

# The Mirror Game: Reflections of Young Canadians in Dennis Foon's Child Advocacy Drama.



*Sarah Gibson-Bray*



Dennis Foon

*Photo by: David Cooper*

**Résumé:** Dramaturge à la réputation internationale, Dennis Foon est un habile créateur de pièces de théâtre qui reflètent les préoccupations des jeunes Canadiens d'aujourd'hui. En tant que pionnier du "théâtre au service de la jeunesse", son objectif est triple: mobiliser, informer et valoriser son jeune auditoire. Le profil que S. Gibson-Gray nous présente est fondé sur sa recherche doctorale et sur des entrevues accordées par l'auteur entre 1988 et 1996.

**Summary:** Dennis Foon is world-renowned as a master craftsman of plays which reflect the culture and concerns of contemporary Canadian youth. As one of Canada's leading pioneers in "child advocacy theatre," Foon's threefold dramatic objective is to engage, inform, and empower his young audiences. This profile of Dennis Foon's life and works is based on my doctoral (and my more recent) research on Foon, and on a series of conversations I have had with the playwright between 1988 and 1996.

Dennis Foon is renowned both nationally and internationally as one of Canada's foremost playwrights. In his 21 years working in professional theatre, the playwright has worn many artistic hats, as dramatist, director, administrator, storyteller, social critic, advocate, humorist, reformer, anthropologist, and iconoclast. Foon's most significant contribution to the arts in Canada has been as a pioneer playwright who has helped to forge a new, realistic, issue-oriented, dramatic and theatrical genre christened "child advocacy theatre." Designed to engage, to inform, and to empower his young audiences, Foon's numerous experiments in this new form include *New Canadian Kid* (1981), *Skin* (1984), *Invisible Kids* (1985), *Liars* (1986), *Mirror Game* (1988), *Seesaw* (1993), and *War* (1994). These works have been enthusiastically received by over a million school children, as well as parents, teachers, and critics across Canada and around the world.

Born in 1951 into a "very staid, middle-class"<sup>1</sup> Jewish-American family, Foon

spent his childhood and adolescence in Detroit, Michigan. He attended an inner-city elementary school which afforded its pupils little artistic stimulation. The playwright's first exposure to the arts came synchronistically with his first taste of Canada. As a camper at Camp Temakwa, a private children's summer camp situated picturesquely in Algonquin Park, the nine-year-old Foon made his stage debut as Jack in Oscar Wilde's delightful comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Apart from idyllic summer escapes from Detroit's stifling heat-waves to the Canadian wilderness, Foon recalls his childhood and adolescence as being "troubled . . . and not the happiest."<sup>2</sup> As a teenager attending Cooley High School in central Detroit, the scene of several race-riots in the mid-1960s, he grew up in a polarized environment fraught with racism and bullying. Foon ran the schoolyard gauntlet himself many times:

Whites hated blacks, simply because they were black . . . blacks hated whites, simply because they were white. I used to carry tons of matches and spare change to school with me . . . If you were asked for a light, and you didn't have it, it was a complication. So rather than be killed, I gave a couple of dollars away. (June, 1988)

In addition to this overt bigotry, more insidious forms of racism were regularly manifest in the Detroit school system. "You'd see the black kids streamlined into vocational training," Foon recalls. "The white kids were in academic programs. Then the black kids went off to become fertilizer in Vietnam."<sup>3</sup>

Growing up in the United States in the socially and politically unstable 1960s and '70s, Foon witnessed the highly controversial Vietnam War, the ensuing Peace movement, and the American Civil rights movement, three external phenomena which left an indelible impression on him. Foon's home life was also unsettled during this period. His invalid father suffered chronically from "psoriatic arthritis" — a severe skin disease combined with crippling arthritis, and serious hearing loss. His constant care absorbed much of the family's time and energy, and created what the playwright vividly describes as "an emotional black hole." "[As is] often the case in dysfunctional families, like those of alcoholics," Foon recalls of his upbringing, "... the child's needs often aren't met."<sup>4</sup> The dramatist's autobiographical radio play for adults, *Children's Eyes* (1983), graphically depicts his father's afflictions and his own struggle to come to terms with them. Though Foon acknowledges that his Detroit boyhood was "utterly different" from the average young Canadian's experience, many aspects of his youth served to inspire his later writings for Canadian audiences and to enhance the playwright's empathy for his young protagonists. Some aspects of growing up transcend time and place, Foon asserts:

... my experiences as a child and teenager were very important to me, and had a lot of effect on my development. When I'm writing a play for kids, I'm drawing upon the emotions of my experiences as a kid and a teenager to help give a piece some kind of emotional fibre, depth, and power. (August, 1988)

In 1969, Foon enrolled in a program of creative writing and religious studies at the University of Michigan's experimental Residential College. With such

renowned literary figures as Joseph Bronsky and March Pearsey as lecturers, and a multitude of aspiring poets and playwrights as colleagues, Foon found college life rich and stimulating. As an undergraduate he made his first foray into playwriting with an experimental trilogy of one-act plays exploring actor/audience interaction. In his third year, he was awarded the prestigious Hopwood Award for fiction. In 1974, with an honours BA under his belt, Foon declined the offer of a John Hawkes Creative Writing Graduate Fellowship from Brown University in New England. Instead, the promising young writer enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts Program in Playwriting at the University of British Columbia, a move which transformed Foon's fond childhood associations with Canada into a permanent and fruitful personal and artistic affiliation.

