AN EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORY AND PRACTICES IN CHILDREN’S THEATER

CULMINATING IN A TOURING PRODUCTION OF

THUMBELINA: THE STORY OF A BRAVE LITTLE GIRL

A Thesis
Presented to
The Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

by
Kate Laissle
June 2010
“It is my conviction that the children's theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century”

Mark Twain (Twain)
# Table of Contents

Introduction 4

Chapter 1: An examination of the History of Children’s Theater 8

  The Beginnings of Children’s Theater in the U.S 8

  The Lasting Effects of Children’s Theater Educational Background 17

  The Shift Toward Cultural Education in Children’s Theater 21

  Production Methods in Children’s Theater 26

Chapter 2: Reflection on the production of *Thumbelina* 33

Conclusion 49

Words Cited 54

Appendix 1: *Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl* Script 57

Appendix 2: Letter sent to the Principals of local elementary schools 82

Appendix 3: Dramaturgical packet given to actors during rehearsals 84

Appendix 4: Photos of *Thumbelina* at Chauncey Elementary School 96

Appendix 5: Photos of *Thumbelina* at ARTS/West 101
Introduction

I first experienced children’s theater during preschool by attending productions at local theaters. My classmates and I looked forward to each new show for weeks, and we talked about the show for weeks afterward. As I grew older, I continued to go to children’s theater shows, but my attention wandered from the actions onstage. Instead I found myself looking toward the audience and becoming entranced by the joy I saw on the children's faces. The unique enthusiasm of children consistently drew me to children’s theater.

One Saturday morning in October, 2008, I was working in the costume shop on a turban for a production of *Scheherazade* for the Enchantment Theater Company while National Public Radio was playing. As I continued to hand sew folds of fabric for a hat to be worn by a puppet, the radio continued to update about the enormity of the stock-market crash. As I sat there, I realized how ludicrous it was that I could be sewing an insignificant turban while the world around me seemed to be breaking apart at the seams. I realized I needed a greater purpose and motivation behind my work, rather than just building costume pieces with no greater goal. While I knew that I excelled at millinery and building costume crafts, I no longer felt that being good at something justified a lifelong pursuit. I knew that I enjoyed what I did, but I did not see how my enjoyment could be more valuable than my potential impact on the world.

This desire to create a lasting impression on people’s lives inspired me to return to my roots in children’s theater. I have been going to the theater since I was
four years old, and have therefore experienced firsthand the effects that theater can have on the youth. Children’s theater productions can be separated into two groups: plays for children acted by children and shows for children acted by adults. I have been lucky enough to experience both forms during my childhood and as a young adult: I initially took classes that culminated in performing scenes for peers when I was seven years old; and, at the age of twenty, I had the honor of watching a group of thirty children, some with Down’s Syndrome, others with cerebral palsy, and others considered gifted, put on a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that was brilliant, honest, and inspiring. In regard to productions with adult actors, my friends and I still discuss with excitement shows that had adult actors, rather than us or our peers as performers, that we saw in our childhood. Looking back now, I understand how deeply productions of *The Little Mermaid* or *James and the Giant Peach* influenced me. This understanding fueled my desire to create a piece of theater for children, produced and acted by young adults who were both young enough to vividly remember their childhood experiences yet old enough to produce a mature work.

I took advantage of the opportunities afforded to me by my senior thesis and returned to children’s theater for the first time since starting college. I hoped that by creating a children’s theater piece I could start my lofty life goal of changing the world. My college theater experience prior to my production was exclusively in the costume shop. Though I understood that costume pieces I made became crucial elements of shows and therefore could help to create moving theatrical experiences for
a person, I rarely saw this direct effect. By producing and directing a children’s show, *Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl*, I involved myself in all aspects of the production, allowing me to comprehend the effect that each element of a production exerted upon another.

To better inform the production *Thumbelina*, I researched the history of children’s theater from its formation in 1903 to current children’s theater productions. I also researched theories on the production and benefits of children’s theater. Though I had worked in children’s theater for many years, I had never studied the form from an academic standpoint. By combining academic research with a theatrical performance I united scholarly and creative approaches to theater in a cohesive form. Furthermore, as I worked on these elements in unison, I discovered overarching themes between the academic approach to theater and the production aspect. I found that my goal of changing the world and influencing young people consistently was one shared by both theater artists producing shows and also the scholars examining children’s theater.

By combining both the scholarly and the creative in my thesis on children’s theater, I made connections that were otherwise unattainable. Not only did I confirm my theory on children’s theater’s goal of changing the world, I also found the goal of first and foremost entertaining children encompassed both approaches as well. By producing, directing, designing, and costuming a touring children’s theater production of *Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl* in conjunction with researching the
topic, I not only started my goal of helping to change the world, I also justified how my simple additions of costuming elements could truly help to change a child’s life.
Chapter 1

An Examination of the History of Children’s Theater

The Beginnings of Children’s Theater in the U.S.

Children’s theater in the United States emerged as a defined form during the start of the twentieth century, a time of pivotal change. With so many new immigrants flooding New York City, among other cities, many worried about the need for immigrants to assimilate into American culture. Because of this population growth, compulsory education laws already in place in many states started to gain greater enforcement with the hope that unified education would quickly assimilate and introduce the American culture to the new immigrants (Katz 23). Children’s theater appeared as another method to help immigrants conform to American culture. The founder of modern children’s theater, Alice Minnie Herts, wrote that theater was “a great opportunity not to impose upon people an ideal from without, but to help people to create an ideal from within” (5).

Children living in the rural U.S, from the formation of the United States until the start of the Industrial Revolution in the U.S around 1850, typically helped their parents in agriculture. Many felt that these jobs provided children sufficient protection as they worked alongside their parents. A major shift in child labor occurred when the population makeup of the country started to change. In New York City, immigrants and former farm workers poured into the metropolis and the size of the city grew from 1.5 million people in 1890 to 4.7 million in 1910 (Gibson). Both rural farm workers
and immigrants settled in the cities looking for higher paying jobs and new opportunities. As such, children, who used to work in agriculture with long hours, shifted to working in factories (Gratton 355). By 1880, the Industrial Revolution had created many jobs best suited for children and their small size. Textile mills in particular used young workers, with children as young as eight tying broken threads in looms. Their small fingers could move quickly and dexterously in tight spaces, and therefore children could do this job, and many similar tasks, more efficiently than adults (Gratton 356). Many argue that textile mills actually built machinery specifically with children in mind, as factories paid unskilled child workers less than their adult counterparts (Gratton 361). Children faced hazardous working conditions in the mills: large spinning machines frequently caught and ripped girls’ hair out or children broke or lost fingers when changing bobbins as the machines moved so fast that their hands easily became trapped (Gratton 356). With these jobs came paychecks for the young children, significantly helping families financially rather than simply providing agricultural help for the family, as they did prior to their entering into the industrial labor force.

Much of the public was unaware of the conditions children faced in the mills, but the iconic photographs by Lewis Hines proved crucial in the shift toward children’s labor reform. Often sneaking into factories under the guise of a fire inspector or a bible seller, Hines took photographs of factory conditions otherwise unseen by the public. Hines worked with the National Child Labor Committee from
1907 to 1917, using his photos as confirmation of the deplorable working conditions in textile mills and coalmines (Olson 17). In large part because of these photos, the American Child Labor Committee started to create laws similar to the British Factory Acts. The Factory Acts, which first appeared in 1833 and increased in number in 1844, gained greater momentum. These laws, while important in establishing a need for children’s labor reform, did not significantly affect the percentage of children in the work force. From 1851 to 1871, the percentage of children (ages 10 to 14) on the payroll of factories only dropped from 28.3 percent to 26.3 percent. A more significant drop, however, occurred by 1911, when only 14.3 percent of children were in the work force (Nardinelli 741, 754).

Scholars attribute this drop to a number of factors, including the change in machinery in both mills among other industrial factories. With the original machinery, most jobs required only unskilled labor, as the tasks for each employee were simple and repetitive. The new machinery, however, required skilled adult labor. An example of this shift was the formation of the assembly-line process pioneered by the Ford Motor Company’s production of the Model T. With a decreased need for unskilled labor, the employment of children also decreased (Gratton 389).

The implementation of compulsory education laws also greatly affected children in the workforce. The State of Massachusetts passed the first compulsory education law in 1642, and while this law had little effect upon the community, it did establish a precedent (Katz 11). In 1852, Massachusetts further modified this law. The
law mandated children attend school for at least twelve weeks per year (Katz 17). The implementation of this law set off a steady chain of events, leading to all other states enacting similar laws by 1918. While the Factory Acts did require children under the age of ten to receive some schooling, many factories ignored this rule. Because they were not well enforced, the Acts did relatively little to curb the number of children working. For example, even with additional Factory Acts, over the time of their implementation from 1831 to 1871 the percentage of children working only varied about 2 percent (Nardinelli 744). Instead, the drastic decrease in child workers was the result of the stricter implementation of compulsory education. Truancy laws, a product of compulsory education, received greater enforcement than Factory Acts, as schools gained money for each child attending. With a monetary incentive motivating the enforcement of such laws, children started to attend school and therefore left the workforce.

In addition to the enforcement of labor and education laws at the turn of the twentieth century, the emotional value of children shifted, and the modern social construct of childhood began to develop. As children’s labor laws gained public support as a result of compulsory education laws and children left the workforce, children became “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” (Heywood 27). Children could no longer provide for the household as effectively as they once did, but families began to place more emphasis on the emotional contributions a child could make to the household. Families’ focus on the emotional benefits and aspects of
children also coincided with the societal emphasis on the concept of childhood. This new idea also motivated a drop in the number of children in the workforce. Many child labor reformers stressed the importance of childhood. Heywood, quoting an American child labor reformer from 1905, states “to profit from the work of children was to ‘touch profanely a sacred thing’” (28). This propaganda had a strong effect on the change in child labor practices and the popularization of the perception that children should regularly attend school in order to improve themselves as human beings.

The start of the twentieth century was tumultuous for many reasons and the rising rate of immigration compounded all of these effects. Not only were new immigrants arriving in America, populations shifted, and many more people resided in urban centers and some cities experienced up to a sevenfold increase in population (Gibson). Adult immigrants often had the ability to remain within their communities, as immigrant groups tended to live in certain neighborhoods within a city, such as New York City’s Little Italy and Spanish Harlem. Adults did not need to venture beyond their established cultural norms, because they could participate in cottage industries or work in small shops with other immigrants from similar backgrounds. Children, however, went to schools with a vast array of students or worked outside of their communities in industrial jobs. These experiences caused children to be more influenced by American culture, as they faced exposure to it every day. This discrepancy created a cultural gap between adults who remembered and held on to the
culture of their homelands and children who were growing up in a country drastically different than the one of their parents’ youth. The immigrants’ children were learning about their new culture and a new language through any media they could. The childhood desire to fit in motivated their pursuit of knowledge, and their young minds were eager to learn and to adapt to the established norms of their new homes.

These events concerning children at the start of the twentieth century created the impetus for the modern form of children’s theater known today. While theater for children started only a little over one hundred years ago, theater involving children has existed at least from the time of classical Greek tragedies in the fifth century B.C.E. For example, in Euripides’ Medea, Medea’s children are crucial to the plot and children probably played these roles (Ward 9). The existence of children in this play does not make Medea a show for youth, just as the probable use of child actors during mystery or cycle plays in the late medieval period, reaching their peak in the fifteenth century, did not make those shows productions for children (Ward 11). Although children acted in plays during most of theater history, theaters rarely produced plays explicitly for a child audience. In Elizabethan productions, boys portrayed the characters of their own age and younger female roles, such as Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona (Ward 13). While children did attend these performances, the performances did not cater to their age group. The notion of theater for children did not yet exist, as the cultural circumstances surrounding the productions were vastly
different than those at the time of pivotal change in 1903, when formal children’s theater started.

Alice Minnie Herts, a social worker in New York City, saw a problem with immigrant children learning the English language and American culture from vaudeville and five-cent pictures (Herts 1). She felt strongly that this poor introduction to English hindered rather than helped the immigrant children’s growth in fitting into a new country’s culture. In 1903, Herts saw the need for an arts program where children of the local Polish and Russian neighborhoods could learn English while establishing a strong cultural and social base for themselves. She formed the Children’s Educational Theater to provide “interesting entertainment” for the youth of the area. Swortzell credits her for creating the first children’s theater in the United States, stating that it “was born in the ghetto as a social and education force to help the children of immigrants learn the language of their adopted country, to provide a meeting place for children and their families, and to offer wholesome entertainment to the children of the poor” (Swortzell 333).

In order to ensure a strong foundation in the English language, Herts decided to use *The Tempest* as the first performance by the Children’s Educational Theater (Herts 5). Herts states she chose the play “because its scenes are laid in Nature’s own abode, significant contrast to the tall and forbidding tenements of the neighborhood because it teaches the lesson of the majesty and simplicity of nature and the nobility of forgiveness” (Herts 5). In her book, Herts initially defends her choice of *The Tempest*
as a production for children through educational rhetoric, stating that the play will teach children qualities crucial to their cultural assimilation such as a desire for kindness, fairness, and the benefits of simple living. She hoped for children to learn crucial lessons through the productions. Later in her book, however, she argues against the notion that children’s theater must be educational. Herts explicitly stated that the formation of the Children’s Educational Theater did not come from a need to test a pedagogical theory, but rather to simply and effectively entertain the children (Herts 6). Yet the rest of Herts’ book stresses almost exclusively the educational benefits a theatrical production can have, ignoring the entertainment value. The repeated use of the term “education” and “educational” reflects the cultural changes occurring at the time, such as compulsory education, and also Herts’ own background as a social worker. Though Herts may have wished to simply entertain children, the rhetoric used throughout her book reveals that her background and desire for education outweighed her desire to purely entertain children. Just as the Children’s Educational Theater marks the start of children’s theater in the United States, it marks the beginning of the need to justify children’s theater from an educational, rather than an entertainment, standpoint and frames the argument about children’s theater to this day.

A major contributor to the educational aspect of children’s theater productions came from the playwrights of children’s theater scripts themselves. As so few were involved in theater originally, those who wrote the plays for children were those already familiar with children’s needs, such as teachers and social workers (Swortzell...
As these professionals valued education and had little to no background in theatrical productions, it makes sense that the plots of these early plays written for children are imbued with educational messages. The dependence on children’s theater to support and shape new immigrants outweighed the need for extravagant productions, and the use of exclusively academic education and cultural assimilation plays continued for many decades.

