Theatre for Senior and Middle Public Schools

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Introducing theatre to senior and middle public school students presents some original problems. The children in the grades from 5 - 8 inclusive are not in the same situation as their younger sisters and brothers. Usually, they are growing out of the family and into the peer group, and no longer go on family outings. There is almost no encouragement given them by their social environment to visit theatres. To attempt a visit by oneself to the St. Lawrence Centre or the Royal Alexandra would be extremely difficult for youngsters, and the smaller theatres, unless they are presenting plays especially for this age group, do not usually encourage the attendance of unescorted public school children, even supposing the programme was suitable and the children could find the theatre.

For smaller children, there are puppets at the library and a fairly wide selection of amateur and professional productions geared to their age level. The fare offered to the Grades 5 - 8 group is more difficult to find, sparser, and usually rather repetitive. Once you have seen Treasure Island and Charlie Brown, what's left?

This leaves the schools. After all, they have the facilities and the audience, and they stand to benefit from the reactions of the children after the performance. Many schools and school boards are aware of the benefits of theatre, both for pupils and teachers, and take pains to attract good productions and make the proper arrangements for follow-up within their own school programmes. Some schools and boards, however, still seem to regard the arts as a frill, particularly in these days of austerity and universal cut-backs.

To these people I would point out that drama does have some very practical applications in the school. For the audience, it creates a unification of mood which, by temporarily lowering barriers, reveals insights not otherwise accessible to the individual. It provides a safe, structured means of observing life, compressed into a capsule of time; it gives excellent lessons in ritual and rhythm, as well as in integration of speech, movement, imagination, feeling, and form; and it creates a dialogue between players and audience, wherein each acts on the other as the drama proceeds. When children have a language problem, drama is one of the most natural forms by means of which they pass through cultural barriers. It is easy for any child to pick out the villains and heroes in an English puppet play, a Roumanian children's musical, or even a well-played French version of Molière. As the children take sides, they listen more intently, picking up not only words and phrases, but attitudes, customs, social mores and traditions. In addition, of course, the uses of drama as a pure teaching device are very well-known. Language arts, history, physical skills, and the identification

of new concepts can all be aided by academic use of theatre. Taken further, in creative drama or theatre arts classes held in the school, the lessons in poise, in thinking on one's feet, in exploring feelings and personalities alien to oneself within the safety of dramatic form, in speech, in movement and in personal integration are extremely valuable. A creative drama class is sometimes the only place where a student has "permission" to use his body, voice, mind, and feelings all at once. For some children, indeed, this class may be the only one in which he or she feels truly alive.

There is, however, another reason for involving children in drama and other art forms. There used to be a popular belief, at its height in the fifties and sixties, that if artists weren't bad, they were mad. Books, articles and papers were written by psychiatrists and psycho-analysts on the various neuroses which led artists to choose their particular form of expression. Painters were responding to early training by "making messes", actors and playwrights were victims of an "unstable identificatory experience", and so forth. Now, for whatever reason (probably because they won't hold water), these theories are becoming old-fashioned. For instance, Rollo May's most recent book, *The Courage to Create,* is one long defence of the artist as the person who encounters reality on behalf of his generation, who struggles against the disintegration of the self, and who tries to unite subject and object at a level where new forms can be created. May insists also that creativity exists between the two poles of spontaneity and form, and he proposes the hypothesis "What if imagination and art are not frosting at all, but the fountainhead of human experience? What if our logic and science derive from art forms and are fundamentally dependent on them rather than art being merely a decoration for our work when science and logic have produced it?"[1]

This is certainly a new departure, for students of the mind have traditionally fought shy of taking the imagination seriously. It is hard to conceptualise, and harder to locate. Much easier is it to call an unusually imaginative child neurotic, as our grandparents called him a liar. Yet psychologist Jerome Singer, for one, proclaims that the life of the imagination is a healthy thing, and the absence of it a leading indication, in certain forms, of neuroses and psychoses. I would suggest further that the healthy "working imagination", that function which protects us from future dangers, allows us to understand others, and gives us new concepts for old, actually prevails against the sick fantasies of neurosis, so that the two cannot function in one personality at the same time. It is not the child in full control of a rich imaginative life who stones cats, sets fire to abandoned buildings, or cowers in a classroom corner—a prey to a disturbed sense of vision, hearing, or smell. These children are under a spell of one kind or another, and cannot proceed with their lives until it is broken. The access to free imaginative play has in some way been blocked. They are literally controlled, hag-ridden, by some concept which refuses to let them go and which

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[1]Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York, 1975), p. 150.

they experience as coming to them from the outside world. The difference between this type of child and the one with access to the "working imagination" is that the former cannot give up his belief even when it endangers himself and others, while the latter, no matter how bizarre his games might appear to outsiders, can stop them cold at dinner time or at the end of recess. Surely, then, we should be doing everything in our power to encourage children to use their imaginations as much as possible, to learn how to control them, and to use them in the service of creativity and artistic form. Of course, I am not proposing that art is some form of panacea. An unreachable child will not be made accessible through a performance or a visit to an art gallery. As far as I know, exposure to art, while it has therapeutic value, cannot cure mental illness, any more than it can cure physical illness. It can, however, give us insights into the nature of the mind and feelings, and it can be a first-class guide to the imaginative world in which the dominance of emotional sickness or health is decided.