As part of his MA thesis at UBC Foon wrote four short plays, including "a very bad children's participation-play" (August, 1988) entitled *Hokum, the Giant Spider*. In 1975, Jane Howard Baker, a fellow student with contacts in the Richmond, B.C. school system, offered to market *Hokum* to local elementary schools. Baker's proposal was both timely and fortuitous. With the recent termination of Vancouver's Playhouse Theatre's 22-year-old school-touring program, theatre companies which could present plays to British Columbia school children were suddenly in great demand. Foon hastily conscripted Baker and three friends, christened his new-found troupe with the name of an adjacent plant store, and commenced rehearsals. The Green Thumb Players were born. Despite Foon's misgivings, *Hokum* was a critical success. Little did Foon or his co-founders know that their fledgling enterprise would blossom into one of Canada's most successful theatre companies for young people, still flourishing in 1996.

Foon's development from novice playwright into a dramatist of international renown and the evolution of his Green Thumb Players are inextricably linked. From 1975 to 1988<sup>5</sup> Green Thumb Theatre provided Foon with a well-appointed laboratory for playwriting, direction, and theatre administration, and also with a stimulating, collegial environment which afforded him contact with other theatre practitioners working in Canada and abroad. By 1976, Green Thumb's actor-writers with Foon at the helm had begun to establish themselves as a writer-based theatre production company which employed West Coast playwrights, professional designers, and small ensembles of professional actors to tour plays to public schools. Their first mandate was "to develop and produce new Canadian plays for young people" (June, 1988).

Foon spent his first five years at Green Thumb honing his playwriting craft and searching for his own distinctive dramatic voice. Through his early adaptations of American and Canadian folk tales (*The Last Days of Paul Bunyan* and *Raft Baby*), an Ojibway legend (*The Windigo*), and a Greek myth (*Heracles*), Foon developed facility as a cultural anthropologist, experimented with narrative techniques and staging devices, and devised research methods such as the personal interview, skills which he went on to apply to very different ends in the second phase of his playwriting career.

The 1978-79 theatre season proved to be a pivotal year both for Foon and Green Thumb: the company had carved out its niche as Vancouver's sole professional school-touring company; the first Vancouver International Theatre Festival for Young People dazzled West-Coast Canadians of all ages with a plethora of innovative productions by theatre companies from other provinces and overseas; Foon, who had married Jane Baker in 1975, became a father; and, with the staging of *Hilary's Birthday*, Joe Wiesenfeld's naturalistic children's play about divorce, Green Thumb assisted in the birth of a new "socially relevant"<sup>6</sup> dramatic genre which was to become their in-house speciality.

The following season, Green Thumb produced *Juve*, Campbell Smith's groundbreaking play for and about teenagers, and Irene Watts' elementary school companion-piece, *Tomorrow Will Be Better*. Both innovative productions were artistic fodder for Foon's creative imagination. Distilling interviews with over 300 Vancouver adolescents from every walk of life, Smith created a pithy rock-musical revue performed by a skilled cast of eight amateur teenage actors.

*Juve* explicitly documented adolescent attitudes to love, self-esteem, teenage prostitution, homosexuality, abortion, substance abuse, and divorce. With the help of three young professional actors, Watts drew on over 2,000 poems, skits, songs and stories by B.C. school children to create a forty-five-minute theatrical revue about "play, friendship, death, sports, philosophy, and sex."<sup>7</sup>

Following *Juve*'s immensely successful tour, Foon and fellow Vancouver dramatist Tom Walmsley set up an improvisational theatre project involving street kids and teenage prostitutes from Vancouver's Davie Street. While working closely with these young people Foon discovered that most of them had been sexually abused as children:

It never occurred to me that the connection [between sexual abuse and street kids] had any possibilities at all ... really the whole issue of abuse and other social problems — I hadn't made that connection in all honesty. (August, 1988)<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by this disturbing new insight, Foon joined the ranks of "TRACY" ["Taking Responsible Action for Children and Youth], a voluntary child advocacy group in Vancouver. In the fall of 1980, TRACY approached Foon and Green Thumb to create the first Canadian "Theatre-in-education" project designed to teach small children how to protect themselves against sexual abuse. Two years of meticulous research, rigorous consultations with a panoply of child experts and educators, and copious collective writing by Foon and actors Fran Gebhard, Brian Torpé, and Wendy Van Riesen, finally bore fruit. In 1982

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*Feeling Yes, Feeling No* was privately piloted at Henry Hudson Public School in Vancouver, and almost unanimously approved. The sexual abuse prevention program was given its premiere public tour in Vancouver in 1983, followed by professional productions by theatre companies in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary. *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* was also demonstrated in Sweden and England. In 1985 the National Film Board released a filmed version of the program for use

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by schools and libraries across Canada. The same year, Foon collaborated with psychologist Brenda Knight to produce a book entitled *am I the only one?*. This poignant compilation of stories, poems and drawings created by sexually-abused children is designed to offer further help to sexual abuse victims of all ages.

