

Plays for Young People
from 8 to 18
to Read and Perform

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NOTE

From the 1950s to the mid-1980s there was a flourishing development of drama in schools and in plays written for the young to perform, as well as in professional Theatre-in-Education.

During that time fiction and poetry for children and teenagers were receiving increasingly serious attention as literature but it seemed to me that plays published for the young were being overlooked.

Published in 1982 by Thimble Press as a Signal Bookguide, Plays for Young People from 8 to 18 to Read and Perform was an attempt to begin critical discussion and to raise awareness of this new dramatic literature among teachers, librarians, reviewers and academic critics.

Throughout my career as a teacher and writer I have believed in the educational benefits of plays performed by and for the young and have witnessed the outcomes in practice. From 1973 to 1979 I edited and published the journal Young Drama as a means of spreading knowledge and information about this sector of education.

The situation changed a great deal after the mid-1980s for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this essay. The bookguide has been out of print for some years. I'm making its Introduction available on my website in the hope that it will be useful to any who are interested in drama and the young, even if only as a record of a notable period in the long history of this still neglected cultural and educational activity.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of plays performed by young people goes back, in Britain, to at least the twelfth century. There is a record of choir boys at Dunstable acting the *Play of St Catherine* early in the

1100s: we can be sure this was not an isolated event.

Much earlier choristers had taken part in the *Quem-Quaeritis* during the ninth century, that moment during the Easter liturgy when angels question the three Marys at the sepulchre, receive a single response and finish the trope with their reply.

This dramatic interlude in a sacred rite grew into the great cycles of medieval Mystery plays, when drama moved out of the church into the secular streets. Boys played in them, taking both male and female parts. The cycles were still being performed in some places while Shakespeare was writing his tragedies. The Chester Cycle went on until 1600, that at Beverley in Yorkshire, till 1604.

By that time companies composed only of boys, organized in a professional and commercial way, were usual. Queen Elizabeth delighted in them to such an extent that between 1558 and 1576 boys gave forty-six performances at Court compared with thirty-two by the men. The reason for such fierce competition is clear. Until 1576 there was no permanent adult theatre, and professional acting was a rough-and-ready affair, 'feates of activitie'. The boys' companies, however, composed of scholars from schools like Westminster, Eton, St Paul's and the Chapel Royal at Windsor, were trained by cultured teachers and musicians; plays were written for them by the best of the day's authors. By Elizabeth's reign they were skilled and sophisticatedly organized groups. Only after the building of James Burbage's Theatre in 1576 did the adult companies first equal and then overtake the boys' in favour.

No wonder Rosencrantz could tell Hamlet 'there is, sir, an aery of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't: these are now the fashion.' (*Hamlet*, II, 2.) In his *Staple of News* Ben Jonson has Censure complain of schoolmasters who 'make all their scholars play-boys! Do we pay money for this? We send them to learn their grammar and their Terence, and they learn their play-books!' (III, 2.) Censures are about still; but Jonson himself had to be careful what he said, for he often wrote for boys as did many of the university wits of the day.

Like so much else, it was during the Puritan Commonwealth that the fashion was lost for what we might call the West End production of child companies, but performing of plays by young people and writing for them has continued in one way or another until now, an unbroken line from medieval times. There were religious, educational and theatrical reasons for this activity but its firm base was always in the schools, sponsored and conducted by teachers, a story that can be traced in the records of some of the famous public schools - Winchester, Westminster, Merchant Taylors', especially St Paul's, which had the most famous boys' troupe of all — as well as in those of long-established choir and grammar schools all over the country.

In his study *The School Drama in England* (Longmans, Green, 1929), T. H. Vail Motter sums up the work of 'The Children of Powles' thus:

The first record in 1378 shows boy actors producing the early type of religious drama. The second, of 1527, shows them doing a play written for them and embodying political purposes meant to influence the actions of the audience. The ecclesiastical influence which provided so important a part of the stimulus to the development of early English drama was at St Paul's ever present, widening from the Boy Bishop ceremonies of the early twelfth century to the ultimate development of the choristers into a semi-professional body of London actors. Meanwhile the development was influenced by the introduction into the school of classical studies and the later emphasis upon the use of English ...

In the history of St Paul's drama, then, can be studied all of the forces which developed the English drama. (page 156)

What Motter finds true of the boys of St Paul's was true generally. Young people were often in the forefront of what was happening in British theatre and its literature, which is quite unlike the history of children's narrative literature and poetry, until recently thought of as a side-issue — if thought of at all — by students of our literature as a whole. Indeed, only in the eighteenth century did children's literature as an acknowledged sector consciously attend to begin to flourish and be published in quantity. By then children's theatre had already achieved one of its highest peaks, was in a relatively quiet patch, and had a history stretching back hundreds of years.

Today it thrives again. Young people appear all the time either as part of companies of adults or in companies of their own, on stage, in films and television. And still the firm base is in the schools. Down the road from where I write is a comprehensive school; in the 1960s I taught drama there and wrote three plays for my pupils to act; all of them were published and often performed. That school now, like many others, has a large and vigorous drama department which looks after theatre studies as an academic subject and which works almost like one of the major national companies in the variety of its activity, ranging from classroom practice through studio experiments to large-scale elaborate productions involving many performers and experienced stage crews who draw on contributions from other departments — art, music, gymnastic, workshops, and the rest. The plays they tackle include everything from pre-Shakespearean to scripts newly written by pupils and teachers themselves.

That school is not unusual. As for primary schools, most of those I know engage in drama work that begins with improvisation and

ends with an annual ‘school play’ often of a far more sophisticated complexity than would have been thought either possible or appropriate during my childhood forty years ago. And as various entries in this guide testify, an increasing number of professional theatre writers are working with and for children of all ages, and are doing so at a standard no less respectable or interesting than their writing for adult theatre.

So the tradition goes on, mirroring, as it has done in the past, the present condition and preoccupations of Britain’s lively professional theatre. How strange, then, that so little attention has been paid to children’s theatre literature by those who concern themselves with what is published for the young. No one considering the history of ‘adult’ literature — whether general reader or specialist — would dream of ignoring theatrical writing as part of the whole, least of all in the country of Shakespeare.

