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*Creative Drama*

**DRAMA**

with and for

**CHILDREN**

*Children's Theater*

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With the cooperation of

The Children's Theatre Conference

A Division of the

American Educational Theatre Association

In collaboration with

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## Foreword

**C**REATIVE DRAMA, as a language art, has been a part of the elementary school curriculum for a number of years. Community organizations also have long been concerned with offering children rewarding experiences in creative dramatics, and many have pioneered in the establishment of children's theaters. Because of the relatively small percentage of trained personnel in the field, advance has been slow. This bulletin is the result of a joint concern felt by the Office of Education and the Children's Theatre Conference for the apparent lack of easily available material in creative dramatics.

There are two underlying purposes in this publication: first, to offer guidance in the art of creative drama *with* children; and second, to give some assistance to enterprising organizations that wish to give plays *for* children. It presents both creative drama and children's theater as an art form and is dedicated to the idea that these forms, when properly implemented in school and community, can bring beauty and richness into the lives of boys and girls. The bulletin does not encompass the therapeutic aspects of creative drama.

Part I is an interpretation of the place of creative dramatics *with* and *for* children. Part II describes ways and means of guiding children in creative dramatics, and Part III is devoted entirely to children's theater—how to establish one in a community and provide details pertinent to theater production.

The Office of Education and the Children's Theatre Conference are fortunate to have been able to engage the cooperation of Miss Winifred Ward to write the bulletin. Miss Ward's years of experience in working with children and directing them in plays, together with her own inimitable talents as author, teacher, and lecturer, made her the logical choice to write the manuscript. For 25 years she served as Supervisor of Dramatics in the elementary schools of Evanston, Illinois, and as Director of the Children's Theatre in the same city. The author's knowledge of and enthusiasm for her subjects can be felt throughout the pages of the publication.

In an effort to present her material in accurate form, Miss Ward solicited the help and advice of many leaders in the field of Drama,

Creative Dramatics, and Children's Theatre. Among the many who gave assistance were Eleanor Chase York, of Western Michigan State College; Kenneth L. Graham, of the University of Minnesota; Agnes Haaga and Geraldine Siks, of the University of Washington; Rita Criste, of Northwestern University; and Wilma McNess, of the Keith Country Day School of Rockford (Ill.) College. Clarence T. Simon of Northwestern University offered great help and encouragement.

The photographs in the bulletin are from Vern Adix, Ute Theatre for Young People, University of Utah; Gladys Andrews, New York University School of Education; Frances Carey Bowen, Children's Educational Theatre of Maryland; Rita Criste, Children's Theatre of Evanston, Ill.; Agnes Haaga, University of Washington; Ella Heimbrodt, Children's Theatre of Western Springs, Ill.; Catherine Hollingworth, Children's Theatre of Aberdeen, Scotland; George Latshaw, Cleveland, Ohio; Ann Pirtle, Seattle public schools; Geraldine Siks, University of Washington; Grace Stanistreet, Adelphi College, Garden City, N.Y.; Virginia Tanner, Conservatory of Creative Dance, Salt Lake City, Utah; Margaret Woods, Seattle Pacific College, Washington.

J. DAN HULL,  
*Director, Instruction,  
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## Introduction

**A** PREMISE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION is to offer opportunities for every child to reach the utmost of his individual capabilities in cooperation with his peers. Education of this kind was indicated in the theme of the 1960 White House Conference, the purpose of which was "to promote opportunities for children and youth to realize their full potential for a creative life in freedom and dignity."

It is the belief of the majority of those who work with children that in order to help them realize their full potential for a creative life in freedom and dignity, all children should have daily experiences in the arts. Since drama is a fusion of all the arts and deals with the actions and motives of man, it can perhaps be more closely integrated with the child's everyday living than many others. Creative dramatics encourages freedom and dignifies dreams; it helps to cultivate imaginative thinking.

As never before, the United States needs an original approach to the problems confronting her within the community of nations. Drama *with* and *for* children compounds the creative dynamics which contribute to the ingenuity characteristic of America.

## PART I

# An Interpretation

**D**RAMA COMES IN THE DOOR of the school with every child.

Almost from the day he is born, the baby begins using drama as his way of learning. His parents are always surprised and amused at the first signs of his intuitive response to drama. Even before he can walk, he shows his enjoyment of make-believe by his delighted participation in the dramatic game of peek-a-boo, with its simulated suspense and relief; his early imitation of the "bow-wow"; his hilarious pretend-riding on a pony as he bounces up and down on daddy's foot to the rhythm of "Ride a Cock Horse."

The amazing amount of knowledge a little child accumulates by his dramatic interpretation of the people around him often goes unobserved. "The child of three, four, or five cannot discover what it feels like to be a mother except by going through the motions of mothering, and the son of a truck driver feels closer to his father by pretending to drive a truck."<sup>1</sup> Those who have studied children know that this is nature's way of helping a child to interpret the world and himself in terms he can understand so that he will be fitted to live in the society in which he finds himself.

The following incident relates to what happened in a family that heard groans and moans of agonizing pain coming from the back of the house one evening. On rushing out to see what was the matter, they discovered 4-year-old Marjorie slowly and apparently painfully climbing up the back stairs.<sup>2</sup>

"Aunt Jessie goes upstairs just this way," she announced, "and now I know how she feels." Aunt Jessie, it seems, suffered from

<sup>1</sup> Hartley, Ruth E., Frank, Lawrence K., and Goldenson, Robert M. *Understanding Children's Play*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1952. p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Merrill, John, and Fleming, Martha. *Play-Making and Plays*. New York, The Macmillan Co., 1950. p. 9.

rheumatism, and her little niece, by assuming the physical actions of her aunt, was experiencing to a degree her inner state.

During the first 4 years of his life, the child is constantly interpreting his little world and experimenting with new ideas of his own. He plays train and plane; he becomes first the milkman, then a whole fire department. He plays out countless parent activities. If he has no friends to play with, he often conjures up an imaginary playmate with whom he plays happily (with no fights whatever) for days on end. Often he works hard at his play, thinking up the most ingenious devices for boats and trucks and many other things. He explores widely and puts new information to use at once.

Then comes school, which in former days brought an abrupt end to this wonderful source of fun and learning. Drama came in the door with the child, but it was not allowed to stay. Here was a kind of play which was the prelude to a great art—the child's first art—and it was ignored in school.

The difficulty was that the only drama the teachers knew was the formal play, and that did not fit into the school curriculum. Whenever a play was being rehearsed for a special occasion, it so disrupted the school program that most teachers regarded it as an ordeal. It never seemed to occur to them to take their cue from the child's own way in drama—the spontaneous, uninhibited way. Instead, the only drama to be found in most elementary schools (there were a few exceptions) was the exhibitional type of memorized plays belonging to special occasions such as Christmas and "last day" exercises.

At one period, when the catchword in education began to be *motivation*, all kinds of plays were written to motivate the learning of facts: Arithmetic plays, geography plays, health plays, and history plays. Dramatics was welcomed as a "cart-horse," as someone expressed it, to carry every other subject in the curriculum. It would have been bad enough if the children had been given the experience of making up the plays themselves. But they had to memorize lines which were not at all a natural expression for them, and the result was that the children simply recited.

All too familiar are the artificial ways in which children give their speeches when they are "drilled" by parents and teachers to repeat lines they only half understand, or move through pageants with never a flicker of feeling on their impassive faces. Even when the children, with their teacher, write the plays themselves, they find it a strain to make up dialog which remotely resembles natural conversation if the objective of the play is instruction. The pictures of one play on soil conservation show a row of the children standing stiff and straight, representing the stumps of trees that have been burned by a forest

fire, while others are lying flat on the ground as "eroded topsoil." One wonders in how many children's lives the love of drama was snuffed out forever by such experiences as these.

## Drama With Children

With the increasing emphasis in education on creative thinking and the development of individual powers, a way of using the child's natural love for the dramatic has developed which is not only suited to the classroom but has remarkable potentialities for his personal development. It is based on his own free, informal play, but guided into an orderly creative process by an imaginative teacher.



*Courtesy, School of Drama, University of Washington, Seattle, Wash.*

**"Who's trip-tropping over my bridge?" Drama created by children from the Billy Goats Gruff.**

This is *drama with children*. Because it is original, it has come to be known as *creative drama*, *creative dramatics*, or *playmaking*. In place of a written script, with lines to be memorized, such drama is created by a group of children, *guided, but not directed* by a teacher or leader. It is always played with spontaneous dialog and action,

and is never written down because written plays become formal scripts to be memorized.

Informal drama may be created from a story, a poem, an experience, a historical event, or an idea. The Western Movement in the United States, for instance, has been the inspiration for many a drama by fourth- or fifth-grade children. A trip to the zoo may motivate a second or third grade to play *The Peddler and His Caps*<sup>3</sup> with its delightfully comic monkey episode. A splash of beautiful colors in the room may bring about a discussion of how colors make one feel, and by playing out such feeling in terms of action.

Unlike children's theater which is designed for an audience and played upon a stage with costumes and scenery, this informal drama needs merely space, with imagination supplying the scenery and costumes. The only audience, as a rule, is the part of the group not playing at the moment. This audience, however, is very important, especially with the older children, since it affords the needed opportunity for communication, builds appreciation for drama in those who watch, and makes evaluation more objective.

If the creative thinking of the children results in an exceptionally good play, it is sometimes shared with another group of children or with their parents. Such a sharing is not considered a performance but rather an informal demonstration, incidental to the really creative experience.

Creative dramatics is not for the talented few nor is its purpose to entertain an audience. Participation is all-important, and the experience of the child who lacks talent is often as fruitful and as enjoyable as that of the child with marked dramatic ability.

### **Creative Drama in the Language Arts**

"What comes to your mind when I say the word 'Ireland'?" asked a fifth-grade teacher in a language arts session.

Faces brightened as they somehow always do at the mention of Ireland. Many hands shot up.

"Shillelaghs," "wee people," "wakes," "shamrocks," "leprechauns." were the first suggestions.

During a brief discussion of the meaning of the things which had come to their minds, they talked about the leprechauns and other wee folk in so many of the Irish tales.

Now the mood was right for the teacher's reading of Ruth Sawyer's

<sup>3</sup> As told by Geraldine Sisk in *Stories to Dramatize*, by Winifred Ward. Children's Theatre Press, Anchorage, Ky., 1952. p. 55.

charming version of *Wee Meg Barnileg and the Fairies*,<sup>4</sup> the story of the spoiled child of easygoing parents who is spirited away by the wee folk. In the fairy rath to which they take her, all she has to eat is the food she has willfully thrown away; she has to wash and mend all the clothes she has ever torn or soiled; and, finally, pick out of all her ugly, sharp words, which are growing like a great field of nettles, the few kind words she has ever uttered.

When the teacher arrived at this point in the story, she paused to ask, "Why do you think Meg was such a disagreeable child? Her parents were very kind. Why should they have such a child?"

"Maybe they were old and always let her have her own way," suggested one child.

"She did as she pleased, but it didn't make her happy," volunteered another.

"Her parents let her get away with things," said the next.

But the prize answer summed up all the rest. "She wasn't raised up right!"

"How do you think the story will end?" asked the teacher. Then, after the pupils had used their imaginations to work out possible outcomes, she read the rest of the story, which showed how each experience made Meg see herself and her parents a little more clearly; and when she found a shamrock with four leaves and wished herself home, she was so happy that she was a different child from that time on.

Now the children "tried on" the characters of Meg, her parents, and the leprechauns in pantomime; planned a play based on the story; and in several class sessions developed a play. There was nothing passive about this experience. Every child was absorbed in spite of the fact that the story was so strongly didactic. It gave them a wonderful outlet for their emotions, patterns of behavior which caused them to do some thinking, a fine Irish humor, and a variety of interesting characters to study.

**Speaking and Listening.**—Creative thinking is new to the thinker. It breaks fresh ground, makes new trails in the mind, and must be expressed in order to be recognized. A new idea is vague and nebulous in a thinker's mind until he has expressed it in words either to himself or others. No school experience gives a child a better opportunity to be creative than does playmaking.<sup>5</sup>

A group of sixth-grade children were exploring the meaning of time, thinking aloud as they tried to put into words what time meant to them. Creative thinking requires effort—real effort—and the in-

<sup>4</sup> Sawyer, Ruth. *The Way of the Storyteller*. New York, Viking Press, 1942. p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Merkleland, Ruth. *The Language Arts in the Elementary School*. D. C. Heath & Co. 1951. p. 11.

centive needs to be strong. They were considering ideas for the play they were to develop in the spring. They found out what they were thinking at the same time they were expressing it.

One child said, "Time is everything that has been and will be."

Others: "Nothing can stop time. It goes on and on." "Men have always been trying to find out better ways of measuring time."

A little girl went home and wrote a poem which she read the next day:

Time to me is a great white bird  
Spreading its wings through the sky;  
Eager hands reach up to grasp it,  
As it flies relentlessly by.

The motive for listening is strong, too, in a creative drama group. Children will always listen to anything dramatic. But there is also a good reason to listen to a story or idea when it has something in it that they need to know in order to participate, and when others are playing a scene they know that they will have a chance to evaluate and then play it themselves.



*Courtesy, Children's Center for Creative Arts, Adelphi College*

**Listening in order to evaluate. The audience in this creative drama class will soon have its chance to play.**

Courtesy in listening is instilled both by the example of the teacher who gives respectful attention to whatever is said or done, and by her insistence on constructive evaluation: not "what is wrong?" but "how can we make it better?" This requires really careful listening.

**Reading and Writing.**—The other two language arts, reading and writing, enter into creative drama in a less direct way. When children are working on a dramatization, and if they expect to share their play and make special properties, they often need to read extensively about a country, the period, customs, coins, or names. Classroom teachers say that the best incentive for research is a creative play.

Some creative writing is necessary for almost every shared play. It may be a bit of verse such as the one cited from the play about time. It may be a prayer, or a spell, or a song.

Thus, all the language arts play an important part in creative drama. This art, in turn, has a rich potential in providing a child with vicarious life experiences from which he learns much—experiences which he could never hope to have firsthand. It gives him a strong incentive for forming the habit of creative or independent thinking, and for organizing and expressing his ideas as he builds with others toward a common objective. Creative drama helps him to grow toward emotional maturity because the strong emotions he expresses are controlled by his study of the characters he is playing. Along with the development of the play and the discussion it entails, there are many opportunities for helping the child build attitudes and appreciations which lead toward a worthy life philosophy.

