

Frog ponds and peasant revolt: Two faces of thriving theatre for children

Vivien Bosley

Résumé: Dans cet article, Vivien Bosley compare deux productions théâtrales de part et d'autre de l'Atlantique, l'une du Théâtre de la Galafronie à Bruxelles et l'autre du Théâtre de la Marmaille à Montréal. Deux théâtres engagés dans la conscientisation des jeunes publics.

Among the many delightful performances at the Edmonton Festival of Children's Theatre in 1987, two in particular might serve as a focus for discussion of some general tendencies in the genre. Both are from the Francophone world, so have at least a language of origin in common. *Frog soup* is a production of the Théâtre de la Galafronie in Brussels, Belgium, and *Parasols* by Daniel Meilleur, comes from the Théâtre de la Marmaille in Montreal.

If one considers children's theatre under the rubric of "theatre" rather than under that of "children's literature", as this essay will attempt to do, then one perhaps should begin with a very basic question: how respectable is it to be speaking of children's theatre? Even doing it seems to require some apology, for it has often been remarked that theatrical people tend to use children's theatre as a stepping stone to other greater things or as a side-show to their real business. There is certainly no money to be made in it and the glory conferred by children is rarely preferred to the adulation of adults. Yet dedicated people do persevere, and their efforts are finally being rewarded by numerous Festivals of children's theatre across Canada. Perhaps, then, apology for discussing an activity which helps form the taste of our most precious resource is unnecessary. Well, then maybe at least explanation is in order; why try to pin down a form as ephemeral as most children's plays are and fix in an academic paper performances which in one case exist only in the memory of the audience? The Théâtre de la Galafronie in Belgium, when asked to furnish a script of *Frog soup*, insisted they didn't have one. Like a fairy godmother, they summoned it from nowhere, and caused it to disappear again as soon as it had served its function.

I think it is important to examine these plays for four main reasons; first, there are microcosmic manifestations of the two fundamentally opposed views of theatre: the theatre as text and the theatre as gesture. They oppose "forme et fond", message and medium, "signifié et signifiant" in an interesting way.

Secondly, and arising from this, they help us to ask the question which has certainly been puzzling theorists of children's theatre since it was inaugurated as a genre in the eighteenth century: to what extent should children's theatre be moralist and didactic and to what extent lucid and escapist?

Thirdly, can we, through these two plays, examine the question to which one has to give some thought when teaching children's literature in general, namely can we see contemporary children's literature as the true continuation of some kind of ur-literature, a further development of popular folk tradition as opposed to the literary genre developed for adults? Fourthly, and perhaps most practically, can we look to plays of this nature with gratitude as some kind of bulwark against the increasing mechanization of child entertainment, as a wonderfully humanising experience for children who, according to Joyce Doolittle, spend a horrifying number of hours per day in front of a television screen, and as an inestimably valuable conduit between our children and our collective mimetic past?

The microcosmic view of children's theatre presents certain problems. Warren Graves, the well-known Edmonton playwright, insists that there is no such thing as "children's theatre" as opposed to adult theatre, and the people most direly in need of fairy tales and childlike fantasies in our society are not children but adults. I think it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with that question, but I do know that I have found it reassuring that my own opinions of children's plays have so often coincided with those of the children I have taken – though I have to confess that in the case of the two plays in question, this was not quite the case. On the other hand, however, the imprinting that goes on in children's theatre is infinitely more powerful than in adult theatre, so one would imagine that infinitely more care should be taken with productions for the young than with adult plays (a glance at comparable budgets may make us cynical about this; on the other hand, the dedication of children's companies may restore our faith). In his book *Children's Theatre: a Philosophy and a method*, Moses Goldberg points out that one of the advantages of a thriving children's theatre is that it prepares adult theatre-goers. What children see when they are young, therefore, will be retained as some kind of Platonic idea of the form of theatre, and the adult will be nostalgic for what she imagines to be real theatre. If I may quote Warren Graves again, he confesses to a deep longing for the magic of the darkening of the house lights, the raising of the curtain, the surprise of the set, conventions he was familiar with in his childhood. Children accustomed to school performances in the round and to travelling shows with minimal baggage will not feel this way; and for my part, I see no harm in that. I can't help feeling that a theatrical tradition which has more in common with the great public performances of Greek amphitheatres, Medieval fairs, Shakespearean tiring houses is much more healthy than one which is locked into the elitism of the later European tradition of the fourth wall. And as for the question of magic in the theatre,

this is created far more by the child's expectation and his readiness to suspend disbelief than by any stagey tricksiness. The moving accounts collected by Miriam Morton of the way in which Russian orphans were completely transported into another world during and after the second world war by extraordinarily dedicated performers playing in very under-privileged circumstances are but a small – if dramatic – part of the testimony to this.

