

Changing the World: An Interview with Writer JoAnne James

• Anne Hiebert Alton •



JoAnne James

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue accordée le 26 septembre 1996 dans son bureau du Centre des Arts de Calgary, la dramaturge et productrice JoAnne James parle de ses oeuvres théâtrales et de sa carrière d'écrivain, de la signification du théâtre pour la jeunesse et, enfin, des objectifs du Festival international pour les enfants qu'elle organise à Calgary.

Summary: In this interview, which took place on Thursday, 26 September 1996, in her office at the Calgary Centre for Performing Arts, Calgary playwright and producer JoAnne James talks about the background to her plays and her writing career, the significance of writing for and entertaining children, and the aims of the Calgary International Children's Festival.

JoAnne James hails from Thunder Bay, Ontario, but has also lived in British Columbia and Saskatchewan; she now makes her home in Calgary. She is a playwright, a single mother, and the Founding Producer of the Calgary International Children's Festival. James has won various awards, including the 1992 Woman of Distinction Award for Arts and Culture in Calgary, and the 1995 Harry and Martha Cohen Award for significant and sustained contribution to theatre in Calgary.

James has written four plays, three of which have been published in *Three Quest Plays*. Her first play, *Square Eyes* (not included in the anthology), tells the story of a boy who learns that his father is illiterate. *Square Eyes* has been performed in schools and theatres across Canada and the eastern United States over the last decade, and has been a tremendous success. Her new book, *Three*

Quest Plays (1996), is a collection of *Moving Day*, *The Echo Box*, and *Willa and Sam*. *The Echo Box* focuses on the dynamics of a relationship when a third child enters an already established friendship. James excels at portraying this delicate balance, subtly addressing Mitchell's implied loneliness when he isn't at the seaside with Hallie, Hallie's near hero-worship of Mitchell and her willingness to include another person into their friendship, and Nora's apparent leadership characteristics which conceal her own isolation. It also considers the function of memory and the importance of play in Hallie's, Nora's, and Mitchell's lives.

The companion pieces, *Moving Day* and *Willa and Sam*, also explore the dynamic of friendship and the significance of play. *Moving Day* spotlights the effect of the news that Willa and Benji must move away to Vancouver with their parents, leaving Willa's best friend Sam behind. Here James portrays Willa's and Sam's dismay at their impending separation with both sensitivity and insight: coupled with Willa's apprehension about moving and leaving Sam is her excitement at the thought of new challenges. In the end, it is Willa's connection with their private world of play that allows both girls to accept their separation. *Willa and Sam* is the sequel to *Moving Day*, and explores the changes that three years of absence have wrought in the girls' friendship, realised when Willa and Benji move back home to Calgary. This time it is Sam's affinity with the world of imagination which reconciles the girls to the transformation in both their friendship and each other.

JoAnne James is also the Founding Producer of the annual Calgary International Children's Festival, which celebrated its tenth anniversary this year. The Festival is held in Calgary every spring, when for six days the city is entertained and delighted by a variety of performances for children's audiences. The festival has been visited by groups from over forty countries; this year, the entertainers included storytellers, actors, dancers, musicians, acrobats, and puppeteers from throughout Canada, the United States, Ireland, Japan, the Philippines, Kenya, Australia, and the Czech Republic. James notes that the Festival is based "on the philosophy that an understanding of other cultures and an appreciation of the arts is an essential component of the educational process." She adds, "The priorities I have as a producer reflect the ones I have as a mother. Like every parent, I want the very best for Gemma. I want her to know that the world is wide and that her life is filled with limitless choices. The Festival is ideally placed to illuminate this for every child."

The following interview took place on Thursday, 26 September 1996, in JoAnne James's office at the Calgary Centre for Performing Arts. James spoke with me for nearly ninety minutes, commenting on the background to both her writing career and her plays, the significance of writing for and entertaining children, her vision for the place of children in the world, and the aims of the Calgary International Children's Festival.

Anne Hiebert Alton: *Is becoming a playwright something you've always wanted to be? Do you think of yourself as a playwright?*

JoAnne James: I think of myself as a playwright, yes. I'm very proud of the plays. They've taken a lot of time — my daughter is thirteen years old, and I've been

writing plays for as long as she's been on the planet earth, because I started the first play when I was home with her. She was just a baby, so certainly that's been a real focus in my career for the last thirteen years.

