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ABSTRACT

Nebraska's Omaha Magic Theatre (OMT) and playwright Megan Terry are concerned with producing socially relevant, issue-oriented musical plays, focusing on young people and the adults who influence their emotional lives. OMT's "Theatre of Process" focuses upon the performing artist to develop and test ways to make theater more meaningful, exciting, and accessible to audiences. To help reach this goal, Terry listens to professional counselors, social workers, and OMT audiences in post-performance discussions to explore the causes of social problems besetting the American family. Each of her plays is constructed around a chosen conceptual theme, then grounded in a contextual situation. For example, "American King's English for Queens," written in 1978, looks at the influence of language and sexism on children's upbringing. In "Goona Goona," Terry explores the cyclical effects of domestic violence upon the physical, emotional, and ethical development of children, using Punch and Judy imagery and acrobatic feats of physical endurance. These texts serve as acting exercises for student actors to explore thematic issues in a visceral manner, and they stimulate further discussions of adolescent issues. Though secondary teachers may choose to emphasize the didactic nature inherent to varying degrees within each text, Megan Terry's artistic approach ensures a thought-provoking, theatrical experience for mature audiences. (MM)

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Megan Terry's Plays for Youth at the Omaha Magic Theatre

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A paper presented at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education conference, Portland, Oregon, August 5, 1988.

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Megan Terry's Plays for Youth

at the Omaha Magic Theatre

Megan Terry does not write plays for adolescents. She writes plays--some of which are written about and with adolescents. This dynamic and prolific playwright, who revolutionized the American musical in 1966 with the Open Theatre's Viet Rock, has continued to write socially relevant, issue-oriented musical plays, but with greater attention to young people and the adults who influence their emotional lives. Together with Open Theatre alum, Jo Ann Schmidman serving as artistic director, she has recorded the language of youth as she hears it at the Omaha Magic Theatre in Nebraska. And it is that language and the distinctive formal style of her playwriting which manifests the wild, outrageous, and rebellious essence of what it means to be an adolescent in modern society.

Like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre, OMT's "Theatre of Process" focusses upon the performing artist to "develop and test ways to make theatre more meaningful, exciting and accessible to audiences."1 To help reach this goal, Terry listens to professional counselors, social workers and OMT audiences in post-performance discussions to explore the causes of social problems besetting the American family. When research is complete, the OMT company improvises thematic metaphors with physically rigorous theatre games in their alley-like, store front theatre space.

For Terry, playwriting is an act of building a theatrical

collage--poetic words and painted images densely layered and intercut to purposely create a non-linear structure.2 Her heavy reliance upon the use of transformational techniques stems, in part, from her drama education with her cousin, Geraldine Brain Siks: "You just apply the principles of creative dramatics to adult drama and you get a whole new kind of comedy, a juxtaposition, and it's all jammed together with film techniques, cutting, jump cuts."3 Like children immersed in dramatic play, actors change characters in a flash, and they frequently transform into objects and furniture to indicate location. Physical gestures and movement vivify internal states with non-stop rapidity to comment upon or invert dramatic messages. Props and set pieces, frequently designed as soft-sculptured objects, are judiciously selected to extend the actor's tools and to materialize conceptual metaphors. Numerous stage directions detail the Magic Theatre's original staging and design plans, though directors are urged to create new innovations. Child characters are usually performed by adults, and young high school actors frequently participate in OMT plays. Overall, Terry's written texts must be considered only as skeletal blueprints for spontaneous and immediate improvisations in actual performance conditions.

Each play is constructed around a chosen conceptual theme and then grounded in a contextual situation. Individual episodes are strung together within a loosely-organized plot to capture one particular aspect of the overall theme. Characters often

serve as stereotypical manifestations of a middle-class American family taken to their most satirical extremes. Terry's dialogue demonstrates her love of unique word and phrase combinations, sometimes suggested by actors in rehearsal improvisations.

Terry's plays for, by and with adolescents are prefaced by earlier plays which delve into debilitating childhood experiences caused by family members, but attributed to the greater society at large. For example, American King's English for Queens, written in 1978, looks at the influence of language and sexism on children's upbringing.4 As explained in the accompanying teacher's guide, each episode presents one aspect of the play's central question: "Do you think like you talk or talk like you think?" (72). The loosely connected episodes dramatize everything from the language of animal and foreign sounds to romantized love songs and sex-determined career roles. As Bonnie Marranca notes, the transformations employed here are illustrative and functional, rather than imagistic, so that Terry's intention of uniting linguistic and feminist ideals fails to meet its educational goals.5

In Goona Goona, a raucous, didactic musical which premiered in 1979, Terry explores the cyclical effects of domestic violence upon the physical, emotional, and ethical development of children using Punch and Judy imagery and acrobatic feats of physical endurance.6 Unlike the doctor who heals the sick, Terry inverts this image by accentuating the grossly unhealthy environment of Dr. Goon's upper-class household, together with his quaalude-

addicted wife, their three brutal and brutalized children, and the paternal grandmother who transforms into the youngest, most violent child of all. The adult actors wear ostensible yarn wigs and padded hospital greens like football gear to physicalize abusive violence to the broadest, slapstick degree. Terry's tragi-comic mockery of a deadly serious American family disease aims directly at parents and presents a bitter condemnation of adults.

