

# MA PROJECT REFLECTION

MA in choreography, 2023

Oslo National Academy of the Arts

# CREATING ROCK-A-BYE

BY IDA CATHRIN UTVIK

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Article 31*

- 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.*
- 2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.*

From the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

In fall 2021 I entered the dance scene in Oslo as an MA choreography student at KHIO. My background was mainly in dance teaching, and I had primarily been working with children and young adults my whole career, both as a teacher, performer and creator. Although I had my training and main interest in contemporary dance, I had recently been living and working in my home district Haugalandet, where this field was less developed, especially for the young audiences. One of my initial motivations for immersing myself in a choreographic practice was to deepen my knowledge in creating performances for children. It was also motivated by questions around how contemporary dance could become more available and inclusive for children, without compromising the artistic quality. Or rather, what are the qualities and mechanisms that this artform encompasses that can resonate and create interest with the small children.

The UN convention on the Rights of the Child states participating in age-appropriate cultural activities as a human right. The Storting's white paper on children's culture (Meld. St. 18 (2020-2021)), emphasizes that also artists must contribute to strengthening children's agency (participation and influence) in art and culture. "All actors must contribute to ensuring that

children and young people participate and influence, both in production and performance. In this way, art and culture can be relevant and representative.”<sup>1</sup> (Meld. St. 18 (2020–2021), p. 103)

**How do we approach the task of creating relevant artworks for the very youngest audiences, children between 0-5 years? What are the criteria and the quality markers that we navigate towards when we create dance performances with and for this group?**

Out of these overarching research questions grew an interest in researching interactive dramaturgies and multisensory performance settings for children, and an ambition to create performances that coincides with their way of being in the world – actively exploring their surroundings and gathering information with their entire body and through all their senses. My research has evolved around physical materials as both a starting point for choreographic exploration and a creative generator throughout the choreographic process.

This paper aims at describing the background for and process of creating my MA choreography project *Rock-a-bye*. The paper is divided into three main parts. First I will write about the **background and research** for the project, and present some references that have been important for my work. Then I will present some **core concepts** that my work has evolved around. Lastly I will give an account of my process of **creating the MA project**.

## 1. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH

The research for my MA project has entailed getting to know the field that I create within, and being in dialogue with it through attending festivals, seminars, workshops and performances. Initiatives like the development and mentoring program *Stor kunst for små barn* at Dansens Hus, Rom for dans Ung, Assitej, Seanse, Oslo Kommune’s program for arts and culture in

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<sup>1</sup> Translated into English from the Norwegian original.



kindergardens, Scenekunstbruket and the newly established Kloden teater (Oslo) and Elefantteateret (Stavanger) are important contributors in the field that I have become acquainted with in my research. Navigating the children's dance performance field has also been a process of positioning myself within a set of values and conventions, and gaining awareness of my place in this field. In the following chapter I will present some of the research that serves as a background for my MA project.

## 1.1. RESEARCHING REFERENCES

*10.05.2022 - Tuesday*

*We had a really good rehearsal Sunday, and a successful showing yesterday for Lærkes exam. Huseby kindergarten were there with 12 kids. In the audience were also two sensors, Lærkes supervisors: Christina Lindgren and Fredrik Floen, my supervisor Anne Grete, Sang who helped us with video documentation and the composer William and his friend.*

*Thoughts after the showing. I had a conversation with Fredrik and another one with Christina and the censors. Fredrik highlighted the children's agency, and wondered if this was something that could be highlighted even more. Why couldn't the interactions and the contributions coming from the kids be even more important in the piece? Could the structure be loose enough so that the whole performance could happen around them and their play and initiatives. If the performance should be interactive and give the children agency, why don't we do it full out?*

*Christina had a different point of view. She highlighted that if the performance wanted to «tell» or «show» something before we let the kids play, then there had to be some rules in terms of structuring the setting and managing the kids. This doesn't necessarily make them feel less free.*

*(From fieldnotes about the process of creating *Himstregimser og andre duppeditter*)*

Some of the questions I found pertinent for my work and that also seems to be an ongoing discussion in the field, are questions around children's participation, influence and interactivity within the performing arts. Broadly speaking the discussion around children's agency. Some of the voices in which I find affinity in this discussion, is collected in Lise Hovik and Lisa Nagel's book from 2017: *Deltakelse og interaktivitet i scenekunst for barn*. The book is a documentation and conclusion of the research project SceSam, lead by Hovik & Nagel between 2012-2017. In the book, they present a model that scales interactive dramaturgies along a line between open and closed form. The model is not an attempt at valuing one form over another, but is meant as a tool for making conscious choices in terms of what kind of interactive strategies one makes use of.

*The model points out that by choosing a type of interaction, you simultaneously choose an attitude and a relationship with the children's audience. The artists' attitudes towards children will always affect the interaction, and this is connected with some associated assumptions, values and dilemmas.*

Hovik & Nagel, 2017, p. 45.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at this in a wider perspective therefore brings up certain questions concerning the adult role and the power hierarchy that is at play. I find that Kai Johnsen puts this very clearly in this quote from the same book.

*Such an interactive contract raises new and interesting questions: How much freedom and predictability can be given to the children in such a situation, and to what extent can such a well-thought-out trust-based dramaturgy possibly be misused for new forms of instrumentality on the part of the adults? It's not just about different forms of artistic and/or historical conventions, but also about the kind of society we want*

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<sup>2</sup> Translated into English from the Norwegian original.

*children to be created into, i.e. what kind of conditions they should have to be able to influence, in reality.*

Kai Johnsen in Hovik & Nagel (2017), p. 102.<sup>3</sup>

Scaling between the open and closed interactive dramaturgies is and will always be a negotiation between the children's needs for freedom and predictability, and the need for structure and progress in the artwork. There are many ways to deal with it and numerous of choices that are constantly made, but the important point seems to be that it is not about choosing either or. I rather see it as mediating between two, sometimes opposite, tensions and navigating according to what the specific situation requires. In other words, it is a constant negotiation. How much control and predictability do I need as the artist and how much agency do I want to provide to the children? And what are the formats or methods that can take care of this constant negotiation?

