Tya Methodology Twentieth-century Philosophy, And Twenty-first Century Practice: An Examination Of Acting, Directing, And Dramatic Literature

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TYA METHODOLOGY
TWENTIETH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY, AND
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PRACTICE:
AN EXAMINATION OF ACTING, DIRECTING, AND DRAMATIC LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century, theatre for young audiences (TYA), or children’s theatre, has been situated as something “other” or different than adult theatre, a kind of theatre—but not really theatre, a construct which opened the door to numerous “how to” philosophies geared specifically toward the theatre for young audiences practitioner. As a twenty-first century theatre practitioner, I am interested in how these philosophies are situated within or against current professional practices in the TYA field. This interest led me to the main question of this study: What are the predominant twentieth-century philosophies on acting, directing, and dramatic literature in the TYA field; and how do they compare to what is currently practiced on the professional American TYA stage?

In order to explore current practice, I focused on three theatres, two of which are nationally recognized for their “quality” TYA work, the Seattle Children’s Theatre and the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis. The third company, the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival, is one of the largest Shakespearean festivals in the country, and has a growing theatre for young audiences program. Between June and October of 2006, I conducted numerous interviews with professional managers, directors, and actors from these organizations. I also attended productions of Pippi Longstocking (Children’s Theatre Company), Honus and Me (Seattle Children’s Theatre), and Peter Rabbit (Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival). It was through these interviews and observations of these productions that I was able to gain data—methodology, techniques, and philosophy—on twenty-first century TYA acting, directing, and dramatic literature.
My study has uncovered that although there are numerous twentieth-century “how to” philosophies, many current TYA practitioners are unfamiliar with them. Most of the twenty-first century TYA practice that I studied follows the trends of the adult theatre.

This thesis serves as the culmination of my Master of Fine Arts in theatre for young audiences at the University of Central Florida. However, it is not a culmination of my study on the theatre for young audiences field. Past philosophies paired with current methodology, while providing models of quality, also open the door to numerous ideas for further study. This thesis challenges me in examining my own notions of quality acting, directing, and dramatic literature in the TYA field; and it is my hope that this challenge makes me a more informed, deliberate, and responsible theatre practitioner.
For Jenna, Jesse, and Tracy
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In 1969, Kansas State University Professor, Wesley Van Tassel, published the results of a survey project that sought to identify if a gap existed between children’s theatre theory and children’s theatre practice. One-hundred and four respondents from community theatre groups, educational institutions, and professional theatre companies completed the questionnaire. The questions—designed for children’s theatre producers, directors, actors, and designers—addressed quality of artistry, training programs, and budgets, and ultimately yielded data about how practitioners in children’s theatre perceived their own field. Although the purpose of the study was not to identify differences between children’s theatre and adult theatre, the framing of the questions often highlighted comparisons. Eighty-seven point five-percent (87.5%) of the respondents believed that children’s theatre scripts were inferior in quality to adult scripts (Van Tassel 424). Forty percent (40%) believed that the acting and directing artistry was inferior (Van Tassel 424), and 20.5% believed that children’s theatre was unrecognized as an art form by the majority of the universities in the U.S. (Van Tassel 420). Although these results were more contextualized than what I posit here, they proved that many children’s theatre practitioners did not perceive their own field to be as professional or artistic as adult theatre.

Van Tassel’s interests in the gap between theory and practice foreshadow my own by almost forty years. My experiences in the theatre for young audiences (TYA) field as a producer, director, and actor have ultimately challenged me to examine the quality of artistry, not only in my own work, but the work of others, which leads to the guiding question of my study. What are the predominant twentieth-century philosophies on acting, directing, and dramatic literature in the TYA field; and how do they compare to what is currently practiced on the
professional American TYA stage? It is my hope that by asking this question and conducting this study, I will become a more informed, conscience, and deliberate theatre artist.

At the time Van Tassel published his results, the TYA field experienced the beginnings of a dramatic transformation that continued throughout the remainder of the century. Available dollars from National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities doubled to forty million and children’s theatres across the country benefited from these funds (McCaslin, *Historical Guide* 31). Cities like Omaha, Wichita, Nashville, and Palo Alto operated theatre buildings exclusively for children’s theatre production, and the Producers’ Association of Children’s Theatres (PACT) negotiated the very first children’s theatre contract with the Actor’s Equity Association (AEA) (McCaslin, *Theatre for Children* 228-247).

Furthermore, in 1969, the Children’s Theatre Conference, a major division of the American Educational Theatre Association (AETA), celebrated its twenty-fifth year of existence, and it was during these twenty-five years, 1944-1969, that many of the children’s theatre theories from which Van Tassel draws were written.¹ And yet, since the publication of Van Tassel’s article, many of those very theories and practices have been set aside and replaced by new ones (Davis, and Evans iii), and the children’s theatre field—or theatre for young audiences—continues its struggle for respectability even today.

The TYA philosophies examined in this thesis are among the only ones published; they also have had ascendancy and influence over other philosophies, as I will discuss in the

¹ These works include Mawer, Patten, and Procter’s *Children’s Theatre Manual*, Robert Kase’s *Children’s Theatre Comes of Age*, Loren E. Taylor’s *Formal Drama and Children’s Theatre*, and the *Association of the Junior Leagues of America (AJLA) Children’s Theatre Manual*. Van Tassel also draws from the writings Winifred Ward and Charlotte Chorpenning, both known for major contributions to the field (Bedard, *Spotlight*).
following chapters. It is for these two reasons I consider these philosophies predominant. Furthermore, I acknowledge that trying to identify predominant philosophies from the entire twentieth century proves a slippery task. However, the majority of the philosophies that I uncover in this thesis were written during the last several decades of the twentieth century. The 1970s and 1980s ushered in new generations of writers, teachers, directors, and producers who helped reinvent the TYA field; and it is a reinvention that continues to occur.

In this thesis, I synthesize several forms of research: the identification of predominant TYA theorists and the examination of their published theories; interviews with TYA practitioners to describe modern practices and philosophies in the TYA field; and my own observations and examinations of current TYA productions. In addition, it is important to note my awareness of my own notions of quality. I include examples from my own experiences as an actor, director, and producer in the professional TYA field over the past fifteen years. As an actor, I have worked with numerous TYA and adult theatres throughout the mid-west. I also served as the producing artistic director for over ten years at a touring TYA theatre based in Chicago. During that time, and up until the time of this study, I was unaware of acting, directing, or playwriting methodology or philosophy geared specifically for TYA. My own acting training was based in Constantin Stanislavski’s method of physical actions and most of my professional theatre work has been rooted in this training. Throughout the 1990s, I continued to work in professional theatre for both adults and children. However, as I gained more experience, I began to notice differences between the two genres. I personally believed that the quality of acting, directing, and dramatic literature was substandard, and often in my own work.

My thesis question calls for some clarifications. First, because children’s theatre is theatre, I discuss similarities and differences with “adult” theatre in my investigation. However,
discerning between adult theatre and children’s theatre, is not the main purpose of this treatise. Rather, I discuss these similarities and differences, because sometimes elements that comprise quality theatre for adults can also comprise quality theatre for children. In addition, in this paper, I freely interchange the terms children’s theatre, theatre for young people, and theatre for young audiences to refer to professional (although sometimes university or community based) organizations that produce plays for children. While some of the “professional” theatres I examine use children on the stage in addition to professional actors, all of the philosophies and theories I discuss in this study refer to adult artists performing for children. I also do not pigeonhole the age of the “child” audience. Older and younger siblings, as well as parents and grandparents, often accompany children to the theatre. For this reason the term, “Family Theatre” has also emerged as a name for the TYA field. While some of the theorists I introduce offer specific ages for their children’s theatre definitions, for this study, I do not.

I would also like to clarify the term, “professional TYA stage.” While this term refers to many forms and approaches, I chose three specific TYA organizations as case studies for examining current philosophies and practices about acting, directing, and dramatic literature, which I compare to philosophies of the past. Two of the theatres were on Time magazine’s list for “the five best [children’s theatres] in the U.S.” (Zoglin, and Goehner 104): the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC), and the Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT). I chose these theatres because, as Zoglin’s and Goehner’s article suggests, the work that they produce often sets standards for other theatres. The third theatre I examine, the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival (OSF), is different than the other two, in that its foremost mission does not focus on youth audiences. However, it does have a growing TYA season, one that is presented on what is considered the “second stage.” It is for this reason that I chose to include OSF in my study.
I attended productions at all three of these organizations, which are theatrical leaders in their respective communities. Therefore, along with the published theory that I examine, I also consider some of the methods and philosophies of these three theatres. I examine how, or even if, the prevailing twentieth-century published children’s theatre philosophy fits into the practices of these three organizations.

I am interested in what makes good theatre, more specifically good children’s theatre; and the ideas, theories, and methodologies I examine in this study possess a common goal—to create good children’s theatre—quality children’s theatre. This leads me to question, what is quality? Is it something that we know exists, yet remains elusive in its definition? Does it mean “excellence” or “perfection?” In the preface to *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, Louis Kronenberger writes on this very subject:

> [. . .] to describe quality in exalted word painting, to bound quality north, south, east, and west, to extract it like some rare elusive fluid, or excavate it like a resistant precious metal, surely the reader, with the word dinging in his ears, would soon want to read no more. (14)

Yet, the ambiguity of the word “quality” does not prevent it from being used as a benchmark for “improvements” in the TYA field. Recent articles in several prominent publications discuss the “rising quality” of the American theatre for young audiences. Both Sylviane Gold’s 2003 *New York Times* story, “Beyond Fuzzy Animal Suits, All the Way to Art,” and Simi Horwitz’s *Backstage* article, “Theatre for Young Audiences: More Adult than Ever,” suggest the TYA field is finally becoming recognized as a respectable theatre art form because of its improving quality. In 2000, Theatre Communications Group executive director, Ben Cameron, penned a lauding article in *American Theatre* calling TYA, “at its best, among the best theatre in the world” (6).
Even one of the nations leading news magazines, *Time*, ran a lengthy article in 2004, entitled *Setting a New Stage for Kids*, which offered a “new and improved” TYA, as it named “the five best [children’s theatres] in the U.S.” (Zoglin, and Goehner 104). But these articles put forth an assumed definition for the word quality, and push me to question: What are “quality plays?” What makes a “quality performer”? What makes a good children’s theatre director? The Children’s Theatre Company’s artistic director, Peter Brosius, offers the phrase, “good theatre is good theatre” (qtd. in Sullivan 50). Do we define quality in TYA by using the same standards of measurement that we use in the adult theatre? Horwitz implies that although the TYA field is becoming more respected, its “quality” of acting, directing, and plays have always been suspect (28-32). Does this mean that children’s theatre has a history of over acting, bad direction, and poorly written scripts? If so, how do we measure the “quality” of this artistry?

Chapter two examines the “marginalized” status of the children’s theatre field. Even today, TYA continues to be marginalized from within the field itself and by the larger American theatre community. Through a review of literature, this chapter traces some of the roots of TYA marginalization, including the relationship between education and the theatre for young audiences field as well as the way our society values children. It is this marginalization that has helped create the need for separate TYA methodology.

In chapter three, I examine several tenets of twentieth-century TYA acting philosophy. Some of these tenets belong to philosophies that are rooted in, or amalgamations of, other philosophies, while some are novel. However, all of the tenets and philosophies have one thing in common; they are presented by their authors as a means to improve the quality of acting in the TYA arena.
Chapter four identifies and discusses similarities and differences between directing for children’s theatre and directing theatre for adults. This comparison stems from the TYA directing philosophy itself, as many of the theorists use this distinction to define “how to” direct for child audiences.

In my chapter on TYA playwriting, I examine the elements that predominant twentieth-century theorists and playwrights prescribe as composing a quality children’s script. I also discuss the rising popularity of serious themes within children’s plays and how these themes relate to the various notions of quality scripts; serious themed plays emerged in the late twentieth century as a construct for quality.

Chapter six details case studies of TYA practices in three current twenty-first century professional theatres. While these studies do not capture the entire essence of each organization, they offer insight as to how current TYA practice compares to twentieth-century published philosophy. My research represents specific artists working on distinct projects at specific places and times in history. By examining these practices through the context of the twentieth-century published philosophy, I hope thought-provoking questions will arise and serve as a springboard for future discourse on TYA methodology and notions of quality.

Part one of chapter six focuses on the acting in OSF’s summer production of *Peter Rabbit*. Through play production observation and an interview with the play’s leading actor, I examine current acting methodology and compare it to my research of twentieth-century published philosophies on TYA acting. In part two, I examine directing philosophies from CTC in Minneapolis and discuss these philosophies as they relate to the theatre’s current production of *Pippi Longstocking*, as well as to published philosophies of the past. And finally, in part three, I compare SCT’s premier of Steven Dietz’s new play, *Honus and Me*, to past ideas of quality.
children’s scripts in the twentieth century. In addition to attending productions during my 2006 visits to these three theatres, I also conducted interviews, several of which appear in the appendix of this document.

It is my hope that the ideas discussed here challenge the entire theatre community, not just those in TYA, to examine the meaning of “quality” children’s theatre. Actors, directors, designers, and playwrights who work in TYA also work in the adult theatre. And so for those artists, who often contribute to TYA work, perhaps this study will provide insight into this unique and important audience. While I continue to struggle with my own notions of quality children’s theatre, this struggle has given birth to my interest in examining where TYA currently rests in relation to theories and philosophies of the past.
CHAPTER TWO: THE STATUS OF TYA

Recently, a colleague of mine shared his frustrations with me about the set design for a show that he was directing. “It looks like children’s theatre,” he said with disdain. “You mean bad children’s theatre,” I rebutted. “Yes, that’s what I mean- bad children’s theatre!” Although I have heard comments like this before, I admit this one bothered me. Perhaps because it came from someone whose talent I truly admire.

Over the past fifteen years, I have been fortunate to work in a variety of theatrical styles. I performed Shaw or Shakespeare in the evenings while, at the same time, I performed TYA in theatres, schools, or libraries during the day. To me, both theatre for adults and children are equally important. However, I suspected that many of those whom I worked with in the evening viewed my daytime work as “kiddy theatre” and, therefore, less meaningful. This suspicion stemmed from numerous conversations with fellow theatre professionals similar to the one above, and, ultimately, I concluded that TYA possessed a stigmatized image within the theatre community. But rather than a frustration, this stigma has become my inspiration, leading me to examine past and present notions of quality children’s theatre, including my own. This examination is the basis for my thesis question: What are the predominant twentieth-century philosophies on acting, directing, and dramatic literature in the TYA field; and how do they compare to what is currently practiced on the professional American TYA stage?

The terms “quality theatre” and “quality children’s theatre” have become buzz phrases for many in the professional TYA industry. But why is the industry compelled to push its product as one that is of “quality?” Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT) managing director Kevin Maifeld suggests that perhaps:
The TYA field has an inferiority complex. I think we all work incredibly hard to convince people that we are at the same level of quality as the well-established regional theaters in our communities. I think we feel like we have to constantly educate and convince people that what we’re doing is quality work and I think because of that we’re kind of relentless in trying to get that message out.

(Maifeld Interview)

This chapter serves as a literature review on the historical and continued “marginalization” of the TYA field. This marginalization as well as the value, or worth, of the TYA audience, have affected, and continue to affect, notions of quality children’s theatre as well as the methods and philosophies prescribed for making that theatre. A discussion of these issues helps to contextualize my study of TYA twentieth-century published philosophy and how it compares to twenty-first century TYA practice.

A Marginalized Theatre

In the 1980s and 90s, numerous articles appeared in *Youth Theatre Journal* that addressed quality and children’s theatre (Greene; Salazar; and Sterling). During this time the phrase de *jour* used to describe TYA’s lower-class status was “ghettoized field.” By the turn of the century, however, the word, ghettoized, was replaced by “marginalized.” The TYA field, some theorists believe, has been pushed to, and resides in, the “lower limit,” “brink,” or “edge” of standards for quality. In her dissertation, *The Rhetoric of Theatre for Young Audiences and its Construction of the Idea of the Child*, Carol Louise Lorenz recalls that the discourse between playwrights, artistic directors, and managing directors at both New Visions, New Voices, and the AATE 2000 conferences called for ending marginalization of the TYA field (333). Two other
recent *Youth Theatre Journal* articles continued this discourse, offering numerous explanations for the current state of TYA (Bedard; van de Water).

In 2000, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Theatre for Youth program head, Manon van de Water’s “Constructed Narratives: Situating Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States,” asserts that traditional TYA discourse is characterized by a positivist narrative that has “constricted and limited the field,” and has situated it as something inferior to professional adult theatre (van de Water 101). Quoting Thomas Postlewait as an axiom for her argument, van de Water suggests that this “inferiority” does not reflect the actual state of the field, but rather how history constructed and interpreted it from “a very specific perspective, which is derived from a set of assumptions that provide the basis for a possible hypothesis” (Postlewait 161).

According to van de Water, Constance D’Arcy Mackay and Winifred Ward birthed this positive narrative, which Nellie McCasilin later perpetuated in her seminal histories on children’s theatre. Van de Water further asserts that Mackay’s 1915 book, *How to Produce Children’s Plays*, was one of the first widely disseminated works on the subject. While the book offers suggestions for producing plays for and with children, as well as a brief history of the children’s theatre “movement,” and a list of plays suitable for production, van de Water suggests that this book is underpinned with a narrative of “appropriateness” and “education,” a narrative that was “paralleled,” according to van de Water, decades later by Winifred Ward (van de Water 103). Of Ward’s four books on the subject, her second, *Theatre for Children*, offers a comprehensive “how to” methodology on children’s theatre production. Although Ward differentiates between theatre for children and theatre with children and places strong emphasis on quality and audience enjoyment in the former (Combs 124-125), van de Water asserts that her ideas are mere “reiterations” of Mackay’s, echoing the idea of a field that needs to be
“appropriate,” “moralistic,” “educational,” and “amateur,” constructs, which van de Water suggest “constrict and limit” the quality of TYA work, promulgating a marginalized image.

However, according to van de Water, Nellie McCaslin’s two editions of *Theatre for Children in the United States*, as well as the “more objective” yet “veneer[ed]” (van de Water 110) *Historical Guide to Children’s Theatre in America* (1987), have carried the positivist narrative forward, which contributes to the field’s current ontological state. For van de Water, this narrative promulgates the idea that, “Children’s theatre is an amateur activity directed primarily to educational and social ends” (van de Water 104).

Yet this positivist narrative, which according to van de Water is in part responsible for situating TYA as inferior in quality to adult theatre, does not rest solely on the shoulders of Mackay, Ward, and McCaslin. She cites articles and essays by Kenneth Graham, Moses Goldberg, Roger Bedard, Jed H. Davis, Mary Jane Evans, and Lowell Swortzell as also contributing to this seemingly narrow discourse (van de Water 104). Most recently, however, theorists seek to deconstruct these traditional narratives in continuing efforts to define or redefine the TYA field. Specifically, van de Water notes the works of Stephani Woodson, Sharon Grady, Jinny Tennyson, Jo Beth Gonzales, and once again, Roger Bedard.

In a 2003 article, “Negotiating Marginalization: TYA and the Schools,” Bedard posits that the field’s unique relationship with America’s school systems is one that has positioned TYA in a meridian that is “safe,” and that it is this very relationship that has been the major definer of TYA identity. Bedard further asserts that the school-agenda influence over the TYA profession has resulted in a “theatre-but-not-theatre” binary that is lopsided toward school culture (“Negotiating” 91).
Citing Plato’s rhetoric on censorship and children as the “philosophical bedrock” for contemporary TYA, Bedard equates Platonic with protectionists. He offers a recent *American Theatre* article penned by Ben Cameron as an example of this Platonic ethos, or protectionist attitude. The *American Theatre* issue included headlines like, “The New Face of Theatre for Youth” and “These days no subject is Taboo,” which prompted several letters to the editor in a subsequent issue. Although Bedard does not quote any of the letters, he suggests that their writers’ Platonic/protectionist ethos is revealed, as the letters call for “a theatre that protects young people, a theatre that upholds [...] traditional subject matter and stories presented in traditional ways” (“Negotiating” 92). It is the Platonic ethos of these letters, Bedard suggests, that positions TYA as something different than theatre in general. Bedard’s article implies this difference or “otherness” is a contributing factor in the “marginalized” quality of children’s theatre, due to the fact that it is a sort of “not theatre” at all, and therefore it does not need to meet the same standards of quality as adult theatre.

Bedard suggests that almost all of America’s professional TYA companies rely on schools, both for audience and for income. This is the case with all of the TYA companies with which I have worked. Bus schedules, breakfast/lunch hours, standardized test preparation, and over all school curricula influence almost every aspect of the field. Standard show length for touring companies varies from thirty-five to sixty minutes, while in-house productions are generally limited to under ninety. In all cases, a play’s run time can make or break the deal with a school. According to Kevin Maifeld, managing director of SCT, content is also under close scrutiny. Parents, principals, and teachers, known as “gatekeepers,” often request an advance viewing or copy of the script (Maifeld Interview). This pre perusal helps educators screen and justify the work as “educational,” an umbrella under which TYA producers are often forced to
position themselves, which, again, positions TYA as something “other” than professional theatre. Many of the larger children’s theatres in America have an education department, or at the very least, an education director; and it is often this person’s job to negotiate the bridge between the organization’s theatrical art and the school’s or community’s educational needs. It is important to note, however, that this position exists at many adult theatres as well. “Education” seems to have a foothold on all theatre, not just TYA.

While Bedard asserts that the relationship with the schools continues to marginalize TYA, he recognizes that this very relationship has also been instrumental to the field’s longevity. However, he closes his article with a hint of severing this tie. He cites the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC) as a theatre that, through its promotional material, appears to minimize school affiliations. CTC artistic director, Peter Brosius, confirms this as he states that roughly 30% of CTC’s audience comes from the schools, a noticeably lower percentage compared to Honolulu Theatre for Youth’s 90% (Brosius Interview), or even SCT’s 50% (Maifeld Interview). TYA’s relationship, or servitude, to America’s education system marginalizes TYA’s identity, one whose quality is measured in terms education and appropriateness, rather than theatricality and artistry.

Neophytes and Pedagogues

In “Underlying Constructs in the Development and Institutionalization of the Child Drama Field,” Stephani Woodson identifies and scrutinizes numerous constructs that have shaped the field. She concludes that many of these constructs remain in place today and calls for theorists to avoid a dependency on early pioneering values (Woodson, “Underlying” 8). Among these constructs is the positioning of child drama as an amateur field, a perception that still
exists. While TYA is gaining more “professional” recognition, it is still considered by some to be a place for beginners on their way to bigger and better things (Gold; Horwitz; Oaks; and Salazar, “Professional”). Small professional theatres across the country, such as the Orlando Shakespeare Festival and The Boarshead: Michigan’s Public Theatre, offer theatre for youth that is comprised of intern casts. This practice of using “beginners” and inexperienced players has deep roots in American TYA history and has perpetuated a paradoxical “step-child” stigma within the larger stigmatized theatre field in general. Since its very beginning, America has had a history of viewing the theatre as something suspect, dubious, or immoral (Bedard, “Negotiating” 93). In fact, societal disdain for art can be traced back as far as Plato (Carlson 16).

Despite assertions made by Woodson’s and historian, Nellie McCaslin, that the founding of children’s theatre in America was in the hands of neophytes, Roger Bedard traces its American beginnings to “professional” productions between 1880 and 1920 (Dramatic Literature 1-3). With roots in British pantomimes, often billed as “Spectacles” or “Extravaganzas,” professional producers helped to legitimize theatre for children (Bedard, Dramatic Literature 1). Bedard notes that between 1888 and 1918, at least one children’s play appeared on Broadway every year. Laura Gardner Salazar confirms this turn of the century professional activity as she writes, “The climate was right economically, socially and artistically for theatre for youth to flower; and flower it did” (“Theatre” 25). Yet by 1920, Bedard suggests, professional productions of children’s plays had halted. Apparently, the lack of children’s scripts caused professional producers to abandon the field, thus leaving it in the hands of amateurs.

These amateurs, according to Stephani Woodson, included Emma Sheridan Fry, Alice Minnie Herts, and Constance D’Arcy Mackay (“Underlying” 4). Mackay was an “early
patroness of community theatre” (McCaslin, *Theatre* 13), and Fry worked under Herts at the Children’s Educational Theatre. It was these three, among others, who, according to Woodson, positioned the field as amateur by emphasizing it as “the educationally prosocial process of producing a play over the cultivated product of ‘artistic’ theatre” (“Underlying” 4). Manon van de Water concurs, as she suggests that both Herts and Mackay “vehemently” opposed the Theatre Syndicate’s professionalization and commercialization of the children’s theatre field (103). All three, Fry, Herts, and Mackay, helped define children’s theatre as something different than professional theatre by positioning it in an educative and social work context.

Although many children’s theatre pioneers were neophytes in the theatre world, they were no strangers to education. According to Bedard, children’s theatre existed largely in the hands of educators for most of its American history (*Spotlight* 1). This relationship between drama and pedagogy in America can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century teacher Charles Stearns, who wrote his Dramatic Dialogues, which ostensibly “constitute[s] the first substantial body of plays for young people written by an American” (Levy 6). This marriage between children’s drama and school teachers has lasted over two centuries, and some of the most recognized children’s theatre pioneers of the twentieth century, Winifred Ward, Charlotte Chorpenning, and Aurand Harris, began their careers as elementary or secondary school teachers. I do not diminish the significance of the prolific contributions of these educators, but merely point out that their backgrounds stemmed from pedagogical training rather than from experience as professional practitioners, which contributed to the “other” or artistically “inferior” image of TYA. The lines between children’s theatre, educational theatre, and theatre education soon became fuzzy. Recreational Drama, Creative Dramatics, Process Drama, and Drama Across the Curriculum have emerged as educative methodologies that do not include a primary
emphasis on performance, yet they continue to be confused with TYA and Theatre in Education (TIE). My own graduate program offered a course entitled “Methods of Teaching Drama.” However, this class, for the most part, did not focus on teaching drama, but rather, proffered ways to use drama as a teaching method. Again, it is not my intention to diminish the validity of such a course, I simply point to the blurry lines regarding education that exist even within the field. Stephani Woodson’s opening words in the article, “Underlying Constructs in the Development and Institutionalization of the Child Drama Field,” illustrate this confusion. “The field and practice of child drama [is] a term inclusive here of all improvisational and scripted forms of theatre by, with, and for children” (1). With such broad definitions, it is no wonder that the adult theatre community might have difficulties in accepting TYA as a legitimate art form.

While postpositivists place prodigious responsibility on historians for TYA marginalization, I have found that the field’s historical and continued relationship with education carries the majority of the weight. I recognize the importance of my own education-based work with Dynamic School Assemblies, Mobile Ed. Productions, Timestep Players, and Music Theatre Workshop. All of these organizations use theatre as a vehicle to teach science, English, and history. However, I suspect that some of the colleagues I worked with at adult theatres marginalize TYA as “kiddy theatre” work, not because of the writings of Mackay, Ward, or McCaslin, but because the work was educational in nature and, therefore, was different.

I do not negate the value of TIE or the dramatic activities posited by the likes of Brian Way, Gavin Bolten, Dorothy Heathcote, Michael Roads or Augusto Boal. But drama, in this form, is different than drama presented on the professional stage. It is a drama that has educative, therapeutic, and social work objectives, and, therefore, the “quality” of the “theatrical craft” is not held to the same standards as those of the professional theatre.
The Value of the 21st Century Child

In her book, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Vivian Zelizer discusses the ever changing social value of America’s children, specifically the dramatic transformation in their economic and sentimental worth between the years 1870 and 1930. The turn of the twentieth century ushered in a new found sentimentalism of America’s youth. This “sacrilization” of childhood led to “a great concern for protecting child life” (Zelizer 54), and was “regulated by affection and education, not work or profit” (Zelizer 209). Indeed, it was a time when sentimental value seemed to trump economic worth. Edgar Guest, a notable poet of the period, writes on the worth of a baby:

“How much do babies cost?” said he

The other night upon my knee;

And then I said “They cost a lot;

A lot of watching on a cot,

A lot of sleepless hours and care,

A lot of heartache and despair,

A lot of fear and trying dread,

And sometimes many tears are shed

In payment for our babies small,

But everyone is worth it all. . . .” (224)

Yet today’s American society may not possess this sentimental view of childhood. By the 1980s, Zelizer asserts, the sentimentalized child may have been displaced, suggesting that perhaps the sentimentalization stops at the family doorstep. “As a result, Americans ‘fail their children,’ by refusing to extend parental altruism to other peoples children . . . their altruism is
paradoxically transformed into miserliness when it comes to public programs or child welfare” (Zelizer 216). Throughout the 1990s, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, children remained overrepresented among the poor, with a poverty rate hovering at 19% (Famighetti 393). And rising statistics in teen violence, suicide rates, and child homicides are equally dismal (Hewlett, and West 59).

However, recent theorists and historians argue that American childhood has never been an age of innocence. New millennium books, such as Steven Mitz’ *Huck’s Raft* and Nicholas Sammond’s *Babes in Tomorrowland*, offer postmodern views on the history of childhood, as they interrogate the constructs of the “normal” child. Mitz writes, “There has never been a time when the overwhelming majority of American children were well cared for and their experiences idyllic” (vii). However, Mitz suggests we cling to fabricated memories and romanticized ideas about a carefree childhood. Mitz’s book seeks to deconstruct the “myths” that have helped to create the very idea of childhood—rhetoric that is reminiscent of Woodson, Bedard, van de Water, and Lorenz.

Wherever one stands on the “idea of childhood” argument, it is difficult to ignore the blatant and tangible problems that face America’s youth today. In their essay, “The War Against Parents,” Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West paint a vivid, but caustic picture:

Too many children have been left home alone, to raise themselves on a thin diet of junk food, gangster rap, and trash talk shows. More and more babies are being born without a skin—with none of the protective armor that in the past was provided by loving parents and supportive communities. Increasingly, these exposed, “skinless” children are being buffeted by a ruthless market and poisonous culture. Many of the more vulnerable have become infected or burned,
their bodies and their souls stunted and seared by the onslaught of neglect and
greed. (60)

Relating these modern American problems to TYA, Peter Brosius writes:

Children are America’s underclass. [. . .] Children cannot vote, many have no
voice, and few are empowered with the tools necessary to change their lives, and
the lives of others. Theatre can and must be one of those tools. (“Can Theatre” 74)

Brosius, a self proclaimed “advocate” for youth, suggests that theatre artists have a responsibility
to value our youth, and this value will be evidenced in the work that is created. From my
experience, I conclude that, when I, as a theatre artist, fail to value the child audience—if I do
not care—my resulting product is substandard and, ultimately, lacks in quality. Theorists
describe TYA as a marginalized field that currently resides in the “lower limit” of quality in
terms of standards for professional theatre. Furthermore, one could surmise that the current
welfare of children in America is of very low priority, thus indicating apathy toward this group
of people, an apathy which, in the theatre, cultivates a “safe,” “limited,” and “restricted” work,
which lacks respect for its audience.
CHAPTER THREE: ACTING METHODOLOGIES

In his introduction to *Acting Power*, Robert Cohen writes, “I think we can all agree that there is bad acting, there is good acting, and there is great acting. And that we can all tell the difference when we see it, even if we can’t exactly define the difference” (*Acting Power* ix). This statement provides a crux for my study on quality acting; the lines between bad, good, and great acting cannot be as universal as the author indicates. The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the tenets of published TYA acting philosophies of the twentieth century. Furthermore, I am interested in how these tenets and philosophies compare to each other as well as to the “method” of naturalistic acting that enjoyed dominance and longevity in twentieth-century America. Because the theorists I discuss in this chapter prescribe acting methodology, I conclude that it is their intent to ultimately produce quality art. Thus, I hope that a discussion of these philosophies might offer definitions and or clarifications about what constituted “quality” TYA acting for the twentieth century. All of the theorists I discuss proffer specific and purposeful ideas that are meant to benefit the actor and ameliorate his or her “performance.” Although the title of this chapter is *Acting Methodologies*, I freely interchange word *methodologies* with the word *philosophies*. Because the methodologies/philosophies that I discuss are diverse, I examine each of them individually. Rather than simply summarizing the acting “methods,” I culled specific ideas or tenets that the authors seem to highlight. In addition to several novel ideas, I have also found common denominators, key tenets that seem to be evident in several of the methodologies. These have provided me with an overall picture of quality TYA acting in the twentieth century. While I acknowledge other children’s theatre acting theories from the early 1900s, the main focus of this particular examination is on
published, comprehensive, TYA acting philosophies and methods, most of which, according to my research, appeared in the latter half of the twentieth century. By comprehensive, I mean systematic and or complete methods or philosophies, rather than just fragmented ideas about what makes good acting. It is important to note however, that while several of the tenets presented by these theorists are original, some of the acting theories themselves are amalgamations of theories posited by the likes of Constantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Sanford Meisner, and Robert Cohen.

Finally, I must briefly acknowledge the inherent relationship between acting and directing. While many of the tenets I identify in this chapter can also be examined through the director’s lens, here I only discuss them as they pertain to quality acting.

Moses Goldberg: A Philosophy and a Method

Several of the methodologies discussed in this chapter on acting identify things that the actor should not do, the common traps and pitfalls that the neophyte actor may encounter. Moses Goldberg’s Children’s Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method is an example. In his chapter on acting, he proffers the worst mistake the actor can make is to “play down” to the child audience by simplifying the role, making it easier for the “ignorant” children to understand. According to Goldberg, the offending actor may not even be aware he or she is doing this. “He [the actor] thinks he is being noble and making great sacrifices to bring a performance to children that they can grasp” (Goldberg 157). However, for Goldberg, this results in an injurious assault on the young audiences’ intelligence, thus, negatively affecting their aesthetic experience.

His acting method, which he calls “little more than applied philosophy,” lays out basic principles for the actor to consider (Goldberg xii). First and foremost, he stresses the importance
of belief. “It is absolutely essential that the actor be able to convince the audience that he believes in the truth of what he is doing” (Goldberg 156). “Acting is believing” is not a novel concept, as those very words open chapter one of the text bearing the same name (McGaw). Acting is Believing has endured eight editions over a fifty year period and remains a staple in many actor training programs.

Goldberg follows with two strengths the children’s theatre actor must possess: range and physical ability. In addressing range, Goldberg asserts that the actor who has the good fortune of holding a contract as a regular player at a professional children’s theatre could expect to play a variety of roles ranging from child to adult, hero to villain, and human to animal. In addition, many children’s theatres produce a variety of styles. Actors should be versed in “Commedia Dell’ Arte, Romanticism, Absurdism, Realism, and Classical Drama” (Goldberg 163). According to Goldberg, the actor with other talents such as “singing, dancing, mime, magic, and playing musical instruments,” also has an added advantage (163).

