



Dramatic Responses to a Short Tree with Tall Ideas

—Jeanne Klein

Children's literature educators and critics seldom include dramatic literature among genres for academic study, for multiple reasons. In contrast to the adult repertoire, with its corporate publishers, far fewer children's plays have been anthologized and thereby canonized as individual trade books for readers. For example, Katherine Krzys's curatorial bibliography lists only one hundred anthologies published in the United States throughout the entire twentieth century. This situation leaves a minority of small publishers to market cheaper acting editions, largely to theatre companies and schools, for production purposes. As a consequence, children are positioned more as spectators than as readers of dramatic literature, unless they perform accessed scripts for other spectators. In effect, literary critics need to consider plays as dramatized experiences.

Unlike the more private readings of books,

critical discussions of children's plays are hampered by the fact that dramas also require page-to-stage interpretations, constructed among multiple artistic collaborators, and public receptions of site-specific productions interpreted during each somewhat unique live performance. In particular, Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)¹ depends upon teachers and parents to bring children to its performance venues. TYA producers must, therefore, select "age-appropriate" texts that appeal not only to intended grade levels, but to adult sensibilities as well—most often choosing popular, familiar titles from the children's literature canon. To encourage adult attendance further, producers often advertise their plays as "family theatre for all ages," thereby discounting age-group differences as a means of sidestepping ongoing "age-appropriate" debates.

Given these market conditions, how might

critics evaluate the artistic success of plays intended for child spectators? As a TYA critic and director, my solution to this quandary has been to compare my directorial intentions with child spectators' responses. For those literary critics not versed in theatre practices, I propose a similar, two-pronged approach to performance criticism. First, as a means of judging artistic production values, critics may analyze the semiotic elements of a given performance by interpreting how artists manifest a playwright's text. Second, critics may compare and integrate their interpretations of spectators' responses that reveal what children understood and recalled. By including children's aesthetic experiences in the equation of theatrical meaning-making, critics may question and illuminate how and why specific artistic choices encourage respective interpretations best.

Crucial differences exist between the reception theories of "implied readers" and the psychological evidence of "real readers," especially when, as Nodelman and Reimer assert, children are involved in inescapable ideological conundrums of adults' interpretations (91–97). As Maria Nikolajeva explains, "various reader-response theories do not deal with real flesh-and-blood readers, but with implied readers" or "abstract textual constructions" of audiences as interpreted by critics who extract images of childhood from texts in

order to theorize how children might possibly understand them (251). I prefer to analyze and interpret the more concrete responses of "real flesh-and-blood" spectators, gathered from culturally situated media studies. Given my extensive cross-disciplinary research in and critical questioning of developmental psychology (as expressed, for instance, in the work of Miller and Scholnick), I employ information-processing theories from social-cognitive psychology to explain how and why different age groups infer similar and different metaphoric themes after attending the same performances—see, for example, my essay "Reading Empathy in a Québécois Play." Knowing the contextual fluidity of developmental patterns allows me to choose and direct plays for grade-level groups, to resist type-casting, and to plan conceptualizations with designers and actors in order to communicate our intended artistic meanings with greater confidence. As Jack Zipes reminds me, "It would take another book to answer these questions [about age groups], but certainly discrete distinctions can be made with regard to the reception of plays by children" (13). In the interest of brevity, I will explain some developmental distinctions in regard to thematic comprehension, without considering all postmodern criticisms of child development theory here.

Some Patterns of Developmental Differences

When asked to identify “main ideas” (or what protagonists learned at the ends of plays), most elementary-aged students recount characters’ visual and verbal dramatic actions—that is, what actors say and do explicitly within the confines of staged performances—in part, because it’s simply easier to describe salient sights and sounds. Few go beyond concrete actions by inferring more abstract, metaphoric concepts that apply to society at large, unless thematic ideas resonate with their personal experiences. The extent to which children (and adults) recognize concrete and/or abstract themes along any continuum also depends on the degree to which discrete episodes are causally connected and how viewers process plot structures. Four- to seven-year-olds tend to focus on characters’ explicit actions within episodes sequentially, one at a time, to understand their goals and outcomes. Older children search for causal connections both within and between episodes simultaneously, while including actors’ implicit motives to find themes that are meaningful to them (van den Broek 335). The following example illustrates, not only these developmental differences, but also how directors’ choices can affect thematic interpretations.

After a production of Mast and Bensinger’s *Dinosaurus* at the University of Kansas, first, third,

and fifth graders were asked what Bunk (the oil worker) “decided to do at the end of the play” and “what he learned” (as a consequential main idea). Eleven-year-olds were more likely than younger children to connect causally related episodes by recalling that, in return for a dinosaur having saved his life in an earlier episode, Bunk decided to save the dinosaurs’ lives by exploding the cave’s entrance so that no one, including himself, could ever return. As a result, he learned, for example, “that money wasn’t more important than like somebody’s life” and “you should respect other people or animals and not just try to barge into their area and their lifestyle.” In contrast, most seven-year-olds relied primarily on the director’s final tableau, in which Bunk returned to the stage (the cave) and stood beside the dinosaurs, and concluded that he decided to stay with the dinosaurs because “he learned they were nice” (Klein, “Children’s Interpretations” 45–47).