Watching performances for the relevant target group has been a big part of the research, and some of the works I've encountered has several aspects that I find interesting. I would especially like to mention choreographer and dance scholar Dalija Acin Thelander, who works with babies in a durational performance installation format, where freedom of movement and exploration in the scenographic space is a big part of the work. Both attending Thelander's workshop at Elefantteateret and watching her performance *The garden of spirited minds* during the fall 2021, has influenced how I think around my own work, and inspired the process of researching performance formats where a high degree of agency and flexibility can be provided to the audience, but at the same time a structured but flexible choreographic pattern coexists within the space.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated into English from the Norwegian original.

## 1.2. ELABORATION OF QUESTIONS

Immersing myself into the field of performing arts for children and researching connected literature revealed several attitudes that I want my work to navigate around. Firstly, I find it interesting to explore what happens if the performance setting can challenge the hierarchy between child and adult, and the child can be allowed a high degree of agency. This relies on a more open interactive dramaturgy, which implies challenges around where to draw the line between allowing and managing. Out of readings, thoughts and experiences grew many additions to my overarching research question, and I have tried here to sum up some main concerns:

- What content or aesthetics can art for children 0-5 years encompass?
  - o How can there be a meeting point between “relevant” aesthetics and artistic quality for both children and adults?
  - o In what ways can physical material and a multisensory approach serve as a starting point to create relevant works for this age group?
  
- The childrens agency – How to balance between a choreographed experience and openness for change/adaptability?
  - o To what extent should the adults control the situation?
  - o (When) does art stop and play take over?

Further, these questions demanded research of method(s), in regard to how information could be collected and the process could be evaluated. In other words, how to make sure that we work in a way that brings us closer to an understanding of the children’s experience.

Therefore, a question that informed my working method was:

- In what ways can we analyze the meeting between the youngest children and the artwork, to get useful information?
  - o What are our criteria for success, and what are the methods to evaluate them?

I see these questions more as catalysts in the process rather than something that the project or this paper aims at answering.

## 2. CORE CONCEPTS - INTERACTIVE STRATEGIES

Creating a performance for a child, for me encompasses structuring it around what I perceive as the child's natural way of being in the world. With the youngest children 0-5 years, for me this means a multisensory approach, where the child is left with some choices in terms of how and to what degree they want to interact physically.

In this chapter I will first write about my interest in *physical material as a starting point* for choreography. Then I will explain how I experience the *meeting between the body and the material* in my work. Lastly, I will explain how the *meeting with the children* informs the process. I will draw on experiences from the MA research periods, the workshops that I have conducted together with Lærke Bang Barfod and our collaboration project *Himstregimser og andre dippedutter*, amongst other projects created during the MA program.

### 2.1. MATERIAL AS A STARTING POINT

*05.01.2022 - Wednesday*

*The Deichman project*

*Opening a book vs. walking into a forest. A whole universe unfolds. Getting oneself deeper and deeper into it. Taking steps, turning pages. Pages pass, trees pass. Numerous pages,*

*endlessness of trees. Materiality. The interplay between two and three dimensions.  
Recreation. Peace of mind.*

(from fieldnotes about the process of creating “Once there was a forest”)

Throughout my MA studies I have been interested in materials as both a starting point for choreographic exploration and a creative generator throughout the choreographic process. In this context, I define materials as physical matter that the body can relate to and interact with in a physical sense, by touching, lifting, moving, etc. In my choreographic research I have chosen materials that I’ve found interesting both in a bodily sense and in a conceptual sense. I’m especially intrigued by objects and materials that creates a friction or a physical limitation to the body. Materials that challenge and manipulates the body’s natural anatomy and physicality, both in a visual and kinaesthetic sense. In these physical limitations I find endless amounts of possibilities. Possibilities of movements and bodily sensations that is only made possible through that exact meeting between that exact material and the body. The material is activated by the body and the body is activated by the material, which creates a generative loop that keeps feeding the creative process. Conceptually I am searching for connections between the material and thematical content. Connections that is not necessarily evident until the line is drawn and the connection couldn’t be more obvious.

The process with my MA project has in many ways been about accumulating experiences from the different smaller projects and processes that I’ve been part of during these two years. Choosing materials, like stone, paper or textile, has been part of it, as well as trying out different strategies for the performers to work with these physical materials. In our ensemble project *Courts, rituals and riots*, which was a collaboration together with BA students from both KHIO and Høyskolen Kristiania, I worked with cobble stones as a choreographic and thematic base. The stones represented both a symbolic layer of resistance as well as a physical resistance for the dancers. The sense of weight and gravity was a big theme in the research and in what way this material provided the body with a different kind of physical momentum. The potential for energy and movement, and how the body had to be organized slightly differently in terms of balance and center of gravity in order to work together with this heavy

object. This exploration created both thoughts and physical discoveries that I took with me into the process and that inspired the choice of stone as material for my MA project.



IMAGE: FROM ENSEMBLE PROJECT STONE BY STONE. PICTURE BY TANIA M. MUSINA, MARCH 2022.

During spring 2022 we created a site specific work in and for Deichman Bjørvika library, in which paper felt like a very natural material to start the process from, both being specific to the site and thematically interesting to explore. The project was inspired and informed by several children's books about forests, deforestation and human intrusion into nature. I collaborated with Ayana Ishihara, a scenography student from Norwegian Theatre Academy in Fredrikstad, and our idea was to rewind the material's travel from forest to paper and create a forest out of paper in the library. Part of the scenography was a "carpet" of coloured paper towels rolled into small balls, covering parts of the floor in the area where the piece was performed. We used the paper balls choreographically, both in the movement work and to create sound. What I experienced during this process was how having this scale of physical material in the space created a different form of access to the work for the children who

experienced it. The material was there for them to interact with on their own premises, and created a different layer of connection between the performers and the audience. This project also had a lot of visitors in the age 0-2 years, and to see how this specific group interacted with the material inspired me to create more work for this age group.



