

# Play reviews

## NOVEL ADAPTATIONS: FACING PREJUDICE

**Goodbye Sarah.** George Bilson (adapt. from his novel of the same name). Copyscript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 36 pp., \$5.00. ISBN 088754-416-9. [First produced: Persephone Theatre, Saskatchewan, 1984]; **Angel Square.** Alan Davis (adapt. from the novel by Brian Doyle). Copyscript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 88 pp., \$7.00. [First produced: Chilliwack Players, B.C., 1986]; **The General.** Robert Morgan (based on the book by Frank Etherington). Copyscript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 56 pp., \$5.00. [First produced: Theatre Direct, Ontario, 1986].

All three of these plays are historical. Two are based on real events or real people: *Goodbye Sarah* is set in Winnipeg during the General Strike of 1945, *The General* is based on the life of Frank Groff, "The Bridgeport General," and is set in Ontario. While not based on actual events or a person from the past, *Angel Square* is costumed and set in Ottawa, 1945.

*The General* tells of growing trust between generations and of two children's battle with injustice when they see it perpetrated on an old "general", a voluntary crossing guard whose work, clothing and hygiene are unacceptable to Kitchener City Council. The play is simple and pleasantly understated. It avoids melodrama, but does not back away from the failure of the children to change the bureaucratic mind. Instead, the children realize that no one can inflict change on an individual if that individual does not accept it. This is true of the community too. Even if the town sign is removed, the community of Bridgeport still exists in the minds of its inhabitants. This gentle and thought-provoking play is suitable for children aged ten and over (grade 4 up).

*Goodbye Sarah*, on the other hand, takes sides. It shows how a community can fracture due to prejudice and ignorance. Even children lose friends when their parents hold opposing positions in the Winnipeg General Strike. The situation is real with implicit violence (off-stage). The punishment of the starving heroine by a prejudiced teacher is heart-rending. She cannot remain innocent. She must accept the unfair uprooting of her family from their community and she must face the injustice without the support of her friend, Sarah. This play will stimulate discussion and understanding of the historical context of post-war Canadian history.

*Angel Square* is the most theatrical of these plays. Creating an analogy for

multicultural Canada in an Ottawa Square in 1945, Alan Davis has kept the humour and poignancy of Brian Doyle's novel. The innocent, hard-working hero, Tommy, finds young love and action-adventure by fighting racial prejudice. Of the three plays, this is the one that has the quality to become a classic in Canadian Children's Theatre. The Christmas ending could be cliché but it isn't because of the innocence of the unassuming hero.

All three of these plays could be successfully produced in the right venue. *The General* would make an excellent school production in a gym or multipurpose room as well as on a stage. This is true of *Goodbye Sarah*, though more elaborate staging should be used to represent the community Sarah is losing. *Angel Square* would be best seen in a theatre with imaginative staging and lighting: the author suggests that the centre stage be textured to depict the square itself as if trodden down by snow. This makes sense as a focal point theatrically and thematically: much action is centred in the Square as different factions of the community meet there on neutral ground.

All three plays portray the danger that prejudice and ignorance pose to the community. By setting their plays in the past, the authors allow us to make our own connections to our experiences in present day Canada.

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## ADVENTURES WITH BULLIES AND MAGIC

**The mystery of the Oak Island treasure.** Jim Betts. Playwrights Canada, 1985. 105 pp., \$7.95. ISBN 0-88754-420-7; **I met a bully on the hill.** Martha Brooks and Maureen Hunter. Copyscript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 43 pp., \$5.00. [First produced: Prairie Theatre Exchange, Manitoba], 1986; **The magic trumpet.** Victor Cowie and Victor Davies. Turnstone Press, 1984. 66 pp. ISBN 0-88801-094-X.

These three plays illustrate the diversity of Theatre for Young Audiences today. From elaborate stage productions and themes of fantasy, to simple boxes on a classroom floor, the sophistication and complexity of material being written for children continues to develop and expand into a body of dramatic literature in its own right. Deeper respect and understanding of the nature and concerns of childhood have resulted in plays that are more responsive to