



**Baboró** International Arts  
Festival for Children  
October, 2024



*Putting performance to work  
for children and young people*

Talking TYA Research Network  
Symposium

in collaboration with Baboró International Arts Festival for Children,  
and hosted by the Discipline of Children's Studies, University of Galway.

11<sup>th</sup> October 2024

Block D  
Room 102,  
University of Galway



Registration	11-11.30am	Block D, Room 102, University of Galway
Session 1 <b>PANEL DISCUSSION</b>  Session Chair: Dr Kate Harvey (University of Galway)	11.30-1pm	Welcome & Opening remarks: Dr Fiona McDonagh (Mary Immaculate College/Talking TYA Research Network Committee Chair)  <i>Access and Engagement Gardening for Early Years Performances at Grassroots Level in the Community.</i>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Cliodhna Noonan (Lead Early Years Artist &amp; founder of Grasshoppers Festival)</li> <li>– Dr Rita Melia (Atlantic Technological University, Galway)</li> <li>– Aifric Ni Ruairc (Axis Theatre, Ballymun)</li> </ul>
Break	1-1.30pm	Light lunch
Session 2 <b>PAPER SESSION</b>  Session Chair: Marianne Ní Chinnéide (University of Galway)	1.30-2.30pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Shaping possibility – ‘Exploring an ecology of practice’</i> Sandie Fisher (Artist &amp; PhD candidate, Ulster University)</li> <li>– <i>Get ON Their Screens: Using YouTube as a Site of Scratch Performance and Everyday Theatricality</i> James Woodhams (University of Exeter)</li> <li>– “‘My Seconds, To Me!’: Encouraging Anti-Bullying &amp; Mercy Through Swordplay” Sara Thompson (York University, Toronto)</li> </ul>
Session 3 <b>PANEL DISCUSSION</b>  Session Chair: Professor Tom Maguire (Ulster University)	2.45-3.45pm	<i>TYA and Ireland’s new arts education curriculum: The case of ‘Ballad of a Bandit’</i>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Dr Dorothy Morrissey (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick)</li> <li>– Marc Mac Lochlainn (Executive Artistic Director of Branar Téatar do Pháistí Branar)</li> <li>– Miquel Barceló (Independent theatre performer, director, musician and practitioner)</li> </ul>
Break	3.45-4pm	Coffee
Session 4 <b>WORKSHOP</b>	4.15-5.30pm	Dr Gill Brigg <i>Teachers as Careful Actors and Actors as Careful Teachers: story spaces for disabled children and young people with cognitive impairment</i>
Break	5.30-6.30pm	Wine reception & nibbles
<b>KEYNOTE</b> Venue: AC201 Arts Concourse	6.30-7.30pm	Professor Helen Nicholson (Royal Holloway) <i>Making, Learning, Listening: feeling the atmosphere in theatre for children.</i>  Introduced by Dr Kate Harvey (Head of Discipline- Children Studies)

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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*Making, Learning, Listening:  
feeling the atmosphere in theatre for children*

Professor Helen Nicholson- Royal Holloway

6.30-7.30pm

AC201 - Arts Concours



Professor Helen Nicholson will reflect on the value of theatre for children as an art form that, in itself, inspires learning. She will argue that current debates about creativity in education risk underplaying the importance of theatre as an experience that enriches children's lives. Drawing on recent research, Helen will consider how theatre-makers create the kind of environments that support children's learning. Following the conference theme, she will ask 'what work does atmosphere do'?

Helen Nicholson is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London where she specialises in theatre in community and educational settings. She has published widely on theatre by, with, and for young people and continues to be inspired by theatre-makers who work with children. Helen has recently undertaken research with learning programmes at The National Theatre, The Royal Opera House, and the Young Vic Theatre in London.

## PANEL DISCUSSION

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*Access and Engagement Gardening for Early Years Performances at Grassroots Level in the Community.*

The discussion will address sowing seeds of development of new early years audiences in different communities of place (Ballymun, Balbriggan, Galway and Mayo) through various residency opportunities and bursaries awarded to Clíodhna Noonan artist in the past two years in particular. The aim is to inspire more artists to create partnerships and reach new audiences, especially those as first-time attendees.