Although nine- to twelve-year-olds are more likely than six- to eight-year-olds to identify metaphoric themes by comparing characters’ actions with their own more differentiated self-concepts, primary-grade students are not incapable of recognizing metaphors—if abstract concepts are concretized in performances and resonate with their individual lives. Younger students also enjoy the pretenses of anthropomorphic characters,

such as puppets, more than older students, who tend to associate such characters with “babyish” preschool programs. While adults may be expected to identify metaphors more readily than children, expectations and motivations for watching a “children’s” play may also impinge on individual responses. Viewers who expect “easy” children’s entertainment may invest less mental effort and focus their attentions on the technical aspects of a production, especially if they expect the story to bear little relationship to their lives. In contrast, those who seek to gain information (such as college students who are required to write essays about a performance) may invest more mindful mental effort by searching for metaphoric themes within the play’s fictive world. As I show in my model of aesthetic processing, the degree to which individual spectators, young and old alike, invest mental effort while processing performances largely determines the degrees of concrete and abstract interpretations (“From Children’s Perspectives” 45).

Directors can encourage individuals’ mindfulness in many ways: first, by choosing scripts that communicate metaphors through characters’ concrete actions, within and between causally related episodes, to facilitate thematic comprehension. Across international repertoires, I have found several Canadian children’s plays

that offer exemplary instances of richly rewarding theatrical experiences.² As a case in point, *The Short Tree and the Bird that Could Not Sing*, penned by nationally renowned playwright, Dennis Foon, offers multi-layered and, oftentimes, ironic meanings within and across each of its tightly knit episodes, without “preaching” its messages or patronizing children’s intelligence. For one week in February 2006, I directed this play at the University of Kansas in Lawrence (pop. 90,000) for local urban and rural audiences of primary-grade students from public and private schools as part of our Theatre for Young People (TYP) season. The following description of this play and the contexts of its production explains my directorial interpretations and how I sought to facilitate children’s comprehension of the play’s metaphoric themes. This insider’s view offers literary critics a model for interpreting performed texts for children.

A Short Tree with Tall Ideas

As noted in his preface to the play, Foon initially wrote this short story (with a very long title) for his five-year-old daughter, while feeling the pangs of separation from her in Vancouver during his playwrighting residence in Toronto—hence the inter-generational basis for its wide, “ageless” appeal. His story was published by Groundwood as a picture book, with illustrations by John

Bianchi, in 1986. Six years later, he developed it into a fifty-minute play with Young People's Theatre in Toronto and the Mermaid Theatre, a puppet company in Halifax. Since then, many professional companies, including Seattle's Children's Theatre and Metro Theater Company of St. Louis, have produced this delightful play.

The story begins with a Short Tree wishing it could grow up big and tall like the other two Big Trees living next to it in a northern forest. When Jacques and Jack, two lumberjacks, cut down the Big Trees and pluck a wee, little Flower growing nearby, the Short Tree feels very, very alone in the world. A Bird that cannot sing flies in and grows to like the Short Tree. Upon meeting a runaway Boa Constrictor hiding in the Short Tree's hole, the Bird helps it find its owner, Aragula, a snake woman, who takes it back to the circus. When a black Balloon, named Nobody, floats in looking for a safe place to live, the Bird helps it find its friends, the Green, Blue, and Yellow Balloons, hiding in the clouds for safety. As time passes and the Short Tree's leaves turn yellow, the Bird must leave to fly south for the winter.

During the long, cold winter, as the Short Tree feels more lonely than ever with its bare branches covered in snow, a Squirrel hibernates inside a hole in its trunk. The Short Tree meets its Shadow, which plays with it during the day, and the North

Wind that sings to it at night. The Big Dipper appears and explains how the Short Tree once flew high in the sky as a seed. Meanwhile, from a southern beach near the ocean, the Bird writes postcards to the Short Tree about its adventures. Tourists yell at it to stop singing, Fish snap at it near the water, and an Alligator tries to eat it in a swamp. On its way back north, the Bird gets caught in the Wind and flies into a snow-covered mountain peak, where it witnesses a Snow Bride and Groom getting married by a Snow Minister.

As the snow melts and springtime arrives, the Short Tree starts feeling growing pains and worries about the Bird making it back north. Jacques and Jack try to catch the Bird with a net, but it manages to escape. Meanwhile, Squirrel comes out of the Short Tree's hole and finds a Mate, and a new Flower blossoms. A Baby Tree sprouts nearby and the no-longer-Short Tree takes care of it, as they hear a horrible "singing" noise. The Bird has returned and the Short Tree introduces it to all its new friends. The Bird is so happy to be back home among friends that it sings!