But whether that was something I dreamed of as a child — I can't say that's true. When I was a child, what I wanted to be more than anything was an actress, and I guess I thought that was the thing that could be achieved. I didn't realise that there were other things that I could do; I was always involved in plays. When I went to university that's what I studied. I discovered play-writing at the university, and I enjoyed it very much. I'd always enjoyed writing, and it came together for me at the university. The university here in Calgary has quite a strong focus on theatre for young audiences, and I really fell in love with that genre: I really respond to a young audience and what they seem to look for in a play, the questions that they're looking to answer in their own minds.

I have a wonderful blend of career, a day job and my own creative work. In my work for the Festival, I'm always looking at scripts and going to other festivals. I was on a playwrights' panel last week, and the phrase I like the best for doing that research, looking at other people's work, is: "I fill the well." I came across another phrase which is the opposite of that, from Van Gogh: he said that he would walk and enjoy nature, and he talked about the whole notion that when he didn't do what I called "filling the well" he had what he called meagreness. I thought it was such a perfect, perfect phrase, because you're always trying to fill yourself up with experiences. So I feel that I'm very well placed.

Alton: *Do you think of yourself as a children's playwright?*

James: Yes.

Alton: *So you write plays for children — as opposed to simply writing plays?*

James: Well, I have a little soapbox that I do for that question — I write for people, and it happens that the people that I write for are young people, but I have a problem with the categorization of our audience: I don't think we do the same thing to adults: we don't say they are in the age group between thirty to forty! I think I write for people, they're young people, though I've had great response from adults.

I had a wonderful conversation with Janet Lunn last year and she said something that really stuck with me: if you ask people what their most memorable reading experiences are, they will often tell you about a book that they read as a child. I'm asked this question a lot, why I work in the children's area, and I'm always struck by it, because if you're in room in a workshop setting where you're generally talking about the arts, and if you throw out the question of what was the moment at a performing arts event that stays with people the most, that they'll always remember, many will remember something that they saw as a child. Our big moments — and I think as children we're more open to them — are epic moments. When you go into a theatre with a play for grown-up people, the audience is sitting talking, but also worrying about where they parked the car, what they'll pay the baby-sitter, where they'll go for drinks afterwards, who's sitting with who, how do they look, all those things, and the buzz is quite unfocused. But if you come to the Festival, for me it's very exciting to be in the



Photo by Trudie Lee

From Willa and Sam
Left to right: Heather Kennedy, Shannon Quinn.

audience. There's a level of interest, there's a buzz that's very exciting, and when the lights come down and the sound goes up at a children's performance, in my opinion, there's the feeling that something is going to happen. If what you have created is good enough, it could really affect somebody! It could make their world a little bit bigger, it could challenge them to go forward in a different direction. You really feel that possibility, and I think that as we grow older we sometimes lose the excitement of that possibility. So I'm really fortunate to work in a field where that's true.

But this question of why you write for children, whether you're satisfied in writing for children, I find it really intriguing. Other people have answered the question far better than I have. For instance, P.L. Travers, who wrote *Mary Poppins*, said she was watching somebody being interviewed on TV who was asked the same question, "Why do you write for children?" And she got up to the TV screen and said, "Say because you have *been* a child!" and the person said, "Because I have been a child." A great story. I think we all have that shared experience.

Alton: *Do you think that by writing for children you're tapping back into that sense of excitement?*

James: Oh definitely, absolutely!

Alton: *That was the feeling I had in reading your plays. I kept thinking, "I remember that! How can she reproduce that memory so clearly?" It was wonderful.*

James: Thank you. I think there are a couple of answers to that: I have a fabulous daughter, and the plays in *Three Quest Plays* are based on things that happened in life, except for *Willa and Sam*, which is a 'dream come true' play — Gemma said,

why don't you write a play about Willa moving back?

Alton: *What sorts of events inspired the plays in Three Quest Plays?*

James: *The Echo Box* is set at the beach we go to every summer, and I watched Gemma struggle with the relationships at that beach. She has one really good friend there, and when another friend comes to visit, Gemma always has trouble negotiating that balance of who to be friends with during that one week we're there. So that was the jumping off place for it: it was just that situation and the idea of the person upsetting the balance. In the volume it's presented first.

I wrote *Moving Day* first, but *Moving Day* and *Willa and Sam* are placed together. *Moving Day* is based on the very sad fact in my daughter's life that her best friend Emily moved away to Kelowna. They were younger then — seven — but I placed them later. It was a very, very difficult thing for Gemma to say goodbye to Emily, and so that was the jumping off point for that play.

