

# Théâtre pour Enfants

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*Les Trois Désirs de Coquelicot* and *Retour de Coquelicot*, Luan Asllani. Leméac (5115 Durocher St., Montreal), 1973. 152 pp. \$3.95 paper.

*Frizelis et Gros Guillaume*, André Cailloux. Leméac, 1973. 93 pp. \$3.95 paper.

*Frizelis et la Fée Doduche*, André Cailloux. Leméac, 1973. 81 pp. \$3.95 paper.

*L'Île-au-sorcier*, André Cailloux. Leméac, 1974. 81 pp. \$3.95 paper.

*Une Ligne Blanche au Jambon*, Marie-Francine Hébert. Leméac, 1974. \$3.95 paper.

*Marlot dans les Merveilles*, Pierre Morency, Leméac, 1975. 114 pp. \$3.95 paper.

Of this collection of seven plays, six were written expressly for le théâtre du Rideau Vert, in Montreal. They offer a fine combination of fun, fantasy, music, dance and audience participation, as well as quite numerous hints to small children how they should behave! Taken as a whole, the variety and quality are so excellent that they are a real "Open Sesame" to both the performing arts and the visual. Three of the authors and six of the plays lean heavily on the traditional fairy tale, but by highly imaginative rearrangements, additions and modernizations they achieve, for the most part, something that is more versatile, whimsical and entertaining than the originals. The stage music requires old folk tunes as well as classical music and modern.

*Frizelis et Gros Guillaume* is set in elfinland, into which blunder the stereotypes of the scolding, hard-working Charlotte and her lazy, bumbling wood-chopper husband. In complete bewilderment, the frightened pair hears the mysterious voices of the invisible, tittering squirrel, Tourbillon, or the mischievous goblins, Frizelis and Bigoudi. They even dance to the woodpecker's rhythmic morse. Though Gros Guillaume blames the "tit cariboo" he hasn't yet drunk, nothing can convince Charlotte that he hasn't taken leave of his senses. Tourbillon's matter-of-fact explanation to Gros Guillaume is that he has entered in between two breaths of wind and landed in "le pays du Milieu", and that he is definitely not dreaming.

Much of the buffoonery is centred on the little bell missing from the three-cornered hat of Frizelis, "le Roi des Lutins". There are comic sequences when Charlotte is changed into a magpie. Probably, from a child's point of view, one of the most successful scenes is the one in which the audience is expected to holler "olé" each time two elves, who play as toreadors against Gros Guillaume, manage a thrust at him. Such spectator participation is a prominent feature of

almost all these plays. At times, it is in the form of repeating jingles, at other times replying to questions, or singing along with the actors.

Including marionettes for the squirrel and the magpie, there are roles for six. The stage setting is a clearing with trees and mushrooms. Props, such as the banquet table, which appears magically from a trap door, and smoke to accompany the necessary explosions, are among the items listed in the stage setting. Some of the interludes, as well as the choruses, are accompanied by harps, violins and lutes. Though many of the fantastic happenings are merely artful, like the disappearances and loud explosions, many others are really artistic. Particularly, the sound effects are designed to provide children with enjoyment and at the same time inculcate a taste for a variety of good music, as well as to familiarize them with the old Quebec tunes for square dances. The poetic descriptions of nature are calculated to arouse a pleasant awareness of its existence—and possibly a feeling of companionship with the charming, if unscientifically presented, birds and beasts of “le Bois-Joli”.

There are many levels of farce, such as the vengeful vendetta between the elves and the fairy Doduche, or the subdued, but for the children, amusing plays on words, or the jocular repartee, or the stream of unconscious humour that dribbles from Gros Guillaume’s unsophisticated mouth.

The moralistic theme of the futility and disappointments that arise from “la chicane” follows the age-old pattern. However, when everyday common-sense morality is dressed up in such a frolicsome manner, it can hardly be criticized.

