



# FAMILY THEATRE FORMAT TOOLKIT

FAMILY THEATRE: EXPLORING THE FULL POTENTIAL  
OF FAMILY SHOWS IN THE EU CONTEXT



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The purpose of this document is to create a Family Theatre Format Definition to further investigate and define the main features and quality standards of the Family Theatre Format. This will facilitate its recognition and circulation at EU level. This format has clear guiding principles, quality standards and operational guidelines. To make sure it reflects the needs of the different national contexts, the format has been shared with relevant stakeholders at EU level for their review and assessment.

### TARGET GROUP:

The Family Theatre Format has been designed to be used by Theatre Makers, Designers, Producers, Venues, Dramaturgs, Writers and Students and anyone with an interest in creating Family Theatre.

### Limitations of this Document:

It has been designed not as a “Step by Step” Guide to create Family Theatre as this would be an impossible task due to the variety of genres, stories, means of engagement and artistic choices available to makers. Instead it is meant as a document that should be used to inform Theatre Professionals or students practice. It highlights the most important aspect of Family Theatre performances and gives suggestions of ways of thinking about creating artistic solutions. It has been designed as a **springboard for conversation** to help creators and highlight the limitless possibilities of Family Theatre

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“The hero’s journey always begins with the call. One way or another, a guide must come to say, ‘Look, you’re in Sleepy Land. Wake. Come on a trip....’ And so it starts.”

Joseph Campbell

### Family Theatre Definition

Family Theatre is a **shared artistic experience that unites generations**, creating memorable moments that strengthen familial bonds. It is a live experience designed for broad appeal, intended to be enjoyed by family members together, where each viewer experiences and enjoys the show in a unique and collective way.

**One of the purposes of Family Theatre is to make theatre a third space for families. In sociological terms, the third place is an environment in which we can find comfort and familiarity that is separate from home (first place) and work/school (second place)**

**Family Theatre can be any genre of theatre created for diverse, intergenerational family units**

**We are aware that the term is used in different forms in various cultures and contexts, but we will be referring to it as Family Theatre**

**The chosen topic/material should work at multiple levels of understanding**

**The content explored in the production should be interesting for children, teenagers and adults alike**

**The language and artistic forms used in the production should be accessible and engaging for different age audiences**

Family Theatre has similarities to, but is completely distinct from, the following theatre forms:

**Early Years Theatre (age 0-4)** is a specialised form of performing arts designed for pre-school children. It uses interactive, sensory-rich and developmentally appropriate experiences to engage young audiences. It can include professional performances for babies on laps or more participatory shows where children can enter the performance area.

Family Theatre *does not cater specifically for this age range*, ie. 0-4 age group.

The core principle of **Children's Theatre or Theater for Young Audience (TYA)** is to create art for and with young people; meaning their perspectives, interests and experiences are considered from the initial idea to the final performance.

Family Theatre is *designed for the whole family* but not all TYA falls under Family Theatre. While Family Theatre aims to engage a broader demographic by considering the interests and experiences of all audience members, regardless of age, TYA focuses primarily on engaging younger audiences.

**Theatre in Education (TiE)** uses theatre and dramatic techniques to facilitate learning and explore social or educational issues beyond simple entertainment.

Family Theatre *does not have the same focus* on informing or changing knowledge, behaviour or attitudes. Education is not a priority in Family Theatre.

**Pantomime** is a type of musical and comedy stage production designed for family entertainment, generally combining gender-crossing actors and topical humour with a story loosely based on a well-known fairy tale, fable, or folk tale.

Although the Pantomime audience may be similar to that of Family Theatre and there is *some crossover* with content and form, Pantomime exists as *a very distinct art form* separate to theatre and therefore Family Theatre.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This Family Theatre format document is the result of two stages of research.

## **STAGE 1: MAPPING FAMILY THEATRE IN EUROPE REPORT (DECEMBER 2024 – MARCH 2025)**

As part of our research, we examined various documents, articles and surveys related to the concept of Family Theatre. We followed this with small-scale qualitative research. The project partners collected data from December 2024 to March 2025 using anonymous online questionnaires and targeted interviews (both verbal and written) with specific stakeholders identified by the project partners in their respective countries.

