Quintessential Reaney: Myth, Magic, and Local Colour

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Apple Butter & Other Plays For Children, James Reaney. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1973. 195 pp. $4.00 cloth.

Apple Butter & Other Plays For Children is a collection of four one-act plays which Reaney says "are part of my life in the sixties". They arose out of his work with Listeners' Workshop in London, Ontario (Saturday morning sessions with actors, directors and playwrights), which attempted to fuse grassroots theatre with local circumstances. There is, Reaney says, a sequence to the four plays which enables us to watch someone grow up.

The first play, *Apple Butter,* is a play for seven marionettes which was written for the Western Fair in the fall of 1965 and was originally performed in a tent on the fairgrounds. The set is classic Reaney: the yard of a gabled farmhouse, with an old elm tree, a water trough, and a barn. A narrator introduces the characters, their relationships, and sets up the plot with a directness well suited to a marionette play:

> A farmhouse in southern Ontario about 1890. The farmhouse is owned by a spinster, Miss Hester Pinch. She has a hired man who works the farm for her called Victor Nipchopper. She boards the schoolmaster, Solomon Spoilrod. Miss Pinch has lately adopted an orphan called Apple Butter. When the curtain goes up we find Mr. Spoilrod and Miss Pinch discussing this orphan.

The plot is melodramatically simple. Apple has been told to watch the crows, for the field has been recently planted with corn. That is exactly what Apple does, too: he watches the crows, watches them as they eat the corn. As a result, he is going to be whipped by Miss Pinch, and is sent off to select his own switch. Fortunately, a Tree Wuzzel comes to his rescue to save him from a beating, as a reward for Apple having saved the elm from destruction. The Tree Wuzzel tells Apple:

> We Wuzzels rule the world, each wuzzel to a separate kingdom—animal, vegetable, mineral, bone, paper. All the trees, all wooden things are ruled by me and must do as I say.

Meanwhile, Miss Pinch has been trying to entrap Solomon Spoilrod in marriage. The previous evening, after four glasses of chokeberry wine, he had proposed to her and she had accepted. But the next day, he has forgotten—he is more interested in seeing young Apple punished.

The three adult figures–Pinch, Spoilrod and Nipchopper–all attempt to whip Apple, but he merely says the magic word of "wuzzel" and each in turn is pursued off the stage by a giant wooden spoon which beats them. The adults decide to take a bone hairbrush to Apple. However, Rawbone, the bone fairy, comes to Apple's aid in return for favours done to Moo Cow which had saved her from the wrath of adults. The efforts of the trio to punish Apple are foiled again by the use of the magic word "wuzzel", and Moo Cow absconds with Victor Nipchopper, jumping clean over the moon with him.

When an elm falls on the schoolmaster Solomon, he gives up his struggle to avoid marriage with Miss Pinch. In a generous turn of spirit, Miss Pinch says they will adopt Apple as their first child and they'll will the farm to him. But Apple prepares to disappear with the Tree Wuzzel and Rawbone, saying "Goodbye, folks, and maybe I'll come to see you in the spring when the apple-blossoms are out and bring you a blossom baby."

Marionette plays, with their stylized movement and dialogue, offer considerable scope for caricature and melodrama, and *Apple Butter* utilizes these possibilities. The characters are delightful. Spoilrod, for example, is the archetypal Reaney villain–a tyrannical schoolmaster who locks children in woodboxes, spends considerable time whipping children, and is considered an authority on switches. However, he is exaggerated to such a degree that he ceases to become a figure of terror, and he gets his come-uppance in the end when he is nabbed by Miss Pinch. Apple, too, is a delightful hero, saucy and quite able to stand up for himself in front of the three towering adults who represent the figures of authority. He has a whimsical sense of humour: when sent to select a whip, for instance, he enters with a series of 'whips' which include a wood chip and a flowering spiraea bush, much to the annoyance of the adults! He also suggests to the Tree Wuzzel that he frighten the three adults so that he (Apple) can go inside and eat up their supper!