The panel will address disparities in access for audiences and how these were managed by the artist in collaboration with venue and university partners; personal and social development of all parties from staff at venues (theatre, university and library staff in particular) and the growth and flowering of new audiences through repeated activity and access to the artist's work. The specific form of grassroots accessible arts experience provided by Clíodhna Noonan and its efficacy over a longterm period will also be addressed.

Clíodhna Noonan will speak about her journey to the current residencies she enjoys and how access and inclusion are central to her practice. She endeavours to reach as many children as possible through her work. All abilities, backgrounds and heritage included.  
[www.actinguparts.weebly.com](http://www.actinguparts.weebly.com)

Dr. Rita Melia Atlantic Technological University (ATU) will highlight how the Young People Children and Education Artist in Residence programme, funded by the Arts Council enhances student experiences on the BA Early Childhood Education and Care programme, Galway and Mayo, and also impacts on the experiences of young children aged 0-6 years in Early Learning and Care settings where these students are on practice placement or work. Dr Melia will link the theory to practice in relation to the current Irish policy perspective of creativity and the arts in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare settings.

Aifric Ni Ruairc (founder of SmAllfolk Festival) will present the development of a three year residency at Axis Theatre in Ballymun with the specific purpose of creating an early years hub for artists and children in Ballymun, and the impact on social inclusion for early years communities that this opportunity with Clíodhna Noonan is presenting.

The panel will present the voices of some of the children who have undertaken this journey and the voices of educators from Axis Creche and Curious Minds who have been impacted by longerterm access to arts experiences delivered by Clíodhna Noonan.

The overall aim of the panel discussion is to present powerful partnerships that have created possibilities for so many children in grassroots communities to enjoy access to arts experiences with qualified and engaged practitioners.

## PANEL MEMBERS:

Clíodhna Noonan: Affiliation- Artist In Residence Atlantic Technological University 2022-23 / Axis Ballymun 2023-24- / [cliodhnanoonan@gmail.com](mailto:cliodhnanoonan@gmail.com)

Clíodhna Noonan is an early years arts creator, producer and programmer for creative arts events with children and families aged 0-6 years. Clíodhna develops and performs her own work for young children age 0-6 years. Clíodhna is a member of Smallsize EU network association ([www.smallsizenetwork.org](http://www.smallsizenetwork.org)) and an active member of TYAI ([www.tyai.weebly.com](http://www.tyai.weebly.com)) she is the founder of Grasshoppers International Early Years Festival. ([www.grasshoppersfestival.com](http://www.grasshoppersfestival.com)). In 2022 and 2023 Clíodhna was appointed as Artist in Residence at Atlantic Technological University Ireland, funded by the Irish Arts Council under the Young People Children and Education Residencies programme. She is artist in residence at Axis Theatre in Ballymun where she is creating a hub of early years arts activity for the community. She is currently also a lecturer on Socio-Dramatic Play at Dublin City University (BA in Early Childhood studies).

Dr Rita Melia

Affiliation: Atlantic Technological University, Galway / Mayo [rita.melia@atu.ie](mailto:rita.melia@atu.ie)

Rita Melia is a lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Care at Atlantic Technological University Galway and Mayo. Rita has led out on a number of arts projects at ATU including coordination of the Arts Council Artist in Residence programme, as ATU Fulbright ambassador with Fulbright Specialist Amanda Pintore Arizona State University and as Coordinator of the Arts in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare pilot scheme. Rita's aim is to increase awareness of the importance of creativity and the arts and how creative play in early childhood supports children's 21st century skills, Creativity, Curiosity, Critical thinking and Communicating.

