

Four Plays by a Poet Who Plays

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Names and Nicknames, *Apple Butter*, *Geography Match* and *Ignoramus* by James Reaney. Talonbooks, 1978 (reprint). 64 pp., 48 pp., 72 pp. and 64 pp. \$3.95 each, paper only. ISBN 0-88922-154-5; ISBN 0-88922-152-9, ISBN 0-88922-153-7, ISBN 0-88922-155-3.

Anyone who has watched a group of children at play – particularly a medium sized bunch with access to dress-up clothes and some discarded household items – will know that there is no production problem that can't be solved by transformation through imagination. "You hold the tablecloth and shake it and that will be the wind." "Scrunch down, all of you! We needs lots of rocks on this road." "Do your whistle now – and the rest of you moan. That can be all the dead guys getting ready for midnight." One way to introduce James Reaney's exceptionally imaginative scripts to a class or potential cast would be to let them improvise some scenes on Reaney's themes: names, authority, orphans, nicknames, freedom, discipline, patriotism, contests, christenings, and so on. A group with experience in creating theatre without scripts and in solving technical problems – "How can we show a race through all of Canada when we have only the space in the middle of the room?" – would have an increased awareness and appreciation of the skill with which James Reaney has solved similar problems; they would also have an internalized understanding of how to perform his plays.

All four plays were written in the sixties and were published together in one volume in the first edition. It was a good idea to republish each separately both for ease of handling by casts intending a production, and because each appeals to a slightly different age group. *Names and Nicknames* was written and rewritten while in rehearsal at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. John Hirsch, founding director of MTC, has always believed in the importance of good theatre for the young and his encouragement of James Reaney in the creation of this loose but lucid fable is just one more thing for which we must thank him. In all four of these plays, good and evil are clearly defined and personified. In *Names and Nicknames*, the villain is Grandpa Thorntree – a life-destroying, crabbed old trapper – who takes pleasure only in inflicting pain. He specializes in ridicule and particularly enjoys tormenting children, specifically by giving them cruel or silly nicknames. Like the uninvited fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*, Thorntree makes trouble at a christening. He intercepts the Dell family on their way to church to christen their first child Amelia; he names her

“Mealy” – “Oat-mealy.” The christening stops, and two years later Amelia is still known as Baby One when the Dells parade to church to christen their second child, a boy. This time they have chosen five names, believing that Thorntree cannot possibly spoil all of them. But the old man jumps off his roof with an open umbrella shouting “Fat Name!” and the Dells disconsolately delay the second christening, too. Thorntree doesn’t just plague the Dells; by the time the Dell family has a third child, he has nicknamed 50 boys and girls. The community, however, outwits the villain by unrolling a “river of names”. Like Rumpelstiltskin in another story tied to names and naming, the trapper is metamorphosed in a fit of rage.

The chanting of the one hundred names for the Dells’ third child is only one of the many opportunities for choral speaking which the play encourages. Almost any number can perform *Names and Nicknames*, but a minimum is probably fourteen. The set is an empty space and a ladder. Anything else needed is invented and acted out by the bodies and voices of the cast. To be parts of a picket fence one moment, horses the next, and children again immediately after, builds in concentration for the actors, who remain onstage throughout, taking animate and inanimate roles as required. It also makes for marvelous theatre. *Names and Nicknames* is one of Reaney’s best known plays and has been published and anthologized several times. But never has it been presented in a more attractive size and shape for the young reader as in this cheerful white and yellow Talonbook, with a splendid cover drawing by Sandra Barrett.

