

BY CHILDREN, FOR CHILDREN.

STAGES JUNIOR ENSEMBLE WORKSHOP

RESOURCE PACK

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RESOURCE PACK
Stages Junior Ensemble

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Stages Theatre Group
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Stages Theatre Group Junior Ensemble

Stages Theater Group is one of the leading theater groups in Sri Lanka which has, over the years, produced several plays that have been showcased both locally and internationally (Kalumaali, Walking Path, Dear Children Sincerely). We work as an ensemble and produce plays that can be performed in all three languages (Sinhala, Tamil, and English), and strive to address relevant social issues.

Stages has always prioritized working with students – especially encouraging them to produce original plays. We have worked with Royal College, Methodist College, Museaus College, Ananda College.

In 2018, we launched the **Stages Junior Ensemble** for children **10 - 15 years of age**. The workshops were conducted by Ruwanthie De Chickera, Piumi Wijesundara and other artists of Stages Theater Group.

The **Stages Junior Ensemble** has run for five terms and has attracted a highly energetic and talented group of approximately thirty students coming from an array of Government, Private and International schools in Colombo.

In the **Stages Junior Ensemble Workshop**, the youngsters meet once a week for three hours. They produce their own plays, conduct their own research, design and run their own productions. They work closely with adult artists who help guide them and also train them in the skills that they wish to develop themselves in.

So far the **Stages Junior Ensemble** has produced original plays, researched, written, directed and produced entirely by children on issues such as bullying in school, gender stereotyping, mothers, the politicization of religion, the education system, the Easter Bombings in Sri Lanka, the daily life of a school-going Sri Lankan child. In addition to learning about theatre, the children have also learnt Mime and Political Cartooning.

The Junior Ensemble is run as a **children-led initiative**. The adult artists and the children who meet regularly through the workshop, are developing, together, what this means and how can it be practically implemented. Currently the children take majority of the decisions deciding what they want to learn, and how they want to learn and the artists provide the children with the support they need. The artists also provide the children with the constant push and encouragement to develop their sensitivity and awareness to the world around them in order that they may observe and understand social issues. They are also helped to improve their creative skills so that they can respond to these issues creatively and also collectively.

This resource pack is an attempt to record and understand some of the developments within the **Stages Junior Ensemble**.



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INTRODUCTION

Stages Theatre Company is an ensemble of theatre artists committed to working together to devise high quality, cutting edge, sustainable theatre in Sri Lanka. Since its inception in 2000, the artists of Stages, under the guidance of artistic director Ruwanthie de Chickera, have been committed to producing new plays, encouraging new writing, translations and developing theatre through the workshop method. Stages Theatre Group aims to create theatre that focuses on deep social issues.

In 2018, we at Stages saw the need to share our knowledge with youth, in order to create a younger generation of conscientious artists that could take the baton and continue to create socially and politically conscious theatre. And this is how the Stages Junior Ensemble was born.

We wanted to foster in young people – the courage to ask difficult questions and the imagination to come up with collective, creative responses.

We started the **Stages Junior Ensemble** for children 10 - 15 years of age. We had a highly energetic and talented group of approximately thirty students coming from an array of schools in Colombo - St. Thomas' College, Ananda College, S.Joseph's, Wycherly Int., Methodist College, British School, Isipathana College. We were delighted that the group comprised such an interesting mix of Govt., private and international schools.

Very soon, these weekly workshops grew into places where children could discuss pertinent social issues and find ways to respond collectively and creatively to them. In our workshops children learnt to create plays within a group, they learnt to write, design for, direct and act in plays, to conduct research whilst working alongside our professional theatre artists.

By 2020 the **Junior Ensemble Workshop** had made it to its fifth term.

The **Junior Ensemble** is slowly transforming itself organically from being a workshop series run by adults artists, to a collective organisation run by the children themselves where they are beginning to write, reflect, opine, act, design, present, question, and even present alternate solutions to problems in and around them. Moving a step away from their daily curriculums in school, and an education system that encourages one to parrot rather than investigate; the **Junior Ensemble** has created a platform in which the children have learnt the essential tools of research, investigation, and critical artistic reflection.

What follows is a brief glimpse into the **Junior Ensemble's** curriculum; their processes; and their ultimate creative output over the past two years...

'Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.'
(Margaret Mead)

JUNIOR ENSEMBLE TERM I
TRAINING IN THE BASICS OF ENSEMBLE THEATRE

THINKING, SEEING, ACTING CHILDREN

When we began the Stages Junior Ensemble, we had to first lay the initial groundwork to introduce the youngsters to the concept we wanted to develop through this workshop series.

