

# "Summerplay and winterplay: Theatre for and by children"

Jeffrey Goffin

**Résumé:** Jeffrey Goffin nous invite à revivre l'expérience particulière du Théâtre Quest de Calgary, qui a sollicité la participation de dizaines d'enfants à la rédaction de deux pièces devant marquer les Jeux Olympiques de 1988: "Winterplay" et "Summerplay".

Children's theatre is inherently restricted by its exclusion of children from the process of production. Adult theatre professionals produce their vision of childhood for the entertainment of an audience of children. This vision frequently runs the risk of being irrelevant to children. It is childhood seen from an adult's perspective. Like nineteenth century melodrama which relied upon stereotypes of Irishmen and Indians, children's theatre constantly runs the risk of misrepresenting children. An Irish playwright will likely create a more accurate characterization of an Irishman. A Cree playwright will likely do the same with a Cree character. Why do adult playwrights assume that they have the ability to speak for children?

In 1988 Calgary's Quest Theatre challenged this assumption with two new plays for children.<sup>1</sup> In early 1987, the Olympic Arts Festival commissioned a work called *Winterplay*<sup>2</sup> to premiere at the Olympic Winter Games in Calgary in February 1988. *Winterplay* opened in January 1988 at the Betty Mitchell Theatre in the Jubilee Auditorium and ran for five weeks. The play then toured Alberta schools for three months. Wagonstage, Quest's summer company co-produced with Calgary's Department of Parks and Recreation, staged *Summerplay*.<sup>3</sup> It toured the city for six weeks in July and August. Adults per-

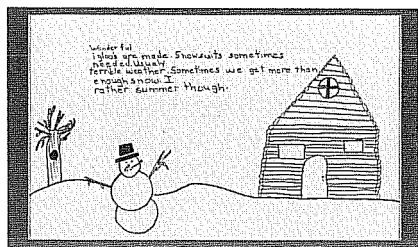


formed these plays but children wrote both of them.

For each play, Quest Theatre invited children to submit writing based on a seasonal theme. Quest sent invitations to schools across Alberta to find material for *Summerplay*. The company received several hundred submissions. For *Winterplay*, intended for an international audience at the Winter Olympics,

Quest requested work from students across Canada. They sent out fifty thousand brochures about the project to elementary and junior high schools (Grades 1-9). The response was overwhelming. Thousands of works poured in from coast to coast. Although the scale of these two productions differs, the process of production was essentially the same.

For *Winterplay*, a team of a dozen teachers and actors read all submissions, selecting certain pieces according to criteria set down by Quest's artistic director, Duval Lang. This was a formidable task due to the number of submissions. The readers ignored the mechanics of clarity, grammar and logic in favour of idea and spirit. Model behaviour or high moral tone was not important. They looked for material with an imaginative, unique perspective on the season. Works with strong sensual and visual imagery, an original twist, a sense of humour, or emotional appeal were chosen. Also, anything relating to the Winter Olympics was selected. Lang read through all the material recommended to him by his readers, approximately 300 submissions. These included plays, stories, poems of every style, a video presentation and recorded texts on cassette tape.



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In July 1987 a group of ten actors gathered for the next step in the process. In a workshop setting, they explored the dramatic potential of the material. Working as a collective for seven eight-hour days, they improvised action, dialogue, and music to bring the writing to life. At the end the company had a rough draft that went into rehearsal with a cast of five actors in January 1988.

Wagonstage worked on *Summerplay* for about four hours a day for six weeks. This brief period combined

both workshop and rehearsal.

The collective offers a clear alternative to the traditional process of play production. It is an alternative to the traditional top-down structure where the writer or director is at the top and the performers are at the bottom. The members of the company work together as equals to create the play. All members of the collective share equal responsibility although final decisions remain the prerogative of the director.