The three stakeholder groups included theatre staff (marketing and technical specialists, as well as artistic collaborators and critics), civic and cultural organisations working with families, and families with children of various ages.



### **RESULTS/INDICATORS**

**Barriers to Attendance** - Major factors discouraging family attendance at theatre include high ticket prices, inconvenient scheduling and poor access to information or theatre locations

**Audience Age Range** - Families primarily attend theatre when children are between 4 and 12 years old, with a decline in attendance as children enter their teenage years.

**Content Preferences** - Families favour familiar stories, such as fairy tales and classics, often chosen for nostalgic reasons. Preferred genres include comedy, musicals and adventure.

**Themes that Resonate** - Successful themes for Family Theatre include 'coming-of-age' stories, familial struggles and life transitions, provided they avoid being didactic

**Seating and Venue Design** - Traditional theatre seating is often seen as unsuitable for families. Families prefer more intimate, inclusive layouts that facilitate physical closeness

**Performance Design** - Theatre-makers stress the importance of creating layered narratives that engage different generations simultaneously, blending complexity and clarity through characters and story arcs

**Interactivity and Genre Variety** - Interaction, humour, puppetry and non-verbal storytelling enhance audience engagement. Different genres from musicals to studio-based, movement theatre – can all serve Family Theatre

**Ideal Performance Length** - Most families and practitioners agree that 60 minutes is the ideal duration for Family Theatre, preferably without an intermission

**Quality and Aesthetics** - High-quality acting, storytelling and bold, engaging aesthetics (e.g. colour, puppetry, immersive set design) are crucial for a successful family theatre experience

**Audience Engagement** - Effective pre-show and post-show strategies can include social media engagement, educational materials, Q&A sessions and actor interactions, which help deepen the impact and accessibility of the theatre experience for families

The full report is available below. We advise readers to go through in order to understand the full width of the Family Theatre Format.

[https://insitedrama.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2025/06/FamilyTheatre\\_FINAL\\_Mapping-Family-Theatre-in-Europe.pdf](https://insitedrama.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2025/06/FamilyTheatre_FINAL_Mapping-Family-Theatre-in-Europe.pdf)

## STAGE 2 - TRANSNATIONAL WORKSHOPS

During the project, the partner consortium conducted four thematic research workshops; two online and two in person, featuring experts and stakeholders from various disciplines who exchanged technical skills, knowledge and experience to help deepen understanding of various artistic forms for family-oriented productions. From these workshops we developed the guiding principles of this document as well as tentative quality standards and operational guidelines. Experts and stakeholders included in this process included Actors, Writers, Psychologists, Dramaturgs, Families, Venue Managers, Directors, Producers and Youth Theatre practitioners.

### WORKSHOP 1 - IN PERSON, DUBROVNIK

Dubrovnik Summer Festival welcomed the project partners and national experts in Dubrovnik, Croatia, around the first Family Theatre workshop. Key discussion topics included ideal performance length, audience age range, seating & venue and social inclusivity in Family Theatre.. Questions around the lack of mediation tools for young audience in Family Theatre were raised and how to remedy this in order for all the members of the same family to enjoy their experience both individually and collectively.



### WORKSHOP 2 - ONLINE, VERONA

AIDA led an online workshop on the topics of quality and aesthetics, audience engagement and themes. It appeared clear that the questions of quality and engaging audiences were linked and that fear was a major factor in engaging family audience. Stakeholders suggested loosening up theatre conventions to cater to the family needs, but they also recognised that this could hinder the quality of the performance and the experience for other audience members.

### WORKSHOP 3 - ONLINE, BUDAPEST

InsiteDrama facilitated the third workshop online and focused on the questions of possible dramaturgies and choosing stories, which led to further discussion on themes and age-appropriate topics. Our research highlighted that familiar stories and mechanisms are the most appropriate for Family Theatre. During this workshop, stakeholders discussed how classic tales and stories could be approached by makers in order to keep them exciting for the performers but also introduce new ideas or shift the audience's perspective to encourage discussions within generations.

