

Eight Plays for Children

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Contemporary Children's Theatre, ed. Betty Jean Lifton. Avon Books (Equinox Books), 1974. 511 pp. \$6.45 paper. (This anthology includes Canadian material among the eight following plays for children's theatre: *The Incredible Jungle Journey of Fenda Maria*, Jack Stokes, 1973; *Kap the Kappa*, Betty Jean Lifton; *Names and Nicknames*, James Reaney, 1963; *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Punch and Judy*, Aurand Harris, 1966; *The Marvelous Adventures of Tyl*, Jonathan Levy, 1973; *Starman Jones*, Douglas L. Lieberman, 1972; *The Riddle Machine*, Beth Lambert; *Five Minutes to Morning*, Mary Melwood, 1965.)

Of the eight plays in *Contemporary Children's Theatre*, Jack Stokes' *The Incredible Jungle Journey of Fenda Maria* is structurally the most complex. Two of the plays, James Reaney's *Names and Nicknames* and Jonathan Levy's *The Marvelous Adventures of Tyl* are broadly conceived in a panoramic style, and two, Betty Jean Lifton's *Kap the Kappa* and Aurand Harris' *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Punch and Judy* are bi-level plays requiring shifts of consciousness between story line and theatrical convention on the part of the actors and the audience. The remaining three plays, Douglas Lieberman's *Starman Jones*, Beth Lambert's *The Riddle Machine*, and Mary Melwood's *Five Minutes to Morning* are more restricted views of microcosmic or closed worlds, inviting a simpler and more intense communication between stage and viewer.

The Incredible Jungle Journey of Fenda Maria by Jack Stokes is a problem-solving journey play in the anthropological mode with mythical and fairy-tale trimmings. A narrator establishes the problem: the hero has been divided by a witch into two parts and the "good" half sleeps on the other side of the jungle, while the "bad" half roams the world doing mischief and being silly. A journey is proposed: the hero can be reconstituted only by a maiden who travels through the jungle and wakes the good half out of his sleep by crying twelve jars of tears. The play then takes its shape from the difficulties of finding a maiden for the job, from the obstacles intruded by the jealous witch, from the

terrors of the jungle journey, and from the psychological complications which arise when the maiden decides she doesn't want to marry the hero after all. The whole of the action is presented as an incident in the history of an unidentified tribe, vaguely tropical, but unlike any tribe on earth. The audience is invited to participate in the most ordinary and limited of ways, and topical references, such as the name of the Principal of the school where the show is playing, can be introduced.

Jack Stokes in his introduction emphasizes the simplicity of the setting and firmly places the primary responsibility for creating the *mise en scène* with the actors. He says “. . . it is the actor who, by his reaction to imagined scenery, produces the scenery. The grasp itself produces the cup which is grasped. The agony on the upturned face creates the ineffable sky-beast which has evoked the agony”. Yet, having loaded his actors with these extravagant tasks of mental stagecraft, Stokes goes on to suggest that his actors need be no more than “hardworking” and “competent (not necessarily superior)”. In this suspect humility the chief pitfall of the play is hidden.

Like many plays for young audiences, *The Incredible Jungle Journey* suggests a complex and often profound inter-relationship among cultural history, anthropological research, and theatre theory. In *The Incredible Jungle Journey*, for example, the players are asked by the playwright to create several simultaneous, interlocking worlds. First they are working within a “story” milieu which the narrator establishes and represents: this framework is loose and allows for movement from narrative to picturization back to editorial comment. Second, the actors must realize the tribal world with its special totems and taboos, but suggest at the same time that this tribe shares in the larger mythological community proposed, but not substantiated, in *The Golden Bough*. Third, the players must maintain their contacts with the real world of the audience, the school in its 1970's form with its special legends and jargon. And finally, Stokes requires his actors to support a backstage “reality”, since characters sometimes step apart from the story and comment on the relative success or failure of the narrator's “playwriting”. This is a rich soup requiring not just “competence” and “hardwork” from the performers and the director, but an intellectual understanding of the implications of their material, and an exceptional ability to keep the fragile bubbles of several theatrical realities in the air at the same time.

Further, there is the larger problem, which cannot be solved here, of whether the child audience can be expected to provide the intricate and multi-level response which *The Incredible Jungle Journey of Fenda Maria* requires. There is always the danger that such a rich mixture will only result in superficiality both in performance and in reception.