And today's child, how does she fit into the tradition just described? Is the post-Sesame Street youngster conditioned to the instant response of the television knob, the domestication of the fantastic, the exposure to aspects of human life formerly thought unsuitable for the young still responsive to the magic of live theatre? Is she still able to abandon herself to the collective experience as public audience and suspend disbelief at the performance of actual people who are quite clearly acting? My answer is an unequivocal yes; not only can the child do these things but she should, for the sake of her soul, do them, and be encouraged by adults to do them. Fortunately, more and more people are of that opinion. Children's theatre has a long and distinguished tradition in Europe, but has a relatively recent history on this continent. The two plays I am about – finally – to discuss were part of a children's theatre festival which is an annual event in Edmonton, and which, by its very existence, underlines the importance being given to children's theatre as a genre today. One is from Belgium, and comes therefore from the venerable tradition which includes the moralising plays Mme de Genlis wrote for her young pupils, grand guignol, Labiche's *La fille mal gardée*, and countless dramatizations of folk and fairy tales; the other from Montreal arises from a much younger ancestry, but was in fact a production of Le Théâtre de la Marmaille which was founded in 1973, so which has therefore a record of durability. Although the actual plays *Frog soup* from Brussels and *Parasols* by Daniel Meilleur from Montreal are appropriately far apart, they both show us that plays for children certainly don't have to condescend to their audience, but that children are perfectly able to appreciate plays which belong to adult traditions: *Frog soup* owes much to surrealist and absurd theatre, and *Parasols* to agitprop and political activism.

To begin with the latter: the play, inspired by a tour of the company to Latin America, tells of the overthrow of a moderate ruler by a corrupt colonel and the disastrous effect of this junta on the people of the country, as exemplified by a family of peasants. This kind of theme – a political statement which concentrates on a specific issue – is well known to any adult familiar with the repertoire of small theatres, many of whom have a mandate to heighten the political awareness of their audience. Now didacticism is nothing new in children's literature; there are those indeed who think that children's literature must be didactic; as we all, presumably, are accomplices in the perpetuation of the tradition of fables and cautionary tales, there must be few who would object to the idea that children can learn as they are being enter-

tained. In this particular play several themes are interwoven in such a way as to be very appealing to children (the nine-year-old who was with me thought this was the most successful of several that we saw together). Several fairy tale motifs are integrated into the script so that there are echoes of elements children could be expected to be familiar with from other kinds of literature. There are archetypal struggles between good and evil, tyranny and freedom, youth and age, honesty and hypocrisy, elitism and egalitarianism, riches and poverty. The characters who participate in these struggles are a king, a queen, a colonel, a princess, a young peasant hero and his poor parents. There is a blend of tragic and comic, seriousness and playfulness: the colonel is the embodiment of self-serving, evil self interest; he is contrasted with the mindless, indulgent and self indulgent king who can't stop eating bananas; the explanation for the explosion in the palace is that the king has burst from banana consumption; the queen gives the king a bull as a present so that he will be able to eat beef; this means that the peasants, who are starving, will have to find the means of fattening it, but it is also an amusing character for a young audience. The young peasant is in the unthinkable position of being too poor to go to school; the only present his parents are able to come up with on his birthday is a piece of chalk which he will need if he does manage to get to school. One familiar feature of children's literature which is fortunately absent from this play is the idea of the female as passive beauty. The young princess here goes out into the world to actually do something, and it is her skills and ingenuity which make possible the plot to overthrow the colonel. Another familiar feature of children's theatre not offered by this play is a happy ending, but watching the reaction of the young audience to a very sombre ending was extremely interesting: obviously the children had been thinking about what had been going on in front of them and seemed to accept the fact that evil can be victorious, but that the struggle against it must go on. They gathered around the actors at the end and were obviously stimulated rather than depressed – which must have been precisely the point of the play.

On the cognitive level, then, *Parasols* is teaching its young audience something. The lesson, however, is offered rather than hammered home with an "if you do this and that, then the consequences are bad, so don't do it" kind of sledgehammer. The mode is expository rather than hortatory. The setting is exotic; children discover that there is a country in which the main crop is bananas; that it takes an enormous amount of labour to produce these bananas; that there are rulers in this world whose power is absolute, that human life is measured by different standards according to whether one is wielding this power or is subject to it; that infants born into circumstances of extreme poverty often do not survive, but that however poor the parents of such infants may be, their death is still the cause of grief. It is impossible to know how any of these messages is going to be absorbed by individual children in the audience, or what kind of imprint is going to be made upon the

