Theatre for young audiences

The good scripts are out there

BY JOHN D. NEWMAN

I recently spoke with a fellow high school theatre teacher who was ready to cancel her course in theatre for young audiences because it was not generating enthusiasm or attracting students. I asked her what scripts she was using and she mentioned some mediocre fairy-tale adaptations and a few original adaptations of familiar children's poems. When I suggested several outstanding publishers, producers, playwrights, and scripts in the field, she took eager notes and asked me, "How did you find all the good stuff?"

The "good stuff" in theatre for young audiences rarely finds its way into secondary school theatre programs. Classroom textbooks and their recommendation lists offer almost no direction in finding it, and most teaching method books used in college training programs shed little light on the wealth of good material available.

If you're a high school theatre teacher who produces plays for younger audiences, I hope this article will give you a compass with which to find some quality scripts that will fit your program's unique needs and interests. If you don't currently mount plays for younger audiences, perhaps you might take another look at the genre and how you can incorporate it into your theatre curriculum.

Before I get into a discussion about the benefits of producing theatre for young audiences and some of the scripts available, I want to clarify exactly what the term "theatre for young audiences" means. It generally refers to plays written specifically for elementary school and middle school audiences. "Children's theatre" is sometimes used as a synonym for theatre for young audiences, although children's theatre generally denotes theatre directed specifically to elementary school students, and theatre for young audiences also includes work more appropriate for middle and secondary school. Most of the professionally produced plays that fall under both categories were originally performed by all-adult casts, or sometimes with child actors playing the younger roles. When I talk about theatre for young audiences in secondary schools, I am referring to plays produced with high school or middle school actors, generally for elementary school audiences, or with high school actors performing for middle school audiences.

The value of theatre for young audiences

Most middle and secondary theatre teachers who direct children's plays have discovered how beneficial they can be in generating revenue, recruiting future students, building the audience for other productions, and improving public relations. The artistic benefits and challenges that good plays for young audiences can provide for teenage students are less obvious.

First, plays for young audiences allow opportunities for your students to perform child characters, which, unlike adult characters, can be based on experience rather than on speculation. While it is true that adolescents are assuming adult responsibilities at ever earlier ages, the fact remains that no adolescent has been an adult. Playing child characters allows adolescents to claim the children that they were and, to a certain degree, still are. The adolescent personality is an eclectic mix of child, adult, and hybrid traits, and actors who play all three kinds of characters during their secondary school careers will gain greater understanding and acceptance of their full selves.

Second, good plays for young audiences are short, tight, concise, and manageable from a directorial standpoint. The more limited attention spans and honest responses of young audiences require a playwright in this genre to exercise precision and economy without compromising the play's integrity or profundity. Plays for young audiences generally allow a director to develop less text in greater depth and afford the director a chance to concentrate on quality rather than quantity.

Third, the field of theatre for young audiences includes an ever-increasing number of good scripts that are focused on adolescent themes and secondary school audiences. Most professional children's the-
contains eight plays by Suzan Zeder (Anchorage Press), who has championed the dynamic child protagonist and redefined the potential audience of plays for children. In her work, Zeder seeks out the emotional truth of stories and characters and presents it in a way that resonates with both children and adult audience members. Susan Pearson-Davis’s introductions trace the development and evolution of Zeder’s work and discuss the complexities of writing quality plays for children.

If you are particularly interested in the history of the genre, I would recommend Roger Bedard’s Dramatic Literature for Children: A Century in Review (Anchorage Press). Bedard’s text offers an overview of the evolution of children’s theatre in the United States through 1984. The book contains several strong, producible landmark plays, including adaptations of The Birthday of the Infanta by Stuart Walker, The Emperor’s New Clothes by Charlotte Chorpenning, and Reynard the Fox by Arthur Faquez, as well as several scripts that are better thought of as historical examples.

Some recommended plays

While I could recommend dozens of good plays for younger audiences, I have limited my list to a dozen scripts that are not only valuable for elementary students but also directly relevant to the secondary theatre students who might perform them. (I’ve included the name of the copyright holder of each; see the sidebar on page 10 for publisher contact information.) What distinguishes these plays is that they each feature protagonists who are adolescents or who face conflicts with which adolescents can readily identify. Common themes include the exploration and assertion of identity, the process of coming of age, and the actions young people take to adapt to and affect their worlds.

