

# P rogram for a Proletarian Children's Theater

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## Prefatory Remarks

Every proletarian movement, whenever it has for once escaped the format of parliamentary debate, finds itself confronting many different forces for which it is unprepared. The most powerful of these, as well as the most dangerous, is the younger generation. The self-confidence of parliamentary tedium springs from the fact that a parliament is a monopoly of adults. Mere catchphrases have no power over children. True, in a year you can make sure that children are parroting them throughout the country. But the question is how to make sure that the party program is acted on in ten or twenty years. And catchphrases will not have the slightest effect on this.

Proletarian education must be based on the party program—or, more precisely, on class consciousness. But the party program is no instrument of a class-conscious education, because the element of ideology, important though it is, reaches the child only as a catchphrase. We are calling for, and shall not cease to call for, instruments for the class-conscious education of proletarian children. In what follows, we shall ignore the question of the teaching curriculum as such, because long before children need to be instructed (in technology, class history, public speaking, and so on), they need to be brought up in a proletarian manner. We shall take, as our starting point, the age of four.

In line with the class position of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois education of little children is unsystematic. This does not mean that the bourgeoisie has no system of education. But the inhumanity of its content betrays itself in its inability to provide anything at all for the youngest children. On

children of this age, only truth can have a productive effect. The education of young proletarian children should distinguish itself from that of the bourgeoisie primarily by its systematic nature. "System" here means a framework. For the proletariat, it would be quite intolerable if every six months a new method were to be introduced with all the latest psychological refinements, as in the nursery schools of the bourgeoisie. Everywhere—and the realm of education is no exception here—the preoccupation with "methodology" is a symptom of the authentic bourgeois attitude, the ideology of laziness and muddling through. Proletarian education needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space *within* which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea *toward* which education leads.

We shall now explain why the framework of proletarian education from the fourth to the fourteenth year should be the proletarian children's theater.

The education of a child requires that *its entire life be engaged*.

Proletarian education requires *that the child be educated within a clearly defined space*.

This is the positive dialectic of the problem. It is only in the theater that the whole of life can appear as a defined space, framed in all its plenitude; and this is why proletarian children's theater is the dialectical site of education.

### Scheme of Tension

Let us set aside the question whether the children's theater of which we shall speak has a connection with the ordinary theater at the high points in its history. Yet we must state firmly that this theater has nothing at all in common with that of the modern bourgeoisie. Economically, the theater of the modern bourgeoisie is determined by the profit motive; sociologically, both in front of the curtain and backstage, it is primarily an instrument of sensation. The proletarian children's theater is quite different. Just as the first action of the Bolsheviks was to hoist the Red flag, so their first instinct was to organize the children. In this organization the proletarian children's theater, the basic motif of Bolshevik education, has a central place. There is a way of cross-checking this. In the view of the bourgeoisie, nothing presents a greater danger to children than the theater. This is not just a vestige of the old bogey—the myth of traveling actors who steal children. What we find expressed is the fear that the theater will unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future. And this fear causes bourgeois education theory to anathematize the theater. We may easily imagine how it would react once the fire came too close—the fire in which, for children, reality and play coincide and are fused so that acted sufferings can merge with real sufferings, acted beatings can shade into real beatings.

Nevertheless, the performances of this theater—unlike those of the great bourgeois theater—are not the actual goal of the concentrated collective labor that is performed in the children's clubs. One might say that here performances come about incidentally, as an oversight, almost as a children's prank, and in this way the children interrupt the course of study that they have never actually completed. The leader is relatively unconcerned about whether or not the course has been completed. He is more interested in the tensions that are resolved in such performances. The tensions of collective labor are the educators. The overhasty, unrelaxed process of educational labor that the bourgeois director performs—far too late—on the bourgeois actor no longer applies in this system. Why? Because in the children's club no leader would survive if he attempted in the authentic bourgeois spirit to influence the children directly as a "moral personality." There is no process of moral influence here. There is no direct influence either. (And it is on this that directing in the bourgeois theater is based.) What counts is simply and solely the indirect influence of the director on the children as mediated by subject matter, tasks, and performances. The inevitable moral processes of compensating and providing correctives are undertaken by the children's collective itself. This explains why children's theater productions inevitably strike adults as having authentic moral authority. There is no superior standpoint that an audience can adopt when witnessing children's theater. Everyone who has not quite sunk into feeble-mindedness will perhaps even feel ashamed.

But even this does not take us much further. To have a positive effect, proletarian children's theaters make a collective audience quite indispensable. In a word: they need the class as audience. Just as only the working class has an infallible intuition for the existence of collectives. Such collectives may be public meetings, the army, or the factory. But the child, too, is such a collective. And it is the prerogative of the working class to have a completely fresh eye for the children's collective, whereas the bourgeoisie is unable to perceive it. This collective radiates not just the most powerful energies, but also the most relevant ones. In fact, the relevance of childlike forms and modes of conduct is unsurpassed. (We draw attention here to the well-known exhibitions of the latest children's art.)

