# Canadians in Wonderland: New Plays for Children

*EUGENE BENSON*

*A Collection of Canadian Plays* (vol. 4), ed. Rolf Kalman. Simon and Pierre, 1975. 320 pp. Illustrated. $16.50 hardcover.

In *The Republic of Childhood* (1975 edition), Sheila Egoff points out that children's drama is the most neglected of the various genres of children's literature. This is true, she argues, not only of children's drama in Canada, but of other countries as well, and she suggests that this dearth of children's drama is caused by the lack of theatres primarily directed to the production of plays for children. It is also true, I think, that the greatest works of children's literature succeed because they appeal directly to the imagination of the child, unfettered by such intermediaries as directors, actors, designers and so on. When a child reads *Gulliver's Travels* or *Alice in Wonderland,* he has no difficulty visualizing Lilliputians or Brobdingnagians or the Mad Hatter. Dramatise these works and the imagination is forced to accommodate itself too often to interpretations that belittle the genius of Swift or Carroll. The dramatist who writes for children has a very difficult task; in 1975 Egoff was only able to refer to six Canadian plays and musicals for children.

Happily that situation has now changed for the better. The Playwrights' Co-op of Toronto has published a number of children's plays, six of which I reviewed in issue No. 3 of *CCL.* Among the plays reviewed then was Henry Beissel's beautifully crafted *Inook and the Sun,* a play which promises to become a children's classic.

The Playwright's Co-op's efforts have now been supplemented by Volume 4 of Simon and Pierre Publishing Company's collection of Canadian plays; the general editor of the series, Rolf Kalman, has enlisted the aid of Susan Rubes for this collection of children's plays. Susan Rubes, the well known director of Young People's Theatre, Toronto, is one of the most knowledgeable people in Canada on drama for children. Volume 4 contains ten plays: *Land of Magic Spell* by Larry Zacharko, photos by Janis Mitchell; *Which Witch is Which?* by Beth McMaster, illustrated by Pat Belanger, *The Clam Made a Face* by Eric Nicol, illustrated by Sirje Jones; *Nuts and Bolts and Rusty Things* by Fred Thury and Robert Galbraith, photos by Mike Gluss, orchestration by Glenn Morley; *King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie* by David Kemp, illustrated by William A. Kimber; *Professor Fuddle's Fantastic Fairy-Tale Machine* by Alan Egerton Ball, musical score by Paul Bradbury, illustrations by Gail Geltner; *Cyclone Jack* by Carol Bolt, photos by Phil Lapides; *Billy Bishop and the Red Baron* by Len Peterson; *Masque,* adapted by Ron Cameron from James Reaney's *One-Man Masque,* illustrated by Catherine Wilson; *Catalyst* by John Ibbitson,

illustrated by Sandy Griffin. The book is handsomely printed and bound, and the various plays tastefully illustrated. Not all the plays are good, but there are enough good things in this collection to make this publication an event to be applauded.

In general, these plays may be classified under two categories—those which seem to be primarily concerned with presenting information and involving the audience (drama as a pedagogic tool), those where the play itself is the thing, where the dramatist's sole purpose is to excite pleasure and expand imaginative horizons. It may be said immediately that the better plays in this volume fall in the second category and that the best of these is *Masque.*

*Land of Magic Spell* has been produced by Toronto's Young People's Theatre. It has six characters and lends itself easily to staging. The play concerns Bill's search for some letters of the alphabet and how in that search he meets such gnomic characters as Crossword, Echo, Miss Take and Miss Spell, and Punctuation. The didactic purpose of the play is too obvious and the language lacks freshness; there are, however, a number of good scenes and the play can be recommended as pleasant and interesting.

Beth McMaster's *Which Witch is Which?* will appeal to children because of its central villain whom they will love to hate. The play has five characters, it is not difficult to stage, it invites audience participation, and it is splendidly farfetched in its central situation—that of a young witch who is not sufficiently wicked to do well in the Scary School for Witches. The villain, Superintendent Sneersby, is well designed to elicit youthful hisses and fears. I feel that the play could benefit from cutting and that the songs interrupt the action unnecessarily. But this is an entertaining play that children will enjoy.

Eric Nicol, author of *The Clam Made a Face,* is well known for his plays, novels and short stories; it is disappointing to find that *The Clam Made a Face* is a dull play which recounts various legends of British Columbia. As his frame device, Nicol utilizes a potlatch and has his Indians tell various stories. But the stories are *told* rather than dramatized, and commentary supplants demonstration.

