

Children's Theatre: I

SAMAR CHATTERJEE

I recollect my days of childhood when in spite of all precautions taken by my grandfather, I used to slip through the back-door to visit the Jatras and operas of such eminent showmen like Mukunda Das and Umanath Ghosal. In the vast make-shift auditorium, I and my fellow culprits used to sit, huddled up in the cold, watching with wonder the exquisite show full of colour, song and costume. Some of the spoken words were understood and some were not too clear for our young heads—yet we used to swallow every bit of the acting, singing and dancing.

There in those hazy days, we the children and chums, committed to memory all the songs and then re-enacted the plays with swords and spears made of bamboo-chips and other easy-to-have materials. Not content with mere show of our prowess as actors and players, we used to gather around us our mothers, aunties and sisters, made a makeshift stage with spare cots and a screen with mother's sarees, and so there was a full-scale play with a fairly full house of ladies and the children of the neighbourhood.

In recollecting those days, anyone could find a clue to the requirement of the children in so far as Children's theatre is concerned. Children look with wonder at any theatrical shows and take in every movement of a play with a great deal of seriousness. To them, play-acting is natural in that they start play-acting the very day they grasp the significance of all the actions of the adults moving around them in and outside the house. To the child every new movement is a new discovery. A child is not merely satisfied with it; it would like to re-enact the piece in a manner often comical to the adults but very much real to the player. These reproductions are a continuous process in which the child leaps from one stage to another until it reaches adolescence, and then to the more serious stages of life.

It has now been established beyond all doubt that entertainment for children and by children should form a part of their education, and should invariably be a part of the school curriculum. All that we have now to find is the correct manner in which such education is to be imparted.

Children's theatre is an entirely new subject and therefore not easy to comment upon as we have not many authorities on the subject who could be relied upon. The growth of the children's theatre movement in this country is of very recent origin. Some form of children's theatre was of course there, but this was mostly confined to school-prize ceremonies, and occasionally as a part of adult shows presented during pageants and festivals. Outside these shows, the only other place where children found some form of theatre activities was the camp fire of the Boy Scouts. Even on these lovely nights, drama found very little scope, in as much as camp fire students often have to give short sketches lasting not more than a

minute or two an item. The school plays are usually longer, and unhappily often contain themes totally unsuited for the age group. This is not because material for children's play are not available, but for a general lack of interest in the matter of choosing and preparing plays for them. There is also the usual indulgence amongst the grown-ups to treat all children's play as 'child's play'. As if it was not necessary to groom the little players for their respective part and any extempore or improvised form of show was good enough for the child. Our recent experiences have shown how important it is to prepare the children for either straight plays or difficult ballets.

Straight Plays

Our first consideration should be to find out what types of story, play or ballet pieces are suitable for children of various age-groups. In the modern educational system of all advanced countries, schools have accepted dramatic activities as a part of the curriculum. This has necessitated search for suitable plays for children of different age-groups. The job is not easy. The playwright must have an insight into the child's mind, and must not attempt didactics in the garb of entertainment to the performing children and to the gay throng in the auditorium. Often the playwright forgets that the script is really meant for the children and not for the adults.

In some schools, the teacher-producer uses episodes from history or from popular story-books with a good deal of advantage. But in selecting such stories or plays, he has to take special care in choosing pieces with showy costumes and abundance of arms and armours. Much though the child may like to read stories about his own kind, he would prefer playing at being a king or a legendary villain rather than being the good boy winning lots of prizes. He would like to rattle his sabre as Rana Pratap and putting on the robes of Alexander means much more to him than ordinary, sedate roles of daily life.

In dealing with straight plays, I would like to mention only those which are intended for children between 6 and 12. Straight Plays for this age-group have to be chosen very carefully, the group being divided into two categories, viz., 6 to 8 and 9 to 12. Straight Plays are mostly those having only play-acting on the theme with very little musical support. A play-acting item for the lower age-group often falls flat due to lack of interest of the child. Not that the child is wholly uninterested, but what it requires is some form of rhythmic support for memorizing and reproducing lines without much difficulty.

Here the playwright has to think twice before any foreign idea is pushed into the mind of the child. The subject matter must be such as would easily kindle the imagination of the child and yet it takes up the 'spoken lines' with pleasure and confidence. He must take many of the experiences of the child's everyday life and give them a special importance—a kind of glory that they did not have when they were just experiences. To illustrate, it may contain as characters puppies, snails, butterflies and frogs—a kind of animal fair which the child of six can easily consider as a wondrous collection of new experiences. To this age-group, the playwright can introduce holidays and trains, falling leaves and bonfires, planes and cars, clouds and sun. He should intersperse his plays with talking monkeys or laughing

cats or any ridiculous yet lovable characters such as spooks and goblins, fairies and elves.

