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ABSTRACT

In spite of the fact that there has been an interest in children's theatre since after World War I and practically everyone--from the Junior League to the educationist--recognizes the need for and the value of good drama, there is a dearth of good drama of literary worth for children. It is true that children have been exposed to drama of some kind--there is intense interest in creative drama (especially on the part of educationists), there are anthologies of children's plays which ra from mediocre to poor in literary quality, and there is a widespre practice of adapting literary works for juvenile theatre audiences. However, good drama must become part of children's literature because (1) it belongs there as an accepted literary genre; (2) teachers should be able to deal with it critically and practically on all levels; and (3) an art form needs an active and viable body of criticism in order to grow in stature. (JM)

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The Play's the Thing:
The Need for Some Critical Perspectives in Children's Drama

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The intent of this paper is to exhort, survey, analyze, and decry. It attempts, indeed, to do too much, but so little has been said about children's drama as a literary art that too much needs to be said. I would like principally to comment on some of the possible causes for the neglect of drama in the field of children's literature, and by so doing, to focus attention on the need for developing critical interest in drama as a literary art.

Fifty-three years ago, M. J. Moses was dismayed at the difficulty he had gathering together an anthology of plays which were written with a real sense of drama and which were clothed in language of lasting literary worth. He was seeking plays that "were not written to prove anything except that the more one is brought in contact with imaginative literature, the more is imagination fed; and the wider the life adventures of fictitious characters, the more wide does our own experience become."[1] But though he found that "the library shelves are full of story plays from history, and biographical plays, there is still a poverty of real dramatic material along these lines. . . . Material is lying loose and no one will use it as it should be used." Surveying the field of drama, he discovered that "the writing of plays for children has mostly been done to satisfy the sparse means of producing such plays in the classroom, in the church hall, or in the assembly-room of settlement houses. Perfunctory courses are given in normal grades on how to dramatize a simply story, on how to produce it along lines of practical stage directing. But somehow the spirit, the beauty, the depth of the theatre is missing. . . .I am fearful that joy is being driven from the plays written for the schoolroom. Remember, perfunctory dialogue is not drama!"[2] But we have not remembered. Unfortunately, in the fifty-three years since Moses urged us to turn our attention to the creation of plays with real literary value, no one has followed his lead.[3]

One voice was raised in 1971 when Dewey W. Chambers pointed out briefly in his Children's Literature in the Curriculum: "The playwright is another artist [along with the novelist and the poet] who uses language effectively in yet another form. The playwright uses language in a dramatic form to communicate his ideas. The script is the technique he employs to tell his story. It is a rare occurrence when a language or reading text will offer a good script to children. The whole issue of the script and drama seems to have been neglected by the authors of some of our better textbooks. The result, of course, is that children have little opportunity to interact with this form of literature."[4]

Is there an explanation for the dearth of exciting dramatic experiences of real literary worth for children? Is there a reason for the failure of all the major texts and anthologies used in children's literature courses to include drama as a legitimate literary genre?

At a recent conference of people interested in approaching children's literature from a scholarly and critical point of view, someone asked a panel of children's editors why so few quality dramas are published for children. Two editors of well-known publishing houses stated that attempts had been made but that there had been no response from the public. One ventured the opinion that no one was interested in putting on good plays for children and therefore there was no market for them. It is true that these remarks were called forth on the spur of the moment, that no attempt

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was made to present them as careful, soundly based explanations; however, they are worth considering at least to determine if there is any basis to the complaint that no one is interested in putting on good children's plays.

The evidence would seem to indicate that there is no justification to the charge. As a matter of fact, it is paradoxical that while children's drama as a literary form is almost non-existent, children's theater is now at a peak.

Interest in the Children's Theater movement developed in America after World War I. We began to realize that "No art can become a vital, moving force in a country unless the children grow up in it, unless it is part of their lives from the time they are very young."[5] These are the words of Winifred Ward, one of the voices in children's theater that made us realize this (that is, those of us who do). There were many organizations and many individuals that made children's theater a reality. Junior Leagues throughout the country played an active part (and still do) in founding and maintaining theaters for youngsters. Many universities, such as Tufts and Northwestern and the California colleges, not only founded children's theaters but began dramatic programs to train the actors and crews to staff them. Theaters were founded and funded in a variety of ways. The Nashville Children's Theatre was the first (and perhaps even yet the only) one to be funded by a municipal bond issue. There is even one supported by the Community Chest. There are touring companies, amateur companies, and professional companies. There have been important names in the history of children's theater in America: Winifred Ward, for instance, for many years at Northwestern University and the author of many books; and Charlotte B. Chorpenning, who breathed life into the Goodman Children's Theatre in Chicago. Probably the most significant indication of the importance and widespread interest in children's theater was the Children's Theatre Conference first held in 1944 under the auspices of the American Educational Theatre Association. The annual conference serves as a clearing house and medium of communication for all those interested in providing an active theater for children, and grew out of the Children's Theatre Press, which was founded in 1935.

