Potions, Pies, and Puns: Participation Plays for the Primaries

MEGUIDO ZOLA

Land of Magic Spell, Larry Zacharko. Photographs by Janis Mitchell. *Which Witch is Which?* Beth McMaster. Illustrations by Pat Belanger. Simon and Pierre, 1974. 63 pp. $4.50 paper.

King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie, David Kemp. Illustrations by William A. Kimber. *Professor Fuddle's Fantastic Fairy-Tale Machine,* Alan Egerton Ball. Music by Paul Bradbury. Illustrations by Gail Geltner. Simon and Pierre, 1974. 63 pp. $4.50 paper.

Simon and Pierre is a small, young, adventurous publishing house, founded some four years ago with the main object of presenting new works by Canadian playwrights in the English language. During this period it has published thirty-one plays in four volumes, under the general editorship of Rolf Kalman aided by Susan Rubes, Artistic Director of Young People's Theatre, Toronto. The plays selected for review here are from the last of these volumes—the first of the series to offer plays for the youth theatre—whose ten items are published in one hardcover volume or grouped together as two plays in each of five paperbacks.[1]

The selections under review here are generally aimed at 8 to 11-year-old children, those in upper primary or lower intermediate grades. Common to the four plays is their form: fantasy, light-hearted, often humorous, sometimes witty, at times degenerating into mere fancifulness or strangeness but, for the most part, succeeding in evoking and sustaining a Secondary World (in Tolkien's words) which illumines our own. There are similarities in theme, too: the plays are unified by their concern with exploring, in a general way, human nature and personality and, more specifically, the processes of language and communication, often as these are related to the child's world of learning. The plays are suitable both for reading material and for theatrical production, the latter clearly being the primary purpose for which they were conceived. As a literary collection, the plays are eminently readable, immediately engaging the reader's attention and sustaining his interest and involvement. The design of the books reflects the taste and thought that have gone into the production of attractive volumes in handy quarto-size format, offering, in easy to read

[1]The single hardback is less expensive than the five paperbacks, but the teacher or librarian may not find it practical to have plays of such widely ranging age-group interest and reading level housed between the covers of one volume. The hardcover volume, *A Collection of Canadian Plays,* is reviewed by Eugene Benson elsewhere in this issue of *CCL.*

double-column printing layout, uncluttered pages durably sewn in between heavy manila covers that promise long life. The text of each play is enriched by black and white line-drawings, or photographs, which interpret and illumine the text as well as delight the eye; children should enjoy William Kimber's beguiling illustrations for *King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie,* and they will be amused by Pat Belanger's droll interpretations in *Which Witch is Which?* A biography of author and illustrator completes the presentation of each play. As a production oriented collection, the plays appear suitable for performance both by and for children. With the possible exception of *Professor Fuddle's Fantastic Fairy-Tale Machine,* the plays seem readily accessible to young actors and their audiences, and suited to simple, effective, and inexpensive production by children with the help and guidance of adults. A positive feature shared by the plays is their view of the audience as being as organic to a piece of theatre as are actors; hence, there is an emphasis on interaction between actors and audience which is effected in different ways and degrees, ranging from the sustained audience participation that is integral to the action of *King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie* to the piecemeal, token, and contrived involvement called for in *Land of Magic Spell.*

