

"Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada? I could rave for days!" An interview with Clem Martini

Kathleen Foreman

Résumé: *Kathleen Foreman interview pour nous Clem Martini, l'un des dramaturges pour la jeunesse le plus réputés au Canada. Martini parle de son travail à Edmonton et compare l'attention portée au théâtre pour adultes et celle, plus réduite, accordée aux oeuvres pour les jeunes.*

It's an ordinary day in an ordinary town. The young man with the remarkable nose flees from his home, school and friends and begins his furtive underground existence. He is the first but others soon follow. As their outcast community continues to grow – so do their noses. They gather at "Ben's Cafe" to listen to the Blues and sip their drinks from extremely long straws. It is the one place where no one points or stares and all share the problem of the prominent proboscis.

Edmonton's McLab Theatre is brimming with teenagers. They cover the stage during the "cabaret" scene of Clem Martini's "Night of the long noses or How I learned to sing the blues". As one of the few adults in the near capacity audience I am overwhelmed by the oneness of the young actors and their peer spectators. I can almost smell the "eau d'adolescence" in the air. Regardless of age, however, adults, teens and actors share a common phenomenon. Everyone has an enormous nose! The club waitresses have circulated through the crowd, asking us to "join the club" and offering one and all a paste-on paper protuberance.

There I sit, playwright at my side, now having to be careful that my own elongated nose does not interfere with my neighbours as we glance about noticing the discomfort of those who are noseless – by comparison.

Edmonton's Teen Festival of the Arts is unique in Canada for its synthesis of teen and adult theatre. At the professional level, new plays are commissioned to be directed, designed and produced in the theatres at the Citadel. "Night of the long

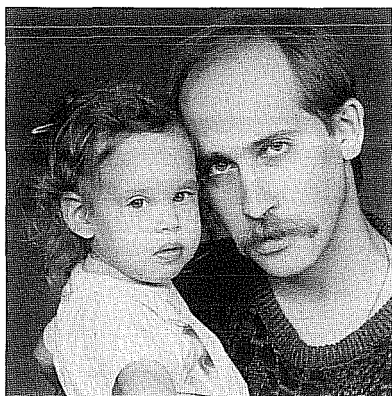


Photo: Deborah Iozzi

Clem Martini and his daughter Chandra.

noses" was one of six new plays commissioned for the Teen Festival of the Arts held in May 1989. All the performers are local high school students. Their peers arrive by the busload for the five day celebration of youth involvement in the Arts. Transformed by exuberant energies, the theatre complex echoes with the laughter and comings and goings of youthful import. Amidst this joyful chaos, I spoke with the playwright, Alberta's award-winning Clem Martini. As a writer of adult theatre, television and film scripts, Martini is also a writer and strong advocate for Theatre For Young Audiences.

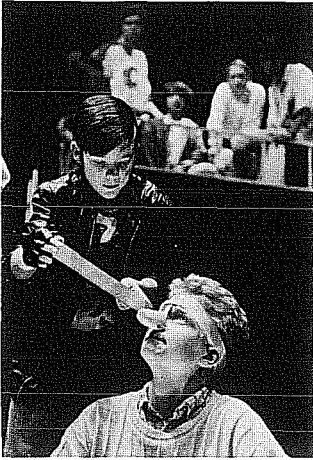
Martini: We should be paying more attention. We should be throwing our time, attention, care *and* our money at young people because that is where our audience is. No wonder there's a crisis and theatre is shrinking. We're not developing an audience. How can we be if we're not going to take them seriously, if we're not going to try to develop them, if we're not going to pull them into the living, breathing theatre and make them excited about it?

I think theatre at its heart is a means of communication. It's a means of us talking to ourselves and developing a voice for this country. Unless you have an ongoing dialogue, unless young people can go to the theatre and recognize it as a means of expression where their ideas are reflected and their souls are challenged, then the theatre becomes a freak show – like the Shrine Circus or when people from the zoo bring in the boa constrictor for the kids to handle. Occasional touring theatre doesn't represent a dialogue where the kids reach out and communicate. It's not something they see often enough.

Foreman: Many of us remember our teen years with a mixture of fascination and horror. Changes comes so fast and unbidden that teenagers find themselves in tremendous turmoil of emotion and growth. It's a hard age and, for the adults in their lives, almost easier to ignore than embrace. Edmonton's Teen Festival is breaking the convention of indifference and exulting in the differences of the pre-adult environment. Tell me about your involvement with the festival.

Martini: I'm very excited that the Citadel is using their large venues and offering something big and grand. That's a rare opportunity for young people. There is potential for large shows. I think all the writers are aware that you are trying not to write shows that have parts in them that the kids can't do, so the shows are about young people, with a lot of young people. They tend to be fairly epic in nature, largish in scope and that tends to push them towards fairly light or adventure fare. That's not a bad thing because touring shows are small.