This was going to be a free and creative space for children, where they would work with artists to develop their sense of the world and also their skills in interpreting what they saw critically, creatively and collectively.

Our first sessions with the children were focused on three elements. (1) Teaching the kids some basics of theatre (2) Teaching the kids how to begin to be aware of themselves, each other and the world around them, (3) Teaching the kids to understand their impact and power over the world around them.

The first sessions were thus designed for students to step into acting, develop a sense of imaginative, expressive and technical skills, combined with the creative application of strong observation, analytical and critical skills. The children were also taught how to be responsible for the collective success of the workshop.

At the first workshop session the students were also all new and nervous, as expected, and it was important to build a sense of the ensemble – or the collective - within them, starting from the very first day. And thus, their journey began with the following first lessons:

- Ensemble
- Rhythm
- Image and Space
- Narrative

THE ENSEMBLE OR THE COLLECTIVE

Creating an ensemble was the first key lesson that the kids were introduced to. And what better way for them to become an ensemble, than begin with respect for the rehearsal room?

Rehearsal Room Rules:

One of the key objectives of the Stages Junior Ensemble was to introduce the idea of self-discipline to the kids as opposed to presenting a set of disciplinary guidelines or rules and regulations. The attempt was to guide them towards this gently. As the kids stepped into their rehearsal room the walls had specifications and labels: 'Bottles', 'Books', 'Bags', 'Shoes'. The excited little eyes identified them and placed their things accordingly before they sat in the room.

One single question was asked prior to commencing:

'Are you all satisfied with the way the rehearsal room looks? It's your rehearsal room. Is it arranged in the way you want it?'

The children's' inquisitive eyes scanned the room one more time. They were not satisfied. Their feet quickly scurried. Books were arranged more neatly. Slippers that had been flung off their feet, were carefully lined up against the wall. Water bottles arranged in height order. Bags lined up neater. And the kids were back. The kids were encouraged to remember what this looked like. This is what their ideal rehearsal room would look like every day during workshops. For, **the very first lesson in theatre, is respect for the space within which you practice.** Your rehearsal room is where you create, it is the source of your inspiration, and thus will be treated accordingly. And this was their first task as an ensemble, where they all took the initiative to arrange the room together so they all felt they owned it.

The circle they sat in, eventually, served as their second lesson in creating an ensemble. The students were sat on the floor in a circle, and asked to adjust themselves into a perfect circle – with equal spaces in between them. The kids soon realised that as soon as even one member of the circle shifted, everyone had to adjust. While the task was initially rather daunting, the children soon developed the concentration to notice when a change in position was required, and later on this, developed into an 'instinct' or a sense of the shape of the room, and themselves within it.

The children identified what their takeaway from this exercise may have been. In theatre one must be...

Listening-flexible-organised-quick to adjust-spontaneous-observant

With the power of observation and listening to each other in mind, they could move forward.



• The kids eager to contribute in their circle.

RHYTHM

A good way to shake off any feelings of intimidation and shyness from the young thespians while also breaking the ice was games. Games would play a vital part in the **Junior Ensemble**. The children were thus introduced to their first game that encouraged spontaneity and also allowed them to get to know each other.

CLAP SNAP GAME:

The first game the kids were introduced to was a game where they got into a rhythm of clapping and snapping as a group as they passed on the rhythm to each other in the circle. While the game seemed rather juvenile at first, as they played, the ensemble realized the level of sharp focus, listening and observation that was required for the game to work. In addition to enhancing these skills and the ability of keeping tempo and listening to each other as an ensemble, the game was also a good way to get back into focus and create group synchrony.

THE NAME GAME:

1. Each person introduces themselves to the circle with their name, accompanied by an action that reflects something that they are not. (eg: Sanuka states his name extremely shyly, although he is an outgoing person.)
2. In the second round of this game, each person says their name, and accompanies it with an action that embodies an emotion/action that best describes themselves.
3. In the third round, each person introduces themselves by saying their name in a particular rhythm. This is then repeated by the entire group, mimicking each individual's rhythm for their name that they come up with.

4. In the fourth and final round, the kids are split into groups of 4-5 where they must come up with a routine and rhythm that includes all five of the names of group members. These name chimes are then presented to the others.