Production Contexts

While no director can control each and every interpretive idea among individual spectators, she can make the metaphoric ideas within a playwright's dialogue concrete through actors'

actions and designers' visual and aural imagery. When directing "children's" plays, I strive to thwart adults' expectations of farcical humour and simplistic *divertissement* by taking themes seriously to counter ageist constructions of perpetually "happy" childhoods. I always counsel actors and designers to "play the play, not the audience" by placing our adult selves directly inside child characters' problematic situations. As a feminist director in an educational setting, I incorporate student designers' initial visualizations and actors' nascent ideas as we work together to discover and arrive at collaborative artistic choices.

Foon's text allows for a variety of character portrayals for both actors and puppets, using a wide assortment of puppetry techniques. I believe that dressing an actor in a bird costume signals audiences to treat the play as a farce, requiring little mental effort.³ To signal more serious, mindful viewing, I chose to physicalize the Bird as a puppet, operated by a puppeteer in full view of the audience. My primary directorial intention was to keep all characters sized in proportion to the largely immobile Short Tree by doubling roles among six actor-puppeteers (three men and three women dressed in black) in four basic ways: 1) three actors "puppeteered" the Short Tree, the two Big Trees, and the Shadow from inside respective costumes; 2) felt-constructed puppets included the Bird (a

woodpecker), additional Wood Beetles (on a pair of gloves), two Flowers, the Boa Constrictor, two Squirrels, two Fish, an Alligator head, as well as four Balloons on sticks and three Snow People on dowel rods; 3) two actors added costume pieces to portray the play's human characters (i.e., Jacques and Jack, Aragula, and two Tourists); and 4) offstage actors voiced the North Wind (characterized as a lounge singer) and the Big Dipper (illuminated by gobos⁴ on two walls above spectators).

We staged the play in an "alley" arrangement in our intimate, black box theatre, with one hundred spectators seated on two opposite sides of the playing space. Primary-grade students sat on the floor in front of adults seated in chairs on risers. At one end of the centre, the "north world" platform contained the Short Tree (an actor, kneeling on a small box under his felted costume), along with two tree stumps (upon which the Big Trees initially stood) and a stair unit behind the Short Tree for his Shadow to stand upon. At the opposite end, the "south world" platform contained a four-foot high palm tree upon which the Bird puppet perched. Between these two worlds lay two smaller platforms: one to represent a "swamp," with an alligator puppet head hidden beneath a green cloth; and the other, a snowy "mountain" unit of white fabric that revealed three stick puppets of Snow People when raised up by kneeling puppeteers. Four

styrofoam “clouds” hung above the centre area for the Balloons’ scene. To enhance spectators’ sense of sharing the same spaces, the stage floor and child seating areas were painted in quadrants to represent four “geographic” spaces—a brown forest, a green swamp, a sandy beach, and snow-covered ground. Seasonal changes were indicated by tulle “leaves” on the Short Tree’s head and two (arm) branches—green for spring and summer, orange for autumn, and white for winter.

Throughout the rehearsal process, actors worked diligently on humanizing uniquely defined characterizations largely through vocal variations. For example, Jacques spoke with a Québécois accent, the Bird used a Brooklyn cadence, and Aragula characterized a gypsy. Using Bunraku-like techniques, visibly apparent puppeteers conveyed vocal expressions, gestured with their hands and arms, and kept their eyes glued to their respective puppets in order to re-direct spectators’ foci from themselves to puppets. To heighten emotional relationships, actors played moment-to-moment sub-texts of vulnerability wherever possible, particularly when the Bird explained why it had to leave the Short Tree for the winter months. Using lighting, sound effects, and transitional music between episodes, the entire production team strove to keep audiences focused upon intended meanings. Nevertheless, I wondered whether my

focusing work as a director would prove successful, and how spectators would respond to these highly conventionalized puppetry techniques.

Gathering Responses After Performances

For every TYP production, I employ various methods to gather audience responses against which to compare and evaluate my directorial interpretations. In the present case, six teachers returned our voluntary evaluation form with their perceptions of students’ understanding, and two teachers voluntarily sent us sixty-four drawings from their rural and private schools. College students in my Children and Drama course were required to attend one of five school matinees and to write essays explaining their emotional responses and personal reverberations of the play’s metaphors.⁵

Teachers from four schools also invited actors and me to lead (unrecorded) post-performance drama workshops in six classrooms with a total of one hundred first, second, and third graders. These workshops were intended to extend the play’s curricular themes, to engage students in role-playing analogous situations, and to answer questions about the production. After introducing ourselves, we began each workshop by asking children to review the play’s story and main ideas: “What were the Short Tree’s problems?” and

“How did he solve them?” We played a mirror game and then improvised scenes using the play’s puppets to encourage various solutions to intra- and interpersonal problems. During the last several minutes, children asked us many insightful questions about the production. Five teachers voluntarily returned our workshop evaluation form with additional comments.

When analyzing responses, I look for patterns or emerging categories of response to see what thematic concepts arise most frequently. Although I was not able to conduct a formal reception study with children, I recalled their oral responses during informal conversations. My analysis of these responses illuminates how children and adults tended to interpret the performative meanings in this production, beginning with my observations during and then after performances.

