

## WITH PASSION, INTENSITY AND STYLE

**Les petits pouvoirs**, Suzanne Lebeau, Montréal, Leméac, collection "Théâtre pour enfants," 1983. 161 pp. broché. ISBN 2-7609-9911-4.

There are very few theatre authors who write mainly or mostly for children and for youth. One can certainly count them on the fingers of one hand, in Québec at least, and one does not wonder why. To write for the theatre is quite a challenge and to write plays for children is very rarely rewarding. The production of such plays is still ignored by most theatre critics (because it is not considered as theatre?) and when a script is published (which, in itself, is quite an achievement), it is rarely reviewed. The dilemma is real, and the problem is an existential one.

Is Suzanne Lebeau to be considered as an exception? She has had training in theatre and is co-founder of Le Carrousel, compagnie de théâtre (1975). She has been writing plays for the 6 to 12 years old since 1975: two of them have been published, all have been widely circulated and one has been translated into English, Portuguese and Polish. And Suzanne Lebeau intends to continue exploring the realms of childhood and of theatre, because she considers that such writing is quite exciting and because she feels great affinities with it.

Her first four plays — *Ti-Jean voudrait ben s'marier mais...* (1975), *Le jardin qui s'anime* (1976), *La chanson improvisée* (1976) and *Chut! Chut! Pas si fort* (1977) — were written on the model of participatory theatre. Being fully appreciative of the involvement of children in theatrical presentations, she also was always very respectful of the young spectators she brought into action. Participation is not manipulation, and to give children an opportunity to participate is to bring them into creativity. It is not using them as objects or as pawns. Critics, however, underlined the educational content of those first scripts and asked why theatre should become just another teaching method. History (1975), geography (1976) and folklore (1975 and 1977) were indeed prominent in those plays, but alongside sure theatrical qualities, and sometimes quite complex dramatic structures. Suzanne Lebeau succeeded remarkably well, for instance, in introducing folktales in her plays without distorting the first and while still mastering her play patterns (1975 and 1977). Mostly, she was gradually writing her way into the complexity of theatre, into the creation of characters and story lines that have credibility and into the building up of articulate contents set up on solid dramatic structures.

In her latest plays, Suzanne Lebeau gets away from participatory theatre and comes to more classical structures as well as to themes of a wider interest. Her main objectives do remain constant however: she strives to speak *to* children and to involve *them* in voyages of discovery. She finds

inspiration in the children themselves: she likes to meet them, in schools or elsewhere, for discussions or theatre games linked to themes she explores in her own writing.

*Petite ville deviendra grande* (1978) bears a mainly social theme and states that cities should first and foremost be built for people — the workers of industry and of the tertiary sector for example — and not for machines and edifices. *Une lune entre deux maisons* (1980) shows the development and gradual working-out of a fine friendship between two very young persons. The characters are as fanciful as their names (Plume and Taciturne) and as true to reality as are all five-year-olds walking into their very first circle of friends (different, of course, from the family circle).

*Les petits pouvoirs* (1982) bears resemblances to previous plays by the author, but it is sufficiently different to warrant such a long presentation. Its theme is quite a strong one: authority, power and their presence in adult-child relationships. Characters are schematic and come out with great straightforwardness; they are presented with a realism that is quite new in the author's production. The rhythm of the action is hard and harsh. The lines speak out the desires and the frustrations of youngsters. All in all, it is a strong play, which talks of children's rights and autonomy. Its limits, as is often the case in children's theatre written by adults, are mostly to be found in the adult readers and spectators. Power is power, however small and however limited its field of application. Adults find it rather impossible to share especially with children the small powers that they own.

*Les petits pouvoirs* is made up of seven scenes, sketches in fact, that are independent from one another although some of the characters are present in more than one. The ensemble presents a chronology of daily experiences: hectic weekday morning, hurried breakfast, classroom events; the inevitable shopping trip to the corner supermarket, supper and bedtime. Ordinary? Not quite! As the author proceeds in her presentation of images and facts, reality is processed through a centrifuge. The result is a dense concentrate, dense and not innocent at all! The daily experiences shown are indeed of the very ordinary kind, and yet they involve children and adults in what look like never-ending confrontations. Whatever it is that adults wish is not desired by children; inversely, whatever the children appreciate is disliked by the adults, especially by parents, those automatic censors. Power games.

