Rejuvenating Out of Date Plays

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The King, The Sword, and The Dragon, David Farnsworth. Playwrights Co-op, 1975, $2.50 paper.

Copper Mountain, Robert Swerdlow. Playwrights Co-op, 1973, $2.50 paper.

As the preceding reviews have demonstrated, the flawless children's play is the exception rather than the rule. Directors looking over scripts for possible production are more likely than not to discover that even those plays which are excellent in most respects contain materials which, for one reason or the other, could not be staged satisfactorily. The most frequently encountered problems these days stem from our rapidly shifting social values and attitudes: what our parents considered progress, our children view as anti-environmental; what to us was rousing high adventure is today frequently denounced as unwholesome violence. Audiences not so long ago were willing to be passively delighted by opening choruses of villagers who spent the first ten minutes of every production singing and dancing about how lovely the weather was; present day youngsters are likely to conclude that everyone in town is either unemployed or simpleminded.

The two plays under consideration here were highly successful when first produced, *King, Sword, and Dragon* at Dalhousie University in 1972 and *Copper Mountain* at Global Village, Toronto, in 1969. Both are intrinsically excellent and, in essence, as timeless and as universally appealing as myth itself: central to both are archetypal patterns and themes which can never lose their relevance. Both, however, contain sequences which are out-of-date today and which, if staged as published, could alienate rather than charm audiences. And the objectionable materials they contain, it should be noted, are by no means unique to these plays: similar problems turn up in the majority of recent but not quite new scripts. In the pages which follow I will deal both with the reasons why these particular plays are too good not to produce, and also suggest ways of updating them—and similar plays—for contemporary audiences.

Before turning to the plays themselves, however, a few words about copyright are required. In theory no directory—neither professional nor amateur—should revise a copyrighted script without the author's permission; in practice, of course, few directors contact their author if they consider the changes in question "minor". Some of the revisions suggested below could be considered minor, others are surely substantial; none, however, has been approved or even discussed with the authors since to do so without a specific production and audience in mind would be pointless. My intent is merely to point out problems and suggest possible ways of dealing with them.

David Farnsworth's *King, Sword, and Dragon* is one of the most perfectly

conceived examples of participatory drama one is likely to find. The audience is involved in the action from the opening lines of the play and is encouraged to use its imagination throughout. And because audience imagination is so stimulated, the play could be as successfully produced with minimal as with elaborate sets and effects. Since, however, a participating audience is more likely than a passive audience to take seriously and internatize the implications of plot and character, it is more important than in formal drama that care be taken about the treatment of elements they are likely to respond to.

The problems posed by this play stem from plot, theme, and characterization. Farnsworth's young hero Art—the "King" of the title by play's end—is loosely modelled on Sir Thomas Malory's King Arthur; his adventures are easily-staged versions of incidents in the original story. Not unlike his namesake, Art establishes himself as the rightful heir to the throne by proving to be the only person able to pull an enchanted sword from its scabbard. He then goes on to outperform the original Arthur: to avoid any shift in focus, Farnsworth has Art accomplish the sorts of feats reserved for the Knights of the Round Table in Malory. His adventures include aiding a Princess in distress, questing for the Dragon of the title—one reputed by the villains to be ferocious but actually shy, chilly, and well-mannered—and outwitting an assortment of evil opponents.

The play could thus aptly be subtitled "Variations on the Story of King Arthur", and, because Malory's complexities are simplified, can serve as an excellent introduction to the original Arthurian materials. As in the original, however, the central opposition is between good and evil, and evil—as in Malory and most adult literature—breeds and aligns itself with violence. Sir Cedric, the most obvious villain of the piece, enters the play snapping a whip; he later knocks his servants around, calls for "instruments of torture" (which, however, never appear), and has his Knights execute offstage (from whence "horrible screams" are heard) a hired assassin who fumbled. His wife Garta is even more nasty: it is she who hires the assassins, instructs them that neither beating, wracking, blinding, nor stretching are sufficient for her purposes; only murder will do, and "for every inch of the blade that's stained with [Art's] blood, there'll be ten thousand pounds [reward]" (pp. 32-33). We witness two unsuccessful attempts at murder on stage—one by poison, one by stabbing—and, presumably, the drowning of the assassin Art throws over his shoulder into the sea.

