

multicultural Canada in an Ottawa Square in 1945, Alan Davis has kept the humour and poignancy of Brian Doyle's novel. The innocent, hard-working hero, Tommy, finds young love and action-adventure by fighting racial prejudice. Of the three plays, this is the one that has the quality to become a classic in Canadian Children's Theatre. The Christmas ending could be cliché but it isn't because of the innocence of the unassuming hero.

All three of these plays could be successfully produced in the right venue. *The General* would make an excellent school production in a gym or multipurpose room as well as on a stage. This is true of *Goodbye Sarah*, though more elaborate staging should be used to represent the community Sarah is losing. *Angel Square* would be best seen in a theatre with imaginative staging and lighting: the author suggests that the centre stage be textured to depict the square itself as if trodden down by snow. This makes sense as a focal point theatrically and thematically: much action is centred in the Square as different factions of the community meet there on neutral ground.

All three plays portray the danger that prejudice and ignorance pose to the community. By setting their plays in the past, the authors allow us to make our own connections to our experiences in present day Canada.

Hilary Thompson teaches *Children's Literature, Canadian Children's Literature and Children's Theatre* at Acadia University. She served as a judge on the 1989 Max & Greta Ebel Award for Children's Writing which recognizes books that foster understanding between different cultures, backgrounds and/or generations.

ADVENTURES WITH BULLIES AND MAGIC

The mystery of the Oak Island treasure. Jim Betts. Playwrights Canada, 1985. 105 pp., \$7.95. ISBN 0-88754-420-7; **I met a bully on the hill.** Martha Brooks and Maureen Hunter. Copyscript. Distributed by Playwrights Union of Canada. 43 pp., \$5.00. [First produced: Prairie Theatre Exchange, Manitoba], 1986; **The magic trumpet.** Victor Cowie and Victor Davies. Turnstone Press, 1984. 66 pp. ISBN 0-88801-094-X.

These three plays illustrate the diversity of Theatre for Young Audiences today. From elaborate stage productions and themes of fantasy, to simple boxes on a classroom floor, the sophistication and complexity of material being written for children continues to develop and expand into a body of dramatic literature in its own right. Deeper respect and understanding of the nature and concerns of childhood have resulted in plays that are more responsive to

the world of a child and that touch their lives and imaginations.

I read *The mystery of the Oak Island treasure* with great enjoyment. First produced by Young People's Theatre in 1983, *The mystery of the Oak Island treasure* is an exciting, scary adventure for children of all ages, full of buried treasure, pirates and ghosts. It begins on Oak Island as Jason and Diane try to uncover the secret of the treasure buried, as legend has it, by Captain Kidd many years ago. The quite ordinary atmosphere of the children's daily lives contrasts sharply with the mysterious and increasingly dangerous adventure in which they find themselves, yet the realism of the children's family life gives the other world of pirates and buried treasure a degree of believability. It is a tale reminiscent of *Treasure Island* and reawakens all our dreams and fantasies of rugged old seadogs, walking the planks, and skull and crossbones.

The children are caught up in the conflict as three old pirates battle over a treasure map. Diane is captured by pirates who think she knows the location of the treasure and Jason must rush to her rescue. The appearance of a ghost frightens the pirates and the children escape only to follow the ghost and stumble across the location of the treasure. There are several more battles with pirates and ghosts, and the play ends with a ghostly smirk and the promise of new adventure.

The mystery of the Oak Island Treasure is well written and full of conflict, suspense, drama, three-dimensional characters, magic, ghosts, pirates, adventure, excitement, and mystery. It fires the imagination and challenges the intellect as it poses riddles and presents mysterious clues. While it does not attempt to deal with any serious issue or concern, it is an extremely well written and entertaining piece of theatre, and audiences young and old alike are sure to find themselves drawn into it.

I met a bully on the hill is very different in style and content. It was originally commissioned by Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg in 1986 for its Theatre for Young Audiences programme. The cast requires two men and two women to play eight and nine year-old children. *I met a bully on the hill* is a sensitive, caring play which touches on such childhood concerns as self-esteem, fairness, and mental and physical abuse, yet has many moments of lightheartedness and humour.

The story revolves around the concerns, fears and troubles of a young girl who moves from the country and has difficulty adjusting to her new environment. The characters in this play are real and sensitive and their concerns are portrayed with understanding and empathy. Action and events are viewed through the eyes of the children involved and the seriousness and trauma which they experience as they attempt to deal with the threatened violence of the local bully is heartfelt. The dialogue in the script is also wonderfully child-like and adds to the authenticity of its moments.

