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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The Performance of Play, Lauren Jones

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Lauren Jones

Committee in charge:

    Professor Susan Narucki, Chair
    Professor Sarah Hankins
    Professor Stephanie Richards

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The Thesis of Lauren Jones is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

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I would also like to acknowledge Mari Kawamura and Joseph Bourdeau for their creative genius in writing and performing *Pocket Music.*

EPIGRAPH

"To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic, to enact to oneself the absolutely other, to pre-empt the future, to give the lie to the inconvenient world of fact. In play earthly realities become, of a sudden, things of the transient moment, presently left behind, then disposed of and buried in the past; the mind is prepared to accept the unimagined and incredible, to enter a world where different laws apply, to be relieved of all the weights that beat it down, to be free, kingly, unfettered and divine."

-Hugo Rahner[1]

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Performance of Play, Lauren Jones

by

Lauren Jones

Master of Arts in Music

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Susan Narucki, Chair

This essay is a study of the art of play as it is defined and used in my musical performance practice. In three sections, I will discuss the nature of play, including examples of what I am defining as the "performance of play." Next, I will look at a case study of how these ideas are incorporated in the popular 1980's television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse.* Lastly, I will discuss how this performance practice is applied to my own work through recent collaborative project, *Pocket Music.*

Introduction

Play is a remarkable practice of the creative mind. With such a simple yet complex practice, many search for the right definition. One offered by education theorist Brian Sutton-Smith gives a thorough explanation of the aspects of play I wish to highlight in this Thesis: "Play is a unique form of adaptive variability, [it] instigates an imagined but equilibrial reality within which disequilibrial exigencies can be paradoxically simulated and give rise to the pleasurable effects of excitement and optimism."[2] Within this extensive definition of an elementary enchantment of the human experience, we can identify a few key characteristics that give play its magic. The establishment of an "imagined but equilibrial reality" that Sutton-Smith refers to is a vessel that we, as imaginative human beings, use to create. Scott G. Eberle, author of "The Elements of Play," provides a elucidation of Sutton-Smith's definition: "[P]lay is inimitable, it takes place in an imagined if unsteady reality, and it is marked by pleasing effects that include optimism."[3] My ideology is to view musical performance through a lens of childlike play to create a personalized, imaginative theatrical world. As a musician and performer, I aim to illuminate the importance of play in childhood and adulthood and to create theatrical performances that engage with play and the "imaginary" from the stance of the audience as well as the performer. As a performer and collaborator, my goal is to use interactive play activities in performance to create a shared sense of childlike wonder, inviting audiences into a shared imaginary world.

In this essay, I will examine the performance of play, meaning, as I am defining the term, the ways in which play is used as a tool to create, experience, and interact within theatrical performances. The first portion of my paper will attempt to define play in its various forms and practices, with special focus placed on what we will call "imaginative play" and "object play." In

the second section, I will focus on one particular, established example of the performance of play in the creation of the late 1980's children's television program, *Pee-wee's Playhouse,* focusing on the visual, musical, and theatrical aspects of the program. Finally, we will examine a collaborative theatrical work of my own entitled *Pocket Music,* which is a multi-movement multimedia production relying heavily on elements of imaginative and object play.

Education theorists have articulated several frameworks for understanding the function of play in musical performance. As previously mentioned, Brian Sutton-Smith, a prominent education theorist at University of Pennsylvania has outlined concepts of play through several classifications, including "The Rhetoric of Play as Imaginary." This is defined as using "playful improvisation" to "[idealize] the imagination, flexibility, and creativity of the animal and human play worlds," a definition that encapsulates the performance practice I developed in writing *Pocket Music.* Playful improvisation is a key factor in my work, improvising as if one would as a child – there is no refined technique, whatever comes to mind is used in creating, no matter how absurd it may be. The playful aspect is also important to me, to always maintain a sense of humor, laughter and lightheartedness. I remember playing as a child in such a way, and I always try to approach that state of mind in performance. Sutton-Smith also comprises that this type of play establishes a positive outlook toward creativity and innovation.[4] In performance, positivity is important to maintain an accessible and welcoming environment for the audience. Imaginative play involves creating an altered reality, or fantasy. It is as if a self-contained world is realized within the mind, and others existing within follow that world's rules and standards or normality.[5]

