Children’s drama history is marked by two foundational moments. The first one characterized by the need of a tool to develop national identity, a common goal both to adult and children’s drama. Concerning childhood, however, the task was harder for this was split between two worlds, two histories, that of their parents —whom bound children to past and family—, and the one being developed within the arrival to the new country. In this regard, cultural assimilation through a new language for some, and through an unified historical discourse for all, set a common identity in which children’s drama played a central role as an instrument for achieve social cohesion. Later, since the thirties and concerning independent theatre, the child was also seen as an appreciated audience for raising consciousness on universal values, which exceeded nationality, values supported first by the Teatro del Pueblo and then by the groups that emerged from it. Entertainment and moral lessons in mainstream or commercial children’s
drama were shaped as in adult’s drama, asserting the standard conceptions of good and evil and the safety of the established social order, in a way that those duties and values which differ from those of the bourgeois society were either absent or appeared only in need of correction. During the sixties emerged an interesting search for new languages, on both themes and procedures, where the preceding taboo which was restricting imagination’s role was set aside. Thus, raises a decade where dreaming was not to be considered as a sin, where language was allowed to create new and different realities, characterized by colorful stories and music, free of moral concerns and even encouraging children’s to break through the borderlands of what is known. This state of affairs remains until today with the slow incorporation of themes, since procedural innovations are not as interesting nowadays. However the quality and perfection of the productions —even the affectedness of some— should be pointed out.

What happens with themes then? Children’s drama, as adult’s drama, on certain occasions or concerning certain playwrights, relies on a realist poetic, in which social references become essential to construe the plot of the play, alongside with historical discourse, which also becomes raw material for writing. However, contemporary realist drama —for both children and adults— has confined itself into the realm of family's privacy, and has given up on its preceding concerns with the many aspects of social life. Family problems, relationships, conflicts between equals and the solitude on an over communicated world are themes
often repeated on texts and productions. How does contemporary children’s drama deals with these themes, with an intended audience which goes from few months old babies to sub teenagers and teenagers, considered as a new age span in itself? This work will address contemporary children’s drama and how this breaks with traditional childhood themes by introducing problems usually considered far from child’s understanding, such as violence between equals, sexual relations, dysfunctional families, the workplace as a domination instance and the exploitation of man by man, war as a violence that completely involves childhood and it’s growth, drugs, sexual abuse and other forms of violence. In order to do this we will analyze some productions staged last year, and also the controversy raised by these new themes between theatrists, playwrights, actors and audiences of children’s drama.

**When taboo grows within ourselves**

One of the major obstacles for the introduction of new themes in children’s drama is the self-silencing imposed by theatrists themselves, whom propose productions for an “idealized” audience, heavily influenced by educational institutions, afraid to upset an audience that has became a secure job source. This audience is also constructed through age spans, and the boldest themes are restricted to sub–teenagers and teenagers, instead of developing procedures that would allow any audience to understand them. Being children exposed to almost every form of violence and sexuality, and to a vulgarized language through
internet, television and movies, it becomes necessary to develop children’s drama as a place where everything could be said from a free, imaginative, fascinating view, in other words, from an artistic vision. The widely spread assumption according to which children’s drama should not reach deep life experiences or negative feelings is preventing drama to approach problems and situations to which children are constantly exposed through the almost funny format of news programs and the production of series and shows which explicitly target children as their primary audience. This is the reason why when such a play is staged its own producers describe their work as doomed to fail:

*Cantata de Pedro y la Guerra* is, according to its own producers, a “failure drama”. Such a depiction is rooted in the producers belief that parents —which are the ones who take the kids to the theatre (unless it’s a TV show)— would avoid any chance to confront sorrow. (Mónica Berman, drama critic)

The critic’s reflection on the production of Falconi and Urquiza is quite correct, since both the playwright and the director have staged several productions in which the sugar-coated themes and the “merry worlds” appear, but only to be violently dissolved by everyday reality. The question that should be answered is: Do we avoid certain problems in order to preserve children from evil and ugliness by offering them a happy childhood? Or are we self-silencing ourselves, avoiding such themes because we
are afraid of the questions children may raise in their innocence, questions for which we may have no answers, and no intentions either to search for them with the children? However, there seems to be a change, and theatrists and playwrights appear to be seriously concerned by the problems imposed by themes in the artistic production. An interesting contribution on the subject has been developed by the Canadian playwright Suzanne Lebeau. Her last work *The sound of bones breaking* (2006) deals with the issue of children and war, but not considering them as mere spectators, but as soldiers. This play earned the *Governor General’s Literary Award* (2009) and was published by Leméac. Both the panel of judges and critics considered its structure and procedures, the author's career and also the people in charge of the production:

In order to show the appalling reality of child soldiers and to denounce it, the experience, the awareness and the commitment of this tandem which has been carrying on Le Carrousel for 35 years were needed. The alternation of voices, the western nurse and the children running towards a better life expresses skillfully our impotence to break through the circle of violence. Allowing the production to avoid the pitfalls of sensationalism, the scenographic procedures manage to set a skilful distance from the horrors of the situation. (AQCT)¹
By reading interviews to figures like Adela Basch, Liliana Bodoc, Magdalena Fleitas, Violeta Naon and the Swedish playwright Cristina Gottfridsson we can obtain an interesting perspective on the new visions which suggest a realist rather than a moralist approach to reality from art’s metaphorical language. Liliana Bodoc, admirer of Maria Elena Walsh reflects on the function and purpose of her texts:

[...] The main purpose is to move him, to make him discover himself and the other. By no means I think it should be for the child a place of absolute and full comfort or indifference. On the contrary, I think it should propose a crisis, though in suitable terms according his age. I think children’s and young adults’ literature deserves a place still to be acknowledged by society, intelligentsia and academia. [...] Even the last strongholds of art are being contaminated by alienation, mediocrity, and the language of compulsive shopping, extreme individualism, indifference, and unawareness of the others. I think it’s quite serious that, as adults, we are being accomplices of this; as if we weren’t aware that a child who develops a bad relationship with arts would also develop deficiencies in both its rational and emotional abilities.

In turn, Magdalena Fleitas explains the way children’s drama should be faced from the perspective of the audience: “the ‘quality filter’ should be thorough, does the play
stimulate children, opens new doors to them, enhances their awareness about art?...” In other words, the key factor that should be accounted for when producing a play is not the content, but whether the play encourages children’s reflection. Instead of the alienated and alienating world of commercial goods, often imposed to children by television advertising, the play should produce the possibility of free thought. When this takes place, beyond the bordereau’s outcome, the children are the first to recognize it. As Héctor Presa points out: “[...] I think there is not such things as taboo themes for children, things that could be not talked about. Of course my plays express a certain softening of gender roles, by blurring the creativity, courage and intelligence differences”. Also Adela Bach, who develops her writing through historical themes, points out the relevance of art in children’s perception: “Drama has been of the outmost importance during my childhood. I still remember my first play, The princess and the pigpen... Quite a title... nobody would dare to use those words today... I really like puns, and, of course, humor”. But maybe it is Violeta Naón, an actress, who hits the nail in the head by depicting children as an eager and perceptive audience, to whom nothing could or should be concealed:

[...] It is great to perform for children; I use a very different energy than when performing for adults. And clown itself allow me to connect with my childhood. But is quite delicate to perform for children: even though I play the fool I try to be aware
on how I’m being perceived. It’s incredible the way they notice everything, even the smallest details. I guess my character is like an outlet for them, that they understand I’m expressing unattainable desires and temptations for them. However, sometimes they draw the line on me, for example, with snots, sometimes they said: “Pig! That shouldn’t be done!” I improvise according to the situation. Once, when I was complaining of being alone, because Rodríguez wouldn’t care for me, when all the audience was silent, from the bottom of the Super Pullman a little voice said: “You are not alone!” It’s amazing how children can either go with you or hold you back. They are like sponges... They have a very direct perception.

It is because of this that, regarding the children audience as an active being, recent productions on *El Patio de Recreo* incorporate daily themes, such as classroom violence, like Alejo Beccar has done last year with *Oruga (Bullying)* (2009). Is with him that a fluid relation between other Latin American members of the project has been established, producing several plays on the UPB stage, in charge of Carlos de Urquiza. It was on this theatre where, during last march, three of the most unusual themes on teenagers drama were staged, in a 60 minutes format, broken down into three smaller pieces. Not only violence as it floods the whole social environment, but also the consequences of this process on a society trapped in an
anachronistic self–comprehension, where prejudice and market constitute the prevailing criteria when acting. Dysfunctional and unsupportive families, lack of attention, ignorance about sexuality, apathy before knowledge —rooted on the growing apathy of their teachers, whose commitment is often handicapped by their social and economical situation. The three plays, beyond their artistic quality, offer the teen audience a voice which represents them, and allow us, adults, to realize both, our unawareness of youth, and our doublespeak, which often confuse young adults, leading them to dangerous paths and shortcuts in order to comply with what we praise.