Yet in the discussion about children’s books that has gone on for two hundred years now, and with deepening professional and institutionalized seriousness over the last two decades, almost nothing has been written at any length about children’s plays. Reviewing of them has been sketchy and erratic, to say the least; there have been few listings, and those that are available are intended for people wanting to choose a play for performance rather than for people with a literary interest in the form itself. Children’s libraries, as far as I can discover, rarely include a section of plays. The published surveys of children’s literature mostly do not even mention them. I share — just to take one example — the general admiration and affection for F. J. Harvey Darton’s *Children's Books in England* (Cambridge University Press), but Darton says nothing about drama except to mention *Peter Pan*, remarking that ‘for all its dramatic form’ it set a fashion, stimulated new ideas and made people realize that ‘plays meant specially for children were a necessity — in fact there eventually appeared a theatre specially for children’. Its plays, however, he could not discuss because, he wrote, ‘they are not books, any more than toys are books’.

There are easily understood reasons for Darton adopting in the 1930s what now seems a peculiarly unthinking position. In a guide that attempts to stake out a place for children’s plays as a form within the whole of children’s literature, it is necessary to outline what those reasons are.

One had best begin by taking on the argument that plays are not a *literary* form. We need a common denominator. David Daiches provides a useful place to start. In his *Critical Approaches to Literature* he talks of literature being ‘any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose not the communication of fact but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or given new life through invention) or the giving of pleasure through some use of the inventive imagination in the employment’. This nicely

covers playwrighting.

Plays depend utterly on language for their origins and being: for their communication among those involved in their creation, from writer to actor; for their preservation and their communication to people outside and beyond the place and time of their beginnings. They tell stories; that is, they are always narrative events dealing in the matter of *what happens, to whom and why*. All this in every way allies them with any kind of creation we usually accept as literary. And though plays present special critical problems, and possess features not shared by other literary forms, this is no less true of the other major forms: the novel and poetry. The important feature is that they are all primarily linguistic, narrative constructs; they are all part of the 'unique relationship between language and form' we call literature (the phrase is Richard Hoggart's). That plays belong to literature seems to me self-evident. What Darton means by their not being 'books' is a sociological rather than a literary argument.

The other reasons for the universal lack of attention to children's plays are less philosophical. Pre-Elizabethan and Elizabethan plays written for the young have been lost or are not much read now. Most people do not even know they existed. Since Jacobean times and up to about 1960, though a considerable number were published and even more were written, very few proved themselves durable. No wonder Darton found little he wanted to say about the ones available in his day.

Since Darton's time, however, and especially from the 1950s, there has been a revitalized movement in children's theatre, just as there has been in British professional theatre. But the plays that resulted have been published mainly by educational firms intending them for reading in classrooms, for book-in-hand performances, and for productions as the annual 'school play'. This matters because children's-book commentators have a not altogether unconscious prejudice against educational publishers, whom they regard not as originators of literature requiring their attention, but as producers of textbooks, reprints, and study aids, and of pedagogic, purpose-written material lacking literary quality. Added to which the plays have all too often been printed in dull-looking editions which themselves put off young readers as well as adult critics.

Over the last fifteen years or so this has changed, as witness the emergence of Methuen's Young Drama series — a trade, not an educational list — and the way jacket presentation has improved on the editions published by Heinemann Educational Books, a firm which for many years, in the hands of its drama editor Edward Thompson was one of the very few that enthusiastically supported and encouraged new work in children's playwrighting and production.

But apart from this, few if any children's book commentators

(never mind critics) were knowledgeable about theatre itself or about the current state of child drama. If they felt competent to discuss the literary aspects of a play, they did not feel so equipped to judge its theatrical qualities. Rightly recognizing that a play is both a printed text and a performed event, the two elements making a whole that must be looked at integrally, they shied off from assessment and criticism. Meanwhile, those people who had theatrical knowledge and expertise with child drama were usually not also familiar with children's literature in general and so could not put a play in its literary context, even if they thought it either necessary or worthwhile to do so.

None of this would have mattered, perhaps, if plays for young people had continued to be as poor as were the great majority in the years up to the 1950s. But things have changed. The base for publication has widened, taking in trade literary publishers and small, specialist imprints as well as educational houses. Professional theatre companies, through their theatre-in-education (TIE) projects, have commissioned and performed for and worked with young people. The National Youth Theatre (NYT), despite considerable difficulty, has flourished, persuading authors to write for it. Now and then, and always too little, the Arts Council has chipped in some money to help make new plays. Even television has begun to do something beyond simply providing drama programmes beamed at young viewers. Schools radio, on the other hand, has for years supported child drama and deserves a recognition it rarely gets.

The reasons for this burgeoning are clear. To begin with, in the comparative financial boom of the 1960s educational expenditure allowed for the appointment of specialist drama teachers in many secondary schools. Their place had been prepared for in the 1940s and 50s by teachers like Peter Slade and Brian Way, work carried into the 1960s by colleagues like Dorothy Heathcote. They demonstrated how important drama could be, not just in speech and movement and theatre education itself, but as part of the teaching of maths and science, history and religion and the rest. With the surge into schools of this wave of well-trained specialists there was at first a reaction against the traditional school play, which, many charged, encouraged showing-off and ego-tripping and unpleasant competitiveness among children, not to mention spurious reputation-hunting by ambitious heads. For a while the fashion swung to improvisation practised without an audience of any kind except perhaps of classmates.

Very quickly, however, the value of — indeed the necessity for — scripted plays given theatrical performances reasserted itself, often, it must be said, because young people themselves insisted. What resulted, however, was not the old-style productions but work that developed out of current thinking about educational drama, and that matched what was happening in the serious

professional theatre at the same time, especially on the fringe: drama in which actors had a considerable say, often inventing or writing the texts themselves, or in which they cooperated with a writer who was one of the company. Group participation was what mattered. And what finally appeared on stage were often performances of great vigour — and often not quite what conventional headteachers either expected or wanted from their pupils — usually presented in the round or on a thrust stage or in a studio rather than on a proscenium stage with footlights and drops and inadequate scenery. The plays themselves made use of theatrical styles and dealt with subjects close to young people's hearts: episodic multimedia events full of demotic language, Pop music, and stories about teenagers and how the world looked from their point of view.