The neutralization of the "moral personality" in the leader unleashes vast energies for the true genius of education—namely, the power of observation. This alone is at the heart of unsentimental love. No pedagogic love is worth anything unless in nine-tenths of all instances of knowing better and wanting better it is deprived of its courage and pleasure by the mere observation of children's lives. It is sentimental and vain. For the true observer, however—and this is the starting point of education—every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal. Not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship (as the psychologists like to think), but

a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands. The new knowledge of children that has been developed in the Russian children's clubs has led to the theory that the child inhabits his world like a dictator. For this reason, the "theory of signals" is no mere figure of speech. Almost every childlike gesture is a command and a signal in a world which only a few unusually perceptive men, notably Jean Paul, have glimpsed.<sup>1</sup>

The task of the leader is to release children's signals from the hazardous magical world of sheer fantasy and apply them to materials. This happens in the various theatrical workshops. To take an illustration from painting, we know that in this sphere of childhood activity, too, gesture is all-important. Konrad Fiedler is the first to have shown in his *Writings on Art* that the painter is not a man who sees more naturalistically, more poetically, or more ecstatically than other people. He is, rather, a man who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand. What characterizes every child's gesture is that creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation. The development of these gestures in the different forms of expression—the making of stage props, painting, recitation, music, dance, or improvisation—is the task of the different workshops.

In all of them improvisation is central, because in the final analysis a performance is nothing but an improvised synthesis of all of them. Improvisation predominates; it is the framework from which the signals, the signifying gestures, emerge. And the synthesis of these gestures must become performance or theater, because they alone have the unexpected uniqueness that enables the child's gesture to stand in its own authentic space. The kind of "fully rounded" performance that people torment children to produce can never compete in authenticity with improvisation. The aristocratic dilettantism that is eager to make its poor pupils produce such "artistic achievements" ended up by filling cupboards and memory with junk, which was piously preserved so that our mementos of early youth might survive to enable us to torment our own children. But childhood achievement is always aimed not at the "eternity" of the products but at the "moment" of the gesture. The theater is the art form of the child because it is ephemeral.

### Scheme of Resolution

Educational work in the different workshops stands in the same relationship to the performance as a tension to its resolution. For no pedagogic wisdom can foresee how children will fuse the various gestures and skills into a theatrical totality, but with a thousand unexpected variations. Even for the professional actor, the first performance can often serve as the trigger that enables him to introduce genuine improvements into a well-rehearsed role.

But in the case of a child, it brings the genius of variation to a peak of perfection. In relation to the process of schooling, the performance is like the radical unleashing of play—something which the adult can only wonder at.

The embarrassments of bourgeois education theory and of the rising bourgeois generation in general have expressed themselves recently in the "Youth Culture" movement.<sup>2</sup> The conflict that this new movement is destined to hush up lies in the claims that bourgeois society (like every political society) makes on the energies of young people, which can never be activated directly in a political way. And on the energies of children above all else. Now Youth Culture attempts to achieve a hopeless compromise: it drains the enthusiasm of young people by a process of idealistic self-reflection, so as gradually and imperceptibly to replace the formal ideologies of German idealism by the contents of the bourgeois class. The proletariat must not pass on its own class interest to the next generation with the tainted methods of an ideology that is destined to subjugate the child's suggestible mind. The discipline the bourgeoisie demands from *children* is its mark of shame. The proletariat *disciplines* only the proletarians who have grown up; its ideological class education starts with puberty. Proletarian education theory demonstrates its superiority by guaranteeing to children the fulfillment of their childhood. There is no need, therefore, for the realm in which this occurs to be isolated from the realm of class struggles. At the level of play, the themes and symbols of class struggle can—and perhaps must—have a place in this realm. But these themes and symbols cannot lay claim to a formal dominance of the child. Nor will they do so. Hence, the proletariat has no need of the thousand little words which the bourgeoisie uses to disguise the class nature of its education theory. It will be possible to dispense with "unbiased," "sympathetic" practices and with teachers who are "fond of children."

The performance is the great creative pause in the process of upbringing. It represents in the realm of children what the carnival was in the old cults. Everything was turned upside down; and just as in Rome the master served the slaves during the Saturnalia, in the same way in a performance children stand on the stage and instruct and teach the attentive educators. New forces, new innervations appear—ones that the director had no inkling of while working on the project. He learns about them only in the course of this wild liberation of the child's imagination. Children that have learned about theater in this way become free in such performances. Through play, their childhood has been fulfilled. They carry no superfluous baggage around with them, in the form of overemotional childhood memories that might prevent them later on from taking action in an unsentimental way. Moreover, this theater is the only usable one for the child spectator. When grownups act for children, the result is archness.

This children's theater contains a force that will annihilate the pseudorevolutionary gestures of the recent theater of the bourgeoisie. For what is truly revolutionary is not the propaganda of ideas, which leads here and there to impracticable actions and vanishes in a puff of smoke upon the first sober reflection at the theater exit. What is truly revolutionary is the *secret signal* of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child.

Written in late 1928 or early 1929; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 763–769. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

1. Jean Paul Richter (1763–1825) is remembered for a series of wildly extravagant, highly imaginative novels that combine fantasy and realism.
2. A reference to the various movements and ideas that were prevalent between 1895 and 1920 and that are known today as the “Youth Movement.” The movement embraced a wide spectrum of ideas—from tame and pragmatic revisions in pedagogy, through the nature worship of young people tramping through the countryside (the *Wandervögel*), to the virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism of the radical Right. On Benjamin's involvement in the movement and his indebtedness to his teacher Gustav Wyneken, one of the main ideologues of the movement, see the Chronology in Volume 1 of this edition.