

Children's Theatre: II

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In the world of theatre, children's theatre has passed the stage where it was tolerated as a nuisance and reached an age where the infant can not only stand but also walk. Though in the last three or four years, this infant has become pretty vocal in India, it is still crawling and it is for those who are seriously devoted to the theatre to help the infant to stand on its legs. But before that can be done, we must be clear in our minds as to what we mean by 'children's theatre'. Broadly speaking, in India when people talk of children's theatre they usually mean:

- (a) Children performing for children on the proscenium stage.
- (b) Children performing for adults on the proscenium stage.
- (c) Adults performing for children.
- (d) A large building of which we can be proud.

There is some justification for type (a) particularly when children are performing for children of their own age group. For children below nine or so, this type of activity can be harmful. And if adults are present among the audience, the situation becomes much worse. For children upto eleven and twelve are likely to show off in the presence of adults; they find it difficult to get really into a part with the result that their acting gradually deteriorates. I would call this type of performance a sort of a social affair where young children spend a good deal of time smiling at their parents, co-performers and class-fellows. This kind of activity, really speaking, has nothing much to do with theatre. It is neither acting nor art. We must guard against this kind of showing off. In this type of activity, it is a fatal mistake to introduce any conscious demarcation between performers and audience, because this artificial barrier does not exist in a child's experience. And if we are agreed that drama is all round us, and not necessarily only in front of us, then there is no need for the audience to face one way only and the actor the other. On a proscenium stage, the child not only loses sincerity and absorption but is also hampered in its movements. Students of children's art will bear me out that a child of eight or nine does not have a full concentration of perspective. And the proscenium theatre, as we all know, is designed and built upon notions of depth, lines of vision, and above all perspective. Putting the youngsters on the proscenium stage at an early age results in lack of confidence in themselves.

There would be some who would violently disagree with this point of view but they, I am afraid, would then be speaking not of children's theatre but perhaps of some aspect of adults theatre. I do not categorically rule out this particular type of activity altogether. But I would plead that where this is contemplated, an apron stage extending well into the audience would be a better beginning.

The idea of adults performing for children, i.e., the type (c), is to my mind an important aspect of children's theatre. It can, however, never entirely substitute or replace children's theatre as such. If these productions are confined to children of about eleven and above, they can be of immense help, particularly if young players are associated with the productions. I am at the same time conscious of its shortcomings too—children are apt to ape these productions and thereby lose confidence in their own ability to dress and make scenes, etc. Their attempts at being the actors that they may have seen would hamper their histrionic talent. It would not be their own real acting.*

But what are we to do about this problem? To my mind there is only one answer. A frequent get together of those interested in children's theatre, actors and educationists to discuss the theatre forms etc. for different age groups.

I am not going to waste your time about the type (d)—a large building of which grown-ups can be proud for obvious reasons. If properly conceived, this may be one aspect of the whole movement but it is certainly cannot be the end. To explain my point, may I be allowed to quote from an article by Peter Slade written in 1948:

Children's theatre is a Land not a building. It is the Land of Imagination and Emotion set in the Empire of Dreams. If we do not realize this, or worse, if we do not want to realize it, because of our own blind adult conceptions, we shall get the wrong sort of theatre and it will not be a children's one at all. There is a danger of its becoming merely the sentimental symbol of those who are no longer young, the showcase for little dead puppets directed by us, and not by their own delight.

Real children's theatre has hardly been conceived yet. It should be something quite different from what we know. It may be that the theatre of the future will not have a stage because future generations of actors will no longer tolerate such absurdities. If we are thinking of a building for children, one thing is certain: the built up stage, one end of it, should not be the most important item. It should be as elastic as possible, with many rostrum pieces and good floor space, with possibly a gallery running round the greater part of, say, an oval hall. A limited audience could look down, less noticed, upon the group patterns and verbal outbursts beneath. Chairs might be kept inside rooms ready for the occasional more formal show. A good canteen, comfortable changing-rooms, bright colours, a size-convertible auditorium, good air-conditioning and plenty of rooms, away from the main hall, to chatter in and continue improvisations, are important characteristics.

The question arises as to what would be the best form for the immediate development of children's theatre in this country. From my limited experience, I can only give a few suggestions which we could perhaps discuss in one of the sessions of this Seminar. It is only after such discussions that we will be able to put the children's theatre on healthy lines:

- (a) Periodical performances should be given by adults for the benefit of children, particularly older children, at convenient places.

* Those who saw the Children's Festival of Dance, Drama and Music, organized by *Shanker's Weekly* in Delhi last year, would recall the efforts of young ladies of the Lady Irwin School imitating Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra in their presentation of Tagore's *Bisarjan*.

- (b) Local companies, amateur or professional, should be formed which would take drama to the school, or may be right into the classroom itself.
- (c) A country-wide programme of educating teachers in children's theatre.