Teenagers have got all kinds of things on their minds. Working with these kids shows me how challenging they are and how much of the world they are wanting to know about. You are dealing with people who are on the edge of being an adult, of leaving home, of all sorts of things. They are chafing at the bit. You can challenge them a little more. You can look at a more sophisticated



ideology. They are able to grasp terms – political terms, frames of reference, terms of socio-politics, sexual politics. These things are not foreign to high school students. They are coming to experience realities of our society. You can be more sophisticated in your treatment of themes.

I set out with "Night of the long noses" to write a comedy, but it's not a comedy that is without bite. The point of conception for the play started with me looking at that teacher in Nova Scotia who had been a real community person, an ordinary joe and a well liked individual until people found out that he had AIDS; overnight he became a pariah. That inter-

ested me because I decided it wasn't just a disease we're talking about here. It's how we are transformed overnight from a group of people who can be charitable towards someone to a group of people who are downright nasty, vindictive and cruel. That has nothing to do with the disease. That has something to do with how we work as a group.

I think the play works as a comedy, but there's a lot more going on than just laughs. High school students are sophisticated enough to pick that up. I want them to go home not with a message but with a lot of questions: How is it that someone can be one thing one day and another thing the next day? What does that say about how we view people? What does that say to us about how the media works? What does it say to us about being a benevolent society that has an idea of justice? What does it say about me and how I deal with people? How is it that society molds me? Will I be the kind of person when I grow up who would turn on someone and ask him to leave a community if he had contracted AIDS? Am I that kind of person? Do I live in that kind of place? Is that the kind of society I want?

I want them to ask all kinds of questions. Theatre is about reflecting on what we do. Hopefully from that reflection comes action. Either you say "Yes, that *is* the kind of society I want!" and you go on to confirm it or you say "No, that *is not* the kind of place I like to live in. There's something wrong!", and you go out and change it.

Foreman: Attending the Teen Festival and seeing "Night of the long noses" was not my initiation to the provocative theatrical vision of Clem Martini. Over the past few years I've experienced your work in both TYA and adult venues. "Swimmers", "Gambetta rise" and Alberta Culture's award winner, "The field" are some of your plays for young audiences which have been professionally toured – performed for children by adult actors. "Night of the long noses" was commissioned for teen actors. Is writing for teen actors a different

challenge?

Martini: It was a little different. I wanted full rich characters for these kids to play. An actor could play several characters whereas for teenagers I try to stick with one character and give them a good character. I wanted to write an experience for them that would be successful. One of the things that was interesting for me was that, because they are teenagers coming from high schools, you can write for a cast as large as you want. Some of the casts in the Teen Fest are 40, 50 characters. I haven't gone that far. I think there are 25 characters in my play. Suddenly you can work with spectacle. You can have honest-to-goodness crowd scenes. So for the "cabaret" and "riot" scenes in "Night of the long noses", instead of one person running around miming a riot, there were all these people, all that bulk on the stage and that's very interesting.

It's very different doing a new play for the first time. There's no blueprint. You have to make decisions and take a chance. The cast was very nervous. They were surprised when people laughed and, of course, they were very pleased. They were delighted to find out what worked and why it worked. It was a different style than they were used to. It's not the type of humour you see on T.V. After all that long rehearsal it was refreshing for them to find out that people appreciated it. That's the kind of thing that you hope they'll discover doing a new work – that there is something beyond what they first read. They were making it theirs, having fun with it. In theatre you take the dare and try to communicate.

Foreman: International Children's Festivals are booming across Canada. They bring international TYA to us and present our domestic productions to the world. Theatre For Young Audiences is emerging from behind the skirts of the national theatre scene and is not used solely as a stepping stone for young actors on their way to "real" theatre. There is a growing body of theatre artists who are choosing to work in the TYA venue. Please comment on the broader implications of the blossoming festival scene in Canada.

Martini: Festivals are a good thing. I have nothing against festivals. They bring in quality work from other countries. That's great! But I keep wondering why there are no TYA companies in major cities that have honest-to-goodness residences, that aren't touring companies? Apart from the festivals, Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada is still primarily four actors touring to every small town.

For some reason Theatre For Young Audiences has been ghettoized. Most TYA theatres are impoverished, strapped for cash. They operate out of a converted garage or the attic of some lonely little place, whereas adult theatre is a cultural institution which gets THE BUILDING downtown, THE EDIFICE to which all the moneyed patrons go. I would say that even the secondary theatres are getting larger focus, larger better space, better granting. Kids don't need any less than adults. Both adults and children need compelling

theatre full of vital demanding images and themes articulated clearly and visually.