Attentions to Theatrical Conventions

From my vantage point during performances, it was difficult to observe the exact placements of audience members’ gazes, whether upon the puppets alone or in concert with the puppeteers’ faces and bodies. In post-performance conversations with primary-grade students, children were divided as to whether they focused only upon the puppets or also watched the puppeteers. Those who focused on the puppets said they did

so because “they were the characters,” while others also watched the puppeteers “to see their expressions.”

With only one exception, the children’s drawings depicted non-human characters without puppeteers, suggesting that most children accepted puppeteers’ conventional “invisibility” by focusing their attentions on the animated puppets. (Only one drawing showed the puppeteer—standing with the Bird puppet perched on the palm tree, and with the heads of audience members below—a literal translation of this child’s experience.) Drawings of the Short Tree (sometimes drawn with two Big Trees or stumps) varied, with some showing a smiley face through a hole and others with no face at all. The Bird was often coloured like our puppet, in black with red wings and a yellow beak, and some drawings included musical notes emanating from the Bird—similar to our graphic design on programs given to students. A few pictures focused on the four coloured balloons, a boa constrictor (crawling up the trunk of a tree), a squirrel, or differently coloured flowers.

In contrast to children’s apparent focus on puppets, several college students noted the extra time they needed to grow accustomed to puppetry before they became fully engrossed in the story and “realized that the actors did not matter anymore.” “I focused on the animals and saw

them as real living creatures. . . . After a while, I forgot the actors were even there.” For others who are conditioned to focus on people in film and television, puppeteers remained a constant distraction. As one woman explained,

Having seen too many movies, my eyes were naturally drawn to the puppeteers when they spoke and not to the characters they were manipulating. I noticed that they were performing the same facial gestures and body language of the puppets they controlled. That made it easier for me to see the puppets themselves as characters in the story and to dismiss reality and let my imagination take over.

Another adult student found it difficult “to fully accept the characters” in doubled acting roles: “[t]his is just an example of the way my mind works in patterns of logic and rules: ‘If [one actress] was the Shadow, [the same actress] cannot also be a Balloon.’” (Whether double-casting posed a similar problem for literal-minded youngsters is unknown.) This same student was also distracted by backstage costume changes behind the south world flat because she found herself “wondering what they were doing.” Likewise, another was distracted by crew

members changing the Short Tree’s leaves on stage because “my eye tends to travel to whatever movement I see,” even under dimmed lights. “I have this overwhelming worry that I will miss something if I don’t pay attention to these needless happenings. I did notice that children present did not seem to be bothered by this occurrence. They focused on the part that was lit.” In contrast, other adults (including myself and designers during dress rehearsals) were surprised to see that the Short Tree’s leaves had been changed on stage in darkness, while they were engrossed in watching the Balloons’ scene just a few feet away.

These examples demonstrate how adults’ observations of youngsters during performances can contradict their assumptions about children’s “weak” attention spans. “It was fascinating to see all those children paying attention to the story. Kids usually start talking and moving around if they don’t find [visual imagery] interesting, but during this show, they all paid attention.” Others wrote: “[i]t was so enlightening to see what elements children were attentive to compared to adults,” especially the fact that “children had much less difficulty dismissing reality and ignoring the puppeteers.” Perhaps “children haven’t been taught to over-analyze and that is why they can glaze over the little distractions that bother us adults so much.”



Figure 1: Short Tree (Steven Karlin) and Bird (Chel Shipley). Photographer: Luke Jordan.

Responses to Metaphoric Themes

Despite being chock-full of irony, the play's explicit dialogue and dramatized actions encouraged thematic comprehension among children. Several main themes arose repeatedly when children were asked to identify the Short Tree's problems. For starters, they recalled the actor's initial dialogue: "The Short Tree couldn't

see. He wanted to be tall, and he grew up at the end," reminding some that "patience" is necessary when growing up. "Even if you're short, don't be sad because you'll grow." More common was the idea that "[t]he Tree was lonely after the lumberjacks cut down the trees and took the Flower." The solution? "He made lots of new friends at the end" (Figure 1). In fact,

after one performance, two second-grade girls spontaneously counted the number of friends that the Short Tree had in the final scene (eight), and I reminded them of two invisible friends (the North Wind and the Big Dipper). Teachers' written evaluations affirmed similar themes of "loneliness and how to deal with it" as well as thematic ideas surrounding "friendship" and "loyalty."