Another problem of the children's theatre to which I would like to draw your particular attention, is its dramatists. I am sure you would agree with me that in a country like ours where there is a dearth of good dramatists, children's dramatists are still more rare to find. There is no doubt that radio has given great impetus to writing for the young. But still, children's dramatists, even for the radio, can be counted on one's finger-tips. It must be accepted that the modern young person is not only fascinated by fantasy, but all the variety of dramatic life which is presented to the adult, only limited by their experience. Plays of adventure, historical or mythical, stories of struggles against great odds—all these themes have been successfully exploited by others and are equally crying out for treatment by us. If young people are to develop a dramatic taste, their fare must be varied. If I may be excused for being personal, from my own experience of writing for children I would say that no one exactly knows the formula for the kind of plays we want for children. And as George Devine has said, "It is this very fluidity which makes the problem for the enterprising dramatist absorbing and stimulating." But one thing is certain, the writer for children must master techniques based on the qualities of a child audience. It must be remembered that each child in the audience is in the process of evolution. Each has come into this world with a powerful drive to realize himself, to grow physically, socially and spiritually. As the child grows up, he first wants to taste everything, then handle everything and then be everything. I am sure most of us remember how as children we want to fly like birds with our arms outstretched.

This desire to enter into the experience of everything around creates the urge for dramatic intensification. Therefore, in play-writing for children, it is essential to give the audience at least one character with whom to identify. The children's writer's greatest pitfall lies in the misuse of comedy. Children love to laugh and it is easy for a writer to introduce hilariously funny scenes which have little to do with the thread of the story. The audience may laugh heartily but its interest in the following sequences or scene will be killed.

Children have great appetite for intense experience but they do not yet know what has real value for the development of their bodies or personalities. Therefore, even at the risk of sounding a little pedantic, I would add that the playwright must realize that his audience needs experiences in proper balance for emotional and spiritual growth. There is no time for sentimentality, preaching, mere prettiness, or above all, for false values. In this, we can learn a lot from the Soviet writers in the field of juvenile literature. The play must be a true interpretation of human relations. In the words of Obraztsov, "It must not be purely imaginative. On the contrary, one must begin from a firm base of reality to unfold better the wings of fantasy." The maxims for writing plays, worthwhile plays, for children are only a few of the many. But I am sure we will all agree with Charlotte B. Chorpenning of Goodman Memorial Children's Theatre, Chicago, that "A playwright must watch audience after audience to find his media."

As I said earlier, of late, this infant—the children's theatre—has become pretty vocal in

our country. And we have had quite a few children's theatre festivals. Needless to say, these festivals are useful as a stimulant. I am all for these festivals if they help in a better understanding of and a deeper love for the theatre. They are all the more commendable if they prepare the children for proper conditions of work and help youngsters to start wanting to act. But if, on the other hand, these festivals encourage the youngsters to show off and the producers to expect personal praise and the institutions to put up plays of the type which in their opinion the judges would like, then they do definite harm.

We must organize festivals which foster the right motives. The non-competitive type of festivals would no doubt be the answer. This type of festival offers a great deal of freedom from nervous tension and better opportunities for doing a play for its own sake. Elimination of false values and assessments would result in better opportunities for team work. And above all, these festivals should give the children what is really needed for their development rather than what is useful for the adult producers and teachers.

I am well aware that for parents and teachers, and even for those interested in the theatre, to recognize the significance of children's theatre is a very slow process; but if we are to have a mature theatre in India, let this Seminar give a clear lead for the children's theatre and let us make a beginning on the right lines. In this introductory paper, I have intentionally not gone into the details of many other problems and aspects of children's theatre, particularly those of production and drama. Broadly speaking, this movement can develop on two parallel lines: (i) to give children the experience of producing and acting in their own plays, and (ii) to give the most beautiful possible productions for child audiences. In order to derive full benefit from this movement, both these activities must be developed simultaneously and side by side.

I would, at the end, like to touch upon one other important aspect of children's theatre. The financial aspect. Needless to say, this movement would have to be put on its legs by the Ministry of Education or local authorities, and along with this, the plays enacted for children must attract sufficient audiences to cover at least a major part of the expenses. But the essence of the financial problem of children's theatre lies in a successful reconciliation between two factors—the limited means at the disposal of its audience and the cost of mounting a show of sufficiently high standard to fulfil the maxim that nothing but the best is justifiable.*

I have been rather plainspoken because I know that all of us interested in children's theatre are very genuine about what we believe to be of value, and only by expressing our thoughts freely on the matter it would be possible to come to an agreement. I am conscious that no one will agree with all that I have said. That was but expected. Perhaps some toes might have been trodden on. That was not my aim. But that is perhaps a good way to start people talking, discussing. If we are agreed that this topic deserves and demands serious discussion, then this paper with its glaring omissions and perhaps hasty conclusions will at least have fulfilled its primary purpose.

* This only refers to one type of activity, i.e., amateur or professional companies performing in schools or at a central place.