

## Editorial: Building Children, Building Bridges: Young People's Drama

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Whether with puppets or live performers, through interactive theatre or issue-based plays, dramatists and producers in Canada have tried, in a time of stringent cutbacks to the arts and to schools, to grab the imaginations of young people, to train them to think, and to make them see themselves. While Calgary playwright and producer JoAnne James feels that drama has the potential to "challenge [young people] to go forward in a different direction" by possibly providing them with an "epic moment" in the darkened world of the theatre, David Hersh and Alex Sideris of Ottawa's Orleans Young Players and the innovative Encore!, feel more generally that young people's drama encourages creative problem-solving, self-discovery, risk-taking, and group-building. And for anyone who has seen James's *Moving Day* or *Willa and Sam* or one of Encore!'s student-run productions (where thirteen-year-olds not only star in the plays, but also direct them, produce them, advertise them, budget for them, and sell you Rice Krispie squares at intermission), one feels compelled to conclude that the talent in Canadian Young People's Theatre is astounding. Its ambitions are, then, appropriately lofty: Sara Lee Lewis of Nova Scotia's Mermaid Theatre, notable for its blend of puppets and performers, feels that her troupe can "work to ensure excellent standards of puppetry," and, when touring, can operate as "cultural ambassadors for the Annapolis Valley, for Nova Scotia, and for Canada." The majority opinion about the efficacy of YPT is probably sounded by JoAnne James (quoting Kevin Locke): "It's easier to build children than repair adults" ... Indeed, all of the contributors to this special issue will tell you how convinced they are that drama fosters moral, intellectual, emotional and aesthetic development.

Why, then, if there is such potential in children's theatre, is there such strife surrounding the staging and touring of productions? Maria DiCenzo's lead article helps us understand that the answer to this question is probably at least three-fold: (1) The audiences — especially of issue-based plays toured to schools — are dual: educators and parents on the one hand, and politicians and bureaucrats on the other. Unlike producers of adult theatre, the producers of children's theatre cannot simply listen to their own artistic impulses: they have to answer to educators and bureaucrats, too. (2) Since there is no national curriculum, the staging of a production, or of any piece of art, will depend on what province you live in and what political party rules. (3) Theatre for young audiences, like much literature for young people, does not have the respect accorded adult theatre. As DiCenzo argues, "the pedagogical and advocacy aspects" of issue-based theatre for young people, "the very features that make it so important in the wider community — are considered to be antithetical to 'art'." And it is for this reason, as Daniel Chouinard argues, that the awarding of three Masques to Jasmine Dubé's children's play, *La Bonne Femme*, has created something of a scandal: it was

treated alongside *adult* plays. Alongside them as equals. And it *won* for best direction and best new play.

Why, also, if Canadian YPT shows such promise, is there such a tendency to be blasé about it? A lack of exposure to drama and to drama criticism seems to be the culprit here. As Sarah Lee Lewis notes, "children need to develop a vocabulary to discuss what they are seeing, and to appreciate the medium of live presentation." Without knowledgeable teachers, without drama courses, school theatres, and visiting troupes, young people may only ever see live theatre as an embarrassing exercise in hyperbole. As you will see in "Partners in Practice," Lorraine Behnan's article on her ambitious university course on "Theatre for Young Audiences," Behnan aims to counteract any awkwardness borne of ignorance or incomprehension through innovative teaching strategies implemented in a partnership program. If we are, according to JoAnne James, "raising the audience of tomorrow" in our young people's plays today, then clearly, we do not want them to grow up imagining mega-musicals are "real theatre." If we want them exposed to honest drama that is not always "safe" and not always twinkly, then we need to build bridges between dramatists and bureaucrats, plays and audiences, to ensure that children may still find an "epic moment" in the dark of their school theatre.

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