To realize these potentials, the child must have the guidance of an adult who is understanding and creative. His own playing is usually unselective and formless until he has acquired some skill, and it will seldom develop into an art form without guidance. He needs a discriminating teacher or leader who recognizes his best efforts, encourages him in his unique contribution, and by a skillful use of questions to stir thinking, helps him to see the possibilities in a situation. As in every other kind of teaching, the role of the teacher is a vital one.

### **Developments in Creative Drama With Children**

Supervisors or consultants in drama, comparable to supervisors of music and art, are needed in the elementary schools to teach techniques to the elementary teachers who have had no special training, to help them in their more ambitious projects, and to give real status to this art. Some public elementary schools have had specialists in

drama for many years. But in most schools, it has been left to the individual teacher as to whether or not drama had any place in the school program. The result has been an uneven and haphazard use of drama, not to be compared with the superior programs in other arts. As a springboard for the introduction of such a program, a teacher skilled in creative dramatics might well be brought in for inservice workshops with teachers.

There are two reasons why it is difficult to convince school authorities of the need for a specialist in creative drama. The first is the present trend away from specialization toward the self-contained classroom. The second is the great emphasis now being placed on science and mathematics education stemming from the public's demand for more and stronger courses in these subjects.

However, it is gratifying to note the number of educators who see clearly that we must have perspective in our education; who realize that if we are to produce people who have imagination enough to do scientific research, as well as to work with others to maintain a self-governing state, emphasis on science must be balanced by a corresponding emphasis on the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.

If an impressive number of parents, teachers, and school administrators become convinced that creative drama is as vital a part of the education of children as music and the graphic arts, it will be given a comparable place in the curriculum.

**Recreation Programs.**—Both formal and informal drama are included in recreational programs. Creative drama has been found to be especially suitable in children's activities because the playing of a story follows naturally the hour in which a story has been told or read to the group; it requires no equipment, can be used indoors or out, and it does not depend on the same children from day to day.

Many programs are handicapped by the lack of trained leadership, but as the recognition of its value and appeal to the children grows, many recreation departments are bringing in skilled teachers of creative drama to give lectures and demonstrations to their workers.

Parents in many cities have arranged for extracurricular classes in creative drama for their children, but these classes reach only a fraction of the children who would most profit by them. Furthermore, so much of the value of creative drama comes from its use in a unified study program that it needs to be in the curriculum rather than outside of school.

**Religious Education.**—Many religious education programs have revealed a strong trend toward the use of creative drama. Although vacation church schools have greater opportunity for such experiences than Sunday schools because of the time element, church school classes

in rather large numbers are being given experiences in dramatizing Bible stories, using puppets, originating worship services, and participating in role-playing.

Recognition of the need for training leaders is evidenced in workshops offered in various parts of the country under the auspices of many churches. The Interdenominational Religious Drama Workshop sponsored by the National Council of Churches, offers sessions for a week each summer at Lake Forest (Ill.) College. Other workshops for training leaders are sponsored locally by city councils of churches.

## Drama for Children: Children's Theater

The child audience, pictured on the cover of this bulletin, is utterly entranced with what is happening on the stage. Observe that in some instances even the hands of the children are reacting to what is going on in the play.

This is drama *for* children. Here, it is the audience which is of first consideration, not the players. Regardless of whether the play is being acted by children or adults or both, or whether the players are amateur or professional, the value of the experience to the actors must be secondary to what the experience means to the boys and girls who see the play. The success of the project is judged by the joy and the cultural value it affords the child audience.

What a magic experience it can be to a child to see several live plays each year instead of having to rely solely on pictures! To go to plays written and acted by people who know and respect boys and girls, who do not distort their favorite stories by changing the character of the people in them, or add satirical and love elements which have no appeal to children.

To be able, instead, to see, at a real theater, truly childlike versions of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Snow Queen and the Goblin*; puppet shows of *Ali Baba*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Paul Bunyan*; and, for older children, perhaps, the *Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Annis Duff writes of this kind of theater, "The three dimensional vision of folk and fairy tales, all alive with sound and color and movement, is of the very essence of enchantment, quickening the liveliest imagination, and leaving an ineffable impression of beauty and wonder." \*

\* Duff, Annis. *Life in a Looking-Glass. The Horn Book*, February 1954. p. 24.

## Why a Children's Theater?

The beliefs and objectives of present day children's theater sponsors may well be studied by any group proposing to establish a theater for children.<sup>7</sup>

*First*, and most important, the theater gives boys and girls the joy of seeing good stories come alive upon a stage. Beautiful experiences are not for one day or one year, but for a lifetime; and, although very few children will ever have really great opportunities, even lesser experiences in the theater can bring a joy that is lasting.

*Second*, a higher standard of taste can be developed in children, since taste always improves with true art experience. The culture of tomorrow begins with today's children; and children who are steadily exposed to good theater care less and less for cheap and inferior plays. Hughes Mearns writes: "Nothing so surely disgusts one with poor work as a goodish experience with something better."<sup>8</sup>

A newspaper editor in a small city which had had a children's theater for twenty years wrote of it, "The Children's Theatre here through the years has unquestionably played a leading part in influencing the tastes and the thoughts of the younger generation."<sup>9</sup>

*Third*, the sponsors of children's theater believe that from the human experiences a child sees on the stage he will grow in the understanding and appreciation of life values. His own experience is necessarily limited, and he may have to wait for years to know the result of any given action. In plays he sees the outcome almost at once, and from these vicarious experiences he learns much about life.

The following summarizes this belief: "The material with which the dramatist works consists of conflict situations in which human beings face emergencies, become emotionally involved, . . . and literally do not know what to do. In their attack on the problem, they run through their repertoire of behavior techniques, some amusing, some unprincipled, others admirable. A direct outcome of the presentation of such behavior techniques is a substantial amount of learning on the part of the audience."<sup>10</sup>

The late Charlotte Chorpenning, director for 21 years of the Goodman Children's Theatre in Chicago, wrote, "My purpose is that the

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from An Interpretation of Terms. *Educational Theatre Journal*, May 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Mearns, Hughes, *Creative Power*. New York, Dover Publication, 1958. p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> Lovelace, Walter, in the *Evansston Review*, August 3, 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, John, in the *Educational Theatre Journal*, December 1950, p. 285.

Goodman plays shall give to the audience in entertaining form helpful experience true to life values."<sup>11</sup>

*Fourth.* a good theater will build in children a basis for becoming a discriminating adult audience of the future. One play a year will not do this; but three or four each season, if they are well done, will be a strong cultural influence, especially if an educational program goes on as an integral part of the theater.

**Any Community Can Have a Children's Theater.**—Hundreds of cities and towns over the country have found ways of satisfying their children's insistent love for drama by providing good plays suited to their age and interests. Communities lacking trained leadership will inevitably meet certain problems, but there are many ways to solve them. Every year there is an increasing number of theaters for young people both in the United States and in other countries. Many parents believe that a good children's theater helps to make a community a better place for boys and girls.

In towns where there is no theater for children, an organization such as the Junior League, the American Association of University Women, a parent-teacher group, a high school or college drama department sometimes produces one play a season or imports a touring company so that the children may at least have a taste of children's theater. Along with the growing awareness of the importance of the arts in our country's culture is more leisure time and the means to fill it with something constructive.

Any community can have such a theater where live performances of good plays, dance dramas, and puppet shows are presented for child audiences, and where the charm of fantasy alternates with the thrill of adventure tales and the realism of modern stories.

Is entertainment in the typical American community contributing to the enjoyment and cultural development of children? Do parents feel as comfortable when their children see "Morton of the Homicide Squad" as when they attend a play based on Stevenson's great adventure tale *Treasure Island*? Is there genuine concern with the way human life is cheapened in many movies in which the hero picks off one character after another with his ever-present gun?

Dissatisfaction with the kind of entertainment now provided for boys and girls can unquestionably lead to the establishment of a children's theater in any community. Here children may see the best available dramatizations of favorite classics, historical events, folk tales, and modern books, played by live actors.

<sup>11</sup> Chorpennag, Charlotte. *21 Years With Children's Theatre*. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press, 1954. p. 53.



*Courtesy, Conservatory of Creative Dance, Salt Lake City, Utah*

**Opportunities in dance drama both for the audience and players. The children are wishing to be something else—an ant, a butterfly, or a grasshopper. From the Italian folk tale, White Patch.**

**Opportunities in the Arts.**—Many city and suburban children hear great music played by symphony orchestras in an annual concert series for young people. Television and radio have contributed immeasurably to their education in music. Children are taken to visit art galleries and museums. But where can comparable dramatic opportunities for child audiences be found in this country?

There are many adults who still look back with a warm feeling of happiness at that memorable occasion when as a child they saw Maude Adams in *Peter Pan*. Many of today's children will grow up to tell that one of the most thrilling experiences of their childhood was seeing Margot Fontaine in the Sadler's Wells Ballet of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Theater of this caliber is rare in America, nearly nonexistent.

Children who live in England, however, have professional theater. at Christmas time at least, in the "Pantomime," that glorified vaudeville tied together with a fairytale, which the whole family attends. Professional companies in other European countries present plays for children either at holiday time or for a longer season. Russia has one of the finest professional children's theaters in the world, with companies that play during the winter in the cities, and far in the hinterland during the summer months. Believing in "education through art," the government subsidizes these theaters, and sees to it that standards are kept high.

Most of the children's theaters in America are amateur, sponsored chiefly by parents who feel a responsibility for providing entertainment of good quality for their children. Several hundred communities produce from one to five or six plays for young people each season. These productions are supplemented by plays from touring companies, most of which have their headquarters on the east or west coast.<sup>12</sup>

### **Developments in Children's Theater**

**The Children's Theatre Conference.**—The national organization for the children's theater movement in the United States is the *Children's Theatre Conference*, founded at Northwestern University in 1944 as a Division of the American Educational Theatre Association (AETA).<sup>13</sup>

The membership of the association (1,500 in January 1960) is drawn from all types of children's theater groups, both amateur and professional. The purposes of the conference are to promote the establishment of children's theater activities in all communities; encourage the raising and maintaining of high standards in children's theaters; provide a meeting-ground for children's theater workers

<sup>12</sup> For information concerning these companies, write John C. Walker, Executive Secretary, American Educational Theatre Association, Department of Speech, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.

<sup>13</sup> A brochure explaining membership and activities in the Children's Theatre Conference may be secured from the Executive Secretary of the American Educational Theatre Association, John C. Walker, Speech Dept., Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.

through sponsorship of an annual national meeting, and of regional meetings and conference committees throughout the year.<sup>14</sup>

The Annual Meeting, in late August, is a time when the members gather to exchange ideas, to hear distinguished speakers, to attend children's theater productions, and to see demonstrations of creative drama techniques and technical skills.

The *Children's Theatre Conference* (known as CTC) has a strong regional organization, the country being divided into 16 regions, each of which holds an annual conference in addition to the national meeting. Interest in children's theater is by this means carried far and wide, along with a greater understanding of what both formal and informal drama can mean to a community.

In the years since it was organized, the CTC has carried on many needed projects, such as formulating standards for evaluating plays, compiling children's theater directories, interpreting the terms used in drama with and for children; making a survey of colleges and universities offering courses in children's theater and creative dramatics; writing a monograph on *Basic Principles and Practices in Children's Theatre and Creative Dramatics in the United States*.

**Something Wonderful Could Happen** if people in every community would come to realize that children have a hunger for things of the spirit as well as of the body and mind; if they realized that present entertainment leaves much to be desired; that even if the mass media were all that the most discriminating parent could hope, pictures can never be more than shadows on a screen.

If parents care enough to take the responsibility for a children's theater, yet fear so big an undertaking as an organized theater with several productions each season, one step may be taken by providing a single play each year. This is not difficult for any community that has one good trained director. The high school drama teacher might be this individual.

A person who has had good training in drama but is doing something quite different for a living might also qualify. This might be an avocation, as it is with many people in community theaters—a "live option," as it were. If no such person is available, it is often possible to secure a production from a nearby college which makes a practice of touring one children's play annually. Good professional companies make tours throughout many parts of the country; and one of them may be engaged for several performances of the same play. The principal consideration in securing a professional group is the quality of their performance. It must be superior.

<sup>14</sup> From the Operating Code of CTC. *Educational Theatre Journal*, December 1958.

In planning ahead for such a production, secure a good play, the finest director available, and as many capable actors as possible. Do not give a children's play to make money. Do not use it as an opportunity for people to act.

Children recognize genuine acting even though they cannot tell how they know. In a performance of *The Prince and the Pauper*, played by college and junior high school young people of little experience, a substitution had to be made at almost the last moment for the part of Mrs. Canty, mother of the pauper. A skilled actress was called in; and from the moment of her first entrance a dramatic hush fell over the audience and lasted as long as she was on the stage. The children had sensed instantly the difference in the quality of her acting. Even if they had not known, the theater's responsibility for setting high standards would have been just as great. Many players who are not skilled are convincing to child audiences because they themselves *believe*—believe in their character, believe in the reality of the story they are living.

### Relation of Children's Theater to Creative Drama

Children's theater and creative dramatics are two different aspects of child drama; the first, formal; the second, informal. There is no conflict in ideology between them; rather, they complement each other. Children's theater is primarily for child audiences; creative dramatics is primarily for the children who participate.

Plays written by playwrights serve as material for children's theater, lines being learned by the players, action planned by the director. In creative drama, ideas, experiences, and stories from literature and history are the material out of which children create plays. There are no set lines to learn, and the teacher acts as a guide, not director.

The children's theater aspires to perfection in order to create the illusion of reality for the audience. Perfection is not the object in creative drama, though children are encouraged to do the best work of which they are capable.

In their effect on child players, formal plays are conducive to poise and confidence. If well directed, they may contribute to a child's skill, to his understanding of character, and to his appreciation of theater. Informal drama gives a child a sense of responsibility and much exercise in independent thinking. His creative ability grows from helping in the development of the play and improvising his speeches. His vicarious life-experience is much broader because of the chance to interpret many roles.

Creative dramatics is a much more natural form of expression for young children than is formal drama.<sup>15</sup> Since it is spontaneous, creative drama comes from their own thoughts and imaginations so that they form the habit of thinking what they say rather than reciting from memory. Older children, with a background of creative dramatics, are capable of playing naturally in either formal or informal drama.

In planning for a children's theater, it must be remembered that an experience in the theater can be a significant one. "Each child is a record of all his yesterdays", wrote Charlotte Chorpenning. Every experience counts in making him what he is, for better or worse. Because of Mrs. Chorpenning's feeling of responsibility as a playwright for what "buried memories" may mean to children, she wrote these lines:

May we who write for children, not forget  
That buried memories of plays may live  
To times and scenes we dream not of as yet,  
And may emerge in harassed days to give  
Ideals to follow, like a flag unfurled.  
Yea, children are the future of the world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Children's Theatre Conference, "Interpretation of Terms," *Educational Theatre Journal*, May, 1956.

