

# A COMMISSIONED PLAY

By Muriel Sharon

Director of The Pocket Players in New York. She co-produced and directed Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat* in a performance that was subsequently recorded by Vox records. She directed Kurt List's opera for children, *The Wise and the Foolish*, and produced and directed *The Unborn*, a film for and by children. She is presently artistic director of the Junior School of The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre and holds a similar position at the 92nd Street Y, New York City. She is also a certified Director of Psychodrama, Moreno Institute.



Photo by Raymond Ross, New York

The concept of a commission is a significant step in the history of CTC-AETA. The contest, as an organizational event, has been the customary way in which new plays for children have come into being. The many questions raised by the concept of a commission may never be answered, but in this article, I will share my experience as Chairman of The New Plays Committee, Region 14, and eventually as director of its first commissioned play, *The Marvellous Adventures of Tyl* by Jonathan Levy as it evolved in the workshop presentation at the Triangle Theatre, New York City, March 1971.

To begin with, before this committee became a reality, it had been a dream of mine to commission a poet to write a play for children. It was my dream that as Belgium had produced Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, Spain Benavente's *The Prince Who Learned Everything Out of Books*, Russia the playwright Yevgeny Schwartz, so might the United States contribute to the body of dramatic literature for children.

The play-commissions project, which I initiated in 1965, was originally conceived as a project of the national CTC—(committee members actresses Mildred Dunnock and Beatrice Straight, former librarian and author of children's books, Maria Cimino, and Editor of the *Children's Theatre News*, Region 14, Ellen Gephart have remained with the committee since its inception in 1965. Jon Tolliver, former Governor of Region 14, joined the committee in 1967.) The difficulties of administering this activi-

ty by the geographically scattered national organization soon became apparent. Jon Tolliver, then Governor of Region 14, proposed (in 1967) that this region take over responsibility for this task. All being passed in good order, raising funds for this project became the next step. Contributions were received not only from Region 14, but from national CTC officers and individuals throughout the country.

The New Plays Committee in seeking out a playwright of demonstrated talent with an affinity for the child's world set up the following procedures for granting a commission:

(In brief: When the Committee finds an author whose ideas and qualifications it deems promising, it will invite him to submit an outline and sample scene or act or whatever form he wishes to submit which he feels will adequately present his plans for a play. If the Committee approves and accepts the material submitted by the author, it will offer him \$1500 and will endeavor to arrange for him to work with a children's theatre company as a means of testing his work in progress. Decisions regarding the publication of his play will be made by the author.)

Quoting from a report in the *Children's Theatre News*, December 1967, announcing "Region 14 Undertakes Commissioning of New Plays for Children":

"These procedures were worked out to give the maximum assurance that any commission will have a successful outcome."

That any creative undertaking must be concerned with "maximum assurance" for success already establishes a shadow of doubt. The right to fail is not a favorite credo in these United States.

So be it. The committee then began the search for a playwright. Poets of reputation who fulfilled the stated requirements were approached. Several turned us down, feeling themselves inadequate to the task or too busy with projects of their own. Contrary to the notion that a commission might encourage the author to write for the money rather than because he was "inner motivated", we discovered that an artist is honest and even humble in his self-appraisal. This attitude was beautifully expressed in an interview with the French playwright, Armand Salacrou, published June 1963 in the first issue of the French publication *Théâtre, Enfance et Jeunesse* then edited by Leon Chanceler founder of ASSITEJ. Said Salacrou:

"It is true that to bring to children the dream and the enchantment would be a beautiful destiny for a dramatic author. I have dreamed of it often—for my children and my grandchildren. 'It was once upon a time . . .' Unfortunately, I have not found the continuation. Yes, it is very, very, difficult . . . One can think of writing for children and in fact

end up writing for grownups, as for example, *The Bluebird*. One would have to be an Andersen or to find the theatrical equivalent of Walt Disney in his best period."

The committee had set no time limits on itself and as it turned out it was six years before its goal was realized. But first, in 1965 and again in 1967, two nationally known poets accepted the commission. Their presentations were rejected by the committee with suggestions for change. These suggestions were in turn rejected by the poets, and negotiations ended by mutual consent. The authors, as stated in the contract, were given a turn-down fee of \$100.

Unfortunately, because lack of funds for this commission made "maximum assurance" for success of such consequence, the committee began to feel the conflict between the poet as playwright (an unknown quantity) and the "well constructed play" (too often predictable). Given the frustrations of the two abortive commissions, not to mention the time consumed, I was becoming weary and wary of the entire commission. We all felt exasperated. How was it possible to find a playwright of demonstrated talent with an affinity to the child's world and who in addition had the touch of the poet? None of us could find any encouragement in similar experiments elsewhere in children's theatre.