At the furthest end of the spectrum from the multi-levels of Jack Stokes' play is the closed and single world of *Starman Jones*. It is the world of the future, and playwright Douglas Lieberman has shaped Robert Heinlein's novel of a runaway boy who becomes the captain of a starship into a swiftly moving and suspenseful tale with a solid psychological basis. In this play there is no break in the illusion that the stage represents the future, no invitation for the audience to shout in unison or come onto the stage to serve as dupes in the performers' tricks. Although Lieberman says in his preface that he hates fairy tales onstage, he has successfully transformed several fairy story motifs into what he calls "a play with low sugar content". Lieberman uses the well worn themes of the child martyr, the unwanted stepchild, the runaway, the stowaway, and the child hero who saves the day because of his miraculous abilities. *Starman Jones* is a script for upper grade school and junior high audiences, but it belongs in the adult genre of the "wish-fulfillment play" along with such pieces as *Hadrian VII*, and *Billy Liar*.

A kind of companion piece to *Starman Jones*, but for younger audiences, is Beth Lambert's *The Riddle Machine*. Once again the setting is the closed world of a spaceship, but this time the characters are aliens, making their way towards Earth. Or perhaps they are not alien at all; perhaps they are simply children who seem alien because they are not "grown-up" yet and can't answer the questions which the computer (the Riddle Machine) asks them. The motor for this spaceship play is the attempt to find the answer to the greatest riddle of them all—or rather not the answer to the riddle, but the riddle itself, for this is one of the messages of the play: that growing up consists partly of finding the right questions and not just the right answers. Beth Lambert suggests that the greatest riddle is "Me", that is, the mystery of human personality. Once the children on the spaceship perceive that riddle, they are ready to advance into the new world where they meet the members of the audience who have been watching this didactic fantasy.

The rather precious message of *The Riddle Machine* is expressed in language which is a little too cute to realistically suggest the conversation aboard a spaceship, even a fantastic one. *The Riddle Machine* says, for example, "You just wait. I'll get my digitals on you yet". One should admit, however, that nearly all writers who try to be funny in the science fiction format suffer these attacks of clumsy facetiousness.

Mary Melwood's *Five Minutes to Morning* is also a closed world play, with strong fantasy overtones, but all cast in a more traditional mold. The setting is rural and reminiscent of the "enchanted cottage" plays of the English pantomime. There are fancy stage effects and giant

mime animals in a dream sequence. Both the atmosphere and the plot of the play are rather far removed from the ordinary experience of North American young people, but the central conflict between selfishness, violence, and destruction on the one hand, and affection, continuity, and preservation on the other is universal. Of the eight plays in the collection, young audiences are most likely to come away from this one with the sense of strangeness, magic, and wonder which seems to characterize the older styles of children's theatre. *Five Minutes to Morning* requires a very sophisticated stage décor; it invites its audience into a theatrical illusion as fully formed as the most elaborate of Broadway musicals or West End farces.

Two of the plays in *Contemporary Children's Theatre* draw deeply from the well of theatrical history and convention. Both fall in the middle range—they are not as open as *The Incredible Jungle Journey* . . . nor as closed as *Starman Jones*— and both use the theatrical metaphor as a means of portraying the universality of human experience, as opposed to the particularities of individual character. In *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Punch and Judy* by Aurand Harris the puppet characters, blown up to life size and played by actors, sing at the closing:

There will always be Punch and Judy, always be . . . it's true.
'Cause there's a little bit of us, a little of us, in everyone of you.

One of the problems of this script is that it relies heavily upon the audience's supposed knowledge of the conventions of a Punch and Judy show. A point of the play is that the interest which the audience takes in the show is a kind of salvation for the Punch and Judy tradition which has fallen into disuse. This is an "adult" viewpoint. After all it is the adults who feel nostalgic twinges at the passing of the Punch and Judy shows: the young audience cannot be expected to feel sad for something they never experienced in the first place, nor are they likely to feel very strongly the compliment that is paid to them when Toby barks, "Punch and Judy have been saved by the children".

