Encouraging audience reflections: The "Schoolyard games" of John Lazarus

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Résumé: *En 1989, Bronwyn Weaver a suivi le Young People's Theatre dans son programme de représentations dans les écoles. Elle évalue ici les pièces de John Lazarus et le rôle de Maja Ardal pour la mise en scène. Cet essai est une réflexion sur la relation entre les comédiens et les spectateurs dans le théâtre pour jeunes publics.*

The philosophy and practice of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)[1] as we know it in Canada have been defined significantly by the advocacy of Dennis Foon, who himself has been influenced by the emancipatory style of TIE practitioners and Grips Theatre Berlin. Since 1979, when he staged *Hilary's birthday* by Joe Wiesenfeld, Foon has concentrated on promoting theatre for children which "sets out with the objective to reflect the concerns and reality of [the] audience with the hope that the play will give the spectators some tools to better cope with a complex and confusing world" (1985). By fostering identification with characters and plot by mirroring the audience's reality, TYA practitioners impart to the audience the knowledge that children not only have the ability to understand themselves and the world around them, but that they have the right to take responsibility for their own existence. The achievement of personal control is both TYA's objective and its theme. "Empowerment" has come to represent this ideal. Specific techniques devised to empower the audience recur in the work of playwrights influenced by Foon. One such writer is John Lazarus. Between 1981 and 1986, he wrote *Schoolyard games*, *Not so dumb* and *Night light* for Green Thumb Theatre. Since then, the plays have been staged across the country.

Lazarus credits Foon as "the strongest influence on my Green Thumb work" because he "taught me to write about children as if they were human beings" (Letter to the author, 1989). Most TYA techniques specifically are intended to promote audience identification with characters that are like themselves since child characters are played by adult actors. Lazarus draws in children because his children play games to work out their problems: the "play" in his plays encourages the audience to make meaning of the drama in the way in which they make sense of the world. Children are not captured by mimicry, but rather through concentrating on their energetic movement and dialogue, and on the immediacy of their emotional reactions. Maja Ardal, director of a recent Young People's Theatre production of *Night light*, stressed that " [children's] bodies

express their emotions more openly and directly" (Personal interview, June 1989).[2] Constant motion is implicit in Lazarus's scripts. An immediate physical action makes the emotion concrete: characters hurt each other when frustrated, clamber to the top of jungle gyms to feel superior, play fantasy games to ease anxiety. Emotional rather than mental identification with characters is encouraged.

Character identification is linked strongly to the subject matter of the plot; the story revolves around a problem about which the audience can feel strongly: doing poorly in school, having to deal with a parent's unrealistic expectations, being bullied, being unable to convince anyone that there is a monster in the dresser (that the audience can see the creature is highly effective as a device to make the audience feel the character's frustration at her brother's disbelief). Because the audience can empathize with what the character is going through, TYA does not rely on active audience participation to draw the child audience into the experience but rather on emotional involvement to encourage complicity with the child character's behaviour.

One of the messages of *Night light*, for example, is that "you can't be mad and scared at the same time" (1987, 19). Lazarus validates the child's reliance on extreme emotions with action which dramatizes the notion that anger is a permissible way to deal with fear: Victor gets his sister to draw a picture of the monster and then to tear it up. As Tara rips the drawing, the actor manipulating the monster puppet physically reacts as if every tear hurts the creature. The audience derives immense emotional satisfaction from vicariously living through the experience with Tara. (But Lazarus is careful not to allow anger to be the final solution. Tara ultimately befriends the monster and puts herself in control by teaching it to talk.) The characters' heightened emotions draw the audience into the story and provide impetus for a solution. Audience are not spectators but participants in the characters' emotional journey.

One of the frequent TYA devices is the dramatization of ineffectual adults or the exclusion of adult characters. Although the danger of stereotyping exists, especially in a negative presentation of adults, dramatizing the plays from the child's perspective reassures children that their problems are as valid as those of adults. One of the reasons Lazarus "declined" to include adult characters was because he saw it as "a chance to write child characters: why clutter up the plays with authority figures?" Maja Ardal's advice to her cast was that " because there are no adults in the play we don't have to delineate how adults see kids [and vice versa]: you can just be people" (Notes, 23 March 1989). Lazarus's closed world automatically makes kids the authority figures.

