people, then we are clearly on very different terrain from Franco Zeffirelli's lush Renaissance version of 1968. The impulse of these lovers is not toward sex — they are far less sexualized than Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting — but toward some impossibly pure state that is achievable only in death. They are continually in or near or falling into water, suggestive of a primal innocence not of this world and safe from adult intrusion. Luhrmann evokes a similarly escapist couple by quoting the climax of the Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* to accompany his montage of the lovers after Juliet joins Romeo in death.

Reviewers have complained about the treatment of the verse in this film, just as they did in 1968. Admittedly Hussey, Whiting and company now sound like the RSC in comparison to Luhrmann's cast. DiCaprio may handle the language a little better than Danes, but they both rise equally to the intense emotional demands of the roles. His Romeo has charm and wit, while her Juliet has a luminous and intelligent presence. I think it has more to do with the sound of Shakespeare delivered in American voices. So it isn't Stratford and they aren't speaking with rounded tones. It may not be the most "poetic" sounding verse, but for the purposes of the film, it works. Film, as it should be unnecessary to point out by now, is a very different medium from the stage. The visual, for better or worse, takes precedence. And the visual is what this film delivers — in spades.

Not all of it works equally well. In her first appearance, Lady Capulet is treated as a grotesque, at odds with her later appearances as a Southern belle who has obviously made a bad marriage. As the nurse, Miriam Margolyes initially has moments when she seems like some dreadful Hispanic caricature, but she improves. Mantua, oddly enough, is a derelict trailer park to which the "Post-haste Dispatch" delivery man comes too late. But these are flaws that are easy to overlook when so much is right. Parents should be aware that the film, like the play, is violent and be prepared to explain why Mercutio comes to the Capulet ball in drag. Although in the age of Dennis Rodman and RuPaul, this may not be necessary. Strangely enough, the drugs, particularly the "likeness-of-death" potion that Friar Laurence brews, seem even more plausible in a modern setting.

You may not agree with all of Luhrmann's choices, but he has created a dazzling entertainment that in its own wired, '90s way is true to the spirit of the original. Shakespeare would be fascinated.

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Munsch's *A Promise Is A Promise* on Stage

A Promise Is a Promise. A Geordie Productions and Barbara Poggemiller adaptation of the book by Robert Munsch and Michael Kusagak. At Toronto's Young People's Theatre, March 1997. Cast: Laura Teasdale, Ron Kennell, Julie Tamiko Manning, Glenn Roy.

At Toronto's Young People's Theatre, the mostly-under-ten audience burst into fits of laughter as Allashua (played by Laura Teasdale) pulled fish from a crack in the

ice with much bravado and concentration, each catch followed by a few moments of staggering, flailing attempts to subdue her quarry, climaxing with a loud final whack and self-satisfied strut. The physical comedy, and physicality in general, of this production of *A Promise Is A Promise* by Barbara Poggemiller and Geordie Productions, was one of the highlights of the show, prompting sudden and hilarious responses from the young audience. Laura Teasdale used an expressive face and body to draw out the moments that her audience was most fascinated with: when Allashua was thrown up from the bottom of the sea to the ice surface, her reaction to the cold was cumulative — beginning with a shiver and escalating to an outrageously impossible level of teeth clattering and body shaking, the entire process greatly appreciated by her audience. The Qallipilluit, with an elaborate (but not ornate) costume of three glittering bright wig-covered heads, made effective use of fluid, exact movement to convey its character. The ice creature's movements instigated one long session of stomach-clutching mirth, as it entered Allashua's house, and encountered, for the first time, such things as bread, candy, pillows and tickling.

Rhythm played a large role in the production as well, weaving itself through the fabric of the entire performance, often integral to the physicality of the show. When Allashua finished her crazed convulsing, she began to run home, her wet clothes freezing on the way. A loud drumbeat accompanied her exaggerated running-on-the-spot motion, the beat slowing as she ran more stiffly, until she fell over, frozen, to one last beat of the drum. Later, when the Qallipilluit comes to the house to collect the children, the Father (played by Glenn Roy), true to the original story, occupied the creature with dancing. I don't remember line dancing, complete with waving hats and appropriate music, as a part of the book, but it certainly made for a surprising and marvellously comedic scene. The original book (a collaboration of author Robert Munsch and Inuit storyteller Michael Kusugak) is marked by repetition and rhythm, popular aspects of any children's story, and transfers well to theatre, aided and shaped by the use of the drums, wind chimes and maracas.

Another key element in the success of the production, which was not immediately identifiable, was the lack of theatrical pretense. The actors moved naturally between narration and dialogue, the sea ice surface included vertical parts of the set, and four very young (but large in enthusiasm) members of the audience became part of the cast. The famous "invisible wall" of theatre was not raised, nor was there any direct attempt on the part of directors or actors to sustain audience belief, and the effect of this complete disregard for proscenium-style traditions was phenomenal. It was clearly understood that theatre for children does not need to concern itself with elaborate details of props, costuming and actors' roles in order to facilitate the magic that is live theatre, for the magic exists within the children themselves. This is not to say that the directors were irresponsible or not thorough in their theatrical representation of the text, but that more attention was given to the telling of the story than to a projected perception of the story, which translated into an attention to image, rhythm and expression, resulting in a pleasurable experience of perceiving.