And then with *Willa and Sam* what I really wanted to hook up was that crossover from childhood to adolescence, and that is where my daughter is now, and has been hovering for the last couple of years. When I was working on that piece, that's what intrigued me the most, the child who still wants to play and the one that is ready to leap off into the teenage life. I read a lot of research that Carol Gilligan did at Harvard about being at the crossroads: she does amazing research into young girls, and how at the age of eleven or twelve they start to lose their physical confidence, they start to emulate their peers in ways they haven't in the past, and they lose their sense of adventure and imagination. So I was intrigued by that whole subject because of my own daughter, and that's what I wanted to



Nikki Lundmark and Lindsay Burns in a scene from Moving Day by JoAnne James, produced by Quest Theatre, Calgary.

hook into. I presented that as an idea to do as a piece, and it was after that that I thought that it could be done with the familiar characters of Willa and Sam. So it was a bit different, how I approached it. I just found — and still find — that whole area a fascinating process, that whole idea that they have to leave play behind just because they're getting older. I think if I'm proud of any of the feedback that I've had on the work, it's that it's been said that I celebrate play.

Alton: *I think that's very true.*

James: I wanted to because I think they play! They're surrounded by so much screen media, by so many activities, so many energies, so much advertising, even more than we ever had to deal with. I think the things that anchor Sam are really very interesting — and that's Gemma, she's the kid with the wall full of whales, the story of the kid with the mother who did the story of whales, the lights through the house. I did that, and I put it in *Willa and Sam*. I saw this spinning Japanese paper lamp in Toronto and thought, "The lamp's fantastic!" I had to make an event out of it, so I wrote Gemma a special story, called "Sophie the Whale," and I wound the lights up through our house, and turned off all the lamps, and it was quite magical. I took her whale watching, too. And I don't want her to lose that anchor, or that sense of wonder; she doesn't have to!

Alton: *Your work shows that you haven't lost it either; is that what you hope for the kids who watch your plays?*

James: Oh, definitely, of course! We got fabulous feedback on *Willa and Sam* from kids during the discussion period.

Alton: *So you take your plays around to schools?*

James: All three plays have been performed here by Quest Theatre, and by other theatres as well; *Square Eyes* has been produced by a lot of different theatres. Duve Lang is the Artistic Director of Quest Theatre, and he's my collaborator; they've all been professionally produced and taken on school tours.

Alton: *You've mentioned discussion periods, is this a formal thing?*

James: It's an informal discussion, but all the plays are accompanied by study guides that go out, previous to the performance, with pre-visit activities that teachers can do with kids and post-visit activities as well.

Alton: *Do you write those?*

James: No, other people do; they have a teacher that they work with to do a study guide.

Alton: *So this is really "instruction with delight" — schools and study guides and specific things for discussion; the educational aspect is obviously there.*

James: Oh, very much so — and the feedback from teachers has been great!

Alton: *Do you have rules when you're writing a play?*

James: Unfortunately, yes. Because all three of these plays have been developed and premiered at Quest Theatre, there are boundaries: the play has to be no longer than forty-five minutes, and no more than three characters, all played by professional actors — I should say three actors rather than three characters, you could have one actor playing more than one character, but since my work tends to be

quite realistic, I've always just used three characters. Obviously the setting has to be easy to perform as well. Those are the boundaries, you work within those.

The up side of that is that I know those parameters and I know how to make them work, and there's been a very supportive team of people behind those productions, especially my colleague, Artistic Director Duval Lang. He and I work together very well: we've known each other probably almost twenty years, we've had a lot of trust in collaboration together. The down side is that there are those restrictions.

One of the things that I'm trying to do now, I hesitate to say it out loud because it's a little scary, but I am trying to write a novel for children. I'd like to have a wider scope. I love writing dialogue, I'd like to be able to enter the minds of kids and be more than a narrator. There are a lot fewer rules, and I want to try it!

Alton: *Have you begun?*

James: Yes! Those ideas are dreams that I've had — you always want to try something else. I took a screen-writing course last year and thought it might be challenging to try a screen play. I'd like to explore more forums, because with the completion of *Willa and Sam*, that's four plays. But because of the Festival, I'm very busy, and I'm a single parent, so every one of those plays, including *Willa and Sam*, took at least two years, mostly at night and on weekends.