IMAGE: FROM THE PERFORMANCE "ONCE THERE WAS A FOREST". PICTURE BY TANIA M. MUSINA, APRIL 2022.

Throughout the MA exploration periods of the first year at KHIO, I collaborated with costume design student Lærke Bang Barfod on her exam, and what ended up becoming the project *Himstregimser og andre dippedutter*. This exploration started from textile objects and experiments that didn't have a pre-planned function, and the choreographic exploration with the materials therefore became extremely open. Function became an important key word at this point, and this created a way of approaching the materials through searching for functions, both in connection to the space and in the meeting with the body. One object could be part of a tree structure in the scenographic space, but also serve as a hat, as well as a container or a handbag. Another could be a cave in which the children could enter, but its



stretchy surface could also be molded into different shapes. This way of working with abstract materials in a non-narrative way influenced the continuation of my process. It was not about creating a story for our 3–5-year-old spectators, but rather to create a universe where everything functioned around its own logics.

## 2.2. MEETING BETWEEN BODY AND MATERIAL

In this chapter I will write about my interest in *senses*, specifically in tactility, kinaesthesia and the sense of hearing, and how I have been working with them in the meeting with the physical material.

*20.09.2021 - Monday*

*Body and space in symbiosis, small bodies exploring changing landscapes, all at their own pace. New worlds open up. We see, we hear, we sense and explore. We dig under, crawl through, give room, stretch out and contract. Like an organism where all parts work together in a finely tuned machinery. The clownfish and the anemone.*

(From fieldnotes, early stage of imagining the MA project)

Like mentioned before, providing a multisensory access for the children to explore the dance piece has been a main principle that my work evolves around. My view on the senses' role in children's life and learning, coincides with this description from Stephanie Bunn's text *Materials in making* (2011).

*Of the thinkers and scientists I find helpful, James Gibson, the ecological psychologist, wrote about the senses which he considered to be active sensory systems (Gibson 1968). He argued that we do not just passively receive information from the world, we actively seek it. Most relevant here is his work on the haptic system or the sense of*

*touch, which includes the whole body as an instrument, rather than just the hands. 'To sense haptically is to experience objects in the environment by actively touching them' (Bloomer and Moore 1977: 34) – for example by climbing a mountain rather than looking at it. It includes pressure, warmth, cold, pain, sensibility to motion, and all aspects of sensuality. It is the most direct way of experiencing the three-dimensional world. It also implies the possibility of changing the world through experiencing it and acting upon it.*

Bunn (2011), pp. 3-4.

What I find intriguing by this description is how the whole body as an entity is considered an active sensory system. Instead of differentiating between tactile and kinesthetic sensing, it describes how matter, in fact, is sensed both internally (kinaesthetically) and externally (tactile) at the same time. Based on this view of the active sensory system I see the senses as an entry point into the artwork, and the physical material as the connecting matter between performer and child. In my work I want to provide the child with the possibility to experience the material through both looking and engaging physically. As spectator they can watch the dancer move and deal with the material, and through their kinaesthetic empathy experience a bodily sensation, but they can also choose to engage bodily and share the haptic experience of the dancer. In this way, the material is what we share and have in common, and through the multisensory access the artwork can be experienced with the whole body, by everybody.

In addition to bodily and haptic sensing, I have developed an interest in sound work through my MA studies. One of the first workshops we had during the first semester at KHIO, was a sound workshop with Per Platou. This was an eye-opening, or rather ear-opening, experience, as I started to consider sound in a very different way than I had done before. Platou's focus on a spatial sound design, and introduction into a variety of different small speakers and sound sources was inspiring and generated a lot of ideas about how sound could be an integrated part of a moving body or a scenographic landscape.



IMAGE: FROM SHOWING OF THE MA PROCESS PERFORMANCE "HIMSTREGIMSER OG ANDRE DIPPEDUTTER". PICTURE BY YANIV COHEN, JUNE 2022.

### 2.3. THE MEETING WITH THE CHILDREN

03.05.2022 - Tuesday

*About what is most important*

*All the props are spread out around the room. Some kids are running with a long ball-filled tube, screaming. Some are fighting over another green and ball-filled tube. Meanwhile some are sitting inside the orange «cave», some are playing quietly with a stretchy collection of rings, trying to figure out what it can do. Some are “whimsing” around in huge hats. It’s a chaos you could say. But if you look more closely, you can see little faces filled with excitement. You can hear that the sounds are joyful. You can discover that there is a different kind of play that has entered the space. There are less rules. There are less pre-programmed expectations around roles/gender roles than with average toys. There are less predetermined*

*patterns of play. The space is open. For sure, unwanted situations can easily occur. They may fall, crash into one another, slip, start to fight.. Nonetheless, five adults are there to make sure that safety is (somewhat) taken care of, that problems and conflicts can be solved, and that the playful energy can flow smoothly in the room, more or less without disturbances.*

*What is considered noisy chaos for an (adult) outside eye, may be a valuable experience for the ones participating.*

(From fieldnotes about the process of creating *Himstregimser og andre dippedutter*)

What felt evident from the beginning of my research was the importance of being in dialogue with the age group that I wanted to create for from a very early stage in the process. I see these meetings as both a way to get to know the group that you want to create for and to navigate the process by having regular check-ins to see how the working material (both physical and choreographic material) meets the children. It has also been a research in itself to test out strategies in these meetings and find out how to use the meeting points in order to get the information that we need to continue our process. I have tested out several different strategies and formats throughout the different projects and MA explorations. I found it helpful to use video as a tool to document and analyze the audience meetings, but I also experienced difficulties with this method, as privacy regulation and parents consents often implied a lot of extra organization and planning with the kindergartens or groups that we invited in. Throughout the research, the audience meetings has included both groups of kids with their parents and kindergarten groups. Some meetings we visited kindergartens, others we invited them to a KHIO stage. The material that we tested varied from short choreographic propositions, free play with scenographic prototypes, strategies of creating a scenographic space, strategies of entering this space with an audience, etc. We tried to be conscious about the main goals for each of the meetings, and to tune the gaze towards the information that we needed at the different stages of the process. Examples of questions were

“What kind of materials and scenographic objects interests the children?”

