



EARLY YEARS THEATRE

MASTERCLASS & LAB

by ThinkArts

with FRATZ International

facilitated by Sananda Mukhopadhyaya



PHASE I REPORT

Theatre for Early Years in India

is a fairly young practice that came to light 15 years ago. Some artists and organisations actively involved in Theatre for Young Audiences, including ThinkArts immediately responded to this field. They started researching existing practices from around the world and bringing some of them to India. This movement also brought about a shift in theatre-making and curation practices among theatre organisations who may not have imagined the possibility of an audience so young. Early Years Theatre practices in India have mostly been influenced by European practices, however over the years our artists have adapted the ideology to the Indian context.



What is the Early Years Theatre Lab?

ThinkArts has a long-established relationship with FRATZ International. Vera Strobel, Artistic Director, Theater o.N., FRATZ International and Berlin Schaufenster was one of the speakers at Engage: International Forum on the Arts for Children and Young People, an online forum presented by ThinkArts in association with Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata in November 2020.

This year's collaboration between FRATZ International and ThinkArts has two aspects to it:

- 1) **Curating** a performance for the very young produced in India to be showcased at **FRATZ International: Encounters - Symposium - Festival for the very young**
- 2) **Facilitating a lab space** for artists to develop their thinking and practice for the very young

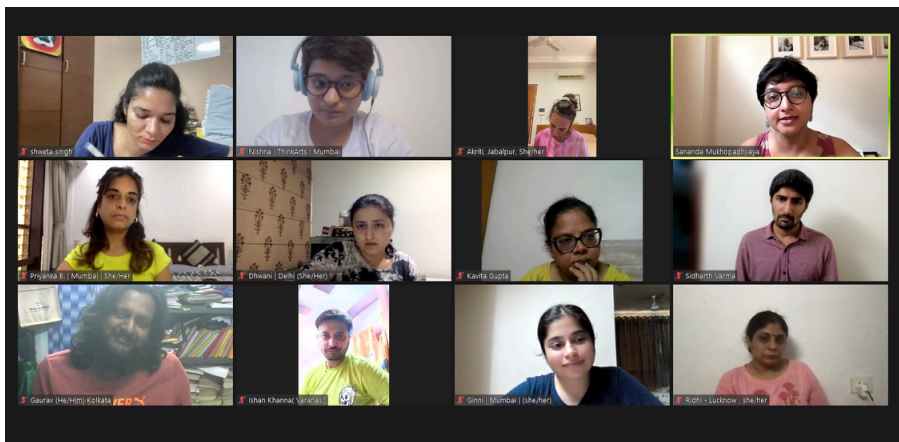
This Early Years Theatre Lab is the **first of its kind** in ThinkArts' repertoire. As the needs and goals of each project are unique to the collaborating organisations, this project too is unique in itself.

After considering different ways to make this opportunity **accessible** to more artists across the country we decided to facilitate it **virtually** in 2 phases.

Phase 1

A series of 4 online master classes
facilitated by Sananda Mukhopadhyaya
June - August, 2024

11th June, Tuesday 6 pm to 7:30 pm IST
25th June, Tuesday 6 pm to 7:30 pm IST
9th July, Tuesday 6 pm to 8 pm IST
13th August, Tuesday 6 pm to 8 pm IST



The master class brought together 31 individuals from a variety of professional backgrounds ranging from theatre, theatre-in-education, drama education, dance, television, storytelling and puppetry.

Being a virtual master class, it also brought about geographical diversity with participants from different towns and cities in the states of Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

The master class brought together new and past participants of ThinkArts engagements thus strengthening the community of Early Years Theatre practitioners.

Phase 1 in numbers



4

SESSIONS



31

PARTICIPANTS



15

CITIES AND
TOWNS

Phase 2

Two participants selected to create solo performances for the very young under the mentorship of Sananda (mid-August to mid-October)

Session 1

focused on understanding the world of the very young and the needs that the theatre fulfils. The participants were taken on a journey to think about their childhood and the realisation that we often tend to “adultify”* experiences for the very young. The session further delved into what the physical world of the very young looks like, the practical aspects of bringing it into performance and the sensory experience.

The session also reminded the adult makers that very young children are simple beings and have simple needs.

The one truth to hold on to is that we are no longer very young and never will be so we can only imagine, learn, research, observe.



**The theatre’s needs
can be
simple.**

***Adultify, a term borrowed from
The Importance of Being Little,
Erika Christakis**

Session 2

dove into the practical aspects of applying the ideas and philosophies discussed in Session 1. The presence of the performer, mitigating traditional ideas to navigate what being present means in the context of early years theatre.

A “starter-kit” asking lots of questions to find answers to during the creative process were explored like -

The presence of the performer

What is the performer’s sthayibhav or constant state of being? This should dictate one’s presence on stage, be authentic.