As for college students, one wrote that "this play carried so many important, socially charged themes, metaphors, and morals that I don't even know where to begin." Like the children's interpretations, themes of loneliness, abandonment, isolation, and separation from loved ones dominated most essays, especially if one relied upon my program note:

. . . Foon's play asks us to confront our fears about loneliness and that sense of feeling alone, small, and lost in a great, huge world. Like the Short Tree that discovers many companions surrounding it, we need not feel alone when our best friends and family members live in far away places. We need only to look around our natural environments and find so much company to fill our lives with simple pleasures each day and night

A foreign exchange student reflected upon her

homesickness; two others recalled missing a brother and fiancé fighting in Iraq. "The ten feet of empty stage between [the Short Tree and the Bird] grew into the miles of distance I have with my loved ones." Another woman, facing a "difficult break-up" with her boyfriend, perceived, "I am not alone no matter what is going on in my life." "Life doesn't stop when someone leaves, but allows for someone else to enter" another opened door.

Many college students empathized or sympathized with the Short Tree by perceiving this character as a metaphor for a small Everychild. Some felt "an instant connection" as they "related with" his loneliness or "felt sorry for him." Most followed his "personal struggles," his "feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability," or his "pain of not feeling adequate due to his size," particularly if they themselves had struggled with shortness throughout their lives. For one parent, this concept "made me think of my children and how they must feel when they can't experience some of the interesting things yet because they're too small. On the other hand, I felt relieved that they are too small to be involved in some of the chaos that the world has to offer." Ironically, the Short Tree's small size also "saves" him from destruction when "the lumberjacks feel he is not worth cutting down, allowing him time to discover happiness and meaning in his life." Thus, the Short Tree is

given the chance to grow “both physically and emotionally” by “embracing his differences” and by learning “how to love himself and what surrounds him” and “to value all the wonderful things he can offer to others.” “Growing up is difficult, but it’s the hard stuff that makes our roots stronger.”

The first words of the play, spoken by the First Big Tree, set a significant context for adults: “Oh my, will it ever end? All those people rushing around, living their tiny lives” (15). Here, Foon immediately establishes and contrasts an easy-paced, natural world against our fast-paced, stressful human world, striking resonant chords among many: “[s]o much beauty is overlooked every day in the hustle and bustle lifestyles we are now living.” As others observed, “sometimes we consume our lives at work,” “never stopping to enjoy life,” “and forget about the little things that make our lives wonderful, like spending some time with our best friend or being there for people who need us.”

Environmental concerns and “the extreme materialism of our country” were evident in the lumberjacks’ destruction of the Big Trees. “We are continuously destroying our natural resources to make more stuff, to build more houses, and to make more money, when instead we should be preserving these resources to make sure that

there will be a land for our future.” Indeed, “We humans tend to think only of how our actions will affect our own lives, not the lives of other animals, plants, and our planet itself.”

The lumberjacks’ actions also suggested “the dissolution of the family,” if one imagined the three trees as “some form of a family unit from which a different family unit begins to grow.” The Short Tree gains a new family with the birth of the Baby Tree, and this unit “grows larger when a Squirrel moves in and later finds a Mate to create a family,” a new Flower blossoms, and the Bird reunites with the Short Tree. Thus, “[i]n today’s world of non-traditional families, this family unit can show us that it doesn’t matter who the members of the family are—what matters is that they love and care for one another.” Family reunions are also foreshadowed by the Boa Constrictor rejoining its missing parent (Aragula) and by the Black Balloon finding its family. In contrast, the Snow Bride and Groom “are just beginning their own family.” I suspect that children may have imagined the two Big Trees as the Short Tree’s parents within the first episode, but I don’t know whether they perceived different family units over subsequent episodes or simply saw the other characters as a sequential collection of additional friends (I suspect the latter). College students, who—unlike most children—are separated from their families, connected episodes

to discern these diverse families as an emotionally resonant theme.

One elementary pre-service teacher noted how “The Short Tree had relied upon the Taller Trees for information about the world around him”—like small children, too young to see the world at large, rely on teachers to provide knowledge. The same student observed the irony that although the Big Trees ridiculed and “largely ignored him, [the Short Tree] mimicked [the same behaviour] to the Flower, who was shorter than him, out of frustration.” This point was not lost on other college students, who recalled the Golden Rule of “treating others the way that you would like to be treated.” By the time the Baby Tree sprouted the following spring, “The Short Tree changed from a child mimicking actions of adults to an adult who listened to the children around him and helped them grow.” Primary-grade students may have missed this thematic idea unless they connected these two episodes at the beginning and end of the play from these adult perspectives.

The play’s turning point occurs as Foon literally casts a black Shadow of



Figure 2: Bird (Chel Shipley) at the beach. Photographer: Luke Jordan.

self-doubt, a concrete representation of the Short Tree's own "dark self-image" or that "little voice of negativity inside our heads that we cannot get rid of." The Shadow first berates the Short Tree for not noticing it: "[y]ou're too busy whining and feeling sorry for yourself" (49). Indeed, for some adults, "the Short Tree became irritating. I was sick of hearing his complaining voice," which "made me realize how annoying people can sound when they constantly see the negative things in life instead of looking at something positive." "When people spend most of their time complaining, they are blinded and don't see the beauty that surrounds them." Ironically, this "cynical" Shadow, that may also represent "our society's obsession with depression," sheds light with the following crucial insight:

SHADOW. No wonder you're so lonely. How can you make friends when you've got your eyes shut tight?

