All Things Have Their Season: Henry Beissel's Children's Drama

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A Trumpet for Nap, Tankred Dorst, translated and adapted by Henry Beissel. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. 51 pp. $2.50. Also available in *Three Plays: Grand Tirade of the Town Wall, The Curve, A Trumpet for Nap,* Tankred Dorst, translated and adapted by Henry Beissel. Playwrights Co-op, 1976. 104 pp. $3.50.

Mr. Skinflint, Henry Beissel. Unpublished. Performing rights held by author, 4158 Oxford Avenue, Montreal, Quebec H4A 2Y4.

For Crying Out Loud, Henry Beissel. In *Cues and Entrances: Ten Canadian One-Act Plays,* ed. Henry Beissel. Gage, Toronto, 1977. 192 pp. $2.95 paper.

Inook and the Sun, Henry Beissel. Playwrights Co-op, Toronto, 1974. 76 pp. $2.95 paper.

The dramatic output of Montreal writer Henry Beissel is a clear warning against over-simple demarcation between children's theatre and adult theatre, since two of the four plays discussed here as suitable for young audiences are as much for adults as for children. That they are both marionette plays has undoubtedly influenced attitudes towards them, since there is no North American equivalent to the European and Asian traditions of serious (i.e. adult, another misconception) puppetry. In his Introduction to *Inook and the Sun* the author expresses his intention that it should "make a small contribution towards the maturing of puppetry in the West where all too often puppets are regarded as something 'for the kids.' " Beissel is actually doing more than that, for in all four plays, and in more recent adult work, he is exploring the communicative power of the very conventions of which theatre is made.

A Trumpet for Nap is a translation and adaptation of a marionette play published in 1959 by the contemporary German playwright Tankred Dorst, several of whose other works Beissel has also translated. The first production of this English language version took place in London, England, in 1968, and it has had repeated runs since.

The simple plot involves the rise from poverty to international stardom of Napoleon Holiday by virtue of a magical jazz trumpet given him by the cheerfully overweight fairy godmother figure of his dead Aunt Rebecca. Nap's heady success makes him forget the virtuous Lizzie, succumb to the bewitching Helen Serpent (agent of the three sinister "ministers" representing the evil capitalist political establishment) who steals his trumpet, and land penniless again in jail.

Aunt Rebecca floats down to the rescue with a file, good advice, Lizzie and a wedding cake.

The fairy-tale nature of the plot includes such fable motifs as three attempts to blow the magic trumpet and a fish swallowing the stolen trumpet. The structure of worldly achievement, temptation, fall, hardship, and true happiness is set in the America of the imagination, the New Orleans that is next door to Eldorado.

Lest it be thought that *A Trumpet for Nap* is a stereotyped children's play, however, note should be taken of the "real live narrator" who is included in the cast of puppets. Narration is part of his role, perhaps too much, but he has artistically and theatrically more important purposes. He discusses with the audience the structure of the play as it progresses, and the need for a happy ending. The playwright's decisions are self-consciously examined; the theatrical metaphor is made plain for all to see.

The Narrator's interaction with the marionettes serves a similar function. Here is a sample from the opening of the play:

> *Herald* (a marionette): This evening we are presenting the fabulous rise of Napoleon . . .
> *Narrator:* . . . that's not the emperor of course, but the dishwasher, Napoleon.
> *Herald:* . . . from the shacks and backyards of the slums . . .
> *Narrator:* . . . we all know what a rich and fertile environment that is!

The ironic and sometimes cynical comments of the Narrator here and elsewhere provide a foil to the simplicity of the fable. The double perspective creates an ambiguity of meaning and subtlety of mood that make it clear that this play is for adults as much as for children. The interplay of human narration and marionette action achieves a particular mode of theatrical sophistication impossible with live actors alone.

Political and social satire are also conveyed by the Narrator, as for instance in the revelation that the stock market is tumbling and the capitalist system collapsing because everyone has been made so happy by Nap's jazz that they dance happily instead of sweating for their bosses. Art liberates us all.

The double perspective is emphasized by the Narrator's didactic role. He constantly points out the morals, reminds us that "the wheel of fortune has come full turn", and leaves us at the end forced to decide whether or not Nap deserves a second chance with the magic trumpet. Aunt Rebecca has an almost equally Brechtian job of moralizing in her song about her Coronation Cake:

> What good is a handful of flour
> All by its poor little self?
> Inedible, I'd say, jus'you try . . . .

* * *

And you jus' eat one bitter almond
All by its acrimonious self -
It's so nasty I swear you're gonna cry.

By themselves the ingredients don't amount to nothing much . . . . But you put everything together—the sweet and the bitter—and make a cake from it . . . .