Why should adults always give orders to children? Why do they detain authority and exercise it in indiscriminate fashions? Why can't children decide by themselves on things that concern them primarily? How can parents impose their own decisions and present them as being morally and philosophically correct? The play asks relevant questions, and the answers sought reach out to other fields of concern, over and beyond what could be

called domestic authority: they are linked with education, with the social process that one engages in when living with other persons and, finally, with the phenomena of social organization and of politics. Power can be exercised in a multitude of ways — with subtlety or arrogance, anger or irony — and affect the individual or the group.

Throughout the play adults impose, question, quarrel, insist, oblige, punish, blackmail; children refuse to obey, resist, exercise whatever power they can. Are there losers or winners in those power games? Some fights find their own issues, but the war rages on, sometimes cold, sometimes hot. Common sense, wisdom are not the usual fare!

Suzanne Lebeau has taken sides while writing this play, the children's side, and she has done so with great determination. Of course, such a strong statement can stir the emotions and bring about reactions: because it is provocative, because it reaches out to real issues.

*Les petits pouvoirs* never gives adults the good lines, nor the predominant roles; it does not present their point of view. To Suzanne Lebeau, it was essential to show children bearing the weight of this power.

Va t'asseoir  
Fais-le donc  
Marmonne pas  
J'te l'ai dit  
Laisse-moi donc  
Tu cries trop  
Pas par là  
Calme-toi donc! (Choeur des parents p. 31)

In accordance with the theme, the writing of the play is direct and it offers no concessions. There is no provision here for lyricism, nor for romantic feelings. The lines of the dialogue transmit an essential message. The rhythm is short, exclamation marks are numerous, as are negations and imperative verbs. And since the characters are more the embodiment of groups than psychologically identified individuals, the use of choruses is most appropriate.

l' m'aiment. . .  
Quand chus poli  
Quand chus raisonnable  
Quand chus sage  
Quand j'fais c'qu'on m'dit  
Quand j'obéis  
Quand chus gentil  
Quand j'me colle  
Quand j'dors. . .  
Ah! laisse-moi tranquille!  
Chus pus en enfant! (Choeur des enfants p. 34)

Suzanne Lebeau admits that *Les petits pouvoirs* was not easy to write. And one cannot but recognize that there is a true and intense passion in her play, a passion that the author has mastered through her impeccable style and the rigorous theatrical apparatus.

The challenge is now for theatre critics and historians to take this play, which was written for children, and to propose a comparative analysis between it and other plays whose central theme or concern is power and its abuses: a Greek tragedy, a French classic, a play of the absurd. *Les petits pouvoirs* will certainly stand strong in such an analysis.

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#### A VERY SOPHISTICATED STORY

**The willow maiden**, Meghan Collins. Illus. Laszlo Gal. Groundhog books, Douglas & McIntyre, 1985. 40 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 088899-039-1.

A charming and very sophisticated tale entitled *The willow maiden* is the result of an international collaboration between American children's author Meghan Collins and Canadian illustrator Laszlo Gal. The reader's eye is immediately attracted by Mr. Gal's magnificent illustrative style. A striking combination of blues and greens ranging from indigo to pale turquoises and emeralds portrays the enchanted woodland setting (fig. 1).

The direct, uncluttered, though extremely rich narrative style used by Meghan Collins will be appreciated by even the most discriminating ear. The author succeeds admirably in creating a pleasing balance between realistic, natural dialogues which feature extremely correct English and beautifully written prose. This extremely readable text immediately involves the listener in the tale. From the first passages the reader/listener becomes interested in the fate of Denis, a lone woodsman who seeks shelter from the rain in the whispering woods...a place from which many a lone traveler has never reappeared...Within four pages occurs the main encounter between the principal characters. Denis, the young local farmer meets Lisane, the willow princess. The reader's curiosity about Lisane and the willow people is avid as is Denis'.