Children love word-play and repetition, and these abound in *Apple Butter*. For instance, Spoilrod says Apple must be called Rusty, as he is full of ancient irony. Apple teases the hired hand by calling him Vic Turnipchopper, instead of Victor Nipchopper. Apple says things to Rawbone like "My bony lies over the ocean" and "Bony Prince Charlie", until Rawbone explodes "That's enough!" And Apple's favourite phrase which is repeated often in the script has a lovely rural echo to it: "It bears thinking on."

The play is well suited to children; it expresses their fears and concerns. Apple is an orphan who must depend on his wits to cope in an adult world. Moo Cow fears that her twin sister Tilly, who has mysteriously disappeared, has been made into a bottle of Bovril or a Gladstone bag. There is opportunity for audience participation in a Punch-and-Judy manner when the wooden spoon chases the adults offstage. All is resolved with a delightful happy-ever-after ending, with retributive justice for all, and Apple goes off on his own terms, not those imposed on him by others.

Geography Match, a play which was conceived for Canada's Centennial, and one which Reaney calls "a shamelessly patriotic play [which] should be played recklessly with all the stops pulled out", is a much more complex script. It calls for two ingenue leads, two character leads, and eight young actors. On the primary level, the play discusses the rivalry between two Nova Scotian schools–Black Blazer's Academy, with its selfish and privileged upper middle class boys led by Mr. Stuffy-Smith, and Shady Hill Continuation School, with its honest everyday kids under the tutelage of the charming Miss Birdwhistell.

Blazers: Hey, you Continuation School Rats
When you see us coming
Please raise your hats.

Continuation School Kids:

Academy dunces
Sitting on the wall
Shady Hill scholars
Are better than you all.

After an initial geography match between the two schools, the battle is given a broader scope. The two schools decide to undertake a trans-Canada race with a 30-day time limit. The winning school will be given cash prizes and scholarships.

But there are other levels to this conflict. In the same Nova Scotia village lives a Miss Weathergood, who is visited by an entrepreneur from New York City called Mr. Wolfwind. He attempts to buy her house for $6,000, having found a map which suggests the house is sitting on top of Captain Kidd's buried treasure. Miss Weathergood refuses to sell, but she and Wolfwind end up wagering a bet on the outcome of the race: $50,000 versus the house. Weathergood's house, Reaney suggests, represents what the Shady Hill kids want to save, i.e. Canada, and the playwright suggests the symbolic use of a suspended model of her house onstage. The struggle between Wolfwind and Weathergood takes on allegorical, symbolic elements: it becomes the struggle between light and darkness, innocence and greed.

The race begins. This is a cleverly constructed piece of writing which involves a number of scenes shifting from time present to time past, and back again. We encounter historical personifications, allusions and legends and fantasy characters. The Blazers turn out to be ruthless little cheats, but every time they manage to get an edge, they suffer a reversal; for example, they bring out a 400 H.P. motor to assist in circumnavingating Newfoundland, but because they refuse to answer the Iceberg lady's riddle, they are misdirected off-course towards Bermuda. The Shady Hill kids encounter a ghost of a murdered nun, and meet at the Battle of Moraviantown with Tecumseh. Then there is a Keystone cops sequence on trains back and forth across Canada. This sounds incredibly complex to stage, and indeed it would be a challenge for the director. But Reaney uses lists of names–place names of Newfoundland, French names,

Indian tribes, names of settlements across the prairies and back, lists of all the creeks which feed into the Fraser River—all of which provide a simple and natural transition from one setting and time to another.

