

The Effectiveness of Traditional Theatre and Digital Interactive Theatre in Developing Communication and Creativity Skills in Children with Excessive Screen Use: A Comparative Analytical Approach -A Comparative Analytical Approach-

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Abstract:

In a rapidly accelerating world that seeks depth and distinction in fast communication, learners face a real challenge: they must process their surroundings quickly while achieving distinction and creativity. Our belonging to an open world today exposes us to multiple angles of auditory, visual and cognitive perception, urging us to understand the child who has grown accustomed to screens and immediate leaps. This situation presents us with a significant challenge: how can we develop this group's cognitive and psychological personality by harnessing play, which forms an essential part of their daily activity and cannot be underestimated?

Play creates psychological, sensory and cognitive relationships between the child and their learning environment. These relationships enable the child to overcome obstacles and process emotions that they have not yet learned to deal with appropriately. Play also supports the formation of healthy relationships with peers, contributing to a child's personal and mental development. With this in mind, we consider traditional theatre and improvisational (interactive) theatre to be complementary strategies to the child's play instinct. These strategies introduce new parameters through which children can learn performance techniques and 'ways of working'. The child should grasp these techniques instinctively while simultaneously building their ability to perceive, capture and analyse during the interactive performance stage. This methodological sequence, moving from innate play to interactive performance, helps child learners achieve fair and balanced integration into a rapidly growing, diverse society. This leads us to a central idea: the need to support this group of learners constructively and productively, using simple methods to help them express their potential without denying their right to distinctiveness and creativity.

To further clarify this idea, we must move beyond unifying visions of ideal beauty and instead encourage what is different from us. We must respect the child's physical and psychological capacities and redefine what is beautiful, ideal and authentically creative.

Introduction:

The use of theatre in a child's life, especially for those who experience difficulties in verbal communication, is not intended to refer to speech disorders that require therapeutic follow-up. Rather, it concerns children who struggle to express themselves due to prolonged digital isolation. Such situations call for supportive, nurturing environments in which children become

integral parts of places, feelings, and creative interactions. This fosters the development of a child's imagination within visual, sensory, and auditory spaces, where the learner-child relationship becomes as close to total fusion and complete integration in action as possible. Consequently, the child transitions from passive reception to active, productive engagement.

By directing the child's imagination toward the boundless horizon of images and by drawing on the child's innate spontaneity and love of play, a strong bridge is built toward understanding the self, valuing it, and recognizing spaces of achievement and motivation. This is achieved by stimulating the desire to participate and to be uniquely distinct in a particular way—through employing all points of the child's body and using them deliberately. This involves adapting body language to facial expressions, gestures, and hand movements, as well as raising the eyebrows, staring, bringing the hands closer, smiling, and more. In this context, non-verbal style carries the largest share of the message, while the language of action carries the largest share of expressing the uniqueness of the self.

Accordingly, the educational process in the learning environment shifts from a routine that is harsh and painful for a child who faces challenges in verbal and social communication, to one that imitates the deep, innate nature of human beings and supports their physical, psychological and spiritual development.

Perhaps the two most important pillars emphasised by institutions concerned with child development when designing their educational and developmental programmes today are variety and individual distinctiveness. Variety acts as a mechanism for identifying the child's innate abilities. Distinctiveness is a specialised mechanism that develops the strong and profound aspects of the child's personality. Consequently, theatre becomes a real intermediary in rebuilding the child's cognitive identity, particularly for those who experience difficulties communicating with themselves and their surroundings.

Through this research paper, we seek to address the main problem:

How can theatre, both traditional and interactive, contribute to self-awareness development in children who struggle with verbal and social communication? How can this child generate creative communication based on a language that is consistent with their psychological and physical nature?

Hypotheses:

This article assumes that interactive theatre complements traditional theatre, and that this integration creates a cumulative, living experience for the child. This experience is lived through the child's body on stage and their imagination in digital spaces. Furthermore, by gently guiding children away from the digital world they are accustomed to, we enable them to engage with experiences that are similar to those they are familiar with. This involves combining real and virtual experiences while ensuring that the visual effects are deliberate and well-designed. This enables children to transition smoothly into fully experiencing live performances with harmony and complete presence.

Traditional theatre allows for the optimal use of bodily energy through movement, voice, facial expressions and the rhythm of communicating with others in the same space.

- Interactive theatre provides an active environment that enables child performers to engage with the audience in an improvisational manner. This develops active attention and dramatic

surprise, both of which are suitable tools for creativity through the optimal use of ideas, feelings and live events on stage.

Methodology:

Descriptive-analytical approach: We use this approach to describe real and digital spaces, and analyse the mechanisms by which they operate within the experience of reception and mutual production.

- Comparative approach: We use this to compare the specific features of traditional theatre and digital interactive theatre, i.e. live presence versus imagined presence.

1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

1.1 The nature of communication

In order to understand the process of communication, it is important to recognise that every communication act involves a set of shared characteristics, elements and original principles. Mastering these elements enables us to understand the skills of effective communication. Some researchers view communication as the transfer of information from one person to another or to groups. Others focus on the processes that allow meaning to be formed and concepts to be exchanged.