### WORKSHOP 4 - IN PERSON, DUBLIN

The Gaiety School of Acting hosted the final workshop in person in Dublin, Ireland. Experts and other stakeholders reflected on the last three workshops, however the focus shifted slightly from questions around audiences to questions on the creative team and the role of the production company in selecting the right people, communicating with external partners and supporting the creatives on their journey to making Family Theatre.



### **Key Research Findings from the Workshops**

**Complexity** - Family Theatre is extremely difficult to make as it has to be a coherent experience that impacts audience members at different levels and at different times.

**Engagement VS Disengagement** - Family Theatre makers should avoid being didactic as it is very clear from families that they love to engage with stories but don't like being told what to think or how to feel.

**Age Recommendations** - Our research suggests a minimum age category for Family Theatre. Age 4+ is recommended to help maintain the theatrical experience.

**Resonance** - Family Theatre should be designed to engage both adults and children, ensuring that each audience member feels that the performance resonated with them personally. This approach creates a richer experience for everyone involved.

**Humour** - Irreverence and humour were identified as key elements regardless of form and content.

**The Third Space** - The purpose of Family Theatre is to create a Third Space for families; that is, a space that is not the home, work or school.

**Professionalism** - Knowing your audience and knowing your craft are crucial elements in producing successful Family Theatre.

**FAMILY THEATRE SHOULD BE CAPTIVATING FOR  
EVERYONE!**  
DUBLIN "IN CONVERSATION WITH" FEEDBACK

# FAMILY THEATRE TOOLKIT

QUALITY STANDARDS &  
OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

In this toolkit, we divide Standards & Guideline Recommendations for Family Theatre into three interrelated sections:

1. **FAMILY THEATRE CONTENT - “SHARED STORY”**
2. **FAMILY THEATRE FORM - “SHARED WORLD”**
3. **FAMILY AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT - “SHARED COMMUNITY”**

As theatre makers, we recognise that **CONTENT** refers to the message or subject matter we choose to present. This content is conveyed through the **FORM**, which includes the styles, structure and medium of language, visual design and artistic techniques.

This toolkit will offer strategies on how to **COMMUNICATE** to & **ENGAGE** with our Family Theatre audiences and successfully market Family Theatre shows.

It is clear from our research that theatre-makers already create Family Theatre but don't necessarily call it that. This toolkit will assist makers in identifying if their work can be considered Family Theatre while also helping makers create Family Theatre.

# 1. FAMILY THEATRE CONTENT

## THE “SHARED STORY” RESPECTING INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES

The Family Theatre format is not designed as a means of limiting the choices or options for theatre makers; It is merely to act as a starting point for makers and to highlight the unlimited possibilities of content. Our research has highlighted the importance of providing a “Shared Story”, and the importance of sharing experience across generations.

**FAMILY THEATRE IS FOR EVERY ONE,  
NOT ABOUT EVERYONE.**

WHAT ARE THE KEY ASPECTS TO  
THE CONCEPT OF “SHARED STORY”?

A “Shared Story” is a bridge between generations.

The idea of a “Shared Story” leads to a “shared journey” throughout the performance which unites the audience creating a ‘Shared Experience’.

A “Shared Story” focuses on emotional truth, humour and meanings that resonate at different levels and at different times with the audience members.

In this section we will discuss the following:

- 1.1 Themes that resonate with audiences
- 1.2 Multilayered Dramaturgy
- 1.3 Families’ preferred Genres
- 1.4 The importance of understanding age ranges

## 1.1 THEMES AND CONTENT THAT RESONATE WITH AUDIENCES

Similar resonating themes were mentioned by experts, theatre makers and families, although the manner in which they can be presented, subverted or showcased varies. It was noted that important topics should not be shied away from or “dumbed down.” Families do not enjoy being “lectured to” or attend performances that are overly didactic. The inclusion of nuance and fun were also key points that were identified during the research.

Family favourite content include:

- Fairy Tales
- Well known literary pieces
- Iconic Books
- Movies

It is evident that families enjoy pieces that they have some familiarity with, there is a sense that a “Shared Memory” of stories is really important for them. These family favourites can be subverted and treated with humour and irreverence. It is also reassuring for families to see something they already have some concept of and takes away some of the barriers of attendance that we found in our research.