In the very first act of introducing themselves, their acting has begun! The students are slowly encouraged through this game to present themselves to the group and make offers, as well as to get to know each other and create their first ensemble piece. In addition to this, they are also introduced to one of the primary principles of creating theatre.

In the discussion that followed the exercises, the kids put forth their observations of how rhythm created timing and pace in the pieces they presented. The students were introduced to the notion of beat and tempo of a performance, and the manner in which rhythm is even able to follow our emotional state and create atmosphere.

IMAGE AND SPACE

Now having well and truly inhabited their workshop space, the kids were encouraged to explore the idea of images in space.

IMAGE FREEZE:

In the first round of this exercise, one person would go on stage and freeze in a certain position, providing an offer for the next actor to come on stage. The second actor would come on stage and then accept this physical gesture of an offer, and create another image that would complete the first actor's image. Actor 1 would now unfreeze leaving actor 2 as the sole image. This would go as actors come in, accept offers, freeze, unfreeze and leave. The kids made observations of how the distance they stood from each other created perspective and began to notice body language and the unspoken messages we hold within our stances.

1. In the second round of this exercise, the kids were told that they would all be part of the image they were creating. They would all be in the frame. Together they would decide how big, or small the frame would be. And depending on where they build their focus, the kids would also inevitably decide which image would be the focal/ central story for the audience.

The kids eventually ended up creating a graphic image that depicted a road accident and created the visual for a simulating story as well as several inciting characters.

2. In the third and final round of this exercise, the kids were put into groups and given a specific image that they had to create together within a specified time (e.g.: T-shirt/ microwave/ burger/

sad letter). As they came together to create the images, students found ways to get creative. They created moving images, and did not stick to the literary meaning of the image they were entrusted with creating (e.g.: one group, when given the image of a football, decided to cluster around one person's food, literally, creating a foot-ball). The ensemble also found ways to create images not only for objects or scenarios, but also for abstract concepts.

The follow-up discussion brought into focus how theatre is but a series of images created in the theatre space, and therefore how our first and foremost task as actors is to capture the audience with gripping visuals. The students were encouraged to harness their skills of coordination, team work, interaction, group work and rhythm as they created images and most importantly composition.

And next came, stepping into the space to get the ball rolling.



STEPPING INTO THE SPACE:

According to Peter Brooks, “a man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” All that is necessary for theatre to happen was somebody watching someone else stepping into a space. This, therefore, was the natural next step for the Junior Ensemble to learn.

The kids engaged in a “stepping in” exercise, where they would simply step into the space with different emotions/ circumstances, or to different audiences. The ensemble did this first individually, and then were put into groups where they were assigned a specific scene that they had to create the best beginning for.



• Creating images and exploring the space as an ensemble.

CHILDREN AS STORY TELLERS

Storytelling is perhaps the simplest yet most compelling form of dramatic and imaginative activity. Which is why the next step for our Junior Ensemble was to use the skills they had already learnt in telling stories.

FINDING NARRATIVE THROUGH IMAGES

1. Photographs and images showing compelling moments were strewn all over the floor, and the kids were encouraged to navigate among the images and pick ones they felt were most compelling.
2. Once the images were narrowed down the kids were split into groups and assigned an image to work with. The first task was to would imagine that the image they had chosen could be the beginning, middle or end of a story Their task was to create the two images that completed the story they had to capture in three still images.
3. Once their image series was presented to the rest of the class, the kids were assigned the task of creating a small scene, where they could dramatize the story they had created, adding to it elements of choreography, sounds and dialogue.

As the students created their first fully fledged pieces of theatrical work, they drew from the images and found themes and compelling moments to dramatize. They had devised their first works of theatre as an ensemble. The junior ensemble was now ready to take on something bigger!



• A group actively investigating their topic of research with Ruwanthie

RESEARCH BASED DEVISING CHILDREN AS RESEARCHERS

If there was one thing we wanted the Junior Ensemble to be, it was to be inquisitive! Devising in drama demands an inquisitive mind, and inventiveness as much as it requires an understanding of the basics of structuring a piece of theatre and a readiness to collaborate with others. Devising is also about owning your stories, and so we asked our Junior Ensemble what they would like to investigate. What were the things that kept them up at night? What were the subjects they wanted to research and investigate further? What stories did they want to pursue for their first public performance?

The ensemble had an array of ideas and questions. Why did they have to do homework? Why was school necessary? What is home? What is mortality? Why do we learn religion? What is friendship? What does my mother do? Who am I? Do aliens exist? The questions started pouring in. Now that they had plenty to investigate, the kids were split into three main research groups in accordance to their research interests or problems.