<sup>16</sup> Chorpenning, Charlotte. *21 Years With Children's Theatre*. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press, 1954. p. 112.

# PART 2

## PART II

### Creative Drama

**A** SHOWER OF IRIDESCENT BUBBLES floated out over the circle of alert kindergaten children, sitting on the big rug with hands hopefully outstretched.

"Whoever is touched by a bubble is magic!" Mrs. Bellmar had said, and who wouldn't sit quietly and wait for a soap-bubble to light on his hand or his head for the fun of being made magic? Particularly, as Mrs. Bellmar had told them that as soon as they felt the magic touch on head or hands, they would be able to float without a sound like the lovely, silent bubbles.

Experience had taught them that if they snatched at a bubble it would burst. So they waited, still as anything, until, one after another, they were touched by the glowing bubbles and given the magic power to float soundlessly (well, *almost* soundlessly) over the floor to the sound of delicate music.

Perhaps, it was because this had been an unusually noisy group, with a tendency to push and slap, that the teacher had planned this as an experience with touch rather than sight. The children did exclaim over the exquisite rainbow colors of the bubbles in the sunlight; but mostly it was the lightness and gentleness that were stressed.

One little girl who had tried rather roughly to pat the teacher's face with the hand of a large doll, said after the bubble experience, "May Hildegarde pat your cheek the way the bubble touched you?" And, as the group started off that day, they "floated" downstairs like bubbles!

That sensitive awareness to environment is the beginning of aesthetic appreciation was the belief of John Dewey.<sup>2</sup> Parents cannot begin too early to cultivate in their children appreciation of sights and sounds, tastes, smells, and things touched. There are plenty of

<sup>1</sup> As told by Marcella Bellmar, Barbereux School, Evanston, Ill.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*. New York. Minton Balch & Co., 1934.

opportunities at home, riding in the country, walking in the woods, or on the beach. It is surprising how much one will grow in awareness of beauty in colors and color combinations, in discrimination in tastes and smells and sounds if one searches with children for stones and shells that are interesting in shape and color, imagines pictures in clouds, sees unusual tree shapes, or colors in the sky. All of these experiences develop an awareness that furthers the child's appreciation of every art in the years ahead.

The game of seeing and imagining is important to children, and will link the entire family or classroom in the enjoyment of living and playing together. Most people remember with warmth and affection those times when their parents wove into the pattern of practical realities of life the bright threads of fantasy and fun.

### Developing Sense Awareness in Young Children

A director of a nursery school went about developing a sense of awareness in the little children she taught by using contrasts.<sup>1</sup> She thought with them about things that are "loud" and things that are "quiet"; then, after a few weeks, things that are "smooth" and things that are "wrinkled." She did not use more than a dozen contrasts during the year, but they included all the senses.

The children thought about many things: "Quiet as a spider makes his web," "loud as a horse galloping over a wooden bridge," "wrinkled as a prune," "flat as a word on a piece of paper," "slow as seeds come up, pushing the earth."

Sometime during the first year or two of school, most children are taken to a farm, a fire department, or a post office. When children relive the next day such an experience as visiting a farm, holding the baby turkeys, feeding the chickens and the pigs, sliding down the hay, they prolong their enjoyment of the visit, and begin to form the habit of recalling sense impressions.

After the visit to the fire department, they like to play going to a fire with fire-truck and hook and ladder. They drive the truck to the scene of the fire, shout orders, play the hose on the building, rescue the survivors.

**Awareness and the Seasons.**—"What signs of fall have you seen?" asked of a group of kindergarten or primary children, calls forth a lively description of autumn leaves, nuts, squirrels, bonfires. The children rake imaginary leaves into a pile or a wire basket (depending

<sup>1</sup> Dixon, Madeleine, *The Power of Dance*. New York, John Day & Co. 1939. p. 25.

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on their experience), light the fire, smell the pungent odor. "Oh, my!" the teacher says, "we're all turning into red and yellow flames!" And, sure enough, all twist and turn and leap high into the air. What a wonderful bonfire!

Each season is full of its own distinctive appeals to the senses: the miracle of spring with all nature coming alive; the sunshine and rain and color of summer; the beauty of snow in winter; and those rare days when frost transforms the world into an exquisite fairyland.

**A Sound Effects Orchestra.**—Children find it absorbing to develop a kind of "sound effects" orchestra made up of all sorts of homely "instruments" which suggest sounds in a forest. The chorus of katydids, tree-frogs, birds, squirrels, wind, and leaves, each in its characteristic rhythm, comes through with sometimes startling realism from grooved handles of seam-markers over which a pencil is rubbed, pieces of coarse sandpaper rubbed together, combs, brushes, small meat-pounders, and dozens of other household utensils.

"See what I discovered!" exclaims Sally, proudly holding up the metal tube from the inside of a coffee percolator, and tapping it with a pencil. "It sounds like a fairy bell!"

"Listen to this!" sang out Bobby as he proceeded to stroke the plastic bristles of two hair-brushes together. "It's crickets!"

Two groups of first or second graders working together can create a little play set in this live forest, or dramatize a poem or story such as Walter de la Mare's *Someone*, William Allingham's *The Elf Singing*, Rose Fyleman's *Fairies*, Florence Jaque's *A Goblinade*, or *The Sleeping Beauty*. What atmosphere for mystery and fun!

All these activities give children experiences not only in sense awareness but also in creative rhythmic movement and dramatic play. Meanwhile, in kindergarten, at least, they will be having basic rhythms accompanied by the piano, percussion instruments, and perhaps by records. Too often their experiences in all three of these important types of activities end in the primary grades, or fail henceforth to receive the emphasis which is essential in art education.

## The Significance of Play

Appreciation of the full significance of play in the life of a child has required a long, long time to become general, if indeed it can be said to be general at the present time.

"Play goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. All play means something."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Huisinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1950. p. 1.

In nursery and kindergarten, dramatic play is of very great value in providing children with opportunities for discovering and expressing themselves. When a child plays at being father and mother, the wild animal and the hunter, the teacher and the pupils, he is not only learning to understand the behavior of things and people but he is "externalizing his inner drama—the various aspects of his inner personality—in just the way in which the creative artist in literature or painting does."<sup>5</sup>

"Play is a prelude to art," writes Brownell.<sup>6</sup> "All enjoyable activities may move on and merge into art. They lose their random willfulness as they mature and establish forms and inner disciplines."

This is what happens in the child's dramatic play. At first it is his spontaneous playing out of ideas and experiences—his rehearsal of things known and his exploration of things unknown. He has engaged in this imaginary play all his short life, with no idea of the pattern or plot which characterizes real drama. His drama has no definite beginning, middle, and end; no preconceived culmination or consequence. It can begin anywhere, and end without any climax. When a child goes to school, his dramatic play centers around the fascinating equipment of the room—the housekeeping corner with its dolls and stoves and beds and dishes; the block corner from which boats and trains and many other exciting things can be made to play on; the trucks and wagons and automobiles.

All this is a far cry from art. Yet it has in it the beginnings which can lead toward art. In the social adjustments which go on all the time under cover of dramatic play, the child is finding out much about himself and how he fits into the group. He is learning how to keep that precarious balance between his own desires and acceptance by the others, for this kind of play is so much fun that he cannot bear to be excluded. And he is using his imagination to create with the other children a dramatic situation which could go on all morning if it were not interrupted.

It is the teacher's part to keep wide open the avenues between play and art, whether it leads toward creative writing, the graphic arts, music, the dance, or drama. As soon as children are ready for the next step in any of the arts, the teacher provides the opportunity and motivation. In the drama, it may well be a guided experience in creating a play with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

**Mother Goose as a Treasure House.**—Nothing is quite so good for a beginning story dramatization as *Mother Goose*, which Cornelia

<sup>5</sup> Hartley, Ruth E., Frank, Lawrence K., Goldenson, Robert M., *Understanding Children's Play*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1952. p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Brownell, Baker, *Art Is Action*. New York, Harper and Bros., 1939. p. 34.

Meigs characterizes as "one of the indestructible treasures of the human race."<sup>7</sup> Quaint and charming, the verses are loved by most children for their perfect rhythm, their type of humor, their delightful variety of character and incident. It matters not a whit that many of them are full of meaning, of political satire, of symbols. Children love hearing about the familiar characters doing the most unexpected and nonsensical things.

One of the first rhymes which the children like to play is *Little Miss Muffet*. Every child understands it, for the experience Miss Muffet has is universal. What child has not enjoyed picnicking, and what child has not been frightened by a spider or a bee?

On a day when the children are out-of-doors, perhaps, preferably in a grassy spot, the teacher may comment on what a wonderful day it would be for a picnic.

"Why not have one right now? If you will look around and find a magic bowl, I will fill it with whatever you would like to eat from this *big* magic bowl I have. Nancy, what would you like me to put in your bowl?"

"I'd like—some ABC cereal," replied Nancy, falling in at once with what she recognized as delightful make-believe.

"I'd like some peaches and cream!" "I'd like a chocolate sundae." And all the other children had some preference.

While both teacher and children are enjoying a make-believe lunch, perhaps the teacher can say, "Do you remember a story about a little girl whose mother gave her a bowl of her favorite food to eat out-of-doors? She chose curds and whey; and just when she was enjoying it . . ."

"A big black spider came and sat down beside her!" may burst forth from several children. "That's 'Little Miss Muffet'."

Then, of course, the children all want to repeat the rhyme and eat curds and whey like Miss Muffet. As the teacher begins to eat with the children, perhaps she can say, "Isn't it lovely here in the garden? Aren't you glad that mother says we may sit out here on this grassy tuffet and look at the pretty pink petunias and watch the big monarch butterflies?"

"And hear the crickets," chimes in Billy, who can always be counted on to lead in any dramatic play.

Inspired by Billy, the children comment on all kinds of things they see in the yard. And it will be surprising if some child does not scream, "A spider!" drop his bowl and run for the "house." This

<sup>7</sup> Meigs, Cornelia, Nesbitt, Elizabeth, Eaton, Anne, and Viguers, Ruth Hill, *A Critical History of Children's Literature*. New York, The Macmillan Co., 1953. p. 70.

being fun, all the others follow suit, and when they come back laughing, they very likely beg to "play it again!"

Now it is fun for all to be spiders crawling along and looking very "scarey." The matter of spinning beautiful webs may come up, and some of the children may have ideas about how to spin the gossamer threads. In one class, the spiders raced across the lawn with such speed that the teacher called attention to the fact that spiders have thin, jointed legs, and they run differently. When the children looked at a picture of a spider, they changed their racing to what they called a "jiggly" walk, and a new kind of fun entered into the playing.

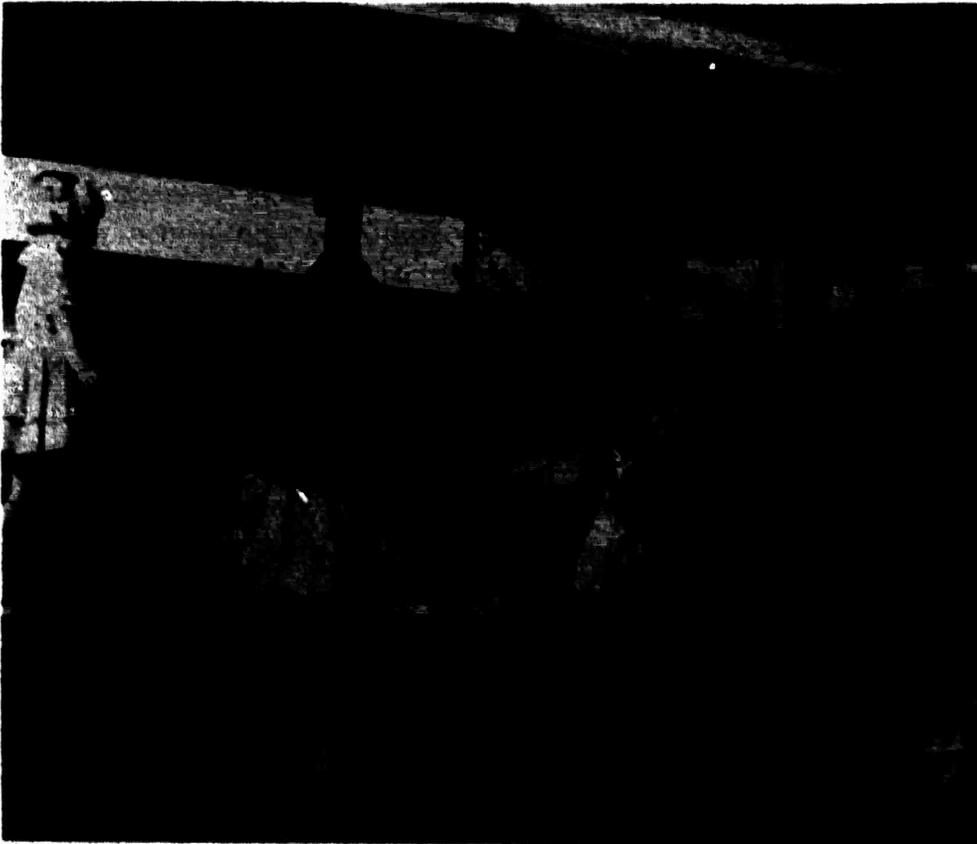
Finally, with a third of the group as Mrs. Muffet, who brings Miss Muffet a bowl of curds and whey to eat out-of-doors this beautiful summer evening, a third as Miss Muffet, and the rest as spiders, they played out the perfect rhyme, using their imaginations to embroider it differently every time it was played. The most fun of all, the children thought, was when one of the spiders had the idea of hanging by his knees on the climbing apparatus, head down as if on a long filament, directly in front of the startled Miss Muffet.

Other Mother Goose rhymes are equally as good for playing as Miss Muffet: *Old King Cole*, *The Queen of Hearts*, *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, *Hickory Dickory Dock*, *Old Mother Hubbard*, and many more. Children enjoy the characters, and something always happens that is fun to play. The rhymes are simple, direct, and, best of all, familiar!

**Other Good Stories for Creative Plays.**—After Mother Goose, *The Billy Goats Gruff* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* are favorites for kindergarten and first grade, along with *The Elf and the Dormouse* and *The Little Pink Rose*, a charming story for spring. Children of the first and second grades play *Ask Mr. Bear*, *Mrs. Mallaby's Birthday*, *Peter Rabbit*, *The Little Engine That Could*, and the nature myth *Why the Evergreen Trees Keep Their Leaves in Winter*.

