Canadian young people's theatre: two companies elicit audience participation

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Résumé: *Dans cet article, l'auteur évoque les difficultés et les espoirs qui animent les troupes de théâtre pour la jeunesse au Canada anglais. Il se concentre sur deux compagnies en particulier: les Carousel Players de St. Catharines et le Globe Theatre de Toronto.*

Throughout its history, Theatre for Young Audiences ("TYA" as the professionals call it) has been beset with the problems of underfinancing, a dearth of good playwrights and a lack of focus. In addition, the public, the press, educators, theatre people and government either haven't known how to regard TYA or have regarded it with contempt. And all TYA companies have always had the difficult task of dealing with widely varying audiences. Consider the difference in perception and experience between a five-year-old from rural Saskatchewan and a teenager from metro Toronto and you begin to understand the problems, and the reasons that TYA companies are so varied in the fare they present.

TYA abounds with puppet, mime and dance groups that appeal to a child's response to visual stimulus. Examples of this kind of theatre are most notably seen in the Mermaid Theatre (Halifax), Theatre Beyond Words (Toronto), and Kaleidoscope Theatre (Vancouver). The spectacle of theatre in a large performance space can also be attractive to children, witness the success of Young People's Theatre (Toronto) and the host of big Christmas shows mounted for family audiences. The numerous companies that focus on school tours attest to the value and popularity of intimate, imagination-oriented shows.

No matter what form TYA takes, one common factor which compensates for all the nagging problems is the audience's willingness to participate. Audience participation in TYA can occur in a variety of degrees and types, but all generally follow the basic rhythm of activity and rest necessary first to release the pent-up energy of an audience and then to use the resulting period of restful concentration. Participation can be divided into three categories: spontaneous, stimulated and directed.[1] A spontaneous involvement will happen, for example, if a child perceives a threat to the protagonist of his/her favourite fairy-tale. When the wicked queen/witch in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" hands Snow White the poisoned apple, the audience bursts into a chorus of "No". This outburst is an expected response that releases the

audience's energy and enables the Dwarfs, in the following scene, to mourn Snow White's death amidst a concentrated silence. Stimulated response will occur when the performers provide an example for the audience to follow. In a performed version of the fairy-tale "Hansel and Gretel", for instance, if an actor in the wings begins to make animal sounds during the scene when Hansel and his sister are lost in the forest, the audience will pick up on this atmospheric cue and begin to make their own scary woodland noises. A directed response can be used to evoke a more fine-tuned participation from the audience. For example, when the Fairy Godmother in "Cinderella" needs help in creating Cinderella's ball-gown she may ask for help from the audience to repeat the magic spell. The audience is only too glad to help. In this way the performer is able to elicit a precise response for a specific need, and so further the story.

Each of these forms of participation can be utilized in any number of styles of production, from intimate school tours to large proscenium stage plays. But unless they are combined with a strong philosophy toward integrating the audience into the story, they can be and, in my opinion, often are used only in a token manner. Two companies that have maintained a high integrity in their production of participation plays for young people are Globe Theatre in Regina and Carousel Players of St. Catharines.

Founded in 1966 by Ken and Sue Dramer, Globe Theatre's beginning was inspired by the work the Kramers had done with Brian Way at the Theatre Centre in England. The touring shows for children that Globe presents are still based on the principles developed by Way who, since his move to Saskatchewan, continues to work with and influence the company. Globe presents all of their school shows in the manner Way suggests in the preface of his scripts, "The play has been written for presentation in the round, and the audience may not exceed a maximum of 200."[2]

Since Carousel Players' first season in 1973 they have similarly kept to a very specific guideline: "The participation plays still remain the basic work outlined in Carousel's mandate. The principle that Des and Faye Davis set out for this theatrical form 15 years ago is still the guide we follow today."[3]

Both of these companies have remained true to their original ideals, presenting participation plays to young audiences in a form best suited to establishing a rapport with the children attending their productions. Both companies have fostered the creation of original scripts and have continued to explore new methods for involving their audiences. These qualities make Carousel and Globe stand out as examples for understanding how deeply a young audience can be caught up in a theatrical presentation.

The work of the Globe company is best understood by studying three scripts by their playwright-in-residence Rex Deverell: *The Copetown City kite crisis, Shortshrift* and *The gadget.* Like all of Globe's school tour productions these scripts were written with Brian Way's principles in mind. All are constructed

to be performed by a small group of actors using a minimum of scenery and props and playing in a small central acting area.