It has been estimated that over five million children are the beneficiaries of the Children's Theatre in America. As impressive as this figure is, it is important to note that no matter how many children the theater groups can reach, it is still the teacher in the classroom who reaches and touches the most children. The teacher is the one who must first kindle a spark of interest in the child and lead him to appreciate and love and understand quality drama. Those who are dedicated to working with children's theater in this country deserve the support and the intelligent, educated help of the classroom teacher who has been introduced to drama from a literary point of view and who can help children to respond to it in the theater.

Nor can we blame the absence of any consideration of drama in children's literature textbooks and anthologies on the supposition that the teacher will not have the opportunity to deal with it in the classroom. Paradoxically again, many of the recent basal readers and literary anthologies used in the elementary and junior high classrooms include sections on drama and at least one formal play for each reading level. To their credit, the editors have chosen relatively wisely among the few quality plays available to them. They have either stuck to the few artists of proven literary worth--like A. A. Milne--who have written plays for children (and after you've mentioned Milne, the list dwindles drastically), or they have picked dramas that are at least adequately written, although on the whole, indeed almost exclusively, void of the "spirit, the beauty, the depth of the theatre" that Moses was seeking in children's drama.

Why is it, then, that practically everyone from the Junior League to the educationists recognize the need for and the value of good drama--practically everyone, that is,except those in the field of children's literature? And why, with more of a market--in the form of an active children's theater throughout the country and in television, commercial and public--than drama has ever enjoyed before, why is there such a dearth of good drama of real literary worth for children?

Some might answer that drama by its very nature is inappropriate for children, or

at best is appropriate only in certain forms--farce and melodrama, for instance. After all, comedy, in its traditional definition, is social criticism with an eye on indicating the ludicrousness of the individual trying to adapt to the illogicalities and immoralities of a mad world, and tragedy deals with man's defeat by the forces ranged against him--both supposedly beyond the ken of the child.

But if we accept as valid the critical approach outlined by C. S. Lewis in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," there is no reason why we shouldn't expect, even demand, children's plays of significance and literary quality. Lewis admonishes:

> Nothing seems to me more fatal, for this art, than an idea that whatever we share with children is, in the private sense, "childish" and that whatever is childish is somehow comic. We must meet children as equals in that area of our nature where we are their equals. Our superiority consists partly in commanding other areas, and partly (which is more relevant) in the fact that we are better at telling stories than they are. The child as reader is neither to be patronized nor idolized; we talk to him as man to man. But the worst attitude of all would be the professional attitude which regards children in the lump as a sort of raw material which we have to handle. . . . We must not imagine that we are Providence or Destiny. I will not say that a good story could never be written by someone in the Ministry of Education, for all things are possible. But I should lay very long odds against it.[6]

Perhaps our failure to remember Lewis's words is one explanation for the lack of children's plays of any literary worth. It is only the playwright who has forgotten them, however; the novelists have not. And of course the children have taken to their hearts those works written from this perspective and conceived on this basis: books like Charlotte's Web, The Hobbit, Dorp Dead, The Upstairs Room, Man Without a Face, Sounder, How Many Miles to Babylon? The list is lengthy and ranges from the merely competent to the brilliant--but the point is that the best children's writers write for children because, as Lewis states, "a children's story is the best art-form" for what they have to say; he ventures further and speculates that "this method could apply to other kinds of children's literature besides stories."[7] It's time to start applying it to children's drama. In this genre we find statements such as the following to put beside Lewis's: "Of course you can always make your dramatization of some familiar story. However, writing a good children's play, even when it is an adaptation, takes time--easily from two to four weeks at full time."[8]

M. J. Moses, in the same introduction that I cited previously, dismayed at the lack of dramatic quality in play offerings fifty years ago, concluded in words that are significant today and that echo Lewis's:

> whenever an art becomes the hand-maiden of education, it suffers by reason of the fact that it is cramped into shape to prove some theory, to demonstrate some principle. . . . With the discovery of "dramatic instinct," "expression as an aid to reading," "gesture as a way toward grace and freedom"--and the other symptoms grouped under the one head of "educational dramatics," a mushroom growth of plays has sprung up to illustrate certain reactions to dramatic stimuli, forecast by the educators. They are now running to the drama as a catch-all and a cure-all for every social evil; plays for social betterment, for nationalization, for farm and fireside, for group consciousness and community pride, are being written plentifully, but they are either too local or so timely that they are scarcely suited for print, since the cause for them quickly vanishes.[9]

Drama, in other words, has been all too eagerly embraced by educators. And with the advent not only of "educational dramatics" but also of "creative dramatics" and "psychodrama," the problem is intensified.

