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UNMAPPED:

EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE
OF CREATION
IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

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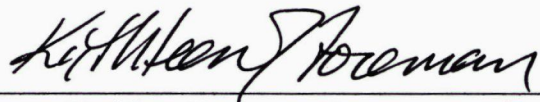
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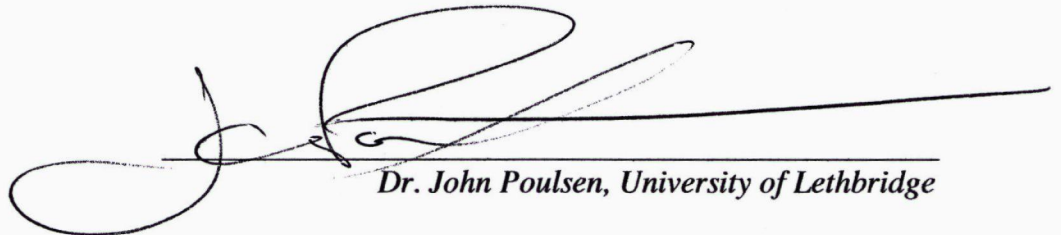
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Unmapped: Exploring the Landscape of Creation in Theatre for Young Audiences" submitted by JoAnne James in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



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Abstract

Contemporary theatre is dominated by plays for adults. Consequently, the powerful world of theatre for young audiences is often ignored. Despite its marginalization, many dedicated theatre practitioners working today have selected this challenging field.

This thesis will explore the following research question: What motivates an artist to specialize in theatre for young audiences? The thesis will look in depth at three current practitioners: Olivia Jacobs (England), Stefo Nantsou (Australia) and David Craig (Canada).

Chapter One situates their work into a historical context in two parts: (1) *The Island* discusses J.M.Barrie and (2) *The Rapids* discusses James Reaney.

Chapter Two, *The Bedrock* explores the backgrounds and working lives of Ms. Jacobs, Mr. Nantsou and Mr. Craig.

Chapter Three, *The Motherlode* examines three of their plays and investigates the themes in their work.

Chapter Four, *The Mesa* offers conclusions and a view to the future.

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Dedication

In memory of Norma Graham,
1950-2003

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Epigraph

Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.

Bob Dylan, My Back Pages

Introduction

As a mirror of the world it reflects, the field of theatre covers a broad range of “isms.” Practitioners have frequent discussions about sexism and racism but one theatrical debate often overlooked is ageism.

Writing or directing plays for children tends to be disregarded by theatre professionals and academics, who assume that truly gifted artists will dedicate themselves to creating works for adults. What critics of the genre often fail to recognize is the unique talent and perceptiveness necessary for the artists who specialize in Theatre for Young Audiences (hereafter referred to as TYA). These contemporary artists are gifted individuals who have made a deliberate choice to work with young people.

Works for children must be created with the utmost care. Who are these artists who have dedicated themselves to this challenging field, despite the reduced pay, the lack of recognition and the secondary status associated with young audience work? This thesis will explore the following question: What motivates an artist to specialize in theatre for young audiences?

The research is framed against my own experience in TYA, primarily as the founding producer of the Calgary International Children’s Festival, a position I held for eighteen years (1987-2004). Since this is a major international festival and the programming took place over almost two decades, it represents an interesting sample of the kinds of content explored in works created for young audiences during that time. As part of the festival’s mandate, I was privileged to travel around the world to select and bring to Canada some of the finest work available for young people. I watched hundreds of productions from dozens of countries. Not all the shows succeeded; in fact, some failed miserably. However, when an effective production was discovered, it was magic.

A young audience can be transfixed in a way that seems difficult for adults. A purity exists within the quality of a child’s attention that I continue to find indescribable and I have a deep and abiding respect for the artists who can evoke that purity. I am intrigued by the reasons that compel practitioners to create TYA work and, with this thesis, I intend to map those reasons. How do they begin their careers? Why do they stay? As I developed the questions, I looked for ways to dig below the surface. I wanted to scrape

through the bedrock and discover the motherlode. Are they reclaiming lost childhoods? What intrinsic rewards do they find in the work? What are its challenges? What values and themes do they share? What differences separate them?

This thesis is the product of conversation, research and reflection with three contemporary artists working in TYA. Their work is put into context through a look at two artists who came before them. Chapter One is a landscape divided into two parts. *The Island* (Part One) examines J.M. Barrie. More than a century ago, he turned to research with children as the base of his approach when he wrote the beloved classic, *Peter Pan*. The story of the boy who refused to grow up by running away to an island free from parental influence has striking parallels to Barrie's own life.

The Rapids (Part Two) explores Canadian James Reaney. Forty years ago, he stated, "Children's classics are far more sophisticated and demanding than most so-called adult literature, which by being adult, has lost its belief in metaphor" (Woodman 27). Reaney set a goal to discover a more fluid way to present theatre. He developed workshops with children in his search for a way to ride what he called "the rapids" of imaginative storytelling. This pivotal work with children, particularly, his children's play, *Listen to the Wind*, enhanced his later work for adults.

The plays under consideration in Chapter One are Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Reaney's *Listen to the Wind*, and to a lesser extent, Reaney's *The Donnellys*.

The following two chapters explore three artists who are not trying to build "a children's theatre for adults" as Reaney was (Woodman 27). On the contrary, they are creating works specifically for and about children. It should be noted that the term "young audiences" includes children up to the age of eighteen and so includes works for teenagers as well as those for younger children.

My interview subjects are David Craig (Canada), Olivia Jacobs (England) and Stefo Nantsou (Australia). All three are respected writer/directors who have their own theatre companies. They have been selected because their work covers a wide range in terms of content and age range, from classical fairy tales to issue-based realism and from plays for four to seven year olds to plays for teens. Due to financial constraints, I was able to conduct only one interview in person, with Toronto's David Craig. The other two

interviews were conducted via e-mail and telephone over the past year. The University of Calgary Ethics Committee approved the questionnaire of fifteen questions. The approval and the questions are attached here as Appendices A and B respectively. The initial responses of the interviewees often elicited requests for clarification from me and, as a result, our conversations took place over several months.

As I teased out the themes from the wealth of material I received, I added the notes and insights I had saved from my own work, which included visits to international festivals and symposiums over the years. "I just wanted to set them down, all in one place, where I could look at them, turn them like stones in my hands, and see what truth they made" (Burnham 2).

I divided the material, like stones in my hands, into sections. As the landscape began to come into focus, I chipped away to explore each layer more fully. Chapter Two, *The Bedrock* looks at the fundamentals. It examines the groundwork behind each writer/director, looking at where their work began and what motivates and influences them as artists. Headings include Beginnings, Audiences, Limitations, Style, Challenges, Influences, Turning Points, Achievements, Rewards and Status. As the artists describe their work, their motivations for doing TYA emerge throughout their narratives.

Chapter Three, *The Motherlode* digs deeper in order to mine the layers of narrative strata, the content and themes of their work. It contains a critical analysis of three plays that I consider to be representative of the work of the writer/directors.

1. Olivia Jacobs' *The Gruffalo*, is the tale of a mouse who creates an imaginary friend who will protect her on her visit to the forest. (For ages 3-6)
2. David Craig's *Danny, King of the Basement*, is the story of a boy who lives in poverty, and the friendships he makes to rise above it. (For ages 8-12)
3. Stefo Nantsou and Tom Lycos's *The Stones* recounts the internationally covered true story of two Australian boys who threw rocks off a highway overpass; the rocks killed an oncoming motorist. (For ages 12- 18)

Additional reference will be made to *Smokescreen* by David Craig, *Mum and the Monster*, by Olivia Jacobs and Toby Mitchell and *The Book of Miracles* by David Craig and Robert Morgan. Headings in Chapter Three include: Stories, Sources of Material,

Values, and Themes. This chapter also identifies the elements of an effective TYA play, with a view to creating some guidelines, a touchstone for the creation of such a play.

After a close examination of the bedrock of the work and a journey into its motherlode of ideas, the thesis concludes with a climb to *The Mesa*, Chapter Four. My research conclusions and reflections will be offered from this higher vantage point, from which I can provide, in addition to the touchstones, a view to the future.

As I dug into the print material available on Barrie and Reaney, I wished I could have asked them my fifteen questions. Going through the interviews, I often thought about how enlightening it would have been to convene a seminar with all of my thesis subjects in attendance. I imagined what it would be like to have David Craig discussing archetypes with J.M. Barrie. I thought about sitting back in a richly upholstered chair, sipping tea and listening to James Reaney discuss with Olivia Jacobs the need for simplicity onstage.

Perhaps we would have preferred to open a bottle of Scotch when Stefo Nantsou brought up the need for “theatrical journalism,” and the opinions of the former journalist in Barrie and the historian in Reaney came to the fore. It would have been a lively and unforgettable afternoon. Instead, I left the comfort of the parlour to scramble through the landscape in order to bring the writer/directors together on paper. Although the result is only a shadow of what might have taken place at that imaginary discussion over tea, I hope that I have distilled the essence of what each of them had to say.

Chapter One

1. THE ISLAND: J.M. BARRIE

2. THE RAPIDS: JAMES REANEY

Make me no maps, sir. My head is a map, a map of the whole world.

- Henry Fielding, Rape upon Rape

1. The Island: J.M. Barrie

When J. M. Barrie sat down to write *Peter Pan* in 1903, he had no idea that the public's fascination with his play would endure for over one hundred years. Not only has it become one of the most widely produced plays in the English-speaking world; it also appears regularly in theatrical and film productions. Despite the enduring popularity of the piece, its powerful subject matter has often been overlooked.

For the most part, the play's reception has been marked by its being read as a play for children, a jolly fantasy of fun-filled adventure. As a consequence, it is not included in the canon of modern drama, as if a work for children cannot tackle issues with the gravity of a writer like Ibsen. (Wilson 609)

Almost a century ago, Mark Twain commented, "It is my belief that *Peter Pan* is a great and refining and uplifting benefaction to this sordid and money-mad age; the next best play is a long way behind" (Birkin 126). The timeless appeal and longevity of *Peter Pan* is almost unparalleled. *Neverland*, a recent film about the life of J.M. Barrie and the creation of *Peter Pan*, starring Johnny Depp, was a box office hit that garnered several Academy Award nominations in 2005. The complexity of the material in the original play continues to intrigue a group of select critics, who place it within the context of contemporary works.

In recent months, American audiences have tasted the anguish of impossible desire when Edward Albee herded *Goat* onto Broadway. They have raged at human faithlessness with an outbreak of *Medeas* and stared into the abyss of epistemological uncertainty with dozens of stagings of *Proof*. But let's put the light stuff to the side for a moment and contemplate the most basic human fears—dread about aging, loneliness, time, the libido, family traumas, gender wars, death. Let's discuss Tinker Bell.
(Wren 44)

The dark themes of *Peter Pan*, which includes the ageless character of Tinkerbell, have made its content a rich source of discussion for many years. Equally, there is no shortage of analysis on what motivated J.M. Barrie to create *Peter Pan*, making the subject an ideal entry point into a discussion of what makes artists choose children as their audience. To examine Barrie's childhood is to see the irrevocably deep ties to his mother that made it next to impossible for him move successfully into adulthood. "Any biography of him shows that the idea of ever really detaching himself from his home and mother was unbearable" (Griffith 29).

J.M. Barrie was a man who, like *Peter Pan*, didn't want to grow up. For him, writing for children was one way he could maintain ties to childhood. He once wrote, "Nothing that happens to us after the age of twelve matters very much" (Wullschlager 10). He was haunted all of his life by an extreme desire for his mother's affection and for a level of approval that, sadly, he never attained. At the age of six, growing up in Kirriemuir, Scotland, he lost his thirteen-year-old brother in a skating accident. David had always been his mother's favourite and when she had a nervous breakdown at his death, James began to impersonate his dead brother in an attempt to cheer her up.

He would play with his mother in the role of his brother.
James did everything he could to resurrect the memory of this first "lost boy". Thus began Barrie's childhood mission

to comfort his mother by becoming so like David that she could not see the difference. He dressed in his brother's clothes, learned his brother's way of whistling and became fixated on the idea of always remaining a boy. In a sense, he became the living version of the son, who by dying, had remained ever young (Wullschlager 119).

