

The Magic Carpets of Gwen Pharis Ringwood

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The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini, Gwen Pharis Ringwood. Unpublished Manuscript. Winner of Ontario Multicultural Theatre Association 1976 National Playwriting Competition.

Gwen Pharis Ringwood, western Canadian dramatist, capped an already distinguished playwriting career by winning first prize of \$750 in the Ontario Multicultural Theatre Association's 1976 National Playwriting Competition for her children's play, "The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini". Her career resembles those magic carpets in its colourful stages of living in northwestern Canada with the mining families of Goldfields, Saskatchewan; with the Ukrainian families of Edmonton, Alberta; with the Chilcotin Indian families in the Cariboo of British Columbia. That her creative magic and her personal warmth have touched many people is indicated by the reaction of a little Indian boy who wrote: "Up in the heart of the Cariboo in a little red ranch-house on the shores of Chimney Lake there dwells a silver-haired Princess". Larry Chelsea, the young Indian from Dog Creek Indian Reservation, composed this poem for her:

The Silver-Haired Princess

She, a woman, a silver-haired princess,
So eager to help, so eager to test.
She, a woman, a silver-haired princess,
So full of warmth, so full of joy.
She—Gwen Ringwood, the silver-haired princess.

During forty years of creative writing, Mrs. Ringwood has produced an abundance and variety of literary works: thirty-four stage plays, three musicals, twenty-eight radio plays, twenty short stories, two novels and countless poems and essays. Ten of her stage plays and the majority of her radio plays, as well as most of her short stories, were written for children. She has always had great rapport with children. Interest aroused by her own four children may have been responsible, but as early as 1935, before her marriage, she was writing children's drama. Her first children's plays, *The Dragons of Kent*, which was inspired by her reading of *The Reluctant Dragon*, was produced successfully at the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1935. For CBC Radio in Alberta she wrote several series of children's plays: "Books Alive" (1951), "Health Highways Series for Children" (1952), "The Voyages of Captain Cook" and an adaptation of "Heidi" (1959). For the Chilcotin Indian children at Saint Joseph Mission near Williams Lake, B.C., she wrote and produced plays that were adaptations of fairy tales

cleverly recreated for the Indians: "The Lion and the Mouse" (1964), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1965) co-authored with Sister Germaine, "The Three Wishes" (1965), and "The Golden Goose" (1973). Having volunteered to work with the Chilcotin Indian children as teacher of drama, improvisation, choral-speaking, pantomime, language arts and writing, and as director of their plays, Gwen Ringwood stimulated them to write their own Indian legends which she and Sister Germaine collected and published locally in two volumes, *My Heart Is Glad* (1965). These Indian children were captivated by this lovely and stimulating lady. She introduced them to dramatic improvisations and they delighted in becoming such things as loons, wolves, waves. The older Indian girls begged her to adapt fairy tales for them and thus, with Sister Germaine, she wrote *The Sleeping Beauty* with a Chilcotin background, using Indian drums and dances. She wrote for it the song, "The Little Weaver Basket", composing the music herself. Presented at the Williams Lake Drama Festival, it won much praise. As festival adjudicator for the schools in British Columbia, Mrs. Ringwood introduced more flexibility and naturalness into children's drama. When her daughter, Carol, was in Grade Five, Gwen formed a children's drama class and they dramatized stories from the reader. Of her daughter, Susan, she says that "she expanded my consciousness about children's plays, making me see them as more dramatic, larger than life. Susan always sees plays in the context of acting in them."¹

Gwen Pharis Ringwood has adjudicated children's plays at hundreds of school festivals over the past forty years in the four western provinces of Canada. At Prince Rupert, B.C., three years ago, a non-competitive school-centered festival was held under the aegis of the schools, which answered to all her recommendations for such festivals. She therefore wrote a long report encouraging other schools to accept her ideas. Her early work in the 1930's with Elizabeth Haynes, director of Drama at the University of Alberta's Department of Extension, and later at the Banff School of Fine Arts, provided a rich background and brought her to the prairie schools to help young people in the art of acting. For these routines she wrote several play-exercises to be performed easily and quickly. Among these were her short plays, "Saturday Night" and "Red Flag at Evening".

The magic of play-impulse in children is well understood by Mrs. Ringwood. In her children's plays she has accomplished what seems to me to be the fourfold aspect of children's plays: the creative, qualitative, interpretative, and psychological possibilities in drama for the young. An examination of these four aspects in her latest and perhaps finest children's play, "The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini", should provide some clues to her style of writing.