Communication occurs through three main levels, which we summarise as follows:

A. The linear view (linear model): Communication is regarded as a one-way event in which the sender encodes (or constructs) a message and delivers it to a relatively passive receiver, who then decodes or interprets it. The message is not limited to words, but includes everything conveyed through words, sounds and facial expressions.

B. The interactive view: The process moves in two directions. The sender and receiver exchange information alternately: the sender transmits a message, the receiver decodes it and responds with feedback indicating either understanding or lack thereof. The sender may also adjust the message. In this view, communication is aligned with its intended purpose when the receiver's feedback shows that they have understood the message.

C. The transactional view

When the sender sends a message, they simultaneously receive information from the message itself and from the person they are communicating with. Thus, both the sender and the receiver participate in constructing shared meanings through the continuous exchange of messages¹.

1.2 Screen time in children and its impact on effective communication

Technology has become an inseparable part of children's lives; many of them spend long hours using various forms of digital media. These tools have adapted to everyday life with impressive speed and have recently become easier to use and more widely available at affordable prices, which has significantly increased consumption rates. Consequently, new terms have emerged in academic research, primarily falling under the categories of addiction and excessive consumption.

Researchers generally agree on a commonly cited definition of this phenomenon: the amount of time a user spends with electronic media, such as watching television or films, playing games

¹- Marlène Frand and Lin Cook, *Interactions: Cooperative Skills of School Specialists (or School Practitioners)*, Al-Hawthwani, Amman, Jordan, 1st ed., 2017, p. 62. / Dar Al-Fikr, Amman, Jordan, 1st edition, 2017, p. 62.

on tablets or laptops, and playing computer games — activities that are often practised while sitting or lying down. These media usage patterns substantially contribute to the amount of time individuals of all ages spend on largely inactive activities.

In reality, after years of this behaviour spreading, it has become clear that we are facing a real crisis in verbal communication and social interaction with this growing group of children, whose numbers increase every year. The early years of development are a critical stage for brain growth and acquiring the foundations of learning, such as language and social behaviour. These experiences enable children to build healthy relationships and avoid potential risks in later life². One of the most important early-years experiences of the past century regarding the dangers of children being exposed to television screens for long periods was the case of the director of a centre for underprivileged children, 'Harlem Children' (for preschool-age children). It was observed that, upon arrival at the centre, the children were unable to utter a single coherent sentence correctly, despite medical examinations showing no physical or mental impairment. Initially, their condition was diagnosed as a speech defect. However, centre staff later discovered that it was temporary mutism resulting from a lack of interaction with the real world, as the children's prior experience was limited to watching excessive amounts of television in their previous places of residence³.

2. Traditional theatre: Between Collective Play and Simulation

2.1 Children's Theatre

Children's theatre provides a boundless arena for nurturing a child's imagination and fostering creative thinking, particularly during the early developmental stages. It enables the creation of endless worlds that blend rich imagination and excitement with topics drawn from everyday reality, human experiences and deeply rooted human values.

Through theatre, children can experience these things in an unlimited number of times and spaces. In traditional theatre, this occurs through the embodied physical experience on stage in the moment. In digital theatre, however, it is governed by the rule of immersion in an ultra-guided digital environment.

The term 'children's theatre' describes performances directed at a child audience, presented by child or adult performers. Its aims generally range between education and entertainment⁴.

Perhaps the specificity of theatre, which directly intersects with participatory play and role reversal, encourages the child to engage with this experience affectionately and spontaneously. In theatre, children find an open space for expressing their feelings and ideas, away from instruction, memorisation and mechanical drilling, which may conflict with the particularities of this developmental stage. As has been stated, 'children's theatre is a key support for the educational process', relying on frameworks and mechanisms that suit children's nature and

²- Karani, N. F. and Sher, J. Mofosho, 'The Influence of Screen Time on Children's Language Development: A Scoping Review'. *South African Journal of Communication Disorders*, 2022, 69(1):825.

³- Mare Wynn, 'Children and Television Addiction', trans. Abd al-Fattah al-Subhi. 'Alam al-Ma'rifa (World of Knowledge)', 1999, p. 65.

⁴- Madi, Hanan Qasab Ilyas. 'The Drama Dictionary: Concepts and Terms. Theatre and Performing Arts, Beirut, Lebanon, 1977, p. 44.

mindset, which differ by nature from adult mentality and identity. In this sense, theatre provides the most effective means of engaging both the minds and feelings of children⁵.

A child, by nature, continuously seeks a way to play; for this reason, theatre becomes a living space in which even serious dialogues—regardless of whether we consider them simple or “naïve”—take up residence.

In early childhood, children’s theatre requires scripts that focus on imagination. These children do not need theatre in the traditional sense, but rather creative play that lasts no more than twenty minutes. This play should focus on movement and include elements that fascinate children, such as colours, lighting, décor, costumes and accessories. The theatrical features of this stage are often enacted in a world of animals and birds.

