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Wayne Kramer

Mark Twain, Children's Theater, Saving Shakespeare

Hampshire College Professor of Theatre Wayne Kramer delivered the annual Five College Jackie M. Pritzen Lecture last year on March 30. The talk, established in 1995 on the occasion of Ms. Pritzen's retirement, aims to honor the community of scholars with whom she worked for more than 25 years as a member of the Five College staff and the spirit of cooperation she did so much to further.

Kramer, who served for many years as a member of the Five College Theater Chairs Committee, has a wide range of productions to his credit as a professional director and designer. His most recent publication, *The Mind's Eye: Theatre and Media Design from the Inside Out*, explores the process of design for theatre and other performance venues, including film, video games, and museum display. The text includes an interactive CD illustrating certain design elements and principles.

In opening remarks for his talk, entitled "Mark Twain, Children's Theater, and Saving Shakespeare," he alluded to the fact that Hampshire was searching to fill a new position in the theatre program for a specialist in children's theater. "Getting to this point," he noted, "has been an eleven-year process filled with roller-coaster-like ups and downs." Children's theater, it's safe to say, has been one of Kramer's passions for many years. So when Hampshire approved the position, it was for him the realization of a long-held dream. It also represented, in his words, "a timely convergence of several threads—the development of the childhood studies program, the public school partnership program, the community partnerships for social change, the opening of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, and our own school's initiatives in arts and social action—I think we are at the beginning of an exciting and fruitful period in the life of the theatre



Natalie Sowell is Wayne Kramer's dream come true. Appointed this fall as assistant professor of theatre at Hampshire, Sowell brings to the college and to the prospects for developing a program in children's theater a wealth of experience and insight. She holds an M.F.A. in theater for youth from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has directed numerous children's theater productions, led dozens of creative drama classes and workshops, and served as artistic director of UJIMA YOUTHEATRE. Her areas of interest include theater for social change and multiculturalism/inclusiveness within child drama. "Including child drama in Hampshire's theater program presents an immense opportunity for interdisciplinary connection and community collaboration," Sowell says.

What is variously called children's theater or youth theater, creative drama, and educational theater has a relatively short history. Aristotle has said: "Those who educate children well are to be honored for they have instructed in the art of living well." Certainly children have appeared on the global stages in various guises and with differing measures of attention and consideration. And just as children have been treated differently historically (that is, as junior citizens, little adults, slaves, and even armies and sacrifices), so too their relationship to the functions and enterprises of theater and theater making has been varied. We can imagine children squirming and fidgeting at Sophocles's productions in ancient Greece. These were, after all, communal and family events. They had both a religious and a social character. Families would have packed food, picnic baskets if you will, and children would have been bundled up for these important public performances. The medieval *commedia dell'arte*, public-square events of an improvisational nature, would surely have appealed to Italian children—the wild physicality of the Pantalone, the lovers and the Doctor, Scaramouche, or that group of servants called the *zanni*. But these small and widely divergent examples from the Western European theatrical tradition do not really address the sense of a theater devised for and performed for a child audience. It is only in the last century that the sense of a theater that was made for children was named, acknowledged, and developed.

The early stirrings of this kind of theater date from the settlement houses of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As a crucible of new social thought and new social action, the mission of the settlement houses was acclimation of the new immigrants. They were what we would today call community centers. In an article entitled "Settlement Houses: Old Idea in New Form" that appeared in the magazine *New Social Worker*, Barbara Trainin Blank observes: "The old settlement houses taught adult education and Americanization classes, provided schooling for the children of immigrants, organized job clubs, offered after-school recreation, and initiated public health services. They offered trade and vocational training, as well as classes in music, art, and theater."



Pantalone

But settlement workers, almost exclusively women, Blank wrote, "were not dispensing charity; they were working toward the general welfare. Underlying all those services was a philosophy of upward mobility, a struggle to help each immigrant group become part of the mainstream and the 'American dream.'"

By 1918, Blank notes, "settlement houses had become permanent fixtures on the urban landscape, with 400 of them stretching across the country." Among the most famous of these, she says, was Hull House, established by Jane Addams, who would go on to become a Nobel Laureate for Peace, and Ellen Starr. "Established in 1889," writes Blank, "[Hull House] was intended as a place where the two women could share their knowledge of art and literature with the people surrounding the institution, mostly immigrants." But, she notes, "the enterprise expanded well beyond their expectations. Because the people who came to participate in their activities brought along so many children, Hull and Starr began a kindergarten program . . ."