There is often a “fear” amongst non-traditional theatre-going families of the unknown experience of the theatre and a well-known story can help to transcend this by making it seem more accessible.

Also a well-known performer/theatre-maker can have the same effect of reassurance for Families. This recurring fear, of a sense of not belonging to the theatre, is the second main issue for non-attendance at theatres for families beside pricing which we discuss in a later section.

**Themes that resonate with audiences include:**

- Coming-of-age stories
- Familial struggles
- Life transitions
- Adventure



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON THEMES THAT RESONATE

### “UNIVERSAL THEMES, BUT LEAVE ROOM FOR IMAGINATION”

- Using a familiar topic or theme is a great place to start - this gives a sense of comfort and security to families!
- Classic stories can be looked at critically in current contexts.
- New ways of telling old stories is an exciting experience for both maker and the audience.
- Universal themes bring families together but you can use specific themes to engage audiences.
- Avoid being didactic! It is very clear from families that they love to engage with stories but don't like being told what to think or how to feel.
- Subverting ideas and genres and not shying away from big topics allows parents and older children to engage with the material on a different level.
- Don't be afraid of opening new worlds and the power of surprise and newness.
- Keep in mind what's interesting to the audience, not what's fun to do as a theatre-maker.
- Don't underestimate the power of nostalgia.
- It is okay to subvert and change the structure of stories but try to keep its emotional truth.

## 1.2 MULTILAYERED DRAMATURGY

Multilayered dramaturgy refers to the practice of structuring a narrative with multiple layers of meaning, format and engagement and this is a feature of many theatre pieces. However with "Family Theatre," there is often an added layer of complexity due to the varying age groups in the audience.

When we are dealing with characters for example, the differences can be surmised as the following: smaller children require 'black and white' characters, at least as protagonists. Older audiences need more layered characters.

This contradiction can be resolved with playing with differences between central and smaller roles in a play. Audiences will find their own level through the story.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON DRAMATURGY

#### "A GOOD STORY HAS NO AGE LIMIT"

- Playfulness is hugely important for family audiences.
- Use archetypes everyone understands - very useful for younger audience members!
- Don't think in terms of age, think in terms of story.
- Reveal different layers of meaning through scenes and tone.
- Focus on moments that have double resonance i.e. creating a personal connection with the audience
- Physical theater, music and rhythm are helpful tools for younger audiences.
- Subtext, emotional depth and irony help engage older audience members.
- Keep emotional truth at the center.
- Mobilise imagination, allow space for the audience to fill in the blanks
- Create a sense of magic and childlike wonder, not childishness!

“THERE’S ROOM FOR ALL SORTS OF MAGIC  
AND MIRACLES IN THIS WORLD – THAT’S  
WHAT I THINK.”

MICHAEL MORPURGO

Our research highlighted several **common mistakes** that families identified in our research as off putting for them:

- Writing down to children
- Over explaining morals
- Adding adult jokes for parents
- Forgetting theatricality

## THE SHARED STORY - CHILDREN WILL FIND ITS WONDER, ADULTS WILL FIND THE TRUTH



### 1.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF AGE RANGES

Family Theatre is a forum in which families can explore and develop social and emotional abilities in a structured yet imaginative environment. When creating work for family audiences it is really important to understand your audience in terms of their levels of understanding both socially and cognitively. This will aid your work in several ways, not just as a performer and maker but also in how you market your piece.

**“CHILDREN ARE NOT PASSIVE SPECTATORS —  
THEY IMAGINE, INTERPRET, AND RESHAPE  
THEATRE WITH THEIR OWN VOICES AND  
EXPECTATIONS. IF WE TRULY LISTEN TO THEM,  
THEATRE BECOMES MORE THAN ART FOR YOUNG  
AUDIENCES: IT BECOMES ART WITH THEM AND  
THROUGH THEM”**  
**MAŠA RIMAC JURINOVIĆ**

#### **Responsibility of Theatre Makers**

Family Theatre productions are designed to appeal to a broad range of ages. As makers you have a responsibility to be aware of how your audience will react to the content, such as the intensity of themes and potential for frightening moments.