“In what ways do they play with the objects, and how does our choreographic proposition or the dancers’ use of the object affect their play?”

“In what way can we make use of choreographic strategies to create a safe environment for the kids to participate and explore?”

“How can we work with interactions without dictating a certain activity?”

“In what ways can we organize the kids in the space to create a safe space, without closing the doors for interactions and the children’s active participation?”

“How can we offer and suggest a variety of sensory stimuli without forcing it upon them?”

Although I see these meetings throughout the process as a necessity and of great value, this method also encompasses a great deal of organization and planning. If we want the children to be present in the process, we need to invite them into the process, and this planning with kindergartens and parents has taken a lot of time and effort throughout the processes with the MA exploration and project. This way of working also makes the process very complex, in terms of analyzing how the artwork affects the children, and what information we can draw out of each specific meeting. I will comment this aspect further in the next chapter about the process of creating my MA project *Rock-a-bye*.





## HIMSTREGIMSER OG ANDRE DIPPEDUTTER

Workshop for children and their parents!  
Location: Oslo Academy of the Arts, on stage 5.  
time:  
Saturday the 26th of February,  
13:00-14:00

Description:  
Movement and play workshop for children based on various abstract objects.

Info:  
This workshop is part of the research for a master project. Therefore video and film will be taken. Which will be used in connection with presentations associated with the project. If you do not want photography, let us know, when you arrive at the workshop.

Welcome to the universe of abstract and strange objects (Himstregimser og andre dippedutter).  
- Ida Utvik & Lærke Barfod

## FORESTILLING FOR BARN

### HIMSTREGIMSER OG ANDRE DIPPEDUTTER

«Himstregimser og andre dippedutter» er et barneforestillingsprosjekt som hyler det abstrakte, fantasifremmende og fasitase ved kunst, og lar dette spille hovedrollen i møtet mellom barnet og verket. Arbeidet henter navnet sitt fra ting og greier som vi har vanskelig for å definere og sette navn på, sånn som «dingen», «tingesten», «duppingsger», eller de danske variantene «himstregimser» og «dippedutter».

I en kryssing mellom forestilling og lekeverksted, introduseres barna til et abstrakt og fantasifullt scenisk univers, proppfullt av rare former, farger, teksturer, lyder og bevegelser. To dansere kamouflerer seg i utforskere, presenterer og transformerer rommet og dets gjenstander, samtidig som også deres egne kropper forvandler seg gjennom samspillet med omgivelsene.

Forestillingen er gratis for deltagere.

Tid: Uke 23 (Tidspunkt sendt til dere på e-post)

Sted: Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo, Fossvæien 24 (Repsjonen)

Aldersgruppe: 3-6 år

Format: Interaktiv danseforestilling

Mvh

Lærke Barfod & Ida Cathrin Utvik



## PERFORMANCE FOR BARN

### HIMSTREGIMSER OG ANDRE DIPPEDUTTER

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Forestillingen er gratis for deltagere.

Tid: mandag 16.05 kl. 10.30-11.30.

Sted: Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo, Fossvæien 24

Aldersgruppe: 3-6 år

Format: Interaktiv danseforestilling

Påmelding ønskes til epost: Ida.Cathrin.Utvik@khio.no eller tlf 41208075, innen 12.05. Vi har en kapasitet på 20 publikummere, inkl. de voksne som følger.



## Rock-a-bye

Stein, vugging, musikk; «rock» kan bety så mye!

Vi inviterer de små som sanser og forstår verden gjennom hele seg til danseforestillingen Rock-a-bye.

Har kan de utforske et abstrakt landskap med knoklige former, knasende lyder, vuggende bevegelser og elektrisk gitarspill, tilpasset de aller minste.

Danseforestillingen er beregnet på barn mellom 6-18 måneder og deres omsorgspersoner, og er en levende installasjon hvor barna er omgitt av scenografi og dansere, lyder og lys. Barna har bevegelsesfrihet og får utforske rommet sammen med danserne.



### INVITASJON TIL FORESTILLINGS-VERKSTED: «Rock n' roll-a-bye baby»

Sted: Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo  
Tid: Fredag 14.10.22, kl 13:45-14:30  
Alder: 6-24 mnd

Vi inviterer til et prosess-verksted av danseforestillingen «Rock n' roll-a-bye baby». Forestillingen er et elevarbeid av masterstudent i koreografi, Ida Cathrin Utvik, og utforsker begrepet «rock» med sine ulike betydninger: Materialiet «rock» (stein), musikkjangeren «rock» og bevegelsen «rock» (vugging). Med dette som utgangspunkt vil arbeidet skape et sensorisk og meditativt univers for babyer og deres omsorgspersoner.

I verkstedet vil vi vise et utdrag fra prosessen med forestillingen, og teste ut prototyper av scenografi og musikk. Både koreografi, scenografi og musikk er arbeid i prosess, og vi ønsker å prøve ut dette på målgruppen for å høste erfaringer til videre arbeid med forestillingen.

NB! Verkstedet vil bli dokumentert med foto/video. Dokumentasjonen er kun til intern bruk, og vil ikke publiseres.

Medvirkende: Ida Cathrin Utvik (koreografi), Lærke Bang Barfod (scenografi), James Layton (musikk), og dansere Andreas Holme Kjærland, Clara Viktoria Fisher, Oda Rognø og Amelia Elisabeth Møller



## BARNEWORKSHOP

### HIMSTREGIMSER OG ANDRE DIPPEDUTTER

«Hva kaller man sånne ting som ikke har noe navn? Sånne duppingsger..?»

Forestillingsworkshop for barn 3-6 år.  
Tid: Tirsdag 03. mai kl. 10.00-11.00  
Sted: Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo, Loftet 1.

Info: Som del av vår utforskning til danseforestillingen Himstregimser og andre dippedutter, vil vi invitere til en prosess-workshop, der vi viser utdrag fra forestillingen og inviterer barna inn til lek i et abstrakt og fantasifullt scenografisk univers.