It should be remembered that children can understand and enjoy many stories which are difficult for them to play. *The Three Pigs*, for example, is told more often than played because the fair incident is not easy for small and inexperienced children to do. In order to create, children need to feel free and confident. Therefore, until they have had experience with simple material, it is best not to attempt stories which have problems. This is true for beginners of any age, and is the reason why older groups very often enjoy beginning with Mother Goose rhymes.

With some experience, children of the third grade have a grand time playing such stories as *The Peddler and His Caps*, *The Brementown Musicians*, and *A Goblinade*.



*Courtesy, Seattle Public Library, Seattle, Wash.*

**The sun and the rain awaken The Little Pink Rose.**

### **The Value of Creative Rhythmic Movement**

From the first day in kindergarten, a child has experiences in rhythms. Aside from the basic rhythms of marching, clapping, skipping, hopping, much of the creative movement in dramatic play and story dramatization will be rhythmic if the teacher encourages it with the use of music or percussion instruments.

The "soap-bubbles" float to the rhythm of soft music, the elf (in *The Elf and the Dormouse*) dances rhythmically in his new suit before the raindrops send him scurrying for shelter; the whole story of *The Billy Goats Gruff* has a pronounced rhythm of its own. On a teacher's *feeling* for rhythm depends the amount and kind of rhythm which she encourages in her children.

There is only a shadowy line between creative rhythmic movement and drama—if there is any line at all. As soon as movement is inspired by an idea or emotion, aside from the purely physical, it is close to drama if not actually drama itself. A child always experiences

an emotion in his whole body, not in any part of him. It is a question in some instances which comes first in his response to an emotional situation: the *idea* or the *movement of his muscles*. An essential part of drama is movement; but whereas creative movement, or dance, even with children, moves into the abstract, drama is concrete—the give and take of social life.



*Courtesy, New York University, School of Education.*

**Fire engines in grandpa's day. Creative rhythmic movement.**

Movement should be an automatic tool, leaving the child free to concentrate on an idea. Children carry out exploration in movement: as animals in a zoo; mechanical ideas such as an elevator, a typewriter, an egg-beater, a merry-go-round; sports, seasons, occupational experiences, and holidays."

Beginning with early childhood, children experience a logical progression in creative rhythmic motion. The child not only explores

Andrews, Gladys, *Creative Rhythmic Movement*. New York, Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1954. p. 134.

movement; he creates, expresses concepts; and solves problems. This provides a basis for a natural progression to folk, social, and other forms of dancing in middle and later childhood.

**Puppets.**—Both creative rhythmic movement and dramatic play should be prerequisites to the using of puppets. Although movement is much more limited in puppetry than in dramatic play, muscular freedom is needed to manipulate puppets successfully, and children who are stiff in movement are very limited in what they can do.

Boys and girls have many imaginative experiences in dramatic play. They have been encouraged to think creatively and to express their ideas, so that when they put the puppets on their hands, they very naturally give them character.

A variety of simple puppets may be used in the primary grades: flat paper or cardboard puppets fastened to rods, hand puppets made of cloth or felt, cone puppets, shadow puppets, and puppets made from household utensils, wood scraps, natural materials, such as driftwood and pine cones, and many others. The making of these puppets is described in various books, several of which are suggested in the reference list on page 65.

Young children should not use puppets which require more than an hour to make. Too often the joy of using puppets is lessened by the time required to make them. A puppet is not a toy, a doll, nor an example of handicraft. It is nothing until it becomes an actor.\*

Some teachers or leaders let children begin with the fun of learning to use the puppets rather than making them first. They keep a supply of puppets on hand for this purpose, and after the children have felt the enjoyment which comes from using them, they have a greater incentive to make their own.

Many of the same values come from the creative use of puppets that result from experiences in creative drama. They are especially effective for children who like to do things with their hands but are timid about expressing themselves in speech. These children are less afraid to speak for their puppets because they themselves are not visible to those who are watching.

The preparation of a play for an audience is much more usual in puppetry than in creative drama. Indeed, with children above kindergarten age, the culmination of almost all puppet plays, even though developed creatively and presented with improvised dialog, is a performance for an audience.

\* Batchelder, Marjorie, Comer, Virginia Lee, *Puppets and Plays, A Creative Approach*. New York, Harper & Bros. 1956. p. x.

## Creative Drama Not for an Audience

Creative dramatics, on the other hand, is far more significant in a child's development if he plays out an idea or story, not for an audience but solely for the joy of creating a character interacting with other characters.

In order to think creatively, one must be free "to the point of reverie" as Dewey has expressed it. If a child's thinking is preoccupied with an audience, it is practically impossible for him to do original thinking.

A play, whether with puppets or child actors, if it is to be given for a formal audience, must be rehearsed until its pattern is "set," even though it has been developed creatively. Plays in creative dramatics should not be "rehearsed"; children are to be guided in developing them. The play must go on developing; it should grow with every playing.

Since the value of creative dramatics is what happens to the child in the process of creating, it is only rarely that a creative play is presented for any audience except an informal audience of children, or as a demonstration for parents of what children do in their classes. It is not a natural thing for little children to appear before an audience (particularly an adult audience) in any kind of play. Gradually, such plays are disappearing from school programs, for teachers are realizing that the experience is unfortunate for young boys and girls. Too often, children, like parrots, say lines as adults have taught them. They become self-conscious, and often show off when the adult audience laughs. When children are older, and have a background of creative drama and rhythmic movement, they are ready to present occasional creative plays which may be both original and charming.

## Creative Dramatics for Older Children

"If thou hast two pennies, spend one for bread; with the other buy hyacinths for thy soul."

This famous saying of the ancient Persian poet suggested to teachers in the State of Washington an exciting way of encouraging sense awareness in children of the middle grades.<sup>10</sup> Just before the children go home in the afternoon, the teacher asks an awareness question. When they return the following morning, they take a few minutes

<sup>10</sup> Sika, Geraldine B., *Creative Dramatics: An Art for Children*. New York, Harper & Bros. 1958. p. 74-79.

to share "hyacinths," or each child writes or draws his idea. "Hyacinth-time" may come once a week or oftener.

Such questions as the following have been asked: "What was the biggest thing you saw this week?" (Some answers: "Mt. Rainier," "a hole in my jeans," "our church when the choir sang the Lord's Prayer.") "What is the best smell for you?" "If you were really hungry and could have one thing to eat, what would you choose?" "What is the pleasantest thing to touch?" "What is the quietest sound you have ever heard?"

In a discussion of experimental activities in the teaching of listening, Miriam Wilt writes: "We sit at our desks with closed eyes, trying to discover how many sounds we can identify. . . . It becomes a game with us, discovering noises we never knew existed, and we are sharpening our ears for other kinds of listening."<sup>11</sup>

Children who from kindergarten have been in a school which offered them experiences in creative drama will go on to richer experiences each year. In language arts they will create plays from stories. In their social studies they will bring alive significant episodes from history; about Roger Williams, perhaps, and how he laid the foundation for religious freedom in our country; William Penn and his fairness in dealing with the Indians; or an eventful day in the Continental Congress.

They will occasionally enact a short scene suggested by a geography lesson, creating an incident in an Egyptian bazaar, or an experience in going to Australia. They will choose or create scenes containing *dramatic elements*, never the mere enacting of factual material. At the time Hawaii became a state, one fifth-grade class, after seeing a film of the islands, was greatly interested to pantomime characteristic activities containing a good deal of drama—surf-board riding, paddling an outrigger canoe, dancing the hula, harvesting pineapples—to the rhythms of Hawaiian music.

They may have an interesting experience involving creative drama and rhythmic movement; or creative drama with music, art, or choral speaking. As a climax for the year, many fifth and sixth grades develop an integrated play involving all the arts and most of the academic subjects as well. One big project for the year is enough, but there are many opportunities for dramatic bits which make unforgettable whatever material is dramatized.

<sup>11</sup> Wilt, Miriam, *Children's Experiences in Listening*. Section 7, in *Children and the Language Arts*, by Herrick, Virgil E., Jacobs, Leland B. New York, Prentice-Hall, 1955, p. 154.

## Creative Dramatics in the Middle Grades

Teachers of the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, in a school where creative dramatics is unknown, will have a surprise when they introduce it to the children. This is something that never has to be "sold" to them. Granted that the teacher believes in its value; believes, too, that in order to give every child a chance to live a creative life, she should offer him an art through which he can express his thoughts and feelings; and knowing that some children can do this through creative writing, some through the graphic arts, others through drama or dance or music, a wide variety of art opportunities should be offered to children.



*Courtesy, Conservatory of Creative Dance, Salt Lake City, Utah*

**Some children find their creative expression in the dance. An original dance from The Berry Tree, a folk ballad.**

There is probably no child who does not feel an urgent need to do something worthy of recognition by others. He longs for individual distinction in something that has significance in his group. It is tragic when he cannot "measure up" in anything. If he does discover some activity in which he can excel, he feels adequate in the group.

"One of the strongest incentives to perfection is to be praised and honoured for one's excellence. We want the satisfaction of having done something well."<sup>12</sup>

A child may discover his ability in sports or in an academic subject. But whatever his main concern, whatever his life work will be, unless he has one or more of the arts, at least as a secondary interest, he will surely live an abbreviated life. Since many children (some of whom do not excel in any other thing) find that drama is the art through which they can best win a place for themselves, a teacher needs to discover this and give them their chance.

### Introduction to the Elements of Drama

Some teachers or leaders begin by telling children *about* creative drama; what it is, how it differs from memorized plays, and how much fun it is. Others prefer to plunge into the *doing* of it, leaving the explanation to come a little at a time. Still others believe that creative movement of some kind is the best approach. This question might be asked—

"If right now you could do the thing you enjoy doing most of anything in the world, what would it be?"

The children think a moment, and then hands shoot up.

"Don't tell us what it is. Show us!"

Children are always interested in a guessing game or charade in which each one pantomimes an activity he especially enjoys, and so they pantomime such activities as playing football, helping to sail a boat, reading, playing the piano, or one of many other favorite activities.

When a group is inclined to be timid and afraid of being laughed at, a leader can enter into the playing at once by doing the first pantomime. This should be thought through carefully, practiced at home, and done with great interest. The effect will be to establish a feeling of confidence.

If the children respond well to this simple game by guessing what is being done, and then show what they like to do, what exciting experience they have had or what gift they would like to receive, it is time for pantomime involving both *thinking* and *feeling*. In the child's own character, there is a limitless number of ideas for movement having to do with a search for something or somebody. It could be the frantic search for a book he must take to school, the search for a friend lost in the woods, the search for his father from whom he has become separated in a great city.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, Huisinga, Johan. p. 67.

If children are encouraged to discuss freely, they are likely to have not only realistic ideas like these but such thoughts as the search on a strange planet for signs of life, the search for peace, or even the search for God. All kinds of feelings will come into pantomime, especially if the leader contributes an idea occasionally to spark the imagination of the children. She has not only the right but the obligation to do this. The search will reveal not only anxiety and fear but hope, joy, and possibly exaltation. Some teachers never fail to get creative pantomime from children if they are given a very large veil or thin silk scarf. A girl often throws it over her head and is transformed into fog, wind, waves, birds, ghosts; while a boy is more likely to knot it around his waist and become a pirate, a genie, or a trail of smoke.

**Pantomime Motivated by Some Emotion.**—Interesting discussions often come about colors and the way they make one feel. Some children have written striking bits of verse about it. In a color demonstration, a circle of short capes of various colors were spread out on the floor, and a group of girls in a dance studio were invited to choose one apiece, put them on, and show in movement how these colors made them feel. A girl in pale blue wove a delicate pattern like moonlight; the purple girl walked as if in a regal procession; the green was lovely like spring; and the red and yellow danced together like flames. Many situations can be devised by both teacher and pupils, dominated first by one emotion, then changing from one emotion to another.

**Characterization.**—Characterization comes naturally to some boys and girls, while others are never able to do more than give a faint suggestion of anyone except themselves. It is principally a matter of imagination, although skill also has much to do with it. A child waves his hand madly in the air to have a chance to play a part he sees vividly, but unless he has had some experience in assuming a character, his playing is often not what he means it to be.

If a group of children are asked what must be done to play someone else, the answer comes quickly, "Act like them." But when the teacher says, "Is that the *first* thing?" Children think a moment and then one or two are ready to say, "First you have to *think* like them and *feel* like them." Characterization *from the inside* should always be stressed in working with boys and girls. They must learn to move imaginatively inside the lives of others, to try to understand why the other person feels and acts as he does. Encourage observation of people the children see every day. If a person is ill-natured, what makes him that way? If individuals are shifty or undependable, what might be the cause?

One good way to study character is through contrasts. Think of three different people in the same situation, such as buying food in a supermarket: a very particular housewife, a man uncertain as to what his wife will like, and a young girl whose mind is not on what she is doing. Half the class may pantomime the three characters successively, while the rest watch and evaluate. Then they reverse roles and the others assume the characters. When the teacher or the children see an especially real characterization, the child may be asked to repeat it alone. This not only encourages the child, but it stimulates the others to make a stronger effort to imagine the thoughts and actions of their characters.

### Creating From a Simple Story or Poem

After children have had enough experience in characterization to acquire some skill, they are ready for a short, simple story, or poem which has many interesting characters. Upper grades or high school students may well enjoy working on Mother Goose characters, which are familiar.

One story is that priceless old folktale *The Stone in the Road*, which has everything needed for a first step into story dramatization. It has a good but simple story, a worthy idea, any number of interesting characters to interpret or create, and action that is definite and easy to do. Furthermore, it can have as much or as little interaction of characters as the players can manage.

Literature almost invariably offers the best material for creative drama. It should always be preceded by some of the elements of drama which have been suggested. When children have had experience in dramatic play, creative movement, situations, and characterizations, they are ready and eager for stories.

Historical and geographical content is good if it is dramatic in character; but because it is limited to fact, it seldom inspires as much natural and imaginative response as does a story. Throughout their experience in dramatics, children also need an occasional project in creating from an idea rather than a story. Sometimes they profit by creating the story itself. More often, however, they draw upon literature for their material. While it gives them much with which to start, it stirs the imagination to go far.

Some literature may tell a story so completely that all the children need to do is to invent a little more dialog to tie it all together. Most stories, however, give opportunity for the children to build whole scenes on a sentence or two. Often they imagine an episode which would naturally have happened between two other

scenes, or sequels that would be logical outcomes. These imaginary scenes usually mean the introduction of some new characters, so that there is plenty of chance for creativity.