The symbolic climax of the play comes with the confrontation of the Grizzly Bear (Wolfwind) and the Coyote (Miss Weathergood) in the Rockies. Instead of a violent battle, however, it is a test of will to see who can remain silent longest. Grizzly Bear is undone by a pet mouse, the kids answer a series of animal riddles successfully, and are carried down river to the sea by Simon Fraser. The race ends as a joint win. Mr. Smith and Miss Birdwhistell decide to marry, and both schools merge to become one happy co-educational school. Once again the happy ending.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that the play is simplistic. On the contrary, of the four plays in this text, *Geography Match* is by far the most difficult one to stage. It is not a script to be approached lightly, but it is one which would be rewarding both in an educational and a dramatic sense.

It has a flexible format which can be easily adapted to a different circumstances, and simplified if necessary. It offers many opportunities for audience participation, according to the director's inclination. But its most attractive feature is that it offers a wealth of learning situations for the student actors. If integrated into the curriculum, it combines lessons in history, geography, spelling, personal relationships, and theatre arts: a rich mosaic-like script. Music and movement can be added in several places, and the lists of words—a common technique of Reaney's—offer endless variables in choral speech. Thus, the play has a solid framework of literary and educational merit, which makes it worthy of careful consideration by the public school teacher.

Names & Nicknames is again set in an Ontario hamlet, this time around 1900. It requires six actors, three babies (dolls) and at least six children. Reaney suggests that the play start with all the actors discussing themselves, their characters and their names, in an informal manner at the edge of the stage. By careful planning, they bring the audience into the discussion about names and nicknames, and from this beginning, the play opens. Reaney says:

> Many of the choruses, by the way, are taken from the suites of words used in a speller that my father learned to spell out of in the 1890's at the Irish School near Stratford, Ontario. . . . The great monumental lists of boys' and girls' names in this book gave me the idea for the climax of the play. Perhaps this might suggest to children plays they could make up from gum cards, telephone directories, even arithmetic books!

Set on Farmer Dell's farm, much of the early action of the play illustrates aspects of farm chores and routines, but these are interpreted in Reaney's poetic style. There is scope both for choral speech voice work and for imaginative staging of the farm animals.

The plot is very simple. Old Grampa Thorntree is a grump; he doesn't like children because they tease him, and he says:

> I have sworn revenge on every child in the neighbourhood and my special revenge against babies is that I spoil their christening by thinking up a terrible nickname for them that will stick and stick and stick, it's so sticky.

Farmer and Mrs. Dell have a new daughter whom they wish to name Amelia. However, old Thorntree intervenes and says:

> They'll call her–what does the name Amelia–Mealy! All the children will call her that at school–Oat Mealy!

Crushed, the Dells decide instead to name her Baby One for now.

In a sub-plot, the hired hand Rob wants to get himself educated in order to make himself more acceptable to the hired girl, Etta. This presents opportunities for more word games within the classroom setting. The seasons pass and the Dells have a baby boy. To preclude Thorntree sticking this one with an obnoxious nickname, the Dells pick five names–Paul John Peter James Martin. Thorntree, listening at the chimney, overhears their plans and foils them by nicknaming the baby Fat Name. The Dells have to resort to calling him Baby Two!

In a last effort to undo Thorntree's damage, Reverend Hackaberry decides to help the Dells. When the Dells produce a third child and Hackaberry goes to christen him, it turns out that he has dozens and dozens of names–so many in fact that Thorntree "was so balked, his envy and spite were so frustrated, that they turned in upon themselves" and he changed into a prickly tree.

This is a delightful climax to the play, and one which involves the entire company in an integrated recitation of some 170 names! The play moves quickly to a conclusion. Etta decides that, now Thorntree is out of the way, she will marry Rob whether or not he passes his exam, now that it is safe to marry and have children whose lives will be untouched by Thorntree's maliciousness. We move to a square dance celebration of the betrothal and christenings, and the play closes with a clever echo of the opening stanzas. As one can see, *Names & Nicknames* is a modest little script, but one which most children can enjoy. It lends itself to unadorned classroom presentation and discussion–especially for those of us who have nicknames we dislike.