*Nuts and Bolts and Rusty Things* is a play about the relationship of dream and reality. Mr. Beans is an engaging, elderly junk collector who tutors a young boy, Sammy, in the ways of the imagination. They set out on a quest and are faced with various barriers that must be overcome and various riddles that must be solved. The play is excellent in its inventive employment of common everyday things that we might find in an abandoned attic, and the interface of real and imaginary situations is well handled. The resolution of the play, however, is false and at odds with the 'philosophy' that has been developed in the play. We, the audience, have been led to identify with Mr. Bean and his ability to transform nuts and bolts and rusty things into symbols; when Sammy falls and breaks his leg at the play's end, we, and Sammy, are told that only *real* doctors can heal *real* broken legs. True, but the theme of the play to this point

had been an exaltation of imagination over sense, symbol over nuts and bolts.

*King Grumbletum and The Magic Pie* is less a play than a series of exercises written to permit children to participate in a make-believe situation; this is educational drama with an obvious didactic purpose (the author is a member of a Faculty of Education). The play would probably interest children in the seven to nine year range, but I feel that it lacks imaginative stretch and intellectual challenge. Grumbletum is a gross carricature and his situation (he has a tummy ache that must be cured) is too simplistic. The illustrations to this play are beautifully and lavishly executed.

An absent-minded professor (a Nobel prize winner who has fled Montreal to live in Newfoundland), a computer that brings to life the characters of fairy stories, a real boy who kisses the computerized Snowhite into life (the language of this scene is too sentimental—"Every kiss is a fantasy . . . It is not the kiss that is important, but what the kiss means"), a search for the lost Snowhite that depends on clues found in the plays of Shakespeare—these are the disparate elements of an engaging, witty and intelligent play, *Professor Fuddle's Fantastic Fairy-Tale Machine.* Whereas one applauds the refusal of author Alan Ball to 'write down' to his audience, the play is perhaps too intellectualized, and too dependent on fairly complex stage effects. Perhaps too the play might be pared somewhat; it is too dense, too enigmatic, too demanding. But the very excesses of this play are witness to Ball's feeling for the richness of language and extravagance of situation. Alan Ball is a playwright of ample promise.

Since I have already reviewed the seventh play of this collection, Carol Bolt's *Cyclone Jack,* I will merely refer readers to issue No. 3 of *Canadian Children's Literature.*

Len Peterson is perhaps the most experienced and prolific dramatist in Canada; he knows how to construct a plot neatly, he has a good ear for dialogue, and he can create credible characters with economy and conviction. *Billy Bishop and the Red Baron* demonstrates all of Peterson's skills in these areas.

The play recreates the careers of two fliers of World War One—the Baron von Richthofen, fabled ace of the German Air Force, and Captain Billy Bishop of the Royal Flying Corps who shot the Baron down in aerial combat. This play is full of exciting scenes that involve young audience who will delight in the lessons in how to fly a propellor-driven plane and the chance to engage in dogfights. Had the play stuck to retelling the story of von Richthofen and Billy Bishop it would have been better; the sub-plot featuring the children in the hospital seems tacked on and extraneous. The play also betrays an uneasy ambivalence in its attitude to war: one moment it exalts the code of chivalry existing among the German and allied fighter pilots of W.W.I., at another moment it deplores (rather mawkishly) the slaughter of war. Says the Red Baron: "It's a very grim sport. Only the worst war in the trenches keeps me flying. How can I hide from Death in the air when I know what Death is doing in

the trenches? Oh, why do old men lie to us and tell us war is glorious?" Despite these minor reservations *Billy Bishop and the Red Baron* is a skillful and engrossing play that children will enjoy.

*Masque* is an adaptation by Ron Cameron of James Reaney's play, *One-Man Masque.* It is the most striking play in the anthology, a mythic and highly inventive metaphor for the cycle of birth, childhood, adolescence, maturity, death. The props symbolize the play's actions: "a colourful children's playhouse and playbox, a wooden cradle, a doll's perambulator, a child's chair, an adult's chair with a small table, a rocking chair, and an upright coffin." This is familiar Reaney terrain. Familiar too are the quality of the lyrics–poetic, banal, celebratory, minatory. Perhaps the poetic voices are too many in the play–Reaney speaks sometimes too facilely in the accents of Blake, Yeats and Dylan Thomas. We move from terror to menace: "And Rook is drawing an obscene drawing in the back of his Vocational Guidance text book. Oh, describe it to me! *(Pause)* It's not finished yet, Foxy. Foxy, suppose we leave it alone . . . and let it ripen into something really culpable," and from pathos to bathos: "I rewarded your music teacher/For the pearly runs in your Scarlatti." *Masque* is an uneven play, but there is none in this anthology I would recommend more warmly.

*Catalyst* by John Ibbitson is a disappointment; it is flat, packed with clichés, pretentious. Characters say things like "There comes a time in every man's life when he has the chance to look into himself," or "Tim, what's happening? You've never acted like this before." The use of narrators is totally unnecessary. In short, *Catalyst* is the kind of play written by a clever undergraduate and suitable for workshop productions. It doesn't merit a place in this anthology.

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