The Participation Play for Children — A New Genre

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The adult who attends a play has learned to project emotions and attitudes. Satisfaction is gained from an involvement which is primarily imaginative, and the physical response is in symbolic or isolated impulses. The adult will applaud, laugh, cry, sigh, wriggle, groan, sweat, clutch arms—but seldom consistently or intensely. A total physical response, a measure of belief or empathy which demands an overt and sustained physical and vocal involvement, is rare. Adult audiences seldom lose their awareness of the separateness of theatrical action and audience, or of play space and life space—and, generally speaking, it is well they do not. On the contrary, most attempts at audience participation for adults have foundered against the rock-hard unwillingness of audiences to ignore this aesthetic distance. Even when an audience or part thereof is willing to participate, the result is usually self-conscious, extrovert or imitative. Or what is worse, as many an idealistic actor has found to his dismay, adult participation can be unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The child, however, responds wholly to experience. Once his own play begins he is able to forget the separation between life and play—or at least to behave more fully and naturally as if his pretend world is true. Similarly, once a play performance begins the child is able, if allowed, to forget the separation between actor and audience.[1] This quality of total involvement or wholeness of experience makes the participation play a natural form for children. In a sense it is not audience participation theatre because the child does not become audience, he is a participant in the play (and "play" in all its senses is the operative word.)

The true impluse for the participation play as a genre lies in the new movements in drama in education. As early as 1900 John Dewey had expressed a new view of education which was to have a profound effect on drama for children: "the primary root of all educative activity is in the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child, and not in the presentation and application of external material, whether through the ideas of others or through the senses."[2] In pursuit of this principle were the child-centered dramatic activities

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[1]Indications of this unawareness of aesthetic distance are provided in children's art work following performances in school gyms. Again and again one finds elements merely mimed or suggested in the play drawn in full detail in the art work while at the same time the gym clock will be drawn in, often showing the actual time of the performance.

[2]John Dewey, "Educational Principles," *The Elementary School* (1900).

of workers in child-drama such as Winifred Ward[3] in American and Peter Slade[4] in England. Harnessing the power of child play, creative drama (to use the most common term) emphasized the spontaneous and imaginative dramatic creations of children working with adult leaders. It offered opportunities to direct play into areas of experience where children might not venture without guidance. It is but a step in degree from the notion of bringing the play or drama out of the child to the notion of bringing the child into the play.

Donald Baker[5] has drawn attention to a continuum from drama (doing by children) at one extreme, to theatre (presentations for children) at the other. At the drama end the focus and concern are entirely the *experience* of the child, while at the theatre end the focus in on a *communication* between actor and child audience with the two functions essentially separate. In between, at various points on the continuum, are experiences in which the children are participants with greater or lesser influence on the final form of the dramatic event. Closer to drama is the creative work of the child developed to a performance point where it is shaped and formed for communication to an audience. Closer to drama too are the forms practised successfully by many of the theatre-in-education (TIE) teams in Britain, wherein a small group of actors play roles in a given situation which is developed with the children to an end often determined by the children.[6]

Participation plays lie closer to the theatre end of the continuum, since they are structured plays with clearly delineated characters and situations whose developments and outcomes are given in the play. However, the plays demand or offer, as an essential part of the form, participation by the children present on the occasion. Such participation is necessary for the full effect of the play but generally does not significantly alter the course of its unfolding, although there are examples where decision making by the children may lead to alternative developments.

Some exponents of creative drama have been suspicious of the theatre experience for children. Peter Slade himself was dubious of the value of adults performing for children although he conceded that there might be value in small groups performing in small rooms and utilising audience participation. He tried some experiments himself in this direction and his best known disciple, Brian Way, expanded his basic interest in drama in education with the formation of a

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[3]Winifred Ward, *Creative Dramatics* (New York: Appleton, 1930).

[4]Peter Slade, *Child Drama* (London: U.L.P., 1954).

[5]Donald Baker, "Defining Drama: From Child's Play to Production," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 15, No. 1 (May, 1973).

[6]On occasions the children are even unaware that the whole experience is play, although this situation is fraught with danger.

professional touring company performing for children in schools. Way himself wrote the first participation plays for this company which still continues to operate from London as the Theatre Centre. Way plays such as *The Mirror Man, On Trial, The Bell,* and *The Hat*[7] have been part of the repertoire of many participation companies and have provided the model for many others.

