

Play-Play

Francesco
Nassimbeni



Why to Play-Play

by Francesco Nassimbeni

Play is central to how I work.
It is my departure point, my method and my home.
I love how unpredictable play is.
It shifts effortlessly from form to form.
One never has an idea of where you might end up.
To play is to venture into the unknown.
This is what I find most exciting about it.

Theatre and performance, my primary practice, centralises play as the primary mechanic of artistic creation. I was ecstatic at the opportunity to set up a 'play laboratory' at A4 so that I could inspect the various variables that encourage (or preclude) play.

What I found was that play is enormously sensitive to atmosphere.
Sometimes a social energy will inhibit people, disabling play.
Other times, a sense of excitement and readiness makes entry easy.
Play can be very fleeting: blossoming one moment and fading the next.

Since most play is sequential, and develops over time, we experience a number of shifting relationships during play.
We are in a place of ultimate focus. We feel very attuned to one another.
We become vulnerable. Our defences soften.
We open ourselves to the journey of play.

Some of play's qualities:

1.

Play is vital.
Play is how we recover our humanity.
Play is how we recognise the personhood of the other.
Play can be seen as key in fostering being and belonging, promoting togetherness and dissolving prejudice.
It is instructive, nourishing, healing.

2.

Play cannot be enforced. It is not responsive to the human desire to impose. It is sensitive to this, and will dissolve when insisted upon. This is perhaps the most damaging attitude that educators may unconsciously adopt, affecting play's efficacy, which we know is substantial, real and necessary.

3.

Play is a social contract.
When we engage in 'free play', the social contract is still in effect, even though the elastic terms of engagement may be flouted, disobeyed, transformed or disguised.

4.

To play is to negotiate a collectively created artistic reality.
When we play, we navigate a matrix of social cues and codes.

5.

Play is performative.
It is embodied and it is expressive.
We bring our bodies into play.

6.

Multiple factors determine the flow of play.
Mood, environment, social dynamics, power relations, biases.
As these factors fluctuate independently through time, multiple states (or 'entry points') are created. These are our paths into play.

7.

Much of what transpires in play is encoded, abstract and symbolic.
It is a world in which the psyche rouses; in effect it is an alternate state.

Workshop 1: 24 November '22 Dance of the Balloons

Given my interest in play and performance as a mechanism for inclusivity, I decided on a participatory workshop and happening, in which a group of participants could paint paper lanterns, animate them with torches, and keep balloons aloft in the air. An experiment in object manipulation, light and shadow: togetherness via performance.



Workshop 2: 1 December '22 Exquisite Corpse



This game, made famous by the Surrealists, has always been a favourite, and scaled up by way of large pieces of paper, the spontaneous phantasmagoria is something to behold! As always, I love the special, never-to-be-repeated element of chance that brings strangers together to play: the results are always surprising and, in this case, also funny and strange.

Workshop 3: 3 December '22 (public) 5 December '22 (Lalela learners) Imagining a City

Over two workshops (the first for everyone and the second for learners from Lalela) Heath Nash and I decided we'd be interested in interrogating the notion of what makes a city, with young people deciding on what was important for them. As such we allowed them to govern the rules of a city's urban design, and via a workshop of making and doing, arrive at a city they might like to live in.



Workshop 4: 8 December '22 The Wearables Workshop

Both Heath Nash and myself often work with young people in exploring how common household objects may be re-imagined as something else. A strip of polystyrene becomes a belt. Cups strapped together then cut down the middle serve as wristbands for a superhero. Capes, cars, glasses, stereos: when imagination is unleashed with permission to play, the results are always exciting and novel, as can be seen here.





The Play-Station: on collaboration with Heath Nash 18 December '22

As the residency progressed, and the room populated by the various objects, ideas and remnants of past activities, the situation seemed to call for some kind of synthesis of all these factors and artefacts.

Heath Nash co-facilitated some of the workshops. Having collaborated with him successfully on various theatrical and community arts projects, he seemed the ideal candidate. He and I share an affinity for the playful and experimental. Both of us delight in the fantastic, the enchanting, the naive. He is also a master of repurposing recycled material into works of breathtaking complexity and singular beauty. I have always known him as someone who makes polyhedral forms that morph, fold and transform. We have collaborated often via our work in community art projects, and thus share an ethical alignment also.

He and I have a rather informal, intuitive way of understanding one another's aesthetic and outlook, but we did manage to decide on our aims:

- To demonstrate play as a methodology toward being and belonging.
- To assess co-operative play's potential as a community builder.
- To demystify the role of artist as icon, and to redistribute agency to the casual observer.
- To promote collective art-making and story-making as a communal activity.
- To provide relief for artists working in solitary and remind them of the joy and remedial function of collective art making.
- To promote the invitation to touch art, move art, laugh about art, to walk inside of art.

As both a portal into play and a free-form installation, the environment allowed for constant shifts as groups of people and children manipulated the free standing elements via workshops, performances and activities.

Francesco Nassimbeni
b.1979
works in Cape Town

For Francesco Nassimbeni, participation, collectivity, inquiry and togetherness are at the heart of his practice. An interdisciplinary performing-arts creative and educator, he believes that art is for everybody and is inspired by the Italian Futurist Bruno Munari's notion of 'Everybody Art' – a socially progressive art practice predicated on inclusion, diversity of view point, participation, imagination and play. Between 22 November–20 December 2022 he was in residence at A4 Arts Foundation's Reading Room exploring play as a method toward social cohesion. The residency culminated in an interactive installation sculpture (in collaboration with Heath Nash) that served as a departure point for interdisciplinary workshops, happenings, interventions and performances.





Play-Play– Wayfinder (2022)

Made for the occasion of Play-Play, with Francesco Nassimbeni
22 November–20 December 2022
Artist residency in A4 Art Foundation's Reading Room

Texts: Francesco Nassimbeni
Design: Ben Johnson
Editor: Sara de Beer

Francesco's collaborator during the residency: Heath Nash

Performers: Freddy Nyezi
Tshegofatso Mabutla
Kelsey Brookes
Jeani Heyns
Gina van der Ploeg
Mpilo Headman

Images courtesy A4 Arts Foundation and the artist

The artist and collaborators reserve the right to retain © of their individual contributions
This publication © A4 Press

A4 Arts Foundation
23 Buitenkant Street
District Six
8001
Cape Town

A4 Reading Room

**22 Nov —
20 Dec '22**