The last play, *Ignoramus,* was inspired by a CBC Wednesday Night debate on education, and uses arguments familiar to anyone involved in education in the 1960's and 1970's. This is a play for four adults and many children, and here Reaney has used "Cours Moyen" and other high-school texts for his lists.

The plot is centred around two polarized points of view. Dr. Hilda History, a traditionalist, and Dr. Charles Progressaurus, an advocate of free expression, are engaged in a debate concerning philosophy of education. Dr. History advocates the merits inherent in the disciplines of Latin and grammar; Dr. Progressaurus favours expression of the inner self. A wealthy brewer, Frothingale, enters the scene. He has just adopted twenty orphans, and proposes to underwrite a unique experiment:

> Suppose that with my millions of hiccup money I were to build you each a school . . . in some remote part of the country, and you each with ten children apiece were to find out over a period of say seventeen years . . . just what happens when you Dr. Hilda History bring up kids according your traditional methods and you Dr. Progressaurus use your progressive theories . . . At the end of the the seventeen-year period . . . then we will meet again and a judge chosen by me will decide—which one of you wins . . . the Frothingale Brewery.

He concludes: "My wealth embarrasses me. Forge me a society of human beings who will know what to do with my money when I'm gone." The challenge is taken up, and Dr. History heads to Dauphin, Manitoba, to raise her brood, while Dr. Progressaurus heads off to Pelee Island on Lake Erie.

The balance of the play deals with various scenes from both schools illustrating events in the education of the twenty orphans. Perhaps Dr. History's kids are too 'perfect', whereas Dr. Progressaurus' children abuse him badly, but it is obvious where Reaney's loyalties lie. However, this is not surprising from one who advocates the reading of Shakespeare to children as bed-time stories.

After eighteen years, the two groups of children are all brought before the Governor-General who is to meet each child and decide which method was more successful. Dr. Progressaurus says:

> What I tried to do, your Excellency, was to teach the child, not the subject. To teach them to express themselves. They were never forced to do a single thing they didn't want to.

Dr. History says simply: "All I tried to do was give them an education."

The Governor-General in his wisdom declares it to be a tie, for although Dr. History's students are all bright and presentable, one of the other students displays mature creative insight. He declares that the two teachers are to exchange their groups for the final year of their high school education, so that:

> Miss History—you will go to Pelee Island and what you must do to these poor progressively maladjusted mites is change them without changing what is charming about them—about some of them, Progressaurus, you will go out to the prairies and superintend this group. If you're any good at all they'll have changed you by the time a year is up.

The wisdom of Solomon? At any rate, the play may sound as if it would be of more interest to educational theorists than to children. But there is a great deal of scope for energetic staging, and again good choral speech work. So there is much to recommend it to teachers.

One of Reaney's strongest points as a playwright is his flexibility—not just in theatrical creativity, but also in his continual encouragement of others to adapt his scripts. His plays, then, become departure points, and individual teachers can alter them according to individual situations—the number of children, the space available, time factors, budgetary limitations, individual talents and local interests. All the plays can be put together by a class of children for presentation within the restricted space of a classroom. The last two plays especially require little by way of props, and lend themselves to simple rhythmical musical instruments. The plays are well presented on large pages with lots of breathing space. I would liked to have seen an index and some tightening of punctuation, but on the whole the plays are visually appealing, as well as dramatically and intellectually interesting.

I suppose I should have declared myself earlier as an unabashed Reaney fan, having been associated with his work since the mid-sixties. I find these plays full of echoes, familiar symbolism, and elements of the same devices and techniques found in his "adult" works like *Colours in the Dark, Listen to the Wind,* and even parts of his brilliant Donnelly trilogy. Reaney's work tends to bring out the child in the man, and to those of us raised on stereotyped Snow White-type plays, this quartet is very refreshing. Full of life in rural Ontario, embroidered with rich language, and always appealing to adult and child, *Apple Butter & Other Plays For Children* belongs in every school library.

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