Some Myths in Canadian Theatre for Young Audiences

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In the short life-span of Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada (less than 25 years) several myths have evolved. Although these myths are much like "old wives' tales", people accept them and make choices based on them. They reflect cultural attitudes held by many professional and lay members of the theatre community.

Myth One: Children are the most difficult audience to please.

Every theatre company has proof of its ability to please its audience. Collections of drawings, photographs, and letters fill many file drawers across Canada. Observers watching child audiences take delight in pointing to the intense absorption of children watching a play. Measuring pleasure and satisfaction is more complicated. One could interview members of the same audience after a show and gather reactions which would form a continuum of opinion from 'terrible" at one end to "terrific" at the other.

How does one determine pleasurable or positive response to a production? Canadian audiences (both young and adult) are generally inarticulate, cautious, and not clear about their own reactions to a play. Contrary to the myth is the fact that many young people go to the theatre without any expectations or demands. In fact, children usually have fewer expectations to be met than adults. This is not because children are less able but because, first, they may not have focused on such an issue and, second, they are usually more open and tolerant about art forms. Likes and dislikes are often based on habit (if they have been lucky to see other plays). Values, appreciation, and honest response to the theatre are learned just as the widespread complacency, blind acceptance, and lack of articulate response is imitated by the young.

Analysing child audience response presents other challenges. The younger the child the less able he is to verbalize feelings, opinions and preferences. Analyzing pleasure, absorption, and comprehension can easily become a subjective process rather than an objective description. Ruth Frost[1] has some enlightening comments on young people and the theatre. She suggests that direct communication with children is perhaps the most useful way of researching response. She cautions, however, that the interviewer must know certain principles about young people and communication in order for the interview

[1]Ruth Frost, "Notes on the Young Traveller", *Canadian Theatre Review* (Spring, 1976), p. 25.

to be fruitful.

Let there be no pretense that children are the most difficult audience. Children can be held and entertained by slight productions, while in some cases a supposedly excellent show does not hold a young audience.

Myth Two: One can tell immediately if children don't like a play.

This focuses on the nature of audience response and an observer's judgement of that response. Some observers will judge an audience's reaction according to subjective definitions of attention and absorption. The definitions could very well cause erroneous readings of certain children or groups. Other observers will use primitive methods of evaluation such as gauging the amount of squirming, talking and fidgetting.

Professionals on communication with young people suggest that if one wants to know likes and dislikes one should ask the child directly. (This holds true for adults as well.)

> Possibly some forced choices may be necessary, as self-examination in children is not a natural activity. Comments or observations of actions are natural and interpretations are made and available if the interviewer sets the tone and talks about specifics and not abstractions. Asking children to tell the story is also informative.[2]

In order to get a true analysis of a whole audience, this interviewing process could serve well. The expertise of the interviewer is critical. Reading children goes beyond listening to words since children lack verbal agility.

> Conversing with children is a unique art with rules and meanings of its own. Children are rarely naive in their communications. Their messages are often in code that requires deciphering.[3]

The art of deciphering is the key challenge to comprehending audience response. The reducation of this challenge to simple generalized judgements about "how much squirming was seen" is an oversimplification. This is one challenge scholars may accept in order to refine the process of child audience evaluation.

Myth Three: A play for children should not be too frightening.

A child deserves no less from theatrical art than any member of society. The issue of "frightening plays" versus "joyful plays" centers around one's

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[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Haim G. Ginott, *Between Parent and Child* (Avon Books, 1969), p. 21.

belief in the content of art and the purpose of art. The theatrical art form should ideally confront all aspects of the human condition: the farcical, the comic, and the tragic. Life is not totally idyllic for most people—and this includes children. Many conflicting forces confront children. John Holt challenges the myth that "childhood is a time and an experience very different from the rest of life and that it is, or ought to be, the best part of our lives," saying "it is not, and no one knows it better than children. *Children want to grow up.*"[4] Plays for children should, therefore, provide the opportunity to treat life seriously and not make the content into slight, bland entertainment.

It is well known that fairy tales and legends have, for centuries, given children and adults the opportunity to live out feelings and struggles in the safety of fantasy. One sees the presentation of agression, physical injury, threats to life, and the resolution of these conflicts. Through confronting these fantasies, man masters the universal internal struggles of the human condition.

Offering material that evokes fears and strong feelings is dealt with in a unique way in the theatrical art form. (This discussion excludes the special problem of children who cannot cope with such stimulation. These disturbed children need professional help in learning how to deal with fantasy and should be carefully handled if they encounter too much excitment.) Theatre for young audiences should value this uniqueness and use it to advantage.

> Theatre deals with live people and a limited conflict, and anxieties and frights can always be settled in the normal critical appraisal after a performance. Thus reality seems almost as much a part of the theatre as of all other experiences in real life. Unfortunately, television and radio can only partly counterbalance the frights they produce.[5]

This places a responsibility on adults who accompany children to the theatre (teachers, parents) or on the company which performs for the children. Some perceptive follow-up should occur after very moving plays. There should be adequate communication to assist coming to terms with struggles and translating experiences into insight and understanding. In this way the child can master the experience. The special medium of the theatre can offer a fruitful learning ground for the handling of fears, anxieties and conflicts.

Myth Four: Plays should have happy endings.

Is it more desirable for theatre to present the human condition as it *is* or

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[4]John Holt, *Escape From Childhood* (Ballantine Books, 1975), p. 106.

