There is a challenge in theatre for children and young audiences research regarding the need to get the theatre studies and investigators closer to the practical experiences of the theatre–makers. This means to allow a bond and a common space of work where theory provides reflective thinking to the theatre–making process and where theatre practices guide to new theories.

This is the reason why the current paper discuss the taboo themes in the theatre for children from a privileged perspective: from the theatre theory concepts and children’s cultural consumption theory as well as from the perspective of the practical experience with the production process of a theatre piece made for children with a war topic called *Cantata de Pedro y la guerra (Song Piece of Pedro and The War)*, by Argentinean playwright María Inés Falconi.

One of the central debates concerning theatre for children refers to its topics and its limits. The so called “children’s theatre” is often a theatre created for the children,
but elaborated from the adult conception of children; which also is influenced by the existing notion of childhood.

Nowadays everyone talks about “childhood”. We know, however, that through many many years the western culture detached from children (maybe, like the demographers suggest, because children died like flies and it was not worth the effort of noticing them), and it was not until lately, starting from the XVIII century, when people started to talk about “childhood”. Until that moment it would have been unusual for a writer to think of writing for children. Children received, in an indiscriminate way, messages that run among the grownups (included those “bloody, threatening and fierce” stories [what we now call fairytales] possibly much more “bloody, threatening and fierce” than what they became later, when converted to traditional stories for children). One can imagine that those messages that run among the adults resulted in a way incomprehensible and in a way fascinating, as always is for children what belongs to grownups world (Montes, [1990] 2001, p.19).

Since 1990’s another concept of “childhood” appears, where the modern notion of “fragile, obedient and dependant children” its replaced by or at least coexists with the notion of “astute, fast and independent children”; a kind of child that knows the secrets of the real world and that overcome, in a great deal, the capacities of the grownups (Minzi en Carli (Comp.), 2003, p. 287). Several authors refer to a postmodern childhood and there are some that even think of it as the end of childhood, like affirms Neil Postman.

During the last decades it has been recognized that
a child does not live isolated from the world of the adults, and that he is affected by what happens outside the “corral of childhood” (Montes, [1990] 2001). The contemporary child spectator is at the same time a TV–spectator, a consumer, a user of computers and electronic games; he is used to a way of living that, as some authors affirm, turns to a more sedentary life lived in front of different screens. Moreover, children’s great exposition to the massive communication media may result in over–information, where the new data is not according to the child’s possibilities of internalization and comprehension.

In theatre for children, how the adult sees the children does not only affect the selection of the plays that the young will see, but also the way in which theatre makers create theatre for children.

Nowadays creators of theatre for children enable themselves to explore a childhood notion that may not be all that happy, or they may delve into in issues that are profound for a child — and also for an adult—, such as loneliness, discrimination at school, parent’s divorce, the one who is different, adoption, among others. Canadian playwright Suzanne Lebeau is one of the international examples among those who have tried to “push” the limit. She has explored issues as the evil in children (in The Little Ogre) or parents who may not take good care of their children (in Tales of Real Children), having reached the most positive feedback from the children audiences. In Argentina, playwright María Inés Falconi works with children with special needs (in Sobre ruedas) or children
that have to work and sleep in the streets (in Juan Calle). Another example is playwright and theatre director Perla Szuchmacher, who was born in Argentina and immigrated to Mexico. She wrote a play about adoption called Malas palabras. Falconi says about Juan Calle that in spite of the positive feedback given by children and colleagues, grownups (parents, teachers, and orphanage coordinators).

There was no way. Sometimes they even felt offended. “This is not for children”, they would say. Some went out of the theatre angry, asking for a ticket refund.¹

Falconi refers to a characteristic of theatre for children: the child spectator is not, usually, who gets to decide which show he or she sees. There are mediators that make this experience possible (or not) for them: parents, teachers, school). Besides, theatre for children audience is actually mixed: there are children and adults (that come along with them). Therefore grownups are an intrinsic part of children’s theatre. And also, in children’s theatre, the playwrights and directors are grownups as well.

Argentinean playwright Adela Basch says she believes in the limits that society imparts, “besides of the (limits that imparts) oneself, that one has to try to overcome. There is this idea that is everywhere, of what children are, of what we should, can and cannot show them”. And next, she

¹. Interview held with Falconi by the author of this paper on December, 2007.
explains that “this notion of what is right comes sometimes from the schools, that is one of the venues where the play circulates, and it there within the critics that write the surveys, everywhere, and is very difficult (for the theatre for children) not to get affected in some way by those limits”².

Theatre makers agree that the issue is regarding “how” rather than “what” to present the themes to the children. Which means, make the selected topics accessible for the children, the children culture (in a sense that the children level of comprehension will be taken into account), in order to make each play an experience that children may enjoy and to which they may relate to. As Argentinean puppeteer and director Ariel Bufano —one of the pioneers puppeteers devoted to theatre for children— used to say: “there are no roses meant for children and roses meant for adults”.