The middle stage of childhood, which lasts from six to nine years, requires a script that emphasises free imagination while incorporating educational and social guidance. This guidance affirms social values indirectly. It should also include adventure and fairy-tale narratives such as the enchanted woman, the seven dwarves in Snow White, or Aladdin’s lamp. In the later stage of childhood, from 9 to 12 years old, the script should focus on imagination connected to reality. Children at this stage are interested in heroism and the triumph of truth. The plays presented to them at this stage have a pedagogical and social character, reinforce religious and moral values, and express national identity indirectly. Additionally, they incorporate scientific and historical information in a way that clearly reflects the unique dramatic style of each age group⁶.

However, this does not negate the fact that play, in all its forms, colours, shapes and mechanisms, remains the common element among these patterns. It is almost impossible for a child to interact fully outside a play environment because social distinctions fade in that setting and innate skills become dominant, such as physical fluidity and mental quick-wittedness. These prepare the way for complete integration within the atmosphere of play.

2.2 Pretend play (imaginative play):

Pretend play is widely regarded as the most important aspect of children’s theatre. Without it, theatre becomes a dry and weak performance lacking the spirit of staging and dramatic construction. The role of the child performer extends beyond acting and imitation to encompass their inherent sense of enjoyment and purity.

As some critics have noted, what distinguishes acting as an art form from other arts is its reliance on play. This is why certain living languages use the term ‘play’ as a synonym for ‘acting’. Similarly, theatre sources say that a performer ‘plays’ a role rather than merely ‘acts’ it. Some even argue that a dramatic work becomes more enjoyable when it is transformed into a play⁷.

⁵- Al-Maliki, M. N. (2014). 'The characteristics of children's theatre and its types, and its relationship to the educational process'. Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad, Al-Karkh 1, Issue 26, April 2014, p. 46.

⁶- Al-Maliki, M. N., 'The Characteristics of Children’s Theatre and Its Types, and Its Relationship to the Educational Process', p. 49.

⁷- Mohamed Nouasra, Jamal: Highlights on School Theatre and Children’s Drama: Theory and Application'. 'Alam al-Kutub al-Hadith (The World of Modern Books), 1st ed., Jordan, 2003, p. 75.

Some people believe that play is merely a passing, secondary stage in a child's life — a time when they have free moments between other activities, such as studying, watching television or using digital media. In reality, however, play is a complete world for the child, offering a structured universe of events, facts and ideas. Through play, children are able to develop their sense of self and build their personalities in ways that other mechanisms cannot fully grasp or understand, along with the complexities that surround them.

‘Play consists of a set of skills practised by the child when they are free. The child chooses them independently, in their own way and at their own pace. This time can be spent in joy and enjoyment. In any case, play must be entirely driven by the child's will. The child selects what to play with and whom to play with.’⁸

The researcher's use of the term ‘freedom’ encompasses many meanings and implications that intersect with the nature of the human being. In her serious inquiry into the meaning of permanence and existence (or being), the freedom of choice granted to the child enables them to establish the first boundaries and initial thresholds towards discovering and defining the self according to what is present, tangible and meaningful within their current environment.

“When we impose a specific theatrical text or form on a child, we force them to express what we want. However, when we encourage children to express themselves freely and spontaneously, whether through movement or speech, we enable them to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. This supports growth and contributes to the healthy development of the child's personality.”⁹

According to the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA), drama therapy enables participants to express their feelings and inner thoughts, set goals, overcome challenges and free themselves from emotional traumas that have often been neglected in favour of digital media and electronic screens¹⁰. In a child's world, play includes group activities where roles are taken on and exchanged simultaneously. Breaking the cycle of silence and passive reception enables the child to develop a clearer understanding of their individuality. In other words, the screen is no longer a mirror of the self; it becomes a burden that prevents a return to sound instincts and a simpler way of life.

‘As the child plays, there are moments in which the child portrays characters. There are also emotional situations. This is what we call dramatic play. Children at this stage have a greater ability to play, imitate and reproduce than adults because imitation comes naturally to them at this stage of mental and emotional development’¹¹.

This leads us to argue that returning to pretend play is a return to the child's nature. It is the only way to rediscover creativity, transforming the child from a passive consumer into a producer of performed texts that encourage interaction with their weaknesses and draw them towards an unlimited horizon of achievement and discovery.

⁸- Jamila bint Mustafa al-Zaqay, *Poetics of Theatre in the Moroccan Child Scene*, Arab Theatre Organization, United Arab Emirates, 1st ed., 2017, p. 34.

⁹- Siukasanili, Fairiet. *Children Make Their Own Theatre*. Trans. Sa'd Ahmad al-Maghribi. (Arab Thought House), no edition note, Cairo, 1991, p. 2.

¹⁰- (DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2024.8080359>).

¹¹- Mohamed Abd al-Mounam, *Theatre and Children's Drama*, ‘Alam al-Kutub, Cairo, n.d., p. 289.

3. Communication with the Surrounding World and Self-Awareness

It is impossible to speak about self-awareness without attempting to understand the complexities of human emotion. The concept of the self eludes any definition that words can offer, no matter how precise or profound they may be. When the self becomes clearer and more settled, it can be reduced to a pure feeling in the present moment. By nature, a child is not truly happy unless they are fully immersed in the present moment, dissolving into it with all their senses.