These settlement houses, then, served as a venue for the exchange of information, strategy, resources, and culture. They helped the immigrants of that era balance the challenges, the promise, and the expectations of a new culture against the pull of

cultural values that had once served them in good stead. They learned how to deal with money, and about housing, health, and employment, but also how to name newer aspirations and hopes, to think in different ways about a wildly more mobile future in which their children could fulfill their aspirations rather than constitute a fearful burden.

In terms of children's theater, among the most important of these settlement houses was one run by Alice Herts. In her vision, children's theater represented a vehicle to help youngsters see themselves in this new setting and help them navigate the conflicting claims of their parents' Old World expectations and the expectations of their new country. Herts saw the settlement house addressing the transition of two generations of immigrants. One, for the adults, was about survival and adaptation. The other, for the children, called for a new way of defining the self and models for a new kind of behavior.

When Herts wrote to Mark Twain in 1907 asking for permission to stage *The Prince and the Pauper*, Twain replied by traveling to New York to see the production. This was a turning point in the development of theater for children because Twain was a national figure of real prominence and his seal of approval on their efforts would not go unnoticed.

Twain organized a benefit for the Herts's work and even joined the group's board of directors.

He later wrote a letter expressing his enthusiasm for the production as well as for the concept of a theater for children. "The reading brings vividly back to me my pet and pride," he wrote, the Children's Theater of the East Side, New York. And it supports and reaffirms what I have so often and strenuously said in public that a children's theater is easily the most valuable adjunct that any educational institution for the young can have, and that no otherwise good school is complete without it.

"It is much the most effective teacher of morals and promoter of good conduct that the ingenuity of man has yet devised, for the reason that its lessons are not taught wearily by book and by dreary homily, but by visible and enthusing action. . . . And as for history, no other teacher is for a moment comparable to it. . . . It is my conviction that the children's theater is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century; and that its vast educational value—now but dimly perceived and but vaguely understood—will presently come to be recognized."

Twain's letter contains a moral dimension, both alluded to and covert, that is perhaps jarring to contemporary political and social sensibilities. It moves dangerously close to the troubled landscape of Ralph Reed and the self-righteousness of such groups as the Moral Majority and the Christian



Hull-House children's theater group performs *Alice in Wonderland*, at the Hull-House Theater in 1922.

JANE ADDAMS MEMORIAL COLLECTION (JMC NEG 462), SPECIAL COLLECTION DEPARTMENT, THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Coalition, factious organizations, oxymoronic in their very names, that appropriate legitimate social agendas for those of a more covert nature. But it is exactly the moral dimensions of possibility in the idea of children's theater that is at once most threatening and most promising.

Eastern European countries, under the Soviet Union, especially during the 1950s and early '60s, realized the potential for political and social manipulation through children's theater. Vast sums were poured into theater companies especially for children. Writers within the Soviet bloc were engaged, theaters were built, and whole acting companies subsidized to promulgate a certain kind of theater experience for children.

Many critics and writers have rightly challenged this effort for its blatant propagandizing: inculcating a sense of loyalty to the state, and an unswerving commitment to the ideas articulated by that state and its definition of citizenship. Lacking a

Aristotle is instructive on this point: "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand." Or, as author Gail Goodwin has noted, "Teaching is one-quarter preparation and three-quarter's theater." Teaching and children's theater are inevitably intertwined.

When I first began teaching I worked at a historically black college in Richmond Virginia. Virginia Union University had an important and classically-centered program in theater when I arrived and for the first several years I emulated the history of that program with my own productions. We did religious dramas. We did Noel Coward and we did Shakespeare. But then the civil rights movement of the '60s came to the campus and our historical allegiances were challenged in a very public and volatile way. We had to rethink the theater program and what it was doing and saying.

I remember vividly being in rehearsal for a production of the musical *The Fantasticks* when a student

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children's theater of their own, however, many of these critics must have envied at some level the Soviet success in comparison with the dearth of such a theater tradition in their own countries. But good theater often emerges and even thrives under adversity. And some of the best experiments in theater in general and children's theater in particular emerged from the Soviet era's sociopolitical agenda mills.