*Feeling Yes, Feeling No* is a four-part program which includes preparatory sessions designed to create a "safety net for kids"<sup>9</sup> with parents, teachers, social workers and facilitators, and two one-hour actor-led theatrical workshops for six- to twelve-year-olds<sup>10</sup> which integrate imaginary scenarios, music, audience participation, and class discussions. The program's multiple objectives include teaching children self-awareness about

their bodies and emotions, as well as learning how to identify and repel potential sexual abusers, how to avoid dangerous situations, and how to seek help should abuse occur. Fourteen years after its inception, *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* is still highly regarded and frequently employed.

*Feeling Yes, Feeling No* proved to be an extraordinary professional and personal catalyst for Foon. His involvement as one of the co-writers propelled the playwright headlong along a path of theatrical explorations into the many facets of youth victimization. Though his child advocacy plays vary widely in subject matter, modes of theatrical presentation, use of dramatic devices, and characterization, since 1981 virtually all Foon's works depict archetypal conflicts between bullies and their victims. The playwright is deeply concerned with the self-perpetuating nature of oppression and patterns of recurring violence, as they affect the everyday lives of children and teenagers.

Foon's first solo dramatic work in the new realistic style adopted by Green Thumb Theatre in the 1980s was *New Canadian Kid*. Inspired by *Immigrant Children Speak*, a modest elementary school drama club oral-history project which the playwright was invited to workshop, *New Canadian Kid* explores the linguistic and cultural travails of the new Canadian immigrant from a child's-eye-view. Despite its celebrity (*New Canadian Kid* has been produced by over 30 Canadian and international companies, and widely translated), the play is an uncomplicated piece of theatre. However, within its simple framework we find many hints of

Foon's distinctive mature dramatic style: a strong central narrative, a realistic plot and characters drawn from interviews with actual kids, the use of monologues and flashbacks, simple staging, and serious subject matter tempered with an optimistic outlook and a light — often Rabelaisian — comic hand.

Foon's central protagonist in *New Canadian Kid* is a juvenile "Everyimmigrant" called Nick. Through a series of monologues intercut with illustrative flashbacks, the boy recounts to the audience the ups and downs of coming to Canada from a generic foreign land called "Homeland." Nick's nemesis takes the form of Mog, a baseball-bat slinging, name-calling schoolyard bully, who delights in mocking his new classmate's language and customs and excluding Nick from his schoolyard games. Foon rounds out his minimalist cast with Mench, the little girl who eventually befriends Nick and helps him outwit his oppressor, and Nick's mother, who lends an adult perspective on immigration to the piece. What makes *New Canadian Kid* a delight is Foon's ingenious comic inversion of English and "Homelander": while Nick confides to the audience in perfect English, the Canadians speak an absurd form of gibberish with slapstick mimed accompaniments. By putting his audience in Nick's shoes, Foon builds a new empathy for the newcomer to Canada.

Many approving critics referred to *New Canadian Kid* as "a play on racism" (August, 1988). Because his actual dramatic intent had been simply to portray "one of the least problematic forms of racism ... and that's bullying," Foon resolved to write "a piece on the actual issue of racism ... hitting it squarely." Drawing on personal insights gleaned from his Detroit upbringing, Foon maintained that the most serious form of racism was "the institutionalized form ... [because of] the way it works itself out in the education system, the government, and in the immigration policies of the country" (August, 1988). In 1984 and 1985 respectively, Foon crafted two new child advocacy plays,<sup>11</sup> *Skin*, his first work specifically designed for teenagers, and *Invisible Kids*, a piece for elementary school students. With *New Canadian Kid*, these pieces form a trilogy which addresses the full spectrum of bullying, xenophobia, racism, and bigotry affecting today's young Canadians.

Foon based *Skin* on material developed in a series of race-relations workshops organized by *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* childhood education advisor, Dr. Judith Mastei. Known simply as "Project One," the improvisational sessions brought together a group of young adult amateur and professional actors from visible minorities in Vancouver to experiment using masks around the theme of the Japanese-Canadian experience. Foon and the actors then canvassed a cross-section of B.C. adolescents from many ethnic backgrounds including native-Canadian, "in an attempt to understand a little about how racism affects youth."<sup>12</sup> Following the 1986 Green Thumb Theatre premiere of *Skin*, Toronto's Young People's Theatre

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presented a second version of the play, which Foon had modified using interviews with area Caribbean-Canadian teenagers.