SHORT TREE. But I'm afraid of the dark!

SHADOW. All the more reason to open your eyes. . . . (50; Figure 2)

From this brief but potent exchange, college students recognized seeing the world from different perspectives as yet another layer of metaphor. At first, the Short Tree "cannot see much further than

what is in front of him," so the Bird initially "acts as his eyes," flying to the circus and clouds to report "what was happening above him." Later, the Short Tree "was so busy complaining about himself that he could not see that others were willing to be his friends." But by opening his eyes to the world around him and moving past the darkness of depression, he discovers an array of new and once invisible friends in the Big Dipper and the North Wind. After growing tall, he "could finally see the things he had only heard about" and "see that he was important to others as well." "This story demonstrates how children can find friends in the most unlikely of places if they would only look, and that growing up happens when we aren't paying attention." "Short Tree shows us that we need to step back sometimes and critically look at the world around us," or more personally, that "I need to look inside myself and open up to new ideas and possibilities."

During drama workshops, I first sought to make the Shadow's metaphor concrete by asking children to close their eyes and remember a time when they felt alone or lonely. When they opened their eyes, I asked them what they saw (for example, their classmates, or lots of friends). I then asked seated pairs of children to mirror one another's arm and hand gestures, paying close attention to their partner's movements. As one teacher



Figure 3: Shadow (Kacie Dienstbach) urges Short Tree (Steven Karlin) to open his eyes. Photographer: Luke Jordan.

wrote, “Everyone enjoyed [the workshop] and gained insight,” hopefully by seeing the Shadow’s metaphor literally.

Racial Resonances

While most college students drew thematic ideas primarily from the Short Tree’s developmental story, others also followed the

Bird’s “mature theme of a lasting friendship that beat social norms and overcame all the obstacles that stood in the way” and “the importance of accepting others.” As the Bird surmises upon first meeting the Short Tree, “I like your branches . . . But I don’t know if I like you. I haven’t known you long enough. . . . But I do think it is safe to say that I will soon grow to like you and we shall

become good friends” (20; Figure 3). Despite their respective “shortcomings and imperfections” (too short and can’t sing), they “look past each other’s flaws” and accept one another as equals. Sometimes “we tend to be too quick to judge others and look at others for only their face value.” The Bird’s “very open-minded personality” and willingness to help others in need show “how friendship can help us believe in ourselves,” as the Bird’s postcards home to the Short Tree prove its “devotion and commitment to their relationship.” As one white woman with a Latino boyfriend ascertained, “Overcoming the species’ differences could be equated with racial differences,” as the Short Tree discovered various friends wholly different from his biological class.

My cast and I had never really considered the racial overtones or “species” differences among characters in this play until this student pointed out this metaphor. Implicit cultural differences were embedded in Foon’s text, even though I was not able to cast actors of colour in this production. Therefore, when conducting drama workshops, the actors and I included this metaphor by asking children how such different characters could ever be friends. Given that children are taught to get along with everyone regardless of race, gender, and class, they explained that differences don’t matter as long as people are nice. So we asked

them to role-play analogous situations (one at a time) in which someone (an actor with or without a puppet) felt lonely, sad, scared, or mean. Using assorted puppets, they tried various tactics to make friends with the person/puppet until the actor did (or did not) give in. As one teacher wrote in his evaluation of the workshop,

Developmentally, 7- to 8-year-olds struggle to come up with friendship skills under different scenarios (shyness, pouty, mad, hurt feelings, distant because of family issues). I could see them thinking hard to approach a character and start a friendship. We talked later during a class meeting—“maybe your ideas won’t work right then, but give some alone time to that person and try later.”

Indeed, crossing cultural and emotional barriers takes time—and patience—for anyone.

As college students noted, the Bird’s contrasting adventures down south also “represented our culture’s need to explore and expand our horizons, often at the expense of our safety.” In yet another ironic turn, the Bird “took a risk” by leaving “the safety of the forest in order to survive.” In contrast to the Short Tree’s discovery of companions all around him, the Bird “discovered that friends are sometimes hard to find.” Given that “safety was an

illusion,” the Bird was “vulnerable” to snapping Fish, angry Tourists, a hungry Alligator, the blistery North Wind, and Hunters from whom it escaped with its life. Nevertheless, the Bird “never stopped singing” “Home on the Range” (the state song of Kansas) and “On Top of Spaghetti” to express itself, regardless of its poor singing voice. Children found these repetitive songs quite humorous, and often sang them after performances.

In contrast to the Bird’s risk-taking attempts at friendship and the Short Tree’s journey toward self-security, the episode of four multi-coloured Balloons seemed to dramatize “that we can only feel safe when we shelter ourselves from the rest of society with only people who are similar to us.” Nobody, the Black Balloon, “feels alone and afraid of everyone, until she is with others of her kind in a place separated from everyone else.” In fact, as an ironic aside, the Bird quips, “I didn’t realize balloons were so sensitive. Must be the thin skin” (27). “What makes Nobody happy is to be reunited with other balloons like [her] that love [her] and don’t want to hurt [her] in any way.”

