
Report from England

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REPORT FROM ENGLAND

MURIEL SHARON

It is one thing to consider the child's own form of expression in relation to the theatre and quite another to consider the professional art of the theatre in relation to the child. While it is generally admitted by both the educator and the artist that a theatrical experience whether by children or for children can be of educational value, the implications of the words "professional" and "educational" present many difficulties. The problem which the Children's Theatre movement in England seems to face is that of negotiating a common basis of understanding between educators in the theatre and the professionals. After the recommendation of the International Theatre Institute conference (in Paris last April, on "Theatre and Youth"), The British Centre of ITI set up a committee this fall to encourage national collaboration between these two groups as part of an international plan. Among the things discussed was the forming of a National Children's Theatre. The results are not yet known but apparently there were some serious disputes over this question. The first outcome of these meetings was a bibliography of plays suitable

Muriel Sharon, Director of the YM-YWHA Children's Theatre in New York City, is spending the year in England on a Fulbright grant. She hopes to contribute at least one additional "Report from England."

for acting by or to children, to be published sometime this year.

I

For the observer investigating Children's Theatre in England, it is clear that the country is somewhat divided into two camps. The difficulty does not seem to lie so much between the professionals and the educators as it does between those interested in producing theatre for children and those of the Educational Drama Association who apparently believe that children under twelve should not see theatre at all. The EDA, however, has its own ideas of what theatre for children should be.

In the past few years, the EDA has developed a large following and has been very active in training teachers of creative drama at its two centers in Birmingham and London. Many schools and teacher-training schools, and some theatre schools, have adopted its theories and methods. It is interesting to examine some of the ideas of Peter Slade, who is EDA's permanent director.

Peter Slade was greatly influenced by the writings of Franz Cizek, the Austrian artist who discovered the significance of what he called "Child Art." Slade parallels his findings in creative drama with what Cizek discovered in

art, and says, "Not only are there obvious forms of dramatic play, but there exists a Child Drama, an art form in its own right." He considers this a folk art form which, like the personality of the child, has its own particular laws. Cizek discovered various shapes which children repeatedly paint. Peter Slade says that when children are free to move in drama, the journey of their movement is worked out in the same shapes as in their paintings. The shape most often seen is the circle, where a number of children play round a center of common interest; or there is the "S" and the figure "8."

In defense of his theory that children should not be exposed to the theatre until they are twelve years old, Peter Slade says, "The impressions imposed on the children's minds when they are too young, encourage them to act at being actors acting a part. All the mistakes and mannerisms are accepted and learned as part of the fun." His concept of a Children's Theatre is one in which grown ups play "amongst" children and not "at" them, and where the shapes employed for various age groups are those which children naturally use. Here actors move among audience and children may move about over the acting areas. This concept seems to approach the idea of a primitive-ritual theatre, where the spectator in his involvement becomes at the same time the player.

These are certainly interesting and provocative ideas and offer a vision of a rather exciting kind of theatre for children. But this vision is dogmatic in that it rules out all other forms of theatre for children, firstly by implying that other forms are mannered and secondly by completely ignoring the values of the child's role as a spectator or appreciator. And ought educators to cultivate his experiences as one might a plant in a

conservatory? If playing "at" children means playing "amongst" them, the question arises, is playing "amongst" children acceptable only in the actual physical sense? Doesn't the very nature of drama imply that the spectator is put into a state by which he is enchanted by what he sees and can identify himself with the characters and become emotionally moved and involved? Isn't it by the nature of this involvement that the spectator is able to sit in his seat and at the same time play "amongst" the fictional characters of the play? Because his participation is one of emotional parallelism and not one of actual identity, his role really becomes that of the appreciator. He is able to say, "I am like Peter Pan" and not, "I am Peter Pan." Is a theatre experience for the young child really invalid unless his participation is only actual and therefore ritual in the primitive sense, so that it becomes difficult to separate the story from the enactment, the spectator from the player? The child's role as an appreciator is as important a part of his growing experiences as his role of the creator, and the theatre should provide opportunities for development of both these faculties.

Those interested in further investigating the theories of Peter Slade can look forward to the publication of his book, *Child Drama*, which will be published some time in May by London University Press.