In *Skin*, Foon presents three distinctive, well-rounded teenagers with whom a young Canadian audience can personally identify: Phiroza Mehta, an Indo-Canadian girl, Jennifer Malcolm, a first generation Canadian girl of Jamaican descent, and Tuan Hung Wong, a Vietnamese refugee with landed immigrant status in Canada. Each has a different account of racism to relate. Using ten secondary characters,<sup>13</sup> Foon interweaves the trio's separate narrative monologues and their accompanying flashbacks into a series of twenty short dovetailed scenes, which explore a comprehensive catalogue of racist acts. The playwright conveys these assaults expressionistically with masks, special lighting, and sound effects. Phiroza is buffeted with racial slurs and simply ignored by many of her schoolmates. Unnecessarily fearing rejection from her Caucasian boyfriend Todd, the shy teenager conceals her true nationality thereby denying her very self. Her gradual mastery of these bullies parallels her blossoming self-acceptance. Jennifer is faced with a more insidious form of bigotry, satirically personified by "Mr. Lee-zard," her grotesque reptilian teacher. With the help of her perceptive cousin Delacy, Jennifer outfoxes her teacher's attempts to denigrate her intelligence and to relegate her to the vocational program. At the play's conclusion, Jennifer deflates her oppressor, acknowledges her real intellectual potential, and re-sets her academic sights on university.

In sharp contrast to his counterparts' ultimately affirmative tales, Tuan's story is sharply tinged with tragedy. Doubly vulnerable due to his skin colour and his lack of English, Tuan copes with the recent drowning death of his brother, while also juggling menial night work, caring for his younger sister, sending money home to his parents in Vietnam, and attending highschool. Though he is skilled at martial arts, he refuses to resort to physical violence in order to protect himself from a shadowy gang of rough young racists. Wise beyond his years, Tuan has witnessed bloody war first hand and has "seen enough death" (24). When his employer's bigotry leads to his firing (by an apologetic but ineffective supervisor), the undaunted, hard-working youth reacts stoically. Foon juxtaposes Tuan's persistent optimism against his Vietnamese friend Lo's embittered approach to making a new life in Canada. A skilled auto mechanic who now requires Canadian experience and a proficiency in English to find work in his trade, Lo refuses to undertake unskilled labour. Ashamed to admit to his family back home his failure to achieve quick success, the youth paints himself into a corner. Despite Tuan's efforts to bolster him, Lo's inflexibility, negativity, and pride eventually lead to his tragic suicide. Though chastened by his friend's death, Tuan's determination to build a better life remains untarnished. Foon frames *Skin* with a choric prologue and epilogue which serve to underline his three protagonists' collective humanity.

In *Invisible Kids* Foon once again employs optimism and pragmatism to tackle racism, in this case on two levels: the personal and the political. In 1984 Nick Barter, Artistic Director of England's Unicorn Theatre, commissioned Foon to create a

companion touring-piece for *New Canadian Kid*, which could be presented to primary school children as a double-bill at London's Arts Theatre in 1985. Following extensive interviews with young children from low-income and middle-class districts of London, Foon crafted a well-made one-act play about racial prejudice and social change from a young girl's perspective. *Invisible Kids* tells the simple story of how Georgie, an eleven-year-old black girl who has lived in England for nine years, is forced to forfeit a school day-trip to France because she lacks a British passport. She has been waiting for over three years for her citizenship application to be approved. Foon juxtaposes Georgie's plight with the timely true story of controversial white South-African athlete Zola Budd's expedient attainment of a British passport (so that she can run in the 1984 Olympics) to emphasize the inherent disparities within the British Immigration system.

In *Invisible Kids* Foon rounds out his young ensemble of characters with energetic Vince and slightly spoiled Samantha (Georgie's black schoolmates), reserved Thiun (newly emigrated from Vietnam), and outspoken Chris (the only white child in the group). Gathered around the playground jungle-gym, the fivesome roughhouse, tell stories (including some about their own run-ins with racists), confide their secret fears and desires, and offer support to one another. Resolved to boycott the class trip (with the exception of self-centred Samantha), the kids collectively hatch and carry out a plan to secure Georgie's passport by petitioning the Prime Minister. At the same time, Vince resolutely petitions his sceptical parents to buy him a special BMX bike. Typically, Foon cleverly uses timely cultural references, naturalistic "kidspeak," and the latest reggae music to underscore the play's naturalistic plot. When a triumphant Vince arrives unexpectedly on his new mount to chauffeur Georgie and petition to the Parliament buildings, the children are given tangible proof that with persistence the seemingly impossible can be achieved. Moved by the "great sense of hope" expressed by many of his young interviewees, Foon set out in *Invisible Kids* to "reinforce that sense of the possibility for change."<sup>14</sup>

Between 1986 and 1993 Foon created a second thematic trilogy of plays for young people which delves into the shadowy world of child abuse, a subject which the playwright first encountered in *Feeling Yes, Feeling No. Liars* (1986), *Mirror Game* (1988), and *Seesaw* (1993) explore a range of destructive physical and psychological abuses visited upon children and teenagers by parents, peers, and themselves.

While researching *Skin* in a British Columbia Native community, Foon was entreated repeatedly to write a play about children of alcoholics. With the support of the Vancouver Centennial Organization and Green Thumb Theatre, Foon and a group of professional actors (including one actress who had experienced parental alcoholism first hand) undertook to research the subject. Working closely with two youth counsellors from the Burnaby Alcohol and Drug Program, the playwright was permitted to join a Youth Drug Information Workshop for teens. Foon distilled the candid personal accounts of these



youngsters together with material garnered from specialists in the field of addiction, to create *Liars*. The one-act play attempts both to inform a teenage audience about the horrors of addiction and to help children of alcoholics gain some control of their lives. Though *Liars* contains graphic depictions of violent behaviour, many critics have praised Foon for his engagingly humorous script and his appealingly recognizable characters.