For instance, Connecticut's *Project Create*, in 1966, its first year of operation, commissioned The Eugene O'Neill Theatre Foundation to find a playwright and to mount a production for touring to the schools included in the project. Nineteen thousand three hundred dollars was budgeted for this commission, the playwright receiving \$2,000. Its success was not assured and the Project Director as well as the staff for the Connecticut Commission on the Arts suffered the fears of a Broadway "angel". They never again repeated this commission. Too much money was involved and too much risk. If government monies were to be forthcoming, the project could afford praise, but could not afford criticism. A somewhat frightening comment on education?

Finally, we found a playwright—Jonathan Levy. If prophets are without honor at home, friends are sometimes forgotten underfoot. I had known of Jonathan Levy since 1966, when I staged his translation of Carlo Gozzi's play *Turandot* which appears in Eric Bentley's collection *Genius of the Italian Theatre*. But I had not met him. Then, in the Fall of 1967, I had begun work on a theatre project with Mark Epstein. I suggested we work with medieval stage conventions rather than with already existing plays and for this a playwright was needed. It was Mark who brought us together. Mark had directed Jonathan's play *Sabatai Zevi* as a Rockefeller presentation by the Theatre Company of Boston in 1966. The three of us collaborated with my Workshop students at the 92nd Street Y, New York City. Using such medieval stage conventions as the "journey", *The Play of*

*Innocence and Change* was written. This play was selected for the list of plays representing the U.S. in the ASSITEJ bibliography of international plays.

In the Fall of 1969, Jonathan was invited by the committee to accept the commission. Subsequently, his presentation was accepted. An authority on Carlo Gozzi, Jonathan has translated Gozzi's *The Little Green Bird* and *The Serpent Queen* as well as *Turandot*, already mentioned. This past Fall, his play *The Shrinking Bride* was seen off-Broadway. Other works for adult theatre seen in New York are *Jack N's Awful Demands*, *Ziskin's Revels*, *The Cushman Touch* and *Master of the Blue Mineral Mines* also seen this season at The Playwright's Unit.

The commissioned play, *The Marvellous Adventures of Tyl*. A Commedia for Children is based on the Germanic legend of Tyl Eulenspiegel. In the play as in the medieval tale, Tyl is almost diabolic in his uncanny ability to see people as they are, not as they wish to appear. But, unlike the medieval legend, Tyl is not a supernatural being; if anything his identity remains ambiguous. He has simply retained his vigorous vision, like a child who has not yet learned to conform to the vision of others. He tries to conform and is in fact, fitted several times with glasses to help him to see the world as others would have him see it. But each time Tyl loses his glasses and each time he is set apart from others as a "troublemaker". The glasses suggest masks and with interesting frames and noses, lend themselves to the stereotypes of Commedia dell'Arte. Those characters who are not stereotypes, do not wear masks. To them, Tyl can relate with gentleness and affection. Tyl eventually refuses to wear glasses preferring joyously to accept his identity.

*The Marvellous Adventures of Tyl* was in its first draft when we began rehearsals at the Triangle Theatre, East 88th Street in New York. The theatre, located in The Church of the Holy Trinity, provided us with a stage equipped with lighting, sound, some technical personnel and rehearsal space. Since the play required movement as does a Commedia play, I worked closely with Sally Gross, our Movement Director. Warm-up exercises built around the movement problems in the play and the individual problems of the actors began each rehearsal. Rather than working with the script, we improvised and developed new possibilities for many of the situations. Jonathan choose and worked through those ideas he felt worked well. In addition, he was very open to the suggestions of the New Plays Committee. By the time the cast began rehearsals with the re-written script, they had tried on most of the characters in the play so that the shape of the scenes fell easily into place. The play was presented to invited audiences for fourteen performances in March, 1971. In addition to Miss Gross, the artistic staff collaborating with me were Frank Sarvello, composer; Martha Edelheit, set designer

and masks; and Natalie Lunn, costume designer. After the play's run, Jonathan made his final revisions.

Criticism has been raised concerning the commission fee of \$1,500. Many considered it too high. After this experience, however, it is unthinkable to me that a playwright of experience and quality should receive less for a commission. We in children's theatre still choose to think of our work as "noble", as if nobility were a virtue exclusive of practical considerations. Perhaps we undersell ourselves or are conditioned to thinking in sums of \$500 or \$200 usually offered as contest prizes. Play contests and such prizes are valid for young unknown playwrights who need such recognition and encouragement, but for the playwright of experience, there is too much work involved in writing a children's play on speculation. It is important to note that poets and playwrights have discovered the children's book form as a substitute form for theatre. The playwright Ionesco wrote *Story Number 1*; Randall Jarrell the poet wrote *The Bat Poet* and *The Animal Farm* and I mention Jarrell because he was interested in the play form. Before his death, in 1965, Jarrell translated *The Three Sisters* for the Actor's Studio which was presented on Broadway. It might be an interesting question to ask ourselves, why have certain authors of children's books who we might wish wrote for children's theatre, stayed away from this form?