Land of Magic Spell tells the adventures of Bill, a down and out old-timer and born loser who, prospecting for gold in the Northwest Territories, strays into the Land of Magic Spell, losing his sole companion and only means of transportation, Bessie the mule. In his search for Bessie, Bill stumbles against Mountain Man, twelve feet tall on his stilts, who is the highest peak in the land and its official king and watchguard. Mountain Man, a language freak who loves nothing better than a wild game of Scrabble, recounts how during a workout for the big weekend game a gust of wind scattered some of his alphabet all over Magic Spell. Because the atmosphere obstructs his vision and he is not able to bend down, Mountain Man can't find the missing letters; if Bill can recover them, Mountain Man will grant him any one wish. The drama centres on how Bill finds each of the lost letters, both with the aid of the children in the audience and in spite of the help of the oddest assortment of characters one could possibly ever wish not to meet, in or out of a language-learning situation. There are the batty twins Miss Take and Miss Spell, forever engineering dotty spelling tricks that don't come off; Crossword, a numbskull who says and does precisely the opposite of what he means; Echo, a talking Harpo type, who knows only how to ape one's every word and action; and Punctuation, whose *shtick* is prissily calling out and miming the punctuation for his and others' lines. When Bill at last presents Mountain Man with the object of his quest he is required—of all things—to spell out his heart's desire from Mountain Man's alphabet. He picks out an 'O', and 'L', and a 'D', but at the last—Bill is a born loser, remember?—he misspells his word, choosing instead of the 'G' a 'C'. A loud, body-racking sneeze proclaims Bill has been summarily stricken with a cold. Still, a surprise consolation awaits him at the end of the road—Bessie, with whom he is reunited. Thus, with poetic if fortuitous justice, love wins out over gold.

In conception, subject-matter, and treatment this fantasy evokes, in its

best moments, the spirit of Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth,* communicating a sense of wonder and of joy in language, its properties, powers, and uses. But the play is badly flawed by uneven dialogue which descends, all too often, to the level of the dull, tired, and hackneyed. The characterization is persuasive if, in some cases, a little cartoon-like and glib. Nevertheless, the play is held together by firm overall construction, a convincing plot, and situations allowing for dramatic exploitation of a wide range of emotions.

Which Witch is Which? is a school drama with a difference: the school is a school for witches and the drama centres on an anti-heroine, Gitch, who goes from bad to worse and makes it by being a failure. Children will readily take Gitch to their hearts as they recognize and empathize with her troubles and delight in her pranks. Gitch faces severe personal problems of hair that won't go stringy, warts that won't take on her nose, and a personality streak that is not mean enough by half. She is forever breaking the bounds of convention by such gaffes as wishing good luck or ending a sentence without a hee, hee, hee. She is a poor student, forgetting formulae for spells and tangling with school rules such as that the one that prohibits making friends. It's no wonder that her every waking moment is made miserable by Superintendent Sneersby, the peppery, old-fashioned head of the Scary School for Wicked Witches. And insult is heaped on injury by Sneersby's pet, the soppy Hagfish, a model student who is a natural at suitably revolting appearances and properly vile and rotten behaviour. When Gitch plans a secret birthday-cake celebration for herself she sets off a hilarious and hectic train of high jinks, hexes, and horseplay. In the end, as Gitch and her companions are about to fall into the ultimate terrible trap laid by the dastardly Sneersby and Hagfish, it is the children of the audience who save the day. Thwarted and defeated, the Superintendent announces his decision to allow Gitch to graduate from the school as its first dropout. *Exeunt* all, cheering.

Children will assuredly find delight in this effervescent farce which bubbles with cheerful lunacy. In spite of its slight plot, however, the plays aspires to be a symbolic and indirect presentation of unpalatable truth. As such, its satirical treatment of the more dubious aspects of school—the manipulation, brutalization, and sedation of students, the indoctrination of beliefs and values, the catechetical memorization and regurgitation of curriculum—makes for fascinating entertainment and finely honed bibliotherapy.

King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie is the cautionary tale of one who falls victim to a besetting ill of our age, gluttony. In his voracious gormandizing, King Grumbletum consumes gargantuan quantities of food but in turn is himself consumed by dyspepsia, which causes him to drive out of his castle all his subjects save his doctor and his cook, Dr. Thermometer and Mrs. Plumcrumble, since, obviously, they provide services of an important nature. How these stalwarts, with the help of the children of the audience, restore equilibrium to the royal personage's digestive system and order to his kingdom is the substance of the play.