If it is granted, then, that exposure to art forms, theatre among them, is valuable and necessary to children, what are the problems to be faced when dealing with the older public school child? Leaving aside the important function of creative drama, which would require a separate article to do it justice, and concentrating on the Grades 5 - 8 students as audience, we shall find that they have specific demands to make of the artists who visit their schools. Unlike the younger children, these students are highly conscious of their social environment and recognize clichés which amuse or bore them depending on the way they are used. They are great ironists and will give full measure of affection to a performer who respects them and appears to appreciate the realities of their world. No audience so completely understands and respects genuine archetypal characters and situations. The problem is to find material which uses universal types and fits them into a milieu the children recognize. Ghost stories, legends (the less familiar and more complex ones), stories of mischief and adventure presented with wit and irony, comic or serious reversals of the expected course of action–all performed with great variety including use of mime, mask, music, poetry and prose–delight children of this age. In earlier grades, it is not advisable to switch the mood too suddenly or without sufficient preparation. Older children, however, love surprises. Because of their experience with television, they do not need every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed. They are able to cope with ideas and value judgements, and to appreciate the "bits that are left out", while something too literal would bore them. Whatever is played in a school by a visiting group should be art, performed by artists. It should be a demonstration of the work of the theatre, and not just a repetition of an easy moral lesson, like the old Victorian novels for children which nowadays make us laugh. To ensure high standards, however, is another problem facing companies touring the schools. In the Spring 1976 edition of *Canadian Theatre Review,* an editorial by Joyce Doolittle describes some difficulties in the section entitled "Small Wonders". She says

> Too often the script performed seems to have been written by someone whose research into suitable style and material for children has been to watch the TV cartoons on Saturday morning. The actors. . .

> understandably view their work as "just a job" and look forward to bigger and better things. The director, having finished his work months before, does not normally travel with the company. He knows that to direct "a kid's show" means being underpaid and not having enough rehearsal time; but it's a start. . .some people have even directed at Stratford early in their careers by taking a kid's show.[2]

Scripts for public school performance seem to vary (with notable and honourable exceptions) between the noisy excesses of the cartoon and the hushed preachments of the "theatre tastes awful but is good for you" school. The cartoon style can be easily dismissed, particularly if it is badly done, but the school of virtuous cliché is a little harder to discourage. This is the kind of script where the actors play out a kind of living commercial for "laughter in Gloomytown" or "Don't be Greedy, it isn't nice", or something equally banal. Almost invariably, the children are asked to "participate" by baking pies, building bridges, or becoming the "West Wind" in order to help the good guys. When this is well done, as it was by the visiting Brian Way company a few years ago, it can be frightening, though effective. When it is badly done, as it is by most of Mr. Way's imitators, it simply results in a watering down of the drama and a feeling among the children that if the actor-characters cannot manage their own affairs they shouldn't be doing the job. In the more sophisticated of these plays, intended for older public school children, serious questions are sometimes raised, and the children's consent is required before they have had time to study the options. There is often a subtle aura of cruelty about them, involving disappointment. For example, a production I once attended with one of my children included a dizzy housekeeper who worked for a "professor". She asked the children to help her complete her housework faster by blowing the dust away for her. That way, she said, she would have more time for herself. As a housewife myself at the time, I heartily approved, and my son and I blew away the dust, expecting, of course, that now the dull stuff was out of her life the lady would proceed with something more interesting. The professor, however, on discovering what she had done, instead of complimenting her on her ingenuity, or us in the audience on our co-operation, proceeded to catechize her severely. What, he wanted to know, was she doing with the time now at her disposal? "Buying Hats" was the reply. Apparently this was tantamount to original sin as far as he was concerned, and he asked her to imagine what would happen if she bought more and more hats and had nowhere to store them? Right then, of course, she understood what housework was for, to keep her from buying hats. This conclusion was required some explanation when we left the show. I do not remember much about the rest of it, as I was still wrestling with the hats and the house dust. Did all the little girls get the message? Find a quicker way to do housework and society has nothing more interesting for you to do in the saved time but consume, leading to more housework? If you do a kind action for someone, is some big guy going to come out and tell you it was stupid or immoral? Did the little boys get the message

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[2]Joyce Doolittle, "A Canadian Perspective", *Canadian Theatre Review*, (Spring, 1976), 19.