While writing this paper within a Canadian context, this trope of racial differences caused me to reflect even further. Perhaps Nobody’s story could also be read as an escape from slavery. Scared and lost, Black Nobody runs away from a “mean boy” who held and then “tried to stick a pin

in” her. The Short Tree surmises, “[s]o you escaped [and] now you’re free” (26). Later, the Blue Balloon tells the Bird, “[b]ad down there” (South) but “[s]afe up here” (North) in the clouds (28–29). Once they are secure among different colours of their same type in their “top secret” location, the Bird assures this “family of escaped balloons” that “[y]our secret’s safe with me” (29–30)—affirming Canada’s multicultural role as a safe refuge from slavery and oppression.

As some college students pointed out, Foon also weaves in subtle ideas about death, usually a “taboo” topic for children (unless veiled within Mother Nature’s world). First, the lumberjacks kill the Big Trees and pluck a Flower, initiating the Short Tree’s plight. Although Aragula and the Boa Constrictor invite the Short Tree to join them on their world travels, the Short Tree can’t “abandon his home without dying.” Likewise, the Bird has to leave the Short Tree or it “would die,” even as it faces potential death from hunters. Once married, the Snow Bride and Groom begin melting to their deaths “to be reformed together” (Foon 56). From winter’s death to spring’s rejuvenation, this “inevitable chain of events,” brought about by the changing seasons, also signals how “children will be faced with change all their lives and they need to know healthy ways to cope with it.”

Gender Stereotypes

During a class discussion with college students, I began to notice the gendered pronouns they were using to denote various characters. I asked, “[w]hat gender do you ascribe to anthropomorphic characters and on what basis?” Everyone perceived the Short Tree as a male character due to his exposed face and audibly male voice. (In fact, I chose to cast a male actor in this role, in part, to counter stereotypes regarding male vulnerability.) These physical rationales differed, however, when female actresses operated ostensibly gender-neutral puppets. Although the Bird was operated by a woman, many perceived her as a male character based on cartooned birds in the mass media (including our university’s “jayhawk” mascot) or assumptions of a same-sex friendship with a male Short Tree. Others deemed the Bird a female character because she “helped” the Boa Constrictor and the Black Balloon, however reluctantly, with “positive energy and a sunny disposition.” Likewise, some saw the Shadow as the woman she was, while others perceived a male character shadowing the Short Tree’s masculinity. Although this same actress held the Black Balloon, two women used male pronouns and one man used female pronouns for the balloon in their essays. One female student was “bothered” by the female lumberjack, while a

male student perceived the two lumberjacks as a married couple because they “constantly argued.” It would appear, then, that no matter which actors are cast in gender-neutral roles, audiences still rely upon gender stereotypes when identifying characters’ genders, even when portrayed as animal puppets.

A Children’s Play for Adults

Just as literary critics have sought to overcome widespread prejudice against commercially popular yet innocuous “kiddie lit,” TYA producers seek to resist “Disneyified” or formulaic expectations of “children’s theatre” as “cute, funny, and simplistic” spectacles. Not surprisingly, then, stereotypes about theatre for children littered adults’ responses in both positive and negative ways, as already noted above. Given the biases of those taking this children’s course, many found that this play “is not only a children’s play, but a commentary on relationships we form as we grow in life” that “spoke to the hearts of children and adults alike,” and therefore, proved “enjoyable to crowds of all ages.” “Many people think this kind of story is only addressed to children, but I could not have identified more with this story. I feel that many adults need to be reminded of the morals of the story.”

One film student, who has worked at Disney’s

Epcot Center, held the common view that children “need constant camera-cuts and humor to keep them entertained and interested.” Others countered this assumption by noting how quiet, and therefore presumably engrossed, children were at this live theatre event. Another student did not feel “emotionally invested,” because the plot was “too predictable” and “didn’t keep me guessing.” Others admitted this was the first children’s play they had attended, and so they either “did not know what to expect” or they “had many different preconceptions that were altered during the viewing.” Such preconceived notions included a “simple plot,” albeit with “significant meanings,” “fun, bright, outgoing, charismatic characters with crazy voices,” “child-friendly music,” “the use of bright colors” in scenography, “a very happy ending,” and “very cute, spontaneous, light humor” with “a lot of funny one-liners”—all of which signaled “great ways to help children relate to the story.”

During performances, however, “children laughed at very different things from adults.” Physical humour sparked giggles as Aragula and the Boa Constrictor exited in a tango, the hunters chased the Bird with a net, and anxiety-ridden Nobody constantly jumped away from the Bird’s beak. In regard to verbal humour, “[t]here were quite a few jokes that went over their heads, but

there were also plenty that didn’t.” For example, after a Tourist yells at the Bird to stop singing and throws a flip-flop at it, the Bird replies, “People are generous here. They give you the shoes off their feet” (51). Unlike adults, children never laughed at these verbal opposites of physical actions, perhaps because they did not know word meanings, such as “generous” (cf. Winner). They did, however, detect the obvious, visual incongruity when the Boa Constrictor corrected the Bird with “I’m not a worm” (21). Foon’s balancing of verbal and visual humour throughout his text offers something enjoyable for everyone.