One group decided to investigate School and Education; why did homework exist and the likes. **My World** was the group investigating questions that were closer to home, identity, friendship and family. The **Philosophical** group investigated the larger philosophical questions such as mortality, morality, religion, space and life in general.

Out of the research generated in these three groups were born three short plays:

- Teacher
- Religion 911
- We Are Trying to Understand Our Mothers

What follows will be an insight into how the kids' first research into their itching questions, ultimately evolved into three insightful short plays.

PROCESS:

As a first step of their research, the kids were asked to prepare a series of questions that they would put to their friends, family, acquaintances, on the burning issue they had. These interview transcripts were typed/written out, or recorded by the kids themselves and submitted to the relevant groups. Once interview process was done, each group was assigned an artist from Stages to guide and direct the piece that the kids wanted to create out of their research material. Ruwanthie de Chickera guided and directed the **My World** group; Pramila Samarakoon guided and directed the **School and Education** group; and Piumi Wijesundara guided and directed the **Philosophical** group. The ensemble, guided by their respective directors, then used their research material to create their devised, short play. They were all assigned a day of rehearsals and provided access to props and costumes.

RESEARCHED BASED PLAYS CREATED BY THE JUNIOR ENSEMBLE

SCHOOL and 'TEACHER'

The kids who researched on this theme had pursued some highly compelling questions in school. Their interviews questioned their teachers, friends and family as to why teachers took up teaching in the first place; who invented homework, and why; whether school was really created for adults or for children. do school uniforms make sense in this heat; why do students get punished for simple mistakes; why do children go to school etc.

Having obtained all kinds of answers for their interviews, the kids decided that there was definitely something worth pursuing regarding the teacher-student relationship in school. This was how the play 'Teacher' was born.

In the play the kids follow the story of a class of students and their begrudging class teacher. The kids try to figure out the puzzle of how a teacher is made. The plot hilariously posits that the teacher was but once a pleasant happy young girl, who is brewed into a teacher with a concoction of things like knowledge; strictness; marker pens; and many more items on the list. While witty on the outside, the play addressed many issues such as restriction of free thinking of children through our education systems; and the need for bettered teacher-student relationships in schools.

• Still from 'Teacher'



PHILOSOPHY and 'RELIGION 911'

The group that tackled more worldly and philosophical questions through their interviews had asked questions such as: why do we need religion; why did we go to Sunday school; are there other living beings in outer space; what is mortality/ morality? With the wide range of questions asked the ensemble decided to narrow their scope down to one of the topics of research that they all agreed was one that needed exploring. Religion, came out on top.

'Religion 911' was thus a piece devised by the kids under the guidance of their director that explored the arbitrary assignment of religions to children, as well as why religion seems to be a root cause of many of the world's conflicts. The play follows the calls that come into a religion hotline or help line manned by representatives of all the world's religions. The story starts with the birth of a child from a mixed marriage, whose parents call the helpline to assign a religion to their child. The family of a dying man calls the helpline, only to receive advice to pray harder and give alms. The play ends on a witty, yet dark note where a man is being beaten by a group of religious fanatics and the helpline is unable to offer a solution and just decides to break for lunch when he decides to call them. Through this short play, the kids were able to highlight serious issues of freedom of religion; corruption within religious institutions; and further posit the question of why there exists religious prejudice.

• Still from 'Religion 911'



MY WORLD and 'WE ARE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OUR MOTHERS'

The group that pursued questions closer to home had interviewed friends and family on a range of topics. The questions ranged from why do their mothers do what they do; what their mother's thought of them; how do you know you can trust a friend; why do friends hide their birthdays; to what were their friends and family members' ambitions. With a wide range of questions being directed at their mothers, the group pursued through their piece, an attempt to understand their mothers.

This heartfelt and witty piece derived directly from the interviews to showcase how the kids attempted to 'figure out' their mothers. What made their mothers tick? What were their interests? What were their relationships like? The play ultimately beautifully tied up the mystery of understanding mothers and the overall notion of motherhood as seen through children's' eyes.

All three research-based short plays were showcased to an audience of parents. We received very good feedback from them. One thing that they all agreed on, is that the junior ensemble had indeed brought new perspective and asked socially conscious questions that were worth pursuing. With just a little nudge in the right direction, the kids that we had begun teaching and training, had turned to teach us adults a thing or two!