The image of Barrie as the boy-man, dominated by his mother and never growing up, was reinforced by his small size. In adulthood, he continued to look like a prepubescent boy, only growing to be just over five feet tall. Having left his childhood home in Scotland, Barrie had moved to London to work as a journalist and playwright. "Barrie found his journalistic formula – an attractive recipe of charm, whimsicality and puckish wit – and he exploited it with the thoroughness and efficiency of a miner working a heavy vein of gold" (Geduld 15). His early fiction included *Better Dead*, London: Swann Sonnenschein, (1888); *Auld Licht Idylls*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, (1898); and *A Window in Thrums*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, (1889). "Any adverse criticisms of his work, had he noticed them would not have disturbed Barrie...as he was becoming increasingly prosperous and everything he wrote, he sold" (Dunbar 84). Additional fiction published prior to *Peter Pan* included *When a Man's Single*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, (1888); *The Little Minister*, London: Cassell and Company, (1891); *Margaret Ogilvy*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, (1896) and *Tommy and Grizel*, London: Cassell and Company, (1900). Plays included *Richard Savage*, 1891 (privately printed), written in collaboration with H.B. Marriott, (1891) and *The Wedding Guest*, New York. Charles Scribner & Sons, (1900).

The Barrie trick of holding out his characters at arm's length, as it were, and making them perform their antics to our sardonic, even sadistic delight, was an early symptom of his instinctive sense of theatre. He never seemed to have lived among real people; everybody else was a marionette, floodlit but capable of the most amusing antics. He saw himself in the same light (Dunbar 83).

“This period was one of discovery for him in so far as he was to learn, in a most lucrative fashion, the saleability of the superficial”(Geduld 18). Although he married actress Mary Ansell in 1894, he did not have a family of his own. As Griffith wrote,

The omnipresent image of his mother prevented his achieving adult sexuality and parenthood himself. His own marriage ended in divorce after fifteen childless years: his wife revealed to friends that Barrie was impotent and the marriage had never been consummated. (30)

In another era, his obsession with his own lost childhood might have taken him on a journey of treatment for what could have been described as case of arrested development. “Have I been too cunning, or have you seen through me all the time? Have you discovered that I was really pitying the boy who was so fond of boyhood that he could not with years become a man?” (Barrie, *Tommy and Grizel* 66) His needs for a continued connection to boyhood were met by his friendship with the five sons of Sylvia and Arthur Llewellyn-Davies, who he met in London’s Kensington Gardens. Barrie became a close friend of the family, eventually becoming the boys’ guardian, after the deaths of their parents.

In 1901, when the boys’ parents were still living, Barrie invited the Llewellyn-Davis family to be his guests for a summer at a cottage near Tilford. He played endlessly with the boys in a summer-long game of make-believe that included pirates and Indians. He cast one of the boys, Michael, as a boy who would never grow up. The result of this months-long game of make-believe that included pirates and fairies was a story he called *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island*. This unpublished private journal, which recorded, in photographs and text, the imaginative summer with the boys and Barrie’s dog Porthos, eventually evolved into a book called *The Little White Bird* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902).

In a statement about the book, Barrie described the endless discussions he had about the *Peter Pan* story with George, the oldest of the Llewellyn-Davies boys:

I ought to mention here that the following is our way with a story: First I tell it to him, and then he tells it to me, the understanding being that it is quite a different story; and then I retell it with his additions and so we go on until no one could say whether it is more his story or mine. In this story of *Peter Pan*, for instance, the bald narrative and most of the moral reflections are mine...but the interesting bits...are his. (Birkin 63)

This small volume, combined with Barrie's child-like view of the world and his lifelong ability to play, was the catalyst for his most famous work. Years later, Barrie fully realized that, in *Peter Pan*, he had drawn himself, the outsider, looking in at the Davies family. "Barrie's fixations on boyhood, mothers, other people's children, had free rein in *Peter Pan*" (Wullschlager 131). Barrie created a Neverland where his "lost boys" could escape the confines of their sheltered lives and the overbearing expectations of their mothers. By populating it with pirates and mermaids and plenty of adventure, he made this island an attractive destination for children. Here was the ultimate escape from the influence of "the mother" and with it came the inherent conflicts.

The fantasy of a motherless world is ultimately impossible for Barrie. Appealing as it might be to project an island free from the tensions of his relationship with his mother, his attachment to her is still the greatest principle of his thinking and wishing. A world without the mother on whom his deepest desires are fixed is miserably incomplete; it is no fun at all. (Griffith 30)

Peter Pan, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up, premiered on December 27, 1904 at the Duke of York's Theatre. Due to the Christmas week date, the London audience expected a holiday pantomime with its traditional plot and characters. Instead, they were treated to a fantasy unlike any they had seen onstage before. Every time Peter flew, the

audience cheered. They delighted in the story of Captain Hook and the Lost Boys and when it was over, curtain call followed curtain call.

For the past number of years, audiences had been subjected to a bombardment of “problem plays”, concerned with social criticism and steeped in gloom. Since *Peter Pan* was wrapped in secrecy from the outset, few had any idea what the author had in store for them. When the curtain rose to reveal a dog preparing a small boy for his bath, it was greeted in stunned silence – followed by gasps of astonished delight. For the rest of the evening, the elite of London’s society flung off the years and whistled childhood back. (Birkin 116)

What they were seeing was a whimsical play, deeply textured with many layers of meaning. Among the subjects the script raises are separation anxiety, the fear of death, aging and the fragility of the nuclear family. The play has stood the test of time, despite critics such as George Bernard Shaw who proclaimed, “Peter Pan was an artificial freak which missed its mark completely and was foisted on the children by grown-ups” (Birkin 118).

Barrie’s boyishness, his love of playing with the theatre is, perhaps, the cardinal fact...How large and exciting and infinitely various a toy for a boy to play with! It was a thousand pities that he could not play with the theatre without having to grapple with what the theatre is there to reflect or expound on...obstinate stuff called reality, which often refuses to obey and sometimes makes the playing boy look silly. (Child 117)

According to those critics, who were his contemporaries, J.M.Barrie had failed because the play dealt with childhood. For them, the only genuine and legitimate arena of theatre was the one for adults.

There can be no doubt that the bulk of Barrie's work is destined for oblivion. Only *Peter Pan* brings Barrie's name perennially before the critics...It is not inappropriate that Barrie's fantasies should find their only enduring audience in the nursery, but it is regrettable that a dramatist so technically gifted should never have widened his scope beyond his own childhood illusions. (Geduld 171)

What these critics dismissed, just because it was for children, was actually a powerful piece of theatre which would transcend generations. A century later, artists are still intrigued by the possibilities for *Peter Pan*'s interpretation on the contemporary stage. In 1968, obscenity charges were laid against director Stuart Gordon for his partly nude satirical Philadelphia production in which Tinker Bell's pixie dust was LSD. (Miller 16) A 1998 production at the National Theatre in London featured island-like design elements visually exploring the ideas of gender and isolation in the play.

The costumes mix the literal with the fabulous; Ian McKellan, as Hook, sports red heels, Charles II ringlets and a ruby pinned to his old Eton tie...the Darling household is marooned like Neverland in the center of a bare stage, presented as a creation of will, a concrete manifestation of parental love and, in its way, no less make-believe than it's (sic) faraway counterpart. (Miller 16)

Peter Pan exemplifies the kind of multi-layered writing that transcends age. J.M. Barrie may have written it as a celebration of make-believe for the boys in his care or as a creative way to escape to an island with his own childhood demons. We can speculate on his motives, but clearly, audiences are still responding to his unique vision. The childlike innocence with which his characters were brought to the stage echoes his summer-long game of make-believe with the Llewellyn-Davies boys. When an artist is able to speak clearly with the innocence of a child's voice, stories not only leap off the stage; they can cut across age barriers with such force that they still resonate a century later.

From 1904 to 2004, theatrical exploration exploded around the globe. Post-modernism gave way to realism and thousands of worldwide experiments were tried in text and in design forms as theatre artists continued to search for the most effective ways to tell a story. As productions toured the world, ideas were shared, technological advances flourished and new approaches continued to evolve.

2. The Rapids: James Reaney

Sixty years after *Peter Pan* pushed the limits of what could be attempted in a play for children, Canadian theatre practitioner James Reaney found himself exploring ways to bring the same kind of childlike whimsy to the stage. Early in his career James Reaney stated: "Children's classics are far more sophisticated and demanding than most so-called adult literature, which by being adult, has lost its belief in metaphor." (Woodman 27)

Reaney was working at the University of Western Ontario in London. An award-winning playwright and poet, he had also written several plays for adults and for children, including *Names and Nicknames* (1963), *Apple Butter* (1966), *Ignoramus* (1966) and *Geography Match* (1967) (Toronto: Talonbooks, 1973). However, he had become frustrated by the limitations of working on these plays in regional theatres. The regional theatre system in Canada denotes theatres that are run by not-for-profit societies and funded at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. Due to the tight schedules set by subscription seasons, these theatres are often run with a rigid eye to production requirements and time on stage.

I wanted a society where directing a play is not equated with stage managing, where the important rehearsal is not the technical rehearsal, where the lighting, costumes, all that money can buy disappear and what we have instead is so much group skill and sense of fun that richness reappears all over the place for nothing. (Reaney, *Ten Years* 55)

Reaney's goal was to demystify theatre, making the audience responsible for at least some of the imaginative challenges inherent in listening to a good story. A pivotal point in Reaney's attitude to his dramatic work came with his visit to a Toronto performance of the Peking Opera in 1961. Astonished by the lightning speed of the action, he watched as props and sets were elegantly replaced by gestures and mime. It was the fluidity of this production which, for Reaney, opened up the possibilities of a new childlike theatrical approach.

In discussing the revelation that occurred at the Peking Opera, Reaney used a river metaphor to discuss the difficulties inherent in the traditional structure of his previous plays for adults, *The Killdeer*, *Three Desks* and *Easter Egg* (Twayne, 1968).

This particular group of plays is constructed like rivers in voyageur journals. You go smoothly along in an apparent realistic way, and then there is this big leap – which directors and actors and audience have got to take. But it's tiresome waiting for the audience to catch up. After watching the Peking Opera at the Royal Alex one evening, I decided to try to write a new kind of play altogether, that is, where it's all rapids. (Reaney, *Ten Years* 59)

Eager to experiment with ways to take audiences with him on the “big leap” into the river of imagination, this voyageur playwright was determined to discover a way to write plays that could ride “the rapids”. Ultimately, he decided that the most effective source would be children. After all, they were the experts in the world of imagination. Reaney's formation of the Listeners Workshop, in London, Ontario during 1964-1966, enabled him to research fresh ways to tell a story. He was seeking a sense of abandon, which is too often unique to childhood. Like J.M. Barrie, he played with children and kept extensive notes on this journey of creative research. He worked with a group of twenty-five volunteers, aged three to sixty. Their challenge? To tell the story of Genesis with no script.

There was simply a list of images and turning points nailed up to a post where the actors and myself would go occasionally to see what is coming next. On the floor (it's the loft of an old Legion Hall) are strips of coloured tape ... and a prop table filled with the things you need to put on Genesis with. For example, mailing tubes for the angels to beat Adam and Eve out of Eden with, cardboard boxes to build the Tower of Babel with and a green garden hose for the serpent. (Reaney, *Ten Years* 53)

The exhilarating process he conducted with the Listeners Workshop influenced all of Reaney's subsequent work. He was deeply motivated to demystify theatre and to engage his future audiences with at least some of the creative work of imagining sets and locations. As he watched children leaping freely from one scenario to the next, he wanted to devise ways to bring that same kind of energy onstage regardless of the age of the audience.

I saw the Peking National Opera perform a centuries-old play, *At the Fairy Mountain Bridge*. The orchestra sat on stage. Gestures and mime took the place of props and sets. I remember a fabulous boat just made by two actors pretending. (Reaney, *Listen to the Wind* 117)

The idea that a boat could simply be created by two actors stayed with Reaney, as he prepared to write and direct a children's play called *Listen to the Wind* for the Summer Theatre in London, Ontario. Produced by Keith Turnbull, this production would mark the launch of one of the most significant artistic collaborations in Canadian theatre history. Turnbull would eventually move out of the producer's role to go on to direct all three plays of Reaney's landmark trilogy, *The Donnellys*. Their first collaboration, however, was *Listen to the Wind*, and it was here that Reaney began to emerge with his own unique style as a writer and director. Jay McPherson, in the *Canadian Literature Review*, described this children's play as "an extraordinary theatrical experience" (McPherson 10).

Listen to the Wind is the story of Owen, a boy who is doing his best to re-unite his parents while he fights a terminal illness. He wants to spend the summer putting on a play with the help of his cousins, neighbourhood children and grown-up relatives. They decide to adapt a melodrama, a Victorian novel called *The Saga of Carefoot Court*. The resulting play within a play gave Reaney the opportunity to have each story illuminate the other. Like Barrie with the island of Neverland, Reaney created a world within a world. As Owen's life runs out, the audience sees him project all of his energies into the production of the play.