Although the goal for educational enrichment greatly affected the content of the plays for children at the Children’s Educational Theater, the plays did more than teach. With the push for education resulting from increased immigration rates, it made sense that the children gaining educational support from the Educational Children’s Theater would bring their immigrant parents to see their productions. Herts had set out to entertain and educate the children of the surrounding areas, yet she ended up uniting a neighborhood (Herts 6). The community reached out to learn more about a production that their local neighborhood was putting together and also offered assistance by sewing costumes or building sets. It was through this community interaction that Herts realized that *The Tempest* “was going to prove an integrating influence between foreign-born parent and American-born child” (Herts 6-7). The productions of the Children’s Educational Theater were able to bring together parent and child once again with common entertainment, therefore bridging both the age gap and the gap between those children of American birth and their parents of foreign birth.
The Children’s Educational Theater provided social education to both adult audience and child actors by using shows with characters who exhibited qualities attributed to higher classes. Herts reasoned that if a child played a king in a production with full understanding of how people of such importance carry themselves, this sense of value and self worth would carry over to the child’s everyday life (Herts 64). She believed that through viewing and participating in theater, the audience and performers both gained an understanding of the societal norms of the United States. For example, in a production of *The Little Princess*, Herts used a very simple dress for a main character in the birthday party scene. Directly after this production, many families from the community requested to borrow the costume for use in childhood photographs. Before this, young girls of the community normally took these photos in dresses covered extravagantly in lace (Herts 43). Such events highlight the great influence the theater had upon the community.

*The Lasting Effects of Children’s Theater Educational Background*

Many of the factors that influenced the start of children’s theater in 1903 continue to affect children’s theater today. While child labor and compulsory education laws are no longer the forefront of political debates, the lasting effects of these regulations continue to affect children’s theater. As The Children’s Educational Theater set a precedent for the goals children’s theater, the influence of education reform on the Children’s Educational Theater continues to affect any theater that
strictly follows the original format of children’s theater. Education still plays a crucial role in children’s theater, yet over time the changing culture of the United States has altered this influence. Themes already present in Herts’ work have taken on greater strength as the art form has gained more respect, one example being the shift away from explicitly educational children’s theater toward performances that primarily entertain and educate as a side effect.

Even when stating an emphasis on education, children’s theater has consistently tried to provide entertainment as a large aspect of the goals of production. Using entertainment, however, as justification for the existence of theater for youth continues to be problematic; indicated by the difficulty in gaining funding for a project for children unless terms such as “educational” are used or implies that the work proposed will do more than just provide entertainment for the audience. With productions for adult audiences, one does not need say that a particular play will change a person’s view of the world or educate them at a deep level in order to justify a work; a production can simply be for entertainment. With children’s theater, however, if the word “fun” is used to describe a production, the production somehow loses its value and is considered of lesser quality than if the production had educational merit. This effect is seen in the downsizing of arts programs in schools, despite research showing the benefits of arts education on academic performance.

Many authors of literature on children’s theater have addressed the ability to teach through theater, with the idea of fun being used only as a secondary support. It seems
that authors consistently struggle with this balance of education and fun in children’s theater, with educational rhetoric tending to win out over the authors intended desire.

Moses Goldberg, a former theater professor at Florida State University and the producing director of Stage One: The Louisville Children’s Theater for twenty-five years, addresses this notion, stating:

The lover of the arts tends to feel that the arts require no justification. However, to expand successfully, the arts must be recognized by leaders of society--especially educators, businessmen, and politicians. The arts must be justified in a language that these leaders will understand. […] Children’s theatre is probably a good thing, but it does not become accepted as such merely by saying so. (13)

Goldberg expands upon the goals of children’s theater and details the methods one must use to convince those not involved in the arts of the importance of children’s theater. He outlines the values of children’s theater in several different ways, with entertainment, psychological growth, and aesthetic appreciation all relating to a child having fun at a performance. He ends with “values to society” in his list of important results of children’s theater, however, stating that it “is perhaps the most potent one, in terms of convincing politicians and businessmen” (16). Most assume that theater for children will be fun; therefore theater artists must present justification of a productions’ educational merit for youth. In his book, David Wood, considered the unofficial National Children’s Dramatist in the UK, goes into great detail about this issue stating:

Why should theatre for children always be educational? Just as adults unwind by going to see farces, thrillers, or musical comedies, so children deserve relaxation. And most teachers would agree that any
theatre experience that has a modicum of worth can be education with a small ‘e’, inviting discussion and follow-up writing and art projects. And most teachers agree that entertaining lessons succeed more than purely factual ones (6).

Wood emphasizes the fun of children’s theater first, yet in order to appease society members with little to no background in the arts, he falls back on the educational aspect of theater. This constant give and take appears in most scholars work on the subject of children’s theater.

Many fear that children’s theater could be as a political tool, shaping children toward one political mindset or another (Goldberg 18). Events during the existence of the Federal Theatre Project show how such fears can negatively affect children’s theater. The Federal Theatre Project started as a way to give unemployed actors and theater technicians work. The Works Progress Administration formed the Federal Theatre Product (FTP). Along with other branches, FTP created a unit for Children’s Theater. Not only did the government subsidies provide for the productions to be free or low cost to the public, the FTP encouraged artists to explore new creative ways of producing children’s theater. The Children’s Theater Units of the FTP marked a turning point, as the first time people recognized children’s theater as a legitimate and professional form of theater. Before this addition, most children’s theater came from the base of Herts and the Children’s Educational Theater, community theater productions made for children but with leaders who had very little theatrical background. With professional theater artists, the production quality of children’s theater productions increased dramatically. These productions proved exceedingly
influential, not just on the lives of the thousands of children who saw the performances, but also on children’s theater as an entity.

A crucial production of The Children’s Theater Units of The Federal Theater Project, one which lead to its later downfall, was *The Revolt of the Beavers*. The show’s plot focused on the idea of sharing and living happily ever after, as the plot involved beavers and children overthrowing the evil beaver chief who had taken all the wood for himself (Heard 111). So many people accused this production of Marxist themes that it closed after only seventeen performances in 1937. When examining the Federal Theater Project, the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee accused this play of attempting to teach Marxism to children, which bolstered the eventual dissolution of the FTP in 1939. When surveyed children listed “Don’t be selfish,” and “Beavers really talk,” as lessons learned from the production; still the government viewed any production for children as highly influential to young minds and therefore dubbed any slight political leaning dangerous (Heard 111-113).

*The Shift Toward Cultural Education in Children’s Theater*

The benefits of children’s theater were seen as reaching farther than simple assimilation and as such children’s theater did not disappear once the rate of immigration slowed. Many changes have occurred over the years for the form to reach its current heights, with the theater’s goals focusing more on culture now rather than education as done previously. Children’s theater continues to grow today, with many
theaters now adding Theater for Young Audiences performances, as the Orlando Shakespeare Theater did in February of 2002 with a production of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Archive). Furthermore, the number of theaters dedicated exclusively to children’s theater continue to increase. A few examples include the Birmingham Children’s Theater that opened in 1947, the Children’s Theater Company that opened in 1965, and the Seattle Children’s Theater that opened in 1975.

The idea that theater seen at a young age affects a child’s opinion and sense of the world in a much deeper sense than it would an adult motivates much of the discussion concerning children’s theater and also the growth of children’s theater’s themselves. Society used to assume that children were merely imperfect adults and gave no greater thought to their status. Children’s rights movements starting at the turn of the nineteenth century and continuing through today, however, changed this idea and recognized the differences inherent between a child’s mind and an adult’s, and acknowledged the differing needs of the two age groups.

By treating children as adults-in-progress, rather than small imperfect adults, greater emphasis is put on what a child learns overall. Whereas a “small adult” need only learn the skill set for one particular job, a child with the potential to grow into an adult needs a full education to allow for both job and life possibilities. With the advent of compulsory education, the hope is that children leave school with a similar base of knowledge; the goal was that students would be literate, prepared to become active citizens, and be able to understand math and science. The goal is also for children to
learn basic social interaction skills within a school setting as well. With a wider range of knowledge of both the academic and social, a child can become a functioning adult with a better foundation of knowledge to motivate any path in life. This valuing of a child’s youth clarifies the increased emphasis on education through children’s theater. Since education is so important to a growing child, many feel that all events in their lives should be educational in order to affect a life at its most malleable period. If one wants to help a child to become a good citizen, one must provide them with the ability to learn. Children’s theater presents itself as a way to teach children the important aspects of life in a new form. As the ideas of childhood needs have changed, the lessons taught in children’s theater have addressed these shifts. Today goals for children in America include learning about cultures from across the world. Children’s theater can therefore focus on this different and expanded form of education, rather than simply reinforcing the value of the English language and American culture, as was socially required at the start of the twentieth century. Because of the large influence of immigration and the newly forming compulsory education system.

Because of the pressure toward compulsory education in the early twentieth century, theater for youth followed the idea that performances tailored to children should provide an academic education for the audience. As young immigrant children had little background in English or American culture, the education provided by the performances proved crucial in their adaptation of their new situation. Emphasis on academic education and learning English increased with advent of compulsory
education laws. Theater partially addressed educational needs of children at the turn of the century by showing rather than simply explaining the cultural norms of American citizens. The visual and interactive aspect of children’s theater helped to enforce the cultural education that educators of the time wished to emphasize. As the rate of immigration dropped, the goal of quick cultural assimilation diminished. The enforcement of compulsory education laws also attempted to ensure that immigrant children gained cultural awareness through school itself, with a lesser need for supplementation by outside sources. As the rate of immigration has decreased, so has the number of new immigrant children entering the school system with no background in American culture. Most students now enter elementary schools with a basic understanding of American culture and cultural goals, thereby allowing schools to build upon this preliminary foundation of cultural understanding rather than having to teach a child all the necessary skills. With an American cultural foundation being provided by a child’s upbringing and supplemented by the schools, children’s theater can now expand upon a child’s knowledge by showing them the traditions of other nations, without depriving children of the knowledge of their own culture. Modern American culture currently highlights and encourages the idea of a cultural mosaic making up the U.S, rather than the previous goal of assimilating other cultures into the societal norms of America. The productions of modern children’s theater reflect this change.
The Seattle Children’s Theater (SCT), one of the most prominent children’s theaters in the US today, put up a production of *Mysterious Gifts: Theater of Iran* during September and October of 2009. SCT brought in the Persian performance artist Yaser Khaseb to do a movement piece based on Iranian folk dance. Through Khaseb’s performance, the Seattle Children’s Theater was able to introduce children in the greater Seattle region to forms of art they would most likely never see otherwise. Beyond just seeing other art forms, through their choice to use an Iranian artist, the SCT exposed children to the rich culture of a country that is featured predominantly in American media because of the current political turmoil. Instead of having children’s first perception of a country being one of a politically unstable nation filled with civil unrest, this production allowed children to see the rich culture that was a crucial part of Iran at its cultural zenith and continues to influence their psyche. This awareness can continue to influence a child’s view of the world from then on because they now understand that there can be more to a country than just what they see on the news. Through this one performance, SCT has the potential to positively shape children’s way of thinking (Mysterious).

A modern take on children’s theater also addresses the immigration issue in a new way. As opposed to the turn-of-the-century theater’s goal of helping children assimilate into the American culture, many progressive children’s theaters now embrace the immigrant cultures in the surrounding areas. Productions by the Children’s Bilingual Theatre, founded by Jordan Schwartz, a ninth grader at Atlanta
Girls School, addresses cultural differences using bilingual productions put on by people from second grade through college age (The Children’s). In this manner, the productions embrace the surrounding cultures, rather than force all immigrant children to speak and understand English. The productions allow children of all cultures to experience ethnic backgrounds different from their own.

*Production Methods in Children’s Theater*

Even with the new freedom in addressing topics, children’s theater professionals face a constant struggle between producing theater focusing either too much or too little upon childhood education. Still, the methods used in the actual productions have stayed relatively consistent from the formation of children’s theater until today. Herts in 1903, The Federal Theater Project in 1938, Goldberg in 1974, and Wood in 1999 all channel similar production and acting methods in their children’s theater productions. Thoughts on and justifications of theater have shifted over time, but the techniques that delight children remain the same. Children at the turn of the century did not have access to the Internet or the mass communication devices that the youth of today have, yet both the modern generation of children and those at the turn of the twentieth century have found joy in playing a game of tag, leap frog, or building box cars out of found materials. Outside factors have changed, but the need for simple forms of entertainment by children remain. The methods used with a child audience have been extremely effective in children’s theater and continue to prove their worth
which each additional children’s theater performance. While the legal recognition of a
state of childhood remains new, the desires of children to both have fun and learn in
some way continue as they did prior to this recognition. Modern laws in the United
States protect children through child labor laws. Though children now face different
issues from previous generations, they continue to gain enjoyment from the same
theatrical techniques used at the start of children’s theater.

Herts used direct address to the audience, theatrical magic in costume and
scenic elements, and the notion of emotional truth toward the audience to achieve her
goals. The methods used to reach children and the problems associated with
performing for them that were faced by at the Children’s Education Theater continue
today. While it is true that theatrical productions for adults use these same techniques,
children’s theater productions use such methods extensively. Children respond much
more readily to characters requesting help and find it very exciting, therefore
motivating its frequent use in children’s theater. An understanding of the particulars of
each method emphasized in children’s theater throughout the form’s history further
underlines how children as a group find joy in the same things, despite the
generations.

Herts details in her book the use of direct address, a method in which the actors
break the fourth wall to talk directly to the audience, in productions for children as a
crucial element for a successful performance. At times, performances must use direct
address in order to keep a performance under control. During a performance of The
Emperors New Clothes by the New York Children’s Theatre in 1936, the characters onstage were busy looking for a sign telling them which way to go. With the sign behind them, the actors continued in their oblivious search while ignoring the shouted help from the audience. Suddenly a young child stood up, took to the stage, grabbed an actor’s hand and led the actor to the sign, informing them, “There it is, you dope!” From that, the director realized asking that for help from the children would be much more effective than having children interrupting the events onstage (Heard 108). A similar example occurred during my production of Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl, which toured to Athens County elementary schools. During a performance, several children insisted on offering help with Thumbelina’s search for her home, even though Thumbelina did not request it. Thumbelina had asked if the children had heard Mama calling for Thumbelina, which they readily replied that they did. The production used the theatrical convention of the character Mama being both narrator and Thumbelina’s mother. Whenever Mama would appear to narrate another section of the story, a chorus of “There’s Mama!” would erupt from the audience, which started to impede the progress of the story. Mama eventually took to putting her finger to her lip whenever she appeared to signal to the children that she was supposed to be hidden. Young children watching theatrical productions have not necessarily learned theater etiquette. Therefore, to the child, walking onto the stage and informing the actors of their characters’ mistakes makes sense. David Wood presents the notion that children are “healthily subversive” (23). As they continue to grow, children continue
to push boundaries to see exactly what new actions they can get away with. This subversive nature plays perfectly into the use of direct address. Though similar in seating style to school events that require silence, theater productions that allow children to interact and speak out during a show allow them to indulge in their desires to let their opinion be known without facing potential consequences. Audience interaction allows children to become part of the action and events of the play. It prevents them from becoming engrossed with discussing the action of the play with their neighbors; rather it focuses their attention to the events as hand as it becomes their responsibility for the action to continue.