Conclusion

Responses to this production run of *The Short Tree and the Bird that Could Not Sing* demonstrate how dramatic literature contains the seeds of both literal and more metaphoric interpretations among “real readers,” based on specific artistic choices that vary by casting, staging, and designs. (Obviously, I have no way of knowing whether different artistic choices would have created similar or different audience responses, for producers seldom publish responses against which to make comparisons.) Like the adults, who elaborated upon these concepts with resonating analogies to their “taller” worlds, primary-grade audiences recognized many of our intended themes of



Figure 4: Short Tree (Steven Karlin) enjoys his friends Bird (Chel Shipley), Shadow (Kacie Dienstbach), Baby Tree (Lance Hill), Second Flower and Squirrel's Mate (Cali Gilman), and Squirrel (Elliott Sowards). Photographer: Luke Jordan.

growing up, loneliness, and friendship. This informal and largely anecdotal analysis of spectators' responses affirms once again how reflective individuals construct multiple metaphors from concrete imagery that resonates with their personal lives.

No matter how much I plan for and expect obvious or particular interpretations, I am always delighted to discover additional concepts that my production team and I had never considered—the implicit nature of all narrative constructions. Some universal themes, such as loneliness and friendship, require no “special” artistic treatments other than playing the play seriously, for the playwright has already provided intrinsic dialogue for anyone to plumb and follow with appropriate artistic choices. Other interpretations may need a director's or designer's nudge to manifest metaphors more directly; for example, building puppets in proportion to the Short Tree to visualize its metaphoric role as Everychild and “shrinking” an adult actor's size in comparison to taller trees standing on stumps. Still other interpretations require adjustments during

performance runs. For example, initially, the Bird puppeteer wore sunglasses to disguise the fact that she was still practising to keep her focus on her puppet alone, but some spectators read her sunglasses as a sign of blindness. During the run, as she mastered keeping her focus on her puppet, she removed the sunglasses and only wore them when the Bird puppet wore sunglasses down south, as we initially intended (Figure 4). As another example, one teacher noted that “at first, [her students] thought the girl with the [black] balloon was a character and not just the balloon.” I could not figure out how to alter this perception, other than having the actress remain hidden behind the wall for a much longer time when introducing the Black Balloon during its first entrance. These examples highlight the crucial importance of gathering spectators’ responses during production runs in order to solidify intended meanings.

Gender and race remain sticky conundrums, whether directors cast with or against identity “types.” For example, in our production of Alf Silver’s *More of a Family*, four actors, including one African American, doubled various family roles. Ignoring one African American actor’s roles as a father, grandparent, and boyfriend in

inter-racial families, one teacher castigated us for “stereotyping” him as a homeless person (the play’s pivotal character). While casting decisions cannot alter selective perceptions, scripts that employ animal puppets can offer additional opportunities for questioning and challenging gender and racial stereotypes.

This case study of one play in its performance context offers a model for theorizing how child and adult spectators construct thematic meanings. Applying social-cognitive principles and reception theories to performance analyses before, during, and after theatre productions allows directors and critics to explain why particular plays succeed in communicating metaphoric concepts to young and old spectators alike. When analyzing play texts alone, critics may imagine theatrical ways of making visual and verbal metaphors concrete for young audiences by proposing various casting, staging, and design choices to assist respective artists in future productions. For all these reasons and more, I encourage literary critics and educators to read and analyze other original plays in the extensive Canadian repertoire by employing the semiotics of theatre in performance contexts with “real readers.”

Notes

¹ Theatre for Young Audiences (and its more commonly used acronym TYA) is a term that was instituted in the US (and elsewhere) after 1978 to emphasize the employment of professional adult actors performing for young people in order to clarify assumptions that child actors usually perform in “children’s theatre” (Davis and Behm).

² Over my career, I have directed several noteworthy English Canadian plays and Québécois plays in English translation: *I Am a Bear!*, adapted by Gilles Gauthier from a children’s book; *More of a Family* by Alf Silver; *Crying to Laugh* by Marcel Sabourin; and *Little Monster* by Jasmine Dubé. For further information on these plays, see “Translating Metaphors from Québec to Kansas.”

³ See photos of Bird costumes and puppets in the published play to compare aesthetic effects.

⁴ A gobo is a small metal plate with cut-out patterns placed inside a lighting instrument to project intended designs; in this case, “stars” in the shape of the Big Dipper.

⁵ College students gave me their verbal assent to quote from their papers anonymously for the purposes of this article. For the present analysis, permission to publish anonymous responses gathered orally and in writing from all spectators was granted by the Human Subjects Committee, Lawrence Campus at the University of Kansas.

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