The world of the play Research

How does studying everything related to the world of the play - language, games, toys, material, socio-political and historical contexts - help the maker and performer build the world of the play?

Sequencing

What is the logic of the series of actions transpiring in the performance (not to be mistaken for a narrative!)

Repetition

What actions, sounds, moments are being repeated? How much repetition is necessary?

Storyboarding


What is the performer doing in every moment of being on stage?



**You don’t always
have to think about
a beginning, middle
and end for plays
for early years.
They live in an
abstract world.**

**The weight of the word
“understand” is too much to carry.
What stays with them is not in our
control. We need to give space for
the experience to soak in.
Priyanka B**

**Participants
speak**



**Presence to me in that case would be,
being aware of me while being aware of
the other and not getting taken away by
the other’s actions but being there
watching/ observing it.
Navedita**

Session 3

extensively explored eye contact - how it helps to establish where to pay attention, the nuances of a narrow and wide gaze, a shifting gaze, pauses, silences and sharing of moments and discovery.

The session further delved into the practicalities of what it means to engage the audiences in relation to objects, material, space, sound, body. It explored how to design the sensorial narrative for the very young.

**When you work with children I feel, the calmer
the eyes are, the easier it is to connect with you.
Sidharth Varma**

Session 4

brought everyone's ideas together into an evening of watching and reflecting on exchanges from the 3 sessions.



Exchange of information

Since the participants came from a range of professions and backgrounds, the exchange of information and perspectives of early childhood too was diverse with experiences of growing up in different parts of India to experiences in the classroom or within families.

Apart from the interactions during the sessions, we also compiled a document of projects, productions, tours of Theatre for Early Years initiated by ThinkArts and other organisations across India. Some of our colleagues were generous enough to give permission to share full recordings of their productions for the participants to view.

The FRATZ International team too shared their philosophy and approach to Theatre for Early Years as well as full recordings of some of the shows produced by Theater o.N.

The lab was a stimulating experience as a lot of things unfolded with just simple discussions and examples.

Ridhi Aggarwal



Community building and collaborations

Ruchira Das, Founder and now Advisor at ThinkArts first came in contact with Theater o.N and FRATZ International through Vera Strobel, Artistic Director - whom she met at the Edinburgh International Children's Festival. They continued to stay in touch when Ruchira visited Theater o.N in Berlin, and later the FRATZ Festival in 2017. Both organisations kept in contact with each other's work over the years. Vera also spoke at the Engage Forum presented online by ThinkArts in 2020, where she spoke about ways in which cultural spaces for young people could be made more accessible and inclusiveness could be ensured.

One of the many objectives of the Engage Forum was to open the possibility for collaboration among various individuals working in the arts for children and young people sector and institutions across the globe. A few years later, this took form with a collaboration that went beyond a visit or a single presentation. ThinkArts became a cooperation partner for the upcoming edition of FRATZ International: Encounters - Symposium - Festival for the Very Young.

While there was an open call for the lab participants, many of the participants were old associates in some way or another. Some participants ThinkArts had worked closely with previously in developing new theatre pieces for young audiences, some participants had been participants of previous capacity-building workshops, and some had been close observers and friends of ThinkArts' work.

At least three participants have worked closely on storytelling projects with ThinkArts earlier, and one has even been a ThinkArts Grantee.

The community afforded by a shared space of labour and interests has grown over the years, and ThinkArts often finds itself meeting familiar faces. Two lab participants took the time and effort to attend a show ThinkArts was touring in partnership with Company Mafalda and Chamar bell clochette—where we found the venue organisers, too, knew the lab participants.

It indeed is a small world, especially the world of Theatre for the Very Young. And so, apart from the potential in performance-making ideas, for stage 2 of the lab we looked at choosing people from different backgrounds, i.e., theatre and education who are also at early stages of their journey in this field to ensure the practice is taken forward and the community grows.

I would really like to be mentored in devising and detailing out a piece for the age group 6 months to 3 years... This request also comes from the realisation that 'Theatre for Early Years' needs to grow and evolve in our country. It is a small tribe right now who are attempting to increase the reach of quality work for this age group. I would like to be a part of this growing tribe.

Mudita Agarwal



Challenges

Organising a series of online master classes presents a unique set of challenges that can impact both the quality of the learning experience and the overall success of the program. From technical difficulties and varying levels of participant engagement to the complexities of coordinating across different time zones, each hurdle requires careful planning and adaptive solutions. This section explores the key challenges encountered during our online master classes and the strategies employed to address them.

Like any virtual programme with a series of multiple sessions, this master class too witnessed challenges in consistency and maintaining activity. However, throughout the series of master classes, over 75% of the participants were regularly attending and most of them actively participated.

