

The Drama Theatre Teacher



-
- ▼ Theatre Education and Ethics
 - ▼ AATE Artistic Expression Document
 - ▼ The Artist's Dilemma

Censorship

Theatre & EDUCATION

Artists & Educators Serving Young People

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The Drama/Theatre Teacher (ISSN 1046-5022) is published three times a year by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. The first issue of each volume appears in the fall. Annual individual membership dues for AATE are \$68, with special rates for students, retired persons, and organizations. Each type of membership includes a subscription to DTT. Copyright © 1993 by The American Alliance for Theatre and Education

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A Publication of the
American Alliance for Theatre & Education
Artists & Educators Serving Young People

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Yearly subscription to DTT is \$25.00 (\$30.00 foreign). Inquiries regarding membership and subscriptions should be directed to Theatre Dept., Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-2002.

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We particularly welcome commentary on article content, book reviews, items of interest to our readers and general comments on the magazine. The Editor reserves the right to edit printed letters to conform to space considerations.

How Dare You Call This *Children's Theatre!* Confessions of an Artoholic

by Alan Levy

"Hi. My name is Alan Levy, and I am an ... *(Be strong now!)* ... I am the Artistic Director of Hartford Children's Theatre, and I am an ... *(Say it!)* ... I am an artoholic and I am addicted to the freedom of artistic expression. *(There... that wasn't so bad!)* It has been one year, three months, eight days and sixteen hours since I last surprised an unsuspecting audience member or preached the gospel of the First Amendment. I know I will always have the urge to produce the unproduceable, but I'm okay now: now that I've got the program.

I wasn't always an artoholic. I can recall simpler days when all I wanted was to please each and every one of my audience. I think the trouble started two and a half years ago with *Into the Woods*. One woman came to see our production with her thirteen-year-old daughter and eleven-year-old son. Although she had never seen the show before, she recognized the title and thought, "Well, after all, this is children's theatre, isn't it?" *(Oh, the torments of that question!)* Once the lights went down, she began to recognize that this musical retelling of Grimm's fairy tales is quite a bit ... well, twisted. Toes are chopped off, birds pluck out people's eyes, Rapunzel gives birth to twins out of wedlock ... and when the Wolf talks about eating Little Red Riding Hood, she had more than a suspicion that he didn't mean for dinner. And that was just the first act!

After the show, the woman cornered me in the lobby and proceeded to tell me how carefully she had been trying to instill the *correct* values in her children (her emphasis), and what a horrible lesson we were teaching these impressionable youths. "Children *will* listen" she went on, quoting from one of the show's songs, "and you're teaching them that there is nothing wrong with adultery. How dare you call that children's theatre! Shame on you!"

I think, perhaps, it was the "Shame on you!" that did it, but I couldn't help myself. The smile disappeared. The "Thank you for coming"s stopped. I turned to her, looked

her right in the eye, cocked my eyebrows in contempt, and asked, "Are you referring to Cinderella's Prince and the Baker's Wife?"

"Of course," she said. "They did it. They did it. Right in front of all those children." *(Okay. Time out. Of course I did not let my actors "do it" right on stage. I mean, this is children's theatre, after all. Right? What they "did" was simply embrace and kiss... a long kiss... while their spouses were seen upstage searching for them.)* "And they were married to other people!"

"Yes," I responded ever so glibly. "But I think you are missing the point. Cinderella finds out about their little escapade and dumps the Prince. The Baker's Wife dies. In typical fairy tale fashion, they both get punished for their actions. The woman opened her mouth to argue and then the logic of what I had said registered. Her mouth closed and she walked away—even angrier than before. Ah, yes. I remember it like it was yesterday. That jolt of adrenaline, the lightheaded rush of victory. I was right! And I proved it to her. *(Boy, talk about missing the point!)*

The show proved to be our best box office draw to that point. At the same time, we received numerous letters of complaint concerning the suitability of the show for young children, to which I joyfully responded. What a terrific (and dangerous) combination: we were controversial and successful! It was a real turn-on: freedom of artistic expression, cutting edge theatre,

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bold, daring, provocative . . . I developed a wealth of buzzwords and catch-phrases to lead me on into battle.

Our next production that year was Suzan Zeder's *Mother Hicks*. By the time the show opened, I was primed, chomping at the bit . . . ready. During intermission, on the first night, a man went up to the ticket booth with his eight-year-old daughter. Standing nearby, I heard him state that the show he was watching was good, but really not a show intended for children. Stepping in to rescue my box office attendant, I proceeded to overwhelm my accuser with facts about the numerous awards and recognitions that the play had received, all in the name of children's theatre. Of course, the man had no facts to defend himself with (*How could he? He had already proved his ignorance concerning children's theatre. Right?*), so he simply responded by claiming that the show was over his daughter's head. "Besides," he added, "It's not a good idea to show children about modern-day witches." Imagine my delight when the girl interrupted her father at this point.