As this movement grew stronger and more accomplished, and as youth drama groups outside schools flourished, so there arrived on the scene writers of acknowledged stature who had become interested in young performers. Ted Hughes, Adrian Mitchell, Peter Terson, Ann Jellicoe, Joan Aiken, for example, all of them included in the selection that follows, wrote plays for children between 1965 and 1972. The bulk of this work was for teenaged players, though; plays for the eight-to-thirteens are still too few, but there are signs that a new surge is about to take place in the publishing of scripts for these younger ages.

In short, there was a coincidence of educational, theatrical, and publishing advances, all supported by social and economic changes that led to refreshment and development.

1970 marked a watershed. That year saw publication of Ted Hughes's *The Coming of the Kings* (entry 1); an Arts Council/Institute of Contemporary Arts-sponsored collection of four plays for the eight-to-thirteen ages, *Playspace* (entry 2); Peter Terson's seminal NYT play *Zigger Zagger*, first performed in 1967; and David Campton's *Time-Sneeze*, originally written for Roland Joffe and the National, which helped establish Methuen's Young Drama series. Joffe, along with other directors that year, started putting to good use money made available by the Arts Council to professional theatre companies specifically for work with young people. As a result another contributory influence in the new wave got going: the theatre-in-education movement, whose great contribution has been to explore different ways of achieving plays and play texts for the young while at the same time taking drama into other curricular areas and opening up the theatre itself to a wider audience than usually attend.

So, just as Motter found was the case all those years ago when child drama had its beginnings, young people's theatre has followed, indeed has helped form, the pattern of theatre in general in the years since 1953 when *Waiting for Godot* went on at the Arts Theatre and people like Peter Brook and Peter Hall, John Osborne,

George Devine, Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Joan Littlewood, and the rest, along with the RSC and the studio theatres, changed the face of British drama, making it again one of the richest, most valuable, and certainly most hopeful aspects of our national life, a focus for our ways of thinking and our most potent form of public expression.

That writing for the young has a part in this should give us enormous satisfaction and cause for pride and interest. That it is time plays for young people should take their proper place in the canon of children's literature and be critically attended to, is obvious. This bookguide is a small step towards that end.

TOUCHSTONES OF QUALITY

This section deals with a group of plays that, individually and together, provide practical demonstrations of qualities I look for in theatre literature for the young.

The annotations give bibliographical information first. This is followed in square brackets by performance details. 'R & P' refers to suggested ages for reading the play and for performing it. Thus 'R: 8-12' means a suitability for the reading privately or aloud to eight- to twelve-year-olds. 'P: 14-18' means that the play is within the scope of fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds for performance. '10m 2f' means there are parts for ten male and two female actors.

1. THE COMING OF THE KINGS AND OTHER PLAYS by Ted Hughes. Faber & Faber, £1.95. 96 pages. ISBN 0571 095623. [R & P: 8 to adult. Four plays, each One Act. Each 40min approx. *The Coming of the Kings*: 10m 2f or 8m 4f.J

Originally written for schools' radio before being published in a version adapted for performance by children, this collection of four plays, and the title play in particular, makes an appropriate and all but self-selecting choice with which to begin this guide. Hughes brings together in his work all the threads I look for in the best children's plays. He is among the three or four finest poets presently working in Britain; his volumes *Season Songs*, *Meet My Folks!* (both Faber) and *Moon-Bells* (Chatto) are outstanding among poetry published for young readers. Similarly, his story *The Iron Man* (Faber) shows what can be achieved in a comparatively simple narrative that satisfies a wide range of readers not just in age — from roughly seven on into adulthood — but in reading experience and skill, from naive and novice to sophisticated and professionally critical. *The Coming of the Kings* is equally successful and standard-setting as dramatic literature. So in the work of this one author we find brilliantly written for children the triumvirate that dominates our literature: poetry, story and drama.

Considering that one of the earliest roots of child acting is bedded in religion, it is also appropriate that *The Coming of the Kings* has the Nativity as its background. Unlike many Christmas plays, however, there is nothing either churchily solemn or awkward and bogus about it.

Outside the ill-fated pub where there was no room, a fortune-teller puts the garrulous and henpecked innkeeper and his loudmouthed wife into a state of greedy excitement by telling them that three kings will visit their inn that day. But how do you know a king when you see one? A pompous priest, an opportunistic businessman, a bully-boy police inspector, a poet-prophet minstrel all turn up and are mistaken before Mary and Joseph come along to be dismissed as ‘these people who wander about’ and are consigned to the shed across the road. At last, as all along we knew they would, the three kings appear, disconcerting the innkeeper by their concern for the King of the Three Worlds who, they say,

will be born to the coughing of animals Among
the broken, rejected objects
In the corner that costs not a penny
In the darkness of the mouse and the spider.

Not unexpectedly, language is what matters in this text rather than action — which is simple, not especially inventive or surprising, though entertaining enough. The dialogue is written in rhyming and blank verse that possesses a pleasing technical variety and is always rhythmically strong. A song now and then is either part of the action or of the background music.

At one extreme there is the lyrical, image-rich speech of the Kings and the Minstrel who, for example, dreams that

a star fell on to the straw beside me
And lay blazing. Then when I looked up
I saw a bull come flying through a sky of fire
And on its shoulders a huge silver woman
Holding the moon.

At the other extreme is the broad comedy of the innkeeper’s belligerent wife goading her husband into beating the fortune-teller:

Batter the brute with your stick till where he's thin
he goes thick And where he's thick he goes thin.
Silence the monster’s din.