• Still from 'We Are Trying to Understand our Mothers'



**JUNIOR ENSEMBLE TERM II
PRODUCTION**

PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

The primary focus of the Junior Ensemble workshop is to ultimately create an ensemble of young artists who themselves lead and take charge of the workshops. Now that they had staged their first public show, it was time let the children slowly take the reins. The next few sessions of the workshop series thus allowed the kids to take charge of running the workshops as well as showcasing a final production that would be created, directed and produced by the kids themselves.

DECIDING ON WHAT TO SAY

DISCUSSIONS:

The preliminary discussions of these sessions discussed choreography, improvisation, and most importantly perspective. What are the different ways that one could look at even the most mundane of circumstances? How would you embody the different experiences of people in theatre?

PICKING A THEME:

For this new production, the kids put forward many ideas worthy of discussion. By consensus, the final shortlist was:

- A boy in a dress
- A classroom fight
- Secret in the family

With a majority vote the ensemble decided to pursue the theme of a fight in the classroom. The kids decided to unravel the central plot line more and delve further into the notion of bringing multiple perspectives into the incident of a classroom fight.



• The Junior Ensemble putting their heads together to decide on theme.

UNDERTAKING RESPONSIBILITIES

PREPRODUCTION:

In order to kick-start the preproduction work for the performance, the kids were assigned to production groups according to what interested them most. The production teams formed were directors, producers, scriptwriters, designers, and stage managers. Alongside this categorization these groups were also assigned subtasks for the day-to-day running of workshops. The workshop committees included backstage, food and beverage, program, games and fitness. As an initial step, in order to clarify the tasks they were to undertake in their workshop committees, as well as to better clarify what duties and responsibilities they must undertake in their production committees, the kids spent some time listing out their tasks.

* Workshop Committee tasks:

Committee	Responsibilities
Food and beverage	Cast care, and ensuring that there are food and drinks for snack breaks
Program	In charge of scheduling each week's work shop, and ensuring the day is going according to schedule
Fitness	This committee would lead the daily warm up session
Backstage	In charge of checking if rehearsal halls have been booked, and also ensuring the hall is clean and tidy both before and after the workshop.



First
Aid....

Help the
Injured....



* Production Committee tasks:

Committee	Responsibilities
Designers	In charge of costume, set, sound and publicity design for show
Producers	In charge of budgeting, allocating, scheduling, and communication among groups for smooth running of show
Games	In charge of picking, and coming up with theatre games for when it is time for games
Directors	Directing scenes and actors; auditioning and casting
Scriptwriters	Writing, editing, collecting and finalizing scripts
Stage Managers	In charge of props, set, and smooth running of show behind the scenes.



• Storyboarding



• Costume design team at work.



CREATING THE STORY – TOGETHER

Once tasks had been delegated and assigned, it was time to start creating the narrative. A group word-map and brainstorming session led to a breakthrough. The plot would follow the multiple perspectives of an incident where a girl has punched a boy in class. The perpetrator and victim in question, however, although appearing in scenes are not ready to reveal what actually happened. . In lieu of their combined silence, all the other characters of the play - from the principle to the cleaner, come up with their own theories of what actually happened.

Following the breakthrough in plotline, a writing session was led by the script writers. All scenes that were written were then handed over to the directors. A scene selection was finalized by the directors who ultimately also did the final casting.

The creation of scenes through devising was now underway. The design team, however, had a problem. How could they get started on publicity if the play still had no title? Yet another brainstorming session later, the ensemble had agreed on a title: 'Who Hit Who?'

Back in their production teams, the kids were hard at work. Producers were organizing preproduction and busy scheduling, budgeting and deciding on venue. The design team had a head start on costume design and were now starting work on the publicity design: posters both hand drawn and digital for social media and Whatsapp circulation. The scriptwriters were busy editing and selecting final scenes and putting them through to the directors who could proceed with rehearsals. Stage management was on prop and set planning alongside logistics. The entire team was well on their way to their first production written, designed, directed, created and acted entirely by themselves!

WHO HIT WHO?

The final production by the the first batch of the Stages Junior Ensemble, 'Who Hit Who?' was a meticulously planned, thought provoking show that was an endeavour led and run by the children themselves with just guidance provided by the Stages artists. From ushering parents in; to leading them through presentations on their preproduction process; to a well-arranged hall; to writing up souvenirs; to the posters on the walls; to the show that was staged; the junior ensemble ran the whole paly.

The audiences was not only simulated by the production value and story, but also at how adept the team was in running the show professionally, in a slick manner that asked for little adult help.