While the notion of keeping a child’s attention is crucial, the use of direct address goes beyond just keeping them involved. Speaking directly to the audience, fully breaking the fourth wall, allows children to become more than just passive spectators; it allows them to become active participants in the production. Adults arrive at the theater with their whole life experience behind them and cultural norms that they must follow. They have learned to guard their reactions, and they understand that the production that they are about to see is false. If one treats them with respect and recognizes their vulnerability, children arrive ready to believe all of the action onstage (Wood 18).

Direct address, however, can become detrimental to a production at times. If one does not focus the audience, the event can turn chaotic. Subtle differences exist between the types of chatter produced by a child audience. An actor must gauge the
audience’s reaction and determine if acknowledging the background noise will help or hinder a scene. If an actor acknowledges an unsolicited spoken witticism, the event can get out of hand, with all audience members responding and shouting at will. However, if one misjudges and disregards input by audience members that the children feel important, the audience could continue trying to get their information across until an actor acknowledges their thoughts. They will continue to interrupt the performance to the point of halting it if the actors do not acknowledge them. There is a line that one must find between acknowledging statements that would continue to cause distractions and the potential for the actor’s response to causes dozens of responses from children. If the script calls for direct address in a performance, the appropriate questions must be asked in order to guide an audience’s response. If a character poses a question, where the child’s opinion will be valued and needed, then the audience can be refocused and the actor can regain control (Wood 233-236).

Theatrical magic does not need to be huge flying sets that descend from the rafters. While such events are “magical,” if lighting and sound are used in the proper manner, theater can create a scene that inspires as much awe as a flying house, yet allows for a stronger balance between character action and technical elements. Such techniques can captivate an audience, especially in scenes that actually use magical elements as a crucial aspect of the production. In a production of Snow White at the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival in the Summer of 2006 that I saw, the audience had previously been encouraged to participate in different aspects of the production, such
as helping Snow White find a cottage, and the audience therefore actively helped the characters and were committed to the show. At one point in the production, the Wicked Step Mother, dressed as an old Hag, offered Snow White a poisoned apple with a gnarled and wrinkled old hand. During this scene, the lighting turned dark and foreboding and the music became eerie. As Snow White reached her hand out to grab the apple, the audience heard the voice of a small girl shouting, “Don’t take the apple Snow White! It’s poisoned! Don’t do it Snow White, don’t take the apple!” As Snow White continued to reach for the apple and then bring it to her lips, we heard a plaintive “Noooooo! She can’t hear me!” It was the combination of lighting, sound, and costuming elements that produced a moment that so thoroughly convinced a young child of Snow White’s potential demise that she felt the need to alert Snow White of the impending doom without any prompting from the characters onstage.

With children, simple elements often work best in productions. Touring productions often involve minimal sets and costumes and little to no lighting, yet if the acting is done well, the production can succeed. Though a simple production may not be anymore visually interesting than their everyday lives, children fill in the visual gaps with their imaginations and rely on the activities occurring onstage to hold their attention and produce an emotional response. Productions face a give-and-take between technical elements and acting. If technical elements are spectacular, the visual stimulation can make up for a lack of acting ability. If technical elements are lacking, however, the acting must compensate for this lack of visual stimulation and engage the
audience with their characters. During a low-budget touring performance, the latter situation often occurs as productions must have small and simple technical elements to fit into limited performance spaces at elementary schools. Often school tours perform in libraries, therefore necessitating little-to-no set and very transportable costumes. If the budget is very tight, all production elements may have to fit into the performers and technical crews’ cars. These simple productions are able to work well because of the actors’ emotional connection and emotion truth that they establish with their young audience.

While many feel that children’s theater is of lesser quality than adult theater and therefore requires lesser acting ability and truth, experienced professionals disagree. According to theatrical legend, when asked, “How shall we act for children?” by a member of his company, the acting-theory pioneer Konstantin Stanislavsky replied, “We act for children the same way we act for adults—only better” (quoted in Robinette). A child audience can sense when an actor is not being truthful because they are highly perceptive of the world around them. They are looking for people to imitate, wishing to be the best people they can, and this desire motivates their analysis of those in the world around them.
Chapter 2

Reflection on the production of *Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl*

My time in Athens greatly influenced me, and during my final year I wanted to give back to the city I love. Since this is a college town, days went by when I did not see anyone under the age of eighteen. My love for the city and my lack of interaction with youth helped me formulate the idea of producing a show for the children of Athens County. I understood in a vague sense what I wanted to accomplish, but still needed to formulate how I was going to achieve my goal. I initially worked with Rachel Dombi, a senior undergraduate playwright, to create a script specific to both of our theses. She needed to write a full-length play for her thesis, and I wanted to do a children’s theater production. At first, it seemed as if this would be a brilliant marriage of ideas, as she wished to venture into the realm of writing for children. We created an idea for the plot, and she started to write. Yet the more we worked together on this endeavor, the more we realized that she could not finish the script in time. Dombi did not need to finish her play until May, whereas I planned to tour my production in March. Because of these conflicts, I realized that I needed to find a script through different means.

At the Orlando Shakespeare Theater (OST), I took classes with and eventually volunteered for April-Dawn Gladu. During my time at OST, Gladu was the education director while at the same time freelancing as a playwright. I had known her since I was seven years old and had helped her in the education department at OST when I
was older. Working in the education office, I learned about publicity for productions and also the specifics as to how to create as successful children’s theater production. Gladu and I remained in contact even after her move to Chicago and my move to Ohio. When I mentioned my predicament to her, Gladu suggested the script

_Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl_ from her newly formed script company and offered its use with discounted royalties (Appendix 1). Through her script recommendation, the idea of creating a touring show formed. While I did not initially consider touring the production to local schools, the format of the script made this option both easy and desirable. The script called for many characters, yet no more than four characters had to be on the stage at the same time, and there were very few required technical elements. My previous college experience principally consisted of work in the costume and crafts shop at the theater; this show allowed ample opportunity to showcase my skills with a large amount of characters but a small amount number of actors. The costumes needed to be vibrant both to hold a child’s attention and to help differentiate between characters. _Thumbelina_ provided a medium that could both display my costuming skills and also entertain children; therefore I could achieve both of my thesis goals at the same time.

After choosing the script, I used the summer of 2009 to organize elements of the production for the coming year. Originally, I intended to use fall quarter to build all of the costumes needed for the tour. I also planned to write the rough draft of the scholarly aspect of my thesis, which would examine the shifting views and
justification of children’s theater through history. I would then be able to dedicate all of my energy during the months of January through March to directing and then touring Thumbelina. After establishing this rough estimate of my year, I used the rest of the summer to start looking for funding. I started searching for money by creating a Provost’s Undergraduate Research Fund (PURF) proposal. After working at the Utah Shakespearean Festival during the summer, I returned to Athens and focused my full attention on writing the PURF proposal. The application went through numerous revisions in the few weeks before the late September deadline. After totaling the money needed for supplies, I arrived at an estimated PURF request of nearly $700. I found out several weeks later that I received $1,000, the first time in recent memory that the PURF committee has given more money to a student than requested. The trust that a group of professionals from a wide variety of fields placed on my production greatly increased my confidence. As I intended to direct, produce, design, build, and crew the production with minimal to no help, such a boost helped enormously.

I spent most of the fall quarter researching the history of children’s theater in the United States. I intended to gain both information regarding the actual production of a work of children’s theater and a historical background that could then motivate my production. The key piece of research that influenced my production was Alice Minne Herts’ book The Children’s Educational Theater, as her passion for children’s theater fills every page. I felt empowered by a sense of purpose after reading it and found myself espousing facts about children’s theater to any poor victim who asked
anything relating to my thesis. After discovering the vast impact of children’s theater, I gained such an enthusiasm for the topic and for my thesis that I could not stop working. Every book I discovered brought with it a new source of knowledge and therefore created an increasing passion for the work.

Even with all this passion for my topic, I faced many apathetic responses in regard to my thesis topic. In my research, I found a consistent theme among scholars that children’s theater rarely gains the respect it deserves. The authors of the books I read constantly justified their profession by how this form of theater would benefit a child academically, while at the same time attempting to emphasize the entertainment aspect of the productions. Each author struggled to find a balance between his or her argument for the entertainment value of children’s theater and the societal view for a need of educational theater. As most of my peers working on theses were addressing traditional academic topics, most brushed over the topic of children’s theater. This became a firsthand experience of the information given to me within my research.

During fall quarter I also began the process of contacting the people involved in children’s theater in the Athens area. My advisor, Dr. William Condee, made this task easier because of his connections with the local schools and arts centers. Every time we met, he would suggest a different person whom I should contact and that could help me realize the production of *Thumbelina*. Through Holly Korn, the Coordinator of Gifted Services in Athens City, I contacted the principals of the local schools and offered to perform *Thumbelina*. Korn enthusiastically supported my goals
and agreed to forward a proposal letter to all potentially interested schools (Appendix
2). As time passed, she continued to follow up with schools to evaluate their level of
interest in the production. With Korn as an established contact within the schools, Dr.
Condee then put me in contact with Connie Winters as a contact with local theater
venues. As both she and her husband, Robert Winters, have been active in children’s
theater and the Ohio Valley Summer Theater for many years, her advice proved
invaluable. When I talked with her on the phone, she both encouraged me in my goals
and cautioned me against potential mistakes on my horizon. Connie Winters’ directing
advice proved indispensable once rehearsals started in February. Not only that, she
helped me to find the wording I should use when contacting the local schools via
email or typed letter.

What I found most interesting, between both the phone interviews with local
professionals and the text research, was the consistency in advice. Themes of
respecting the audience and treating children as people rather than a group of “others”
repeatedly appeared. It seemed as if everyone’s advice, both published and
unpublished, came from the same source. After my own experience, I realize that the
consistent source is the children themselves. Across generations and locations,
children respond in much the same way, and the repetition of hearing this advice was
invaluable during the rehearsal and production process.

The goal of finishing all the costumes before winter break proved more
ambitious than I had thought. With researching children’s theater, writing grant and
thesis proposals, and contacting people from the surrounding community, I had little
time to work in the costume shop. Though I could not finish multiple costume pieces
as originally hoped, I did find the work on artistic projects calmed and helped me to
synthesize ideas concerning the research aspect of my thesis. When working on
building sparrow wings until the early morning hours, my mind had time to wander.
This wandering allowed me to discover new research connections and focus on
something other than the academic. The opposite applied during winter quarter, as I
worked so much on the creative aspects of the production that returning to the paper
proved incredibly helpful. By continuing to work on all aspects of my thesis at the
same time, I managed to achieve a balance between the academic and the creative with
each aspect informing and aiding the other.

The first few weeks of January involved finalizing contacts with the
elementary schools. There were many snow days, and it became difficult to stay in
contact with the schools and get confirmation as to whether they still wanted the show
to perform for them. Though I sent initial emails out to approximately nine schools,
only five responded. I therefore called these five back and continued to talk with them,
yet out of this group only two schools confirmed dates, Chauncey and West
Elementary Schools. Because of the time lost to snow days, however, West
Elementary was forced to cancel their scheduled performance the week before we
were set to perform. I feel that I achieved the amount of success and openness with the
elementary schools that I did because I had a person working with me inside the
school system, Korn. Without her I feel I would have faced a great deal more difficulty.

While working with the elementary schools, I also discussed performing the show at both ARTS/West and the Dairy Barn. Emily Prince and Ginger Schmalenberg, my contacts at each location respectively, were supportive and enthusiastic. As my goal for *Thumbelina* of giving back to the community relied heavily on those in positions of influence supporting my production, the support of Schmalenberg and Prince made me feel validated in my goals.

Working with Prince made me realize just how much aid I needed with publicity and interaction with the public. I created a press packet and started to use a production company title. Prince did all of the publicity for the ARTS/West performance, and Schmalenberg did the publicity for the performance at the Dairy Barn. In hindsight, had I publicized more, I feel the turnout would have been much greater. I did not think about publicity until it was too late. I became so focused on having the production ready for opening that I failed to let people know when we opened. While I did have a large turnout at ARTS/West, approximately one hundred people, the audience at the Dairy Barn was small. There were only about twenty people, with approximately half there because they knew actors in the production. The school performances were wonderful, because once I had established the date, there was no need for publicity. The show had a fixed audience of the intended age group that I hoped would respond enthusiastically. Not only that, this audience of children
were skipping class to see a show, therefore getting out of school made the play that much more exciting. The ongoing theme of balance in all aspects of the production appeared here as well, as I need to balance the build for *Thumbelina* with publicity aspects. In this instance, I did not balance as effectively as I could, but the end result did not suffer for this.

Once I confirmed the performance dates and times, I was able to devote my full attention to the production aspects of *Thumbelina*. I hoped to have all costumes finished before rehearsals started, therefore giving me a month to create or find sixteen costumes. While ambitious, I initially felt I could accomplish this with minimal stress. I overestimated my skill at building quickly, and while I did have the most crucial pieces finished by the start of rehearsals, a few remained. I felt that it was important to get costumes finished before rehearsals, as I knew that costume pieces would be crucial in the rehearsal process. Many of the items helped to define characters physicality, such as the Spider’s arms and backpack that both played a large role in the capture of Thumbelina, and that encouraged me to meet my goal quickly.

While I would not change my work pace, I could have analyzed my habits better. If I examined the speed at which I worked, I could have determined the time needed to complete each project and therefore would have achieved a better balance between stress as motivation and a desire to work. I did finish all aspects of the production before the last week of rehearsals, leaving me with nothing to panic over finishing during the last week. While there were repairs up to and after opening
because of the vigorous nature of the performances and the repeated rehearsals, I had built a sizable number of costumes alone in only a few weeks. During most productions I have been a part of, the last week prior to a show going up is often ridden with panic over many last-minute items needing work. In this case, the final week before opening was eerily calm for me. I was in control of my own actions and therefore could ensure that all that need to get done was done on time. With all prior productions I had been a part of, everyone worked as a team to finish everything. Though working in teams does help to split up the workload, if one person falls behind, it forces everyone else to fall behind as well. As I was the team, only I could get behind as opposed to a whole team causing delays.

Though I finished most costumes by the start of rehearsals as I hoped, once we began my inexperience with directing made me second-guess every aspect of the production, including costumes. I tried to keep this production as self-contained as possible, and therefore directed the production as well as worked on all other aspects. My only previous directing experience was directing a short five-minute scene in a classroom setting where I had very little instruction. To combat this lack of first-hand experience, however, I had the good fortune of previously working with and observing excellent directors. Once rehearsals started, I channeled the memories I had from rehearsing with them and used many of their directorial techniques. As I needed the actors to be confident in my abilities, I had to walk the fine line between acting confident versus admitting when I was lost. A good director conveys confidence with
their actions and I found it difficult to convey this confidence initially. It ended up being a constant battle for me during rehearsals to be confident in my vision of the show and convey this to the actors. When I lacked confidence in imagination, I turned to the brilliance the actors were bringing to rehearsals. With each actor coming to rehearsal brimming with energy and enthusiasm, the production became a collaboration of everyone’s ideas, with me building the process and shaping the final product.