Our use of the term “living interaction” in the discussions to come is therefore justified. We seek to rebuild social skills obscured by the screen, taking into account the developmental and cognitive features of each stage, which begin to manifest through a child’s behaviour and repeated questions about their feelings and ideas. Children try to express these feelings and ideas through movement and role-playing.

Using educational theatre provides children with strong opportunities for experiential learning at this stage due to its impact on children’s emotional and cognitive states. Educational theatre supports the idea that individuals learn by observing and receiving feedback from others, as well as through self-reflection and interaction with the environment. This enables children to view life as spectators and make conscious ethical decisions about situations presented to them. This forms a ‘cognitive playground’, where children can experience the consequences of their own and others’ behaviours indirectly¹².

For a child, play is a fundamental means of discovering the self and reconsidering one’s thoughts and judgements about the environment one inhabits. The absence of this experience may result in a missed opportunity for psychological development, social openness and the benefits of lived experiences that can help one to recover from setbacks. For a child, play is a stepping stone towards becoming and being present in reality.

When an adult assumes a role, they perform it as an appearance and act in order to appear a certain way. The adult also always expresses the self in relation to reality. Children act as if in order to be, to satisfy their immediate personal needs, even when collective work is necessary for that purpose. They do the same when trying to establish their identity: they conceal it, search for it, find it, adjust it and place it within an imaginary context... and so on.”¹³.

It is now clear that preparing a child to have meaningful experiences requires us to implement a comprehensive programme that encompasses the psychological dimension and other aspects of life necessary for individuals to navigate life’s experiences as smoothly as possible. Accordingly, investing in play is the first step towards capturing the attention of children addicted to screens and redirecting it towards the outside world.

The relationship that children form with what they see on stage — whether they perform on stage themselves or take part in any group game — is comprehensive and total. They voluntarily surrender themselves to what happens within the game, with complete willingness and intense engagement. Therefore, theatre in general and play in particular serve as effective means of

¹²- Monks, Helen; Ayles, Jennifer; and Thomson, Shane, 'The Use of Theatre in Education (TIE): Edith Cowan University Child Health Promotion Research Centre, March 2012, p. 5.

¹³- Siukasanili, Fairiet. *Children Make Their Own Theatre*, p. 76.

education, talent development and inner refinement. It is therefore assumed to be an effective way of addressing specific cases, such as children's addiction to electronic games and digital screens.

Recent studies have found that children's theatre has a strong impact on children and their development. They have also shown that engaging in imaginative activities such as theatre can strengthen intelligence and help young minds to see the world from a different perspective. This allows them to imagine new worlds, unique possibilities and creative ideas. Additionally, children who attend live theatre demonstrate greater tolerance towards different people and ideas, as well as increased empathy towards others¹⁴.

In this experience, the child encounters real life as it truly is, rather than the digital world they are accustomed to, with its moving images, multiple colours and audio-visual effects. The child lives to experience life, breathing with clarity.

3.1 Mechanisms for Building Effective Communication in Traditional Theatre

Traditional theatre is based on verbal and non-verbal communication. This creates a clear plot, suitable characters and balanced dialogue, driving the ritual of play and spectatorship to spaces of enjoyment and integration that are as wide as possible. Additionally, it adds an aesthetic and poetic dimension through its intelligent use of all things genuinely human, stemming from pure instinct, alongside a fundamental message that serves the hierarchy of ethical values while encouraging inquiry and critique.

As we are discussing children in the developmental–cognitive stage who have lost their natural right to enjoy these aesthetic aspects due to their immersion in the digital virtual stream, we have found that consolidating their initial communication skills is the cornerstone for building other learning outcomes and skills. Traditional theatre establishes the meaning of a living presence and prepares children to dispense with any intermediary that blocks their recognition of themselves and their perception of the surrounding elements.

A. Non-verbal communication

The ability to use and understand how others employ non-verbal cues skilfully is essential for maintaining healthy behaviours. It is also necessary for establishing and maintaining positive relationships. Furthermore, non-verbal communication can have a significant impact when used to clarify, confirm or distort the meaning of verbal messages.

You can communicate more effectively with a child learner when you understand the non-verbal messages they send and receive, and how each of you interprets them. Non-verbal messages are a central mechanism for conveying emotions and behaviours. This has been demonstrated in studies conducted in multiple laboratories over the past three decades.

In fact, I would argue that non-verbal messages are often more direct and transparent than verbal ones. Words are selected in a specific hierarchical order according to the meanings and contexts that a group has agreed upon. In this way, non-verbal communication operates according to the relationship between sender and receiver.

Researchers have also shown that non-verbal elements are more difficult to falsify with regard to the true intentions of the speaker. For instance, experts in non-verbal communication have

¹⁴- Kori Radolff, 'The Rose: Performing Arts for Children and Families. April 2016, p. 1.

developed diagnostic tools to detect deception in a given sentence or situation, such as taking a long time to answer a question, reducing eye contact, changing the topic frequently, taking frequent pauses and smiling less often. These mechanisms reveal the extent of the speaker's sincerity or lack thereof¹⁵.

A.1 Body language

Body language is the first critical threshold for engaging with a child who is addicted to digital media. As soon as the child recognises that they have a physical presence that is distinct from the device they are using, it creates a significant change in how they experience space and time. Here, the body becomes the strongest evidence that the child inhabits a different space to the one shown on the screen.

