

Different Stages, Different Ages

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Willie and the Watchers and *Revolutions*, Cherie Thiessen. Playwrights Co-op, 1978. \$3.50.

You Want Me to be Grown Up, Don't I?, Rex Deverell. Playwrights Co-op, 1979. \$2.50.

The Beast in the Bag and *Wild West Circus*, Isabelle Foord. Playwrights Co-op, 1977. \$3.00.

A Friend is a Friend, Rene R. Aloma. Playwrights Canada, 1979. \$2.50.

Six plays, four authors, and three distinct audiences are represented in this review and any producing group must be aware of the needs of the particular age levels and, more importantly, must exercise some control over what age sees each production.

Cherie Thiessen's plays (*Willie and the Watchers* and *Revolutions*) are not exclusively children's plays since the theme and treatment of both could be effective for an adult audience as well as for a senior secondary or perhaps even a junior secondary one. *Willie and the Watchers* hits the high school student right where he lives. Willie has advice forced on him, Willie is forced to take action, Willie is destroyed. The pressure on Willie comes from the outside and will strike sympathetic chords in the high school student who is often pressured, counselled, advised and forgotten. The play is a fascinating tale with science-fiction overtones that might fit nicely into Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*.

The scene opens in a desolate place where the Watchers wait. They watch unseen as people climb a steep cliff and leap to their deaths. Willie climbs, leaps but does not die. This is what the Watchers have been waiting for, their new Saviour. The first problem is to convince the miraculously unhurt Willie that he *is* the new Saviour, the awaited one. Willie is doubtful, reluctant and mostly confused by the Watchers' attentions but he listens.

The Watchers take Willie back to his parents to seek signs of divinity from his childhood and, when pressed, the parents remember some peculiar events:

MOTHER: . . . He was born in the back of the car in a
garbage dump . . . As I lay there . . . looking

out the window, there was this bright light . . .
they were burning the garbage . . . the light
seemed to glow all around us.

FATHER: After his feeding, when I burped him, it always
came out so melodious . . . profound.

There are far too many images to present here but the scene of remembering is loaded with divine (Divine) absurdity that is accepted as “signs” by the Watchers. It’s a tremendous scene.

Willie begins to accept his role, as every little thing he says is taken for gospel. But there is dissent amongst the Watchers over what Willie should do next. Followers, crying and chanting, want the miraculous leap repeated; as Willie prepares, his parents arrive selling souvenirs of Willie’s childhood. They merely want their rightful share of the profits (Prophets). Willie leaps, dies, the followers depart disillusioned, and the souvenir business goes bust. The Watchers return to their desolate vigil.

The play is excellent and still timely, although first produced in 1969. It cuts savagely at the pressures on young people from adults, cults of fanatic followers, religious fads, and commercialism. The humour and satire deal with some of society’s obvious follies. A high school audience would dearly love to see the society that pressures them being pressured back.

Thiessen’s *Revolutions* is, again, a futuristic tale. Four survivors, each with his own physical and emotional deformity, live together near some kind of junk heap. They look at the clouds and play games, games repeated as the clouds are repeated, games that tell who they are and how they came to their present forlorn situation.

The final game, of course, fills out the situation for the audience, but the moments of in-game and between-game fill out the characters. We see their moods, the status of each in the group, their fears, and their individual outlooks. This is an intriguing play which both casts light on the society that rejected the group and also explores relationships within the group of cast-offs. Again, this theme is relevant to the high school audiences.

Another intriguing play, *You Want Me to Be Grown Up, Don’t I?* by Rex Deverell, is called a play for young people, but I think it should be a required play for young people and their parents *together*.

It was designed for the difficult nine-to-twelve-year-old group and is an excellent choice for them. The theme “I hate my parents” is rarely explored, and its treatment in the play is natural, direct, and only partially resolved. Four pre-teens each hate their parents or authority figures for

different reasons. By taking roles they act out lampoons of the adult attitudes and hypocrisy, but the common element for all of them can be found in two familiar lines:

1. "You're too young to understand,"
and
2. "You're old enough to know better."

The nine-to-twelve-year-olds hearing these lines find themselves in a never-never land of confusion that clouds their view of what is expected of them. They role-play to release some of their frustrations, but it is not enough: they must take some kind of action. The result is a midnight raid to despoil the statue to motherhood in the townsquare. By the end of the play, despite their earlier rage, each of them realizes that part of what their parents have been saying is true. But parents should see this play because part of what the children are saying is true as well.

This play has depth of feeling uncommon in children's plays for this age level. It flows easily, has natural dialogue and shows an interesting concept of the adult world through children's eyes. One of the reasons this play is so perceptive can be explained by a note at the beginning of the text:

"Special thanks to the group of fourteen Regina young people who spent two workshop sessions exploring the themes of the play . . ."

If more writers and directors took part in this type of dialogue more plays of this quality would be produced.

The next three plays are for an audience of five-to-nine-year-olds. Isabelle Foord has two plays (*The Beast in the Bag* and *Wild West Circus*) low in message but high in entertainment. Structurally they are almost identical. Each has controlled participation wherein members of the audience help make magic spells and, also, transform themselves into things like rocks so that the Beast won't be able to eat them. Both plays have simple plots with the bad guys in each changing (because of our participation, of course) into good guys.

The Beast in the Bag has the better story of the two, particularly in the way the action is introduced. While demonstrating magic (and teaching the audience how to participate) two story tellers make a mistake, awaken the Beast, and let him loose. The rest of the play deals with what to do with him and how to avoid being eaten.

In *The Wild West Circus*, the audience is involved as the townsfolk of an old west town. We see the sheriff and others try to foil the dastardly deeds

of the nasty gunfighter who comes to town to wreak havoc. A mysterious Dr. Lao and his magic circus come to town and with his help and the audience's participation the gunfighter is transformed.

Both plays combine good slapstick and silliness with interesting participation in adventure for the whole group; but one of the dangers of such plays is too heavy a reliance on the slapstick. These plays need to be developed carefully by the cast and the director so that they also provide some in-depth characters and build a sense of relationship. Depending on the choices made in rehearsal the script could move from the surface silliness to well-developed fun.

The third play for the five-to-nine age group is *A Friend is a Friend*, a children's musical, by Rene R. Aloma. The play begins in a toybox. Raggedy Ann, jealous of the beautiful new ballerina doll, packs up and leaves. With warnings, and a few contacts, she sets out to try her luck in acting, singing and dancing. This allows us to meet some very entertaining and eccentric characters. Of course she fails at all these endeavours and she returns to the toybox pursued by a ragpicker. The play ends happily when the little owner of the toybox refuses to go to bed without her Raggedy Ann.

This play deals with jealousy, the feeling of inadequacy, and loneliness. These are all emotions important to the five-to-nine age group as they try to deal with various problems: losing the spotlight to a new baby brother, failure at sports or games, or the feeling of being abandoned by friends or parents. *A Friend is a Friend* is a well-written, well-paced, and reassuring play that tells the audience that friendship is very important and that it is good to just be yourself. The only danger thematically is the possible interpretation that you should never stray from your own little sheltered box. The play needs a balance in production, or possibly a change in the script to say it is good to try something different even if you fail.

All of the plays mentioned in this review are good and all could easily be produced successfully if the age group is carefully considered. Each play has a particular interest for a particular age range. The best show presented to the wrong audience can be as abysmal as a bad show. The same care and thought that make these good scripts must be expended by the producers to make them successful productions.

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