Behind *The Coming of the Kings* stand old folk sources — Mystery plays, pantomime, folk tales — in all of which the characters represent aspects of humanity rather than individual people. What matters is the satiric edge: making fun of human foible for a moral purpose. This is a world in which the stupidly

self-assertive are shown to be fools, at least when viewed from the vantage of eternity, and the meek and oppressed inherit the earth — though only, please, at the end of the play: Lord make us meek and mild, but only when the show is over.

The play is as simple in structure as in plot. Little episodes, each involving a new character, are connected by the selfish expectations of the innkeeper and his wife, and draw to an expected and celebratory conclusion in the worshipping of the Infant (who, mercifully, remains off stage; no mooning family group to be enacted). The setting makes few demands on child stage crews: a road with, on one side, the front of The Emperor's Head inn and, on the other, the outside of the stable shed. Costumes, sound effects, props, music, lighting (if wanted) — everything is well within the scope of any school or group, whether of children from eight to teenage, or of adults.

What needs careful attention and should be given hard work and a great deal of rehearsal time, is the dialogue. The temptation to treat the piece naturalistically should be resisted. Something more pointed, perhaps formalized, is called for, a vocal and acting style that matches the simple, clear lines of the story and Hughes's shaping of it in his verse. The whole play is neat, well-crafted, polished, deeply satisfying because it is so precisely *right* in every detail: a small masterpiece of traditional (as distinct from Modernist) theatre.

Even the typographic design of the published script reaches a high standard, a first-rate example of how well dramatic literature can be presented for children when the classic virtues of print are observed. I mention this here because so many plays are printed in ugly or badly prepared editions, something for which there is never any excuse. Bad typography costs very little less than good and has the considerable disadvantage of making a play harder for an inexperienced reader of plays to understand and visualize. Seeing a play enacted in the theatre of your imagination is an essential skill if you are to enjoy reading it. Well-thought-out stage directions presented in clear and attractive print help draw a young reader in, making it easier to translate words in print into sounds and images in the head. If we care about dramatic writing as part of a child's literary heritage, then we have to care about how it is offered and preserved in print.

The Coming of the Kings exemplifies another quality I want to note that applies to the whole guide, and that eventually sorts out a good play from the rest. It repays all the effort spent on preparing it for performance. In other words, like all worthwhile literature, it stands up to constant rereading. If a play has not the richness, the density, to go on yielding ideas and refreshment of thought, feeling, and amusement, throughout a long period of rehearsal, then it is not worth anyone's concentrated attention, least of all any child's. If, in fact, everyone's interest soon shifts from the play itself (the work)

to the mechanics of staging it (the social and artistic side issues of theatre), the play is not worth the bother.

The Coming of the Kings stands up well to that test. Witty, as it is also comic, elegantly constructed, humanely satiric, a revitalized version of an old story, and everything focused on the essential, the fundamental element in all literature — language itself — this play is exactly judged for the capabilities of young people as actors and as readers.

2. TAMBURLANE THE MAD HEN by Adrian Mitchell. In PLAYSPACE. Methuen, Young Drama series, £1.95. 95 pages. ISBN 0413 455408. [R & P: 8-18; preferably a mix of all ages. One Act. 45-60min (depending on amount of improvisation). Many parts with no m/f requirement; minimum perhaps 15.]

If Ted Hughes woos us with traditional dramatic virtues, Adrian Mitchell wows us with a Modernist romp till our ears go Pop.

The People of London are working, ‘with phoney enthusiasm’ the stage direction says. Enter Tamburlane in a chariot drawn at breakneck speed by assorted Animals; ‘each actor should choose his or her own’. Loud rock music; the Animals become a Pop group. Tamburlane sings

I’m a freaky kind of fowl
With bell bottom legs
I’m a sort of Mick Jagger
Laying oblong eggs.

Apparently Tamburlane has been playing terrible tricks on The People, preventing them from working. Enter Superior Being who, aided by his servant Pet Computer, summons Supercrab to rid The People of the anti-work scourge. But The People rebel, appoint Tamburlane Lord Mayor, after which Supercrab is tricked into defeat and there is general rejoicing.

Clear? A satire on political power? A moral story about people running their own lives? An anti-work parable? A comedy about urban life? All of these, perhaps? Why be monothematic, or why, come to that, always speak plain? Density is a literary virtue, especially when, like all the best folk art, the surface is as immediately appealing, as apparently simple fun as this. Of course, Mitchell himself, in his introductory note, denies any knowledge of such matters. Just as to the question ‘Why is Tamburlane, which is usually thought of as a man’s name, described as a hen?’ he replies, ‘There is no answer to this.’

There is something of *Pere Ubu* in *Tamburlane* and of Absurdist theatre in the play’s antics; there is also an affectionate sending-up of pantomime and Hollywood musicals. Some readers might even be reminded of Spike Milligan and Monty Python, not to mention

(who would?) Brecht.

In an Introduction to the four excellent — and each quite different plays in this volume — Michael Kustow says Mitchell's drama is 'like *Dandy* and *Beano*, a scruffy, cheeky piece' and suggests that 'So much of what we see on the stage today lacks this essential ingredient — the innocence of bold simple dramatic gestures, the inheritance which theatre shares with games and play. At its most theatrical, drama has never forgotten this link.'

Mitchell makes that connection. *Tamburlane the Mad Hen* calls for improvisation of the kind children enjoy: building on an outline that leaves plenty of room for their own invention. His stage directions suggest what is needed in the tone of someone actually working with children, and then leaves them to follow their inclinations. Whereas the text of *The Coming of the Kings* (entry 1) is 'firm', 'finished', a script that needs to be followed exactly — a text-focused play — *Tamburlane* is 'loose', open, 'unfinished', a script meant for shaping and adding to, according to the capacities and imagination of the group performing it — an actor-focused play.

This difference in authorial attitude is paralleled in children's narrative literature. Roald Dahl's stories, for example, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, are reader-focused just as Mitchell's play is actor-focused, whereas Alan Garner's *The Stone Book* is, like Hughes's play, text-focused.