Obviously, if one believes that children should be protected from all hints of violence, *King, Sword, and Dragon* cannot be considered for production. Since, however, we cannot eliminate gratuitous violence from the television programs and movies that children watch, a play like Farnsworth's can be an extremely effective means of teaching proper responses to the violence children will be exposed to elsewhere. Because the play is participatory, its audiences are forced to exercise their imaginations throughout; it is a very simple matter for the actors, during their interaction with the audiences, to lead them to recognition of how destructive a force violence is. All the evil characters who initiate

or use violence are destroyed by it; Art fights only in self-defence and accomplishes his goals by mental–rather than physical–ability.

Evil and violence are presented in a highly sophisticated manner in the play. Sir Cedric, as implied earlier, is a farce villain whom neither the other characters nor the audience take seriously: he rants, rages, and bullies, but we join his servants in boo-ing him (in song) the moment he turns his back. All instantly recognize him for what he is and thwart him by avoiding or ignoring him. He is a contrast to less readily perceived evil: he poses no problems for Art, but we (directed by the Minstrel-narrator) are forced to see that Art is immature, and, in fact, unqualified to rule the land, until he learns to recognize evil disguised as good. In mid-play Art permits the two assassins to sail with him and does not realize what is going on until they actually attempt to stab him. It is not until the final moments of the play that he perceives that his true opponent has always been Cedric's wife Garta, a character who in many ways echoes Lady Macbeth. Like Shakespeare's creation, Garta–rather than her easily manipulated husband–is the real source of all evil in the land: it is she who is tempted into action by visions of the power she will have as Queen; it is she who sees the possibilities for exploiting Art's initial innocence and turning it to her advantage; she maneuvers Cedric into actually seizing the crown, blinds Art to the significance of his having fulfilled a prophecy, and, after tricking him into accepting her as Queen, uses her wiles to make him serve as questing knight. It is only after Art's return from the quest (with maligned Dragon in tow) that Art has matured sufficiently to expose Garta for the hypocrite that she is; by play's end he has learned that evil as frequently manifests itself in subtle as in obvious ways. Only after his defeat of Garta do we (and the chorus) know that he is capable of ruling, and only then does he deserve to live happily ever after. *King, Sword and Dragon* thus presents evil, and its associated violence, in a totally wholesome and instructive manner: because it makes a complex subject comprehensible to children, it is as fine an introduction to adult literature in general as to tales of Knights and their ladies.

If all the proposed murder, mischief, and mayhem in *King, Sword, and Dragon* is functional and justifiable, one other plot element can only be roundly condemned. Lady Garta is a successful variant of Lady Macbeth; the Princess of the piece–Helena–is a totally unacceptable imitation of *The Merchant of Venice's* Portia. For reasons never hinted at in the play, Helena's father, the King who died before the action begins, has disinherited his daughter: as she tells us ("with simple dignity"),

> My father's will was declared before he died. The heir to the throne will be revealed by the Court Magician. (p. 10)

Grimston, the magician whose oracles are voiced by a Speaking Cauldron, makes the situation even more intolerable:

> The new king will be chosen by a test . . . Whoever draws this sword [from its scabbard] is the rightful heir to the throne . . . The person who draws the sword will marry the Princess. (p. 10)

All characters in the play–including Helena–accept this state of affairs: a "male heir" is required to rule the land. Shakespeare's Portia, who was likewise burdened with a father's will which did not permit her to choose her own husband, at least complains about the situation and, in most productions, aids her preferred suitor in winning her. Not so our Princess Helena. She is characterized as a passively obedient female without mind enough of her own to object either to her father's (apparent) lack of confidence in her ability to rule the land or in his assigning her as chattel to whichever *male* in the kingdom is best able to perform the sword trick.

