2001

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Stuart Walker: Lessons from the Prophet of the Portmanteau

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Stuart Walker is the playwright, director and producer who created and led the Portmanteau Theater and its company. The Portmanteau, a portable stage, presented plays to families in New York City and throughout the country. Walker wrote most of the short and full-length pieces he directed and presented them in various combinations. Those who have studied theatre for young audiences might be most familiar with Walker’s adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Birthday of Infanta*, which appears in Roger Dedard’s *Anthology Dramatic Literature for Children: A Century in Review*. Many of Walker’s lesser-known works appear in Edward Hale Bierstadt’s *Portmanteau Plays, More Portmanteau Plays* and *Portmanteau Adaptations*, which are available in most academic libraries.

Many of Walker’s staging, touring, lighting and directing innovations may seem commonplace today; however, developed in the years surrounding World War I, his practices were well ahead of their time. Some of Walker’s hallmark works were rediscovered by and are now associated with later theatrical artists. While Walker may not have exerted a direct impact on the evolution of theatre for young audiences, his approaches and principles influence today’s theater. Walker’s works exemplify the following five principles and merit a contemporary consideration.

I. The Walker Technology Principle: Know when and how to use it.

Stuart Walker was mentored by melodrama magnate David Belasco, referred to by one biographer as the “Bishop of Broadway.” In terms of production scale and spectacle, Belasco could be considered the Steven Spielberg of his day. Although his characters were simplistic, his technical expertise allowed him to achieve his epic vision. An oft-cited scene from *The Girl of the Golden West* required thirty-two stagehands to portray the embrace between hero and heroine inside a cabin as snow blows through the logs. In *The Governor’s Lady*, Belasco painstakingly reproduced a child’s restaurant in full naturalistic detail. Transformed into a grand opera by Puccini, Belasco’s *Madame Butterfly* stunned its premiere audience with a fourteen-minute lightshow using the most advanced lighting techniques of the era.

One would expect that Walker, after working as an apprentice to this theatrical sorcerer, would emulate Belasco’s scenic wizardry when his interest turned to family theatre. Indeed, Walker shared his mentor’s genius for stage technology. When he set up his Portmanteau on the stage of the New Century Theatre, Walker’s homemade, household-current dimmer system proved more effective than the theater’s celebrated “million-dollar light board.” Stuart Walker eliminated foot lighting and pioneered forty-five degree side lighting decades before Stanley McCandless. Experimenting with reflectors and gels, Walker discovered advanced methods unparalleled by those of his contemporaries. Furthermore, his collapsible stage rivals the best touring systems of our day and was unique in its era.

However, the “Prophet of Portmanteau” veiled his wisdom and reserved his skill. If Belasco was the bishop of the theatrical cathedral, Walker was the wandering prophet who retained his power and worked miracles at integral moments. Walker did not simply emulate David Belasco’s scenic wizardry; he expressed himself with artistic independence. Walker developed his own artistic voice rather than echoing that of his mentor and showed a power equal to that of Belasco as he developed his personal theatrical language.
II. The Walker Story Principle: Every story has a natural time and space.

Stuart Walker believed that every story has a natural playing length and that the time a play is afforded on stage should be no more nor less than the story dictates. This led Walker to create many pieces too short to be performed individually. Rather than stretch these stories beyond what he felt were their natural playing times, Walker developed a system that allowed him to present pieces of various lengths in the course of a program.

During the 1930’s and 1940’s, the length of a play was determined by adult expectations rather than by concern for the story’s natural time scale. As a result, many plays exceeded the interest and attention spans of their younger audiences. Using the system of combining plays allowed Walker to keep his family audiences satisfied.

Besides temporal confines, Walker also faced the challenge of spatial limitations. Yet his Portmanteau stage, in its ability to be used in both small and large theatres, allowed Walker to overcome many of the spatial boundaries he encountered. However, there were times that Walker chose to stage his plays in a more traditional fashion, and so left the Portmanteau unassembled, allowing his company to fill the entire stage space.