The lesson to be gleaned here is the importance of integrating social commitment with an equal commitment to individual rights and autonomy as important social objectives. The ideal to strive for might be a children's theater that conveys a more objective view of civic responsibility while fostering personal growth and a multicultural perspective. Taken together, these would be far healthier objectives for children.

came running into the theater to announce that Martin Luther King had been assassinated. What an irony! There was a world of upheaval and turmoil going on outside our little theater, a culture in flux and challenge, and we were doing a musical! But I also remember an incident two years later in rehearsal, this time for an original African American drama called *Black-out!* I think the title would be called a contronym: Half the title references a theatrical lighting term and the second calls up the conditions we experienced on the main shopping streets of the city. Black . . . out! This time, a student came rushing in with the news that Washington, D.C., was on fire and the Richmond police and campus police had been alerted. The convergence of the outside and the inside that time was more congruent.

Out of that soul-searching we developed the first statewide African American drama playwriting contest, supported through generous grants from the NEH (in those days there were still generous grants for the arts). One of those awards funded a children's script about slavery in Richmond. We produced it. We invited the area children to see it and we were bowled over at the enthusiasm and commitment of parents, teachers, and children to the idea of a children's theater that would address the current concerns and perceptions of the African American community there.

Looking back on that experience now, I realize that we were carrying on the work Alice Herts had started in 1907. What I did see clearly at the time was that my own students, in meeting after performances with children from the audience, were behaving differently. The children, who had been used only to seeing Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo on television, were suddenly seeing live faces from their own community in situations of conflict, loyalty, fear, and happiness. These were real-life people and characters with whom they could identify. And my students were for the first time basking in the experience of being admired for something they had done, having children idolizing them and embracing them, asking for their autographs. My students had become heroes. It was a win-win situation.

What falls within the purview of the terms children's theater, or youth theater, or creative Drama, or theater in education must be carefully defined. As Twain himself once said: "The difference between a perfect word and a near-perfect word is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." We need to be careful here.

Children's theater is, first and fundamentally, theater *for* children. It is performed by young or full adults with the usual trappings of full theatrical production: lights, sets, costumes, sound, acting in a fully theatrical space. Variations on this experience mirror those in more conventional theater forms. Children's theater, for example, can be in the round, environmental, improvisational, minimalist, abstract, even absurd.

In Moses Goldberg's *Children's Theater: A Philosophy and a Method*, he says that "in creative dramatics for children, performance is not the major goal. The focus is on development of the child's creative personality. *The emphasis is on the process* [italics mine]."

Geraldine Brain Siks, in her book *Creative Dramatics: An Art for Children*, describes creative drama as "a group experience in which every child is guided to express himself as he works and plays with others for the joy of creating improvised drama."

That is, creative drama uses the strategies of theater with non-performance objectives. Children's theater has performance as its objective.

What, one might ask, does the theater offer children that television or video can't provide? Certainly those media offer intimacy and visual stimulation. They are capable of writing that is engaging and personal, of ideas that are universal or multicultural. But theater is a medium of two distinctions: It has a live human being. That we are wired for live people is a fact documented in clinical studies of awareness and recognition development in infancy and childhood. We know how to read faces with a ferocious clarity. We learn how to interpret movements with a blazing sense of accuracy. Second, the theater occupies three-dimensional space.

What does the theater offer us that TV or video cannot? First of all, theater is not a babysitter. It requires concentration, planning, travel, and public behavior. It is not distracting. It is different. Theater also appeals to our more primal sensibilities, the community of the fire and of the hearth, membership, and collective security.

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The distinguishing factor here is that the work be a child-centered experience: That is, the writing and the performance are directed at a child audience between the ages of five and, usually, 15. And always at the heart of the theatrical experience is the actor, a live presence, ritualized and focused, in a three-dimensional space, creating a story. The idea of the story, the seduction of it, commands our attention because we believe we can learn something about ourselves or others from the telling. Our natural interest in the story can be grafted onto the child's experience. Social values, a sense of self and others, the sanctity of the other and self, these are all communal and social concepts that protect our membership and cohere our efforts.

What, in the final analysis, can we say about children's theater and the creative techniques of theater making for children? As with all important

and collective endeavors, we have to begin with personal commitment. Children's theater should reside within the domain of public educational systems and private organizations. It should address civic responsibilities. It also belongs on the campuses of colleges and universities.