Aifric Ní Ruairc

Affiliation: Programme Manager at Axis Theatre Ballymun/ [aifric.niruairc@axisballymun.ie](mailto:aifric.niruairc@axisballymun.ie)

Aifric Ní Ruairc is Programme Manager of Axis Ballymun and established the Sm(ALL) Folks Festival in 2023 which focuses on accessible and affordable theatre for children of all abilities and backgrounds aged 0-8. Aifric's background is in early years work, with a focus on imaginative play and utilising drama as a tool to teach and promote the Irish Language. In this time she facilitated workshops for The Abbey Theatre, The Ark and Axis Ballymun.

## PAPER PRESENTATION

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### *Shaping possibility – ‘Exploring an ecology of practice’*

Sandie Fisher Artist & PhD candidate- Ulster University / Fisher-S@ulster.ac.uk

The wonderful USP about Theatre making is its ability to harness possibility, the ‘What If’s?’ that the form allows. Much has been explored about the ‘Why ‘of Theatre for Young Audiences, the extrinsic values of the form and its relationship with its audience. This presentation makes the case for a considered exploration of the intrinsic value that lies within the process of the theatre making itself: the ecology of shaping possibility.

Looking through the lens of the artist, this presentation looks to the democratic practice that has emerged and the processes and skills of the discipline that have been crafted to facilitate work in this context, highlighting the importance of looking inward. The hypothesis is that the processes of making Theatre for Young Audiences requires a specific skill set and approach that sets it apart from other forms of theatre practice. The presentation makes the case for the importance of telling the “stories of the practice” (Maguire 2022) to help reveal more about the identity and value of Theatre for Young Audiences.

### Biography

Sandie Fisher is an artist and academic working extensively across both disciplines for over 25 years. As a practitioner Sandie developed her reputation through her work as Co-Artistic Director of music dance performance company, Assault Events and, as a Community Dance practitioner. In Higher Education Sandie has worked as a Lecturer / Senior Lecturer at a number of institutions including De Montfort University, Ulster University, Cardiff Metropolitan University and University of Cumbria, always championing new methods of teaching, and learning for embodied arts practice. Notably, Sandie was instrumental in developing and delivering the first BA Hons Dance Course on the Island of Ireland.

As a dance artist Sandie’s work has focused on alternative performance spaces, interdisciplinarity, storytelling and collaboration and she has always put the audience at the heart of her artistic practice. Commissioned work has seen Sandie develop an expertise in making theatre for rural touring and alternative spaces, theatre for children and young audiences and multidisciplinary ensemble practice. She has choreographed and directed work that has toured the UK and internationally, gaining ‘Best Practice’ recognition by Arts Council England Creative People and Places for her community focused projects.

Sandie’s background as a dance artist, community dance practitioner and academic sees her fluidly cross the boundaries of practice as research and research in practice, drawing on the power of collaboration and interdisciplinarity to push at the boundaries of our understanding, skill and knowledge of the arts.

Sandie has also been recognised for her work in arts and health with her collaborative projects being nominated as Finalist for Educate the North Award, and her collaborative work being named as one of the top 100 projects for Health in the National Campaign Made At Uni Research Project. Sandie is currently studying a PhD in Theatre for Young Audiences at Ulster University.

## PAPER PRESENTATION

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### *Get ON Their Screens: Using YouTube as a Site of Scratch Performance and Everyday Theatricality*

James Woodhams – University of Exeter/ J.C.B.Woodhams@exeter.ac.uk

YouTube has become a dominant access point of culture for children (Folklyard et al, 2019). It has been noted that ‘80% of children age[d] 0-7 use YouTube’ with children spending on average ‘1.39 hours each weekday and 1.47 hours each weekend day viewing YouTube videos, which are approximately 4 to 9 minutes in length’ (Neumann & Herodotou, 2020:72). COVID-19 led to a dramatic adoption of YouTube globally, including to dynamic experimentations of how to creatively use the site to reach young audiences with theatre (Morgan, 2022). Theatre productions presented on YouTube embody an inherent contradiction. The digital space limits the theatre's essence of liveness. Whilst it is vital to note that the ‘dynamic of (dis)placing is at the core of theatre’ (Quick and Rhuston, 2024:12), it is clear the divide generated on YouTube further dislocates the audience from the performer thus diminishing any interplay occurring.

