

Yerxa's remarkable paintings give life to a shimmering underwater world with arresting mixed media of watercolours and stencilled pastels. This is a fascinating, expansive book with roots in multiple traditions and the commonality of children's literature.



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Video, film and play reviews

Getting Involved: Interactive Theatre for Young Adults

Veronia. Daniel Liebman. Produced by Quest Theatre, Calgary. *Tag*. Clem Martini. Produced by Quest Theatre, Calgary.

Daniel Liebman's *Veronia* and Clem Martini's *Tag*, two recent productions by Calgary's Quest Theatre, suggest well the impressive range and ability of the company as well as the strength and diversity of contemporary playwriting aimed at young audiences.

Martini's *Tag* (which I saw at St. Cecilia's with a K-6 audience) is the starting piece for an examination of conflict among children and possibilities for avoiding such situations or, at least, resolving them. The story involves the antagonism between two nine-year-old friends, Kelly and Jason, over Jason's prized baseball cap. The action, set in an abandoned building represented by a simple climbing frame structure that allows a variety of movement and levels of action, involves escalation from name-calling and a little shoving to a series of serious accidents. The exaggerated consequences of a trivial incident fit with Martini's generally exaggerated form for his play: his technique is broad farce and

characterizations are oversized. It is a strategy which certainly keeps his audience rapt and the laughs coming quickly and often (with tried and tested classics such as someone's pants getting pulled down to reveal garishly coloured underwear!).

What is most successful about this play is how connections are made between emotionally hurtful moments and actual physical violence. Those connections become clear as do their consequences. Performers Nikki Lundmark, Gary Nugent, and Edward Belanger did a fine job in showing how hard it is to be vulnerable and how easy it is to act tough — and it was a message that seemed to get heard. As stage manager Debbie Read pointed out to me, the show itself is only the first stage of Quest's project with a school on conflict resolution. The team spend the rest of the day with that school in various workshops with individual classes working with students in improvisations and question-and-answer sessions based on the play in order to develop their audience's understanding of the issues.

Tag has been playing through several seasons with Quest including the 25 shows in Fall 1996. *Veronia* is on tour through Alberta, Saskatchewan, and BC, with an extraordinary 83 performances in total. I saw their 62nd since October 7th (at Huntingdon Hills Elementary School, again for a K-6 audience). I found *Veronia* a fascinating play, moving between "history" and the present, community responsibility and consumerist greed, with a deft and skilful ease. The plot involves Ronnie, a homework-hating elementary school student, who identifies more with her Mercedes-Benz-coveting father than her liberal altruist mother. A social studies assignment leads her to read in the textbook the story of her own great-grandmother, a new immigrant to Alberta from Roumania and the hardships she had to endure (near starvation, racism, life in a sod house, learning English and so on). As Ronnie's "dream" takes her back to experience first-hand those hardships, she develops a new awareness both of her own cultural history and the need to support those less able to support themselves. The play opens with the father and daughter's derision of a bag lady rummaging through their garbage; it ends with their offering her food and shelter. Idealistic, yes, but also convincing: *Veronia* doesn't preach to the kids but shows them some of the choices that each and every one of us can make.

I had thought that the slippages between past and present, twentieth-century Ronnie and nineteenth-century Veronia, a little too slick perhaps for the young audience but apart from one or two minor confusions (answered in the audience talkback), they clearly revelled in it. Their horror as the nineteenth-century father went to beat his daughter for her laziness and lack of respect was palpable; their concern with social responsibility was laudable. (In the talkback, it was astutely pointed out by the actors that it's not always safe to invite a stranger into your home, a sign of the times for sure, and the children were very quick to suggest donations to food banks and shelters, naming some of the most prominent in this city.)

Veronia's performers Paul Cowling, Terry Middleton, Rebecca Northan and Charlene Sashuk gave a rich and complex texture to Liebman's characters. All ages were clearly engaged by each character as well as the relationships between them. And that, in the end, seemed the most important part of the play: that we understood a little more about how we relate to people, what we get right and what we get wrong and the necessity, always, to look behind the surface to appreciate something of the history every person brings to their day-to-day existence. Not an easy thing to remind an elementary school audience of since

their own lives are still somehow so new, but Liebman's play reached both the hearts and minds of his spectators. I much admired this play.

Both these plays show what complex and engaging dramatic material there is available for young audiences in Canada as well as the enthusiasm of those audiences in responding to much more than "kids' entertainment."

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Shakespeare — The Animated Tales

Videos: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 1992. ISBN 0-679-83902-X. *The Tempest*. 1992. ISBN 0-679-83905-4. *Hamlet*. 1992. ISBN 0-679-83921-6. *Macbeth*. 1992. ISBN 0-679-83917-8. All screenplays and abridgments by Leon Garfield. Random House Home Video. Each approx. 30 min. Each \$18.95.

Books: (Sold separately.) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. ISBN 0-679-83870-8. *The Tempest*. ISBN 0-679-83873-2. *Hamlet*. ISBN 0-679-83871-6. *Macbeth*. ISBN 0-679-83875-9. All abridgments by Leon Garfield. All published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1992-93. Each \$6.99 paper; library bindings available.

The Random House Home Video versions of six plays are perhaps the most useful introductions to Shakespeare educators at all levels are likely to find; the books,

however, are less satisfactory. Each play utilizes different graphics: some are drawn, others use animated puppets or dolls. The books illustrate their abridgments of the texts with the videos' graphics. My dissatisfaction with the books is that their texts do not match the abridgments in the videos nor are they complete texts: they would be much more useful if they did either one thing or the other. Each video uses a narrator for introductory and other materials which are not "acted." All six abridgments are well done and for the most part give accurate overviews of the plays. And, happily, the abridgments tend to stimulate students of various ages to want to learn more about the plays. My six-year grandson is fascinated by *Tempest* and after a dozen viewings asks questions raised but not answered in the video and clamours to



The Tempest