Rachel Field's charming little poem *Roads* is one example of good literature for dramatization.<sup>12</sup> By examining it, one can to a certain extent generalize on the requirements of material for creative drama.

A road might lead to anywhere—  
 To harbor towns and quays,  
 Or to a witch's pointed house  
 Hidden by bristly trees.  
 It might lead past the tailor's door,  
 Where he sews with needle and thread,  
 Or by Miss Pim the milliner's  
 With her hats for every head.  
 It might be a road to a great, dark cave  
 With treasure and gold piled high,  
 Or a road with a mountain tied to its end,  
 Blue-humped against the sky.  
 Oh, a road might lead you anywhere—  
 To Mexico or Maine.  
 But then, it might just fool you, and—  
 Lead you back home again!

Whether the teacher or leader chooses the material, or whether the children ask to dramatize a story or poem from a book they have enjoyed, *it is vitally important that all or most of the children like it.* The reason a child enjoys a story is chiefly because of the kind of emotional appeal it makes to him. A story or a poem that fails to arouse emotion is dull, and will never make a creative play.

Children like this poem. If presented to them by a leader who enjoys it, they never fail to respond to it. The unusual thing about it is that it appeals to an amazingly wide age range. Beginning with about the fourth grade, one can count on its sure appeal for a creative play to every age level from 9 to 50. It means all things to all ages. Each does something different with it.

Even third-grade children enjoy hearing it; but their experience is too limited for them to grasp its real possibilities for dramatization; it is better saved for those who can do more with it.

Each description arouses the imagination to create something beautiful or funny or poignant, the final two lines ranging all the way from the pleasure of getting home to dinner to the warm, deep feeling that "home" stirs in everyone after a long absence.

<sup>12</sup> Field, Rachel. *Pointed People*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1924. Also in *Stories to Dramatize* by Winifred Ward. Anchorage, Kentucky, Children's Theatre Press. Permission from Arthur S. Pederson.

Children in the sixth grade play Roads.



Trying on hats!

At Miss Pim's, the milliner . . .  
With her hats for every head.



A cave!

It might be a road to a great,  
dark cave  
With treasure and gold piled  
high.



Home!

Oh, a road might lead you  
anywhere . . .  
But then, it might just fool you,  
and—  
Lead you back home again!



Courtesy, Lincoln School, Evanston, Ill.

The emotional appeal is strong. "A witch's pointed house hidden by bristly trees" is a fearsome thing. Who knows what may happen to those who venture too near? "A great, dark cave with treasure and gold piled high" may mean pirates, or treasure to be found in chests that have been left there by robbers. "A road with a mountain tied to its end" may mean a climb to the top of a hitherto unscaled peak. There is the possibility of quaint or funny incidents both at Miss Pim's and at the tailor's.

*The content of the story should have potentialities for giving children meaningful experiences true to life values.* This does not mean that it should be profound. It may be light and beautiful, or humorous. It need not concern morals or ethics. The important thing is that it should concern values in life. *They must be sound values.*

In many of the old tales the central character falsifies to the villain about an action of his own or another character. Because he is the hero lying to the villain, the feeling is given that it is all right to fib if you do so to such a person. This, of course, is a false idea, and it is the leader's responsibility to see that the stamp of approval is not put on it. The teacher would probably never say, "this is wrong, children!" She might ask, however, "What do you think he could have replied so that a lie would not be necessary? Somehow we never like to have people we admire tell lies." When children know that they themselves are not involved, they feel free to discuss quite objectively what they consider right and what they consider wrong.

The poem, *Roads*, as it happens, does not concern ethics at all unless they come into the playing of the poem.

*A good story for a play gives plenty of opportunity for interesting action.* In the poem, *Roads*, there is material which may be used entirely as pantomime. It could even be danced. It is only when it is tied together with characters who walk the road, are involved in things that happen, and arrive back home again, that speech is actually necessary.

*A story that is good material for a play always has interesting characters.* The poem, *Roads*, is full of possibilities for delightful and interesting people. The children must decide who the characters which travel along the road will be. Some groups are mainly interested in the scenes along the road, and spend all their time playing these. Others are likely to use one or two characters who, for one reason or another, walk along the road and are involved in what happens at each place.

*The quality of the story should be good.* If it is not carefully written, it will not be worth the time it takes to work it out. Expe-

rience with good literature has a lasting influence on the taste of boys and girls. The poem *Roads* is well written; its style, language, quality of images are superior. The author has made a valuable contribution to children's literature with many poems and stories. Her *Doorbells* and *General Store* are some of her poems which are much used for creative dramatics. The readers can make a story out of the poem, *Roads*—a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

**One Way of Introducing "Roads."**—When the time seems right to introduce "Roads" to a fourth-grade language arts group which has enjoyed dramatic play and a little characterization, consider what, in the children's experience, will be the key to open the door for them to see the delightful possibilities in it.

Actual experiences are always good to set a mood. Lacking an immediate experience with an interesting road, such as children might see if they were in camp or at a picnic, try asking a question, "What do you see when I say 'roads'?" This will bring forth many ideas. At first they will be realistic ideas such as "a road that led out of our camp last summer that I always wanted to explore." Encouraged to use their imaginations, they may come forth with "the road of moonlight on the water," or "the road we'll be traveling to the moon in 25 years."

When the mood is right, say the poem *slowly*, giving the children (who are perhaps listening with closed eyes) *plenty of time to visualize it*. Since each place is pictured with only two lines of verse, it would be like a kaleidoscope if you were to read the poem rapidly.

"What place did you see most clearly?" the teacher might ask. It will be surprising to see how distinctly some of the children saw every road. In a second reading, the children could choose *one* scene and see what is *happening* there.

What an abundance of ideas will pour forth! No matter what their age, many of the listeners will see complete incidents taking place in their chosen scene. Each child who seems eager to describe his scene should be given a chance to express himself; and the teacher will listen with keen interest to every evidence of creative thought. This is important.

One fourth-grade teacher, after she and the children had listened to all the ideas, said, "Do you suppose we could put together our good ideas for one of the scenes and play it?"

Since more children had described "the great dark cave" than any other scene, they decided after a discussion to play that one, and begin with some pirates dragging in loot to hide it. One of the girls (a potential Girl Scout) had a plan for a Girl Scout troop

to be picknicking near there, and to discover the cave with all its "treasure and gold." They decided to begin with the pirates dragging in a part of their treasure to stow it away, then return to the ship to get the remainder. Several girls would then come along on the way to join their leader and the rest of the troop for a picnic. The last girl, always lagging behind, would see something shiny as she passed the entrance of the cave, which was concealed by bushes. One of the pirates, in his haste, had dropped a gold coin!

This would lead to the discovery of the cave and the gold. Then what should they do—gather as much gold as they can carry away? They were all for doing this when the teacher asked, "Whose gold do you suppose this is?"

"Why, it's stolen," the children replied. "Nobody knows where the pirates got it."

The question then arose that even if they know it is stolen, do they have the right to take it? After a little discussion, the girls decided that good Scouts would run to tell their leader.

"Let's have the pirates come back and catch them!" exclaimed one of the boys who could see real excitement ahead.

"Yes, and" . . . gleefully drawing their fingers across their throats with an ominous sound, several boys showed what would happen.

It looked as if the story might come to a bloody climax. The teacher gave no opinion on the matter but asked whether others had ideas about this. Fortunately, in every classroom there is usually a "steady element," or group which can be counted on to protect against extremes.

In this instance the boys finally agreed it would be just as much fun if the girls *almost* got caught; that they would hear the pirates just in "the nick of time." When they played the scene, though it went no further than this, their idea was that the Scout leader "got the law on the pirates" and they were caught.

With this much guidance the children had planned the scene. If they had taken over entirely, they would very likely have followed their first impulse to carry away the treasure, and be caught and "done away with" by the pirates. With the teacher's acceptance of the children's ideas, with no evidence of disapproval but with several questions to stir their thinking, they had an experience they enjoyed. This required some creative thinking, organizing of ideas into a dramatic form, and cooperative planning. Even though their play was anachronistic, it was an enriching experience for the children.

The group spent three-quarters of an hour in planning this scene, and played it several times with different casts. Each time it was evaluated. The "audience" commented on whether the players made

it clear who the characters were and what they were doing, commended interesting and natural action, and suggested ways to make it still better. Another day the class played Miss Pim, the milliner, and the mountain-climbing scene. They talked about the home scene but did not play it even though it was the part of the poem out of which they could have made a complete story.

High school and adult groups like to choose their favorite scenes, divide into groups of about five, and, after ten minutes of planning their chosen episodes separately, come back and play them for each other. They never fail to have fun and excitement in working out their scenes. Few of them would have believed they could feel so free and have such a delightful time with a child's poem.

### **Creative Plays in Other Subject Areas**

The most valuable experience which many fifth and sixth grades have all year may be a creative play as the center of a unified study in all school subjects. This is no small achievement. It extends over a period of several months, and its culmination is often the climax of the year's work.

The learning that comes out of such an experience in interrelationship is incalculable. The result is not just another play, nor is it simply a triumph in the retention of factual material.

Such a project includes a live audience—usually one performance for the school and one for parents. The latter is a demonstration of the children's work rather than entertainment, although it is invariably entertaining even when too full of the results of the children's research. Because of the thorough work they have done, the players are confident and fluent. If anyone in the audience is unaware that dialog is being improvised, with no written script anywhere, he may easily think from the smoothness of the performance that the play has been written. Only an occasional "Okay" and a slip in grammar shows that it is as genuine as an oriental rug with an imperfection here and there. If the observer realized that only during that afternoon one of the chief characters had come down with the mumps and that another child had stepped into the role without so much as trying on the costume, he would appreciate the resourcefulness and sense of responsibility developed by this kind of creative work.

**Source Material for Plays.**—Many ideas for plays come from the social studies. Whatever country the class is studying at the time the play is being planned may motivate the choice. For one group, interest in medieval England brought about a creative play based

on *Adam of the Road*, by Elizabeth Janet Gray; for another, studying Africa, a dramatic story about Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt. For others: a Russian folktale, showing the superiority of wit over brute force; a Japanese story contrasting the old and the new ideas in Japan; a Chinese story showing how knowledge outwitted the conceit of the Emperor who commanded that all learned books be burned in order that knowledge might begin with his dynasty.

Plays may also be built around persons who have contributed much to society. It might be Roger Williams, William Penn, or Benjamin Franklin; an artist or musician, or a great modern character, such as Albert Schweitzer.

Other groups may be interested in pioneer stories: the great Northwest, the Gold Rush, the Santa Fe Trail. *The Tree in the Trail*, by Holling C. Holling, has more than once proved successful.

One of the favorites in a sixth-grade classroom in Illinois, was an Indian play based on a tale about a young Indian boy who came upon a pioneer white lad whose foot had been badly hurt by thorns. After relieving his suffering, the Indian took the white boy to the nearby camp where his father, chief of the tribe, made the injured boy welcome. A feast was given in his honor that night, and the young braves entertained him with tales, told in pantomime, of the exploits of their heroes. Each story was accompanied by tom-toms and rattles played by the rest of the tribe, seated in a circle on the ground. No two of the pantomimes had the same pattern, but all the braves followed exactly the beat of their own distinctive rhythms. Intense eagerness characterized the whole process of work from the day the children began originating Indian rhythms until it was produced for the rest of the school.

Children have a richer experience—judging, organizing, learning about dramatic construction—if they study a complete novel rather than a short story, and their work is more challenging if they select episodes and adapt the narrative to dramatic form. Considerable skill, however, is required on the part of the teacher-guide. This is also true if children create their own story, for it is extremely difficult to originate a plot good enough to present for an audience.

One sixth-grade group, interested like all modern children in space travel, wanted to plan a space play.<sup>14</sup> Of their own volition, they discarded several poorly written, even though exciting, stories; and because they had an unusually gifted dramatic teacher to guide

<sup>14</sup> Described in *Playmaking With Children* by Winifred Ward. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. 1957. p. 168.

them, and a classroom teacher who gave them many opportunities for helpful scientific study, they created a charming play. They called it "The Dark Side of the Moon."

Certain regular periods during the week may be set aside for the development of the play, while various kinds of research go on at other times. Sometimes a native of the country being studied is available to talk to the group. There may be a documentary film, a museum collection; and there are always helpful books and pictures.

If the play should need songs and dances, the music and physical education teachers are usually willing to help. In art periods the children may design and make costumes and properties. There may be songs or prayers to write. Both the space play and one on the subject of time required scientific charts. When all these activities are spread over several months, the regular school routine is not disrupted in the least until the final week. In the meantime, regular work in the social studies unit may have progressed far beyond that particular aspect of study on which the play is based.

School is unusually interesting and exciting for the children involved in the "big project"; and they become so sure in their conception of what it is all about that they have the confidence of "authorities." Many classroom teachers have testified to the value of such a project in motivating research, in bringing growth in independent thinking, and in helping to socialize children who have been unsocial. It is an adventure, shared by teacher and children, which is usually the most demanding and happiest experience of their school year. What makes it so enjoyable is that at the heart of it there is a creative art experience—the kind of experience which "is as necessary to the health of the spirit as food is to the health of the body."<sup>11</sup>

### Interrelationship of the Arts

Art experiences in the future will be provided for children more and more often in an integrated context rather than as separate arts. Drama and dance always have been in reality the same art. The essential quality of both is motion. When pantomime fails to make the story clear, then words take over.

Music motivates many experiences children have in creative drama. They often listen to records, such as *Danse Macabre*, *Circus Time*, *The Little Shepherd*, *Of a Tailor and a Bear*, and pantomime—what

<sup>11</sup> Applegate, Mauree. *Everybody's Business—Our Children*. Evanston, Ill., Row Peterson & Co. 1952. p. 205.

the music says to them. The playing out of stories is a strong motivation for art expression; and, in turn, a picture sometimes stirs the children's imagination to create a play. The rhythm of Indian drums may be the starting-point for a stirring dramatization; and when children work together on an integrated project, every art to which they have been exposed—creative writing, music, dance, designing, and painting—converge in the drama which is the meeting-place for all of them.

## Improvisation in Junior and Senior High School

The term "creative dramatics" changes to "improvisation" for young people of high school and college age. Informal drama is used in many high school speech and English courses, and in probably all college acting classes.



*Courtesy, School of Drama, University of Washington, Seattle, Wash.*

Witches scene from Macbeth. Played creatively by junior high school students.

In an eighth-grade elective dramatic course in the Evanston, Ill., school system (which has a dramatic department with a supervisor and trained specialists) the students are introduced to the plays of Shakespeare by the dramatizing of episodes from the stories of several of the plays. Using Shakespeare in this way introduces children to the plays in the way they were intended to reach people—by experiencing them on the stage, not in English classes. When young people know the stories of the plays and become acquainted with the characters, they enjoy and profit greatly from playing them in their own words, leaving Shakespeare's difficult language until senior high school.