A sequel to this is *Frizelis et la fée Doduche*. The conception is basically similar. This time the fun centres around the elves’ efforts to find their missing magic gem, which they’ve mislaid after using it on individual children in the audience. The stone has the power to light up briefly or brightly, depending on its reactions to the unvoiced answers to Frizelis’ patronizing questions, such as “Is Solange greedy?” or “Does Pierre work well in school?” Another strand of action is the elves’ fruitless effort to catch their arch foe, Doduche, in a net. Since she has the power to become invisible for six minutes at a time, this is just as side-splitting for the onlookers as it is difficult for the hunters. Of course, Gros Guillaume and the scolding Charlotte accidentally fall down the slide leading to Frizelis’ domain, which adds considerably to the hilarious confusion. Naturally, it’s Gros Guillaume whom the elves net, and it’s Charlotte who makes off with Doduche’s magic wand. As is to be expected, Doduche has her moment of triumph and, for a few moments, casts a successful spell on all. Eventually, after lots more buffoonery, everything is returned to its rightful owner, Charlotte and her fumbling, bumbling Gros Guillaume surface from their sequence of crazy dreams and lapses into nightmares, and the wicked fairy Doduche’s spell is forever broken. Everything is going to be all right—at least in the subterranean realms of elfinland! The child audience is incited to join in the victory couplets, which are soon interrupted by the forced return of Doduche on the back of a co-operative moose! The word for “moose” is “orignal”, which

gives rise to the expected and pleasurable childish punning on the word "original".

Among the charmingly ingenious props is a telephone composed of two mushrooms shaped like ear-phones, which is deliberately used to function as a mind-reader. When this contraption repeats the wicked fairy's unvoiced, hateful thoughts, the noble, self-righteous elves decide she mustn't be set free and given back her wand, till she is cured of her malicious anger. The treatment they agree on is to let her see how happy the elves are, and to make her laugh. At first the laughing party is forced and artificial, but it quickly gains momentum, and Doduche laughs in spite of herself. Presto, she suddenly feels light as a bird! It seems she hasn't laughed in thirty years. Everyone enjoys the spectacle of her becoming thirty years younger! The moral, carefully pointed out, is that "la joie de vivre, ça s'attrape!"

Such swift and condensed action, with all its brouhaha, is less suited for oral or silent reading than the familiar and simpler fairy tales. This is just what makes it so excellent on the living stage. Obviously, it requires lively actors and at least some of the props so carefully described throughout the text. Farce of such high levels can be acted out by secondary school students of French for the benefit of pupils in kindergarten, grades one or two, or even nursery school.

*L'Île au Sorcier* also blends the somewhat feasible with the very light fantastic. There's an erudite Professor Anthracite who spouts little doses of Lamartine's poetry for the benefit of the timorous young teacher, Mademoiselle Beatrice. To judge by the way she tackles her tame little boat trip as an adventure, she represents the now despised sweetly clinging-vine syndrome. Similarly, the courting fossil-professor shows up as the archetypal pedant. With very little excuse, other than making an impression on the tender young lady, but under guise of edifying her small pupil, Jean-Sébastien, he manages in short order to insert brief bits of assorted information on such far-flung topics as the theoretical cloud of meteorites which lengthened Joshua's day of battle so that his warriors were victorious!

As in the previous plays, a good portion of the fun and frolics revolves around a missing charm. In this case, the humans manage to get hold of a magic bracelet or secret talisman which is the exclusive property of the enchanted island's animal inhabitants. It passes from human hand to human hand, causing day to change to night, amid thunder and lightning, till the bewildered professor is in danger of losing his Latin and Greek! However, he maintains sufficient lucidity to seat himself on the back of a huge frog and scribble notes about his analysis of happenings—to wit, an unscheduled eclipse. The frog, of course, wears a cap of Nymphaeaceae (which is vulgar for water-lily), while patiently submitting to the indignity of being sat upon.

While the young teacher is playing truant with the amorous professor, her young charge tootles himself to sleep under a willow tree. Promptly, above

his head, he catches sight of a talking coon—before the audience can see it. He tries to get the children to guess from his questions what kind of animal it is. The real plot, that of the enchanted bracelet, opens up when the raccoon decides to betray the animal world for the sake of a juicy apple! Here too, emerges the anti-pollution pitch, amid a medley of sounds and sights, which range from dragonflies and whip-poor-wills to king-fishers and owls—against a back-drop of trees, bulrushes, water and moonlight.

