Commitment or Compromise

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When the Kaze No Ko Company of Japan performed in Edmonton for the annual convention of the Canadian Child and Youth Drama Association (CCYDA) in May, 1976, they delighted and astonished their audiences with three brilliant pieces from their extensive repertoire. Jamie Portman reviewed their first performance for the Southam News Services:

> It was all done by a group of resourceful young wizards, working with the most basic of props under the inspired direction of Yukio Sekiya.
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> It constituted creativity in the noblest and most wonderful sense, and it was the sort of creativity that you tend to encounter only in that most unjustly neglected of the arts, children's theatre.[1]

There was no need to justify a special theatre for children at that moment, and anyone who worked or ever had worked in that genre could feel proud to be a part of something so obviously fine.

In a panel discussion for the CCYDA conference, the dramaturge of the Kaze No Ko, who is also one of their playwrights, told an audience of artists and educators something about the company and its philosophy. Founded after the Second World War, the *Kaze No Ko* or *Children of the Wind* now has over twenty-five years of experience. There are three complete acting companies and seventy-three artists in all are employed. A career in theatre for young people is considered (as it is in the Soviet Union and other eastern European countries) to be a lifetime commitment by most members of the company. It is not viewed, as in so many North American companies, as a stepping stone to "real" or adult theatrical careers, but as a proud and demanding profession in its own right.

The biggest reason for founding the Kaze No Ko was an idealistic one. All aspects of education before the Second World War had trained Japanese children, particularly boys, in a militaristic tradition and philosophy. The founders of the Kaze No Ko believed that a professional theatre company dedicated to a humanistic philosophy could transform the hearts and minds of the rising generation. Whether they have accomplished this aim is impossible for a Westerner, having seen them perform abroad for only one week, to

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[1]Jamie Portman, "Japanese troupe turns theatre into magic," The Calgary *Herald,* May 26, 1976.

determine; but beyond any doubt, the artistic quality of the work is outstand ing. Brian Brennan, writing in the Calgary *Herald* about the troupe's Calgar performance, said

> The highly-disciplined and versatile troupe presents an imaginativ and clever series of visual images, using a minimum of props and lot of energy and agility. The performance transcends cultural an language barriers; the fact that the players speak in Japanese matter not a bit. They communicate through their movements and facia expressions, offering a truly international art form.[2]

In following a deeply felt philosophy and in supporting talented and well-traine artists in a large company over a lifetime, the Kaze No Ko has become company of international excellence. We in Western Canada saw them once. Th children of Japan have this kind of theatre regularly. It is expensive, but some one in Japan feels it is worth the price.

It is my belief that the lack of a deep belief and faith in the genuin values of a special theatre for children has resulted, in Canada, in a plethor of slight, cynical and insipid pieces of theatre. These, in turn, have engendere an unprofessional attitude in both actors and directors towards what they often with just cause, regard as trivial and tedious works.

In an essay called "Children's Reading and Adult Values" by Edward W Rosenheim, Jr., reprinted in *Only Connect,* the humanist's position is define as follows:

> For the humanist, above all else, takes into account the realitie of the human condition. And those realities do not lead us int a beautiful, passionless realm but are compounded of hope an fear, of doubt and reassurance, of need and the fulfilment of need It is in encounter with these human facts that we develop uniquel human values, and they are the values we seek to develop in an share with our children.[3]

The dramaturge of the Kaze No Ko company did not identify the humanisti values which were to replace, for the new generation in Japan, the militar precepts under which his generation was trained, but I do not believe the would differ greatly from the above.

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[2]Brian Brennan, "Kaze No Ko Company called extraordinary" The Calgary *Herald* May 28, 1976.

[3]Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr., "Children's Reading and Adult Values," reprinted fro *The Library Quarterly* (January 1967) in *Only Connect,* edited by Egoff, Stubbs a Ashley (Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 27 - 28.

We make a great show, in North America, of wanting "the best for our children", but the shoddy quality of food, toys, books, recordings, television and movies designed for the captive "child market" belie our platitudes. And a quality theatre for our children is not even on most people's list.

Values to be engendered in the young by a theatre especially for them should, I believe, include faith in oneself, kindness to others, sensitivity to sight and sound, and the ability to experience both joy and sorrow intensely as an important and deep part of the human condition. Live theatre should give children a chance to test safely a variety of situations they may meet in life. Most importantly, theatre should present quintessential human problems in a strong symbolic style, to allow the child to find form for his fantasy and to accept wonder as an element of existence.

The philosophy, if it may be dignified by such a word, of most theatre for the young in Canada has been less a credo than a reflection of the affluent, bourgeois, consumer society in which it was spawned. One reason for producing plays for young people here has been to provide an elite entertainment alternative to the noisy Saturday movie matinee to which middle-class parents might comfortably accompany their offspring. Another reason has been the belief—or at least the voicing of that belief—that to provide live theatre for children today would help to fill the seats of the adult theatre of tomorrow. The style of plays written and produced for these reasons tends, not surprisingly, to be imitative of middle-class adult theatrical expectations: mini-musicals, derivative and devoid of charm, and fairy tale plays which ignore the fundamental values provided to children by the original stories, about which Bruno Bettelheim has recently written with such conviction in *The Uses of Enchantment:*

> This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.[4]

Too many fairy tale plays for children in North America have opted for adding comic characters, gratuitous group scenes and updating or "jazzing up" the original story. Bettelheim comments on the modern avoidance of crucial issues in its offerings for children. Although he is discussing literature, these statements apply also to plays for young people.

> Modern stories written for young children mainly avoid these existential problems, although they are crucial issues for all of

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[4]Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 8.

