Soliloquy by One Who Writes for Children's Theatre

JAN TRUSS

In the moment of being asked to write a play for children's theatre, my mind becomes a kaleidoscope, a calliope, a carousel, a marvelous coloured thing agog with a hurdy-gurdy of poignant enchantments. Here is an invitation to make pure art, pure magic.

Then I sit down to write. I envisage the audiences. Some jump and shout rambunctiously out of yellow school vans by the windy side of theatres with teachers yelling for them to shape up and line up and shut up or else—or else. Some are marshalled in long lines down naked institutional corridors to sit on gymnasium floors, jubilant to be missing two whole periods of math or biology or health. Some come primped and patient with conscientious parents to endure for education and culture's sake an evening performance—or, worse still, to lose a precious Saturday afternoon. Then the waiting eyes stare across my typewriter the littlest ones trustful and willing to be transported anywhere; the middle ones trying to ignore the naughty elbow in the ribs and the foot that is kicking them under the seat; the adolescent ones veiled in a defense of nonchalance, daring us to touch them, if we can. I try to remember what it felt like to be six, or ten, or sixteen. And I try to remember how it feels to be talking, eye to eye, with each age group.

"But the child has changed," voices of the experts, sponsors, theatre boards, the media and editors cry out. They give me to understand that opulence and television have remodelled childhood and plasticized its heart. "You have to compete with television," they tell me; so I think of information dispensed by puppets with mutilated voices, a health lesson, a science lesson, a moral preached by an asshead with wagging ears; a cricket chirp-chirping, a bear being silly. The experts go on, "The modern child expects the slick and the flip. He likes things that are funny. He is conditioned by sit-coms to laugh."

Doubts arrest the typing fingers. Why bother? Perhaps live theatre, like novels and children's books without pictures, is outdated. Television can do it all so much better and simultaneously motivate consumerism, without which there would be no funds to subsidize the quaint luxuries of the arts. "No, no," enthusiastic promoters reassure me, "live theatre has its place. It can be used as a vehicle for conveying information. It can teach children Canadian history." Another teaching aid to make the consumption of information palatable. Teach. Instruct. Alas, I want to think of theatre as a special occasion of heightened experience—another door to the soul! How should one write for little plastic-hearted monsters, offspring of a society that snarls, "Educate, Educate," and stand ready with an evaluation checklist of small definable goals?

I ponder. Recently, I heard complaints by some local teachers about a pilot project in children's programming that C.B.C. was asking them to evaluate. The complaints were mocking and hostile—you know, public money and all that. In curiosity, having gathered that the offending video tapes had something to do with theatre for children, I arranged to view them. Sat one night after school among the machines in the audio-visual storeroom. The beginning of the first tape was awkward. A bit offputting. It did take a while to suspend disbelief. C.B.C. was filming a play by Len Peterson that was being done in the manner that much children's theatre is done in school gymnasiums: on the floor surrounded by the audience, without lights, with minimal costume suggestions and few actors. It was a play about a Canadian war hero, pilot Billy Bishop, and it was being performed in a hospital for sick children. I watched it at various levels: listening to the script, marveling at the concentration and intensity of the actors, aware of sensitivity in the camera work, observant of the attentive response of the audience. To me it developed into a small miracle. Moved me to tears. Seemed like pure art, pure magic. Layers of art. Layers of magic.

I talked more to some of the teachers and asked what they would have liked instead. "Don't you think it would have been better to have spent the money on presenting accurate information—like pictures of the actual planes?" they asked me.

Is theatre, like strong liquor, an acquired taste?

I am confused. Leave the writing to trudge with failure down my snow-deep valley and tease the mind with such silly questions as, "What ultimately matters to mankind? Does it dream? What does it want for its children? Does it?" The sun slants dramatic across the Rockies and the sky is very blue. Snow silence for forested miles. Happiness? Insignificant woman on the massive landscape, given, in a moment of intense reality, a feeling of immense human significance and comprehension.

An intense reality that confirms our humanness—the thoughts run on to battle with theatre. This summer, in a San Francisco enclosed shopping plaza, I watched a magnificent dimension of theatre. Four young Jewish jugglers—Jewish from their gentle patter—tossed their gaudy jugglers' clubs up into the sunshine trapped between skyscrapers and brought the dark-suited importance of lunchtime businessmen and the bustle of busy shoppers to an ensnared stillness. The act was not spectacular. A simple, innocent act, yet the upturned faces softened, smiled, shed importance, became lovely. Four young Jewish jugglers took the place, the space, and wove an intensity, an experience so real it was magic. And the crowds smiled at each other, walked away with silly smiles, having been transported into a deeper reality, an inexplicable joy. Simple. Inexplicable. Profound. . . .Transportation into a deeper reality, a spiriting away of one, at once outside oneself and inside oneself.

