagination advances the aesthetic attitude outside of the life-skills that it develops. As Gardner mentions, telling a story signifies advanced development. And, as we go back to earlier discussions on communication and aesthetics, it is also vital for creating a work of art. Understanding how to relate the story, having a developed literary imagination, benefits the creator in her sharing with the audience.

How does the MCT process “release” the imagination? To use a Stanislavskian term, the imagination is the “as if.” Since I hold that learning is best done experientially, or interactively, the “as if” must become active. Dramatic action accomplishes that. Through dramatic action, the “as if” is put into play; the fictional world is placed in a realistic domain. In other words, the children are able to see, hear, and feel their imaginations at work, rather than simply think it. By working on the show, the children are required to activate an imagination through the structured dramatic action.

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5 Gardner, Art, Mind & Brain, 173.
One other comment on imagination should be made. Along with aiding the progress of the aesthetics in both life and art, it also counteracts the enemies of the aesthetic. Daily routine, when it becomes simply that with no driving force behind it, can work against the aesthetic properties of life. In developing a theory of critical teaching, Ira Shor postulates: “When the class examines familiar situations in an unfamiliar way, transcendent changes become possible. Such an animation of consciousness can be formulated as extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary.”6 A production does just that: It takes the ordinary (relationships, dialogue, and even everyday tasks) and presents it in an extraordinary way. Involvement in that process will vitalize the humdrum. Shor further supports this by noting: “The act of separation from routine reality can be aided through creating your own media and art. This activity pushes away the enveloping world. It changes people from being passive consumers of expression to being creators of meaning.”7 Breaking away from these mundane, daily routines through the creation of a work of art transforms the individual and this will carry through into the appreciation of daily aesthetics; it will create the hunger for living a life of beauty and variety rather than blandness and monotony.

Very soon, the rehearsals will pass from the initial learning of the show to the refinement of the piece. The assorted “tips for running the show in rehearsal” that are given to the tour actors complement the aesthetic developments occurring within the students. Adding new “building blocks” in each rehearsal, e.g. props, lights, costumes, keeps the interest in the production, thus keeping focus, and also maintains a freshness and vitality to the experience. *Beginning and ending each rehearsal gathered as a group*

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7 Ibid., 108.
emphasizes the necessity for interpersonal skills in order to function as a team, and this helps to reinforce the collaborative learning techniques entering into more and more schools nowadays. In fact, Healy notes:

Inclusion of such cooperation along with competition may have several effects: (1) making classrooms more success-oriented; (2) counteracting some of the social isolation experienced by children without old-fashioned “neighborhood” play experiences; (3) building oral language skills by teaching structured ways of talking together about what is being learned.\(^8\)

Keeping everyone involved falls into place with the philosophy of active learning; while in the “doing” mode, the experience is better felt by the students. Keeping a steady pace and forward momentum in the rehearsal does the same for the overall experience. Giving each run-through a specific objective, e.g. diction, picking up cues, more energy, opens the perceiving system for the student. All of these build upon each other until the performance day arrives. All the efforts of the students throughout the week now create the work of art. All the individual movements experienced during the process formulate an entire experience.

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\(^8\) Healy, 283.
CHAPTER 6

Consummation: The Performance

With the auditions, the students experience the start of the movement. Life-skills, aesthetic attitudes and sensibilities, are all introduced here. During the rehearsals, this movement continues its flow. The elements introduced and processes begun in the previous stage now take effect and cultivate within each student. The final performance is the consummation of all parts—the climax of the piece. There are still assorted skills and sensibilities taught individually, but the primary benefit comes from how it integrates everything prior to it. Every movement within the artwork is unique, yet reflective of the other movements in some way. Like a river, “in an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself.”¹ The product cannot have the impact aesthetically on the children without the process. The focus isn’t on the performance in and of itself, but rather on what has cumulated in it.

One movement the performance completes is the development into imagination. I mentioned earlier the importance of imagination and how the process releases it. We’ve seen that it develops the awareness of communicating a story, which in turn translates to sharing an experience, and that it counteracts the enemies of the aesthetic through shutting out the routine and menial. However, it is also the final stage of the levels, or

¹ Dewey, 36.
attitudes, of the mind. Northrop Frye suggests that there are three main attitudes:

"First, a state of consciousness or awareness that separates you as an individual from the rest of the world. Second, a practical attitude of creating a human way of life in that world. Third, an imaginative attitude, a vision or model of the world as you could imagine it and would like it to be."\(^2\) Creating a human way of life cannot be done without understanding where you stand in the world. To imagine the world as you would like it to be, you must first have interacted within that world. As an experience, each attitude leads into the next, finalizing with the imagination.