Audiences will be quickly drawn to the lonely girl who misses her Grandpa, friends and the places of her childhood memories. Terrorized by a bully who

threatens to harm her and blackmail her, she teams up with two other children and they plot revenge. In retaliation they put salt in his sandwich, ketchup in his gym bag and dog "glitch" in his sneakers. When the abuse and threats continue, they handcuff the bully to a bridge and plan to leave him there overnight. Considering what they have done, the children decide that getting even may not necessarily be good and they return, letting the bully go, and apologising.

My concern with the script is the amount of violence within it. The children hurl a great deal of unpleasant verbal abuse at one another and there is a perturbing conversation in which one child states that she has no trouble with bullies since she followed her father's advice to "haul off and punch them". Another concern is that the wrong message may be passed to children. Much of the play's action centres around revenge and retribution and even though the children repent their action in the end, I worry that audiences may get the idea that the play is condoning violence – that giving the bully a taste of his own medicine was what reformed him.

I am sure, however, that any company which approaches the script with this awareness will find itself with not only a thoroughly enjoyable piece of theatre but one which provides the opportunity for the group and/or teachers to open discussion on many issues relevant to children.

The magic trumpet follows the tradition of more classic fairytales. It was first presented by the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1969. The play is fast paced with characters that children are sure to love – bumbling, inept and just plain mean adults, a classic evil villain, a brave child hero, and a magic talking tree. The characters, however, are mere stereotypes and the plot lacks depth.

A group of children who wish to escape the insensitivity and cruelty of adults in their community of Grindstone decide to run away with Magic Maestro, a magician who promises to turn them into their favourite wild animal and let them perform in his circus. Predictably the children discover that all is not as they imagined as they spend their days endlessly practising tricks. Simon Small, the only child who does not leave, realizes their danger and volunteers to rescue the other children. When Simon finds them they discover the source of the magician's power and asking for the help of the audience, Simon blows a magic trumpet.

It is significant to note that this script was written twenty years ago and since then much has evolved in the themes, complexities and subject matter we present to young audiences. The authors state in their introduction that above all they want to be entertaining. The play has wonderful moments as they battle the magician for the magic trumpet; however, it falls short of their desire that it serve as an example to all children that they can achieve a "just and happy world" for themselves. These characters learn little about themselves or others from this experience. The script explores several different forms within it, such as mime and audience participation, but only in isolated

moments which tend to detract from the overall unity and flow of the play.

I am not suggesting that a play written for the central purpose of entertainment is not a valid piece of theatre for young audiences. It is just that I feel very strongly that whatever we present to children should speak to them with equality, challenge their intellect and imaginations and seek to expand their perceptions.

Louise Kearley teaches theatre, folk literature and creative writing in Newfoundland. She is completing an MA in Developmental Drama at Calgary.

UNIMAGINATIVE PLOTS AND PREDICTABLE ENDINGS

This building hates kids. Colin Thomas and John Carroll. Copsycript, Playwrights Union of Canada. 32 pp. \$5.00. [First Produced: The Young Neptune Company, N.S., 1984.] **Blood-brother, step-sister.** Vivienne Laxdal. Copsycript, Playwrights Union of Canada. 38 pp. \$5.00. [First produced: The Great Canadian Theatre Company, Ont., 1986.] **The haunted castle/Robena's rose-coloured glasses.** Beth McMaster, songs, Monica Palmer. Simon & Pierre, 1986. 92 pp. \$7.95. ISBN 0-88924-175-9.

This building hates kids was originally commissioned by the Canadian Housing Design Council and first performed in 1983. It has two characters, a brother and sister named Crois and Germaine Parker. This play deals with the effects that moving from a suburban house to an inner city highrise has on the children's lives.

This building hates kids is not without charm and deals fairly effectively with a complex topic. However, it has two major problems. Firstly, the play is overly verbal at the expense of dramatic action. This is not to suggest that the play should be a non-stop rollercoaster ride but for most of the play the two children talk, chant or sing about the problems of relocation, their unhappiness and their search for an ideal home. Although the dialogue is relatively convincing, and the songs and chants do add life to the script, the play cries out for more dramatic action. The other major flaw is that because there is no clearly defined dramatic conflict the resolution of the children's problems is both abrupt and all too comfortable.

Those scenes which do contain dramatic action are most effective. In one scene Crois and Germaine play frisbee indoors, physically demonstrating the problems of cramped living quarters. In another Crois is chased by a "mugger" who wishes to rob him of his walkman, illustrating the dangers of urban living. There is one other scene of note, in which Germaine consults a ouija board and speaks to a lifesize puppet called Grace, which is a most effective device.