In actor/reader-focused writing, the author puts himself at the disposal of his audience, hoping to become the actor/reader's amanuensis, pleasing himself and his audience by giving them what he knows they enjoy and allowing his work enough scope for audience participation for everyone to remake the story into something of his or her own.

Text-focused writing asks the actor/reader to enter into the author's finished work, taking it on and bringing it to life in the imagination and on the stage in the way that the text seeks to be known and understood. In actor/reader-focused writing, the play is at the disposal of the performer-audience. In text-focused writing, performers and audience must put themselves at the disposal of the play.

Neither mode is intrinsically 'better' than the other; both are present in literary writing and always have been. The important thing is that young people should experience the extremes of both modes (and all the shades in between) and learn how to handle them in their reading, and in their theatre activity, whether as performers or spectators.

Tamburlane the Mad Hen offers plenty of opportunities for actor/audience-disposed fun. But it also calls for fine-tuning in performance if a sufficiently sharp edge is to be kept on the comedy and enough discipline in acting and staging to prevent the whole thing descending into a sloppy riot embarrassing to watch. Nothing

is required that young people cannot deliver; but a great deal is required from the adults who direct them.

As a text for reading, either silently or aloud, the play suffers from being a working draft rather than a finished piece, unless the reader has some experience of how to bring a playscript alive. The music by Tony Attwood is also a principal element in the play's nature (though new music could be written if a group wanted to do this).

A NOTE ABOUT THE OTHER THREE PLAYS IN *PLAYSPACE*

The Cutting of Marchan Wood by Richard Hughes uses the patterns of children's games to tell a story based on a sixteenth-century poem about the felling of a wood in Elizabeth the First's time: a professional march, a choose-your-partner dance, and chanting, for example. Language is again at the centre. Protest at the rape of the countryside is the theme, a modern topic shown to have historic roots. The piece is more suitable for group work, leaving much to imagination, than for individual 'star' performances with everything made plain.

In *The Boy Without a Head* Edward Lucie-Smith takes a Jamaican folk tale from the Anancy tradition and treats it like a ritual enactment, using a lot of choral speaking. A 15-20 minute entertainment about a boy seeking a suitable head, this is a story of how head and heart must work in harmony together if one is to have a happy life.

Niki Marvin attempts an ambitious retelling of a North American Indian folk tale in *The Legend of Scarface and Blue Water*, which shows both hunting and healing to be necessary for survival. This is the kind of complex script that calls for a great deal of research in the classroom to accompany and make sense of detailed and lengthy rehearsals: a theatre-based project on a topic of predictable interest to eight- to fourteen-year-olds. A fine example of educational drama and theatre brought together in a literate and theatrically exciting play, though one that young people will find more satisfying to perform than to read.

Playspace is a reminder of what can be achieved when reasonable amounts of commissioning money, experienced authors, dramatically lively schools, and knowledgeable directors are brought together. And the results, when published like this, are available for others to benefit from for a long time to come.

3. WORDPLAYS 1 edited by Alan Durband. Hutchinson, £2.25. 132 pages. ISBN 0 09 149221 1. [R & P: 10-18. Six short One Act plays. Various lengths and character requirements.]

4. WORDPLAYS 2 edited by Alan Durband. Hutchinson, £2.25. 119 pages. ISBN 0 09 149241 6. [R & P: 10-18. Six short One Act plays. Various lengths and character requirements.]

One of the origins of children's plays, used by teachers in medieval times, is the form of the Dialogue, a short piece for two or more voices, usually adapted from classical authors, but later from English literature as well, the intention of which was to teach Latin, Greek, and the mother tongue in a lively way. Entertainment with a didactic purpose, the same root from which grew children's literature as a whole.

There are several advantages in the Dialogue method. Speaking lines written by skilled authors engages children in the articulation of the best of their own or any other language. The repetition of the words — the rehearsing of them — provides the kind of practice no learning can manage without. During rehearsals an adult has a chance to guide, form, correct, and teach the art of speech as well as the art of writing, and most of all the art of reading. Because the rehearsals have a real end in a performance before an inevitably critical audience of their peers, and maybe of strangers too, the pupils are motivated to greater and more enthusiastic effort, and their willingness to work can be kept up over a longer period of time than might otherwise be the case. And yet short Dialogues do not impose the same demands on time and resources that preparation of a full-scale play production costs.

Lately there have appeared modern equivalents of the Dialogues: very short, specially written, few-character, self-contained playlets. Durband's two collections are among the best. His purposes are to give young people a sense of form, by providing good examples of the drama of the present time, and to help them come to an understanding of what we mean by interpretation.

Dave Sheasby's *We Shall Never Die* deals with the Silkstone Colliery disaster of 1832 when a number of child miners were drowned. Sheasby re-creates that day, using a narrator to link short dialogues that build up to a picture of the children's lives, and finishing with a story-report of the disaster itself. The play has been performed by a Sheffield middle school in their hall, the audience sitting in the centre and the action taking place around them. Costumes, setting, props were all basic and suggestive rather than historically accurate or elaborate. The emphasis was on telling the story and conveying the historical information.

Mandy Alexander's *The Tree Machine* grew out of improvisations during history lessons and examines nineteenth-century misuse of child labour and the working conditions of boys who were made to climb chimneys in order to loosen soot. There are four scenes preceded by a verse Prologue for six voices. Again this is simply a way of telling us how life was.

The Awful Billy Smiff by Brian Jacques is a comedy about character. In the first of two parts we hear from his teachers about Billy and how dreadful he is; in the second part we see Billy in action. Naturalistic in style, the piece depends on a sense of timing and an ability to deliver funny lines crisply, and resembles the all

too familiar TV sitcom, which at least makes it likely that it will be easily appreciated by young performers and readers.

Working in something like the same way is *Darren's Conker* by Anne Pickles, though it lacks the particular focus on character revelation that gives Jacques's play its interest. A spaceman finds himself in a classroom and by inquiring into everyday things that we all take for granted (like how a school is run) manages to create humorous havoc and helps us see ourselves in a fresh light. A fairly straightforward amusement based on naturalistic writing.