I capitalized on my dramaturgical knowledge by providing the actors with a packet of copied sections from research done the previous quarter (Appendix 3). A dramaturg generally works with the director and playwright to help with research and development. As a dramaturg on previous Ohio University productions, I was familiar with the benefits that background research could have on a production. The packet addressed how to act in children’s theater and the many problems that could and would occur during performances. This packet gave the actors an idea of the goals of the production and what to expect when performing for children. The addition of dramaturgical packets helped to give the production a foundation in theory and therefore aided the rehearsal process in that form.

Because I have worked in children’s theater, I knew what acting style needed to be used, but I did not have the director’s vocabulary needed to convey this vision. It was as if I was trying to teach adults a language with only a seven-year-old’s vocabulary. Over the course of the rehearsal process, however, I learned how to
convey what I wanted the actors to do effectively. There is a very fine line between acting for children and talking down to them in a patronizing manner. Simple changes in vocal tone make or break a children’s theater show; it is difficult to explain the difference to someone with little to no experience with this theatrical form. When I was finally able to convey the difference, I could see the flash of recognition cross the actor’s faces and the rest of the rehearsal process was incredibly easy and enjoyable. By the end of the four-week rehearsal process, I had become confident in my direction, and I felt the cast trusted me more. As the actors knew that this was the first production that I had directed, I felt that I had to earn their trust. When I realized that I had earned it, I gained a sense of accomplishment. The consistent theme of balance appeared here as well, as all of my actions informed on another. My previous academic research helped to motivate my creative directing experience.

The costumes, once added, provided a completely new level of exploration within the performance. As soon as actors used costume pieces, their character came alive with a new fervor. In the production, Froggy Mom and Froggy Boy play a key role in Thumbelina’s journey, and their costumes are crucial to holding a child’s attention. These characters appear at the start of the show, and therefore their vibrancy would help capture a child’s interest. The costumes were frog puppets that I borrowed from Holly Cole, Professor of Costume Design at Ohio University. The addition of the puppets changed the manner in which the actors moved. The frog puppet sat on the actor’s heads yet the arms of the frogs were short enough that the actors needed to
keep their arms at chest level to be comfortable. This slight change in physicality brought new depth to their characters, as it forced the actors to play around with the costumes to find a distinct manner of movement. Another example of costumes adding characterization is the spider costume, made up of a shirt with three arms attached to it, with each arm connecting to one another with elastic. These arms then looped to the actor’s wrist, thereby allowing the actor to control all of the spider’s arms in one movement. Once the actor started to wear this costume piece, his movements became larger, more distinct, and more strongly character driven. When I saw each of these changes in rehearsal, I realized how interconnected each part of a production is. I discovered that costumes could affect an actor’s character choice just as much, if not more, than a director’s suggestion.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I debated what the set should be, shifting back and forth between folding flats of black fabric and using multiple dressing screens as a changing area for the actors. When other theater students asked to how the production was progressing, I mentioned that I did not really have a set. Three graduate students then offered to help; they designed and then painted a canvas drop of a myriad of colors. I was in disbelief that people would be willing to take time out of their busy schedules to help me. Because of their help I was able to have a fifteen-foot by seven-foot scenic drop that could tour around to the local elementary schools and help to transform whatever locale we were at into a place of fun and new experiences for the kids. Though they painted the backdrop for me, I needed to trim it
to size and sew a pocket at the bottom so that it could attach to a frame, I did not ask for help in this situation and realized halfway through my endeavor that this was a poor choice. While I did accomplish the needed sewing on my own, another set of hands while attempting to sew fifteen feet of crisp, newly painted canvas would have been helpful. To support this drop, I needed to build a frame from which it could hang. The frame needed to be made of PVC and collapsible so that the whole set could fit into my car to tour to different schools. This became a complicated ordeal to build, as connectors for PVC pipe only come in a few shapes and angles. I needed 45º angled pieces, which are not part of the standard set, so three different pieces had to be cobbled together. This is another instance in which I should have asked for more help to avoid problems. For example, a scenic artist could have informed me that attempting to have one piece of fifteen-foot long PVC hold up a large drop would cause the pipe to bow in the middle. The fierce independence I displayed while putting the show together proved to be both a blessing and a curse; it allowed me to build costumes for sixteen character in under two months while taking a full class load, yet it also made me too stubborn to actually admit when I needed help. I realize now that the areas that I excelled at were areas where my knowledge on different subjects could play upon each other. With directing, I had costumes and dramaturgy to help bring in other beneficial information, yet with scenic design I had no background information that could help. Hence, this aspect proved more difficult.
I also had a problem with creating a sound design for the show. Though the sound cues were simple enough that I could handle them on my own, I did not anticipate the need for them at first and therefore did not have to time to create them. I have almost no background in sound design, and the prospect of doing so on top of everything else was daunting. Graduate students once again helped me. Nicholas Quinn, a graduate student in the sound department, noticed me walking by with a petal skirt one day and asked if I needed help. When I mentioned my apprehension in needing around cues, he offered not only to find me a sound designer, but also to find someone to run the technical elements of the show for me.

On the day that we opened, my friend Rachel Dombi, the playwright I was originally planning on working with, offered her help in getting everything to the schools and set up. On the morning of March 5th, the cast and I drove to Chauncey Elementary School and held two performances (Appendix 4). Set up went by quickly and with only a minor problem of a set piece having been left back at the theater. One frenzied drive back into town later, and we were ready to go. As we walked through the hallways, many of the kids stopped and stared at us in awe. They treated us like rock stars as we carried frog parts and PVC pipes down the hallways. The first performance was for second and third graders, a group of about forty kids. I introduced the show and then the actors started the performance. The kids loved every minute of Thumbelina’s journey and were so enthused that it was hard to get them to focus on the events that were occurring as opposed to talking about events that
happened previously. The pointers in the dramaturgical packet that I handed out to the actors at the start of rehearsals proved true, as every possible reaction described occurred. The kids had a tendency to point out the loudly obvious moments that older age groups would have accepted as theatrical conventions. For example, at one point the Sparrow offers Thumbelina regurgitated maggots as a meal. The kids had to let their friends know that it was, in fact, a gummy worm. They also cared so much about Thumbelina that whenever she was in danger, such as when the spider was sneaking up behind her, they felt that they had to warn her; they did so emphatically.

The difference between the second and third graders and the younger group of kindergarten and first graders was that the older ones understood that they were watching a show, though they were fully invested in the actions. When we had a question and answer period after the performances the older children asked questions such as “What is Thumbelina’s skirt made out of?” “Can you play the guitar?” and “Are learning all those lines hard?” The younger children, in contrast, deeply committed to the reality of the performances and the existence of each character as a separate entity. Though Zane Urquhart played six different characters and one could see his face in each, they believed that there were six separate people behind the screen who all happened to look similar. They also asked Katie Weber, a 22-year-old, who played the role of Mama, whether she was the real mother of Thumbelina, played by a 20-year-old Rachel Collins. The performances themselves went wonderfully, though for future productions I would encourage the actors to ham up moments in
which the children were laughing, and therefore slow their pacing so as to allow the
children to enjoy the moment move.

The performances at ARTS/West, a local arts venue, went equally well
(Appendix 5). It was very interesting to go from a school setting in which laughter was
the high-pitched squeal of children, to ARTS/West, where the audience was over half
adults and college students. Even with this age group, however, there was an
incredible amount of laughter. People consistently said how much they loved the
show. I also received a compliment on the directing from Shelley Delaney, the Head of
the Professional Actor Training Program at Ohio University. She stated that I managed
to have the production not talk down to children and therefore made the show
accessible to all ages. This had been my worst fear, and it was wonderful that a
professor complimented just how well the show went. I also received an email from a
set of grandparents who took their five-year-old granddaughter to the show. They
stated that their granddaughter wanted to see the show again; “high praise from a five
year old,” they said.

In contrast, the performance the next day at the Dairy Barn was rather
lackluster because of the small audience. Since the show relies heavily on audience
interaction, it did not come to life as much as it did at the three previous performances.
While this was unfortunate, it did not diminish how well the other performances went.
Conclusion

By approaching the study of children’s theater through both a creative and scholarly lenses, I gained a great deal more insight into the form than either approach alone would have granted me. The historical background surrounding the advent of children’s theater informs many of the modern trends in children’s theater. Understanding the great influence of compulsory education and labor laws on children’s lives and their treatment as people enlightens a person’s understanding of why children’s theater formed when it did. Without the enforcement of these laws, the need for theater for children may not have received any recognition. Had the notion of childhood fallen to the wayside in favor of maintaining children in the work force, there would be no need for children’s theater as youth would be working in the factories rather than needing entertainment and education. By recognizing this shift, the world changing effects of children’s theater becomes more prominent.

With society today, it is hard to imagine a time when a large percentage of lower-class and lower-middle-class children worked from a young age. The early propaganda against child labor, that such labor was defiling a precious being, became a culturally accepted norm. Though only one hundred years have passed, the idea of child labor has shifted in our minds from something that happened with great frequency in the factories of the United States to something that only occurs in impoverished or third world countries. American law now requires for children to finish at least part of high school, attending school until at least sixteen years old,
which encourages children to attend college. One can understand how such a large shift in perception of children and childhood could affect theater designed for youth. As the basic needs of academic education, such as foundations in English language and the American culture, presently occur through public schooling, children’s theater can now branch out and start to address the emotional and cultural education needs of children. While the justification of theater for children still includes rhetoric concerning education, the education that a child can potentially gain through theater has shifted from a standpoint of solely preparing children for the next level of school such as high school or college to an education concerning a child’s worldview. Children’s theater now has the opportunity to educate children in cultures that they could not normally gain access to. With my production of *Thumbelina*, I continued to build upon the changing face of children’s theater.

Overall, I am proud of how everything came together with the production. I felt that these performances not only helped me rediscover my passion for theater, which had been pushed to the side after several unfortunate events, but it also restored my belief that theater has value, and is incredibly worthwhile. The laughter created by a single performance made up for all the stress associated with making that one performance possible. The crucial nature of the costumes in this show also helped me to realize that the career I have chosen can have a great effect on people. Seeing firsthand how costumes are a crucial part of theater and therefore a crucial part of the performances that have such power caused this realization. What also astonished me is
that throughout the production, people continually asked if I needed help instead of me needing to beg for it. The connections I forged throughout my years in the costume shop helped to make this production possible. It consistently astonished me how important connections were in the mounting of *Thumbelina*, as without them I would not have been able to travel to the schools, have a set, or have any form of crew and help. It informed my perception as to both how much people believed in children’s theater, as the desire to help on the part of other people became stronger once they were informed of it’s children’s theater nature, and also how the crucial nature of each person and element involved in a production.

Beyond just the use of costumes, working on a production confirmed how the methods of direct address, theatrical magic, and emotional honesty consistently reach child audiences. While the intricacies of the goals of productions and the circumstances surrounding children’s theater have changed, these methods have stayed true. The production methods still affect children, as the essence of childhood has remained the same. Children across cultures and generations can still relate to games on a basic level and also relate to certain production methods in the same manner. The shifts in children’s theater toward showing children the world’s varying cultures, as opposed to a goal of cultural assimilation, reflects the progress of the United States’ attitude toward children. Children did not become inherently better beings, rather changes in cultural understanding have allowed children’s theater’s to explore topics previously unavailable to them. Children’s theater has expanded beyond its small
formation, addressing only the immediate cultural needs, to encompass vast topics concerning cultures on a global scale. It stands to reason, therefore, that as the understanding of childhood and child development grows, so too will the topics addressed in children’s theater continue to expand to cover greater and greater topics.

By producing a children’s theater production myself, I saw firsthand the effects of children’s theater upon youth. The responses of child audience members enforced the direct effects that theater for their age group can have on children. Hearing their questions directed to the characters onstage and by being informed of their opinions on the show later through by the adults they attended with caused a revelation within me. I realized that my production, though very small, may have started to change the world through only a few children. As one child can grew into the one adult that makes a difference, I realized that by knowing I affected just a few children, I may have started a ripple effect of change through both the community and the world.

Without a dualistic approach of examining children’s theater both from a scholarly standpoint and a practical production one my understanding of children’s theater as a form and also my production itself would have suffered. By utilizing multiple sources of information with each influencing each other, I not only produced better work, both scholarly and creatively, I also connected ideas and topics with each other in a manner I would not have otherwise. Without an understanding of the influence of compulsory education laws at the advent of children’s theater, I would have reacted in a different manner to the constant insistence of education rather than
entertainment in productions for youth. Yet all of these varying elements come
together with a united goal of trying to change the world by starting at the formative
level of children.
Works Cited


Appendix 1

Script of Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl

Thumbelina: The Story of A Brave Little Girl is published by special arrangement with the author, who also holds the copyright. Publication or production in any part is illegal.
Thumbelina
The Story of a Brave Little Girl

by Liza Lentini

© 2007

For More Information:
www.TYAscripts.com
info@TYAscripts.com
407-247-5066

This perusal script is being provided to you by www.TYAscripts.com Possession of this script does not imply permission for your company to produce this play or distribute copies of the script. If you are interested in producing this script at your theater or school, please fill out the Royalty Request Form and email it to info@TYAscripts.com
CHARACTER

THUMBELINA  A very small, very brave girl.

MAMA  Thumbelina’s mother and the narrator of our story.

FROGGY MOM  A bossy, controlling mother.

FROG BOY  A wimpy, belching toad.

BEETLE  A hip crooner with a guitar.

SPIDER  A malevolent trickster.

SPARROW  A wounded, gentle creature who befriends THUMBELINA.

MOSQUITO  A Dracula-esque insect who gets into a karate match with THUMBELINA.

CLOUDS  Large, white puffs that bring on the impending storm.

POND FRIENDS

A FUNNY BUG, on his way to work.

A GOLDFISH, getting ready for school.

A BEAUTIFUL THING, sunbathing.
AT RISE: MAMA, in traditional motherly
dress, bounds onto the scene,
which is a current tableau of
all of the characters,
including a sleeping
THUMBELINNA.

MAMA
Oh, hello! I didn’t see you all there. Are you ready for
a story? It’s the story of a very small, very brave little
girl, and how she found her way home. I am her mother, but
everyone just calls me Mama.
(Beat.)

Ever since I was a little girl, all I wanted was to have a
child of my own. So I hoped and I wished, and I wished and
I hoped. And when that didn’t work, I hoped and I wished
and I wished and hoped some more. And then one spring day,
after hoping and wishing as much as I could, a rosebud
bloomed, and laying asleep on its petals, was the tiniest,
most perfect little girl.

