CHILDHOOD, TABOO
AND (POETIC) LANGUAGE
Guillermo A. Dillon

INTRODUCTION
We are proposing a reading of childhood and taboo as meaningful which resonate biographically and collectively for the adults who act as mediators of children’s drama experiences.

Children’s theatrical experiences always involve the active participation of adults. On one hand, the artists—who select what appears on stage and how it appears—on the other, parents, family or teachers who facilitate the contact of children with the theater; and finally organizations or social actors who manage and give social recognition to the theatrical experience (critics, schedulers, festivals, awards).

Adults have ever diminishing participation in the contemporary screen life (TV, Internet and gaming platforms) of children. The young tend to choose what to consume directly, with little participation of their families.

These facts are part of a decline in the symbolic
effectiveness of both the family and the school as central institutions of modernity. Therefore, in an era in which adults have abandoned essentials tasks, drama possesses a unique value in that it can invoke the active presence and convivial relations between adults and children.

In the experience of theatre, a “convivial” encounter (Dubatti, 2002) —direct human exchange, ephemeral and intimate— is completed by a poetic language event deployed in an area of the spectators.

This poetic language event can build a bridge between generations transmitting multiple levels of meaning, joining in the same act rite and game, structuring and timing rupture. We can make place, thus, to the experience and knowledge coming by the mundus imaginabilis that a rationalist-positivist discourse ignores.

**Childhood as spectator**

We emphasize the polysemy of the term “childhood”; it can be considered as a signifier which echoes within each subjectivity and which will therefore be defined by the common imaginary associated with the speaker’s biography.

The term childhood, “infancia” in Spanish, (etymologically composed of a denial “in” and “faris”: talk) refers us to the course of the word of adults, where nonspeakers remain spectators. This word that we give to childhood can try to give meaning, to say what one desires to hear or silence that which one does not want to hear.
In each socio–historical epoch, the notions of childhood, of boys and girls, are subordinated to current debates articulated in philosophical, educational, legislative, medical, and religious contexts. Above all, they are subordinated to the beliefs and fictions about boys and girls in a given community. (Minnicelli 2007: 38)

Therefore, when one creates, thinking about a child spectator, one establishes a dialogue between the work and subjective representations of what a child is and should be. The audience of children is an invisible fiction (Buckingham 2002), an abstraction which we will never understand.

Taboo and Childhood

In Totem and Taboo (1981), Freud analyzed this phenomenon within the framework of the transmission of the ancestors’ lineage to new generations. It’s not fortuitous, therefore, that we talk in this forum of how Taboo is articulated with the cultural transmission from adults to children, by means of the theatre.

Although Freud describes analogies between primitive people’s social organization and neurotic expressions; some of his ideas can help us to think about some aspects linked to “taboo” in the present.

Sigmund Freud expresses two opposed meanings of this term, referring both to the sacred and the forbidden; he proposes “fear/sacred” as a more exact definition.
Freud also said the taboo “works compulsively, rejecting any conscious motivation” (Freud, 1981: 1746). The prohibitions involved in the taboo have no firm basis, but they seem natural for the people under their influence. In the area of children’s theater, it becomes necessary to reflect, as in this forum, in order to glimpse its implicit bases and transform these naturalized facts into a problem for analysis.

In another part of this text Freud says that, “a taboo transmitted by a king or a priest is more effective than one transmitted by an ordinary man” (Freud, 1981: 1760). We believe that the story, and how it is narrated in the theatrical ritual, (just as what is omitted) possesses particular value relative to other social speech. In addition, we can also think about the different hopes of the spectators: adults waiting to reaffirm shared meanings and children looking to understand themselves and their environment.

Freud also notes the negative consequences of taboo violation, its sanctions imply the isolation and exclusion of the transgressor from his community (in a real fear of “contagion”). This is not insignificant in thinking about a desire for the status quo when dealing with taboo themes in the field of children’s entertainment.

Unlike some cultural products for children—or adults taking their place—theater can offer diverse ways in which adults can be associated with them occupying a significant role in cultural transmission. Adults sharing their own artistic language—when they avoid pamphleteering or didacticism on stage—can help new generations build a symbolic framework. The search for meaning at the theater
becomes privileged, emotional, bodily and “convivial”.

Freud warns of an ambivalent relationship to the contents of unconscious taboos. We believe that — in addition to being traversed by them — this duality operates as a search for preserving some idealized and mythical notion of childhood.

Taboo subjects are kept off the stage (essentially everything related to sex or death), implicitly maintaining prohibitions that we assume protect children. However we are also trying to preserve the illusion of a lost paradise of childhood, a mythical place free of conflict and contradiction.

For Françoise Dolto (1994: 132) the child, “is in direct contact with an essential reality that adults only perceive in a distorted manner, through metaphors and symbols, by a system of conventions”. Because of this direct contact with the real, they are eager for words, images and symbols to help metabolize their experiences.

In this “struggle for meaning”, as Bethelheim put it (1988), poetic theatrical language communicates unconscious meanings which are freeing, and which enrich subjective constructions, a process which should not be left only to family and school.

In contrast to the individual and domestic appeal screens offer, theatrical ceremony offers the possibility of the social tie, of the convivial meeting with others, a matrix of shared meanings driven by the poetic language of theater.

On the other hand, we believe that, as a result of an apparent protection of what is thought of as “childhood”, a restriction on the themes and content (and also the
aesthetic) limits the right of future generations to experience a fuller subjective development through different looks fuller that will encourage greater understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Lic. Guillermo A. Dillon
Facultad de Arte
Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires
Tandil, Argentina

References