For the audience, the play's special theme of the creative use of life is made most compelling in the child's-play simplicity of the means by which its effects are achieved. The author's program notes refer to the techniques of the Peking National Opera but where the Peking company relies on the fantastic training and bodily control of its actors, what is astonishing about Reaney's production is the sense of play, of freedom, of creation before one's eyes. (Macpherson 10)

This notion of having a story magically unfold as a "creation before one's eyes" was precisely the style of theatre that Reaney had been pursuing in the Listeners Workshops. Unlike Barrie, who deliberately aimed to impress his Victorian audience with the latest in technical wizardry required to make Peter "fly", Reaney chose to reveal any technical choices, to have the magical made visible.

While conceiving the play of Peter Pan, Barrie contacted George Kirby (of London's Flying Ballet Company) to ask him to produce a flying system...Kirby accepted the challenge and invented a revolutionary harness that not only allowed for complex flight movements but could also be connected and disengaged from the flying wire within a matter of seconds. (Birkin 109)

Reaney wanted no such tricks. If there was going to be a sound effect, Reaney wanted the audience to see clearly how it was created. He wanted to transport them back to the Victorian world of Caresfoot Court, not by elaborate costumes and period sets but by the use of their imaginations, as they watched the action and listened to the chorus. The coach scene from *Listen to the Wind*, is a preview of the horse race in *The Donnelly's*, where this "children's theatre" approach was destined to be utilized most effectively for an audience of adults:

The miming of the coach scene is an example of the whole method: whenever the actors had to go from one manor house to another, a boy appeared with a wheel which he coasted along, they following him behind running in time with him. Before they get on the coach, they walk or limp or whatever; once in the coach, they glide along with it.
(Reaney, *Ten Years* 60)

This production of *Listen to the Wind* was a turning point for Reaney. The ability to direct his own play and the freedom to forge his own theatrical style, including the pivotal use of a chorus, made a tremendous difference to his future projects. He saw it as the production that was the culmination of all of his experiences to date. Like Barrie, Reaney had the theatrical goal to transport the vividly imaginative world of children to what he viewed as the exceedingly drab world of adults. "The children's theatre he had in mind, therefore, was a children's theatre for adults" (Woodman 27).

Always intensely aware of his own rural and national background and of the importance of utilizing it in his poetry and drama, Reaney was also motivated to contribute to a distinctly Canadian theatre. In his 1966 program notes for *Listen to the Wind*, he expressed hope that "out of this play, a new theatre in Canada might grow" (Reaney, *Listen to the Wind* 117). Like his hero Owen, he was now ready to start on a signature story of his own. "Seen in the light of his background and earlier plays, the Donnelly story appears ready-made for the Reaney works" (Noonan 276).

The Donnellys is a Canadian epic and is based on the true story of an Irish family, emigrants to Ontario, who were murdered, thirty-six years after their arrival, by a secret society formed among their neighbours in Biddulph. The legendary Donnellys were part of the mythology of the area where James Reaney grew up. The fact sheet distributed to the audience prior to each performance provided this concise background information on the story:

The area that Donnelly settled in became much like the Ireland he had left. Donnelly refused to participate in the

power struggles and became ostracized and discriminated against. The Church and State conspired against him and he fought back. In 1867, when “neighbours” burned his barn to the ground, the family swore that nothing short of death itself would drive them from the township. (Reaney, *Barrels* 150)

Reaney had spent over ten years researching this blood-soaked episode in Canadian history. The resulting trilogy begins with *Sticks and Stones*, which introduces the family and the tensions in Biddulph; it ends with *Handcuffs*, which tells the story of the murders. With the powerful Donnelly material, Reaney intended to use the same fresh approach he had experienced with the Listeners Workshop in London. He felt it was essential to bring in children to work with his adult cast at the Nova Scotia rehearsals. “I was out to tell as strong a story as I could devise, as richly as possible” (Reaney, *Ten Years* 53). In Halifax, Reaney invited dozens of children to join the actors in the company, every morning, to work with Greek myths. Each afternoon, the actors would work on the Donnelly material with some of the storytelling ideas they had developed with children. The actors absorbed a great deal from their young collaborators:

The directness of a child’s imagination is simplicity itself: now we’re in ancient Greece, here’s the crown and you’re the king. “Be here now” is acting lesson number one. The children’s enjoyment is infectious; an actor needs to rediscover that ability to play, to throw all of oneself joyfully into the fray. (Ludwick 132)

Reaney’s intention was to free the inhibitions of the actors, and ultimately the audience, from their traditional definition of how a story was told. In rehearsal, the influence of his work with children was crystal clear. “Reaney’s work was continually trying to return to us our childhood sense of play and he writes stage directions like ‘threshing machine’ and trusts that we can create one” (Ludwick 133). The games used in these workshops had an enormous impact on the style of the trilogy. String games were

featured in *Sticks and Stones* (Part One); spinning tops, in *The St. Nicholas Hotel* (Part Two); and shadow games in *Handcuffs* (Part Three). Director Keith Turnbull discussed how this playful, spontaneous workshop model compared to the traditional training experienced by most of his actors:

There was a world of training, which did not accept anything like coincidence. One of the most creative things is coincidence and there's a way that one can feed coincidence. So you're not feeding what will happen, but you're feeding the possibility of coincidence happening. But when you're working in a workshop situation, particularly with lots of kids, coincidence is rampant. (Turnbull 157)

Reaney's work, coupled with Turnbull's direction, constantly strove to bring the childlike delight in metaphor to the adult audience. To that end, the actors were challenged to be as creative as their young counterparts. As Patricia Ludwick stated, "We are expanding our range of poetic connections to the material and our physical repertoire too. Can we juggle, make shadow puppets, sing harmonies a cappella?" (133) Reaney was confident that he could create a play in which adults would be given an equal opportunity to take imaginative leaps. For the most part, the reviews were excellent but there was some criticism. It is interesting to speculate here on the stamina of the adult reviewer. Perhaps a child would have had an easier time keeping up with the action.

The NDWT production itself whirled the audience around to the point of mental dizziness with strong physical symptoms of exhaustion by the end of three hours. We were swirled from incident to incident so fast, it was impossible to comprehend everything onstage. I kept wanting to stop the action for a moment to absorb all that was in one scene, but I never could. (Claus 151)

Patricia Ludwick, who received consistently rave reviews across the country for her portrayal of the family matriarch, Mrs. Donnelly, made a powerful statement on her respect for Reaney:

I am tired of defending Reaney. The usual charges are that the plays are too busy, unedited, a shying away from violence. But the man is dealing with light; he focuses on good and evil, has a vision of a life lived in an awareness of God, man and nature. I believe that, at its best, the visual imagery has the power to evoke primal responses, that the use of unmasked theatricality can awaken an audience's own imagination, that the material of our own stories transformed by a poet's insight can make us see ourselves new, see with our hearts as well as our minds. (134)

Looking back at the making of *The Donnellys* years later, Reaney was very conscious of the contribution his work with children had made to the trilogy. "Oh, there were all sorts of ways that children were present in the plays: the quickness of movement, the fluidity – all learned from watching experts. The final grace is not so learned perhaps but the shameless exuberant use of energy is" (Reaney, CTR 41). At the time *The Donnellys* was produced, it was groundbreaking work. It was a fiercely Canadian story, told in a highly original way. That way resulted from working with children and being unafraid to expect that audiences, even those handicapped by being adults, could take imaginative leaps.

There's a great deal of symbolism, imagery and shifting levels to accept in this particular play – for example, the scene where William Donnelly challenges James Carroll to dance his signature; children watching this scene just accept it; their parents have difficulties. And so would the actors if there hadn't been some preparation in opening the mind to myth and metaphor and showing that the young are

frequently more sophisticated in this regard. (Reaney, CTR 41)

Like J.M. Barrie one hundred years before him, Reaney recognized that, given the opportunity, adults could make the imaginative leaps which come so naturally to children. Their work was significant because it demonstrated the validity of the child's world and the imaginative ways it could be translated onstage. Through inviting the audience to watch a man dance his signature or witness a boy fly through the window of a nursery, these theatre artists proved that the impossible could be achieved. Adults could actually take the leap, particularly if they were provided with an imaginative story that had been crafted with the help of children.

The goals of finding a good story and discovering the best way to tell it continue to be at the heart of the work being done by many artists working in the field of TYA today. Unlike Barrie and Reaney, however, the intention of the contemporary artists is not only to utilize children as a resource. They are not mining the imaginations of children in order to reach adults. Rather, their intention is to consciously choose young people as the primary audience, fully recognizing their lives and their challenges as being equally deserving of theatrical exploration as those of adults.

The lives of children are filled with mystery and exploration. In a world so rich with possibility, there is an imaginative landscape that calls out to be discovered and investigated. The artists we will meet next have chosen to devote their current artistic work to that inquiry.

Chapter Two

THE BEDROCK

Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver, The Summer's Day

Beginnings

Three contemporary artists who choose to specialize in works for young audiences are England's Olivia Jacobs, Australia's Stefo Nantsou and Canada's David Craig. Their initial motivations for choosing this field range from being inspired by the commitment of people working in TYA to stumbling into an opportunity by chance: "I actually fell into working for young audiences" (Jacobs 1).

Ms. Jacobs is the artistic director of Tall Stories, a London-based company, formed in 1996, which has since toured throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Poland, North America, Chile and Singapore. On reviewing the company's production of *Snow White* at the New Victory Theatre in New York City, the New York Times reviewer Lawrence Van Gelder warned audiences to expect something different from the usual American fare.

Audiences tempted to regard these performances as an opportunity to la-la themselves and their children into a cute distillation of Disney should be aware that this production of *Snow White* skips over Sleepy, Doc, Grumpy, Dopey and the gang and returns to the notably grim Grimm Brothers for its inspiration. Happily for theatregoers, the 60-minute, intermissionless result, intended for audiences seven years and older, is an engrossing, irreverently funny, melodic and exceptionally

well-acted pleasure...directed by Olivia Jacobs. (Van Gelder)

It was a 1998 visit to the Edinburgh festival that led the young director to choose to focus her energies on what she refers to as “family theatre.” Ms. Jacobs and her producing partner, Toby Mitchell, had participated at the festival before and decided to return with more “of a concrete plan of what we wanted to achieve” (Jacobs 1).

We set out a few goals. We wanted to place an emphasis on strong, interestingly told stories, we wanted to entertain and we wanted to use a physical, visual style, working in a more collaborative way to make our productions.

(Jacobs 1)

The company selected two stories to work on: *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde. “These were stories that pleased us as adults, which we enjoyed and appreciated, which had great dramatic potential and which had a real sense of satisfaction at the end” (Jacobs 1).

The new company, calling themselves Tall Stories, created a highly visual re-telling of the two stories. “We were actually anticipating working for an adult audience with *Alice and Mr. Dodgson* and the Oscar Wilde story was terribly sad” (Jacobs 1). Given that the production delved into the relationship between Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Alice Liddell, the little girl on whom he based his books, the company members were very surprised when family audiences attended the Edinburgh performances. The shows received an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response and immediately sold out.

Alice and Mr. Dodgson is a touching and exquisitely crafted celebration of the unique relationship between Alice Liddell and Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)...Tall Stories has captured a rare magic in this delicate and moving piece of beautifully acted theatre. (Scotsman)

When Ms. Jacobs reviewed the audience feedback forms, she was taken aback to find they repeatedly declared the Tall Stories production was the best thing available for families at the festival. Curious about this, the company members decided to scout the other venues to see what else was playing for this mixed aged group of parents and children. “So many of the shows that we saw were aimed at the lowest common denominator” (Jacobs 2). Identifying a lack of high quality work aimed at this audience, Ms. Jacobs decided this family audience might be a niche her new company could capably fulfill in the highly competitive London theatre marketplace:

Whilst we had been aiming at adults, by simply telling a great story really imaginatively, we had captured a spark of great family theatre. I loved watching the children and parents enjoying the shows together and I suppose that was where the passion ... began. I haven't looked back since.
(Jacobs 2)

In Australia, Stefo Nantsou was studying acting at the University of Newcastle (1979-1982), when he had the opportunity to attend school performances by a Queensland TYA company, called Popular Theatre. Looking back, Mr. Nantsou has a vivid memory of being struck by the controversial content of their material, especially because “they had a very political line. One show in particular was about the arms build-up of Russia and America, a very cool subject for high schools” (Nantsou 2). On graduation, Mr. Nantsou was invited to join Freewheels, a TYA company that was operating in his hometown of Newcastle at the time. He joined the ensemble and became immediately immersed in collective creation:

I was intrigued by their commitment and passion for their work and their politics. This also suited me fine as a young lefty actor/writer, this thought that one could do powerful plays for young audiences with an aim at challenging dominant, right-wing media content. (Nantsou 2)

Freewheels provided Mr. Nantsou with the foundation for his future work. He subsequently founded Zeal Theatre, in 1988, as an independent company, which began to tour to Victoria and eventually set up its operations in Melbourne. There was a positive response by students, teachers and the support of the arts community. “Zeal’s work was recognized as unique, as it provided a gutsy form of theatre heavily focused on ‘teenagers’ experiences.” (Lowdown) Tom Lycos, formerly of Circus Oz, joined the company in Melbourne. He co-wrote and continues to perform, with Mr. Nantsou, in their signature production, *The Stones*. It has been performed from Singapore to London.