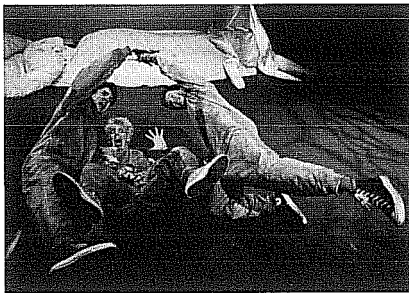
While the processes of selection and dramatization in Quest's workshop forced adult perspectives on the work, there was a conscious effort to lessen this intrusion. At every step the performers tried to remain true to the author's intentions. Every member of the collective strived to preserve the integrity of the original. This effort resulted in a production reflecting a child's

perception not an adult's. It is also more fragile and vulnerable than a scripted play since it is dependent upon the insights and creativity of so many different individuals.

Lang began the *Winterplay* workshop by placing the actors in groups of three or four. He gave a story to each group and asked them to create a dramatic interpretation of it in ten minutes. He encouraged them to use any format or style of presentation that came to mind. The only limitation imposed was that the actors remain faithful to the original work. After presenting the stories and discussing them, the groups traded stories and set to work to find a new way to dramatize the material. The first presentation eliminated the obvious stylistic choices. Subsequent attempts forced the performers to stretch themselves to find a new and distinct way of depicting each story. The company presented two or three versions of each story, then moved on to new material. In this way the company quickly distilled the essential elements from each story.

Improvisational acting exercises such as telling stories in gibberish or isolating body parts proved very useful and became part of the final production. Brainstorming on the idea of winter, the company created short vignettes using only vocal sound and physical movement. Cracking ice on a puddle, putting your tongue on frozen metal, the joy of the first snowfall, bumper riding and playing with frozen laundry were incorporated in *Winterplay*.

Both *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* drew upon childhood games related to each season. Rehearsals included looking at games the actors played when they were kids. It was easy to get excited about this since everyone could make a worthwhile contribution. During the *Summerplay* rehearsals, the company skipped and played Keep Away, hopscotch, leap frog, and Red Rover. For *Winterplay*, they played Fox and Goose, Shinny, Crack the Whip, and had snowball fights. The *Summerplay* cast went to playgrounds and watched children playing. They collected skipping rhymes and chants. Games became a recurrent motif in both plays offering another strong connection with the audience.



While children's writing and games provided the content of the play's scenes, equally important were the transitions from scene to scene. Lang spent considerable time on these. Both *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* were anthologies or collages comprised of about twenty different works. Both were lively, fast-paced shows with a loose structure incorporating music, dance, games, mime,

short skits, poems and stories. Because of this episodic structure, the action of the play had to move smoothly from scene to scene without distraction.

Lang preferred not to use a formal introduction for each scene as this would distance the audience from the material. When transitions in such a play work properly the audience does not notice them. The action flows smoothly. To achieve this requires careful planning. If the transition is too smooth, the audience is unsure of where the first scene ended and the next began. If the transition is too long, the audience's attention can stray. If it is too abrupt, it disrupts the pace of the play. Many transitions used music, a short game, a quick rearrangement of props or the shift of focus from one group of actors to another.

*Summerplay* is about games and vacations and formal and informal games. It featured short scenes on family holidays, bugs and mosquitoes, games, chanting and tall tales. The emphasis is on variety and quick pace. Each scene was very energetic. Carrie Hamilton's design consisted of several large, brightly coloured boxes in a variety of shapes. These looked like building blocks and by moving them around the stage, like building blocks, could create any setting required such as a car, a boat, a table, and a desk. A single plank served as diving board and a teeter-totter. A large blue cloth served as a curtain and as the billowing surface of the ocean. Each object was transformed in front of the audience through the actors' movements. The audience completed each metaphor in their own minds enabling the pretense. Costumes were coveralls in primary colours. Props were kept to a minimum. The design provided a dynamic visual statement consistent with the energy and fun of the show. The performers related directly to the audience throughout the play, never allowing their involvement in the action to disturb that connection. The company acted out scenes such as "The summer I met pirates", "Finally going up to the lake" and "Have you ever caught a bear?" speaking all narration directly to the audience.

*Summerplay* made use of audience participation continually. The performers encouraged children to sing along with the songs and to imitate their movements. Half-way through the play the company played "Guess that game". Each actor took a turn miming a game played during the summer and the audience tried to identify it. This scene led into a relay race in which members of the audience were invited to compete. Teamed with one of the performers the children went through Under-Over, leap frog and a wheelbarrow race. The scene served to release any restlessness from sitting for such a long time, enabling the children to remain attentive for the remainder of the show.