(THUMBELINA, asleep in a flowerbed, is unveiled.)

MAMA
Because she was no bigger than a thumb, I called her
Thumbelina.
(Beat.)
But even though she was very small, there was something
very big inside her.

(THUMBELINA stretches, yawns, and out comes
a beautiful, strong voice which carries
a note that goes on for miles.)

MAMA
(Proudly.)
That’s my girl!
(Beat.)
Thumbelina!

THUMBELINA
Yes, Mama?

MAMA
I think it’s time you and I had a talk.
THUMBELINA

What is it Mama?

MAMA

Thumbelina, life is a very unpredictable thing. You never know what tomorrow will bring you. One day I was a lonely woman, hoping for a daughter to come along, and then, when I woke - there you were! So, not everything unexpected is bad. But sometimes, things happen in life that require you to be very, very brave.

THUMBELINA

Like what, Mama?

MAMA

You’ll know it when you see it.

THUMBELINA

And what do I do when I see it, Mama?

MAMA

Don’t ever give up hope, and always know that I am here waiting for you when you come home. Promise me you’ll never forget.

THUMBELINA

I promise, Mama.

MAMA

Now you are not like other girls, Thumbelina. You are very small. And people will try to convince you that you’re less because you are different. But you show them what you’re made of. No matter what it takes.

THUMBELINA

I never want to be away from you, Mama.

MAMA

If there are times when we’re separated, just know that I’m never far away. Promise me you’ll never forget.

THUMBELINA

I promise, Mama.
MAMA

(To audience.)
And for so long, we were so happy. But then one day, while
I was asleep, a froggy mother was just hopping by the
window, and spotted my little Thumbelina.

(FROGGY MOM hops on by and does a double-take
when she passes a sleeping THUMBELINA.)

FROGGY MOM
Ribbit. Ribbit, ribbit. Oh! Ribbit. What a pretty
little girl. And so small. She’d make the perfect wife
for my froggy son!

(FROGGY MOM slides a sleeping THUMBELINA
onto her back, and hops in a bumbling circle
to her froggy home.)

MAMA
And just like that. The froggy mother scooped up my
sleeping Thumbelina and hopped as silently as she could way
far away, across moats, and brooks, and slimy ponds, until
my little girl was captive in their froggy home.

(FROGGY MOM lays THUMBELINA down across
from a sleeping, snoring FROG BOY. The
snoring is so loud and obnoxious it wakes
THUMBELINA.)

THUMBELINA
What...where am I?

FROGGY MOM
Ribbit. You’re home now, little girl.

THUMBELINA
What are you talking about? This is nothing like my home!
(Beat.)
And what’s that horrible smell?

FROGGY MOM
That, my dear, is your new husband!

(FROGGY MOM probes her son, who finally awakes
with a rattled, loud snort.)
FROGGY MOM
Ribbit. Son...meet your new wife.
(Beat.)
Well, aren’t you going to say hello?

(FROG BOY opens his mouth and out comes the loudest, most horrific burp.)

FROG BOY
Hello.

THUMBELINA
No way am I marrying you!

FROGGY MOM
Little girl, mind your manners! Is that any way to speak to your new husband?

THUMBELINA
My name is not “little girl”, it’s Thumbelina. And there’s no way I’m going to marry a smelly, frog boy like him.

FROGGY MOM
Who couldn’t love that face...

(FROG BOY mugs for THUMBELINA.)

FROGGY MOM
Look at those warts! That perfect green skin. Those movie star good looks. Isn’t he simply irresistible?

(FROG BOY lets out another gigantic belch.)

THUMBELINA
I’m somehow finding it rather easy to resist his boyhood charms.

FROG BOY
(With gigantic belches.)
Oh, Thumbelina, say it isn’t so!

THUMBELINA
If you’ll just direct me back to my home—

FROGGY MOM & FROG BOY
No!
THUMBELINA
Why not?

FROGGY MOM
Because...
(She plops a wedding veil on THUMBELINA’s head.)
Your wedding’s tomorrow!

THUMBELINA
Look, Mrs. Frog, I understand your need to find a wife for
your... son. Everyone needs someone to love, right? But
I don’t love him. And besides, my mother is going to be so
worried about me—

MAMA
(From off.)
Thumbelina! Thumbellllllllllllllnnnnnnnnnnnn!

FROGGY MOM
You’ll marry my son tomorrow whether you like it or not!

THUMBELINA
Oh, no I won’t!

FROGGY MOM
Oh, yes you will!

(They chase each other around in a circle
for quite some time, the frogs hopping as
fast as they can, until finally they catch
THUMBELINA, put her on a lily pad, and push
her off into the middle of a lake.)

MAMA
But they caught Thumbelina, and they put her on a lily pad
and pushed her into the middle of the lake.

FROGGY MOM
There now, see if you can get yourself out of that one!

THUMBELINA
I can swim! I’ll... I’ll simply dive off and swim my way
home!
FROGGY MOM
Go ahead. Jump off. Swim to your heart’s desire. But you’ll never make it to shore. And even if you were the best swimmer on earth, there are creatures in this pond scarier than your wildest imagination, covered in slime from head to toe, mutants with a thousand legs and fifty mouths! And very sharp teeth to rip a tiny thing like yourself into a million little pieces. So if you know what's good for you, you’ll just go right to sleep, and when the sun comes up you can marry my froggy son, and the two of you will live happily ever after!

(FROG BOY lets out a blissful belch.)

FROGGY MOM
Goodnight, Thumbelina.

(She hops off humming “Here Comes the Bride”.)

FROG BOY
Don’t be sad, Thumbelina. I’m sure you and me are going to be very happy together.

(He burps again and hops off.)

MAMA
As the darkness grew, Thumbelina became frantic.

THUMBELINA
Just for the record, I’m not afraid of the dark. The dark can’t hurt you...

(THUMBELINA listens to some strange sounds in the distance.)

MAMA
But there were lots of mysterious sounds she couldn’t identify.
THUMBELINA
Just because I don’t know what they are, doesn’t mean they’ll hurt me.
(The sounds grow scarier.)
Just because I don’t know what they are, doesn’t mean they’ll hurt me. Just because I don’t know what they are, doesn’t mean they’ll hurt me. You just quiet down, noise. I said quiet down! Quiet down! You can’t hurt me! Quiet down!

MAMA
Maybe we can help Thumbelina quiet the sounds together?
Let’s try and see if it works. Ready? When I count to three, we’ll all say “Quiet Down” together. Ready? One, two, three! QUIET DOWN!
(The sounds grow louder.)
Uh, oh. I think we’re going to have to try again. This time, louder! Okay? Ready? One, two, three. QUIET DOWN!
(The sounds grow even louder.)
One more time, I think we’re almost there. One, two, three. QUIET DOWN!
(Silence.)

THUMBELINA
Thank you!
(She lies down as if to go to sleep. A clock is ticking in the distance.)
Oh, boy. The evening is rolling on and on and pretty soon the sun will come up, and I’ll have to marry that gross burping boy.

MAMA
(Calling.)
Thumbelina!

THUMBELINA
Wait a minute...did you hear something?
(She asks someone in the audience.)
Did you?

MAMA
Thumbеллививививививививививива!

Mama! Can you hear me? Mama?
(MAMA can’t hear THUMBELINA, and so she turns away and cries.)

THUMBELINA

I’m here Mama! I’m trying to get home!

(THUMBELINA opens her mouth and lets out a belt of a long, beautiful note. MAMA picks up her head and listens, and then addresses the audience proudly.)

MAMA

That’s my girl!

(SUDDENLY, a BEETLE, strumming a guitar, sporting a shaggy wig a la Lennon/McCartney circa 1964 and a Liverpool-ian accent, approaches THUMBELINA.)

BEETLE

Jolly good singing voice you got on ya.

THUMBELINA

You startled me!

BEETLE

Sorry. I heard you singing from the other side of the forest. I’ve been looking for a lead singer. Wanna join my band?

THUMBELINA

What’s the name of your band?

BEETLE

The Beetles, of course. Can’t you see that I’m a beetle?

THUMBELINA

Most beetles I know aren’t carrying a guitar.

BEETLE

Well then, you know nothing about music.

THUMBELINA

Can you please help me? I have to get off of this lily pad before the sun comes up and — oh, look! — it’s coming up now!
(The sun is visibly starting to rise.)

BEETLE
Why don’t you just fly?

THUMBELINA
Because I don’t have wings.

BEETLE
Why don’t you just jump?

THUMBELINA
I’ll never make it if I jump.

BEETLE
Then swim! Don’t you know how to swim?

THUMBELINA
I’m a very good swimmer, but the frog mother told me that I’d be eaten alive by all sorts of horrendous creatures in the water. If I go in there, I’ll never make it out alive!

BEETLE
Believe everything everyone tells you and you’ll never know the truth. The frog does okay in the water, doesn’t she? And she’s not much smaller than you. Is she?

MAMA
These were very wise words from a beetle.

THUMBELINA
Mister Beetle, I can’t thank you enough.

BEETLE
No problem, little girl. In the end, we get by from a little help from our friends. Cheerio!

MAMA
And with that, Thumbelina dove right into the water.

(THUMBELINA holds her nose, and pretends she’s jumping right in.)

MAMA
At first, everything was very foggy, and she was a little bit scared, but then... when things became clearer... she actually started to take in all the interesting sites.
(With this, THUMBELINA floats around stage, as do many interesting creatures when they’re introduced.)

MAMA
She passed a very friendly bug that was very late for work, but not too late to say hello.

THUMBELINA
(Like “Good Day”)
Blub, blub!

BUG
(Tipping his hat.)
Blub, blub!

MAMA
A brightly-colored dragon fly, taking a stroll with a tadpole. Some goldfish in a school...

GOLDFISH
(Carrying a book.)
Two times two is four, two times three is six, two times four is... what’s two times four?

THUMBELINA
Eight!

GOLDFISH
Thank you!

MAMA
And a beautiful, iridescent creature, sunbathing.

THUMBELINA
My, you certainly are beautiful. What are you?

BEAUTIFUL THING
I’m too pretty to talk to you. That’s what I am.

THUMBELINA
Well, excuse me!

MAMA
And when Thumbelina had finally drifted to shore, she was disappointed her water adventure had come to an end.
THUMBELINA
I’ve made it to shore already? What a shame! I was having so much fun! But at least now I don’t have to marry that awful frog boy! That’s cause for celebration! Everyone join me. Ready? Hip, hip hooray! Hip, hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!!!
(Beat.)
And now to find my way home.

(A SPIDER wanders by.)

SPIDER
Hello little girl. You’re not from around these here parts, are you?

THUMBELINA
Actually, no. I’m looking for my mother’s house.

SPIDER
I know just where that is. If you just follow me, I can take you there.

THUMBELINA
You’d do that for me?

SPIDER
Well, of course! I’ve never seen a little girl as small as you, and I’m sure your mother misses you very, very much.

THUMBELINA
I’m sure she does.

SPIDER
Right this way.

THUMBELINA
Oh, thank you Mr. Spider! Thank you so much!

SPIDER
Most little girls are afraid of spiders. They scream and they run and they try to smush us with their shoes.
THUMBELINA
Yes, it’s true. But my mother taught me that most spiders are actually completely harmless. Spiders might look scary, but they’re quite good for our environment in that they eat many other harmful bugs and flies.

SPIDER
True, true. Right this way.

THUMBELINA
And then, of course, there is the other kind of spider, but those are extremely rare and aren’t found in houses, but rather in remote parts of the woods and...hey, where are we exactly?

SPIDER
We’re in a remote part of the woods. And you’re looking at a spider that’s...the other kind!

(THUMBELINA shrieks and tries to run away, but before she can the SPIDER wraps her up in a web of fabric. SPIDER ties a bib around his neck and gets out a fork and knife.)

THUMBELINA
Wait a minute, what are you doing?

SPIDER
I’ve heard that little girl meat is quite tasty, and I haven’t eaten for days!

THUMBELINA
Wait! Wait! Um, don’t you want some dinner-time entertainment?

SPIDER
(Thinks about this.) Well, that certainly would be nice, but...I can do without it.

THUMBELINA
Wait! Wait! I know you’re going to eat me, but there’s one thing you should know.

SPIDER
Yes?
THUMBELINA

I’m a truly excellent dancer.

SPIDER

Oh? Well, that’s interesting, but I’m too hungry—

THUMBELINA

No, seriously! I’ll make a deal with you. You let me dance for you, as my dying wish, and I’ll just lie down and let you eat me alive, no questions asked. That way you get your entertainment and your dinner, too!

Really?

THUMBELINA

Really! No strings attached. (THUMBELINA turns to the audience for an aside.) I need you all to help me escape, okay? (She winks at the audience, and then turns back to the SPIDER.) All I need right now is a little music.

SPIDER

Well, I don’t have any music. I’m a spider!

MAMA

(To audience.) Can you help Thumbelina by making some music? Everyone put your hands together, just like this. (MAMA demonstrates, and gets the audience to join in.) Now don’t stop clapping until Thumbelina’s free!

THUMBELINA

(Listening to the clapping.) Listen! I hear music!

SPIDER

That’s kind of nice, actually.

(The SPIDER starts to clap, too, and THUMBELINA starts dancing. Her little dance is fast and swift, and she spins and turns her way out of the web, binding the spider, without him even knowing it.)
THUMBELINA
Ta da! And there you have it!

SPIDER
Wait! Wait! How did this happen?

THUMBELINA
I may be small, but I’m not stupid. See ya later Mr. Spider!

SPIDER
Wait! Wait! Get me out of this thing! Waiiiiiiiittttt!

MAMA
And she continued onward, walking through the woods, looking for her home. But the more she walked, the more lost she became. Until finally, lonely and tired, she sat down on a twig, and cried.

SPARROW
(In a soft, kind voice.)
What’s the matter little girl?

THUMBELINA
Who’s there?

SPARROW
It’s me. It’s just me. I’m a sparrow.

(The SPARROW is dragging itself towards THUMBELINA, obviously weak and hurt.)

THUMBELINA
You’re the most beautiful, most delicate bird I’ve ever seen.

SPARROW
I may be delicate, but can fly great distances. So don’t think I’m just some silly little bird!

THUMBELINA
Oh, you don’t have to tell me twice. I’m the smallest little girl in the world, so many people automatically think I’m a weakling.

SPARROW
I would never think that of you. But why are you crying?

Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl © 2007 Liza Lentini
PERUSAL SCRIPT ONLY – for production rights contact info@TYAscripts.com
THUMBELINA
Well, you see, I’ve been lost in the woods now for several
days, and I miss my mother and I’m worried that I’ll never
find my way home.

SPARROW
I’m sure you’re mother misses you very much.