* * *

Now my cake is no ord'nary cake,
'Cause it teaches a man to take
All the sad with the gay,
Ev'ry night, ev'ry day,
For life's bitter and sweet like my cake.

Moralist or not, Aunt Rebecca is fun, and much of the theatrical vitality of *A Trumpet for Nap* derives from its energy, fun, and fantasy. The three sinister politicians are represented by three large white telephone receivers choreographed in free space. The warm-up numbers before Nap's big concert at Jubilee Hall include an Androcles who mistakenly gets eaten by the lion, a weightlifter who eventually disappears into the flies doing handstands on his weights, endless can-can dancers, and the narrator's typically sardonic description of "a fata morgana . . . presented by 70 ladies from the New York City Ballet. They are dressed in transparent veils and they undulate backwards and forwards to create the illusion of water." And when Nap's third attempt to blow the trumpet results in a "magnificent solo" we have the following stage direction:

> The melody Nap plays on the trumpet is taken up by a band. The lids of the garbage cans begin to rattle, mice and cats dance, the garbage from the cans and the tins and boxes all fall in line in a grotesque dance behind the trumpet-playing Nap who, himself dancing, moves off into the city.

The scope of marionette theatre is evident, and Beissel's version of Dorst's play has exploited the medium to the full. A simple story with lots of action, commented on with elaborate irony by a narrator who is thoroughly involved with the puppets himself, results in a rich drama for both adult and child.

The first performance of *Mister Skinflint: a comedy for marionettes* in May 1969 in Montreal followed the English presentation of *A Trumpet for Nap* by only a year. The cast of puppets again includes "a real live Narrator", but this time the play is aimed exclusively at a child audience, probably five to twelve-years-old.

The characters are not only simple but stock: the miserly Skinflint, his virtuous daughter Pearl, the young hero, an amiable uncle, an avaricious widow, and a well-intentioned pirate ghost in league with the audience. He is invisible to

everyone else except the Narrator and Rosy the pig. The plot involves the unsuccessful efforts of Skinflint and various other unworthy characters to get for themselves the ghost's treasure, but after misunderstandings, mistaken identities, stolen gold and false arrests, finally the intervention of the narrator and shouting by the audience ensures a happy ending.

Audience participation (in the vocal manner of this play, at the very least) is often mistakenly considered a *sine qua non* of children's theatre, and there is no questioning its effectiveness. But encouragement and control of such participation are delicate operations, as any actor will tell you, so the Narrator in this play is vital. He is somewhat foolish (always a sure-fire success) and gets himself arrested and led away by a policeman just when he is needed most. Therefore his return to ensure a happy ending, and his concern with the storybook which he keeps losing, give him a similar artistic function to that of the Narrator in *A Trumpet for Nap.* To underline the theatrical point being made, the Narrator (played by Beissel himself in the original production) actually emerges at the start of the play from a large coffer marked "Treasure Chest"; and at the end of the play the puppeteers come forward to lower the marionettes into the same chest. The playwright's idea of treasure and its uses is clear.

Confusion over the nature of "treasure" is, indeed, one of the principle themes of the story. Skinflint is constantly being interrupted by people looking for, as he thinks, his treasure. In each case they are referring to some other "treasure" such as his daughter Pearl (the name invites confusion), or Rosy the pig. The final disposition of the actual pirate's treasure is unusual for this type of tale in that the hero splits it with old Skinflint in order to win Pearl. (Inook also bargains in *Inook and the Sun.)* The narrator, who had previously explained to us that riches will only bring happiness to someone who is not mean and greedy, now tells us that the hero's solution has made everyone happy; this is certainly true, but somewhat at odds with the audience expectations generated at the start of the play.

Like *A Trumpet for Nap,* the play is lively and full of incident. The invisible ghost and the ghost-chasing pig are useful comic devices, as is the existence of a character who is the spitting image of the hero and called, therefore, Spit. Beissel's theatrical use of sound is inventive, as in the scene involving the musician Fiddle (who does so badly), the Butler Snub (who yawns loudly), and the dog Amadeus who alternately whines off-key and crunches up violins.

The weakest aspect of an otherwise satisfactory play is the language. The situation is custom made for word hoards. Children love the inventive and sensuous piling up of words. Use could be made of piratical, musical and miserly slang, and comic abuse should certainly rise above the level of "you blind muckworm" and "a pox on the pig." The plot is active enough, but the opportunity to enrich it with the sound of words is insufficiently exploited.