> us. The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal in issues and grow safely into maturity. "Safe" stories mention neither death nor aging, the limits to our existence, nor the wish for eternal life. The fairy tale, by contrast, confronts the child squarely with the human predicament. [5]

Until we have theatres for children based upon a philosophy which does more than to flatter the cultural aspirations of parents or to train, like seals, a claque for the regional playhouses of the next generation, we will not have a serious repertoire of plays or serious professionals to play them.

Because the theatre is a group art, with participation possible only at the moment of public performance, it is an extremely expensive art form. The quality of the Kaze No Ko could not have been achieved through good intentions alone; it had to be nourished over many years and at a high level of support. The same has been true of such other world-famous theatres as the Leningrad TUZ (Theatre of the Young Spectator) in the USSR, now over fifty years old.[6] The security of a high level of subsidy will not guarantee a high artistic quality, but the lack of it does guarantee the rise and fall of dedicated artists who build, at great personal cost in both energy and economics, *potential* Kaze No Ko's in Canada, only to expire through exhaustion from a continual battle to survive.

Commitment in Canada is so constipated, so grudging–and so punishing. Again and again companies of promise are encouraged by just enough money to allow them to hope that their work can succeed. Then, when the quality of work has proved itself, the "seed" grant is reduced, or removed (or in these times of inflation, remains the same!), and they flounder. They make compromises: they reduce the number of actors in their plays for young people from six to five, and then from five to four–placing incredible limitations upon the playwright and impossible demands upon the actors.

Philosophical compromises are also a risk when one's patron is exclusively the separate or public schools systems of Canada; these institutions are now the largest consumers of our theatre for young people. No professional theatre for children in Canada exists today without their patronage. And while it is important for theatre to be presented in the schools so that children who might otherwise never see an example of live professional theatre may be exposed to this experience, to perform *only* in the schools is ultimately erosive to the art form. Also, until more educators are enlightened enough to believe that the theatre is instrinsically an art form worthy of inclusion in the life of a child,

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[5] *Ibid.*

[6] For a full discussion of the Leningrad Theatre see the author's article "The Leningrad TUZ" in *Canadian Theatre Review,* Number 10, pp. 40 - 45.

quite apart from any didactic messages about metrics or Metis, the danger that the theatre may be dropped in favour of only orthodox classroom methods of teaching metrics in math class and Metis in social studies is great indeed.

That we have produced any producible and publishable plays in Canada since the founding of our first professional Theatre for Young Audiences—Holiday Theatre of Vancouver in 1953—is a tribute to the faith and courage of a handful of idealistic playwrights, producers, directors and publishers. Great plays throughout the history of the theatre have been written for a particular place and company of players. If we accept Shakespeare and Moliere as examples of the quality we admire in plays for adults and would wish in our plays for children, it would seem that the closer the relationship between the playwright and the company, the more likely one is to receive fine plays. In some companies in Canada, over the past decade, a few such relationships have been encouraged. These playwrights still have to contend with the limitation of extremely small casts; they do not have the luxury, in most cases, of elaborate design possibilities, most companies do not keep the same actors from year to year, so that writing to a particular acting talent (another traditional way to develop great theatre) has seldom been possible. But continuity with the artistic director and, in some cases, with the region in which they write has led to the creation of some distinctive, if not yet distinguished, works.

Three examples of productive and continuing contacts between a playwright and a company, leading to publication, are the works for young audiences of Carol Bolt, Paddy Campbell and Rex Deverell. Carol Bolt's commissioned works for Young People's Theatre (Toronto) include "My Best Friend is Twelve Feet High," "Cyclone Jack," "Tangleflags," and "Maurice." Rex Deverell's plays for young people have been written for the Globe Theatre (Regina) and include "Shortshrift," "The Copetown City Kite Crisis," and "Sarah's Play." Paddy Campbell has written many plays for young people—first for the Arts Centre Company (now defunct) and later for Alberta Theatre Projects, both Calgary companies. These scripts include "Chinook," "Too Many Kings," and "Under the Arch." Playwright's Co-op has published all of the above-named scripts with the exception of Ms. Campbell's "Under the Arch," which appeared in *Canadian Theatre Review* No. 10, devoted to Theatre for Young Audiences.

All of the scripts published by Playwright's Co-op have been in great demand by both professional and amateur groups. Each play has as its theme one or more of the humanist values mentioned earlier in this article. All take children and the theatre seriously. Also, plays these three playwrights have written for the adult theatre have been produced by the same company for which they wrote works for young people. Young People's Theatre helped to produce Carol Bolt's "Shelter," Alberta Theatre Projects produced Paddy Campbell's "Hoarse Muse," and Rex Deverell's "Boiler Room Suite" was commissioned and produced by the Globe Theatre. This, too, is an encouraging development because it represents a commitment by the company to the works of its writers—recognizing that some material is more appropriate for a child audience and some for an adult audience, but that each is equally important

to the artistic life of the company.

An expanding repertoire of published plays which say something important about the human spirit should contribute significantly to Canada's ability to achieve, in its theatre for young people, the kind of excellence accepted as normal by companies such as the Kaze No Ko of Japan.

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The following free booklists are available from Irene E. Aubrey, National Library of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N4:

*NOTABLE CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS/UN CHOIX DE LIVRES CANADIENS POUR LA JEUNESSE

*SOURCES D'INFORMATION SUR LES LIVRES CANADIENS-FRANCAIS POUR ENFANTS/SOURCES OF FRENCH CANADIAN MATERIALS FOR CHILDREN

*CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A TREASURY OF PICTURES/LIVRES CANADIENS D'ENFANTS: UN TRESOR D'IMAGES