"But Daddy," she said.

"Quiet, Honey. Daddy's talking now."

"But Daddy—"

"Okay, what is it?"

"Daddy, she isn't *really* a witch. Everyone just calls her that because she's different."

Game, set and match.

"Don't underestimate children!" was my new rallying cry as we headed into what was surely going to be our safest and least objectionable production ever: Maurice Sendak's *Really Rosie*, the story of a girl who pretends to be a movie star, featuring the music of Carol King. But sure enough, more letters came. Many observed that our show selections were proving to have a common thread—an obsession with death. Others thought *Rosie* a bit on the mean side with regard to her younger brother, Chicken Soup. The top-per came in the form of a phone call from one parent, who was also a kindergarten teacher, who objected to the bad example the show presented: children calling each other names and telling people to shut up. "After all," this molder of young minds proclaimed, "*we* always teach *our* young people that it is impolite to say shut up." Of course, I had a response. (*I hang my head*

in shame, here. It just came out.) "Yeah," I said. "But they still say it, don't they?"

As I embarked on that self-righteous journey of choosing the next season, no title was out of reach, no subject taboo, no risk too great. I read with great interest of a local high school's banning their own drama club's scheduled production of *The Shadow Box*. I thought of offering them a slot in our season, but figured they might get the credit as the risk-takers. We could lead off the year with *Marat-Sade!* Too dark . . . maybe save it for Christmas. And there's always that new Max Bush play! Boy, it's great to be an artist.

I wish I could say that hitting rock bottom like that caused some sort of revelation. Or that I was saved through some flash of divine intervention. It was nothing as dramatic as that. In a moment of weakness, I just got cold feet. The culprit? A play called the *Arkansaw Bear* by that social deviant par excellence Aurand Harris. This was going to be the crown jewel of my artistic life. A play that was guaranteed to make parents squirm. A play totally devoted to the subject of death, yet in a gentle guise. The title of the play was sure to evoke visions of cute animal costumes—maybe even bunnies! And, just like the cover of the play script, we could design a poster for the show which featured a dancing bear carrying a suitcase! The audience would take their seats . . . the lights dim . . . and BANG! . . . a little girl is told her grandfather is dying. Momentary relief—she runs away, the play turns fantastical: a mime, a dancing bear, a star that grants wishes . . . but what do you know . . . soon they're *all* talking about death!

I can't recall exactly when my fears took over. I decided to redesign the playbill to include games, puzzles and other pre- and post-show activities for children to complete with their parents. There were even suggested questions for parents to use to stimulate further discussions regarding their children's fears, confusions and insights into death. Detailed synopses of the play and its theme were included in the flyers distributed through our mailing list and by the cast. Press releases were written to clarify the content of the play, rather than attract the unsuspecting. One local newspaper even edited our release and promoted the play simply as "a story about death and dying."

Our first performance was a student matinee. We had a dangerous mix: first through fifth graders. And—surprise—no negative comments. Not one! But the adults were teachers after all, not parents. Surely that evening, we'd see mothers dragging their children out in droves. But guess what? Again, not a single complaint. Finally, halfway through our last performance, a woman walked out with her four-year-old. I ran over to be accosted by her horrified reaction. "No," she responded good-naturedly. "It's just that my son keeps asking why the bear doesn't have a bear costume on. I'd really like to stay, but I think my son is disturbing some of the other people in the audience." I was devastated. "I'll talk to him outside," she added.

Needless to say, I never recovered. I thought long and hard about what happened, and realized that despite all my noble intentions, an audience member's negative reactions to a given production were determined more by their preconceptions than by the specific nature of the play. Looking back, I also realized that what I had perceived as "criticism" against the play may have been nothing more than a natural feeling of let down. (*They feel like they've been tricked.*) But whose fault is that? (*Certainly not the audience's.*) Well, why not? They could've called to find out more about the play. (*Perhaps.*) Well, a good parent would want to know these things, wouldn't they? (*And if they called, what then?*) What do you mean? (*Would you tell the truth? How often will you be willing to say: "Yes, Sir. The Arkansaw Bear is a play about death and dying."*) I mean, it's just that they see the name of our theatre and they expect to see Snow White and the Dancing Vegetables all the time. If they really knew what we mean by children's theatre—(*Ah-hah!*) You want me to admit that it's my fault that they don't know what children's theatre is. You want me to take responsibility for teaching the whole darn community what children's theatre is. Right? (*I never said that.*)

