

The strengths of this fantasy lie in the originality of theme and richness of imagination which nourish its situations, dialogue and songs. At the same time, the play poses obstacles as theatre for performance and production by children. Some of the complex characterization would tax the resources of the maturest actors, and the play's staging, particularly from the standpoint of sound-cueing and lighting, is extremely complicated. Notwithstanding this play has much to give.

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Of Shoes and Ships — and Garbage Cans

BETTY DUFFIELL

Stick With Molasses, Beth McMaster. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. \$2.50 paper

George, Gertie and the Garbage Grabbers, Felicity Marcus. Playwrights Co-op 1973. \$2.50 paper.

Garbage cans—how odd. These two plays for children share this unusual common denominator. One garbage can serves as home for a temporary genie; the other sings, dances and calls himself Joe. But the plays themselves are very different. *Stick with Molasses* is a firmly scripted dip into children's fantasy and works within an easily recognizable format. *George, Gertie and the Garbage Grabbers* becomes a bizarre, imaginative trip with science fiction overtones, relying substantially upon actors adept at working with an audience of youngsters.

Stick with Molasses is familiar fare. The forces of Good overcome Evil. 'Good' is Charles, a young man arriving to work in his Uncle David's circus, only to find his uncle has died. 'Good' is Hilary, a pretty lion tamer kept busy avoiding Jabez Fump, ringmaster with dishonourable intentions. The circus fortune-teller, Hulda Crump, manipulates Jabez and covets the circus for her own. Jabez and Hulda plan to destroy the will of David Holbrook which names Charles as the new circus owner. Before the will can be destroyed it disappears and the game is on.

Charles and Hilary are aided in their search by two allies: Alvin the totall

tame lion and Freddie, a rather special genie. Freddie makes his home in a garbage can—pardon me—sanitary receptacle. After all, he reasons, who is going to rub a garbage can? Frustrations, danger and hope abound until Goodness wins the day. Charles regains his circus; Hilary and Freddie will help him; and Miss Crump, relegated by trickery to Garbage Can Genie, is patiently attended by faithful Jabez.

Predictable—but with charm and whimsy: a genie in a garbage can, dressed as a hobo, a genie who looks and talks like W.C. Fields and possesses both a slipping memory and a magic carpet. But this carpet does not fly. It secures its victims in a molasses-like vice until the magic word—if recalled—is spoken. Small touches add sparkle and fun. Songs slip in and out the action—Jabez with his allergic sneeze, Freddie as he unpacks his garbage ‘house’ and settles into circus life, and Alvin, the friendly lion whom everyone will love.

The play moves smoothly through a script peppered with audience participation: chases, hiding, instances where the audience knows what the actors do not realize. A single set, adaptable to box or the round, provides ample scope for imaginative use of colour, design and versatility. A ‘working’ lion cage and circus tent which will open into the fortune-teller’s lair are the basics. Dressed with banners, flags and streamers, the potential exists to trim a fine production. Children of all ages who take pleasure in the predictable will enjoy the entertainment and participate in the fun. *Stick with Molasses* is a pleasant piece of children’s theatre, but it stretches neither the actor nor the audience.

Not so with *George, Gertie and the Garbage Grabbers*. The script was developed during rehearsals at the Edmonton Experimental Theatre, where the production was first performed in October, 1972. The play depends heavily upon improvisations of action, dialogue and mime.

From the outset, an open stage gives the audience time to explore the set with their eyes and thus begin the participation process. An ingenious assortment of odds and ends represent the junk shop, operated by George, the practical, and Gertie, his zany assistant. A decided lack of customers, coupled with Gertie’s tendency to purchase outlandish (and unsaleable) gadgets like the doody-wangle-zippo-dealy keep the shop unprofitable. How to pay the rent? Two customers appear. Both are totally bizarre in dress and, in one case, language: Mtai, of the cape and velvet knickers, and Varoomska, a vamp with rat-like persuasions who promises \$1000.00 for a particular garbage can.

The sought-after can cowers in a corner, discovered at last by George and Gertie. Quite a can. Joe Garbage may sing and dance, but he is a marked can-man. Varoomska’s red circle is upon him. Varoomska and her cohorts are garbage eaters from the planet of Garbagia, trying to colonize earth and turn it into one huge, delicious garbage dump.

Far-fetched? Yes. In fact, the plot wears thin and lacks much cohesiveness.

The opportunities for audience and actors outweigh these defects. Much of the humour is visual, involving costumes, pratfalls, and mime. A marvelous sense of the ridiculous is all pervasive, augmented by a dash of spooks and 'other-worldliness'. Pacing and storyline require audience participation and concentration. How many will remember the spray cans? The plot, like a detective story, scatters clues. The audience must take two steps forward to respond. If the response is not forthcoming the actors strive to subtly draw out the information.

Weird characters invade the stage: Varoomska and her repulsive comrade Blod; Mtai of the incomprehensible language and a marvelous excuse for mime; Joe, a garbage pail with arms, legs, and lid for a hat, singing and dancing his way to the CBC. The play, if it works, could be great fun.

Each play makes very different production demands. *Stick with Molasses* could be well-mounted by either an amateur or professional troupe, and it will surely please most audiences. *George, Gertie and the Garbage Grabbers* is more selective. It demands professional actors with well-developed skills in working with an audience. Many small props and two sets make travelling impractical. The play has greater potential for success in a 'home' theatre where audiences, too, are creative. The more theatre-experienced they are, the more likely an audience is to respond to this kind of theatrical stimulation.

These are interesting plays, but they are not great. Neither leaps from page to imagination like an *Inook and the Sun*, nor gives one the feeling of a particularly Canadian play. Both lack a definite sense of place. Still, in the hands of the right directors, both offer a framework to pleasurable, imaginative productions.

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