On the subject of range, Goldberg makes a comparison to acting for adults, highlighting the vast array of fantasy and non-realistic characters in the TYA field. Rarely, if ever, can an actor play a pig, a fox, a tree, or a star on the adult stage. But the children’s theatre stage offers a plethora of these opportunities, thus giving the actor the opportunity to exercise his or her range. In addition, he also notes the abundance of underdeveloped characters in children’s theatre scripts. These characters are more difficult for the actor to portray, asserts Goldberg. In fact, to avoid one dimensionality, a good actor must be able to “construct a serious biography or super-objective for a talking tree” (Goldberg 163). The importance of versatility and range, both physically and psychologically, prove salient ideas in what constitutes good acting for Moses Goldberg.
Another key tenet that the director/playwright identifies is physical ability. The importance of strong physical conditioning for children’s theatre actors is echoed by other theorists discussed in this chapter (Wood 224). In fact, in their book *Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion*, Helane S. Rosenberg and Christine Prendergast write:

> The most obvious potential problem for the actor who works in young people’s theatre is the lack of disciplined training to the body [. . .] A stage character will only be able to do what the actor as person can physically do. The stronger and more disciplined the actor is, the greater potential the actor has for playing many different kinds of roles. With practice, actors will climb scenery with ease, perform choreographed fights safely and believably, as well as execute the smallest physical movement, such as the lifting of a teacup, with control and in character. (69-70)

I concur with the weight these theorists place on stamina and physical ability. My own TYA acting work proved to be extremely physically demanding. Furthermore, as a director for the TYA stage, I often tended to cast actors who were physically fit and versatile. Physical ability is a talent that I often look for; it has served as an indicator of quality in my own practice.

In addition to stamina, Goldberg places emphasis on communicating with the body. According to Goldberg visual imagery is to what the child audience most responds. He promotes the study of both mime and mask work, and recommends Viola Spolin’s text, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, as a useful tool for learning to supplement gestures for words.

I believe that the ideas of belief, range, and physical ability could further the career of any actor. But it seems, according to Goldberg, they are paramount to the actor who works in children’s theatre, thus identifying several tenets of “quality” TYA acting.
Goldberg’s most distinct contribution to TYA acting theory rests in his insistence that the actor develop the ability to respond to the audience’s response. This idea was not addressed in my own actor training. According to Goldberg, the actor must first understand that most children’s theatre audiences vary greatly from performance to performance. On a weekend afternoon performance, for example, the audience is comprised not only of children, but many adults as well. This is important because the majority of this audience, aside from the very young children—those under the age of five—will respond in a more adult like fashion. According to Goldberg, the children in the audience will take their cue from the adults and, therefore, be less vocal or audible in their response. On the other hand, the student matinee performance usually comprises mostly children and, because of this, the children will respond in a way that is truer to their nature, one that is louder and more audible to the actor. Once the actor understands the volatile nature of the audience response, he or she must then learn to discern the difference between what Goldberg calls a “negative” audience response and a “positive” audience response. Goldberg starts with the negative response, which he equates with restlessness. This restlessness or “noise,” Goldberg asserts, is often caused by the poor quality of the play, yet he proffers other possible contributing factors such as audience discomfort. Goldberg’s only suggestion for the actor in this situation is to renew his or her own commitment to the action and, if appropriate, slightly increase the tempo of the scene.

The positive audience response is another matter entirely. Goldberg posits that responses appear in the following forms:

1. “An answer to a rhetorical question in the script.”

2. “A warning or cheer for the protagonist . . .”

3. “Repeating a favorite sound or funny line . . .”
4. “Asking questions of ones neighbors or parents about the plot or characters.”

5. “Acting out at some physical level the action one wants the character to perform.” (159)

Goldberg asserts that these sincere reactions can be classified as positive. They are directed at the story and the characters, not the actors. However, the ability to cull positive responses is only part of the actor’s job; he or she must also be able to discern which positive responses to acknowledge. Goldberg believes that if the response is a suggestion, and it comes from a “significant portion” of the audience, the actor should take notice. If the suggestion further develops the action, the actor can acknowledge and even take the suggestion, thus satisfying the audience’s need to participate. If, on the other hand, the suggestion digresses from the action, the actor should first acknowledge it, but then reject it. However, this rejection, according to Goldberg, must be followed by a new action, thus quelling further disruptions (159-160).

Goldberg also introduces what he calls a “trick” for controlling the audience. Both negative and positive noisy responses from the audience can be quieted using this method, provided it is not overused. “The trick is simply to do something unrelated to the previous action preferably in mime” (Goldberg 160). With this “trick” Goldberg posits the ability to create spontaneous physical actions as a tool for controlling the audiences’ response.

Moses Goldberg remains the only theorist in my study to discuss the handling of audience response at such depth. Audience awareness proves an important consideration for all actors, yet Goldberg positions this skill as one of the prominent considerations in quality acting for young audiences.

While these four tenets—belief/truth, range, physical ability, and audience awareness—do not encompass Goldberg’s entire acting methodology, they are predominant. Goldberg offers
them as key skills that the TYA actor should acquire. Once acquired and deliberately employed, Goldberg believes that these skills will lead to a “method” that will help the actor avoid being “gobbled up” by the child audience.

**Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans**

In 1982, Anchorage Press published a comprehensive textbook for the fledgling TYA practitioner. Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans offer a massive volume of TYA history, theory, philosophy, and methodology entitled *Theatre, Children and Youth*. Davis and Evans originally collaborated in 1960, with their book *Children’s Theatre: Play Production for the Child Audience*. However, the following decades would bring drastic changes to the TYA field, and according to children’s theatre historian, Nellie McCaslin, these changes were “greater than in any other period of comparable length since the founding of the first children’s theatre in America in 1903” (*Historical* xi). McCaslin states that although the 1970s and 80s did not see an increase in the number of children’s theatres, the decades did see an increase in quality (*Historical* 49). Ideas of quality were shifting, and in 1982, Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans collaborated again to offer a new set of standards for the TYA field.

Just one year after Davis’ and Evans’ 1960 collaborative offering, a compilation of essays entitled *Children’s Theatre and Creative Dramatics* was published by the University of Washington Press. In this book, Davis provides a chapter called “Producing Theatre for Child Audiences,” and the topic of acting emerges as one of the lengthier sections. Davis argues that one of the most critical factors in acting for the child audience is attitude. The actor must believe that what he is doing is a “worthy art form deserving of his best creative efforts” (Davis,
“Producing Theatre” 94). This early work also discusses “awareness of the audience,” a topic that emerges as a quality acting philosophy underpinning in his later work.

Professor Mary Jane Evans also has ideas about quality acting in children’s theatre. She believes that actors should be:

[. . .] versatile, spontaneous performers who are able to shift from role to role. Every actor may be called on to become a narrator, an intermediary with the audience, numerous characters ranging from human to animal to fantasy, inanimate objects—anything the imagination demands. This requires great physical and mental agility, flexibility, control, and superb discipline; congeniality and willingness and ability to participate in a continuing creative process, interacting imaginatively and cooperatively with other actors, the director, and, ultimately, the audience. (Evans, “Theatre for Children” 126)

This single paragraph touches upon several tenets noted by other theorists, including the actor’s overall attitude—reminiscent of Davis, and range and physical ability—which predates Moses Goldberg. Evans continues with the assertion that not only should the actors respect the child audience, but like them as well.

Years later, in Theatre, Children and Youth, Davis and Evans introduce three new ideas pertaining to acting for young audiences. The first, also addressed by Goldberg (159), is the balance between empathy and aesthetic distance. It is essential that the actor have an understanding of this before he or she can assess the nature of the child’s aesthetic experience. According to Davis and Evans, empathy is equal to the audience’s identification with characters, and they posit that it is the sole responsibility of the actor and is created through the portrayal of interesting and truthful characters. Aesthetic distance, as Davis and Evans write, refers to the
“spectator’s awareness of the non-actual nature of the art form” (176). According to the authors, if the actor balances these two ideas, it allows child audiences to emotionally connect to the story, while always remaining aware they are watching a play. The nineteenth-century English critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined this as the “willing suspension of disbelief” (Carlson 221). This understanding and balancing of empathy and aesthetic distance is a skill that Davis and Evans suggest the TYA actor should posses.

Davis’ and Evans’ second tenet is the actor’s commitment to maintaining consistency in their performance. A lengthy run of any production can physically wear on any performer, and it proves a challenge to maintain the integrity of the originally directed and created piece. Actors are susceptible to fatigue, boredom, and even on and off stage practical jokes. According to the authors, the TYA actors guilty of practical jokes probably believe their youthful audience cannot detect it, thus revealing the actor’s lack of understanding of the work. For fatigue and boredom, the authors suggest several exercises which help the retaining of spontaneity and the reexamination of character. I know from personal experience, both as a performer and as a director, that actors are often unaware that their performances have altered; it has happened slowly over time. Quality actors, according to Davis and Evans, recognize this and strive to keep their work consistent.

The third and final tenet I wish to discuss is the duality of involvement and objectivity. According to the authors, the actor has a dual responsibility, and he or she must fully understand and accept this. The “involvement” side deals with the actor’s ability to understand the heart of the child. Quality actors can truthfully relate to the playful imaginations of all ages, and understand the child nature and respect its sensibilities. They must sincerely be involved. The “objectivity” side relates back to Davis’ “awareness of the audience.” The actor should “remain
aside from the character,” in reality, ready to communicate with the audience and provide an escape, should the imaginary created world become too stressful. In addition, this “remaining aside” allows the actor to examine the character in third person, as well as first, which gives him the opportunity to comment on the character. If the actor does not accept both roles, according to the authors, he is ignoring the “inner dimension,” and is bound to the pitfalls of superficiality, which is in opposition to “quality” acting for Davis and Evans.

This “dual role” is a stretch from the popular ideas of Stanislavski, a method based in truth and realism. However, it may have roots in the theories of the nineteenth-century French actor, Constant Benoit Coquelin, who believed that “great actors” have a “first self” and a “second self” when taking on a role (Carlson 234). The “dual role” also bears resemblance to Moses Goldberg’s insistence that the actor develop the ability to respond to the audience’s response. Both ideas posit an “awareness of the audience” as a marker of quality acting. Davis and Evans posit good children’s theatre acting is just good acting. Yet, they also bring their own unique perspectives to the table. For example, Davis and Evans insist on using adult actors, rather than child actors, on the professional stage. Child performers lack the skills and abilities of their adult counterparts (Davis, and Evans 40). This is an argument that Winifred Ward examines in her 1939 book, Theatre for Children (171), and it is one that still exists today in the twenty first century.

David Wood

The Whirligig Theatre is one of the predominant children’s theatre companies in the United Kingdom. Since the late 1970s, the company has toured to major theatres throughout Great Britain. The man at the helm of this company, a once steadily working actor with stints at
theatres like the Royal Shakespeare Company, remains a man whom the London Times has
dubbed “the national children’s dramatist” (Wood 250). Since the late 1960s David Wood has
authored over forty children’s plays, many of which have been produced throughout the world.
In fact, his adaptation of Roald Dahl’s The BFG will open the 2006-07 season at Minneapolis’
Children’s Theatre Company, “America’s flagship theatre for young people” (The Children’s
Theatre). David Wood is a recognized international leading figure on the subject of theatre for
young people.

In 1999, with the help and encouragement of author Janet Grant, Wood published an
extensive “how to” manual entitled Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing
and Acting. In this book, Wood articulates a TYA acting philosophy that stems from his decades
of personal experience.

According to Wood, basic acting ability serves as the foundation of what an actor needs
in the children’s theatre. An actor must be able to move well and speak clearly with good vocal
projection, and demonstrate the ability to develop multi-dimensional characters. Wood asserts
that the actor must resist the temptation to rely on the obvious one-dimensionality of a character.
“The Cowardly Lion in The Wizard of Oz is indeed cowardly [. . .]. But that is only scraping the
surface [. . .] actors must explore their roles and find nuances and subtleties, and chart carefully
how the character develops or changes” (Wood 231). In addition, Wood emphasizes the need for
physical conditioning. He states that many actors are genuinely surprised at how physically
strenuous this art form can be. He also believes that the ability to perform special skills is a sign
of a quality performer; Wood suggests actors train in puppetry, magic, juggling, stilt walking,
and acrobatics. David Wood, like Moses Goldberg, posits physical ability as a marker for
quality.
David Wood also suggests that “quality” actors need to enjoy playing larger than life characters and possess a “child-like wonder.” Both Mary Jane Evans and Winifred Ward concur. And, as Ward points out, the idea of possessing a “child-like wonder” as a marker for quality TYA acting dates back even further (173). In the opening stage directions of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie pens, “All the characters, whether grown-ups or babes, must wear a child’s outlook on life as their only important adornment” (7). Another important ingredient regarding overall attitude is the actor’s responsibility to take the story seriously, which Wood asserts as a key tenet. If the actor fails, the result is a superficial performance, thus destroying the heart of the play. “The temptation is to think, ‘Oh isn’t this fun.’ It is not necessarily fun. It certainly isn’t fun if you are a walnut, about to be covered with chocolate” (Wood 225).

Like Moses Goldberg, David Wood categorically believes that respecting children is prerequisite for the TYA actor. However, for Wood, liking children is not. This is an interesting remark, one that is in exact opposition to Mary Jane Evans who writes that the actor must respect and like children (“Theatre for Children” 126). David Wood believes that respect is enough and concludes this point with the assertion that actors must want to inspire and please the child audience. This will result in an “exciting theatrical experience.”

Like Goldberg, Davis, and Evans, Wood reminds the actor that child audiences and adult audiences respond quite differently, and he recommends learning to “monitor” the former. This monitoring is necessary in order keep the child audience’s attention. He describes one of his methods here:

When I perform for children I always imagine a piece of elastic stretched between me and the audience. It needs to be kept taut if I am to retain their attention and keep hold of them. Because of the volatility and instant response of a
children’s audience, it is not difficult to sense when their interest is beginning to wander; the onset of restlessness is quite palpable. The elastic starts to slacken; this could lead to a loss of control. Now is the time to use one of the techniques to bring them back and tighten up the elastic again. A change of pace, a sudden burst of movement or an increase of vocal volume [. . .] It must be instinctive.

(Wood 227)

From my perspective, the techniques listed here are synonymous with Moses Goldberg’s “trick.” This brings me to David Wood’s most significant contributions to TYA acting philosophy, his offering of the neology *suddenly*. A *suddenly* is a change of direction, a new idea, or change of pace. It can be a scene shift, a music cue, or simply a beat change for the actor. For the actor, mastering this concept and then applying it to the character development—which means understanding and recognizing *suddenlies* in the rehearsal process and then finally employing the various techniques in performance—is a marker for quality acting for David Wood.

Wood’s TYA acting principles comprise a method, one that is offered in a lucid and systematic “how to” manner. Of his principles, the following seem to be indicators of quality acting; recognizing and playing *suddenlies*, possessing a “child-like wonder;” as well as a variety of special skills.

A Sense of Occasion

In 1983, Helane S. Rosenberg and Christine Prendergast proffered a TYA 
“comprehensive textbook for university students seeking a firm introduction to the field” (ix). The textbook, *Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion*, admittedly targets the TYA director. However, a thirty-six page chapter on “Acting for Young People,” marshals some
thought provoking advice for the performer. According to the authors, the subtitle of the text, *A Sense of Occasion*, refers to the special and fantastical event that children’s theatre should be. They also believe that quality theatre is rarely made available to young people (Rosenberg, and Prendergast 1). Therefore, one of the aims of this book is to improve the quality of the TYA field, and to this end, the authors offer a multitude of creative and concrete models. If Goldberg’s text is “applied philosophy,” as he suggests, then *A Sense of Occasion* is prescribed methodology. The bulk of the acting theory that Rosenberg and Prendergast offer is not original or indigenous to children’s theatre. In fact, the three acting methodologies they present come from adult theatre schools of acting. These include Stanislavski’s method of physical actions; The Super Six: Cybernetic Acting; and the Outside/In Approach to character. I do not intend to dissect these methodologies here, but rather to outline their main ideas in order to identify tenets that are analogous to other TYA methodologies, to better create a picture of notions of quality acting for children in the twentieth century.

While Rosenberg and Prendergast offer an examination of Stanislavski’s method, I point to Sonya Moore’s *The Stanislavski System* for a lucid summary of this method:

> There is no inner experience without external physical expression; our bodies transmit to others our inner experiences [. . .] The most profound processes of one’s inner life are expressed through physical actions. A shrug of the shoulder, a movement of the spine [. . .] He [Stanislavski] realizes that there is a break between the intellectual and the physical preparation in the actor’s work on the character. He concludes that from the very beginning the performer must include the physical life—his body—in the psychological process in order to make this break disappear. (17-18)
This paragraph does not encompass Stanislavski’s entire theory, yet it does expose a cornerstone of his method: commitment to physical action. Rosenberg and Prendergast sum it up in this sentence, “Acting, then, is the reality of doing from moment to moment, living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (73). This idea of “the reality of doing” is an echo from the opening chapters of Sanford Meisner’s *On Acting*. “The foundation of acting is the reality of doing. [. . .] Let there be no question about what I am saying here. If you do something, really do it” (Meisner 16-17). The line between “physical actions,” the actual physical actions—not gestures—the actor undertakes in the given circumstances, and the “action verb,” the active verb an actor uses to obtain his or her objective, is sometimes blurry in Rosenberg’s and Prendergast’s text. However, they connect this method of acting to the TYA performer by positing that plays for young audiences are not typically as “textually rich” as plays for adults. It is up to the actor, according to these authors, to be rich and specific in their physical actions. Moses Goldberg asserted, “It is absolutely essential that the actor be able to convince the audience that he believes in the truth of what he is doing” (156), a tenet directly related to Stanislavski. According to Charles McGraw, the author of my first acting text, the easiest way for an actor to get an audience to believe in what he or she is doing is by employing honest truthful physical actions (25).

1. “Think ahead not behind,” prompting the actor to ask “what for?” instead of “why?”

2. “Develop a positive and active world view,” suggesting that actors always “like” the characters they portray.

3. “Develop a private audience,” a technique of creating an imaginary person or group of people significant to the character. This will help the actor to create genuine “characterization.”

4. “Transform the seeing, not the being,” a technique where the actor views others as his character does. This is substituted for trying to “become the character.”

5. “Relish the style,” a direction to not only accept and learn the style, but “relish” it.

6. “Bring the audience to the world of the play, not the play to the audience,” a theory that invites the audience in to be a part of what was rehearsed, rather than changing the world of the play to suit the audience. (92-95).

Robert Cohen, the originator of these principles, stresses the importance of practice, as these principles can only be learned by doing; one cannot learn to act by reading in a book (Cohen, Acting One xvii). Rosenberg and Prendergast suggest that Cohen’s approach focuses on the future, rather than the past which, according to Rosenberg and Prendergast, greatly benefits the children’s theatre actor. It “can assist the actor in dealing with the important actor/audience relationship so significant in presentational plays” (92). The authors clearly delineate between Realism, or representation and Non-Realism, or presentation, the latter, according to the authors, is the key style in TYA acting.
Another acting methodology that Rosenberg and Prendergast offer is the Outside/In technique. Using this method, the actor relies on his or her physicalizations to create the inner character. Rosenberg and Prendergast suggest that the techniques of Delsarte, Alexander, and Feldenkrais are all rooted in this approach (96). I would add that Stanislavski’s method of physical actions also bears some resemblance. Rosenberg and Prendergast discuss two distinct Outside/In approaches. The first is The Three-Dimensional Body. This approach posits that body, force, time, and space are the four elements of developing a character.

Each character movement becomes a question of which body parts move through space, making what shape with what kind of force utilizing what kind of time. This clear practical method of movement analysis also offers actors a way to allocate and conserve energy—a very necessary factor in plays that are intensely physical, as are many plays for young people. (Rosenberg, and Prendergast 98)

The second Outside/In approach is called The Effortful Technique, which the authors attribute to Rudolph Laban. This technique emphasizes a specific action with a clear objective. These actions include: float, glide, slash, wring, dab, thrust, flick, and press. When one of these actions is performed, there are three variables that the actor must consider; tempo, the timing of the action; direction, the aim of the action; and degree of weight, which can be heavy or light. Both of these Outside/In approaches are rooted in dance. However, the authors suggest them as valuable acting methods, because their principles are rooted in the physical, a tenet that Rosenberg and Prendergast posit as key in quality TYA acting.

All of the acting methodologies Rosenberg and Prendergast offer are complex and could be more thoroughly investigated. However, the authors connect the copious tenets of these methods to construct several models of quality acting for young audiences; and therefore, they
offer one of the largest compilations on TYA acting methodology, a compilation that is rooted in naturalistic acting, combined with a presentational style.

**Closing**

In 1996, I was hired to play the role of Peter Pan at an AEA theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Struggling with my objectives and actions, I looked to a fellow actor for advice. Here was an actor whom I admired, one who was talented and committed. He looked me in the eye and said, “It’s only children’s theatre, don’t work so hard.” Needless to say, this conversation did not assuage my concerns. I soon found myself sitting in the artistic director’s office looking for support. “I know it’s only children’s theatre but-” were the words I uttered, when he quickly interrupted me. “You should never do that. You should never think of children’s theatre as anything less than *any* theatre!” Rob Goodman’s words have stayed with me ever since. However, due to numerous conversations with fellow actors, I knew some of them looked down on children’s theatre. These actors shortchanged me, shortchanged themselves, and most importantly, shortchanged their audience. For whatever reasons, maybe ignorance or maybe a lack of respect, these actors had come to believe that artistic standards for children’s theatre are somehow lower than those for adult theatre. Looking back now, I wonder if I was one of those actors.

My recent research uncovered several acting methodologies intended specifically for TYA acting. The tenets that comprise these methodologies such as physical ability, audience awareness, and verisimilitude are as multifarious as the methods themselves. Nonetheless, while not all theorists agree on what constitutes quality acting, some consensus exists on these tenets. Verisimilitude equaling quality is prominent in the works of Moses Goldberg, Davis and Evans,
and Rosenberg and Prendergast, the latter citing the methods of Robert Cohen and Constantin Stanislavski as sources. Some may believe it is necessary to be even more sincere, more truthful when acting for children. Stanislavski, himself, is noted to say, “It is necessary to act for children as well as for adults, only better” (Goldberg 23). I was taught that if I was supposed to do something on stage, such as love someone, why not really do it? This edict served me well until I, while playing Peter Pan, shared the stage with a fourteen-year old actress portraying Wendy. It was then that my “method” seemed to be inappropriate, which sent me scrambling to find a new one. I could not focus on the “reality of doing;” I could not really love this girl. This acting problem provides a crux for me, even today, as my methods are still based in verisimilitude.

Paradoxically, some of the “methodologies” discussed in this chapter also posit that presentational style, or non realism, is more appropriate for children’s theatre. The ability to sing, dance, play musical instruments, and perform a variety of circus skills, combined with a tenacious stamina and an ability to interact with an audience, marks the sign of a well rounded quality actor according to Goldberg, Wood, and Rosenberg and Prendergast. In the forward to *A Sense of Occasion*, Martin Esslin writes:

> [. . .] theatre for young people must be presentational, must be able to confront its audience with the full range and vocabulary of styles, from commedia dell’arte to classical verse drama, burlesque comedy, Brechtian alienation, or grotesque expressionistic acting. The subject matter of the domestic drama and comedy for which the naturalistic style is best suited is simply too uninteresting, too drab for children [. . .] (Esslin viii)
Twentieth-century TYA acting philosophy seems torn between a presentational style and a non-presentational style. Some of the tenets of these philosophies provide new approaches and things to consider in my own acting and teaching. Some of these pieces, like David Wood’s *suddenlies*, are new for me. *Suddenlies* are more than a beat change or a *French Scene*; they are a concrete tool for the actor to vary the tempo and rhythm of a scene. Other tenets, like Moses Goldberg’s audience awareness and Davis’ and Evans’ duality of involvement and objectivity, are articulations of ideas that I already knew existed. Yet, they give tangible documentation that I, and other actors, can study. Furthermore, some of Rosenberg’s and Prendergast’s offerings, particularly those based in the works of Cohen and Laben, offer me new acting methodologies and techniques completely disparate from Constantin Stanislavski. The basic action based acting training I received did not thoroughly prepare me for TYA work. While my acting methods are often rooted in belief, sometimes additional techniques are required to create a three-dimensional character out of a one-dimensional role for an often audible and volatile audience.

My acting method—and I believe this is true with many actors—is an amalgamation of different ideas from numerous sources. Some of my practice is rooted in what I learned about acting verbs at Wayne State University. Some of it stems from reading books by Sonya Moore and Robert Cohen. Other pieces come from working with directors like Libby Appel and John Peakes or actors like Scott Wentworth, Colm Feore, Pam Myers, and Shani Wallace. Some of it comes from my experience performing at thousands of schools across the country. A lot of what I know about acting, I learned from my own students. It is through working with them that I am forced to articulate my own techniques and beliefs. However, this study provides new ideas and new techniques that, for me, offer new pieces to the ever growing puzzle of acting philosophy, ultimately making me a better actor and acting teacher.
CHAPTER FOUR: DIRECTING THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

If you watched Saturday morning cartoons in the 1970s, you probably still remember the words. *Schoolhouse Rock* episodes like “Conjunction Junction” and “Three: It’s the Magic Number” had characters, storylines, lyrics, and melodies that were not easily forgotten. And in the 1990s, when my friend Dina Joy Bird was cast in the Theatre BAM’s original stage production of *Schoolhouse Rock, Live!*, my old Saturday morning memories returned. The show was produced in an old storefront fifty-seat basement venue called Café Voltaire. It was the most popular off/late night theatre venue in Chicago in the 1990s, and *Schoolhouse Rock, Live!* proved a popular late night production.

Over ten years later, I assistant directed another production of *School House Rock, Live!* at a professional theatre for young audiences. Although the show was in the hands of a skilled director, one with extensive experience in the “adult” theatre, this production lacked something that the first one possessed, and it was difficult for me to pinpoint what it was. Perhaps the show was lacking an overall direction or purpose, a concept or “spine” that unifies all of the contributing artists and ultimately leads to an amalgamation of art, which becomes the magical theatre experience. This experience proved a turning point for me. It prompted me to seek and identify, in tangible terms, notions of quality in TYA directing, which provides the bedrock of this chapter. Is there a body of knowledge a TYA director should know? What constitutes the published twentieth-century TYA directing philosophy, and how has it contributed to notions of quality?

As I mentioned in the last chapter, I recognize the inherent relationship between directing and acting. Often directors gain some of their directing experience from their own acting
experience. Furthermore, much of the twentieth-century (adult theatre) directing philosophy that I researched offers some of the same ideas and language that is offered by twentieth-century acting theorists. The creative worlds of these two artists remain inextricably linked. Theatre for young audiences proves no different. Some of the theorists who offer TYA acting methodology, such as Jed H. Davis, Mary Jane Evans, Helane S. Rosenberg, and Christine Prendergast also contributed thoughts on TYA directing. And certain ideas such as Moses Goldberg’s audience awareness and David Wood’s use of suddenly are reexamined here. Throughout the century there were numerous offerings on “how to” direct children’s plays, providing an ostensible paragon of quality. However, I am seeking TYA philosophy that transcends the fundamentals of “how to” interpret a script and stage a play, for this can be found in the plethora of directing books in the adult theatre library. Are there published twentieth-century TYA directing methodologies and how have they contributed to notions of quality? As it turns out, I found very few resources to help me answer this question.

Precedent Philosophies

The term “Children’s Theatre” remains confusing even today. Those of us in the field can discern between TYA, TIE, Youth Theatre, and Recreational Drama—yet all of these fall under the category of Children’s Theatre. Therefore, in America, it is understandable that, for most of the twentieth century, the term “Children’s Theatre” referred to both theatre for children and theatre with children. Very few writers have made a distinction.

Early twentieth-century children’s theatre advocate Constance D’Arcy Mackay fails to draw lines between adult and child players with lucidity. In her 1915 book, How to Produce Children’s Plays, she makes specific distinctions between productions in the schoolroom,
productions outdoors, and productions on the stage. Most of the text is geared toward one who is producing with children, yet there are some indications—like her distinction between child players and child audiences—that allow room for interpretation. While she may have intended her suggestions for use with children, some theorists categorize her work as seminal in the professional TYA field (McCaslin, Woodson, van de Water).

As a director/producer, one of the first important duties, according to Mackay, is choosing a script. “Take something suited to their environment and temperament,” she writes as she offers four categories of children’s plays: modern, fairy, historical, and nature (Mackay 46). Whatever script is chosen, it should have these three things: literary quality, meaning poetic dialogue; dramatic quality, meaning an interesting plot with a climax; and it must contain an idea, one that “should teach some dominant truth either subtly or openly” (Mackay 48). While this idea of teaching is also evident and argued in adult theory dating back to Horace, Mackay positions it as absolute in children’s theatre, suggesting the director’s focus should be educative.

After a few suggestions on casting, Mackay offers a detailed day by day production/rehearsal model. One act (the length of many children’s plays of the time) should take roughly ten days of rehearsal and two days of dress before it is performance ready. She gives specific instruction to the would-be children’s theatre director for each day of the rehearsal, and Mackay includes points on play analysis, acting truthfully, and communications with the “scene-setter” and “property man.” One of her most salient points is the importance of rhythm and tempo, for it is here, she believes, where most children’s productions fall sluggishly short. However, she does not give specific early twentieth-century productions that are guilty of this peccadillo. Mackay also warns against tampering with the play. “Do not lengthen it,” she
asserts, “A children’s play is not a minstrel show. It does not need interpolations. […] Trust the author” (Mackay 43).

The idea of trusting the playwright is an important ingredient in other philosophies as well, including that of Winifred Ward. While some theorists posit striking similarities between Ward’s 1939 *Theatre for Children* and Mackay’s *How to Produce Children’s Plays*, I found that Ward addresses the subject of directing more thoroughly. One of the major differences is Ward’s delineation between child actors and adult actors. It is clear from her title that this book is mainly about theatre for children. Her directorial approach manifests itself under two headings, “Qualifications of the Director,” and “Duties of the Director.”

Under qualifications, Ward believes that, first and foremost, the director should have a clear understanding of children. This includes an interest in their happiness and welfare, knowledge of child psychology, an understanding of modern pedagogy, and a thorough knowledge of children’s literature. (Ward 146-47). According to Ward, this understanding will eventually lead to respect, an idea that would later prove an underpinning of theory on quality TYA directing.

Other theatre knowledge also proves beneficial for the children’s theatre director, particularly, technical knowledge in costumes, scenery, lighting, and make-up, and knowledge in business and publicity. In addition, Ward suggests that the children’s theatre director be skilled in other arts such as design, dance, music, and “color harmony.”

The duties of the director, according to Ward, are clear cut. In addition to serving as a member of the executive committee, the director will select material, choose the casts, direct the play, and “harmonize all phases of the production” (Ward 148). It seems, however, that Ward’s directorial posits are applicable to any theatre, not just the children’s theatre. However, she does
examine the differences between directing for adult audiences and directing for child audiences, a distinction that other TYA practitioners also make in order to describe quality TYA directing. Ward suggests:

By studying child audiences at play after play, a director learns that though technique in general is the same, the approach is different. In place of a complex, sophisticated world, here is freshness and simplicity. Instead of subtlety and restraint, here is a clean-cut straightforwardness and freedom. Such a difference in the mood and outlook of children’s plays means that of necessity the directing must be changed. Certain points, too, need more emphasis. (Ward 149)

Among these points, Ward emphasizes enunciation, broad comedy, and action. According to Ward, these points are applicable to adult theatre, but require more attention in theatre for youth. Ward’s theories proved popular among emerging children’s theatre practitioners. In fact, other notable youth theatre specialists such as Geraldine Brain Sik, Kenneth Graham, and Aurand Harris worked under her guidance at Northwestern University. Her distinctions between directing TYA and directing for adults imply a model of TYA quality measured by simplicity, straightforwardness, and an emphasis on comedy.

In 1961, professor Frank M. Whiting published an essay entitled “Recommended Training for Children’s Theatre Director.” This essay appeared as a chapter in the book, *Children’s Theatre and Creative Dramatics*, which also contained writings by Sara Spencer, Kenneth Graham, Nellie McCaslin, and Winifred Ward. Like early writers though, Whiting does not make the distinction between theatre with children and theatre for children. Even so, like Ward, he offers a list of “unique qualities that the director of or for children will need, or need to a greater degree, than his classmate who plans to direct in college or on Broadway” (Whiting
110). These qualities include emphasis on entertainment, keeping the storyline strong, and a keen sense of action. This implies there are “extra” things the TYA director will need in order to be a “good” director. For me, however, Whiting’s advice is clouded, because of its nebulous positioning within a book that seeks to “professionalize” and raise the quality of theatre for young audiences, as *Children’s Theatre and Creative Dramatics* does. Whiting’s essay appears geared toward a director who is directing with children, rather than for children. Nonetheless, it is positioned in the “Children’s Theatre” section of the text, the section geared toward professional theatre for children. It would seem more appropriate in the “Creative Dramatics,” or theatre with children section, because of its focus on child players rather than a child audience.

Finally, I recognize Vernon Howard’s 1969 book, *The Complete Book of Children’s Theatre*, for its brief comments on directing. Upon finding this title, one might think that he had struck gold with a veritable encyclopedia of all things children’s theatre. However, like his predecessors, Howard’s text focuses on work with children. Aside from introductory information about how to run a rehearsal and work with actors, the majority of the text is comprised of pantomimes, skits, and plays for young people to perform. I do not mean to dismiss the importance of producing or directing plays with children. In fact, I applaud it and recognize that it takes a highly skilled artist/teacher to do it well. Frank M. Whiting writes on the professional, college, and children’s theatre directorial pecking order:

> At present the height of theatrical achievement is to become a director on Broadway or in Hollywood; success in a college or community theatre comes next, while success as a director of a children’s theatre receives polite and condescending acquiescence. Actually it would be more rationalized and civilized if this attitude could be reversed, for the college director needs
everything that a professional director needs plus the kind of character, personality, training, and understanding that makes him a worthy member of an academic community and an effective teacher of young men and women, while the children’s theatre director in turn needs all that the college director needs plus special aptitude, skill, and training in handling the most difficult and challenging of human beings, young children. It is a field that calls for the best.

(Whiting 108-09)

Again, Whiting suggests that that there are tools that the TYA director would need in addition to the tools he or she would need to direct a play for adults. This idea, similar to Winifred Ward’s, not only ultimately helped position the TYA field as something “other,” but also identifies things like lucidity and simplicity of story and the importance of humor as things to focus on for the TYA director.

Respect for the Audience, Respect for the Work

Russian children’s theatre director Zenovi Korogodsky tackles the issue of respect in his 1971 essay, “Respecting the Child Spectator.” Korogodsky argues, “When we speak seriously about the greatest dangers to our theatre for children and their artists, we must admit that this danger consists of our weakening concern for, and diminishing closeness to the child spectator” (14). He continues with, “Too often the children’s-theatre practitioner sees his work as a routine assignment and merely seeks to get the job done” (Korogodsky 14). Challenging, unapologetic, and insightful rhetoric to be sure, yet I wonder how deep it cuts, as the children’s theatre practitioner is often the adult theatre practitioner, who is simply trying to survive with another gig. But according to some theorists, there is a unique obligation to the child audience, for often,
they have not made the decision to come to the theatre themselves; they were brought there by a parent or teacher. And so, the director must “make decisions for the young people whose hearts and minds are entrusted to the director’s aesthetic control” (Goldbeg 153). For Korogodsky and Goldberg this obligation is an important ingredient in quality children’s theatre.