Understanding how body language affects our interactions and using it to communicate can have a profound impact on all our communication processes. Body language can be classified into body movement, such as posture, as well as facial expressions, signals and hand movements. This classification includes raising the eyebrows, staring, bringing the palms closer together and smiling gently. All of these are part of this classification. The number of signals and meanings carried by the body is immense, and non-verbal behaviour accounts for the largest share of a message's meaning. Body language carries the largest portion of meaning in non-verbal communication¹⁶.

The real problem arises when a child's body becomes merely a tool for navigating the algorithms of the digital world, reducing its role from an active element in constructing reality and producing meaning to that of a distorted consumer living in a fluctuating space and searching for immediate gratification and illusory pleasure.

B. Verbal communication

Verbal communication is formed through vocal cues, often referred to as 'paralanguage', which constitute the sound component of language rather than the verbal, or word-based, component. Sound is further evidence that the child can express their feelings and thoughts verbally, rather than falling silent and passively consuming external sounds through their digital/electronic device. It also conveys a vast amount of information separate from the verbal content of the message¹⁷.

Paralanguage includes vocal tone, loudness, the rhythm of speech and control over speech rate and pitch. It also includes the timing of silence, as well as many elements of paralanguage that may become pronounced when the speaker is experiencing strong emotions. In this sense, paralanguage encompasses the sounds that accompany the words forming the speech, as well as the silences during which participants in the communication process rely solely on eye contact or other signals. This produces a coherent rhythm throughout the entire communication process.

This experiment has taken us to the next stage of developing a first-grade child's attentional processes. This requires us to provide the greatest possible number of non-digital tools to

¹⁵- Marilyn Frand and Lin Cook, 'Interactions: Cooperative Skills of School Specialists', p. 101.

¹⁶- Marilyn Frand and Lin Cook, 'Interactions: Cooperative Skills of School Specialists', p. 102.

¹⁷- See: Marilyn Frand and Lin Cook, 'Interactions: Cooperative Skills of School Specialists', p. 103.

increase focus and sustain the child's engagement. These tools can be likened to assembling a jigsaw puzzle (or a 'bazar' game), in which the child acts as either a character on stage or a viewer in the auditorium — an integral part of the whole. Successful children's theatre does more than stimulate imagination; it works on deeper layers of the child's (and the audience's) subconscious, extending attention spans and encouraging children to "pull the strings" of the dramatic thread¹⁸.

Initially, 'Heartsell' acknowledges that sitting in a dark room may not come naturally to children, but this is precisely what is required. Since television is a common form of entertainment, children today are not accustomed to sustaining attention for an hour or an hour and a half; they see a new image every three to four seconds. They have become accustomed to continuous change, but have not learned how to listen. Full attention from a child who is accustomed to rapid rewards, brief scenes and programmed algorithms will not be achieved unless we establish an integrated system that filters inputs and strengthens healthy relationships, thereby building the child's confidence in their cognitive and creative abilities.

B.1 Listening Process (Cognitive Presence):

It is not possible to address the concept of extending a child's attention span without a complete understanding of the listening process. A full understanding of listening techniques and the listening process itself requires us to consider its essential components: hearing, attentive listening, comprehension and response. Listening involves all of these elements, even though the sequence of their occurrence varies according to different models¹⁹.

Hearing involves receiving sound waves as they travel at a specific frequency and intensity. This is an involuntary physiological process, but it is influenced by the listener's auditory capacity. In turn, auditory ability may be affected by continuous exposure to sounds of the same frequency or volume, similar background noises to those the listener is trying to hear and other factors. Many people experience hearing impairment due to heredity or acquired hearing loss. Those who interact with them must adapt their strategies accordingly.

This means that hearing does not always rely solely on sound. Some individuals depend on sign language to express their emotions. For this reason, we can assert that the listening process is a highly significant mechanism for enabling a child to acquire sound language and engage in effective communication with others, both within and beyond the auditorium²⁰.

From a communication perspective, listening is a highly precise process. Without listening at various degrees and stages, it becomes impossible to produce a clear and appropriate impact in the interactive process. This leads us to recognise the nature of dialogue in children's theatre, where silence is on a par with sound and words. Without the listening process, the 'code' of silence remains undeciphered and immediate interaction is not achieved.

¹⁸- Kori Radolff, 'The Rose: Performing Arts for Children and Families*', p. 2.

¹⁹- Adler, R. B. and Elmhorst, J., 2010. *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

²⁰- Malin Frand and Lin Cook, 'Interactions', p. 111.

B.2 Dialogue

In children's theatre, dialogue is governed by a set of criteria. One of the most important is taking into account the developmental stage of each group. Since we selected the cognitive stage of 3–7 years from the outset, the dialogue must prioritise clarity and directness when presenting ideas, clarifying events and shaping the characters' features — so that both the child actors and the audience feel they are experiencing things first-hand. This kind of dialogue enables children to safely express emotions and build an emotional map that supports the development of clear and healthy relationships within the surrounding community.