Alton: *So the whole notion of a structured routine, sitting down from nine to five and devoting the day to writing, is not something you've been able to do?*

James: No, but with *Willa and Sam* I had a wonderful opportunity: I was invited to be a participant at the playwrights' colony at the Banff Centre two summers ago, and so I found myself for thirteen days — I know exactly how many days! — at Banff in a room with my laptop and a company of actors, not just me but a whole group of people with whom I could have readings, and I could be working on my piece, and my director was there, so there were workshops. That part of it was fabulous, but for me the luxury of not having a ringing phone, not having Gemma to look after, there's food there for you

Alton: *Sounds like a writer's heaven!*

James: Yeah, it was magnificent, and I took full advantage of it — and I got the whole second draft of *Willa and Sam* done, so I think that was the best writing experience I've had, just the best. I think probably *The Echo Box* was the hardest one to keep going back to and going over again; I found that one really hard.

Alton: *That's my favourite.*

James: Probably because it took the most effort!

Alton: *I'd like to talk a bit about philosophy and writing for children. Ursula Le Guin recently gave a talk in Calgary, during which she commented that she writes in "despised genres" — meaning science fiction, women's literature, fantasy, children's literature. She also said something very similar to what you said in your Calgary Herald article earlier this year (15 March 1996) when you commented on the Dunblane tragedy: she said, "We are living in a world which despises children." What's your reaction to that statement? Do you think it's true?*

James: Well, I hate that comment, but I'd have to agree with it. I think we have to

do more than just tolerate children and childhood, we have to celebrate it! It's the same as what Janet Lunn said about paediatrics, in medicine, it's looked down on — why is that? I don't know the answer to that, and I guess I fight against it; I just find that this is an audience that deserves all our respect! In my work with the Festival I'm told that the best way that we can raise money to support what we do is to say that we're raising the audience of tomorrow, and my response is always, "No we're not, they're a valid audience right now!" Just because they're eight doesn't mean they're less valid than someone who is forty-eight, and I'll take anybody on who tries to tell me that they are. My image that I use in that speech — when people try to tell me that that's the way to approach this — is that I feel like I've got all these kids and I've got a character bringing them into the gingerbread house, to be enchanted, and I bring them in through the back door, and when they exit through the front door they're still children, but they're children dressed in tuxedos and carrying chequebooks, and writing subscription cheques to the symphony and the opera, and I've tricked them somehow in this gingerbread house! And that's *not* what it's about at all — that's not why they're here. They're here to be challenged and enchanted and confronted and delighted and all of those things!

Alton: *Transported — but not into little adults, rather into some other realm.*

James: Exactly! To say that they're despised is really harsh, but there's some truth to that, and it's very painful. I find that with this work, and with the Festival. When we bring in our children's artists I treat them with the utmost respect, they're not treated as second-class performers because they're choosing to perform for children. That's what gives me great satisfaction, putting them in a theatre, giving the show great lighting, great technical support, the kids come in and sit in real seats, the lights come down — transported is a good word.

Alton: *Jan Truss said something of children's theatre, she said: "I want to think of theatre as a special occasion of heightened experience — another door to the soul" ["Soliloquy by One Who Writes for Children's Theatre," CCL 8/9 (1977): 70-73].*

James: That's great, that's it!

Alton: *The mission statement of the Calgary International Children's Festival is: "To change the world by surrounding children with excellence so that they can recognize their own power and demand excellence from the rest of their lives." Is this what you want to do? How do you want to change the world?*

James: Yeah, I'd love to change things, and that's how: by surrounding kids with excellence so that they will recognize their own power and then use that power. This came out of the horrifying idea that kids are reading books without authors: they were reading *Strawberry Shortcake* books then. So your kid could read a book about a product; the people who made the book put out the product, and there was no care at all of what the story was, and all these books were being created to sell products. At that time I felt that kids were being bombarded with all this commercialism, and they still are, and now with the internet and all this other stuff, they're constantly bombarded — so they've got a lot to deal with. So when I say surrounding them with excellence, I mean what we do at the Festival, where we have the opportunity to bring them into a space and instead of being bombarded with the image of somebody selling them a character in order to buy

a toy, they will see a puppeteer or a dancer or actor who's trained for years to tell them stories. I think that if that excellence enters them — like you said, takes them into another realm — then we can equip them. I think children as they grow become more well rounded and capable adults if they can express themselves, if they can be in touch with their feelings, if they learn about creativity, if they learn about ways to just put themselves out there, take risks — art is also about risk. So when I talk about surrounding them with excellence, the whole idea is to get inside them, then they realise within their own hearts that they can make the world better. I find that a defining idea, and we really use that — we often look at each other and say, "Ah yes, but is it going to change the world?"