Not so many years ago, before the women's liberation movement, we might have accepted a female character so incapable of managing her own affairs that all she could do was hope for a Hero to come and solve her problems. The movement for women's rights discourages the proliferation of fairy tale conventions which depict women as helpless. Surely no Canadian child should be asked to sympathize with such a type. And a Canadian child today would wonder why Princess Helena could not be a queen if Queen Elizabeth II can.

It should be noted that Helena is, in any case, an anachronism even by medieval or Arthurian standards: anyone familiar with the original stories of Arthur, Tristram, Lancelot and their companions knows that Arthurian ladies, although idolized, more frequently ordered their knights around than took orders from them. Helena is, in fact, more like Victorian stereotype than the Medieval: Tennyson's Elaine may have withered and died because Lancelot preferred Guinevere to her, but Malory's Elaine, rather than take "No" for an answer, disguised herself as her rival and tricked Lancelot into fathering Galahad.

The sexism can be eliminated from *King, Sword, and Dragon,* as well as from similar plays, in a number of ways. Here perhaps the simplest solution is simply to drop the character, and all references to her, completely: since Art is a very young teen, or even pre-teen, isn't it more appropriate for him to mount the throne alone at the finale rather than hand in hand with a pre-pubescent bride? The only objection to this solution is that it leaves the arch-villainess Garta the sole representative of her sex in the play: a sympathetic, but admirable, Princess is not only needed as a foil to her, but is appropriate and expected in a play set in the days of King Arthur. An alternate solution involves rewriting: a modernized Portia (appealing because she does more than accept and wait) or a wise-cracking Princess (modeled, perhaps, on the heroine of *Star Wars*) would not antagonize the most ardent Woman's Libber.

Less offensive to some, but potentially more so to others, is one of the stereotyped stock characters in the play. Farcical stock characters, if well acted, are guaranteed laugh-producers; some care must be taken, however, about what butts we provide for children to laugh at. Midway through the play is a variant treatment of *The Merchant of Venice's* Casket Story. (The only echo of *The Merchant* lacking in *King, Sword, and Dragon* is a counterpart to Shylock!) Before Art unwittingly succeeds where others fail, three contenders for the throne and the Princess' hand attempt to pull the enchanted sword from

its scabbard; each is a buffoon who disappears from the play immediately after his comedy-turn failure. It is the first, Sir Senile de Crepitude, who is a problem: the audience is encouraged to laugh at his near blindness, almost total deafness, and overall feebleness due to age. One suspects that grandparents in the audience will not be amused.

Plot and characterization pose problems for directors interested in *King, Sword, and Dragon;* once script revisions are introduced, however, production itself is a fairly straightforward and simple matter: because audience imagination is stimulated throughout, it is really the audience rather than set builders and technical crew who do most of the work. *Copper Mountain,* by contrast, is not participatory and to produce it successfully as published would require both elaborate technical facilities and highly professional performers. Production difficulties can be overcome by ingenuity, however, and the basic script is good enough to justify the effort.

Unlike *King, Sword, and Dragon, Copper Mountain* does not attempt to introduce young audiences to adult themes; instead of using even vaguely realistic characters and situations, it employs fairy tale elements to lead audiences to a deeper insight into life's complexities. It is one of those very rare children's plays in which plot and theme are as intimately interrelated as in the most sophisticated adult classics. The plot begins when we meet a Prince who has been transformed into a Frog: like nearly every other character we will meet, he once had everything anyone (even a Prince) could desire, but was nonetheless dissatisfied with life. Observing (like Alice of *Wonderland*) some frogs in a hole having a party to which humans were not invited, he tells us that he wished he were a frog and, alas, his wish was granted by some unspecified agency. Anton, the play's young hero (who, incidentally, could be a female as easily as a male), volunteers to borrow a magic, wish-granting ring from the King of Copper Mountain; he learns, however, that he must solve the problems of the kingdom before the ring will be loaned. A major character, but one who does not affect the plot, is the Queen: like the Frog-Prince, she is bored with all the best things in life but her wish—to become a star in the skies—is, for some unspecified reason, not granted.