"Women are stupid and flighty, and if you do find new ways of moving the housework out of the way, they'll only go out and spend money"? Almost all of the moments when the children are asked to participate involve questions which could benefit from debate, and unless the accompanying literature sent to the school develops this further in a sufficiently open manner, I am afraid that some of society's more irritating prejudices may only be further confirmed through this type of performance. Of course, a really alert teacher who enjoys such exploration will make a profit out of almost anything that comes her way, but in this kind of situation she can only do so by undermining the script, which makes the children less likely to trust the next group of performers they see.

This leads me to the actors and why, how, and when they should be trusted. Like workers in any other field, actors can be trusted when working. If they demonstrate to the student audience that they are developing their craft, and this this is what chiefly interests them, they will get all the trust they need from the children. However, it may take time and, in some cases where there are special problems at the school, it may take more than one visit or more than one company before the children feel as at home with theatre as they do with television. This is the reason why mime groups are so successful and popular in schools. Besides creating illusion, playing out scenes and stories, and building suspense and sympathy, the mime artist in a school setting takes time to very carefully introduce his craft. Although I have not attended a concert for a school audience since I was in school myself, I hear from those who have that musicians also give an introduction to their craft to accompany their repertoire. The same situation should obtain for actors in the schools. Logically, musicians feel that they are building future concert audiences when they play for children. Dancers and mimes feel the same way. Yet there seems to be a curiously self-limiting attitude on the part of theatre companies playing for the young audience. Perhaps this is because while the musicians, dancers, and mimes play also for adults, most school theatre companies do not. This is a situation that bears more investigation. If you feel that you are not doing yourself any good by playing for a children's audience (as an artist), you will tend to limit the audience's appetite for theatre to the point at which they leave your influence. Why develop a taste for other actors' theatres? Drama Education people do not help this situation by confusing the issues of theatre as craft and theatre as educational tool. In order to appreciate theatre properly, students should be able to see the natural link between the company which visits their school and the world of professional theatre outside, which they can visit when they are older with (we hope) taste and sensibility developed by their school experience. Many drama educationists seem to have missed this point and tend to ensure that theatre for schools remains in an academic ghetto, limited to their phase of influence; they seem to feel threatened by the idea of theatre as a vocation and as a part of the commercial world.

The training of actors for children's theatre perhaps also leaves something to be desired. Possibly because of the limiting forces I have just described, the actor in a children's theatre production may feel out of touch with the rest of the theatrical community. There certainly is the feeling that no special

techniques are needed.

Sometimes one finds this prejudice in the strangest places. For example, I have yet to read, anywhere, a really good review of children's theatre. There is almost always the feeling, in even the best reviewers' columns, that visiting a children's performance should get them danger pay or workmen's compensation or at least a week in a sanitorium afterwards. It seems to me to be the height of illogicality to, in one column, moan about the lack of audiences for adult theatres and, in the next, give a patronizing or indifferent review of a children's performance that in nine cases out of ten misses the point of the exercise. It doesn't seem to have dawned on many people in theatre or related professions that sooner or later children grow up and become adults who are quite capable of selecting their own entertainment, and if they haven't been impressed by the theatre brought into their schools, they are going to choose something else.

Let us now, however, instead of these negative speculations, consider the possibility of an overall view of theatre. This view would include wide access to creative drama at one pole, and children's theatre of many varieties from nursery school through high school at the other, leading to a discriminating adult audience for a large variety of adult plays—classical, experimental, and popular. The question then arises, who is to implement this overall view? Imposition of taste and doctrine from a central authority holding the purse-strings and/or the access to theatres and audiences would bring about a worse state than the one we presently have. Perhaps it is a matter of growth. If theatre people and drama in education people could feel that they are all part of a whole, instead of the champions of isolated little warring kingdoms, then, perhaps, artists and educators would be able to think of good theatre at any level as a personal victory, instead of anxiously watching to see who is getting a bigger share of whatever financial pie is going the rounds. Each group could then find a satisfactory niche, with artists moving easily from one to another:—C.B.C. documentary one week, Grades K - 4 the next, and a season at a mainstream theatre to follow. This would enrich both the artist and the profession, and it would do incredibly encouraging things for the audience, whether they were adults, nursery school children, or those eternal in-betweens, the senior public school students, from whose ranks, after all, and from nowhere else, come our future critics, our future audience, and our future artists.

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