child's memory. (A friend told me recently that, curious about what children extrapolate from what they see, he had asked his young son who had watched *Dr. Zhivago* in the family car at a drive-in, what it had been about. "It's about a little boy and his mummy dies" was the answer.) We can, with some justification, take it that children are going to identify most strongly with the children on stage – as they identify with the smallest, youngest, least significant member of families in fairy tales. In this case, *Parasol* represents the adults it portrays as being locked inside their personae and too firmly fixed in their habits to even think about changing them. The king, when urged to diet, finds, like the rest of us in a similar situation, that the eating habit is hard to break. The peasants, who recognise the injustice of their situation, are too weary and undernourished to do anything about it. The only characters in whom resides hope for redressing the wrongs of the *status quo*, are the young peasant Simon and the little princess. They alone view the world with the eyes of the innocent and judge it independently of the social straightjacket in which their elders are imprisoned. They hatch a plot which is meant to bring freedom and justice to the poor and oppressed; we applaud their initiative, we acknowledge their spunkiness, and we sympathise with them when their attempt fails. The play ends with the mournful bellowing of the doomed bull and a voice over saying "Et les prisonniers, eux, chantaient leur douleur, en espérant qu'un jour leur chant soit entendu". (As for the prisoners, they sang of their grief in the hope that one day their song would be heard.) We know that we are listening to this song in this very theatre and the children in the audience realise, however obscurely, that a torch has been passed on to them.

On a purely theatrical level, *Parasols* succeeds in creating a world of make-believe using very simple and effective devices, and in initiating the young audience into the conspiracy of theatricality. The imprinting here involves the "text" of the entire performance and the transmission of the totality of signs implied by Anne Ubersfeld in her title *Lire le théâtre*. What we are asked to read here is a series of conventions which we transpose into truths for the duration of the performance, and which, given that the audience had not necessarily had previous exposure to these conventions, imprint themselves as expectations for future theatrical experiences. The devices used seem to me theatrically sound and worth some brief comment: synecdoche is a very effective stage technique. Each set of characters has a home space suggested by simple sets: a couple of pillars and a throne suggest the palace; a grass roof the peasant dwelling; a grey wall the colonel's bunker. Similarly simple costumes suggest character: a crown, or a straw hat; or a uniform of unrelieved black. What was particularly interesting in this performance was that the same actors played the royal couple and the peasants, transforming themselves from one to the other by a quick change of costume. The fact that this worked is proof that although at some level it is being made clear to the children that these are actors playing roles, it is also clear that the children had no

difficulty whatsoever in accepting the characters at their persona value.

Frog soup has to be discussed in very different terms. Considerations of plot, conflict, message do not arise – indeed, there exists no such thing as script. The play patently derives from a theatrical tradition which has the surrealism of Jarry and the absurdity of Ionesco in its ancestry; the ancestry is sufficiently well entrenched to allow for the development of such an extravagantly non-message based creation. If the script is non-existent, then it is difficult to speak in terms of the cognitive content of the play. Rather we must speak in terms of reading the totality of the theatrical experience. The main topos of the piece is a mammoth soup bowl full of water. The main character in the play cavorts around the rim of the bowl, jumps into it at the sound of danger, frantically slurps soup from it as heavy footsteps tread overhead, hides among imaginary reeds when an exotic bird appears on the shore of the pond, into which it has transformed the water by its very presence. If pushed, I suppose one could interpret all of this in endless ways: as a Jungian expression of collective consciousness of origins in primordial ooze, as a Freudian salute to the amniotic sac, as a Marxist sneer as we consumers turn everything into a consumer product, as a reference to the Barthian paean in *Mythologies* to the way in which the child's imagination can adapt objects from their original purpose into other uses. If one hesitates to lay such heavy claim on such a wacky little number, one can certainly say that it exploits to an admirable degree the ludic possibilities of the stage, that it stretches the child's imagination by making him realise that on stage you can do anything. It also makes children laugh – which is a great gift. Seeing the little guy jump into the pond and come scrambling out dripping wet is wonderfully amusing spectacle in a slapstick kind of way. The actor in question remains the underdog and the person with whom children can easily identify as he finds ways of dealing with life situations – even if these situations are far from explicit in the play.

What these two very disparate plays had in common was the element which above all is necessary for theatre to be successful for children: namely a complete honesty on the part of the participants and a refusal to condescend to a young audience. The world of make-believe is made real before the children's very eyes and mesmerizes them so that they are drawn into it. Refusing to condescend means taking advantage of all the possibilities to which children are exposed and blending them with traditional elements of children's literature in order to create an artifact which expresses modern reality but keeps the child in touch with the constants of the imagination. If more children had the good fortune to be exposed to this kind of theatre we would be far less concerned about breeding a passive generation, stunned into a catatonia of the imagination by excessive exposure to television, and could feel confident that children's minds were being exercised to learn and act and to use the cognitive and non-cognitive parts of their mental capacity to fuller extent.

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