Towards a Significant Children's Theatre

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Over six years (and nine plays) ago, I first considered this question. This winter, actors are battling the blizzards of Saskatchewan with yet another attempt at an answer. How do we achieve a significant theatre for younger audiences?

Children's Theatre in Canada is in a kind of hiatus. What we are waiting for is not clear, but the word "significance" seems to ring bells. Last Spring I gave the above title as a seminar topic at a Children's Theatre conference in Edmonton, expecting only a handful of delegates with an esoteric interest in Meta-children's Theatre. When I arrived the classroom was filled with a hungry mob of directors, writers, teachers and funding council personnel. There would appear to be some relevance to the topic.

Canadian theatres have been asking important questions about children's drama. How does one keep a child's attention? What characters do children enjoy? What elements keep a plot moving for a younger audience? How can stories be dramatized for young audiences? How can the values of creative drama activities be combined with the theatre? One can see that these questions are questions about theatrical style. They are significant questions, but they are not questions about significance.

Once asked, the theatres have been ingenious in the rich variety of answers they have produced. The vitality and originality of companies performing for young audiences has parallelled, even surpassed, the astounding burst of original Canadian theatre for adult audiences in the last ten years. In the former, directors have been less constrained by financial risk. They have experimented liberally, they have taken theatre into the far reaches of the country, they have presented plays in school gymnasia and in the finest equipped houses. They have given us elaborate and expensive productions, and they have given us rough and lively productions on shoestring budgets.

I, for one, have to be grateful. A playwright must be as concerned about the health of the theatre as other writers are about the health of the publishing industry. Too, I'm a sucker for theatre and theatricality. I need a highly original, creative, expert children's theatre to write for. We have that now.

But where do we go from here?

If the medium is the message, what finally appears to the young audience is a medium/message unit. How do we who create that unit work towards "significance?" Which of the many labourers is most responsible? Of course most of

the production team try to create an honest, thorough, vivid, entertaining, immediate, stage-worthy presentation. But ultimately the playwright (be he an individual writer or a director/actor collective) will be called to task if the play is not worthwhile.

So I offer, humbly, a few criteria. I offer them to directors and dramaturges as aids in play selection. I offer them to audiences, because you are only going to get what you demand. But most of all I offer them to fellow playwrights.

I. Truth

We have to start with the question, "Is the play true?" If we don't start with that question, we have no place to begin at all.

Of course, truth is not the opposite of fiction. (This is old ground, although one still comes across people who will not read novels because they are all "lies!") Nor is truth identical with facts. Facts shrewdly arranged and selected can be untrue or can create an untrue impression.

I am calling here for a quality of truth in our children's theatre which would automatically preclude productions of much of the nonsense which passes for theatre these days. When adults try to write a children's play they often go a little insane. They remember a never-never land that never was. We have hundreds of scripts that can never achieve significance because they are a dense melange of silliness with neither the ring of truth nor a shred of reality.

For crying out loud! Even if we think about ourselves as children, were we not human beings with human perceptions? We weren't elves! And we knew enough about truth to recognize it when it came our way.

I remember the first children's play I wrote and I blush. It was called *Soup.* It concerned the adventures of Nittlepickle, the kitchen boy, and his search for Tickyplum Soup. Mercifully it has never been produced, although I was disappointed at the time. I thought there were some cute songs in it.

We can define truth, then, by the quality of reality in a play. Are there enough elements which the audience can relate to reality–items, characters, actions, setting, emotions, conflicts–that are recognizable to the young audience? Remember, we are not talking about a blinding vision of ultimate truth–just a right direction, a right facing.

Before going any further, let's get another thing straight. Writing for a young audience is not a limiting occupation. C.S. Lewis opined that children's literature was the best sort of literature in which to deal with serious subject matter, and I've found this born out in writing for the theatre. Adults are often interested in treatments which emphasize sophistication and complexity. Children require honest getting down to basic questions.

Children also require inventive ingenuity that breeds fresh solutions in the minds of author and audience alike. These requirements are not limitations. Nor need we simplify our perceptions to the point of triviality. If we find the problem we are dealing with in a play complex, we admit it in the play–simply and honestly. "Oh, my gosh, this is a hard problem!"

The old rule that tells authors to write about things they know is essential for the children's playwright as well. He (or she) has no special licence to disregard it.

Does this quest for truth mean we should abandon the creating of fantasies for children? Of course not. Fantasy is truly a part of our human makeup. But perhaps we can deal with fantasy in a more realistic way. I saw the Peter Pan children's classic again and was struck once more with the poignant way it explores the pathos of the battle between reality and fantasy in our lives.

To summarize: the first step towards significant theatre for children must be committment to truth. Without it we may achieve a bright bouncy entertainment made entirely of silly putty.

II. Importance

A play may be true, but by virtue of being true it may not necessarily be important. It may be about something real and still be totally unimportant. In playwrights' workshops I have heard people respond to criticism of their scripts with "But it's all true. They really talked that way!" Alas, nobody cared. The scripts were perfectly believable, full of familiar-sounding dialogue, but they contained nothing of importance to the audience nor, one suspected, to the author.

Children's playwrights are often guilty of addressing the question to the wrong party. They ask themselves what is important to children. It would be better if they asked children what is important to children. It would be better still if they asked themselves what is important to themselves. It would be best of all if they could join forces with the children to create a play of importance to both parties.

It's about time we got our priorities straight. Plays have to be about something. Why not something that matters? Again, we are not trying for a play of cosmic importance and of eternal endurance. It's easy to get lost out there. We are only trying to work with what is immediately relevant. Something good will come out of it if we have faith.