One of the aspects of in-person workshops that is always missing in virtual interactions are the 'water cooler conversations'. Organisers keep finding various ways to facilitate these to suit their environment and time restrictions. We attempted using Padlet, a collaborative web platform with shared boards and sticky notes to share thoughts, questions and wonderings in between sessions. During the initial phases, it was buzzing with activity. However, as the sessions progressed, it saw only a handful of regular posts.

Time restrictions played a role here too, especially with the curiosity the participants came with and the further curiosity that the discussions in the sessions invoked.

Conclusion

Despite the usual challenges of virtual interactions, this series of master classes was a success not only because of the diversity in the room but also the exchange. Thanks to Sananda for curating the sessions to be free flowing and sharing in-depth insights from her experience and the active participation of the participants in each session. The last session of the masterclass saw more than half of the participants sharing their ideas and taking away learnings from Sananda.

While it was a space for professionals working for and with children between 0 to 6 years of age to enhance their practice and experiment in a theatre practice for this age group, there were several with experience in working with different age groups of young people, or had no theatrical experience at all. In this, one of the original purposes of the lab to grow the community was achieved.

After almost ten years of facilitating international exchanges in this space for the very young, ThinkArts is proud to be able to design and host a programme in an entirely Indian context with support from FRATZ International: Encounters - Symposium - Festival for the Very Young

I initially thought Theatre for Children is more about acting, expressing & performing while creating something beautiful for them. But this master class broke all my assumptions. Theatre for Children is much more and goes much deeper.

Priyanka Adhikary

About ThinkArts

ThinkArts was founded in December 2013 to facilitate high quality, transformative arts engagements for children and young adults, based on the belief that regular creative experiences are essential for children to develop their imagination and emotional intelligence. We have reached thousands of children and young people across India through our work in schools, museums, heritage spaces and theatres, collaborating with over 75 national and international partners.

Along with curating arts engagements across age groups, ThinkArts has hosted international performances, capacity building projects for artists and educators and created co-productions in the field of Early Years Theatre. From inviting international productions like Flying Cow by De Stilte (The Netherlands), Out of the Blue by Sarah Argent & Theatr lolo (Wales), Woodbeat by Helios Theater (Germany) to master classes by Dalija Acin Thelander (Sweden), Sarah Argent and Kevin Lewis (Wales) to co-productions like Into the Daydreaming with Dalija Acin Thelander (Sweden), Kaath with Helios Theater (Germany), Cooking Pot with Theatre lolo (Wales) and the in-house installation and production Dreamscape, ThinkArts has contributed extensively to the Early Years Theatre landscape of India since 2015.



About FRATZ International

FRATZ International: Encounters - Symposium - Festival for the Very Young has been presented by Theater o.N. in Berlin since 2013 and has since established itself as an important international children's theatre festival in Europe. Every two years, FRATZ invites remarkable guest performances to Berlin. It also hosts a symposium to discuss and explore the latest developments in dance and theatre for very young audiences. Colleagues from all over the world meet in Berlin for this international exchange.

The festival is aimed at children from 0-6 years and follows a decentralised approach. It is important that art and culture should be accessible to all people, regardless of age or social or cultural background. Therefore it is a core element of the festival that the guest performances are shown all across Berlin — sometimes at temporary venues in districts where, otherwise, theatre rarely occurs.

Before, during and after the festival, FRATZ offers the FRATZ Encounters, a workshop program for preschool children between the ages of two and four.

The respective experiences and results of a FRATZ year are documented and evaluated in the FRATZ Reflections. The brochure is printed in German and English and made available online free of charge to the public.



About Sananda

Sananda is a theatre maker and art based educator based in Mumbai, India. Her first play for the early years was for babies - 'Warp and Weft' was created under the mentorship of Sarah Argent and Kevin Richard Lewis as part of 'Shishu-Baban' a collaboration between ThinkArts, Kolkata and Theatre lolo, Cardiff (2017). She then directed 'Oool' for Tram Arts trust, under the mentorship of Barbara Kolling from Helios Theatre, Germany in a series of mentorships facilitated by the Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, New Delhi (2018). She has since been regularly making works for the early years. Her works explore materials, movement and musicality. Other plays she has directed are - 'Hanv Gara Asa' for ages 2 - 4, commissioned Serendipity Arts Festival (2019), 'Golla' was commissioned by Ranga Shankara Theatre, Bangalore for their Children's Theatre Festival 'Aha!' (2021, digital). 'Ee Gida, Aa Mara' for ages 2 to 3.5 commissioned by Ranga Shankara (2022) and most recently Saglejan Kheltat / Everyone Plays commissioned by QUEST for Gostarang (2023).