The moral becomes more palatable (both for the other character and for the audience) when it is dramatized coming from another child: peer pressure prevents the message from acquiring the aura of a lesson. The message is integral to the action as it results from the consequences of characters' actions and from the reactions of the other kids: Binnie addresses the issue of the na-

ture of friendship in *Schoolyard games* when she tells Eleanor that she wouldn't play with her if she wasn't her sister; Rocky and Victor discover that they are not so different from each other when they engage in a bout of self-directed name calling in *Not so dumb*. In *Night light*, Victor helps Farley with math when Farley stops the bullying; Farley makes the first steps to understanding decimal fractions with Victor's encouragement; and Tara draws a second picture of the monster to make into a get-well card for her father, whose illness generated the creature. "In *Night light*. . ." Lazarus "like[s] the fact that each kid gains power not by conquering the enemy but by befriending it." The same can be said of the kids in the other plays. Each child gains insight into the others (and herself) with the result that the children reach understandings which are mutually beneficial.

Empowerment is reinforced by stressing that the child cannot rely upon an adult to solve the crisis. In Lazarus's plays, it is the adult's physical absence, not their inability, which decides the child to solve the dilemma. Victor and Tara's mother is exhausted in *Night light* so Victor refuses to burden her with his or Tara's problem; the principal in *Not so dumb* only offers help when Rocky goes to his office and makes the overture (the audience learns that he knew the children were in the classroom all along and chose not to interfere); while the "pecking order" of *Schoolyard games* is not the sort of problem that parents can even solve: kids have to work it out themselves. Self-reliance is dramatized as a choice, not a necessity. Lazarus believes "The victim-to-victor (or victim-to-Victor) theme is a form of audience empowerment. . . .[Children] should *feel* more powerful while watching the play." Empowerment comes from observation, not instruction.

The technique might be called reflective peer pressure for two reasons: the play's realistic reflection of children's lives acknowledges the actual power peer pressure exerts; and, the dramatic reflection encourages audience reflection of their own behaviour as measured against that of the child characters. Reflective peer pressure is a most valuable empowerment technique: it underlies the whole TYA philosophy because it is structured upon a realistic solution coming from the child character which audience members can conceive of as being useful or applicable to themselves.

An important dramatic device is the presentation of all sides of the issues. There is never just the one protagonist in Lazarus's Green Thumb plays: he is careful to make all of the characters understood by the audience. To objectify the subjective concerns of individual characters he features each child at some point in the play: Eleanor breaks down in *Schoolyard games* and reveals the confused, lonelier side of the bully, while hyperactive Binnie's skill as a diplomat is featured in both the plays in which she appears. A more confident Victor appears in the "at home" scenes in *Night light* so that the audience know that he is not the wimp Farley calls him. And when Farley plays at saving his "dumb" father, the reason for his bullying becomes apparent

in his echoing of his father's verbal abuse: "I dunno how you got to be so dumb, Dad, but you sure didn't get it from me" (24).

Maja Ardal stressed that each boy had endowed the other with a label and that the behaviour was a survival tactic of the schoolyard. She found physical moments to signal the character's other side. A casual unspoken relationship between big brother and little sister, based on Victor being stronger than Tara, was created by the way he would push her onto her bed or not flinch when she hit him. YPT's Farley was a popular character because his other side was always apparent in his nervous physical energy and because he dropped all pretense of being "cool" when he was alone.

Not so dumb effectively dramatizes the perspective of the other side by placing one character in the position of another. Victor thinks that "it's neat" that Binnie writes backward but that she does not try hard enough to write correctly. He is challenged to try the mirror writing. When he has trouble, Binnie and Rocky subject him to the type of criticisms that they hear all the time: "If you really wanted to, you could do it" and "Well, the rest of us can do it, so what's wrong with you, Victor?" (1984, 33).

Seeing different sides functions in three important ways: it allows children to make up their own minds about how they feel about the actions of characters, the reflection makes them recognize how their own emotions and behaviour might affect other people, and it provides the audience with the opportunity to experience what it feels like to be a different kind of person. TYA resembles educational drama in this common strength to transport children into another person's perspective.

However, since most child audiences are captive audiences because they themselves did not choose to see the play, the playwright and director need to make the play immediately accessible to the audience in ways that are both appealing and familiar to children if they hope to foster identification within the given school time frame of less than an hour. A method of drawing children into the play is by embedding in the dramatic world imagery (objects, places and ideas) which conjures up a common meaning for the majority of the audience. Because they convey an instant psychological or cultural meaning to which a child can commit, I call them commitment shortcuts. The most valuable shortcuts are those which play on universal emotional associations rather than those which depend on popular "cultural iconography", because references to current trends tend to draw the child's attention away from what is happening to what is being presented.