For us, the most important thing about dialogue is integration into the improvisation process. Improvisation helps children express ideas fluently without being constrained by constant monitoring or immediate correction from performers or directors. At the same time, it requires them to pay close attention, choose vocabulary that conveys their ideas and stay focused on the scene without getting distracted or confused. It also gradually helps the child develop a richer linguistic repertoire and a complete artistic 'map', improving their performance and their sense of the theatrical atmosphere.

As mentioned previously, children's theatre emphasises the concept of non-excessive compression in the conversational image. In early childhood in particular, children are guided by two dominant modes of thinking: they are presented with facts, people and ideas in concrete, visible, audible and tangible forms. Accordingly, these ideas and pieces of information are linked more to visual enactment than verbal expression. Children interact more readily with visual elements than with dialogue itself.

Meanwhile, the language used should be simple and smooth — language that can easily reach the child's mind²¹.

Under no circumstances should we belittle a child's creativity in theatre, especially during their early attempts to develop performative skills. At this stage, a child's emotions are the primary guiding factor, but we cannot ignore the cognitive aspect of their personality. Children are not seeking final answers; they are searching for beginnings, for dreams and hopes that deserve to be realised.

When we impose a particular play or theatrical form on a child, we force them to express what we want. However, when we encourage the child to express themselves freely and spontaneously, whether through movement or speech, we enable them to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. This supports their growth and contributes to the sound formation of their character.²²

This, in turn, encourages the child to develop their cognitive presence. Such presence can only be achieved after progressing through all levels of active response and active listening during the training phase. The process then moves the child away from the passive reception to which they have become accustomed through silent observation, towards a state of creativity and

²¹- See: Malik Naama Al-Maliki: *Characteristics of Children's Theatre and Its Types and Its Relationship to the Educational Process*, p. 57.

²²- Siukasanili, Fairiet. *Children Make Their Own Theatre*, p. 2.

distinctiveness within the performance production through evaluation and ongoing development.

4. Interactive Theatre

It is not possible to discuss interactive theatre without referring to digital theatre. As we explained from the beginning, children who overuse screens develop difficulties communicating with themselves and others. Therefore, any reckless attempt to forcibly remove the child from their world could lead to a setback and a return to digital isolation. For this reason, patience and wisdom are required when dealing with addiction to digital media.

As the saying goes, patience is necessary to master any art form, and learning this art requires patience, which is difficult for modern humans, as well as for systems and focus. Our artificial system feeds us with haste and impaired attention. For example, cars and aeroplanes transport passengers quickly — the faster, the better. The modern person believes they are losing time when they do not create things quickly. Yet they do not know what to do with the time they gain, except to waste it²³.

We argue that providing certain visual elements alongside live performances in interactive theatre allows children to gradually become immersed in the live experience, either as performers or audience members. The digital screen can be used to create the backdrop with supporting lighting and sound effects that complement the performance, rather than providing an excuse for excessive showmanship that distracts the child performer/audience from the present moment and fragments time with digital and virtual elements.

Additionally, dramatic surprise can be used to reveal or conceal characters, as well as to introduce tools and props. This enables the child performer/audience member to experience something unique where magic, imagination and fantasy meet technology.

This brings us to the most important point in the therapeutic plan: the child must understand that they are an individual with their own experiences, which enables them to control their use of the digital screen and turn it off without feeling empty or disoriented. This means that we have fostered a child who is truly independent of digital stimuli, one who recognises the importance of art in their life and appreciates its details — details that create spectacle and enchant both sender and receiver.

4.1 Bodily presence:

For a child who is beginning to perceive that there is a wider world beyond the limits of their immediate surroundings, being present in the moment enables them to appreciate this space and interpret it according to their own rhythm. At first, this space may seem routine, but it deserves careful attention to its details. The child's bodily presence within it activates their capacity for reflection and attentiveness. In such a context, there is no 'image' outside of these two conditions: attention and contemplation.

As previously mentioned, the body is the most important representation of iconic presence in live performance. It initiates and activates this iconicity and links shots and moments together. Here, the body is a spatial, meaning-producing entity because it is visible above all else.

²³- Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, trans. Majdad al-Mounam Majdad. Dar al-Awda, 2nd edition, Lebanon, p. 107.

We can also refer to Merleau-Ponty's assertion to understand the significance of the body's presence during an action:

'My body is form, as it participates in every form — it is a form with dense significance.'²⁴

Thus, the body is, above all, a presence within a wide space. In order for the child to grasp this space, they must understand that they are an active and influential factor within it, possessing all the necessary tools to capture, interpret and generate new signals that open up fresh pathways of understanding.

Although the body may deviate from the original space in which it first encountered its earliest challenges, it always retains the capacity to return by maintaining an appropriate distance from the various worlds it enters, whether for pleasure or discovery.

"The body has the capacity to embrace the general load it derives from the original place. Thus, dancing, singing, poetry and the way of eating are all mediums through which the body declares its identity and that of the original place."²⁵

This clarifies the importance of investing in a child's physical presence throughout all stages of their learning journey, from their formative years to their education.

Moreover, interactive theatre targets the cognitive dimension more than the emotional one. It stimulates thinking and critical reflection in the audience, an objective also sought by traditional theatre. In interactive theatre, the spectator is a key participant in the theatrical production, with complete freedom to interact, take stances and produce appropriate responses²⁶.