II

England's outstanding professional company performing for children is Caryl Jenner's Mobile Theatre, whose headquarters are in London. Caryl Jenner formed the Mobile unit in the spring of 1948 at the Amersham Playhouse, where she had been experimenting with pantomimes and other children's enter-

tainment. The original purpose of the Mobile Theatre was to bring living theatre into the schools, particularly in cases where there was no opportunity to see live theatre. Later it became evident that there was a much wider audience for the company's productions. In 1949 it was reorganized with the support of the Arts Council so that it could perform suitable plays for adults as well. Today the Caryl Jenner Mobile Theatre runs two separate permanent touring companies and one temporary company which is allowed to make a profit. As well as playing to adults, each company carries performances for children of three age groups: four to seven, seven to eleven, and eleven to fifteen. The children's plays are subsidized by the Local Educational Authorities and the adult plays by the Arts Council.

Each company consists of six or seven professional actors who are responsible for acting, driving, stage management, and business supervision. The companies together have toured to every county in England and some in Scotland. Each year they cover about 20,000 miles and give 500 performances in about 240 villages and small towns, playing in village halls and schools and sometimes in prisons. An average of two visits a year is made to one place.

What is remarkable about the work of the Mobile Theatre is the standard of excellence and freshness of performance that is maintained despite the low budget for operation and all the demands which touring makes on a company. This can only be achieved by excellent organization and with a leader who has vision, determination, and essential taste—and Caryl Jenner meets these requirements.

Most fortunate for the company is the fact that it has its own resident playwright, Wilfred Harvey, who is well

acquainted with the physical problems of the Mobile Theatre and is able to balance this with the needs of the various age groups for which he writes. Some of the more successful ones written this season have been *The Fly Catcher*, *Mr. Punch at Home*, *Tiggy*, *Tiggy Touchwood*, and *The End of a Fairy Tale*, which tells about the private life of the brothers Grimm.

The productions designed for the infant group, four to seven, are done in arena form. The children are seated around a chalked circle on the floor and one of the players begins to tell them a story. Action replaces narrative, and the story comes to life. Props are often imaginary. A squire's horse is a hobby horse, and colorful costumes supply the atmosphere. The form of these infant dramas is quite free—using repetitive verses, singing, and movement. Some of the effects are reminiscent of a child's own creative play. Audience participation is frequently and naturally used, with some of the children being called upon actually to step into the magic circle of play-making.

Proscenium performances are gradually introduced for the older groups. For the seven-to-eleven group, a combination is made of the half circle and a platform. Productions designed for the senior group utilize the full proscenium.

Each program for the different age groups offers two plays, the principle being that children develop in two-year stages and that a double bill fills this gap. A double bill also affords a contrast between a comic and a more serious piece.

Eventually Caryl Jenner hopes to have a permanent theatre in London. Rumors have it that this may come about in the not too distant future. At any rate, for the present the Mobile

Theatre is firmly established in school programs all over England.

III

With Boxing Day festivities and the traditional Christmas pantomimes, London offered its children a choice bill of fare this year. Beside the old hardy annuals such as the pantomime *Where the Rainbow Ends* and *Peter Pan* (which has been playing regularly each season since its first performance in 1904), there were such well-known titles to choose from as *Babes in the Wood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Aladdin*, *Humpty-Dumpty*, *Cinderella*, *Cinderella on Ice*; and so the list went on and on. One of the outstanding children's plays which has become regular fare in London is Nicholas Stuart Gray's well-written version of *Beauty and the Beast*. It was performed this year by a newly-formed company called "The London Children's Theatre." Kitty Black, who organized this group, has additional plans for future holiday productions. *Beauty and the Beast* was followed in January by *The Princess and the Swineherd*, another adaptation by the talented Mr. Gray.

For the first time this Christmas season, the British Drama League offered a series of six lectures on "The Theatre" designed for young people nine to eighteen. These lectures were intended to open children's minds to the joys of taking an intelligent interest in drama as well as to the fun of play-making at home. Dame Sybil Thorndike, Donald Wolfitt, E. Martin Browne, and others were among the speakers.

Dame Sybil Thorndike opened the series with an inspired talk on "Going to the Theatre"—where, she is convinced, one can always discover something new about his fellows, and where he can join with them in discovering the truly exciting things about life. Her advice: "To go to the theatre as to a feast." Other topics included in the series were "Model Theatres," "Great Actors," "Mystery Plays," "The Puppet Theatre," and "Famous Plays." Young people everywhere have a very real desire to establish some basis on which to evaluate their theatre experiences; and the response to these lectures was heartening indeed.