The story of *The Copetown City kite crisis* revolves around air and water pollution, the discovery that the kite factory (the only major industry in town) is the cause of this pollution and the efforts of Sol (Copetown's young citizen of the year) to stop the further decay of the city's environment. The source of the pollution is narrowed down to the "secret process machine" without which the Copetown City kite would be just an ordinary kite. Efforts to shut down the machine are opposed by the Mayor, who sees such an action as a threat to the growth of his town and by Mr. Henley, the owner of the factory.

The playwright uses a topical situation on which to base his story and one with which the children watching can identify. Pollution is often discussed in our society; it is a problem the children in the audience may already have strong ideas about and they can therefore feel involvement in the topic. In this way Deverell avoids the pitfall of many works for children, that of condescension. He gives his audience a serious topic in a realistic situation. Within the body of the play there are a number of opportunities for both directed and stimulated participation. In the first scene, a town celebration, the audience is included as either townsfolk or as members of the Copetown City Kiltie Band, a kazoo type ensemble that plays at inopportune moments. It is a good beginning, allowing for an excited audience to expend some extra energy while at the same time immediately involving them in the action of the play. This directed participation is aided by reaction to the speeches delivered by the bumbling Mayor and the stuffy librarian, Miss Plimpton, both of whom are sure to elicit a number of spontaneous responses. The most interesting and involving audience participation in the script takes place at the climax of the play and demonstrates how much power can be given to an audience in this genre of theatre. The conflict in the play is reduced to one crucial decision, whether or not to close down the kite factory. This question is decided by the workers (the audience) who vote on strike action. Deverell provides two endings so that the students in the audience are able, by their decision, to affect the outcome of the play. Through this stimulated response the participants are made aware of how their choices can affect not only their own lives but the lives of others. A powerful lesson!

In structuring his play Deverell also keeps in mind the necessary rhythm of activity and concentration by interspersing relatively static scenes with moments of physical action. Before the scene building up to the strike vote Deverell suggests that the audience by given jobs at the factory.

> They [the audience] are mobilized for the various phases of building the kite, the operation of the secret process machine, testing, selling, shipping and so on. . . .Directors will know how much can be done without breaking down the story line of the play itself. The important point is that the audience feels it has a stake in the factory and its product.[4]

In this way the energy built up in the previous interview scene with the Mayor is used in a manner which adds to the story and prepares the audience for its involvement in the following scene.

Another principle encouraged by Brian Way and followed by Globe Theatre is that of involving an audience's imagination, rather than using complicated sets, to fill in details of setting and character. In *Shortshrift* a representative of the town of Shortshrift travels to the government in Grand City to find out what is wrong with their town. His journey is an excellent example of how easily and totally this reliance on imagination to create scenery can be utilized.

FRED: (to his automobile) Well, Annabelle, up to a long trip? I guess there's not much of a choice. We'll get you cranked up here.

(Starts car by crank)

Come on, start old girl!

(Another crank and the car putters into life.)

Good girl. (climbs in) Good-bye!

TOWNSPEOPLE: Good-bye Fred.

FRED: Out onto the highway now Annabelle. Past that signpost with the sign missing. Past the grain elevator and out into the open country. Ah, Annabelle, for an old crock you're running fine, eh? Thatta girl. Happy to be free! (brakes and swerves) Durned gopher. You'd think they'd know enough to stay off the highway. . . .Hey, Annabelle we're getting near Grand City. Look there's the airport. Oh Annabelle, watch out! That great big plane looks like it's gonna hit us. (ZOOOOM) No, it's all right Annabelle. . .he missed us![5]

In this way Deverell enables his audience to "see" the changing scenery in their own imaginations while keeping them involved with some stimulated response in his use of the low-flying plane incident.

Brian Way stresses the importance of gearing the show to the age group to which it is directed, particularly at the start of a performance:

The opening for the 5's to 8's often needs to be slow and gentle -- slow in order for everyone to a have a good look at everything, gentle so the youngsters are eased into the experience of the play and the story without one scrap of "playing down" by the actors.[6]

It is important to remember that many children in a TYA audience are experiencing their first live theatre. It is a novel experience for them, but also a potentially frightening one. The "slow and gentle" approach is important for gaining their trust and allaying their fears.

The beginning of *The gadget* is a good example of this "slow and gentle" but entertaining opening. The character of Ivan (boy inventor) has an opening monologue in which he introduces himself, tells the audience what he does and describes some of his inventions, including his talking computer, exploding pea shooter and back-firing water pistol. Having grabbed everyone's at-

tention Ivan proceeds to involve the entire audience in helping him build his new invention. Deverell gives the actor playing Ivan the chance to gather the audience's attention without frightening them and then allows the children to participate in a group project, one in which there is no chance of failure since the pieces for the invention are mimed and Ivan is in charge of their assembly.