Terry continues to condemn distorted American values by focussing more intently on adolescents in Kegger, staged in 1982.7 Armed with five months of intensive research, she seeks to educate teenagers--and their influential parents--about the effects of alcohol abuse. Here, individual responsibility for one's actions seems to take a back seat to the parents and media-ridden society who carry the blame for teenage drinking.

Written as an assembly-length play, the action takes place before, during and after a beer party against a backdrop of highways and nomes. Grim, statistical testimonials are voiced over a downstage microphone to counterpoint the celebratory antics of young, reckless teenagers in a carefree party atmosphere. Parents are relegated to huge, smiling mom and dad soft-sculptures, with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Cheever who arrive, blind drunk themselves, to pick up their son from the party. While most parental admonitions express ineffectual adult frustrations and warnings about keggers, the youths justify their drinking habits as an excuse to ease the pressures of adult

regimentation at home and school and the tensions and loneliness inherent in peer relationships. They speed down highways in soft-sculptured cars and pass giant containers of beer and booze, while moving billboards advertise commercial slogans and promote the adult glamour of drinking. Once at the kegger, the teens all suck from several baby bottles with tubes attached to a huge keg of beer.

While these striking images display the infantile nature of adolescent behavior, other episodes miss the mark in trying to change attitudes about drinking. One drunken teen nearly kills his girlfriend in his car and later passes out from an apparent overdose of drugs and booze. Though his girlfriend is miraculously revived and helps rush her boyfriend to a hospital, the outcome of his condition is left hanging. Though one set of parents threaten to stop their son's behavior once and for all, there is no follow-up scene to find out whether or not such tactics might work. Despite these loose ends, the play's educational function helped to promote its national tour and local television airing, as well as its performance at the Secretarial Conference for Youth on Drinking and Driving in Washington, D.C.

Terry's preoccupation with children and youth culminated during the summer of 1983 when she wrote Fifteen Million Fifteen-Year-Olds with a core of eleven youths ages nine to twenty.8 Like professionals, these young performers developed the script with Terry and Schmidman through rigorous warmups and

improvisational exercises. A more detailed analysis reveals their theatrical perspective about the youth of today.

The manuscript of Fifteen reads like a punk-rock video with its all too evident string of theatre games holding together the rebellious theme of raw 1980s adolescence, yet these frequent jump cuts aptly capture erratic, pubescent behaviors. The playground setting, with its long, chain-linked fence and gutted television sets, symbolizes the minds of teenagers caugnt between the free play of childhood and the restricted rules of curfew imposed by adult society. Since teenagers lock themselves behind bedroom doors as private refuges from adults, Terry exploits this motif by having each actor carry an individualized door from which to shield and protect him or herself. This central image and the repetitive, musical "leaning ritual" supply the actors with functional and motivational stimuli for spontaneous and constant physical actions.

Verbal and physical violence pervades the text as if Artaud's theatre of cruelty were applied to youth. In an effort to mimic adult's superior power and control, these children and teenagers throw insults at one another "just for sport" with every intention of denigrating others to help raise up their own vulnerable egos. For example, Patty, age eleven, blurts out, "Your existence is the best argument for abortion," and nine-year-old Howard the Duck retorts, "Your feelings are toxic waste" (4, 3). To gain further attention, they bang metal pipes--and their heads--against the doors and fences in a "slam dance with

the universe" (43). Milo, age fourteen, demonstrates how to "really kill" with numb-chucks (20). They vent their rage against insensitive adults like "Old Blister," a neighbor woman who poisoned the dogs and dandelions. Krystal, age thirteen, organizes a plan to vandalize Blister's empty house, and Dana, age twelve, suggests they blow it up with firecrackers. All in all, Patty accuses them of not knowing the difference "between real life and horror movies" (26). Yet while she defends an adult friend who taught her oriental cooking, she describes these lessons with a sword. Adults are clearly the enemy here as these alienated children and teenagers reflect the backfired image of their egocentric parents from the Me Decade.

Terry's lyrics reinforce the antagonism between youth and adults. "It's us against them," they sing, as their doors and fences set up barriers to communication (44). They shout about how they are "burned out" and "washed up at fifteen" where "nothing's left but my SCREAM!" (12). Which lines originated from the actors and which derived from Terry's adult perspective? How can these characters claim to be "in a state of grace" amid such frank pessimism (35)? When they plead for adults to "trust us" because "we still love you with all of our might," (sung "convincingly," according to the stage directions), how can the audience believe them (60)?

Terry seems to rely entirely upon the character of Irene as the one glimmer of hope against this despondent view of youth. Though Irene says she doesn't use drugs, she spends her days

"just walking" in her own fantasy world "somewhere else" spouting poetic lines and exploring an abandoned house full of doors (36, 14?). She renames Gracie "Alana" like Quixote's Dulcinea, while Leon argues that she is still in "the fairy-tale world of little kids" (31?). When two detectives come to arrest her for truancy, Gracie must protect and lie for her. Throughout the play, the ensemble finds itself both repulsed and attracted by her radiating aura. "Change your name and move a few blocks," says Irene, and build a new nation of fifteen million fifteen-year-olds where you don't have to be fifteen to join (52?). "I'm the target. The red button is yours," she challenges the audience, as she sums up the reason for her trance-like state (53).