Object play is similar but involves the incorporation of inanimate objects into play ritual. This may involve man-made, or found objects belonging to the earth, such as sticks, leaves, dirt, etc.[6] This concept connects to imaginative play in that one must imagine that the object is

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something other than its accepted "real" definition. By using objects in performance, one creates imagined props, instruments, characters, etc. in this aforementioned self-contained world. One may also animate objects, giving human traits, characteristics, or soul/spirit to inanimate objects.[7] This technique is exemplified by the many such characters in *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and by many musical and performative materials used in *Pocket Music.* In this essay, I will examine the various visual, theatrical and musical aspects contributing to the artistic success of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse,* specifically how creator Paul Reubens and his team of artists, musicians, animators, and other collaborators created their own fantastical world through play and improvisation. Considering this program as a prevailing example of imaginative and object play I will further draw comparisons between Reubens' approach and mine in *Pocket Music,* a children's style show for all ages. Play activities are a central focus of *Pocket Music,* and through these techniques I hope to emphasize the importance of play not only as an artistic practice, but as a fundamental part of the human experience. Using play in performance can then be a intensely rewarding experience, inviting the audience and performers alike to connect with their "childlike side".

Play as a Creative State

When was the last time you remember "playing" just as you did as a child? Simply letting the mind wander, imagining and enacting fantastical scenarios, singing, dancing, and living in magic and wonder; building tall sculptures out of blocks to see how high it can balance before toppling over, pretending to be an astronaut soaring to the moon and back in less than thirty seconds, making a "mudpie" or "leaf salad;" Personal memories of imagined activities like these serve as cherished relics from my childhood, which I revisit fondly and often. I cannot help but wonder why these kinds of practices which come so naturally to children are not incorporated more often into the daily life of the adult. Many writings and studies have been done throughout decades on childhood play (Piaget 1929, Herron & Sutton-Smith 1971, et al.) but I would like to focus on the importance of play in the adult life, and more specifically play in the life and practice of a musician/performer.

When discussing play, either imaginative or object based, we find that many of the thought processes at work will translate into musical performance practices in various ways. I am defining this as the "performance of play," a performance practice using specific elements of play in the creation and performance of musical and theatrical works. In imaginative play, the player chooses to create a personalized "alternate reality." Philip E. Silvey writes about the different types of play, discussing imaginative play in detail:

> During this type of play action, children create a fantasy version of reality where they generate characters that do not really exist and stories that are not, in actuality, happening. This kind of play creates something set apart from the real world, set apart in a way that protects the actor yet allows him or her to safely "try on" identities and attitudes.

Therefore, this type of play involves imagining the world in an alternate light, a very powerful tool of creativity. Everything is created within the mind, going against the norm and redefining

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reality. I remember playing pretend as a child, specifically playing "house" with my cousins. In this game we would assume different roles in a made-up family. We transformed the front porch to my house into our home setting, where my parents had stored a table, a grill, and an old laundry machine. We would play for hours and hours, seemingly all day, and it was as if we never tired of playing or ran out of imaginings. I want to relive this state of creativity. Is there a way to capture this nostalgic state in music and performance?

Silvey also underlines that play for children is "exploratory and improvisatory" and that "children pretend and engage in imaginative scenarios that evolve in the moment." When playing, children are improvising, making things up as they go along, with an innate aptitude for imagination, thinking of the absurd, the silly, and the impractical. A child might pretend that he or she is standing in a house that then turns into a boat, then all of the sudden the boat starts to sink, but all is okay – the child suddenly finds him or herself in an underwater universe and has a conversation with the surrounding sea creatures. Everything is improvised, which is quite a precious skill to possess. It is fascinating to see the ability that many children have to imagine such a scenario that builds on itself and spurs into multiple layers of imaginative storytelling.