You can also build in audience engagement strategies, which can include interactive elements for very young audiences to broaden the appeal of your work. We have based our recommendation on the age categories defined in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) which defines three broad age categories: theatre for early years (0-6 years), children’s theatre (4-12 years) and theatre for youth (13-18 years). Family Theatre suggests that these are broadened to include adults.

More recommendations on engagement and communication strategies are available in Part 3 of the toolkit.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT AGE RANGE

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE!

The key to creating a Family theatre production is to allow moments that resonate with different audiences and different levels at different times, to do this you must have knowledge of age ranges, rites of passage and generational concerns.

#### **Early Years (Ages 0-4)**

The content is often designed to be engaging and requires attention to the children's responses. Productions can incorporate interactive elements, such as breaking the fourth wall and allowing children to participate in the performance; body language and movements not speech are the basic expressions of all children's performance for this age range.

**NOTE: We believe Family Theatre begins at ages 4+ as this is the age in which children and adults can begin to share their artistic journeys together.**

#### **Younger Childhood (Ages 4-7)**

From ages 4-7, children develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally as they enter school, making sense of the world through logic and imagination. They love fantastical stories. However they can still struggle to tell fact from fiction.

#### **Middle Childhood (Ages 7-11)**

Children of this age in particular are looking for adventure and heroes who usually possess ethereal power and a quest for some secrets. Fantasy and imagination are hugely important for this age as well as stories that include peers and friendship. For this group, consider the play's length, subject matter, and complexity. Productions may include mild peril or highly comedic violence.

### **In Between Years (Ages 10-13)**

For this age group, due to neurological development, many children find it difficult to make decisions and recognise themselves within the rules of the adult world, their own emotions and those of other people. For the age group of 10-13 years of age, everything seems to be more confusing than ever before. They are not children anymore, but not yet adults either. Magic is receding into the background and the desire for self-identification emerges. That is why this age group reflects more strongly on stories embedded in reality or lifelike circumstances.

### **Teenagers (Ages 13-16)**

This audience is generally more attuned to social themes and behaviors. Some productions produced for this age range may contain more intense or frightening content, including infrequent violence or situations that could be disturbing for younger children. Additionally elements of surprise or unexpected storyline can appeal to this age-range. They like to be 'thrown off' and surprised – but only if they are given a hint or a tool to decode what they see. Due to their sense of rationality, teenagers usually don't like unclear, ambiguous symbols; they prefer straightforward messages. But at the same time, there is nothing that alienates them more than a direct didactic intention.

### **Young Adults (16-20)**

This audience is in the final stage of adolescence, characterised by significant growth in abstract thinking, future planning, and identity formation. It's a period of transition that includes milestones like learning to drive, considering post-school paths, and navigating new social and romantic relationships. Content related to lifestyle, hobbies, and other interests is very popular and they are highly digitally savvy.

### **Early Adulthood (ages 20–39)**

In early adulthood there are two distinct audiences who would share similar interests:

- Unattached Adult - Young adults become independent from their families of origin, focus on developing their own identity, and pursue careers and peer relationships. They can bring younger family members to Family Theatre shows.
- Coupling/Marriage - Adults commit to a partnership, create a new family system, and learn to balance marital needs with career demands. These could be parents who bring their own children and their friends/relations to shows.

### **Middle adulthood (ages 40–59)**

Key characteristics of this age group are a mid-life re-evaluation and often includes changes in family and career. Middle-aged adults may also face the "sandwich generation" challenge of caring for both their children and aging parents.

### **Late adulthood (age 60 and above)**

These are individuals adjusting to life after career and child-rearing stages are complete. This stage can involve becoming a grandparent, adapting to generational roles, and facing the challenges of aging.



**“WE DON’T STOP PLAYING  
BECAUSE WE GROW OLD;  
WE GROW OLD BECAUSE WE  
STOP PLAYING.”**

**GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**

## 2. FAMILY THEATRE FORM THE “SHARED WORLD”

Theatre creates a unique social and communal experience between performers and the audience, while fostering a sense of community and providing a platform for collaborative creation

Theatre as an art form consists of many different styles or genres, defined by its structure, conventions, and objectives. Examples include classical Greek tragedy, Shakespearean drama, modern musical theatre, or contemporary performance art. These forms combine elements like words, voice, movement and visual design to tell stories and communicate ideas, engaging an audience in a particular way.