The teacher reads to students, in Shakespeare's words, the episodes they choose to dramatize. In this way, they may get the flavor of the dialog, and are able to use many phrases from the play. This approach is encouraged by the teacher who wishes above everything else to instill in them a love for great literature.

Some senior high school English teachers use improvisation in Shakespeare and in teaching other dramatic literature. Speech teachers are finding this technique valuable in role-playing for discussion groups, and also in approaching formal plays. Many and varied experiences in improvisation are assigned college acting classes for attaining naturalness in characterization. Some of the best university theater directors consider this technique indispensable in staging plays.

**Scout Program in Dramatics.**—Creative dramatics is used not only in community recreation programs but it is one of the most vital and popular parts of the Girl Scout program. The 1956 handbook, *Dramatics and Ceremonies for Girl Scouts*, states that all of their plays should be "creative dramatics." Whether the girls do brief improvisations or full-length plays, they develop them all creatively.

The Boy Scouts also have a drama program, with requirements given in the 1957 Merit Badge Series in *Dramatics*. These requirements are all in the field of formal dramatics, but it is left to the local communities as to what kind and how much dramatic activity there shall be.

### The Teacher's Role

What does the teacher or leader get personally from creative work with children? There should be a reward for the kind of effort it requires to stir creativity of any kind in pupils. Hughes Mearns says that before anything significant can be done in the creative education of youth by adults, "they themselves must first learn to become

creative personalities."<sup>16</sup> Even then, the techniques of the creative art must be thoroughly understood; and the best way to learn them is at a college or university where good courses are offered.

It looks easy when one sees a demonstration in creative dramatics by a skilled teacher. One is aware that the leader creates a relationship with the children that is friendly and confident; that she both enjoys and respects them. One admires the natural way the teacher leads into what she has planned to do, and the vitality with which she presents it. It is wonderful to see how enthusiastically the children respond.

The teacher does not talk much. In place of expressing opinions of her own, she draws out the children's ideas by skillful questions. She appreciates their replies. Sensitive teachers encourage children to create in their own way. They know that a creator cannot breathe with strange lungs.<sup>17</sup> When the children fail to make suggestions necessary for the improvement of work, a question from the leader can bring about the keenest thinking of the group. Children are encouraged to believe in themselves and their abilities, and in so doing help themselves to reach the outer rim of their capacity to experience.<sup>18</sup>

**Rewards of Creative Teaching.**—The rewards for guiding young people in creative work are great. Teaching, to a very large extent, is a creative profession, and many teachers outside the arts are remarkably creative. There is likewise a great opportunity for exercising the imagination in creative writing, drama, dance, music, and the graphic arts. As teachers grow in creative ability, they are constantly building inner resources which make their present life rich and provide for later years when they may not have so many people and activities on which to count.

In guiding children in creative drama, encouraging results do not come at once. It is a slow and sometimes discouraging process. Ideas often do not get off the ground. However, in rare moments something happens which provides the thrill of accomplishment. Remember the mechanical bird in Andersen's "Nightingale," which played its little waltz tune perfectly every time—and the real nightingale whose song was unpredictable because it came from the heart? This always has been and always will be the way of creativity.

<sup>16</sup> Mearns, Hughes, *The Creative Adult*. New York, Doubleday Doran & Co., 1940. p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Lowenfeld, Viktor, *Creative and Mental Growth*. New York, The Macmillan Co., 1952. p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Mearns, Hughes, *Creative Power*. New York, Dover Pub., 2d ed., 1958. p. 256.

# PART 3

## PART III

### Children's Theater

**M**ARK TWAIN WROTE to a Chicago school principal, "It is my conviction that the children's theater is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century, and that its vast educational value—now but dimly perceived and but vaguely understood—will presently come to be recognized."<sup>1</sup>

This conviction is shared by many people in this country. If all children's theaters were of as much educational value as the one with which Mark Twain had experience as board president—the Children's Educational Theatre of New York—the cultural value of children's theaters would be generally recognized today.

The Children's Educational Theatre was the first real children's theater in the United States and had a definite cultural influence on the entire underprivileged neighborhood in which it existed. Founded in 1903 by Alice Minnie Herts<sup>2</sup> in a New York settlement house, the Educational Alliance brought much that was beautiful into the lives of children whose only entertainment had been the cheap adult picture shows in the vicinity.

The year *The Tempest* was presented, families who had never read a page of Shakespeare in their lives were inspired by the enthusiasm of their children to acquaint themselves with the play. Sometimes a lecturer explained the plays to be given in the language spoken by the parents of the children. Every effort was made to bring about a general appreciation of whatever drama was to be produced in the playhouse. The theater was so highly esteemed that it had other distinguished supporters besides Mark Twain: William Dean Howells, Brander Matthews, George Pierce Baker, and Otto Kahn.

<sup>1</sup> From an undated letter published in the *Chicago Record-Herald*.

<sup>2</sup> Herts, Alice Minnie, *The Children's Educational Theatre*. New York, Harper & Bros., 1911.

Present-day children's theaters have few illustrious champions to give them prestige, but their standards are rising, thanks to the quality of many of the people who are working in this field of the theater. The National Children's Theatre Conference has been steadily carrying on an educational program since its founding in 1944. Playwriting competitions are stimulating young authors to try their hands at writing children's plays. Many colleges and universities are producing and touring one children's play each season, and child audiences in the older established children's theaters are growing more discriminating with each season's experience.

If and when children's theater production reaches a high artistic level—and at the same time never loses its appeal to the child—more gifted writers will be attracted to this field just as distinguished authors and illustrators have been entering the field of providing fine and beautiful books for boys and girls. Children in the middle and upper grades could appreciate more mature plays than are now offered them; and authors who can write plays with depth of meaning underlying their easily understood plots contribute not only delight in entertainment to a child audience but help to build a worthy philosophy in the lives of the boys and girls.

This is the most urgent need of the children's theater today. Good scripts always interest the best directors, designers, and actors, both professional and amateur; and when they are well produced, they arouse an enthusiastic response from the parents and children who see them. Great theater for children can only come about with great plays. Both organizations and individuals over the country are working toward this end. They are offering prizes in play competitions, trying out new plays, experimenting with interesting techniques, and arousing a wider and wider interest among adult theater people.

## **Developing Plans for a Children's Theater**

If a community is convinced of the need of a children's theater and is willing to work for one, it would seem advisable to study how such an enterprise has been successfully accomplished in other communities. Some community groups have organized children's theaters with full seasons of plays. Others are merely sponsors who present one or more productions each season. The examples given below—a few out of the many which might be named in each category—show something of the wide range of children's theater activity over the country.

## Types of Sponsors

*Civic Theatres.*—Portland, Oreg.; Kalamazoo, Mich.; Tulsa, Okla.; Indianapolis, Ind.; Pittsburgh, Pa.

*Colleges, Universities, or Professional Schools.*—University of Minnesota at Minneapolis; Goodman School of the Theatre, Chicago, Ill.; Northwestern University (co-sponsor with the public schools), Evanston, Ill.

*Parent-Teacher Associations.*—Wellesley, Mass.; Anderson, Ind.; Detroit, Mich.; Hartland, Wis.

*City Recreation Departments.*—Washington, D.C.; San Diego, Calif.; Richmond, Va.; Boston, Mass.

*Junior Leagues.*—Flint, Mich.; Shreveport, La.; Rochester, N.Y.; Albuquerque, N. Mex.

*American Association of University Women.*—Chattanooga, Tenn.; Rapid City, N. Dak.; Crystal Lake, Ill.; Lawton, Okla.

*Community Children's Theatres Sponsored by a Combination of a Few or Many Participating Organizations.*—Seattle Junior Programs; Nashville, Tenn.; Palo Alto, Calif.; Kansas City, Mo.; Omaha, Nebr.; Oakland, Calif.; Birmingham, Ala.; Spokane, Wash.; Milwaukee, Wis.

## Plans for Organization

A community group, wishing to found a children's theater, may begin by seeking to interest all organizations concerned with children. Since there is often no trained theater person in the community to initiate children's theater, it is possible to solicit the cooperation of parent-teacher groups, recreation departments, public libraries, elementary teacher groups, Junior Leagues, the American Association of University Women, and Scout and Campfire leaders. The public school administrators should be among the first to be contacted. Any or all of these community groups may be invited to make up a planning committee for a children's theater organization. From 20 to 30 representatives is a good number with which to start an organization of this kind. Such groups are usually enthusiastic, but uninformed. One of the first steps is to give them some background concerning the value and purpose of a children's theater.

The *manual* written by the Seattle Junior Programs could be very useful. This group is a strong and efficient organization and may well be emulated by other communities. This particular manual suggests that board members be chosen from a variety of organizations; and that many active members be enlisted for the actual work

of such committees as finance, program, theater facilities, tickets, promotion, and the many educational aspects connected with establishing a children's theater.

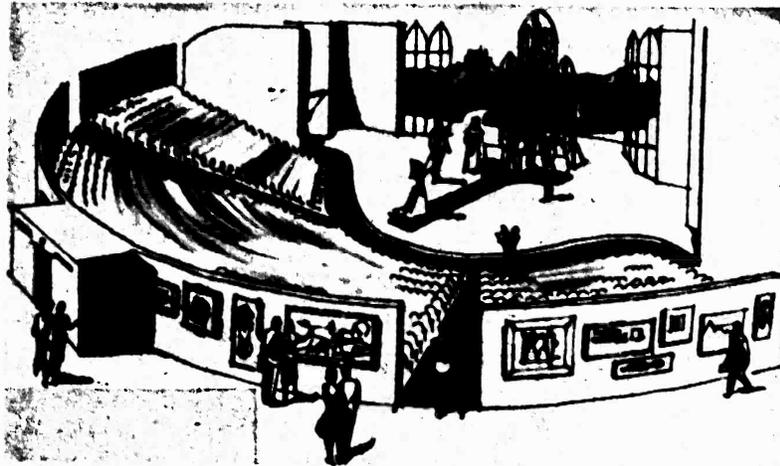
**Choosing Sponsors.**—If the theater is to be a truly community project, a sponsor or sponsors should be representative of the whole community. A single organization, if deeply interested, can manage the project alone, as so many Junior Leagues have done. The citizens, no matter how appreciative, will not consider the theater their own unless it is a community organization, such as a city-wide parent-teacher association, a community theater, or a city recreation department.

It is advisable in organizing a community children's theater to contact all representative community groups especially concerned with the welfare of children in order to ascertain the degree of their interest. The first of these will be the elementary school administrators. If a vital interest is established with them, they will be the most valuable sponsors of all. Indeed, without the cooperation of the public schools, it would be unwise to attempt a children's theater.

**Selecting Facilities.**—A suitable auditorium and stage will be one of the first requirements for a children's theater. An ideal place would be a beautiful little theater with 500 or 600 seats, with check-rooms for coats, rehearsal space, workrooms for making and storing costumes, scenery and properties, an efficient switchboard, exhibit rooms, and a large foyer. However, an auditorium or a community theater is usually available. Perhaps, at some future time, some beneficent citizen will offer a theater built especially for children's plays, as was the case in Palo Alto, Calif.

Lacking any adequate auditorium, a large room with no stage at all has been found to be entirely satisfactory. In fact, it has some very real advantages over an auditorium with a stage. A considerable number of children's theaters now present all their plays "in the round." These arena stages are often only the floor space in the center of a circle of seats. If plays are given for an audience of not more than 200, it is possible for all children to see if some sit on the floor in the front circle, others on small chairs, and the back rows on ordinary chairs. For a large audience, platforms are necessary to raise part of the seats to levels where every child can easily see the play.

These theaters are much more intimate than the picture-frame type, and children like to be close to the players. Several of the new designs for children's theaters with stages have a semi-circular seating arrangement which brings the whole audience near the stage.



*Courtesy, Western Springs Theatre and Arts Center, Western Springs, Ill.*

**An ideal stage and auditorium for a community theater.**

Children's theater directors often find that an arena arrangement makes a between-scene conversation for director and audience easy and natural. Although care should be taken not to dissect the play or production so that the illusion is impaired in any way, the director can make the children aware of aspects of plot or character which will add greatly to their appreciation. Sometimes, too, they like to learn a witch's spell, or sing little songs from the play. In several of the English children's theaters where plays are done in the round, children in the audience often find themselves drawn into the action of the play, as townsfolk, perhaps, or people at a fair.

Although the beauty of setting and lighting which every child should have the change to experience is only possible with a proscenium stage, it is a good thing to know that simple productions can still be effective "in the round," making use of costumes and properties but without any scenery.

## Theater Production

Since arena theaters require a different kind of directing from that used for a proscenium stage, it will be necessary to consider first whether the group will be producing its own plays, or engaging outside groups which require one type of theater or another. Many present sponsors produce one or two themselves and supplement them with several programs from other sources.

Such sources may be the drama department of a college if there is one in the vicinity; a high school drama department (in some of the larger communities several high schools contribute one play each); a private studio; a community theater; a professional touring company.

There are at present a number of touring companies in the country presenting plays, puppets, dance programs, and other types of entertainment for children. Many theaters regularly engage one or more of these each season.<sup>3</sup>

### Staff for a Producing Group

If a group is able to produce its own plays, it will, of course, need a staff. The most important members of such a staff are the director, technician, business and publicity managers, and costume head. Most necessary is a director with theater training. Without a trained director there can be no real theater. But there are few communities which do not have several people who have studied in the theater departments of colleges. The training will probably have been in adult theater, but if such a person *knows and likes children*, he or she can adapt his knowledge to the children's theater.

There is an advantage in having a permanent director rather than a different director for each play. A long-range view in choosing plays, a working acquaintance with sponsors, staff, and potential players, and a reputation for high standards built up over the years, go far in insuring the success of a children's theater. A permanent director should, of course, be paid.

If the right person cannot be found for this position, a governing committee must take on many of the responsibilities which a permanent director would assume. The program committee should read and evaluate many plays in choosing the year's program and in planning for several successive years. Directors will have to be found and consulted on the plays they are to direct. Players will be assembled for tryouts. When a director is staging a play for the theater for the first time, members of the committee should watch rehearsals from time to time to make sure that standards are being upheld.