Meanwhile, there is bound to be criticism from the social realists who decry the fairy tale form. "What? Another fairy tale? This is not where children of today are at." They insist the concerns of children *now* are with social issues—ecology, drugs, war, etc. It is true that children are concerned with these but I should like to go on record and say that the fairy tale as a play form is not dead. The fairy tale, like the fable and the myth are necessary forms of expression because the hidden language contained in this form becomes a kind of code language, a screen for feelings and ideas which cannot be expressed any other way. It is bad faith or lack of imagination, not to say, opportunism, to call this form dead. If we can allow a fairy tale its rightful vigor on stage without spoofing it up or sentimentalizing it, we can also create magic and a genuine arena for emotion.

Ideally, a commission for children's theatre should provide money for not only one playwright, but several, as well as an entire working company of actors, directors, a staff of artists and technicians. This should not be for one production but for many. It is my belief that we can no longer conceive of a play written apart from a working company . . . a community of artists who share a common vision and respect for each other's skills. In such a working relationship, it is possible to evolve a living kind of

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**Deadlines Must Be Observed**

of the actors easily provide any atmosphere that is needed.

Because of the demand for acting skills, the experience for the actor is invaluable. He must remain alert and flexible. He must include and deal with all ideas presented without losing his characterization. He must be as inventive as his audience is. For example, when children suggested burning the edges of the treasure map to age it, Madam Flouncebustle replied, "Smoky the Bear wouldn't want us to play with matches." When another child suggested spitting on the map, Teddy replied that that might be unsanitary. When an audience wanted the Princess to get the Sunshiny braves to kill Bad Bart, she improvised that her people didn't believe in killing, they would much rather make Bad Bart into the kind of person who could become their friend. Most of all there is the necessity for the actor to really listen, to concentrate with full focus on what is going on, not only to act but to react—for these are essentials that the future professional must master.

These four Involvement Dramas have not been confined to performances in schools. They have been and are being performed in community theatres and University theatres throughout the country.

Four different plays, and the reactions of thousands of children to them, demonstrate that Involvement Dramatics is an exciting form of children's theatre that can be richly rewarding to all who are indeed involved in it!

### **An Approach to Theatre**

(Continued from page 9)

professional and entertaining—and most of all, rewarding, to themselves and their audiences.

This may not be the only approach in bringing a theatre to young people, but I believe it to be a true and honest approach and beats anything else encountered.

Thank you—and Peace.

### **A Commissioned Play for Children**

(Continued from page 14)

theatre. But with all the personnel for realization, there must be inspiration, respect for spectacular magic, taste, honest confrontation of emotions and the touch of the poet. Can one playwright provide all this? A playwright of genius, perhaps. But let us begin somewhere. Perhaps this first commission is a necessary beginning step. Perhaps for CTC-AETA this first commission was a necessary step for the future.

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NOTE: Requests to read or to produce *The Marvellous Adventures of Tyl*, can be made to the author's agent, Phyllis Wender, Wender and Associates, 1545 Broadway, New York City 10036.

## **Looking Glass Provides Unique Experience**



Looking Glass Theatre of Providence, R.I., received a citation from the New England Theatre Conference as the prototype theatre embodying the idea of drama as a civilizing force.

Looking Glass has been continuing its original work in theatre experiences for children which are designed for valid, dramatic interaction.

These unique experiences extend and blend the philosophy of child drama and professional improvisational theatre. Each play tours to schools and libraries and is created for a specific age group and a limited audience of 200 children.

### **Looking Glass Will Present a Production at the CTA-AETA Convention in Chicago in August.**

Staging is arranged to bring the children into the drama as it happens around them. "The Outsider" a play about Roger Williams" was researched and directed recently by Bernice Bronson. The contemporary relevance of the play was heightened through slide projections of past and current repressions of individual freedoms.

The audience created a riot to help an arrested Puritan, responded as children in a classroom, judged Roger Williams in a court trail and actually built a wooden house which symbolized the dreams of the founder of Rhode Island.

A new show for first-third graders now touring the state was developed by the company from primitive myths of creation researched by Mrs. Bronson. Audience participation reaches a new height for Looking Glass in this drama.

"The Sun, the Moon and the Pretty Girl" is also touring now for fourth-sixth graders in public libraries for audiences of 60. This is less a show and more a structure for child drama. Directed by Elaine Ostroff Looking Glass founder, the experience deals with the theme of creation. The skilled actor-teachers who present the material must constantly be able to adapt the activity to the response of the children.

**The Children's Theatre Review in Issue No. 1, 1971, identified Moses Goldberg incorrectly. He is director of Children's Theatre at Florida State University in Tallahassee and CT director at Asolo State Theater of Florida.**