

Theatre for Young Audiences: Considering Quality

I An Interview with David S. Craig by Prof. Larry Schwartz, OISE, Toronto.

L.S: *What were some of your earliest memories about being engaged with the theatre?*

D.C: I remember seeing *The Sound of Music* with my family when I was about nine. I was singing in a church choir at the time. I looked at the seven children in the Trapp family, all blonde (like me), all singing (like me), all performing onstage and I leaned over to my mother and said, “How do I get up there?”

L.S: *What theatre-going experience impacted you as a student learning about theatre?*

D.C: When I was in my term of my first year at Queen’s University, David Kemp, one of the theatre professors, sponsored a performance of Brian Way’s London, England based, “The Theatre Centre”. The performance was in an open space with no lights or set. The actors created many theatrical images using their bodies. The actors were only a few years older than me and were getting paid. Three days later I dropped out of Queen’s. In a year I was in acting school in London. In four years, I was offered a job acting for “The Theatre Centre”.

L.S: *Entertainment or education: Do you think that theatre for young audiences is a balancing act of these two issues?*

D.C: No, because I don’t try do either. I am interested in creating high quality dramatic literature for young people. Being entertaining is a natural part of great literature but it is only a part. When the art is created, our education director tells us how it is educational and of course it always is. Why are theatre artists always asked this question? Would you ask novelist Tim Wynne-Jones that question?

L.S: *Your plays are especially noteworthy for not being didactic. There are messages within many of your pieces, yet you are concerned, I know, with making theatre that helps young people think about issues, about their own world and the world of others. What is your personal goal in writing theatre for young audiences?*

- D.C: To hold a mirror up to life. Life is full of issues. Life is not didactic. Life is full of ironies. I believe young people have as rich an emotional life as adults. They may be limited in their life experiences but their joys and heartaches, victories and defeats are felt with as much power and passion as adults. In creating theatre for them, I try to find themes that express as many of those feelings as possible. I cast a net wide into their lives (and mine), a net which becomes heavy and full and very hard to pull out of the sea. But I am never alone. There are directors, and designers and actors and when we are all pulling the net that comes over the side full of ideas and feelings and laughter and recognition.
- L.S: *For this article, I am considering the word 'quality'. What does quality mean to you?*
- D.C: There is obviously no formula for achieving quality theatre art, however, time is a key element. Time for the playwright to create, time for him or her to test ideas with a director and actors, time for designers and composers to develop their contribution as the project goes and time for actors to inhabit their roles with confidence and commitment. Quality comes from by hiring the best talent available.
- L.S: *Can you share the story that explains how you were inspired to write **Danny, King of the Basement**?*
- D.C: I heard on the radio that 25% of the homeless people in Toronto were children under the age of twelve. That shocked me. I didn't know. I felt that having hungry children in Toronto, the richest city in Canada, was intolerable. I knew in that moment that as a father, a citizen and a theatre artist, I had to write a play on the subject. At the same moment, the artist in me protested that he didn't want to write a play about child poverty. The subject was too depressing. Who would ever come to such a play? It took me two years to negotiate a truce between my conscience and my artist. The key was modelling Danny on the Artful Dodger and conceiving that Danny's crisis would not be losing a home but gaining a home.
- L.S: *The play has been performed throughout Canada and beyond. Are Canadian audiences different than European audiences?*
- D.C: European audiences are more experienced. They don't have to be persuaded that the arts have value.
- L.S: *What story / stories can you share, that would validate that **Danny** has done it's job in helping young people think about poverty? Literacy?*

D.C: I'm afraid I can't give any concrete evidence that the play has had any affect on child poverty. We performed in Ottawa as part of the official opening of Parliament. All the MP's were invited but only about six were in the audience. Tom Stoppard says that plays don't change anything. If you want to change something you should go into politics. However, he does say plays can create an environment in which change is possible, desirable, perhaps even, inevitable. I hope that's what **Danny** has done.

L.S: *How do you think theatre can 'change' kids?*

D.C: I don't know if plays can change 'kids' but I do know plays have changed me.