The forms suggested in this toolkit are not intended to be exhaustive but are merely informed by research that the partnership consortium has conducted. Much like the Family Theatre content section of the toolkit, the forms suggested below are meant as a starting point for theatre practitioners to begin their process of Family Theatre making.

In this section we will consider:

- 2.1 Preferred Performance Genres**
- 2.2 Quality and Aesthetics**
- 2.3 Ideal Duration Length**

## 2.1 PREFERRED PERFORMANCE GENRES

There was a clear sense of occasion going to the theatre, our families remembered the atmosphere as something special, this was described as "entering a special world" the idea of something beautiful and extraordinary.

As theatre makers we must ask the question: how can the performance genre assist this?

A variety of different genres were mentioned by the interviewed practitioners. Some practitioners maintain that improvised performances with a high level of audience engagement can become extremely powerful Family Theatre experiences. Other artists are critical of improvised performances because they lack a clear and well-developed storyline that they believe is central to engaging different generations at the same time.

The most commonly mentioned genres in our research were ;

- Puppetry
- Dance
- Classical Street Theatre
- Mime
- Pantomime - Family Theatre consortium are treating pantomime as its own specific art form for the purpose of this document

The overwhelming consensus from the research was that there was no **one** genre that could be classified as Family Theatre. Different genres, from musicals to puppetry and street theatre, can all serve Family Theatre.

" IT IS THE WRITER'S JOB TO MAKE  
THE PLAY INTERESTING. IT IS THE  
ACTOR'S JOB TO MAKE THE  
PERFORMANCE TRUTHFUL."

DAVID MAMET

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON GENRE

### “USE THE GENRE OR GENRE VARIATIONS THAT SUIT YOUR STORY”

- Language - Consider non-verbal aspects for your production e.g. movement, music, sensory elements These can work really well for multigenerational audiences.
- Think about what visual elements can aid your performance. Do you need lots of bright lights or will understated lighting carry the mood better?
- Musicality can underscore and help understanding for both younger and older audiences.
- Ensure your performance space complements the size and intention of your production.
- Think about whether audience participation serves your piece well, don't add it in just for the sake of it.
- Playfulness- Incorporate humour and a sense of fun which are identified as key aspects of Family Theatre
- Using Improvisation- This requires a lot of skill and experience from the actors who must follow a set of improvisation rules in order to keep different age-groups engaged



## 2.2 QUALITY AND AESTHETICS

It's important to note that when we talk about “Quality” in this document we are not focused on aesthetics, which we will treat as a separate form.

“Quality” is talking about the following elements

- High quality acting
- Qualities connected with the theme
- Content VS Form

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON QUALITY

## QUALITY CAN NOT BE COMPROMISED ON

- You need very skilled actors to deal with a younger audience as they can be more restless and inquisitive than older audiences who recognise theatre etiquette
- The quality of the piece as a whole really resonates with younger audiences, so think about how the story relates to the aesthetics and make sure it reinforces the story.
- Budget can affect what you can do with visuals and staging but think cohesively and leave space for imagination

Aesthetics in Family Theatre encompass the use of theatrical elements like visuals, sound, movement, and colour to create a stimulating and engaging experience that goes beyond simple entertainment. You want the audience to perceive the performance as art.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON AESTHETICS

### “DON’T BE AFRAID TO BE BOLD”

- The design should reinforce the story, it does not have to have bright colours and flashing lights if the story doesn’t need it.
- The more immersive you can make the design the better for younger audiences.
- Music can really help carry the audience along with the emotions of the performance.
- Movement, dance and physicalisation are great non-verbal tools of telling the story.