To overcome this dislocation, it seems that practitioners have started to use YouTube not only as an engagement tool but as a site of creative trail for future creations. Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) companies toured fresh adaptations of their digital work for live audiences after lockdowns lifted. One key example is *I Want My Hat Back* by Little Angel Theatre, which toured in 2023 after debuting on YouTube in April 2020. The rising costs of making a new theatre production due to the cost-of-living crisis (Wayne, 2024), compounded by TYA companies losing state funding, are reducing the opportunity to trial and refine creative voices for Theatre for Young Audiences. Therefore, adapting and expanding creative work that has already been trialled online helps to refine and test the artistic vision of performance quickly. It enables the ability for a scratch performance, the process of developing and presenting smaller versions of new theatrical pieces (Meyer & Hjorth, 2013), whilst simultaneously reaching audiences that are not currently attending theatre (SOLT, 2023).

This proposal aims to provoke a theoretical reconsideration of how YouTube can become a radical space for theatrical engagement and development. Using two productions through a case study methodology will highlight how utilising YouTube as a scratch site could lead to increased artistic development, engagement and accessibility. It allows for practitioners to test, experiment and trial artistic works with limited exposure and maximum reach. It could allow the sector to hear new voices, with a more limited point and accessible entry. Furthermore, this paper will use the framework of Theatricality developed by Quick and Rhuston (2024) to argue the benefits of having greater amounts of TYA productions available. It could enable daily theatricality to be further embedded in children’s lives. By reconfiguring the perception of YouTube there is the potentiality to generate a richer ecosystem for TYA performance.

### Biography

James Woodhams researcher, theatre-maker, community-applied theatre producer, and puppeteer. Based in Plymouth, United Kingdom, James has built a career that spans multiple

artistic disciplines, with a particular focus on Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). His research interest lies in exploring the intersection of space and theatrical engagement, investigating how different environments can shape, enhance and reach new audience's experiences. His work also includes an exploration of children's creative engagement online, the intersections of theatre in unconventional sites, barriers to access in the arts and adapting business models within the industry.

James has extensive experience with youth and community-applied theatre, working on projects that leverage the arts to foster social change and community development. His work in this field has often involved collaborations with national portfolio organizations, where he has played a significant role in talent development, nurturing emerging artists and helping them to find their voice in the arts industry. James currently works as a Commercialisation Manager for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) faculty at the University of Exeter. In this role, he works at the intersection of academia and industry, helping researchers translate their scholarly outputs into impactful applications that can reach leading to sustainable societal change.

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## PAPER PRESENTATION

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### *“My Seconds, To Me!': Encouraging Anti-Bullying & Mercy Through Swordplay”*

Sara Thompson- York University, Toronto / Witches@yorku.ca

Though American Renaissance festivals are generally known for their cosplay opportunities, giant turkey legs, and the bawdy humour of stage acts, a strong streak of ‘family friendly’ entertainment is present at most events, encouraging schools to bring students on educational day trips and parents/guardians to bring children along. In addition to playground areas, human-powered rides, games such as archery & pillow-fighting, and knighting ceremonies, such festivals routinely offer performances specifically aimed at child and youth audiences. On School Days, certain acts perform only their less bawdy material and emphasize historical information in speaking to students. Other performers are permanently focused on young patrons: these acts are implicitly or explicitly tailored to meet supposed parental or curricular expectations concerning ‘appropriate’ language & lack of references to violence or sexuality, and are sometimes offered in designated children’s areas. Story-tellers, sing-along musicians, and interactive trunk shows are common.

This twenty-minute paper explores one such act, *The Nature of Mercy*, a touring duo that performs at a number of the best-known Renaissance festivals in the US. In their comedic show, adult sword-fighters portraying a hero and a villain recruit young audience members – generally from ages three to thirteen or so, of all genders as well as physical and intellectual capabilities – to their opposing sides and attempt to teach a lesson on anti-bullying. Providing the children with soft foam swords, the characters demonstrate chivalric greetings and proper stances for sword-fighting, encouraging the children to mimic them before briefly sidelining the youngsters for a choreographed sword & knife fight. The performers’ commitments to engaging young audiences means that the show’s resolution and moral message is occasionally more ambiguous than originally written. However, even when the hero prevails, the act’s use of the children as backers raises questions about social inclusion, behavioural learning, and mob mentality.

