Process and Product: Developing Scripts for Children to Perform

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Most children in creative drama programmes eventually reach a stage where they are eager to utilize their developing skills in dramatic expression by "doing a play". Having experienced the process of extending awareness physically, emotionally and imaginatively through creative play, they want to see that process evolve into a product–a structured play. The problem then, for their director or teacher, is to select suitable material for such a play, material which will interest and challenge the group as well as provide a vehicle for their desire to express through drama.

The dearth of such material in script form is a fact often lamented by teachers with enthusiastic young "Thespians" on their hands. But necessity is still the mother of invention, and the lack of good ready-made plays for children to perform can provide the impetus for many fine home-made scripts. In producing children's scripts, whether from an original story idea or by adapting stories from folklore and literature, there are certain principles and procedures which, if observed, usually lead to a rewarding result.

To begin with, there must be a good story involved, for without that most basic ingredient there is little scope for dramatic action. The choice of material which contains archetypal situations and which lends itself to variations of traditional forms is also an asset for stimulation and development of the young imagination. Archetypal and traditional patterns awaken a sense of universal significance in what is being enacted because there is an evocation of something encountered before, whether in family life, game-playing, books, pictures on television, and even in dreams. Children recognize such dramatic experiences when they encounter them in an actual form, and they respond with a heightened awareness that the dramas which they shape have some relationship to a wider human experience. They are enriched by the reverberations.

Having found a good story, the next step is to determine whether it has enough of the elements of drama which appeal to children and which provide them with multiple avenues for exploration and creation. Does it have characters, whether vegetable, animal or mineral, which can be identified, understood and re-created by the children? Does it allow for interesting patterns of movement within "stage" space? Does it lend itself to a synthesis of the arts? This latter question is particularly important in a classroom situation where a dramatic vehicle is needed which will allow every child to become involved and to contribute his or her particular talents. It is wise, then, to consider the possibilities for use of art, crafts, music, movement, mime and language. Colour, sound, movement, characterization, conflict–these are the things which child-

ren want incorporated into the plays they perform, just as much so as in the plays they see performed.

Presuming that a story has been chosen which measures up to all the criteria cited here, one might well ask how to begin to shape it into a drama which can be produced. The material can be explored in a series of drama sessions with the students, allowing them to express and experiment with their own ideas about the story. In the beginning, it is best to devise some games and exercises with mime, sounds, gestures, moods, and emotions which will develop the skills required to perform the finished play. These games and exercises can be introduced as isolated dramatic activities without the children having any knowledge of the story. This allows the director or teacher to assess the range and capability of the group without any member trying to impress with an interpretation of a specific character. In other words, the children explore and develop their potential without any sense of auditioning for parts. When they have developed some ease in using body and voice, and evoking feelings and emotions in ways related to the demands of the material, the children can be told the story and begin to probe its possibilities as a play. They should be encouraged to isolate what they see as the key scenes and to improvise a presentation. Separate groups can improvise the same scene so that the multiple possibilities for staging become evident. Once the group has arrived at a method and sequence that works and no new ideas are forthcoming, the process of setting it all down into a script can begin. The children's own ideas for words and action are brought together into an organized whole. Additions and improvements which will heighten the theatrical effects and help the children to develop their ideas and realize their aims can be suggested by the director and tried out by the children. Their response to such suggestions must be carefully assessed to be certain that the end result is a script with which they are at ease and which they enjoy performing.

This approach to writing a script for children is based on experience and practice, and perhaps some examples of material which has been scripted, produced and used by other groups besides the one which first developed it would be useful as illustration.

The first example is a dramatic presentation entitled *Canadiana,* which was put together by forty young students ranging in age from eight to sixteen years. Some students did dramatic monologues–character portrayals taken from Canadian history and literature. One girl did a short scene of Susanna Moodie writing an entry in her journal by candlelight. There were choral readings of Canadian poetry, but the main presentation of the evening was the dramatization from a prepared script of some of the sacred legends of the Sandy Lake Cree.[1] These legends contain all of the dramatic elements which are cited as

[1]The stories were taken from James Stevens, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

desirable. They lend themselves to mime, ritual dance, simple but colourful costuming, mask-making, music (both recorded and live), encounter, emotion (fear, joy, terror, etc.), and multiple characters (old, young, brave, fierce, monstrous). Best and most important of all, they are good stories. The children used narration, mime, and dramatic scenes in the script—whatever best suited their purposes.

Here is an example of one of the "games" used in the early stages of working the material into a script. It was used to develop the sense of menace and terror that would be required to perform one of the tales—"The Fat Boy and the Giants with No Hearts". The group was divided into two lines facing each other in partners across the room. One line was provided with very long pieces of string which they pulled up through blouse or shirt from the bottom to emerge at the throat. These were the victims; the other line, the monsters. They experimented with monster postures, menacing sounds, expressions of terror, breathing, cries, etc. Monsters then pursued victims; when they caught them, they took hold of the string end at the throat and extracted the "life force" by slowly pulling it out. The victims expressed their terror and agony until the string was extracted, and then they lay still. The sense of menace and terror evoked in this game was effectively re-created within the content of the story.

The archetypal patterns were strongly present in these tales. The Indian braves were hunters, providers, protectors. Family life was cherished; the old were revered for their wisdom; the hunt was celebrated in music and ritual; the gods were appealed to for help, especially in time of danger. Monsters inhabited the earth with men; scenes of joy and celebration of life in action were alternated with scenes of terror and sorrow and the stillness of death. Every one of the forty children contributed an idea, made a prop or mask, and performed a role. They were aware, without having to state it, that they were engaged in a process of action which included both comic and tragic modes.

Another scripted story introduced a group of thirty-seven children ranging in age from six to sixteen to the techniques of satire in a play based on the story of the Pied Piper. Working with improvised scenes in the early stages of developing the script, the young people soon realized that the scene could easily be changed to their own city and that the issues within their own municipal environment could be interwoven with the basic story. Visits to city council and collections of newspaper accounts of council proceedings became part of the material on which they drew to develop their script. Thirty-seven members of a cast with such a wide age range soon were sorted out into balanced groups: six councillors, six rat-pack members, six irate members of a citizen's group, six cats, twelve children who were terrified by the huge rats, and one Pied Piper.

The material was shaped into a dramatic whole which made use of various traditions. The groups of characters allowed for very distinct character types but, at the same time, provided opportunity for choric dramatization. Original music was written and the three balanced groups of six—councillors, citizens,

and rats–had a song which became a reprise in their scenes. Conflict and encounter was varied as different groups came into opposition–citizens were angry at councillors; councillors argued with the Piper; citizens battled against rats; rats terrified children.

Archetypal patterns were essential in this play. Family life was presented and disrupted; political issues became the source of much comedy; the dreams and play of childhood provided scenes of action and fantasy. Grotesque rats became the monsters of folklore, and the Piper took on the qualities of the poet-dreamer who sees visions beyond the understanding of those who are not pure in heart. The students even explored the experiences of their own dreams and nightmares and shaped those experiences into theatrical scenes. In the end, the story of the Pied Piper took the form of a one-hour script which included a range of scenes including comedy, fantasy, drama, and even melodrama. The play has been performed since then by two groups of children who were not involved with the development and writing of the script, but who were able to relate to it and bring their own particular style to performing it.

Analysis of the material before selection is the key to successful script-writing with children. The workshop method of developing the script works if the elements are there which set off the reverberations in the children. Out of their play comes the play. Johan Huizinga defined play as "an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility."[2] A stage play has the same limits and requires such a visible order. Having explored the potential of a story through a play process, children are ready to launch a play product.

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[2]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 10.

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