Can children's theater exist on its own merits? That's a question that still haunts the effort today. Can children's theater forge new social links and, perhaps, ensure a stronger future for the American theater? Can it morph?

I would suggest that children's theater in all its experimenting forms can be looked to as a catalyst for three constituencies:

ally recognized theater and playwright development center, the Humana Festival. It would seem that one consequence of children's theater is a healthy community theater.

Our challenge is to create a vital, artistic and enthralling children's theater that is, at the same time, capable of instructing. To do so, we need writers to challenge and instruct our children in ways that will instill in them responsibility, empathy, and concerned citizenship, citizens who will value each other and believe in the common need for collaboration and creative citizenship.

We need a children's theater that does not merely divert but also discloses, one that does not just en-

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and sensitive to the needs and aspirations of their fellow citizens.

2. Better theater makers. Visually literate and conversant, capable of literary analysis and responsive to social pressures that suggest reflection and thoughtful diagnosis and prognosis.
3. Better audiences. Audiences that demand independent, original creative voices and visions; who question social priorities, including issues of access and the allocation of resources.

It is interesting to speculate about the relationship between children's theater and the development of adult-theater audiences. Perhaps more than coincidentally, cities with children's theater companies also have permanent adult theaters and residential companies. In such communities, there is both a demand for and a broad audience base that supports theater. Seattle has a youth theater company and an active and successful adult theater company, the Seattle Repertory. Minneapolis has a premier children's theater company (headed by a Hampshire graduate, a recent recipient of a Tony award) and Minneapolis also has one of the country's premier residential adult theater companies, the Guthrie. Louisville has an important children's theater company and a nation-

ally recognized theater and playwright development center, the Humana Festival. It would seem that one consequence of children's theater is a healthy community theater.

Exposure to the theatrical event allows us to be conversant with our psychological and emotional landscape and, by extension, empathic to the similar or foreign landscapes of others. I take heart in a *New York Times* article of March 24 this year, which notes: "A \$22 million, 299-seat theater designed by the architects Frank Gehry and Hugh Hardy is expected to be the newest ornament of a growing cultural district in Brooklyn.

"The multipurpose experimental space, to be built on a city-owned parking lot adjacent to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, would serve as the first permanent home for the Theater for a New Audience, a 25-year-old Off Broadway company known for its productions of Shakespeare and classical drama as well as [here my emphasis] *its educational programs in New York City schools.*"

Building the theater is the first step. Filling it with ideas and children is a second.

So, one might ask, what does all this have to do with saving Shakespeare? The conceit is: absolutely nothing. Shakespeare does not need to be saved. Brooks Atkinson, writing about the designer Robert Edmond Jones and his book *The Dramatic Imagination*, states: “First: food, clothing and shelter. Second: art. The man who is hungry and cold cannot give much thought to anything else. The immediate necessity of staying alive consumes all his energy. But once he is relieved of the primary essentials, he inhabits a sphere of society where only art can give his life meaning. Art mediates between the day’s work and eternity: between the prosaic facts of life and the grand truths of the universe, ‘the proving of things unseen,’ in the language of the Old Testament.”

Shakespeare, after all, is resilient. He really doesn’t need saving. He was a writer with a keen sense of the universal in all of us, a writer whose appeal is global in the honesty of his observations. Perhaps the only thing that can challenge Shakespeare and the kind of theater he thought important is indifference. I would suggest that children’s theater and the values of the ritualized live experience that theater can afford us are first steps in countering that indifference. Certainly we can live without Shakespeare. But what

kind of world are we creating if we devalue reflection, thoughtful debate, and our commonality? Our global singularity?

In the final analysis, children’s theater will survive in spite of us. It was a good idea 100 years ago and it is a good idea today. Like other genres of theater—historical drama, agit/prop and street theater, happenings and found-site installations, musical theater, and social dramas—children’s theater will take its importance and cue from our collective sense of need. If we want it, it is there for us. We suffer as a nation from an egregious marginalizing of our early childhood educational process. And the politically motivated “No Child Left Behind” initiative does not address that negligence. Long-term investments are hard to justify and subsidize. But there will be communities that understand the developmental and behavioral dimension of the live theater event for children. They will understand or come to understand the long-term benefits from those experiences. We will be distinguished by our attention to that population and that kind of theater making. I am proud to be a part of a community—Hampshire and the Five College community—that stands at the forefront of such a commitment.