[5]Herbert Kupper, "Fantasy and the Theatre Arts", *Education Theatre Journal* (March, 1952), p. 36.

as it *should be?* It is certainly happier and tidier to present the ideal for man: that conflicts end in blissful resolution. Such a sentimental attitude to certain problems is unrealistic. Why not be more honest in treating dramatic conflict for any age group? The attitude of presenting the ideal to children is rooted in the false notion that children are naive and their innocence must be protected. At least some plays in a child's experience should challenge the audience to come to terms with serious issues, realistically.

Myth Five: Plays should be easily understood.

> The notion that characters in a children's play must be elementary is totally erroneous. The notion that in a children's play the writer can use only a completely pragmatic, readily recognizable theme is dubious.[6]

There is no justifiable reason that plays for children should be in any way slight, dull, didactic, flowery or insipid. Theatrical art should expand the consciousness, fill in the gulfs that exist between people, for any age group. One expects theatre to be more than a slight entertainment or simply a story line unfolded; let it acknowledge people's (including children's) capacity for delight, joy, and sorrow at the heights and depths of the human spirit.

> We use the senses to arouse passion but not to fulfill the interest of insight, not because that interest is not potentially present in the exercise of sense but because we yield to conditions of living that force sense to remain an excitation on the surface.[7]

If the purpose of art is to offer a spark, to inspire an insight and to elicit a creative response, not all Canadian scripts achieve this end. The challenge to face a human crisis and to inspire imaginative insights does not come from plays which offer neat and tidy role models in predictable story lines with nothing to move the human spirit.

> Sometimes a performance that is so complete at the moment that it ties up all the loose ends and thus joins closure, may have a less lasting effect than a less perfect performance which leaves problems or relations unsolved in the minds of the audience and thus sets off a continuing creative process.[8]

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[6]Eugene Shwartz, "The Most Demanding Audience", *Theatre for Children, Adolescents, and Youth,* trans. Miriam Morton (Iskvsstvo Press, 1972).

[7]John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Minton, Balch and Co., 1934), p. 21.

[8]John Anderson, "Psychological Aspects of Child Audiences", *Educational Theatre Journal* (December, 1950), p. 287.

Mermaid Theatre of Wolfville, Nova Scotia, is one company writing its own materials and believing in a certain depth in themes and attitudes. *The Invisible Hunter* is one such play that has a firm plot line as its basis but also contains sub-plots and themes which deal with the universal issues of good, evil and the laws of nature.

Similarly, vocabulary, theme, and conflict need not be simplified to suit the lowest common denominator in an audience. One prefers that the play challenge the most mature audience member while offering "something for everyone". Sheila Egoff affirms the point on vocabulary: "children's spoken and listening vocabulary is far superior to their reading one."[9] Let theatre challenge them.

Myth Six: There is a correct genre of theatre for young audiences.

Canadian scripts can be found which could fall into various categories: myth, fantasy, history, farce and realism. Various plays are participational, i.e. require vocal and/or physical involvement in the show. To argue the "correctness" of any one genre is to focus falsely on the problem of scripts for children. There are too few quality scripts in any genre. The few good scripts which exist are soon exhausted by companies, and the search for more is frustrating. Canada needs to encourage more quality playwrights for young audiences just to satisfy the present appetite from season to season. One should support the local, quality playwright no matter what genre he chooses. Some Canadians who have proven themselves are Henry Beissel, Carol Bolt, Paddy Campbell, Rex Deverell, Eric Nicol and Jan Truss. But there are just as many other playwrights producing scripts which are fatuous, empty and unworthy of the time and attention paid by theatres and audiences.

Some companies have in the past allied themselves strongly to certain genres. This commitment to only one genre would seem to limit a company's growth and, worse, to limit the audience's experience. Some Canadian children think that the theatre is four people with limited technical facilities in the middle of the gym inviting the audience to participate in the story. One hopes that, ideally, children will be offered a variety of genres and styles, just as one hopes that they will be offered a variety of books or films. It is the variety and quality of theatre over several years which can make a genuine impact.

The more general question which can be raised queries the specialization of a theatre uniquely designed for the young. One alternative which could be considered is that of quality family shows. These scripts would be written to challenge both children and parents. By devoting special funds, companies, and

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[9]Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 247.

writers solely to children, Canada may be developing a business which isolates children as "different". If by "different" is meant the misconceptions of "less serious", "less intelligent", and "less realistic" than adults, the specialization is an insult. This ultimately is a disservice to children, theatre and society. There should be the same demands made on a script for children as there are on those for adults. Perhaps in Canada we have made too much of the differences in developmental stages in children, thus writing plays for some ideal, clinically-defined child while shortchanging many in the audience who could appreciate a more complex art form. A variety of theatre experiences which, in the long run, would balance out a high-quality, healthy art diet is desirable.

Myth Seven: We are preparing the audience of tomorrow.

To use the above as a priority purpose of children's theatre is to distort the purpose of art. The inherent suggestion that children are learning to go to the theatre (as a training ground for the adult audiences that regional theatres crave) is to degrade the whole field. These attitudes should not enter the philosophy of a company unless the business angle of theatre is allowed to set the tone for its goals. Children should be taught to meet life head on, NOW. A child, like any other person, should be encountered as a dignified individual and not viewed as a potential future subscriber.

In brief, we need to re-discover the meaning of childhood and to meet the child in ourselves. Unless we do this we will perpetuate the belittling disrespect for children and their experiences that present theatre myths embody.

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