Leading the Team

I found general consensus among directing theory, both adult and TYA, that a director should be an exceptional and superlative leader. Ward posits that the director is the final authority on every aspect of the play; no one should question the director’s “command” (148). Adult theatre director, Hugh Morrison, suggests that the director should have a finger in every pie, yet bear none of the individual responsibilities (14). He or she is a leader. The director’s role is so important that Helane S. Rosenberg’s and Christine Prendergast’s entire text, Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion, views all theatrical aspects through a directorial lens. And although the director has many leadership responsibilities and duties, for me, the job remains enigmatic. In this section on leadership, I examine some of the duties and responsibilities of the director for both children and adults. Because of the lack of TYA directing methodology, these points offer similarities and differences in directing between children’s theatre and adult theatre.

One of the first jobs of any director is choosing a script, unless, of course, someone such as a producer, artistic director, or department chair has already chosen one. Martin Esslin believes that this is where children’s theatre sins the most (vii). Too often, he believes, children’s theatre directors choose material that is weak and condescending to young minds. It is this young audience, Esslin believes, that requires “more excellent” scripts. Indeed, as I

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mentioned in chapter one, there has been a paucity of quality children’s dramatic literature. Still, it seems it is up to the director to choose the right play, and not compromise artistic integrity. Harold Clurman, author of *On Directing*, goes much deeper when discussing the choice of script for the adult theatre. Yet his offerings seem more pragmatic than artistic. For example, in his chapter on script selection, Clurman focuses much of his attention to business and audience considerations. He does discuss the artistic merit of plays, yet his rhetoric is that of a “professional” rather than an “artist.” His discussion is driven by practical work considerations rather than aesthetic ones.

Script analysis also proves an important responsibility for both the TYA and adult theatre director. In their text, *Fundamentals of Play Directing*, Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra suggest that the director should analyze a play through Aristotle’s six elements—character, story, language, idea, rhythm, and spectacle—as well as the play’s structure, which they break up into six parts: exposition, development, conflict, crisis, climax, and resolution (23-26), a structure that is strikingly similar to Eugène Scribe’s well-made play (Jacobus 693). While Rosenberg and Prendergast do not address elements or structure, they do offer a thorough discussion on play analysis, but their offerings are not indigenous to TYA. In fact, they admittedly borrow Clurman’s word, “spine,” to describe a play’s backbone or through line. Rosenberg and Prendergast posit the director as an “interpretive artist” rather than a “creative one.” This is not meant to imply that the director is not creative, but rather, to clarify that the director’s main function is to interpret, and then tell the story. Rosenberg and Prendergast hold fast to this point. Harold Clurman, however, seems a bit more flexible. “The director (if permitted) has the right to do what he pleases with the script provided what results is persuasive, enriching and consistently intelligible in itself” (Clurman 40). On the other hand, veteran
Chicago director, Terry McCabe, wrote an entire text on the subject entitled *Mis-directing the Play*, which seems to challenge the director’s freedom. He writes, “Directing that seeks to control the text, instead of subordinating itself to the text, is bad directing. I believe the director’s job is to tell the playwright’s story as clearly and as interestingly as possible. Period” (McCabe 16).

Although theories in general vary, one distinction that I have found that differentiates the TYA director from the adult theatre director is the way he or she works with the actor. While adult professional theatre directors may indeed coach the actor, in my experience working under CAT, SPT, LORT, and Dinner Theatre contracts, it is rare that directors consider themselves teachers during rehearsals. Yet, in the TYA realm, directors often take on a dual role. Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evan’s point out that often the children’s theatre actor is young and inexperienced and that the director should be patient and willing to play the role of teacher (Davis, and Evans 164). Zaro Weil, former artistic director for Metro Theatre Circus², seems to agree with this philosophy, as the director stresses how certain things should be taught to the neophyte actor (Interview 134). Moses Goldberg goes even further with this point as he posits that it is the director’s job to “teach” his or her young actors about the uniqueness of the child audience, particularly in terms of audience response, as I mentioned in the last chapter. The director, he believes, should teach the actors to discern between different types of responses and, in addition, equip the actors with tools to help them handle the responses.

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² The Metro Theatre Circus in St. Louis, MO is now called Metro Theater Company.
In my own experience, I have found that it is true that the actors who work in professional children’s theatre, on average, seem to be younger and less experienced than actors who work in the professional adult theatre. Consequently, some of the practice at some professional children’s theatres, in my experience, is educative in nature. The directors often teach as they direct, which is more in line with university theatre. An example of this is the use of actor warm-ups and games during the rehearsal period. Many professional actors that I have worked with in the adult theatre would acknowledge the importance of warming up their bodies and voices, yet it is left to them to perform this duty on their own, as they have been professionally trained and know their own instruments. Very seldom, aside from musicals or fight rehearsals, have I experienced this within the rehearsal period. Likewise, in educative settings, games are often used to both physically and creatively warm up for rehearsal; they also serve as excellent bonding tools. And sometimes directors will even employ a game or improvisation within a rehearsal to help the actors find or create their characters. I have experienced this type of rehearsal working for directors under the TYA Equity contract, yet not other union contacts. However, this does not mean that they do not occur, or that they are not valid tools for the artist. I simply conclude, from my experience, that many TYA directors consider themselves teachers as well as directors, due to their “teaching” methodologies.

Finally, I address the director’s role as a unifier. Again, it would seem that most theorists, TYA and adult, agree that the director should unify the entire production team. According to Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director, Libby Appel, it is imperative that all of the artistic contributors are on the same page. The director, through negotiation and collaboration, should rally the entire team around a common idea or goal, and then through inspiration and encouragement, motivate the team to achieve that goal. If the director fails in this
task, the production can seem discombobulated; all of the elements do not fit together (Wood 157).

Moses Goldberg’s Directing Guidelines

In any university library, one can find countless books on methods and philosophies about directing for the professional stage. Yet, in my research for published TYA directing methodology, I could find only two; they belong to Moses Goldberg, and David Wood. Both of these veteran TYA directors categorically agree on the importance of leadership and unification. In his book, *Children’s Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method*, Goldberg asserts that the director is responsible for the “total artistic creation,” because he is the single unifying factor (152). He offers seven guidelines for the TYA director, and it is through these guidelines, according to Goldberg, that we can examine the differences between directing for children and directing for adults, a comparison that both Winifred Ward and Frank M. Whiting also used to illuminate ideas of quality TYA directing.

The first guideline is the importance of “emotional truth.” It is on this point, according to Goldberg, that many TYA practitioners commit a serious error, emotional condescension. The work should be presented in a way that is accessible to children. However, he stresses that this does not mean “oversimplify.” In other words, everything about the story should be true to the child’s world. Goldberg asserts that, “This means that adult logic, complex sociological imagery, and complicated plots are not desirable” (138). A comparison can be made here to Constance D’Arcy Mackay, who wrote, “The range of emotion in child-drama is, of course, restricted: such things as money-lust, power-lust, vice, social ambition, despair, or trickiness do not exist for normal children” (48). I also discuss these “subjects” in the chapter on dramatic
literature for children, but they are important to note here as well, as they represent ideas and emotions that a director must consider.

The most successful TYA director, according to Goldberg, is an expert at the second guideline, “visualization.” Goldberg asserts that the director should be adept in creating a visual language, which cannot contradict the text and must help to tell the story. He suggests rehearsing the actors with no words, using only gibberish or mime, thus allowing them to explore and create more visual ways of communicating. Visual imagery was also a forte of John Clark Donohue, cofounder and former artistic director for the successful Children’s Theatre Company. Many of the plays that Donohue wrote, directed, and produced subordinated language and relied on visual imagery to convey their major themes (Hicks 164).

As his third guideline, Goldberg offers the importance of variety. Due to children’s overwhelming curiosity and short attention spans, Goldberg believes variation proves paramount. He borrows the term, syntheticalism, from the Russian director Zenovi Korogodsky, to promote the idea of combining disparate theatrical elements, performance styles, and literary genres. According to Goldberg, this disparity is extremely attractive, as well as necessary to the child viewer. “Variety may be the ‘spice of life’ for an adult, but it is more like ‘bread’ for the child” (Goldberg 142).

With his fourth guideline, Goldberg reminds the TYA director to consider the “multi-age” of the audience. It is difficult for a director (or an actor) to create art that appeals to three, ten, thirty, and sixty-year olds all at the same time. Yet Goldberg suggests that that is exactly what the TYA director should do. Assume the audience is of all ages, he posits (Goldberg 146). However, he digs deeper on this point while discussing the importance of playing to the adult audience. Here he asks his reader to consider the idea that the adult audience member retains
some of his or her childhood fantasies and behavior, meaning that in adulthood, we do not become different people than we were when we were children, but rather, we become more complete. The person, or persons, that we once were at five or ten, still reside somewhere inside us as adults.

“Casting identification” is Goldberg’s next guideline, which appears to be a debatable issue among many directors. When casting a role, Goldberg believes that the director can either fulfill the child’s expectations, or “stereotypes,” for that role (such as using the image of Disney’s cartoon when casting the role of Snow White), or on the other hand, the director can challenge said stereotypes. Goldberg argues that the more artistically satisfying choice is to challenge these stereotypes, yet he suggests that the child audience should somehow be prepared for this new interpretation of a familiar character, thus challenging them to opening their minds and accepting different points of views. He writes that if the child audience is not prepared, they may never buy into the world of the play. The forewarning, he suggests, can be done by using study guides, promotional material, or a curtain speech.

The sixth guideline or consideration that Goldberg addresses is “audience participation.” However, this idea should not be confused with Brian Way’s Participation Theatre, a form of theatre that includes the audience in a vital role, and asks them to literally join the world of the play. However, Goldberg is influenced by this type of work, as evidenced by his participatory plays, Aladdin and Hansel and Gretel. Yet, “audience participation,” in his directorial guideline context, is quite different. Instead he refers to the audience response that is common, according

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3 Brian Way’s Participation Theatre is discussed in Davis’ and Evans’ Theatre, Children and Youth (39).
to him, in children’s theatre. In fact, Goldberg suggests that this audible response is one half of the produced play, while the actor’s dialogue becomes the other. As I noted earlier, Goldberg believes the director should have a thorough understanding of audience response and train the actors to have the same. Goldberg even suggests that actors should prepare to cut dialogue when necessary, for it is unwise to play out a negligible moment that the audience already audibly anticipated.

The final directorial lens through which Goldberg views differences in directing for children and adults is “theatre magic,” or theatrical or special effects. This “theatre magic” is tied to spectacle and proves essential to children’s theatre according to Goldberg. Yet he warns the director to use discretion in the use of theatre magic, as it can be overdone. Performing Arts Repertory Theatre TYA director, John Henry Davis, agrees:

> You’ve got to be careful to not always make spectacles. If they want to see spectacle, they can go to the movies. There they have spectacle; what they often don’t have is human stories with true conflicts that engage them. And I think that’s what we have to work toward. (Davis Interview 66-67)

Moses Goldberg’s philosophies and methods stem from years of study and experience not only in TYA, but adult professional theatre as well. TYA directing methodology, in Goldberg’s case, addendums adult directing methodology, and Goldberg often draws from classic and mature literature such as Shakespeare and Goethe to illustrate his points. Furthermore, his number one guideline, emotional truth, is also rooted in adult methodology, namely Stanislavski. Finally, I note that Goldberg offers his philosophies on TYA directing (as well as acting), not as absolutes, but always suggestions drawn from his own experiences.
David Wood and the Director’s Challenge

Like Moses Goldberg, David Wood places strong emphasis on unifying the artistic and production teams. In *Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*, he opens his directing chapter with a charge that the TYA director should challenge everyone who works on the production to cultivate a “genuine commitment to working for and entertaining children” (Wood 156). He further emphasizes the director’s need to understand and appreciate the artistic contributions of designers. According to Moses Goldberg and former Honolulu Theatre for Youth artistic director, Pamela Sterling, TYA often attracts the artistic imaginations of theatrical designers (Goldberg 180; Sterling, “An Artistic” 8). And David Wood suggests strong and lucid communication between the director and these designers. Rosenberg and Prendergast also offer a chapter on this subject, focusing on what directors should know about the design process. They conclude, as does Wood, that it is up to the director to synchronize all aspects of the production. If the director fails to do this the following problems will surely emerge:

1. “The actors are taken by surprise at the last minute by costumes that make it impossible to do what they rehearsed.”

2. “The designer has created a set that has forced the action too far upstage so that actors are too far away from the audience.”

3. “The scene changes are too long.”

4. “The choreographer has devised dance steps and intricate routines that are more suitable for an adult audience.”

5. “The music for songs is too loud, and the incidental music (if any) is not sympathetic to the action.”
In my own experience, I have seen these problems arise in children’s theatre and adult theatre. However, I must admit, I have experienced and witnessed them more often, and of greater magnitude, in TYA. I believe, as Wood also suggests, this is often due to the director’s inability to create “buy-in” from his or her artistic team. Wood implies that a designer can certainly be talented, yet if he or she lacks an understanding of, or sincere respect for the child audience, his or her design will come up short and affect the entire production. This idea ties back to two earlier points that are perceived as indicative of quality directing, respect for the child audience and leading the production team to do the same.

Wood also spends time discussing the issue of casting, as he suggests that 90% of good directing is good casting. Veteran adult theatre directors, Hugh Morrison and Harold Clurman, would probably agree as they both indicate the importance of casting in their respective texts. Clurman writes, “Cast good actors—and you’ll be good directors” (64). David Wood admits that he looks for actors with a lot of energy and who are not afraid to make big and brave choices. He drills his auditioners through a rigorous music, movement, and cold reading audition, followed by a personal interview. This interview is important, asserts Wood, because it allows the director to determine if the actor possesses the disposition needed for TYA. In my experience in casting and hiring position, an interview with the auditioner better informed the decision making process. While my instincts were not always correct, after these interviews I would have better understanding of how these actors felt about high energy work and children in general.

Turning the attention toward staging and blocking, there is very little TYA philosophy that addresses this skill. Rosenberg’s and Pendergasts’s *A Sense of Occasion* discusses
composition, body positions, different types of crosses, and the importance of using levels, yet all of these points can also be found in Dean and Carra’s adult directing text, *Fundamentals of Play Directing*. There seems to be negligible difference in creating blocking and pictures for children or adults. Goldberg only briefly touches upon blocking when he discusses visual language and visual imagery. David Wood, who pre-blocks the entire show, asserts that a major consideration in directing for the child audience, as opposed to the adult audience, is the narrow eye span of a child. This prevents the child audience member from following any physical action as well as an adult could. Therefore, Wood suggests that the TYA director avoid any sudden change of focus to the opposite side of the stage, as it might be missed by the younger spectator. Aside from some TYA practitioners general belief that extra stage movement should be employed (Davis, John Henry, Interview 66; Maifeld Interview), Wood’s note on abrupt movement proves a salient idea in TYA staging.

Turning to Wood’s thoughts on script interpretation, he warns the TYA director to analyze the TYA script in the same manner as he would an adult script, taking particular care in eschewing posturing or cutesy interpretations. He highly recommends finding and emphasizing humor, but he finds serious and tragic moments also prove effective and appropriate. Like Goldberg, Wood also suggests that the TYA director give extra attention to “beginnings” and “first times.” This can mean the beginning of a story or a thought, or the first time a character or idea is introduced.

Directing actors to quickly develop their characters is also important to Wood. He notes that actors often try to begin their character development with a blank slate. However, according to Wood, this can be a mistake. Actors should be encouraged to use the “obvious” starting points early on. For example, if an actress is playing a witch, he directs the actress to use the
image of an old hag with a pointy hat and broomstick as a starting point. Hopefully this will
develop into a well-rounded three-dimensional character, but it is important to acknowledge this
as a starting point. This theory on characterization seems contradict to Goldberg’s casting
identification guideline, which implies that the director steer the actor away from using
stereotypes as basis for creating their characters.

Wood also posits an intriguing theory for the director to direct the actor to deliver
“negative” statements “positively,” thus keeping the energy of the play up beat. For example, he
suggests that a line such as, “I’m so unhappy, I don’t know what to do,” should be delivered as
if the actor was saying, “I’m so happy. I’ve never been so happy in my life” (Wood 189). This is
perhaps a nebulous concept, yet Wood asserts that “By playing a negative line positively, it gives
it negative strength rather than negative weakness, and thus keeps the attention of the audience”
(189). In addition, Wood argues, this suggestion helps actors avoid over sentimentalism, an
issue that Winifred Ward cautioned against exactly sixty years earlier (151).

Finally, I want to address David Wood’s ideas on the directing of suddenlies. As I
mentioned in the last chapter, suddenlies are a change of direction, a new idea, or change of
pace, which can be created by a scene shift, a music cue, or simply a beat change for the actor.
Wood tries to include at least three suddenlies on every page of each play that he writes.
However, he suggests that the director must not only recognize these, he can also create them.
By interpreting and directing scenes with numerous suddenlies, the director keeps “the audience
on their toes, forcing them to attend, giving them no time to get distracted, making them want to
know what happens next” (Wood 183), behavior indicative of good or quality directing.
Closing

The theatre practitioner who is creative and conscientious will often confess that his largest reservation about children’s theatre is the fact that he “knows nothing about it.” Such a statement is unfortunate, for, although it is true that there are special considerations when it comes to an audience of children, the learning of these few considerations is minor when compared with the technical skills and creative expression which have already been mastered by this same artist.

(Goldberg 119)

Moses Goldberg’s words appear indicative of many professional directors’ attitudes toward TYA. However, my research suggests, that there are very few differences between directing for adults and directing for children. From what I can tell, the “body of knowledge” that a TYA director should know is the “body of knowledge” that an adult director should know.

Like most art, directing for the theatre is subjective. I studied numerous texts, and took several courses on the subject, and sometimes, I admit, it is still difficult to discern the difference between the “fundamentals” and “advanced” directing techniques. Ideas that are true for one director may not be true for another.

However, according to Moses Goldberg, TYA directing requires certain “considerations.” These considerations for the child audiences do not appear in any of the adult theatre directing research that I found. In fact, the only adult directing book in my research that even mentions children is Keith Slater’s *Directing Amateur Theatre*, yet another salient indicator of where TYA is positioned in the “professional” theatrical hierarchy.

Early children’s theatre practitioners, such as Constance D’Arcy Mackay, Winifred Ward, and Frank M. Whiting, sought to define models or methods for the TYA director, models
that seem to revolve around notions of suitability. However, the obfuscation between theatre with children and theatre for children blurred the lines of a recognizable TYA directing philosophy. For me, these lines remain blurred today.

By the end of the century, however, the TYA directing philosophies of Moses Goldberg and David Wood emerged. Their ideas of TYA directing are modeled after ideas of adult directing, ideas of emotional truth, use of visual imagery, and variety. Yet their considerations offer specific ideas that are not addressed in the works of Harold Clurman, Dean and Carra, or other adult directing texts (McCabe; Morrison). These considerations center on leading the team in respecting the child audience, teaching actors how to handle the audience’s response, emphasis on spectacle and stage movement, and an avoidance of overly sentimental acting. Goldberg’s and Wood’s offerings remain some of the only published TYA directing philosophy, yet, strangely, I have found a lack of discourse regarding these philosophies.

For me, like tenets of the TYA acing philosophies, some of the ideas presented in this chapter represent additional tools from which I can choose when directing theatre for young audiences. These tools, or “considerations,” seem to be rooted in sensitivity for the child audience, an idea that dates back to Mackay and her “suitable” themes. In addition to this sensitivity, TYA directing philosophies appear to place great importance on the director as a “unifier.” Both Goldberg and Wood spend considerable time urging the TYA director to rally and teach his or her company, and to create buy in, particularly in respecting the child audience. However, I am not sure if these ideas constitute a “body of knowledge” specifically for TYA directors, for they seem pertinent to any director. Ultimately, for me, I am interested in why these philosophies or “considerations” exist. Why do ideas of sensitivity, collaboration, and
respect call for more attention in the TYA field? I do not have the answers to these questions, but it is my hope that discourse on the topic of TYA directing will continue.
CHAPTER FIVE: DRAMATIC LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

In 1810, a short, satirical, early Tudor comedy *playscript* called *Jack Juggler* was discovered in the Duke of Devonshire’s library. The play sat neglected on the library shelf for over two-hundred years. Although the author remains unknown, the late TYA playwright and academic, Lowell Swortzell, places the play’s authorship somewhere between 1553 and 1558. This time period coincides with the reign of England’s Edward VI. In her book, *Theatre for Children*, Winifred Ward suggests that Edward, “the boy king,” loved the theatre and that he maintained a group of players for entertainment at the English Court, just as his father Henry VIII did (12).

Based on the coinciding time frame, *Jack Juggler* may have been one of these entertainments. According to Swortzell, *Jack Juggler* is the oldest play intended for children to see, making it “the beginning of children’s theatre in the English-speaking world” (4). However, over three-hundred years later, Mark Twain ostensibly uttered his often quoted declaration: “children’s theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Ward 33). Although it is difficult to pinpoint when playwrights began writing for child audiences, dramatic literature for children was scarce in America at the beginning of the twentieth century but grew steadily in quantity over the next one-hundred years.

This chapter examines the ideas and constructs which have influenced and shaped notions of “quality” TYA literature. I offer these constructs as neither “good” or “bad,” but by identifying and examining them, they illuminate notions of quality of the predominant twentieth-century theorists. Constance D’Arcy Mackay writes that “A good test for a children’s play is its suitability for all occasions” (44). She uses “suitable,” not to refer to subject matter or age
appropriateness, but rather to imply that good children’s scripts should be “effective,” whether they are elaborately performed or simply read. She writes, “A stage-play for child-audiences that cannot be stripped of its ornamental trappings without losing its charm for schoolroom audiences is fundamentally not a play for children” (Mackay 44), prompting me to ask, what are the necessary elements of a “quality” children’s script?

Early Twentieth Century

During the early part of the twentieth century in America, few children’s scripts enjoyed longevity. Laura Gardner Salazar describes the decade between 1900-10, as a professionally active time in which pantomimes, (also known as “extravaganzas” or “spectacles”) like *Humpty Dumpty* and *Mr. Blue Beard* or musicals like *Buster Brown* or *The Wizard of Oz*, proved popular in New York (“Theatre for Young” 26-27). However, despite the plethora of productions, few people considered these plays valuable in a literary sense. During the opening years of the century, the Junior League also emerged (1901), as well as theatrical activities in settlement houses like those of the Children’s Educational Theatre (1903). Both of these groups proved instrumental, intentionally or not, in pulling the TYA field away from “commercialization.” Alice Minnie Herts, founder and director of the Children’s Educational Theatre, had “high standards in selection of plays” (McCaslin, *Theatre for Children* 15), and because of these “high standards”, she earned the respect of of Montrose J. Moses, an editor and critic of the early twentieth century (qtd. in Swortzell 678). Herts relied on Shakespearean classics like *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to introduce her child audience to the theatre. Her work lasted for several years and served as a model for other settlement houses in
New York and other cities. Her standards for choosing children’s scripts were no different than choosing adult scripts.

However, believing there was need for more children’s plays, Montrose J. Moses edited *Treasury of Plays for Children* in 1921. Yet, according to Lowell Swortzell, the plays Moses chose lacked sophistication, and even Moses believed that the plays missed “the spirit, beauty and depth of the theatre” (qtn. in Swortzell 678). Titles such as *Pinkie and the Fairies*, *Ding-a-Ling*, and *The Clown of Doodle-Doo* were ruling the anthologies during the first several decades of the century. Moses later edited two more anthologies, *Another Treasury of Plays for Children* (1926), and *Ring up the Curtain* (1932), as he continued to denounce “poor scripts and amateur playwrights” (Woodson, “Underlying Constructs” 4). Yet, he was fighting a steep uphill battle as he noted in his *Another Treasury of Plays for Children*, “The paucity of children’s plays continues [. . .] and the editor [Moses] has often times been discouraged by the seeming indifference on the part of the writers of children’s plays to attempt anything of an artistic nature” (Moses 604-605). This idea of an “artistic nature,” proves one of the first recognizable, yet ambiguous, markers for “quality” in TYA scripts.

Winifred Ward also emphasized this “artistic nature.” Although not a playwright herself, many of Ward’s philosophies and seminal ideas regarding “quality” children’s theatre remain an influence on the field, even today. Like Mackay, Ward promoted Aristotle’s elements and relied on George P. Baker and William Archer for interpretation of those elements (Ward 79-80).

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> Playwriting for children is governed by the same rules as playwriting for adults. There must be a beginning, a middle and an end. There must be what the Greeks declared was the essence of drama—struggle. The younger son sets out to reach a goal. Three times he is frustrated, but in the end he succeeds. His frustrations and final success may be given in one act or in three acts. But each scene, each bit of dialogue, must speed him on his way, must be built toward a climax.

(qtd. in Lorenz 56)

Mackay almost provides a checklist for quality and goes even further as she identifies a difference between playwriting for adults and playwriting for children:

> Yet there is one rule wherein children’s playwriting differs from adult playwriting; its theme must be one which children will appreciate, its dialogue must be within their comprehension. That is the play must be written for the child mind. It must contain the essence of the things which children think about when they are by themselves. (qtd. in Lorenz 56-57)

This difference is echoed by Ward (in her 1939 book *Theatre for Children*), who also believed that the story should be one in which children can relate. For playwriting guidelines, Ward focuses on Aristotelian ideas and offers these eight essentials for creating a quality children’s script: *exposition*, or background information; *dramatic situation*, or the beginning of the drama; the *complication*, also known as conflict; *suspense*, the audience’s need to know what happens
next; development, forwarding the action; climax, the highest peak of the play; characterization, real characters with which the audience can sympathize; and dialogue, words to tell the story.

Ward appears to combine Aristotle’s six elements of drama and Eugene Scribe’s well-made play structure to create her list of “essentials” for a quality children’s script (Aristotle 50; Jacobus 693).

In her 1950 revised edition of Theatre for Children, Ward offers seven plot considerations derived from a “long and careful study” of child audiences (128-133). Ward uses plot as a quality measurement and posits the following “considerations” as benchmarks. She first believes that the plot must be understood by its audience, and she stresses the importance of choosing an age appropriate story. She believes this is difficult to achieve, because a story that works for younger children will not work for those in junior high school and visa versa. She also posits that the play should start with action already happening. Although this somewhat contradicts her own “exposition” essential, she remains adamant on this point. Ward states, as her third consideration, that the play should build to a climax and then end. She believes that inconclusive and puzzling endings are weak; instead she writes that endings “should be definite, conclusive, and satisfying” (Ward 130). Suspense is Ward’s fourth plot necessity and the use of comedy is the fifth. Too much comedy, she warns, will tire the audience, but deftly woven into a serious play, comedy brings a sense of relaxation to children, thus “heightening their enjoyment.” (Ward 131). Ward’s sixth consideration is eschewing romance and love scenes. She believes that Sleeping Beauty can still marry the prince and live happily ever after, but writers should avoid scenes of love. Mackay, too, offered the same advice years earlier, suggesting love scenes are beyond the child’s range of emotion (48).
Poetic justice is Ward’s final plot consideration. Children, she believes, possess a strong sense of justice, thus she promulgates happy endings where right is rewarded and wrong is punished (Ward 132). On this subject she writes:

Many authors attempt to picture life as it is—and life is too often unjust.

Are we giving our children a wrong picture of life, then, if we choose plays which are characterized by an ideal justice? If so, why not have plays which will prepare them for what they will meet? [. . .]

The reasons we should not do so are very sound. In the first place the child needs to know what right standards of justice are before he is ready to judge right and wrong actions. [. . .]

It is not necessary that a child face all the hard realities of life. Childhood is a time to grow strong in understanding, in right attitudes and appreciations, in sense of values, so that he may be better able to meet disillusionment when it comes. And to this end he should be exposed to what is fine, what is happy, what is ideal. (Ward 132-133)

Others, such as Kenneth L. Graham, followed Ward’s lead on the importance of values in children’s theatre. In his essay, “Values to Children from Good Theatre,” which derived from his 1947 dissertation, Graham posits “values” as markers of quality (27-30). Thirty years later, Jeanne L. Hall also promulgated the importance of values such as positive self image, ethical character, and cultural contrasts, as definitive indicators of quality children’s scripts (8-13).

For me, Ward’s most intriguing challenge to TYA playwrights is to create a children’s theatre of “ideas.” Two distinct sections reference this theatre of “ideas” in the 1950 revised edition of Theatre for Children. The first is titled “Plays Concerning Social Questions” (Ward
and the second one is called “The Drama of Ideas” (Ward 125). Both of these lengthy sections call for children’s dramatic literature that is not afraid to address race problems, war, and social injustices of the world. At the time of her writing, published children’s plays of this nature did not exist. Yet she believed that if plays of this nature were related to the child’s world and free from adult propaganda, there was a place for them in children’s theatre. Such an idea proved courageous for the time, and I believe that ideas like this one, combined with a persuasive personality, make Ward’s philosophies prevalent today.

From the Playground to the Stage

In 1952, Campton Bell wrote in the Children’s Theatre Conference Newsletter that Charlotte Chorpenning was “the most powerful influence in the children’s theatre movement in this country” (qtd. in Bedard, “Charlotte” 85). During the twenty-year period preceding that year, Charlotte Chorpenning wrote and produced a prodigious body of work at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. According to Roger Bedard, Chorpenning single-handedly “doubled the mid-century repertoire of American children’s plays” (“Charlotte” 92). She wrote at least fifty-five plays for children, and her formulaic structure provided an ostensible paragon of quality for others to follow. It was this generation of children’s playwrights, according to Bedard, that took the field from the “playground” of the settlement houses and recreation centers, and returned it to the stage where it belonged (Dramatic 7).

While working at the Goodman, Chorpenning conducted extensive studies on her child audiences. She enlisted university students, as well as parents, to observe audience reactions, all at the same time, from different vantage points, so that she could make conclusions on “how to create, build and release suspense, and also, how to control excitement” (Bedard, “Charlotte”)
She used this data to create a model for writing children’s plays, a model that was later copied by other writers throughout the century.

In 1954, under the encouragement of publisher Sara Spencer, Chorpenning published *Twenty-One Years with Children’s Theatre*. In this book, she lists twenty-eight “rules” or procedures for writing a good, or quality children’s play. Of these rules, Carol Louise Lorenz lists the following as being the most important, because Chorpenning repeatedly stressed them as being necessary guidelines (Lorenz 118). The first rule is that *the protagonist should be a character with whom the audience can identify*. Children’s playwrights often offer stories which the audience will view through the protagonist’s eyes. Playwright and director Pamela Sterling posits that TYA “explores the world through a youthful perspective and/or speaks in the voice of a young person” (qtd. in Bedard, “TYA Questions” 15). This idea not only speaks to what makes a play TYA, but also what makes a quality TYA play. Chorpenning’s next rule is that *the end of the story must be contained in the beginning*. According to Lorenz, this was manifested in Chorpenning’s characters. At the beginning of her plays, she strove to define which characters were “good” and which were “bad,” thus, ultimately revealing their destiny of poetic justice. *The story never stops* was Chorpenning’s third rule. It would appear that this rule stems from Aristotle’s unity of time, or how future theorists interpreted Aristotle’s unity of time. Unity of time has often suggested adherence to real time (Carlson 40), and Chorpenning’s plays adhered to that (Lorenz 122-125).

Her fourth rule was to *show rather than tell*. Chorpenning believed that the conflict of the play should be shown on the stage, rather than spoken in the dialogue. She also insisted that actors use their entire body as much as possible to physicalize the action. The fifth and final rule that Lorenz identifies is the importance of the *mise en scène*. Every element, the blocking,
gestures, costumes, set, properties, sound, and lights must work together to tell the story correctly. This emphasis on movement and the physical, as well as pulling all of the theatrical elements together is echoed in the seventies by playwright Moses Goldberg, and then again in the nineties by playwright David Wood, indicating that Chorpenning’s ideas of quality enjoyed longevity.

Writers and producers copied Chorpenning’s style and formula throughout the forties and fifties. Most of these copies, according to Roger Bedard, were not of the same caliber as Chorpenning’s. As the second half of the century progressed, there were some who fervently rejected the use of rules and formulas when writing plays. In the 1970s, Moses Goldberg would write:

Rules and formulas may be stimulating to a genius, but are usually stifling to anyone else. Their worst fault is that they lead to dreary uniformity. The rules dictate the plays. Gone is the unifying force of the playwright’s vision. Substituted is an external judgment, applied a priori to limit or discourage innovation. Where are the serious artists who write to express their own vision; where are the experimental plays that explore the playwright’s powers of communication; where are the honest dramas created from a playwright’s imagination and tailored to a growing mind? For the most part, they are not in the children’s theatre. (122)

Nonetheless, Chorpenning’s fairy-tale formula remained a paragon of quality through the end of the century. In 1998, Coleman Jennings’ anthology, Theatre for Young Audiences, posited twenty-four playwriting “essentials” that bear resemblance to rules of the past (Theatre 2-5).
In addition to her plays, Chorpenning’s notions of quality greatly influenced other playwrights, who also contributed to the quantity of children’s dramatic literature in the twentieth century. “For the first time in the history of the genre, people were attempting to teach the skills necessary for writing children’s plays and to outline what they considered to be appropriate formalistic elements of such plays” (Bedard, *Dramatic* 10).

*Sara Spencer*

Children’s Theatre Press founder and publisher Sara Spencer wrote:

> Oh the plays that need to be written! Plays with characters so real they would touch our souls with love, with understanding, with compassion. Plays with plots so inevitable they could turn out no other way, whether good or ill. Plays with language so poignantly used that the result would be pure poesy. Plays with ideas so brave, so compelling, they could light the way for a new generation. Plays so pregnant with extended meanings they would give rise to divine music. Plays so rich with imagery they would call for new breakthroughs in designing, costuming, lighting. Plays that would establish the children’s theatre as an art form.

(“A Word” 69)

By the time Spencer penned these words, Charlotte Chorpenning’s prodigious body of work was almost complete. Many of Chorpenning’s plays were published by Spencer’s Children’s Theatre Press. Spencer was a huge advocate of Chorpenning, and of her fairy-tale model of quality. “The fairy tales are classics. Their stories are woven of the stuff that enchants children, and each generation has found new meanings in them. [. . .] We salute the fairy tales. Long may they
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reign” (“A Word” 68). However, the manifold titles that the press released throughout the years prove that Spencer did not wish the children’s theatre solely confined to the fairy-tale genre.5

In a 1961 essay entitled “Writing Plays for Children,” Spencer offered three basic principles for every playwright, the first of which is a genuine respect for the child audience.

Spencer posits that there are only a few playwrights who hold children in the proper regard. She singles out Chorpenning as being the only one who has “brought to the work the artist’s acceptance of responsibility for developing a high degree of professional craftsmanship” (Spencer, “Writing” 99).