Creative drama (it has become so popular and so widespread that the term needs little definition) differs from literary drama in that the emphasis is not on the result or on the creation of art but on the encouragement of creativity on the part

of the child. Its purpose is to involve the child, to get him to participate. It is a sound and worthy educational technique and can be extremely successful. Most of those who are knowledgeable in the field encourage starting with a good book, and thus it is a vehicle for getting the child involved in good literature. Winifred Ward, for instance, states that the child gains much more when he works from the plot and characters of a masterfully told story than when he attempts to create from scratch or when creative drama is used only as a vehicle for learning, say, a history lesson.[10] Thus, creative drama is a way of getting into literature. The benefits of creative drama are so many that there is a danger it might blind us to the benefits of formal drama as a literary art. Indeed, a widely used children's literature text summarily dismisses formal drama and states that it has no place in the elementary classroom.[11] But there is danger, I think, in becoming so utterly caught up with creative drama or educational dramatics that we use them as substitutes for formal drama. Encouraging the child to articulate his own ideas is a worthy goal, the value of which should not be underestimated; but it is important to remember that the more the child adapts a story, the more he puts of himself into the story, the further he moves away from the story as a unified work of art. The story's style, of course, is the first thing to go; its mood, its tone, the careful balance of elements that make up a work of art, flee soon after. All that remains is the plot line; the theme becomes nothing but a moral tag without the other elements which give it significance and depth. Further, there is a danger that the child will come to think of a "play" as only a matter of dialogue, that in a novel words are arranged one way, and in a play, another. The thousands of so-called adaptations of favorite children's works and of folk tales are all too frequently built on this notion. In other words, there is no idea of the play as a formal work of art with a form and a technique that go far beyond a simple arrangement of words, a changing of "John said" to "John:".

Creative drama, then, must have an important place in the elementary curriculum; its benefits are too many to be ignored. Creative drama must be encouraged; it must be used in the classroom, but it should be used by teachers who have a firm grounding in literary principles, who know that creative drama is not drama and who can lead their pupils not only to be creative and articulate and involved but to appreciate the glories of the written work of art as well.

The intense interest in creative drama has not totally wiped out interest in the printed word, although the interest seems to be mostly on the part of the educationists. The fact is that there are many books of plays available. Without any available body of criticism, without any standards, or even, indeed, any interest exhibited in creating or upholding standards of literary quality, there is quite a large bibliography of children's plays. The quality is extremely uneven, ranging from the mediocre to the shockingly bad.

We can make no attempt here at critically evaluating the whole range of children's drama; it is something, however, that badly needs doing. Critical attention should be focussed on anthologies that include such a "play" as Penny Wise, which closes with these inspiring lines:

> Rack it up and stack it up,
> And stash your cash away--
> Sunshine's daylight saving time
> Before that rainy day.
>
> In a row the dollars grow,
> The bankbook says how many,
> But every dollar crisp and green
> Started with a penny![12]

The purpose of this play, lest you mistake, is to teach the child the value of money; its subtitle is "A Play about money and thrift." Or there is The Wonderful Circus of Words: A Play about the parts of speech. Very up-to-date and of a somewhat better quality, but just as didactic, is the recent Walk Together: Five Plays on Human Rights.

An advertisement for a recent anthology for use in junior and senior high school states that "All the ingredients for successful comedy are found here: wildly improbable situations, such as a meeting between Shakespeare and a tough theatrical impresario (Avon Calling); crusty, tight-lipped characters like Zeke and Zack, a pair of Yankee farmers with a knack for outwitting city slickers (A Couple of Right Smart Fellows); uproarious onstage action, featuring cave-girl lovelies wielding clubs, in a prehistoric beauty pageant (Meet Miss Stone-Age!)"[13] It hardly needs to be said that plays of this sort are completely lacking in literary value; further, they are usually sexist, racist, and stereotyped in every respect. They are, indeed, quite dangerous.

Also to give us pause, perhaps, is the widespread practice of "adapting." Practically everything has been adapted for juvenile play-goers from Romeo and Juliet to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Tolstoi. The list is depressingly endless. By the time a child is an adult, he has seen so many wretched "adaptations" of Shakespeare that he can react only to parody, or he sees the theater only as a place to "relax" and turn off his mind rather than have it engaged with powerful drama, either tragedy or comedy. In our anxiety to bring literature to children in a "palatable" form, we encourage the transforming of novels and stories into dialogue which succeeds only in destroying the original work of art and in failing to initiate the child into the beauties of drama as a true art form. We are frequently too anxious to use drama as an introduction to literature rather than viewing it as an important art form in its own right; the result is the destruction of one art form and the failure to deal with another. We talk pompously about the "magic of the theater" as though it were something automatic, a thing in itself. But the "magic of the theater" is the creative spark struck by the actors and the director and the playwright and the audience creating together. In theater for adults, the dramatic art of the playwright is a crucial element that no one would dream of doing without. Must it be different for children?