The trouble, however, starts in the matter of presentation of these characters. Should such plays be confined to play-acting alone or should they be in rhyme, with definite emphasis on music and rhythm? I have already said that play-acting becomes uninteresting for children of lower age-group unless supported by music and song. To the bigger age-group also, a play must have much of verve and elements of drama so that the players feel that the absence of music has been sufficiently compensated by enough interesting situations.

For example, a boy playing a short drama (historical) would find it jolly good to rattle his sword and chase a fleeing co-actor off the stage. He would love to tell lines condemning a villain in no uncertain manner. He would also give a good account of himself as a clown in a circus or a monkey-man with monkeys. He may sometimes like to play the teacher, the one with the cane, but he would run away if you ask him to act the good boy. He has in fact no time to play at being school again or being the good boy which he certainly is not.

The finest plays, from the standpoint of children, are those which give children the scope to be away from their daily routines, and offer them to be somebody or someone they have been introduced anew. The playwright's job would be to go back to his own childhood and come within a child's own wavelength in order to study the little crowd of children, and find out for himself what interesting discoveries are being made by his younger friends. The playwright is sure to find that these discoveries are not the same for all ages. With the progress of time, the newer generations are coming to know a different world than the one we were introduced to in our time. It is true that some objectives have remained the same but other objectives with tremendous force have caught the imagination of children of the modern era. He sees flying fortresses, radios, and other modern activities.

Already he has started disdaining the idea of spooks and goblins, elves and fairies at a much earlier age than it was usual in our age. Therefore, today's playwright will have to see that his characters are fresh and modern. His characters must act, play, sing and dance with enthusiasm. It would be impossible for the children either on the stage or in the auditorium to sustain their interest unless the playwright can introduce new situations every three minutes. He has to abandon long dialogues and interminable talks and sermons. Less words and plenty of action would be the ideal setting for the play-acting part in a children's play. The shorter the play the better it is, and in no circumstances a children's play should exceed 45 minutes of fun and acting. If at the same time the playwright takes good care to avoid too many shifts of scenes, the producer will find it extremely convenient to give a good account of himself.

Ballets

From straight plays we come to children's ballets. In choosing stories for ballets, the teacher-producer must be careful in selecting pieces with emphasis on rhythm, musical value and story. A child's reaction to rhythm is instantaneous and positive. It either rejects it or likes it. To a child, the subtlety of a ballet piece is immaterial. All it wants is a catchy simple tune

set to basic rhythm with jingling words to match.

For a seven or eight year old child, to execute the complicated rhythmic steps of classical dance is not unknown; sometimes they do their part with commendable professional skill and often the mudras and expressions are well blended although they represent expressions of adults, and are entirely unsuitable for that age-group. Such characterization for a child is not only harmful but also tends to be in serious conflict with a child's environment.

Obviously, the choreography of a children's ballet must consist of very simple compositions with more stress on rhythm and grace than on complicated classical steps. Similarly, the story for the ballet should also be such that the child may be able to recognize it as a story which is often heard from the granny or read in popular story-books. The words and verses of such stories must be simple and should scintillate the mind of a child.

Ballet fantasies have a varied effect on the average child. Some people consider that fantasies are good to read but in presentation as ballets or plays, they sometime react adversely on the children. This is not quite true. It has often been seen that large audiences have been kept enthralled when fantasies were put up well synchronized with music and songs. There is no dearth of material for suitable ballet stories in our different languages. What is required is apt adaptation of these stories into ten, twenty or thirty minute pieces for children of different age-groups. Children should not be allowed to participate in ballet stories obviously written for grown-ups.

Rhymes: Its Power Over a Child

Just as a mother puts a baby to sleep with easy chanting of a lullaby, so can we get the best out of a naughty, dull or backward child, who would otherwise not respond to the cajoling of the teacher through regular curricular activities, however skilled the teacher may be. All children become restless if they have to sit still for long, and more intelligent the child the more restless it is likely to be, because its mind leaps quickly from one object to another. Fortunately, we are now in much happier possession of facts concerning the idiosyncracies of a child than a decade ago, and retaining all the techniques of our wise old grandmother, we can perhaps still find a means to direct the child through an entirely different and happier way to obtain the best for a child. We have now ample proof that steps and dances, miming and play-acting, songs and games can make up for the many deficiencies of a backward or dull child by way of bringing to the surface other latent qualities, which in turn tend to correct the failings surely and progressively.