The raccoon is weeping piteously because he's going to starve to death. You see, he has no salivary glands. This is why he can't swallow dry food. Alas, it's an impossibility to wash it in polluted water! In gratitude for the child's apple, the raccoon undertakes to reveal secrets not meant at all for humans. As a starter, he conjures up an ancient wizard who looks like a beardless Professor Anthracite, but who is equipped with a feather head-dress. And so the play continues with its many little dabs of wit and artistry.

The ecological pitch is strong and honest, and cannot be considered troublesome or tasteless. This is only partly because it is so entirely pertinent and up-to-date. Nor can it be considered unsuitably didactic that the trout Professor Anthracite thought he had caught turned out to be a miry old sardine can. At least he came within an inch of getting some real sardines! On the other hand, he briefly but somewhat gratuitously goes on to assure his credulous audience that Indians were impeccable environmentalists:

Ce n'est pas comme autrefois, tenez, par exemple, avant l'arrivée des blancs: les Indiens avaient beaucoup de considération pour les plantes, les animaux et tout ce qui les entouraient. Ils se seraient bien gardés d'abîmer ou de salir ce qu'ils considéraient comme leur garde-manger (p. 23).

However, on the whole, the ecological lessons are so smothered in animal grief and human humour that a basically sound attitude is taught through pathos and laughter, amid idyllic scenery, beautiful music, noisy sound effects and audience participation, all of which is calculated to maintain constant and rapt attention.

As do the previous plays, *Les trois désirs de Coquelicot* uses a human story strand as a framework for the fantastic; somehow, Luan Asllani contrives to keep a clear line of action. There are two main themes: first, Coquelicot, his laziness, his nightmare acquisition of King Midas ears, his three wishes, his self-sacrificing rescue of a stereotypic princess, and his awakening with his own ears; second, the wretched Queen of the Night, her plot with the evil fairy, Tarabas, and her almost successful attempt to capture and banish for ever to the underworld a young princess who plays a part similar to those of Snow-White and Briar-Rose. Of course, the intended victim is saved from her Proserpine-like fate, escaping with only a few minutes of statuesque sleep. The unfortunate Queen of the Night is thwarted by a wish-granting wand that instructs Coquelicot how to deliver the innocent princess in three easy steps. Though the Queen has already endured many centuries, for unknown crimes or possibly

nonexistent ones, in her plutoesque palace, she is harshly condemned to return there.

The version of *The Three Wishes* is a positive one, as the hero's wishes are self-sacrificing. He dutifully, if dolefully, opts for the safety of the princess, instead of his own need to be rid of his donkey ears. In the long run, his virtue is rewarded. By current tastes, this sounds pretty pat. So also, many of the numerous edifying instructions throughout the play sound patronizing and superficial, even unintentionally fun-provoking. For instance, the height and strength of Lin-Lin, the chief (not the king) of the elves, are due to his appetite for bananas and spinach—and he announces he'll cure his lack of good looks by eating carrots! At least a little more amusing is Coquelicot's terror when the unseen presence of the evil queen is announced by sudden and deep darkness during the day, and fearful thunderings and wind. The slothful child knows from one of his uncle's friends that the end of the world would be approaching when or if he ever did any work—and alas! here he is busy harvesting plums! On the whole, blanket statements, such as those of the elfin chieftain, that he likes obedient children, even though he likes them just as well if they are less good, are not particularly appreciated by the average Anglophone small child—unless as a very feeble or stupid attempt at a joke.

Though this play has less physical comedy and lacks the boisterous shenanigans of most of the others, the action is well sustained, in spite of occasional brief bouts of mediocre badinage, such as that between the old uncle and his nephew about the rooster.