Two plays by Zeder (both published by Anchorage Press) exemplify the adolescent quest for identity. In Mother Hicks, an orphan known only as Girl is bounced from family to family in a small town in Illinois during the Great Depression. When Girl falls ill, she is taken in by Mother Hicks, an enigmatic healer woman whom the townsfolk believe to be a witch. Mother Hicks and a young deaf man named Tue help Girl to discover who she is and where she came from. The Taste of Sunset, a prequel to Mother Hicks, portrays Tue’s journey between the deaf and hearing worlds.

Many good plays for young audiences deal with adolescents whose search for identity is compounded with conflicts between their native culture and the culture in which they are being raised. Steven Dietz’s The Rememberer (Joyce Kety Agency) is based on the true account of a Squaxin Indian girl who was appointed to be the “rememberer” of her people’s heritage and yet was sent to a government
Publishers of plays for young audiences

Anchorage Press is generally regarded as the premiere publisher of plays for young audiences in the United States. Founded as the Children’s Theatre Press in 1935, Anchorage accepts only three or four scripts out of the hundreds of produced scripts that are submitted each year for consideration. Named for its early home in Anchorage, Kentucky, the company is now based in New Orleans and publishes some of the foremost playwrights in the genre, including Aurand Harris and Suzan Zeder.

New Plays Inc. (formerly New Plays for Children) is a small but reputable publisher which, like Anchorage, is devoted primarily to plays for young audiences. A good portion of its plays are based on familiar fairy tales, as is the case with many small publishers in the field. However, the scripts published by New Plays are generally more innovative and better constructed than other published adaptations of the same source material.

Most secondary school theatre teachers would probably be familiar with Dramatic Publishing, Baker’s Plays, Samuel French, Inc., Dramatists Play Service, and Smith and Kraus, all of which publish children’s plays in addition to adult works. Each of these companies has some excellent plays for young audiences.

Dramatic Publishing absorbed children’s play publisher Coach House Press in the 1980’s and thus has an extensive core collection of plays for young audiences. Dramatic has continued to add to its offerings with new works recently developed in major professional children’s theatres around the United States. They publish the stage adaptations of many of the most popular and celebrated children’s novels.

Baker’s Plays has a large collection of plays for young audiences, in addition to its holiday, adult, and family offerings. Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service each publishes a few plays for young audiences. They are often written by playwrights known primarily for their work in the adult theatre and plays that premiered in New York City rather than in regional professional children’s theatres.

Smith and Kraus publishes some excellent anthologies of plays that premiered at two of the foremost professional theatre companies in the United States: the Seattle Children’s Theatre and the Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis.

In addition to their plays in the Smith and Kraus collections, the Seattle Children’s Theatre and the Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis have extensive collections of individual plays that were originally performed on their stages and whose rights are administered through the theatre. Other professional children’s theatres—such as the Honolulu Theatre for Youth and Stage One: The Louisville Children’s Theatre—also administer rights to plays they originally developed. The rights to some plays for young audiences—such as Steven Deitz’s excellent The Rememberer (controlled by Joyce Ketay Agency)—are administered through literary agencies or the playwrights themselves.

Here’s the contact information on each of the publishers and theatres mentioned above:

Anchorage Press, Inc., P.O. Box 8067, New Orleans, LA 70182; phone: (504) 283-8868, fax: (504) 866-0502.

Baker’s Plays, 1445 Hancock, MA 02169; phone: (617) 745-0805, website: www.bakersplays.com; fax: (617) 745-0891.

Dramatists Play Service, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016; phone: (212) 683-8960, website: www.dramatists.com; fax: (212) 213-1539.

Dramatic Publishing Company, 311 Washington Street, Woodstock, IL 60098; phone: (800) 488-7469, website: www.dramaticpublishing.com; fax: (800) 354-5302.

New Plays Incorporated, P.O. Box 5074, Charlottesville, VA 22905; phone: (804) 979-2777.


Smith and Kraus, Inc., 4 Lower Mill Road, North Stratford, NH 03590; phone: (800) 895-4331, fax: (603) 795-4427.

Susan Schulman Literary Agency, 454 West 44th Street, New York, NY; phone: (212) 713-1633, fax: (212) 581-8830.

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Honolulu Theatre for Youth, 2846 Ualena Street, Honolulu, HA 96819; phone: (808) 839-9885.

Joyce Ketay Agency, 1501 Broadway, Suite 1908, New York, NY 10036; phone: (212) 354-6825, fax: (212) 354-6732.

Stage One: The Louisville Children’s Theatre, 5 Riverfront Plaza, Louisville, KY 40202; phone: (502) 589-5946, website: stageone.org; fax: (502) 589-5910.