There is also the question of whether it makes any sense, theatrically or psychologically, to magnify puppet figures to real-life proportions. This destroys an entire range of reactions which the Punch and Judy show has traditionally relied upon. The fact that the puppet is smaller than the child who watches it is a primary source of the delight which the child takes in the play—that mysterious delight which we feel in the presence of the miniature. But perhaps Aurand Harris would reply to this criticism that Punch and Judy were taken from life-size commedia figures to start with, so there can be no harm in returning them to their full strength.

Jonathan Levy's *The Marvelous Adventures of Tyl* also relies upon a commedia dell'arte format to portray the story of the birth, childhood, and maturity of a picaresque scoundrel named Tyl. Although the play is in the commedia style, as Levy points out in his production notes, "it is in the early rough tradition of the commedia—wolf skin and cloven hooves, not dominos and small feet . . . it should be muscular and acrobatic, not pretty". But Levy's play is far more ambitious than any commedia sketch ever was. Except for Tyl, everyone in the play plays many roles, including those of animals. This is a direct violation of the commedia dell'arte scheme and tends to undercut that important source of humour in any commedia play: the laughter caused by the perpetual adherence to type—Harlequin is always Harlequin and Pantalone is always Pantalone, even when they are in disguise. In *The Marvelous Adventures of Tyl* the actors change character so rapidly and have so little continuity that the typical commedia humour arising from archetypal rigidity is sacrificed for a less satisfying cleverness—the easier delight arising from mere changeability.

James Reaney's *Names and Nicknames* is another ambitious work which relies on an outside convention to make its point. But here the convention is not theatrical, it is social. Reaney recreates the playground world and uses the rhymes, the games, the mocks, and the nicknames of a Canadian childhood to chronicle the coming of age of a farmboy. Out of a loosely connected series of songs, poems, homey anecdotes, nursery images, and schoolbook exercises emerges the picture of a rural world. The playwright seems to assume that the young audience will see reflected in the legends and language codes of a bygone youth the process by which modern childhood grows out of itself. If there is indeed such a thing as the secret garden of childhood, closed forever to adults and accessible only to other children, this play, properly handled might be very successful with young audiences. The problem of the script is inherent in that assumption: if childhood is a mysterious country, how can adults recapture it, except as an imperfect exercise in grown-up nostalgia?

The one play in the anthology which most successfully tells a logical story with a reasonable moral, without losing the strangeness and wonder of its conventional source, is editor Betty Jean Lifton's own work *Kap The Kappa*. The message of *Kap The Kappa* is one which any audience, young or old, will recognize and apply: that is, Know Thyself, Be Yourself, and To Thine Own Self Be True. But the author uses a foreign convention—both theatrically and socially foreign—and a setting which has interest for its audience quite apart from its social implications. Taking from Japanese folk mythology a kind of sea creature, the Kappa, and telling the tale of his adoption into human family in modified Japanese stage conventions, she has skilfully in-

tegrated the audience's own worldawareness (whether of Tokyo or Calgary) into a *mélange* of songs, dance, and dramatic vignette.

In her introduction to this collection Betty Jean Lifton calls children "shape shifters" and she has in her choice of scripts for the anthology been faithful to her assertion that a child can deal, both at the levels of story and theatrical technique, with the concept of the multiple self. These eight plays are among the richest available to the contemporary children's theatre producer.

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The Wooden People As Introduction to Literary Study

JACQUELINE HUNT

The Wooden People, Myra Paperny. Illustrated by Ken Stampnick. Little Brown, 1976. 168 pp. \$6.95 cloth.

Novels for young teenagers tend to reflect in somewhat diluted form the concerns of the older adolescent and adult world. During and following the upheavals of the 1960's, there was a great flood of "realistic" stories, often dealing in stark terms with social problems foisted upon the young by the tumultuous adult world. All too often these stories presented reality in bleak terms, depicted a cold unloving world, and showed the young caught up in bitter family conflict. All too often the inadvertent message emerged that parents are either uncaring or inadequate, and the young must find their own values, at best without parental support, at worst in the face of parental abuse. The old-fashioned family story seemed a thing of the past, and writers concerned with verities other than current social ills turned to historical or science fiction.

But times change. The young do not welcome being constantly harrowed by problems and suffering. There is, if you like, a backlash against contemporary social realism that is being reflected in a new ripple of nostalgic stories set in the 1920's and 1930's when the physical realities of life were harsher, but its psychological complexities less