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Foon's two teenage protagonists in *Liars* inhabit opposite corners of their adolescent world. Sixteen-year-old Leonore is a quiet, studious "preppy" from a well-to-do family. Her extroverted classmate Jace is a tough leather-jacketed denizen of the fringes of the "headbanger" crowd, who comes from a blue-collar background. Despite these conspicuous differences, the two youngsters share a subtle kinship; both Lenny and Jace live with an alcoholic parent, and each, in his/her own way is a loner. Foon uses the teenagers' superficial dis-

parities to underline the universality of addiction. Whereas Lenny secretly struggles with caring for her frequently incapacitated and neurotic mother, keeping house for her demanding workaholic father, and maintaining top grades at school, Jace copes with the unpredictability of his unemployed alcoholic father, who is by turns buddy and bully. Foon cleverly represents the alcoholic alter-ego of each adult with life-size mannequins which the inebriated parents wield alternately as shield and weapon.

While Lenny fantasizes about escaping her oppressive home-life and moving to Japan (symbolized by her fascination with the serene beauty of the ancient Japanese tea-ceremony she re-enacts), Jace resorts to drugs and heavy-metal music to carry him away from his sordid reality. Through a series of brief encounters (interspersed with graphic flashbacks of life at home) the teenagers meet, become friends, play games and share confidences, fall in love, and make a pact of mutual support. At the climax of *Liars* both Lenny and Jace confront their parents about the destructiveness of their addictions, and plead with them to seek professional help. Lenny meets with anger, denial, and verbal abuse. Jace is brutally beaten by his father. Foon ends *Liars* on an ambiguous open-ended note; whereas Lenny finds the inner strength to seek counselling for herself, Jace finds a "safe" haven in drug-induced oblivion — thereby mimicking his father's self-destructive dependency — and opts for an uncertain life on the streets. Peers and professional counsellors, Foon implies in *Liars*, can be stronger allies in the battle against parental alcoholism than parents themselves.

In 1987, Foon set out to research the impact of media images on teenagers' sense of self-esteem. With only the title *Mirror Game* clearly in mind, the playwright canvassed a multicultural class of local grade twelve drama students; the subject



From the Green Thumb Theatre for Young People production of *Mirror Game*  
Peter Scoular as Bob and Heather Troop as Maggie

Photo by David Cooper

“bored the hell out of them.” However, the arrival of a female student to Foon’s class with a black eye administered by her boyfriend as punishment for being late prompted “a much ... more intimate kind of discussion about relationships and families” (December, 1991). The episode provided Foon with the impetus to write a play about violence and abuse in teenagers’ relationships. Broadening his earlier explorations of the bully/victim and dysfunctional family themes, in *Mirror Game* Foon presents a wide spectrum of abuse which ranges from the merely irritating to the devastating. As in *Liars*, adults’ negative patterns of behaviour directly affect their offspring; often history grimly repeats itself. “If there’s going to be a bad response [to *Mirror Game*] it’s because the gloves are really off and I take a real whack at parents and adults” (June, 1988), Foon reflects.

*Mirror Game* recreates a catalogue of typical teenage haunts; classrooms, cafeterias, school washrooms, and parental homes are simply evoked through textual references enhanced with minimalistic staging. As in a Shakespearean comedy, Foon divides his *dramatis personae* into two contrasting sub-groups which comprise both a comic and a more serious duo. Bob, the acne-obsessed, lovelorn narrator, and Maggie, his self-effacing, engaging confidante, serve as foils to Luke and Sara, whose external good looks and “cool” demeanours mask

a troubled bully and his mesmerized victim. Whereas Bob and Maggie are caught up in a comic triangle of unrequited young love, Sara and Luke are trapped in a much more dangerous entanglement rife with jealousy and physical abuse. As the play unfolds, Bob's vain attempts to win Sara's affections mirror Sara's successful battle to free herself from Luke's manipulative clutches.

In *Mirror Game*, Foon juxtaposes revealing flashbacks of each teenager's homelife with scenes from the present, in order to reveal gradually what makes his

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young characters tick. His adult protagonists present themselves as ghostly voice-overs or eerie silhouetted projections on a giant scrim. Bob is simultaneously denigrated by his verbally abusive father and suffocated by his over-protective mother, while Maggie vainly tries to bolster her self-absorbed, self-pitying mother in the absence of her workaholic father. Sara is forced to co-exist with her well-intentioned but brow-beaten mother and her mother's crude wife-battering boyfriend. Since early childhood, Luke has suffered vicious verbal and physical lashings at the hands of his sadistic, bullying father.

Parental behaviour, Foon implies, can profoundly affect the next generation. The playwright's depiction of Luke's metamorphosis from child scapegoat to pent-up bully is a frightening illustration of how violence perpetuates itself. Foon's compelling portrayal of Sara's slow awakening to her own self-worth, and her ensuing rejection of Luke's warped affections (spurred on by Maggie and Bob), conversely demonstrate the power of peer support to effect positive change. With self-respect, Foon also implies in *Mirror Game*, comes empowerment.