The sophisticated staging and lighting taken for granted in "le théâtre du Rideau Vert" could be greatly simplified for school productions. Included in the text are copious and explicit instructions for lighting effects. Some of these are essential because of day mysteriously and suddenly becoming night, or because of the old man's calling to Coquelicot to enjoy the sunrise, or because the Queen's cloak glitters more effectively in the dark. Though two backgrounds are called for—one (a forest clearing) in Acts I and II, and a second (trees, path and cabin) for Act III—the addition of a cabin might do. More complicated, though perhaps not mandatory, would be a mode of presenting elves as miniscule in comparison to a child or an adult. Among amusing little stage-props are the two battery-run tiny red lights, concealed under Coquelicot's wig. He switches them on whenever he blushes. Hence his name!

In the sequel *Retour de Coquelicot*, Asllani uses a simpler plot. A fairy appears first on the scene to introduce each of three humans, and an elusive elf, Lin-Lin, whom she accuses of having strewn stones on the field of poor old Tonio. It is these stones that provide the vehicle for the action. Since neither the mischievous, obstinate elf can be persuaded to move them with his magic, nor the lazy, sleepy Coquelicot to do it out of good will—work being against his principles—the three supernatural beings, the good fairy, Lin-Lin the King of the Elves, and the sorceress, Tarabas, hatch a plot. Their bait is greed, and

Coquelicot and his co-truant from school, Mange-Tout, fall for it enthusiastically. Their reward is a shabby old purse which, each time it's opened, produces a gold coin. Happily, they figure they won't have to go to the much-hated school any more. However, Mange-tout points out that wealth does not bring knowledge. The solution is to hire a teacher who comes to their home. Though they allow the wily Lin-Lin to trick them out of their wealth and badger them about going to school, they eventually become duly repentant, and decide that they had better compromise. Their about-face is really due to fear of Lin-Lin's announcement that he is having a double set of donkey skins and tails made to measure for them. In the long-run, the thought of the trial of both going to school and of studying at the same time is so unendurable that Mange-Tout comes up with the bright idea that they will attend class one year and study the following year! As the play ends, they seem to have their cake and be eating it too—except for the fairy's parting warning: "il y a toujours un mais dans les histoires de Fées".

It is only in plot that the story is purely fanciful. The conversations between Uncle Pascal and his friend Patate, particularly about Coquelicot, are quite Molièresque in their delineation of character. Uncle Pascal develops serious heart palpitations whenever his friend dares contradict him, or when he discovers that his beloved nephew has had a complete relapse into his old sleepy, lazy ways. The heritage of the French language and literature is well echoed in the attempted fourberie and flattery of old Tonio, who claims he can't remove stones from his field because someone has stolen the trousers he has used so carefully for the last forty years. The hard-nosed Coquelicot promptly reminds him he had already tried that trick three years previously. Thin little Mange-Tout, of the gargantuan appetite, is a simplified, childish descendant of the famous Rabelaisian character. Lin-Lin has "la tête de bois comme celle de Pinocchio", as well as all the guile of a peasant character from de Maupassant. Though some of the abundant humour may, from the height of an adult, seem to be in the form of clichés, the compendium of familiar ideas, well-understood jokes and basic culture make children feel comfortable. Once more, there is a great emphasis on how Coquelicot should behave, and how thoroughly human he is in his short-lived remorse and his lack of moral fibre. Obviously, he has no more longing to acquire any of the Anglo-Saxon work ethic than any other little boy!

This would be one of the easiest plays to produce. There is only one stage setting. Sound effects, which are well indicated, are mostly thunder and melodious sounds simulating flight. The lighting is also quite simple. For the flying stones, balloons are suggested. There is no mention of Coquelicot blushing and needing special little red lights for this effect. As there is less comedy of action, and more stress on amusing conversation, the play is more suited for presentation to young children who understand a reasonable amount of simply spoken French.