Terry's solution to youth's frustration and rebellion towards adults fails as an idealistic cop-out. Rather than presenting a positive and practical solution to open communication channels between adults and youth, the moral seems to imply that teenagers should live in an imaginative fantasy world in order to survive on a nuclear-doomed planet. This play attacks and confronts those adults who have closed the doors on youth by urging them to change their attitudes and behaviors--provided those very adults attend the performance.

This reading of a performance-based script apparently tells only half the story. Newspaper accounts note how the production "enlightens with a surge of hope for the future," while another sees it as "a gritty but hopeful reaffirmation of youth and identity in a society where parents once seemed to like kids a

lot more than they do now."9 Omaha reviewers frequently comment upon the overriding, energetic performances by these spirited youngsters which overshadow the play's thematic content. In fact, Terry reports that some parents cried upon seeing their own children in this new light. Perhaps the sights and sounds of the youthful performers themselves work sufficiently to play against the text.

In the final analysis, this play seemed to mostly benefit its youthful participants both as a personal and social release and as an unforgettable theatre experience. In an OMT newsletter, Jed Chrysler, age fifteen, writes in a self-revealing tone, "I can identify with it. I can learn things from the play that I haven't been aware of before, not necessarily about myself, but about other people." Fourteen-year-old Dylan Mitchell agrees: "I like it cuz it's weird. If Megan, the playwright, likes what you say she'll put it in the play. Lines like 'Shock Ray to Overwave'--that was me. You feel like you're participating."10 Apparently, Terry has nurtured a loving, family experience with these youth through the magic of theatrical collaboration.

Terry admits to having a pessimistic view of contemporary youth and family life.11 But with material gathered from post-performance discussions of the previous plays, she attempts to discover how communication problems might be resolved in Family Talk, staged in 1985.12 Using a television game show as a visual metaphor for a home setting, parents and children join together

to illuminate the causes and more realistic solutions of typical quarrels in a more linear-structured plot. Here, though the teenage brother and sister still argue viciously over using the telephone (with its thirty-foot long cord), Mom learns that the word "fight" holds different meanings, and all family members agree to rule number one: "No one puts anyone else down" (65). Thus, the entire family begins to work on contributing to everyone's welfare by seeings things from another person's viewpoint, and each person recognizes that they are all "exceptional" (46).

While Terry's play scripts have the Omaha Magic Theatre trademarks stamped inedibly on them, directors are free to recreate a wealth of improvisations from these richly textured blueprints for performance. These texts are also suited as acting exercises for student actors to explore thematic issues in a visceral manner, and they serve as stimulating triggers for further discussions of adolescent issues, rather than solutions for societal ills. Though secondary teachers may choose to emphasize the didactic nature inherent to varying degrees within each text, Megan Terry's artistic approach to these issues ensures a thought-provoking, theatrical experience for mature audiences.

Notes

1 Omaha Magic Theatre Fact Sheet, obtained by author Oct. 1984.

2 Megan Terry, "Two Pages a Day," The Drama Review, T76, 21.4 (1977): 60.

3 Dinah L. Leavitt, "Megan Terry," Women in American Theatre, eds. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (NY: Crown, 1981), 292.

4 Megan Terry, American King's English for Queens, in High Energy Musicals from the Omaha Magic Theatre (NY: Broadway Play Publishing, 1983) 1-75.

5 Bonnie Marranca, "Megan Terry," American Playwrights: A Critical Survey with Gautam Dasgupta Vol. 1 (NY: Drama Book Specialists, 1981) 191-192.

6 Megan Terry, Goona Goona, ms., Music by Lynn Herrick, Structured by Jo Ann Schmidman (Omaha, NE: Omaha Magic Theatre, 1985).

7 Megan Terry, Kegger, ms., Music by Marianne de Pury and Joe Budenholzer (Omaha, NE: Omaha Magic Theatre, 1985).

8 Megan Terry, Fifteen Million Fifteen-Year-Olds, ms., (Omaha, NE: Omaha Magic Theatre, 1984). All page numbers for quotes are noted in the text.

9 Chris Olson, "Musical Deals with Exasperation of Youth," West Omaha Sun, 31 Aug. 1983; and, Roger Catlin, "Scruffy Kids Put Bite in '15-Year-Olds'," Omaha World-Herald, 29 Aug. 1983.

10 Magic Dust, Winter, 1984, p. 6.

11 Personal interview with Megan Terry at a rehearsal of Family Talk, 27 Nov. 1985.

12 Megan Terry, Family Talk, ms., Music by Joe Budenholzer and John J. Sheehan (Omaha, NE: Omaha Magic Theatre, 1986).

Manuscripts of these and other plays may be obtained by writing:

Omaha Magic Theatre, 2309 Hanscom Blvd., Omaha, NE 68105
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