Prosjektet er et samarbeid mellom Lærke Bang Barfod (master i kostymedesign) og Ida Cathrin Utvik (master i koreografi), samt danserne Fie Dam Mygind og Marlene Bonnesen (master i dans) ved Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo.

For påmelding, send sms til 41208075 eller epost til ida.cathrin.utvik@khio.no innen 29.04. Opplys om antall barn og voksne.

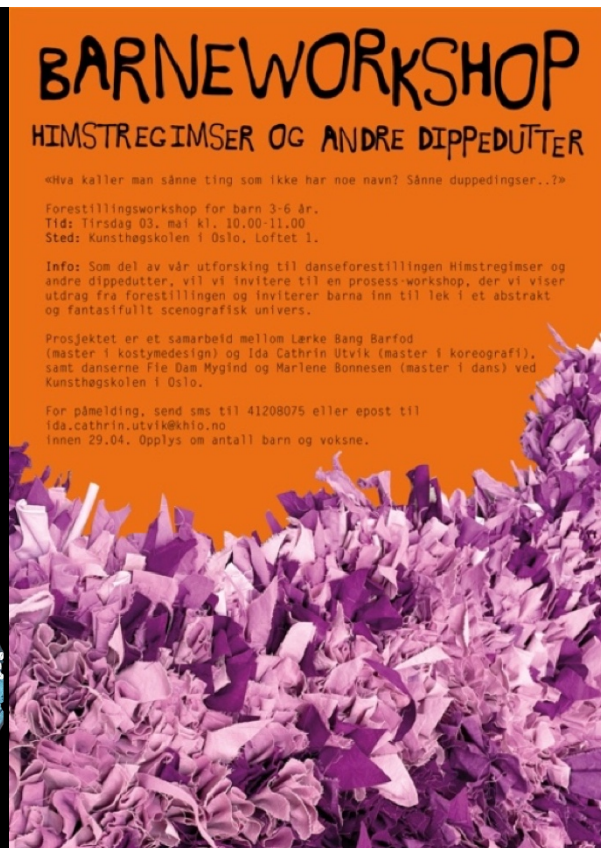


IMAGE: INVITATIONS TO DIFFERENT WORKSHOPS AND PROCESS SHOWINGS. PICTURES BY LÆRKE B. BARFOD AND IDA C. UTVIK, AUGUST 2021-MARCH 2023.

### 3. CREATING THE MA PROJECT

My final MA-project *Rock-a-bye* was planned and created between June 2022 and March 2023, and was performed eight times between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of march 2023. In this chapter I will give an account of my process of **creating the MA project**. I will do this by first presenting my *artistic idea* and present my collaborators. Secondly I will describe my *process and methods*. Lastly I will write about my *evaluation and further plans* for my project.

#### 3.1. THE ARTISTIC IDEA

The project *Rock-a-bye* grew out of interests developed and experiences gained throughout my first year of the MA studies. The Deichman project had triggered a curiosity for the age group 6-18 months-old babies, and the ensemble project had triggered my interest in continuing to work with rocks as material. The collaboration project *Himstregimser og andre dippedutter* with Lærke had turned into a long-term collaboration, and some of the concepts from this project I was curious to continue investigating.

My overall aim with the project was to create an abstract and interactive space for babies where they could interact with the material and the dancers on their own premises. The idea for the project came out of an epiphany that “Rock” was a word that entailed several meanings that did not really share a connecting point. Suddenly the connection nevertheless seemed quite clear to me. What if the *rocks* (stones), the *rock* (music) and the *rocking* (movement) were elements of the same universe. And why couldn’t this be a universe for babies? I started developing the idea together with Lærke, in relation to this curiosity, and in combination with the research questions: *What content or aesthetics can art for children 0-5 years encompass? Can there be a meeting point between “relevant” aesthetics for children and adults?*

### 3.1.1. ROCKS

*“Rock” as physical material: Density, weight, structure, patterns, “treasure hunt” (differences in value), grounding, universal and existential – the very ground we walk on, the universe – giant rocks floating in space, navigating with gravitational forces.*

(Keywords from project description, 27.05.2022)

The idea for the scenography with the “sensory rocks” started during the exploration *Himstregimser og andre dippedutter*, where costume designer Lærke created two purple textile lumps that were representing stones in our abstract landscape. The stones had their different functions and sensory stimuli hidden inside. One of them contained a small Bluetooth speaker that played peculiar sounds. This object would be rolled around in the space to create moving sound and curiosity about what was hidden inside. The other stone was smaller and had a zipper that made it possible to open and invert, so that the orange fringing inside would be revealed. The thought of having textile stones as a main scenographic element I found extremely interesting and motivating, and it felt like endless of options in terms of how to create sensory variation in this landscape. The rocks could have speakers inside, or they could be filled with material that created an acoustic sound. There could be differences in the weight of the filling, and perhaps the relationship between size and weight could be somehow distorted. The rocks could also have different surfaces to create both interesting visual variety as well as differences in tactility. Aesthetically we wanted the rocks to have some reference points to the world of rock music and rock culture, and the colors black, grey, red, silver metallic and electric blue became a main palette. I wanted the costumes to share aesthetic details with the rock scenography, in order to create a merging of body and material, and use this camouflage effect choreographically.

We wanted the space to be filled with a big amount of the textile rocks, in order for the physical material to have the interactive effect that I wanted – to serve as a sensory access to the work and a connection between performer and child. During the idea process we considered how natural rocks could be present in the space as a physical material, but because we wanted the space to be completely safe for a small baby to explore, we decided to stick



with having soft materials on all surfaces, and use natural rocks as a filling or core inside the soft rocks.

What was evident was that we needed to have some of the rock prototypes ready as soon as the rehearsal process started, and that the movement material would be developed through working with the actual rocks. The scenography was therefore also created in very close dialogue with the designer, in order to let the movement work feed the design process, and vice versa.