The play, *Une Ligne Blanche au Jambon*, has the most fanciful and yet meagre plot of the whole series. Its Alice in Wonderland nonsense is purely for

amusement, and has no such mundane aims as instruction as to how its spectators should behave. The characters, or, rather, the grotesque monsters engage in conversation and action as fantastic as they themselves are. The central figure is a sort of giant papier mâché machine mounted on skates, and manipulated internally by an actor. This "creation" is called Bandit Bandeau. He wears a cape, so his back can be covered. When the cape is flipped over, another character, Shérif Rif, comes into view. He is embedded in the back of the bigger figure! Since the Shérif, who is ignorant of what's happening in his own back, is searching for Bandit Bandeau, there's plenty of hilarious confusion as to why the Shérif is so incompetent that he can't find the person who had stolen the road—with its white line. The audience is reminded at times that they must keep the secret of Bandit Bandeau's whereabouts. The old opinion that genuine nonsense should be grounded in horse sense seems to be flouted. If so, there is compensation in being exposed to such imaginative nonsense. There's a farcical recipe which requires a hard-to-find teardrop. Whenever Cruche, the ostrich, stiffens unpredictably into unconsciousness, Escargot brings her to again by placing an alarm clock in her beak. It tickles her, she comes to and says adoringly to Escargot, "Tu es ma vitamine, mon aspirine, mon antiphlogistine"!

Since the play was originally written for a travelling troupe, the scenery was very simple. All that is needed is a grove of trees which allows actors to enter and exit. A road with a white line crosses the stage diagonally, and disappears behind the grove. Props, such as the alarm, are easily come by. The real problem is the weeks of time and trouble to manufacture the shapes for Bandit Bandeau and Bozabelle, a fabulous animal that trails its rear by means of a sort of umbilical cord, some ten feet behind its front quarters. For so few roles as seven, it would not be worthwhile for many schools to attempt a full stage production. However, children could enjoy such buffoonery as they learned to read the play, since the language is simple.

The seventh play, *Marlot dans les Merveilles*, was created by the Théâtre du Tréteau in Quebec City and later enacted before 40,000 children in the course of 125 performances in the Ottawa-Hull area.

It offers an interesting new dimension. Preliminary instructions to the stage manager explain that instead of visible props, such as a wall, all that's needed is for the comedians to mime, in front of the children, the size and shape of a wall. This is particularly well suited to the plot, which includes an invisible tower, walls and nets. The décor itself represents "somewhere" in a square blue planet, where everything, including bananas, are blue! The very simple tale and the unsophisticated love story follow the normal pattern of the ever-successful hero and the beleaguered maiden, who is the "merveille merveilleuse" and the object of Captain Marlot's quest. A third character, Bedaine, is the clumsy, paunchy aide-de-camp who manages to keep the somewhat feeble and barely humorous dialogue going. However, small children would doubtless uncritically enjoy being included in the space trip, and feel enough suspense to have goose pimples when they see their space pilot's life threatened at intervals

by the strange old man Shnok. It is this character which escapes from the usual stereotype of the complete villain. He is supposed to represent the inner demons of children, but at the same time he's basically, if ambivalently, sad and kind, as well as evil.

The stage-production of a simple landscape all in blue needs comparatively little effort. There would be need to teach both the actors and the public that they are to imagine the various invisible structures. It certainly seems to be a unique and fascinating way of gaining audience involvement.

On the whole, the seven plays offer very pleasant entertainment, at times a somewhat old-fashioned didacticism, and most of the time an infinitely varied and creative use of language. If the fantastic leans, for the most part, to the traditional fairy-tale, this is because children need something familiar. There is no harm either, in the emphasis on the universal struggle between good and evil. There is a rich range of subjects. There are non-realistic animal stories, popular fairy stories, pure fantasy and a space-age yarn. Such a cross-section offers something to both rural and urban children of many backgrounds. Apart from the very attractively coloured book covers, there are, in almost all the books, good black and white photos, which offer clues as to staging and costuming.

Though the stories are primarily meant for very young children of four or five to eight or nine, the comic action would be very acceptable to somewhat older children, and the music very attractive to any age-group. Traditionally, the acting is done by reasonably young, or at least trim, adults, but there is no reason why children should not fill the roles in small home and school productions, or adolescents in larger-scale efforts beamed at young local audiences. There are even almost enough female roles to qualify for our recent Women's International Year!

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