THUMBELINA
I know she does. I just wish I could go home.
(Beat.)
What happened to you?

SPARROW
I fell from my nest. I hurt my wing. I’ve been laying out
here in the woods for several days hoping that someone
would come along. And here you are!

THUMBELINA
Oh, but...I don’t know anything about healing birds’ wings.
I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I won’t be much help to you.

SPARROW
Just sitting with me and being my friend is a great help.

Is it?

THUMBELINA

SPARROW

Of course it is.

MAMA
And the two sat there for hours and hours and time just
flew right by. They told each other stories—

SPARROW
You simply wouldn’t believe what it’s like to fly over the
clouds, Thumbelina. It’s so beautiful. You would think
it’s frightening to be up so high, but it’s not. It’s
simply glorious the way the sky opens up and there’s
nothing but blue, everywhere you look!

MAMA
And they even told each other jokes.
THUMBELINA
What do you do with an injured insect?

SPARROW
I don’t know – what?

THUMBELINA
You put it in an ambulance!

MAMA
When it was time for supper, the sparrow offered Thumbelina
the only food she had.

What is it?

THUMBELINA
(Considering.)

SPARROW
Regurgitated maggots mixed with earthworm heads. You
should try it, it’s good for you.

THUMBELINA
Okay!

(She opens her mouth and the sparrow
drops a gummy worm in.)

THUMBELINA
That’s not half bad! In fact, it’s rather tasty.

MAMA
And at night, they built a comfortable little bed out of
soft twigs and fresh leaves.

SPARROW
Goodnight, Thumbelina.

THUMBELINA
Sweet dreams, little sparrow.

MAMA
But that didn’t mean that they were safe from harm.

(A buzzing sound arises from off stage.
THUMBELINA stirs, but doesn’t awake. After
the buzzing intensifies, a MOSQUITO emerges
with his very long, blood-sucking nose, and
pokes at a sleeping THUMBELINA who lazily swats him away. The MOSQUITO flies around the stage, and pokes her several times more, until finally the SPARROW awakes.)

SPARROW

THUMBELINA!

(THUMBELINA awakes nose-to-nose with the blood-sucking bug.)

THUMBELINA

What is it?

SPARROW

It’s a mosquito! They fly around and land on your skin and bite you and make you itch something horrible!

(The MOSQUITO looks THUMBELINA up and down, licks his lips and makes slurping noises.)

MOSQUITO

(Dracula-eque.)

I vant to suck your blood!

THUMBELINA

No way!

SPARROW

Yes, way. Run. Run for your life, Thumbelina!

THUMBELINA

I’m not leaving you alone.

SPARROW

Do it. Please! Save yourself.

THUMBELINA

I may be small, but I am fierce.

(She pushes up her sleeves.)

He’s no more than a fruit fly.

SPARROW

What are you doing?

THUMBELINA

Kicking some insect butt, that’s what I’m doing!
SPARROW

Thumbelina, no!

(THUMBELINA and the MOSQUITO square off, like they’re in a karate match. THUMBELINA ties a black belt around her waist.)

THUMBELINA

You messed with the wrong little girl, Mr. Mosquito. One thing most people don’t know about me is that my mother raised me to not be afraid of anything, even annoying bugs that bite you and make you itch.

(The MOSQUITO comes towards her, but she chops him so hard on the neck, he backs off, buzzing loudly.)

THUMBELINA

Did that hurt? Oh, boo hoo!

MOSQUITO

I want to suck your blood!

THUMBELINA

Yeah, I know, you said that already!

MOSQUITO

I want to suck your blood!

THUMBELINA

Well, then, give it your best shot, big nose!

(The MOSQUITO lunges towards THUMBELINA again, and this time she performs an elaborate spin kick on him, which knocks him right to the ground.)

THUMBELINA

Have you had enough? Or are you ready for more?

(The MOSQUITO’s buzzing isn’t quite so pronounced now. He tries to stand, but with one swift, last chop, the MOSQUITO is down for the count. THUMBELINA puts her foot on the MOSQUITO’s body, and raises her fists in a victory stance. The SPARROW applauds.)
THUMBELINA
Now go home! And think twice before you decide to sting
innocent people.

MOSQUITO
(In a wimpy voice, dragging himself off.)

Yes...

THUMBELINA
Yes, what?

MOSQUITO
Yes, Ma’am.

THUMBELINA
That’s better.

(The MOSQUITO exits.)

SPARROW
Thumbelina, thank you so much! I can’t believe you would
stay with me!

THUMBELINA
You’re my friend, Sparrow. That’s what friends do for each
other. Besides, you saved me.

I did?

THUMBELINA
Before you came along, I was very sad and hungry. But you
gave me the only food you had and kept me company, and gave
me the courage I needed to keep going.

SPARROW
And you know what else? I’m feeling much, much better now.
I think if all goes well tonight, I might be able to try
and fly tomorrow.

THUMBELINA
You think? That’s great news!

SPARROW
Yes. So long as it’s nice and warm and dry. That’s all I
need.

___

Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl  © 2007 Liza Lentini
PERUSAL SCRIPT ONLY – for production rights contact info@TYAscripts.com
THUMBELINA
Well, I will do everything I can to make you well again, Sparrow.

SPARROW
Thank you, Thumbelina.

THUMBELINA
We get by with a little help from our friends.

MAMA
And night time came again, and the sparrow and Thumbelina went to sleep. But soon, something was all around them. At first, it was indistinguishable, but then...was it fog? No, it was a cloud. Many, many clouds. A storm! A rain storm! Oh, but the sparrow needed to be warm and dry to get better, didn’t she? The thunder awoke Thumbelina.

(A loud sound of thunder wakes THUMBELINA and the SPARROW. A gigantic puffy CLOUD is wafting around them, tauntingly.)

SPARROW
Oh, no! Thumbelina! The rain! What ever will we do?

THUMBELINA
Help me, Sparrow! We’ll blow the clouds away!

SPARROW
But that’s impossible! They’re bigger than us and they’re coming right this way!

THUMBELINA
Try it with me, Sparrow. On three, we’ll blow together, okay? Ready? One, two, three!

(They blow the cloud, but it’s barely slightly rattled, and still makes its way towards them.)

THUMBELINA
We need help!

(Turns to the audience.)

Can you help us? I know that if we all work together, we can blow the clouds away! On three, we’ll all do it together. Ready? One, two, three. BLOW!

Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl © 2007 Liza Lentini
PERUSAL SCRIPT ONLY – for production rights contact info@TYAscripts.com
(This time, the CLOUD is knocked over completely. But after a moment, it gets up and starts towards them again.)

SPARROW

Thumbelina, look!

THUMBELINA

We simply have to try again.

(To audience.)

This time, we’re going to blow twice. We’ll count to three, and I’ll cue you. Here’s the first one. Ready? One, two, three! BLOW!

(The CLOUD is knocked down again.)

THUMBELINA

One more time. Ready? One, two, three. BLOW!

(The CLOUD rolls off the stage.)

SPARROW

Thumbelina! We did it!

THUMBELINA

Of course we did! Thanks to a little help.

SPARROW

And the good news is...

(She finally stands, and stretches out her wings.)

I think I’m ready to fly.

THUMBELINA

Oh that’s wonderful! But does that mean you’ll be leaving me?

SPARROW

Leaving you? Hop on! I’m going to take you home!

(THUMBELINA hops onto the SPARROW’s back and they take off.)
MAMA
And they flew and they flew, first over trees, and then high up in the sky, and then through the clouds, where it was even more beautiful than the sparrow had described, even more beautiful than Thumbelina could ever have imagined.

THUMBELINA
I never knew anything could be so wonderful!
(Beat.)
Look down there! That’s my mother’s house. And there’s my mother.

(THUMBELINA let’s out her infamous singing note, and MAMA turns to look, only to find her daughter flying overhead.)

MAMA
Thumbelina!

THUMBELINA
Mama!

(THUMBELINA climbs off of the SPARROW’S back, and she and her mother hug.)

MAMA
I’m so happy to have you home!

THUMBELINA
It’s great to be home, Mama.

MAMA
You are such a brave little girl, Thumbelina. I’m so proud of you.

THUMBELINA
Well, I had some help from some very special friends.

(THUMBELINA looks towards the audience and winks.)

ENTIRE CAST
And they lived happily ever after. The end!

END OF PLAY
Appendix 2

Letter Sent to the Principals of Athens County Elementary Schools
To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Kate Laissle, and I am the director and coordinator of a touring children’s theater production of *Thumbelina*. I am also currently a senior theater major in the Honors Tutorial College at Ohio University working with Dr. William Condee. This production is also part of my thesis for graduation from the Honors College.

*Thumbelina* is a journey story following Thumbelina through her adventures of trying to get home after being kidnapped by a Froggy Mom who wants Thumbelina to marry her son. It is age appropriate for grades K-3, and is performed by four actors with a production length of approximately 30 minutes. I have the opportunity to perform this production to a select number of elementary schools during the first two weeks in March; the specific date would be decided upon in coordination with you. This production would be free to the school, and a digital or paper copy of a study guide would be provided if teachers desired to prepare their students prior to the performance. We would also be available after the performance to answer any questions the students may have, if you so desired. Furthermore, if you would like to review the script prior to the performance, I would be more than happy to lend a copy to you.

All we would need for this production to work is access to an indoor space in which we would perform, which could be a gym or a cafeteria, with the goal being that we could set up for an hour prior to the performance. I also would appreciate confirmation as to whether or not your school is interested in having a performance of *Thumbelina* by January 15th.

I will follow up with an email or telephone call, but feel free to contact me with your response either via email at K_Laissle@yahoo.com or call me at 321-276-8438.

Thank you for your interest,
Kate Laissle
Appendix 3

Dramaturgical Packet

Selections taken from

*Children's theatre: A Philosophy and a Method*

by Moses Goldberg

&

*Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*

By David Wood
Cynicism

Cynicism is something one must always avoid. It manifests itself in different ways.

* An actor may simply feel embarrassed playing an animal or a twitting Jumbly or a villainous, bouncing Plum Pudding Flea. As a result, the actor may play the part without real conviction, as though winking to the adults in the audience, 'I know this is daft, and I'd much rather be doing a bit of Shaw or starring in a musical, but this is the best I could get...'. Children won't be fooled. They won't reward such a performer with their full attention.

* An actor may play a role over the heads of the children in the audience towards the adults, as if to say, 'Look how clever I am at entertaining the children!' This leads to a kind of complicity with the grown-up section of the audience, almost ignoring the children, except when getting them to shout out, and avoiding any notion of taking the character seriously. This is most obviously seen in pantomimes, where there seems to be a rule which says that at no point should there ever be a sense of real danger; even in adversity, the characters should act with a detached jollity, refusing to take the plot seriously, for fear of being caught doing 'proper' acting.

* An actor may be unable to 'let go' because he or she finds it difficult to enter the imagination of the play. If, in The See-Saw Tree, one of the creatures living on the tree cannot really believe that the tree is in danger or that he may soon be homeless; if he cannot translate the fears of the tree folk into human terms; if he cannot play 'for real' the potentially tragic situation – then the audience will never become truly emotionally involved in his performance. It stands to reason that if the actor doesn't believe it, the audience won't. Just as the audience is expected to enter into the spirit of the play, so must the actor.

---

Actors' Pitfalls

Acting for children requires you to consider not just what you are doing, but what the audience is doing. I have played The Old Bag on several occasions and can picture myself sitting in my trap for my first entrance, carefully listening to the audience reaction to the opening scenes, trying to gauge the appropriate level for this particular audience. While I'm mentioning sitting in traps, I would like to add that although working for David Wood is satisfying it is usually also dangerous. I am resigned now to a first day of rehearsals where I will be leaping off a shelf six feet high, climbing trees and generally taking my life into my hands.

Susannah Bray

When I perform for children I always imagine a piece of elastic stretched between me and the audience. It needs to be kept taut if I am to retain their attention and keep hold of them. Because of the volatility and instant response of a children's audience, it is not difficult to sense when their interest is beginning to wander; the onset of restlessness is quite palpable. The elastic starts to slacken; this could lead to a loss of control. Now is the time to use one of the techniques to bring them back and tighten up the elastic again. A change of pace, a sudden burst of movement or an increase in vocal volume; a deliberate challenge to the children to make them concentrate again, to regain their attention. Of course, when you are acting with others, you cannot suddenly do your own thing with no regard for anyone else; but with experience, the whole cast can simultaneously gauge the tension of the elastic, dropping and use a spurt of energy to stop the attention drifting any further. It must become instinctive. Monitoring the audience is far more important in a children's play than in an adult play. And every audience will bring different challenges.

Before the first performance of a children's play I try to warn the actors of certain dangers they may not have encountered if they have never played to children before. These thoughts are not meant to intimidate the actors, rather to make sure they are prepared for any eventuality.
ular age group creatively. Otherwise the sequence deteriorates into instructions from the actors blindly followed by the audience—not the creative experience sought.

In any case, participation drama sets up the convention that the audience responses are a part of the play. This means that all responses by a significant portion of the audience must be dealt with. I have directed a participation version of Rumpelstiltskin where the children shouted out the antagonist's name in the middle of the play. The actor playing the part quickly responded, "That's right! But you also have to guess my last name," and the play went on. The actor who is not flexible at improvisation should stay away from participation plays!

the responsibility

Once the actor has learned to distinguish responses and control them, he will become aware of his power. To know that one can manipulate others is both an elevating feeling and a frightening one. When the group manipulated is as large, as diverse, and yet as unified as is the audience at a good children's play, the feeling is magnified. An Italian actor who had spent most of his career in the children's theatre once expounded to me on the "priesthood" of a children's theatre actor. The concept is a meaningful one. The child gives himself with complete faith into the hands of a good actor. In the primitive theatre, perhaps also in the early Attic tragedy, the actors were religious mediators—medicine men and priests. It was an act of faith to accept the meaningfulness of a dramatic performance. The child's response is similar to that of the primitive.

Needless to say, such faith confers a responsibility on the "priest." In a primitive dance/drama the performer who made a mistake was punished or humiliated. Those who performed well received the combined blessings of their audience/congregation. In the children's theatre, the actor who succeeds bears the credit for spiritual growth in his audience as well as other kinds of growth.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

One of the least attractive attributes of the American children's theatre is the extremely limited opportunity to create a career in the field. The children's plays done in this country have been amateur-dominated up until the early 1970s. "Only grad小孩" are professional possibilities beginning to appear. The roles and styles of many children's scripts are also limited in certain ways, depriving committed actors of a chance for per-

ual growth. This rarely bothers the university or community theatre actor who goes from show to show as a matter of course, but it can become a real disadvantage to the professional under contract to a single theatre. Some of these disadvantages will probably remain in the field. Others, hopefully, are on the way out. Certain unique features of the acting opportunities in the area of theatre for children are worthy of some brief exploration.

range

Assume you were to find one of the relatively rare jobs in this country as a member of the acting ensemble of a children's theatre. What kind of roles could you expect? On the surface, a range wider than that in any other theatre. In a single season a character actor with juvenile features might play Androcles, Tom Sawyer, the Sailor in Tlingit Bird, and a realistic youth in a modern mystery play, such as Enid and the Detectives. If the theatre also plays for teenagers, he might add a Shakespearean or Sophoclean role to the list. All these are only levels of human characters—from Commedia dell'arte, Romanticism, Absurdism, Realism, and Classical Drama. But he might also play Rhadaman, Piglet, a troll, a dragon, or a talking tree within the scope of the theatre's repertoire. Since fantasy comprises a good part of every season, no conceivable kind of role is outside the realm of possibility.