Argentinean theatre maker Héctor Presa says that the great subjects in manhood are little great topics within the issues of children: love, anguish, hurt, loss, health, friendship, playing, the impossible things, discrimination, and he believes that the key is regarding its treatment.

To me, there is not and there should not be any differences. I do not believe that there are taboo topics; what I believe is that there are different kinds

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of narrative that belong to different ages.

We also have to understand that even if children may get affected by the same issues that affect grownups, this does not always happen in the same manner; death, for instance, is something—from a child perspective—that might happen to a pet or to a grandparent, but the child’s own death does not appear to him but in a distant and unclear dimension. The child does not fear his own death like an adult may. This is why it is important for the playwright to find a suitable way to write about the selected topic (Levy, 1988, p. 4). Lebeau confesses that the limit that she could not trespass is desperation, and affirms that she can write about any theme, even the toughest one, as long as she found a light of hope. Presa agrees and says that unlike in some plays for adults, in children’s theatre it is convenient to leave some doors open to offer the audience ways of resolution, because closing all the paths generates suffering in the children.

There has to be spaces where [the child] may recognize the problem, approach it, but also where he will be able to see exit doors, even if later he decides which one to choose.³

By referring to taboo topics in theatre for children we do not necessary refer to every “serious” theme or to those that belong the adults’ world. Regarding children’s theatre in Argentina, theatre maker Hugo Midón works with political
issues with a humor treatment and through musical theatre genre (an example is the democracy theme in the play *Narices*, the appearance onstage of a “cacerolazo” —citizens expressing their discomfort through the sound of beating kitchen battery— in *Huesito Caracú*, and children’s rights in *Derechos Torcidos*). Meanwhile, Adela Basch had researched for a long time before creating historic pieces with a lot of word-games (and wrote plays such as *José de San Martín, caballero del principio al fin* and *Colón agarrar viaje a toda costa*). Director Claudio Hochman presented innovative versions of Shakespeare plays, previously almost unthinkable as suitable for children, such as *La Tempestad*, that performed in 1996 at the theatre Teatro San Martín).

When we refer to taboo topics in children’s theatre, on the other hand, we make reference to the issues from which the adults want to protect and prevent the children from; at least regarding theatre exposure. It is quite curious that these are the same children that are exposed to a great deal of violence in several TV programs. Not only are we referring to the images of the news, that sometimes are shocking, but also to shows that are fiction. There are also a great number of electronic games which purpose are to kill the enemy while internet “lets” the children access to unlimited information, included pornographic sites, without adult supervision. It would be naïve to think that those adults that let children sit in front of violent scenes on TV

are not the same adults that decide which play children should go see. Maybe the distinction is that theatre offers something truly different: it can reach the spectator live, here and now. The aura to what Walter Benjamin refers. And this experience moves us. Let us remember the concept of catharsis by Aristotle. It would seem that in the theatre every experience is “stronger”, more vivid, and that is causes a greater impact. This is exactly why we can think of the importance of using this media of expression as a means to canalize themes that effect and move the children. And which is also why it is important to remove this idea that many mediators have that theatre is just merely another means of entertainment; a product of the cultural industry that should serve as an escape and not enable analytical thinking to the children.

**Practical experience:**

*Cantata de Pedro y la guerra*

*Cantata de Pedro y la guerra*, by María Inés Falconi, is a theatrical adaptation of the novel book *Pedro y la guerra* by the same author. The play tells the story of the bond that is created between a boy (Pedro) and a grown man (Don José) when a bomb crashes on the town’ school, since their country was at war. The play was directed by Carlos de Urquiza in the venue of Universidad Popular de Belgrano in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the year 2009 and it was played by the ensemble Teatro Buenos Aires. The piece was suggested for children from nine years old. The author of this paper had a privileged position since as the assistant to the director
she could be a part of the creation process while being able to observe closely each performance, once the play opened.

The creation process of *Cantata de Pedro y la guerra* started with a meeting with the whole cast and creative team. In the words of its director:

It was necessary to refer to the unusual of a war topic in a show intended for children. The resistance that it might cause, the comments that we should most likely get (“that is not for children”), and above all things it was necessary to reaffirm the will to do this, the necessity of working for a different kind of theatre for children, committed to the child’s reality, the real child, not the child of imagination or the “child that we carry inside”, that who is old and outdated and that never sat in front of a computer nor had facebook or cellular phone...⁴

Among the issues discussed throughout the creative process, there was the issue of the music that accompanied the whole play since it was a cantata. The director decided to use the storytelling style, where the four actors-narrators would take parts in the story and with subtle attitude changes they would play the different characters.

This allowed creating a distance from the story when necessary, and for the narrators to talk straight to the

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spectators, establishing a connection with hem. Music was not used as in musical theatre, where characters perform while singing, but it served to generate ambiance and to move the storyline forward. There was also a musician, guitar player, onstage who played live the songs of the show and that accompanied the narration with his music.