Seattle Children’s Theatre, Second Avenue North and Thomas Streets, P.O. Box 9640, Seattle, WA 98109; phone: (206) 443-0807, website: www.sct.org; fax: (206) 443-2379.
school that tried to erase all memory of her native traditions. In *Dragonwings* (Dramatists Play Service), Newbery Award-winner Lawrence Yep tells the story of a Chinese boy growing up in turn-of-the-century San Francisco where he helps his father realize his dreams of running his own business and creating a flying machine. Loomey’s *Becoming* (Dramatic Publishing) focuses on an illegal immigrant boy’s futile attempt to convince an unsympathetic immigration officer to let him stay in the United States.

Two mythological plays depict the struggle of young people who are ostracized from their own community. In Kraus’s *The Ice Wolf* (New Plays Incorporated), an albino girl becomes the scapegoat of an Eskimo village’s problems until she is cast out and transformed into a vengeful beast. In Laurie Brooks Gollin’s *Selkie* (Anchorage Press), an Orkney Island girl, born of a human father and a seal-woman mother, cannot find peace among the islanders and ultimately reunites with her mother in the sea.

Leonard’s *Crow and Weasel* (Samuel French, Inc.) and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Seattle Children’s Theatre) by Y York portray youth comprehending and coping with the realities for their world. In *Crow and Weasel*, the title characters are two young men from a universal tribe who undertake a journey to learn about the mysterious people of the North. Along the way, they come to appreciate their own native traditions and learn to rely on themselves and each other as they confront the challenges of nature. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* features a seventeen-year-old woman named Kit who finds herself in a town of intolerant Puritans. Kit, like many adolescents, fails to understand the rules of her society and unwittingly brings upon herself suspicion of witchcraft with her careless comments, capricious attitude, and impulsive actions. In the course of the play, her awareness, sensitivity, and maturity increase as she finds her way out of a dangerous situation and demonstrates a responsible concern for other people’s well-being.

The protagonists of Harris’s *The Pinballs* (Anchorage Press) and Lola and Coleman Jennings’s *The Early Life of Louis Braille* (Dramatic Publishing), like many young people today, are discouraged and feel that they have no control over their situation. However, both protagonists find ways of making a difference. In *The Pinballs*, fifteen-year-old Carlie feels like a pinball, being bounced from one foster home to the next. However, she eventually assumes control of her life and takes responsibility for nurturing the two younger boys at the foster home. In *The Early Life of Louis Braille*, an adolescent Louis Braille is frustrated by the rote teaching methods and lack of raised-letter books at his nineteenth-century school for the blind. Against the doubts and outright opposition of administrators, who don’t want the blind competing with the sighted in society, Louis secretly creates and teaches a six-dot reading system to his friends who daringly demonstrate its potential.

My final recommended play is a brilliant portrayal of an adolescent’s unique vision and the misunderstanding that ensues as adults try to interpret it. In Hush: An Interview with America (Dramatic Publishing) by James Still, Maggie, a thirteen-year-old blind girl, sees visions of lions and angels. In this post-modern romp, a media circus descends on Maggie’s hometown of Hush, Kansas, as the American public tries to comprehend these peaceful visions amid a violent world.

**Strong ensemble plays**

In addition to the plays with adolescent themes, there are a number of other works for young audiences that might be less thematically relevant to secondary school students but offer multiple speaking roles and thus, more ensemble opportunities for student actors.

Harris explored numerous theatrical genres and styles in his plays for young audiences. He wrote two farces (published by Anchorage Press) which are as valuable in demonstrating historical theatre styles as they are entertaining. Harris’s commedia dell’arte adaptation of *Androcles and the Lion* was long the most produced play for young audiences in the United States. Androcles, as the Arlequino character, helps his miserly old master’s daughter to escape into the woods with her lover, where he befriends a lion who later spares his life in the Coliseum. Another Harris play, *A Toby Show*, is a turn-of-the-century tent theatre adaptation of the Cinderella story. The title character, a red-headed country bumpkin, outsmarts the small-town aristocrats and gets rightful-heir Cindy together with her biplane-flying prince.