Her second principle is a complete command of theatre craftsmanship, and again, Spencer lauds Chorpenning as an exemplary artist. A thorough and complete theatre background is necessary. According to Spencer, it is important for a playwright to possess knowledge and understanding of the classics, even if just to deviate from them. In addition, Spencer also stresses the importance of “entertainment,” which she believes is the number one goal of the theatre.

Her third and final principle is that the playwright should possess an adventurous spirit. Here Spencer suggests that children’s theatre goes a dimension beyond adult theatre. She challenges playwrights to begin thinking in new and adventurous ways. Spencer writes:

The child’s mind is a mysterious and wonderful place, a child lives hand in hand in poetry. To speak to him, one needs not only new story material. One needs

5 The Anchorage Press, formerly the Children’s Theatre Press, web cite offers the complete catalogue of plays which spans a wide range of style and subject matter. Please see http://www.applays.com for a list of plays that are outside the fairy-tale genre.
new styles, new patterns of décor, new breeds of character, new planes of meaning, for a good play must give a child something to grow to. (“Writing” 100)

While Spencer offered these three principles for children’s playwrights, she also acknowledged that the current playwriting practices (those in 1961) fell dramatically short in meeting these principles (“Writing” 101). In 1966, Spencer changed the name of her press from The Children’s Theatre Press to Anchorage Press, The International Agency of Plays for Young People. This name change reflected the international “direction” she was going with her work. In the late 1950s, Spencer began importing plays from other countries. These plays, according to Spencer, “demand more of our producers than our American playwrights have dared to ask” (qtd. in Krzys 153). She was challenging playwrights in the field to expand the repertoire of plays and go beyond fairy-tales, one-dimensionality, and simple right and wrong stories. Sara Spencer’s challenge led to a “genre of theatre for youth [that] more than ever before reflects the trends of contemporary adult theatre, and demand[s] that its audience examine a whole area of grey” (Jennings, and Berghammer). This trend set new standards for quality in the coming decades.

The “Adultification” of Children’s Theatre

In 1988, during a joint conference of Theatre Communications Group (TCG) and the International Association of Theater for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ/USA), four professional children’s theatres banded together to create what would be called the New Generation Play Project (NGPP). The project’s purpose was to attract and commission some of America’s most talented “adult” theatre playwrights to create “a body of superior dramatic works” that would “create a lasting legacy of first-class scripts for young people and families” (Jennings, Eight Plays 2-3). I do not know if the resulted works were “superior” in quality, yet
the project itself serves as proof that many professional TYA leaders believed that a paucity of quality scripts existed for children. Theatre professor Alexis Greene asserted that NGPP sought not only to attract established adult playwrights to the TYA field, but also to “broaden the range and tenor of this branch of literature” (9). For some practitioners, this meant erasing the lines between children’s theatre and adult theatre all together. Noted TYA playwright, Suzan Zeder, writes:

The operant philosophy upon which I have based my work is the belief that there is no such thing as playwriting for children’s theatre. There are those who consider writing for children to be a specialized form, somehow different from writing for any other potential audience. Such a consideration can be degrading to both the form and the audience; and endangers in me the same rage I feel when well-meaning colleagues ask when I am going to write an adult, and therefore serious play. I am a playwright plain and simple. (qtd. in Lorenz 274)

Zeder’s rhetoric echoes in debates over the past twenty-five years, as TYA practitioners continually struggle to earn and gain respect from the adult theatre community. And indeed the TYA field gained some ground, and one reason for this is the ever-changing idea of what is suitable for the child audience. In the 1970s and 80s, more and more children’s plays with serious themes began to emerge, and with plays like *Step on a Crack* and *Doors*, Suzan Zeder led the way.

The last twenty-five years of the twentieth century saw dramatic change in what many in the TYA field considered to be a quality children’s script, and the serious themes that the
“today” plays explored emerged as a salient and common element that defined quality; this element is one that is still prevalent today. In the introduction to *Seattle Children’s Theatre: Six Plays for Young Audiences*, John Dillon asserts:

The world can be a scary place, and theatre that tries to deny that doesn’t really help anymore than entertainments that flow with mindless violence do. Yes, there are frightening things out there but watching young people on stage working through them, learning how to cope with them through love, courage and honesty can only help prepare our new generation for the world we’re leaving them. (x)

John Clark Donohue, playwright and founder of the Children’s Theatre Company, was in the forefront of this movement toward equating quality with serious themes. His work, throughout the 1970s, challenged the “cardboard cut out” preconceptions of children’s theatre. He posited that children were interested in such serious themes as growing older, death, birth, love, and sex, subjects that were, for some, taboo (Donohue 85). Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans address this TYA transformation in their text *Theatre, Children and Youth*. Under the section headings of “Greater Freedom for Playwrights,” “An Expanding Repertoire,” and “Restrictions Fade,” Davis and Evans discuss the increasing number of published and produced children’s scripts that address subjects of death, murder, aggression, violence, and sex (93-112). Serious themes were becoming analogous with quality.

Yet with these serious, or mature, themes also came an argument for suitability. TYA plays that explore the more difficult struggles of the human condition continue to cause

6 Catherine Dezseran, Ph.D. classifies the serious-themed plays of the 70s and 80s as “today” plays in her 1986
controversy. However, this is also true in adult theatre. Is this trend yet another indicator that TYA is “growing up?” Suzan Zeder suggests that TYA plays should reside in a world of risk and that playwrights must not be afraid to be catalysts for social change. She writes:

One of the primary functions of the arts throughout history has been to serve as a form of antibiotic for the ills of society; to create an irritant to the system that upsets the status quo and calls attention to the fact that something needs attention.

(Zeder 25)

And she is not alone in her beliefs. The past twenty-five years of theatre for young audiences has explored issues of racism, slavery, genocide, suicide, disease, divorce, and sexuality. Plays like Zeder’s *Step on A Crack*, Brian Kral’s *One to Grow On*, and Aurand Harris’ *The Arkansas Bear* paved the way for even more serious works like Kim Hines’ *Home on the Mornin’ Train*, Kathryn Shultz Miller’s *A Thousand Cranes*, David Saar’s *The Yellow Boat*, James Still’s *And Then They Came for Me*, and most recently Still’s *The Village Fable*, Steven Dietz’s *The Remember*, Jose Cruz Gonzalez’s *Salt and Pepper*, and Laurie Brooks’ *The Wrestling Season*. All of these popular TYA plays deal with serious and mature issues. The popularity of these scripts suggests that mature themes exemplify quality in TYA literature.

However, some people question the purposes of such work. In a letter to the editor of *American Theatre*, James Breckenridge writes:

It is easy to commend children’s theatres [. . .] that have sought to “establish an atmosphere of professionalism [and] set high standards for their artists.”

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Youth Theatre Journal article, “Form and Content in Plays Dealing with Serious Subject Matter.”
However, when “the reality of the child’s world” is equated with plays specifically focused on topics such as “poverty, violence, prejudice, and disease,” I believe they are offering our children a dirty glass and one that is only half full. It presents our children with a darkly unbalanced view. (3)

Breckenridge alludes to a previous issue of *American Theatre*, which applauded the “serious” direction that TYA plays, such as David Saar’s *The Yellow Boat*, were going. Breckenridge further states:

> The theatres in your article seem to feel that the “real world” can only be experienced through the failures of a society, rather through its success, and that beauty, poetry and fulfilled dreams exist, for the most part, only in fairy tales. (3)

Roger Bedard interprets Breckenridge’s voice as one that calls for TYA to operate in “appropriate” and “order-maintaining” ways, ways that offer “safe, traditional subject matter and stories presented in traditional ways” (“Negotiating Marginalization” 92). Bedard also refers to Breckenridge as a “protectionist.” Ten years earlier, Suzan Zeder suggested that protectionists were “enemies of art and education” (Zeder 28).

Of course, the “adultification” of children’s theatre does not mean that TYA is responsible for the “adultification” of childhood. Modern society, in its effort to prepare its youth for adulthood, pushes its young to grow up fast. In a techno-pop culture filled with media violence and sexual advertising, twenty-first century children are more exposed to the adult realities of the world much more than even the baby-boom generation. This growing sophistication of children has been occurring for some time. Neil Postman, in his 1983 book, *Disappearance of Childhood*, attributes this growing sophistication to the television, which offers adolescence the same viewing content and information that it does to adults (124).
However, television cannot account for the all of the modern problems our adolescence face today. Today’s youth struggle with drugs and diseases that were not common or prevalent thirty years ago. David Saar’s play, *The Yellow Boat*, serves as a case in point. Originally produced by Childsplay Theatre in 1993, *The Yellow Boat* tells the true story of David Saar’s hemophiliac son, Benjamin, who tragically died after contracting the AIDS virus in the 1980’s from a blood transfusion.

Is a serious and mature themed play, such as *The Yellow Boat*, suitable for children? That question proves too big for me to examine here. Nonetheless, it is clear that elements of tragedy have made their way to theatre for young audiences. Serious, mature, adult themes have entangled themselves within the fabric of a new TYA, one whose content is concerned with social questions and exploration of the human condition. Winifred Ward’s vision of a “Drama of Ideas” may have finally been realized, and have become equated with “quality” in dramatic literature for children.

**Closing**

I once had the opportunity to perform in Russell Vandenbroucke’s *Holiday Memories*, under the direction of Libby Appel at the Indiana Repertory Theatre. Adapted from Truman Capote’s two short stories, *The Thanksgiving Visitor* and *A Christmas Memory*, this play was full of rich poetic language and multi-dimensional characters. I truly believed we offered theatrical art to the young audiences of Indianapolis. I equated this rich language and these multi-layered characters with quality. Looking back, I recognize the irrelevance this story had to the audience; it was not significant to them. I wonder if this audience, which was comprised of mostly inner-city youths, related to the boyhood troubles of Truman Capote, growing up in the 1930s, rural
Alabama. How was this relevant to their world and their lives? In retrospect, I question if that was a “good” play for that particular audience. For me, Mackay, Ward, and Chorpenning’s idea of a story that is significant to the audience shines through as an essential element of a “quality” children’s play.

Philosophies of what makes a good children’s script in the twentieth century are tensioned between three distinct, yet sometimes interwoven, constructs. The first, I believe, is exemplified by Constance D’Arcy Mackay and Winifred Ward, who provided almost a checklist for adherence to Aristotelean structure and purpose for a model of quality scripts. This model survived throughout the century as Aurand Harris, one of America’s most produced TYA playwrights, states:

You have a main character. That main character wants something, tries to get it, there’s trouble, there are climaxes. There are all of these complications and then finally he or she overcomes all of that. Then we have an ending that is satisfying.

(qtd. in Corey, Aurand 18)

However, Ward and Mackay also offered two distinct ideas, emphasis and interrogation of plot—particularly one in which “children” can relate—and the importance of poetic justice. These ideas carry over into the second construct, one categorized by the plays and playwriting “rules” of Charlotte Chorpenning. Her fairy-tale plots—stories that children ostensibly related too—and her character identification and ideas of poetic justice, would serve, along with her structure, as a formula for other playwrights to follow.

The final construct was birthed by the challenge issued by Sara Spencer. Her challenge to TYA playwrights to explore new and deeper territories ushered in a school of playwrights who tackled social issues that Winifred Ward wrote about decades earlier. The themes, themselves,
did not equate quality, but rather, their *seriousness* did. For the first time, the writing trends of dramatic literature for children shifted toward adultification, and the mature themed “today” plays proved popular, with their reflections of struggling humanity.

While suitability remains a point of contention in the TYA field, controversy is a part of *all* theatre. The serious elements found in many “today” plays are equated with an increase in quality as Catherine Dezseran noted in 1986: “There appears to be some evidence that the use of truthfully presented serious subject matter may be aiding in the growing sophistication of theatre for young as an art” (9). And this trend continued through the turn of the century as evidenced in recent *Back Stage* articles like “Theatre for Young Audiences: More Adult Than Ever” (Horwitz), which posit the idea that “adult” theatre equals quality, and children’s theatre is moving in that direction. However, “quality” should not be confused with audience popularity; scripts based on famous literary stories, picture books, and fairy-tales are still thriving in contemporary professional theatres for young audiences. But what some in the TYA consider “high art” or truly meaningful, contemporary, cutting edge work is often based on the continuing struggles of the human condition.

My personal beliefs of what makes a good children’s play continues to evolve. This study has inspired me to deliberately avoid *one* standardized checklist or formula for writing a play for children. But, perhaps the most significant issue that continues to shift my thought process is the adultification of children’s dramatic literature. I suspect this shifting is due to the evolving notions of suitability and serious themes. I believe that the plays that have themes that are pertinent to the audience, child and adult, are the plays that are most significant; and the plays that have themes of gravity, themes of “serious and lasting significance in humanity’s
spiritual, moral, and intellectual life” (Cohen, *Theatre* 421), are the plays on which I most often wish to work. These are the TYA plays that I believe to be of the highest quality.
CHAPTER SIX: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PRACTICE

This chapter examines twenty-first century children’s theatre practice at the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival (OSF), the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC), and the Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT). This examination is not indicative or exemplary of all the work of these artists or theatres, but rather exemplifies the practices of three specific projects at three specific TYA theatres at a specific time in history. Put more simply, I have constructed my own snapshot of theatre for young audiences in Orlando, Seattle, and Minneapolis in the summer of 2006, as it relates to the twentieth-century published philosophy on TYA acting, directing, and dramatic literature. I am interested in how the various notions of quality of the past compare to the various notions of quality and practices of the present.

Part One: Acting at The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival

The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival was founded in 1989 by Dr. Stuart Omans. In its seventeen year history, the festival has produced forty-one main stage Shakespeare productions. Their mission and vision statements read:

With Shakespeare as our standard and inspiration, the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival produces bold professional theater, develops new plays, and provides innovative educational experiences that enrich our community. [. . .] Our vision is to create a theater of extraordinary quality that encourages the actor/audience relationship, embraces the passionate use of language, and ignites the imagination. Our goal is to be a nationally recognized destination theater offering productions and education year round for all audiences. (Orlando-UCF)
The festival is currently located about twenty miles north of Walt Disney World in Loch Haven Cultural Park and is housed in the relatively new fifty thousand square foot John and Rita Lowndes Shakespeare Center. According to its web site, the festival is one of the top ten in size and length of season in the county and currently has an operating budget of 2.2 million dollars. It boasts a six-show main stage season, a new play festival, and an education department that works with both adults and children through outreach and in-house programs. In addition to its six main stage shows, the festival currently offers a three-show TYA season, which, this year, includes *Peter Rabbit*, *Miss Nelson has a Field Day*, and *Really Rosie*.

OSF operates under an agreement with the Actor’s Equity Association (AEA), the union for professional stage managers and actors. The specific type of AEA contract the theatre employs is known as an SPT contract, which stands for *small professional theatre*. The SPT contract is popular throughout the country (outside of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) for small theatres that want to employ AEA actors, but it allows these theatres to use both union and nonunion performers. However, OSF does not utilize a union contract in its TYA season. Both CTC, and SCT (and numerous other theatres that produce children’s theatre throughout the country) utilize an equity agreement known as the TYA contract. Although OSF employs AEA actors on its adult stage, it does not on its TYA stage. I note this here because some theatre

7 The festival has also utilized the LORT, or *League of Resident Theatres* contract when producing at the large Lake Eola Amphitheatre.

professionals cite AEA status as an indicator of quality acting (Maifeld Interview, Giomi Interview).

Methodology and Technique

From my research, I have concluded that twentieth-century philosophy on TYA acting is characterized by tensions between representational and presentational performance. The latter’s tenets include physical ability, special skills, and an acute audience awareness, while the former is based in actions, belief, and verisimilitude. I examine those tensions through OSF’s production of Peter Rabbit.

Just after the performance of Peter Rabbit, my oldest daughter and I rushed to its star, Brandon Roberts, to get an autograph. I asked him how he was enjoying the experience. “It’s going well,” he replied, “but I am really hungry for some verbs.” When we met a few weeks later I asked him what he meant.

In an ideal situation a director would say, “okay right now you are trying to get sympathy; instead of trying to get sympathy, try to manipulate Mother Rabbit.” That’s an ideal verb that I’d like to get from a director. Whereas often times, and a lot lately, I’ll get, “be more whiny,” or “do it like so and so,” or “do it like Bugs Bunny.” [. . .] That takes a lot of power away from the actor, and therefore the character [. . .] That’s basically what I mean by being hungry for verbs, because there has been a drought of them lately. (Roberts Interview)

For me, Robert’s definition obfuscates the line between the duties of the actor and the duties of the director. Nonetheless, Robert’s description of choosing actions, or “verbs,” lines up with the popular techniques found in books like Acting is Believing (McGraw 42) and A Beginning
Actors Companion (Pate 33). In the latter, authors Susan Pate, Randy Wonjong, and Donna Breed call these verbs (or actions) “tactics.” This is also the case in Robert Cohen’s Acting One. All three of these acting texts remain popular among actor training programs across the county.

My own training taught me to choose a verb—this is my action, an action I will do to a partner. I then choose an adverb—this is my tactic, the way I will play that verb. At any rate, although the terminology differs, the meaning and process for acting a role are similar. For me, casting director Michael Shurtleff captures the essence of this theory:

> Maximum conflict is what you should be looking for. Who is interfering with your getting what you are fighting for? Do battle with her, fight her, woo her, charm her revile her. Find as many ways as you can to go about getting what you are fighting for. The more ways you find, the more interesting your performance will be. (43)

Robert’s comments reside in the “doing rather than being” realm of modern acting theory, which has deep roots in the Stanislavski system. However, Roberts never mentioned “physical actions” in our discussion of technique and methodology. Nonetheless his highly physical performance and his confessed lack of action verb-use, suggest to me that his character was created through experimentations with physical actions, thus utilizing an Outside/In approach as described in Rosenberg’s and Prendergast’s A Sense of Occasion (96-100). His physicalizations, rather than verbs, became the underpinning of his character. The way he moved, postured, and gestured were instrumental in creating the audience empathy, at least for me. Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans define empathy as audience identification with the character, which is the sole responsibility of the actor (176). Robert Cohen writes, “When empathy is present, the audience experiences what is often called the ‘magic’ of theatre” (Theatre 22).
The other actors in *Peter Rabbit* also created specific and unique ways of standing and moving, which made each of them distinct. RK Possum twisted her hips and swayed her bent arms back and forth with every slow and careful step she took. Charlene C. Skunk gracefully strode across the stage with both her nose and her rear purposely pointed upward in an affected sort of manner. And Mother Rabbit showed her maturity with a low center of gravity, yet still walked with energy, purpose, and intent in a slightly bow-legged manner. Roberts, as Peter, demonstrated deliberate physical choices with every movement. He displayed all of the physical skills that Rosenberg and Prendergast proffer as basic, which include the ability to “walk, turn, kneel, crouch, lie down, rise, and run” (69). Roberts, however, demonstrated further skill as he executed stage tumbles, choreographed fights, and the climbing of scenery. These numerous “special skills”, as well as the other actors’ emphasis on the characters outward physicalities, further indicate an Outside/In physical approach to creating their characters. David Wood suggests the “physical” part of character development to be an excellent starting point (182).

Stamina and physical strength were also evident in this production. Roberts excelled in this area as he zigzagged and crisscrossed the playing space at high speeds. While I did not see Roberts appear tired or out of breath, he admitted that the show was physically demanding.

*Peter Rabbit* runs at about fifty minutes, and I am more tired at the end of that fifty minutes than I think I’ve been at the end of any show I’ve ever done. It’s the style that we’ve adopted for the world, it’s a very Warner Brothers cartoon style, and Peter runs around a lot. (Roberts Interview)

Robert’s comments exemplify the type of physical conditioning and stamina needed to perform many TYA roles, agreeing with the ideas of David Wood and Moses Goldberg. However, equating stamina, physical strength, and physicalizations with quality is not indigenous to
children’s theatre. The venerable Sir Laurence Olivier once said, “Of the basic elements necessary to acting, the most important are stamina and actual physical strength” (qtd. in Rosenberg, and Prendergast 70).

I also observed the vocal aspects of Peter Rabbit. At times throughout the show, the actors used their voices to create a variety of animal noises and sounds, including screeches, hoots, howls and other abstract rumblings. However, the overall tenor of sound lacked bass. All of the actors possessed higher pitched reed-like voices, which ultimately produced a lack of vocal variety. Often the vocal quality of the show sounded one-dimensional. Although vocal strength, intensity, and variety are important tools for the actor, twentieth-century philosophy offers very little discussion on them, especially compared to the “physical.” However, David Wood addresses this some as he identifies “a singsong voice” as major pitfall for the actor to avoid (228). In Peter Rabbit, this singsong quality was evident in the voices of Mother Rabbit, RK Possum, and Charlene C. Skunk.

The range of an actor emerged as an important idea in twentieth-century TYA acting philosophy. This refers to not only the physical range or ability, but also the emotional range. For example, according to David Wood, a character like the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of Oz is indeed cowardly, but there must be more to him than that to make him interesting (231).

There must be range and depth of emotion. This type of range, from my observations, appeared to be missing from Peter Rabbit. For example, Farmer Mac has the objective of capturing Peter. The actor portraying this character, keeping it simple, commits to that objective by making choices that always seem to relate, at least outwardly, to capturing the rabbit. However, according to David Wood, Farmer Mac should possess other qualities beyond his desire to capture Peter. While Farmer Mac’s intentions are clear, he is missing the multiple
layers that make up an interesting and believable character, one to which the audience might relate, or empathize with in a way that transcends, “That’s the guy who wants to get the rabbit.”

Herein lies the actor pitfall to which both Goldberg and Wood so often allude. It is a pitfall of neglecting to develop multi-layered emotional characters that develop and grow throughout the action of the play. David Wood contends that the reason for this neglect is that many actors believe that they must play “children’s theatre” characters in a “jokey” or “silly” way (225). The actors who do this fail to take the story and characters seriously, and, therefore, rely on surface information; they never dig deeper than the obvious.

In addition, the actors in Peter Rabbit are portraying children, animal children. According to Roberts, animals and child characters are red flags for many actors. In his own observations, he has notes that actors have difficulty capturing the essence of child characters:

And it always reads to me, if I’m in the audience, as that’s an adult playing at being a kid. [. . .] With playing kids, I think actors rely on general observation. You can go to the playground and watch kids play, but for the most part, it’s just incredibly difficult to get on stage and use your bag of tricks, things that always work for every kid, because every kid is so different. It’s hard to pin point specific things that every kid does. And I don’t know, it may just be my imagination, but it seems like there are a handful of things that a lot of actors kind of fall back on, when they’re playing kids. (Roberts Interview)

He admits he has a bit of fear when trying to develop youthful characters:

This is a scary thing, because you’ve got actors in their twenties, suddenly being asked to play eight-year olds. This is impossible, because I don’t remember how I
acted when I was eight. I don’t know anyone who really does, and can honestly capture that. (Roberts Interview)

Roberts’ contention that some actors merely posture their characters when portraying children, is also evident in *Peter Rabbit*. For some reason, there exists an idea that creating a child character is different from creating and developing any other character, such as an old man, a drunk, an animal, or a tree. This is what actor’s do—create characters; age is but one of the given circumstances. Roberts says that he tries to focus on objectives rather than age.

One of the most apparent TYA acting tenets of published philosophy found in OSF’s production of *Peter Rabbit* is its audience participatory nature. This tenet is posited and discussed in detail as a marker of “quality” by both Jed H. Davis and Moses Goldberg. For the most part, the actors in *Peter Rabbit* appeared comfortable in handling the unpredictable responses from the audience. However, there were moments in the production when the audience participation seemed forced. This was always a moment when the audience was asked to help with an action and make a specific choice. Yet, often it was not an action or choice that was germane to the play’s story, and, therefore, to me, seemed contrived. Roberts commented on the practice of involving the audience in this manner:

All of a sudden the audience finds itself saying, “This is the part where you make the noise like the elephant, everybody make the elephant noise.” The audience is asked to do this even though they may have just been seeing a dark show with a serious theme. They have invested into this one world, and now they have to hum along with a song in a completely different world. For some reason, some people feel that they have to do that sort of thing to make it entertaining for kids, and it’s just not true. (Roberts Interview)
This production, as well as others at the festival, demonstrates that some TYA practitioners believe that “quality” means getting the audience to participate.

However, this is only one part of the participatory nature of *Peter Rabbit*. The other part is the actor’s, specifically Robert’s, ability to play off the response of the audience. At a critical moment in the show, Peter, Robert’s character, is faced with a dilemma when trying to decide if he should enter a cage to get a carrot. Peter asked the audience if he should go in. Dramatic irony was evident as the audience knew this was a trap. They reply that he should not enter the cage. Often times, however, the audience was ahead of the action as they shouted to Peter before he even asked a question. In these situations, Roberts admitted that he cut a line or two to keep the integrity of the character/audience relationship. Goldberg stresses that the actor acquire this very skill as he writes, “It is also wise to prepare for cuts at high tension moments. If the audience anticipates a reaction or an event, it is foolish to continue with it as rehearsed” (150). Thus, according to Goldberg, a “quality” actor knows how to handle the audience’s responses. I know that Roberts has never read Goldberg’s words, but through experience, he has learned to apply their meaning.

Both Suzan Zeder and Moses Goldberg offer their ideal theatre models that would erase the distinction between “children’s theatre” and “adult theatre,” and according to its mission, the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival appears to aim for that mold. Zeder believes that it is up to regional theatres, like the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival, to expand its definition of audience by producing quality works that speak to a “multigenerational focus,” thus expunging the title, “children’s theatre,” altogether (qtd.in Greene 12). Indeed, with its growing TYA program, the Shakespeare Festival would appear to be on this track. However, according to Goldberg’s model, there should not be a separate set of actors for the children’s stage than the
ones who perform on the adult stage (165), a contention to which the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival does not adhere.

**Part Two: Directing at the Children’s Theatre Company**

In 2003, the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre was awarded to the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This event marked the first time in the history of that award, that a children’s theatre was the recipient, and CTC joined the ranks of regional theatres such as Yale Repertory, Arena Stage, and the Guthrie. The New York theatre community appeared to acknowledge the idea that children’s theatre was “growing up.” However, it was not just the New York theatre community that recognized theatre for young audiences; mainstream America noticed as well. In fact, one year after winning the Tony Award, CTC was recognized in the number one spot in *Time* magazine’s list of leading children’s theatres in America. Today, CTC serves as a model for other theatres throughout the country. TYA organizations are emerging in cities like Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, and Orlando, and according to CTC’s artistic director Peter Brosius, artists and administrators from these organizations have traveled to Minneapolis to see how the CTC machine works (Brosius Interview).

**Peter Brosius and Notions of Quality**

The time I spent interviewing Peter Brosius turned into an informal stream of conscious conversation about TYA and directing philosophy. Although he sits at the artistic helm of one of the most prestigious children’s theatres in the world, Brosius makes it clear that his background is not in “children’s theatre,” but rather “theatre.” However, his professional experiences over
the past two decades suggest otherwise. Before joining CTC, he held the artistic director position, first at the Mark Taper Forum’s Improvisational Theatre Project, and then at The Honolulu Theatre for Youth, both of which primarily serve young people. Nonetheless, his training at NYU was not in children’s theatre or TYA, but in directing.

Brosius considers himself a strong advocate for young people. Although he did not use the word “respect,” a word that is ubiquitous in TYA philosophy and discourse, he does believe that if you are an artist in the TYA field, your work will be more meaningful if you are an advocate for the youth that make up your audience. His face showed thoughtful concern and sobriety when talking about the struggles of twenty-first century youth, struggles with education, drug abuse, poverty, and healthcare. He believes that the artists at CTC have a responsibility to make socially relevant theatre of the highest possible quality. “Our job is none other than to make simply the best theatre in the United States” (Brosius Interview). And this theatre is for an under served class of people, for according to Brosius, “Children are America’s underclass” (”Can Theatre” 74). Under his guidance, CTC is committed to addressing current critical issues of today’s youth. In an American Theatre interview with Kate Sullivan, he states, “We have a responsibility to directly engage the cultural language and iconography of the time we live in, and show that brilliant theatre can be made out of stories of the immediate moment” (qtd. in Sullivan 50). Brosius is resolute in his steadfast belief that “Good theatre is good theatre” (qtd in Sullivan 50). And he has held this belief for some time. In the early nineties, while working at the Mark Taper Forum, he contended that TYA artists overemphasize the needs of the child audience rather than focusing on creating the best possible theatre (Greene 12).

As an artist, Brosius seems to be driven by art that is rooted in social issues and his aesthetic bends toward more serious themed projects. Of the ten plays offered in CTC’s 2006-07
season, Brosius will direct only one, *The Lost Boys of the Sudan*, a new work that deals with three boys fleeing the horrors of war, while trying to cope with cultural differences. Other recent social issue works include *Snap Shot Silhouettes*, about the tensions between African American Somalians; *Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, which criticizes Catholicism and neocolonialism; and *A Village Fable*, which examines ideas of communal brutality, intolerance, and suicide. It is in discussing plays like these that Brosius’ pathos emerges. Furthermore, his self acknowledged epic theatre influence is evident as his productions often employ Brechtian distance and possess non-linear stories. In fact, his advice to those entering the TYA field is that “they should read Brecht [. . .] and they should read about theatre, and not necessarily about theatre for young people” (Brosius Interview). While his penchant for social issue works do not illuminate his directing methodology, they do give insight to his philosophy as a prominent twenty-first century TYA director.

He has also been influenced by the avant-garde and adult experimental theatre. This is also true of European TYA companies. This is ironic, because American TYA is often influenced by European TYA. For example, Brosius notes that the Dutch are often lauded at ASSITEJ (International Association of Theater for Children and Young People) festivals for quality TYA work. Yet many Dutch producers have been influenced by the work of the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, and other American experimental artists. Linda Hartzell, artistic director for the Seattle Children’s Theatre, makes the irony even more curious as she posits that some American adult experimental theatre has roots in American TYA. Hartzell states, “The kind of thing Mary Zimmerman did in ‘Metamorphoses,’ we’ve been doing for years, in such productions as ‘Tale of Two Cities,’ and ‘Romeo and Juliet’” (qtd. in Horwitz 30). Hartzell implies that directing in adult theatre has mimicked the quality of TYA directing.
Brosius’ proclivity to social issue plays is directly related to theatre for social change. In fact, Brosius acknowledges the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Teatro Campesino as his early influences. Both of these groups have produced “Guerilla Theatre” and can be classified under a theatre for social change genre, yet Brosius merely views them as “companies that advocate for and care deeply about a community” (qtd. in Sullivan 50). And that appears to be his philosophy with CTC as well. Brosius seems intent on directing theatre that will create action, an intent that is reminiscent of Brecht:

We make theater to help our audience see that the world is knowable, malleable, and demands critical thinking. We make theater so that young people will realize that there is tremendous power in their imagination. If they embrace that power, they can change the world. (Brosius 75)

One of Brosius’ goals as artistic director is to create work that is “radically different from one piece to the next” (Brosius Interview). Eschewing “cookie-cutter” children’s theatre, Brosius commits to creating artistically distinct and different paths for each of CTC’s productions. This focus on variety is evident with the artists as well. Drawing resources from the avant-garde, European children’s theatre, opera, visual art, Japanese animation, and the hip-hop music world, CTC has collaborated with artists from numerous mediums and genres, making it an inimitable theatre for youth. This method implies a “quality” that is difficult to define, due to its variety.

Brosius is also concerned with the physical nature of theatre. Again, he calls on Brecht for inspiration. According to Brosius, Brecht would invite a child to watch a rehearsal through a
glass window. The child could see the actors, but not hear them. After a run through, Brecht would ask the child to tell him about the show. If the child could not tell him the story, Brecht knew he had more work to do physically. This exercise is in line with Brosius’ philosophy. He believes it is important for the actors to tell the story with their bodies. In the book, *Children’s Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method*, Moses Goldberg also advocates this idea. In addition to promoting the use of mime and even masks, Goldberg believes that the actor should be able to communicate clearly without words, using *only* his body. “The actor who can only talk well is not useful in a children’s play. The actor who intends to work for children must therefore develop his expressive movement through formal training and a continual awareness that there is more to communication than words” (Goldberg 164).

In my interview with Peter Brosius, he also emphasized the importance of story and stressed the idea of providing multiple points of access to those stories. Those multiple points could be literary, physical, audible, spectacle or any other theatrical elements. CTC serves entire families, and each show, according to Brosius, should be accessible to all ages. Even though certain productions might be geared for preschoolers or teenagers, siblings, parents, and grandparents will always be there as well, so it is important to tell the story so it will appeal to everyone. One of Brosius’ most intriguing ideas, for me, is his capriciousness on clarity of story. Although he stresses the importance of clarity, perhaps, he suggests, sometimes we are too clear. He suggests we might leave more to the imagination and let the magic of theatre do its work.

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9 This method was also utilized by director Peter Brooke according to John Dillon in his introduction to *Seattle...*
We get in epic fights about our yearning desire to make it clear; are we murdering mystery? Because all great art has mystery in it. And often, we in this [TYA] field beat the mystery out of it for purposes of clarity. (Brosius Interview)

CTC’s artistic director also emphasizes his artists and the artist’s needs. This idea is on the top of David Wood’s list of directing challenges. Wood believes it is imperative for the director to cultivate a unified team in order to create the best possible theatre. Since Brosius arrived at CTC in 1997, he has formed a core acting company of union actors from the Minneapolis area, as well as an apprentice acting company, mostly comprised of newly graduated BA’s and BFA’s from around the country. These actors, both the core company and the apprentice company, read and workshop the prospective scripts for the following season. They are then asked their opinions about these prospective scripts.

Another important point Brosius makes when discussing his directing philosophy is the importance of resources. He does not focus on dollars, although CTC has a comparatively healthy budget, but rather, he focuses on artists and their needs. He states:

So you are serving that artistic vision. You are delivering it, so that when a designer comes in with “x” you are not saying, “You know we’ll do a facsimile of that.” No, whether it’s a scene painting, or props construction, or costume construction, you deliver that. You brought in the best people. You delivered. Obviously there are limitations of time, energy, and money. Obviously there are limitations with whatever your organization can do. But one tries to wrestle, beat,
raise, pray, do it, whatever is necessary to provide the resources for the artists.

(Brosius Interview)

My research does not uncover Peter Brosius’ specific method of directing. However, his philosophies on the TYA field do relate his ideas about what constitutes quality directing. As a director, he leans toward producing work with mature and serious themes; he places emphasis on the physical when telling a story; and he places importance on the idea of leading and cultivating a team that respect and advocate young people.

