

## Editorial:



Photo: Mary Rubio

Joyce Doolittle and her husband, composer Quenten Doolittle, at Guelph

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in Canada has come of age and this issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* acknowledges and celebrates its accomplishments. Canada's professional theatre for children has always enjoyed a variety of styles. Plays from Britain, France and the United States dominated the reper-

toire of early companies, but with the explosion of artistic nationalism following its centenary, Canada developed and promoted its own writers and world view. The success and growth of the annual International Children's Theatre Festivals in many Canadian cities brings us the best in the world and engenders respect for our artists abroad.

Theatre is a magpie art. Scene and costume design, style and direction are as important as the words. In many cases, collaboration between the director and designer resembles that of publisher and illustrator for a child's picture book. Communication between the actors and the audience is complicated. Many devices used by contemporary companies, often in the interests of economy as much as art, are highly sophisticated – a length of blue cloth for a river, for example. But this minimalist, symbolic style also reflects children's play, where a broom is a horse and a pie tin, the moon. What Bronwyn Weaver calls *commitment shortcuts* and what Vivien Bosley refers to as the *conspiracy of theatricality* succeed because they echo the innate ability of children to make-believe, suspend disbelief and enter a world of imagination.

Whether we should instruct or entertain young audiences (most practitioners believe in doing both!) remains an issue for TYA – as it is in children's literature. Barbara Christofferson pleads for plays to inform young people of dangers they may face in our society; Clem Martini asks us to do some kids' plays just for fun. John Lazarus says that exploiting entertainment values in his "message" scripts increases their effectiveness. And even the most playful pieces discussed in these pages – *Frog soup*, *Winterplay* and *Summerplay* – instruct audiences in the language of the stage through their blatant theatricality.

Ties between education and theatre for the young are endemic and range

from restrictive to rejuvenating. Britain's Brian Way was the single most important early influence on both drama curriculum and theatre for the young in English Canada. His 1967 book, *Development through drama* is still an authoritative text for teaching creative or child drama to classroom teachers. His observations, shared with Joyce Wilkinson, (herself a pioneer drama specialist), on the current state of the art in Canada as compared with that existing during his late 1950's cross Canada tours, makes clear the distance we have traveled and signposts our future goals.

At a recent international symposium on Drama and Education in Toronto, Lowell Swortzell, U.S. editor of an ambitious new survey of world children's theatres, told listeners that the three persons mentioned most often as influences on their work by companies he canvassed were: Athol Fugard, Bruno Bettelheim and Augusto Boal. Théâtre sans détour's use of Boal strategies is discussed in this issue by Héléne Beauchamp. Boal, Bettelheim and Fugard are all concerned with empowering people. Boal offers theatre techniques to persecuted people to arm them with clear and vivid versions of their oppression; Bettelheim presents convincing arguments that ancient tales can shape a child's inner landscape as protection from crippling neuroses, and Fugard gives an eloquent, individual and even handed voice to both black and white people of his native Africa.

Empowering the audience has helped to bring TYA to its current condition as a genre warranting support and scholarly reflection. Many examples are cited in this issue. Open or ambiguous endings to plays are more common today and allow the audience to reflect and make up their own minds about what may happen after the play's events have ended. Contributions from children are solicited and used to create plays. Difficult subjects such as date rape and child sexual abuse are examined and, through theatre, boys and girls are made aware that they have every right to say "no" to unwanted advances. Playwrights in Alberta are commissioned annually to write plays specifically for teen aged actors for a celebration of Teen Drama at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. In Calgary, Alberta Theatre Projects devotes a weekend to a "blitz" of workshops for teen-aged playwrights. Native people are increasingly empowered to tell their own stories and interpret their own culture as more of them contribute directly to the performing and other arts. In TYA, an outstanding example is *Annie and the Old One*, a Newbery Medal book dealing with native rituals surrounding death, which was adapted for the stage by prize-winning Canadian playwright, Tomson Highway, for Cascade Theatre's tour of Ontario schools.

Our perceptions are changing. Innocence is not always desirable and may, indeed, be dangerous. Natives are not "picturesque" and their unique wisdoms can help us all. Live theatre is a powerful force for tolerance and joy.

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