IMAGE: FROM PROCESS SHARING OF ROCK-A-BYE. PHOTO BY TANIA M. MUSINA, JANUARY 2023.

### 3.1.2. ROCK

*“Rock” as sound material: Playing with, twisting, and combining the terms and sentences “Rock-a-bye baby” and “rock n’roll”. Rock music genre mostly associated with roughness, darkness, adult/young adult audiences, rebelling, loudness, youth culture. How can the genre be deconstructed to find an essence that can also be appreciated by and create amazement with the very youngest audience?*

(Keywords from project description, 27.05.2022)

The idea for music and sound design started with rock as a music genre, and specifically electric guitar as an instrument, as well as a continuing interest in spatial sound design. In addition to its clear connection with rock music, what made me curious about the electric guitar was how this string instrument could potentially create vibrating sound qualities that would support my idea about rocking as a movement. In addition to guitar sounds I was interested in incorporating sounds from rocks as a material. The idea was to record rock sounds and play them from Bluetooth speakers inside the scenography, as well as experimenting with a rock/pebble filling in the scenography stones that would create an acoustic layer in the soundscape when the scenography was activated by the dancers or children.

I started a dialogue with James Layton, an MA composition student at NMH, in September 2022, and James was brought into the project as a composer and sound designer. Our starting point for the investigation was to look at how rock music could be deconstructed and brought into a meditative state to support the sensory space, and how natural rock sounds could be included in this investigation.

### 3.1.3. ROCKING

*“Rock” as movement material: Rocking movement - something the babies have experienced both in their mother’s womb and after birth. Cradling, comforting, continuous, repetitional, drowsing, pendulum, kinesthetic feeling of one’s own weight, being held and “dropped” interchangeably.*

(Keywords from project description, 27.05.2022)

The interest to explore rocking as a movement material came from both the associative connection it had to babies as a target group, and the kinaesthetic qualities of the movement itself. To me, rocking is about relating to gravity in a very particular way. An interplay between the body’s materiality and the gravitational force, and how this is felt in the body.

The notion of gravity was also a big interest in terms of the other materials in the space – the rocks. I wanted to explore how weight, mass and gravity was felt in the body, both when the body itself is being rocked and when the body deals with moving other material.

Experimenting with creating differences in weight in the scenography rocks therefore became important to the process. I was also curious about the babies’ kinesthetic experience, both by watching the dancers move and by moving, lifting, holding and interacting with the rock material.

#### The performers

In my project, I wanted to work with a group of four performers, at least one of them being a male dancer. In the beginning of the process and our exploration week in October 2022 I had a group of four BA dancers from KHIO: Clara Viktoria Fischer and Andreas Holme Kjærland (BA contemporary 3<sup>rd</sup> year), Amelia Eilsabeth Møller (BA jazz 3<sup>rd</sup> year) and Oda Rognø (a 2022 graduate from BA contemporary). By the first rehearsal week in January 2023 I had also included two more dancers into the project: Anders Engebretsen (a post-graduate student in the program *performative practices*) and MA dance student Oda Olivia Ø. Lindegård. We had a working structure where the dancers rotated their roles, four were performing while two were observing and taking notes, or had other tasks in the production.



IMAGE: FROM PROCESS OF CREATING ROCK-A-BYE. PICTURE BY TANIA M. MUSINA, JANUARY 2023.

### 3.2. PROCESS AND METHODS

In retrospect I realize to which extent my project and process was about pedagogical considerations, and how these concerns fluctuated along three main lines: my relation with the audience/babies (the choices of material in and the organization around the performance), my relation with the dancers (the process of creating together with and facilitating learning for the performers) and the relation between performer and child that was created in the actual performance or test performance setting. In this chapter, I will elaborate on these considerations, and present some of the methods I used in creating the project. I will give an account of my experience with having *reference group and process sharings*, and how the process has developed through meetings with internal and external *supervisors*, Anne Grete Eriksen and Venke Marie Sortland.

### 3.2.1. WORKING WITH CHOREOGRAPHIC TASKS

My entry point into creating choreographic material with the dancers was both informed by artistic desires and pedagogical necessities. For the performance to allow interactions between performer and child, the choreographic structure needed flexibility and space for these interactions to happen. It was therefore obvious that improvisational tasks would work better than rigidly structured choreography. At the same time the tasks needed to be very specific so that the dancers were not concerned with *creating* material, but on how to work with their material *in relation* to the kids. To ensure these interactions, we also needed to level with the audience in a spatial sense, working extensively in the lower level. To create the open and interactive space that I wanted, our movement work also had to take care of safety measures. This included constantly scanning the space, always being aware of the space behind you and working in a slower tempo. The slow tempo together with repetition as a tool was also a way to make sure that the smaller kids were able to follow our trajectories and perceive the movements.

As I wanted the movement material to arise from the meeting between the sensory rocks and the dancers' bodies, I suggested movement tasks that worked with getting into a *dialogical state* with the material, sensing and playing with its functions. I soon discovered that for the improvisations to be more specific and move in a landscape that I found interesting, I needed some key words. The words were verbs and based on actions, functions or movement principles. The words were: *swinging/rocking, rolling, rocking (as in jamming/rock concert mode), lifting, dropping, transporting, hiding/camouflaging, cracking/breaking, scanning (+ smiling)*. We used the words, both separately and in different combinations, as a base for creating choreographic tasks. We examined how these words would create movement functions in the body itself, and through the body's relation to the rocks.

I wanted the movements to be based on simple and readable functions, and my curiosity was if this simplicity in movement would also be perceived and "felt" by the small children. This created a focus on specificity in the tasks, both based on how the specific movement function was felt in the body and how it was perceived from the outside. Piling these combinations of

tasks after one another, we had already accumulated lots of movement material by rehearsal week two, that could be tuned and kneaded along the way.