Directing Pippi Longstocking

Matthew Howe is a resident director with CTC as well as a master teacher in CTC’s Theatre Arts Training (TAT) program. In addition, he also serves as a casting director for the apprentice acting company and teaches several of its classes as well. He graduated from the University of Victoria in British Columbia and also trained at Circle in the Square Theatre School in New York. At CTC, Howe directed a number of large cast productions including Cinderella, The Wizard of Oz, Lyle the Crocodile, Disney’s Aladdin, and The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins. In the 2006-07 season he will direct two Dr. Suess favorites, How the Grinch Stole Christmas and Seussical, the Musical. In the 2005-06 season, he directed the large musical Pippi Longstocking, which I attended to examine how Howe’s proclaimed methodology on quality directing evidenced itself on the stage. I learned through our discussion that Howe proclaims to be the type of director that challenges his co-artists to rise to a high level of commitment and passion for TYA work. It is this type of leadership that David Wood describes in the opening paragraph of his chapter on directing in his book, Theatre for Children: Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting:
The director needs to invite each member of the team to share in the challenge, and make sure that they fully comprehend the nature of the challenge and understand how worthwhile and important the work is. [. . .] Their attitude to the work should reflect a freshness of ideas as well as a level of excitement at the opportunity to produce high-quality work for children [. . .] (Wood 155)

Like Brosius, Howe places great importance on telling the story clearly. By practicing rigorous script analysis, Howe strives to keep the “spine” of the play intact, always coming back to it. However, as an artist and director, he pushes himself to go further with the script, never relying only on the words and always looking for ways to stamp it with his own unique aesthetic. One of his key beliefs is not to rely on spectacle. He avoids this, and leads his actors to avoid this, by focusing on truth, specifically truth in relationships. In his production of Pippi Longstocking, most of the adult characters are presented with slap-stick and caricature qualities; there is one, Mrs. Pryssellius, the chairperson of the Child Welfare Board, who seems to reach out to Pippi. Originally presented as the antagonist in the story, Mrs. Prysselius discovers that it is up to her to raise and care for young Pippi. Amidst the large musical numbers and the spectacular costumes and scenery, Howe focuses on this relationship when telling the story.

According to Brosius, the actress playing Mrs. Prysselius originally interpreted the character in a slap-stick way. She “developed a kind of wacky Lucille Ball ad-libbing, non-stop jokey persona” (Brosius Interview). However, both Howe and Brosius felt that if Mrs. Prysselius was portrayed this way early in the play, the conflict—and thus—resolution would not be clear between these two main characters, thus Howe steered Mrs. Prysselius in a more serious direction.
Howe claimed he drilled the importance of these relationships, focusing on making the characters real people with truthful needs. By working this way, he believes, you can strip away all the other theatrical elements, the set, the costumes, and the props, but you will still have your story, a story revolving around relationships, and one to which children will respond. He notes that the truth and honesty of the story can be proved time and again in the rehearsal hall before the actors ever set foot on stage. Constance D’Arcy Mackay offered almost the same idea a century ago when she wrote, “A stage-play for child-audiences that cannot be stripped of its ornamental trappings without losing its charm [. . .] is fundamentally not a play for children” (44).

Nonetheless, spectacle and visual imagery are underpinnings in Howe’s Pippi Longstocking production. The designs of this production provided color, texture, shape, and light; and the scenic elements, including, a three-story revolving house provided multiple playing levels for the interior and exterior of Pippi’s home, as well as a prodigious pirate ship that sailed on and off the stage that gave the audience visual stimulation. These scenic elements, along with manifold costumes, contributed to Howe’s mise en scène. At the end of act one, there is a dream/nightmare scene in which the house magically rolls away, fog floods the stage, and Pippi desperately tries to reach out to her father and dead mother who are among the other nameless, faceless, statuesque like characters who are waltzing around the stage in a trance like state. Visually, this scene was an amalgamation of the Oklahoma’s dream ballet and The Phantom of the Opera’s underground labyrinth. In the second scene of the production, the lights come up on a fair at which the audience views an eclectic composition of levels and colors, with intricate tableaus and variety of detailed costumes, and simultaneity of action. In act two, scene two, the three-story house disappears and is replaced by a schoolroom. The entire stage is filled with
students as they perform the musical number “Pluttification.” Led by Pippi, the students untie their book straps, which turn into jump ropes, and perform an energized and creative playground-like dance that rivals many eleven o’clock numbers. This focus on spectacle and visual imagery is reminiscent of Goldberg’s “considerations;” however, Howe insists his directing attention is mostly pointed toward truth in relationships.

Another Goldberg TYA directing tenet that is demonstrable in *Pippi Longstocking* is its variety. The style of the production is *synthetical*. While a majority of the production is presentational with singing, dancing, and a slapstick Keystone Kop style of humor, Howe also employs a representational style that often utilizes the fourth wall and focuses on the “Reality of Doing.” For the most part, the *syntheticalism* of performance styles appears unified, but, at times, the styles work against each other. An example of this is the anagnorisis—the protagonist’s major self discovery—of the story; in act two, following a highly comic scene, Pippi discovers just how alone she is, a very serious moment. This pivotal realization is followed by another important discovery by Mrs. Prysselius, who realizes that she must be the one to take care of Pippi. She walked down stage in a melodramatic fashion and sang this discovery directly to the audience. Here, I observed the lines between presentational and representational become blurred, and the anagnorisis lost its effect as it failed to create empathy, at least in me.

In turning to Howe’s directing *philosophy*, he asserts strong opinions on staging familiar titles. He believes:

> [...] you have to take that audience expectation into consideration when you’re putting together how you’re going to present you story. [...] if you’re
going to do *The Wizard of Oz*, you better deliver *The Wizard of Oz*, and there
better be a girl in a blue and white gingham dress. (Howe Interview)

He acknowledges that there are, of course, exceptions, such as if he were presenting *The Wizard of Oz* in an entirely reconceived manner. Nonetheless, he places significance on audience recognition and suggests that the director must sometimes merely “get out of the way” (Howe Interview). However, he adds an addendum to this point—pushing himself to give the audience not only what they are expecting, but even more, suggesting that the director can retain the integrity of the story and still tell it in new and inventive ways. In fact, it is almost a mandate at CTC to find new and distinct concepts when producing a familiar story. However, Howe warns that it is important to “inform your audiences that sometimes you’re going to come and get what you expect, and then sometimes you’re going to come and it’s going to be really different” (Howe Interview).

In his interview, Matthew Howe also addressed the director’s obligations and responsibility to children, the very words that Moses Goldberg uses in his chapter on directing in *Children’s Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method*. Howe believes that CTC, especially the Theatre Arts Training program, has an obligation to mentor children. And he believes that artists in the TYA field have a responsibility to help children bridge the gap between their personal environments and the larger world that they live in. For Howe, education and theatre seem to go hand in hand. TYA, in his opinion, is most effective when it is created with a careful mixture of pedagogy and theatrical artistry. He admits that often when he takes on the role of “director,” the teacher in him is also evident.

Quality TYA theatre, according to this resident director, is measured in terms of truth and honesty. Howe believes that theatre that is rooted in reality is a theatre that audiences will
eagerly accept; it is a kind of theatre that artists can proudly offer to children, rather than forcing it on them. Howe’s idea of reality is analogous to theatre that comes from a grounded and truthful place. He promotes this idea regardless of style. In fact, the ultimate challenge with a presentational piece like *Pippi Longstocking*, according to Howe, is finding the truthfulness and honesty amidst the one-dimensionality and would-be spectacle of music, dance, costumes and scenery. David Wood and Moses Goldberg both address this challenge at length. Goldberg discusses the “challenge of the imagination when one is required to construct a serious biography or a super-objective for a talking tree” (163). Yet he offers absolute “emotional truth” for the actor as a panacea for the challenge, and this idea is echoed by Matthew Howe. Although he frequently directs and choreographs the bigger musical productions at CTC, verisimilitude drives Howe’s aesthetic; he focuses on the truth and relationships, rather than the spectacle. In fact, he notes that some of the most effective and creative theatre that he has seen was work that was simple and low budget. He says he carries this mentality with him even when directing a show with a cast size of thirty or more.

The published TYA directing theories of David Wood and Moses Goldberg revolve around the adult ideas of emotional truth. However, they do offer several “considerations” for the would-be TYA director including leading the team in respecting the audience, teaching the actors to handle the audience’s response, emphasizing spectacle and stage movement, and avoiding overly sentimental acting. The directors at CTC, according to their interviews, are positioned more within the adult realm of theatre directing theory. Although he personally knows Moses Goldberg and David Wood, Peter Brosius acknowledges that he has never read either of their written works on TYA directing philosophy (Brosius Interview). He has his own philosophy that I epitomize by *syntheticalism*. Every show and every project possesses no CTC
stamp, other than it is completely independent and different from the others. Drawing from a myriad of styles, genres, and artistic mediums, each of CTC’s work is radically different from one piece to the next. Uniqueness serves as one of Peter Brosius’ directing stamps.

In their interviews, both Peter Brosius and Matthew Howe articulate a tenacity, commitment, and desire, to simply make the “best” theatre possible. For them, quality means “creating work of high stakes, heightened consequence [. . .] one of investigation, research, openness, endless play, trial and error, experimentation, rigorous text analysis, and deep choices” (Brosius Interview).

Matthew Howe puts it this way:

We’re really encouraged to think outside the box [. . .] and not fall into that trap of producing what is expected. It has got to be more than that. And that’s a huge challenge to take on, because at times you feel like it might be ok to do a checklist. But if you take the time to challenge yourself to [. . .] invest in thinking about “what else?”, it always pays off. Because you find something—you just do. It might be the most subtle thing, but it will make the difference in the outcome of the piece. And all it will do is deepen that good theatre part of it. So it’s not just good theatre, it’s great theatre, or it’s life changing theatre. (Howe Interview)

Part Three: Dramatic Literature at the Seattle Children’s Theatre

About one hundred paces from Seattle’s Space Needle is one of the countries largest and most respected children’s theatres. The Seattle Children’s Theatre (SCT) is positioned in the heart of the culturally rich Seattle Center, an eighty-seven acre campus that also houses Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Intiman Theatre, Seattle Shakespeare Company, The Children’s Museum,
The Pacific Science Center, the Experience Music Project, and the Seattle Supersonic’s Key Arena. This campus also hosts numerous music and ethnic festivals throughout the year. Seattle Center draws an annual ten million visitors from around the world, and all ten million of those visitors walk within proximity of SCT.

Originally formed in 1975 under the name, The PONCHO Theatre, SCT’s main stage productions currently serve over two-hundred eighty-thousand children and family members annually. According to SCT’s marketing literature, this is the largest audience of any theatre in the state of Washington. The organization offers seven Equity stage productions in two theatres, the four-hundred and eighty-five seat Charlotte Martin, and the two-hundred and eighty seat Eve Alvord. SCT operates a Deaf Youth Drama Program as well as an extensive Educational Outreach program and the SCT Drama School. The School provides theatre training to over thirty-five hundred students, ages three to nineteen, annually, making it the largest of its kind in the country. SCT operates with an almost seven million dollar budget, and in November 2004, it was honored by *Time* magazine with the number two spot in the top five children’s theatres in the country.

SCT is managed by the partnership of artistic director, Linda Hartzell, and managing director Kevin Maifeld. Both “are guided by the belief that children deserve professional theatre of the highest quality” (Hartzell, and Frockt viii). I am prompted to ask: what does a script of the “highest quality” look like?

SCT has become nationally recognized for new play development in the TYA field (Plays). Among their new play initiatives is NGPP, a project in the late nineties, spearheaded by a consortium of professional children’s theatres seeking to attract the artistic “quality” of established adult playwrights to children’s theatre stages across the country. SCT has also
published two small anthologies, *Seattle Children’s Theatre: Six Plays for Young Audiences*, volumes one and two. These anthologies contain new works by Suzan Zeder, Y York, and Steven Dietz. The latter two have become SCT favorites, as their new plays continue to be produced year after year. While the plays in these two volumes demonstrate multiple structures and subject matter, SCT considers them all to be “quality” scripts, as John Dillon indicates in the anthology’s introduction (ix).

In 2004, SCT partnered with the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis to create a new organization known as Plays for Young Audiences (PYA). The purpose of this partnership was to:

> [. . . ]provide a centralized clearinghouse of scripts written for young audiences to professional theatres, amateur/community theaters and schools. Both CTC and SCT are well known for commissioning productions that are topical, contemporary, fantastical, and written by some of today's leading playwrights. The growing PYA customer base to-date includes all fifty United States and the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mexico, Philippines, South Africa, Spain and the United Kingdom. Through its service to the larger children's theatre community, PYA will be a catalyst to drive the field of theatre for young people to new heights. (Plays)

Both SCT and CTC are in the vanguard of TYA amelioration and dissemination. But the popular, and often produced, TYA plays such as *Bunnicula, Go Dog! Go!, Holes, Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, and *Still Life with Iris*, all premiered at the Seattle Children’s Theatre. Throughout their thirty year history, the organization has commissioned and produced
over ninety-three new works. This contribution to the dramatic literature cannon has greatly
influenced notions of quality of TYA over the past thirty years.

Honus and Me: A Script Analysis

In 1993, playwright Steven Dietz wrote his first TYA script, *The Rememberer*, which was
produced the following year at the Seattle Children’s Theatre. Thus began a production
relationship with the author and artistic director Linda Hartzell. Dietz has continued to offer new
works, and SCT has continued to produce them, often with Dietz in the director’s chair. His
other TYA premiers at SCT include *Go Dog Go, Still Life with Iris*, and the most recent, *Honus
and Me*, which was adapted from the Dan Gutman book of the same title. The book became so
popular that the author followed it with an entire series. After seeing this production, and then
reading the script, I was curious as to how the play compared to past philosophies and models for
quality.

I apportion notions of quality TYA scripts in the twentieth century into three distinct
phyla, all through which Dietz’s *Honus and Me* can be examined. The first phylum is classified
by an adherence to Aristotelian structure as proffered by Constance D’Arcy Mackay and
Winifred Ward. TYA playwright and academic, Coleman Jennings, states that TYA scripts
should be an “integration of characters, dialogue, plot, setting, and theme” (*Theatre 3*).
Interestingly, he offers all of Aristotle’s elements except music, as requirements. Perhaps this is
because this element is best analyzed in production, rather than using the script itself. He also
chooses the word “setting” over “spectacle”, perhaps for the same reason. Nonetheless, Jennings
provides elements, or his markers of quality, to analyze Steven Dietz’s *Honus and Me*.
Set in modern day Pittsburgh, *Honus and Me* focuses on Joey Stoshack, a ten year-old boy who is a baseball fanatic. As he narrates the story, the reader learns of Joey’s obsession for baseball cards. In fact, every time he holds one, he experiences a tingling sensation, not unlike static electricity, all through his body. He believes it gives him a sort of magic power. However, despite his passion for America’s favorite pastime, Joey lacks the confidence to play effectively for his little league team, the “Bluebirds.”

While helping to clean a neighbor’s attic, Joey stumbles across the rare and valuable “Honus Wagner T-206” baseball card which is “indisputably, the most valuable baseball card in the world” (Dietz 19). He mistakenly shows it to a pair of card dealers who, knowing the cards worth, serve as the antagonists and chase Joey throughout the play in order to get the card. However, late one night, in his room, magic happens, as he is visited by the famous Honus Wagner, himself, who ostensibly traveled through time, almost one-hundred years. Neither Joey nor Honus understand why this happened, but they soon accept their reality. Through his relationship with Honus, Joey learns lessons of confidence that culminate in a trip back to the 1909 World Series, where Joey poses as Honus and helps the Pittsburgh Pirates triumph over the Detroit Tigers and their Georgia peach, Ty Cobb. When Joey returns home, he realizes that he should return the baseball card to his elderly neighbor, who hastily tears it into pieces, not knowing its worth. This, of course, causes the two card dealers to halt their pursuit of Joey. In the end, Joey is left with the confidence he needs to hit two singles and a triple in his next “Bluebirds” game.

This play easily fits into Aristotelian ideas of rising action, climax and denouement. TYA Aurand Harris states it this way:
You have a main character. That main character wants something, tries to get it, there’s trouble, there are climaxes. There are all of these complications and then finally he or she overcomes all of that. Then we have an ending that is satisfying.
(qtd. in Corey, *Aurand* 18)

Indeed, Dietz provides a nicely packaged resolution in which Joey learns a few lessons and reconciles his conflicts. It is the adherence to this structure, as well as the play’s balanced “integration” of character, dialogue, plot, setting, and theme, that situates *Honus and Me* as “quality” TYA script according to the Aristotelian based construct.

However, positioning this play as a “quality” script proves more difficult when examining it through the second twentieth-century model, a paradigm put forth by the plays and “rules” of Charlotte Chorpenning. Her combined work of plays and “rules” ultimately produced a formula that many perceived as quality, and, therefore, copied in terms of style and structure. Her structures, such as those used in *The Emperor’s New Clothes* and *Alice and Wonderland*, are reminiscent of the well-made play, yet even more simplified. On structure alone, Chorpenning’s work could be positioned within the early twentieth-century model that I mentioned earlier because of its adherence to Aristotle’s ideas of rising action, climax and denouement. However, her “rules” give us additional markers for quality, markers that survived into the twenty first century.

Dr. Carol Louise Lorenz suggests five of Chorpenning’s rules as being significant. The first rule is having a main character with whom the audience can identify. Winifred Ward suggests that this is done by telling the story through a “child’s point of view” (87). More modern playwrights, such as Pamela Sterling, suggest that the protagonist should be a child (Interview 15), thus making him or her “identifiable.” Steven Dietz’s protagonist is a child, and
the story is told through his perspective, yet whether or not he is identifiable, remains elusive. Joey is a wide-eyed ten year-old boy who loves the game of baseball. Baseball, as a theme can instantly make Joey an identifiable character to some, but at the same time alienate others. Also, Joey’s given circumstances offer a picture of an all American average kid, yet he represents only one model and, therefore, cannot represent us all. However, I argue that Joey is identifiable because of his struggles. It is the things that he does, his actions, not his persona, that make us identify with him. He struggles with his teammates, his coach, and the antagonistic card dealers who are out to get him. He also struggles with his parents, as he learns their notions of right and wrong. These struggles, conflicts, and clashes in relationships ultimately make Joey identifiable as a human being, not just a wide-eyed ten year old boy.

Chorpenning’s second “rule” for writing a “good play” is that the end of the story must be contained in the beginning. This rule is manifested, according to Lorenz, in the behavior of the characters (122). The characters should be clearly defined at the beginning of the play so that the audience can tell the “good” from the “bad.” In the beginning of Honus and Me, we know Joey is the good guy, and we can sense, that in the end, although he may not accomplish all of his goals, he will ultimately win and triumph over his adversaries, in this case the two skuzzy card dealers, as well as his own lacking of self confidence. Thus we know at the very beginning of the play, from the archetypes of the characters, what will happen at the end; the good guy, Joey, will win. Poetic justice is evident in Honus and Me, as he escapes the card dealers and regains his confidence. He also grows and learns; and the lessons that he learns are common to all humanity; be honest; do what is right; and believe in yourself. Although Joey clearly represents the “good guy,” his character growth does contradict one element of Lorenz’s interpretation of Chorpenning’s rule. According to Lorenz, Chorpenning’s characters do not
evolve, but rather “move from one situation to another, revealing various aspects of their good or evil personalities” (122).

This point applies more aptly to the “evil” card dealers. From the very moment they are introduced, it is apparent, through their costumes and characterizations, that they are “evil,” and they never evolve—but rather stay resolved on their one-dimensional objective, which is getting the “Honus Wagner T-206.”

One the other hand, the characters of Joey’s mother and father do not fit within the constructs of this second rule. Both characters provide conflict for Joey and each other, and it is difficult to tell who is “good” and who is “bad.” It is not that they are poorly defined characters, but rather, they are defined in numerous ways. Their objectives are not relegated to a single obsessive desire. Both the mother and father characters reside in a grey area that more resembles real life than that of Chorpenning’s dramatic formula.

*The story should never stop* is the next of Chorpenning’s rules. This refers to several things, the first of which, according to Lorenz, derives from George Pierce Baker (122). Chorpenning interpreted Baker’s playwriting tenet as driving the plot forward in a linear fashion toward an eventual anagnorisis. The plot in *Honus and Me* develops quickly from the moment Joey finds the baseball card to the moment he discovers his self confidence, as he plays in the 1909 World Series. The climax is then resolved in the denouement, as he returns the card to his elderly neighbor, who tears it up, thus dismissing the antagonistic card dealers; and Joey is left to have a successful short-stop career with the “Bluebirds.”

Chorpenning also identifies things that happen, internal or external, to detract from the main action of the play, as something that makes the story “stop.” On this point, *Honus and Me* does not adhere to Chorpenning’s edict. The non-unity of time and action, both, digress from the
progressive linear plot. While the audience/reader can accept the dramatic convention of Honus traveling to the future and Joey traveling to the past, the audience/reader is not given logistics as to how or why this happens, thus asking it to fill in the missing pieces to make the plot progress. Furthermore, the subplots of the parents, the card dealers, and one hundred-year-old love story between Honus and the elderly neighbor, while all interesting, do not move the main story forward. And, finally, Joey’s narration, while important to the character/audience relationship and identification, has little effect on Joey’s choices or actions. These three “non-Aristotelian” elements bend more toward a Brechtian style story that seeks to take the audience out of the action of the play, thus “stopping” the story and breaking away from the Aristotelian model of quality.

According to Lorenz, Chorpenning also identifies external elements that can affect the forward action of the play, thus affecting the play’s quality in a negative manner. These elements are rooted in the audience’s reactions and the environment of the theatre house. However, these can be remedied through the writing of the play. Chorpenning would use chase scenes, songs, dances, and even games to provide a physical release for the audience and regain its attention. This proves ironic, however, in that she suggests activities that take the audience out of the world of the play in order to get them more focused on the action of the play. From my analysis, the script of Honus and Me employs no such techniques.

The fourth rule is to show the action rather than tell it, a rule echoed by other notable TYA playwrights. In his introduction to Theatre for Young Audiences: Twenty Great Plays for Children, Coleman Jennings offers this same advice in his list of consideration for the playwright. Aurand Harris, also, offered these words to the students in his playwriting class:
So, don’t in your plays have two people come on and talk talk talk talk . . .
because that gets boring boring boring. Do something, show it, let them do it,
show it and make scenes where they have to do things and show things. You’ll be
surprised at how easy it is to do that. (qtd. in Corey, Aurand 18)

While it may be the director’s job to stage the action, Steven Dietz makes it easy. The first scene
of Honus and Me exemplifies the playwright’s ability to show rather than tell. Joey’s first words
of the play are directed at the audience, indicating a narration of exposition. Yet Dietz
demonstrates simultaneity of action in his writing. Joey speaks to the audience, his scene
partners; he is befriending them and sharing his love for the game of baseball. He is also
enlightening them on the magical electricity that takes over his body when he holds a baseball
card. However, while Joey plays his objective to his scene partner, the physical action on the
stage shows a different story, one which provides the necessary exposition. All the while Joey
speaks to the audience, he stands in the batters box, swinging at pitches in the middle of the a
little league baseball game. This action continues for the first five pages of the script. By the end
of this first scene, Joey has told the audience all about his passion for the game, but they also see
what a poor player he is as he strikes out at the plate, loses the game, and then is mocked and
disparaged by his teammates and coach. All of this action is shown rather than told, thus
positioning Honus and Me in this construct as a model of quality.

The final Chorpenning rule is the importance of the mise en scène. Dietz utilizes a
variety of theatrical elements to tell his story. His stage directions describe a set design that
depict an entire baseball field, yet one that through the use of lights and minimal scenery can also
serve as other locations. He also utilizes the elements of light and music as he works them into
his writing, often indicating lighting isolations and imagery, as well as numerous music and
sound cues. And often, Dietz offers specific music, as he does in one of the last scenes of the play, “MUSIC: the lovely, solo trumpet version of ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’” (96).

Most of Winfred Ward’s plot considerations fall into one of the five Chorpenning rules. However, there are two that do not—suspense and comedy—and both are needed according to Ward (130-131); and they both fit into Chorpenning’s model as well. Ward states, “Expectancy should carry over from one act to the next, too, and a play should never point ahead, leaving the outcome uncertain up to the very end” (131). Suspense is an important element in *Honus and Me*. The audience/reader waits to see if Joey will elude the card dealers, side-step his parents moral teachings, and cash in his golden “Honus Wagner T-206” ticket. However, this idea in some ways, contradicts Ward’s own beliefs of poetic justice and Chorpenning’s posit that the ending should be evident in the beginning.

I believe that comedy also plays a central role this play. While the majority of its themes are serious, i.e. self confidence, honesty, and morality, Dietz offers comedy through the characters of the card dealers, the coach, and the anachronisms of Joey’s and Honus’ time-travel. According to Ward, this comic relief in a serious play provides “needed relaxation to children, heightening their enjoyment” (131).

Although these “rules” serve as benchmarks for twentieth-century quality TYA plays, they do not provide a simple check list as the previous model had. These rules offer constructs that are not easily defined and lead to multiple points of view, which ultimately opened the door to my final twentieth-century phylum.

In 1964, Sara Spencer penned an essay entitled “Does Good Always Win?” Her voice was the first among many throughout the later part of the twentieth century that sought to remove some of the “insulation with which we have tried to protect our children” (qtd. in Jennings and
The 1970s, 80s, and 90s saw a plethora of TYA plays that sought not only to entertain, but reflect the world’s “truth” as well. The serious subject matter and mature themes of “today” plays led to an adultification of TYA literature that represented a model of quality that is still prevalent in the twenty first century. Elements of “adultification” of children’s plays can be traced as far back as Chorpenning. Although many of her fairy-tale adaptations contained basic themes of good versus evil and right versus wrong, themes also evident in *Honus and Me*, Chorpenning also suggests that the playwright employ “adult overtones” (Lorenz 124). Dietz, understanding his multi-aged audience, utilizes this technique. In the performance that I saw, Joey offered a modern quip about Barry Bonds and steroid use, a reference largely lost on the younger audience, yet it produced an audible response from the adults.

But Coleman Jennings, in his own lengthy list of playwriting suggestions, denounces this type of practice as he writes that “A script that uses puns, sophisticated jokes, or innuendo to amuse the grown-ups while going over the heads of the main audience is unacceptable in children’s theatre” (*Theatre* 3). However, Jennings does acknowledge the recent popularity of the serious themed children’s play. In fact, he notes that *all* of the plays in his anthology, *Theatre for Young Audiences: Twenty Great Plays for Children*, are “serious.” What used to be measured by use of comedy and childishness is now measured by publishers with sobriety and maturity. Notions of quality changed drastically during this period.

Adultification is evidenced in Steven Dietz’s *Honus and Me* on several fronts. The main conflict is with Joey and himself as he struggles, almost hopelessly, to fit in. Completely ostracized by his teammates, Joey is a complete loner. Another mature theme that arises is the intriguing one hundred-year-old love story between Joey’s elderly neighbor and the great Honus Wagner. Near the end of the play Miss Young, Joeys elderly neighbor, holds the picture of
Honus in her hands and then walks dreamily upstage toward the light which represents her old love. Joey narrates: “And the wrinkles on her face slowly faded away . . . and her hair turned from grey to blonde . . . and she was beautiful . . . and young . . . she was . . . going . . . gone” (Deitz 96). Yet whether she passes away or travels back to 1909, remains nebulous, but this scene evoked pathos and empathy in the adult audience, at least for me. Peter Brosius describes this theatrical ambiguity as the mystery that “quality” theatre needs (Interview).

The structure of *Honus and Me* also indicates it is for a more “sophisticated” child audience than those of the past. Dietz respects his child viewer’s intelligence as he offers an abundance of simultaneity of action, giving the viewer credit to be able to follow complex time travel and time shifts.

The most salient adultification of this play is its focus on Joey’s family, which actually serves as a minor subplot. The topical theme of family is indicative of numerous “today” plays of the eighties and nineties and exemplifies the quality paragon of that period. While this “family” subplot does not thoroughly develop, it does cut deep into the societal issues of the modern American family. There is a scene between Joey and his mother and father early in the play, in which we learn that his parents are not together. But the tension between the two parents is only the initial struggle. It is evident that Joey is caught in the middle, and, in some ways, must choose between them. Neither parent is represented as “good” or “bad,” just simply different from the other. Yet this division causes havoc on Joey’s moral education, often leaving him alone to discern between right and wrong, one of his main struggles throughout the play.

While the Seattle Children’s Theatre continues to produce familiar titles and adaptations, it is also in the forefront of developing new “quality” plays for young people. Steven Dietz’s *Honus and Me* is a new play *and* an adaptation. SCT’s continued relationship with Steven Dietz
and other “adult” playwrights serve as an indicator that SCT is also in the forefront of adultifying TYA, a late twentieth-century model of quality that still exists. However, notions of quality are not exclusive of each other. Numerous elements of twentieth-century TYA philosophy on what makes a good play are evident in this Stven Dietz’s twenty-first century play, Honus and Me. The ideas of poetic justice, good versus evil, a progressive linear plot, and an identifiable character shine through with lucidity. Honus and Me’s quality comes from influences from throughout the twentieth century, suggesting even a new paragon of quality, one that amalgamates Aristotelian ideas, Brechtian elements, poetic justice, and themes of the struggling human condition.

Closing

The 2006 November issue of American Theatre publishes that, according to its Theatre Facts survey, the attendance at professional TYA organizations, as well as adult theatres with a TYA series, has consistently risen over the last five years (Wren, “Younger” 41). This article is congruent with the previously mentioned new millennium missives that cite TYA’s rising popularity, due to its increase of “professionalism.” All three of the theatres in my study also represent this professionalism. The very fact that these organizations exist, for me, is a testament of their commitment to bringing professional quality TYA to their communities.

However, these three theatres create a multi-dimensional picture that represents the numerous and complex practices that drive the current TYA field. The various artists at each of these theatres, OSF, CTC, and SCT, possess their own inimitable ideas and philosophies about what constitutes good acting, directing, and dramatic literature. It is clear to me that Brandon Roberts is committed to quality acting, whether he is performing for adults or children.
Although he believes that many actors look down on children’s theatre—he believes this is due to a lack of quality scripts—he personally strives for excellence in every performance he gives. Prior to this study, I had worked with Brandon in another TYA production, and that experience, combined with my interviews and observations for this study, compels me to believe that strong, committed, and deliberate TYA acting methodology is alive in modern day TYA practice. This can also be said of TYA directing and playwriting. Neither Peter Brosius nor Matthew Howe defines their directing methods as solely TYA, thus refusing to be labeled “other” or inferior. Both of their proclaimed philosophies are distinctly adult, with roots in both Stanislavski and Brecht. However, “sensitivity” to their young audience is evidenced in their rhetoric of advocacy and responsibility. Steven Dietz’s play, *Honus and Me*, not only challenges previous models of quality TYA scripts, it also embraces them. It is an amalgamation of numerous techniques and structures which represents a new kind of TYA script, one that cannot be easily confined to one set of standards. It is a kind of script where right and wrong is not always black and white. Prior to this study, I believed that much of the current TYA acting, directing, and dramatic literature was substandard. However, these case studies show tireless artists committed to making great TYA theatre, proving to me that the “quality” of the TYA field continues to improve.

The TYA practices of these artists at these theatres compare and contrast to the published TYA philosophy of the twentieth century. Some of the ideas are present in modern practice, and some are not. However, it is evident to me, through my interviews and observations, that all three of these theatres have artists who employ acting, directing, and playwriting, methodology and philosophy that will serve as models of quality for the coming century.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

In the preface to *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, Louis Kronenberger writes:

Quality, or whatever term for what is good and valuable of its kind, is the chief element in almost all aesthetic appraisal; if not the whole, then certainly the heart, of criticism. What is good and valuable will seldom, of course, be flawless; but what it lacks, or in what ways it is limited, will neither disfigure nor discredit it, and in every age we feel the need to search it out. If today, in a forever changing age with “revolutionizing” fads and sometimes totally inverted values, there is reason to reaffirm the need for quality, there is equal reason to reinvestigate the nature of it—to prod and poke at all the traditional sturdy truths, and not entirely scorn the spindly or rusty hypothesis, and to allow for disagreement about everything involved, except that quality does exist and endure, and that there are ways of identifying. (13)

Kronenberger’s words about “quality” serve as the inspiration for my thesis question. In my effort to make quality children’s theatre, I examined twentieth-century published philosophies and compared them to modern day TYA practice. Some constructs of quality acting, directing, and dramatic literature, both past and present, appear as lucid black and white structures, while others remain personal ideas, ambiguous as art itself. Identifying these published philosophies and synthesizing them with current TYA practice to create a model or “paragon” of quality proved my biggest challenge in this study. Multiple perspectives and diversity in approach epitomize this would-be model, but I believe that the numerous and varied ideas about what
makes good children’s theatre is what makes TYA an exciting and invigorating field in which to work.

The twentieth century produced a genre of theatre (TYA) that was marginalized by both the TYA field itself as well as the larger general theatre community, of which TYA is a part. This marginalization manifests itself in both how the TYA field is perceived by theatre professionals and in the TYA work itself, specifically in the “quality” of acting, directing, and dramatic literature. My research suggests that TYA’s marginalization stems, in part, from its multiple and varied identities. For me, the lines between theatre for children, theatre with children, creative dramatics, theatre for social change, and the use of drama as pedagogical tool appear blurry. The numerous monikers Family Theatre, Theatre for Young People, Theatre for Young Audiences, and Children’s Theatre evidence this obfuscation. Furthermore, the more educative Youth Theatre, Recreational Drama, Creative Dramatics, and Drama in Education are often confused with professional TYA, even among professional TYA practitioners. If professional TYA is not in fact Theatre for Young Audiences, and continues to encompass the many aforementioned theatrical and dramatic activities, then, I believe, it will remain a kind of theatre that is not really theatre, and therefore marginalized.

I believe TYA’s position as something “other” contributed to the creation of philosophies specifically for the TYA field. However, my study suggests that some of today’s TYA practice, the practice that I studied through interviews and observations at OSF, CTC, and SCT, does not appear based in twentieth-century TYA published philosophy. Instead, much of the practice that I studied is rooted in twentieth-century adult theatre philosophy. This seems particularly true with acting and directing. The phrase, “Good theatre is good theatre,” represents the views of several of the individuals that I studied for this paper, and the theories of Stanislavski and Brecht
continue to influence TYA practitioners. The published works of Moses Goldberg, David Wood, Jed H. Davis, Mary Jane Evans, Christine Prendergast, Helane S. Rosenberg, Winifred Ward, and Charlotte Chorpenning remain unread by several of the practitioners that I interviewed. Nonetheless, some of the ideas and tenets that comprise twentieth-century TYA philosophy surface within modern day practice. “Notions of childhood,” and “developing an understanding and respect for the child,” are the underpinnings of several of the TYA philosophies which remain pertinent to the twenty-first century practitioners that I interviewed. For me, this shows that the gap between theory and practice that existed during Van Tassel’s 1969 study has narrowed considerably. I am encouraged that professional theatre practice appears to be slowly merging with concern for the youthful audience.