Maja Ardal proved the current trend wasn't the only way of getting the child to commit quickly to the performance when she chose to underscore the emotions of the children in *Night light* with selections of classical music. Children did not find the music distancing. One girl told me that the music matched the play "because it [the play] was scary and the music was scary" (Notes, 11 May). The pieces she is referring to are from "Neptune" from Holst's *The*

planets and Stravinsky's *Rite of spring*. Maja Ardal's selections unobtrusively heightened the intensity of the child characters' emotions without interfering with the meaning of Lazarus's text. Maja Ardal felt the music gave "young audiences the recognition that we, as adults, recognize how important their emotional reactions are" (Notes, June).

The child's perception of place particularly fulfills the need to draw in children quickly. Most commonly TYA plays are set in the home, school, or playground (or schoolyard) environment, or in a combination of these locales. Because children identify emotionally with these places as the places where the struggle for personal power most often occurs, very little time need be spent establishing character relationship to the environment. Audience members will endow the familiar location with their own meaning and relate it to the character and situation.

The effectiveness of place as a commitment shortcut in the empowerment process also depends on how the writer and the actors present the characters as responding to their environment. In Lazarus's Green Thumb plays, child characters are territorial: one character controls the space at any given time. Eleanor, the quick tempered leader in *Schoolyard games*, violently bosses her younger sister into playing at the other end of the playground as a condition to teaching Susan a handspring. In *Not so dumb*, Binnie lets Victor know he is an intruder in her classroom by stressing that "This is our room. This is our special room for the special learning disabled kids and their special teacher. . ." (1984, 13). Farley makes it unsafe for Victor to travel the schoolyard in *Night light*; the monster makes Tara's bedroom unsafe. Lazarus's kids invade or are invaded, defend, dominate or are ostracized in situations which are related specifically to the places they inhabit. The plays just don't take place in the schoolyard, classroom or bedroom: they are defined by the locale.

Schoolyard games requires a workable jungle gym and parallel bars to dramatize the hierarchy in the schoolyard and *Not so dumb* is set in a learning assistance classroom to dramatize the misconceptions of children with learning disabilities. In *Night light*, the children's fears are seen to be associated with particular environments established by a practical jungle gym, a dresser and a bed (which became a hill with a quick flip of a cover in YPT's production). These objects not only differentiate locales, but play a significant role in character responses as they evoke specific emotions in both character and audience. As the significance lies in what the struggle for control entails and means in these particular places, not in the physical place itself, representative sets, even rostrum blocks, can be used – making it easier for a small cast to assemble the set quickly.

Maja Ardal emphasized the characters' possessive and emotional relationships with their physical environment. This emotional territorialism, implicit in the script, is made concrete through blocking and physicalization which highly personalizes the jungle gym, dresser and bed (and hill) for each child

character who has contact with it. Maja Ardal suggested to Tara that the set has become "an alien version of your bedroom" which you have to "reclaim" from the monster (Notes, 21 March). The audience saw not only Tara's terror of the invasion but also a barely masked aggressiveness which develops into one of the methods she uses to confront the creature. Maja Ardal ensured that height was equated with the boys' power struggle by having Farley physically restrict Victor to small areas of the schoolyard by looming over him from the top of the jungle gym or the hill so that he could feel powerful by being taller than his victim. Therefore when Victor confronts Farley with his ultimatum, Victor's empowerment was clearly dramatized by a "territorial walk": Victor gingerly infringed upon Farley's territory by climbing over the jungle gym and across the hill to exit (Notes, 30 March).

The heightened perception of time in which theatre naturally occurs is an effective commitment shortcut reinforced by the school tour limit of an hour or less. It is realized by introducing the child character into an intensely concentrated event which the child perceives as a life crisis. Lazarus's scripts move straight into the complication: the power loss of all three children in *Night light* takes less than ten minutes of stage time to accomplish. From the opening of *Not so dumb*, the absence of the teacher adversely affects Binnie and Rocky, while Eleanor's almost immediate desertion of Susan to go to a gymnastics meet to which she refuses to invite her friend causes the violent rift in *Schoolyard games*. Lazarus's dramatic world is infused with a sense of urgency which parallels the immediacy children infuse into their own experiences.

The perception of heightened time is also reinforced by a reversal of normal time associations: the characters perceive it in the breakdown of their normal world. After school is the time to play with friends, but although it starts out as such in *Schoolyard games* it goes awry. Night time is associated with family time in *Night light* so Tara's monster materializes the evening of the same day her father goes into the hospital. *Not so dumb* plays on the association of school time with regimentation. Binnie feels it must be their fault when the teacher doesn't show up: "This doesn't make sense. We must be getting something wrong. Why isn't she here! . . .I hate when people change things!" (1984, 2).