L.S: *How do you think theatre for young people has changed since you began writing plays?*

D.C: Roseneath Theatre is changing the way that the public and theatre professionals in North America view Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). TYA generally has a poor reputation. We are challenging that stereotype by producing original dramatic literature that compares with the best of adult theatre. The plays we develop are produced by theatres across Canada, in the United States, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Turkey and Israel. We are also held up as industry examples for our best practises in small theatre administration, international tour management and as educational liaisons. Roseneath Theatre is the only Ontario theatre that annually produces and tours plays for teenage audiences. We work with and encourage senior theatre artists to reexamine this field and to bring their best work to it. We constantly reexamine our work and systems to ensure that they are the best they can be and are willing to take a successful work and rework it if we think it can be better.

L.S: *What is your crystal ball view for theatre for young audiences for the future? Do you think a 21st century appreciation of theatre will be different than when you first began to write plays?*

D.C: Yes, but I don't think it will be good. In my lifetime I have seen the prestige of live theatre dwindle. I have seen two major foundations, the Chalmers Family Foundation and the Laidlaw Foundation, diminish or remove their support for live theatre. It used to be that the announcement of Tarragon's season was a major cultural event. Now, commercial theatre dominates the press and the audiences are getting older and older. TYA has a clear mandate and an obvious audience so we are growing slowly although in Ontario there are only 4 touring professional theatres whereas in Quebec there are 25.

L.S: *Your plays are shown in schools as well as in professional theatres. What advice would you give to teachers who invite your company to perform in the schools?*

D.C: Stop marking and watch the play!

L.S: *Is it the responsibility of the teacher or the playwright to make theatre educational?*

D.C: It is the responsibility of the teacher to unpack the meaning of the play and to develop the children's aesthetic appreciation. They should encourage critical analytical and emotional thinking about the play. They could start with this questions, "What did you like?" "What didn't you like?"

L.S: *In an article entitled "Theatre for Young Audiences and Grown-up Theatre" (in How Theatre Educates by David Booth and Kathleen Gallagher (2003), editors), Maja Ardel challenges the term Theatre for Young Audiences, saying that the term 'has done much to hinder as to help. This very specialized world, ahs bit its nature, become a separated one. She explains that for TYA, playwrights have to anticipate that it will be largely children who appreciate our play. Is your voice focused on an appropriate age group when you write your plays?*

D.C: Absolutely! It's essential! A grade one student doesn't understand irony the way a grade five student does. They are, developmentally, completely different animals. I create for three specific age groups: JK – 3, 4 – 6 and 9 – 12. Anyone who says you can have a play for grades JK – 6 is just trying to sell their show. That said, I try to take complicated ideas and distill them into a form that children can understand. When I'm successful, adults appreciate the play as much as children. Adults see the rainbow while children see the primary colours. Adults adore **Danny** but it's still for kids.

L.S: *How might you answer Ardal's question: "How does the playwright straddle the world of adults and the world of the child, and still retain her/his singular voice?"*

D.C: All artists struggle with limitations be they budget or style or content. I don't spend much time worrying about it. Maybe I've just internalized the censorship! For example, I can't use swear words when I perform a play in high schools. There are good reasons for this. Does this reduce my options as a playwright? Yes. Does it affect the audiences appreciation of the play? No. If there were swear words, the kids would enjoy them. When there aren't, they

don't notice. Do educators affect the subjects that I choose to produce? Yes, but I have not found myself limited unduly. There are plenty of good stories that I like and teachers like. Maja's vision assumes that TYA will have a strong 'adult element'. I'm all for that because I am an adult and I think I would be bored creating theatre that only appeals to kids. At the same time, I am fascinated by the child within me and find it challenging to take complex ideas and render them in a form that will be understood by children. For example, *Rocket and the Queen of Dreams* is a shadow play about the monsters children encounter in their dreams. But 'monsters' has an adult political resonance. Osama Bin Laden is a monster. How do we deal with him? Working on an adult level and child level at the same time is terrifically challenging.