The conventions appropriate to the participation play–an informal space; reliance on imagination rather than elaborate properties, set and costumes; minimum or no lighting and sound effects; length generally under an hour; the necessity of limited audience size–have all suited the kind of small touring company which has developed as the main organ of theatre for children in countries without massive state aid for such theatre. So where the spectacular productions of Theatre for Young Spectators are the model in the USSR, in Canada the five-actor, simple set, touring van, school gymnasium presentation is the norm. Here, however, is a fortunate melding of economics and philosophy since participation plays demand this kind of production. So across the country most of the work of the better known Children's Theatre companies fits this model–Young People's Theatre, Toronto; Globe Theatre, Regina; Citadel-on-Wheels, Edmonton; Alberta Theatre Projects, Calgary; Hexagon and L'Hexagone, Ottawa; Carousel Players, St. Catharines; Studio Lab, Toronto; Playhouse-Theatre-in-Education, Vancouver; Youtheatre, Montreal; Theatre des Pissenlits, Montreal. Most have adopted the Participation play as their stock-in-trade, although many have modified their commitment or extended their horizons. Playwrights have been developed, performed and published in this form, and writers performed and published in other spheres have turned their hands to the participation play. These playwrights often work closely with particular companies in the development of scripts: Rex Deverell with Globe Theatre, Carol Bolt with Young People's Theatre, David MacKenzie with Carousel Players.

The simplest kind of participation found in the participation play is based on a principle common to all effective theatre for children. This is the rhythm of rest and activity, corresponding to the attention span of the child and the need for a periodic release of energy pent up by the unavoidable restrictions of the theatrical form. Even a hoary old form like the English pantomime allows for this release with its encouragement of hisses and cheers, its "which way did he go?" cries for assistance, and its sing-a-long choruses. Here the child is to a greater or lesser extent involved in the action of the play, but is involved as himself, as spectator. Because he is uninhibited and because he is more "whole" than an adult, what he feels must be released physically and vocally. So in any kind of theatre the child audience is at times a noisy one. To dampen this response by external means–"shush"–is to run the danger of inhibiting and destroying the response to the play. This kind of participation will be found in the participation play too without any special encouragement, but it may have a special quality or value because of its association with other levels of participation.

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[7]Scripts available in North America from The Teachers' Book Shop, Cambridge, Mass. 02140.

Many participation plays call for a preliminary meeting between actors and children before the play proper actually begins. In this "preamble" the child may be warmed up to the play (not told the story or explained the theme), or given some practice in some aspects of his role-playing. He may even be given the opportunity to choose his role or at least some details of it. In the beginning of Len Peterson's *Almighty Voice,*[8] for example, the children follow the actors in practising some behaviour of Mounties, settlers and Indians in nineteenth-century Saskatchewan. Later they will be divided into these three groups and will perceive and share the play in one of these roles.

The most important function of a preamble is to establish a strong rapport between actors and children. In the form favoured by some companies, there may be a special rapport between particular actors and a particular group of children. In Carousel Players' *Norse Saga,*[9] each actor meets with a group who become thralls to his thane. The play occurs as a gathering of the "hordes": Eric's horde, Leif's horde, Thorhill's horde, and so on. In other examples, the groups may be tribes, families, ship's companies, cities, animal species, even armies. In the course of the play the groups so formed will take their cues from their actor leaders. Encouraged by this relationship and this rapport, however established, an element in the child's participation will be that of helping the play and the actor. Because of the simple conventions of participation theatre there are ample opportunities for the child to help by providing sound effects, being properties and scenery, and playing roles in addition to those taken by the actors.

Now at this level the purist may feel that the child is being manipulated into participation or that there is no real creativity in it. There are several answers to this objection. One is that a beginning by helping may develop with the reserved group or child into a deeper level of role-playing; it may lead to the release and involvement necessary for a higher level of role understanding or role belief. The child who "boards ship" in order to help the scene being presented may find himself caught up in the bustle and organization and may be carried by the discipline of the crewmanship and the rhythms of the activity and its accompanying chant into a feeling for the spirit of the adventure and an empathy with the life of the people involved. Such was apparently the experience of many children in the ship scenes of *Norse Saga.* Or in a similar ship boarding scene in *Canadian All*[10] by Stephen Heatley, children may experience by analogy the crowding, the confusion and the disorientation of the new immigrant.