### 3.2.2. *WORKING WITH STRATEGIES*

The dancers in the project had very diverse experience in terms of children and performance work for this group. Some I had already worked with in my Deichman project, some had performed in children's dance performances with other choreographers, and some had never even seen a children's performance. My main concern was whether they would show an interest and maturity towards being with the babies in a performance setting, as I saw their task as not so much *performing for* but *being with* the children. Their performer role would entail a sensitivity in the meeting with the children, and an ability to adapt their movements, interactions and strategies accordingly. To facilitate a learning process for the dancers, provide them with tools and prepare them for the task, I chose several strategies. First, I took them to see a baby performance by Loan Ha in MUNCH museum in October, to observe another performer deal with this age group. The second strategy was inspired by my mentor Venke's recommendations; to have a working residency in a kinder garden. We started the first two rehearsal weeks in January by commuting between KHIO and Støperiet kindergarten. Our main aim was to spend time with the children to get to know our target group, and for the dancers to have experiences with interaction and play. Another strategy that Venke introduced was to give the dancers the opportunity to observe each other while working on the floor with the children. This inspired the working structure *four dancers on and two dancers off*. The structure allowed the dancers to experience the interactions both from the inside and the outside, which also gave them a bigger ground for reflection and discussion throughout the process. I experienced that this strategy both resulted in a steep learning curve for the performers, and made them feel an engagement in the process and ownership to the project.





IMAGE: FROM PERFORMING ROCK-A-BYE AT KLODEN TEATER. PICTURE BY YANIV COHEN, MARCH 2023.

## **Guidance and mentoring**

My mentors for the MA project has been two prominent figures from the field: Anne Grete Eriksen has been my internal mentor from KHIO, and Venke Marie Sortland has been my external mentor from the field. The mentors have served as reassuring guides throughout the creative process, as well as reminding me of and guiding me through pedagogic and organizational concerns. Venke has been of great help when choosing strategies and working methods with the dancers and with the children. Throughout the last part of the process, she was there for almost every test performance, and provided valuable observations and discussions. I especially appreciated her insisting on being conscious about what kind of meetings and interactions we wanted to create in all the different choreographic parts. This way, our goal was clearer and our tests more productive. She also conveyed solid and thorough methods, like testing every version of a structure twice with an audience before making big changes. Anne Grete has been both a valuable historical reference and a steady mentor. I especially appreciated her insisting on being clear about the goals for the tests and audience meetings. What is it that we want to investigate, and how will this affect our choice

of methods? She has also reminded me of the resource that parents and kindergarten employees are in the research, and suggested ways of making use of this source of information. This is something that I want to make more use of in the continuation of my work, and investigate in how this collaboration with the adult companions can be structured.

### *3.2.3. WORKING WITH INTERACTIONS/TEST PERFORMANCES*

One of our main methods throughout the process was the frequent audience meetings/test performances. Although the original plan was to end every week with a test, we soon discovered that we needed to test as often as possible. One of the main aims with these tests was to provide the dancers with enough opportunities to rehearse their interactions with the children, so that they would feel safe and competent in these meetings. Another aim was to tune the choreographic content, as well as to reveal and test the organizational framework that needed to be considered. Every little detail from what times of the day we showed the performance to how we entered the performance space with the kids turned out to have a huge impact on their experience. We used our discoveries from test performances throughout the process to consider different entrance and exit strategies, test out ways of organizing the audience in the space, consider what kind of info the audience would need in the beginning, etc. For the test performances to be as useful and informational as possible, we tried to be specific about what we wanted to test, and to create some goals for each of them. We ended every test with a discussion about our discoveries and experiences.

#### **Discoveries about the space**

A major part of the MA exploration and findings was about the aesthetic space and how different spaces influence the small children massively. What we discovered through our different visits in the kindergartens was how extremely challenging it was to come into a space that the small children already knew too well and do something totally different with it. Their expectations about that space were so present, their routines so inherent, that even our invasion with four to six bodies and ten textile rocks didn't necessarily make the children



immerse into our universe. It was a brutal but necessary reminder that they needed something different to engage, and that the choice of making this a stage performance rather than a performance for the kindergarten space, seemed to be the right one. In that way we could control and shape the space in a different way than what we would manage in the kindergarten.

When inviting the children to KHIO we also encountered different challenges concerning the space. It was evident for me that the combination of age group and dynamic interactive format would need a physical delimitation. Using stage curtains to define a space was therefore a part of our scenographic exploration. Our test version of the stage curtains turned out to become a way too interesting effect, and the peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek games at some point became more interesting for some than what was happening inside the curtains. We interpreted this as a sign that the choreographic structure needed more progress around the time that their focus shifted.

When we moved into Kloden teater with our final rig, we experienced very different challenges, as entering the theatre space suddenly became a big barrier for some of the children. In our first kindergarten test group at Kloden, many of the babies were too scared to even enter our performance “tent”. In the following tests and performances, some were scared and cried already when entering the theatre building through the main entrance, and then getting them into the performance space became a huge challenge. This unexpected experience became a great concern through the last stage of our process, and made us constantly reconsider and retry different entrance scenarios and strategies.

We had many discussions about these experiences. Why were the kindergarten kids so scared here at Kloden, compared to the tests we had at KHIO? One factor we discussed was the light. The blackbox at Kloden was a quite dark space, and the transition from the blinding daylight outside was evident. I also experienced at this point that my artistic desires were working against the children’s need for safety. My idea of having a dimmed light in the beginning of the performance to enhance the camouflage and merging effect between bodies and material, gradually disappeared as the lights were adjusted up. Another factor I considered was the size

of the space. At KHIO we had rehearsed in a larger space than what our final rig allowed at Kloden. This resulted in a different proximity between dancers and children, which probably (in combination with the stage light) resulted in a more intense experience for them. In a positive sense, they were not concerned with playing with the curtains anymore, however, for some the experience turned out to be too intense.

### 3.3. EVALUATION AND FURTHER PLANS

The performance had its premiere at Kloden teater 1<sup>st</sup> of March, and played eight times altogether, six performances with kindergarten groups and two open family performances during the weekend. However, as we had conducted ten different run throughs with test audience before the premiere, to differentiate between rehearsal and performance feels like an artificial divide. Inviting the children into the process to such an extent, in my opinion has been one of the biggest strengths of the project. I consider the basis of experience that I gained to be of great value in the continuation of my work.