Schoolroom rhymes are the one sure key to this development and yet it is not a new technique. For generations, our grandmothers have tried this technique of controlling a truant child by humming nursery rhymes. If we apply the same means by a judicious mixture of mathematics with rhyme, music and song, whereby both may be made equally interesting, the teacher will have the finest possible means at her disposal for arousing interest among her charge. Here the children's theatre can do a lot by way of development of the material for this type of rhyme and music, and by handing these over to the teacher. While emphasis will have to be given on suitable words, the tune is no less important. Children must have

that type of songs and rhymes, on the instant hearing of which they will know that here are the songs that will give them vitality, beauty and power of their own emotions, imagination and experiences. These must be of such freshness that the teacher also finds them exhilarating to participate with the whole class. Add to this the power of demonstration—that is to say if the rhymes are also suitable for demonstration, the little folk will make the teacher their own Prime Minister!

Group action through suitable rhymes can focus the child's whole attention and satisfy its longing for movement and change. Moreover, every child responds to an invitation to beat out the time. Group activities based on easy graceful demonstrative rhymes, in music and in stepping should be the key to the development of young children, but unhappily there is a dearth of suitable material for the schools. The English-speaking child is fortunate in inheriting a wealth of nursery rhymes in every variety of rhythm, which lend themselves to music and miming. Many of these rhymes are little more than jingling words strung together for their merry sound, for it is the rhythm rather than the content that appeal. The origin of many of these old rhymes is lost in obscurity but nevertheless these have just as much meaning for the child of today as they had for the child of decades ago.

To the children's theatre should go this sacred duty of bringing joy to the Indian child. A store of rhymes, many entirely new and others adapted, may be composed and created for the class rooms. These rhymes may then be set to delightfully rhythmic tunes and simple steps based on traditional dance movements, which can be taught to a whole class of children and which can be produced on the stage in colourful settings. Rhymes, rhythms, tune and colour are blended to provide a rich appeal to the children and to awaken their artistic faculties. Every effort should be made to find the child's own mode of expression and to mould each item according to the reaction of the children themselves.

The children's theatre can thus put more life and joy into our Nursery and Kindergarten schools by giving full recognition to the principles that small children need rhythm to develop their inherent faculties, and that they learn more by action than by formal teaching. From the rhymes in the classroom to the show on the stage is but a step. If the children enjoy doing rhythmic movements in class, they will learn to do them without self-consciousness on the stage, and thus give pleasure to thousands of other children. Once a team had been built up, they could tackle longer items and dramas without difficulty and reach a surprising degree of perfection. Innumerable books and scores of music published in England and Europe containing nursery rhymes is a pointer that they have fully assessed the value of rhymes in Nursery and Kindergarten classrooms.

Music for Children

What poor music we normally hear during children's performances! And this with a large number of accomplished musicians in every school. Nothing exasperates me more than the poor musical accompaniment which generally goes with brilliant dances and mimes. Given good synchronization between the ballet, the chorus and the orchestra, even the simplest of dance pieces would make an instant hit.

Music for children should be such as would instantly make the children sit up with joy and excitement. Such music must be simple, rhythmic, soothing and delightful. There should not be anything complicated and bombastic about it. It must be lilting, sparkling, joyous, buoyant and happy. While the words must emphasize action, the music will spur the child into hilarious activities. There must be a clear demarcation between music for adults and music for children. While adult's music has its own significance, children's music must be based on a solid structure on which to build the rhythmic activities of the child. This music must be associated with singing games, play-party songs, work-songs, dance-tunes. It must be synchronized with clapping, skipping, stepping—in fact it must be a music of motion. May be the words of the song will change in new environments but not the tune, not the notes, because the music will have a vitality irresistible to the child as also to the teacher.

We have a wealth of tradition in music. But alas! Not where children's music is concerned. We have done precious little for composing music for children, particularly with an eye for the nursery and lower forms of schools. But the time has now come to do original work in composing music for the children, and for this the technique applied by the English and American schools would be a good ideal to start with. To achieve this end, closest possible collaboration is necessary between the composers and the authors of the children's rhymes, plays and ballets. Unlike other countries, we have no means to verify the soundness of children's music as we have no set rhymes published with easy and clear notions—we have no book of verses and poems which have been set to music and tried in the school rooms. Till we bring out more and more books of this nature, it would be impossible to judge whether correct music has been set for the children. For development of children's theatre in all its aspects, creation of 'music for the children' is a pre-requisite, and with a good network of All India Radio studios scattered all over the country, it should not be difficult to prepare such rhymes and scores for the schoolroom under the proper guidance of suitable writers and composers.

Direction

It is one thing to direct a play for adults but absolutely different to direct one for children. Here you are dealing with a crowd who want to show and to see as well. The items to be displayed must be flexible and should not leave any gap between scenes. It must start with a swing and remain swinging upto the end. Children's play should have no interval. If it is a variety programme, the items should be so arranged as would allow the performers to view the show directly after their own parts are over. Otherwise, there will always be a crowd near the wings spoiling the general effects of the stage and the sets.