What are the ways in which a musical performer could access this state of childlike uninhibition and create an imagined scenario that evolves in the moment? In many ways free improvisation could be seen as the equivalent of imaginative play for a musician. In his book *Improvisation,* Derek Bailey remarks that free improvisation is the earliest form of music making, it is the origin of creativity. Before one has a preconceived notion about genre, idioms, or style, improvisation is free and open to anyone, including "beginners, children, and non-musicians."[8] This openness and increased freedom to imagine new possibilities is the strongest and most obvious connection between free improvisation and play. When improvising, similar to

imaginative play, the musician is thinking on the spot, trusting one's creative intuition. Music is written in the mind and in the moment. A non-musician who does not know how to read music can improvise, and we know that children also have a keenness for improvisation. Bailey's point about openness is also important in the performance of play and what I hope to employ in *Pocket Music*. Much of it is loosely structured and improvised by the players to create the possibility of play with audience members. Just as in play, free improvisation can be for anyone who wants to join and is similarly unstructured, so that the possibilities of musical creation are vast and ever-evolving.

Another detail that is important to my musical play practice is maintaining an optimistic outlook and demeanor toward music and performance. Sutton-Smith also mentions that play can bring about excitement and optimism and emphasized its role in maintaining a positive outlook toward creativity and innovation. It is important to see the joy, silliness, and absurdity in music, to look at the "bright side," and not take oneself too seriously. Just like in the above-mentioned scenario of the imagining child, the ship is sinking, but the danger is not apparent. Instead, the child sees this as an adventure into an underwater world. This is not to say that one should ignore inherent danger, but there is something delightfully naïve about playing. It does not seem to bring up a negative view on the world, but maintains a light, and playful mood. Scott G. Eberle, further emphasizes this point in maintaining that play "almost always promises fun." To allow oneself to just have fun in this way can seem a demanding task in the life of an adult, and to see the humor in music, is something I strive for in practice and performance. Insisting a sense of humor allows me to revisit a childlike state of euphoria and uninhibitedness.

Philosophers have commented on the origin and practice of play stemming from experiences in early childhood. Jean-Jacques Rousseau discusses play and claims that a healthy

child's life is "seemingly reaching out beyond him," conveying how the curiosity of children allows them to always strive for more.[9] Curiosity is at the core of imagination, and in performance leads to creating fantastic works of art. In literature, the curious character of Alice shows the magnitude of what can be imagined in creating her own self-imagined reality in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* This famous children's book focuses on the absurd, vile, and inconceivable imaginings of Alice, a curious seven-year-old girl who drifts into a dream on a summer afternoon. Alice's character speaks of her desire to live in an imagined reality, saying "If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?"[10] Her curiosity to imagine the world in a way that isn't is a powerful notion of creativity. It looks at the accepted features of one's environment and questions them, reimagines them. In Walt Disney's film adaptation of Lewis Carroll's story, "Alice in Wonderland," she similarly sings a song while daydreaming entitled "A World of My Own," in which she describes animals living in "fancy little houses" and dressed like humans, supernatural flowers that can speak to her, and a "babbling brook" that sings a song she can understand.[11] Alice is reimagining the way things already are, and shows evidence of object play, thinking of objects coming to life and interacting with her. This story is often referred to as "literary nonsense" by many scholars and writers, including Wim Tigges, author of "An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense," thus is viewed as an iconic form of children's literature spearheaded by Carroll.

Nonsense is another important factor in the performance of play. Tigges defines nonsense as "words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas" and "language without meaning."[12] To allow oneself to ignore the imposed structure and order of their material surroundings allows us to

bend reality in a way that creates a new self-imagined and personal environment. Creating one's "own world" in this way displays elements of surrealist thought, which as defined by André Breton, aims to challenge the definition of reality and alter one's perception of the world. In surrealism, the lines between dreams and waking life are blurred, truth is questioned, and imagination encouraged.[13] Further emphasizing the realm of imagination, surrealism seeks to express thoughts and images that are not possible in the already existing world. Using this idea in performance as an outlet to express the questioning of one's perception of reality can have the ability to bring all participants to an immersive state of childlike wonder.