Foon's 1993 play *Seesaw* once again explores the complexities of young people's relationships with their peers and families, in this case from a twelve-year-old perspective. While interviewing dozens of Winnipeg elementary school students, the playwright observed that these children were coping with increasing external hostilities and diminishing parental support. *Seesaw* marries “slice of life” realism with expressionistic puppetry “to show the forces many twelve-year-olds keep in balance in order to survive.”<sup>15</sup>

As in *Mirror Game* Foon presents a cast of four well-rounded characters: shy, intelligent Josh who finds self-expression in magic, Charla the new kid at school who is trying to “fit in,” Paige, the trend-setting cliquish pre-teen, and Adam, the schoolyard extortionist and covert artist. *Seesaw* traces the dynamic ups and downs (at school and at home) of this young foursome. Peer pressure, mass-media influences, and self-esteem are central issues. Underdogs Charla and Josh ultimately come out on top, by collectively defusing Paige's and Adam's efforts to manipulate and harass them.

The parents in *Seesaw* are satirically characterized (through the magic of collaborator/Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett's artful puppetry) as animals



From the Green Thumb Theatre for Young People production of  
*Seesaw*

Standing: Brian Drummond as Adam; Daniel Dolan, Stage Manager;  
Ellie Harvie as Paige

Seated: Laura Myers as Charla; Jacques Lalonde as Josh

*Photo by David Cooper*

and inanimate objects: Josh's ever-preoccupied workaholic parents sport attaché-case hats complete with Rolodex files and cellular phones; Charla's sincere, hard-working divorced mother is constrained with marionette strings; Paige's "blended family" includes her superficial "fashion-mannequin" mother, her materialistic "sportscar" step-father, and her manipulative little step-brother Misha, who takes the form of a demonic two-foot-high puppet with two faces; and Adam's quarrelsome parents are cat and dog hand-puppets. Through fleeting glimpses of life at home with these parents, in *Seesaw* Foon illuminates the correlation between family dynamics and how kids relate to each other.

In 1994 Foon created two new plays which aptly demonstrate his breadth and versatility as a playwright for the young: *The Short Tree and the Bird That Could*

*Not Sing* is a delightful fable for little children; *War* is a hard-hitting cautionary tale for teenagers on the brink of adulthood. Both plays are departures from his characteristic child advocacy dramas. Adapted from Foon's 1986 children's book, *The Short Tree and The Bird That Could Not Sing* is a tragi-comic fantasy for primary school children which chronicles the meeting, separation, and joyful reunion of a lonely sapling and a gregarious (if tone-deaf) migratory song-bird. The playwright penned the metaphorical little book after his marriage ended, as

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a means to reassure his daughter of his constancy. Using programmatic music, puppetry, elaborate lighting, and rainbow-coloured scenery and costumes, in his stage adaptation Foon exploits all the magic of theatre in order to convey a subtle message to children about the nature of love and loss.

Foon also wrote *War* for his daughter, now a teenager, but to a very different dramatic end. “I worry about kids, especially young women,” the playwright and father recently reflected. “It’s scary having a

teenage daughter ... this play is a warning to her and to her friends.” *War* is an atypically bleak piece which confronts the issue of societal violence head-on. The play explores “the way that we raise our young men ... and, those young men’s minds” (June, 1996). In *War* Foon presents a rogues gallery of unsympathetic teenage protagonists who have each been indoctrinated to become amoral, dangerous young men: Brad, the hockey-team “hit-man” turned arsonist; Andy, the would-be Arnold Schwarzenegger clone and actor; Tommy, the aspiring fighter-pilot and date-rapist; and, Shane, the lethal, now jaded ex-gang-member. Through a series of succinct monologues interspersed with actual conflicts, three of the four jostle for dominant position. When Tommy and Brad challenge Andy (the lowest on the totem) to combat in “the cage,” Shane steps in to protect him. In repayment, Andy offers to secure Shane an audition with his agent who casts violent action films. Tommy vicariously wreaks revenge on Andy by raping his ex-girl friend Sheila, whom Brad maliciously claims also to have bedded. One of the most striking dramatic elements in *War* is the punchy raw slang which the characters wield like weapons. Reminiscent of the “Droogspeak” in Burgess’s brutal black comedy *A Clockwork Orange*, Foon’s invented dialect embodies the brutality and alienation of his subjects.

Parents are virtually non-existent in *War*’s barren world; the young men look to fictional television and film personae as role-models. Brad and Tommy dance to the tune of “The Coach” and “The Commander” respectively, two unseen figures with arbitrary powers who exploit their underlings and ultimately betray them. Female characters are notably absent in *War*. Consequently, the audience is privy to a type of male conversation which women, at least, rarely overhear. “The women are there in the boys’ heads,” comments Foon, who has deliberately objectified Sheila, the sole young woman in the piece. Sheila’s vicious off-stage rape (re-

enacted graphically by Tommy) is at the heart of Foon's play, a stark metaphor for "the politics of domination"<sup>16</sup> which the playwright clearly abhors.

