

## **Breaking the fourth wall of the hospital room.**

An exploration of Helium Children Charity's work with children in isolation and the use of puppetry to deconstruct architectural and bodily borders.

By Dr Emma Fisher

### **Boarders**

This paper will look at testimonies of puppeteers working in health care settings for Helium Children Arts and Health. Can the puppet be used to knock down walls both metaphorical and real lending the child a voice to express their individuality? I will look at how the puppet can be an emotional prosthetic or avatar, by transferring how the child feels into the body of the puppet. The puppet becomes the child's mirror; one which they can imprint their story on and one that can reflect out into the wider hospital and beyond to places where they cannot physically go themselves. The term emotional prosthesis in relation to puppetry was coined by Jane Taylor (2015) in her work around puppetry and political memory.

Helium Children's Charity sends puppeteers, artists and musicians into work with young people who are disabled or are living with chronic illness in Ireland. With projects like Puppet Portal (2009-2011), Cloudland's (2012 -2015) and Firefly (2015- 2017) sending puppeteers and artists into hospitals, with two suitcases working with support groups around chronic illness and with The Pop Up Picnic going directly into children's homes. In support of this article I used testimonies of the artistic director Helene Hugel, artist Siobhan Clancy, musician Thomas Johnston and puppeteers Niamh Lawlor, Eszter Nemethi.

In 2009, I began working with Helium as a puppeteer in residence. As someone who had spent a lot of time in hospital as a child (because of an accident which paralyzed my left arm), I know first-hand what a scary experience it can be. It was especially rewarding to work in the Isolation Wards, one on one with the children. These were the children that really needed something to do, to find a voice to express their experiences, and/or a distraction from their reality

*'You have a private space where they are making and telling their own story and then they have an opportunity to project outwards and communicate beyond themselves and I think that's really rewarding as well.'* Helene Hugel

### **Social Model of illness in an environment where the medical model is prominent**

In the world of the hospital and in the home of a sick child, real life temporarily stalls to be replaced by a different temporal existence for the young person. The hospital is where medical procedures such as bloods and blood pressure is taken, the sound of drips, beeps reside and operations take precedent. While Outside the walls of the hospital children go to school, play games, etc. In the hospital, these children are in limbo. In the world of the hospital the medical model of illness and disability is at the forefront. The medical model links directly to the person's diagnosis and to their body. The aim is to cure the damage and if this is not an option, to manage the damage caused by illness or disability. However, this view mainly categorises the disability/ illness rather than the person. Evans (2004) states that

people with disabilities or illness are within the medical model often defined by their disability or illness, rather than as an individual. Fisher and Goodley (2007) agree stating:

*'The role of 'patients' own narratives has often tended to be reduced to a process of eliciting information regarding specific symptoms of disease or of abnormality' (Fisher and Goodley, 2007, p.66)*

So where does the individual child's voice reside within a hospital? What the puppeteers bring with them is the social model of disability and illness. They are solely interested in the young person's personal experience, their voice (their narrative). By being the one none medical component, they bring with them the reality of outside, while also carrying a bag of tools that can transform their environment and their story into the realms of fantasy. The children instead of just being patients are artist, puppeteers and storytellers. Transforming themselves into Astronauts and their surroundings into space. Helium children's charity has the child's voice at the heart of their projects.

*I don't think it's important because it has a health benefit I want to say that its exactly important because it doesn't necessarily have a health benefit and its cool and it can live there in a place where everything is catered for the health benefit...they need to do something, people still need to live and in the hospital, that's suspended in a weird way.*  
Eszter Nemethi

## **The Fourth Wall**

The fourth wall in theatre is an invisible boundary between the characters in the play and the audience. It is broken when the actors address the audience or state that they are actors in a play. At its heart is direct communication that traditionally shouldn't be there, when applied in theatre it can snap the audience back into reality and out of the world of the play. If applied to the hospital, when a puppeteer gives the child a vehicle to communicate their views outwardly to the rest of the hospital staff and their families, they can briefly break the reality of the hospital world, not just for the child but for the staff as well.

*I think it's purely the puppetry, just the idea that they can project passed the fourth wall so they have that opportunity to communicate to someone else. Helene Hugel*

Audience = Medical Staff and child

Actors = Child

Characters = puppets

Puppeteers = dramaturgs

## **Power of the Puppet**

**'The puppet is an unpredictable creature...it ferries us between worlds' (Posner et al., 2015, p. xxiii)**

Niamh Lawlor talked to me about the power of the puppet, when used in these settings. Niamh stated that it is a medium connected to play so it immediately lightens proceedings, or puts proceedings into another dimension. Things can be done through it which might not be able to be done directly. Aronoff (2005) talks about the symbolic use of the puppet, as the child cannot always say how they feel so it comes out in play.

*Puppetry is used a lot to bring mystery and to encapsulate something that is beyond the bounds of the actors. This is something I learned in the puppet portal, the puppet allows you to transcend the limits of your physical body.* Siobhan Clancy

Siobhan talked to me about how the puppet has more immediate access to powers that are beyond human range. Young people can use the puppet to express their desires and aspirations.

*They may be temporarily using a wheelchair ...the puppet can also experiment with confinement and have fun with it and I don't want to imply that a wheelchair means confinement as a wheelchair can mean independence as well and I've seen that be explored through puppets, where devices like wheelchairs to express their own independence.* Siobhan Clancy

All the artists talked about the power of the puppet to transcend physical limits and social boundaries and so lend the young person a voice where they can be cheeky and ask questions.