Another consideration is the length of the play. We have already stated why for obvious reasons no play should take more than 30 to 45 minutes to perform. Even in such cases, it should bring in different sections or groups of children in different acts. Children have an abundance of energy and enthusiasm. They can go on playing for hours on end, but children in the auditorium do not have the same concentration as the players. If the play is

not good enough, the audiences show it unmistakably.

In directing a children's play, the teacher-producer would do well in making the programme non-stop. The audiences must not get a chance to giggle, talk or fidget in their seats. Many fine plays have been marred due to unimaginative direction. Here the playwright must also help in the production by making available opportunities for quick shifts or turns from one scene to another. It should be borne in mind that children are more attentive to music and rhythm than to acting. Wherever play-acting forms the chief feature, the auditorium should be small, compact, and the last child should be able to hear the actors as well as to see them. How often we have seen good performances drowned in the noise of an unusually big auditorium with bad acoustics and ill-arranged seats. Wherever play-acting is to be the star item, the teacher must ensure that the environment is suited in all respects.

Selecting the Cast

Selecting the cast in a children's play is as much a problem as in the case of adults. Here again the playwright is partly responsible for the confusion created in the minds of the players and the producers. In children's plays, it is best to have many heroes and many villains. In fact, the playwright must have the imagination to visualize the difficulties of the producer-director and create the characters with an eye on the entire cast.

In children's plays, there is a varying degree of talent amongst the participants. Normally, a talented child is selected for stellar roles while others are fitted in according to their capacities. But here the irate parents make good production impossible by reminding the teacher that their children were no less talented, and that they should have been given better roles. They do not realize that a gifted boy or girl would make even a minor role a great success, and that in a play there is no such thing as a minor role! We must let children know that each part is as important as the other. And it would be a good thing to allot the so-called minor roles occasionally to successful children so that they may not develop a complex of superiority and standoffishness. In fact, children are mostly unconcerned about the role they are given, it is their parents who pollute their mind by unhelpful remarks and suggestions.

Decor

Another field where the children can have plenty of fun is preparation of set and decor. What tremendous interest is shown here by the children. I have seen the art director of children's theatre besieged by the whole troupe as well as by the children of the host school during their last year's visit to the Capital. He was given suggestions and hints by his little admirers *ad lib*, and he accepted a lot of them without a moment's hesitation. Before a school performance, children will follow the teacher like lambs just to be given the chance of helping him to make simple sets for the stage. The greatest mistake would be to snub a willing child, because the child's participation in theatrical activities would only be complete if it is allowed to identify itself with the whole play and not a part of it.

It is not at all necessary for the school to go for expensive equipment. Schools must plan their shows sufficiently in advance, if possible the planning for the next show should start

immediately after one is over. When the art teacher makes his drawings for the set, it would be fine to encourage the children to suggest points with regard to their idea of the particular piece. The senior students of the art classes will be very much suitable for preparation of the sets and we have seen how wonderful sets could be made out of very inexpensive materials with a few simple tools and a pot of paint and brush. The main thing, however, is planning. If, for example, the school decides to present *Khiner Putul* (Cheese Doll) at the end of the school term, let the teacher and the big girls plan to draw and carve sets for it throughout the whole year. A few frames of different sizes with strong cloth as the base would make an ideal ground for drawing such pieces. The smaller the stage, the easier it is to furnish. Use of half wings will particularly reduce costs, and sets on pivots will allow both sides of the wings to be freely viewed. The half wings can also be used as sets whenever considered necessary. It should be the guiding principle of every Nursery school not to pay the decorator a piece of its money, which it needs so desperately.

In the field of education today, children's theatre plays a very important role. Just as we need good text-books for the child, so do we need suitable set-up for dramatic activities in schools in the manner of literature, technical help, equipment and accessories. The cultural value of the theatre is unquestionable. Its utility as an educational force has been fully proved. Play-acting, miming or dancing cannot be regarded any more with indifference either by teachers or by parents.

The children's theatre movement in this country is charged with the task of finding out more and more about the child on the little stage. That the recent activities in this direction have received such spontaneous international response is proof enough of its wonderful potentialities. With more and more experience, it will provide a tremendous force to new generations who are no longer required to bend down over dull desk-work in dingy classrooms. We must provide children with the very best of everything so that they may grow up as better citizens.

I have discussed briefly the basic aspects of the techniques suitable for children's theatre. It is quite certain that every school can, with a little bit of sustained effort, build up a theatre where the children would get the time of their lives singing, dancing and miming, playing and studying, all at the same time.

The little young faces need such environments. We grown-ups really know so little about the minds of children that no conclusions as to their reactions can be taken as final. We have to try everything out. The children will themselves indicate which way they wish to go. It should be the privilege of the pioneers of children's theatre to travel with them, to laugh with them and cry with them, as the mood suits the little, jostling and happy throng.