

## **Taking Children and Young People to the Theatre**

A visit to the theatre has the potential to be a life-changing experience, as well as an opportunity for a unique kind of learning. It can touch the imagination, arouse curiosity, or fire an artistic impulse. Theatre can also be an exceptional resource, linking as it does to so many areas of knowledge: history, geography, language, citizenship, and much more. Learning in theatres has its own skills-set – theatrical literacy and the understanding of dramatic conventions, a specialised vocabulary, and the ability to sit and watch a performance without distraction.

The aim of this resource is to provide advice and suggestions to support your visit to the theatre so that it is enjoyable and beneficial, and perhaps may become the first of many.

### **For Schools**

If you are planning a school trip or a large group outing to the theatre then it is often best to get in touch with the venue. Most venues, especially those with education departments, will be able to help with the nitty-gritty logistics of your visit and be able to provide you with useful information and resources to make the most of the performance. Often they will also have risk assessment forms for visits to their venue that they can send you, reducing some of the paperwork involved.

It is also best to approach a visit with a clear idea of the curriculum areas you want to address. Going to the theatre can sometimes be an overwhelming experience, so if you approach a visit with a clear focus and communicate this to your class then they will know what to look out for, and you will be able to draw clearer learning outcomes from the visit.

### **For Families and Small Groups**

If you are taking your family or a small group to the theatre then you will not necessarily need to contact the venue about the logistics of your visit, or need curriculum-based learning outcomes. However, especially if it is a child's first visit, it is a good idea to make sure they are prepared for the experience. Often theatres will have online learning resources that you can make use of at home, so it's worth checking the venue's website.

## Preparing for your visit

### Discussion

As mentioned above it is often a good idea to familiarise young people with what they are about to experience; regarding both the show they are seeing, and the theatre they are visiting.

Before your visit make sure they know something about the theatre and what they will be doing there. Discussion could include the following general points:

- What is a theatre? (a place that shows plays and performances which people agree are of high quality)
- What is the difference between a performance in a theatre and seeing a filming of that performance on a TV? (a theatre performance is a unique experience that involves both the actors and the audience. The film is one of many copies, it is the same no matter who sees it)
- What sort of theatre is it? (old, young, big, small) Does that affect the kind of shows you will see there and how they are put on?
- How should we behave in a theatre? (more on this below)
- There are many different ways to look at a play: the plot, the themes, the staging, the acting, the stage design, the lighting and sound. However, there is also another very important message, which is that you can just enjoy watching the work, being carried away by it, and discussing it afterward.

In your discussions before your trip you should not necessarily be afraid of discussing the plot of the play you will be seeing. Familiarising children with what they are going to see can be useful as often there is so much to take in that young people can miss important elements of the storyline. On the other hand surprise can also be stimulating. You will know your children and whether this is something that could benefit them.

You may also want to provide additional information about the play and the playwright in advance of your visit. For instance, it can be useful for children to understand a play's historical context or have some knowledge of the playwright. It may be more fun to provide this information before the visit but leave discussion of its significance until after they have seen the performance, where it is illuminated by the play itself and by the children's responses to the work.

## **Behaviour and 'Rules'**

Theatre is unique amongst art forms as it requires collaboration from both the audience and the actors to make it work. Therefore it is important that discussions before your visit cover how to act responsibly in a theatre, as this can dramatically alter the experience for both your children and other members of the audience.

In these discussions it is helpful to think about how you act can affect other people's enjoyment of the performance, and the actors' ability to carry out their job. Often people will have paid a lot of money to see a show, so it is worth discussing how they might react to a performance being disturbed, and think about creating your own guidelines for your visit.

There are no hard and fast rules for how to behave in a theatre. For example, laughing at almost any time in a pantomime would be strongly encouraged, but laughing at inappropriate moments and putting off the actors could be very disruptive in another play. What is and isn't appropriate is something you will have to decide with your class or family.

Here are some guidelines you might want to use as a starting point:

- I will give the performers my full attention
- I will respond to the actors and actions in a respectful manner
- I will be quiet during the performance so others are not distracted
- I will turn off my mobile phone or other electronic device
- I will only eat and drink in the interval

## **Managing Children's Responses:**

Children often surprise with their insights and analysis after watching a piece of theatre.

In order to generate the best responses it is important to avoid making discussions of the play feel like a test. Ask open-ended, non-leading questions about how the play made them feel and what they thought the play was trying to communicate. It is often beneficial to personalise questions – don't ask what the play was about, ask what *they think* the play was about.

Importantly, by asking questions in this way there is no right or wrong answer. You should explain that it is fine for children to disagree with each other as they might have experienced the performance in a different way to others. The beauty of theatre is that it is open to interpretation, and a child's interpretation is as valid as any other.

Children's responses are often very spontaneous, they may make free associations with their own worlds or with other imagery with which they're familiar, which can be very telling and sometimes funny. Be prepared to accept all interpretations and connections, however improbable, because these are usually genuine ways of responding to something which maybe outside children's current experience. By accepting the more unusual responses you encourage children to think about theatre

in new ways, help them make theatre relevant to their own lives, and may even find the discussion veering off into interesting areas that you hadn't planned for.

Sometimes children might not have the language or context to respond to a play as fully as they would wish. Here it can be useful to provide information about the historical/political/cultural context of the play in advance. You could also give children additional information about the play as they react to it, to see how their thoughts change. There are glossaries of theatre terms online which may be beneficial when children are trying to respond to the play after your visit.

Watching a piece of theatre can often be a defining moment that stays with you for the rest of your life. As well as thinking about the play, children should be encouraged to remember how much they enjoyed the performance. For younger children, why not ask them to write and thank the people they met at the theatre and the performers that they enjoyed?

### **Following your visit**

After the visit it is important to get children responding straight away to how the play made them feel and what they thought the play was about. This doesn't just have to take the form of a discussion. The children could express themselves using other art forms such as drawing, painting or poetry; or they could be encouraged to create their own short pieces of theatre using themes from the play.

When using another form of artistic expression to respond to the play it is often beneficial to then question the child as to why they chose to respond in that way. For instance, if they drew one of the characters from the play you could ask the child why they used those colours, why they chose that character, or how they think that character is feeling to encourage them to think about the performance.

You can also encourage a considered response by asking children to read the script and think about how they would stage the play. They could even act out different parts of the play. Often it's better to not worry too much about the exact lines but just to recreate the feelings from the play or to explore the key themes. It can be fun to ask children to improvise scenes from the play or even to improvise the characters in different settings or contexts.

A piece of theatre is a great opportunity for cross-curricular study. It can easily be used to examine the historical or literary context. Themes from the play can be taken as a launch point for potentially discussing all areas of the curriculum from science to geography to maths. For older children it can also be an excellent way of discussing more serious social issues in a less personal way, from racism to sexuality to violence.

It is vital, if possible, to take the children to same theatre again. This breeds a familiarity and comfort with that venue, and encourages them to visit again of their own accord. You could even give the child, or the child's parent(s), details of suitable performances coming up so that they can plan their own visits.