**Qualifications of a Director.**—Whether a children's theater director stages one or all of the plays of a season, he needs two qualifi-

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<sup>3</sup> Information may be obtained by writing John A. Walker, Executive Secretary, AETA, Dept. of Speech, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.

cations above all others: *trained ability to direct plays, and an understanding and love for children.* Beyond these two qualifications, he needs to have a certain amount of administrative ability, plenty of vitality, a refreshing sense of humor, good taste, and a personality which wins the respect and admiration of both children and adults. He must be able to look at life through the eyes of a child, at the same time seeing its values with the vision of a far-seeing adult.

**The Technician.**—Beginning theaters rarely dignify the person in charge of scenery and properties by the title of "technician." He is usually just an untrained person who is handy at building the settings and assembling the properties which the director needs. The technician may or may not be the person who designs them. The husbands of the women who have assumed the responsibility for the production often take over these jobs.

Some of the most satisfying settings are very simple indeed. By means of several tall screens of three or four panels each and a few steps and platforms, colorful and imaginative settings can be devised for a whole season of plays. The screens, often used in front of stage drapes, have double-acting hinges so that they can be painted on both sides and used for two different settings. If they are heavy, furniture gliders can be used on the bottom so that they will not have to be lifted. Irregular, decorative tops for the screens are added for oriental or other plays for which they are appropriate.

**The Electrician.**—If there is no electrical equipment, the electrician's job is simple: he merely turns on and off what lights there are. An old school stage may have only a row of footlights and border lights. Both give a hard, artificial light, and no artist would tolerate them. Most men or high school youths know something about electricity and will find ways to soften the lights and make them contribute in some small way to the mood of the play. By using only sections of the footlights to emphasize certain stage areas, and combining colors in the borders, an electrician can help greatly to make the stage pictures more effective. Two or three spotlights, if they can be rented, will enable him to provide good visibility as well as beauty to the scene.

**Costume Committee.**—In an arena production or a stage play with a minimum of scenery, the costumes become increasingly important. They add much to the beauty and interest of the play, as well as to the establishment of character.

The head of the costume committee, therefore, whether trained in the theater or not, must make a careful study of each play: the period (if any), the characters, and the plans for the stage back-

ground and lighting. This individual always works with the director and the designer, in order to see that the costumes suit the characters and are a harmonious part of the stage pictures. Each element of the production must be planned to let the story come through.

Whoever assumes the responsibility for the costumes must be skilled in cutting patterns and sewing. There is much to know about fabrics and where to get them, both in theatrical fabric supply houses and in the various departments of a large store. The head costumer should also supervise a number of assistants who help with costume changes in the running of the plays, press the costumes between performances, and see to the cleaning and storing at the end of the productions.

**Promotion and Publicity.**—Although the promotion of a children's theater depends on all who have anything to do with it, most of the responsibility for filling the house for the plays devolves on the publicity chairman. When a theater is new, the chairman talks to parent-teacher groups and other adult gatherings, interprets the aims of the theater to parents, writes newspaper articles, arranges for radio and television publicity, plans for photographic service, and is on the alert for any or all opportunities to interest both parents and children. Colorful posters (often made by the art classes) are placed in every school. Handbills or brochures, giving the full schedule of plays with brief but interesting descriptions are given to children to take home. All necessary information about dates, hours, place, and cost of season and single tickets, are sent out by many theaters shortly before the opening of the season ticket sale. Needless to say, the person in charge of publicity will need assistants to carry out his many duties.

Whether the theater produces its own plays or engages its talent from outside sources, the job of the publicity head is of vital importance. An enterprising, dynamic person who can both write and speak well is always sought for this position. But above all other qualifications, this individual must have a deep and unchangeable belief in the theater and all it should mean in the lives of the children.

## **Financing a Production**

### **Importance of the Business Manager**

Absolute honesty and dependability, a good business sense, a co-operative spirit in working with other organizations, and a deep interest in the welfare of the theater—all these are indispensable in

the person to whom the business matters of the children's theater are entrusted.

A children's theater is not a good means for making money. Even if such an institution were not a sufficiently worthy end in itself, it could not earn any considerable amount without pricing its tickets beyond the reach of a large percentage of the children in the community. Rather than trying to be a money-making institution, a children's theater is better off if *partially* subsidized so that the price of the tickets can be kept at a nominal cost. At the present time, some theaters make their plays available to children at no cost whatever. Other sponsors price their tickets anywhere from 10 cents to \$1.50.

### Items of Expense

A *royalty* is charged for the use of the play. Almost every good children's play requires a royalty payment for each performance. At present, the usual rate is \$15 for each performance, a very few plays requiring more or less. In a theater with a small auditorium and many performances, reductions are often made by the play publishers.

Some groups, wishing to reduce expense, write their own dramatizations of folk and fairy tales. This is poor economy, for unless a playwright has much imagination and skill, the play he writes will not be worth producing. It is not easy to write a good play, even when it is based on a dramatic story. Although children may flock to see the play, it will be doing them an injustice if less than the best which has been written is offered them. Economize on almost anything rather than on the script.

*Rental* of the auditorium, if it is not donated, may be so large an item that it is prohibitive. For this reason, some institution, such as a school or a community theater, should be urged to become a sponsor and grant the use of the needed space for the cost of such items as light, heat, and janitor service.

*Books or manuscripts* for the staff and players are expensive.

The *printing of tickets*, both season and single, is an item. Reserved seat tickets will be more expensive to print than general admission tickets. The availability of good seats is an important incentive for advance buying.

*Posters*, announcement brochures, and pictures for publicity add to the expense. Pictures are not always used, but are usually an asset. Often a local newspaper will take one or more pictures for the paper without charge. Photographs are usually taken also to keep as records of the productions.

*Programs.* if they are used, cost money. Many children's theaters have discontinued the use of programs after discovering that the audience in general seems little interested in them except as material for paper airplanes.

*Electrical equipment and supplies* constitute one of the first expenditures made in any new theater. Spot and flood lights and dimmers, even though expensive, contribute more than anything else to the visual aspect of a play. Dimmers, especially, are indispensable for mood lighting with its gradual changes and its dramatic climaxes.

Expert advice should be sought when the opportunity comes for purchasing a small, portable switchboard or a complete control board. Before any lighting equipment is added to what is already on the stage, the amount of electric power being brought into the building must be checked by an electrician to determine whether it is sufficient to carry the extra load.

*Scenery and properties* are rather large items, of course. But the trend is toward suggestive settings, less than full height, and combined with the larger stage properties, stage curtains, and an artistically lighted sky cyclorama. For folk and fairy tales or for any nonrealistic play, this type of setting can be very delightful. Even in realistic plays, it is interesting to see how satisfying a partial set can be.

*Costumes,* because most children's productions are costume plays with large casts, can be a big item. Since it is not fair to ask the players to pay for their own costumes, the theater should build up its own wardrobe. A large part of a production budget often goes for costume materials.

Cheap fabrics are always a poor investment. The old idea of using cheese-cloth and cambric has never been a popular one in children's theaters where costumes must be used over and over again or remodeled. Many materials can be found in theatrical supply houses which, although not cheap, look like much more expensive fabrics. Cotton duvetyn, for instance, appears to be fine broadcloth; and rayon silks, satins, brocades, corduroys, and leatherettes are wonderful substitutes for handsome and expensive materials.

The cleaning and laundering of costumes can amount to rather a large sum if plays with large casts are given.

*Make-up.*—The make-up box will need a few extra supplies for each production after the original investment.

*Trucking* may be an expense, if scenery is not constructed in the building in which the productions are given. It is a large item in touring.

*Service.*—The janitors should be paid for extra work unless this is included in rental. If performances are given in a school where rent is not paid, a good deal of extra work is caused for the janitor. It is not only right that the theater should pay him a regular fee, but it will be money well spent in gaining his respect and his willingness to work for the interests of the theater. If a fire marshal is present at performances, it will be necessary to pay him also.

*Music.*—Nowadays, most of the music and other sound effects can be had on records, or they can be taped and used again and again. In such cases, the expense is much less than to hire musicians.

*Incidental expense.*—Plays for consideration, stationery, stamps, telephone bills, and occasional taxi bills, must be considered in the budget.

This list of expenses takes no account of salaries for director, technician, or costumer. For a single production, it is quite possible to do all the work with volunteer help. There are few theaters which can call on volunteers to give as much time and thought as it requires to direct, produce, and costume a *series* of plays without paying them adequate salaries.

If such duties are a part of the work expected of teacher or civic theater staff, that is another matter. It is easy to see that a children's theater must be an altruistic undertaking with the sharing of responsibilities by many people. Schools, public libraries, symphony orchestras, and museums do not pay their way, nor are they expected to do so. Theaters can pay their way, but they should not be asked to assume the total financial load if they contribute to the culture of the community.

Auditoriums are offered to many American theaters today with little cost. Certain staff members of schools, colleges, or civic theatres are assigned to responsible positions in the children's theater as part of their jobs, and very often theater students are given credit for laboratory work backstage. Countless men and women of the communities are doing volunteer work of all kinds.

Money taken in from ticket sales can be used for royalties, scenery, costumes, equipment, and in some instances to pay the director and certain other staff members. With the cooperation of many institutions, organizations, and individuals, children's theaters are now enriching the lives of some millions of children in this country and abroad.

## Choosing the Script

Where are scripts purchased? How are plays chosen for a wide age range of children? How long should a children's theater play

be? How much difference does it make in the choice of a script whether the players are children or adults?

These are a few of the questions which are always asked by those who plan to present plays for children, whether a single play or a season's offerings. They are important questions, for on a wise choice of plays depends much of the immediate success and also the lasting value of the theater.

A trained children's theater director has read most of the available plays, has worked on some of them, and knows how to judge a play for children. But if a group inexperienced in children's theater must choose, it is a good thing to seek advice from people who do know children's plays.<sup>4</sup>

*The Children's Theatre Conference*, a division of the American Educational Theatre Association, has materials on the criteria for evaluating children's plays, lists of published plays, and many other helpful materials, which are very valuable to inexperienced members. Most of the experienced children's theater people in the country work on various committees and projects of the Children's Theatre Conference. Its quarterly Newsletter is full of information as to what goes on in the field. The *Educational Theatre Journal*, which is sent to all its members, has articles both on adult and children's theaters. Explanation of membership is given on page 13.

### Age Range in Audience

Since the understanding and interests of children differ from year to year, it is not easy to choose plays which are best suited to all. Some few children's theaters have two series of plays, one for children from 4 through 7 or 8, the other for children from 8 to 13 or 14. In such a plan, suitable plays can be chosen for all. Simple, one-hour dramatizations of *Peter Rabbit* and *The Three Bears*, for instance, delight the little folk. Longer and more complex plays such as *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Treasure Island* are meaty fare for the older children. Most beginning theaters plan plays for children between the ages of 6 to 10, since attendance within this age range is largest. Such tales as *Jack and the Beanstalk*,<sup>5</sup> *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*,<sup>6</sup> *The Adventures of Tom*

<sup>4</sup> WARD, WINIFRED. *Theatre for Children*. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Chorpenning, Charlotte. *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press.

<sup>6</sup> White, Jessie Braham. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. New York, Samuel French.

*Sawyer*,<sup>1</sup> can be counted on to attract large audiences of children. As long as the theater is a novelty, it is likely to draw the older children; almost everyone remembers with joy these stories of their childhood. Witness their popularity when produced in moving-pictures, television, or ballet. If the plays and their directing continue to cater to the appeal mainly of young children, the attendance of the older boys and girls will soon fall off. It is difficult to find an answer to this problem unless certain plays each season are chosen and advertised for a particular age range.



Courtesy, George Lathau's Puppets, Cleveland, Ohio

Flip Jackson and Wilbur. Puppets are always popular with young audiences.

**Story Interest.**—The first requirement for a suitable play script is a story which will interest and be understood by children in the age range for which it is intended. To children this is the most important aspect of a play.

Take *Tom Sawyer* as an example. It can always be counted on to interest boys and girls from 8 to 14. Charlotte Chorpenning's adaptation, called, "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" is one of the

<sup>1</sup> Chorpenning, Charlotte. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Chicago, Coach House Press.

very popular plays now being presented in children's theaters. The Mark Twain novel is episodic, but the writer, in the interest of keeping it within a reasonable time limit, and at the same time holding it to a direct dramatic line, worked out the plot in four scenes. Because so many incidents had to be omitted, it was found necessary to take some liberties with time and space. The story is not changed, however, and the scenes build directly to the climax. Because the novel is so full of fascinating adventures, some directors prefer to use a play version consisting of many short scenes, including more of the episodes, even though each one is less fully developed.\*

*Story Meaning.*—A play should have meaning—should *say* something. It need not have a theme, like *The Blue Bird*, which says that we may search the world for happiness when all the time we might have found it at home. However, it must have universal truths. It may show the power of human kindness, the superiority of keen wit over brute strength, the struggle within a boy who is afraid to do what his conscience tells him is right.

This last is one thing which Tom Sawyer says. Even though Tom is far from being a "model" boy, the struggle within him between the urgency to tell the truth to save Muff Potter's life, and his terror both of Injun Joe and the probable consequence of breaking his vow not to tell, could scarcely be stronger. It is so real that every child lives through it with him, and there is a certain exaltation, even beyond admiration, when the good in Tom is victorious.

This was not the object of Mark Twain's story which was written as a reflection of his own boyhood in a little town on the Mississippi River. Every really good story has certain threads of universal truth woven into its fabric; Tom Sawyer is no exception.

The exposition should make clear in the first few moments of the play what the situation is and who the characters are. The settings, costumes, and properties will help, but the dialog and action should tell the audience what it needs to know. It should evolve a little at a time as it is needed. The most natural exposition comes from what one character says to another, and the more skillful the playwright the less noticeable it is that he is putting certain speeches into the mouths of his characters in order to inform the audience.

The play, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, opens with lively action: Tom darting out of the house, jam on face and hands, followed shortly by Aunt Polly who suspects he has been up to mischief. Even for children who do not know the novel, the situation

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\* Sara Spencer's *Tom Sawyer* is in eight short scenes. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press.

is perfectly clear. Each character who enters is identified at once: the audience is not left to question his relationship with the story.

The plot of the play is made up of a problem, its complications, and solution. The story must never be allowed to stop. Interruptions, such as dances which have no real function in the story, or any other interpolated action or incident, weaken the structure and lessen the interest of an audience.

Early in the play a problem is revealed which the hero needs to solve; and the successive incidents are characterized by conflict and suspense. A secure situation never arouses us emotionally and a play which does not do this is no play at all.