Since all three of Deverell's plays mentioned in this study were written for Globe they reflect the kind of audience for which the company performs. They are gently paced works tuned to the rhythm of life on the prairies, with the story lines and settings immediately identifiable to their audiences. The company and its playwright are able to produce these shows so successfully because of a long history of touring in the same area and their great understanding of the audience to which they play.

Although Carousel Players follow many of the same principles in presenting their productions they are much more of a theatre-in-education company than Globe. Because of this educational bias Carousel's plays are often more historical in content and the manner in which the audience is involved in the action is somewhat different from Globe's. Nevertheless Carousel's mandate echoes Globe Theatre's aim.

> The principle is that the audience of children ceases to be an audience. We present the children (100% of them) with the opportunity to experience the events of the play from the point of view of participants in our story.[7]

To accomplish this ideal Carousel's scripts are concerned with events that involve groups of people, thus allowing the entire audience to participate in large, clearly defined sections.

Carousel has taken Brian Way's concern for involving the audience at the opening of a play to heart. Before each performance individual actors in the troupe meet with various sections of the audience for up to fifteen minutes. In these preambles the actor invites the students to become members of his/her group and then coaches them on what will be expected of them in their group roles. The rapport developed in these pre-show meetings establishes the kind of involvement that each member of the audience feels; it is important that the students be voluntary participants and have a share in creating their own group actions. An example of how this is accomplished can be seen in the following sample preamble from Carousel Players' production of *Earth song* by David MacKenzie.

> After introducing him/herself, the actor asks:
> "Can everyone tell me what their favourite celebration is"?"
> [Answer]
> "Well, our story is about a celebration too. In our story I play Marad the leader of the water people. Would you be the water people with me?"

(Reply)
"Now, the water people have a chant that I want to teach you."
(The chant is taught.)
"Can anyone think of a movement to go with the chant?
(Movement from the children.)
"Now everyone do that. Is there a sound that goes with water?"[8]

In this way the children express their own participation forms, are more intimately involved in the creation of their roles, and have a stake in the story before entering the performance area.

To better understand how Carousel is able to present their material and involve their audience so completely, it is necessary to study a few of the plays they have presented, namely *Almighty Voice* by Leonard Peterson, *The torch* by David MacKenzie, *Place to grow* by Duncan MacGregor and *First people* by Faye Davis.

Although originally produced by Young People's Theatre in Toronto, *Almighty Voice* meets Carousel's needs well. As a piece of Canadian history it fills the company's education goals admirably and the opportunities Peterson gives for involving the audience as settlers, North West Mounted Police, and Cree Indians provide participation in abundance. The settlers learn to say "God save the Queen" and plow imaginary fields, the police take their oath as officers of the law and participate in the hunt for Almighty Voice and the Indians learn native chants and celebrate Almighty Voice's victories with dancing.

David MacKenzie is Carousel's most prolific playwright, having contributed seventeen plays for young audiences to the company's repertoire. *The torch* is a good example of his work. The play tells the story of the first Olympic Games. Here, as in *Almighty Voice,* most of the audience involvement is stimulated participation prepared in the preamble. Three groups of students are given roles as citizens of the city states of Elis, Pisa and Sparta. One group is assigned roles as the priests and priestesses who will officiate at the first Olympiad.

The value of this group role-playing as a means of fulfilling the company's mandate is expressed by Carousel's founder, Desmond Davis.

> Through this basic role the child can participate directly in the world of the play -- he can experience the life, share directly in the enactment of the story, and make decisions which may affect his role and occasionally the outcome of the play. The real aim of these plays is that the child will reach a full experience through a belief in his role. This belief will be reached through imaginative and emotional involvement in a convincing world created by the actors from the script and through actual physical and vocal participation in some parts of this creation.[9]

The vocal involvement in *The torch* is in the form of city-state chants and oaths to the gods. Physical participation takes place during a re-enactment of

the kind of training exercises Olympic hopefuls might have gone through and in the foot race that determines the eventual winner of the event.

Not all of the participation in Carousel's productions is prepared in the preambles; spontaneous participation is also a part of their shows. *Place to grow* has a number of examples of this kind of audience reaction. The story is set in the Niagara region during 1784 and involves the resettlement of a group of United Empire Loyalists. The audience participates as settlers drawing lots for land grants, building cabins, and preparing and sharing out food. As a recurring bit of business the playwright has included a pesky bee that attacks the Sherwoods' young son, Thomas. This makes for some amusing chase scenes sure to evoke a reaction from the audience.