The creative aspect of a children's play is that which sparks the creative play-impulses of children to such a degree that they will participate vicariously

¹Quoted from Gwen Ringwood's interview with this writer, at Chimney Lake, B.C., May 16, 1976.

in the adventures of the characters. In "The Magic Carpets", the singing, dancing, miming characters come to life out of the tapestries of the Eskimo, Indian, Ukrainian, Italian and French Canadian magic carpets, thus involving the whole child—his outer senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, feeling, rhythm; his inner senses of imagination, memory, instinctive perception. His spirit, mind, emotions, body all come into play. "The Magic Carpets" is an immediate experience creating dreams, longings and unconscious urges that may later come to fruition. The miracle of a play takes shape as Antonio Angelini walks the streets of Canada with his donkey, Samothracia, and his wonderful magic carpets. This play is a fine contribution to all the "magic carpet" literature of the past! Again and again the audience is called into action to join in the loon's call, or the wild geese call, or the coyote call to warn Antonio of the approaching policeman who would confiscate the unlicensed donkey. When Antonio loses his donkey and his wife, Maria, the audience is again prevailed upon to chant their names singing in an ascending scale—Samothraciamaria! The children's instinctive sense of humour is drawn out in enjoying Antonio's absent-mindedness for, having initiated the audience's warning calls, Antonio mistakes them for real loons, to the delight of the young audience.

I call the qualitative aspects of a play those elements which give structure and richness to a children's drama—unique characters, amusing dialogue, exciting plot, imaginative staging, and those other elements of dance, music and pantomime. Characters are important because children identify strongly with them. They must be sufficiently defined, either as good or bad, so that the child can interpret character; the dialogue must be clear, colourful and humorous; the plot action-packed. Ringwood achieves these in her depiction of the frustrated wife, Maria Angelini, in the Masked Marvel, Thor Orlakson, and in the French Canadian, Jacques LaSalle. All these characters are foils for the central rich character of the rug dealer, Antonio. His qualities of generosity, kindness, good humour and trust contrast sharply with the other characters, especially the officer of the law, Peter Wilson. The dialogue in a children's play must communicate and deepen human relationships and what the characters do and say must be motivated by the emotional conflict in the play. The dialogue adds to the character's charm and individuality while developing the plot, theme, and atmosphere, and it must be natural and true to life. Dialogue in "asides" to the audience gives the children an inkling of future events and establishes an intimate and sometimes clandestine relationship with the young audience who delight in this secret knowledge. For example, after the scene where he fails to steal the donkey from Maria, Thor Orlakson, the Masked Marvel, says to the audience:

See that? My first robbery and I made a mess of it. All I got was a bunt from that donkey and advice from that woman. It's true about the fishing. It's closed down at Gimby. Because of the poisons. And I did try to find a job but nobody needs me. So this morning I turned myself into the Masked Marvel. I'll show that lady and her donkey, I'll show her. I'll steal something and I'll sell it and I'll buy a hamburger and a milkshake and two hotdogs and a blueberry pie.

She'll see the Masked Marvel is an important robber. I'll show you, old lady with your dumb donkey!

In this "aside" the Masked Marvel appeals to the sympathy of the children, their sense of humour, and their past experience with so-called "old ladies" who have chastised them. Also the Masked Marvel tries to justify his stealing on the plea of being hungry and having no job opportunities. Needless to say, the mention of food appeals to children's imagination.

"Asides" also establish Antonio's amusing characteristics—his absent-mindedness, his lack of judgement, his simple trust. When he first discovers the robber, Thor, he mistakes his robber's mask for an anti-snoring device! He says in a puzzled tone to the audience:

There's a boy snoring . . . He's wearing a mask over his face. That's odd. I wonder why he'd—I know! He thinks the mask will keep him from snoring. It won't, you know. If a person snores, he snores—that's all.

A good children's plot reveals the problem, sets forth the complications, and builds to a climax, solving the problem so that virtue is rewarded and evil punished. There must be a tight relationship in the basic episodes—a pattern of cause and effect, problem and solution of the problem. The entire play usually revolves around an initial incident. Episodes are created to complicate and intensify the problem. In "The Magic Carpet" the plot involves the obtaining of a license for the donkey, Samothracia, who endears himself to the audience. Complications set in as Thor attempts to steal first the donkey and then the magic carpets; Antonio gives the license money away for a new carpet bought from Jacques LaSalle; Peter Wilson threatens to put the donkey in jail. The plot revolves around the romantic, easy-going, forgetful, unreliable but loveable Antonio Angelini who calls himself "a rug nut, a carpet beetle." The climax occurs when the policeman offers to buy a rug and Antonio cannot part with any until he finds a duplicate. Then the transaction is made; Antonio can buy the donkey's license and the policeman is prevailed upon to place it ceremoniously over the donkey's head. The funny anti-climax has Thor stealing the donkey's popcorn, but he is saved from jail by Maria. Jacques invites the Angelinis to set up shop in his aunt's garden and the policeman promises to bring the Mayor to see the magic carpets. The staging is simple but requires several playing levels—trellises for displaying the rugs, a park bench, a cart, and an area for the dancing and miming groups. By means of these elements Gwen Ringwood says "The play tries to weave the magical richness of a beautiful carpet."