This is a fantasy for younger children which will provide enjoyment and satisfaction through an unusual depth of participation. The play is constructed to allow the children of the audience a real sense of participation in the play's plot, characterization, and dialogue. While the play is partly scripted, it is clear that the text is there for the purpose of providing the basic structure and major supports of a framework within which actors and audience can find their most workable relationship. There is in fact no audience at all since these are on stage, almost from the start when their help is enlisted by the King's exiled servants, a Lord Chancellor, a Housemaid, a Gardener, and a Groom, to whom the children are apprenticed to follow a calling. The children then go to the castle and, having secretly observed the King at his table, help diagnose his problems, suggest solutions, and decide on a working plan. When it is resolved that the magic pie must be made as the only hope for curing the King, the children help in identifying the pie's ingredients, determining how to obtain them, collecting them, and making the pie. Once the King is cured, he obtains the children's help in the cleaning and restoration of castle, grounds, and stables, according to the children's several callings and their chosen specialties within those roles. The plays ends with a celebration and improvised group-dance highlighted by a welcome distribution of double wages of gold-foil covered chocolate coins. *King Grumbletum and the Magic Pie* is an effective bridge between traditional theatre and creative drama.

Professor Fuddle's Fantastic Fairy-Tale Machine recounts the misadventures of an absent-minded genius in his development of a prototype machine of imagination-boggling conception. Unlike your run-of-the-mill computer, which never gets beyond memorization and some lower-order thinking operations, the Professor's contraption will ingest the basic ingredients of a fairy-story and recreate the tale according to its own imagination, materializing its characters, locales and events, and animating the whole with its own pulse of life. In a hideout in the wilds of Newfoundland, Professor Fuddle, aided by his brash, precocious teenage grandson Jeff, stages a dress-rehearsal of the machine's production of Snowhite and the Seven Dwarfs. Things go awry as the computer shows up deficiencies in such basic skills as conceptualizing number, size and sequence, and in being more than a trifle short in the memory department. The nagging and carping of the impatient Jeff provoke the machine (which, it turns out, has feelings) to blow one fuse too many and grind to a halt, leaving the fate of the sleeping Snowhite in total limbo. Jeff, who has by now fallen in love with the missing heroine, gets the machine working again by ingenious strategems and, in a series of hilarious encounters, he, the Professor, and the dwarfs, aided by the children of the audience, set about plugging some of the gaps in the computer's basic skills in order to find and rescue Snowhite. It is all in vain. She is not found until the dying seconds of the play when–in a startling but entirely credible dénouement–guess who lands on the doorstep: some of the Professor's cronies who have been looking for him all this time, and who are none other than the dwarfs and Snowhite! In the end it is the machine which has the last and best word, "And they all lived happily ever after."

The strengths of this fantasy lie in the originality of theme and richnes of imagination which nourish its situations, dialogue and songs. At the sam time, the play poses obstacles as theatre for performance and production b children. Some of the complex characterization would tax the resources o the maturest actors, and the play's staging, particularly from the standpoin of sound-cueing and lighting, is extremely complicated. Notwithstanding this play has much to give.

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Of Shoes and Ships — and Garbage Cans

BETTY DUFFIELL

Stick With Molasses, Beth McMaster. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. $2.50 paper

George, Gertie and the Garbage Grabbers, Felicity Marcus. Playwrights Co-op 1973. $2.50 paper.

Garbage cans—how odd. These two plays for children share this unusua common denominator. One garbage can serves as home for a temporar genie; the other sings, dances and calls himself Joe. But the plays themselve are very different. *Stick with Molasses* is a firmly scripted dip into children' fantasy and works within an easily recognizable format. *George, Gertie an the Garbage Grabbers* becomes a bizarre, imaginative trip with science fictio overtones, relying substantially upon actors adept at working with an audienc of youngsters.

Stick with Molasses is familiar fare. The forces of Good overcom Evil. 'Good' is Charles, a young man arriving to work in his Uncle David' circus, only to find his uncle has died. 'Good' is Hilary, a pretty lion tame kept busy avoiding Jabez Fump, ringmaster with dishonourable intentions The circus fortune-teller, Hulda Crump, manipulates Jabez and covets th circus for her own. Jabez and Hulda plan to destory the will of David Holbrool which names Charles as the new circus owner. Before the will can be destroyed it disappears and the game is on.

Charles and Hilary are aided in their search by two allies: Alvin the totall