Appropriately, this scene moved into the poem "Sweat". After rushing around for the first half of the show, and particularly after the races, the actors were often hot and sweaty. The image of melting visualized the poem. The actors slumped to the ground, immobilized by the heat.

This mood sets up the next scene, "Sumnet". In it, the hard-boiled detective Sunday searches for a blackmailer. Whether from television or film, children easily identified the characters of the detective genre as well as the many

echoes of games and dramatic play. It is a familiar scenario.

"Sunnet" is fast-paced. The detective shadows his client, trying to find the blackmailer. Sunday tells the audience, "To be on the safe side (and not to lose a good client) I shadowed her everywhere – to the beach, the roller derby, the amusement park." The supporting actors created each locale quickly through simple mime. One moment they were roller derby skaters and the next, riders on a roller coaster, the next. The story concluded with the criminal uncovered as well as the reason for the blackmail: "When I asked the girl what she did she said, 'I ate a chocolate bar on my diet.'" The logic may not be that of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler but it is appropriate for the author and the audience of *Summerplay*.

The company wrote music for several poems as well as composing original songs of their own. Each changed the mood of the show. The "Bug Song" is a rock and roll litany on the ordeals of dealing with bugs:

Bugs

Are just a waste of slime  
I squish them all the time  
Can't get them off my mind

I'm real tough  
And enough's enough  
No bug's gonna make a fool of me  
Oy! Oy! Oy!  
No more runnin'  
When I see them comin'  
I'm ready for them  
Splat! Look out this bug's for me

An orgy of bug-killing, carried out with much stomping and slapping, concluded the "Bug Song". The "Butterfly Song" followed. Unlike the loud and funny "Bug Song", this is a melodic, delicate tune. The flurry of comic antics as the company exterminated a legion of insects ended. The actors remained stationary and watched the flight of an imaginary butterfly.

Fly little butterfly  
Fly all around me  
Come and tickle my toes  
Fly little butterfly  
Tiny and beautiful  
Come and land on my nose  
Flutter by, Butterfly  
Better fly, Butterfly  
Butterfly, play with me.

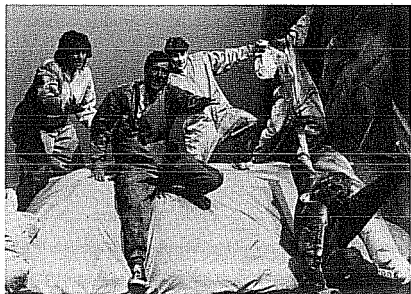
The sequence of scenes serves to advance the play. Contrasting an energetic

scene with a quiet, reserved one, the action moves through a variety of familiar activities and perspectives on Summer. The "Summertime Song", introduced at the outset of the play, returns toward the end, establishing a circular structure for the piece.

*Winterplay* has an open structure comprising sixteen written pieces. The material covers a wide variety of responses to winter. There are lyric poems about winter weather such as "Some snow poems", "Snowflakes", "Life as a snowman" and "Winterplay". There is the action-oriented poem "Hockey" and a rap called "Winter rap". There are comical stories such as "Slush! All we ever get around here is slush!", "Sweep Rocko", "The Calgary Olympic problem", and "The day the winter wizard turned bad". "The King who never saw winter" is a game show. There is a tragic story about two sisters, "Only partially right".

*Winterplay* was intended for a wide audience. As the only event for children in the Olympic Arts Festival, it attracted international attention. In its initial five weeks at the Betty Mitchell Theatre in Calgary, the company relied upon lighting and sound to augment their performance. Yet Quest also intended to tour the play to schools across the province where the performance venue would be gymnasiums and classrooms. The production had to be able to accommodate the tour with only minimal changes. Consequently, the run during the Olympic Arts Festival used little technical support.

