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Laurier professor helps unlock theatre for handicapped children

Drops of salt water are delicately placed by helpers on the cheeks of a youthful audience as an actor talks about crying. In another play, the scent of a pine forest breezes through a school gymnasium as its characters journey through a fantasy land.

Those are just two of the innovative ways theatre is beginning to be adapted for physically and developmentally handicapped children prompted by the findings of a year-long research project by an English professor at Wilfrid Laurier University.

By presenting plays with special features designed to appeal to the senses and monitoring their effects, Leslie O'Dell has helped to unlock the theatrical experience for physically and developmentally handicapped children.

And Lynne McNab, a Laurier alumna who inspired the project and served as O'Dell's research assistant, is now using the results in her own theatre company, ACTSENSE. Its first 18 performances in Southwestern Ontario over Christmas were sold out and two other plays are being prepared for tour in March.

Entitled "Theory and Practice of Theatrical Performance for

Developmentally and Physically Handicapped Children," the project was conceived when the two met up on campus in 1987 and McNab, who majored in music, shared with her former director a personal dream of starting a company for severely handicapped children.

"Children with special needs can't just go with their school to a play," said McNab, who at that point had worked for a year both in children's theatre and with severely handicapped children. "If you can't see and can't hear, you can't appreciate it."

They decided to collaborate and soon made a daunting discovery, O'Dell said. "Nowhere -- not in Canada, the United States, Australia, nor the United Kingdom -- were there any theatre companies whose performances were oriented towards the handicapped audience. And there was just as little academic material on the subject.

"Social workers, teachers, and theatre groups all wanted to know what we had learned because they have immediate uses for this kind of information."

With funding from the university, the actual work began in February, 1988. O'Dell created a play, *The Fiery Crystal*, which McNab directed. Using two actors and a musician, it consisted of a base production in which sensory stimuli were added at crucial moments.

Music, for example, could consist of either musical punctuation such as the drum roll that accompanies a fall, or continuous underscoring. As well, the actor's voice could be modified from speaking to swinging, and the resulting change in

audience response measured.

Other senses were stimulated at appropriate times within the play. Bright colors are a given in children's theatre, but O'Dell knew it was important to record response at how an object was brought into a child's range of vision.

Touch required the actors to place objects directly into a child's hand, or brush it across the face, along with the direct contact of the child by the actor.

To stimulate the sense of smell, objects were doused with characteristic scents, or a specific smell permeated the performance space.

The sensory variables were linked to moments that defined various components of the play, such as its theme or conflict. And characters could be associated with a specific musical theme, smell, or touch.

The show was performed 15 times, with the actors using the same movements, positioning, and intonation when delivering their lines. The sensory variables were added in combination or alone at each separate performance.

The response of each child in the audience was carefully recorded by a teacher or aide who could 'read' them, O'Dell said. "The teachers know what the children's normal responses are; what gestures or sounds they generally make, no matter how minimal those signals are."

The results showed that the variables work best in combination: smell and touch being especially powerful together, while all music worked well. Even touch alone, coming as it did

from a stranger, was a powerful stimulus.

As O'Dell had hoped, the children could respond to the event as a theatrical experience when it was performed in their intimate sphere; that is, six children no more than six feet apart from each other, and no more than three feet from a performer.

A second play, *The Sad King*, was performed to test assumptions from the first and to examine the response of an integrated audience of 'normal' and handicapped children, since that is the trend in schools. The cast of four actors gave six integrated performances in circumstances approximating normal touring company conditions.

O'Dell said the results of the second experiment were not as clear as the first and the problems of integration have not been solved.

"In an integrated setting, the handicapped children encountered sight limitations and isolation from the actors due to the actual (expanse) a school gymnasium. The pace of action was affected, and the noise volume of the normal children shadowed or overpowered the gentler response of the handicapped.

"But one good point was made clear," O'Dell added. "Large amounts of sensory stimuli in any children's play will work very well for audiences of all levels of ability."

The third stage of research took place in the summer of 1988, in which the O'Dell-McNab production style became fine-tuned in a very rapid series of plays. Each one tested a different idea, be it poetry -- Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

condensed to a 30- and ten-minute version -- audience participation, or the thematic exploration of death.

"I believe children cry out for opportunities to explore dark issues and fears through art." In this case, even the severely handicapped children empathized with the actors, while higher functioning children expressed sadness.

O'Dell is now working on the presentation of her results of these two trials in two forms: the first in practical terms and suggestions for use by theatre professionals, and secondly, more extensive reports for scholars in various academic disciplines.

"The result of this year's work is not only scholarship for many disciplines, but a way of inspiring and directing theatre professionals to provide to a forgotten audience," O'Dell said.

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