Sutton-Smith also outlines the genres of play as "humor, skill, pretense, fantasy, risk, contest, and celebrations." The first of these holds much pertinence as another important element of play as it is incorporated into performance – humor. The role of humor as a component of play and performance is one which I find is often overlooked, and acknowledging humor as a valid form of performance play is particularly important to my artistic practice. Humor allows a certain vibrant energy to enter a performance; that energy is, in many ways, unique to humor. What is notable is that humor is often lacking from a typical performance in the genre of contemporary classical or notated music. One hypothesis of humor made by professors Warren and McGraw is that humor is a "benign violation" of norms, similar to surrealist thought and in a way, imaginative play.[14] To encapsulate what we have conferred about imaginative play, this theory brings up the point that in order to pretend or imagine, one must first violate a norm, or pretend reality is something other that it isn't. I hope to bring this remarkable realization of childhood into performance settings by creating performances that inspire imagination, improvisation, and the rejection of performance norms.

The second form of play, object play, involves the incorporation of inanimate objects, and interestingly enough, can involve the act of bringing an inanimate object to life. "A child might create a role or voice for a plaything (which could be a toy or perhaps a found object reimagined)," says Sutton-Smith. Giving a voice or spirit to an inanimate object is an interesting phenomenon of play. A practice of cultures across centuries, animism is the acceptance of all things, inanimate and animate to have a spirit.[15] Piaget studied animism in children and commented on "the tendency children have to regard objects as living and conscious," noting that this is a common practice of play for children. I am sure many adults can relate to this idea from childhood, perhaps picking up sticks from the ground to build a stick figure then giving it a voice, naming stuffed animals, or making faces out of objects such as leaves or pieces of paper. When playing with toys as a child I would often speak as the toy, interact with other toys (or humans) and enact improvised scenarios involving toys as the members. One particular fondness of mine was hosting "tea parties" and inviting all my stuffed animals to the party. I would dress them all up for the occasion, then give them names and personalized seats at the tea table. These objects came to life for me as a child, and I recognize these experiences as precious, still desiring to arrive at this state of imagination in my musical performances.

As I will later discuss, in *Pocket Music*, objects have an important function; most "instruments" used in the work are found objects. Moreover, the object serves as the connecting force among the three players, as we share most objects among us. These objects include some instruments and many non-instruments, from pots and pans to tambourines, and each of them can hold a different meaning depending on who is playing them. The movement of passing objects around, taking objects from a shared pool is play-like in that it is unsystematic, shared, and equilibrial. The inanimate object is important in *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, as most of the characters

in the program are objects that have come to life. The existence of their spirit is never

questioned, it is just accepted that each object is a friend and member of the playhouse. Pee-

wee's best friends are objects, and they each have very distinctive physical features (designed by

a team of artists) and their own unique personalities. We will look closer at these objects

described in *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and how these objects bring life into the playhouse,

contributing to the imagined reality that is discussed throughout this paper.

Pee-wee's Playhouse: A Performance of Play

Imaginative play and object play are linked by, of course, the imagination. To create a

living creature out of an inanimate object is a divine imaginative gift. Emphasizing the way that

Pee-wee's Playhouse brings these notions to life, the playhouse is a place where nonsense makes

sense in that every object is alive. The creation of this subjective space provides a new set of

abnormal "rules" that are acknowledged by all participants. There is an acceptance and

encouragement to be a "big kid," to run around, play with toys, scream, have fun. These notions

are embodied by one of television's most famous big kids, Pee-wee Herman. Played by actor

Paul Reubens, the character of "Pee-wee" encourages viewers to indulge in their childlike side –

he is curious, playful, optimistic, even snarky, stroppy and "little-brother-ish" at times. Professor

and media scholar Henry Jenkins writes positively about Pee-wee Herman and his ability to

create a unique persona and heartfelt, childlike environment, stating Pee-Wee let children be

children and created a space that was mischievous and "wacky." One example which he

highlights is a recurring gag in the show, where Pee-wee encourages viewers to "scream real

loud" whenever someone says the secret word. Jenkins goes on to state that Pee-wee's ability to

"break the rules" sets precedence for an altered reality, where a different set of rules are

employed:

> What makes *Pee-wee's Playhouse* "fun" for these preschoolers, then, is the way that it
> operates as a kind of anti-kindergarten where playful "misbehavior" takes precedence
> over "good conduct," children are urged to "scream real loud" at the slightest
> provocation, making a mess is an acknowledged source of pleasure, "grown-ups" act like
> children, and parental structures no longer apply.[16]

Pee-wee's character shows viewers that it is okay to be a "kid," to accept oneself for who

they are, and to indulge in inherent pleasures of childhood. Considering the scope of audiences

this television show appealed to, this has a broader effect. Not only were children attracted to this

program, but "grown-ups" were as well, thus adults were encouraged to embrace their childlike side. So is the importance of performances such as this; a work that invites people of all ages to play along, to make fun of things that are typically accepted as normal, to forget socialized norms.

Every aspect of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* creates a world of its own, inviting the viewer into a game of make-believe that drops them into the fantastical imagined environment. The unique stylized and "silly" persona of the sets, dialogue, music, and characters all contribute to a self-contained world within the playhouse, where "anything can happen." This immersive environment invites the audience to "play-pretend," to forget that there is an outside world, accepting the events within the playhouse as "normal" based on their new context. Much of the show is a created set, with each of the characters in the show being a part of it. Everything in this house is alive, from Pee-wee's chair (known as "Chairry") to Mr. Window, others including Magic Screen, Clockey, Mr. Kite, and Floorey. Such an imaginative quality makes the playhouse pop with life, with many characters serving simultaneously as set pieces. Also, from a visual art perspective, these sets are a huge part of what makes this show what it is stylistically, as each item and decoration is brightly colored and vivid, each with its own personality.

As the show unravels, these unique "inanimate" personalities bloom. At the start of each episode, Pee-wee walks over to Conky, his robot friend, and asks him for "today's secret word." As Jenkins mentions, this is one of the most participatory aspects of the show. Whenever anyone says the secret word, the rule is that everyone in the playhouse and everyone at home gets to "scream real loud!" After discovering the secret word, Pee-wee might go sit in his chair, Chairry, who provides a comforting line, inviting Pee-wee to sit down since he's had a long day. He might say hello to "Floorey," another inanimate character, who was discovered after Pee-wee

rearranged the playhouse and a part of the floor began to speak to him. The character of "Clockey" tells Pee-wee the time of day, and with a mouth full of braces speaks with a lisp to announce that "It's time for a Penny cartoon!" Pee-wee may go to his refrigerator for snack time, where every inanimate food object inside is alive. This refrigerator is usually full of action – perhaps Pee-wee opens the freezer and a frozen ham hock is ice-skating, while the ice cubes are cheering on the sidelines. Another time, he might open the door to see carrots dancing to mariachi music. The food and activities they engage in change with each episode, and it is always an anticipated moment to see what will happen when Pee-wee opens the door. Doug Chiang is the food's animator, creating a specialized Claymation for each time the refrigerator is opened. This emphasizes the concepts of imagination and animism within the show, and further illuminates the immersive and imagined reality that is created in the playhouse. It seems as if everywhere Pee-wee turns, everything is alive. The house itself is a character, and everything within it as well. The creators of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* imagined a remarkable amount of personalities from inanimate objects, demonstrating a keen sense for their imaginative and childlike side. I want to bring this into my work and find value in seeing a television show that can inspire people of all ages to push the boundaries and perception of reality.

Alongside the visual aspects of the show, the music in *Pee-wee's Playhouse* gives it a surreal flavor. Most of the music seems uncomplicated, yet there is such complexity to its elements. Many composers collaboratively worked on the music, which gave each episode a personalized sound. Some included Danny Elfman, The Residents, and Mark Mothersbaugh of pop group Devo, while there were several others that contributed to the wackiness. A striking aspect of the music of this show is that it sounds as if much of it was made using 1980's synthesizers and keyboards, while it still maintains a wide range of sounds for different

moods/characters. For example, the theme song of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, written by George
McGrath, Mark Mothersbaugh, and Reubens himself, invites the audience to get ready for a
world of endless possibilities, where "wackiness," playfulness, and imagination are encouraged.
In the opening theme, the composers play with shifting tuning, which provides an unsettled
feeling, emphasizing that the world the viewer is about to enter is not stable or "normal" in the
slightest. The synthesized bass is simple and reminiscent of children's music, going back and
forth from I to V, in a "bum-bum" fashion. These synthesized sounds have a similarity to
childhood games or toys.