This means that the body is a form that produces the world, recognising its relationship with itself and with other bodies with which it communicates in various ways. The relationship between the body and the tangible world is vertical and transcendent rather than merely linear. This opens up broad horizons for reading and interpreting texts in which the body is an element of their construction²⁷.

By 'texts', we do not mean only written or spoken materials, but rather the concept extends to all possible forms of communication between human beings²⁸.

4.2 Immediate response:

Teaching a child who is mentally distracted due to screen addiction how to focus on performance and viewing may draw them out of the virtual fluidity zone and into the zone of activating the event itself. In other words, it enables the child to improvise by filling auditory and visual gaps in the moment. Here, the child realises that their role in the performance is not limited to merely watching or interacting within the scene, but advances to a more creative

²⁴- Wafiya bint Masaoud, 'Narrative Techniques Between the Novel and Cinema', Al-Wisam al-Arabi-al-Jawa'ih, 1st ed., 2011, p. 388.

²⁵- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-'Ayadi. Centre for Arab Unity Studies and Arab Translation Organisation, 1st edition, Beirut, 2008, p. 315.

²⁶- Mohamed Nouredine Afya, *Image and Meaning*, Cultural Centre for the Book, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st edition, 2019, p. 158.

²⁷- Hanan Mohamed Abd Al-Halim Nasser, 'The Effectiveness of a Programme of Constructivist Interactive Theatre Activities in Developing Some Mathematical Problem-Solving Skills in the Overactive Kindergarten Child', Kafr El-Sheikh University, Faculty of Education, 2019, p. 271.

²⁸- Wafiya bint Masaoud, 'Narrative Techniques Between the Novel and Cinema', p. 388.

stage. This stage enables them to experiment with ideas and seek solutions to problems that arise spontaneously²⁹.

Being on stage therefore becomes highly significant for building the scene and influencing the audience, whose experience leaves a clear and lasting effect.

If we encourage children to use their imagination and creativity, and give them the opportunity to play different roles — silent, loud or moderately expressive — they will be able to express themselves as individuals as well as being part of a group. In this environment, they develop the ability to narrate stories, anticipate verbally and express their feelings with fluidity and ease. Here, interactive theatre breaks the 'fourth wall', transforming the child from a passive recipient into an active participant in the dramatic event. This is achieved by involving the audience through direct questions and improvisation, as well as inviting children to take part in dialogue or movement on stage. Active interaction reaches its peak as a result, immediately and vividly stimulating and activating the child's senses. In this way, digital technology becomes subordinate to the language of the body, eye contact and spontaneous emotional expression³⁰.

Interactive theatre engages the cognitive dimension more than the emotional one. It provokes thought and critical reflection in the audience by encouraging participation and interaction with the performers and other audience members, which is not possible in traditional theatre. In interactive theatre, both the spectator and the performer participate in the theatrical work, and both have complete freedom to interact and respond appropriately. The child benefits from this immediate on-stage response, whether as a performer or viewer, by safely releasing and processing their feelings through participation. They can also acquire many human values and develop verbal and non-verbal communication skills by immersing themselves in varied, lifelike experiences. These experiences can help children to recover from withdrawal and isolation, thereby increasing their self-confidence and equipping them to control the emotions that arise from excessive use of digital media.

5. Digital Theatre

Digital theatre is a new form based on combining real elements with synthetic images. This is achieved in real time during the performance. Specifically, real elements, such as performers and props, are placed in a room and blended with a fabricated virtual set or scene through a visual simulation system³¹.

Children can participate in this performance either as performers or as audience members. Children's theatre was developed on this basis, with shows created specifically for child audiences, either by child actors or professional adult performers, or a combination of both.

²⁹- Chatterton, S. and Butler, S., 'The Development of Communication Skills through Drama', Vol. 2, Issue 2, Down Syndrome Research and Practice, USA, p. 84.

³⁰- Hanan Mohamed Abd al-Halim Nassar, 'The Effectiveness of a Program of Constructivist Interactive Theatre Activities in Developing Some Life Problem-Solving Skills in the Overactive Kindergarten Child', p. 271.

³¹- Hamilton & McFarlane, 'Children Learn Through Play', in: Putting Children First: The Newsletter of the National Childcare Accreditation Council*, 2005.

Regardless of whether the approach relies on traditional methods or electronic media, the focus remains on engaging children's audiences³².

In her 2020 study, English language scholar Lisa Dauson confirms that digital technology can open up endless possibilities for constructive, dynamic interaction within an integrated curriculum for learners with disabilities. According to the programme designed to suit each learner's specific needs, it can achieve impressive outcomes, bringing learners to a state of holistic awareness of the meaning of learning and participation alongside their typically developing peers³³.

This means that, by combining performance and technology, interactive theatre can transform written text into audio-visual content. This allows learners to experience a sense of fluidity and motivation when acquiring knowledge and information through engaging, group-based, motivational games and interactive audio-visual scenes via virtual simulation³⁴.