Anton's task is to rid the kingdom of three troublesome beasties: a serpent overly proud of its excessive length, a tiger so inordinately fond of potatoes that he is leaving none for the farmers to eat, and a bald eagle who revels in intimidating all and sundry with his fierce looks. Anton deflates the pride of each, tricks each into wanting something inappropriate, and then manages to grant their wishes. Each (like the Frog Prince) is so unnerved by the unforeseen but inevitable consequences of his wish that he gives up all socially destructive behaviour and returns to being a straightforward animal. Anton is now able to use the wishing ring, but he—along with the other characters—has learned that, as the Frog Prince says, "It doesn't matter what you are on the outside, it's what you are on the inside that counts" (p. 39).

The moral is underlined by the Frog Prince's choosing to remain shaped

as he is, but the author, unaccountably, then goes on to contradict his own theme. Having illustrated that even wishes, if granted, cannot change human (or beastie) nature, he appears to forget his own lesson by having Anton wish that "all the children in the world would grow up strong and healthy and would live in a world without wars" (p. 39)–too desirable a wish, surely, to present in a context where wishes invariably backfire disastrously. Logically, of course, the only thematically appropriate "final wish"–if one must end the play with a wish–is that all of us learn and accept the truth of what the Frog Prince has just articulated.

If staging only the central action as outlined were all a director had to concern himself with, *Copper Mountain* would be a dream vehicle for any small group. As published, however, production would be a nightmare. The play contains a number of sequences which only a company equipped with extraordinary resources could stage effectively. The opening scene, for example, seems guaranteed to send all but the most patient (and captive) audiences scurrying out of the theatre. As in *King, Sword, and Dragon,* a Minstrel-narrator opens the play; instead of introducting us to the plot or involving us in the action, however, he sings nine lines of such inanities as,

> My name is Willy and sometimes I'm silly
> But most of the time I'm absurd.
> Thank you for coming, it's nice to see you smiling,
> I hope you are hearing every single word . . . (p. 1)

(Willy, in fact, is neither silly nor absurd at any point in the play.) Following the song we have villagers dancing, teasing, laughing, and giggling for 39 repetitive lines of "Good mornings", "It's nice to see you smiling", and "The Prince of Copper Mountain is on his way" (pp. 1-3). The sequence, of course, prepares us for the entrance of the Prince-Cum-Frog, and his entrance is effective only if we have been led to expect a young Robert Redford on a White Charger; the problem is, how does one hold the audience's attention until the Frog Prince enters (and the story begins to unfold) unless one has a totally professional Willy–an actor-acrobat able to command an audience through stage presence rather than lines–and a chorus able to sing, dance, and move so effectively that we respond to the beauty of the scene for its own sake. The Canadian Opera Company could succeed; few primary school troops could.

At least two other sequences present equally formidable production problems. Scene 2 opens with an 18-line aria by the Queen: she here voices her dissatisfaction with her role in life and her desire to become a star; the lines, unlike those in the opening scene, are important to the central theme of the play. Unfortunately for directors who do not have highly talented singer-actresses in their company, the lines could not be spoken rather than sung: their overall absurdity as well as the Queen's character is emphasized by their operatic style and delivery. Scene 3 presents a totally different type of problem. Here Anton is enroute Copper Mountain and meets a "Blinky": the stage directions define him as "a three-headed monster. One head talks in the past,

one in the future, and the other is confused" (p. 14). The trouble is, no one hearing the Blinky speak could possibly realize that each head is using a different tense. Furthermore, I defy anyone having read the stage directions to find a reason for having such a character in the play in the first place. (Anton asks directions to Copper Castle but receives only meaningless answers; he ends the scene continuing on the way he was going at its beginning, and the Blinky is never heard of again.) If the scene were to be retained, it would be necessary to inform audiences of how and why the Blinky was answering Anton and, I should think, of what he was doing in the play in the first place.