More astringent is Willy Russell's *Politics and Terror*, a nine-page, ten-minute episode in which people's use of language to gain power over one another is explored in a conversation between two short-trousered boys. Pinter in the primary school. Finding out how to speak this play without seeming to 'act' it could be a first discovery for many young people of what 'style' means and of 'the voice' that is in all narrative writing, whether heard only in the head or performed aloud. We seem to learn about them first as audience and listeners, then as performers and readers-for-ourselves. Play reading and performing are two of the best ways of gaining these skills, especially when the plays are as short and yet as satisfyingly complete as Russell's.

The final play in the first book, *All Friends Together* by Tim Shields, a farce about social manners and attitudes to children, works like a TV play through six scenes that reveal the Jenkins family — ineffective father, strident suburban mother, drab daughter Iris — who give a party for their 'friends'. Iris's 'friend' is a life-size talking doll, Siri, whose name is, of course, Iris spelt backwards, and whose nature is Iris's rebellious self. At the party Siri's rudeness and slapstick tricks cause chaos before she speaks the unacknowledged truth: 'Oh, you're such a pack of hypocrites ... You only stick together because it makes you feel safe, like sheep.'

Rousing stuff, broad and caricatured, and provoking predictable laughs and easy agreement, but leaving scope for Durband's second purpose: 'The *words* are provided,' he writes in his Introduction. 'How you *play* them is a matter of interpretation ... What is the purpose of the play? Though the words stay always the same, the way in which they are delivered is a matter for decision.'

Volume Two of *Wordplays* expands on the opportunities offered in the first. Alan England, Peter Terson, Ken Campbell, Alan Bleasdale, Chris Bond, and George Friel — all theatre writers of considerable skill and experience — provide six pieces of greater complexity and subtlety than those in the first volume, ranging from Campbell's *Get Well Soon* to a realistic slice-of-life in *Gone to Jesus* by Chris Bond.

Durband's broadly educational intentions aside, none of the other one-act play collections in this guide quite match these for suitability for ten- to fourteen-year-olds, nor do the others match his *Playbill* collections for the older ages. Though I do have one

criticism. Neither volume is quite wide-ranging enough; they do not, for example, include surreal plays, nor adaptations from, say, short stories, nor anything that draws on the tradition of plays with music. Like so much British theatre, Durband tends to concentrate our attention on the sort of comedy that finds itself most at home on TV and in socially purposeful, if not downright propagandist, theatre. No doubt future volumes in the series will set this right. Certainly we can do with a great deal more dramatic writing of the quality Durband has gathered here, not only for teenagers but, perhaps even more importantly when one considers his educational intentions, for younger children. Though my own hope is that such work will come about as a literature in its own right and for its own sake rather than for overtly educational reasons.

A last point. These two books are well designed typographically for use by inexperienced readers, another virtue in their favour, even though their authors have not yet seen how stage directions might be developed to involve readers (rather than performers) in the text in a more helpful and entertaining way, something that has been thought about in, for example, the Act Now series.

5. THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER adapted by Charlotte B. Chorpenning from the novel by Mark Twain. Garnet Miller, £1.50. 73 pages. ISBN 0 85343505 7. [R & P: 11-18. Four Acts. 1hr45min. 14m 6f Extras.]

6. TOM SAWYER adapted by John Charlesworth and Tony Brown with music by Eric Wayman from the novel by Mark Twain. Heinemann Educational, £1.25. 79 pages. ISBN 0435231693. [R & P: 11-18. Two Acts. 2hr. 18m 4f Extras.]

7. TOM SAWYER adapted by Derek Lomas from the novel by Mark Twain. Macmillan Education, Dramascripts series, 95p. 58 pages. ISBN 0333195566. [R & P: 11-18. Two Acts. 1hr 30min. 22m 10f Extras.]

From about ten years old many young people begin to look, with what I can only describe as an instinctive need, for opportunities to perform in full-length (an hour or longer) scripted plays that are able to sustain their interest: the dramatic equivalent of the novel. There are of course, as with novels, plays from the general adult list they can enjoy. But plays of high quality *for and about* the early adolescent period of life are still all too few. Many of those that are produced are trite — banal in their dialogue, structurally inept — and are, finally, condescending to their audience.

Young people ten to sixteen years old have a number of natural skills as actors. They enjoy enormously working together as a group (the ‘gang’ instinct is strong). They are physically quick, athletic, manually dextrous. They revel in learning and carrying off stage business, liking to do a lot with hand props and technical

effects. As in their everyday speech, they prefer the rapid cut-and-thrust of short-line dialogue, which also, however, means that carefully placed longer speeches can have extraordinary emotional and counterpointing effects. As for characterization, they perform people of about their own age truthfully, though they tend to caricature adults.

Tom Sawyer might have been written with all this in mind, which no doubt explains why there are three different recommendable adaptations of the novel. As well as providing touchstones of these qualities contained in a text, they serve also as examples of the potentialities that lie in dramatizations of children's novels and stories, which often supply far richer sources for scripts than the inventions of some would-be dramatists for the young.

Chorpenning retains three main threads of Twain's story: the adventure plot involving Injun Joe and the treasure; the depiction of Tom's everyday boyhood life along with Huck Finn, Joe Harper and the other kids, and their relations with adults; and the subplot of Tom's adolescent relationship with Becky Thatcher. Chorpenning trims and adjusts Twain's story to the structural needs and limits of a two-hour play and contrives a nicely comic climax, with the three central boys attending their own funeral before revealing themselves, the recovered loot, and the truth about Doc Robinson, Muff Potter and Injun Joe. Of the three versions, this feels and is closest to the original book in spirit and texture.

Charlesworth and Brown remove the Becky Thatcher subplot (sadly in my view) in order to allow more scenes to do with the main plot, as well as to make time for songs and crowd-chorus scenes. Theirs is, however, an attractively busy treatment, more in tune with modern theatrical fashion than Chorpenning's, and allowing scope for many players and for all kinds of theatrical effects and technical skills from the crews. They have kept true to Twain's dialogue, use more of the boyhood-depicting episodes and in some respects stay closer to the construction of the original. Together the two versions make an interesting study in the art of dramatization when compared with the novel, a project not beyond, and certainly not beneath, young people of fifteen or sixteen as a parallel project to a production of one of the versions.