The musical texture contains sounds that one might consider "silly," including
synthesized voices imitating laughter, bells ringing, slide whistles, sound effects of fish blowing
bubbles, and spring sounds. The use of traditional instruments is employed, however the
composers approach them in a humorous way, like a piano glissando used for comedic effect,
and a trumpet played with a plunger creating a "wah wah" sound. Most of the percussive
elements are synthesized, and the ones that are not synthesized seem to be executed with non-
instruments, like a spoon hitting against a glass or banging on pots and pans. These kinds of
"simple sounds," humorous effects, and the use of non-instruments create for me a sense of
nostalgia by reminding me of banging on pots and pans as a child or attempting to make funny
noises. I have incorporated these kinds of elements into my recent work *Pocket Music,* in which
each of these elements, from visual to auditory, is just a little bit off-kilter, absurd, nostalgic, and
playful.

The lyrics of the theme song of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, sung by Cindi Lauper in a "silly
voice" impersonating Betty Boop, are an example of the nonsensical language used within the
show:

Get outta bed, there'll be no more nappin'! (Wake up!)
'Cause you've landed in a place where anything can happen -
Now we've given you fair warnin'!
It's gonna be that kind of mornin' -
For bein' wacky!
For getting nutty!
Golly, it's cuckoo!
At Pee-wee's Playhouse!

Using words such as "wacky," "nutty," and "cuckoo" bring out the playful and childlike side of language. With the use of nonsense, the audience knows to expect that nothing will be normal; thus, is even the major theme of the introduction to the show.

Wayne White, one of the creators of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, mentions in the documentary *Beauty is Embarrassing* that he wants to continue to create "art as entertainment." In his disdain for societal pressure to always "say something important" with artistic work, he wishes to create something immersive and relatable to audiences. White views art as entertainment because for him, it was always a source of entertainment. He emphasizes his need to not take himself too seriously, incorporating humor in "art that pokes fun at itself." Talking about his childhood, he says he always had an engagement with bringing objects to life – picking up sticks and creating sculptures out of found objects: trash, cardboard, and things that are left behind. [17] His art was inspired by engaging with object play as a child; he uses found objects to create beautiful works of art. He conceived and built the puppets for *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and articulates his fondness for their use. When asked what he likes about puppets, Wayne responds: "I like that the fact that they come alive. They're animated – you can draw a character, build a character, and it lives outside of your imagination. It goes into the world." The use of puppets in the series bends the perception of reality in the playhouse even more – most of Pee-wee's friends are puppets, and most of these are inanimate objects. Pee-wee simply accepts these objects as members of the playhouse and plays with them every day – just like a child would play with toys in a toy box.

In *Beauty is Embarrassing,* Wayne White also gives insight into the improvisatory nature of the creation of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, admitting that most of the time the creators were just making it up as they went along. Even the character of Pee-wee was invented by Paul Reubens in an improvisation session when he worked with the L.A. based theater troupe, *The Groundlings*.[18] Reubens reveals this information in an interview at the 2011 SXSW film festival, while also adding that he really started to create Pee-wee's character when he was five years old. Basically, all of Pee-wee's character was invented all at once, Reubens accounts. It was one improvisation that sparked this character, and in that moment became timeless. Pee-wee's sporadic and chaotic nature is reminiscent of childhood, running around the playhouse "playing" or interacting with all of his toys, jumping from task to task. The improvisatory nature of play is something that I emphasized with *Pocket Music*. Much of this work is improvised, that of which I find a crucial part of play and necessary to emphasize when writing a work for young audiences, since children can be profound improvisers. Practicing improvisation can be beneficial for young creative minds, to never let imagination stop stirring.