Unfortunately, most of the roles in play written specifically for children are somewhat one-dimensional. What makes playing the bizarre roles difficult is the exacting need for sincerity throughout. It is relatively easy to flesh out an underwritten human hero. It is somewhat more of a challenge to the imagination when one is required to construct a serious biography or super-objective for a talking tree! Of course, the roles vary enormously in their problems. In the shallow scripts the actor has to be creative enough to provide the missing substance, while in other more complete plays he can concentrate on interpretation and interaction with his colleagues.

In addition to the many different parts, the variety of styles requires a multi-talented actor. In the previous chapter, synthesicalism was shown to be a useful device in the children's theatre. This puts added emphasis on the actor's other talents, such as singing, dancing, mime, magic and playing musical instruments.

physical requirements

Due to synthesicalism and the extreme importance of the visual aspect of the play, the actor in a play for children often finds that the
The audience response may be toward the play's development, or away from it. If the play is well-written the audience will probably only be anticipating the next action which is planned. In this case, the cast has only to speed through the intervening material—perhaps cutting some of it—and thus satisfy the audience that their suggestion has been taken. In the event, however, that a vigorous response leads away from the play's development, and the style requires acknowledgment, the actors should be prepared to acknowledge the response and then reject it, perhaps by indicating a reason why it won't work. This rejection of the idea is at least an acknowledgment of the response. The actors should immediately follow the dismissal of the audience's suggestion with a new action to prevent a repeated outbreak of the same or other suggestions (unless, of course, the actors are ready to abandon the script and improve a new scene based on the best idea from the children).

Actually, there is a simple trick for controlling all audience responses. A noisy negative reaction can be halted and too boisterous positive participation can be quieted, provided the device is not overused. In both cases, the purpose should be to capture attention before introducing a necessary bit of the play's development. Otherwise, the trick is wasted. The hope is that this new development—when they see it—will recapture the wandering attention of the noisy audience, or refocus the energies of a loudly positive one. The trick is simply to do something unrelated to the previous action, preferably in mime. For example, take the moment when Androcles runs from the Lion. The children urge him to get away. Then the Lion steps on a thorn and moans in agony. Androcles overcome his fear and returns. At this point, it is probably important that the audience realizes that Androcles is afraid, but conquers his fear out of compassion for the Lion's pain. But many audiences will not quiet down to listen if Androcles comes back and approaches the Lion. Uninhibited children are particularly suspicious that the Lion might be faking. They scream at Androcles to run, and will miss the point entirely that he is coming back in spite of fear. The actor playing the slave wants the children to appreciate the struggle Androcles is undergoing within himself. He decides to use the "trick." He suddenly mimics the presence of a mosquito buzzing around his head. He brushes it off. The comic business develops with him anxiously trying to end the irritation. The audience gets quiet to absorb this new episode. As quickly as he can, Androcles shrugs off the fly and gets in a few key ideas of his inner conflict, which will hopefully have the result of involving the children in his decision to help the Lion. Without the "trick" they would surely have missed that particular point. Chasing a mosquito has nothing to do with the play—but at least it doesn't contradict the play's style, and, if it is done well, it can become a means to reveal a new side of Androcles' character, perhaps his tolerance of petty discomforts. Of course, he might have done something else—lost a shoe, found an itch, or dropped his moneybag. Something in keeping with the character is obvious. The best choice, so long as it fulfills the criteria of being physical, unrelated to the previous action, and preferably mined in a stage silence. Is the same manner, a noisy audience can have their attention returned to the play for a new development which may get them interested, although this method won't work indefinitely if the whole play is dull or "talky.

There are slow scenes in fairly good plays, however, and these are legitimate places for careful use of a visual "trick," when a key line is coming up. Obviously, if such needs can be anticipated, the attention-capturing business can be integrated into the character and plot development during rehearsal.

Of course, in a participation play, the actor's goals are slightly different. He wants the audience to participate, needs their help to do the show, and is prepared to improvise on the basis of their ideas. The participation play seeks creative responses, however, not just responses. Each child must be encouraged to respond in his own way. In Hansel and Gretel, when the children are asked to become berry bushes the actors keep insisting that they want all different kinds of berry bushes. If the children all imitate each other, Hanele may say, "Those are all the same. I want different kinds." Or the actors may take pains to reward the unique ideas: "There's a really different one, Gretel," or, "Look at this one, Hansel, it's so short," or "tall" or "prickly," or whatever sets a particular creation apart from the others. One reason for limiting the audience size at these performances is to give the actors a chance to be aware of all of the responses, and to reward the most creative ones.

To end a sequence of participation, the actors in these plays often use the device mentioned above. Gretel carries her apron full of berries to Hansel and dumps them in a basket very carefully. The audience quiets down to watch her concentrated pouring. Quickly she says, "Thank you," and nods for the kids to sit down. If necessary she might say, "That's all we need now; we have enough berries.

Creative dramatists training is particularly useful to the actor in a participation play, as it teaches him the techniques of phrasing questions so as to elicit a diversity of responses, and then helps him select the most creative efforts for praise and reinforcement. In more complicated sequences, where the children actually join in the on-stage action, it is an absolute necessity that the actors have experience at guiding this partic-
The audience for a children's play may be composed of adults and children, or it may be all children during school hour performances. There is a vast difference in response. But always one must play to both the adult level of appreciation and the specific response of children—the adult level for the integrity of the role, and the children's level for the success of the performance. The discussion that follows parallels much that was said in the preceding chapter to the director, but now from the actor's point of view.

The characters in a play for children must be as motivated, as three-dimensional, as real as in any other kind of play. And, even more often than in the adult theatre, this means that actors and directors must flesh out a playwright's utilitarian creations. Most of the tales for younger children are filled with characters who represent broad human attributes, such as generosity or greed. It is this generality which makes the fairy tales so universal. But in translating the faible to the stage it is necessary to dramatize the character. He cannot simply be, and thereby represent a quality. He has to have a specific voice, a walk, and a physical carriage.

The actor often has to supply these details of characterization with little help from the playwright.

The penalty for failing to achieve a believable human character is quite severe. Not having the patience of their elders or the manners to ignore their own boredom, children will destroy any performance that does not please them. If any detail of characterization strikes them as phony they will literally "turn off" that actor. If the slightest bit of condescension is detected, they will respond in kind, by ignoring the performer who is ignoring them. It is absolutely essential that the actor be able to convince the audience that he believes in the truth of what he is doing. The worst criticism that can be offered of an actor in a children's play is that he is "playing down" to the children. This attitude is easy for children to recognize. They sense immediately when any adult considers himself superior to them. They can tell when the actor simplifies or "indicates" his role to make it easier for the young, ignorant audience members to understand it. Sadly, the actor is often unaware that he is projecting such an attitude. He thinks he is being noble and making great sacrifices to bring a performance to children that they can grasp. Unfortunately, he is defeating his intentions. If he played by part challenging the young to appreciate the depth of his portrayal, he would be far more likely to succeed. Again, there is a need for respect—respect for audience, respect for colleague-artist, and respect for self. The latter is the most important, especially to the actor, for he is seen directly by the audience while the playwright and director remain hidden. It is difficult to respect someone who does not respect himself. If the actor cannot believe in his character, and in the children's theatre there are many bizarre roles, then he must be so good at pretending he is believing that no one—child or adult—can tell the difference.

Moreover, this belief must be evident at every performance. Children don't read reviews which tell them that so-and-so was excellent on opening night. The only thing that matters to them is what they actually see. Consistency and concentration are particularly necessary in the children's theatre. The difference between an indifferent audience of children and an attending one is quite evident, and the difference can be caused by an actor having a "down" performance. Even the best professionals fluctuate from performance to performance—that is one of the things that makes the live theatre exciting. Typically, these fluctuations are overemphasized by the actors in an adult show. The show rarely changes as much as the actors think it has. But in a children's show, their worst fears are realized. A young audience is a too faithful barometer of the level of the particular performance. On the one hand, it is a frustrating experience for the company to be found out in even their least lapses. On the other hand, it is gratifying to the honest artist to feel that the audience will know if he is at his best, and that it will let him know, too.

The characters in a play for children must, then, be approached with honesty and respect, must not be oversimplified or condescending, and must be played at every performance with consistency and concentration.

The response

There is an almost intangible skill, desired in actors, which is impossible to convey in a classroom or rehearsal hall. It is the ability to play to and with an audience. It consists of an almost subconscious control of
timing, volume, energy, and other aspects of the performance in such a way as to take the fullest possible cognizance of the audience's responses. In a sense it is a kind of flexibility—allowing one's performance to be molded nightly by variations in audience responses. Experience in performance is almost the only way to develop such a skill, although, of course, rules can be drawn up regarding timing of laughs or entrances.

The child audience, especially the school-time, based in homogeneous age group, responds quite differently than does an adult audience, or a mixed audience of children, parents, and other interested adults at a weekend matinee. In the mixed audience, the children's responses are guided, at least partially, by the responses of the adults. Children are used to deferring to adult models of behavior. But when they are on their own their natural pattern of responses emerges. And these responses can be overwhelming to the unprepared. The absence of adult inhibitions makes the child much more demonstrative and exuberant than his quieter parent would be. Probably the biggest difference between acting for children and acting for adults is the need to become familiar with the response pattern of a school audience, and to learn some techniques of dealing with these vigorous responses.

The first thing to learn is the difference between a positive response and a negative one. The difference between restlessness and participation is readily obvious to the director sitting in the house, but to the actor on stage, the two reactions are sometimes hard to distinguish. Restlessness is usually caused by the poor quality of the play. To the actor it sounds, at first, like a vague shuffling or repositioning of bodies in chairs. Then one hears feet running up and down the aisle, and the slowly increasing general sound of an auditorium before the play starts. This constitutes noise and it is a negative or non-attending response. It means that the audience has withdrawn some portion of its attention from the world of the play. It may be caused by physical discomfort—too little air, too much time between intermissions, or too much heat; or by an overtaxing of the child's excitement which finally causes a breakdown of his ability to concentrate. It is most often caused by too little action on the stage, or by insincere business or characterizations. The only way to deal with this kind of response, if it is within the actor's power to deal with it at all, is by renewing one's concentration on the action, and trying to do one's subtle best with the character one is playing, perhaps slightly picking up the tempo of the scene—without losing any of the scene's depth.

A positive response from the audience can be just as loud, just as diffuse, and just as distracting to the actor's concentration. It generally comes in one of several forms:

- An answer to a rhetorical question in the script.
- A warning or cheer for the protagonist, which is easily identified as a positive response; or a whispered warning or cheer to the child's neighbor, which is hard to distinguish from noise.
- Repeating a favorite sound or funny line, perhaps elaborating on it. (This is especially common among younger children.)
- Asking questions of one's neighbors or parents about the plot or characters. Acting out at some physical level the action one wants the character to perform.

All of these responses are positive because they are sincere reactions by the child to the material of the play. If they become comments aimed at the actors they indicate a broken concentration, but as long as they are aimed at characters or at comments about characters, they are legitimate expressions of the child's participation in the play.

The most difficult kind of positive response to handle is a suggestion for action, particularly if it is given out loud by a significant portion of the audience. The actors, assuming they recognize the positive nature of the suggestion, are at a loss as to whether to acknowledge it or not. To ignore the audience may cause them to lose interest in responding further. To accept the suggestion may encourage a flurry of further shouts which will totally disrupt the performance. There is also the problem of teaching the child about aesthetic distance. In an adult play we can rarely influence the action by means of direct suggestions. We must develop an involved detachment from the work of art. Should not the child begin to learn to dissociate himself? On the other hand, direct communication is one way to learn the difference between live theatre and television or film, and this is also something he needs to develop. The answer probably depends on the specific situation. In all cases it is wise to ignore a response from an individual or two. Only if a significant portion of the audience in several sections of the house is responding should any notice be taken. Then the actor's procedure depends on the production style. If the play is very theatrical, with direct address to the audience, and especially if the audience is ever requested to participate actively at any point in the play, then the actors must somehow acknowledge the response. Not to do so would violate the internal validity of the style. How can the audience be asked to respond at one point, or be spoken to directly by a character, and then not have their response or their reply accepted at another point? However, in a moderately realistic style where no apparent notice is ever taken of the audience by a character, it would be wrong suddenly to break this convention and accept a direct response. Having made a bargain with the audience about a set of conventions, it is necessary to keep the bargain.
physical demands of the performance are his biggest problem. A great
deal of stamina is required by plays with big action scenes, which are
apparently unavoidable in scripts for the young. In fact, it is somewhat
paradoxical that the audiences of children requires sincerity, control, and
consistent performances—which usually implies mature representational
type actors, while the scripts demand active, youthful physical bodies—
which is more often associated with young presentational type actors.

Since mime and movement are so critical to the success of an actor
in a children’s play, it is essential that these abilities be evaluated before
casting. It always requires a prepared autochrome as part of my auditions
for amateur productions, and try to insist on some physically expressive
character when auditioning professionals. The deeply felt portrayal of a
complex character is perfectly valid for a children’s audience, but there
should also be an alertness in the portrayal and a readiness for non-verbal
expression. The actor who can only talk well is not useful in a children’s
play. The actor who intends to work for children must therefore develop
his expressive movement through formal training and a continual aware-
ness that there is more to communication than words. The technique of
“gibberish” is a useful one for supplementing language with gesture. The
best description of this technique is to be found in Voila Spinetti’s Impro-
visation for the Theatre. The use of a mask may also be recommended as
a rehearsal check for character business and the effectiveness of movement.
By replacing the vocabulary with gibberish and the face with a mask, the
actor is left only with inflection and gesture—two of the best ways to
convey a character to a child viewer.