By far the least successful of the works considered here is *For Crying Out Loud,* described by the author as "a play for young adults," meaning teenagers,

specifically from fourteen to sixteen. It is also the only play written for actors rather than for marionettes. Commissioned by the Toronto Young People's Theatre after the success of *Inook and the Sun,* with which it shares many thematic concerns, it was never performed by them. Its only production so far has been by a high school in Ontario.

The story centres on an illiterate sports-obsessed teenager called Rocky who wakes up in the middle of the night to find he has been proclaimed supreme leader of a successful revolution. His father is transformed to a field-marshal, his English teacher to minister of education and his girlfriend Cathy to a voluptuous sex-queen. The revolution has been engineered by creatures from "inner space" called Asomatans who are represented on stage by a red light named Alpha. Only Rocky and the audience can see and hear Alpha (just as only the audience, Narrator, and Rosy the pig could see the ghost in *Mr. Skinflint*).

Pessimistic visions of death (Omega) and the future (a soothsayer) finally spur Rocky to prove that he can cure the world's ills as the revolution requires. He outlaws pollution, poverty, inflation, crime and war; abolishes banks, money, the army and compulsory school; and proclaims a policy of love to the turbulent crowds outside his window just before he realizes the revolution has failed and he is about to be assassinated. Enter two male nurses to put him in a straight-jacket and jolt the audience into thinking the play has been Rocky's insane fantasy. Then Rocky wakes up; now the play must be seen as a dream. Curtain. But the red light, Alpha, is still there. Was it real after all?

For Crying Out Loud would be almost unplayable in the theatre. The tone is condescending, the character of Rocky quite unbelievable within any convention, the language stilted, and the entire concept gimmicky. It is for instance hard to imagine an audience of "young adults" taking seriously the pedantic priggishness of Alpha about bad language:

Rocky: O shit!
Alpha: oh your language!

* * *

Rocky: I don't give a . . . goddam about Asimitons!
Alpha: Asomatans.—And you'll have to do something about your language, really . . . if you want to do something about the world.

In fairness, however, I must record that at least one teenager who saw the Ontario school production identified strongly with Rocky, and with a play that, as she saw it, dealt sympathetically with the frustrations of growing up in a world controlled by self-seeking adults.

The play's real interest lies in its ideas, which are very similar to those of Beissel's other work, and much more explicit here. The concern with language (not just swearing, but language as a tool of thought and communication) is

emphasized by the improvement in Rocky's speech as the play progresses, and his realization of its importance.

> *Alpha:* Your language is improving.
> *Rocky:* It ain't good enough. I know it ain't good enough, because, you know, I feel, like, all cramped up inside. It's like I sometimes dream: the pitcher has thrown the ball, I see it coming at me—but I ain't got no bat.

Rocky's awareness that the inadequacy of his language is at the root of his inability to think straight leads him to the inevitable conclusion that he needs school and the knowledge learning can provide if he is to understand the contradictions of the world.

Contradictions, paradoxes and dualisms abound in the play, as the presence of both an Alpha and an Omega should indicate. The principal dichotomy, and the play's major point, is spelled out by Mr. Cross (note the name), Rocky's English teacher, near the end:

> *Alpha:* . . . everything is possible. I exist in another dimension. I'm pure spirit.
> *Cross:* Then you're less than we are. We're flesh and bones inhabited by spirit. And to be human we must nurture and develop both . . . Yes, we're gods and animals rolled in one, each one of us. And we've got to fit those two halves of ourselves together. Without degrading or destroying either.

This traditional concept has dramatic potential to be sure, particularly in theatrical modes that go beyond the merely realistic, but its possibilities are not realized in this play. We must turn to the much more successful *Inook and the Sun* to see similar ideas worked into a coherent dramatic form.

Performance at the Stratford Festival is the best possible springboard for any new Canadian play, so it is hardly surprising that *Inook and the Sun* is Henry Beissel's best known work. It deserves its fame, and since the 1973 Third Stage opening at Stratford it has had several other productions. Some have used marionettes and masks as specified by Beissel, others, actors, dancers, or multimedia treatment. The theatrical future of the play seems assured.

Eugene Benson points out in his review of the play in *CCL* No. 3, quoting the author, "Inook is not primarily written for children . . ." In this it resembles *A Trumpet for Nap,* which also has as much or more appeal for adults as children. The opening couplet cackled by the black Raven can hardly fail to suggest to most adults the ambiguous world of *Macbeth:*

> White is black, and black is white
> Arctic winter, arctic night.

The uncertain values of Shakespeare's tragedy are not inappropriate here, but the second half of the quatrain has a specificity and bite that are Beissel's alone:

> Snow wind, ice wind, wolves at bay
> Man and beast are winter's prey.