Children seem to be able to enjoy theatre differently than most adults do, engulfing the performance in an almost effortless embrace. When I discussed this

characteristic of theatre + children in an interview with Bob Munsch, he agreed: "in children's theatre, the same wall (the invisible wall between audience and performance) can exist, but children put it around themselves." Observing my fellow audience members, I could attest to this truth. My seven and ten year old cousins fully accepted the Qallipilluit as "real" within the context of the story, although they recognized Ron Kennell (the actor playing Qallipilluit) when he appeared in different roles — without his ice creature costume — at the open and close of the play, and in spite of Kennell's occasional habit of letting two of his heads, constructed as hand puppets, swing loosely, their identity as puppet/costume obvious. Even the audience members who became cast members — Allashua's brothers and sisters — were obviously enthralled and deeply engaged with the production. It was simply assumed that the audience's imagination had great scope, and the actor-audience dynamic facilitated by such an assumption was riveting.

Robert Munsch himself was not involved in the scripting or directing process, his perspective resting on his role as an original co-author, and audience member. In my interview with him, he said that the only quibble he had with the show was the portrayal of the Quallipilluit. I found this somewhat perplexing, having seen the Qallipilluit — in costume, movement and voice — as a definite highlight of the show, and having watched my young cousins respond to Kennell's portrayal of the creature with wide-eyed glee. Munsch's contention, however, seems to be based in a desire to uphold cultural integrity, and raises some interesting questions. He felt that the Qallipilluit were played as witches, in the vein of the evil witch from Snow White. His uneasiness with this interpretation is derived from his understanding of Inuit legend, in which witches of that variety have no place. The presence of evil is more impersonal in Inuit culture; the Quallipilliut, after all, impersonate the danger of the sea, and, as Munsch said, "the land isn't nasty — it just kills you." Kennell's Qallipilluit had a screeching, quasi-whining voice, much more evil witch-like than the "voice that sounded like snow blowing over the ice" from the book. The input of Michael Kusugak, who was involved in this production, and is an Inuit storyteller and co-author of the original book, would enrich this discussion. However, he was on a tour schedule and could not be reached.

Other than the hesitation around the Qallipilluit, Munsch said that he had enjoyed the show. I asked about other performances of his stories, and he talked about occasionally pulling the license from really bad shows. This prompted a discussion of some of the essential elements of a good children's theatre production, one of which is, unarguably, the involvement of the audience with the performance, to some degree and in some manner. Munsch referred specifically to his stories working by involving the audience, and commended the directors and cast of this production for their "wonderful" integration of four children from the audience, making their debut appearances as Allashua's brothers and sisters. The incorporation of these green actors was indeed impressive, and, far from hindering the show, enhanced it. Julie Tamiko Manning, as Allashua's Mother, was the chief facilitator/conductor of the four, which looked perfectly reasonable in the context of the play, because, after all, that's what mothers do! The moment of glory for Allashua's siblings (and a fantastic piece of physical comedy for everyone) came after Allashua had been mostly thawed out, and demanded hot tea with lots of sugar. The children became a tea conveyer belt: Mother held the tea, the child beside her held the milk and the next the sugar. The other two

children were the runners, bringing cups to the line to be filled, to Allashua to be emptied, then around the bed and back to the line of tea, racing giddily in their circle of tea delivery, pushed on by Allashua's squeals, shouts of delight and cries for "more sugar, Alex!"

A few aspects of the production were disappointing: Glenn Roy was a rather mechanical, low-energy Father, the sound effects and music sometimes threatened to obscure actors' voices, and the audience sat through a very long bout of storytelling by Kusugak before the play began. Kusugak is a storyteller, not a performer. He would be appreciated and entertaining in a small room with a fireplace and an audience of about ten people, but his skill was dwarfed by the stage and rows of seating. His stories were wonderful, giving context and culture to the performance, but they went on for longer than even my attention span could bear. When he began yet another story, having been on stage for quite some time, a child in front of me turned to her friend and asked despairingly, "he's gonna talk more?" Despite these few shortcomings, the production was, overall, very well done. The story came alive on the stage in a wondrous interplay of rhythm, narrative, song, dialogue, slapstick, dance and traditional Inuit chants, all laced with a great sense of fun.

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Giant Peach or Big Apple?

James and the Giant Peach. Directed by Henry Selick and Produced by Denise di Novi and Tim Burton. Allied Film Makers. 1995.

This lively screen adaptation of Roald Dahl's popular children's story might give you the sneaking suspicion that the tale itself has followed the "path of the peach" — from Britain to America. Yet unlike the giant peach, which tastes the same on both sides of the Atlantic, this tale has changed its flavour to appeal to an American palate.

Those familiar with Dahl's story will find much of the movie familiar ground. Yet while the book and the movie never seem as dissimilar as apples and oranges, they do invite another comparison — between the Giant Peach and the Big Apple. Randy Newman, who converts Dahl's verse into the film's best song, also adds pieces of his own, most of which praise New York as the city of limitless opportunity. The fantastic journey across the Atlantic becomes another version of the familiar yellow-brick road to the magical city, and this film provides a host of interesting fellow-travellers: a swaggering centipede, a musical Grasshopper, a cowardly worm, a Greta Garbo-like spider who prefers "to be alone," a prim but feisty ladybug, and a Victorian glowworm, who arrives in America exclaiming "God bless the colonies."

On its own terms, this film tells a powerful tale of populism, teamwork, and, at times, unrestricted delight. Like *The Wizard of Oz*'s travellers, James and