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## A Brief Survey of the Development of Dramatic Literature for Children

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## A Brief Survey of the Development of Dramatic Literature for Children

The history of dramatic literature for children on this continent is a confused and confusing trail of professional and amateur endeavors, of plays meant to be performed *by* children and plays meant to be performed *for* children. The repertoire of children's plays was born in late nineteenth century settlement house moralities and informal classroom dramas, nurtured by a short-lived interest by professional theatre producers, maintained by amateur theatre organizations, and ultimately brought to maturity by professional theatre organizations. But while the history of these plays developed along circuitous routes, it follows a course of ever-increasing literary and theatrical sophistication.

During the forty-year period from approximately 1880 until 1920, the professional theatre first produced children's plays, and those tentative experiments helped establish theatre for children as a legitimate and popular theatre form. This activity, in turn, led to the development of a small body of children's plays that were subsequently performed in theatres throughout the country.

The major portion of this early repertoire—apart from scores of playlets and pageants written for classroom and playground use—consisted of familiar stories dramatized into crudely-constructed, sentimental melodramas. These early plays are distinguished more for their pioneering position in the development of the literature than for any value inherent in the works themselves. And once the economic potential of this limited repertoire was exhausted, professional producers abandoned the field almost entirely. By 1920, the first phase of the development of dramatic literature for children had essentially come to an end.

During the nineteen-twenties, the few plays developed in the previous decades were produced repeatedly, as amateur producers, like the professionals who preceded them, quickly recognized the profits (both economic and otherwise) to be gained by offering plays with these familiar titles for child audiences. It was not until 1928, when Charlotte B. Chorpenning began to write children's plays, that American children's theatre

slowly began to break from this lethargic state. While Chorpenning relied almost entirely on fairy tale subjects for the more than forty plays she added to the repertoire, she approached her work with a sense of dramatic form and a sensitivity to the child audience that demonstrably raised the standards of dramatic literature for children. Under Chorpenning's leadership, a renaissance occurred in American children's theatre, and by 1945 scores of new playwrights were working in the field.

In 1949 the Children's Scripts Evaluation Committee of the American Educational Theatre Association compiled a list of sixty-one "recommended" full-length plays for children.<sup>1</sup> This list, divided among "Fairy Tale Plays," "Favorite Story Plays," and "Historical Plays," reflects both the quantitative growth of the field to that time and the very narrow view of children's plays that had been perpetuated. The dramatists of that day had yet to venture successfully into wholly original material.

While this second period in the development of the literature brought both qualitative and quantitative change to the repertoire, by 1950 children's drama had become virtually synonymous with moralistic fairy tale plays, dramatized in the style of the "well-made play." It took a renewed interest in children's theatre by professional producers to bring about a higher level of sophistication.

The most visible change in children's theatre after mid-century was a gradual increase in professional production. Beginning with a few groups formed in New York in the nineteen-fifties, the field grew, until by 1970 there were professional children's theatre companies in most of the large cities in the United States, as well as touring groups operating in smaller communities. This new professional network quickly exerted pressure for change in the literature. For every new theatre company content to perform a familiar fairy tale, there was another intent upon developing new plays that more imaginatively addressed the needs of modern audiences. From such companies came vaudeville revues, dramas based on current events, story theatre,

comedy sketches, improvised drama, profiles of historical figures, and musical dramas, all of which have little in common except a deliberate avoidance of the traditional fairy tale material.

By the late nineteen-sixties, the repertoire of dramatic literature for children had begun to change significantly. Writers looked to original stories, multi-dimensional characters, contemporary themes, and techniques that reflect a freer and more artistic use of dramatic form. Traditional fairy tale dramas still occupy a prominent place in the repertoire, but the last two decades have seen the creation of plays with subjects that range from the problems of the handicapped to the effects of divorce on children. And in addition to the ever-present "well-made play," some contemporary plays are in a wide range of styles, from presentational to representational, from story theatre to participation drama. Many of the plays in the modern repertoire are much like the naive adaptations from the turn of the century; still others continue in the tradition of the fairy tale plays from the nineteen-thirties and forties. But more than at any other time in the history of the field, the repertoire is changing and growing.