III. The Walker Casting Principle: A good eye for talent may still have its blind spots.

After his first performance using the Portmanteau stage, Walker was approached by a well-known New York producer who exclaimed: “Where did you get that cast?! I’ve never heard of one of ‘em—but they’re wonders!” Walker replied, “I got six of them out of your companies.”

The star system, well engrained in Walker’s time, allowed a few, big-name actors to eclipse the talents of lesser-known but equally skilled performers. When one works in artistic isolation, reliable actors can become stars in their own eyes, and they may cast these actors in roles that could be better filled. It is sometimes necessary to take a fresh look at the options in order to combat the blind spots created by familiarity.

IV. The Walker Audience Principle: You can include a younger audience without excluding an older audience.

As a boy, Stuart Walker gave regular performances using his toy theatre, on which the Portmanteau was largely based. By age twelve, Walker was writing and producing a new play every week, each of which had to please both the younger and older members of his home audience. When he had a full-sized theatre at his disposal, Walker was thus able to satisfy both the children in his audience and the adults who brought them to see his plays.

Accounts of their performances attest the fact that Walker’s plays entertained the young and old alike and that most were both critically and financially successful. What remains open to interpretation is how Walker achieved that golden balance. In some cases, his plays operated on multiple levels, allowing both age groups to be entertained. An example of this is The Trimplet. This play portrays a journey, intriguing enough to be enjoyed at face value by the children watching but it also supports philosophical and symbolic aspects enjoyed by the older members of the audience. In other cases, his play’s trans-generational appeal is derived from its portrayal of common childhood experiences. For example, Nevertheless is a simple story of a boy and girl arguing over a piggy bank which is nearly stolen by a thief whom they successfully reform. It’s ability to capture the reality of the creative play that all have experienced as children or observed as parents keeps this story from becoming a stale morality tale. Likewise, the dwarf and infanta in The Birthday of Infanta remind their audience of the ridicule many experience as children and the careless cruelty of which most have been guilty at one time or another.

Walker also recognizes the desires of both young and old through his use of dialogue between the “device bearer” and “you” (a cast member planted in the audience). The device bearer sets the stage and establishes the background through prologue. He is occasionally interrupted by you, who asks questions that children in the audience might have about particular words or ideas. These
exchanges usually occur at the beginning of the play, so as to be the least obtrusive, but sometimes take place later during the action. The dialogue between the device bearer and you embodies both the curiosity of the child and the impatience of the adult to get on with the show.

Whatever method used, Stuart Walker successfully entertained and enlightened both young and old. One may not choose to use any of Walker’s particular conventions or approaches but should still strive for his inclusive ability.

V. The Walker Patriotism Principle: Even heroes need to set limits.

During World War I, the Portmanteau Theatre and its company were, more or less, inducted into service. The theatre and its entire repertory of forty-eight plays were put at the disposition of the U.S. Army to perform overseas for servicemen. The company members agreed to perform in war zones, accept the pay of enlisted personnel, and forego any royalty payments. Ultimately, the army decided that the Portmanteau was too high-brow for what they wanted and cancelled the tour.

After the war, Stewart Walker was approached by the U.S. Navy, which asked for plans and cost estimates for building Portmanteau clones aboard dozens of its ships. Walker enthusiastically supported the concept and put his designs and plans at the disposition of the navy. The concept was approved, and Walker was asked to proceed with construction of the theatres, but at his own expense. Walker declined the offer, which probably would have bankrupted his company.

Walker went beyond the call of duty and offered services above and beyond those the army and navy demanded. He believed in his cause and both he and his company were willing to sacrifice in order to further it. However, Stuart Walker, a shrewd businessman as well as a great patriot, knew where to draw the line. In the theatrical profession, time and energy are offered to create quality theatre for young people. The Prophet of the Portmanteau taught the principle of learning when enough is enough.

Stuart Walker is a model of innovation, energy, and creativity. We have little of his writings or theories but have the example of his life and works. The principles Walker exemplified are worthy of consideration today and remain as relevant in our own time as they were in his own time.