The fact Nantsou and Lycos are writer/performers has made maintaining their artistic independence a priority for Zeal Theatre and for Mr. Nantsou. “I have resisted getting a board of managers... a corporate structure would drag too much time away from the work ...and I have the freedom to make whatever shows I want” (Nantsou 29). He has continued to prefer operating on his own, without government assistance except for some recent assistance to travel abroad. Today, he notes that this was a pivotal decision.

Freewheels, incidentally, lost all of their funding last year and no longer exist. So I was correct all those years ago when I set up Zeal Theatre to not go for funding so my work could not be dictated by government agencies. Freewheels was told their work was no longer relevant. I would hate to be told my work was no longer relevant by some government schmuck. (Nantsou 2)

Being a new theatre graduate and taking a first professional job with a TYA company, was an experience also shared by Canada’s David Craig. Mr. Craig studied in England at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama. Although his intention was “to become Laurence Olivier and to take my place on the classical stage,” (Craig 2), he discovered that a unique aspect of Bruford was its offer of formal teacher training as part of its program.

So in addition to studying Shakespeare and the Greeks, Chekhov and Ibsen, I did teaching practice, I wrote learned

essays on teaching theory, I made study plans. I learned a lot about education. None of us paid any attention to the teaching practice. We were just mad keen to be actors. Inadvertently, that training, by accident, gave me a language which was going to be invaluable in my later life.
(Craig 4)

After graduation, one of Craig's first acting roles was with Canterbury T.I.E. (Theatre in Education). He worked under Patrick Masefield, an experienced and enigmatic artist who encouraged his company members to work collaboratively. This approach intrigued Craig: "Instead of just being hired to pick up the script, learn the lines and do the text analysis, we were creating something new" (4). The company toured extensively and Mr. Craig spent four and a half months working with them, from January to May, 1970. "So all of my formative experience was touring and we always created new work as we toured. It was very collegial and I was drawn, from a very early age, to be involved in all levels of the creation of a play"(Craig 5).

On Craig's return to Canada, he auditioned for mainstage theatres but he "went from having five auditions a week in London to having three auditions a month in Toronto" (Craig 3). It was a very competitive setting for a young artist just starting out: "I looked around and found myself as an actor in competition with other slim, blonde Caucasian guys and I saw that there were other people who were, frankly, as good as me, probably better than me"(Craig 5).

Since he had made a firm deal with himself to commit to a life in the theatre only if he could make a living at it, he decided to create work for himself by developing a solo clown show. "I was going to be professional in that my income was going to be derived from theatre because I felt that anything less than that would be fake" (Craig 1). Billing this solo show as being "direct from England," Craig marketed *The Clown who Laughed and Laughed* directly to schools:

So I created this show and I would get \$100 for one performance and \$150 for two performances and when

someone gave me a cheque, I thought I was the richest person in the world because I had created the play and acted in the play and sold the play. I found the whole thing enormously exciting. (Craig 5)

At the time, David Craig was still more focused on finding a way to make a living in the theatre, than on committing specifically to a career in young audience work. “Now you’ll notice that in this whole story, I’ve not mentioned anything much about children because I’m not sure I ever said I wanted to perform for children because what I wanted to do was be Laurence Olivier on the Stratford Stage” (Craig 4). However, the success of *The Clown Who Laughed and Laughed* created a demand for Mr. Craig to continue to work in the school market. Jay Scott, of the Toronto Globe and Mail, described Mr. Craig’s performance as having “the jumpy grace of a Red Skelton”(Scott 1).

Liz Gorrie out at Kaleidoscope called and offered me a show and I turned her down. I thought, why should I go and work for someone else for minimum wage when I can perform my own play for my own company? (Craig 5)

Kaleidoscope Theatre, based in Victoria, was one of the major TYA companies in Canada at that time and Elizabeth Gorrie remains one of the country’s leading directors in the genre. Craig’s decision to bring his work directly to his audiences led, in 1976, to the formation of his own company, Theatre Direct Canada. David Craig found that he was talented at raising funds for specific projects and soon he had an office, a staff and, most important for school touring in Canada, a van. He found the discovery that he “was an entrepreneur as well as an artist” liberating (Craig 6). When he compared himself to other young performers in their early thirties, he realized very quickly how much better his financial situation was than most. Additionally, he found satisfaction in the work and was given plenty of opportunity to be onstage:

We performed two hundred shows a year, and so I had wonderful opportunities to perform. I always performed for a full house, three hundred kids at a time. I knew actors

who were performing for sixty-three people and they thought they were doing well. I was playing for six hundred people a day. You know, why trade that to perform for sixty-three adults in some drafty place in the evening?
(Craig 7)

David Craig went on to create several more shows for Theatre Direct and by the time he resigned in 1981, the company was touring up to three productions simultaneously and was presenting more in-school performances than any other theatre company in Canada. In 1981, Craig's production of *All For Beaver Hats!* toured Holland, Germany and England. He eventually left the company in order to write for adults. He wrote *Booster McCrane, P.M.*, which ran for fifty-one episodes from 1991-1993 on CBC's radio show, *Morningside*. During that same period, he also formed a partnership with Robert Morgan that eventually grew into Roseneath Theatre in 1983, a company devoted to original family theatre.

Audiences

David Craig writes for both adults and children but is regarded as one of Canada's leading advocates of the TYA genre, despite his acknowledgement that creating works for children holds a unique set of challenges. One of these is the difference in audience response, which was described by all the interviewees as one of the most challenging aspects of working with young audiences. Children have very little pretense, at least when it comes to attending a live performance. If they dislike a show, their refusal to feign interest will be lightning-swift. "A teenage audience is honest in their response and if they are bored or hate a show, they will let you know in no uncertain terms" (Nantsou 5). All the interviewees agreed that there is no escape from an unhappy crowd of young people. "If your show is boring, or not well presented, or badly performed, you know within about four minutes" (Jacobs 5).

Different age groups within TYA react differently to performances that do not interest them. Small children will quickly lose interest and express it vocally. "Younger

children are quite happy to turn to a friend or parent and loudly proclaim, 'This is boring' or just get up and wander about if their attention is not grabbed" (Jacobs 6). Sometimes, they send that message in more unorthodox ways. "Quite often, theatres will have tip up seats and we always use the tip up seat test when we open a new show. If you can hear the sound of the seats banging, you know you've missed the mark" (Jacobs 5).

With teenagers, the performers are battling complacency and peer pressure, not to mention hormones, as noted in this review from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

Pre-teen and teen audiences are notoriously difficult audiences. They take it almost as a point of pride to let it be known that anything their teachers might take them to for entertainment is lame, boring and uncool. Throw in a whiff of moral message and they're instantly on their guard to deflect it. *The Stones* doesn't pander to them. It grabbed their attention and held it throughout. (Carter)

The artists who generate such a level of attention must be unafraid of the challenge. "The teenage audience is honest but if you can grab them with a piece of theatre and really go to the extremes of laughter and tears, then it's a very rewarding feeling for an actor" (Nantsou 6). Although the loud and often unruly reaction of teenagers might disturb more traditional performers, these TYA artists prefer unvarnished honesty to what they describe as the complacency of the adult audience. "As adults, we have learned politeness and often hold back on what we really think, which makes it much harder to gauge audience enjoyment" (Jacobs 5).

An adult is much more capable of being phony about their response to a show. Adults can fall asleep during a production and tell you later how much they liked it. False and fake! These responses are learned when one goes to the opera and ballet. One can't be seen to dislike or criticize 'high art'" (Nantsou 5).

If adults can be less than honest about their response to a particular piece of theatre, it may be because they are at the same disadvantage described earlier by James Reaney. Sadly, many have simply accepted a life in which they have forgotten how to play. “Reaney’s theatrical goal became to transport the vividly imaginative world of children to what he viewed as the exceedingly drab world of adults” (Woodman 27).

When we’re young, we play make believe all the time. If you can create something visually interesting onstage, inventing whole worlds with two blocks and a stick, you’re entering a really childlike world. Sometimes we forget this when we grow up. And our self-conscious side holds us back from really letting go. (Jacobs 5)

When an adult enters the theatre, he or she is being asked to leave the drab world behind and to remember what it was like to pretend.

Limitations

Within the discussion of that childlike world, there are certain limitations for theatre artists. “So far, there has been nothing that I have done for children that I would be unwilling to do for adults although I would say that for the younger members of the audience, we take care to ensure that the vocabulary we use in our shows is not unnecessarily complex” (Jacobs 9).

Clearly, the use of profanity and swearing, seen as acceptable in a play for adults, will not work in a production for children. “For teenagers, in schools, it is not a good idea to say ‘fuck’...or take my clothes off. Nor am I interested in saying these words or flashing myself for an adult audience. I don’t think that would enhance my performance greatly” (Nantsou 10).

In addition to language, there are limitations regarding the creation of sets portable enough to tour, running times of under one hour and small casts willing to work with limited production values.

Over the course of this research, there were several times when I regretted that financial restrictions had allowed for only one live interview. As stated earlier, my interviews with Mr. Nantsou and Ms. Jacobs were conducted via e-mail. Having the opportunity to spend an afternoon with David Craig for a live interview made it possible for him to provide additional insights, including this one about these unique parameters of the genre and their gift to him:

When I think about leaving children's theatre, what children's theatre has done marvellously for me is that it's given me limitations. These limitations have been enormous but they have powered me creatively... I think otherwise I would have been, as many artists are, faced with too many choices. We have the school gym, forty-five minutes, three actors, and a certain age group and within those constraints I can relax and create. People are approaching me about writing a movie script for *Danny, King of the Basement* and I feel myself panicking because it seems that the possibilities in film are limitless, whereas the possibilities of stage are so constrained. It's almost like a sauna and yet, within that very rigid structure, there seems to me to be wonderful opportunities for imagination. (Craig 23)

Within those "sauna-like" conditions, a tremendous hothouse of creativity and innovation can emerge. Although adult theatre might provide artists with wider parameters for issues such as language, children seem to have fewer boundaries in terms of style.

Style

As James Reaney commented, children could watch a scene of a man dancing a signature and "just accept it; their parents have difficulties" (Reaney CTR 131). The variety of style within the genre is one of the aspects that make it so attractive for

innovative writers and directors. In this discussion, the term style can include theatrical form, design or distinctive visual appearance, sound or production quality. “For it is, in our opinion, one of the glories of the field that our style is so varied. It points to a career commitment by talented, dedicated and imaginative artists” (Doolittle/Barnieh 186).

Children don’t have any set expectations of how theatre should show up. They accept that whatever they’re told is theatre, is theatre. As long as they’re engaged by it, they’re willing to accept it... Adults very rapidly begin to expect theatre to appear in a certain form. They like costumes and they like sets and they like stories to appear in more traditional ways. (Craig 10)

If the style and content of a production can capture the imaginations of a young audience, they lean forward in their seats, spellbound. I have witnessed this time after time and been awestruck by the ability of certain artists to captivate a young audience unconditionally. What captures that spellbound attention? In my experience, the most outstanding productions for young audiences make very few compromises because of the age of the audience:

As I see it, there is very little difference between creating a work for young audiences – we learned that when we started creating work for adults that was equally enjoyed by young people. We go through the same creative process, pay the same attention to design, music and choreography as we would for grown ups. (Jacobs 9)

In a follow-up to her interview, Olivia Jacobs expanded on the need for quality in the style of TYA works:

I guess I’ve just seen too many shows where the company has painted a bit of red, green and yellow or tied a curtain up badly and assumed that this is enough to fill the stage. Young audiences are used to high definition colour and

realistic graphics but it's not enough to say "it's just kids, they won't notice if it's tatty." What is onstage needs to be thought out and properly made. I'm not suggesting that TYA needs huge naturalistic sitting room sets. In fact, we aim to provide our audience with a chance to let their imaginations do a lot of the locating. But what is onstage needs to provide an appropriate home for the show, it needs to define the space, it needs to be an integral part of the production, as does the lighting and the music. It may be that all you need are two sticks and a box – it's how you use them that makes the difference. (Jacobs 17)

When young audiences are presented with respectfully created productions, they throw up no barriers and are willing to accept all kinds of experimentation with style.