You want me to say that a parent has the right to know what to expect when they bring a child through the doors of a theatre which claims to be intended for young people. That a parent must have the opportunity to discourage or withhold their child's participation from a theatre production if they believe it to be contrary to their beliefs

and interests. And the burden for all of this must rest with the theatre. You expect *me* to inform the public in an honest, straightforward manner. And I know why, too. You think that every children's theatre must place concern for the child as their guiding principle for all artistic and business decisions. Don't you? DON'T YOU? (*Well . . .*) Tough! I'm not going to do it! (*Watch it, now.*) No. I'm an artist. I don't need to explain myself. Or my art. If the public doesn't like it, well, they can just... (*Just what? Stay home?*)

Children's theatres face stronger scrutiny from their audience than adult theatres ever face from theirs. All I know is that in the world of children's theatre, there are no standards of ethics or morality except for those established by each individual theatre. And if we can't, or won't, explain ourselves to our own audiences, well, no wonder there are such gross misconceptions regarding children's theatre. (*Pssst!*) What? Oh, yeah. I've been asked to remind everyone of our simple twelve-step program:

1. Admit that preconceptions about your theatre are your responsibility and not your audience's.
2. View your operation as a service organization, and find ways to actively engage and educate your community.
3. Beginning on the Board level, enact policies which detail your moral and ethical standards. Make sure that everyone who is hired or volunteers at your theatre is informed of these standards.
4. Commit budget money to print a brochure describing, in layman's terms, what type of children's theatre you produce. Such a brochure should include:
 - ▼ The type of actors you use to cast your shows.
 - ▼ The appropriate ages you recommend for your productions.
 - ▼ The ethical and moral standards by which the theatre operates, including your views on appropriate language, actions, violence, and subject matters (sex, death, religion, politics).
 - ▼ Other unique aspects of your operations of which you are proud.
5. Create lobby displays in your theatre, studio, and reception area aimed toward the new visitor. Make these nov-

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Formerly of Youth Theatre Unlimited, Hartford, Conn., Alan Levy is currently Artistic Director of Hartford Children's Theatre. He will be directing a staged reading at the Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices in May.

ices feel wanted. Each one is a potential subscriber or donor! Let them know that their questions are legitimate and their concerns are important. Include copies of your informational brochure as part of this display.

6. Develop a system for handling audience complaints and train all staff accordingly. Give a brochure to each and every person who ever raises a question about what you do or how you do it.
7. Be proud of what you do, but take the mystery and pretense out of theatre. Find new ways to make your children's theatre accessible and friendly. Try and find ways to encourage your audi-

ence to learn more about the workings of your theatre and all others.
8-12. Make up your own! ▼

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Coda

Mother Hicks: Censored

by Paul Prece

Washburn Children's Theatre became a reality in October, 1992, with a production of Suzan Zeder's *Mother Hicks*. The production itself was simple, straightforward, lyrical, conceived as a genuine and faithful rendition of Zeder's intent.

Response from students, teachers, and parents was overwhelmingly positive from 90% of those in attendance. It was from the other 10% that concern and question rose.

Objectionable language—"damn," "hell," and "Jesus"—was cited as inappropriate for children, the suggestion being that the play would encourage usage of these words. Other words in question cited by concerned adults, apparently through second-hand information, do not actually occur in the script and were not spoken during the production.

One group of two hundred school children, though already loaded on buses, were returned to their classes rather than attend the production because of these non-existent words. Evidently, the principal had received a phone call concerning the objectionable language. When I asked which words were in question, those the principal mentioned were not in the play. Even with this information, the students were not allowed to attend.

In an emotionally fueled six page letter, a concerned mother shared her response to the play with me, terming it "... sanitized of traditional religion, thoroughly infested with the germs of secularism and New Age-mother-goddess revivalism . . . an unholy rite of passage."



Mother Hicks at Washburn Children's Theatre, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.

I have always opted to cancel or choose an alternative script rather than to revise an author's intent. With *Mother Hicks*, when two hundred children were kept waiting on buses, only to be returned to their classes without journeying to the play, I chose conciliatory changes to prevent further incident.

I wish, like the girl in Zeder's play, that things were different. *Mother Hicks* responds to me, too: "Well, you can wish in one hand and spit in the other and see which gets full first." ▼

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Theatre Department
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287-3411**

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**Fall Theme: Teacher as Innovator
Deadlines for:
Teacher as Innovator: July 1, 1993
Shakespeare's Legacy: October 15, 1993**