Pocket Music

Improvisation, when used in a children's show, demonstrates the performance of play. It invites a range of possibilities for sound and interaction, while inspiring imagination. The imagination is one of the most powerful human capabilities, and within *Pocket Music* I desire to illuminate its potential. This work is targeted toward audience members of all ages, from children to "grown-ups," and all are invited to dream, play, laugh, and have fun. As outlined above, it is my goal to appeal to the playful, childlike side of the viewers, whether they are five or 85 years old. The show examines the contrast between reality and the imagination, order and chaos, solemnity and whimsy by creating a self-contained reality that can only exist in the world of *Pocket Music*. An exploration of the world of the imagination incorporating interaction, humor, surrealism, and at times downright absurdity, the show aims to make the audience cheer, laugh, and have a good time. Within the performance, the themes of improvisation and play come together in such a way that makes it just as much fun for the both the audience and the players.

Pocket Music was written by myself, a vocalist, composer Joseph Bourdeau, and pianist Mari Kawamura, although in working together we do not stick to our assigned roles of singer, composer, and pianist. Within the show, we are all singers, composers, and instrumentalists of various capacities, many of which involving non-instrumental objects. There are no assigned roles or tasks, each member contributes the same weight of duty to the performance. A wide range of sounds and actions is accepted; the act of refining a specific technique is thrown out the window. Through creating *Pocket Music*, we often worked in a way which was very relaxed, and more akin to musical socialization than a musical rehearsal. We created the musical score in a play-like manner through improvising, discussing our daily experiences, and just having fun

together. We used found objects, including pots and pans, glass bottles, whistles, and bells, as well as children's toys/instruments such as toy pianos, kazoos, slide whistles, ratchets, etc. Similar to the types of sounds found in the musical score of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* mentioned earlier, by using these sounds one is reminded of childhood and can create a sense of nostalgia and play for the audience and performer. All of these instruments are placed on the floor, picnic style, on a quilt. In the setup process for the show, most of the instruments are haphazardly dumped onto the quilt in no particular order, and no one player is assigned to any instrument. For most of the performance, the players are free to grab any instrument they wish, making decisions in a loosely structured, play like manner. We share the instruments often, meaning small instruments like whistles and kazoos are in near constant rotation around the blanket. These sounds and manners of playing are reminiscent of childhood play and aim to bring about a similar nostalgia within the audience and performers as programs like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse.*

The structure of the show, in fact, is fairly similar to that of *Pee-wee's Playhouse,* with the performance playing out in three episodic segments that can be molded and evolve with different iterations. Our performance style is generally casual and breaks the fourth wall often, with the performers engaging in conversation with the audience. This promotes a "children's television show" performance style by talking directly to the audience and brings them in to prepare to be a participant in the imagined reality that *Pocket Music* creates. By breaking away from a traditional performance style with a set of established concert rules for the audience and the performer, it brings the two groups closer, as if we are all playing together.

The first section of *Pocket* Music is a game-like portion similar to Simon Says, entitled "Little Miss Bossy Screen" in which a television screen gives commands to the players. The commands are playful and nostalgic; some examples include commands to the player to "tell a

story about a pet," or to "just play the harmonica – you might like it!" Others ask the players to scream intermittently or sing songs from their childhood. Each participant is improvising and can choose to interpret each command in their own way, executing a participatory nature of a children's game. Sound effects are played over speakers that represent each of the characters, and when hearing each cue, the player must change from the previous cue immediately. The fast rate of change requires the player to improvise quickly, at times leading to utter chaos. The segment focuses on bringing interaction and improvisation into the shared atmosphere of the performers and audience; ideally, it would become a game that the audience would participate in to increase their connection to the players. Similar to the approach in *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and other children's television programs, the type of audience participation presented allows for the viewers to be players from their seats, to be a part of the madness.