One thing the project really confirmed, was how different it is to create and perform for one year old kindergarten kids coming with their kindergarten group and pedagogues, compared to one-year-olds coming with their parent(s). I believe this is based on several reasons: the children are new to the kindergarten as phenomenon, they are new to the performance setting as phenomenon, they have limited life experience in general, and facing new experiences and meeting totally strange adults can be a challenge without their parents by their side. While the children coming with their parents felt safe and ready to explore as soon as they entered, the kindergarten children needed a long time to get to this point. Some of them didn't manage to get there at all. Consequently, this affected the dancers and their choices of strategies in the performance setting. They had to be much more sensitive in their interactions with the children, and select their trajectories in the space very carefully when they performed for the kindergartens compared to in the open performances. Having a split focus between both of these audience groups in the process, we didn't quite manage to target any of them to their full potential. However, the base of experience gained is wider than it would have been if we

only focused on one of the groups. It also became clear that every run, every meeting, every performance, is a continuous research, and that the work is never finished, but ever adaptable.

If I could have done anything differently, I would have wished to have more time with the composer joining our rehearsals, in order to adapt the sound even more according to experiences from the tests. I would also like to try how expanding the space a little bit, and perhaps giving it some more light, would affect the kindergarten kids in terms of feeling safe. I also believe there is some unresolved potential when it comes to strategies of entering and tuning in. These are some aspects that I will continue to investigate if the project will be shown again in the future.

However, I experienced that the children in general showed an interest in the performance and its content throughout the test performances and final performances. I also experienced that we succeeded in creating a space where the children could experience on their own terms, by observing more from a distance or engaging with the material physically. One of the kindergarten teachers even called it a “spiritual experience” after one of the showings, and she especially highlighted how the slow tempo seemed to have a very calming effect on the children. One of the perhaps strongest experiences and discoveries throughout the process was to see how the work was met by the two neurodiverse children who were among the kindergarten audience groups. Their pure joy and engagement in relation to the work confirmed for me the potential of adapting the performance for a diverse audience, and this is something I would like to do in the future.

The collaboration with Kloden Teater in this project has been a very useful experience, both in terms of the practical challenges of moving a production to a different theatre space, the dialogue and connections made in the field and the expertise on the house that I was given access to.



IMAGE: FROM SHOWING ROCK-A-BYE AT KLODEN TEATER. PICTURE BY YANIV COHEN, MARCH 2023.

## CONCLUSION

In the initial phase of my MA project, the meetings with different literature and projects that deals with performing arts for children, made me aware of how choices of interactive strategies entail some inherent values towards the children's audience. Questions around children's agency and the negotiation between a closed and an open form, became important concerns in the work with the MA project. I discovered here that I wanted to create a performance setting that focused on more open interactive dramaturgies, to challenge the power hierarchy between child and adult. Further, I discovered that having physical material as a starting point for choreographic exploration both serves my artistic interest for the meeting between the body and the material, and my wish to create a multisensory performance setting for small children that meets their natural needs for sensory exploration. Throughout the first year of the MA program my choreographic research included several smaller projects that investigated these interests, and that informed my final MA project

process in different ways. I experienced how a big scale of physical material in the space could serve as a connecting point in the interaction between the dancers and the 0-2 year old children. I experienced how abstract textile objects could create a universe that focused on function rather than narration. I also experienced how working with heavy objects that affected the body kinaesthetically could be an interesting principle to explore with the little ones. These findings, together with the experiences of using audience meetings as a research method, became important for the process of creating the MA project.

The process with *Rock-a-bye* has made clear that fluctuating between different roles is a part of the work when creating for and with children, both implying artistic, pedagogic and production management tasks in an almost equal degree. Working in close dialogue with the target group requires time and resources, but is an inevitable part of the process of creating age-specific artworks. The audience meetings and test performances in our process served three important functions: to get to know the age group and rehears our interactions, to tune the content of the performance to make it interesting for the children, and to reveal the organizational structures around the performance that needed to be considered and adapted to the children's needs. The pedagogical concerns in the project involved both considerations of the children in relation to the content of the performance, considerations of the dancers and their process of learning and developing their skills in the performance setting, and the interactions that happened between dancer and child.

Some main discoveries in the final MA project included how the performance space affected the children's experience to a high degree. Both factors like their familiarity, experience, and expectations with the space, how we designed the space in terms of scenography and light, and our strategies to enter and transition into the performance space are worth mentioning here. The project also highlighted the difference between the audience groups 6-18 months old kindergarten children, and 6-18 months old children coming to see the performance with their parents. This has made me more aware of how to work with different strategies to approach the two respective audience groups. Perhaps is creating works for the safe and familiar kindergarten space a way to go with the youngest kindergarten children.

What it means to succeed in creating relevant or age-appropriate dance performances for 0–5-year-old children remains as a question for further investigation. I believe that the way to approach this question is to keep working in close dialogue with the audience group, and accumulating experiences along the way. I also see the performance setting in itself as a space for continuous research and adaptation, where *the performance* or *the artwork* is never a static entity, but rather an ongoing process.

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## CREDITS AND VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

Rock-a-bye

01.-04.03.2023

Pilotscenen, Kloden Teater

Link to videodocumentation: <https://vimeo.com/813507070>

Password: Rockbaby23

Concept and choreography: Ida Cathrin Utvik

Costume and scenography: Lærke Bang Barfod

Dancers and co-creators: Anders Engebretsen, Andreas Holme Kjærland, Amelia Elisabeth Møller, Clara Viktoria Fischer, Oda Rognø, Oda Olivia Øverbø Lindegård.

Music and sound design: James Layton

Light design: Martin Myrvold

Internal supervisor: Anne Grete Eriksen

External supervisor: Venke Marie Sortland

Video documentation: Yaniv Cohen

Photo documentation: Yaniv Cohen and Tania Maria Musina

Co-producer: Kloden Teater