**“Only children believe they're capable of everything.
They're trusting and fearless;
they believe in their own power and get exactly what they want.”**

(Paul Coehlo)

JUNIOR ENSEMBLE TERM III
CHILDREN RUN WORKSHOPS

CHILDREN RUN WORKSHOP

By Term III of the Junior Ensemble, the idea that this would be a child-run arts initiative was growing stronger and taking more shape. In spite of the challenge of absorbing new children who had to be trained, once again, to begin to trust their instincts and take responsibility for their actions. Term III of the Junior Ensemble began with a good vibe.

At the outset, the kids were encouraged to list out, in groups, what they would like the learning outcomes of this term to be. The groups were also asked to come up with a set of rules they thought everyone should follow over the course of this term. The learning outcomes finally decided upon were production, design, and character building. The kids came up with a whole list of rules: no complaining; be punctual; no bullying; 2 hours of each session would be dedicated for drama while one hour would be dedicated purely for fun and games; kids get to declare snack time; and perhaps the best rule of all... no rules.

The kids were then divided into their respective workshop committees, to both run the workshops as well as complete their specific tasks and responsibilities for the final production. Each committee was handed two books in which they were asked to maintain records of their work and proceedings. One book was for their committee, whilst the other was a production management book. The children were also encouraged to list out what they were interested in learning – so that the artists could respond to their particular interests.

And their workshops had begun!



• Deciding new committees and their respective tasks

HOW TO BUILD A CHARACTER

A number of children indicated in the beginning of Term III that they like to learn how characters were created. And so it was decided that we would focus on teaching them this term.

What do we think about when creating character?

In a preliminary discussion, the kids were asked to list what they thought made up a person's character. They came up with an array of things: personality, backstory, emotions, mannerisms, past, context, reactions, body language, voice. A discussion was led about how a person's mannerisms, or involuntary actions and quirks create character and add to their personality traits. The workshops therein focused in on the following:

- Getting into character
- Creating characters
- Creating a play through characters

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

The ensemble's first exercise led on from their discussion of bodily mannerisms that a character embodies. The exercise went as follows:

1. Kids are asked to walk in the space and as they walk they are asked to empty themselves, and become neutral in terms of how they carry themselves.
2. Once their bodies had become neutral, kids stand in front of a mirror and are instructed to assume one emotion.
3. In generating the emotion, the kids are asked to start with the eyes, then breath, the shoulders, and eventually work the emotion into their whole body.
4. The kids then gradually go back to being neutral and then repeat this entire process with another emotion.
5. The kids then gradually go back to being neutral and then repeat this entire process with another emotion. the kids then gradually go back to being neutral and then repeat this entire process with another emotion. The whole group then attempts one emotion (eg: anger, shyness, happiness)

The ensemble highlighted how, once they were asked to empty their bodies and become neutral they suddenly noticed all the little mannerisms that they had. This emptying also help them to stay in another character and add their own personal mannerisms to that character. Once they had mastered this exercise of embodying a character and emotions, the next step was character interactions.

CHARACTER INTERACTIONS

1. In their first exercise the kids paired up and devised short scenes of interaction between two characters that had opposing character traits in terms of how they spoke. They enacted interactions between loud vs. quite characters; extremely slow vs. fast characters; and aggressive vs. timid characters.

2. The next session further explored character interactions by bringing in the element of atmosphere. In groups of three the kids explored how the entrance of a third character into an ongoing interaction between two characters already on stage could change the atmosphere of a scene. The kids explored this change of atmosphere with witty and engaging scenes of: a drunk man entering a yoga centre where two people are in meditation; a mother entering the scene of two fighting siblings; two friends being encountered by a really annoying classmate; a creep getting close to assaulting two people, only to realize he knows them.

The kids thus developed in this session the skills of taking on a role when acting the part of someone they were not. They took on roles that had their own unique personality traits, qualities and specific characteristics. The kids' final takeaway was that it is only with successful characterisation that one can embody a role and bring a person to life in a three-dimensional way.



• Exploring character interactions

CREATING CHARACTERS

Writing a three-dimensional, complex character is a task that comes before the act of embodying one. In the discussion that followed, therefore, creating characters with complexity and conflict was discussed. A one dimensional character cannot create conflict or make a play interesting and so the students were encouraged to think deeper into characters with complex emotions and conflict.