The second section is a series of short wildlife films that imitates a nature "mockumentary," animating the animals on the screen. One film, entitled "Ants in Your Pants," shows footage of an ant colony that I filmed at Anza Borrego State Park in San Diego, CA. In the performance, the film is projected on a screen while the players live-score the movie with the "picnic pile" of instruments while seated on the floor. Within this film, the ants follow each other around, seemingly very organized, following the leader in a straight line to their destination, fulfilling a perfect form and structure, completing an assigned task. With the addition of animated music, the ants seem to "come to life" or become more "human" and appear to take on certain humanistic personalities, as if they are recognizing their "flaws," "fears," and disorganization. When specific music is added to their activity, some groups of ants appear to be "arguing," while other ants become a "busy highway" where they run into each other, and some seem to be wandering aimlessly alone into the desert. The film also follows around one particular

ant carrying a fuzzy seed, seemingly trying to find its way back to the ant bed, but getting lost, trapped, and stuck in certain obstacles. The goal of our musical score is that throughout the film the viewer begins to feel something for the little ant, as if perhaps he is sad or lost. This highlights the idea of animism, that these animals have human characteristics and seem to experience existential crises such as loneliness, fear, or isolation. For example, a scene of the ants feasting on a crumb of bread is accompanied by a tribal percussive musical pattern as if they are engaging in a humanistic food ritual, while the solo ant trapped in a grass pile is accompanied by a high-pitched whistle iterating the same repeated note in a tense, chaotic manner, emphasizing the chaos and discomfort of being trapped or lost.

In the third segment, the players are unraveling the traditional notion of a "puppet show." Audience members are encouraged to "gather round" to listen to a story, which is told using spoken text, movement, and singing. The musicians tell the story through song, while the puppets enact the story. In the latest performance, we enacted the story of Lewis Carroll's poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter," incorporating the aforementioned "nonsense language" into the show as a way to shape a surreal environment. With the help of props artist Molly Gabbard, we created puppet masks for the Walrus and Carpenter that two dancers, Molly herself and Viktor De La Fuente, wear on their heads. Instead of using puppets in a traditional "puppet show" manner where they are contained behind a puppet box, Molly and Victor themselves are the puppets that come to life. They begin behind the puppet box and exit onto the stage, bringing the characters to life even and creating an immersive experience for the audience. With this segment, I wanted to design a puppet show that alters reality in the way that it breaks out of the traditional form. Humans dressed as the walrus and the carpenter make these characters seem more absurd,

and the types of full-body movement they perform makes the characters take on a larger-than-life persona.

The main goal of *Pocket* Music was to create a show that brings improvisation, interaction, and play into the performance, and with these tools create an imaginative world for the viewers. Performing *Pocket Music* brings out my childlike side and encourages me to forget about the traditional notions of performing; it feels as natural as play and inspires optimism, humor, and joy into the performance. I hope that through watching the audience feels the same way, that they engage with an imaginative side of themselves they haven't explored since they were a child. *Pocket Music* was modeled after a children's television show in the way that it is episodic, it relies on humor, it is playful, it is absurd, and sometimes things do not quite make sense. In the future of this work, I hope to incorporate more interactive elements so that the audience feels even more a part of an "imagined reality" created together in the space. The nature of *Pocket Music* opens up a space to many possibilities, which my collaborators and I plan to explore. Our future plans include creating varied versions of the show, including smaller, more child-centered performances. Each segment of the show may be a standalone performance in future iterations, with more interactive elements such as games, sing-a-longs, and toy drum circles. With the hope to open up a space to allow audiences to play along, whether child or adult, we want to bring everyone together to a place of remembering what it is like to be a kid, playing, improvising, and imagining.

Conclusion

We have examined three distinctive units in this essay – first, the concept of play, and the ways in which play can be imaginative and creative. The performance of play was defined as a performance practice in which elements of play are used to create theatrical performances and create a collaborate self-imagined reality of audience and performers within a theatrical space. An established example of what I find to be successful at obtaining these goals is the 1980's television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse.* We considered the ways in which the described self-created reality exists within this television program, and how the concepts of imaginative play and object play are incorporated through the various visual, musical, and theatrical elements of the show. Lastly, we dove into *Pocket Music*, and discussed how imaginative and object play were observed during the creation and performance of the work. Using *Pee-wee's Playhouse* as a case study of how the performance of play has been seen as successful, we compared it to *Pocket Music*. Imaginative and object play are woven throughout both of these performances to produce a unique world within. It is my goal to promote the use of play in not only the lives of children, but the life of the adult, and develop a performance practice that allows me and the audiences I reach to never stop being a "big kid."

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