Children are in general far more flexible around issues of style...So I find if you were to line up ten of the top TYA plays in any given year, you would probably find a vast range of style and it would be a much larger range of style than you would find if you lined up a season at a regional theatre to see the plays they were doing. (Craig 10)

Indeed, at Calgary International Children's Festival, the style umbrella under which works for children was presented was extremely wide and generous. Works ranged from traditional productions to realistic plays and inventive re-tellings of old stories. In a day, a child could move from an Israeli production telling the story of Louis Braille, with nothing more than a sandbox filled with pencils to represent all of the characters (*A Touch of Light* by Ambulo Theatre, 1998) to a Danish theatre piece that transported them to the African desert through the use of a unique soundscape (*Tiger Tango* by Det Lille Turneteater, 1998). Young audiences moved from theatre to theatre, accepting the challenges of these vastly different styles without question. Enchanted by the works of extraordinary artists, they traveled easily from one invented world to the next.

Challenges

For the artists inventing these worlds, the creative landscape can be wide open but the realities of their working lives are often more restricted. When asked about the biggest challenges they face, they gave a range of responses. They spoke of the conflicting loyalties of career and home, loss of creativity and the inevitable frustrations of dealing with bureaucracy.

Each of these companies is financed differently. In Canada, David Craig's Roseneath Theatre is funded at the federal, provincial and civic levels. It is staffed with a general manager and David Craig is paid a regular salary as artistic director and writer. In England, Olivia Jacobs runs her company with limited government assistance and must earn the majority of the Tall Stories budget through earned revenues. In Australia, Stefo Nantsou has made a conscious choice to avoid any formalized structure. He runs Zeal Theatre from a home office, streamlining its operations as much as possible:

It's just me doing all the pays, contracts, publicity, secretarial work, wheelings and dealings...if that means being a little poorer, then fine. It's worth having the holes in one's jeans rather than a hole in one's head from the thought of having another "crisis funding meeting with the board". I have been on enough boards and gone to enough meetings for other company's continual survival (they always seem to be in crisis mode) to know that I don't want Zeal to be like that...it remains small because that's all we can afford and it is all I want to afford. (Nantsou 29)

In the case of Ms. Jacobs, the lack of government funding is a problem. Tall Stories has been unable, to date, to access operating grants from the British Arts Council. This type of sustaining funding would enable Jacobs and her producing partner Toby Mitchell to hire more staff and reduce some of their own responsibilities:

It is the continuing challenge of finance versus dream. We live a very hand to mouth existence. Tall Stories remain

funded only on a project basis. Each year we have to earn enough money to pay all our core costs and touring costs – which means we have to keep costs low and carry out a huge amount of activity. There are never enough hours in the day and very often we feel compromised artistically by the shortage of staff. We run from rehearsal room into the office at lunch times and find ourselves washing costumes and cleaning the van at weekends...I'd never say no to a full time General Manager ...Or some core funding for that matter. Or a proper office, come to think of it. (Jacobs 22)

For David Craig, the challenge has been an artistic one. His leadership of Theatre Direct and Roseneath Theatre has required a significant amount of administrative time and effort. His talents as a producer have occasionally threatened to overtake his commitment to being a working artist:

I think the biggest challenge is to stay on task and to stay with my creativity...it scares me and so it's very easy for me to get caught up in being a producer or just about anything else and to stay away from it. So I think the hardest thing, the biggest challenge for me is to clear the decks and become a creative person. You know, I've never had a play that hasn't been produced. I've created a world for myself in which that wouldn't happen. But it's also a world in which I haven't been perhaps taking the risks that I could. Because, you see, I already knew these plays would be produced. (Craig 22)

As an artist at mid-career, Mr. Craig's comments about risk-taking are particularly intriguing. There is certainly plenty of time for risk, as the work of anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson suggests: "At midlife, these moments of re-assessment and re-direction occur but here is a half a lifetime of productivity still ahead"

(Bateson 16). As the interviewees grow older, each of them face the constantly shifting challenges of integrating career and family. Olivia Jacobs gave birth to a baby boy in the summer of 2005. The challenge of juggling career and family is a phase she is only now entering. Both Mr. Craig and Mr. Nantsou have been facing these challenges for years and the issues contingent on blending work and family life are reflected in their answers.

Someone said that an artist was someone who could be a father to his children, a husband to his wife, work all day and still have something left over. I put myself squarely in that position. Was I a good husband? I don't know...I tried to be a good father. I'm not sure I was... I do think that I have been slightly driven. (Craig 21)

The challenges of being a working artist and an actively involved parent are significant. Long hours, concerns about finances and insecurities about the next project are compounded by the logistical demands of combining domestic life with international touring:

The work itself is not challenging, the work is too inspiring and too much fun to be challenging...The biggest challenge has been to be a fulltime self-employed artist and raise a family at the same time. It is much easier to steer one's career in the arts if one is single with no children. It is especially challenging now that I am a single Dad of two teenage daughters. (Nantsou 22)

In addition to the pressures on family cited by Mr. Nantsou, these artists are often faced with grueling touring schedules and school venues that are usually far from ideal.

Influences

For theatrical magic to happen under these circumstances, the artists must have discovered inspiration, in addition to stamina, along the way. I was curious to learn who

they would name as their influences and was delighted to discover that they ranged from “my mum and dad” to Bruce Springsteen.

“It’s cheesy, I know, but I think I was most influenced by my mum and dad” (Jacobs 16). Growing up in England, Olivia Jacobs fell in love with the theatre when, at age eight, she was taken by her parents to Stratford Upon Avon to see *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Macbeth*. Her parents also made up stories with her every night before bed and she credits them with her love of storytelling.

Another particular influence was a storytelling company called the Besht Tellers, with whom I toured Europe some years ago. In the show I toured with, they used two actors, two musicians and two sticks to tell some of the most vivid and poignant stories I have ever seen. It was truly inspirational. (Jacobs 16)

All of the interviewees expressed great respect for the kind of simplicity that transforms a stage with something as basic as two performers, two sticks and music. That kind of aesthetic is reminiscent of the work of James Reaney, particularly when he was influenced by the Peking Opera to trade elaborate sets for a simpler form of storytelling. Like Ms. Jacobs with the Besht Tellers and their sticks, he was mesmerized by the Opera’s “fabulous boat just made by two actors pretending” (Reaney, *Listen to the Wind* 117). Nantsou also mentions admiring simplicity, when he discusses his influences:

My greatest influence has been the English writer/director /actor Steven Berkoff for his brilliant acting style and his empty stage approach. His focus was always on the actor telling the story with no cups of tea or kitchen sink props. His performance in 1977 of his first play *East* was what gave me the push to do what I’m doing now. I thought “I want to be like him.” (Nantsou 16)

David Craig describes his early mentor, Patrick Masefield, in equally admiring terms. Masefield was the artistic director of the Canterbury company where Mr. Craig worked after graduation.

Patrick Masefield was very experienced and talented and he was a huge influence. He taught me that children's theatre could be entirely three-dimensional and entirely creative, entirely satisfying, entirely aesthetically beautiful, not just for children but for everybody. (Craig 14)

Conversely, Olivia Jacobs points out that all of the influences she lists were from theatre companies for adults: the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford Upon Avon, the Besht Tellers, and the third influence she cited. "I am also inspired by the relaxed comedy of companies like the Right Stuff, who also use direct contact with the audience in their productions. Interestingly, none of these companies works for young audiences" (Jacobs 16).

Neither does Bruce Springsteen. However, David Craig cited Springsteen's masterful staging and delivery as having a significant influence on him.

Springsteen is the finest live performer I've ever seen and the way he crafts and orchestrates changes in mood, in tempo, from huge rock and roll bonanzas...to the next minute, the lights going to a single spot, just him and a single acoustic guitar and him being able to communicate as if he were sitting in your living room. His energy...has been a real inspiration to me in terms of pleasing an audience. It is very important that the audience come out saying that "this was fabulous, this was really, really worthwhile." (Craig 17)

Stefo Nantsou was also inspired by a generation of writers who helped to take Australia out from under the shadow of colonialism. "Australian writers of the 70s were a

big influence, telling our stories to our audiences, rather than the ‘cultural cringing’ of telling English and American stories to an Australian audience.” (Nantsou 16)

Influences on creative work can be in the form of instrumental people or mentors but they can also take the form of certain events.

Turning Points

I asked the interviewees if they could identify any turning points in their careers which may have influenced their work. I wondered what they would describe as having been pivotal moments in their growth as artists, marking a passage from one layer of a career to the next.

Deciding to start my own company was the biggest turning point. I never had any real intentions of pushing myself ahead of others... I was more comfortable pushing a company than myself into the spotlight. (Nantsou 31)

This emphasis on the company instead of the individual is echoed in the answer provided by Ms. Jacobs. “I would say that the development of my creative life has been less about sudden and revealing turning points and more about incremental development” (Jacobs 31). She did describe one turning point, which was to bring the Tall Stories production of *Snow White* to the Scottish International Children’s Festival in Edinburgh in 2000. That led to their first North American invitation, to the Calgary International Children’s Festival in 2001.

From there, we were invited to a Showcase in Philadelphia, where *Snow White* was selected to perform at the New Victory Theatre on Broadway and to tour the whole of the USA. We knew then that we must have been doing something right. (Jacobs 31)

For Stefo Nantsou, the worldwide attention received by *The Stones* has validated the early decision he made to launch his own company. “Remaining freelance would have led me down a different road perhaps but I am very proud of Zeal Theatre’s

achievements” (Nantsou 31). His independent streak emerged in his response to the question about turning points, which revealed how much having his “own shop” means to him.

Look, with a name like I have, with a background like I have, with my politics the way they are, I never expect to be “ahead of the pack” or “given things on a plate”. There is nothing much braver than opening one’s own shop and seeing if the customers will come. Not for me anyway. Luckily the customers like what I can provide. And they keep coming back for more. (Nantsou 31)

I was curious about what Mr. Nantsou meant with “a name like I have”. When I queried him about this in October (2005), he immediately responded with this informative comment about Australia:

“With a name like mine” means that if you have a migrantish name someone will always ask “Oh, and where are you from?” ... In Australia, there is still an inherent, invisible racism that people would like to think doesn’t rear its ugly head anymore, but that’s not true. “Wogs” are still “wogs” in this country and “we” are still regarded with suspicion, especially now with “the war on terra”...we’re not really considered “one of the gang”...It’s a lot easier being a Russell Crowe or a Geoffrey Rush, nice palatable Anglo names.(Nantsou 30)

(Interestingly, months after our initial interview, a series of race riots were reported in Australia in December 2005 which were instigated, in part, by white supremacist gangs. I spoke to Mr. Nantsou, in January 2006 when he was performing *The Stones* in a sold-out run on Broadway. He told me that Zeal has already begun interviews for a new show about the current situation on the streets, tentatively titled *Gronks*.)

In England, the Scottish festival invitation was pivotal for Olivia Jacobs. The subsequent tour of Tall Stories to North America enabled her to expand and develop the company's way of working so that they could seamlessly meet the challenge of adapting to various venues.

The production developed quite organically to fit the new scale of venues that we were playing. We began to see how we could work on a larger scale without losing the intimacy of our work. As we went on to develop *The Gruffalo*, we found ourselves developing again – starting with a set that fits in the back of a small hatchback – and now, over 800 performances later, in the West End and on DVD. (Jacobs 25)

David Craig cites the start of his writing partnership with Robert Morgan as a turning point. They met when Morgan came to audition for work as an actor.

I auditioned a number of people including him and ...I thought he had a lovely energy. I hired him and then a year later, I said, "Why don't we write a play together?" And he said, "Oh I've never written a play before, I wouldn't know how," and I said, "It's easy. Let's just write one together". The first play we did together was *Morgan's Journey* but when we decided to do another play together, we wanted it, rather than being educational, to come from a more artistic center. It was about male aggression. Here we wanted a new way of conceiving TYA, which was that we were taking very adult themes and concepts and interpreting them for kids. Throughout this period, we never talked to kids, we never interviewed kids. As a matter of fact, we were really working in reaction to Dennis Foon. (Craig 10)

Since my interview with David Craig was live, I was able to ask him to expand on this. Dennis Foon is the founding artistic director of Vancouver's Green Thumb Theatre. Although he has not been with the company for over fifteen years, his successful methodology has been very influential in Canadian TYA, particularly manifested in plays about contemporary issues. His plays have included *New Canadian Kid* (1981), *Invisible Kids* (1985), *The Mirror Game* (1987) and *Seesaw* (1989). Included among his many awards are the British Theatre Award, two Chalmers awards, the Jesse Richardson Career Achievement Award and the International Arts for Young Audiences award. Describing his approach, Dennis Foon emphasized the importance of validating the child's voice.

The principle we start out with is to empower kids, to let them know they have the right to be involved in discussions about issues that affect their lives. The basic thing is to start with the premise that kids are essentially powerless in society. They are controlled and their lives are dictated by adults. (Foon)

I worked with Dennis Foon at Green Thumb Theatre for three years (1981-1984) and learned a lot from him. Nonetheless, I understand how his high profile across Canada might have rankled other hard-working artists in the field.