L.S: *But enjoying plays, deciding what is good or poor, is a personal thing?*

D.C: Of course. Some plays give answers to questions we want answered, some don't. Dissecting plays is one of the great joys of theatre going. My non-theatre friends like attending the theatre with me because I see so much. It's not because I'm clever or smart it's just that I've seen so many plays the performance moves more slowly. When I go to a baseball game I don't know what's happening. But when we create plays, we must always be personal. Roseneath Theatre is a company that seeks to reveal, through the theatrical imagination, the shades and colours, the tempests and calms, the humour and suffering of our personal lives. We limit this pursuit of the personal in one way only. The people we serve are (also) children.

L.S: *In the title of another article "Theatre for Young People", I raise the question "Does it matter?". How does David Craig think Theatre for Young People matters?*

D.C: I think theatre and art in general is one of the great civilizing forces of our age. I think this occurs because audience, as the Greeks knew well, sit in judgement on the behaviour of the characters in the play. They sit as moral arbiters. Shakespeare said in Hamlet, "The play's the thing to catch the conscience of a King." He's right. Our conscience is engaged as we watch the play. Contemporary theatre engages with the audience around contemporary issues. We do that.

L.S: *Do you ever find yourself asking the question "Why?"*

D.C: You mean why the arts? Why the theatre? No. I've been frustrated with theatre as a business but never as an activity. I believe the arts represent one of the most powerful civilizing forces of our age. Civilizing because of what great art evokes and encourages in ourselves. Civilizing because art strives to

make sense of the world in as perfect an aesthetic form as possible without thought to cost or personal sacrifice. Even art that fails is valuable because it is an attempt at that ideal. We, and I speak for everyone who works at Roseneath Theatre, are drawn to the challenge of creating and disseminating great theatre art. For our world it is vital. For our children it is essential.

L.S: *As a playwright, what is David S. Craig proud of?*

D.C: To have created a play where every unit of dialogue and action works towards a unified, intellectual and emotional whole. I am amazed that I have done that. You can kill me now.

David S. Craig, playwright

David S. Craig is one of Canada's most prolific and successful dramatists for youth and family audiences. He was the founding Artistic Director of Theatre Direct Canada and is currently Artistic Director of Roseneath Theatre, one of Canada's most respected Theatre for Young Audience companies. He has written more than twenty professionally produced plays including *Having Hope at Home* and *Fires in the Night* for the Blyth Festival, *Booster McCrane, P.M.* for Toronto Free Theatre and *Cue for Treason*, for Young Peoples Theatre. His one-man show *Napalm the Magnificent* won the Chalmers New Play Award and his performance was nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award. For Roseneath Theatre, David's plays have won three Dora Mavor Moore Awards and three Chalmers New Play Awards. His play *Danny, King of the Basement* has been performed extensively across Canada, the United States as well as in the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria where it was nominated for the German Children's Theatre Prize, the first Canadian play so honoured. For CBC Radio, David created a fifty-one part series for Morningside based on *Booster Crane, P.M.* and for Metro Morning, 50 episodes of a hit comedy series called *The Diamond Lane*. NOW magazine has called David S. Craig, "one of the top twenty playwrights in Canada."

References

Ardal, M. "Theatre for Young Audiences and Grown-Up Theatre: Two Solitudes". In K. Gallagher and D. Booth, eds, *How Theatre Educates: Convergences and counterpoints* , 189 – 197. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Briley, R. (2004). "To What End?" In *Stage of the Art, Spring 16 No. 2*: 18-23)

Craig, D. S. (2001/2006). *Danny, King of the Basement*. Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.

Giles, J. (2001). "The Importance of Children's Theatre in Elementary Schools". In *Voice*, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Winter, 2001: 10 – 15)

Schonmann, S. (2006). *Theatre as a Medium for Children and Young People: Images and observations*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Springer, S. S (2006). *Theatre as A Medium For Young People: Images and Observations*. The Netherlands: Dordrecht.

Swartz, L. "Theatre for Young People: Does it matter?" In K. Gallagher and D. Booth, eds, *How Theatre Educates: Convergences and counterpoints* , 198-206. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.