The choral nature of this introduction takes us directly into a world of myth and symbol, of death and rebirth, of ritual dances, of trials of strength, initiation and understanding. To say it is an adult world rather than a child's world is to miss the point: it is a numinous creation that comprehends both.

The story of *Inook and the Sun* involves the Inuit boy Inook in a winter journey to bring the Sun back to his land so that his people will have good hunting again. In the course of his quest Inook must deal with wild animals and spirits, hardships and dangers, riddles and despair, before finally freeing the Sun to return (for part of each year) as his bride.

The technique of the play was inspired by Japanese Bunraku puppetry, in which the puppeteers are visible on stage with their large marionettes. Beissel says in his Introduction,

> It occurred to me that the manipulators could wear masks and interact with the puppets, and that such a technique would be particularly appropriate to the two basic dimensions of the Eskimo experience as I saw it—the one natural, the other supernatural. The spirit figures might be effectively enacted through masks, and the Eskimo, pincipally Inook himself, through puppets.

A Trumpet for Nap and *Mr. Skinflint* also involve interaction between humans and marionettes. Even *For Crying Out Loud* uses visions and spirits in a similar way. It is no coincidence that Felix Mirbt, the puppeteer who first presented *Mr. Skinflint* in Montreal, was principal puppeteer and co-director of the Stratford production of *Inook and the Sun*. Here too the theatrical subtlety of puppetry is used as a metaphor for what cannot be comprehended. The mythic and symbolic levels of the play are powerful precisely because they are presented by means of a strict and artificial convention. In this way Beissel's recurrent themes and ideas are given dramatic force.

Professor Benson has drawn attention to the importance of imagination and knowledge in the play. Inook really becomes a man not when he kills his first bear, important as that is, but when he learns that "all things have their season." Understanding and courage enable Inook to see beauty, achieve wisdom, and resolve the ambiguities of the arctic.

The polarities (if I may be forgiven the term) of the play are suggested in Beissel's Introduction:

> The stark realities of the conflict between summer and winter,

> light and dark, heat and cold, and the struggle to survive between them, seemed to call out for dramatic treatment . . . .

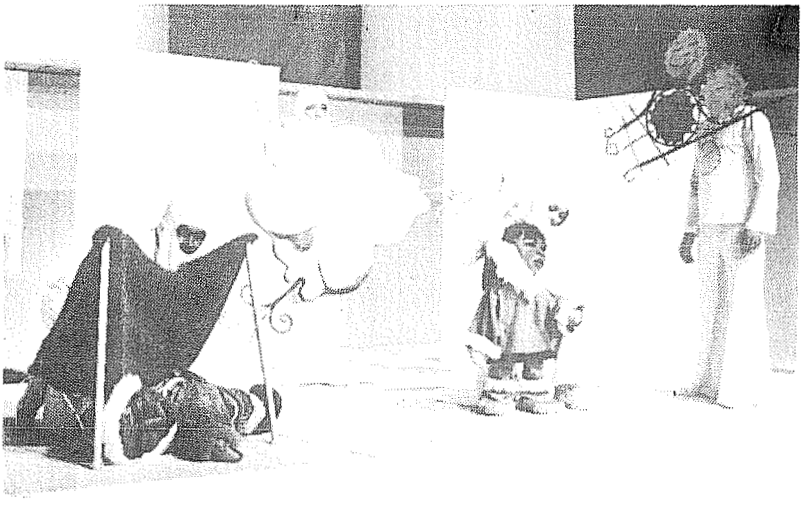
"The struggle to survive between them" is also Rocky's choice between idealism and pessimism, Alpha and Omega, spirit and body, god and beast; in another sense it is Aunt Rebecca's bittersweet Coronation Cake, and Nap's rise and fall on the wheel of fortune. "Tears are the price of living," says the Spirit of the Moon; "Life is full of joy" replies the Spirit of the Wind. Although these two Spirits seem at first to be opposites, and although Inook is helped by the Wind and is determined to prove himself to the pessimistic Moon (rather as Rocky reacts to Omega), it becomes clear that they are not absolutes, that each must be allowed to have his season. The Raven closes the play on the same ambiguous note on which it opened, but arctic twilight has now been replaced by a golden sunrise, and the mood is one of understanding.

> Summer comes and winter goes
> Winter comes and summer goes
> Man kills beast and beast kills man–
> Thus it was since time began.