### Biography

Sara Thompson (she/her) is a folklorist & pop culture scholar who teaches in the Children, Childhood, and Youth Studies program at York University in Toronto, Canada. Research interests & pedagogic work include the study of contemporary youth culture, queer theory, Celtic folklore, fairy tale adaptations, and literature & film for young people; her ongoing research focuses on the culture & participants (artists, performers, crafters, vendors, showrunners, and audiences) at American tourist sites known as Renaissance Festivals or renfaires.

### *TYA and Ireland's new arts education curriculum: The case of 'Ballad of a Bandit'*

The subject of this panel is a work of TYA, *Ballad of a Bandit*, which is currently touring Ireland's primary schools. This work is located in the tradition of 'guerilla theatre' which has its roots in the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. 'Guerilla theatre' usually takes the form of surprise performances to unsuspecting audiences (in this case, children of 8 years and over in their primary school classrooms). Accordingly, the advance promotional material for *Ballad of a Bandit* warns teachers: 'Please keep information about this performance to yourself ... to assist with the immersive and surprise nature of the piece please DO NOT inform children.'

Typically, 'guerilla theatre' seeks to intervene in political and social inequalities by drawing attention to them. This is achieved through the use of parody and carnivalesque techniques. In *Ballad of a Bandit* Miquel Barceló combines storytelling, music, object animation and clowning to engage children in a surprise immersive theatre experience centred on the adventures of 'The Captain'. This character is inspired by the legendary historical figure Captain George McNamara of Cong who sided with tenants against their landlords during the Penal Laws in Ireland. In the tradition of the legendary Robin Hood, 'The Captain' stole from these rich landlords (whom he considered greedy) and gifted his spoils to the poor in the villages around Cong (in County Mayo). In *Ballad of a Bandit* Barceló reimagines 'The Captain's' story for a contemporary young (classroom) audience.

*Ballad of a Bandit* is identified as a work of TYA and so does not set out to teach children but rather to provide them with an artistic and aesthetic experience that 'moves' them in the here and now and, perhaps, at some future time. TYA has its roots in TiE which dominated theatrical provision in Ireland's schools from the mid-1970s through to the early 2000s. Like TYA, TiE sought to provide children with a 'moving' experience while, additionally, seeking to cultivate learning about life and/or the school curriculum. Towards this end, TiE practitioners facilitated post-performance workshops in which school audiences engaged in an *experience* of the issues explored in the performance itself, and they designed packs containing ideas that teachers could use to further children's learning across a range of curriculum subjects. In this tradition, *Ballad of a Bandit* comes with a 'a specially designed creative engagement pack' focused on enabling children to write their own stories/comics about life in penal times.

In this panel, the background, motivation and form of *Ballad of a Bandit* will be explored as will the background and motivation for its enactment in schools. Additionally, the affordances and challenges afforded for TYA practitioners by a new arts education curriculum in Ireland's primary schools will be interrogated with specific reference to *Ballad of a Bandit* and extant in-school arts initiatives in Ireland.

#### PANEL MEMBERS:

Dr Dorothy Morrissey (EdD, MA, Graduate Diploma in Dance, Graduate Diploma in Drama, BEd) is a lecturer in drama education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She is also Equality, Inclusion, Diversity and Interculturalism (EDI) Lead for the College's Faculty of Education and she leads the College's Theatre Artist in Residence Programme. Dorothy's research interests lie across the arts and education and she has published and presented her work in a variety of national and international fora. She is a member of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Arts Education Development Group and her Department of Education (IE) commissioned report on 'I am Creative', a pilot project involving inter-professional collaboration in special schools was published in March 2024.