The fear of change which prevents Rocky and Binnie from at first seeing beyond their immediate negative response to the crisis also motivates the characters in the other plays. Susan's fear of being denied a gymnastics lesson from Eleanor allows her to acquiesce to the older girl's banishment of her sister even though Binnie has shown her more kindness. Tara doesn't want "some dumb book" on dealing with children's fears to help her get rid of the monster; she wants her mother. Victor does Farley's homework and Farley won't study for the math test because to behave otherwise could lead to further humiliation.

The reversal of the normal order becomes the device with which Lazarus initiates the process of empowerment. The reversal brings with it a lessening of self-respect and even a loss of status in the eyes of peers: the humiliation of the loss of control is the impetus for the child character to take control. The crisis becomes a situation of challenge when the child is at the lowest point of victimization.

When the "L.D." report files become mixed up, it is Rocky, who has a reading disorder, not Victor "the brain", who reasons that they are colour coded by grade, and when Rocky discovers the teacher is not coming back, he goes to the principal to turn himself in for looking at his file, but finds the principal willing to explain it to him. (*Not so dumb* differs in this respect from the other two plays in that the adult, although never seen, is active in solving the dilemma. But it is the children's experiences which allows for the conclusion. The empowerment occurs in what the kids learn about each other and themselves. The children decide to go see the principal *voluntarily*.) When Eleanor twists Susan's arm so badly that they think it is sprained, the violence causes the girls to re-evaluate their friendship. Tara and Victor strike a deal with their respective bullies when the emotional torture becomes too much to bear. Instead of just reacting emotionally, the child characters use reason. Heightened time highlights the act of empowerment for the passage of time is significant only in that it parallels the characters' emotional development.

An inconclusive ending is frequent in TYA. Although a solution has been found more quickly than it would be in real time, Lazarus is careful not to present a neatly packaged "happily ever after" conclusion. His child characters solve, but do not resolve, their problems: Victor and Farley do not become friends but they make tentative steps towards doing so; Eleanor's violent temper has not vanished but Susan and Binnie learn how to deal with it a bit better; Binnie and Rocky still need special classes but they and Victor have a better perspective of their difference and the beginnings of a friendship.

The open ending moves the audience towards self-reflection and provokes personal conclusions. Lazarus's realistic endings encourage children to effect a change in the immediate world in which they live: he draws attention to a common childhood problem but leaves it up to the individual members of the audience as to what they should do with their new awareness and with the suggestions subtly offered by the play's action. Children can project their own meaning into the drama. When I asked children (150 kids in Grades 3 to 6) if Farley and Victor become friends, the vast majority of children said yes; when I asked if Farley passed the math test, one third said no or that they weren't sure.

For children to be empowered by the vicarious experience, they need to see that the character's positive active response to the dilemma is rewarded with improved self-esteem and respect from the other characters. A hopeful open-ended resolution is important because, while the problem is not seen as con-

veniently vanishing, the child character, and consequently the child audience, is left feeling more in control.

The strength of Theatre for Young Audiences lies in recognizing that theatre *as* theatre is education. The most effective TYA plays, like those of John Lazarus, merge the theatre product and the empowerment process in a well-told story which affects the audience from the outside in. There is no overt message as instruction is inherent in the action: Lazarus's plays are not about the issue; they are about how children confront the issue.

> I used to believe [writes Lazarus] that entertainment values were sugar-coating for the true purpose of the play, which was to deliver the message to the masses. I now believe the opposite: that the message, or rather the theme, is just one of many entertainment values in a good play, albeit an important one. I might add that as I have shifted . . . to my new entertainment centred view, my work has become much more politically effective (Letter, 1989).

It is the aesthetic distance of performance, created by the physical set, adult actors, and humour, which makes children comfortable in accepting the play's reflection of their personal reality. Objective subjectivity, best expressed as "that is not me but it is like me", allows children to be entertained by the performance while it is occurring and to reflect on the meaning once it is over. Lazarus's "schoolyard games" entertain and empower with audience reflection.

Notes

1 The term "Theatre for Young Audiences" was first introduced by Joyce Doolittle in the early 1970's to indicate theatre performed *for* children *by* adults rather than theatre acted by children. She was influenced by the Russian term "Theatre for Young Spectators" (Letter to the author. 22 Jan. 1989, and personal conversation, 26 May, 1989).

2 YPT staged *Night light* for their School Tour Programme. It was directed by Maja Ardal, the Associate Artistic Director. In rehearsal from March 21 to April 2, 1989, the production toured, under the auspices of Prologue to the Performing Arts, from April 3 to May 19, 1989. I conducted a participant observation of rehearsals and followed the show as it toured. I also administered questionnaires to audience members.

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