

Strings That Bind

CATE ROBERTS

Trick Doors and Other Dramatic Sketches, Betty Keller. November House, 1974. 129 pp. \$2.50 paper.

In her introductory notes to *Trick Doors and Other Dramatic Sketches*, Betty Keller outlines the intention behind her collection of brief, small-cast plays. As a high-school drama teacher and director of theatrical workshops she has faced the frustration of "trying to find short, complete-in-themselves acting scripts" which are both thematically suitable for teen-age actors and capable of being inexpensively and easily mounted. *Trick Doors* is the result of her frustration and provides, for those of us who lack Ms. Keller's obvious talent, at least fourteen fewer frustration-wrought situations.

"All these sketches," Ms. Keller states, "are a comment on relationships, those strings that bind person to person and thereby change and warp or enhance personalities." This could be said of virtually all plays, perhaps, but it is particularly true of the sketches in *Trick Doors*. The sketches are compact and succinct (ranging in length from four to eleven pages), and consist of one-to-one confrontations which provide glimpses of larger situations, unstated yet easily perceived by the audience. Although the staged action is limited, its impact derives from the way that the three-dimensional characters imply their past histories and foreseeable futures. My senior high-school drama students had no trouble presenting improvised prologues and epilogues to the sketches. In addition, they carried out exercises in which characters from one sketch interacted with those from unrelated sketches—empathising, advising, admonishing—indicating that Ms. Keller has created characters who are not only vividly alive, but who also can direct our attention to universal and compelling concerns which transcend the individual plays. This is perhaps what Ms. Keller intends when she states that the sketches in her collection have been designed to enable actors to "investigate the corners of the conflicts."

Despite this open-endedness, the tone of the sketches is tightly controlled by the authorial introductions of the characters. In "Down on your Knees!", for example, a sketch that deals with a teen-age girl's love-hate relationship with her oppressively religious, now dead father, Ms. Keller describes both the physical and mental features of her protagonist in order to guide the actress. "Her clothing," she indicates, "is bright and stylish and her hairstyle becoming but a little overdone. She wears a cloak of anger and defiance like battledress to shield her sense of rejection and loss." Similarly, in "In the Middle of the Night", Ms. Keller structures the actors' interpretations by stating that the relationship between the young, homeless boy and his sixty year old companion "indicates that they have been together for some time, and reveals varying degrees and

kinds of love, tolerance of the other's weaknesses and sometimes the seeds of hatred born of compulsory interdependence."

While there are definite hints of compassion ("In the Middle of the Night"), of selflessness ("Walking Back"), and of sardonic humour ("Love Scene: Dominic and Sadie"—the story of a garbage man's self-interested 'love' for a short-order cook), the sketches purposefully avoid "the blissful finality of happily-ever-after" endings. Significantly, the title sketch, "Trick Doors", deals with "the prolonged agony of a fraying family tie" and has as its central character a mother who is "fiftyish" and "unstylish"—"a 'feeler' of a creature accustomed to rebuffs and humiliations", someone who "knows no status but that of a doormat." Although the mother eventually manages to assert her right to be an individual, "the actress must convey to the audience that this rebellion will be short-lived." In general the sketches avoid depicting happy themes, preferring to deal with such motifs as suicidal cries for help, loneliness, guilt, selfishness and fear of the unknown. But this cannot be regarded as limiting, for within these short sketches Ms. Keller has successfully included elements from such diverse sources as science fiction ("Perfect Perley"), expressionism ("Sophie"), absurdist drama ("Tea Party", "Winnifred and Grace"), and mime ("Bridgework").

Ms. Keller's concern to direct the attention of inexperienced actors towards the internal motivations of her characters is in many ways admirable. However, in some situations such forceful authorial guidance can be limiting. Instead of relying on the dialogue to stimulate the actor's imagination, thereby allowing him to create his own interpretation, Ms. Keller constantly provides all the answers. This approach is most intrusive in "Sophie", which consists of a dialogue between Sophie, whose "age is indefinite, her clothing unremarkable", and an unseen, domineering voice ruling her conscious and sub-conscious world. This voice should challenge an actor's interpretational ingenuity; but this is likely to be inhibited by Ms. Keller's precise instructions: the voice is "abrasive, sexless, ageless", and may "be handled in one or all three ways 1. an offstage voice, 2. an amplified 'God' voice, 3. various voices spotted in the audience."

The stage directions can also be over-prescriptive. Consider for example this excerpt from "Tea Party":

(At rise, ALMA is positioning HESTER'S wheelchair.
UL. ALMA'S cane is on HESTER'S lap.)

HESTER: That's it.

(ALMA takes her cane from HESTER. They both survey the room.)

ALMA: I think I'll sit on the sofa . . . at the far end.

HESTER: Yes. That will be cosy. Then he can sit on this end between us.

(ALMA sits on the DR end of the sofa. They both study the effect.)

ALMA: But then he's too close to the door, Hester! (HESTER nods, absorbed in the problem.)
ALMA: (moving to the UL end of sofa): Then I'd better sit here.
HESTER: But now he's too far away from me, Alma. (ALMA stands; both of them study the room again.)
ALMA: But if I push the tea trolley in front of you, he'll have to come to you, won't he?
HESTER: Oh, all right, Alma. You're sure it's today?
ALMA: (pushing the tea trolley laden with cups and napkins, etc. to HESTER): The first Thursday of the month.

The stimulus for movement should lie in the lines themselves, and even inexperienced actors ought to be allowed to 'feel' the action. The user of this book should feel free to ignore the author's directives as long as the dialogue and the action remain convincing.

Also largely unnecessary is Ms. Keller's fear of having her work labeled as "sexist". She apologises for the fact that she has "provided only thirteen roles for women and seventeen for men." This surely is to lose sight of the universal nature of her characters. Some sketches do require specifically male/female confrontations, but most transcend stereotyped sexist concerns. Vanity, uncertainty, self-doubt and materialism are human traits which apply to both men and women and can, therefore, be presented by either sex. Would, for example, the plight of Alma and Hester ("Tea Party")—two old women caught up in the past because the modern world refuses to communicate with them—be any less poignant if the characters were called Herbert and Henry?

There are minor criticisms. There is nothing parochial or rigidly limited about these sketches, and anyone fascinated by the diversity of human experience will enjoy them. Also, in these days of rampant inflation and cut budgets, it is extremely pleasant to know that such solid material can be found at such a reasonable price. The publishers have done well and the public at large can benefit—"use for production by schools is free and requires no advance permission."

Cate Roberts teaches Theatre Arts at Lord Elgin High School, Burlington.