WRITING CHARACTERS

The kids were entrusted with a writing task. The kids were encouraged to pick a strong female character to write a piece on. The character could be fictional, but must draw inspiration from someone they had observed in real life. Their key task was to find complexity in the character they were writing on, and to find conflict within her character that would make her an interesting character, worthy of pursuing. The kids, as usual, did not fail to impress.

- **Kenolee** in autobiographical form wrote about a person in a high position who wants everyone to still like her.
(The principal was the character)
- **Haimi** wrote about a bossy girl who wants everyone to like her because she needs validation.
- **Sheraya** wrote about her mother and how she put on a brave face, and sacrificed a lot for her family but was probably carrying her own burdens.
- **Anouk** wrote about a person she admired and thought was her friend but was not too sure as she was not acquainted enough.

- **Kithmi** wrote a monologue about what goes on in her mind when she thinks about this woman character.
- **Hans** wrote about his grandmother who was a popular artist surrounded by people all the time, who he felt didn't really know her. As her grandson, he was not sure how he felt about this.
- **Chethaithwa** wrote about her mother's friend who seemed so strong all the time but was also vulnerable.
- **Kaiyah** wrote about her mother.

The ensemble had come up with complex characters in complex circumstances. What would happen if two of these characters they had written out, were to encounter/ interact with each other? The kids moved on to then devise scenes in which these characters interacted with each other. A conscientious mother met a principal who wanted to be liked; a concerned mother phones up her seemingly strong friend; two girls encounter a bossy girl in school who needs validation. Through stimuli that were their own observations and the characters they had written out, the kids were thus able to create compelling short scenes of interaction between their characters.

CREATING A PLAY THROUGH CHARACTERS

DECIDING THEME

This time, deciding the theme for their final production was solely up to the children. The kids threw in three main ideas that they felt would help them develop a play through character development. The three ideas were: multiple personality disorder; to life around a tree; to people behind the scenes.

After a fruitful discussion on which of the three ideas would enable them to best create a show by beginning to create and focus centrally on 'character' they picked 'people behind the scenes'.

They initially discussed what it meant to be- a person who is behind the scenes. These were the people who usually went unseen in most cases, but the people without whom certain things or occasions would never be able to run smoothly. Given the interesting premise of allowing people behind the scenes to take centre stage, the kids started brainstorming on what they would discuss. What would these people be behind the scenes of? A movie set? A play?

The lightbulbs flickered and the kids decided they would go with developing a play, discussing what goes on 'behind-the-scenes' of an actual play.

DECIDING CHARACTERS

To decide on the characters, the kids refreshed their memory into character building exercises they had done priorly and then decided to devise a few interactions between possible characters behind the scenes. For this exercise, they incorporated the idea of voice. They came up with the different kinds of voices characters could have

(e.g.: loud, quiet, soft, stammering, repeating the same thing, fast talker, slow talkers, lisp, people who don't finish sentences, sarcastic etc.) The kids then engaged in a discussion in a group about the different kinds of characters that they saw in the scenes to discuss ideas about how they can use this exercise to build characters for their final production.

The next major breakthrough was when they finalized the characters they wanted in their play, and started fleshing them out and giving them character traits. The ensemble started discussing types of roles, characters and character traits that the characters in their play can comprise of:

- Director
- Producer
- Light and sounds
- Makeup
- Prompter
- Cleaner
- Water boy
- Homeless guy
- First aid guy
- An angry person
- A quiet person
- Two people working against each other
- A clumsy person
- A perfectionist
- Slow person
- Fast person

The kids then started connecting the characters they had created with the list of character traits they had created separately. After they had attributed a number of character traits to each other the characters, they started embodying these characters. They were called upon to respond, within the limits of the characters they had created, to spontaneous situations. The children were then finally put into groups of three and asked to improvise 'behind the scenes' moments that might occur between any of these three characters they had created. The situations they showcased back to the group had many good ideas which could be brought together to create a play.

Now that they had started fleshing out their characters, it was time to get down to writing!

• Exploring the character of 'Jeff the Light Operator'

light Operator.

His ID photo
with the
LIPSTICK

JEFF the light Operator.

even
got
angry
in
the
Studio

Beware of Jeff



• Likes to flirt

• This man is 65 years old

• He is almost completely blind.

• He has three wives but no children
always tells to other people about
another girl.

Likes to flirt

• His enemy is the sound operator.

• Always thinks he is the best for everyth-
-ing.