Later, Frye puts imagination into perspective: "When you stop to think about it, you soon realize that our imagination is what our whole social life is really based on. . . . In practically everything we do, it's the combination of emotion and intellect we call imagination that goes to work."\(^3\) As the smoother integration of emotion and intellect occurs through the more developed imagination, aesthetics will fill our everyday lives to an even greater capacity. The MCT process replicates the movement into imagination. In the auditions, the student becomes more aware of herself. In the rehearsal process, the interaction and creation within the new experience occurs. Now, the fulfillment of all that comes to pass.

Experiencing the beauty of a well-crafted performance and being involved interactively in such an experience are the most hands-on means the process has in developing aesthetic sensibilities. Everything that went into it artistically—the movements, patterns, rhythms; experientially—the ceaseless flow, building from one step to the next and utilizing all that came before; and socially—learning skills from

\(^3\) Ibid., 135.
interpersonal to intrapersonal, reaches a conclusion in the end. With the success of the production, all those parts of the movement are substantiated. Realizing the teamwork that was necessary to create an impressive production opens the door for what teamwork can do in everyday interactions. Reaching the conclusion of a movement that shines guides the student to avoid arrest or stasis in future experiences and see them through to fruition. Successfully communicating a well-developed artwork to an audience will initiate the passion for future creations.

At this point, it seems necessary to address the problem of: “What if the production doesn’t shine? What if it’s simply ‘bad’?” This entire process and the theories behind its success have presupposed an ideal matching of professional performer and educator in the position of the two tour actor/directors. Obviously, just like any business, employees won’t always live up to their hired expectations. MCT has been effective in learning how to weed out the “bad seeds” reasonably well; if anything, they will sometimes err on the side of bringing in a staff member who might not have the performance skills desired, but have proven effective in working with children. But again, MCT will try to couple that person with someone who can carry the burden through any performance dilemmas. It is also clear that, just as poor performance by the tour members can affect the process, so too will a variation of teaching styles. However, while some minor hindrances might occur through these differences—e.g. some tour staff might be stricter or lighter in the discipline category which might affect the outcome of both the show and the process in some way or another—the place where the “ideal” situation is requisite is in the finalization of a successful production. I will maintain that in this area, failure to achieve
that goal can present a detrimental experience for the child. As I shall discuss, there will be certain adverse effects associated with a "failed" production.

As has been stated, a successful process must result in a successful product. Higher standards must be attained and maintained throughout the entire process than is typically expected from a "children's performance." In chapter 1, we noticed the growing trend of a new awakening towards what children will accept when put before them. We saw how respected companies are paving the way for a higher standard by presenting pieces that are written, produced and performed with as much truth and dedication as their adult counterparts. We heard the implorations to treat children with respect, such as when Davis and Evans argue: "Young audiences bring a sense of wonder with them when they come to the theatre. In return they deserve sincerity in performance, richness of thought and feeling, eloquent expression and visual excitement. The greatest offense is to underestimate the audience and so to condescend."^4 The same quality needs to exist in productions where the children perform, just as it is sought out in productions where the children are the audience. If the goal of any children's theatre\(^5\) performance is to enrich a child's life, steps must be taken to ensure the success of this goal.

Recalling Greene's belief on the aesthetic, we see that merely "being in the presence of art forms is not sufficient to occasion an aesthetic experience or to change a life."\(^6\) For the child as an audience member, this involves an active listening. For the child as a performer, it involves not simply being in the production, but rather experiencing the production. An MCT show attracts children as both audience members and performers.

\(^4\) Davis and Evans, 44-45.
\(^5\) Again, this phrase entails any production where either the child performs or is the target audience or both.
\(^6\) Greene, 125.
For both groups, a determination in achieving the status of an aesthetic experience for them rests in the level of the production. A child in the audience will not stay actively listening very long if the production is low in quality; a child as performer may still experience the production even if it is inadequate, but the resulting impact will not be a positive aesthetic event, and so it may turn the child away from aesthetics. Davis and Evans, like Caron, believe the product needs to have high quality to it.