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, I am interested in what makes good children’s theatre. What are the ideas, theories, and philosophies about TYA acting, directing, and dramatic literature that emerged in the TYA field over the past one-hundred years, and how do they compare to the current day professional TYA practices? My research on published TYA methodology offers the TYA actor and director a “way of doing things,” methods of achieving quality (“Method” def). My research of twentieth-century TYA acting philosophies demonstrates tensions between presentational and representational approaches to performance. While TYA acting has roots in verisimilitude, some philosophies suggest that quality TYA acting is rooted in stylized characterizations, special skills, and physical abilities. I found this very dichotomy exemplified on the professional TYA stage at the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival. Actors, such as Brandon Roberts, trained in the naturalistic acting methods of Stanislavski, struggle with employing those methods to their TYA acting work, because their characters might include less traditional roles such as plants or animals. I personally attest to this
struggle with my own TYA acting work. My actor training has been Stanislavski based, and I
had not even considered that acting for children was different than acting for adults, until I took a
class called *TYA Acting* in graduate school. However, this class, albeit valuable, focused only on
a representational style, and did not include presentational style. For me, there were published
TYA acting philosophies out there, yet no one introduced them to me. There are tools, or
“tricks,” that TYA actors are learning as they go, such as Brandon Robert’s ability to discern
audience response and adjust his performance accordingly, or the importance of stamina and
physical conditioning, or the *additional* level of commitment needed when tackling one-
dimensional roles, that have been common in TYA scripts. These tools can take years to realize,
let alone develop; and the published philosophy of Moses Goldberg and David Wood offer an
introduction to some of these tools. For me, at this stage of my career, I can use some of this
philosophy to introduce these tools to my own acting students.

Philosophies of TYA acting and directing in TYA, like the adult theatre, remain
inextricably linked. Much of the early twentieth-century directing philosophy is somewhat
sketchy, due to the obfuscation of directing theatre *for* children and directing theatre *with*
children. Curiously, much of the discourse revolving around these ideas, the ideas of Mackay,
Ward, and others, combines theatre *for* children and theatre *with* children together in one
convenient historical package titled “Children’s Theatre.” However, I find the most
predominant ideas, both past and present, focus on the director as a leader, a leader who unifies
the entire production team to understand, as well as *respect* the child audience. Respecting the
audience remains a common theme in much of my research, and according to both Moses
Goldberg and David Wood, it is the job of the director to inspire his or her production team to
respect the audience and create the best work of which they are capable.
As a TYA director (and actor), I want to inspire other artists who work in the TYA field to value this young audience. I do not suggest that we valuate children and put a price tag on them, but rather, we value them in the sense that they are estimable, important, and possess intrinsic worth. For me, if I choose to hold this class of people in this regard, then, hopefully, I will choose to offer my best, most artistic efforts when creating TYA. However, if I do not deliberately make this choice, and, instead, view children as a sort of nebulous “other,” not worthy of my artistic efforts, or as a set of complex problems that I am supposed to fix, then I will promulgate the continuance of a marginalized field.

My research leads me to believe that the issue of respecting the child audience can be remedied, first by TYA directors, who are sensitive to this issue and can lead their actors and designers to a high level of respect for the work. Second, it is my hope that university actor training programs cultivate a sense of respect and understanding for this important art form. The published TYA acting methodology from the twentieth century is not a panacea for “bad” acting, but it does offer ideas and tools that are addendums to adult acting theory, which might help the actor better prepare for the TYA stage.

Twentieth-century children’s dramatic literature stands separate from acting and directing. I characterize this literature as a triangulation of ideas, which include an adherence to Aristotelian elements, formulaic structures, and adultified thematic stories. Elements within each of these constructs continue to be considered “quality” by some of today’s TYA practitioners, as evidenced by Steven Dietz’s play, *Honus and Me*. Yet this amalgamation of theory represents a new model for quality, one whose elements and benchmarks are not as easily defined as those of the past. This new model celebrates “otherness” and multiple perspectives. “Diversity of
approach is the order of the day, and it is difficult to chart the mainstream, so complex in its
network of tributaries” (Davis, and Evans iii).

In the early twentieth century, theatre critic, Moses Montrose, called for a more “artistic
nature,” in children’s plays. Yet by the end of the century a new kind of children’s dramatic
literature appeared, one that reflected the themes of the adult theatre. This literature seeks to
question rather than answer; it represents the world as it is, rather than how it should be.
However, although this adultified model of quality carries over into the new millennium, the
early and mid-twentieth century constructs of comedy, simplification, and poetic justice endures
as well, as evidenced by the multifarious script offerings by the Seattle Children’s Theatre,
which includes Steven Dietz’s Honus and Me.

It is difficult for me to create one picture of how published TYA philosophies on acting,
directing, and playwriting compares to professional TYA modern day practice. It is a complex
picture with much incongruence. Yet this incongruence is not the final answer or result of this
thesis; rather, it provides an impetus for future study and discourse on TYA methodology and
practice. My research shows that, although some of the written philosophies themselves may not
influence current practice, many of the ideas contained in those philosophies represent ideas that
might be useful to TYA professionals. These ideas and how they relate to modern TYA practice
are the ideas that I intend to study further. I am specifically interested in the training of TYA
actors, directors, and playwrights. Many of the current practitioners whom I interviewed emerge
from adult theatre training, and I conclude that this is one of the reasons for TYA’s movement
toward adultification. I do not suggest that this proves negative. But rather, I suggest that there
are ideas, methods, and philosophies geared specifically toward the TYA field which for me, are
worth examining further. This is one of my major conclusions for this study. I intend to use

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several of these ideas in my work as a TYA practitioner and teacher. The relationship between adult theatre and TYA, and the multiple notions of quality for each, is another topic I would like to explore further. Is there a need for a separate field, or should TYA simply be a part of “the theatre” itself, both operating under one roof with the same set of artists, as suggested by TYA playwrights Suzan Zeder and Moses Goldberg? This relationship with adult theatre opens the door to further study about TYA’s identity, and how that identity, or identities, affects notions of quality about the work in theatre for young audiences. While this topic has been researched and discoursed, I hope that dialogue continues, and not just within the TYA field but the larger theatre community as well. And finally, I am inspired to continue research on understanding, respecting, and valuing the child audience. It is the research and discourse on this issue that, I believe, can truly raise the quality of professional TYA work. My research in this thesis, with both published philosophy and modern day practice, leads me to conclude that these topics require future examinations.

Prior to this study, I believed the general “quality” of TYA work to be poor. However, the published philosophies and the modern day practice that I uncovered proved me wrong. This philosophy and practice inspires me to become a better artist.

Philosophies, as well as notions of quality, in the TYA field continue to evolve with alacrity. CTC’s 2003 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre was an invigorating “shot in the arm” for children’s theatre. It helped bring respectability to the field, and it appears that respectability is growing as TYA attracts more seasoned and talented artists. In fact, Peter Brosius argues that, “One of the single biggest events in American theatre is the merging of professionalization and theatre for young people” (Brosius Interview). Both CTC and SCT sit in leading positions of this “professionalization.” Their commitment to new play development and
their Plays for Young Audiences, a publishing partnership between the two, seeks to disseminate quality TYA scripts to theatres across the country. Other TYA organizations, fledgling practitioners, and TYA academics study their histories and businesses and artistic practices.

In addition to leading a charge to professionalize TYA, CTC and SCT are also in the vanguard of its “adultification.” Peter Brosius stresses the importance of Brechtian and Stanislavski theory. For him, quality children’s theatre means simply quality theatre, and the type of the theatre that seems to drive him is of the more serious and social issue nature. And others measure quality with sobriety as well. Theatre critic, Eric Bentley, while measuring quality through intensity writes: “To begin with Oedipus and Lear would be beginning at the end, that is, with the noblest and most intricate intensities, those with the largest human and spiritual meaning” (34-35). With these words, Bentley positions the abstruse and tragic themes of Oedipus and King Lear as being the most lofty, magnificent, and superior. I think many would agree, as these plays serve as quality models in dramatic literature. And so, if we accept the postulate that good theatre is good theatre, then it is understandable that our children’s theatre would follow the “quality models” of adult theatre.

In his forward to Twenty Plays for Children, William B. Birner writes, “Changing environments, are interacting with changing ideals—and like it or not, we cannot claim relevance to future generations unless our mirror reflects an awareness of this real, actual, wonderful, shocking world” (vii). Echoing the words of Sara Spencer, Birner’s voice helps to usher in the trend that leads to professionalizing and adultifying the TYA field, which is one of the constructs of quality, in which it is currently. Personally, I want to create theatre that questions and challenges, theatre that is bold and unafraid to explore and interrogate ideas of existence and survival. I want to create theatre that has mystery and excitement; it is a theatre that is not afraid
to tackle the serious social and humanistic issues with which today’s youth struggle. From my observation in this study, it appears to me that the TYA artists at the theatres I visited want to do the same thing.

However, I do not feel the impulse to expose and introduce mature ideas to a child audience that has not yet experienced those ideas, ideas that are perhaps “adult.” Russian children’s theatre director Zenovi Korodsky writes:

We must approach children seriously, but a serious approach to them, a respect for their feelings and aspirations, does not mean “maturing” the children’s theatre so that it approximates the adult theatre, something that some TIUZs [Theatre for Young Spectators] have justly been accused of in recent years. The danger of such maturing is that it causes certain TIUZs to want to attract adult audiences rather than resulting in a greater respect and a more correct attitude toward the young spectator. (16)

I find myself agreeing with these words, if only because of my desire to encourage others to want to work in TYA, and not perceive it as a stepping stone on their way to bigger and better things. The adultification of TYA certainly brings new standards in which to measure quality, standards more in line with adult theatre; and I am encouraged with this direction. However, theatre for young audiences, as with all theatre, should come from the heart, and in our handling of complex and mature material, I believe that we should exercise responsibility, sensitivity, and even fragility in our aesthetic expressions. The Greeks had a word for this, *paideia*. “It involves nourishing a small body, but it also involves growing a child’s soul—sharing the stories and rituals that awaken a child’s spirit and nurturing the spiritual bonds that create meaning and morality in that child’s life” (Hewlett, and West 61).
As a direct result of this study, my own notions of quality continue to evolve. The numerous TYA acting, directing, and playwriting theories, as well as the varied practices of modern TYA professionals, challenge my own construct of what makes good or quality children’s theatre. Therefore, as I continue to explore new artistic ideas and perspectives, my benchmarks are ever shifting. However, what has not changed—what has remained constant—is my desire and commitment to strive for excellence and create that quality in a field that deserves the best.
The following text is a transcription an interview between Allen McCoy and Peter Brosius, the artistic director of the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

ALLEN MCCOY: In my research of quality children’s theatre, I found that in the past twenty or thirty years, many have written about the lack of and need for quality children’s theatre. But very rarely do they define what quality is. So I wanted to know what quality theatre is to you.

PETER BROSIUS: Quality theatre for young people is quality theatre. And quality theatre is setting rigorous standards, working with the best possible people, working with which is often, in our case established professionals, who are working at major theatres and major opera companies here and abroad. Then asking them to make their best work. Insisting in a way that under no circumstances do they ever condescend or make lesser work. It also means, then, of course providing them with the best resources to make that work. I just had a meeting yesterday with leading designers from across the country on a new script. It was our second meeting; we got very far; we will have a third meeting so that we can make sure that the work is refined, as smart as they can be. These are two day meetings where you’re working all day, and sometimes into the night, but sometimes not. And then it also means fighting to make sure there are resources, so that you have shops that deliver what the artists want. So you are serving that artistic vision; you are delivering it, so that when a designer comes in with “x” you are not saying, “You know we’ll do a facsimile of that”. Whether it’s a scene painting or props construction or costume construction, you deliver that, you brought in the best people, you delivered. Obviously there are limitations of time, energy, and money. Obviously there are limitations with whatever your organization can do. But one tries to wrestle, beat, raise, pray, and just do whatever is necessary to provide the resources for the artists.

So that means making the case to the public endlessly and repeatedly that what you’re making is simply and none other than the most important work happening in any community. Because the images you plant in the heads of young people will stay with them for their entire lives. And that’s true. You remember the show you saw when you were five; you remember shows you saw when you were eight, nine, ten and eleven, as do I. And you remember those first seminal experiences. If they were shoddy and mediocre, you remember that, and if they were transcendent and gorgeous, you remember that. You are part of a whole process of creating future artists, enhancing the lives of young artists who may happen to be five, or thirteen, or nine. You’re creating audiences. You have this awesome responsibility to make none other than the best work in your community. So we take that very seriously. Our job is none other than to make simply the best theatre in the United States. So the work that happens on our stage is not first draft work. The plays we’re doing this year have been in development sometimes three years. We re-write, workshop, draft, and do exploration, and then we try and find the teams that are right for that project, rather than just what are right for us. We ask the artists, “In your ideal world, where we’re the designers, who is the director, what’s the team that most excites you about bringing this work to life?” If they say they don’t know, we say, “Here are some extraordinary artists, might these be the right artists?”
MCCOY: There are several “how to” texts that have come out for the last thirty or forty years, Moses Goldberg has one and David Wood has one. Are you familiar with any of the TYA published philosophy?

BROSIUS: I know and respect both Moses and David, but I haven’t had the chance to read these books. I did not come from a formal training in children’s theatre. I got my degree in Directing from NYU. I got interested in the field as an undergraduate because of the work I saw in Europe. I’ve never studied creative dramatics. I was mid-way through my professional career at the Taper before I had heard of Dorothy Heathcote. It was truly thrilling to learn about her and her work, but it came later in my life. So it was a field that came to me through my seeing German, Dutch, and some Italian theatre in Europe.

My advice to people when they ask about it is that they should read Brecht, Stanislavski; and they should read about all the great works about the theatre, not necessarily about theatre for young people. What’s interesting for me is that the Dutch theatre, which people talk about as a leading theatre community, came about by seeing the extraordinary experimental work of the American experimental companies, companies like the Wooster group, Robert Wilson, and Meredith Monk. This American adult experimental work influenced a generation of theatre makers to then make new theatre for young people. So their work is influenced not by Dutch theatre for young people or American theatre for young people, but American Experimental Theatre for adults. So it’s kind of a curious process; there are many paths to this.

MCCOY: What are some of the elements, you mentioned Stanislavski, of high quality acting for you?

BROSIUS: High quality acting is a combination of an extraordinary understanding of being in the moment, creating work of high stakes, heightened consequence; the process of creating that is often one of investigation, research, openness, endless play, trial and error, experimentation, rigorous text analysis, and deep choices. I don’t know if that answers it. There is no single method. There are brilliant actors who’ve never trained for a moment, and then there are actors who have worked in a variety of training areas. There are different cultural traditions of what good acting means as well. Good acting in America is very different than what good acting in the Netherlands and in Belgium is. It’s about focus, rigor, depth of investigation, being alive and in that moment, and utterly relentless in the stakes being played.

There are lots of definitions of what it is and it’s not. There’s no single road to the process because there is so many different kinds of work that constitute different approaches.

MCCOY: What is a good or a quality TYA script?

BROSIUS: I would say it’s the same quality, the same thing that makes a good script. We don’t make those definitions here. We ask people when we commission a work to make a piece of work that is important to them, true to them, and is their best work. Most the writers that we commission have never written for young people. We also work with people like James Still and other folks who have written for young people. The things that we think about in terms of young
people are making it specific, making it clear, without making it simple. Then we get in epic fights about how in our yearning and desire to make it clear, are we murdering mystery? Because all great art has mystery in it. Often we Americans, and we in this field, beat the mystery out of it, sometimes for purposes of clarity, narrative clarity, character clarity, character arches. The great works like *Death of a Salesman* are pretty internal pieces, and fairly mysterious. We think about points of access, making sure there’s such a way they can find points of entrance. Most American youth theatre tends to have a youthful protagonist. In the rest of the world it’s completely different. Often there are no kids in European work. There may be three old men in a bed dying.

There are certain conventions that I think one has to be careful of because we can sometimes denigrate the imagination of young people by thinking they need this. When in point of fact, they can identify and make imaginative leaps. So, you hold a script here up to the same standards you hold a script up to any theatre. Is there a focus to the narrative? Are the character voices articulated and specific? Separating script from production, we’re cognizant of the fact that we are playing to a multiplicity of audiences at any given moment. They’ll be three-year-olds, four-year-olds and five-year-olds in the audience. And there will be forty seven-year-olds and eighty two-year-olds in our audience. So you’re conscious of that. What does that mean? There is an exercise that Brecht did as a director that I always think about and talk to directors about when they make work. During Brecht’s rehearsals, he would do this exercise where he would have a twelve-year-old kid come in and watch. In his theatre, there was a space where they could watch the rehearsal or a run through, through a piece of glass. You couldn’t hear a word. So he’d have them watch the show. He’d say, “Tell me about the show, tell me what you saw.” If he couldn’t tell you the story, he knew he’d screwed up. If your staging is clear, if the physical life of the production is specific then you have told the story. I think about that in terms of multiple points of access. If it’s a piece about deep emotional territory is there some other event, a physical life that keeps the younger ones involved until they can hook back into the narrative? You’re not going to dumb it down for the older kids, but you’re also going to recognize that it’s a broad audience.

In developing a new script what we sometimes find is that there is a need for what we call an act of translation. It’s simply like when we were doing *Beggars Strike*, which is an adult novel about a government minister and corruption, a kind of political satire set in Senegal. The last thing you’d think you’d ever make a piece of children’s theatre out of. I read it, and it was really interesting, because it was about ambition, and it seemed like, even though it was set in Senegal, it’s about a dad who’s too busy to be with his kids. And in the original book it’s his twenty-year-old daughter who runs off and has an affair. So I said to the playwright, what if you change the age of that daughter? That’s the one way of making this a play for young people. I said, “This is a really interesting book. I don’t know if it’s a play for young people.” So we made that adjustment that that daughter went from twenty years old to eleven. So there was a translation. Pretty radical in a way, and so then it became a story about how as a politician you’re not home with your kids because you’re busy; you’re a working professional. In this case it’s about ambition. He wants to be president, but at what price? And so it became a piece about all busy fathers, all busy people who let ambition overtake them, consume their soul, lose their soul, and need to get reminded of their soul by their kids.
Marquez’s story, *Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, is as much about neocolonialism as it is a critique of Catholicism. When Nilo Cruz did his adaptation of the story for our theatre he chose to foreground the experience of the kids, as the ones who discovered this disoriented old man who has wings. In Nilo’s play it is truly the kids who become his advocates. And Melissa James Gibson’s piece, *Brooklyn Bridge*, in a way it was very similar to many of her adult pieces. It’s set in a New York apartment building, with dislocated alienated characters. So, all the other characters could be in any Melissa James Gibson plays, but they revolved around this latchkey Russian immigrant 5th grader. So is the writing any less complicated? No, it’s very complicated, but the center event is someone trying to finish a 5th grade term paper.

In terms of the quality of scripts, the job of the director or the dramaturge is to ask questions. When are you lost? When do you cease to care? When are you over explaining? When have you not made exposition action? It’s just some basic rules that are emotional and responsive rules, hopefully, there are no rules. Hopefully the works are so utterly different one from the other that you can’t even recognize this theatre. We are in design meetings right now for *Lost Boys in the Sudan*. It is an epic poem. Most of it rhymes. The chorus is a chorus of cattle, because the Sudanese raise cattle. And so that’s how it starts.

MCCOY: Do you think that there are many in the field that feel that realism doesn’t work, or doesn’t have a place?

BROSIUS: I can’t answer about the field. I can say that for me personally, some of the things that we have had the most response to have been the most realistic. When we did James’s *Amber Waves*, it was a huge success. For the people who came, it was a deep emotional ride. When we did *Snapshot Silhouette*, about the tension between the African Americans and Somalis the work was extremely realistic and very powerful for the audience. So, some of the work we commission and produce is deeply theatrical, and some work is musical, and some adaptations of classics. Some that we commission is abstract and poetic, and some is realistic. It was amazing doing *Amber Waves* up on our stage. We had people driving 3 ½ hours, farm families coming, and we were in the middle of a farm crisis, and there was a drought happening. I don’t know if you know the play.

MCCOY: I actually happened to be working at Indiana Repertory while it was on their stage.

BROSIUS: Oh James did that?

MCCOY: Yes.

BROSIUS: It’s quite a different production the way he did it, because he added all those songs. I know he had a good reaction there too. You can’t get more realistic than that; it’s a family play, and the reaction, the humor, the tension, the controversy of having off stage suicide! People still talk about it, and yet for the farmers who just lost a neighbor because they were bereft, it was a very important play. It was important for this community, for young people, and for families. It’s the same way with *Brooklyn Bridge*. On one hand it’s sort of slightly majestic
and abstract, and the language is heightened; yet it’s a very realistic portrayal of a girl who tried
to find who she is, trying to find her place in the world. It has a huge emotional impact, no
songs, no dances nothing, just terrific acting and a fantastic, unbelievable script. It creates its
own rigorous and unique world and it’s absolutely true to the rules of that world. The writer
isn’t afraid of that world, and the script creates a logic that’s gorgeous. So part of our goal is
truly to make work as radically different, from one piece to the next, as humanly possible.

MCCOY: Do you have any thoughts on how the education system has affected quality in
children’s theatre?

BROSIUS: What do you mean the education system?

MCCOY: The relationship with the schools. I assume CTC has some relationship with the
schools in Minneapolis. Does that affect quality, whether it affects scripts or production?

BROSIUS: When I was in Hawaii, I remember as we began to do a lot of surveys. What are the
things you’d like to see? What are the books you’d like to see? What are the stories you’d like
to see? We’d get your popular book titles, but we’d also get lots of things on Hawaiian History,
myth, culture; and those were exactly the things they never brought their kids to see. So I would
commission those, because it’s my interest, and it’s exciting, and the hardest things to book.
And the audience at Honolulu Theatre for Youth is very different than here at CTC. HTY’s
audience was about 90% school audiences, where here it’s only 1/3. It’s 2/3 public, so our
profile is very unique—it is a multi generational audience. That is the core of who sees our work.
So we are in a different relationship with the schools than other youth theatres. We work very
closely with schools and look at what is on their reading lists and what they are studying but it is
just one of the many factors that goes into what we put on our stages.

So the long and short answer to that question is I think our education programs are deeply
involved in school partnership programs. We are deeply involved in what’s going on in the
schools and curricular issues. However, our play selection is not determined by what’s on the
school reading lists. What we commission is not determined by what kids have studied. What
we want to investigate in workshops is not what kids have necessarily studied. If we only did
that, we wouldn’t have produced Beggar Strike. Trust me in the elementary schools the tension
between the African American Somali community is not being talked about. The farm crisis is
not being talked about. In terms of the immediate life of what people are dealing with in the
schools, we never would have done Amber Waves; we certainly would never have done Reeling.

MCCOY: I wish I could’ve seen that.

BROSIUS: Not a lot of kids were dying to investigate a 1920’s silent world, if you know what I
mean. We would do BFG; we would do Christopher Paul Curtis’ work, adaptations of books
that are being read. But we do those things not just because kids know them, but because
Christopher Paul Curtis is a good writer, a smart guy, and a great storyteller. Roald Dahl is like
Theodore Geisel. He’s fiercely ethical, fiercely imaginative, combative, ragingly idiosyncratic, a
genius. I think Dahl’s work is problematic for adults. I mean Dahl’s work is not nice to adults.
Most adults are insane in Dahl’s work. And most of the kids are negotiating in an insane world populated and controlled by adults. Some are more commercial, obviously, like Disney’s Aladdin. It’s a story that has some terrific songs, not the strongest script, and yet we thought it would be an original thing for a holiday piece.

MCCOY: Do you feel that Equity’s involvement in the TYA field, the TYA Equity contract, throughout the years has affected quality in children’s theatre?

BROSIUS: I think there are producers out there who need to be challenged to honor and protect their artists. To treat their artists, their actors with respect and dignity and to honor this field. So we are a company that uses equity actors, uses non-equity actors, and uses student performers. We usually have equity and non-equity. It just happens to be all professional equity company of 5. We have performing apprentices that we hire. They are typically young people out of college with a BA, BFA, and sometimes MFA from programs across the country. So we work with equity all the time. Now in terms of field wide equity is positive, by requiring theatres to attend to the quality of their actors. While we don’t pay as much as the Guthrie, we pay as much as most of the other theatres in town, so that, the quality of actors we get, is almost without exception the same as any theatre in town. So there is no “I don’t do children’s work”, we don’t get that, because we work with really good people. We work with great artists, writers, and directors. Then we treat people well. We don’t pay them a fortune, but we pay them more than minimum, most of the time. I think it’s a good thing that equity actors feel that they are in a professional space that treats them professionally. I think that the more the field is able to pony out the money to get those actors the better the quality. This is not to be negative, but if you are only operating with young students or non-equity actors, there are certain things that will be more problematic and certain compromises of quality possibly that affect the entire enterprise. So we are doing ANON(ymous) an adaptation of the Odyssey, that we just did for teens, and I have literally the who’s who of great actors from the twin cities in it. And that sends a message out to the playwrights, actors, and to this community that you have a brilliant writer, a great design team, and the best actors in town. That’s good for the audience, it’s good for new work, for everyone. It’s also expensive.

So the long answer regarding the presence of Equity is I think net positive.

MCCOY: Do you see a difference in quality in theatres that produce TYA on their main stage and the quality of theatre that is produced at a LORT company that has a TYA program on their second stage?

BROSIUS: I haven’t seen the work that most regional theatres do for families. The Alliance, South Coast Repertory and People’s Light Theatre all do programming for families on their main stage. This is terrific. There are many other adult regional theatres as well across the country that are bringing fully produced work for young people and families to their subscription audiences. This is exciting and important. It is also a huge development from the less than inspiring history of professional theatres forcing their productions of theatre for young people on to the set of another play, with a 20-minute load in on that Saturday morning, covering the other set, and then they do the show. That’s obviously less than ideal for the artists and audiences
involved. It’s one way to do the work; it’s not the most artistically satisfying or probably the most effective.

One would hope that you can attract a significant audience and sophisticated audience, like we do, if you do good work. If you support that work, they will come, and they will be excited about it, and subscribe, and be donors, and be lifelong family with you. If you do it “shoddily” and denigrate the work, and keep it as a second class citizen, that’s what you’ll get. When I was at the Taper, most of that work toured. Was I paying my actors the same amount that they were being paid on the main stage? No, but I was paying them LORT B salaries. Not much in LA, by movie and TV standards, but by theatre standards, they were good salaries. Was the same amount of time and resources put to the touring shows as to the main stage? Of course not. This whole arena of discussion about the role of the regional theatre and family programming would be good to talk to Abby Adams about at People’s Light, or Susan Booth at the Alliance.

MCCOY: Because you are in a management position of an organization serving children, their parents, and families, and as a parent too, I am interested in your thoughts are on how our society values children?

BROSIUS: This is a curious culture. We talk a lot about youth, in terms of how well our children are educated, how well they’re fed, how well they’re taken care of. Yet there are a huge number of children with no health care, in classrooms of 40 or more with no proper facilities. There are also a number of parents who are not supported with after school programs, with effective and safe child care while they struggle to make a living. It’s a national crime. So the work that we have to do as people, parents, artists, and advocates for young people, (because if you’re in this field it’s better if you’re an advocate of young people), is very serious. The fact that one child is without health care is insane. The fact that a sick child could impoverish a family forever, it’s just insane. And then we have kids going to school hungry, it’s just crazy. The fact that we rely on public schools to be the therapist, kitchen, drug and alcohol treatment centers, for kids who’ve been damaged is very serious. So there is a lot of work to do. It’s very moving to be here in Minneapolis and Minnesota, where this theatre has been supported for it’s 40 years, with it’s extensive community and educational partnerships, and we just raised 30 million bucks to expand this building. That is incredible.

While there is darkness, there are always forces of opposition. I would argue that one of the single biggest events in American theatre right now is the growing professionalism of theatre for young people. The number of buildings and theatres that are going up, in Chicago to Charlotte to Bethesda is encouraging. We get people once a month coming from somewhere to talk about how to do it in their community, from Beverly Hills to Miami to San Francisco, it’s great. People recognize what it means to have a space like this in their community. It’s just different than having a traveling troupe come to your school. To come to a space, which honors you, that is professional, is beautiful, is quite an enabling thing. I think the limited nature of state and national funding for the education and the arts is a serious challenge. While there have been some wonderful but very small increases to the NEA we are still an infinitesimal part of the budget and this makes it harder for children, for schools and for arts organizations. The fact is that arts funding should be quadrupled to keep pace with the growth of the field and inflation.
But think of what you could do with advanced programs in the schools in music, oral history, folk histories, new works, play writing and literacy programs tied to the arts. Would you potentially stop the drop out rates and increase the high school graduation rates from places where it’s 50% or less? Just imagine you don’t have a high school diploma, imagine that world. What are the skills, what are the jobs you are going to get? What’s going to happen when you think that potentially 50% of the kids in many Urban centers, probably rural centers as well, are dropping out of high school, because the fact that it doesn’t make sense, or the economics are so tough in their family, or they’re bored, or there’s too much chaos in the family? It’s HUGE! What are those kids going to do? It’s not going to be pretty in most cases because the options are limited. Studies show that the highest rate of illiteracy in America can be directly correlated to prisoners. People that can’t read and write, or they can’t read at a decent level, isn’t such a surprise, they end up in jail, this isn’t brain surgery. So, do we value children? I think that answer will be a little different when there are at most 20 kids in every classroom, when there is universal health care, when there is safe daycare for parents, so they aren’t frantically scrambling and putting children in situations that are problematic, then I’ll say that we value children. And at the same time I am at an 11 million dollar theatre serving young people. I’m paid a salary, I have health care, I have a home, I have a car, and I get to make the work that I love. So I am very lucky and a very privileged person. I understand that I’m in a community where there are a very generous group of people, corporations, political leaders and foundations who believe strongly in the arts and strongly in education. But at the same time, our state government is cutting and cutting those essential services. So it’s complicated. So I’m in a position where it may seem insane to be critical, because of the privilege of this big building, all these costumes, lights, all the staff. At the same time the larger picture is one of problematizing the situation for many parents and many teachers. Just think of what the teachers are paid. So, do we value children? How much are we paying teachers?

MCCOY: Could you talk a little bit about your thoughts as far as innovation or creativity or quality about Pippi Longstocking, the show that’s on the stage now.

BROSIUS: This is a show that I did not commission but have produced twice. What’s important in a piece like this is to go at it like in any piece of theatre. What happened in the classic, what happened at the moment of its birth, so when this book was published, what did it do? What was the reception? Was it was a revolutionary book? Did it change children’s literature? Had there ever been anything like it? In fact, the publication of this book was radical and scandalous. Why? Obviously it was a tale of a girl that was alone, a girl without parents, a girl whose father goes off and leaves her, and says she’ll do fine. What she does is create her own reality, and so we wanted to celebrate not being a smart-alec, but being a questioner and having an outsider’s perspective. I think we got really close to that eventually, both at the school scene with the cops and with Mrs. Prysselius. The cake scene was particularly difficult to achieve. In that scene it was important to make sure, the hugeness of her aloneness was apparent. We wanted to convey her attempts to fit in and her failure. However, she then still made an effort to keep this life up. So what was important in the process of, “did we get it? Did that scene crack open, break your heart?” Because for a moment you see that she really doesn’t have all the tools to survive.
MCCOY: Peter, Thank you for your time today.

BROSIUS: You’re welcome.
The following text is a transcription of an interview between Allen McCoy and Matthew Howe, a resident director and master teacher at the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

ALLEN MCCOY: Many scholars and practicing professionals have written articles about the need for quality children’s theatre, or the lack of quality children’s theatre. What does quality theatre mean to you?

MATTHEW HOWE: Well quality theatre across the board I think regardless of whether it’s children’s theatre, adult theatre or any theatre, speaks truth. It’s theatre that’s honest and theatre that’s truthful and actors that get to actually ground themselves, in a truthful place when they perform. With us and theatre for young audiences in particular you are dealing with a clientele, a young clientele that should be just as expectant as an adult. They may not directly know that they are, but they should be just as an expectant as an adult in that what they come to see is something that’s going to feed them in some way; whether it’s food for thought, whether it’s a plot about life situation, or circumstance of people or thematic things that come up in the play or whether it’s just coming with an expectation of being entertained. They should expect that when they come to the theatre, they are going to get something offered to them, that they can receive, rather than something that’s just pushed at them, and forced to receive. Also in delivering quality it is our job to make sure that every experience for everyone that comes in, is as full and rich as it can be. Now of course, that’s a huge demand on the theatre industry, and I think with children it’s even harder. You have to work even harder, to make sure that that’s happening. It’s something that we talked about a lot during the rehearsals for Pippi. You can’t allow yourself to get into a rut and just repeat this over and over again and know that the audience will receive it. They will always applaud at the end; they will always give you that at the end, but only you the performer know whether or not you are deserving of it. And you have to discern that before you start. You have to know what it is that you have to be doing, to be validated that way by an audience. And you have to know when you’re actually really deserving of it when you finish each show. So that task is gigantic because that kind of maintenance and that kind of dedication to the art, with a large group of people, and a lot of students is challenging. I think it’s essential that we keep striving for that, and here, that’s one of our mandates. Peter’s been really great about always insisting upon that, that we always stay focused on finding that kind of energy and work to that maximum capacity. Even though it may sometimes feel like you’re overloaded, you need to constantly learn how to keep stretching and taking on more, equipping yourself to do the work you do, whether you’re on the stage or off; that the craftsmen that build the sets that the designers that come and work with us, the directors and the choreographers and the actors, all are encouraged to keep stretching and digging into that pool of what’s there to work from. For us it parallels right into what we do educationally and how we teach in our education program. I think that’s what makes our students, hopefully, a little more equipped when they finish high school. When they move on to study theatre, they carry with them this experience and they’re just a little more aware of what they’re aiming for.

MCCOY: You mentioned performers quite a bit. As a director, could you talk about some things that you would consider indicative of high quality acting?
HOWE: Truth. I already said that, but I’ll say it again, Truth for me is huge. Multi-dimensional, multi-faceted work, regardless of the style. We do a lot of variety in the kinds of material we present and some of it is very issue driven; and realism, verses The Wizard of Oz. Often times for me, I do a lot of The Wizard of Oz’s, the big musical pieces, and the things that maybe are a little more fantastical. I often feel that those pieces are even more challenging because there is a stereotype connected to them. A familiarity, or a stereotype connected to a show causes you have to push past the “showbizzy” part. So when I rehearse a piece, I spend a lot of time developing a truthful understanding of all of the inter-relationships in all of the characters. I study the consequences of their choices, and the story that’s being told. You must constantly go back to the story that’s being told, tell the story, amidst all of the stuff that we can do; all the time, keeping in mind that we should be able to strip away the costumes, the sets, the spectacle, and still tell the story initially so that an audience feels it. Often times that proves itself in the rehearsal room, because we’ll find that truth, and once the actors know that they have that, then they are not satisfied unless they deliver it. If they’re only presenting a caricature that slips one night, the voice isn’t right, the costumes fails, or the prop doesn’t work, then there’s nothing else to stand on, because you’ve been relying on that caricature to sell what you’re doing. But if you’re playing the truth of somebody, if Aladdin and Jasmine are playing the truthful love story, regardless of whether or not she’s wearing the right costume, we’re going to get it. For me, that’s just an essential thing that happens, and I would say a good bulk of the rehearsal time for myself is spent working on that. I have to trust all the other stuff to happen, like all of the comedic shtick, and all of the technical stuff. That can be left to the technical to do; they can figure that out, we don’t need to worry the actors about that. Leave the actors in their element giving them what they need; which is nurturing that sense of, “This is the story we’re telling.” Then we can enhance it with everything else, never letting it take over. The tornado in The Wizard of Oz has to be scary, but it’s still about Dorothy. It’s still about what’s happening to that girl, her family, her life, and her little dog, and that woman that’s so vicious to her. You sometimes forget about the story, and just make it a huge big visual spectacle that could wow the audience, but then, where are the people in it? The people have got to stay in there; you’ve got to always tell the story.