Regarding the scenery, the director chose to have a table with a mockup of the town where Pedro lived, that would illustrate the actor’s narration and that would serve as a metaphor to indicate the destruction caused by the bomb and the later reconstruction. The main challenge was, in this case, to find the right scenery for the moment where Pedro and Don José are trapped under the ground after the bombing. First, the idea was very figurative: one table with an edge that would look like the ground and two caves on the sides. The problem was first concerning the visuals, because the scenery would not let the audience see the actors, and second for the impossibility to move the actors; problem that came up through rehearsals together with a need to find a theatrical manner of blocking the scene. Finally, it was chosen to create the scene out of theatre convention using two structures that suggested two different spaces, with the same pale color that was used for the table and the costumes.

Because of its content, the text of the play was what caused more discussions. There where some phrases that where really strong, and even though on the book did not seem that relevant, onstage they seemed to acquire a tragic implication, which was not intended to transmit. In one
scene, Pedro asks what happened to his friends and his mother tells him that everyone died, even Lucia, his pretty neighbor. This is one of the lines that were finally cut of the play. Mainly because it was not necessary since it was very clear up till that point that all the other kids had died with the bombing. In difference with the novel children el book, in theatre there is a multiplicity of languages that present each situation from the acting, scenery, music, ambiance generated by the lights design, shadows and, not less important, the presence of the actor and the spectator. There was a need of not stressing the morbid of the situation, but to maintain the hope, as we have mentioned earlier, focusing the narration on the bond between Pedro and Don José. It was not easy, because the actors’ tendency was to dramatize the situation in a tragic style. It took a lot of rehearsals to achieve the tone in which the director wanted to tell the story.

Another algid decisive point was related to the message of the play. The director wanted to stress the bond but, did the text allow it? In this case the playwright was present through the creation process. One of the arguments happened when the director saw in some passages of the scene where Pedro discovers that he is underground, as helpless and terrible, while the playwright had conceived it since a humorous perspective, from the absurd (notice the following fragment). Fragment:

**Pedro**

*(Scared.)* Maybe I died and they have already
buried me. ¡Mom! ¡Mom! *(He waits for an answer that he does not get.)* How silly of me! If I am dead they won’t hear me. If someone hears the voice of the dead, people tell them that he is crazy. Had I known when I was alive that dead people can talk I would have paid more attention. Maybe I could talk with grandpa Paco.

The argument, in which actors and the director’s assistant were also involved, developed into a debate regarding the necessity—or the lack of it—of working these themes from a humorous perspective. The director said that humoristic treatment avoided the selected theme, minimized it, and that what appeared on the text was not funny at all, no matter what the author’s intention were. She replied that many times children have reactions that in the eyes of the grownups are absurd, a logic of their own. Some would say that the message was helpless. Others, that the text was center on Pedro, who does survive, thanks to the connection created with Don José. Throughout the rehearsals, many tries and mistakes, the creative process took the north of narrating the bond between the two leading characters and to set a tone of hope. Even a final song at the end of the play was added.

Besides the music, the narration was accompanied by a big screen where images were projected. It served as the TV where the townspeople would watch the news or as the sky when they see the military plane approaching. The screen was also utilized as a semantic media by projecting
a series of world leaders related to war and images of children in war situations. At this point we may observe how the adult spectator was taken into account, since even though children could comprehend some of the images of children in situation of war or under the ground, many children–spectators did not know who these world leaders were.

The suggested audience age was also a theme of debate. As a matter of fact, in some publications it was printed “from 9 up” while at the box office they told that the play was for children 8 and up.

**The performances**

*Cantata de Pedro y la guerra* first appeared onstage at the UPB (Universidad Popular de Belgrano) theatre between the months of July and October, 2009. The number of the spectators was not large. The play can be inscribed in what Falconi refers to “theatre of failure”:

I have a kind of theatre productions that I call “theatre of failure”. This is a kind of theatre that won’t be successful nor will it have repercussions on the press, that will have no audience, that will not go to the schools, and I do it still because I feel that this is what I should write about.

The performance’s beginning time (Saturday 21hs and Sundays 18hs) allowed both children and adults to come. The audience was mainly adults, not children nor young people. If there were between 30 and 50 spectators,
only 5 to 10 were children. Adults were moved, especially with the scene where Pedro reunites with his mother. Many of them cried in different moments of the play. There were also some that would laugh thanks to Pedro’s ideas. It happened also on occasions that the actors, which were performing with all of their talent and commitment, were moved to tears and then it was difficult for them to go on.

On the other hand, throughout the performances children–spectators paid close attention in silence. They did not seem disturbed as much as their accompanying adult ones were. This reinforces what we have mentioned regarding children having different knowledge about different themes and a different way to get affected by them. Maybe this would not have happened to children from other part of the world that had to go through this strong situation (war). Sometimes children asked questions to their parents once the play finished. One 10 year old boy said that he thought the play was good. He said that they were studying Second World War with his class and that he wanted to tell about the play to his classmates. The conclusion that reached another boy, an 11 year old, was “it is very hard to address an issue like war, and this play does it well”.

Even so, there were grownups that left the theatre saying that that was not a play for children; that it was “too harsh”.

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