The values of drama are widely recognized and all too frequently blindly sought. And blindness leads to exploitation. One publishing house with the phrase "Educational Book Corporation" in its title advertises that over three hundred and seventy school systems use its dramatic offerings, which include, as a selling feature, an adaptation of the O'Henry story, "A Service of Love." The "play" opens with a brief introduction:

> Joe Larrabee and Delia Caruthers had both come to New York to make their fortunes. Joe was an artist. Delia was a singer. They met, fell in love, got married, and for a while were very happy. Their only trouble was their lack of money. It takes money to study art and study singing, and very soon they had no money at all. What were they to do? Each was an ambitious artist, and each was ambitious for the other.
>
> But ambition won't pay for art or singing lessons; it won't pay the rent or buy groceries, either. Delia had an idea. So did Joe. They kept these ideas secret from each other. But a little trick of fate (the usual O. Henry surprise ending) showed them how close their ideas were to each other. Really close! And isn't that the way it ought to be, with two people who are so much in love with each other?[14]

As low as his position is in American letters, O'Henry never turned out such hackneyed prose as this. The play that follows is, of course, not a play at all but a mere transcription of O'Henry's dialogue, edited and simplified, minus O'Henry's descriptive passages. An "announcer" has been added to provide transition and setting. The imbalance and distortion that result destroy the flair for form that O'Henry possesses, and blur what little literary worth the tale itself has. Advertised as "easy and inviting to read . . . , written in living speech to interest any young person from fifth grade through tenth . . ." such plays can only deaden a student's ear to the rich and varied cadences and rhythms of his language.

To be sure, there are plays that are worth a child's attention and that have been created by writers who have an awareness of the range and power of language and who

know what they are about. But it cannot be denied that there is a great need for some critical perspectives in children's drama. It is absolutely essential for drama to be taken into the fold of children's literature. It is necessary, first, because it belongs there as an accepted literary genre; second, because the teacher is expected to be able to deal with it critically and practically in the classroom on all levels; and third, because an art form needs an active and viable body of criticism in order to grow in stature. Children's drama needs children's literature and children's literature needs children's drama.

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Footnotes

[1]Montrose J. Moses, ed., A Treasury of Plays for Children (Boston, 1921), p. 542.

[2]Moses, pp. 543-45.

[3]This statement is based on a survey of books and periodical articles of the last fifty years. The survey was made more difficult since Virginia Haviland's excellent Children's Literature: A Guide to Reference Sources does not include drama in its various categories of children's literature; nor do any of the major children's literature texts or anthologies (Arbuthnot; Nelson; Johnson, Sickels, and Sayers; Huber; Anderson and Groff; Gorgiu). All the major critics in the field (L. Smith, Townsend, Egoff, Hazard, Heins, Haviland) are silent on drama. An extensive bibliography could be compiled of the works available on creative drama, psychodrama, and practical play production. Such works are not concerned with the play as literary art and, if they approach the matter at all, deal with it only briefly in sections on play selection; their approach is outlined more fully in the body of this paper. Encouraging, perhaps, is the recent birth of Drama, an English periodical edited by Nancy Davis; "encouraging" because it is the only thing on the horizon, "perhaps" because it remains to be seen how much emphasis will be placed on a critical approach to formal drama. I should also mention two unpublished dissertations which are valuable, but of course, not of much use to the ordinary classroom teacher: Kenneth L. Graham, An Introductory Study of Evaluation of Plays for Children's Theatre (Utah, 1952) and William H. Kingsley, Happy Endings, Poetic Justice and the Depth and Strength of Characterization in American Children's Drama: A Critical Analysis (Pittsburgh, 1965).

[4]Dewey W. Chambers, Children's Literature in the Curriculum (Chicago, 1971), p. 122.

[5]Winifred Ward, quoted in Theatre Arts, 41 (May 1947), 66.

[6]C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in Only Connect, ed. S. Egoff, G. T. Stubbs, L. F. Ashley (New York, 1969), p. 219.

[7]Lewis, p. 208.

[8]Robert C. Kase, Children's Theatre Comes of Age for School, College and Community Theatres (New York, 1956), p. 30.

[9]Moses, p. 543.

[10]Winifred Ward, Playmaking with Children from Kindergarten to High School (New York, 1947), p. 51.

[11]Charlotte Huck and Doris A. Young, Children's Literature in the Elementary School (New York, 1961), p. 424.

[12]Claire Boiko, Children's Plays for Creative Actors (Boston, 1967), p.

[13]Plays, 33 (January 1974), back cover.

[14]Henry Gilfond, American Plays for Reading (New York, 1966), intro.