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[8]Len Peterson, *Almighty Voice* (Toronto: Book Society of Canada Ltd., 1974).

[9]Jacqueline Holt & Company, *Norse Saga* (St. Catharines: Carousel Players, 1973).

[10]Stephen Heatley, *Canadians All* (St. Catharines: Carousel Players, 1974).

A second answer to the charges of manipulation and tokenism is that there is value in such participation even if the involvement goes no deeper than a passing agreement to join in. It is a generous and satisfying feeling for the child to know he has contributed to the play, that he was necessary for a property, a sound, an action or a decision. He will at least feel he is part of the ceremony or ritual which is the true basis of these plays. Of course such help should be essential to the full enactment of the play. Again, participation at this level may not be creative in the sense of a playwright's creativity, but it is certainly akin to the interpretive creativity of the actor. The child playing the role of a mountie or a raccoon or even a tree will present his own idea of a mountie, raccoon or tree and will sometimes surprise the experienced actor with a line, a movement or an action which contains an unexpected truth or a charming freshness. If the child is co-operating willingly he will attempt to be convincing and may in the process learn something about himself, about himself in a group, and perhaps even about the life he is imitating. He may also teach something to the actors or teacher-observers.

It is a difference of degree rather than kind, but there will be times when the child all but becomes the role he is playing, where his role-belief goes deep enough for him to gain a sense of experiencing the life of his role. As with the actor, and as with the child in normal play, the belief is not total--there is always that monitor ready to remind the person that he is role-playing and to enable a return from the role quickly and easily. This deeper level of participation is commonest in the very young and seems to all but disappear by adolescence--although it may be that it is merely more difficult to evoke at the later ages. Evidence of this level of involvement is observable in the quality of concentration and concentrated behaviour which goes beyond the suggestions of the play or the actor-leader; it is witnessed in the discussions afterwards and in the comments made during the play to the leaders; it is felt strongly by the actors working with the children; and it is implied in drawings made after a performance where details only pretended in the performance are filled out in realistic detail by the child artist. One remarkable and charming example of this level of belief in the action of the play occurred frequently in a Carousel production, *Totem-Go-Round.*[11] The actor playing "man" also played "dog" with no costume change except a head-piece which left his face completely exposed. When he returned again as man, his tribal friends repeatedly and without any prompting whatever (it was not called for in the script at all) would tell him about the big dog that came while he was away. These were usually Grade Three children.

It is actors and child participants working together in the creation of an involving imaginative environment which will bring about this degree of belief. In this sense it may be said to be a function of the performance rather than the script. The playwright's contribution is, however, vital, firstly in a script which

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[11]Faye Davis & Company, *Totem-Go-Round* (St. Catharines: Carousel Players, 1973).

gives the blueprint for this environment and secondly in the provision of or allowance for opportunities for participation. The script may call for actual physical action such as making sounds, accompanying on a journey, becoming a forest, rowing a boat, digging, joining in a ceremony, running a race, helping in farming or building, joining an attack or a defence, sitting on a jury—the list could include all activities known to man. But a more crucial element in this level of participation, and one which will occasion the actions of the previous examples, is the basic role allocated to the participants by the script.

The usual premise in participation plays is that the child is not present as member of an audience but is present in some role appropriate to the environment of the play. Some examples will make this clearer. In *Norse Saga* the children all play the roles of Norsemen, thralls to the actors' thanes. As such they participate in two voyages, in a feast, in farming and in a trial. In between these major activities they perceive the acting out of the story as if they are physically present. In *Almighty Voice,* the children are early allocated roles as settlers, Mounties or Indians. They have actual activities in these roles, but beyond this they perceive the events of the story from this perspective and as if they were present. In *The Clam Made a Face*[12] by Eric Nicol, the children are Indian tribesmen. As such they both perceive the story and help act it out. Sometimes all children play the same role, sometimes each group has a separate role, sometimes their roles, like the actors, may change as the play progresses.