I chide myself. Laugh at myself for being so serious. Admit that children's theatre appeals to me as a most serious business insofar as it is a rare chance

for the child to sit in on a considered and intense bit of life where real people are taking off the masks. Children, to me, are very serious people with seriousness minutely focused. But does that really matter? King Kong and Jaws and another Exorcist wait compelling at the end of the road with the Moneychangers. Why not just slap up a script that calls for farting bugles and big red noses and eunuch voices, flashing lights and lots of slipping on banana skins? Indeed why not? Perhaps because I am no Charlie Chaplin. Reason enough. The making of laughter is surely a skilled and serious business. Childhood is too short for shallow laughter—or shallow anything, if theatre is to be a special occasion. I reason that I would like to use it to surprise the inside child, not as a diversion from life but as a deeper immersion into it.

Neither confidence nor convictions are kept easily, but when I sit down to write again, I am back again to trying to remember what it felt to be six, or ten, or sixteen, and how it feels to talk, eye to eye, with each group. It is the only honest way I know.

Get down to the practical business. The eyes look up waiting. The business of the script is to orchestrate the components—word and sound and silence, light and dark, colour, texture, movement—and transform the place and the space into theatre. This year, as economic belts tighten in our poor country, we write for fewer and fewer actors. (At present, I am at work on a script that will attempt to build up some feel of the great Western multicultural immigration—with four actors. Last year, we might have had six. There have been opulent years when children's plays teemed with characters who could be flipped on in flat moments for bright diversion. Economy brings us sharply to the essentials of the art form. At least, a hopeful thought.) The space and the place may be an empty echoing room, a gymnasium, a summer's shouting playground, or, occasionally, a real theatre building with all the accessories. Seldom is there the old convention of lights lowering majestically and velvet curtains opening with pomp, while wide-eyed innocents wait silent and eager. In our much plainer places there are many examples of that young person we've encouraged to express himself, to be cynic and critic, a little boss in his own confident world, a young person who has not been schooled in kindly politeness. So—the opening moments must have in them the stuff to settle and soothe, to captivate and engage that audience while forwarding the action of the play. Script in firmly to catch a mood, grab the space. The outside child has been so bombarded with noises and lights and KTels shouting that a small windchime of sound, a candle flame in darkness, a voice that speaks directly can be persuasive theatre for the inside child. The opening moment is like the "once-upon-a-time" that once upon a time settled other generations to curl up and submit to a story.

Setting the mood for the audience sets the mood for me the writer to submit to the kaleidoscope, the calliope, the hurdy-gurdy. Submitting, I, at one and the same time, become the soundmaker, the set, the controller of lights and shadows, the necessary movement, and I speak all the words out of all the voices to the waiting minds while I listen to their faces. I never think of theatre as an animated narrative but rather as an orchestration of forces that is evocative

far beyond words and story. The archetypes are called up in the interplay of word, character, costume, gesture, texture, space, and intensity. And all the time one tries to write to twitch the imagination of the director. A play does not necessarily make good reading or lend itself to playreadings or radio. It could even be written without dialogue. Then how would you read it? Or call it literature?

For the very practical reason of catering to short attention spans, in a conscious attempt not to bore, the whole gamut of theatrical forces is kept moving in a script for children's theatre. The script tries to introduce full theatrical possiblities of light, colour, texture, movement, stillness, sound, silence. The writer dares to be frankly and unabashedly theatrical. I feel I can plunge into my own whimsy, explore the hearing of looking and give flesh to the metaphor. I was kind of enchanted when one of my scripts called for characters to come wrapped in whispers. In another play, a memorable moment for me was when an Indian progressed through a snowstorm, the storm being a poetic thing of flapped lengths of gauze. There is a naive and poetic dimension that I dare offer to young audiences that I would not trust to adults, who have, I think, learned to be too literal to be able to submit to the full art of theatre. Perhaps the study of literature has given the impression that the play is the word, the story, thus piloting appreciation in only one dimension. It's like dissociating the dancer from the music, the character from his domain.

As the words grow on the pages, it is the playing of the play, in all its dimensions, that roller-coasters in my mind. And I write with the hope that something important, not trivial, will come out. In a persistently naive and unfashionable way, I believe that trivia, information, the flip, leave the soul undernourished. So I script hoping for an important idea, important funny, sad, wow–important somehow, for the director to bring to power with the indefinable force that is theatre.

What is important? The gut. The honest. The searching. Some surprise to the inside child that may be no more measurable than a catch in the breath, a little smile, a jump-for-joy feeling, or merely a dream ten years later.

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