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Current Trends in Theater for Young Audiences & a Note on Movies

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by Harold R. Oaks

Information gathered from a recent survey of some 55 production groups for young audiences is interesting. They still rely on folk and fairy tales as themes for many of their productions (21%). Here one finds The Three Little Pigs, Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp, Beauty and the Beast, Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty, Pinocchio, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, etc. Book adaptations (24%) have increased over the past ten years and have passed folk and fairy tales. Popular titles include A Wrinkle in Time, The Odyssey, The Secret Garden, Winnie-the-Pooh, Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, Little Women, Animal Farm, and The Wizard of Oz. Many companies still either develop their own material, have a director/playwright develop their ideas or use works written especially for this audience (55%). Titles in this area include The Arkansaw Bear, One Thousand Cranes, Doors, Step on a Crack, Mother Hicks, and Most Valuable Player.

Plays for Young Audiences are moving away from the simple retelling of fairy tales into more careful analysis of motives and conditions of life for the modern child. These “issue” plays represent a majority of the new titles published, and a substantial percentage of the plays produced by professional companies performing for young audiences (K-12). The Arkansaw Bear deals with death; One Thousand Cranes, with nuclear war; Doors, with divorce; Step on a Crack, with a step-mother; Mother Hicks and Most Valuable Player, with racial and social prejudice. Most companies perform in schools and intend the productions to be the springboard to discussions about these issues and to perhaps inspire units dealing in much more depth with the plays’ implications, both present and future.

The field still suffers a lack of quality plays for Junior High/Middle School and High School students. There are, happily, exceptions. A high school drama teacher who understands theater, the students, and who has a view of education as a whole, uses the motivation of theatrical production to stimulate research into a period, problem, or situation that expands students’ intellectual, artistic, and emotional understanding. For example, a production of I Never Saw Another Butterfly or The Diary of Ann Frank, both of which deal with the Holocaust, can be a springboard to a whole series of experiences to understand an historical period. One director/teacher for Butterfly researched Hitler’s rise to power, World
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War II, and the complexities of Hitler’s beliefs and attitudes toward the Jewish people, then used the initial rehearsals for lecture and discussion of these topics. The films Night and Fog, Playing for Time, and Genocide were shown and discussed. Each cast member was assigned to read at least one book outside of rehearsal from a list provided by the teacher. Interest was so high, some students read several books. The director brought memorabilia from World War II Germany (arm bands, flags, insignia, etc.) and had a discussion based on the reading and the films as they focused on the general theme of the play and the individual characters. The largely Christian cast visited a synagogue and discussed Jewish customs, beliefs, and sacred books with the Rabbi. As a result of this visit, some students were motivated to read books on Jewish history and people. On their own, individual cast members sought out German immigrants who could discuss the Nazi period. Some researched Jewish food and prepared a meal for other cast members. The production was much more than “putting on a play;” it was a total experience for the performers. Word of the production spread and audiences were large and interested. For the audience the play was also more than just entertainment.

A NOTE ON MOVIES FOR CHILDREN

Adults who use video movies with young people should be aware of four books available as reference works:


These publications are reviewed in the current issue of Young Viewers (Vol. 10: Nos 2-3, 1988), 12-17. Movies for Kids... lists more than 400 classics suitable for children and adolescents. Movie Guide for Puzzled Parents has an excellent index listing good movies for all ages: good movies for ages nine/ten and up, etc. Minton also includes an introduction entitled “Movies and the Changing Values in America” which is well worth
reading. The reviewer for Young Viewers, Maureen Gaffney, felt parents “shouldn’t leave home for the video store without it.” “The Family Guide . . . covers 5,000 titles with brief write-ups and some indication of whether they are appropriate for family viewing. The Consumer’s Report . . . will not be out until this spring, but does suggest a specific viewing age range for each entry, along with a listing of two related books.” It’s introduction also discusses use of the VCR in child-appropriate ways that go beyond mere babysitting.