The creation of a piece of Theatre involves multiple creatives, producers and crew working together to create the final performance. We have identified through our research several key roles. Family Theatre is a specialised form, the following roles would find training and up-skilling beneficial. However, it should be noted that this list is not exhaustive

## KEY ROLES FOR AESTHETICS

### COLLABORATION IS KEY TO A COHESIVE DESIGN

The Director is the central figure in the creation of the overall creative vision and is the person that brings together Form, Content and Engagement. However their vision can not be realised alone. The key designers to assist them in developing their Aesthetic are:

- **Set Designer** - They design the physical world of the performance.
- **Costume Designer** - They design the costumes for the performance.
- **Lighting Designer** - Use lighting design to create atmosphere, mood, focus, and to support the story/narrative through the use of light and shadow.
- **Sound Designer** - Creates and manipulates sound to enhance the audience's experience, including sound effects, music, and atmospheric audio.
- **Choreographer** - Designs any dances or movements within the performance

## 2.3 IDEAL PERFORMANCE LENGTH

Our research shows there is an overwhelming consensus on the ideal performance length, according to families and practitioners.

**60 minutes was identified as the maximum duration for a Family Theatre show, preferably without an intermission.**

Choosing which works best for your performance will depend on what Story you have to tell. In order to keep the audience engaged, Theatre Makers recommend that something unexpected should happen at 30 minutes approx, as this is when audience attention naturally wanes.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON PERFORMANCE LENGTH

#### “THE NEXT, THE NEXT, THE NEXT!” LOUIS LOVETT

- Try to introduce lots of “Nexts” to help keep the audience riveted to their seats, wanting to know what is going to happen: a new character appearing, a sound effect, a lighting change, a surprise twist, a musical sting. Compare it to the page-turning appeal of a successful children’s book.
- If the key age-range is 4 year olds, then shorten your production. Most practitioners agree 30-45 minutes is ideal.
- Pacing is key - you need to have surprises for the audience and keep it flowing!
- Know your story, what is key and what can be left out. You need moments to engage both adults and children but these don’t need to be at the same time.
- Children will show you when they are bored: they will move in their seats and maybe voice their opinions. Actors and performers need to be prepared for a less “polite” audience in Family Theatre.
- It’s not the children’s fault if they are bored, it’s perhaps a failure of the production. The production should interrogate its content to see the points where children drift away and ideally try to make these sequences more engaging.

### 3. FAMILY THEATRE ENGAGEMENT THE “SHARED COMMUNITY”

Positive family experiences can create lifelong memories with each other. Compared with other audiences, families have engagement needs that are unique to them. Family Theatre engages both children and adults as active participants in their theatrical experience, each with their own expectations within the theatrical experience.

One of the purposes of Family Theatre is to make theatre a third space for families. In sociological terms, the third space is an environment in which we can find comfort and familiarity that is separate from home (the first place) and work/school (the second place).

It is important to know how to speak about Family Theatre shows and how to make the experience of the audience a positive and memorable one. Our research has shown that Audience Engagement should be wide ranging and offer cost effective ways to increase the accessibility for families.

#### KEY POINTS

Families talked about a sense of occasion going to the theatre, they remember the atmosphere, so the feeling was something other than the show.

All talked about entering a special world, something beautiful, extraordinary

Below are suggestions on how to make a performance family-friendly and engaging:

- 3.1 Family Audience Engagement - Best practice**
- 3.2 Seating and Venue - Best practice**
- 3.3 Barriers to attendance**

### 3.1 FAMILY AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT - PRE-SHOW & POST-SHOW

When designing a show remember to keep in mind what the barriers to attendance are for your audience. For families in particular these are high ticket prices, inconvenient scheduling, and poor access to information or theatre locations. You should work in partnership with venue managers and producers about ways to circumvent some of these barriers.

#### PRE-SHOW MARKETING

Parents should be reassured that the theater is a welcoming place to be enjoyed peacefully, in the company of understanding people and that it’s truly worth it. Promoting Family Theater should include clear communication that even if a child cries or needs to get up, these are challenges all families face and can handle.

#### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON PRE-SHOW COMMUNICATION

#### “REASSURE FAMILIES THAT THEY BELONG IN THE THEATRE”

- Trailers help families understand the performance and help them prepare.
- Age categories for shows allow families to make informed choices.
- Show the magic of the Theatre as a unique shared experience.
- Make it more magical!
- Relaxed performances and permission to move are hugely beneficial to families.
- Meeting families where they are at and bringing the theatre to them can be the first solution, the first step before bringing them to the theatre.
- Focus on the fun rather than formality.
- Marketing has to be considered and match the tone of the performance.