Standard good theatre practices must be applied to any production presented to a public, admission-paying audience, no matter who the cast will be and where it will be performed. If the production is to fulfill its purpose of providing a sound aesthetic experience for those who come to see it, the director seeks the same qualities and characteristics in youthful actors that he hopes to find in adults. This does not mean that he expects them to come to him as technically proficient performers, nor does he expect to make unreasonable demands on them. It does mean, however, that he chooses the best possible cast and then works with them in such a way that participation in play production becomes a worthy artistic experience for them, even as watching the play provides aesthetic benefits for the audience.7

Treating them as professionals is important in bringing this belief to fruition. Everything from maintaining quiet backstage to not allowing the other characters to mouth the words of the character speaking instills in the students the quality level sought for the show. The dress rehearsal is the best place to enforce all of these traits. This rehearsal, as a general rule, occurs during the couple of hours before the first performance. With the proximity to the finished product, everything noted to the students at this point is more readily accessible when the final moment comes. Making the slight adjustments needed—"a little more volume...reach with your upstage hand...don't wait in the wings where the audience can see you"—will not only polish the product for them, but also control the final movements of the experience. Energy, excitement, and even nervousness are valuable to both the production and the process.

7 Davis and Evans, 190.
However, excessive enthusiasm, uncontrolled fervor and irrepressible fear will benefit neither the show, nor the experience for the students. By working on the little details, the students have something to do, and so have a point of focus that contains and effectively directs the dynamism.

After the final bow has been taken, the sets have been struck, and the tour actors have gone, the children are left much richer in aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes. Some effects will be direct, like the expressed desire to “do another play” or the enrollment in a dance class or even an increased focus on schoolwork now that the child feels there is something worth working towards. A letter sent Caron from the parents of a child involved in the production in Spokane, WA reads:

Recently my daughter had the chance to be in a play at her school. I want you to know that she had a wonderful time! She is a very sensitive child and normally doesn’t want to finish anything she starts. . . . Jennifer was so enthusiastic about this, and I have never seen her more determined to accomplish what she started. . . . I just wanted to Thank [sic] them and you for giving my daughter her chance to shine.

Some of the effects will not manifest until later. And some will be an ongoing process.

Greene writes: "As has been said, a rock is an obstacle only to the one who wants to climb the hill."\(^8\) The fear of not being with their parents, of being seen onstage, of messing up a line are obstacles that wouldn’t exist if the students didn’t want to climb the hill—if they didn’t have the longing to do the production. That association of seeing the hill, wanting to climb it, and subsequently conquering the obstacles can last throughout the child’s life. Without the association, the process, the experience, a child may easily fall prey to what Greene warns about:

Finding it difficult to stand forth from what is officially (or by means of media) defined as real, unable to perceive themselves in interpretive relation to it, the young (like their elders) are all too likely to remain immersed in the taken-for-granted and

the everyday. For many, this means an unreflective consumerism; for others, it means a preoccupation with having more rather than being more. If freedom comes to mind, it is ordinarily associated with an individualist stance: It signifies a self-dependence rather than a relationship; self-regarding and self-regulated behavior rather than involvement with others.\(^9\)

MCT can plant the seed, even if just a small one, that there is something more. The joy the students encounter in interacting with the aesthetics and artistically communicating with others can possibly remind them throughout life of a time when the joy came from experiencing rather than gathering or taking or gaining. To appreciate simply being in a production, what was involved in getting there and what was overcome in the success, instead of looking for what is gained financially or morally or intellectually, is the crux to aesthetics: art for art’s sake.

As Elliot Eisner states, “Seeing is central to making.”\(^10\) And so, it stands to reason that seeing beauty, seeing the aesthetics in life, is central to making it as well. Reflecting back one last time to the classroom example of an aesthetics in everyday life, the more “beauty” found within the structure of learning inspires the learning to continue within the student which leads to heightened aesthetic properties in other aspects of life. The skill of the teacher to impart knowledge and understanding is critical in creating an aesthetics in the classroom. However, the student aids in this work of art as well. So when Greene claims, “It will be argued as well that children who have been provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, to pose their own questions are the ones most likely to learn to learn,”\(^11\) the experience found in the MCT week renders the student ready to share and communicate in the artwork.

\(^9\) Ibid., 7.
\(^11\) Ibid., 14.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