Alton: *What kind of world do you want? Ten years from now?*

James: I'd like there to be no sexism, I'd like there to be a world where my daughter has every opportunity open to her, I'd like a world that is free, I'd like a place where diversity is celebrated, where differences are embraced.

In a perfect universe, I'd like better quality, equal opportunity, a real sense of play, and I'd like to turn the TVs off, and celebrate books, go to the theatre, have fun, play with the children. I would have every school teach children about emotional intelligence as well as intellectual intelligence, and teach kids to be in touch with their feelings. That is going to make them more successful, healthy human beings. I'd get them to realise what's sacred and what's divine, and be in touch with the creative. I'd like people in charge to look at the world through the eyes of a child, and give them the respect that they so richly deserve. I have a quote by a Lacodo Sioux, performer Kevin Locke, who said: "It's easier to build children than to repair adults."

Alton: *Are you doing exactly what it is you want to do? Would you like to give it all up and write full time?*

James: It's very tempting — I'd love to take a break; I'm the founder of this Festival, and it's a lot of work — so if somebody came along and said, "We've figured out a way that you could take a sabbatical" I'd be really happy, even for six months.

Alton: *Would you write?*

James: I'd love to! But I don't see a way just now.

Alton: *How do you feel when you see your plays performed — and now, having your first volume in print, holding it in your hands?*

James: For me, that was the result of many years of work, those three plays; that's a big piece of me. The difference between being a playwright and the writer of other works is that moment when you can stand at the back of the theatre and see things come together: there are actors, a director, a designer, lights and music, everything that goes into it, it's very collaborative. You're standing at the back of the theatre and you hear the words, and they all come out of your head. It's really a very, very exciting, uplifting moment — it really is, and I'm not sure how writing a novel will be; reading novels is so private.

Alton: *On the other hand, your book would be on the shelves for kids to read.*

James: True, but I'm a bit daunted by that, I really am. I don't know if I can do it,

I don't have a deadline, nobody's waiting for it. One thing about when I'm working on a new play, I know when I have to have the first draft, attend the first workshop; it's very structured. It has to be because it's all professionally done, there are people to be hired, there's money to be raised. Whereas, this is just a little file that's sitting in my workroom at home — I get to it when I can; there's real freedom there, on one level.

Alton: *Last question: if you were going to introduce yourself to someone who didn't know who you are or what you do, what would you say?*

James: I'm a searcher; I'm somebody who's always trying to figure life out. I think by doing my own work, I'm constantly trying to figure myself out too. I say that Sam is Gemma — but they're really all me. There's a big chunk of Willa, the person who charges forward, who says, "I have seen the future and it's big!" That's a big part of me. But I'm also Sam, sitting back and living a quieter life, contemplating. I found myself at a function last year where somebody who didn't know me asked what I did, and I heard myself say, "I'm a writer." I felt proud of that — it's exciting!

Plays by JoAnne James

Square Eyes. 1986. Unpublished Play. Several performances by Quest Theatre in Calgary, premiering in 1986; also performed at the Grand Theatre in London, Ontario, the Neptune Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Manitoba Theatre for Young People in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Green Thumb Theatre in Vancouver, BC; toured for two months in Alberta and BC schools in 1990 as well as in the eastern United States in 1993.

Three Quest Plays. Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1996.

Moving Day. 1989. Performed in elementary schools and community halls throughout Alberta in 1989; other performances include a Quest Theatre production in Calgary, Alberta, and a production at the Manitoba Theatre for Young People in Winnipeg; also performed at Calgary International Children's Festival in 1989.

The Echo Box. 1992. Performed by Quest Theatre in Calgary in 1993; also toured for three months in Alberta in 1993.

Willa and Sam. 1996. Performed by Quest Theatre in 1996 in Alberta schools.

Anne Hiebert Alton received her PhD in Victorian literature from the University of Toronto last year, spent 1996 as Honorary Research Associate at the University of Sydney, Australia, and is now an Assistant Professor at Central Michigan University with primary teaching responsibilities in children's literature. She has published articles on Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, and children's literature, and is currently writing a book on Victorian spinsters.