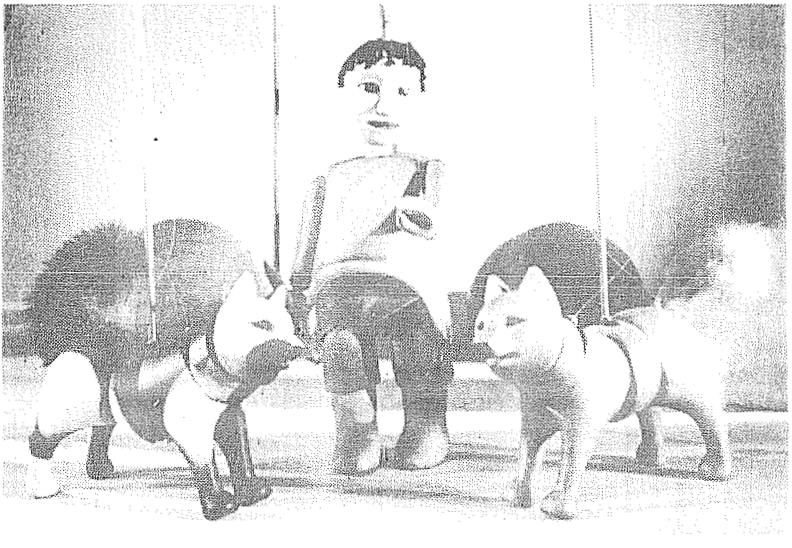
Inook and the Sun is a highly theatrical piece. The visual possibilities for puppets, masks, costumes, setting and lighting are enormous. Beissel's sense of sound, particularly in the ritual dance, is powerful. Language, apart from occasional lapses such as "it is your light/That flushes our skies" is formal and strong. And the structural pattern of quest and achievement is fulfilled through the remarkable interplay between the puppets and their own puppeteers.

While I would not wish to argue with Professor Benson's admiration for the drawings of Norman Yates in the published text, it seems to me unfortunate that the opportunity was not taken to illustrate the stage possibilities of the play. There have already been several productions. Photographs showing different approaches to the text by directors, designers, puppeteers and actors could do much to aid the theatrical imagination of the reader, as the accompanying production photographs demonstrate. To illustrate a play script as if it were a complete work of literature and nothing more is to perpetuate misunderstanding of the theatre and to ignore the centrality of performance in any real understanding of drama. (See illustrations on following pages).

Of the four works by Henry Beissel considered here, the three marionette plays are all lively theatre. All three use song and dance, comic dialogue, magic and fantasy within the framework of a serious moral theme. Beissel works to achieve his didactic purpose by delighting his audience, and it is noteworthy that he is most successful in the two plays that are not specifically for children. His purpose is not to preach, to talk down to children, but to deal with fundamental moral problems in a way that will be accessible to young people as well as to adults. The lack of artistry of *For Crying Out Loud,* in which he con-



Marionettes, actors and puppeteers combine in the 1973 production of *Inook and the Sun* at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, Canada.



Inuit soapstone carvings inspired the design of the wooden puppets used at the Little Angel Marionette Theatre, London, England. Note the absence of visible puppeteers or actors in this production of *Inook and the Sun.*

descends to his audience, and the success of both *A Trumpet for Nap* and *Inook and the Sun,* in which the writing is not primarily for children, indicate the importance of taking young audiences seriously. Mr. Skinflint, it is true, constitutes successful theatre exclusively for children, but is an altogether less significant work than the other two marionette plays.

Confirmation of this view of Beissel's moral concern in his work is found in his most recent adult play *Goya* which had its premiere in Montreal in late 1976. Speaking about the play in an interview with the *Montreal Star* (6 November 1976), Beissel said:

> Certainly Goya faced [paradoxes and conflicts], but in the play I make no attempt to solve them, because they can't be solved. There are no simple answers in life. There are only unresolvable contradictions which we somehow have to learn to live with and somehow survive with some degree of integrity.

In the play itself Goya is faced with moral dilemmas reminiscent of those of Nap, Inook and Rocky. Just as interaction between actors and marionettes is used in most of Beissel's children's plays to explore the nature of man and the ambiguous moral universe surrounding him, in *Goya* the subjects of the artist's portraits come to life to people the imagination of both their creator and the theatre audience.

Henry Beissel is most successful when he uses theatrical convention, be it marionettes, masks, or "unreal" actors, to embody his dramatic images. His moral concerns are remarkably consistent throughout both his children's and adult plays. The new technical explorations of *Goya,* after the dead-end of *For Crying Out Loud,* give reason to look forward to the possibility of more plays as exciting for young audiences as *A Trumpet for Nap* and *Inook and the Sun.*

A former member of the Drama Department at McGill University, David Carnegie is now teaching at the University of Wellington in New Zealand. He has worked in professional and educational theatre in Canada, Britain, and New Zealand, and he has published many reviews and articles about both children's and adult theatre.