Marc Mac Lochlainn

Marc is the executive artistic director of Branar, a company he founded. Based in the West of Ireland since 2001, Branar is renowned for creating highly imaginative and beautiful work. Branar productions tour nationally and internationally bringing its work with equal enthusiasm to leading arts venues, such as the Southbank Centre, London and Abbey Theatre, Dublin, as to a local school in Galway. Branar is committed to reaching its audience, wherever they are. Through its Meitheal strand of work Branar cements its commitment to supporting artists and producers making work for young audiences in Ireland.

Marc is dedicated to creating meaningful and engaging theatrical experiences for children. He is a strong advocate for the need for theatre for young audiences to be resourced on a par with theatre for adults. He believes that work for children should be unquestionably valued. Marc and Branar were the Theatre Artist in Residence in Mary Immaculate College of Education in Limerick. Marc was formerly a Board member at TYA Ireland, Meitheal na mBeag, Macnas and An Taibhdhearc.

Marc's other work includes most recently, presenting Déan tú Féin É a 6 part DIY series on TG4. He also owns and runs Bricí Spraoi an imagination play system that tours to schools and festivals.

Miquel Barceló

He's an independent theatre performer, director, musician and practitioner. Trained at École Internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq, Paris. He has worked extensively in theatre over the past 30 years. Specialised in Physical Theatre, Children, Street, Arts Disability & Community Arts.

Since 2000 he's based in Ireland and he works in an ongoing basis with Branar, Macnas & arts organization for adults with ID 'That's Life'. He's a co-founder of the street-theatre duo The Gombeens and international theatre company Teatro Punto. He has toured extensively in Spain, France, UK, Holland and USA.

His main focus is performing, directing, researching new pedagogical approaches to theatre & composing music for shows. He has developed an intensive workshop programme with Youth Ensembles & theatre for children in schools.

He's currently the inaugural Branar associate artist 2024, allowing him to research and develop new ways to connect with young audiences and therefore, to bring his artistic practice to new levels.

## WORKSHOP

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*Teachers as Careful Actors and Actors as Careful Teachers: story spaces for disabled children and young people with cognitive impairment*

Dr Gill Brigg FRSA/ gillbrigg3@gmail.com

This workshop will explore the pedagogical/performative approaches common to both teachers of children with cognitive impairment and theatre practitioners. Referencing a project with teachers and theatre practitioners in Limerick, I will share examples of how we explored this notion theoretically and what we discovered practically. Our explorations centred around a recognition that:

- Both manage playful spaces
- Both know how to build, and hold, focus for participants
- Both know the value of exploring stories to make sense of the world
- Both utilise a sense of anticipation to draw people in

Using the premise that ‘teachers are careful actors and actors are careful teachers’, we will examine the importance of aestheticised spaces to engage children with cognitive impairments in, whilst also offering protection from, the ethical issue of conflating fiction with reality. A central tenet to creating such spaces is through the three theatre spectra:

Silence to Sound

Darkness to Light

Stillness to action

We will hear about how these spectra, documented by Dorothy Heathcote and used extensively in the theatre, can be utilised within classrooms to encourage engagement which creating ‘oxygen-changing’ moments in the room: a shift towards co-created learning moments.

I will argue for the centrality of this approach in enabling children to develop an empowered relationship with the world around them and the role of Drama and Theatre to this process. The core of this is how teachers and theatre practitioners can enable participants to enter, inhabit and leave stories as a way of exploring human emotions. We should be encouraged to embrace, and indeed celebrate, the mercurial ‘oxygen-changing moments’ as being a valid and fully accessible learning mode.

Suitable for theatre practitioners and teachers, the session will be playful and will include some practical activities.

## Biography

Dr Gill Brigg FRSA

Gill has over 40 years' experience as a cross-phase drama teacher, theatre-maker and advisory teacher. She has worked for the last 20 years in specialist schools as a Theatre-in-Education performer, Drama specialist and class teacher. She now works nationally and internationally with teachers, actors, and academics, developing their practice with neurodivergent groups. Gill is SEND Officer for National Drama in the UK and a Visiting Lecturer in Sensory Theatre at Rose Bruford College. Her PhD researched emotional engagement for audiences labelled as having complex disabilities.