The interpretative aspect of the play should allow children both to reflect upon past experience and to grow in a sympathetic understanding of the world and its people. "The Magic Carpets" provides Canadian children with a knowledge of the various races of people who combine to form this nation—Eskimos, Indians, Ukrainians, Italians, and particularly the people of French Canada.

Through the emotions, sensations and images aroused by the play, the child forms patterns of ideas raising his Canadian consciousness. Some indefinable vision, unique to himself, is produced in the child through a good play. Given significant imaginative and evocative experiences in drama, the child's attitudes toward life and people can be singularly changed. The theme of this play is love: the child can see why the characters do what they do. Antonio's love for his carpets, his donkey, and his wife encourages a change for the better in the other characters; the power of love is demonstrated almost unconsciously to the children.

The psychological aspects of a children's play are very significant. Drama can provoke psychological confrontations for the child that he may find difficult to face directly in his own life. In a play dealing with problems like his own, he is able to reach a kind of catharsis which is very reassuring to him, though he may not be consciously aware of it. In "The Magic Carpets", Maria Angelini is the Mother figure, scolding, working, helping, loving. The Masked Marvel is the bad boy whose attempts at stealing are thwarted, but who is saved at the end through Maria's protection. Peter Wilson as the agent of the law provokes fear because he punishes offenders, but his change from antagonist to friend is most reassuring to the child. Jacques LaSalle is the friendly neighbor image who solves one's problems after one has helped him. Samothracia, the donkey, is the courageous one who bunts the policeman as the child would like to do to all lawkeepers. Antonio is a kind father figure who helps one enjoy life though inevitably he is scolded by his wife. To small children any menace must be made one with themselves and brought within their power. A children's play can be a kind of magical propitiation of the horrors of the grown-up world. As emotional disturbances are dramatized, the children can come to terms with what has disturbed them in real life and put their fears and anxieties into perspective.

"The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini" is a play that fulfills what I see to be this fourfold demand of children's theatre. It provides those creative, qualitative, interpretative and psychological possibilities so necessary for an audience of children. It can be defined as romantic drama in that its ending depicts life as we should like it to be, although the characters, dialogue, and setting are quite realistic. The rhythms, mood and atmosphere of this play offer a distinctive style. Patterns of brightness and shadow, overtones of sparkling colour interwoven with darker threads of mistakes and weaknesses, result in a magic carpet that will set a child's imagination soaring while at the same time anchoring him more firmly in the realistic world.

NOTES

Gwen Pharis Ringwood's children's plays are as follows:

[Note: TS indicates typescript, unpublished radio work produced by CBC, Edmonton, Alberta, or CKUA. MS indicates unpublished plays.]

"Books Alive". TS. Edmonton: CBC Radio, *Right on Our Doorsteps*, December 7, 1951.

"The Dragons of Kent". MS. Edmonton: Banff School of Fine Arts, 1935.

"The Golden Goose". MS. Williams Lake: Cariboo Indian School, 1973. (An adaptation).

"Health Highway Series for Children". TS. Vancouver: CBC Radio, 1952.

"Heidi". TS. Toronto: CBC Radio, 1959. (An adaptation).

"The Lion and the Mouse", MS. Williams Lake: Cariboo Indian School, 1964. (An adaptation).

"The Magic Carpets of Antonio Angelini". MS. Winnipeg: Ontario Multicultural Theatre Association, 1976.

The Sleeping Beauty. In the volume, *My Heart Is Glad*. Ed. Gwen Ringwood, Williams Lake: local publisher, 1965. (An adaptation).

"Red Flag at Evening". MS. Edmonton: Department of Extension, University of Alberta, 1940.

"Saturday Night". MS. Edmonton: Department of Extension, University of Alberta, 1940.

"The Three Wishes". MS. Williams Lake, 1965. (An adaptation).

"The Voyages of Captain Cook". TS. Edmonton: CBC Radio.

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