We were sick of Dennis...because the way he talked about theatre, about TYA...that there was only one way to do it, his way. That included talking to kids, working with them at schools, not having any adult characters in the plays. The children were always the protagonists...The plays were generally realistic with some kind of an imaginary or theatrical twist to them...but generally they were quite realistic and dealt with issues and Green Thumb is still using that formula to this day. He was very successful at it because he was a good writer but we didn't want to be like him so we began from concepts. We were going to try and wrestle with the greatest problems of our age and we were

going to try and translate them for children...we didn't realize it at the time but we were working at a very high conceptual level. (Craig 15)

Craig and Morgan's collaborations included *Morgan's Journey* (1985 Chalmers Award) *Head 'a Tete* (1987 Dora Mavor Moore Award), *Dib and Dob and the Journey Home* (1998 Chalmers Award and Dora Mavor Moore Award). Their writing/producing /performing partnership lasted for seventeen years (1983- 2000) and has ended only recently so that they can both pursue independent projects.

What I brought to our writing partnership was comedy and Robert... appreciated a good joke but he thought I overdid it. And what he brought to it was a desire and a willingness to go into the shadows, go into the darkness, to make people cry. He felt that the classic journey was to journey into the darkness, you took the audience into the darkness and then you brought them back to the light and that was the appropriate structure for a children's play, where a happy ending is not something simple or easy or letting anyone off the hook. It was in fact, our duty to provide a sense of hope to children. I think when you get to a high school audience ...they become hungry for darkness. They become hungry for the twisted, the rebel... So Robert taught me to look for the human, to dig to find where was the feeling in that. And I thought he was too sentimental so we balanced each other. I wouldn't let him get too sentimental and he wouldn't let me get too gaggy. So together it really, really worked. (Craig 16)

Creative partnerships have been important to all of the interviewees. Stefo Nantsou and Tom Lycos have partnered on Zeal Theatre projects since 1996. Olivia

Jacobs and Toby Mitchell have worked together for the past ten years, the last eight being devoted to Tall Stories.

We're quite different but I think that's what makes our partnership work. In the past, we have worked quite separately on productions, with me directing a show simultaneously to him directing another, or one of us producing for the other, but as the years have passed, our work has become more organically linked artistically. We've learned from each other. I've learned to be more sparing with text and he's learned more about physicality and making visual pictures. Every year our artistic process becomes more combined. (Jacobs 17)

David Craig reflected on the pivotal effect of the success of his play, *Danny King of the Basement*, which was not written in partnership. It has toured throughout North America and Europe, been produced in Germany, won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Production (2002), the Canada Council for the Arts Theatre for Young Audiences Award (2002) and the Chalmers Award (2003); it has also been optioned for film.

It's a turning point because I think it really propelled my career into a different level, an international level. Up until then I had just been quietly doing my thing in Toronto and occasionally, you know, touring, but kind of under the radar...I don't think that (the success) is going to change what I do but it changes the way I look at what I do, ...I could die tomorrow and feel, wow ...I really achieved something in writing that one play. I think that one play is really good...and so if I don't do anything else, I will feel quite satisfied with that. That's amazing. (Craig 32)

The recognition that can follow the reception of a successful play is certainly a rich reward, in itself, for any artist. I wanted to explore this more fully, to see how success played into the motivations for the artists. Given the opportunity, I wondered what the interviewees would identify as their greatest achievement.

Achievements

I was surprised at the responses to this particular query. According to the artists, this was the most difficult question that I posed. David Craig contested the question before answering it, challenging me on my definition of the word “achievement”. Olivia Jacobs wrote from England to say that this was the only question with which she was struggling. The only one of the three who was unequivocal in his response was Stefo Nantsou.

The most important achievement as an artist has been to travel and expose my work to other nationalities, cultures, and fellow artists from other countries. You cannot get a perspective of your own work until you see it shown outside their normal context...all the touring with *The Stones* has by far been the most important achievement, and having so many other companies from around the world (about 20 countries by now) performing *The Stones* in their own language for their own audience. Directing some of these productions is another huge achievement for me...something I always wanted ... to travel the world and perform and direct in a wide variety of international schools, festivals and theatres. (Nantsou 11)

International touring has been a highlight for all three of these artists. Although the opportunity to tour has been equally significant for Ms. Jacobs, she also emphasizes her company's modest beginnings and their enduring commitment to playing in their own London neighbourhood.

This is a really hard question. My most important achievement seems to always be successfully getting through whatever it is I'm working on – whether it be finding the company a new home – or opening a new show. I am proud our work has toured the UK, USA, Canada, Singapore, Chile and Poland... that we have been invited to perform at the Royal National Theatre, in the West End and on Broadway – but that we still perform in Linlithgow Primary School and other similar venues most weekends of the year... that over 200,000 people have seen our productions...that we have a really excellent DVD on sale in the shops in the UK. But mostly, I am proud that a company that Toby (Mitchell) and I began from a room in a tiny flat in Kilburn all those years ago has survived for 8 years and is continuing to achieve the aims that we set out and more besides. (Jacobs 20)

The success of both Zeal Theatre and Tall Stories has had a significant impact in their own countries. The phenomenal response of *The Stones* worldwide has raised the interest of international programmers in other Australian groups. In fact, the only government funds that Zeal Theatre has accepted have been modest grants for recent international travel, with the expectation that this federal sponsorship will help to promote Australian artists. In England, the work of Tall Stories has been instrumental in raising the profile of works for young audiences.

When Toby and I started the company, we were battling to make a voice for family theatre in the UK. To provide a high quality, imaginative option for families that didn't want to sit through another bad pantomime (often children's only theatre experience in the UK)... Eight years later, things have changed a great deal in the UK. Just by

looking at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Programme it's easy to see how many more companies are bringing family work to the festival. I am proud that we have helped to make that change. (Jacobs 20)

David Craig answered this question somewhat differently and did not address the substantial international success of his own company at all.

The experience of being an artist in the present moment...is what has given me the most satisfaction. It is whatever is itching the itch so it's the process. It's just the process. And some processes have been easy and some processes have been hard but it doesn't really matter, they've all itched the itch... So the thing that I'm most excited about is whatever I'm doing right now... I remember all my projects with fondness. They all seem to be children to me. Some children have been successful, some children have been less successful but they've all been like children to me. They've all been my creative DNA and so the process is the thing that gives me the most fulfillment and in a sense, achievement. When I write a first draft or later, when I see it onstage and I think, okay, there's 90% here that works and now I'll just go back again and work on that other 10%. If I can answer the question in a slightly different way, I would say what gives me a lot of satisfaction is my growing control and command of the dramatic form. (Craig 21)

Rewards

For these particular artists, the unique demands of playing to children are outweighed by the rewards. They are drawn to the world of young people and are clearly

undeterred by its challenges. Their interviews are consistently marked by what I can only describe as a moving and unique compassion for children and their circumstances.

I don't think I made a decision that I was going to stick with theatre for young audiences, I don't think I really have even now but I find it deeply satisfying to create work that is meaningful to an audience. I would have been happy to perform for adults but perhaps I had a particular sympathy for children. I don't know why I do but I have a real sympathy for children and their situation. I find them fascinating. I'm just interested in their lives. I think their lives are very rich and passionate, filled with dramatic incident and situation. (Craig 7)

I often found myself struck by the bravery of the TYA performers who would visit the Calgary International Children's Festival. Admittedly, we would provide them with the most unruly audiences. Children who were excited about being out of school would often have difficulty settling in to watch and listen. I would hold my breath, wondering if they would ever calm down. Suddenly, they would be transfixed by what they were seeing onstage. I was surprised to discover that these challenges sometimes provided the most memorable rewards. "Teenagers are harder, yes. I prefer the harder audience. It stretches one's abilities". (Nantsou 6) Ms. Jacobs notes that the flip side of the potential for raucous behaviour by children is the potential for equally raucous enthusiasm.

If you can capture their interest, young audiences are open to suggestion and happy to let their imaginations run wild. They...join in, shout out and generally forget themselves for the duration of the show. (Jacobs 6)

Idealism is, at least in part, what rewards these artists. With the young audience, they are presenting their work to people whose whole lives lie in front of them. Their futures are wide open.

I believe that our shows can make a difference, especially in these modern times when the media looks at issues and themes in such a black and white way, a very western American dominant ideology. We try to give our audience another way of looking at something. (Nantsou 7)

Additionally, there is the reward from one particular aspect of TYA.. Touring and playing to children is simply hard, honest work.

I wanted to make it possible to make a living in the theatre and it's not a field that attracts high rollers because...it's monastic in its simplicity and rigour and effort. You know, it's really hard work, the theatre. I was attracted to it as an art form but also to the fact that I was willing to work hard... I found the effort involved in setting up the sets, loading in and loading out, all of it; I found all of that effort very satisfying. I like working hard. (Craig 30)

Although the interviewees have built careers that have been rewarded in less tangible ways than some of their contemporaries, they have, nonetheless, found job satisfaction.

Status

Clearly, these artists feel compelled to produce their work, despite the lack of status, as in public recognition, professional standing or monetary rewards associated with the field. Writers and performers for children generally receive less media attention, less critical acclaim and less money. In my research, David Craig provided a specific case, comparing the royalties for his new adult play, *Having Hope at Home* to those he earns for his children's play *Danny, King of the Basement*.

Look, I get \$45 (per performance) in royalties for *Danny King of the Basement* and around \$600 (per performance) for *Having Hope at Home*. If Danny had been for adults, I

would have made as much as Michael Healey* did with
The Drawer Boy! (Craig 30)

Mr. Craig receives 10% of the theatre's revenues for each performance of his plays. He stresses that an equivalent amount of work and time went into the writing of both plays. "The adult play took longer but not substantially longer. Once you have created a world and characters, it doesn't take that much longer to create a ninety-minute experience versus a sixty minute experience" (Craig 31).

Although the adult theatre world holds little allure for Stefo Nantsou, he wonders if his work for young audiences has typecast him.

Of course, if I were offered a role in a big musical version of Rasputin, I would consider it. But there's a big chance I wouldn't be offered it because I am seen as a "performer for teens" and therefore I can't be much good. It's not seen as "appropriate for an actor of worth." (Nantsou 29)

Many TYA companies employ young actors right out of theatre school or university drama programs. For the majority of these young performers, the TYA jobs are merely stepping-stones to a becoming "actors of worth," which will ostensibly mean landing more lucrative and prestigious jobs in adult theatre. "Theatre for children and families is often seen as an in-the-meantime job" (Jacobs 29). One of the actors, Jerome Ackhurst, who performed in David Craig's *The Clown who Laughed and Laughed*, commented directly on this point.

Like most actors doing kid's plays, I would rather be doing straight dramatic roles. Only one in a hundred actors involved in children's theatre is in it because that's what he really wants to do. It provides experience and money. I do it to get away from having to wash cars or dig gardens for a living. (Doolittle/Barnieh 51)

In some cases, however, the performers who have gone on to work for adult companies admire the careers of their colleagues who have remained with young audience work.

Now I find the friends I have who are well-known actors from film and television are jealous of what I do because I don't do crap! I do shows which have a passion behind the presentation, not something that my agent would prefer me to do so they can make money out of me. (Nantsou 29)

For the most part, the rewards of working for the young audience seem to outweigh the lack of status or financial returns for the interviewees. "Despite the fact that I will never make a fortune and the work can mean long hours, I can't think of anything I would rather do" (Jacobs 29).

The question of prestige is significant because, I guess it's been less important to me than it would be to other artists...Initially, I wanted to be an actor. I had to give up performing on the great stages of the world but I found very satisfying employment, not prestigious employment, but I got a chance to be an actor anyway, more than many of my contemporaries...It was important for me to perform in front of an audience. I didn't care what the audience was. If I was performing to an audience that was receiving the work and enjoying the work and telling me that I was a wonderful guy, that was enough prestige for me. Obviously, I loved it. (Craig 30)

All the interviewees reported that they derived satisfaction from engaging an audience; they also made some pointed comments about the hierarchy of adult theatre. These three artists clearly prefer to work for their own companies: "Whatever I write gets produced so it's a sweet deal at the moment. I'm in a very good spot" (Craig 30). In addition to placing a high value on their independence, they prefer a more egalitarian,

co-operative approach to theatre.