Here we have the heart of the participation play. Through this basic role the child can participate directly in the world of the play—he can experience the life, share directly in the enactment of the story, and make decisions which may affect his role and occasionally the outcome of the play. The real aim of these plays is that the child will reach a full experience through a belief in his role. This belief will be reached through imaginative and emotional involvement in a convincing world created by the actors from the script and through actual physical and vocal participation in some parts of this creation. The child participates in and enjoys both "process" and "product," for unlike creative drama there is a firm aesthetic product, the given play.

Most participation plays for children operate within very free conventions. Settings and costumes are simple and suggestive rather than realistic, properties may often be mimed, the telling of the story will often involve leaps in time and place, and the actors may be called upon to play many roles including animals and inanimate objects. In all these ways these plays resemble children's own play so that the child audience finds no difficulty in accepting them. Furthermore, this very freedom—and its ready acceptance by the agile imaginations of childhood—makes active participation easier. The child is not overwhelmed by a strange and realistic setting he can do like the actors in imagining his props; he can, again like the actors, transform himself from role to role; he can play

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[12]Eric Nicol, *The Clam Made a Face* (Toronto: New Press/Firebrand Press, 1972).

inanimate and non-human objects; and he can, as he does in his own play, drop in and out of character and situations. For periods of the play he will be physically inactive as he watches the actors develop a part of the story, then he may play the role of a natural element such as rain or wind, thus providing environment for the story, then he may be a tree, or an animal or a member of a family, or a sailor, and thus contribute an action essential to the unfolding of the story.

No role or activity a child is called upon to play should be more difficult than any he might undertake in his own play. It is this principle which determines the age level for which the play is appropriate. Ideally, as with many English TIE companies, a play is designed for one age level only. However, companies in Canada more often have to work for larger audiences than a school can provide with one grade. Many companies design their participation plays for three distinct levels, usually Kindergarten to Grade Three, Grades Four to Six, Grades Seven to Eight. Few companies attempt participation of any depth or extent for High Schools and some, in fact, will not take it beyond Grade Three. Companies and playwrights work from intuition, experience, and trial and error in determining the kinds of participation appropriate for different levels, and the curious thing they all seem to agree on is that they more often underestimate than overestimate the capability and willingness of young audiences.

This last point highlights an unfortunate state of affairs in the development of the participation play as a genre. The participation play for children has been with us now for some time, but because it has its existence primarily in the unheralded work of small and financially poor theatre companies performing for children only, it has not earned the attention it deserves from educators, theatre people and publishers. This position is slowly being remedied as more plays are published, more work is seen, the formerly poor companies gain prestige, and a beginning is made towards theorizing and researching the essential nature of this valuable and important genre of children's literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This is a select list of some published and unpublished participation plays and their sources. It includes all those plays mentioned in the article. A full bibliography has still to be done but this list may enable interested readers to pursue their interest by reading some scripts. For this reason the plays have been grouped according to their sources.

Brian Way, *The Mirrorman, The Bell, The Hat, On Trial.* Educational Arts Association, Teachers' Bookshop, 90 Sherman St., Cambridge, Mass. 02190, U.S.A.

Bernice Bronson, *In the Beginning, Most Powerful Jujus, Canterbury Tales;* Barbara Linden, *Tribe.* New Plays for Children, Box 273, Rowayton, Conn. 06853, U.S.A.

Carol Bolt, *Cyclone Jack;* Leonard Peterson, *Billy Bishop and the Red Baron.* Simon and Pierre, Box 280 Adelaide St. P.O., Toronto, Ontario.

Leonard Peterson, *Almighty Voice.* Book Society of Canada Ltd., 4386 Sheppard Ave., Agincourt, Ontario.

Eric Nicol, *The Clam Made a Face.* New Press/Firebrand Press, Toronto, Ontario.

Stephen Heatley, *Canadians All;* David MacKenzie, *The Torch, Earth Song, Way to Go;* Jacqueline Holt & Company, *Norse Saga;* Faye Davis & Company, *Totem-Go-Round.* Carousel Players, Box 372, St. Catharine's, Ontario.

Paddy Campbell, *Chinook;* Carol Bolt, *Tangleflags, My Friend is Twelve Feet High;* Len Peterson, *Let's Make a World;* Rex Deverell, *Shortshrift, The Copetown City Kite Crisis, Sarah's Play;* Isabelle Foord, *Junkyard.* Playwrights Co-op, 344 Dupont St., Toronto, M5R 1VP.

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