

Confusion and Tedium

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Tangleflags, Carol Bolt. Playwrights Co-op, 1974. 24 pp. \$1.75 paper.

My Best Friend Is Twelve Feet High, Carol Bolt. Playwrights Co-op, 1972. 33 pp. \$1.75 paper.

I had a lot of trouble with these plays, which are written, presumably, to be performed for children, not by them. For a start, they are very different from Carol Bolt's work for adults, with the strongly political viewpoint determining the choice of subject in such plays as *Red Emma*, (Emma Goldman as a fervent young revolutionary in the 1890s), *Buffalo Jump* (the On-to-Ottawa Trek of 1935) and *Gabe* (a new look at Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, in the perspective of present-day Metis). Second, I stayed uncertain just what was going on in *My Best Friend Is Twelve Feet High*. And third, I had difficulty in deciding what audience was intended—primary-age, I suppose.

I had trouble, too, in picturing what was supposed to be happening at several points in the plays. Only twice do the bare scripts include information and advice, for reader and potential director, on what worked (and what failed) when these were performed: "Obviously, the dragon fight can include any number of special turns. In the original production we included a karate contest, a reel, a couple of amazing high leaps, a fashion show, a tango and a tug-of-war in the first round. We also included a simultaneous French commentary" (*My Best Friend*). At the end of *Tangleflags*: "If there is no question period, Mr. Rubinek can go away to get his mailbag in which he can discover programmes which the cast can then deliver to each child, during the final song. We tried this in the first production but the question period sounded like seagull island when five hundred kids flapped paper around." Please, Ms. Bolt and Playwrights Co-op, more information, of this and other kinds, with the scripts!

Tangleflags begins as a town with no name. So the Czech who wants to be the mailman can't (because no one can send letters to a place with no name) and the Japanese woman who wants to go away for a while can't (because there are no road signs to direct her back again). Should they fight over whether to give the town a Czech or Japanese name, or should they settle it peacefully? We discover that they have much to learn from each other: folk dances, buchtá, origami, flower-arrangement. The need for names is demonstrated by their all putting on big black hats and long black coats, and not knowing who's who, and by the sad story of the boy whose name was so long that he didn't get rescued when he fell down a well. Eventually they name their town—you've guessed it—Tangleflags.

My Best Friend Is Twelve Feet High starts in song, "I saw a pigeon baking bread/I saw a baker coloured red," and then we find five youngsters in their clubhouse, meeting as the Royal Loyal Gymnasts, Engineers and Story-tellers Club. They argue about who is President and allow Alice to join if she is Mope-the-Dog. And then she sings about jewel thieves in France, with the rest acting it out. And then Pip and Frank sulk, and the other two compete for President:

I was greeted with affection
At our latest club election
I'm the closest to perfection
And I'm anti-vivisection.

And then rival clubhouses are built. And then they play at sailing. And then there is a long fight between a dragon and Uncle Robert. And then—I'm nearly halfway through—the play continues to be spun out by a sequence of inconsequential expedients until we end with a little moral about co-operation:

KING: I did it. I made up a story.
PIP: We all made up the story together, Captain King.
KING: That's a good way to do it. When one person can't think of what to say.

Confused in my responses, I turned desperately to my sons, who read the plays. Christopher Page, aged 13, writes: "*Tangleflags* seems written on three different age-levels: the songs are on a pretty low level, the plot seems aimed at a somewhat older age group, and the prose is a somewhat higher-level vocabulary still." Jonathan Page, aged 11, spots the morals: "*Tangleflags* tells children about not fighting. It also implies it doesn't matter what race you are. The theme of *My Best Friend* was telling anyone that just because someone is a great person does not mean they're good at everything and that people should work together and not against each other. I found this out because Captain King had his own clubhouse and they found that King was not very good at singing and story-telling."

These scripts might well appeal to any group of young, inventive, open-minded, playful actors. They would give any youngish children an enjoyable hour. If we still want morals, there's a well-sugared pill. Altogether, just enough to be worth our time, I suppose.

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