A few categories that people find important might be helpful at this point:

A. *Home.* I mean by this anything that represents security, from warm rooms, warm colours, warm textures to the various intellectual

categories and classifications that enable us to feel at home with things we do not understand.

B. *Being loved.* This is more risky than *Home.*

C. *A sense of self worth.* In dramatic terms, we want to know that our actions have an effect. *Loving* is more dramatic than *being loved.* So is *hating.* Sometimes we do very destructive things in order to convince ourselves we do not act in a vacuum. A sense of identity is connected with this. So is a sense of having a *home* and *being loved.*

D. *Flight.* We want to fly. Flight is something like freedom–but less of a cliché. Hélène Baillargeon-Cotes (CBC's Chez Helene) once used the phrase "roots and wings" in reference to goals for children. We need to feel so secure that we can fly with our imaginations and our deeds.

E. *Values.* We need to know how the world around us actually operates and how to judge the things we find there. We need to know how to act in our society and how to judge our own actions. If we have no value scales we become confused and frightened and manipulated. The ways we resolve this dilemma are not always satisfactory, we discover. (A good play can help us to see more clearly at any stage of our development).

To summarize: the true things in our work ought to be important true things that connect author and audience at the deepest level of common concern.

III. Interest

We have proceeded from a very subjective criterion, truth, through a somewhat less subjective criterion, importance. We are now dealing with the most objective of all: whether our play is able to hold an audience's interest. (One can see the way my mind works when I evaluate subjectivity in this way.)

We may say true things and they may be important, but if the way we say them is as dull as ditch water we probably don't have a play. (I deliberately list this criterion third. If we put it earlier in our quest for significance we are in moral trouble. If we delay it any further, we are in theatrical trouble. However there are a lot of plays that are uninteresting precisely because they are untruthful and unimportant.)

The agonies of the quest for significance must be balanced by the pure joy of the human dance, and the whole craft of the playwright must be brought to bear. If the playwright is not a skilful game player–master of suspense, humour, conflict, the well-chosen epithet, the sudden surprise, the textured character–then, no matter how worthy the content, the work will simply not

be worthy for the stage. The theatre is a high calling.

Technique is related to significance not merely as a means to an end. It commands respect in an audience because it indicates respect in the craftsman. Eventually it transcends itself and points to a world of meaning beyond craft and beyond craftsman.

Part of our technique must be a proper distancing of ourselves from the subject matter. Our perspective must be personal, original and warmly human. Yet there is no craft that can impose such a perspective on one's playscript. It has to be achieved in the living of one's life.

Children respond quickly and energetically to various tricks of the trade, and it is sometimes possible to get away with a pastiche of tried and true third-rate theatrics. But it is wrong to try.

To summarize: a play must be vividly interesting if it is to be a play at all. One should not start off with this concern, but one must eventually have it. Technique is worthy in and of itself.

IV. Effect

Does the play *do* anything? Immediately, I hear an outcry from some quarters—"art doesn't have to do anything, it just *is*!" Yet even such purists will admit that art by nature does a number of things such as raise the viewer's consciousness, stretch his perspective, release the artist's creative impulse, and, at least, add to the texture and sum of human experience. These effects are significant.

I would also want to ask whether our work exercises an effect on society. The spiral of objective/subjective criteria has now moved back towards the the subjective. Effect is hard to measure, and the author may have to rest content with the subjective notion that at least he has tried. I wrote a play about prejudice last season. My intention was, without apology, to declare my 5 - 8 year-old audience and to myself that prejudice is stupid. I will never know whether I significantly influenced anybody's attitude, but I have my hopes.

If our plays do anything, we must also ask how worthy is that effect. There are two dangers here. We must have seen enough of the old, manipulative, message plays for children to know what we do *not* want. The lessons of such plays boiled down to the idea that one's elders always knew best. There was a certain nasty tone, a punitive quality, about the plays, and the lessons were quickly dismissed as a result. Nevertheless, reaction against the Sunday School type of drama (and we still find it, secularized and thundering various sorts of liberal messages) must not prevent us from exploring with our young audiences the questions of personal and social values. Nor should such reaction prevent us from seeking a noticeable impact for our work.

V. Significance

Our search, like a spiral, takes another turn inwards yet further out. Soon we shall lose sight of it altogether. I have suggested that we are moving towards significance when we are concerned with truth, meaning, effect, change, attitudes and interest. Yet significance at its root is a sign that points down a road towards something more than the sign itself. So now we must ask, "Do our plays point beyond themselves?"

This is a less charted route for the playwright. The modes of travel are metaphors, models and symbols, a feeling for the tragic and the comic elements of existence, the myths and archetypes of the human soul, and the courage to approach the ineffable wonders of the universe.

A final note to teachers, librarians and theatrical producers: If we are to have a significant body of children's plays in Canada, the playwright who writes for young audiences must become less anonymous. Children *may* be excused for not knowing about writers—but teachers themselves often ask actors if the play they have just performed was made up by the troupe. Writers working in this area have a beautiful task, but if we want to become known as playwrights we are forced to write for adults. This doesn't hurt us as writers for children—it is good exercise and we may want to do it anyway. Nevertheless, it is an indication that the public does not regard children's theatre as a first rank art.

Much of what I have said is, of course, applicable to any kind of writing for children. Readers of this journal may have found much of it familiar. Some of what I have said is also applicable to writing for grown ups. This is as it should be. We are all in this together.

I have described here my personal criteria. I wish to have my own work judged against them.

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