As asserted at the beginning of this work, children’s drama —as adult’s drama— cannot deny its audience’s everyday reality. Maybe these themes, which have been progressively included in playwrights, actors and critics works, had always been on drama’s imaginary, fallen silent.

María de los Ángeles Sanz
UBA/GTEA

Bibliography
1. The sound of breaking bones is a production of Le Carrousel theatre company and Théâtre d’Aujourd’hui (Montreal), in residence at Théâtre de la Ville (Longueuil, Quebec), in co-production with Théâtre Jean Vilar de Vitry-sur-Seine and the Fédération d’Associations de Théâtre Populaire with assistance from the Aide à la création program of the Centre national du Théâtre and support provided to the author by SACD (France).

2. Born in Buenos Aires, on November 23, 1946, Adela Basch has a degree in languages from the University of Buenos Aires. Her first job was as a translator of English written books. She wrote her first play in 1979, Abran cancha, que aquí viene don Quijote de la Mancha, staged on the same year. Between 1986 and 1990 she worked on the “Reading Plan” of the National Book Agency, coordinating reading–promotion workshops and on the spreading of children literature. Between 1993 and 1998 she managed Libros del Quirquincho, Coquena’s Publishing children branch. On 2002 she founded Ediciones Abran Cancha, an alternative editorial project aimed to promote, outside mainstream media, interaction opportunities between children and adults, through reading and expression workshops. She is currently living and working in Buenos Aires, though she often travels around the country, coordinating workshops and activities linked to children’s literature and drama.

3. Liliana Bodoc was born on July 21, 1958 in Santa Fe, Argentina. Authoress of the novels Los días del Venado, Los días de la Sombra and Los días del Fuego — also known as La Saga de los Confines —. She also published the young adults’ novel Diciembre Súper Album and Sucedió en colores, a collection of short stories. She was awarded with the Fundación del Libro’s Best Young Adult’s Literature Work Prize (2000), the IYL’s White Ravens (2002 and 2005), the Children and Young Adult’s Fantasy Foundation’s Narrative Award (2001), the Destacados de Alija Award (2003) and Kaleidoscope (2003) and Konex (2004) awards.

4. Music therapist (Universidad del Salvador), kindergarten teacher, musician, singer and composer. She was born on November 14, 1970 in Buenos Aires. She is Founder and Director of the “Jardín de Magda”, an artistic introductory area made up by 15 teachers/musicians, which works in the cultural venue “Risas de la Tierra”. “Risas del Viento” and “Risas de la Tierra” are musical CD’s for both children and adults, made by Magdalena Fleitas and her band. Since May 2004 they are performed as a live show which includes songs, air acrobatics, trapeze, dance and a video. They have performed in several theatres such as MALBA,
C.C. Recoleta, Teatro Argentino de la Plata, El Ombligo de la Luna, C.C. Gral. San Martín, and the MOMUSI series among others. Their work nourishes from Argentina and Latin America’s traditions and connects children with our folklore through a modern, stimulating and attractive language. Their work runs through different folklore and urban rhythms, leading us through Argentine’s regions, recalling landscapes sounds and voices from many cultures.

5. Violeta Naón, actress, studied acting, clown and other disciplines with Ricardo Bartis, Augusto Fernández, Pompeyo Audivert and Norman Brisky. She graduated from the National Conservatory of Drama (IUNA).

6. Cristina Gottfridsson, Swedish playwright, has been writing for the stage since the beginning of the 90ies. She is the author of more than 30 plays among which many were written for young audiences. Her plays have been staged by theatres all over Sweden as well as in Germany and Hungary. She has worked as an in–house playwright for Malmö Stadsteater (Malmö City Theatre). Cristina lives and writes in Malmö.

7. “Schoolyard’s Stories” was a European project aimed to reach an age span (12 to 18 years) which seemed to be quite reluctant to drama, and thus, forgotten by playwrights, producers and theatrists. From this experience emerged written productions in several languages, about twenty plays, workshops and meetings. It was also the starting point for developing the project in Latin America, which is an ATINA’s initiative with the participation of the ASSITEJ Latin America Centres (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Spain). A similar project is currently being developed in Europe under the name “Platform11+”, which involves eleven European countries.