*I guess it allows them to express themselves through different activities that social parameters, tabooed or more frowned upon.* Siobhan Clancy

### **Stories hidden just below the surface**

In a lot of cases you can see the child's story hidden just below the surface, breaking down bodily borders and transferring what they wish to do and what they can't do to the puppet. When Niamh Lawlor as part of the Puppet Portal was working with a girl in isolation, the girl started puppeteering a teddy bear Niamh had brought with her. The puppeteered bear started asking another teddy-bear still in its plastic;

*"are you ok trapped in the plastic? Are you lonely? How are you feeling? "It was as if she were giving herself a chance to have a dialog with her situation"* Niamh Lawlor.

Similarly, when I was working with a girl in isolation, she made a puppet who was trapped in a dungeon and was trying to escape. Fellow puppeteer Anna Rosenfelder worked with a girl in her hospital bed who made up a story of a puppet girl in a hospital bed who was "*feeling lonely and bored, the puppet girl set of to travel the world- a freedom denied to the girl*" who created the puppet. In all of these cases the children seem to use the puppet to express their own experience of being in isolation, making an intangible feeling into a physical puppet and letting the puppet speak for them.

### **Puppetry to deconstruct architectural borders.**

A child in isolation cannot venture out of their room, however their puppet and their voice can. In the third year of Eszter Nemethi's residence on Cloudland's she created a game with

different teenagers. They could link in and listen and play the game through their phones. When creating the game with them, Eszter had them first draw a map of their own rooms. One room turning into a monster as the child decided the chairs and beds in a row looked like giant teeth. Then children sent Eszter out onto the corridors to draw maps for them of the places they couldn't venture. While Eszter was out there mapping the corridor, medical staff would ask her what she was doing. She would explain that it was a zombie apocalypses and she was mapping the route for the teenager. Here Eszter was a vessel for getting the young person's story out. Sometimes Eszter would only work with the young person once and so she would go into the next teenager and fill them in on what the other young person created, so they knew what happened and would continue the story. So, children who were in isolation where able to collaborate. What they ended up making was an interactive game where the person playing could choose what happened and in what direction in the hospital they went, however the hospital now housed dragons and zombies.

*If you know the hospital and you know the corridors then you know it's real. However, if you're not in a hospital then you don't recognise those bits. So, I was trying to make it so that the ones that really know the hospital, because they spend too much time there had extra information.... Also, mapping is reimaging, suddenly you know it better than other people and suddenly you own that space. Then they are the owner rather than a captive in it as that is a different relationship. A prisoner inside. Eszter Nemethi*

Siobhan Clancy during the puppet portal made a puppet window on the hospital corridor, where children puppets and stories were shared to anyone passing. She found out children would be proudly showing their puppets to their parents and that medical staff would often stop by to see the work.

*Generally, family members are anxious about their young person so seeing them being creative and having fun boasted the mood and the confidence of the adult in room and reminded them of the little human that was inside the bandage wrappings of anxiety. Siobhan Clancy*

Siobhan went one step further and made a puppet theatre with another artist, which was commissioned by Avril Carr for the ward in Boumount hospital. The puppet theatre was displayed on the ward. When you turned a hand crank, puppets that were made by the children with Siobhan moved around on the inside of the theatre. So, puppets that were made by young people gained a legacy and could be manipulated by other children who could use them to tell their own stories. It offered a permanent puppet stage in the hospital.

## **The Pop Up Picnic**

The Pop Up Picnic is a Helium project in partnership with the Jack and Jill Children's Foundation. It sends puppeteer Niamh Lawlor and musician Thomas Johnston into homes of early years' children with complex needs. They return to the same child and their family multiple times, to perform to them a multi-sensory performance, that incorporates object manipulation and music. Their aim is to provide parents with new ways of bonding with their young child. Artistic director Helene Hugel said the feedback was amazing from parents.

*It was a chance to bond and to do normal stuff. I don't think it was distraction I think it was more about normalisation and a sense of relaxation and a way for the family to all be able to*

*share and experience together. Which is something they can't do together so often as the home can become quite medicalised and mom the nurse. Helene Hugel*

They arrive at the house and spread a picnic rug on the floor, transforming the domestic world. They re-invent ordinary objects, transforming them into the extraordinary, leaving behind them a sense of fun and play. Teapots became old men, music shakers turned into bees, lentils became magical. Here again the puppeteer and musician brought play into an environment that was heavily focused on medical procedures. They transformed the living room into an outdoor space where they were having a picnic. They used the power of imagination to tear down the fourth wall and by transforming ordinary objects into extraordinary characters, they left this sense of fun and play behind.

## **Conclusion**

The puppet is promoting communication and breaking through the fourth wall, whether that is as part of a performance in a child's home or in the isolation room. Agency of the performer is a common interest in these two theatrical spaces that we are creating. At the heart of this work is the well-being of the young person and the opportunity for that person to explore social issues or health experiences, that have an impact on their lives. What helium gives these young people is a tool for them to explore and express what's going on; an ability to transform their environment and create a fictitious world that is detached from them, but helps them to work through what they are going through. This voice then spreads out to the other young people in hospital, to medical staff and their families. The puppeteers, musicians and artists that work for Helium facilitate the unexpected in hospitals and homes, by giving these young people a voice.