Ironically, the only male character in *War* who elicits our sympathies is the one who has participated most fully in this "power-over" world. Shane is truly a tragic figure. Beaten as children by their mother's boyfriends, Shane and his brother transformed childhood survival tactics into a lucrative teenage profession; the duo served as cold-hearted gang-mercenaries, who would commit any crime for a price. A teenage Faust, Shane sold his soul for money and power. When his brother whom he genuinely loves is murdered, Shane's eyes are forcibly opened to the fragility of life and the illusory nature of power. "The Hurt you put out stays alive ... and one day, any day, finds you again ... just smells you and splatters your life away."<sup>17</sup> Wisdom for Shane comes too late; when his assassins strike at the end of *War*, he offers no struggle.

As a piece of theatre, Foon's *War* defies traditional classification; the play ends without resolution or redemption. Foon is deliberately "not letting the audience off the hook" (June, 1996). Unchastened by his friend Shane's death, in a final monologue Andy cockily rejoices in landing the film part of a "gangbanger." Whether in life or in art, Foon implies, the violence continues.

The seeds for Foon's most recent exploration into youth violence were sown in 1992 as he prepared to write *Seesaw*; several of his ten and eleven-year-old interviewees in Winnipeg recounted to him their involvement in criminal activities. The playwright's personal experiences with juvenile vandalism and break-and-entry at his Vancouver home served as a further creative catalyst. Determined to find out "who these kids were" (June, 1996), Foon spoke with hundreds of children, as well as social workers, youth counsellors, psychologists, teachers, and police and school liaison officers. In a little over a year, Foon had created the production draft for a CBC television feature film for grown-ups, with the resonant oxymoronic title *Little Criminals*. Though *Seesaw* and *Little Criminals* both depict children on the brink of puberty, in every other respect they are galaxies apart: *Seesaw*'s inherent lightness, humour, and hopefulness sharply contrast with *Little Criminals*' heart-wrenching pessimism; *Seesaw* sends a positive message to its young auditors, *Little Criminals* a caustic warning to its adult viewers. When Foon's superbly written screenplay aired for the first time one Sunday evening in January 1996, over 1,800,000 Canadian viewers sat watching with a mixture of horror and compassion. Shortly after, Foon and his CBC associates were lauded on the floor of the Canadian Senate for addressing the issue of youth violence.

*Little Criminals* is a compelling portrait of the short tragic life of an eleven-year-old criminal. In his diminutive anti-hero Des, Foon has created a complex individual who is at once cockily invincible and pathetically vulnerable. The illegitimate offspring of an underprivileged teenage-mother and her abusive foster-father, Des has grown up in a harsh frenetic world devoid of love, stability, and beauty. He shares his sordid home with a television-addicted grandmother, his drunken ineffectual mother, and a stream of her lowlife suitors. He is haunted by

the mystery of his father's identity. With only himself to depend on, Des has fallen into an underworld of dope-dealers, arsonists, and thieves, and apparently landed on his feet. The mask of cool bravado which he sports as the foul-mouthed ring-leader of a ragtag gang of under-age offenders conceals a frightened child crying out for help. *Little Criminals* chronicles Des's tenuous ascent out of this underworld and the series of betrayals which ultimately bring about his downfall. Foon heightens the nightmarish atmosphere of the screenplay with striking visual images of fire, rapacious animals, and death's heads, and with potent textual metaphors for the "dog-eat-dog" jungle in which Des exists.

The dramatic structure of *Little Criminals* is intricate. Foon introduces us to Des through a series of flashbacks (filmed from Des's perspective) which graphically depict the astonishing range of criminal activities he and his gang have undertaken for money and kicks. Des is finally caught ransacking a house with his soulmate Cory (using Cory's three-year-old step-sister as an unwitting accomplice), apprehended by the police (who are frustrated by his young offender immunity), and sent to "Children's House" for psychological assessment. Through juxtaposed snippets of Des's sessions with Rita his psychotherapist, the audience witness the slow unmasking of Des's humane side. Here is a child capable of generosity, love, and compassion, who secretly expresses his inner-self through beautifully rendered drawings on his closet wall. For a fleeting moment, Des's redemption seems possible.

The two-fold peripeteia in *Little Criminals* occurs when Rita inadvertently violates Des's closet-sanctuary, and sadly informs the boy that he must proceed to a foster home since their allotted time together is up. Triply-betrayed by his mother, Rita, and "the system," and determined to avoid the dreaded foster home at all costs, Des sets out on a reckless path of self-destruction with his only friend Cory playing a delinquent Tom Sawyer to his Huck Finn. When Des cold-bloodedly shoots their corrupt seventeen-year-old mentor, the terrified Cory abandons him, choosing to return instead to his flawed but loving family. Eluding the police one final time, Des bids his comatose mother goodbye, sets his house alight, and awaits life's ultimate "escape" in the womb-like haven of his closet.

In *Little Criminals*, Foon presents an apocalyptic vision of the lost child whom society has failed. "People *can* help these kids," Foon reflects, "but people run out of time" (June, 1996). The real tragic flaw is not in the child, Foon implies, but in a system that puts time and money before people.

