

AN AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S PERFORMER 'EMILY WHO' **AT VISIONI FESTIVAL, BOLOGNA, 2024**

My name is Emily McKnight, and I am a Sydney-based Australian actor, voice-over artist and musician. I am also a children's performer, known professionally as Emily Who. In March 2024 I attended the Visioni Festival in Bologna, as part of the Artist Meets Early Years Program (AMEY).

Visioni is a week-long, international festival of performing arts for early childhood, curated by the children's theatre company La Baracca, at their theatre in Bologna – Teatro Testoni Ragazzi. It includes shows for children under six, by performers from all over the world, as well as workshops, conferences, meetings and seminars for educators and performers. AMEY is a program within the festival, that gives international children's performers the chance to perform in preschools in Italy, providing opportunities to experiment and research their work in front of children while in their familiar environment. I was the only Australian artist part of the festival.

After my original invitation to the festival in 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was wonderful to be given the opportunity to attend and perform four years later. During that time, I have worked in the children's performance industry as Emily Who, writing songs and developing my live show. I perform a mixture of original songs aimed at preschool-aged children, and work as an animateur – creating educational shows in collaboration with orchestras to connect young children to classical music. For AMEY, my research was to take a typical Emily Who show of original songs and experiment with how the songs would work with a non-English speaking audience, in order to further develop the show.

The program included two preschool performances and a presentation to adults. In preparation, I examined my regularly performed show 'A Day For Adventure', and reviewed my other songs, weighing up which might be more accessible across the language barrier. I looked for songs favouring clear actions that kids could copy, or songs I could use props to assist with the storytelling. I also decided to include my song 'Australian Animals', to provide insight about me and where I'm from, as well as introducing them to animals they may never have heard of. Each animal has a movement the kids could copy, and a corresponding puppet that I revealed as I sang. I also decided to bring along my flute and include a bit of music education and appreciation.

I was chauffeured and accompanied to the preschool on both days by a member of Lo Sguardo Altrove – a group of teachers, educators, and pedagogists of the Municipality of Bologna – whose name was Corrado. He was brilliant to talk to about education, early childhood, and performance practice. We compared performing outdoors and indoors, as well as the idea of a 'soft' start and end to a show – playing and engaging with the children on either side of the performance, as opposed to a clear performance opening and closing.

I committed to performing outside for both shows. The preschool had a suitable courtyard area, and I had brought along a small portable speaker to play the backing tracks. I set the props on a bench behind me. While the speaker was loud enough, I realised that having a

microphone, which I usually use for indoor shows, would have elevated both performances. This was part of the learning curve – interpreting the space for the performance, considering sound travel, audience interaction, and prop management.

The first show was scheduled for ten to fifteen children, aged between three and four. However, midway through the show, more children joined, doubling the audience. I immediately had to adjust in order to manage the larger group, who were full of enthusiasm. Despite creating a 'stage area' and an 'audience area' in the courtyard at the beginning, the space morphed into one that we all moved through together as the show went on. This put the puppets and props within full reach of the children, and meant Corrado had to hold the speaker up so it could still be heard. By the second show, I ensured better prop management by sectioning off an area that only I had access to, preventing enthusiastic audience members from picking up props mid-show.

One of the primary challenges I faced was investigating how to perform English songs for Italian-speaking children. Despite thorough preparation, the reality of the language barrier and the need for immediate adjustments in my performance style were initially quite significant hurdles. A key insight from my first show was the necessity to slow down my speech and use simpler language, avoiding full sentences where possible. This approach, combined with non-verbal cues, made it easier for the children and educators to follow along and engage with the performance. For instance, using expressions and pointing at my face while saying 'Happy Face, Sad Face, Grumpy Face' helped bridge the language gap. This adjustment allowed educators to translate more effectively when needed. It also meant that even as I sang in English, the slower intros allowed them to follow along more readily.

Despite my initial nerves and concern about the language barrier, the children were very engaged. They danced along, copying my movements and facial expressions. However, the beginning of the show – where I usually introduce myself and encourage the kids to call out their names – was lost in translation. To address this, I started the second show with a flute section, engaging them immediately without words. I played high notes and low notes, while moving my body up and down accordingly until they began to follow. I then did the same going fast and slow. This approach worked much better, capturing their attention right away. When I did begin to speak, they were already with me and ready to participate even more.

I also presented the music education part earlier in the second show: going from three-dimensional animal puppets to pictures of musical instruments on a piece of paper made the children much less engaged with the instruments, whereas showing pictures before the puppet songs created a better build-up. One of the highlights was the 'Dance Like a Dinosaur' song, where I initially involved Corrado with a dinosaur hat. He fully participated, which turned the song into a game of chase – the children delighting in an adult-sized dinosaur chasing them around. However, the song is intended to encourage the children to participate by stomping around pretending to be dinosaurs, so after this moment I hid the hat and sang it again to involve them. In the second show I made it simpler by not producing the hat, and getting the kids involved immediately. I think doing this together enhanced their participation and enjoyment. Staying for lunch after the first show allowed for extended interaction with the children, building a deeper connection. They showed me

their favourite rooms, toys, and things to do, imitated some of my words, and welcomed me to sit with them. I even had my hair done at an imaginary salon!

Reflecting on the performances, I realised the importance of accessible language, clear actions, and immediate engagement. The second audience was rowdier but still engaged, enjoying the songs and even calling for an encore. Slowing down and including more repetition made the second show fifteen minutes longer than the first.

It was an incredible experience performing for these children, and I loved every minute of it. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity, which has provided valuable insights and will undoubtedly help me grow as an artist by honing my ability to connect across language barriers and cultural differences. It was so useful to have multiple performance opportunities so I could improve within the week itself, and I remain inspired and full of ideas to incorporate into my show, purely based on the connections I made with these children in their schools.

The AMEY participants also had the opportunity to perform for other festival-goers and educators, in an evening show. This provided a platform to share our work and discuss the children's performance industry across different countries. Observing the variety of performances – from songs and movement to contemporary dance and performance art – highlighted the differences in approach and raised questions about appropriateness and audience engagement across cultures. My contribution to AMEY was quite different to the other performers – there were artists from Italy, Mexico and Brazil, and they were mostly exploring performance through dance and props.

Throughout the week, I also attended many other shows as part of the festival. Many performances I attended seemed, to me, to be too mature for a children's show by Australian standards, prompting me to reflect on the differences in children's theatre between Australia and the rest of the world. The prevalence of non-verbal, gestural, and stylised performances contrasted sharply with the more narrative-driven formats, often using familiar stories, that are regularly seen in Australia. This made me think about what makes something appropriate for kids, and who determines this.

The festival also highlighted the lack of funding, support, and accessibility for children's theatre in Australia. It became clear to how limited our children's theatre culture is, beyond adaptations of children's books (which certainly have their place, but seem to take up the majority of Australian children's theatre.) I believe there's a need for further respect for the craft, and acknowledgment of children's capacity to interpret and imagine. These reflections will inform my ongoing contributions to the children's performance industry in Australia.

Children's theatre and performance can effectively change the world. I think it plays a vital role in early childhood education, fostering imagination, creativity, and emotional intelligence. It is crucial to encourage children to think, use their imagination, and be entertained by something created and performed specifically for them. I will continue to reflect on the festival experience and dream up ways to enhance children's theatre in Australia based on what I have learned.