Has a director faced with such a script–but without the cast and facilities to stage such sequences as polished spectacle–any options? Rather than attempting the impossible, a director might consider the advantages of actually emphasizing and exploiting the limitations of his resources. The term "camp" has been variously defined and dissected, but we can here limit it to mean–as the *Random House Dictionary* has it–"a pretentious gesture, style, or form, especially when amusing or when consciously contrived." The television program *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* is perhaps an ideal example of "camp."Adults too often think of camp as a mode which can be enjoyed or appreciated only by sophisticated–or pseudo-sophisticated–adults; that very young children are able to relish it as readily as the most jaded of their parents, however, will be immediately apparent to anyone watching youngsters responding to such television programs as *Wonder Woman, Bugs Bunny and Road Runner,* and *Sesame Street.* It is more often than not the most outrageously incredible elements which stimulate them; they will sit passively hypnotized through objectively credible–given the "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary for any of the programs–and well presented sequences, but they react to the villains in those moments when they so overplay their malevolence that they become absurd.

Would it not be more effective to stage an opening chorus (such as that required by *Cooper Mountain*) so outrageously and blatantly badly that the audience enjoys and responds to the emphatic incompetence of the cast rather than to embarrass both audience and cast with an unintentionally awkward production number? The opening banquet of *King, Sword, and Dragon* succeeds because Cedric's servants are too incompetent to set a table without help from the audience; a chorus of villagers too befuddled to decorate a town square properly to welcome a Prince because they are so preoccupied with smiling at each other to cover up their confusion could, I think, be equally successful. Whether a director wanted to take the additional step of encouraging the audience to aid and direct the villagers would, of course, be an individual decision. The "camp" approach, however, would work equally well with the problems presented by other difficult sequences in *Copper Mountain:* if Joan Sutherland is not available to sing the Queen's quite difficult aria, why not imitate the Phyllis Diller approach? If a spectacle cannot be as well staged as the author intended, go audaciously to the opposite extreme: Camp is enjoyed *because* it is so blatantly bad.

Both *Copper Mountain* and *King, Sword, and Dragon* contain examples of two other types of problems directors are likely to encounter in all but the most recently written scripts; changing times, but in two different senses, cause the difficulties in both cases. Words acquire new meanings with alarming rapidity these days, and children are often more acute to evolving slang than adults. Both plays have references to "grass": the authors obviously meant the green stuff we plant in front of our houses and mow every Saturday, but younger and younger children these days might have visions of marijuana. An even more potentially dangerous term crops up in *King, Sword, and Dragon:* the only food the Dragon of the piece eats are vegetables and "coke" (rather than "coal"). Since the audience cannot tell that the word is not capitalized in the script, most would assume that he *eats* the carbonated soft drink; the more sophisticated in the audience, alas, would likely guffaw at his craving for cocaine. And, finally while many adults will consider "hippy" still current slang for the bearded war-protesters of a few years ago, most children would not see any point to a series of jokes in *Copper Mountain* revolving around a hippopotamus who wants to devote his life to poetry and avoiding bathing.

An author's age—rather than the passage of time itself—is often responsible for his blindness to the ways in which children perceive what he presents. In *King, Sword, and Dragon,* for example, the assassins' first attempt on Art's life is by offering him a drink. That alcohol is intended is emphasized by Art's refusing the drink because he wants to keep a "clear head" while sailing his ship. Plotwise, it is perfectly logical for the villains to drink since they are adults, but Art is, after all, only a young boy—and would not most children in the audience wonder at his even considering a "swig"? Finally, *Copper Mountain* contains the sort of flub in identification that many adults would not notice, but which youngsters would. The Frog Prince is clearly identified as the Prince of Copper Mountain in Scene 1, yet later on it is clear that the King and Queen of Copper Mountain do not know of his existence. If I were six again, I know I'd worry as much about this family relationship as about the King in *King, Sword, and Dragon* who disinherited his daughter, the Princess.

My emphasis throughout has been on the problems, both major and minor, that *King, Sword, and Dragon* and *Copper Mountain* pose for directors; in spite of the time spent discussing their faults, however, I must reaffirm my earlier statement that my intent is to salvage rather than condemn. The difficulties are due to our changing tastes and standards; were audiences the same today as the few years ago when the plays were written, there would be little to object to in either. Both, like so many other recent but not new plays, require updating; both, however, are so fine in so many other respects that they are worth the trouble required to update them.

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