Lomas provides a third useful adaptation, though not one that possesses Chorpenning's neatness of structure or Charlesworth and Brown's greater density of treatment and added musical attraction. He has also Englished some of Twain's American style and modernized the dialogue here and there; the result is a loss of Twain's rhythm and colour. My own experience when producing the Chorpenning version was that, with very small changes for local reasons, Twain's language spoke well in English boys' and girls' mouths, provided they did not attempt an American accent. What matters is not the words themselves, but the rhythm of the speech.

All three versions only succeed on stage if they have a marvellous actor for Tom Sawyer himself and a very close working relationship between Tom, Huck, and Joe Harper. That so little depends on the girls, and that one version even cuts out the Becky Thatcher story, points up a neglect that disgraces all our dramatic literature: a lack of plays that give a proper place to girls and women as characters and actors. But more are appearing, at least for young people, every year, and some go in for positive discrimination.

8. *BY COMMON CONSENT* by Paul Thompson. Heinemann Educational, £1.50. 96 pages (including music). ISBN 0 435 23881 7. [R & P: 15-18. Two Acts (in nineteen scenes). 2hr 15min. 40m 10f Extras (doubling possible or larger casts if extras increased).]

In recent years plays for older adolescents have rapidly increased in number, coming mostly from two sources: from schools, where they were usually written by teachers for their pupils, and from playwrights collaborating with the NYT and other youth theatres. *By Common Consent*, first performed in the round at the Cockpit Theatre, London, by the NYT in 1974 and subsequently televised by BBC in 1975, is an impressive example of the complexity and density of work possible with well-handled companies of young players.

Essentially an ensemble piece for a cast of about fifty (though more or fewer are possible), the story is a political fantasy set in the future (though how fantastic or how futuristic are themselves points for discussion) when young people have been organized by an authoritarian regime into a force for keeping law and order. But the League of Youth has been turned into a totalitarian bureaucracy, governing even minor details in everybody's life. Kung Fu is practised within the League, individuality is suppressed, rigorous discipline is imposed in order to rebuild society after an economic collapse. 'In order to get unity and moderation one must execute extremists.' Zone Eight is selected to officiate at a public execution of two terrorists. Afterwards, sickened by what they have seen, four of the boys desert and try to join revolutionaries. Their comrades are sent out to hunt them down. After contacting the guerrillas, two of the deserters are caught and shot in a climactic and ritual ceremony.

This is a play as much about ideas as it is about character; short, intercut scenes bring the arguments alive with dramatically persuasive effect; songs reinforce and encapsulate key ideas. Some commentators see Brecht in all this, but the style owes as much to Shakespeare as anyone. Processions, crowd spectacles such as the execution and a wedding, the interplay between ruling officials, ordinary youths, terrorists, and the deserters who link them all and provide the play's focusing characters: all help give shape and

considerable textual variety and colour to a piece of epic theatre. To treat such subject matter so profoundly, without loss of theatrical interest on the one hand and without falling into intellectual banality and agitprop crudity on the other, is greatly to Paul Thompson's credit.

As literature, his play stands alongside young people's novels like Robert Cormier's *After the First Death* (Gollancz). Uncompromising in subject and style, they are aware of themselves as fictions, as things made, in ways that are Modernist rather than traditional in the nineteenth-century manner: they are kaleidoscopic, a mixture of conventions, able to shift about without excuse or explanation in time, place, point of view. Writer and reader/audience are as conscious of the form as of the content. Also, both Thompson and Cormier are unashamedly writing for, as well as about, their intended audience of teenaged people. This gives the writing its focus, its overall controlling and unifying attitude in the narrative.

9. SKUNGPOOMERY by Ken Campbell. Methuen, Young Drama series, £1.95. 47 pages. ISBN 0413 33910 6. [R: 10-16; P: by 15-18 for performance to 7-15s. One Act (in five scenes). 60min. 5m 4f (or variations).]

Plays for performance to children by professional or amateur companies now make up a fast-growing category of theatrical literature which young people might enjoy reading or performing themselves. Campbell is the fashion-setting arch clown of one prevailing mood. Jane Ellison caught the spirit of this example of his work in an *Evening Standard* notice. *Skungpoomery*, she wrote,

demonstrates Ken Campbell's talent for capturing a comic moment and blowing it up into a great balloon of idiotic fantasy . . . His metaphysics proceed from a plot and characters which *Beano* readers will recognize and rejoice in. Bullying policemen and ferocious, Andy Capp women tyrannise the weak and timorous. Like poor, egg-dribbling P.C. Wibble, hounded by a Medusa of a mother who searches his trousers and sends him off to walk the beat in his shorts.

Astonishing the hold *Beano* and *Dandy*, Laurel and Hardy, and Spike Milligan's Goons have on the imaginations of middle-aged writers now working for children. Ken Campbell, Raymond Briggs, and Mike Rosen — children's playwright, picture-book artist, and poet — seem to me to inhabit the same world, and certainly receive the same kind of delighted attention from child audiences.

In this play, the double act is Amazing Faz and his feeble assistant, *twoo*, who has become listless, lacking in sparkle. To cheer him up, Faz invents skungpoomery, which means 'thinking up a word and then doing it'. *Shankfinerbling*, for example: going

up to someone's legs and finerbling them with your nose. Or *whangbunkling*: firing off bunklies into the air with the aid of a ruler. Or *bunkjamjarmering*: smearing strawberry jam on your pyjamas and doing a bunk into the street. Faz and *twoo* get so excited by their game that they bunkjamjarmer off into the streets, causing consternation, surprise and amusing alarm till, pursued by Bunkett, Snatchem and Stuff, officers of the law, as well as by poor P.C. Wibble and his mum, they eventually get everyone so high schlongpecksnurbrunklewibbering that comedy takes over the world. Blackout.