Carolyn Smith's abstract design transformed easily into many different settings. A tree-like arch stretched over a mound of large, creamy-white pillows that looked like snow. The stage became a television screen, a game show studio, a frozen lake, a playground and an Olympic Stadium by rearranging the pillows or unrolling a curtain. The actors wore colourful overalls that were sufficiently neutral to allow the actors to change characters by adding a hat or a scarf. With the addition of hoods, the costumes become snowsuits.



The company rose to the challenge of finding a distinctive method of presenting each piece. The story of Joe, an eleven-year-old who becomes a

runner in the Olympic Torch relay, was performed behind a curtain hiding all but the performers' legs and feet. "The dreadful day", about a pair of mittens, was presented using only the actors' hands. Both of these scenes demanded that the actors convey a character using only part of the body. This isolation forced the actors to be as expressive as possible with those limbs. The novelty of these scenes gave the play a sense of fun and imaginative play.

"Only partially right" was a tragic piece about two sisters who fall through the frozen ice of a river. It was presented as directly as possible. The per-

formers told the story to the audience without extraneous movement or enactment of the events. The stark presentation emphasized the sombre mood of the piece.

Producing "The Calgary Olympic problem" posed problems of its own. The story tells of a professor who contracts with the Winter Olympics to change the unseasonably warm weather and provide much-needed snow for the event by rearranging the stars. (Ironically, the Winter Olympics faced this very problem but in real life no such simple solutions arose.) To bring the story to life and add an extra dimension of theatricality to it the company relied upon an improvisational acting technique used both by Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone. The cast translated the script into the nonsense language of gibberish. The story remained the same but rather than emphasizing language, the performance had a strong imaginative quality and absurdity throughout. For example, the original version opened with this speech from the professor:

I just don't understand. It's the middle of February and all the stars are in their right positions and yet it refuses to snow. I think I better call the president of the Winter Olympics now!

In performance this speech became:

Nix nix comprehending. Ish Diddle of Airy Feb und all die arsters perfecto, buts it nix nix schnee schnee. Tinkum callum Bigga Bigga Boss inter Lympics pronto!

The audience grasps the content from the broad acting and the selective use of words that approximate the English original. The device serves to draw the audience into the world of the play. The child watching the scene easily deciphers the gibberish as they would a word game or a secret code. Here again the play incorporates a common childhood game.

*Winterplay* and *Summerplay* are not the first use of child authors in professional theatre. Many precedents exist throughout Canada. Montreal's Théâtre de la Marmaille has a long tradition of collective creation which includes children and adults as equal partners in the creative process. James Reaney's children's plays grew out of his Listener's Workshops in the Sixties as did his theatrical technique used in his later plays such as *The Donnelly trilogy*. Both Edmonton's Citadel Theatre and Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects offer playwriting workshops for teenagers. However, *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* stand out as recent examples of what is possible when children write a play for children.

This kind of collective creation has many benefits for all involved.

For the children who wrote material used in the play there is the unique experience of watching the company's interpretation of their ideas. It was an opportunity to celebrate their work far beyond anything possible in an average Language Arts class. Students who saw their own work produced ex-

perienced the angst, joy, frustration and surprise common to any playwright.

For the schools there is the example of collective creation which they may use as a model for their own productions. The collective process used in both *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* requires little other than an active imagination. It is inexpensive. Simple props and costumes are used. It can be created on any theme. It does have the drawback of being time-consuming, requiring a workshop session in addition to the rehearsal period. However, it is a unique way to celebrate the writing of students. Duval Lang sees this as one way of overcoming the tendency of some teachers and parents to give too little credit to the creative powers in young people. The result is a production that has immediacy and relevance for its audience.

For the theatre company there is the attraction of working with writers who have few preconceptions, fewer inhibitions and unlimited creative energy. For them, structure does not necessarily mean a beginning, middle and end. There is not necessarily character development or even logic to the writing. It is pristine, naïve and incredibly imaginative. Adults provide only the form. Children provide the content.

For actors, the collective process allows each one to make a substantial contribution to the play. There is freedom to try anything and to do anything. The process makes use of the actor's imagination in a way seldom required by adult theatre. There is also the opportunity of working together as equals to create a new play.