The development of dramatic literature for children has progressed markedly over the last one hundred years. Beginning when children were given only passing notice as audience members viewing adult plays, the repertoire has expanded to the extent that there now are several hundred published plays for child audiences, including traditional adaptations, original plays, operas, musical comedies, improvisational works, and participatory dramas.

Children's theatre has survived an inconsistent relationship with the professional theatre, the manipulation of social workers and educators, the biases of parents, and the sometimes strangling hold of the fairy tale. The development of dramatic literature for children has lagged behind the stylistic, formalistic, and thematic innovations of the American theatre as a whole; but the last thirty years in particular have seen the introduction of new ideas that hold promise for future

growth in the field. While quantitative growth is still more apparent than qualitative growth, significant progress has been made toward the creation of plays for children in which artistry prevails over custom and in which artistic truth is more important than a familiar title.

Although the list that follows is by no means definitive—much less all-inclusive—each of the plays represents well one or more of the various trends in the development of the dramatic literature for children, I offer it as a place to begin.

*Cinderella* by E. L. Blanchard. First produced in 1883.

This British Pantomime presents the Cinderella story amidst lavish visual spectacle. While these extravaganzas were not originally intended for children, their fairy tale subjects attracted family audiences. American adaptations of this unique theatre form strongly influenced early children's drama in this country.

*The Little Princess* by Frances H. Burnett. First produced in 1903. (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1911).

This faithful adaptation of the famous children's book heightens the melodramatic aspects of the story and the sentimentality of the situation. Good triumphs over evil in the end, but not before many tears have been shed for the unfortunate Sara Crewe.

*The Emperor's New Clothes* by Charlotte B. Chorpenning. First produced in 1931. (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1932).

One of the first children's plays written by this prolific writer, the play is only loosely based on the original tale. Chorpenning introduces additional characters to clearly delineate the "good" and the "bad" in the conflict, and—as typical of most of the drama of this time—the ultimate resolution underscores a pronounced moralistic perspective.

*Reynard the Fox* by Arthur Fauquez. First produced in 1958 (Brussels) and in 1960 (United States). (New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1962).

One of the most influential foreign imports in the modern repertoire, this play revolves around the "rogue" hero, Reynard. Focusing on the "morality" of the hero's deeds, Fauquez obscures the traditional "good" against "bad" conflict and artfully exposes greed and hypocrisy on all sides.

*Androcles and the Lion* by Aurand Harris. First produced in 1963. (New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1964).

Harris uses the lion and slave fable as a framework for a farcical *commedia dell'arte* scenario. Clever language and the artful use of the predictable *commedia* characters has made this one of the most popular plays in the modern repertoire.

*The Ice Wolf* by Joanna Kraus. First produced in 1964. (Rowayton, Ct.: New Plays, Inc., 1967).

This serious treatment of prejudice and revenge is set in the world of the Eskimos. Kraus effectively combines realistic characters and situations with elements akin to a folk tale. The protagonist, Anatou, is a poignant victim of the persecution of others and her own blind desire for revenge. That she must take some responsibility for the tragic happenings in the story makes this much different from the traditional fairy tale literature.

*Step on a Crack* by Suzan Zeder. First produced in 1974. (New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1975).

This play typifies much of the modern repertoire both in the realism of the

protagonist's character and the relationship of the story of the play to contemporary society. The story, which focuses on Ellie Murphy's adjustment to a new stepmother, is cleverly told, and the "relevance" of the story does not overpower the sound theatrical crafting in the play as a whole.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Louise C. Horton, ed., *Handbook for Children's Theatre Directors* (Cincinnati: National Thespian Society, 1949), pp. 22-23.

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