

Children are People in Rex Deverell's Plays

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Shortshrift, Rex Deverell. Playwrights Co-op, 1972. 29 pp. \$2.50.

The Copetown City Kite Crisis, Rex Deverell. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. 39 pp. \$2.50.

Sarah's Play, Rex Deverell. Playwrights Co-op, 1975. 27 pp. \$2.50.

Shortshrift, Copetown, Grand City: individually these would not be surprising place names on a Canadian map. But placed side by side, as they are in the landscape of Rex Deverell's plays, they clearly belong to the model world a child constructs in order to play out the real world he sees, hears about, and worries over. Deverell creates a playroom in which an audience of children discover and try out ways of dealing with the world as they perceive it.

Rex Deverell's three published plays, *Shortshrift*, *The Copetown City Kite Crisis*, and *Sarah's Play* were written with Regina's Globe Theatre for the company's 1972-74 tours to elementary schools in Saskatchewan. They are examples of the participation play, a form which should perhaps be described for adults accustomed to traditional theatre. The participation play has been developed, notably by Brian Way, in England over the last twenty years. It is not intended as an entertaining and involving spectacle for an audience of children and adults sitting in a proscenium arch theatre. Rather, it is an hour long dramatic experience for a group of children sitting on the floor around a small playing space in a large classroom or a hall; "the whole room becomes the theatre, the actors and audience sharing the same space and the same experiences."¹ The audience's emotional involvement in the play will lead them to participate actively in it. The play needs their help—in the form of sounds, information, and improvised acting—if it is to proceed.

With few exceptions, Brian Way's plays take audiences into a world constructed from the components of folktale and fantasy. By contrast, Deverell's work is uniquely related to the real world. His first published play, *Shortshrift*, is carefully constructed from what a prairie child might overhear: rural complaints about big government and the whispered fears of a small community that it may soon be a ghost town. *Shortshrift* is "a good town . . . one school, one church, and one grain elevator." Its motto is "We may not be big, but we're happy!"(p.1). One day its inhabitants, characterized by their occupations

¹Quoted from the production notes of Brian Way's *The Bell*, edited by Margaret Faulkes (Educational Arts Assoc., Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

in the community, find themselves without energy or desire to go on. They watch listlessly as the town hall, symbol of the co-operative spirit that makes them a community, burns down. Fred offers to go "to Grand City, to the Government to find out what's going on"(p.11). There he encounters a computerized bureaucracy run by H.B. Quack who has taken Shortshrift off the map because it was small and didn't count. Fred's protests only land him in jail, charged with obstructing government. At his trial audience members are called as defense witnesses; however, Judge Quack dismisses them all "on some outrageous ground or other"(p. 22). Fred is assessed a fine which he can pay only by selling his car and cleaning all the windows in the government building (with the help of the audience). But Fred's attempt on behalf of his community has its effect: his fellow citizens feel their energy return because "someone (Fred) let us know how important we really were" (p. 28). Quack is defeated when he goes to Shortshrift to bilk the inhabitants of their remaining resources, and Fred returns to an enthusiastic welcome which the audience celebrate by helping to rebuild the town hall.

The audience of *Shortshrift* is led, by participation in the trial scene, to take the side of the small town against bureaucratic government. In the final participation sequence the audience tries out a way to help a community survive: that of concern and cooperation.

In *The Copetown City Kite Crisis* the audience actually decides the fate of a threatened community. Copetown, located just down the road from Shortshrift, is small but it is growing because an industry has located there. But the Copetown Kite Manufacturing Company has brought problems as well as population; although no one will admit it, the town's air and its water supply are becoming polluted. Sol Sims, Copetown's Young Citizen-of-the-Year, discovers that effluent from the factory is causing the racking cough which threatens the health of his friend, Nancy. He attempts to persuade the mayor to stop the industry's pollution but succeeds only in getting a letter of introduction to Mr. Henley, the factory's owner and founder. The audience participates, as workers, in the factory scene; according to Deverell, "The important point is that the audience feels it has a stake in the factory and its product"(p. 19). It becomes evident that Henley is an idealist who has devoted his life to creating the world's lightest and best-flying kite. He feels that his successful secret process is more important than the pollution it causes. The mayor feels that the town will disappear if the kites do not continue to sell well. Sol proposes that the factory workers strike to force Henley to stop the polluting secret process. Deverell provides two endings for the play: if the audience of factory workers votes to strike, the pollution disappears, the factory struggles, and the town continues, not growing but coping; if the strike is rejected, Nancy's family leaves town to save her health, Sol moves away, and Copetown thrives with its inhabitants sadly wearing smog masks on the bad days.

The audience participation in *Sarah's Play* is far more subtle than the involvement and decision of Copetown. In this recently published script Deverell puts aside the child's socio-economic fact collection and takes his

audience into the mental playroom where the individual rehearses and replays social relationships. Here the audience offers information it possesses and discovers the wider awareness which develops from it. Sarah, an eleven-year-old (who is to be acted "for character not for age" according to the production notes) lives in Grand City, a fairly big place where "a person can't hope to get to be friends with everybody"(p. 1). She welcomes the audience to *her play*: that time and space where events are played out as *she* wishes them to be. The mechanism to accomplish her wishes while preserving a semblance of reality is a computer, which is played by an actor representing the adult world. Significantly though, the computer must be programmed: the audience does this by providing it with a memory bank of facts. Sarah's problem is that her friend Melody seems not to like her because she has not invited her to a party to which she has invited Sarah's other friend, Ivan. Using her power to have her wishes fulfilled by the computer, she tries unsuccessfully to gain an invitation first by punishing her friends, then by bribing them. Finally she has to computer-program them to like her; however, she finds no pleasure in having them follow her like robots, repeating "We like you Sarah, we really and truly do"(p. 24). At last the computer states the only course of action left for her: she must give up her power to control events and simply be herself. "You can never expect everybody to like you. But some people will and that is all that's necessary"(p. 26). Sarah leaves the basement room in which her wishes come true, finds Melody and Ivan, the computer provides music, "and everyone celebrates the end of the play"(p. 27). Deverell undoubtedly wishes the audience to feel that, since they programmed the computer, they taught Sarah her lesson, and led her to end her play by going out from the playroom of imagination into the real world.

Appended to *Shortshift* is a statement by Deverell which might well be his philosophy of children's theatre.

A lot of playwrights don't respect children for being people. But they are people. They have their own conflicts, their own problems, their own anxieties, just as adults do. They can accept tragedy just as they can accept comedy.

He suggests that just as there is a theatre for adults, so there should be a theatre for children in which young audience members have the same status as adults in traditional theatre. Adult theatre playing down to provide matinee fun for children and their parents does not treat children as people.

Children participating in Deverell's plays are respected as people because they are given adult powers in the real world as they perceive it. This is apparent in the settings of the three published plays. *Shortshift* is a playroom construction in which young audiences have adult effectiveness for they help achieve a solution to a real problem as they understand it. In *Copetown* children have an emotional stake in a model socio-economic problem, determine how it will be solved, and experience the consequences of their solution. Members of the audience of *Sarah's Play*, situated at the door leading from the child's private