**[Thresholds: The essence of artistic opinion?](http://whenfallsthecoliseum.com/2011/08/16/thresholds-the-essence-of-artistic-opinion/" \o "Thresholds: The essence of artistic opinion?)**

Posted on August 16th, 2011 by Chris Matarazzo

My seven-year-old son, who has once been immortalized in this column for his masterful rendition of a the *Jaws*poster, informed me last Friday morning that he was planning a puppet show: “Mario Brothers.”

This meant I had work to do.

We went to the computer and printed pictures of the characters (no drawing this time; he wanted precision) and then we went out back to find sufficiently straight sticks to use to hold the cut-out characters. After an hour of box-cutting, stick-taping and theatrical logistics, the play was ready to begin. No script. This was to be improvisational puppet theater. Puppeteering without a net.

The crowd of four gathered: my older son (9), his neighborhood friend (8?), Krimpet, our dog (4), and me (back off). Shades  were drawn. My older son announced the beginning of the show: “Ladies — well, lady *dog*— and gentlemen!  ‘Mario and Luigi,’ scene one.”  My younger son giggled behind the tablecloth and jutted his hands up into the box frame. Princess Peach and Luigi, two-dimensional but thespian in every way, appeared.

PEACH: “Oh, Luigi! Bowser has stolen my crown. What shall I do?”

LUIGI: “Oh, nooo. That’s-a-terrible. What are we-a-going to do-a?” (For the record, the kid does a pretty good Italian accent.)

BOWSER: “I have it at my castle! Mwaaaahahahaaaahh. Stupid-heads!”

(Big laughs from the *whole*crowd here. Even a “hhrrrumpph” from Krimpet.)

LUIGI: “Who’s–a-the stupid head, eh? You just-a told us where it is. That’s-a-so-naize!”

BOWSER: “DOH!” [slaps head and leaps to a suicidal death out of the cardboard proscenium]

An uproar of laughter from all.

Well, this went on. And on. I laughed hard in the beginning. The kid is funny. But after scene six, my laughter became a little more forced. The two boys watching were still belly-chuckling, but I had had enough of the silliness, however cute and clever it was for a little guy. By scene twelve (it went for twenty) the neighborhood kid was playing with Legos, though older brother was still sitting bolt-upright and laughing. By scene eighteen, we were all clapping politely and forcing smiles.

Sensing the loss of his audience, my boy wrapped it up with a rousing bow from the puppets and we all applauded enthusiastically.

“Tha-wiz-grrt,” the neighborhood kid said. (He had decided to see how many Legos he could fit into his mouth. From the looks of it, he had been trying since scene thirteen. I frowned. He spit them on the rug, sheepishly.)

Watching this little puppet play, it occurred to me that all artistic appreciation and criticism comes down to personal thresholds. This is one of those ideas that makes me fear I am flirting with the obvious or with something that has already been said a hundred times. But this idea makes sharing artistic opinions a bit complicated, if not ineffective. It is really the measure of what “taste” is. Can there be “good taste” when we all have different thresholds for elements of art?

In the case above, there was a silliness threshold. The kids lasted longer than I did and then each one of them fell off according to his own threshold.

This is so for all of us. We each have a line that determines how much sentimentality we can take on art; how much ugliness; how much violence; how much cuteness; how much formality; how much “camp”; how much sex; how much noise; how much volume; how much sophistication; how much simplicity; how much obvious craft, etc.

We each, in essence, have an “artistic tolerance room” in the hotel (Things do check in and out, don’t they?) that is our brain and that room can only hold so much of element “X”. Obviously, this makes things difficult when it comes to sharing our opinions. If I tell you: “Meh. That movie is too schmaltzy. Over the top,” you might watch and think it is beautiful and rich. Clearly neither of us is right; it is just that my shcmaltz threshold was crossed and yours was not.

Anyway, it seemed interesting. I know the idea of differing opinions isn’t so new (“There’s no accounting for taste”) but it’s cool, for me, to think of “taste” as a result of thresholds within individuals. It just takes the idea closer to the essence.

*Chris Matarazzo’s*ARTISTIC UNKNOWNS *appears every Tuesday.*