Among Zeder’s many fine plays are four (all published by Anchorage Press) that I think are particularly good ensemble works. The first, *Wiley and the Hairy Man*, is a Southern folk tale in which a boy must find the courage to outsmart the evil creature who haunts the swamp around his home. The script includes a flexible chorus that creates the rhythm and the physical world of the play. Another Zeder play, *In a Room Somewhere*, presents a unique challenge for adolescents. It requires the actors to portray adults who arrive in a mysterious room where they must confront the challenges of their childhoods before they can return to their adult lives. *Doors* portrays a family about to divide, a situation which may adolescents must face. The protagonist and his best friend are pre-teens, however, which might make it easier for the actors to portray such emotionally troubled characters. While most of the characters in Zeder’s *The Play Called Noah’s Flood*
are adults, the play was commissioned by the Flint Youth Theatre and originally performed by an adolescent cast there. The ensemble play is set in a medieval town that is struggling to produce a religious drama in a nearby town’s pageant. Subplots include the story of a teenager who wants to become a soldier despite his parent’s opposition and the story of a young man who stutters but saves the play with his beautiful recitations as God’s voice.

Other plays by various writers also offer excellent opportunities for ensemble acting. Maurice Sendak’s musical Really Rosie (Samuel French, Inc.), which has been performed in New York with both all-adult and all-child casts, features the four stories of the “Nutshell Library” framed by a tale about a group of children entertaining themselves on the streets of Brooklyn. The show might be a good choice for a musical theatre production slot. Shay Youngblood’s Amazing Grace (Dramatic Publishing) focuses on Grace, an African-American girl exploring her cultural identity as she plays out stories that include characters ranging from Hannibal and Joan of Arc to Cinderella to Peter Pan. The Yellow Boat (Anchorage Press), available in a short and a long version, tells the true story of playwright David Saar’s son, who suffered from hemophilia and contracted a fatal case of AIDS during the early years of the epidemic. While the play is a deeply moving drama, its themes of redemption through art and creative play make the piece ultimately uplifting. In addition to the boy and his parents, the cast includes children, teachers, parents, doctors, and nurses. Newbery Award-winning novelist Louis Sachar adapted his own novel There’s a Boy in the Girl’s Bathroom (Susan Schuman Literary Agency) into an effective play about a group of elementary children who are affected by an unorthodox school counselor and an enduring bully who struggles to change his behavior and his reputation.

No article of this length could completely encompass all the exciting new material being developed for young audiences. However, I hope that I have whetted your appetite and stimulated an interest in a body of literature that is thematically, artistically, and logistically suited to secondary school production.

There is plenty of “good stuff” out there in theatre for young audiences that could be effectively performed by secondary school students. Many of the publishers, plays, and playwrights might not be well known in secondary schools yet, but they have as much artistic and educational value as the adult scripts that now dominate the repertory. I would never advocate that a secondary school theatre program devote itself exclusively to producing plays for young audiences, but I believe that every program could benefit from trying some of the genre’s wonderful scripts. John D. Newman has been teaching theatre at Highland High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, for the past nine years. During a sabbatical last year, he completed a master’s degree in theatre for young audiences at the University of Texas at Austin. This summer, he will begin work on a Ph.D. in educational theatre at New York University.

Casting, from page 2

Some of the best input I have received about this process came from two student actors who recently stepped from the chorus to assume dramatic acting roles: Jenny, a sophomore, took on the challenging role of Linda in Willy Russell’s Blood Brothers and freshman Kyra undertook Nora in Neil Simon’s Brighton Beach Memoirs. Each was ecstatic about being cast, yet apprehensive about the upcoming rehearsal process. As Jenny puts it, “I had trouble trusting myself—that’s what I needed the most support with.”

One other point before I begin discussing the arduous task of casting and directing the untrained actor: I’m not suggesting you spend all your time working exclusively with your novice actors. Your veterans need your guidance as well, if your cast is going to succeed as an ensemble.

Auditions

If the audition includes several new faces, it’s more important than ever to remain open-minded and flexible. Untrained actors are usually extremely nervous at auditions (and who can blame them) and require extraordinarily clear directions. Whatever feelings of inadequacy they have can be eased with straightforward and useful information about the impending readings. According to Kyra, she felt like “there were so many other people more qualified than I was.”

A wretched reading is, of course, just cause to dismiss an actor from casting consideration. But with someone giving it his or her first shot, look for potential. You’re not necessarily searching for a lead (although you shouldn’t rule it out), but you are looking for particular traits that might prompt you to take a chance on an unknown, including:

- A loud, clear voice.
- A perceptive intelligence demonstrated by making some sense of the text being read.
- An inherent grasp of stage presence or comic timing.
- A certain physical presence that suggest an affinity for a particular role.