The aim is to encourage a new habit of theatre-going for families. Currently, most families don't attend theatre regularly. Family Theatre is treated as a once-off special event or spectacle to be experienced only once a year or less.

## POST-SHOW ENGAGEMENT

It is generally agreed by Makers and Venues that post-show engagement is not necessarily needed or desired by audience members. It was agreed that the priority was in making sure that audience members felt welcomed throughout the theatre experience from the moment they walk in the door to the moment they leave.

One of the aims of Family Theatre is to stimulate a conversation between family members. This conversation does not end in the theatre but instead develops into dialogue and memories that they share together, creating intergenerational understanding.



### 3.2 SEATING & VENUE - VENUE RESPONSIBILITY

The key to welcoming families to theatre is to create an experience from the moment they step through the door. Traditional theatre venues and seating are often seen as unsuitable for families. Families prefer more intimate, inclusive layouts that facilitate physical closeness. However below are practical examples for how to improve the experience for families regardless of your venue design.

While this toolkit is primarily aimed at theatre-makers, we are aware that a lot of decisions regarding seating arrangements and front of house are the responsibility of the venue. We encourage practitioners to have active conversations with the hosting venue in order to create a synergy between the production, the practitioner, the audience and the venue itself.



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## THE VENUE

### Before the theatre visit:

- A video introducing the venue can be key to easing anxiety of parents and children before entering a new space. Additionally, extra signage may be useful to help audience members navigate the space.

### Upon audience arrival:

- Provide booster seats to allow smaller children a better viewing experience and to help them be more independent spectators. This will also give more space for parents, which can be welcomed for their own enjoyment of the performance.
- If available, provide space to store unnecessary items and clothing, such as a cloakroom.
- If available, designate a space where audience members may go throughout their theatre-visit for some quiet time / break.

### During the show:

- Show announcements should be linked to the tone of the show to give a sense of continuity.
- Additionally, think about how to potentially adapt theatre convention to suit your audience needs better - this needs to be clearly communicated with the audience, with the creative team and performers and with the front of house team.
- Relaxed performances work for families. These performances are comfortable for those with sensory needs with gentler lighting, and acceptable for those who may struggle to sit in one place through a whole performance.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## THE FRONT OF HOUSE TEAM

- Be **welcoming**: a good welcome is always the best start. Plan how you are welcoming people to the performance. It is important to give people the opportunity to ask questions and make them feel comfortable.
- Consider your **body language**: lower your body so you can speak to children at their own level. This helps them realise that they are a key part of the performance. However, some practitioners favour the opposite, remaining tall. It's a subjective choice.
- Ask **questions**: plan some questions that will help facilitate discussion and gauge the families' level of understanding and familiarity with theatre. This will help you make the families feel more welcome.
- Create a **positive experience**: people remember experiences they have enjoyed, felt involved in and that have inspired them to do or find out more.

When considering venues, seating arrangements and welcoming family audiences into the theatre building, there are two overarching questions to consider:

- What are the practical needs and fears of the audience?

This would then translate into practical adaptations of the space and potentially extra training of staff in customer service specialising in family audiences.

- What would best compliment the production?

This question is of the shared responsibility between the venue and the producing company. Tone, atmosphere and world-building should be considered - think about what energy you need the audience to start their theatre experience with.

If nothing in particular can be put in place to compliment the show, avoiding a jarring pre-show experience should be the priority

### 3.3 BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

Cost, lack of knowledge, fear and distance from theatres were all mentioned as major barriers to attendance for families. Some of these factors are out of your control but being aware of them can help you communicate with your audience.

#### KEY RECOMMENDATION ON BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

#### “KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE, KNOW THEIR BARRIERS”

- Using the recommendations from the previous two sections will help bridge some of the fear that families have in attending the theatre.
- Understand where families get their information about cultural activities, these include social media, local libraries and schools.
- Consider linking up with local schools to offer discounts: they are in constant communication with families and is an easy way to get in touch with your audience.
- Know what times work best for Family audiences: afternoon shows are typically best, but know your cultural context, e.g. In Ireland young children go to bed earlier than in Italy!



# JOIN THE CONVERSATION

We would love you to join us on our journey of play,  
experimentation and imagination

The adventure starts now!

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