When Campbell (and his imitators) is good, he is hilarious; when he is bad he is excessively tedious. Like all clowns of the frenetic kind (Milligan included) he doesn't always know when to stop. Maybe he just doesn't know how to stop?

Skungpoomery is Campbell at his best. It impresses me for a number of reasons. First, though the comedy is most obviously physical in nature (there is a marvellous moment when Wibble draws faces on his bared knees and makes the faces talk to each other), all of it is language-based and controlled. So though it appears a slapstick play, it is primarily a comedy of verbal wit and humour. Then, while seeming to be arbitrary, farcical nonsense, it is really a study of stage comedy itself; a point is being made about the place and value of humour in everyday life, and some ways in which humour is caused are being explored. The material is actually under great control; no scene goes on too long, nor does the play itself; and the pacing allows just enough relief from the headlong chase of words and action for actors and audience to catch their breath. The characters are broad, even comicstrip, but each has a recognizable personality and one can't help liking them, even Mrs Wibble. They are too vulnerable and at the mercy of Fate (the author?) for us not to. Indeed, there is an innocence and vulnerability about all of Campbell's work; reading or watching it one feels that the clowning is really a way to hide and to keep at bay a terrible fear of a puzzling, untrustworthy world.

Skungpoomery is a winner in the theatre and, by ten and older, is a script children can enjoy reading aloud or silently with great pleasure. Even the stage directions carry on the fun, are as much part of the text as the dialogue: *FAZ and TWOO escape in all directions at once; Enter a pair of bloomers; HUMBOTTOM, fishing his civvies out of the bin which is where we forgot to mention he bunged them earlier* Of course, older teenagers would love playing it for younger children, and would learn a lot about theatre skills and techniques from doing so.

A last thought. Why do we have so many plays-for-performance-to-children of this kind? Do children only enjoy and appreciate frenetic, zany and bizarre *Beano*-fun? Do they always have to be rolling in the aisles with comparatively easily achieved laughter if a play is to be considered appropriate for them? There are others

available of different kinds, but this is the dominant mood. Maybe children's playwrights and professional theatre companies producing for younger children need to discover what the best children's story writers already know: that children enjoy a wide variety of form and content and can be an appreciative audience for stronger meat than is so often served up in plays specially for them.

10. *KILLED: JULY 17TH 1916* by Belgrade Theatre in Education Company. Amber Lane Press, £2.25. 61 pages. ISBN 0906399299. [R & P: 14-18. Two Acts. 1hr 20min. 5m 3f.J

Distinct from plays for performance to children as part of a theatre company's ordinary programme are plays written for performance by theatre-in-education groups as a way of teaching or, when young people are also the players, as a way of learning. Brian Way has been a pioneer in this field with plays like *Discovery and Survival*, which tries to help children understand how humanity developed by making discoveries and overcoming adversities, and *The Wheel*, which tries to help them see how they can act out their own stories.

Killed sets standards among recent TIE plays. It is one of two published by a newish firm specializing in theatre, the prospects for whose list look good, judged by this example.

The story concerns an incident in the First World War. Billy Dean, hardly out of boyhood, volunteers in the 18th Manchester Infantry regiment. During a battle he loses his way, finds himself back in his own lines, and ends up being court martialled for cowardice in the face of the enemy. He is found guilty and shot.

As Billy awaits his execution, we see in flashback his relationship with his girlfriend, how he got into the war, what he thought it was about, his life in the army and at the front; finally, in the play's present time, his girl's life at home and Billy's death are interwoven.

Economic, dramatically effective, skilled in its use of historical raw material and theatrical forms, this is a moving and very satisfying play entirely performable by secondary-aged pupils, though it was written for performance to them by an adult company.

An extra dimension is added to the standard-setting quality of the play by the presentation of the script in book form. The text is printed well and designed so that the script can be read with pleasure. Other features enhance the script as a reading experience too. First, an Introduction discusses the play itself: its background and how it came to be written, as well as some production suggestions and notes on the characters. This concludes with a further-reading list of books devoted to the history of the First World War. Then comes a Prologue compiled from an eyewitness account given by P. J. Kennedy, a private in the 18th Manchesters,

of the execution of a young soldier whose end ‘was a kitchen chair hidden in a French quarry’ and a grave that bore a cross ‘but instead of the words “Killed in action”, as on similar crosses, it merely said “Killed” along with the date of the execution. Nothing else.’ The play follows. Scattered throughout the text are well-produced photographs of men at the front and one of women at home ‘working for the war effort’, loading coal at a gasworks in London.

The care and thought with which the book has been brought together makes for an integrated whole, a piece of literature constructed of different forms of ‘telling’: story, information and pictures. It points in directions one would like to see being explored further by authors and publishers. Certainly, one hopes *Killed* will receive wide attention in schools and from youth groups as well as from other TIE companies.

CONCLUSION

By now, I hope, some of the critical features that influence my selection of plays for this guide have been established:

- a) Ideally, the text should be a literate whole, both dialogue and stage directions working together to provide a readable entity as well as a script for directors and performers. Language is seen as the principal dramatic element. How is the language handled? How strong is its personality and ‘voice’? What colour and texture does it possess? What density of meaning and pattern does it offer? How keenly does it create character and provoke action? How well judged is it for the potentialities of the young people (and of roughly what age) who are its intended readers, performers and audience? These are central questions.
- b) Form is as important as content. How the play ‘works’, how it is made, what techniques of theatrical narrative it offers young people, and how well form and content match, the one assisting the other: all this should be taken into account.
- c) The characters should be within the scope of young players both to understand and to realize.
- d) I am interested in the opportunities allowed by a play for young people to invent, interpret, bring to bear various skills of imagination, design, and manual crafts, as well as performance skills of voice and body.
- e) I put value on the likelihood that a play will generate interest beyond itself: in its subject matter, its ideas, its people, its form. In short, how likely is it to stimulate thought and action - and of what nature - in readers and performers?

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