With all this emphasis on the physical portrayal, it is only common
sense to insist on physical preparation. Warmups, exercises, frequent
run-throughs to build up stamina, and outside training classes are all
good ways to bring a company to a state of physical readiness during a
rehearsal period. An external approach to the characterization, without
neglecting the simultaneous development of the inner life of the role,
is also highly recommended for the children’s theatre.

the actor’s growth

If there is ever to be a pool of talented actors working in the chil-
dren’s theatre in this country, there must first be an awareness of the
naturally limiting aspect of only acting for children. In spite of the range
and requirements of playing to children, there are still components of a
performance which are lacking in a well-done children’s play. One of
the most noticeable losses is peer-approval. It is gratifying to be wor-
dipped by a child, but it does not replace the adult praise which so many

actors crave. Moreover, there are many roles and plays which simply are
not suitable for children usually because of their emphasis on verbal or
intellectual developments, but occasionally because the play is simply
beyond the experience of even sophisticated children. Few children’s
theatres will stage a bawdy Restoration comedy—both language and sub-
ject matter are too remote for the child. Yet any good actor likes to feel
that he can have a chance at all the roles in dramatic literature, at least
occasionally.

It should be the policy of any children’s theatre with a permanent
company to insist that its actors play for adults as often as possible. The
ideal, of course, would be to produce plays for all ages right in the home
theatre. If publicity is carefully handled, there is no reason why two pub-
lies cannot be developed for a theatre, particularly since most children’s
plays are confined to matinees. For the actor (and the rest of the artistic
staff) it would be an ideal application of the repertory theatre concept to
perform in a play for children in the afternoon, and an adult play the
same night. The most important thing to guard against in this connection
is a too great separation between the adult theatre and the children’s the-
atre. They are not two different phenomena which require two different
sets of actors. They are both the theatre—merely with different audience
orientations. The good actor should be able to switch from one audience
to another.

If the theatre or the director is unaware of the actor’s need to be a
total actor, then it is up to the actor to insist on his right to pursue his
own artistic growth. Any actor who feels he is being stifled by the limited
opportunities available to him will quickly deteriorate as an artist. In
order to ensure top quality performances for the children, everyone con-
cerned must also work toward continually challenging the artists and pro-
viding them with a chance for self-fulfillment and growth. Besides roles in
adult shows, this includes casting challenges within the children’s theatre
repertory, and a chance for continual development through the study of
mime, voice, fencing, ballet, or other related skills.

the attitude barrier

The opportunity to make a contribution to the art of theatre, to
arouse and excite an expanded audience for the performing arts, to help
in the development of expressive and creative people, and to exploit fully
the limits of his own growth awaits the actor who can dedicate himself
to acting for an audience of children. The only obstacles to these goals
are the shortage of paying jobs and the actor’s low opinion of the chil-
dren’s theatre. The job market is poor in all of theatre, of course.
obligations to himself

The most important obligation which the director has is to himself. The underlying usefulness of the director as an artistic force is served only when an integrated and unified aesthetic work is produced. The choice of scripts must satisfy his interests, and call him forth to interpretation. The characters and their conflicts must seem honest and real, so that he feels inspired to bring them to life. He must believe that his work is important, that it will be noticed, and that it matters if he does it well. He should have the same anxieties, obstacles, personality problems, and self-doubts to overcome as he would have in the adult theatre; and he should experience the same sense of accomplishment and reward when he succeeds.

It is hard to tell whether the child is more in awe of the actor he sees on the stage, or the actor is more in awe of the child. Just as a young child will hesitate to touch or speak to an actor he has appreciated, so most actors resist any confrontation with children—even on or off the stage. This awe is understandable in the child. He is trying to reconcile life and art. He is unsure whether he is addressing the character or the performer. As he gets older, of course, he resolves this confusion and eagerly seeks autographs and conversations with the artists he admires. It is more difficult to understand the actor's shyness about children. Furtively it stems from a valid fear of the child's intensity and commitment. As one actor voiced it, "Children gobble up actors." But a good portion of the performer's awe comes from ignorance. Not knowing what children are like and having only vague ideas about children's plays, he tends to avoid the whole experience of acting for children. And because extraordinary financial temptations and brilliant directorial guidance are rarely available to urge him to discover this audience, he usually doesn't know what he is missing.

Acting for children differs from acting for adults only in certain
Many first-time children’s actors are genuinely surprised at how much effort they have to put into rehearsals and performances. And it never gets any easier. Every performance requires the same amount of energy; it is impossible to cheat or play at half-steam. Children’s actors need to be physically fit or they will soon collapse from exhaustion. I find the audition usually weeds out unsuitable actors.

Once, when I was casting a production, an agent rang me and told me that there was an actress I really had to see. She would be perfect for the part. Unfortunately, she was working in Plymouth, but the show had already opened, so she could come over for a morning audition. On the only possible day, she also had a 2 p.m. matinee. So it was arranged that she would get a very early train, come in audition at 9.30 a.m., and return straight to Plymouth. My choreographer, musical supervisor and I met up at the rehearsal room, and the actress duly arrived. She looked pretty rough, complaining that she had hardly slept the night before, worried that she was going to oversleep and miss the train. The train journey had been traumatic, and she was feeling like death. When asked to sing and dance, she complained that it was far too early in the morning to expect her to be able to show off her skills, and proceeded to do her stuff grudgingly. When I asked her to read, it was quite obvious that she was a clever actress, but she reading lacked any spark or enthusiasm. When I tried to chat to her, it was obvious that she was worried about staying too long in case she missed her train. She wasn’t offered the job. She was very talented, but maybe she wasn’t a ‘morning’ person.

Even healthy young actors cannot combine a madly social night-life with early morning shows. No one can work to children on automatic pilot. It demands considerable concentration to deliver

the necessary precision when ‘living in the moment’, carefully positioning one’s suddenness and allowing for adjustments to one’s performance necessitated by the volatility of the audience. Actors contemplating working for children should seriously consider whether they are able to operate on all cylinders during morning performances. Self-discipline is required.

The most difficult issue for any actor to come to terms with in children’s theatre is the seriousness of the story. In my experience, it is always the darker side of a story that grabs the children’s attention. Yet very few actors and directors take the content seriously. As a result, the biggest impediment to the success of children’s theatre is a misguided assumption that a children’s play must be played with a tongue-in-cheek. This is despite the fact that the plays have been carefully constructed with crucial emotional issues for children. Time and time again, the heart of the play is destroyed by this blindness. Actors and directors slam the door shut on any idea of genuine threat or danger. There is little comprehension of the importance of letting children’s emotions respond to something quite raw. Actors often believe that fantasy roles have to be played in a Jerry, silly way. When you have characters who are bumblebees, or slugs, the temptation is to think, ‘Oh isn’t it fun.’ It is not necessarily fun. It certainly isn’t fun if you are a walnut, about to be covered with chocolate.

It may well be an advantage for actors to have retained a certain childlike sense of wonder. By this I don’t mean that they should be psychologically stunted or that they have never grown up. What I mean is that actors should be able to share with the audience a genuine delight in the story being presented and find a real pleasure in the fantasy and the magic. It helps if actors can suspend disbelief and enter into the spirit of the play like a child. Such actors will almost automatically play ‘for real’, with no cynicism, finding a truthful and honest performance.
happened in the Polka production, that the child's response should be taken on board, considered, and then kindly and politely rejected.

- A problem that sometimes arises is that the audience will shout out something which the actor cannot understand. In this case, the solution is to ignore it. By the time you have tried to find out what is being said, anarchy might have set in. On the first performance of *The Ideal Gnome Expedition*, the Gnomes rescued the Clockwork Duck from the ditch and, as per the script, asked the audience what it was. The response sounded somewhat different from what we expected. Instead of the word 'duck', the audience seemed to be shouting 'book'. I could see that the Gnomes were thrown by this. They asked the question again. Again the reply, 'book'. Thankfully, the actors realized, round about the same time as I did, what had happened. We were playing in a theatre in the Midlands, where the local accent pronounces 'duck' as 'dook'.

The answer was correct, but simply sounded different from the pronunciation we were used to.

In *The Witches* it was very difficult at times to control one's own laughter in 'stage silences' while 'magic' was happening and visual effects, because you'd hear a tiny voice yell, 'Don't do it!' or, 'Be cautious!', or once a small boy saying, 'Ha. Ha. She's poisoned.'

Janet Whiteside, Grandmother in *The Witches*

The actor's natural temptation might be to 'cop out' when an unexpected comment comes from the auditorium. But control is essential. I'll never forget a performance of *The Selfish Shellfish* when Seagull was in his final death throes, having been coated with oil by the Great Slick. This was a very moving moment, as the other characters surrounded him in reverent concern. The audience fell absolutely silent, sharing in the moment. I was delighted. Suddenly a loud voice from the front of the stalls, where a party of brownies was sitting, echoed through the auditorium. 'Stupid little bird.' Thankfully, the actors kept their cool and continued concentrating. There were a few titters from the audience, but to my relief, another sound took over: the sound of the other children slushing the culprit in no uncertain terms. The interruption could have proved disastrous, completely breaking up the atmosphere. Instead, it galvanized the audience into a determination to experience the cathartic climax of the play. The vast majority of the audience had become totally involved and was determined not to let one child spoil things.

- One of the most common concerns expressed by actors after the first performance of a play is actually a huge compliment. This occurs when the actors expect more laughter and general verbal reaction than they receive. They come off stage complaining that the audience can't have enjoyed it much, because they were too quiet. But the fact is that if children are quiet, it means they are listening, and if they are listening, they are always enjoying the play. If they are not enjoying it, they would be talking and rustling. Actors must never feel they are 'getting it wrong' if the audience is quiet. The reverse is true. Children don't always find funny the things that made us laugh in the rehearsal room.

Characterization

It is a temptation for an actor to believe that a character in a children's play will usually be one-dimensional, a caricature, and that this somehow makes it easier and less challenging to work on than a character in an adult play. This is dangerous. It is true that many characters will have one specific quality of frailty which provides the basic tool for characterization. The Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz* is indeed cowardly, Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* is a heartless villain. Such obvious pointers are not only useful to the actor, they are essential in clearly establishing the character with the audience.

Indeed, it is often useful for the actor to start with the very basic, fundamental aspects of the character.

But most characters in children's plays will have much more to offer, and, as in an adult play, actors must explore their roles and find nuances and subtleties, and chart carefully how the character develops or changes. Treat the material seriously and the results will be rewarding. The Old Bag in *The Gingerbread Man* is a cranky recluse. But that is only scraping the surface. She turns out to be
lonely and vulnerable. She has magical healing powers, thanks to her herbs. By making friends with the Gingerbread Man, her life is transformed. And she becomes something of a heroine when she cures Cuckoo’s sore throat. The actress playing the role has a very challenging task. She has to invoke the audience’s loathing early on, display her vulnerability enough to secure a little sympathy, and then convince them of her good intentions. In the simplest terms, the actress has to turn the audience round. Part of her job is to make the audience understand that first impressions are change. This is harder than it sounds, because a child’s instinctive reaction is to see life in terms of black and white. To portray convincingly the various shades in between, which represent the complexity of most human characters, is no mean achievement.

**Audience Participation**

Actors encountering audience participation for the first time should try hard to approach it with relish rather than dread. Assuming it is integral to the play and not simply an excuse for rabble-rousing, it is a perfectly legitimate device to further the involvement of the children in the story. Therefore, it is important that the participation is indeed part of that story, rather than a section grafted on for the sake of it.

When inviting participation, never come out of character. It is not you talking to the audience, it is the character. There should always be a valid reason. As we have seen, children will readily help by giving information or advice, and will certainly be happy to help the goodie or hinder the baddie, should the opportunity arise. The more seriously and genuinely the character addresses them, the more eager and vociferous will be the response. If you want advice urgently, ask for it urgently, keeping up the momentum and letting the audience see how vital their contribution is.

Make sure that you address the audience clearly, repeating questions if necessary. The earlier in the play the participation comes, the more important it is to make the audience understand that you really do want them to participate. If the first response seems a bit thin and tentative, ask the question again with added intensity, encouraging a bigger universal response.

Never anticipate a reply. Encourage it, but never make it seem that you knew the answer in the first place. Receive their reply and let your face light up with understanding. And always say thank you. This is not simply a question of politeness, it gives the children pleasure to feel that they have been of use, and helps to make them feel they are an important element of the play.

If you are inviting the audience to take part in a set piece, for instance, making the garden grow in Meg and Mog Show or catching the ugly insects in The Pirates of Cabbage Patch Corners, don’t undervalue the importance of carefully rehearsing the audience. It is more fun for them to “get it right”. Therefore, don’t be afraid to repeat a section, or “have another rehearsal”. As long as they see that you mean business, and how important it is to you (your character) that they do it well, they will respond with care and enthusiasm. If you make it seem that it doesn’t really matter anyway or pretend not to notice when they start saying a line early, the whole thing will lack discipline, the audience will be less inclined to do it “properly”, and a very muddy sequence will follow. In The Gingerbread Man, when Salt and Pepper, helped by the audience, catch Sleek the Mouse under the mug, the excitement and sense of anticipation can be truly electric. But sometimes the desire to give Sleek his just deserts proves so irresistible that the audience jumps its cue instead of waiting for Salt to blow his nautical whistle. It takes tremendous strength of will as a performer to assert one’s authority and make sure the sequence doesn’t get out of control. But it really does pay dividends to be firm. And, if you stay in character, the children will accept your pedantic insistence on getting it right as a way of making sure the plan is successful.

When the audience help Meg and the other witches to make the garden grow, it can be wonderfully exciting and moving. If Meg and the witches play absolutely for real, making the audience understand that the noises of springtime they make might really fool the garden into thinking it is springtime, the children will try really hard to make the magic happen. The effect is further enhanced if Meg and the witches remain unsure of a happy result. They must keep up the
but they stopped fooling around and were attentive for the rest of the show.

In the rehearsal room, whenever there is any type of audience participation, anyone who is not performing a character at that moment should become the audience, so that actors can anticipate responses. This gives the actors practice in clearly communicating with an audience.

The First Performance

Don’t expect an audience of children to clap in the places where adults might be expected to; for instance, at the end of songs. In an adult production, if a song finishes with a final climax and flourishes the audience usually accepts it as a cue to clap. Children will not automatically recognize such a cue because the notion of clapping hands together to show appreciation is not yet part of their social language. If the performance is a family one, at which many parents are present, it is likely that the adults will indeed clap, and that some of the children will join in. If it is a school performance, the actors should never expect applause and should certainly not show disappointment when it doesn’t come. Finish the song clearly and neatly, then go straight into the next line of dialogue.

You may also notice the lack of volume in the clapping at the curtain call. Often this is amply compensated for by cheering which seems to be to children a more instinctive way of showing appreciation. As a director, I try not to keep the curtain calls going too long for this very reason. It’s fine if there is some action to music going on, or a reprise of a song, but it is probably best not to have too many bows. If there is little or no enthusiastic clapping, the actors will naturally complain that it felt ‘eggy’.
Appendix 4

Photos from March 5th, 2010 performance at Chauncey Elementary School

Taken by Kate Laissle
Appendix 5

Photos of March 5th, 2010 performance at ARTS/West

Photos by Adam Suntken