At one time the regional theatres used to have a mandate serving adults and kids, but more and more regional theatres have backed out of that mandate. They call this "target marketing". That means kids have been edged out even further and you're left with the touring market. Festivals are just an extension of that tour. It's taking the touring shows and giving them a week or so in a public venue where they enter into the public consciousness.

In essence you're saying to kids "Here's your theatre for a week. Come and get it while it's hot!" As much as I like the festivals and they are exciting, it's infuriating that there isn't a home in each major city for Theatre For Young Audiences.

Foreman: A brief overview of your scripts for adults and children reveals enormous range of characters and situations. The WW II veteran father of your recently successful "German lessons" lives in the textured and tortured world of memory and reality, while the ten-year-old protagonist of "The Field" is exploring the possibilities of friendships which expand familial and cultural boundaries. As you write for both adult and young audiences, I am curious to know how you adjust for the age variety. Is your writing process altered by focusing on a different age group?

Martini: You have to be sensible. You have to be aware of where kids are in their development, the kinds of interests they have and you have to write in a manner which is going to involve those interests. I start with what intrigues me and excites me as a writer. When I write for an adult audience I simply assume that they will be interested in what I have to say. With a younger audience there's an extra step when you say "Ah, this interests me, but would it have interested me when I was ten, twelve, thirteen?" If it's not a theme that would have interested me, then I look at what would have made it interesting to me at that age. It's a matter of looking at younger protagonists and viewing it from their eyes.

I have a very strong memory of being a kid. I guess I'm trying to talk about my experiences as a child to kids. I felt very alienated from adults and very much in a kid's world. As a writer I think you try to articulate those things that are strong memories. As a child I had no experience with theatre. I lived in books. I was always reading stories. I was the only member of the Calgary Public Library Book Club. The librarian was always trying to find other members who would come in and join. They'd join for a week and then they'd be gone. I was her club. I'd come in and she'd give me eight books to read and I'd read them all.

My books and my brothers formed a real world for me that had very little to do with adults and nothing at all to do with school, which I didn't like. We would have long talks and debates and literary discussions about what style of writing was provoking the mind most. That's what started me writing. I

guess a lot of the stuff that I write for kids is because I'm still trying to make sense of it. Kids out there, I don't want them to feel they're the only ones who are looking around and going, "I don't understand how separate these worlds are". I'm trying to provide a link somewhere.

I work with a lot of young people and I don't feel out of touch with them at all. Times change, but I don't know that in the time since I was fifteen human beings have changed so drastically. Music changes, clothes change, language changes – it's easy to keep up with the language. It hasn't changed that radically. The thoughts and feelings are universal. I've been working with fourteen-fifteen-sixteen-year-olds the past couple of years at Woods Treatment Center and that has given me a pretty good idea of the kind of sensibilities they've got, the kinds of concerns they have, the stuff they voice.

I also do writing workshops with younger kids. It's pretty strange doing writing workshops with six-year-olds because they don't even know how to write to any great extent but they do know how to tell their stories and that's what I work with. The stories are about themselves and what they did. It's about what they do with family and friends. By the time they are eight, grade 2, it's changed. The stories aren't about them anymore. The stories are about people with assault rifles spraying fire on someone or blowing up things. Guns are in their lives. The plots are pulled right out of T.V. The T.V. message is that what is happening with themselves is not exciting or compelling. It's what's happening on T.V. that's exciting and compelling. When I work with kids I say "Let's skip that. Tell me about yourself".

But guns are such a potent symbol that it fills their stories. It's appalling. I don't understand how people can make light of it. T.V. has nothing to do with their lives. It's an abrogation of what's real, of what they feel. It's a cashing in of what they believe is important and buying what the T.V. tells them is important. Talking isn't important, working things out isn't important. What's important and exciting is action, taking action, picking up a gun and going and getting the bad guy. I don't want to T.V. bash because it holds great potential, but it's controlled by the advertisers. They don't want to challenge kids, they want to sell products. That's who's speaking to kids right now. Theatre is totally new to them. They're not thinking of theatre as a mode of expression. I would hope that theatre would provide something that isn't trying to sell something.

What I think is interesting about TYA in this country is there are more people, more new playwrights writing new plays. I think more so than in theatre for adults. What's unfortunate is that less care is given to new plays. People are commissioned more often for Theatre for Young Audiences, but less care, less money, and less energy is expended upon those productions.

Foreman: School touring is the reality for most TYA companies. There is a symbiotic relationship between the educational institutions and the Arts funding organizations. As a TYA writer, you often must create within school tour

format. What are your thoughts on the effects of the school venue on your exploration of theatrical possibilities when writing for young audiences?

