

Components of Success in Foord's Plays

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A Dream of Sky People and *Shaman*, Isabelle Foord, Playwrights Co-op, 1970 and 1971. \$3.00.

Junkyard, Isabelle Foord, Playwrights Co-op, 1970. \$2.50.

Say Hi to Owsley, Isabelle Foord, Playwrights Co-op, 1970. \$2.50.

Isabelle Foord creates a personal child drama out of native mythic variants and a satirical examination of contemporary society. Of the four plays reviewed here, two (*A Dream of Sky People* and *Shaman*) are retellings of myths and two (*Junkyard* and *Say Hi to Owsley*) are youth culture satires. Three of the four centre upon a bickering couple who quarrel amusingly before they find themselves able to reach an experienced and educated epiphany. A wise and friendly elder generally assists the couple in their progress. *Owsley* is the exception to this pattern, and it is the least successful of the plays. Throughout her work, Foord uses mime, song and dance, and elemental props (particularly coloured bands of cloth) to encourage audience involvement. Her texts achieve beautifully simple results with this apparently artless range of devices.

Shaman and *A Dream of Sky People* read more effectively than the other two. Given a strong core of myth, Foord can relax with the material and insist on its importance as a story. Or, as the aged storyteller would have it:

They call me a magus, a conjurer, a magician, a witch. It makes no difference. Words are cheap.

This is only self-deprecation, of course, for soon enough the storyteller has drawn the group of skeptics (the audience?) whom she has confronted out of their circle and into her dream, the play.

A Dream relates the descent of Nabazho and Nacha, the Sky People. This Canadian Adam and Eve have been called down the wind into the earthworld of the Lynx, the Grizzly, the Caribou, and also of their guardian, the Spider Lady:

... In the winter, I must spin among the stars. Then my people sleep.
In the summer, I weave a soft green blanket for the ground.

Although terrified by the violence of the Lynx ("Good is a kill; pretty is a full stomach"), Nabazho and Nacha learn courage and compassion and the Spider Lady introduces them to the natural riches of their new home.

Shaman flows with even simpler, more essential rhythms, Mic (Musk Ox) and Mac (Arctic Owl) have been mutated by the evil Ooktah into “naked newts”. They are neither animal, nor fish, nor fowl—but a pathetic combination of all three. They flee to a good Shaman to seek protection. The storyline is elastic, and Foord has organized the material so that Ooktah’s subsequent attacks on the Shaman’s magic circle provide numerous opportunities for participation and decision making by the young (ages 5 to 11) audience. When Ooktah finally penetrates the circle, Mic and Mac are strong enough to use their natural ingenuity as animals to defeat him—but only after some cajoling by the Shaman:

Oh, by the Northern Lights! Will you stop that gurgling! Just believe that you’re strong and brave! Belief is the best medicine.

Ooktah is defeated by the combined forces of the ox, owl, shaman, and the audience, and upon the loss of his evil medicine is transformed into Seal. The suggestion here is of healing and positive transformation (of magic, really). Even the most evil creatures are only distortions of familiar animals, and the Arctic is at peace again.

Perhaps it is the unexpected absence of a childlike story which tells itself, with characters whose action and dialogue are attractively circumscribed by their roles as mythic components, that disappoints the most, but *Say Hi to Owsley* strikes me as an ambitious failure. Foord introduces an impressive number of satirical episodes: the not-unrelated topics of ecology, politicians, violence, television, UFOs, and the apocalypse all make self-mocking appearances. The dialogue is uneven and, despite stage instructions indicating “Pinter pause” or even “a painful Pinter pause”, the result seems talky. The funny bits (Noah as Cecille B. De Mille, the “Art Linkletter show”) bump uneasily against the strident caricatures such as the Prime Minister:

I have, in a completely unconstitutional act, wrested power from those quacks in the Pentagon who have concentrated three thousand years of civilised history to miserable little armed skirmishes on the surface of this crapcan of a planet, and opened up a new frontier. . .
SPACE WAR! !

Say Hi To Owsley is strange and uneven—almost inevitable, given the concentration and disassociation of the play. “The cast of Thousands” which Foord smiles at in her introduction is too unwieldy an ensemble to produce a unified statement.

Junkyard is a more successful satire because the characters sound both funny and true. The hero, Claude, a would-be Hamlet spouting parodies of Yeats and Ché, is a delightful mockery of the youth culture’s self-dramatization and romanticism. Flower, the heroine and girlfriend of Claude, brings a measure of realism to their struggles (she suggests that they use passive resistance

to protect the junkyard), and the attendant, Blues Band, who speaks by means of kazoo, is a friendly representative of youthful shyness and inarticulation. There is (need it be said?) opposition in their form of stodgy and utilitarian adults. Mrs. Tripp and Mr. Mayor don't want to cancel the sockhop ball this time out. Instead, they are attempting to replace the source-of-creativity-and-fun junkyard with a parking lot. The young people turn militant in its defense. As Flower says of their treasurehouse:

But that depends on how you look at it. If you look carefully, you'll see it is pirate's treasure. Pirates aren't tidy! Look at it another way and it's the ruins of the Chapel Perilous. Ruins take up space, and nobody bothers about that!

After several rounds of satisfactorily farcical posturing by both camps, the truth of this observation is at last generally accepted, and *Junkyard* ends harmoniously with a communal. Peace reigns along the generation gap.

The success of *Junkyard* depends upon Foord's skilfully ironic celebration of the youth culture of the last ten years. Her work often refers to artifacts found in this milieu: the sub-title of *Sky People* is "A Rock Myth For Young Adults", and this may be good indication of the parallels Foord hopes to reveal. The same play includes Beatle songs (from *Abbey Road*) as suggested commentaries, there is a selection from *Hair* ("Be-In") in *Junkyard*; and the opening dialogue of *Owsley* evokes memories of the conclusion of *Easy Rider* ("You blew it.") Such pop ready-mades may provide a useful focus in performance, but they interrupt the pattern of the works as literature. Far more valuable is the gentle lesson in each play, "Act Brave", and the repeated demonstration that even the most hostile environment may be transformed by belief and love. Isabelle Foord is capable of a relaxed theatre that fascinates and teaches with only the simplest of materials. One awaits further works, and their wider reception.

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