DAVID: . . . Thomas, what's the matter?
THOMAS: That bee, sir. I think it's followed me from the land draw.
DAVID: Don't be ridiculous.
MARGARET: Be careful, David. It's coming at you, now.
DAVID: Where? Oh! (The bee lands on his shoulder.)
THOMAS: Stand still, Father, I'll get it.
DAVID: No, leave it to me. (he brushes it off) There! (the bee goes for Margaret) Be careful, Margaret, they can be painful.
MARGARET: (dodging) I know. (it settles on her skirt)
THOMAS: Hold it. I'll get it. (misses) Nope!
DAVID: I've got it. Careful, Margaret. (He takes a swipe at the bee and it buzzes over and settles on Thomas' hat which has previously been thrown on the floor in an attempt to catch the bee.)
MARGARET: Wait! (The three stalk the bee to the hat and Margaret stamps her foot on the bee and the hat.)[10]

This imaginative use of an invisible insect gives the audience a chance to enjoy the actors' predicament while still allowing the performers the opportunity to maintain believability in a real situation. The playwright is also able to use this bee to connect the various working bee scenes in the play.

Carousel, like most TYA companies, tours shows geared to a variety of age groups; *First people* is written for students from kindergarten to grade three. The kind of participation in this show is much less sophisticated than in *The torch*; it is much more physical in nature, the scenes are shorter, and the play contains more broadly comic characters. The audience is allowed to release its energies more frequently and the shorter periods of concentration conform to the reduced attention span of this age group.

The play, a compilation of stories and native legends about how the earth began, ends with a native tale of how the falls at Niagara were formed by the thrashing of a giant serpent. The students are physically involved at the very beginning when asked to experiment on the type of shape best suited to the formation of Earth. The audience groups form a square, a triangle and a line, before settling on a round world. In a re-enactment of the time when "huge

animals" roamed the forests, the students are encouraged to become trees through which the actors, as giant sloths and beavers, can roam. The actors manipulate the audience by using lines such as, "When I run through the forest I knock all the trees down." This is a much more interesting and effective method of getting the children to sit than telling them to do so.

The rapport established in the preamble is particularly important for this age group. It may be difficult for the students to retain precise instructions of sound and movement for particular moments in the play, but if the leader has established a good relationship with his/her group, they will readily follow whatever action the leader initiates. In *First people* these actions help in portraying wind, rain, long grass, corn and sleeping Indians.

Both Globe Theatre and Carousel have been influenced by Brian Way's principles concerning audience participation. This can be observed in the careful manner in which each company approaches its audiences, the physical arrangements they use in performance, and the kinds of participation they elicit. Apart from the educational pressures placed on the two groups, the differences between them are a result of the influences exerted by their audiences over a period of years. Globe Theatre has been able to rely on a common rural and small town heritage to create an immediate rapport with its audience. Carousel, based in a more cosmopolitan area of Canada, must take the time in a preamble to establish a common ground. The methods are different, the desired result remains the same; understanding through heightened audience awareness brought about by physical, vocal and emotional involvement.

The participation play is certainly not the only valid form of theatre presented to children. There are many other forms equally as exciting. When a participation play is performed with integrity, sincerity and with the aim of totally involving the entire audience, however, it is theatre at its best, thought-provoking, educational and exciting. For these reasons this particular genre of TYA at least deserves greater consideration and support to guarantee its continued growth.

NOTES

1 Brian Way. *Audience participation theatre for young people* (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1981) 2.
2 Brian Way, preface, *The mirrorman* (Boston: Baker's Plays, 1973) 1.
3 Carousel Players, *Participation plays for elementary schools: a rationale and a mandate* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Carousel Players) 1.
4 Rex Deverell. *The Copetown City kite crisis* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada: 1972) 19.
5 Rex Deverell. *Shortshrift* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1972) 12.
6 Way. *Audience participation,* 107.
7 Carousel Players, *Participation plays,* 107.
8 Carousel Players, "The participation play", workshop given by Carousel Players at U.T.S. Toronto, Ont., Feb. 17, 1987.
9 Desmond Davis, "The participation play for children: a new genre," *Canadian*

Children's Literature 8/9 (1978): 24.

10 Duncan MacGregor. *Place to grow* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Carousel Players, 1978) 10.

PLAYS

Carousel Players

Davis, Faye. *First people.* St. Catharines, Ontario: Carousel Players.
Peterson, Len. *Almighty voice.* Agincourt, Ontario: The Book Society of Canada, 1978.
MacGregor, Duncan. *Place to grow.* St. Catharines, Ontario: Carousel Players.
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---. Rex. *The gadget.* Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1983.

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