I have remained focussed on the theatre I do because I detest the “normal” adult theatre industry. I hate it that stage managers wash an actor’s underwear and work ten times the hours of a bit-player and usually get paid a lot less. I detest the “normal” way of rehearsing a play. The triangle shaped hierarchy, the elitism, and the snobbishness. Bourgeoisie theatre is just rehashing what others do on Broadway or on the West End or what others do on film and television. I have no interest in it. Fringe theatre usually is boxed in its own “undervaluing of itself” and therefore will always be seen as just that, “on the fringe”.
Not interested. (Nantsou 29)

My interview with Stefo Nantsou took place over a number of months via e-mail. He sent this portion of his interview with me from a ferry off the coast of Norway where Zeal Theatre was on tour with *The Stones*. This segment was written fresh from a performance. He wrote, “There is not much monetary reward, but the response I received from the Norwegian high school students this morning was well worth the trip and the pay packet. I doubt I’ll abandon the work”(Nantsou 29).

I am compelled to continue to make work for a family audience when I see a room full of children with their parents and both are enthralled. Watching them talk about the show afterwards and seeing the interaction between them is hugely rewarding...what might make me want to abandon it? Not that much, to be honest. (Jacobs 29)

There are not many lines of work where the service you have provided has “enthralled” your customer. Despite the unique demands of working in TYA, the satisfaction gained is clearly enough to motivate these artists to continue.

By looking at how David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou started out in TYA and reflecting on their influences and the formation of their companies, we have obtained a sense of what motivates them to pursue their work in this genre. They are undaunted by the limitations of the form in terms of raucous audiences and gymnasium performance spaces. They are willing to meet the personal challenges of combining touring with family life. Although they have each been recognized for their work, they are not pursuing financial rewards or high status in the theatre community. This information is significant because it offers glimpses into their characters in addition to helping to define them as deeply committed artists.

What these three artists are committed to is the telling of stories. In the next chapter, we will discover how they select their stories, where they find them and how they tell them in play form. We will examine three of their works, *The Gruffalo*, *Danny King of the Basement* and *The Stones* in depth and look at how myths, dreams and archetypes affect their work. Additionally, we will explore their values, themes and opinions about the elements of an effective TYA play.

*Michael Healey is a Canadian playwright who has earned a significant amount of royalties with his 2001 play for adults, *The Drawer Boy*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MOTHERLODE

For that is what is lost in so many lives, and what must be recovered: a sense of personal calling... Dare to envision your biography in terms of very large ideas such as beauty, mystery and myth.

James Hillman, A Calling

A short, bespectacled man holds up a small blue facecloth. He looks expectantly at the young audience seated in the Engineered Air Theatre. Hesitant and eager to please, his face is filled with hope as he asks, “Can we agree, just for today, that this is the Black Sea?”

The man is a gifted, European performer named Lars Frank. He is an actor/puppeteer playing at the Calgary International Children’s Festival. The year is 1995 and he is here with Theatre Waidspeicher from what was then called East Germany.

Ten years later, this is one of the lines I have never forgotten. This production, called “*Who’s Afraid Of?*” explores the world of childhood fears including being scared of the dark and of saying goodbye. In this scene, the production is examining the fear of being at the seaside, of not knowing what is “out there”. In a charming and unforgettable manner, Lars Frank has just searched the stage for something to suggest water. He is a master at the art of safely inviting children into his world, and his use of the innocent and familiar-looking blue facecloth is a brilliant entry point to a story that could otherwise be frightening. He gently convinces the audience to agree to suspend its disbelief and to agree that just for today, this everyday object is the Black Sea. The children are ready for the story to begin.

Stories

What makes a story so indelible that it has stayed with me all these years? In order for a theatre piece to create this kind of lasting impact, a good story is essential. I

wanted to know what compels the interviewees to select certain stories. I asked them what stories they found important to tell and why.

I like stories about outsiders. I like stories about people who are at the edge so I can shine a theatrical light on them, so that in attempts to break through prejudice or ignorance or alienation... we watch as these characters might be moving from the fringe to the center. (Craig 17)

Movement or growth often reveals itself when characters in the plays face a problem or crisis.

I am interested in telling stories with a dilemma. Ones with no simple answers to the questions it may raise. I am always looking for contemporary stories, which may have “another side” to that which may be shown in the television news or in the newspapers. My work tends to examine contemporary issues, which I feel are ... propagandized or sensationalized by dominant western media. (Nantsou 9)

All the artists discussed the necessity of loving the story, of feeling passionate about finding the best way to tell it. “I think for me there has to be a personal connection to the material. There has to be something about it that is touching me in my life” (Craig16). *Smokescreen*, about a young boy’s struggle with drugs and the helplessness that his father feels, exemplifies Craig’s comment. The play emerged from his own family, in particular, his own son’s struggle with drugs. In a Roseneath Theatre study guide prepared for the play by Patterson Fardell, Craig made the following comment.

What I experienced as a parent is that my children viewed marijuana use as next to harmless. They were not alarmed by daily use, daytime use, using alone or using during school hours. I was. I am not a prude, but I felt my kids were using marijuana too young and too much. I felt the drug was subtly affecting their mood and behaviour in

ways to which they were unaware. I wanted them to stop! Completely! Now! The conflict that arose between their attitudes and my own was one that I felt many families were experiencing. It forms the emotional core of the play.
(Fardell 2)

An interesting range of opinions arose when the interviewees were asked specifically about how the approach taken in a TYA play differs from that taken with a play for an adult audience. While Olivia Jacobs believes the response to her company's work would be the same for both groups, David Craig points to some differences.

We would hope that we could perform any of our shows to an audience of just adults, just children or a mixture of both and still hear laughter, hear moments of stillness and obtain the same level of applause...these points may come at different times depending on the age of the audience but, for me, a good show...should work on a lot of levels.
(Jacobs 9)

Craig's answer to the same question raises an interesting comparative point about the level of maturity one can reasonably expect from a young audience and how it necessitates certain restrictions.

As a theatre artist, you have to acknowledge that there are certain things that don't work for children, that they don't appreciate, for example, irony. Why? Because they've simply not lived long enough. Irony is juxtaposing expectations versus reality so I might say one thing and mean something completely different...For example, my children don't understand the humour of Doonesbury. I have to explain it to them because it's so rich with irony, saying one thing but meaning something else. That's just one of the differences between children and adults. You

have to find a way to communicate with them but emotionally they're just as sophisticated and they're quite capable of understanding large issues if they are explained in a simple way. (Craig 11)

Olivia Jacobs, with the Tall Stories production of *Mum and the Monster* (2002), chose to use a classic journey story format to examine the large issue of divorce. Toby Mitchell wrote a short story, which evolved into script form during the rehearsal process, with his input.

The play charts the story of Tom, a young boy who lives at the base of a mountain. When Tom's mother disappears, his father tells him that she has been kidnapped by a monster, causing Tom to venture up the mountain to rescue her, meeting giants and witches on route. When he finally finds her – he discovers that she is in fact, quite happy with the monster, and intends to stay with him at the top of the mountain. Tom heads back down the mountain, revisiting the tall man (the giant) and the old lady (the witch) that he had met on the way up. Finally he returns home to his dad. Whilst the show retains a fairytale like quality and on one level can be seen as a simple adventure story, it also tackles a real life issue, which affects a huge number of families – what happens when mum and dad don't stay together. This has been a most controversial show for us, causing tears from some parents, anger from others who are unhappy for their children to be confronted with this issue (even within its fairytale setting), and the writing of grateful letters from others, thanking us for providing them with a way to talk to their child about something they were going through.

Whilst we took on board the comments from parents who were unhappy for their child to be confronted with a story

in which there is no happy united family at the end – we were very proud of the show and the boundaries it pushed. If anything, it made me more determined not to shy away from any story – even if the subject matter may be hard.
(Jacobs 3)

Critical response was excellent.

So tight that the modulations in tone and pace are seamless, *Mum and the Monster* follows the lives of a little boy called Tom and his mum and his dad, with hypnotic rhythms, echoes and storytelling. By turns, joyous and sad, exciting and frightening, this tale with an unexpected twist keeps up to Tall Stories statuesque standards. (The List)

Difficult subject matter is not an obstacle for these artists. Speaking about one of his earliest collaborations with Robert Morgan, David Craig discussed the genesis of *Head ` a Tete*. (1987)

We were inspired by the Cold War between Russia and the USA .We wanted to explore what the roots of that aggression were. We had grown up with the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis. That had been a seminal moment in each of our childhoods and the notion of bomb shelters and fall-out and all those horrible things which faded from our memory, until 911, I guess...It seemed to us back then that the rattling of Moscow and Washington seemed like children in a playground. So what we tried to do was to explore aggression, particularly male aggression, through schoolyard games as a metaphor for global conflict. So, you can see, that doesn't sound much like a children's play, does it? (Craig 10)

In a series of interviews, edited by Anne Frank, about writing for children for the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television in 1996, writer/producer Kim Todd, summarizes the need for passion:

If you haven't got something important to say, write for another audience. You have to have something vital to say to children. You have to be willing to get down, eyeball to eyeball, to say it...Children work on gut reaction. They can't be bought cheaply. They are a tough audience because they are so honest. Writing for children is not just a job. It has to come from a passion. (Frank 125)

For Nantsou, the passion comes from the full investigation of a story, the goal being to tell it from more than one side. "I see myself as a theatrical journalist, trying to analyze, dissect and deliver stories within a theatrical framework. Hopefully, we can do that in a way that will make an audience think a little harder and deeper about the subject matter"(Nantsou 12). Additionally, each artist seeks to provide the audience with a tangible emotional response.

We look for stories that have strong dramatic potential, a clear protagonist and a satisfaction factor. By satisfaction factor I mean that when you finish the story – you feel something. It might be an "ooh" or a tear or a big smile – but it gives you a real sense of satisfaction. (Jacobs 11)

In order for the young audience to fully experience the play that is being performed, the material must be presented clearly. In their interviews, Nantsou, Jacobs and Craig all discussed the importance of clarity. They each work diligently to make their plays as accessible as possible.

What attracts me ... is material that does not have to be interpreted by children, that has no degree of interpretation. For example, when adults go and see Shakespeare, there is a high degree of interpretation that goes on. We have to

understand that this is Elizabethan England and not modern England, not modern Canada. We have to get over strange accents, strange language, strange customs; we have to interpret all those things to get to the emotional core of the story. So what I'm attracted to are stories that don't require any interpretation or minimal interpretation. I want the interpretation to be next to effortless so that the kids are really directly impacted by the story. (Craig 12)

For Olivia Jacobs, the story remains the key, even as it becomes a way to explore certain ideas with the audience.

Mostly, we find ourselves drawn to stories that have some underlying meaning. For example: *Snow White* is about the beauty myth and by twisting the end a little and showing Snow White to inherit her mother's mirror, we ask the question of whether Snow White will grow up to be as vain as her mother. *Rumpelstiltskin* suggests that it might not be prudent to promise things that you can't provide. Even *The Gruffalo* – which is seen more as “fun” than “meaningful” implies that the big guy doesn't always come out on top. (Jacobs 15)

The Gruffalo

It is, in fact, the tiny Mouse who comes out on top in the Tall Stories production of *The Gruffalo*. Based on an original storybook by Julia Donaldson, which has become a well-loved story for children throughout the English-speaking world (MacMillan, 1999), *The Gruffalo* was adapted by the members of the Tall Stories company and directed by Olivia Jacobs in 2001. It is the story of Mouse, who decides to brave the woods in search of nuts and encounters several scary animals. In order to frighten them off, she invents a Gruffalo, a terrifying monster who will devour them. Mouse succeeds in getting through the woods, until she herself comes face to face with the very creature that she has

imagined. This play for young children, aged three to seven, explores, in a beguiling and humourous way, childhood fears about being the one of the smallest creatures in a frightening world. The Tall Stories production features three actors. One actor consistently plays the character of Mouse while the other two actors take all of the other parts. As the production opens, Mouse dreams of finding delicious nuts in the forest, while the other two “narrators” remind her of how scary the woods can be. They warn her against taking a walk there, cautioning her that the woods are filled with foxes and owls and snakes. The first line of the book is repeated very effectively in the script and is immediately recognized by the audience.

Most parents and virtually all children will know the tag line by now. From the very first strains of “a mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood”, the Tall Stories adaptation of Julia Donaldson’s tale never misses a beat.... As Mouse encounters each potential predator, she also finds enchanting characterisation, both verbally and musically. (The Scotsman)

Music is a key element in *The Gruffalo*. Short snappy songs, by Jon Fiber, are used to identify each character. Comical lyrics and inventive choreography are used to great effect. The Tall Stories production has enlarged the book by fleshing out the characters of each predator that Mouse meets along the way. Fox is a cockney taxi driver who sings,

You’ve just met the bloke who’s got Knowledge/To show
you ‘round, the best price in town. (4)

The use of the term “the knowledge”, exemplifies the humour in the play that is targeted for adults. London taxi drivers must pass a famously punishing test about the whereabouts of London streets and neighbourhoods before they are granted a license. Once they have it, they are described as having “the knowledge”. It is doubtful that a child of four would get this joke but the adults enjoy it. While this typifies much of the verbal cleverness in the play, there is plenty of physical humour to amuse the children.