The adult actors get inside a child's mind and see the world differently. They think as a child and see through a child's eyes. This is an important experience. Sometimes adults lose track of the wonder inherent in that vision. A piece of cloth is not just a piece of cloth. It can be the ocean or the sky. A board can be a diving board. It only requires imagination to believe in it.

The actors in both *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* enjoyed themselves. It allowed them to remember their own childhood. It unlocked memories. The workshops became days of playing for everyone involved. Even the voice of adult authority, the director, became a child. According to actress Nikki Lundmark, during the *Summerplay* workshop the actors became children and Lang became "the kid who rings on your door and asks you to come out to play."

The basis for both *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* is that which children are an authority on: play. Sports, games and imaginative play appear throughout. Children play in order to understand the world around them. Through drama they can celebrate their common perception of that world. The collective process empowers young people by minimizing adult influence on their artistic expression. The best children's theatre aspires to this. By using children's writing, Quest Theatre's *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* easily achieve this level.

## NOTES

1 All quotations from *Summerplay* and *Winterplay* are from the unpublished texts



supplied by Quest Theatre. All texts are without page numbers.

2 *Winterplay* by Canadian Children

Directed by DUVAL LANG

Assistant Director BARBARA BATES

Designed by CAROLYN SMITH

Music Composed by DAVID RIMMER

Touring cast: MARK BELLAMY, ANDY CURTIS, JAN DERBYSHIRE

Betty Mitchell cast: MARK BELLAMY, ANDY CURTIS, JAN DERBYSHIRE,

JOSEPHINE ROSE, ELLEN RAY HENNESY

Stage Manager: JOHANNE DELEEUW

Stories (in alphabetical order): HOCKEY by Jason Rebus, Sherwood Park; JANUARY 14 by Michael Moppett, Calgary; LIFE AS A SNOWMAN by Nathan Fisher, Calgary; ONLY PARTIALLY RIGHT by Natalie Bichsel, Rosemere; SLUSH, ALL WE EVER GET AROUND HERE IS SLUSH by Shannon Martin, Beaverlodge; SNOWFLAKES by Derrick Craig, Kamloops; SOME SNOW POEMS by Zoe Neill-St. Clair, Nanoose Bay; SWEEP ROCKO by Michael Henschel, Saskatoon; THE CALGARY OLYMPIC PROBLEM by James Dow, Calgary; THE DAY THE WINTER WIZARD TURNED BAD by Cyril Redillas, Bonnyville; THE DREADFUL DAY by Sarah Matthews, Bedford; THE KING WHO NEVER SAW SUMMER by Sandra Luken and Christine Stappels, Oakville; THE TRIP by Lucas Dambergs, Halifax; THE WINTER RAP by Amanda Corber, Nepean; WINTER by John Hinchey, St. John's; WINTERPLAY by Curtis Miller, Calgary.

*Winterplay* was workshopped by Quest Theatre during the summer of '87 with the following company: Lana Skauge, Josephine Rose, Marianne Moroney, Clarice McCord, Jim Leydon, Chris Hunt, Andy Curtis, Mark Bellamy and Bruce Parkhouse; Stage Managed by Johanne Deleeuw and Barbara Bates; Directed by Duval Lang. From the *Winterplay Handbook*, Sheila Stinson and Marlene Almond, Quest Theatre.

3 *Summerplay*

Director: Duval Lang

Assistant Director: Barbara Bates

Designer: Carrie Hamilton

Cast: Susan Lauer, Bill Melathopolous, Nikki Lundmark, Jeremy Laurence, Susan McNair.

*Summerplay*

SUMMERPLAY LETTERS; SUMMERTIME SONG (PART 1); THE SUMMER I MET PIRATES; SWIMMING VIGNETTE; FINALLY GOING UP TO THE LAKE by Darren MacDonald; MOSQUITOES by Sheilah Hickey; BUG SONG; BUTTERFLY SONG; HAVE YOU EVER CAUGHT A BEAR?; GUESS THAT GAME; RACES; SWEAT; SUMNET; FATTY FATTY TWO BY FOUR; PLAYGROUND; SUMMER POEM; -ING POEM; SUMMERTIME SONG (PART 2); THE FROG STORY; SUMMER STORY.

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