Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States

Harold R. Oaks
Theatre for Young Audiences in the University States

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The title of this publication has recently been changed to reflect the inclusion of reviews of plays for young audiences. This article will review theatre for young audiences in the United States to allow our readers to better understand conditions in this field.

General Information, Attendance, and Budgets

Over ninety professional theatres in the United States produce works for young audiences. Most of these are located in major metropolitan areas, but many also tour to more remote areas of the country. In a recent survey, thirty-six of these professional companies reported an annual combined attendance of over 9.6 million for productions during the previous season. Adult regional theatre (as reported by Theatre Communications Group) had an attendance of just over sixteen million in its 182 reporting theatres.

Attendance (1992-93 season)

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<tr>
<th>Theatre Affiliation</th>
<th># Theatres Reporting</th>
<th>Total Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TCG Theatres</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>16,003,189</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASSITEJ/USA Theatres</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9,614,068</td>
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Annual budgets (1992-93) for the thirty-six young audience theatres ranged from sixty thousand to just over five million dollars. Average budget for the thirty-six theatres was $938,380, or just under one million dollars. Budgets for TCG companies ranged from $45,000 to over $20 million. Average budget for the 182 reporting theatres was just over $2 million ($2,008,940).

Budgets

<table>
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<th>Budget</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TCG theatres (total of all budgets)</td>
<td>$365,627,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSITEJ/USA theatres (total of all budgets)</td>
<td>$33,781,680</td>
</tr>
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Theatres for Young Audiences (TYA) in the United States, with 37% of the theatres, are playing to 60% of the audience with less than 10% of the budget. TYA theatres offer a tremendous "bang for the buck!" These figures also tend to represent the lower ticket prices and, in many cases, the lower wages paid to actors in theatre for young audiences.

Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States comprises about 40% of the nonprofit theatre in the country. Theatre is not as influential as film and television, but where there are strong regional theatres in such cities as Minneapolis, Seattle, and Honolulu, it does have a substantial impact in the community.

How do professional theatres for young audiences present their work?

Over half of the professional theatre companies perform in school settings. Most of the rest have a home base theatre where main productions are staged and children are brought to see the productions by teachers or parents. Most companies perform regular school shows for bused-in audiences and also schedule a number of evening and weekend performances for family audiences. Performers at "home theatres" are frequently "jobbed in" for productions rather than coming from a repertory company, although some players are used repeatedly in productions. Productions are not kept in repertory and only rarely are "brought back" in later seasons. Many of these "home base" theatres also mount small touring productions to reach outlying areas and to serve people who are not able to come to the theatre.

Touring shows in schools are almost always minimal, with limited costumes, sets, and lighting, and with small casts of four to six traveling in vans. These tours may last several months and cover large parts of the United States, playing two or more locations a day. Others will be limited to one urban area and will be funded by units in that region. Members of touring shows frequently give "workshops" for small groups of students; these workshops deal with issues addressed in the production. Teachers’ guides to help prepare students to see and understand productions and to build on themes in the classroom following the performances are frequently used for both "home-based" productions and for touring shows.

Some "touring circuits" cover specific regions of the United States. These are consortiums of presenters that arrange theatre company tours to share travel costs. These may involve several cities in a particular region or may cover several states. The circuits bring more heavily produced shows to large stages, and audiences are bused from their schools to see the productions.
Productions in home theatres tend to be fully produced, with excellent sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and properties. Staging is usually presentational, with a fourth wall that is only rarely broken.

Types of plays performed for young audiences in the United States

*Folk tales, fairy tales, and legends compose over one-quarter of the plays staged. This includes such titles as *Princess and the Pea*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *Aesop Fables*, *Japanese Fairy Tales*, and *American Tall Tales*. Popularity of these plays has risen six percent over the past five years. Many of these titles are familiar to parents and are therefore easier to sell than new works.

*Adaptations of literature for children and young people represent almost one-third of the works produced. This includes adaptations of such books as *Velveteen Rabbit*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Babar*, *The Hobbit*, *Secret Garden*, *The Jungle Book*, *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Curious George*, and *Bridge to Terabithia*. Many of these titles are also familiar to parents and teachers and therefore sell very well.

*Plays about history, people, and general experiences comprise about one-third of the plays produced for young audiences in the United States. These include titles like *Amber Waves* (life on a midwestern farm in the depression years), *Fourscore and Seven Years Ago* (Abraham Lincoln), *Apollo: To the Moon* (U.S. moon landing), and *Androcles and the Lion* (a Comedia retelling of the traditional story). Many of these plays deal with social issues, but that is not their central focus.

*About fifteen percent of the plays deal primarily with specific social or political problems, such as drug abuse (*Addict*), divorce (*Doors*), environmental issues (*Troubled Waters*, *Whales*), violence (*Guns*), preschool children's safety (*Smart about Strangers*), race relations (*Most Valuable Player*, *Woman Called Truth*), prejudice (*Mother Hicks*), child abuse (*Prodigy* [early life of Mozart]), and some current problems (*The Troubles: Children of Belfast*).

*A few companies still prefer ensemble-developed material. This group is not large and seems to be dwindling (from ten to four percent in the five years of this study). Current practice favors scripted material.*
Published Reviews

Many different types of plays are reviewed in *The Children's Book and Play Review (CPBR)*. We have contacted the major publishers of plays for young audiences, and most of them have sent copies of their new titles for us to review. Many professional theatres, however, do not select titles already in print. Frequently they commission adaptations or new scripts directly from playwrights for use in their theatre. Only after production at the host theatre, and opportunities for other professional theatre production do these titles become available in published form for amateur production.

The *CPBR* play review team has determined to try to secure copies of new plays produced at professional theatres and to review these for our readers. Information on who to contact for copies of the script and rights for production will be included with reviews. We will continue to review major new works from the publishers and will periodically include lists of plays on specific topics or areas of interest (Christmas, adaptations of Shakespeare, divorce, abuse, etc.) for interested readers. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

*N*ote: Material above is taken from a report on Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States given by the author at The Fifth Playwrights' Forum of Frankfurt for Children's and Young People's Theatre, December 3-5, 1993 in Frankfurt, Germany. Information comes from a study of issues of *Marquee*, a publication of the International Association of Theatre for Young Audiences: United States Center (ASSITEJ/USA) for the past five years.

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