MCCOY: In your experience as a director, when it gets tough to get what you’re going for, how easy is it to blame a script? Do you ever blame the quality of scripts when you don’t get the results you want with the overall production?

HOWE: No, I don’t think so. I suppose you can, you certainly can. You could say that sure is a flimsy piece, or we only have two pages to explain a whole history! But I think that’s when you accept that challenge. You know and accept that’s what you’re dealing with, and you equip your actors in the rehearsal hall. You work out finding everything that has to surface within that framework of the script, whatever it may be. Granted there are some bad scripts, so it’s choosing material that you can do this with, then finding within the rehearsal all the subtext that has to surface through those few lines that has to come out; also finding the point that has to be made amidst a conversation that might be leading somewhere else, and making sure you find a way to let that happen. And again, it’s the actors that have to stand up there and do it, so they’re your resource and they have to know. We came up against this in Aladdin, because the script is developed for middle school performers basically, and MTI is distributing it as that. So when we
opted to do it as a professional production, we had to look really closely at how to use this framework and make these lines really work for the audience. A lot of it is in that sub textual understanding of the actor, so that they know, when there’s a pause, it’s not just a pause. How do we articulate this so effectively that all of it comes through? The whole history of Jasmine’s father surfaces in this conversation between Jasmine and her father. How do you do that? That’s part of the challenge of the rehearsal. I think it can be done. However, there are also just scripts that you don’t want to do. When you choose, and when you’re working, it can be a cop out to say it’s too bad the script is so weak. Find a way around it, keep working until you’ve exhausted all your options and before you run out of time, but you don’t give in. If you give in, you’ve stopped looking for solutions, so keep looking for solutions.

MCCOY: I Googled the phrase, “quality theatre,” and most of the theatres that came up were children’s theatres. Quality theatre seems to be a buzzword for the children’s theatre industry. What’s your take on this? Why do you think that might be the case?

HOWE: I think, because there’s a stereotype of children’s theatre when you say “children’s theatre”. The general public would have a picture in their minds of actors that are overacting, doing fairytales or clowns. There is a tag on a piece of industry that has evolved so much since it started that I think you are constantly battling that imagery that comes to mind. Consequently, professional theatre companies that are working for young audiences have a tendency to want to say this is quality work. This is work that is speaking to children in a new way, and reaching children in a new way, re-telling those stories in a new way that maybe you haven’t seen before, which we do a lot of. Just because it says that you’re doing Sleeping Beauty, doesn’t mean that it’s going to look like the cartoon of Sleeping Beauty. It can be told in a different way, and the work that you’re going to see on the stage is something that adults will go and see great acting and will appreciate it as well. I think it’s breaking an old stereotype more than anything.

MCCOY: Do you think CTC battles that too? A company, or organization that is nationally known, with a budget that is one of the highest theatre budgets in the country?

HOWE: Oh sure, we still do, because of the audience expectation. You have to take that audience expectation into consideration when you’re putting together how you’re going to present a story. We struggled with this a lot with The Wizard of Oz, because it is so beloved. There are some titles I think that you can take the liberty to re-tell, but if you’re going to do The Wizard of Oz, you better deliver The Wizard of Oz. There better be a girl in a blue and white gingham dress, unless you’re changing the title and re-conceiving the story. But if you’re going to use “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” and there is an audience expectation that automatically comes with that, and you have to deliver it. Then amidst that, you do something that makes it special and unique to your production. Then people walk out of the room and say, that was glorious! It was everything I wanted and more. But you’ve got to get the “and more” part. If you don’t then you’re just carbon copying, you’re just copying the film, and we don’t want that either. You want to analyze what is it that people get from the things that they know so well. Then when you have the chance to re-invent or re-tell, or discover a new way to explain a story, then you can take that chance. Then you inform your audiences that sometimes you’re going to come and get what you expect, and sometimes you’re going to come and it’s going to be really
different, which I think we did really well with *Sleeping Beauty* this year. It was really wonderful. Greg Banks directed it, and it was very well executed, and a very different way of presenting that story, and it worked beautifully.

MCCOY: There has been quite a bit of rhetoric in the TYA field about how good theatre is good theatre, and it doesn’t matter who is in the audience. Do you have any thoughts on that?

HOWE: How good theatre is good theatre?

MCCOY: Yes, particularly when it comes to TYA.

HOWE: Well story telling is story telling. Whether it’s a classic or a musical or an opera or a piece of theatre for a younger audience. I agree that good theatre is good theatre. I think you still have to know who your audience is. There are definitely challenges that come with finding the balance line between not caring if the material is supposed to reach a young audience, and being smart and using that information as you develop your story. One thing we do a lot of is commissioning and development of new works. Peter will speak to this more, but I think we’re learning how to be really good about that, like making sure that, as much as we may want the piece to do this, we have to do something else in order for it to hit those people. And there is a learning curve that I think you have to go through, especially when you’re trying to involve new pieces. But good theatre is good theatre, regardless.

You do have to worry about your audience; we are a children’s theatre. We’re not the theatre for everybody, as far as our name, we are a children’s theatre company, and that is our main market, young people and families. We have to keep that in mind, but at the same time you don’t want to be restricted by that tag or title, and give in to only doing the same things. We’re really encouraged to think outside the box, regardless of what it is that we’re doing, and not fall into that trap of just producing what is expected. It’s got to be more than that. That’s a huge challenge to take on because sometimes you feel like it might be okay to just do a check list. But if you take the time and challenge yourself to invest in thinking about “what else,” it always pays off; because you find something, you just do. It might be the most subtle little thing, but it will make the difference in the outcome of the piece. And all it will do is deepen that good theatre part of it. So it’s not just good theatre, it’s great theatre, or its life-changing theatre. And it’s speaking on a much deeper level.

I also really believe that in family audiences, with younger audience members, the attachment that you can make to them is significantly life changing. You have to believe that too, that something that you do on that stage can significantly change the life of somebody for the rest of their existence. So, that’s a huge obligation to fulfill and to be aware of as your working. It’s not good enough to say, “Okay fine, we’ll take it out of the box.” When we do a re-mount of a show like *Pippi*, it’s not just like *Pippi* from before, it’s a new *Pippi* with what we learned the last time, and more. So to me the hugest compliment is, “This is a better show,” even though maybe some of the people were better in the other show or better in this one, or maybe the *Pippi*’s brought different things to the table. The idea that the work we did this time, took it a step further than we did the last time. And that’s how you have to keep going back to it. And
amidst all the business you must deny your automatic instincts that your head is filled with. Things like, “I have all my notes from before, I have all my choreography written out, I don’t have to do anything new,” it’s a cop out. You have to tell yourself, “No,” go back to it again, and re-start, re-think everything, make sure that you are doing what you’re here to do, which is hard.

MCCOY: Because you are in a directorial position, in an organization that serves children, and their parents, and their teachers, I’m interested in your thoughts on how American society values children. What kind of values do we place on children?

HOWE: I think there’s always a lot of talk about the catch phrases of the children of the future. Things like we have to look after our children, so that we know where there going, and we’re providing them a way to go. That’s always lovely to say, but do we really effectively do that on a regular basis as a society? Sometimes I wonder. The school systems are constantly struggling to stay connected to the mandate of teaching and reaching every child and making sure that they have every opportunity to get what they can in their formative years of growing up in the school system. You have to do this all the time, to the very best that you can, so you start making compromises, in order to keep it all going. So I think the schools really struggle. There are wonderful teachers out there that are trying really hard to make that kind of an impact on young people and support them in the way that they need to be supported. Family structures struggle so much in the last years. I think the needs of kids have changed drastically, even in a place like this where, most of the students that train with us, have supportive families that want them to do this kind of stuff. Watching what they deal with on a regular basis, and balancing school and family life, and the pressures of where they’re going to go next, is amazing. It’s hard and it takes an investment from us as the adults that’s pretty intense if we really want to have that kind of mentoring relationship with kids.

In a place like CTC I think we have an obligation to really work at doing that, and to be who we say we are to them. We’re not just doing it for lip service, but really doing it. And in our programming choices I think Peter is really aware of thinking about that, and making sure that we’re not sort of just doing stuff for the sake of doing it. We are doing things that really make a difference to people and to children and families. Certainly in education, that’s one of our big things to make sure we reach those kids. We are doing more than just getting them in and out of class. CTC becomes a home for them as they progress through those years, so that they feel that sense of support to make judgments that they have to make without being stranded amidst the world as it is now.

It feels like it’s getting more and more isolated for kids. The further we go technologically, and the further we go into the future, it just feels like their independence is being challenged in a younger age. But at the same time, we are kind of enabling them to be isolated in that independent struggle. They can sit at their computer, they can talk on their cell phone, they can be on their palm pilot, they can play their video games, they can stay in this very self saturated little environment without intercommunication with other people; physically being aware of somebody else in the same space and that isolation isn’t necessarily enabling them to be stronger young people. It may be giving them lots to do, but it’s not necessarily encouraging them to
learn how to live. So I think we have a huge responsibility to try and bridge the gap of that, and show how that can support them in their growth, but it isn’t everything. It’s hard, I think; I’m very connected to a lot of our kids, and I listen to their struggles. I would never want to go back and live through that now as opposed to when I did. I graduated from high school in ‘79, and I just can’t imagine carrying the load that they carry now, and then some of them I look at and I am amazed that they are so together. The fact that they can handle all of this, and still be a star performer as well, it’s pretty amazing.

MCCOY: Do you feel that the theatrical unions whether it’s IATSE, or the directors union, or Equity have affected the quality of children’s theatre at CTC over the years, and if so how?

HOWE: I don’t think so, not in a negative way. We manage to deal with all the rules and regulations of each union, as they need us to, and we accommodate all that. And we have artistic integrity that succeeds, so I don’t think we’ve necessarily been hindered by it. It could be challenging sometimes, in that, if I’m directing a show that has the acting company in it, and they’re also performing in something else in ten shows a week, then there are often times days where I’ll only see them for an hour and a half, and they may be in a leading role in my show. I have to somehow make the rehearsal schedule work. So there are those challenges of dealing with hourly restrictions or having access to a prop on a weekend when there’s a non-union house someone may be in and working. But you just grow into that; you learn how to make that all work. There are often times when I have a number of people in another show at the same time as rehearsing one with me, and up until the Sunday before the tech rehearsals start, I don’t have them for more than an hour and a half to two hours a day. And then I have to very efficiently work up until the point where I get them, and then we saturate that time with putting the last pieces together to make a show work. That was very true with Pippi.

MCCOY: Do you see differences in the quality of acting between Equity and non-Equity?

HOWE: That’s a really hard call because I think I’ve sat in a lot of auditions; and there are some extremely talented equity actors and performers and then there are some extremely talented non-equity actors. Some performers have chosen to not be equity for whatever reason. They’ve just had a good gig non-union, and knew they wouldn’t get work by going union. I think it’s really dependent upon where you live and the industry where you live, and what your job opportunities are, and where you are going to go next. I have students that have left us, and went off to study theatre, and asked advice on this. The answer is always different. For example, I had a girl that graduated from NYU last year and got her equity card. She did an Off Broadway piece, did feature film in the fall, and is waiting to find the next thing now. Part of her is thinking I’m restricted now on what I can actually go and audition for; yet I’m so young that I haven’t necessarily got the right credential to get there. She’s a great talent, so I think it’s really dependent upon where you are. And talent is talent, it may be that somebody has just been in a non-equity space for a long time and always had success and is really great, and we have some of those in the twin cities. We have people that are really great, that just have not worked in union houses, and then we have other people that have done a lot of union work and have stagnated too, so it’s both.
MCCOY: Are most of the actors and directors that work here, aside from the things that have come in from Europe, local?

HOWE: Some shows are sort of set up to be more localized. If there is a specific need for casting, like Aladdin, we audition in New York and he came from New York. It was great. And then other times it will be completely localized, because we do have really strong talent here, for example like with the Grinch. As soon as I knew I was going to do it again I said, “We have to have Bradley play the part.” Not a question of having to look further for that one. And then we also look show to show. We look at which shows can we afford to allow students the opportunity to audition for roles. Which shows demand a need for young actors’ roles, and which shows do we need to do less of that in. So it changes show to show.

MCCOY: When you hire your apprentice company, do you just place them into the season, or do they have an audition again when they get here?

HOWE: They do a general audition wherever they meet me, and in some cases I get to work with them a little more than just an audition. Some of the schools that we link with that host our auditions like Circle On The Square, give us space and time. I do more than just audition them; I get to workshop with them a little bit for an hour or two. For Salt Lake City I go in and teach the acting classes of every year of their program while I’m there. I get to meet everybody, and some kids I can track through their progress through the years, at the University of Utah. And some of them I’ve hired after knowing them for four years, and that’s really cool. I get to watch their growth in their program and then analyze how is that going to contribute to their first year out.

MCCOY: How much time do you spend there?

HOWE: I spend two days teaching and then I audition. We have an open call and the seniors all come and audition. The school is very hospitable about me going back. And we’ve started to build some relationships with some places in San Diego now to do the same thing. DePaul has hosted us for that in the past, and there are a number of other schools that I’ve gone to. Those relationships have provided us with kids that are coming, kind of knowing what is going to be expected of them. Once they get here we’ll often have them read for the visiting director so that the director knows what they’re dealing with, because sometimes they’ll be assigned to a show, and the director has to figure out where they’re going to go. Other times the director will come in and say, “I want that person to play this part.”

MCCOY: How has the TYA’s relationship with the education system affected scripts in the field? You can also go into production if you like. I’m just curious on what your thoughts are on how the field has grown, the quality of the scripts, that sort of thing, and how that has had a relationship with educators and the education system.

HOWE: Well I think certainly utilizing the resources we have of professional playwrights and storytellers that really know how to make stories come to life in script, has certainly allowed for a much richer experience for the performer and for the audience as well. At the same time, the right educators certainly know the audience well, people that work in education, that are really
good at it, have a really clear understanding of what reaches those kids in my class. And if it’s an educator that works in the class, we have a teaching artist that works with us, like Maria Asp, she’s on staff with us. She’s such a specialist of reaching the young classroom as a theatrical resource. She wasn’t trained as a teacher, but she’s an incredible teacher, and it’s because of the combination of her savvy of how to teach and her savvy of the art. She comes at that with the younger age, and then I do that with the older age, and it’s that combination of knowing both worlds that I think really can push it up a notch. The most effective stuff I think is used in the best theatrical production side of things with people that understand the best educational approaches at the same time. So if you can find those people that know both worlds, to be in some kind of leadership position, in the development of that work, you get something pretty magical when you’ve finished. If it’s too much swayed towards production, you can loose sight of that educational need that is there, and if it’s too much swayed towards education, you can forget what it means to entertain. So finding that balancing line in the middle is really tricky, but if you can get people from both worlds working together on it, then you can create some pretty cool stuff.

MCCOY: Is there a difference between directing for a children’s audience and directing for an adult audience? Are there certain things you might employ as a director for one that you might not for the other?

HOWE: Personally, I don’t. I keep in the back of my mind who we’re building the piece for, but I purposely don’t try and color what I’m doing in order to reach that crowd. I trust the audience. I trust young minds to be able to understand, and not have to be spoon fed and over literal in order to get the message through. I trust the people to figure it out, or at least to be able to question afterwards. I trust that they can see something and not have to all the answers and then be able to ask after. So I don’t purposely think, “Oh, here are the set of rules that we use when we’re putting a piece together for children”. You do what you need to do, and then you have to constantly keep thinking about it, you can’t stop, and you can’t assume, you have to keep questioning right up until the time that it opens. Is this effectively going to work on all fronts? Is it equipping actors with enough to work with? Is it equipping an audience with enough to receive? Is it telling the story? I always go back to that, is the story in tact here? Or did we get too cluttered in something? You really have to be honest with yourself because you have to decide that you have your own personal things that you love, and maybe those things aren’t going to work in this show. Maybe you have to find something else, and maybe you have to give up something, as a director, that you might like a lot. But it’s not necessarily furthering the work that you’re doing on this piece. That’s another part of the challenge of being a good director. You have to be able to step outside of yourself, and get yourself out of the way. And that’s hard to do sometimes.

MCCOY: Do you see a difference in quality between theatres that produce TYA on their main stage such as CTC, and theatres that produce TYA on their second stage in a TYA program, for example a LORT theatre, that has a TYA program. Do you see general differences?

HOWE: I will say, but that’s a very big generalization. I think there are some places that value what the “Theatre for young audiences” component is within the life of their theatre, and will do
it really well. Unfortunately, I think there are places that maybe utilize that audience for a different purpose. Maybe it’s a way to access funds, maybe it’s a way to access grants, maybe it’s a way to perpetuate something within the life of the theatre. Unfortunately the reality is that some people just use that, and I don’t agree with that. But I think it does happen, we’d be silly to think it doesn’t. It doesn’t have priority in a place that maybe doesn’t have the financial support to run a real Theatre for Young Audiences program effectively. That may be the first thing that gets chopped, in the budgeting process. It’s a hard call, because if you’re trying to do it, then your hearts probably in the right place. You wanted to do something that would reach a young audience, as well as what you do on your main stage. Maybe it’s summer stock where you have your main stage series, and you have your theatre school that runs at the same time. I’ve seen and worked at theatres where that program is not given the support from the theatre at large that it needs to really run effectively. Maybe there’s a couple of people in it that are working night and day to keep it alive and keep it going, or a group of interns that suddenly are thrown into it that have to make it work. That’s a shame, but at the same time in those places, I think there are the people that are taking that opportunity and trying to make it into something, so if it’s there, at least it’s there. It may not be there with the right perimeters, but eventually maybe it will grow into that. But it’s a shame that everywhere it can’t be fully supported, but I guess that’s just unrealistic.

MCCOY: Do you feel that the TYA theatre from Europe has influenced quality in TYA in our country?

HOWE: I think so. I think because there are some greatly innovative minds in Europe. Of course there are certainly greatly innovative minds in the states and in North America, and Canada as well. However, the thing that’s so cool about bringing people from Europe is that the norm of how to process, or the norm of how to perceive a piece, or how to tell the story, maybe comes from a slightly different shape than us. Just by having them around if we are attuned to it, and not just sort of ignoring it, but by having them around you can learn to let things open up to yourself. You can learn how to look at something in a new direction, from a different side. Then when you go back to your next thing, you can keep that in mind, and it just helps you to keep that growing process happening, and not just get stuck in a box. It’s always very fascinating because it can always be the simplest things, that somebody would do or say, or something you see in their show. It was shadow puppetry but it was so beautiful, and yet it was not high tech, it was not bells and whistles, it was very simple; but it was so effective, and as I sat and watched it I thought, simplicity sometimes is the thing you need. And that just reinforced that for me. You don’t have to have a big frame around the picture, just the picture’s enough sometimes, not always, but sometimes it is. So I think it’s valuable when you can, and you’ve got the resources to do that. Fortunately, we can, at times involve ourselves with people from around the world, and that’s a luxury for most people. But when you have that kind of luxury you have to keep your eyes open to it, and your ears open to it, and your brain open to it and what it’s bringing, so that you learn from it. You keep learning from it.

MCCOY: You just touched up on this a little bit. Do you equate budget with quality or funding with quality of production?
HOWE: I think some of the most effective theatre that I’ve seen has not been big budget theatre, and some of the most incredible memories I have of seeing people perform even here, has been in a studio, or in a rehearsal, or without all of that “stuff”. I always think that the process is the process regardless of how it is finally seen by the public. And for me, that process is key to the success of the show. The fact that then you can then augment your story telling by having beautiful costumes, and an incredible set, or a rotating stage, or whatever it is, by flying so and so in and all that is just icing. But it needs to all be exactly what I said; it has to be an extra to the core. We are at a place where we are fortunate enough to be able to choose some of that, where we are able to make those pictures on the stage beautiful and do things that maybe other places couldn’t do. And then there’s lots of stuff that we would love to do that we can’t do. We can’t simply because we’re not bigger than we are. So you’ll be constantly reminding yourself that it’s a privilege to have what we have, but at the same time, you can still do it if you don’t have all the bells and whistles you want. You can still do this art it’s just where it’s packaged and how it’s packaged. You keep telling yourself that, and keep going back to that. You’re constantly going back to telling yourself why you’re doing what you’re doing, to effectively tell a story. And whether that means you’ve got a show that’s gigantic with a million bells and whistles or nothing, you can still do the same thing.

MCCOY: Matthew, thanks for your time. I look forward to seeing Pippi.

HOWE: Sure. I hope you enjoy it.
APPENDIX C: KEVIN MAIFELD INTERVIEW
The following text is a transcription of an interview between Allen McCoy and Kevin Maifeld, managing director of the Seattle Children’s Theatre in Seattle, Washington.

ALLEN MCCOY: In my research of quality in children’s theater, many of the writers wrote about the need for or the lack of quality, but a definition of quality was actually very seldom defined. I wanted to know what the phrase “quality theater” meant to you.

KEVIN MAIFELD: We’ve defined it here at SCT as professional, and then we’ve defined professional further by using union casts, there’s going to be SSDC directors. I mean these are basically all union positions. We have IATSE stagehands and crew. We have USA designers. We feel that the industry, through its union affiliations, has created some standards of quality that primarily regional theaters have adhered to over the years. Therefore, if we were to take that model and apply it to children’s theater that in a broad sense by using that definition, then we would increase the quality of the work we’ve been doing. I think, in fact, that has happened. We, I think, believe that when you bring talented artists who make their living from theater together and you do that regularly, you create the best work versus trying to find people who are holding down a day job and are trying to do this at night. We don’t use kids on the stage—very, very rarely. And one of the reasons we don’t do that is it’s the rare child that who can sustain eleven shows a week, which is how many performances we do and most of our runs are 9-10, sometimes 13 weeks long, so these are very long runs. So, there are just physical demands that, I think, require professional actors. Now, there are always exceptions, but that’s kind of a general rule.

In addition, when we’ve tried to use kids on the stage and we’ve done it in very specific ways, you’re taking a child out of school an incredible amount of time. So not only can their school work suffer, even if you provide tutors, but their whole social network kind of falls apart. I mean their social network becomes the theater and not what we think is normal for a kid which is their schoolmates and their sports teams and things like that. And we certainly have parents who would love for their kids to be on our stage, but we tend to double-cast, so that two kids can share the same role so they’re only doing five or six shows a week. We found that when we’ve had to do it, that was a good balance.

So for us quality is about professionalism and we define that really through a union affiliation.

MCCOY: I googled the phrase “quality theater” and most of the theaters that came up were children’s theaters. “Quality theater” seems to be a buzzword for our field. What do you think about that?

MAIFELD: I think the TYA field has an inferiority complex. I think we all work incredibly hard to convince people that we are at the same level of quality as the well-established regional theaters in our communities. I think we feel like we have to constantly educate and convince people that what we’re doing is quality work and I think because of that we’re kind of relentless in trying to get that message out. Having said that, I meet people virtually every week who have lived in Seattle their entire lives and who have no clue what we’re about, that there’s professional Equity actors on the stage. They’ve got this opinion of what children’s theater is. It
tends to be relatively inexperienced actors in big fuzzy fur suits and that’s kind of their tunnel
vision of what children’s theater is. I think that’s where it came from.

MCCOY: I agree with that, but you might be the first person I’ve met who in conversation has
said that it also might be an inferiority complex… that’s interesting.

A recent backstage article that I read lauded children’s theater. It was talking about how
children’s theater is improving. But then the writer went on to say within a large segment of the
theater community and the public at large that there is still a lingering sense that children’s
theater is not quite up to snuff, professionally speaking, that it’s a career stepping-stone at best.
A degree of ambivalence is evident. “We work here, but it’s not really what I want to be doing.”
I was wondering what your thoughts were on this dichotomy in perceptions of the field,
particularly from those within the TYA field.

MAIFELD: Well, I think we’re in a field that’s evolving pretty quickly. I keep referencing back
to regional theater but that’s where I was before I came here; and so, I think, when you look at
the Guthrie in 1970 and the Guthrie today, there’s certainly been lots of changes, but the core
kind of concept of the company is very similar. I mean it’s pretty much remained unchanged for
a very long period of time. I think in our field it’s changing, in some cases, at lightening speed,
because as companies become more well-established, and I’ll use Child’s Play in Arizona as an
example, because we do a lot of work with Child’s Play. When David Sarr first went there he
was doing the kind of typical, or stereotypical I should say, children’s theater, which was non-
Equity actors, mostly school tours, four actors in a van, being paid $300.00 a week, to do x-
number of shows for 55 minutes. And as they have found the resources to grow that company,
they’ve been able to then bring on actually a company of Equity actors who have now been
working for quite a while. Then they brought on professional designers, professional directors,
etc.; so as their resources have come together and they’ve become more stable, they’ve been able
to elevate the level of quality and professionalism. So I think that the dichotomy exists in the
field because there is a generation of people, and our artistic director Linda Hartzell is one of
them, who started out at one end of the spectrum and in relatively short time has moved to a very
different end of the spectrum. And so in fifteen to twenty years, you’ve had some pretty big
changes. Dallas Children’s Theater is another example of that. They’ve moved into a new space
and I know Robin Flatt believes that the new physical space is going to help them elevate
themselves both in the community’s perceptions and in their own perception about the kind of
work that they can do.

MCCOY: There’s been a lot of rhetoric in the TYA field about how “good theater is good
theater,” it doesn’t matter who is in the audience? What are your thoughts on that?

MAIFELD: I don’t think it matters who is in the audience, and we now feel that we have true
success when a play is ageless, and what we mean by ageless is that a grandparent, a parent and a
child have an equally rewarding experience; so that when the play is over and they’re walking
out of the theater, all three people are chattering about the experience, then we have
accomplished our mission and our goals. If the child is engaged and the parent and the
grandparent are bored to tears, we have not accomplished our goal. So I think more and more
children theaters that we’re involved with are defining it that way. Now, we have two audiences. Half of our audience roughly comes from school field trips, school shows we call them. They’re here at this theater, but the children come in as classes. The other half of our audience are subscribers and ticket buyers, and from watching the different audiences you see how a whole group of kids responds to a play versus a mixed audience of kids and adults, and when they’re both responding well, we think the play is working, so I don’t think it really matters anymore. The other way I gauge it is this. There was a time when teachers would all be in the back chatting and not paying attention and I think now, with very few exceptions here, the teachers are right there with the kids; and they’re engaged in the play as much as the kids are and I think that’s a good thing.

MCCOY: Do you think that the multiple sets of standards for children’s fare by theater critics have influenced our notions of quality in our field?

MAIFELD: I think a lot of it depends on the critic. I think we’re fairly blessed in Seattle with Misha Berson who also writes for American Theater Magazine and is, I think, a very sophisticated, intelligent, savvy, theater critic versus a theater reviewer which is, I think a whole different kind of person. When Misha comes into our productions, she insists on seeing them during school shows, so she will not come to a public performance of one of our plays. She wants to see it with a house full of kids. But when she comes in, I always feel like she is judging us with the exact same critical eye as she does Intiman, Fifth Avenue, or ACT Theater, so I don’t feel like we’re getting any special treatment because of the theater young audiences. When another critic comes in who doesn’t know us very well, I will often times see references, and maybe I’m hypersensitive, in the review that I think speak to the fact that they’re not used to reviewing plays for young audiences. There’s a bit of surprise that it was so good, you know, and so I think that by coming I think they get educated. Now, in other places that I’ve worked where I know exactly, I think, what you’re talking about which is where a critic comes in and says, “Oh, well for children’s theater, this was great,” but there’s somehow a different standard. They might pick-up on either a tone in the play or something like that, that we don’t feel is a critical element, but that’s the thing that they’ve latched onto. I guess that’s their prerogative as a writer, but to go to the issue, I think, Misha and I talked about it, and she feels that it’s part of the responsibility of critics who are reviewing both regional theater work and children’s theater work to be consistent. It’s fairest to the theater artists involved if they’re consistent in their standards.

MCCOY: Because you are in a management position in an organization that services mainly children (and their parents and teachers), I’m interested in your thoughts about how our American society values children?

MAIFELD: Well, I think there are two camps...I think there’s maybe more than that. I think we have what we’re finding right now is that a growing percentage of our audience members are what I call hyper-parents. These are parents who have decided that by age four their child will be speaking a second language, playing a musical instrument, have seen King Lear, you know, these extraordinary expectations of very young children, and that’s a growing part of our audience. The reason they’re coming here is they’ve got this checklist of all these life experiences that their young child has to have by age 7 or 8 to get into the proper preschool and
the proper elementary school and the proper high school and the proper college. This is part of that checklist, and we joke sometimes about it, but thankfully they’re very loyal patrons and they’re generous donors so we like them. But when you watch them in the lobby before and after the show, as a parent of two boys, I regret that sometimes there is so much pressure put on the children. “Did you get the moral lesson out of this play?” They’re not allowing the child to just enjoy the play for the sake of enjoyment. So that’s one group. Then there’s another group who have left it up to schools, both public and private, to do the parenting for them. They see the fact that their kids come to see a play with their school, so they have no responsibility to have any other arts activity as a family because the schools have taken care of it. It’s kind of a benign neglect, I guess. And those are kind of the two extremes that we’ve seen as we try to talk with non-attending families.

MCCOY: What are your past and/or present experiences with Equity and the TYA contract and how has that affected quality in the work here at SCT?

MAIFELD: Well, SCT had operated under the traditional TYA contract for a long time. However, we were doing so many things differently that we ended up with a whole bunch of side letters that Equity had agreed to over the years. So when I arrived here in 2001, we were coming up on an Equity negotiation, so I said, “You know, I’m looking at this contract and we have so many side letters, it’s like you’ve got a whole different agreement. Why don’t we abandon the traditional TYA agreement and come up with our own agreement that works for Equity and for the Seattle Children’s Theater?” And they were open to that. We were fortunate to have four local Equity actors on that first negotiating team who had worked here a lot; and we literally went through item-by-item and showed how we were different from the typical TYA company, or actually the typical TYA contract provision, and came to an agreement. So we now call it a modified TYA agreement because it’s pretty dramatically modified. So we’ve now come up on a renewal of that and the renewal process, we didn’t even meet face-to-face. He sent me kind of what their salary and benefit expectations were. We were very happy with how the mechanics of the contract were working and we did some negotiating on the phone and Email and we were done. Before this, I’ve participated in work negotiations which are epic and you’re three weeks in New York and it’s very contentious and all that, but this feels great to me. Now, we, by comparison, are paying Equity actors very, very well compared to other TYA companies. So I think from Equity’s perspective this is a really good gig and they can turn around and show it to their members and say, “Isn’t this wonderful what we did for you.”

I do know that there are other TYA companies who now employ Equity actors who don’t see it as part of their mission to ever be 100% Equity. You know, they’re going to be perfectly fine with an Equity/non-Equity ratio similar to the LORT agreement. It comes back to mission and vision. Our model isn’t right for everyone. Often times when I’m at conferences with other TYA people and I talk about how we have a full Equity contract, they shudder to think about that; because they can see that there’s big financial ramifications for their companies, so it’s not their goal and that’s okay. The core TYA contract, which may be what you’re asking about, I think was set-up for a different time and place. I think the core TYA contract was developed and continues to be used for a lot of touring companies who are primarily employing very young, fairly inexperienced, first-time Equity members, and it’s a great learning experience. I don’t
diminish that, and I think there’s a place for it. It’s not what we’re about. So I can get why that
contract is the way it is, but there’s a lot of provisions in there that I don’t think really reflect
where the professional children’s theater field is today.

MCCOY: Beyond salary, are there specific provisions that you could address that were
negotiated beyond the core contract?

MAIFELD: The big ones are number of performances in a week because anytime you go over
nine performances in a week, you have to pay additional compensation, so we were doing that
bump-up anyway. Meal penalties on two-show days. On Fridays, we have a little bit of a weird
schedule because the morning show is at 10:30 and the afternoon/evening show is at 7:00
because it’s our only weeknight performance that we do for families. So it’s a very long span;
it’s what is called span of day. So we had to go in and ask for concession to say, “Yes, an Equity
actor doesn’t go into overtime between these two performances.” So there’s just things like that
we felt we needed to negotiate into the contract instead of always having a side letter.

MCCOY: I hope I am not wearing you out.

MAIFELD: No. These are great questions.

MCCOY: I was curious about your experience with other unions like IATSE or the directors
union, and how, or if, it has affected quality or what your ideas of quality are?

MAIFELD: I’ll start with the directors and designers. You know, in Seattle, if you’re a member
of USA or SSDC, it means that you’re working pretty regularly in professional theater, and,
therefore, a lot of the designers and directors have worked together as teams before, sometimes
here and sometimes at other theaters. There’s a nice shorthand of communication and style that
happens when you have teams that come together again. With the stagehands union, I think that
was a function of the quantity of work that we were doing and their need to set some parameters
for that. I mean the short way of saying it is I think we were really pushing our scene props,
costumes and scenery hard, because we do a seven-play season and I think the union brought
structure to that. Now, I think the quality and I particularly the safety has increased dramatically
since we have a full IATSE crew. There are double-checks that happen within the IATSE and
how you structure the team; that means that safety harnesses are double-checked or sword fights
are very carefully orchestrated. There are just a lot of checks-and-balances that happen when you
have an IAA crew that don’t necessarily happen when you don’t have an IATSE crew. And
there’s a cost that goes with that and it’s a pretty substantial cost; but I think that it helped create
a safer work environment for all of our artists.

MCCOY: Is the IATSE crew full-time here?

MAIFELD: They’re seasonal. This year, they’ll come on in late August and they finish mid-
June.

MCCOY: Do you believe there is such a thing as a good children’s theater actor and if so, how
is that different from a good adult theater actor?

MAIFELD: Yes, I do. I feel passionately about this, and when we do casting, we really try to assess that. Here is the main distinction. Actors who do well here, meaning that they do great work and they want to come back and we want them to come back, are actors who understand an eleven-show week. The energy of the audience is going to be very different show to show. The kids can be hyper, very loud, very responsive or they can sit there and there’s no response; and you just never know until you get in front of them, so there’s that. And so it’s an actor who can kind of go with the flow of the audience. And then you hit weekends and you have five performances in a row with families, and so you have adults in the audience who are now laughing at jokes that nobody laughed at Tuesday through Friday, now they’re hilarious on Friday through Sunday. So it’s actors who are comfortable adjusting timing, reacting to the audience that they have. There are some actors in town who don’t want to work here because they feel that kids don’t appreciate the subtlety or the nuance of their work and that’s fine. We tend to do, I think, very sophisticated work. Yeah, we also do broad comedy and musicals as well, but generally we find that kids are an amazing group when it comes to discerning what’s working and what’s not up here on the stage. And so with some of the actors who’ve chosen not to work here I think it’s more their own issues than it is an issue with their work and our audience. I think it’s an insecurity about being in front of audiences who can be very perceptive. I think adult audiences put up with a whole lot of stuff, good and bad, and I think sometimes actors get away with it with adult audiences and they won’t get away with it with student audiences.