*Courtesy, Children's Theatre, Evanston, Ill.*

**Muff Potter promises to take the boys fishing. Tom Sawyer, dramatized by Charlotte Chorpenning.**

Then comes the climax in which the problem is solved, often by the hero, sometimes by others. This needs to be the high point in the drama, definite in a child's play, with a conclusive and satisfying ending coming almost immediately after the climax. "Satisfying," to young children, means poetic justice, a fair distribution of rewards and punishments. Older children should learn to realize that these need not be material rewards and punishments, and the most thought-provoking plays leave an audience with a question or a feeling that they should do something about the situation. In any event, the important thing is that the sympathy of the young audience is kept on the side of what is fair and right.

Characters should have traits recognized by the children as "real," whether the play concerns fantasy or modern realism. They should be individualized, consistent, and thoroughly believable.

Every American, child or adult, recognizes the people in *Tom Sawyer* as real. Judging by the book's enormous popularity abroad, they would seem to be universal. There is scarcely a boy who does not see much of himself in Tom, Huck, Ben, or Joe. Few would admit to seeing themselves in Sid since he is made such an entirely unsympathetic character.

Dialog should sound like natural speech. Such a master as Mark Twain, while apparently writing conversation directly from life, heightens its quality to such an extent that an experienced playwright like Charlotte Chorpenning admitted that she never fully appreciated his writing until she found it necessary to write dialog to fill in scenes from the book.

Unskilled playwrights usually make the mistake of writing speeches which are too long to be natural. If they would listen to someone reading their scenes aloud during the writing of the play, they might avoid lengthy dialog which will have to be cut by those who direct their plays. *Everything possible should be shown by action.* Dialog should be reduced to a minimum in a children's play.

## Directing a Play

No one should ever attempt the directing of a play without training, for to do it even adequately requires very special understanding and techniques.

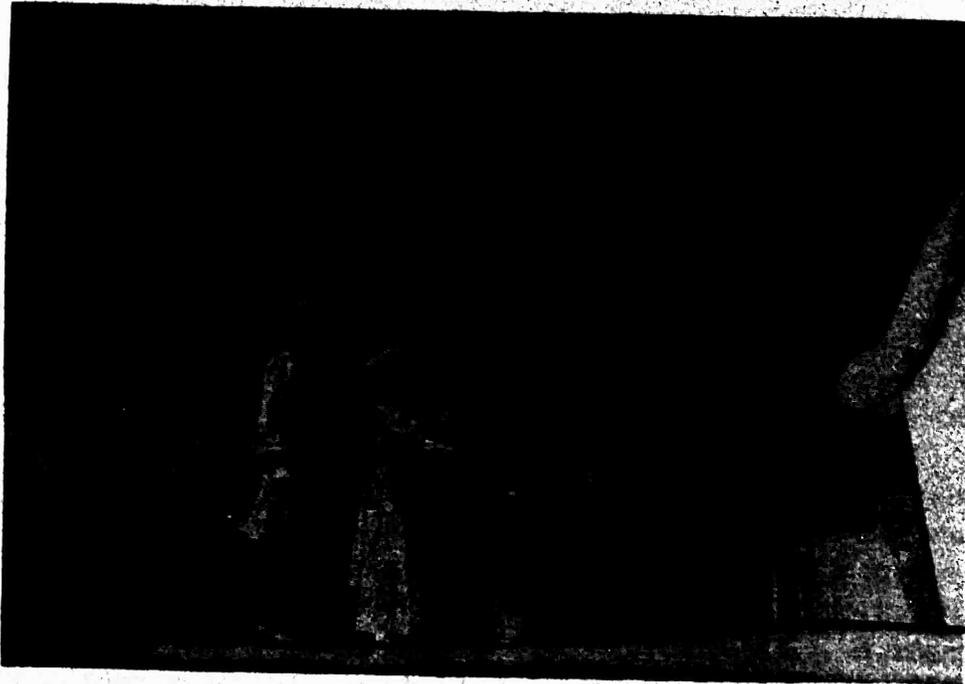
The first requirement, after theater training, is the understanding of boys and girls and a real respect for them. Condescension in the attitude of adults toward children is all too common, and most children recognize it immediately in the plays they see. This attitude is manifest in a playful, insincere feeling on the part of the players, or slapstick business which most of the children reject as "corny," designed to get laughs at any cost. After one play two little girls were heard to comment in aggrieved tones, "They acted as if we were *little kids!*"

Children should always be given credit for intelligence and appreciation even when a minority of them do not appear to deserve it. Their apparent lack of manners is often due to faults in the play or directing which prevents it from holding their interest.

## When the Play Is Cast With Adults

Suppose, first, that the play is cast with adult actors, or with a combination of adults and children. A large percentage of children's theater plays are in one of these categories.

The relative advantages of casting with adults or children has been the subject of many controversies. Almost anyone will admit that the illusion of reality is far better when older people play adult roles. Few children are convincing in size, shape, voice, movement, or—most important of all—depth of understanding. Often a bearded child playing the part of a grandfather looks like a dwarf.



*Courtesy, Utah Theatre for Young People, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah*

### An adult cast in *Onagain, Offagain*.

On the other hand, it is very difficult for adult players to give a true illusion of children. They work too hard at it. They may be straight of figure, their voices may be right, and their movements so carefully studied that they appear to belong to a child. They may have the advantage over child players in that they are artists who understand characterization better than any child can, who are skilled in speaking, in timing, in building to effective climaxes. One boy, after seeing a skilled adult cast remarked, "They are *too good*." He was conscious of diction that was too beautiful for the characters, acting that was so sophisticated as to seem artificial.

Children, in spite of their lack of skill, bring to children's roles a freshness and a childlike quality that can seldom be imitated by adults. This is why most theaters that do not have the problem of touring use children in child roles no matter how difficult the rehearsal problem may be.

Many skilled actors thoroughly enjoy playing for child audiences. They like them because they are forthright and because they let the players know they like them. They like the whole-hearted way in which the children enter into the story. Because the actor does not feel the need for restraint, for the subtlety which is expected in the adult theater, he plays with zest and enthusiasm and, unless he oversteps the bounds of good taste, the children take him to their hearts.

### A Child Cast

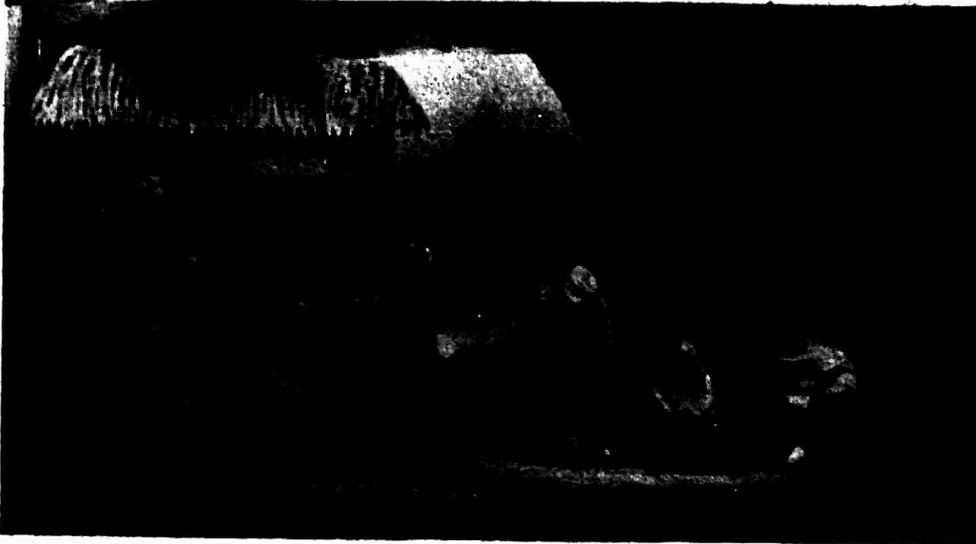
Young children should participate only in creative drama. They are not ready for formal plays before an audience. It may not harm them to have a walk-on part in a crowd scene for a children's theater play. Not only is there some danger that the child may have a tendency to "show off," but it will mean risking his fitness for the far more enriching experience which comes from creative drama.

Children of 11, 12, and 13 who are small for their age can often play the roles of children younger than themselves with naturalness and charm. If they have a background of creative drama, they come to a formal play with far more understanding and appreciation of plays and of characterization than children who lack experience in informal work.

To begin with, the size and type of children are important if they are to give an illusion of reality. Imagination and a fine attitude are even more significant. Their fitness is evaluated not only by sensitive observation but by consulting their classroom teachers. Parents are always consulted, for their approval and cooperation are very necessary.

Projection of voice and clean-cut speech are noted carefully, for there is seldom time in the few weeks of rehearsal for a child to improve greatly in this respect. Throughout the rehearsals, however, a director must give careful attention to this, for children almost inevitably speak too rapidly. Acting with trained adult players is often a help to their speech as well as to their workmanlike attitude.

In directing children, natural reasons should be used to motivate actions, even if there are also technical reasons. If children have had considerable experience in creative drama, they may have better motives for action than the director himself. In most of the aspects of directing, the same points used for adults acting for child audiences hold true if the players are children.



*Courtesy, the Children's Educational Theatre of Maryland, Baltimore, Md.*

A child cast in Old Pipes and the Dryad.

## Directing Child Players

**Pantomime in Tryouts.**—Whether players are adults or children, pantomime as well as speech may be used for tryouts. Children who have had experience in creative drama are so accustomed to telling a story in action that they expect to try out in this way. Adults are afraid of creative tryouts at first; but a director can be far more sure of his casting if he makes a practice of giving the players certain characters and situations to work out creatively in pantomime.

"You are the honest general," a child may be told if he happens to be trying out for *The Emperor's New Clothes*.<sup>9</sup> "You are very sure that you will be able to see the cloth on the loom. Show how you feel when you see nothing. Show also the thoughts that go through your head and what you do when you realize that the Emperor will think you unfit for your office."

<sup>9</sup> Chorpennig, Charlotte. *The Emperor's New Clothes*. New York, Samuel French.

Sometimes the director asks a group to play a short scene creatively, using improvised dialog as well as action. This kind of tryout gives the director a good idea of the player's understanding of the role, as well as his imagination in working out his action and dialog. Children, especially, need to be watched for voice projection and clean-cut speech.

### Rehearsing a Play

The direction should be planned so that the players can tell the story in action insofar as possible.<sup>10</sup> All action should, of course, be naturally motivated. In fact, it should seem inevitable. But it should never be necessary for the characters to carry on any conversation for more than a few moments at a time without some kind of action. A new director soon finds that his audience is lost if he does not observe this rule.

On the other hand, pantomime will hold a child audience in utter silence for minutes at a time if the children are wondering just what a character is doing and why he is doing it. If they are afraid that he will not get it done before someone else comes (as, for instance, when Zar and Zan, in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, are trying desperately to get the cupboard doors to stay shut before Han returns), the audience shows audible excitement, shouting with laughter, every muscle working to help them.

Comedy in business is enjoyed far more than comedy in lines. An adult cast that has keenly anticipated throughout the rehearsal period the response to *Alice in Wonderland* has often been disappointed because the cleverness of the lines has gone perfectly flat in performance. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the comedy business of Quee washing the faces of the other dwarfs is much funnier to children than the very amusing lines in which the dwarfs solemnly rebuke Quee for stealing, and in the next breath give him directions about the absurd things he is to collect the next night.

Very careful enunciation and voice projection are more important for an audience in which there are young children. Lack of experience makes it very difficult for them to get the meaning if they do not hear every word.

Emotional tension should be of shorter duration than for adult audiences. Children enjoy suspense, but the play is so real to them

<sup>10</sup> Ward, Winifred. *Theatre for Children*. Anchorage, Ky., The Children's Theatre Press, 1958. pp. 198-201.

that they become overexcited unless they have frequent relief. The graveyard scene in *Tom Sawyer*, so full of suspense and violence, is relieved by the humor of the superstitions and the elaborate vows made by the boys.

Most children consider romance "very silly," so a director should make as little as possible of any romantic scenes. It is acceptable to the children for the prince to take the hand of the princess, but it must be only her hand. In spite of all the television and moving-picture shows children see, they will jeer at love-making on the stage. This shows how much more real the story is when the players are within the same four walls as the audience. Pictures can never be so real as live performances.

Fights and duels are very much enjoyed by older children because they are exciting. They love to see Peter Pan defeat the swaggering Captain Hook, and they like the violence in *Treasure Island*. At best, there is danger in duels, but when they are necessary, a skilled instructor should be called in to teach the actors a few simple techniques which, if carried out in varied positions and parts of the stage, appear to be much more complex than they actually are.

Laugh lines are very difficult to estimate until the first performance of a children's play. Players should be especially sensitive to this because a child audience often laughs when you least expect them to do so, while remaining entirely unresponsive to what most adults would consider funny. If the dialog continues while the audience is laughing, those who are eager to hear will "s-sh" the others, and the players will be forced to stop after they have passed the laugh lines.

Occasionally even a children's play contains something which offends parents who attend with their children. It may be that someone who represents the law is evil or ridiculous. Sympathetic characters sometimes tell lies or are involved in drinking scenes. A director should give careful thought to the ethics of any play for children, for in spite of the fact that these things may be authentic, most of such scenes can be omitted without any real loss. "Goody-goody" plays are not desirable, but a theater takes more responsibility when plays are produced for impressionable young people than when they are played for adults. The good director considers carefully the ethical standards of a play, and if he feels, for example, that *Robin Hood*, who had so many qualities which the children admire, has characteristics which are open to question, he may (a) take care to make clear the situation in England which caused Robin to be an outlaw; (b) emphasize his fine qualities, such as courage, good sportsman-

ship, and gentleness to the poor and weak, and make little of his custom of relieving travelers of their gold. Friar Tuck is usually just a jolly and lovable friar rather than a tippler.

## Curtain Time

"A play is never a living thing until it is shared."<sup>11</sup> And now comes the expectant audience of boys and girls to share it. This is the rewarding part of children's theater.

Saturday afternoon. Children pouring down the aisles—lively conversations—sometimes a greeting to a friend half way across the house—here and there a friendly tussle. The lights begin to dim, and if a shout does not burst forth, it is there, *wanting* to come out! The mascot appears from between the curtains and talks in a friendly and intimate way with the children. He may be a puppet held in the arms of a grownup; he may be a clown or a character in the play. Sometimes it is the director, who greets the audience and introduces the story.

Then comes the mood music, sometimes gay and lively, sometimes soft and beautiful, to take the children away from the reality of the theater and everyday things into the magic world of "once upon a time."

A breathless moment of expectancy, and the curtains begin to part. The play is on! And if the playwright has done his work well; if the director and designer have given it "the quickening touch of radiance"; if the characters really *live* in the players, the spark ignites and once more the miracle of the theater happens!

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, Roy. *Creative Theatre*. John Day Co., 1929. p. 5.

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