Martini: Everything about TYA tours tends to be bargain. It's amazing how much quality theatre you do get from touring companies, but it's appalling that they always have to be this bargain basement brand. You'd think kids deserve better. You'd think that you wouldn't always have to slash and cut and minimize everything in terms of kids. As a writer I'm very aware of how small the set is, how tiny the cast is, how infinitesimally small the budget is. You write a show that can be contained within all those limitations. You sure don't write *Cats*.

There is an ideological debate that goes on in children's theatre of a very literary nature. What is the purpose of kid's theatre? Is it to instruct or is it to entertain? Most of the plays that tend to look at ideas have a moral message involved. I don't mind that. Look at some of the kids' plays that have a lot of replay time, like "Feeling yes, feeling no". Most of Green Thumb's work is issue-based. We've come a long way from a time when all you were allowed to give kids were pantomimes "Puss 'n' boots", "Cinderella", but I wonder if that's all we're going to concentrate on.

The delineation that exists between adult theatre and kids' theatre is pretty simple. In theatre for young people we feel no restraint in laying out a message to kids – no restraint whatsoever. In adult theatre it's completely the opposite. I wonder where we are short circuiting our thinking that we feel that theatre is something else when we do it with kids, that it is for instruction, while when it's for adults it's for entertainment? Can't we give something to kids if it's just for pleasure?

The teachers buy the show, not the students. Teachers write in and say "Wouldn't it be nice if I had a show that fits in with my lesson on geography?" You end up writing a show which complements the curriculum. You search for an idea that will appeal to the teachers and connect with the kids. The bottom line is whether or not the teachers feel it has filled their mandate of assisting them in teaching the children. That will predicate whether or not they buy another show from the touring company.

If we're going to give them instruction, does it have to be articulated in such a straight forward fashion so that we're simply giving them a moral lesson? One of the things that I am keen on exploring in TYA is the nature of the form. I would like to see us trying harder to present a more wholly realized type of theatre for kids which involves nuance and subtlety and all those other things which go into entertaining theatre – as well as content, social content and thought. Theatre is about exploration – posing a question and trying to find possible answers. If we go in there with too strong a didactic attitude – this is what we're going to say – then we won't find anything. It makes for a very rigid type of theatre, rather than posing questions about the world and using theatre as a giant laboratory to set it before us.

Adult theatre has all the money so they can create all the magic. Go to adult shows in the regional theatres and think about how much you are affected by the sheer spectacle of it; how much the spectacle comes to reinforce the images that are written in the play. All that is missing in theatre for young people in the touring reality. Perhaps TYA having no money has said "Well, what we can do is give them strong message, a strong story line." You can express an infinity of ideas within the form of haiku. In that sense there is no infringement upon what you want to say when you only have four actors, but it doesn't allow you much scope. You have to deal with a very tiny world. I think one of the things that kids have come to expect is that theatre is small, minimalist. One man talking in an empty space.

But if you believe that circus and spectacle have something to do with theatre then it's a very small circus you're talking about and a very minor spectacle. You can't have a crowd on stage or feel the power that a chorus might propel.

Our day at the Teen Festival draws to a close. The last of the buses, crammed with young people loudly discussing their "fave" play, pulls away. The theatres, dressing rooms and foyers are empty. The magic of artist, illusion and audience is gone. The edifice stands silent, but a trace of sneakers and hair gel lingers with the echo of youthful shrieks hinting of their return another day. Surrounded by this grand quiet, I almost whisper my last query.

Foreman: Any dreams or directions for the future? What would you like to see happen with the exciting, evolving genre of Theatre For Young Audiences in Canada?

Martini In everything that I do – in every festival, in every kind of piece I write – I'm looking for a chance to show diversity. I would love to play with large and powerful images where you can actually create a world for a kid. Allow theatre to be every bit as complicated and as interesting as life, as imagination.

I would just like to see someone get daring and say "Kids are important! We're going to do a theatre here, it's for kids, we're going to get a home for it and we're going to make it stick!" A theatre cooperative would be a wonderful thing. Several TYA companies housed in one place and offering very different styles of theatre. Hopefully what you could do is a synthesis. The best kid's theatre should be on par with the best in adult theatre.

Kids have a right to theatre every bit as much as adults. I don't think kids are being serviced or seeing the range of theatre that they deserve and I think it's time that the major regional theatres wake up and realize that if they don't do things to cultivate young people, these people are cut off from theatre FOREVER!

Plays for young people by Clem Martini

Swimmers

Gambetta rise

The field

Shoo Shoo and Vlum

Escape from L 10 11

Night of the long noses

Night-time or not (an adaptation of Dennis Lee's *Jelly Belly*)

Swimmers appears in *Playhouse: Six fantasy plays for children*. Joyce Doolittle, Ed., Red Deer College Press, 1989.

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