Foon never seems to lack creative inspiration. He is currently working on a new play for teenagers about youth involvement in Canada's underground neo-Nazi movement, and an episode about pedophiles for an adult Canadian TV series on parole. His play *The Short Tree and The Bird That Could Not Sing* is about to be piloted as an animated television series. Leslee Silverman, Artistic Director of Manitoba's Theatre for Young People, has recently commissioned Foon to write a piece on the effects of parental gambling and "the casino movement" on kids.

Since 1975, Dennis Foon has written more than twenty plays for young people, directed over a dozen works by other Canadian writers, and commissioned and premiered more than 35 new Canadian plays. He is a recipient of the British Theatre Award for Best Production for Young Audiences (*Invisible Kids*, 1986), two Canadian Chalmers Awards for Best Children's Play (*Skin*, 1987 and *The Short Tree and The Bird That Could Not Sing*, 1995), a British Columbia LEO Film Award for Best Screenplay (*Little Criminals*, 1996), and an International Critic's Prize from the Monte Carlo Film Festival (*Little Criminals*, 1996). In 1989 the playwright's "outstanding contribution to the field of the arts for young people" was recognized with the prestigious international Association for Young Audiences Award. As a pioneer dramatist who holds a mirror up to contemporary Canadian youth culture, Foon has truly earned his status as "bedrock in the field of English-Canadian theatre for young people."<sup>18</sup>

#### NOTES

- \* I would like to thank Dennis Foon for graciously permitting me to interview him. I am also very grateful to the staff of Blizzard Publishing for their generous provision of Foon's most recently published texts, and to Green Thumb Theatre for Young People for so promptly supplying me with production photographs.
- 1 Dennis Foon, Interview with Gibson-Bray, August, 1988. All subsequent quotations excerpted from my own interviews with Dennis Foon will simply be denoted in the text by a bracketed date.
- 2 Dina Sudlow, "Playwright focuses on the realities of young lives." *Victoria Times-Colonist* 2 May 1989.
- 3 Joe Adcock, "Fanfare — Beneath 'Skin' lies hope for the future." *Seattle Post Intelligencer* 9 May 1986.
- 4 Sudlow, "Playwright focuses."
- 5 Foon left the Artistic Directorship of Green Thumb in 1988 in order to put all his energies into writing and direction.
- 6 Kevin Barker, "Kids' Theatre Grows Up." *CP Air Express* July/August 1986.
- 7 Joyce Doolittle, "The West Coast's Hardy Perennial: Green Thumb." *Canadian Theatre Review* 37 (Spring 1983): 59-65.
- 8 In her book *STREET KIDS: The Tragedy of Canada's Runaways* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.), author Marlene Webber explores in depth the direct connections between child sexual abuse, dysfunctional families, and street kids.
- 9 *Feeling Yes, Feeling No*, NFB of Canada, 1985, The film: Part One.
- 10 The program offers two specially tailored versions of Part 4, one for children in Kindergarten to Grade 3, and the other for students from Grades 4 to 7.
- 11 There are two versions of each play: Vancouver and Toronto versions of *Skin* (the latter has been published), and the original British *Invisible Kids* and a second for Canadian audiences (the latter also is published). Though both versions of *Skin* are equally effective, in my opinion the Canadian *Invisible Kids* lacks the powerful motivation and structural integrity of its British predecessor.
- 12 "Programme notes to *Skin*," Green Thumb Tour, 1986.
- 13 As in most of Foon's plays written with a touring-company in mind, *Skin* can be played with as few as four actors.
- 14 *Invisible Kids*, Toronto version, "Background," 59.
- 15 Dennis Foon, *Seesaw* (Blizzard Publishing: Winnipeg, 1993), "Playwright's Note," 58.
- 16 Dennis Foon, *War* (Blizzard Publishing: Winnipeg, 1995), Preface by Guillermo Verdecchia (Director of Green Thumb Theatre's premiere production of *War*), 16.



17 *War*, 57.

18 Leslee Silverman [Artistic Director, Manitoba Theatre for Young People], Interview with Gibson-Bray, 19 December 1991.

#### SELECTED PUBLISHED WORKS

*am I the only one?*. [Children's book, co-authored with Brenda Knight] Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985.

*Feeling Yes, Feeling No: A Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program*. [Film with co-screenwriters Moira Simpson and Anne Wheeler. Prod. Jennifer Torrance. Theatrical Dir. Dennis Foon] National Film Board, 1985.

*Heracles*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978.

*The Last Days of Paul Bunyan*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1977.

*Little Criminals*. [Screenplay] Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Inc., 1996.

*Mirror Game*. Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Inc., 1992.

*New Canadian Kid & Invisible Kids: Two Plays by Dennis Foon*. Vancouver: Pulp Press Book Publishers, 1989.

*Raft Baby*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978.

*Seesaw*. Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Inc., 1993.

*The Short Tree and The Bird That Could Not Sing*. [Children's book] Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986.

*Skin & Liars*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1988.

*War*. Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Inc., 1995.

*The Windigo*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978.

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