Brown and Hewitt have also emphasised the specificity of digital education, providing personalised programmes that cater to each learner's unique needs. In interactive digital theatre, image and sound features can be enabled to support learners with communication difficulties by adjusting repetition and speeding up or slowing down audio and visual elements. Meanwhile, learners with hearing and speech difficulties can activate a communication symbol mechanism where symbols appear beneath the image.

This demonstrates that digital theatre can have a positive impact on live performances when used thoughtfully and effectively. Time, subject matter, colours, sounds and sizes can become meaningful indicators that help draw the child out of isolation. Alternatively, digital theatre can serve as a temporary support tool that we withdraw once the child has regained the focus and enthusiasm needed to fully experience the live event.

'An image may not always represent what can be directly perceived by the eye, given the limitations of our vision. Instead, a mental image may be entirely different, with no direct connection to the external world. This image is not solely defined by its function of reproducing what the eye captures; sometimes, it shifts away from that origin and frees itself from it.'³⁵

Accordingly, we cannot blame the digital image itself. Above all, it is a set of intersecting auditory and visual angles arranged within a moving strip, governed by a specific rhythm. This arrangement can embed multiple messages in the mind of the child recipient, making it an effective educational tool when we control its inputs and the duration of its presentation to the child. Building a comprehensive scene that refines the therapeutic experience in its entirety may require certain visual and auditory effects in children's theatre. However, these elements should never overpower the live performance. Our aim is to establish solid connections that engage the

³²- Yacine Abd al-Mohcen al-Aqabbawi, 'Artistic and Educational Standards for Digital Theatre for the Preschool Child', *The Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Specific Education*, No. 27, July 2021, Part 1, p. 546.

³³- See: Nadjm Hannachi, 'Digital World, Unlimited Capabilities: The Role of Technology in Unlocking the Potential of Students with Special Needs'. *Al-Jami' Journal for Psychological Studies and Educational Sciences*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2025, p. 65.

³⁴- Nadjm Hannachi, 'Digital World, Unlimited Capabilities', p. 66.

³⁵- Lavaud, Laurent. *L'image (The Image)*. Flammarion, Paris, 1999, p. 18.

child, both emotionally and physically, with the world within the play space that the child has helped to create.

Given theatre's substantial impact on children, digital theatre should be subject to specific standards and specifications appropriate for this age group. This includes the quality of the content provided, the novelty of the ideas presented, and the appropriateness of the language used, as well as the suitability of the presentations for children's needs and level of maturity. Additionally, digital theatre for children must adhere to certain conditions, such as the personification of characters, the quality of the plot, aesthetic appeal, and artistic staging of the digital theatre elements, which differ considerably from traditional theatre³⁶.

Digital theatre therefore plays a functional role as a transition tool, supporting certain scenes and then disappearing when the plot takes over. Ultimately, this enables children to acquire the core elements of traditional theatre, including verbal and non-verbal elements, dialogue, character and 'response' as the act of capturing details of the scene in terms of both image and sound. Children can also experience the elements of interactive theatre, such as the presence of the body separated from the digital device, participation with performers and the audience, stimulation of intelligence and language, and eye contact, which helps to build trust.

Research findings

Based on the above, the following conclusions represent the most important findings:

Traditional theatre is a strong reference framework for rebuilding a child's early learning processes, particularly for those who experience difficulty identifying themselves or communicating with their surroundings.

- Interactive theatre loses its meaning in the absence of prior experience of traditional theatre. Without this background, children may feel unsafe when placed directly in a live experience involving real performers and an audience that watches and interacts with their performance. This may result in the child retreating back into the digital world.

Understanding the specific nature of live theatre, without a digital intermediary, and gradually accepting this space—while the digital medium remains present in a limited way—enables the child to distinguish between a real arena for creative expression and renewal, and a digital arena bound to repetition and passive reception.

Digital theatre does not replace traditional theatre; rather, it serves as a transitional stage between the traditional and the interactive. In this regard, we leverage the child's familiarity with the digital space to stimulate full engagement in live performances.

Interactive theatre stimulates immediate responses through the presence of real human beings. Depending on the nature of the events and the overall plot structure of the performance, the child may benefit from a digital medium or may dispense with it.

When using digital technology in live performances, we ensure it supports the dramatic moment and helps build the event. Technology should serve the moment, not replace it. Allowing the child to stare at the technology for an extended period and become absorbed in it undermines its value.

³⁶- Yacine Abd al-Mohcen al-Aqabbawi, 'Artistic and Educational Standards for Digital Theatre for the Preschool Child', p. 540.

Using narrative justification and dramaturgy through the gradual withdrawal of technology ensures that children do not perceive the digital element as something cold and shocking that occurs during the performance. Instead, they understand that it is a meaningful dramatic event within the story. The emotional shift moves from confusion and fear towards enjoyment and a sense of control over the unfolding events within the world of spectatorship, where imagination and magic take hold and enable things to appear and disappear. When the visual effect fades ‘through magic’, the performer — the human being — remains on stage, sharing the moment with the child and making them feel a sense of closeness and that the performer is present for them.

Despite the presence of technology, the difference in space alters the outcome of reception. Transitioning the child from individual, silent digital consumption to interactive, collective digital consumption within the theatrical performance enables them to experience the joy of group play and to distinguish between live reality and virtual illusion.

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