

Eric Nicol's Plays for Children

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The Clam Made a Face, Eric Nicol. New Press, Toronto, 1972. Also available from Simon and Pierre, \$4.50 paper.

Beware the Quickly Who, Eric Nicol. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. 48 pp. \$2.50 paper.

Eric Nicol is well-known both as a columnist for two Vancouver newspapers and as the author of numerous book of cheerful humour. Since 1950, when *The Roving I* was published, he has been awarded three Leacock medals for humour. As a dramatist he is less generally recognized, but he has been writing for CBC radio for many years and, in 1950 - 51, worked for the BBC. His major production, *Like Father, Like Fun*, made it, very briefly, to Broadway in 1969. Of his two plays for children, *The Clam Made a Face* dates from 1968; it was produced by Susan Rubes' Young People's Theatre in Toronto in the 1971 - 2 season and at the International Children's Theatre Festival in Montreal in 1972. *Beware the Quickly Who* was produced by the Holiday Theatre in Vancouver, with the assistance of the Centennial Commission, in 1967. It was published in 1973 by the Playwrights Co-op.

The Clam Made a Face takes its name from one of the West Coast Indian stories included in the play. The setting is a contemporary potlatch, with the audience included as part of the circle. Within it are acted out for the visitors five stories, of the clam, the whale, the frog lady, the mosquitoes and fog, and finally of Siwash Rock. The four actors are the Chief, his son and daughter, and the fool. The theme is stated by the Chief: "our stories are truth wrapped in the dark cloud of time." He proves his point reasonably well, though one can argue the justice of the contented Indian (Horace's *vir integer vitae*) being rewarded by his conversion into an eternal and visible (granted) but very immovable rock, much less his wife being included without so much as a by-your-leave. There is plenty of action of a gleeful sort, as when Little Bear, the somewhat indolent son, is chased by the Cannibal Ogre, but to my mind the best parts are those in which the animals talk, especially the whale, with a happy feeling for the sounds of the English language and a gay (if anthropomorphic) appreciation of the delights of water and exploration. "Wallow, wallow, wallow, what wizard water to wallow in!"

It should be possible to stage *The Clam* in almost any surroundings. A flat area, to hold the circle of actors and audience, would be preferable to a stage. I feel good costumes or masks would be essential in distinguishing the rapidly changing roles of the actors; even with these a certain amount of imagination and a willingness to pretend on the part of the audience, and skill in mime on the part of the actors would be necessary to keep the plot developments clear.

I am thinking here in particular of the appearing of the little faces, and then the people, within the clams. Nevertheless, any audience over the age of six should enjoy the play thoroughly.

Beware the Quickly Who is a play on a larger scale. It is roughly twice as long, in two acts as opposed to one for *The Clam*, requires ten rather than four actors, and uses a stage with fairly complex lighting and scenery arrangements. The opening is tremendously effective; the voice of the Who barks out, and the audience's sympathies are immediately engaged with the boy in the front row, Johnny, who becomes the hero of the play. He embarks on a journey faintly reminiscent of the road to Oz, seeking his name, and accompanied by the recurring presence of the Who, authoritarian, peremptory, mercenary, evil, assuming various forms to suit his purpose. The dialogue is a delight—quick and lively, defining character, unexpected and yet colloquial. Pinning down suitable examples is not easy; I can only mention the Lion (Brit) caught in Fairy-tale land, with a thorn in his foot, complaining, "the thorn is the least of it. There's an idiot runnin' 'round trying a glass slipper on everybody's foot. Like to cripple me, he did." Also worthy of note is the Beaver's description of Johnny as a "d-minus monster".

Two young readers were engaged to read the plays in the hope that particularly adult reactions could be avoided. Their reactions to *Beware the Quickly Who* were, without reservations, entirely positive: "terrific", "exciting", "written for older children" (what higher praise from a 12-year old?). Neither of them minded at all what seemed the flaw to the adult mind: the unexpected appearance of the theme of Canadian nationality. Johnny has been everyman, or in particular every older child, seeking his identity as all must do; abruptly he is Johnny Canuck, out to discover his national identity. Even Eric Nicol's ingenuity appears somewhat strained in fusing the two ideas, although he contrives to tidy everything up soundly in the end. There is no question but that the breadth of the play's appeal is restricted by the nationality theme; there is also some measure of absurdity. Is this "young man in a little boy's outfit" who speaks and acts as a child, really somewhat better than 100 years old? Has he come through two world wars, numerous smaller ones, migrations failures, small successes hardly won, and ended up so unknowing? No one is better qualified than Eric Nicol to write on Canadian character, and he does not, happily, indulge in the tearing-red-maple leaves-from-our-bleeding-heart rhetoric of certain writers, but I could not help feeling a small shaft of disappointment. The appearance of the play in 1967, sponsored by the Centennial Commission, accounts for the theme and, I am sure, no one seeing it that year would have experienced surprise. One is left sharply aware how much has happened in Canada since that year. While Eric Nicol's intention is always to be gently funny—"I always watch where I throw the banana skin", he once said in an interview—today audience reaction to the Frog, the French prince in disguise, might not be good-humoured laughter. It would, nevertheless, be a great pity if a very good play became a one occasion affair—and my young readers did not complain. Is anyone willing to try a 24th of May presentation?

The publishers have given *The Clam* an attractive format, with heavy coloured paper, distinctive print and line illustrations by children. *Beware the Quickly Who* is much more utilitarian, designed as a working script. It has sufficient omissions and misprints that the author's intention is occasionally not clear.

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Subtle Frivolity

GILBERT DROLET

Les Eléphants de Tante Louise, Roger Auget. Les Editions du Blé, Saint Boniface, 1974. Paper.

To review a play through a careful reading of the script is much like commenting upon the quality of a dish after assiduously studying the recipe but without actually tasting the result. It presumes a great deal.

In the case of *Les Eléphants de Tante Louise* the publishers have done their best to present us with an enjoyable experience. The cover by Roland Mahé, artistic director of le Cercle Molière, is reminiscent of the hippopotamus ballet sequence in Disney's classic *Fantasia*. Designed for use in the classroom, the text is followed by questions and word games devised to elicit added interest on the part of young students in the themes developed in the play. There are also Nicole Guyot's excellent photographs obviously taken while the play was in progress.

The idea for *Les Eléphants* originated with a television script by Marcel Sabourin entitled *Fantôme, Clowns et Citrouilles*. Le Cercle Molière expanded the T.V. scenario and staged it with moderate success in 1971. Encouraged to write a sequel retaining the same characters, Auger completed *Les Eléphants* in February 1972. It was staged in June and met with the unanticipated approval of large and enthusiastic audiences.

One of the obvious reasons for the play's success is that it observes the proven basic principles of contemporary children's theatre: a small cast (6) performing for an audience whose participation is essential if, in this case, minor. Moreover, simplicity of setting and scenery serves the double purpose of simultaneously focusing the spectator's attention upon the action and the characters