Apple Butter is a play for marionettes originally commissioned to be performed for children attending the Western Fair in London, Ontario, in 1965. There are seven characters. The villain of this piece is Solomon Spoilrod, a schoolmaster. Spoilrod gives Reaney the opportunity to philosophize on modes of education and methods of discipline – a concern which plays a big part in both *Ignoramus* and *Geography Match* as well. The plot combines elements of the trickster myth (Apple Butter is a lot like Tyl Eulenspiegel) and the retribution of inanimate objects upon cruel and greedy humans (as in *The Red Shoes* and “The Lad Who Went to the North Wind”). Time after time we are reminded of the rich literary background and immense love of legend which infuses all Reaney’s writing. A combination of simplicity and sophistication – a layer of lore sprinkled with pure corn – are hallmarks of his style. Most children are fond of puns and some of the puns in *Apple Butter* are real groaners.

Rawbone: I am the spirit of all things bony

Apple Butter: My bony lies over the ocean?

Rawbone: Call me Rawbone

Apple Butter: Ooooooh. Rawbone it is.

Rawbone: Tree Wuzzel told me to come and help you.

Apple Butter: Bony Prince Charlie

Names and Nicknames and *Apple Butter* would be at home in any house or classroom where creativity is valued. Construction of the wood fairy from twigs and leaves and the bone fairy from pieces of bone would not only be fun, but would suggest other ordinary objects which could become puppets in plays of one's own invention.

Geography Match and *Ignoramus* are more specifically Canadian in content and intent. *Ignoramus* dramatizes a debate between traditional and progressive education. Although this is a subject of universal concern, there are many distinctively Canadian references in Reaney's play. While this may limit the script's use elsewhere, it should enhance its value at home, where many classroom teachers, librarians, and parents are eager to find intelligent and witty Canadian material. It is, in Reaney's own words, "an Aristophanes Old Comedy type of play where you have lots of comic chorus work and grotesque farcical combats." An entire school could be involved, but this play is also suitable for a single class project. The publishers suggest that it is appropriate for grades 3-4 and up; I think it would be particularly successful with boys and girls in grades five and six because at that age they would savor the comic elements.

Geography Match is "a shamelessly patriotic play" based, like *Ignoramus*, on a competition between two school classes. In this case, the contest is a race from one side of the country to the other by the private Academy School kids against the public Continuation School kids. The plot is complicated and intensified by a wager between Miss Weathergood, representing genteel tradition, and Mr. Wolfwind, representing crass exploitation. As the two teams work their way across Canada, place names, legends and historical incidents and characters are interwoven to aid or thwart the contestants. *Geography Match* can accommodate various cast sizes, with twelve as a minimum. The first production, by the Broughdale Public School of London, Ontario, had three directors, seventeen backstage workers and a cast of twenty-three.

These four plays are among the most appropriate I know of for performance for or by young people – because they plug so directly into child's play. That is one reason they work so well in the theatre. Another reason is the consummate skill of the author. It is exciting to find a famous writer not only "taking time" to write for kids, but going to some trouble to endorse child's play as an ingredient vital to his survival as an adult artist.¹ Whenever a Canadian writer of authority contributes to children's literature it is a cause for celebration. In the sparsely settled territory of theatre for the young the event is even more appreciated because it is even more rare.

NOTES

¹James Reaney has written two articles about ways in which workshops with children influence his writing: "Kids and Crossovers" (*Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 10, Spring 1975) and "Ten Years at Play" (1969) reprinted in *Dramatists in Canada - Selected Essays* (University of British Columbia Press, 1972).

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Plays for Canadian Children

MALCOLM PAGE

Cyclone Jack, Carol Bolt; *Billy Bishop & the Red Baron*, Leonard Peterson. Simon & Pierre, 1974. 63 pp. illus. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88924-011-6.

The Devil's Instrument, W.O. Mitchell. Simon & Pierre, 1974. 31 pp., illus. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-9690455-6-5.

These three plays, written in the early seventies, have in common only the fact that Simon & Pierre have chosen to publish them. They are good-looking, large-format texts; however, they lack such basic information as the date and cast of first production. Further, while *Cyclone Jack* and *The Devil's Instrument* have several photographs of the play in performance, *Billy Bishop* is illustrated instead with vaguely relevant old pictures.

These plays show great variety: two are written for large casts but one,