• ask's for snack from the
director every time (even during the show)

• Always puts the latest wives
new li

• But fights with the people during
the show time if the director
tells another person to operate the
light

CHARACTERS DECIDING PLOT

Unlike the usual route to devising a play starting with a plot point, the kids were starting to work their way into the story by finding stories through the characters that made up the plot. In a group writing exercise, they started filling in more character traits and features for all the characters they finalized in the play. And by devising scenes of interaction, the kids slowly started building up the dynamics, and relationships between the characters in the play that would make things interesting. They were creating complex characters; building up relationships between these characters; and creating conflict.

Production teams in parallel started thinking out and planning the pre-production, and actual backstage necessities for the play. A new show was well on its way to being constructed by the Junior Ensemble!



EASTER DAY BOMBINGS IN SRI LANKA

Production for 'Behind-the-Scenes' was well under way, until the unexpected happened. On 21st April 2019, Easter Sunday, three churches in Sri Lanka and three luxury hotels in Colombo were targeted in a series of coordinated terrorist suicide bombings. Everyone had been going about their daily life as usual, our junior ensemble had been preparing for their upcoming production, and disaster struck in the form of a terrorist attack throwing everyone into a state of shock and instability. Fear and paranoia had struck every household; and an ugly monster of suspicion and racist sentiment was also slowly raising its head.

The kids' production was put on hold.

During this time, the children's lives changed very fast. Fear and paranoia and racism began to infiltrate their homes, their parents' conversations, their schools, their interactions with teachers and students. Schools were subject to stringent security checks – with transparent bags being made mandatory, soldiers posted within schools, bomb-drills all descending suddenly on children. Added to this was the sudden fear and suspicion of each other that was fuelled both at home and within school by parents and teachers.

WHEN LIFE MEETS ART

Like everything else, the Junior Ensemble Workshops also paused for a bit. But after a few weeks we were able to resume our activities.

When the children turned up for their first workshop after the Ester Bombings they had a lot of questions.

The children discussed what had just happened and discussed among each other the confusion, sadness, and disappointment they felt. Adults weren't sharing enough information of what had just happened, and even if they were, the kids saw no conversation on how to best move forward.

And this is when the Junior Ensemble collectively made their decision: they would speak up. They would create a play in response to the devastating event that had occurred, and share their sentiments with the adults who seemed as confused as they were.

The children brainstormed an idea and then came up with the title which aptly captured their confusion about how quickly and how fundamentally their worlds had changed. The title of the production they were going to do would be **'What Just Happened?'**

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

'What Just Happened?' was a performance of monologues written, and performed by the youngsters of the Junior Ensemble in response to the 2019 Easter bombings. In response to the events that unfolded, the kids started questioning the futility of checkpoints; restrictions in schools; the behaviour of media; their own confusion and sadness; how Easter had changed; racist sentiments; and many more themes that allowed them to voice their opinion. The children performed all this to their parents and families – in what turned out to be a very powerful and eye-opening experience for all. Their parents were not aware of how deeply affected the children had been, or the kind of questions that were circling in their heads, or even what they understood to have happened.



• The Junior Ensemble rethinking their production.

Through the production of **'What Just Happened?'** The Junior Ensemble had come of age as young artists. From being a group of youngsters who had come to a drama class; they had grown to a youth collective that was responding to a calamitous event in the country through their creative output. They had been courageous enough to throw away all their hard work of the term because it was suddenly irrelevant. They had been courageous enough to bring into the rehearsal room the real problems faced by themselves and society. They had been courageous enough to address their own personal fears and prejudices through art and hold these identities up for public scrutiny. They had been able to do all this with a mix of humour, self reflection, empathy and fun. In the process they had managed to re-write the impact of the Easter Bombings on themselves and their families. They were well on their way to becoming the new generation of conscientious artists creating relevant and critical art.

**"Children are not things to be moulded,
but are people to be unfolded."
(Jess Lair)**



• The Junior Ensemble leading the audience in a warm-up.

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This resource pack was produced as part of the 'Artist Research, Archiving and Documentation Project' of Stages Theatre Group.

Through this project, practicing artists engaged in systematic and critical analysis of their own work, analysing a decade worth of theatre productions and processes of Stages Theatre Group. The decade spanned the immediate ten years after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka (2009 to 2019).

Sixteen resource packs, such as this one, were created for publication in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Each resource pack, written and researched by artists, examines the surrounding socio-political context within which these productions were created and analyses the creative decisions taken within the process. Supporting video material was also created as part of this initiative. All material produced through this research project can be found at www.stages.lk

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