

# A Prairie Playwright Who Keeps His Promise

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*Three Plays: The Underground Lake, Shinbone General Store Caper, The Uphill Revival*, Rex Deverell. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. 102 pp. \$3.50 paper.

Rex Deverell is a Canadian playwright whose work for young audiences, developed and produced in association with the Globe Theatre of Regina, Saskatchewan, constitutes a significant contribution to Canadian literature for young people. The author, born and raised in Ontario, tells of two concurrent experiences in his early adolescence which have some bearing on the style and content of his plays. At about thirteen years of age he responded to "the call" at a Baptist revival meeting. At about the same time he saw *Oedipus* at Stratford, Ontario. He classifies the first experience as theatrical in nature and the second as religious in character. Both exemplified, in his words, "a congregation celebrating the word." Deverell studied theology at McMaster University and theology and theatre at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. After three years as a minister, he found his interest and enthusiasm for the theatre gave him the desire and courage to attempt one year as a freelance playwright. That was 1970; a decade later he has produced and published over a dozen plays for young people, as well as two plays for adults: *Boiler Room Suite* and *The Mark at the Corner of Scarth and Eleventh*.

The recently published combined edition contains three plays, each addressed to a specific age group. Deverell is particularly successful in adapting his distinctive style to each age level while retaining a verve and intelligence to interest older persons who may find themselves attending one of his "school plays."

*The Underground Lake* is a play about prejudice for kindergarten to grade three children. Eight characters, played by six actors, enact a play within a play about the *overgrounders* and the *undergrounders* in a controversy over their supply of a vital natural resource—water. The traditional balance between the two groups—neither of whom has ever seen the other—is disturbed when an Overgrounder alliance of academic research, politics and business builds the Professor Gimpwurst Giant Super Pump to replace the rusty but reliable pump through which the water supply has steadily, but slowly, come for years. The Undergrounders are, quite naturally, dismayed at the speed with which the new pump lowers the water level in the Underground Lake. They close off the supply. Both sides dig a

tunnel toward one another. An explosion is averted; each side sees the humanity of the other; and the storyteller, Tiffin says:

People! You see, that was the key to the problem. You have to understand that no matter how you live or what you look like, if you are people, then you've got something in common . . .

The Globe Theatre believes in open staging and audience participation in plays for young children. In *The Underground Lake* the audience is invited to help the Professor to describe the unseen Undergrounders, to create the sounds and moving parts of the pump and to make pumphandles and a Spritzenheimer valve. Also, prejudice against children by the crotchety capitalist who, with the storyteller, provides the parenthesis for the fable, softens at the end through participation and leads the audience to have additional insight into intolerance.

The characters in this forty-five minute play are drawn with broad strokes, but Deverell satirizes foibles familiar to everyone. There are many unknowns in the life of a child and he may, like Shivers of Undergroundia, be afraid and imagine the unknowns as monsters. When, in the play, it is Shivers who saves everyone's life by pulling the burning fuse from the dynamite, the young audience members, who have identified strongly with Shivers, have a memorable model of bravery.

*The Shinbone General Store Caper*, a mystery drama for medium-sized children (grades four to seven), is both a spoof of detective stories and an inquiry into the relationship between individual vs. social guilt and responsibility. Its heroine is Amy Anderson, proprietor of the general store of the title.

She is a rough hewn, big-boned woman. Her skin looks as if it has been scrubbed red. She is also big hearted, twinkly eyed and her voice would be fit for hog calling. She is a kind of Annie Oakley or Calamity Jane. Occasionally we detect a note of strain or anxiety. She, too, is affected by the current recession in the town's economy. However she has an indomitable interest and delight in things around her.

It is winter in Shinbone and a blizzard is imminent. Amy's generous heart and reluctance to collect on bills owing from customers harder up than herself have placed her in a compromising position with Parkins, the town banker. Also, an unsavory stranger named Sam Wrecker is skulking about for reasons unknown; and he has made friends with Gus Gustofferson, Shinbone's junk dealer – "a crude rough man who makes his living at odds and ends, some more dubious than others." Bill, the postman, Mildred, a senior citizen, and Matty Harris, an officer of the R.C.M.P., complete the cast. The plot is an ingenious blend of false clues, mixed motives and double disappearances. The general store disappears in the blizzard and it takes all of the recently acquired expertise of Constable Harris, along with some

assistance from the audience, to solve the mystery. The success of *Shinbone* depends upon style and again, the characters are broadly drawn. The message in this play, for an older age group, is left purposely ambiguous. Medium-sized boys and girls are familiar with the mystery genre from reading literature as diverse as Nancy Drew and Sherlock Holmes; they also are familiar with spoofs on style from films like *The Sting* and the Pink Panther series. In addition they can accept that there is often more than one answer to one of life's problems – or only a choice of less-than-ideal answers. Amy's "crime" raises important issues about our society. Because we care about Amy, we are likely to think more deeply about her dilemma.

The most ambitious play in this volume is *The Uphill Revival*, written for a high school audience. The author's opening note is important:

Up-Hill moves from a feeling of caricature through mystery to serious realism. The enthusiasms of these people are important . . .

Although the author shamelessly indulges his penchant for creating cliché names to identify characters (e.g., by calling the religious con man Richard Lord), most of the people in *Up-Hill* are more complex than in the other two plays. Amelia Morley, in particular, is an unorthodox heroine and provides a good role for a young actress. The ploy of the play combines contemporary curiosity about outer space and inner mysteries: the play's action includes a flying saucer "sighting" which occurs at *Up-Hill*, a manipulative mystic who arrives to establish "contact" with the other worldly intelligence, and the genuine "possession" of Amelia. Adolescents often have a veneer of sophistication, but most are still idealistic and unsure of how much of those ideals they should expose and test in a cynical world. Frank Summers, Amelia's boy friend, tests his vision of the world by writing poetry and sending it off for possible publication. Amelia's grip on reality is less secure and she is lost for a little while. But the play ends with laughter at human folly, including our own – a healthy and restoring response to life.

Rex Deverell's concern for social reform and for the retention of spiritual values comes through in all of his writings. He is sometimes criticized for preaching through his plays. But it is his keen sense of humor and his ability to capture and record the essence of human beings blundering through their day-to-day cares and concerns that save his script from being pretentious or platitudinous. An author's importance increases as his number of works increase. Also a playwright's name gains stature because of a long-lived association with a particular theatre company, in a particular place. Rex Deverell is such an author and playwright. He has created an adjacent world to the real Regina, Saskatchewan, one he lives in. Shortshrift, Copetown, *Shinbone* and *Up-Hill* have their own reality and inhabitants. May the plays for young people continue and the plays for us elders increase!

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