

# On Writing Plays for Children; or, You Can't See the Audience from the Trapeze

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Last week I went down to CBC-TV in Vancouver for a conference on a play for children I was writing. It was a twenty minute adaptation of an American writer's science fiction book, and it was for a series called *The Magic Lie*, to be hosted by W.O. Mitchell. Mitchell is going to introduce my "dramatization" and, after the playlet is over, urge the children watching to go out and get this book from their local library.

The trouble is, no child is going out to get this book from the local library because it is a godawful book, and my dramatization of it has to be the shoddiest thing I've ever done.

I had promised the script editor to *do* the book before I read it.

Rule one: never do that again.

After I read it, and I'll tell you the title and the author—why not?—after I read *The Infinite Worlds of Maybe* by Lester Del Ray [I know, I bet that isn't his real name either], I phoned Dene and wailed, "My God, but it's just terrible!"

"But we had to have an example of science fiction."

"But there's Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* just for starters," I wept.

But they hadn't been able to get the rights to L'Engle's book, and, as Hugh Beard, the CBC producer, said to me, "CBC can't afford to hire brilliant writers."

Well, I'd promised to do the damn book and I was bound by that promise, so I worked. God, how I worked. I don't remember sweating over any script the way I sweated over *The Infinite Worlds of Maybe*. This is the story of a son, nineteen, who is left behind by his father, a crackpot scientist, who has gone off to explore parallel planes of existence. The son, at first ashamed of his father, goes to a professor and together they decide to follow the father into these other realms of possibility. The message seemed to be: Children, even when you're nineteen, honour your father, even if he does seem a bit dotty.

There *were* rather interestingly latent themes of homosexuality [the nineteen-year-old and the professor come to be “friends” and feel warm and tingly about each other] but there were *so* latent, I’m afraid that to emphasize them would have done violence to Del Ray’s intention, not to mention his amour propre. I remember suggesting that we go all out and make this a really interesting play, but neither the producer nor the script editor felt that the subject matter was appropriate for children.

I’m not sure that you can restrict subject matter for children. I know that I didn’t in any of my own children’s plays. When my comedy, *Sqrieux-de-Dieu*, was playing last summer at Lennoxville, critics found it exceptional that any one who wrote “mild-mannered children’s plays” could have written such a shocking adult satire. That’s because my plays for children were never “mild-mannered” and I never restricted my subject matter. I always wrote about the things that were bothering me at the time.

*The Riddle Machine* deals with children facing the problems of a godless universe: taking dope as one way out of despair, becoming automatons obedient to societal programming as a means of avoiding freedom and responsibility.<sup>1</sup> *The Song of the Serpent* deals with miscegenation, illegitimacy, racial conflict and child rape. And people die in it. It may be written as a touring company melodrama, but it’s hardly innocuous. Billy De Luxe, my anti-hero, is a negro fop and misanthrope. I love Billy and still see him as one of my best creations. I often sing the song I wrote for him: “I never did nothin’ for nobody/Nobody did nothin’ for me.”<sup>2</sup> *World, World, Go Away!* is probably my most serious play, in terms of form—should I qualify that and say, most serious *children’s* play? No, damn it—but my most unfinished as well. In *World, World* I attack the democratization of theatre promulgated by Brian Way and followers. I allow the protagonist to be the typical “participation hero” who keeps asking the audience to “help” him. My own disgust at such abrogation of the artist’s responsibility spilled out in this play, and the play ends with the anti-hero suddenly wresting the action (another popular vote) away from the audience and deciding for himself what his destiny shall be. Freedom, he says, is an individual thing, and you can’t ask the audience to decide for you.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Riddle Machine* was done at Holiday Theatre in 1967 and also played Expo for the Centennial; it did a four month tour. It played Chicago’s Jack & Jill Theatre too. Published in an Avon Equinox anthology, *Contemporary Children’s Theatre* (edited by Betty Jean Lifton), it has been performed about four times in the U.S. in the last two years.

<sup>2</sup>*The Song of the Serpent* was done by Holiday Theatre in 1969 (I think), taken for a four-month tour of B.C., and then done a year later in Vancouver. It’s been published by Playwrights’ Co-op, and I keep getting royalties, so either someone’s doing it or someone’s stocking up on Canadiana.

<sup>3</sup>*World, World, Go Away!* was done in 1970, or thereabouts, by Playhouse Holiday, and I’ve never finished it properly, so it isn’t published.

That's it, you see. That's where CBC is wrong. When you're out there on the trapeze, all your muscles and your skill had better be in top working order. When you're flying from one bar to another, you don't ask, "Who's looking at me? If it's a child, maybe I can relax a little, maybe I don't need to try so hard, or strain so much." You'd bloody better strain, you'd bloody better work your butt off, because a fifty-foot drop is just as bad when the eyes looking at your gore on the floor are ten years old.

I am so sick of this attitude, that a play for children is automatically "mild-mannered." Read gutless and boring. You write the best you can, and about the things that get to you, and maybe, when you want to express the problems of sycophancy, you don't *use* the word "sycophant," maybe you use a name like Knuckle-Under Nogan, but the dilemma is the same, and when Knuckle-Under Nogan dies from sycophancy, the child doesn't have to understand the *name* to recognize the ignominy. A child's life if filled with ignominy and humiliation and the struggle to become human. Kill your father? Sleep with your mother? Listen, that's the sort of play to write for children . . . all the children of the world.

So, what am I saying? I'm saying that when CBC told me that all they wanted out of me was plot and "likeable characters" for *The Magic Lie*, they were insulting children, they were insulting me, and they were ripping off the taxpayer, not to mention W.O. Mitchell. What's the *point* of doing sixth-rate books (we won't get into the problem of Del Ray's citizenship)? What's the point of doing *anything* that's acknowledged to be crud before you even start? Is it all right to put on crud when it's crud for children? Listen, when I die, God is going to say: "Here's a list of all four children who went to the public library and got out Lester Del Ray's book." Those children, who weren't able to change the channel, are on my conscience for life. W.O. Mitchell, wherever you are, forgive me for that script. I wrote it, I finished it. I tried to stay true to the author's intention. But all the time I was certain of one thing . . . children recognize the banal. Children recognize the cheap.

Oh yes. There's one other thing Hugh Beard asked me to do to the last version of my dramatization, *The Infinite Worlds of Maybe*. He had actually rather liked the script. My plot was much better than the original. There was just one thing. The characters, while "true to the book," were really not there.

"I know," I said, grinding my teeth.

"Well," said the CBC man, "can't you sort of stick the characters in?"

*Betty Lambert, who also teaches in the English Department of Simon Fraser University, is a freelance writer whose plays include The Riddle Machine, The Song of the Serpent, World, World, Go Away, Sqrieux-de-Dieu and The Visitor.*