

moments which tend to detract from the overall unity and flow of the play.

I am not suggesting that a play written for the central purpose of entertainment is not a valid piece of theatre for young audiences. It is just that I feel very strongly that whatever we present to children should speak to them with equality, challenge their intellect and imaginations and seek to expand their perceptions.

*Louise Kearley teaches theatre, folk literature and creative writing in Newfoundland. She is completing an MA in Developmental Drama at Calgary.*

## UNIMAGINATIVE PLOTS AND PREDICTABLE ENDINGS

**This building hates kids.** Colin Thomas and John Carroll. Copsycript, Playwrights Union of Canada. 32 pp. \$5.00. [First Produced: The Young Neptune Company, N.S., 1984.] **Blood-brother, step-sister.** Vivienne Laxdal. Copsycript, Playwrights Union of Canada. 38 pp. \$5.00. [First produced: The Great Canadian Theatre Company, Ont., 1986.] **The haunted castle/Robena's rose-coloured glasses.** Beth McMaster, songs, Monica Palmer. Simon & Pierre, 1986. 92 pp. \$7.95. ISBN 0-88924-175-9.

*This building hates kids* was originally commissioned by the Canadian Housing Design Council and first performed in 1983. It has two characters, a brother and sister named Crois and Germaine Parker. This play deals with the effects that moving from a suburban house to an inner city highrise has on the children's lives.

*This building hates kids* is not without charm and deals fairly effectively with a complex topic. However, it has two major problems. Firstly, the play is overly verbal at the expense of dramatic action. This is not to suggest that the play should be a non-stop rollercoaster ride but for most of the play the two children talk, chant or sing about the problems of relocation, their unhappiness and their search for an ideal home. Although the dialogue is relatively convincing, and the songs and chants do add life to the script, the play cries out for more dramatic action. The other major flaw is that because there is no clearly defined dramatic conflict the resolution of the children's problems is both abrupt and all too comfortable.

Those scenes which do contain dramatic action are most effective. In one scene Crois and Germaine play frisbee indoors, physically demonstrating the problems of cramped living quarters. In another Crois is chased by a "mugger" who wishes to rob him of his walkman, illustrating the dangers of urban living. There is one other scene of note, in which Germaine consults a ouija board and speaks to a lifesize puppet called Grace, which is a most effective device.

The description of the set design suggests that it too is a most effective dramatic device which serves the development of the plot. *This building hates kids* is an interesting play, but, as with all too many "issue" plays, the topic is emphasized at the expense of some necessary elements of good theatre for young audiences.

*Blood brother, step-sister* is by far the most engaging of the scripts reviewed here. The story concerns three children living together under one roof. Alexandra is 12 years old and she and her eight-year-old brother Jason, by some quirk of the divorce settlement, are forced to leave their mother's home in British Columbia to live with their natural father. Unfortunately, for the past five years their father has been living happily with a new wife and her daughter Elizabeth who is also twelve years old.

The immediacy of the situation creates problems for all concerned. It impels the children to adjust to their new siblings and "mark territory". The children fight and argue. They discuss the problems they face but they don't really do anything together. As a result the play suffers from the same lack of action mentioned above. Although the plotline is somewhat forced, the characters are very warm and human. Therefore the events of the play do not come across as being contrived.

The climax of the play is when Jason, troubled by a French homework assignment to draw a family tree and having already been "helped" unsuccessfully by his sisters, creates a peace tree which interweaves both families. This is understood by the children as a metaphor for a tranquil solution to their disharmony and they become friends once more. Overall there is a very gentle feeling to *Blood-brother, step-sister*. The issues are raised in an accessible and non-patronising way so that the children in the audience can easily relate to them.

Unlike *Blood-brother, step-sister* and *This building hates kids*, Beth McMaster's two plays, *The haunted castle*/*Robena's rose-coloured glasses*, are full of non-stop action. *The haunted castle* was first produced in 1970. It concerns a friendly chessplaying ghost called Gus who helps Princess Laurinda and a page named Jamie outwit the villainous Prince Cadwallader and his Aunt Chatter. In so doing Jamie is dubbed a knight by the Princess's father, King Krispen, and thus is able to win her hand in marriage.

Anyone who is familiar with English Pantomime or the "he's behind you" school of children's theatre will find few surprises in *The haunted castle*. Based on a simple formula it contains stock characters, a lame plot and an all too predictable ending. That being said, there can be no doubt that when performed this play will be amusing, successful and enjoyable. However, it is also patronising, pedestrian and predictable and involves the worst kind of crass audience manipulation. *The haunted castle* is not a play for those who believe that Theatre for Young Audiences should employ magic and metaphor and stimulate the wonder of a child's imagination. In fairness to the author it was

written nearly twenty years ago.

*Robena's rose-coloured glasses* is a later work, first performed in 1978, and has much more to commend it. The story revolves around Robena the maker of miraculous rose-coloured glasses that can transform the outlook of their wearer. Robena simply wants to use the magical glasses to help people improve their outlook on life. The villain of the piece Z.B. Squintee wants to mass produce the glasses for profit. The unscrupulous Squintee tricks Robena into giving him both the glasses and enough information to mass produce them.

While still possessing a few of the faults of Ms. McMaster's earlier work, *Robena's rose-coloured glasses* is a well crafted example of its genre. There is far less senseless manipulation of the audience and some excellent use of metaphor and imagery to help move the plot along. It has warmth and honesty which is not present in *The haunted castle* making it more accessible to its audience of three-to-eight-year-olds. The suggestion that either of these plays will reach ten-to-twelve-year-olds is a little misleading, especially when performing for a sophisticated urban audience. However, there is no doubt that both of Ms. McMaster's works could be performed successfully with young actors aged twelve and up as suggested.

While not every play for young audiences will be equal to the best work of Dennis Foon or Rex Deverell, two authors the reviewer holds in high esteem, there are many good works being written by Canadian playwrights and it is good to see Canadian plays getting into print. Hopefully, publishers will continue to take the risk of publishing some of the excellent contemporary works which not only entertain but through the use of believable characters, dramatic actions and imaginative plots inform and stimulate young minds.

**Bernie Warren**, a director and playwright for *TIE* and *YPT*, has taught drama and theatre in schools and universities in America, Britain and Canada. Currently, he is Co-ordinator of the Drama in Education Program, Department of Theatre, Concordia University, Montreal.

## HITS OR MYTHS?

**Who was that masked man?**, collectively created by Gloria Latham, Linda Carson, Wayne Specht, Sandy Kovak, Susan Snowdon. Copsycript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 28 pp., \$5.00. [First produced: Axis Mime, B.C., 1984]; **Teri and the river crystal**. Mary Polito. Copsycript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 21 pp., \$5.00. [First produced: Kawartha Summer Festival, Ontario, 1985]; **The Bird Prince**. James Defelice. Copsycript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 40 pp., \$5.00.