MCCOY: How does the TYA relationship with the education system affect the canon of dramatic literature for children?

MAIFELD: We talk about this a lot. We, like a lot of children’s theaters, have done a lot of work based on popular children’s books and now the rights to those books are getting harder and harder and more expensive to acquire. So, we’re in a real transition period right now because we feel like we’re heading towards a time where we, in a given season of seven titles, will not be doing as much work based on popular books as we have been. That has far reaching ramifications for this company, because if you’re doing Goodnight Moon, which we’re doing next year, it comes with built-in marketing. Just by letting the title be known, it kind of sells itself. Now, what teachers tell us pretty adamantly is that because we’ve been doing work that’s been based on popular children’s books, it’s a very broad safe zone. In other words, they know the content of the book and, therefore, they think they know the content of the play. We’re usually pretty truthful to the book, so they’ve built-up a level of trust with us over the years. Okay, if they’re doing Junie B. Jones and a little Monkey Business, I know what that’s going to be like, therefore, I’m not going to get heat from my principal because there’s obscene material or things that could be perceived to be obscene. I’m not going to get heat from religious parents, etc. The safe zone very big. When you do a play like Shape of a Girl, which is not based on a book, no one’s ever heard of it, that safe zone gets very narrow and so teachers feel less able to immediately choose to book tickets for a show like that until they have a lot more information. So often times, they want to read the script, which we’re fine with. Often times, they want to come to a preview which we encourage them to do and actually see the show.
I think there’s been some really good new work really for both kinds of theater. We’re fortunate right now to have a universe of playwrights who are writing wonderful stuff. I think children’s theater is wrestling with more topical issues than we used to. We occasionally still do our fairy tale stories, but we tend to do more works that we feel have some resonance to children and families today. I think a lot of the new work that’s being produced is about the struggles that we’re facing as a society. So I think the quality of writing is good. What we found is not every playwright can write for young audiences. Again, like with actors, it’s hard work. I mean, to get a scene to work for a group of 10-year-olds is, I think, much more challenging than getting a scene to work for 45-year-olds. Now, playwrights may disagree with me tremendously on that point (laughs). I think you’re dealing with more issues. I think you’re trying to keep the tension...the artistic tension there, you’re trying to get the energy of the piece to not sag. Yes, I think as a playwright for young audiences, you’ve got lots of multiple priorities that you’re trying to juggle throughout the play to make it work. Stephen Dietz has written a lot of work for us and I think he’s one of the great playwrights who’s been able to move back and forth between TYA projects and adult projects with great ease. Not all playwrights can do that and we’ve had some where, you know, we thought they could and we got into draft number five and realized it’s just not working; and they just don’t have the skill to make it work. So, it’s experimental like all new play development.

What we tend to see is when a playwright, who’s been primarily writing for adult audiences, tries to write for young audiences, the first two or three drafts are what I consider dumbing down the play. They’re afraid to make it sophisticated. They’re afraid to create illusions back and forth in time. They’re afraid to have multiple characters from different time periods. I think there’s a reluctance to take some risk. Some playwrights we guide in that direction and say, “It’s okay to wrestle with these issues or it’s okay to elevate the language of these characters, the kids will get it.” But often times when we get those first two or three drafts, there’s a sense of, “I’ve got to keep it clear, simple, or easy.”

MCCOY: What are some of the differences, if any, between directing for young people and directing for adults?

MAIFELD: I think there are similar issues, when we’ve hired directors who have not worked in children’s theater that much. We just had this happen recently. A very good, wonderful talented director but had not really worked with young audiences, had the actors kind of stand in one place and talk to each other. I mean, there was just no movement. Linda kept saying to her as much as it makes sense in the story line and in the characters, they need to move around. There’s got to be some action. And the director really pushed back on us, “No, no, no, we have to, you know, get this.” So, Linda said, “Okay, we’ll try it.” So in previews we tried it and sure enough, we call it the wiggle-factor. We sat in the back of the house and if the kids start wiggling, then you’ve lost them, they’re not paying attention. So sure enough, we got to this scene. These two actors are not moving. They’re just talking to each other for a fairly long period of time. The kids are rocking back and forth in their chairs, they’re chatting with their friends, you know, I mean they were not paying attention, and so the director came out and she goes, “Okay, now, I know what you’re talking about. I can reblock this scene.” So it takes
different skill. Not that you have to be lively and big and all that. I think just kind of subtle movement, changing of focus, you know, changing of light, maybe bringing in a sound cue. I mean there are some very nice subtle things you can do to just keep a young person’s attention in the moment of the play.

MCCOY: What is the relationship, in your mind, between funding/budget size and quality productions?

MAIFELD: Well, I think they’re very intricately linked. I think, to fund professional theater is an expensive proposition and I think we work tirelessly with our donors to help them understand why it costs so much, because many of them come out kind of the old school of TYA which is: “Why is it so expensive?” It’s four actors in a van, with no set. So we do a lot of educating when you’re operating at this professional of a level. You have the same cost structure as any regional theater in the country, yet your income potential is dramatically less, because of school shows. We charge ten dollars right now for tickets when the cost is roughly thirty-six dollars per ticket. So, we’re having to find twenty-six dollars of subsidy for every single child who walks through the door. We have some great season sponsors who totally get it and they’re willing to invest in it; but I think particularly with new donors and corporate donors, in particular, corporate people tend to have a very hard time understanding why it costs so much. So I think budget size really is influenced dramatically by what level of compensation you’re going to provide to your artists and to your crafts people.

MCCOY: What’s the annual operating budget here?

MAIFELD: This next year we’ll be at 6.8 million.

MCCOY: Are there differences in quality between theaters like Seattle Children’s Theater and Alabama Shakespeare Festival or Seattle Repertory?

MAIFELD: I really...I don’t think there’s any quality difference between what we’re doing and what those other theaters have done. I really don’t. I think that’s what we aspire to and have for a long time and I think we’re there. It’s interesting because I saw a production recently at another Seattle theater and for all of the pedigree behind this production, it just really looked bad. You know, it wasn’t designed well, it wasn’t crafted well, it wasn’t...I mean the acting was okay but the direction wasn’t phenomenal, you know. So it reminded me that even when you have resources, it doesn’t necessarily mean you get results, that it’s attending to all the details of a production that make it successful and look good. And I learned after the fact that this particular play, they had really done it on the cheap and I think it looked it. I think the theater was trying to save money and I totally get that, but they had made some pretty dramatic cost cuts to some significant pieces that were not built well, you know. As one audience member I felt you could tell.

MCCOY: Do you see a difference in quality between theaters who produce TYA on the main stage, like SCT, and theaters that produce TYA on a second stage, for example, a LORT, or SPT theater that has TYA program?
MAIFELD: I think that’s changing; but I think initially a lot of LORT theaters and I’ve worked in two of them, when they did the children’s show everything was scaled down. We’re not going to spend as much on costumes; we’re not going to spend as much on scenery; we’re going to have a shorter rehearsal period, you know; we’re going to get a young director; you know, we’ll try out a script from a playwright we’ve never worked with before. Yeah, it was like everything kind of got shrunk. I think now that’s beginning to change and the example I use is South Coast Rep. About three years ago they called me and asked “Do you have some scripts you could send us of plays that you really like that you think work for all ages?” And so we sent like five or six scripts and they started to producing some and got this immediate wonderful reaction from their audience; and they made a lot of money and now they’re doing it every year and now they’ve just increased to two shows a year. Then they said, “You know, for us, it’s like finding the lost city of gold. It’s like when it’s done professionally at the same level as our main stage, the audience reacts in a different way than when we cheapen it down and we’re doing it on a much smaller budget.” So it comes back to brand. If you go to South Coast Rep for a certain brand experience, you want that experience no matter what you’re doing. And so if you’re going into a TYA production versus a main stage production, you want that brand experience to be the same.

MCCOY: And I think that probably a lot of the new scripts that are coming out have something to do with that, too, where in the past, maybe a lot of people used older scripts or adaptations where they would adapt their own and now, you know, there’s like plays for young audiences where theaters can look at quality scripts or, at least, what companies like SCT are producing in scripts. In terms of innovation or creativity or even quality, could you tell me a little bit about the two productions that you have now, which I can’t see until this weekend and I can’t wait? I wish I would have seen them before I’m talking with you. I’ve read lots of reviews but...

MAIFELD: And Honus and Me, I think is a perfect example of what we’re about. This is Stephen Dietz’s play so this is a playwright who has made his career writing for adult theaters and now is writing more for us. He took a wonderful book by Dan Gutman and brought it to the stage and I think kept the theatricality and the dramatic art of the book intact. It’s beautifully acted. I’m really pleased with the cast. They’ve really gelled as an ensemble during the run. It’s baseball in Seattle in the springtime which has been a perfect connection because we tend...though the Mariners are not doing well this year, but generally our audiences are very rabid for baseball. It’s in a smaller space which presented some scenic challenges, but I think our designers really responded to that challenge exceptionally well and I think that as you’ll see it moves around a lot and yet I think we’re able to capture kind of those distinct environments of the play. Junie B. Jones, I don’t like. I’ll just tell you that right now.

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MAIFELD: We brought this...everyone in the country was doing it and making lots and lots and lots of money and last year when we came to season selection we needed a big title in the spring ‘cause traditionally when the weather is nice, people don’t want to go inside and so you have to have something that’s pretty attractive to get people in, particularly families on the weekends. Junie B. Jones has an incredible loyal following for the books and, you know, we just have this challenge of selling tickets. Imagination Stage in Bethesda, Maryland, developed the script with Joan Cushing, and when we heard the music and read the script, Linda and I both were like it’s
just not good, you know, but yet it’s very truthful to the story. In fact, it tones down. I don’t know if you know these books at all, but Junie B. Jones is a pretty, you know, awful child and pretty disrespectful to adults and teachers and all that, and I think Joan has done a good job of kind of toning that down. She learns her moral lessons and all that. Having said that, we did not have the resources to rework the score the way that we had hoped, so we ended-up using pretty much the same music that came from Imagination Stage. And Imagination Stage, we were just there because they’re doing another one of our plays called A Hundred Dresses. You know, they’re at a very different part of their evolution and so they’re just kind of becoming a professional theater; and they’re doing great work for the resources that they have, so I don’t want this to be perceived as anything bad about them, ‘cause I really respect what they’re doing and for them, Junie B. Jones was a huge kind of step up. So we went into production. I think it’s got a pretty good cast. We’re playing it on two levels which we don’t do very often, so it’s a two-story set. It’s very broad and campy and young kids adore it, love it, go nuts for it. After about age six or seven, I’ve noticed from sitting in the back of the house that older kids tend to be pretty bored with it. Part of it is the character of Junie B. Jones. I mean she’s written as a kindergartner and, you know,...so it’s not my favorite production. I think we gave it the best that we could give it. You know, I think we tried to make the best of a fairly bad script and even worse music and, you know, it’s working okay, but it’s just not something we’re particularly proud of (laughs).

MCCOY: I am glad just to hear you say that, and I appreciate your candor. Do you feel that way with stories that are geared to your younger audiences in general?

MAIFELD: No. No. Go, Dog! Go! is an exception and coming up Good Night, Moon. These are stories for very young kids that are brilliantly written, very beautifully created through a lot of physical action, great use of creativity, both for the audience and for the artists. So no, we can do work for young audiences exceptionally well.

Well, it’s...and I think the reason we’re getting some of that is, you know, a lot of our audiences in Seattle, they go to the Fifth Avenue, they go to the Paramount, so they’re used to seeing big Broadway touring shows. This is not that but there’s elements of it that feel like that and so I think for our audience who hasn’t seen much of that from us, it feels like, wow, this is a splashing big, you know, time musical, and so I can see where that comes from. It’s just again not...in fact, the project we’re auditioning for right now, Sorcerer’s Apprentice, which will be our holiday show this next year, you see, that to me is one of the beautifully done, it’s a world premiere.

OyamO, who is a playwright from Ohio, and it’s just a wonderful retelling of this story that we all think we know that’s been around for I guess like 1200 years and, you know, people know the Disney Fantasia version of it, but they don’t really know what the true story is which is really about the master and apprentice relationship, like learning from your elders. And, you know, that’s going to be a big splashy musical but it’s really creative and inventive and wonderful music and it’s going to have great dancing. You know, so we can do that and it will feel like a big splashy musical. With Junie B. Jones, it was like I think the source material was just kind of so limiting for us that we gave it all that we could, but I think as an audience member you kind of
reach a point where, you know, I have a hard time keeping interested in it.

On the other hand, you know, we’re very close to all the work we do and so it’s hard to be objective and certainly we’ve heard from our audiences that they’re loving it, just loving it, so...

MCCOY: Well, I just wanted to let you know that I was going to be here all week and I’m going to see the shows over the weekend and I’m very excited. Well- I appreciate your time. Thank you for meeting with me!

MAIFELD: You’re welcome!
APPENDIX D: BRANDON ROBERTS INTERVIEW
Allen McCoy: What is your definition of quality children’s theatre?

Brandon Roberts: I think for me a definition for quality children’s theatre would be theatre that, gosh that’s a tough question. In general I think it’s theatre that tells a strong story that invites kids or young audiences into a world where they can use their imagination, be entertained, and learn something along the way. Also, just as a general observation theatre that doesn’t talk down to kids, theatre that provides a reality for kids, even if it’s a bigger and broader reality than what you would get in another play, such as an adult contemporary play; theatre that is approached as though it were Shakespeare.

McCoy: Can you describe your acting process, both for the rehearsal and the run, for *Peter Rabbit*?

Roberts: Well, we had a two-week rehearsal period for the show. The script is only twenty-five pages long. We had it blocked in a day, so very quickly solved most of the immediate problems that presented themselves, and therefore had a lot of time to basically explore our physical lives within the play. We got to the point where we had the opportunity to run it into the ground, which happens often in rehearsal periods; but fortunately our director was generous enough to recognize the situation and cut rehearsals short so that we weren’t just running into that. But since we had that extra time, everybody got off book really fast and pretty much developed their immediate characters. I initially before we started rehearsing, wanted to make Peter just a little bit closer to me. I knew obviously he would have a different essence from myself, but I was going to try and keep him fairly simple and fairly honest. Even after the first read through, Pat the director was pretty clear about how he wanted the kids to be kids, which for me, instantly sent a red flag. He didn’t want to get child actors, he wanted us to play the age, I guess; which is a scary thing, because you’ve got actors in their twenties, some of us in our late twenties, suddenly being asked to play eight year olds; which is impossible, it’s impossible to do, because I don’t remember how I acted when I was eight, and I don’t know anyone who really does, and can honestly capture that.

McCoy: Whenever there’s a child character, you’d prefer a child to play it?

Roberts: Not necessarily. But a lot of times, when actors my age are cast in a younger role, it’s so easy to play at the kid, taking the general observations, or what you think a kid does, and try to manifest that. And it always reads to me, if I’m in the audience, as that’s an adult playing at being a kid. So rather than obsessing about playing the age, I try to throw myself just into the reality of the play or the world that we are creating. And the reality is I’m now a Rabbit, and this is the world that we live in. I have these wants and needs. I try to make it about the desires of this animal, of this rabbit, and he wants to play. I think he enjoys causing trouble, he’s mischievous. Hopefully that child-like essence will come to the surface because I’m focused on these wants and needs. Ideally I did that every time; it’s hard to say, I don’t know whether it came across or not.
MCCOY: Why is playing a child or young person different than playing an old person, or a large drunk buffoon? How are those different?

ROBERTS: I don’t think they are, because the same exact thing applies for an old person. I’ve had to do that to; and I think I do fall into those traps, I think it’s hard not to. Certain aspects do work; I think when you’re playing an older character, a little bit easier, at least for me. As human beings get older, their physical life takes on a whole different life of it’s own. There are distinct things that you can see every day sitting at a restaurant. You can observe how that particular person moves, how this older gentleman stands up from his chair for example. Maybe that’s something that I can incorporate, that’s something that I can physicalize. With kids though I think it becomes a much more general observation. You can go to the playground and watch kids play, but for the most part, I find it incredibly difficult to get on stage and do this bag of tricks. These “three certain things” may not always work for every kid, because every kid is so different. And most of the time when you see them, they might be playing a different role. What if they’re on the playground using their imagination being a pirate or something. Maybe that’s something that I can incorporate, but I don’t know if it is. I mean it seems like there are a handful of things that a lot of actors kind of fall back on, when they’re playing kids. I just don’t think it’s as easy as that. It’s a much broader world I think the kids are living in, depending on the age of course that you are playing. A lot of times they might be experiencing things for the very first time, which automatically makes the world bigger, and magnifies the weight of things.

Speaking specifically to the cast of Peter Rabbit, we’ve been very lucky to have a strong cast that isn’t satisfied just doing that. I think each of us, even though we never really sat down and talked about our process necessarily, have given enough respect to our prospective characters, to try to find a little more than just the stuff that most kids generally do. And again it goes back to investing in the world that you’re creating. And we’ve had to work a little harder with this one I think, because it isn’t the strongest script that I’ve ever dealt with for young audiences, so therefore we’ve had to pump a little more life into it through our characters.

MCCOY: The last time we met, a few weeks back, you mentioned you were hungry for verbs. Could you explain that a little bit further?

ROBERTS: Yes, this is strictly based on my training. Every actor should have a script analysis method; they should know how to score a script. Basically it’s just the process of going through your lines and separating them into beats and units and knowing what you want with each thing you say, and choosing verbs for yourself. I’m at the point where I don’t write it down necessarily, I just tend to do it as I go. It’s often the case that the initial verb that I pick, or happen to be playing, isn’t necessarily what the director thinks. In an ideal situation a director would say, “Okay right now you are trying to get sympathy; instead of trying to get sympathy, try to manipulate mother rabbit.” That’s an ideal verb that I’d like to get from a director. Where as often times, and a lot lately, I’ll get, “Be more whiny,” or “Do it like so and so,” or “Do it like Bugs Bunny, on a cartoon” or something like that. “Do you remember that episode of Sienfield where Kramer did this?” By directing that way it takes a lot of power away from the actor, and
therefore the character. Instead of coming from somewhere inside the character where the character can be fighting for what he wants, he’s thinking “Oh, now I have to do it like Krammer” or something like that, or I have to be whiny, don’t forget to whine here. So, that’s basically what I mean by being hungry for verbs. There seems to be a drought of them lately.

MCCOY: Why do you think poor acting or over acting is often associated with children’s theatre?

ROBERTS: For one reason or another, children’s theatre has a bad reputation with a lot of the acting world. I don’t necessarily agree with it, and I think part of it is that there are a lot of bad scripts out there. Many are written, whether the playwright realizes it or not, they are written in a very kind of pandering tone, they are pretty obvious, the plots are pretty formulaic and everything. I think a lot of the actors just don’t give it the same kind of respect that they would give to something else like Shakespeare. But I personally have been fortunate enough to deal with people, in my training, that did give theatre for young audiences the same amount of weight. I did my internship up in Virginia at the Barter theatre. We did all the kids shows that toured out in schools, and brought schools into us. We literally said, “If you treat it like it’s Shakespeare, then it will be.” Then at that theatre, we also took the time to figure out what was wrong with scripts, and how we could improve them, to tell the strongest story possible. Ultimately, I don’t know the answer to that question. But that’s my general impression that I’ve gotten.

MCCOY: Is Peter Rabbit in good shape?

ROBERTS: I believe that Peter Rabbit is in great shape, as a matter of fact. I think many times because actors don’t respect the craft of doing theatre for young audiences as much as when they do adult theatre. Many times kids shows either slip in quality or the actors get bored and start to try new things that may not necessarily fit within the world that was created in rehearsals. However, Peter Rabbit is actually pretty close to what it was. And I think the improvements that have occurred, have only enhanced the story. I know for a fact that I have inadvertently or advertently altered a couple of lines here and there, to make the meaning pop a little bit more. Some of the lines were written a little bit obscurely, or didn’t necessarily fit as well. Over the course of the play Peter has to learn to basically just be nicer to people, and stop playing practical jokes, and behave himself. I felt like there were a few opportunities that the audience could be reminded that that lesson is happening, without shoving it down their throat, but the lines didn’t necessarily reflect that. So I know that I switched a few words here and there, so that the line was basically the same, but the audience could still see those wheels turning in Peter’s head, or see him figuring out, oh this behavior isn’t working, what can I do? I need a new tactic, and maybe it’s this. I wanted the audience to see him trying different things to ultimately get what he wants, which is out of the cage. Well, it just so happens that by being nicer to people, his friends will actually help him.

MCCOY: What about Peter Rabbit himself? Is he physically in good shape? How does your stamina and strength compare to something like Twelfth Night, which you did last season?
ROBERTS: I’ll tell you to be perfectly honest, Peter Rabbit runs at about fifty minutes, and I am
more tired at the end of that fifty minutes than I think I’ve been at the end of any show I’ve ever
done. Just the style that we’ve adopted for the world is a very Warner Brothers cartoon style,
and Peter runs around a lot. I look forward to getting caught in that cage, because I can sit still
for a while. I’m hanging in there personally, and I don’t believe that any lethargy is showing up
on stage. I think I’d be getting notes about it if it were. I think the morning shows are a little bit
more challenging than later in the day, because you get a chance to be awake for a little bit
longer. I definitely like to do jumping jacks before the show. In fact the first school show that
we did, the first 10:30 show that we did, I didn’t do any jumping jacks, so I didn’t get my heart
going beforehand. Consequently, the first couple laps I did around the theatre, I was pretty
winded. When I got off stage I thought, “Oh boy, I need to do a little cardio before I do this,
before the show starts”.

MCCOY: Do you think there are elements of acting methodology that apply only to TYA and
not to the adult stage?

ROBERTS: I’m sure that there are.

MCCOY: Are there things that improve the quality that might only apply TYA?

ROBERTS: In my heart I want to say no. I think that both theatre for young audiences and
theatre for adults should both be approached in the exact same way, with the same amount of
respect. There are obviously more things to be aware of as an actor on stage that you can deal
with with a theatre full of 7-12 year olds, that you’re not going to deal with, with an audience of
adults. Again in most children’s scripts there are direct addresses, and in Peter Rabbit there’s a
lot of incorporating the audience. For example we get them to shout out to us. There is a
technique to getting the audience settled down, once you’ve just riled them up, which I don’t
know if anyone has mastered. So that is obviously something that actors have to deal with, and
it’s not necessarily something that you can rehearse. I do believe it’s something that you get
better at as you deal with it more and more. And I don’t necessarily know the best way. This
very morning we had one of our more rowdy crowds, and so I find myself experimenting. Do I
just sit quietly and wait for them to quiet down? Or do I try and top them? Or do I do something
physically to get their attention, or try and make them interested in something else rather than
continuing to shout out the answers to the question we just asked them? After all, they’re just
doing the job that you have given them, they’re being helpful like we just asked them to. I don’t
know that there are any exercises to do during the rehearsal period to enhance that, once it gets to
be show time.

MCCOY: What are some of the techniques that you use, or have used, to monitor or manage a
responsive audience? You just mentioned a couple. Are there any others?

ROBERTS: Well, basically when you instill the audience with the power to become a member of
the cast, to provide information to us, you have to listen to them. Very often some of my written
lines will be eliminated because they’ve already said them.
MCCOY: And you eliminate the lines?

ROBERTS: I personally eliminate the lines because I’ve listened to them. When they’ve just told me that I shouldn’t go into the cage, I shouldn’t say the lines, “Maybe I shouldn’t go in there.” The only exception for me would be if it had comical weight. If it works out at the exact right time, for example, they say it as I’m bending down to go into the cage, I can stand back up, and if they quiet down, I can say, “Maybe I shouldn’t go in there,” and that tends to get a laugh because they’ve just said “Maybe you shouldn’t go in there”. Then the next line is “Something’s telling me I shouldn’t go in there,” so I’m giving them credit for saying it, without saying, “oh, I shouldn’t go in there?”, but it changes. Today, it worked out that they continued to holler. They said it at the moment I was getting ready to go in the cage, but they kept shouting, so I decided in the moment that it would be better to move on to the next thing which is trying to get the carrots from outside the cage. So I went onto the next problem. In my actor brain, the idea was that by crossing around the cage, hopefully that would pull their focus. That way they want to hear what I have to say next, rather than waiting for them to quiet down and prolonging that moment, because that moment had already passed.

So, it’s relying a lot on actor instincts, and using your best judgment in whatever moment you have, but at the heart of it, it’s listening to them. If you want kids to take part, and actually offer them lines in the show, which is what you’re doing when you’re asking them questions, you have to respect that and listen to them. It is challenging, because in the very next scene after we go back to the woods, after I’ve been caught in the cage, and mother rabbit comes out and Charlie is there. They are asking, “Where’s Peter? Where’s Peter?” Meanwhile the kids may be shouting, “He’s back in the garden, he’s back in the garden!” In the script it’s not written for them to come to that conclusion until 5 minutes later. That’s one of the biggest challenges. We’ve broken down the fourth wall and we’ve listened to the audience; but here’s a section where because of the script, we have to shut them out all of a sudden. That’s such a weird thing and I don’t know if it ever succeeds. I think part of it is a style thing, and part of it is a writing thing, a script thing. Obviously the kids in those audiences have gotten ahead of us, and they are ready to move on to the next thing; they don’t necessarily need a recap, and that’s basically what that scene is. It’s a re-cap, “Oh he got caught because he was going after carrots; well maybe we should go back, oh well where is he, I don’t know.” So I don’t know, that’s a tricky thing there, and I’m glad that I’m off stage during that scene.

MCCOY: Do you think children’s theatre actors need to like children?

ROBERTS: I don’t necessarily think so. These are going to be some pretty generic observations here. I’m scared to death of children, because they’re the most honest audiences you’re ever going to have. They are going to tell you how they feel, and if you suck, or whatever. Whether it’s by shouting out, or wiggling, and that just lets us down, and we’ve lost them. Do you have to like children? I don’t necessarily think so. I personally am not looking to have kids any time soon. That doesn’t mean that I hate children of course. When I go out on stage, I get more nervous as an actor for kids shows than I do for adult shows, simply because of the fact that they’re so honest, and I don’t attempt to speak their language or anything like that. I just try to trust myself to play my actions, go for what I want, fight for my super-objective in the show, and
hope that they’ll go along with me on the ride. I tend to find some success with that. So, I don’t
know, I think they want the same respect that adults are given. So I just try to trust the young
audiences to go with us on the story, and most of the time they do.

MCCOY: You and I performed together in a play, and during that run there was a little monkey
business and fooling around on the stage. Do you think that kind of behavior is indicative of
most actors when they work in TYA?

ROBERTS: I don’t know. I’d be lying if I said I never took part in any of those things as well,
but ideally no. I’ve done plenty of adult shows where stuff like that happens as well. So I can’t
officially say, “Oh yeah that’s a habit only of kids theatre.” However, at the end of the day, I
think it comes down to the amount of respect and how much you honor the world that you
created. I think the core of that begins with the direction. Sometimes you may have a director
who may be sitting back on his heels thinking this is just a kid’s show, we’ll get it up on it’s feet
and it’ll be fine. If that’s how you’re going to approach it, that’s how your actors will approach
it as well. And so I go back to, if you treat it like it’s the Shakespeare show, if you treat it like
this is the money maker show, which in a lot of theatres cases it is, it will have that weight. It
will have the amount of respect from the theatre company that you would ideally want it to.
That’s one thing, to be honest, about the Shakespeare Festival, that disappoints me a little bit.
Whether they intend it or not, the general impression that they give of how they feel about their
own theatre for young audiences is that the shows don’t deserve the same respect that Into the
Woods, Twelfth Night, or whatever their main stage season is. This baffles me, because we just
did a show to a house that was jam packed full of kids, and I’ve done two of their main stage
shows, and I don’t think I’ve done one that was sold out. Granted the tickets are a little bit more
expensive so I guess it balances out, but they deserve the same respect. Whether they get it or
not, is a different thing. The core of each show should be looked at individually. I think the
director needs to invest into what he or she wants the world to be, and care enough about the
world to inspire the actors and characters to make the same investment.

MCCOY: Do you feel that this company places the same level of resources in terms of talent or
budget in their TYA work that they do in their adult work?

ROBERTS: Well granted, this was my first TYA show over there, I don’t know how money gets
divvied up. I know this being their first summer show as it were, they weren’t looking to spend a
lot of money on it. But even with that in mind, it’s a very good quality show; certainly as good
as their other TYA shows that they do throughout the year. From where I’m sitting, I don’t think
this was a mistake for them. They kind of knew it was a gamble going into it because they didn’t
know where they were going to pull audience from. The weekend shows have been fairly sparse,
but a lot of the morning shows have been pretty full for the most part. So from where I’m sitting
I don’t know if they are making money, but can only guess that they’ve done okay at the very
least. I can’t imagine that they wouldn’t give it another shot next year. I’ve heard that there are
TYA shows that the artistic director never even came to see. And that’s just sad, you know.
Here you’ve got a theatre company that tends to use a similar team of people for a lot of their
shows, production staff, even actors will come back and do more than one show. You’ve got the
same human beings fighting the same fight that you’re fighting with the main stage shows, we’re
all working towards the same purpose, which is the success of this theatre company, so it should have the same weight and is due the same respect than everything else that is done. I think people can tell when the same amount of nurturing has not gone into one thing that it has into something else.

I think the *Jungle Book* could have been a very strong show. Because she tried to stay true to it’s Indian origin, and it kind of had a dark setting, and a threatening tiger, with creative costumes, it felt very *Lion King*-ish. There was a tiger head on top of a human head, so everything was done very creatively. There were no fuzzy monkey suits, or anything like that. You could see that these were people with elements of animal kind of tied into their own bodies, which I’m a huge supporter of as well. But then all of a sudden you found yourself in the midst of a section where you make the noise like the elephant, because they ask the audience to make the elephant noise. You think, okay wait a second, we were just seeing a dark show about a baby who had to be raised by wolves because he and his mom got separated. That world has just been shattered. I mean my brain fell out of my head when I saw it. I felt like saying, “Wait a minute, I had invested into this one world, and now I’m having to hum along with a song, come on!” Those little things, for some reason, some directors feel they have to do to make it entertaining for kids, and it’s just not true. If you watch any good strong Disney movie, there’s nothing that’s pandering to the kids. It’s just as entertaining for adults as it is for the young audiences, and they win.

So I don’t know, I feel like if a lot of companies gave the children’s scripts the same weight that they gave the main stage scripts, then they wouldn’t feel like they had to do that. It’s like they’re already assuming that they’re going to fail with the story. Either the script is bad, or the actors or directors, so they need other elements in there. It automatically communicates to me as an actor, well okay you don’t trust that the story is captivating enough, so here’s the part where we have to wake the audience back up by making them sing along or whatever. It’s frustrating.

MCCOY: What correlation, if any, is there between quality acting and union status, and how does that relate to Orlando Shakespeare Festival?

ROBERTS: Wow. Well I am non-union myself, and again, I’m going to be talking out of turn here, because I don’t know much about the union actually. I’m not striving to join the union, just to make myself more available for roles. If you’re asking me if I think that I’m as good as Equity actors, I believe that I am. I don’t know. The way I kind of think of it, is that I’m an actor that’s for sale all the time, I just come cheaper. So I’m more affordable, I’m local; you don’t have to house me. I don’t know what the drawbacks are. Based on the Equity contracts, obviously the Shakespeare Festival has an obligation to bring in x amount of Equity actors per show. Much like a lot of other regional theatres, they feel that the best equity actors come out of New York, and in some cases, you know they’re right. Some New York actors come down here and knock your socks off. But I don’t necessarily agree that they’re doing a better job than a local equity actor or a local non-equity actor would do. I think some of that is a status thing.
There is a certain amount of frustration going into an audition knowing that the role that I would really like to do is going to go to an equity actor out of New York or somewhere else. So it is discouraging as a local boy, who’s been very loyal. I go in and I do my job; if you invest in reviews, I’ve gotten good write-ups for what it’s worth. I mean I don’t invest in them myself, but based on what everyone has told me, to my face at least, they enjoy working with me. I don’t feel like I cause any trouble by any means, but non-the-less that mentality is there. There is a whole world of numbers that I don’t understand about how they have to have so many equity actors per show, to keep there union status, whatever that is. That’s something that I can’t really talk to, but in my case in particular, I feel that I bring the same quality to the stage as an equity actor would.

MCCOY: What are some of the things that come to mind that a children’s theatre actor should know or be able to do?

ROBERTS: Well, I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again, respect for the world, respecting the world that you’re creating, respecting the page, no matter how much you don’t want to or be inclined to; listening both to the audience and to your fellow actors. I think also this always takes me by surprise. There was a group of kids who came to see the show, that had just had a birthday party. We were kind of wrapping up the autograph session, and one of the little girls looked up at me and said, “I used to have one of you.” I can assume she was referring to a stuffed animal. I thought, “Wow,” I just made one of her stuffed animals come to life, and hopefully I did it justice. Suddenly, there’s this huge responsibility that you may not have been thinking about before. When you’re doing a show such as Peter Rabbit, with a very well known character, a lot of people will relate to Peter Rabbit, and there is a certain amount of respect that deserves. Obviously you can’t please everyone, because everybody is going to come in with a different memory of Peter Rabbit, or Winnie-the-Pooh for example. So that’s why I don’t feel like I can get away with anything. If I’m not invested in the world that we’ve created, they’ll see right through me. They’ll see me slip, if I slip out of that world, back into Brandon world, they’ll see it. So it deserves just as much, if not more respect than any other show would. If I were to give some sort of grand wisdom to fellow actors, I would just say give it the same weight. Give Peter Rabbit the same weight that you would Romeo and Juliet or Death of a Salesman or any show.

MCCOY: In terms of quality, innovation, creativity, tell me about this production of Peter Rabbit.

ROBERTS: It always makes my skin crawl when you see the fuzzy bunny outfits, Barney on stage, or Sesame Street Live. I guess there’s a time and place for them, but I just don’t think that that kind of thing belongs in a live theatre more intimate situation I guess. As far as our production, I was very excited to hear that both the director and the costume designer both agreed that we weren’t going to try and hide the fact that we are people. So it was decided there’d be elements of animal on the actors, and initially there was talk that we wouldn’t even do any make-up, that unfortunately changed. Here I am painting whiskers on my face. I’m not a huge fan of that, but I think overall I think that we’ve created a very fun world. I came in before rehearsals started, actually to help out with some of the group sales. It was interesting just hearing some of the early production meeting stuff. They were talking about keeping it kind of
nursery rhyme-ish, which I think scared the marketing director. The initial thought was, there goes half of our audience, because if we have to sell it to really really little kids, who’s going to come? We need to make sure it’s appropriate for older kids as well. I think that’s when the show itself got steered more towards that cartoon-ish world. I think as far as the production team goes, we’ve all captured the same show. I kind of wish that we were using the stage a little more, but again that came down to budget stuff. I guess I wanted more of a playground out there, but I think that given what we’ve got, I think we’re doing a fun show.

MCCOY: Thanks Brandon!

ROBERTS: You bet!


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