Fox invites Mouse for lunch but, when Mouse figures out that she might be on the menu, she makes up an imaginary friend to scare away Fox. As she begins to describe her Gruffalo, her imagination takes flight and she makes him bigger and scarier than anyone else in the forest.

FOX. A Gruffalo? What's a Gruffalo?

MOUSE. A Gruffalo? Why, didn't you know? He has
terrible tusks. And terrible claws. And terrible teeth.
In his terrible jaws...

FOX. Where are you meeting him?

MOUSE. Here by these rocks. And his favourite food is
roasted fox! (9)

Mouse triumphs after scaring away Fox and she subsequently frightens off all the other predators by referring to her imaginary friend. When London's Time Out Magazine selected *The Gruffalo* as one of the Top Five Children's Shows of 2001, reviewer Jane Campbell described these predators:

The owl is an old military bird, who tries to lure Mouse off to join the woodland air force by describing its other members; "Peacock is our most highly decorated officer", Duck is "one of our quack troops", but at the threat of being made into owl ice cream for the Gruffalo – he huffs ... and flies off. Snake, meanwhile is a sinuous Mexican with a big hat and moustache, who is in love with himself and his wiggly hips. With a superb cast, catchy tunes and good jokes, Tall Stories have transformed a well-loved story into an exuberant, funny show. (Campbell)

When the Gruffalo initially appears, he is not as scary as Mouse imagined him to be. In fact, he is as nervous about being in the woods as anyone else and Mouse discovers that simply being big is no guarantee of being brave. She realizes that her size does not matter and that her own inner resources will carry her into the future. Adults and children alike are transported by the production, as is demonstrated by the following letter from a parent.

A child is more likely than an adult to be able to accept improvisation, but as an adult who saw *The Gruffalo* with his children, I was staggered at how readily I accepted a man wearing a tweed jacket and a cap as a fox! So it is with great admiration that I thank the diminutive cast for making me a child again!! I was not prepared for the experience and it is one of those rare occasions where I can truthfully say that, given the opportunity, I would take my children to see it again. If not, I may just go on my own! Thank you.
(Brewis)

Mr. Brewis, a parent of three, thought the production was improvised; it was, in fact, tightly scripted and directed by Olivia Jacobs. I can concur that these performances are so fresh and convincing, they appear to be improvised on the spot.

The fact that *The Gruffalo* is based on a picture book adds another level of meaning for young children. I still remember what I considered to be an extraordinary question from one of the children at the 2003 Calgary International Children's Festival who saw the Tall Stories production of *The Gruffalo*. She asked me why the yellow butterfly wasn't in the play. I explained that the yellow butterfly was on the cover of the book but the play was telling the story in a slightly different way. Her astonishment that a play she enjoyed could neglect something evidently so important to her, may have been one of her first experiences in multiple interpretation. Clearly, she was able to enjoy the play, even without her beloved butterfly.

Source Material

Although *The Gruffalo* is based on a popular book, some of the interviewees utilize existing materials. I asked the artists where they discover their source material. “Source material is everywhere I go, everything I read, everyone I meet and talk to, or overhear. The best and most interesting stories usually come from those closest to you”(Nantsou 18). Time Out magazine reported that one source is the audience themselves. Elana Vereker’s article described how Stefo Nantsou and Tom Lycos use the time on the road, with one show, as an opportunity to research and develop their next production.

Working on limited cash flow means that the development time becomes very practical. When Stefo and Tom are on tour, they talk to the audiences after the shows about their responses to what came up in the performance as well as specific questions that feed into the next show they are writing. Then, in the evening, they create scenes and characters for the next production. This innovative approach to creative development invigorates the current performance and post-show talks with a sense of contribution, immediacy and direct engagement between audience and art. (Vereker)

Olivia Jacobs accesses her material from more traditional sources but has also developed original material based on ideas from her company members.

We read traditional stories, folk tales, myths and legends, modern children’s books and classic picture books. We also seek out unusual or odd stories from far off places that might be the start point of something. For example, there’s a story about a badger and a goblin in our new show that is really quite peculiar – but wonderful too. We have also created work from poems (like *The Owl and the Pussycat*)

and, on many occasions, from an idea that we have had or that has crept up during a workshop. (Jacobs 11)

David Craig discussed his work as initially coming from humour and in this respect, his background is reminiscent of J.M. Barrie's. Both saw part of their roles, as young boys, to be the ones to amuse their families. In Barrie's case, his audience was primarily his mother, while Craig entertained his entire family.

The first thing I loved to do was to make them laugh...the skill that I brought right from the start was an ability to make people laugh...It might have been a little sophomoric but it was the first thing I had to offer. Sometimes I think that I had that because of my family of origin, if that's of interest to you...I had a very tense family situation. My brother and sister were older than me and my father was frequently in conflict with my brother who moved out shortly after I was born...and my father was kind of a tense guy. So whenever we would sit around the dinner table and things would get tense, I would say something funny to relieve the tension. So my style of humour was to just create tension and then make a joke to release it... My first plays were pedagogical in nature. They were teaching plays but they were largely comedies. (Craig 7)

These plays included the early Theatre Direct Canada productions of *The Dream Burger Dilemma* (1975), *The Railroad Story* (1975) and *The Great Canadian Energy Show* (1977).

After a story has been selected, it will require months of work and when completed, will often stay in a company's repertoire for years. For example, Tall Stories' *Snow White* and David Craig's *Danny, King of the Basement* are going into their fourth and fifth years of production, respectively. The Zeal Theatre production of *The Stones* is now in its ninth year of production and has been performed over 900 times. In order to

put that much time into a story, the artists must feel completely invested in it. It must hold deep meaning for them.

Myths, Dreams and Archetypes

Meaningful stories can be found in myths, which form a substantial component of children's literature. Joseph Campbell was a leading authority on mythology until his death in 1987. He was a preeminent scholar, writer and teacher whose work has had a profound influence on readers throughout the world.

We need myths to survive and to explain and understand our existence.... Young people just grab this stuff. Mythology teaches you what's behind literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life. It's a great, exciting, life-nourishing subject. Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities.
(Campbell 11)

The Book of Miracles, by David Craig and Robert Morgan, is a mythological adventure fantasy about two young people from very different tribes. The play follows their story as they escape from the Seeds of Fear, find the mysterious Hero of the book, and bring order to the chaos in their land.

I always look for archetypical situations, almost Jungian situations. When I feel I've found it, I'm telling a story that has at its core some kind of universal story that could be told now or was being told 5000 years ago. When I feel that I'm telling a story like that, then I feel good. *The Book of Miracles* is an example of that ... I felt like I was on solid ground and I could trust the material. I could invest the work and energy and money, in that project, to bring it to fruition. (Craig 14)

The journey in the play is accomplished without the help of adults. *The Book of Miracles* was presented in a captivating, stark style by the two writer-performers, David Craig and Robert Morgan, as it explored the need for tolerance and the power of personal conviction. “Like all great fantasy stories, *The Book of Miracles* is a quest, at whose heart is self-knowledge, and at whose conclusion are compassion and a fuller understanding of the human condition” (Daniels).

Pursuing an understanding of the human condition is an ambitious goal, to say the least. In conjunction with asking the artists if they worked with myths in their creative work, I inquired if they worked with their own dreams.

Not my own but my next project is going to be an exploration of children’s dreams and...I’m going to spend two or three weeks in a high school in Toronto talking to kids about dream images ... that may be particular to children’s experiences as opposed to adult experiences. It will be a puppet shadow theatre piece, not a stage play ... Maybe we will watch the character descending a ladder and then we’ll see what happens and there will be some kind of catharsis that the character will experience along the way...I think it will have mythical elements, dragons and monsters but I have no particular plans to use them as a starting point. (Craig 23)

As stated above, Olivia Jacobs and her Tall Stories company read myths and legends as part of their research into source material.

I suppose that to some extent I am always working with my own dreams. I think and dream in pictures and try to find ways to make pictures come alive on stage. I dream of creating work which overflows with excitement – and always try to achieve that in rehearsal. But I don’t think I’ve ever had a dream and then tried to make a stage production of it – I don’t know that my dreams are exciting

enough...we have worked with myths and fables and fairytales – *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Snow White* for example – and we may look at Greek myths in the future – good stories are always worth telling. (Jacobs 19)

To find stories worth telling, the interviewees all seem to find a wealth of material around them. David Craig's process is a blend of using archetypes and having a personal attachment to the material.

I'm attracted to the fact that I'm having an argument with my son (*Smokescreen*). I'm attracted by creating a fantasy world (*Book of Miracles*). I'm attracted by trying to showcase conflict between Russia and America because I'm scared of bombs (*Head 'a Tete*). But at some point during the process, I start looking around. I start checking in and comparing the work that I'm doing with things that strike me as archetypal. I'm no expert on Jungian theory but an example of that would be *Danny, King of the Basement*. (Craig 10)

Danny, King of the Basement

As mentioned earlier, the play is the story of a homeless child and his mother as they try to survive in a modern Canadian urban landscape. Its genesis was a radio news program about a 2001 report on homelessness in the city of Toronto. David Craig heard the program as he was driving his car and he was baffled by the statistics cited.

What caught his attention was the statement that twenty-five percent of homeless people were children under the age of twelve. The fifty-year-old father of two teens remembers being flabbergasted, thinking that such a thing was impossible in such a prosperous city. In Craig's mind, homeless people meant homeless men. (Prokosh D1, D7)

Craig did extensive research, which included interviewing homeless children being raised in a shelter. He was determined to make the play accessible and entertaining, despite its difficult subject matter. The play begins with ten-year-old Danny awakened from a deep sleep by his mother because it is time to leave another one of her live-in relationships, where things have gone wrong. According to Danny, this is their eighth move in less than two years. "I'm the King of moving," Danny says. (3) We know it's the voice of painful experience as we watch him navigate his way through continually rough times. "Toronto playwright David S. Craig shines a penetrating light on the mindset of a wanting kid most citizens would drive by thoughtlessly on one of our sorry streets" (Prokosh D1, D7).

Once again, Danny and his mother head for a new neighbourhood, a new basement and what looks like a new life. Danny meets his neighbours: the spoiled Penelope, whose affluent lifestyle has changed since the recent break-up of her parents and Nick, a hockey-loving boy whose angry, unemployed father's constant yelling has undermined his confidence. In spite of parents who can't seem to cope, the three children do, as they forge a friendship and support each other by creating an imaginary, funny world.

Danny, King of the Basement is everything that you want a show for young audiences to be. First off, it's entertaining; speaking to kids in a language they understand, with images they recognize and humour they can relate to. Secondly, it's been put together by top-notch professionals ...But most importantly, it's been written with insight and compassion by David S. Craig around a very important theme: the thin but seemingly uncrossable line that divides the "have's" from the "have-nots" in our society. It's productions like this that the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre For Young People should be putting on its mainstage, not over-upholstered Masterpiece Theatre re-treads like *The Secret*

Garden. Danny, King of the Basement is the real thing.
(Ouzonian)

When Danny's mother loses her new job and admits she has been lying about the whereabouts of his father, Danny runs away. "It is a play about resilience, fear, hope, friendship and the love of a flawed mother" (Greenaway). His thin-ice world of illusion, which included the dream of a reunion with his dad, is shattered. Danny is eventually discovered, by police, half-frozen under a bridge. He is hospitalized and, as he recovers with the help and support of his new friends, the boy finally discovers he belongs somewhere.

In facing up to the very real issue of child poverty and homelessness with honesty and humour, Craig and Roseneath have created a powerful piece of theatre that speaks to all of us. (Coulbourn)

"I'm not proud as a citizen that this is a reality for so many children, but I'm deeply proud of how I communicated the problem in this play" (Craig 11). Audiences in Canada, the USA and Europe have responded to its power. In Montreal, one reviewer noted "And in the end, when the cast took its bow, the standing ovation said it all. *Danny, King of the Basement* is a hit on all counts" (Greenaway). Craig's investigation of "home" and what it means to a child resonates for me. I am reminded of *Salvador* (Calgary International Children's Festival, 1998). An unparalleled production from Le Carrousel Theatre de Quebec, it explored the notion of leaving home and the experience of immigration. Salvador is a bright boy growing up in the Andes, who learns to read at the age of four. His mother wants more for him than the village life of a shoeshine boy and her courage and determination make it possible for him to move abroad to become a writer. A sensitive script by award-winning writer Suzanne Lebeau described the anguish of a boy leaving a mother he would likely never see again. An outstanding set and lighting design evoked the majesty of the sun-baked mountains of Peru, Salvador's beloved homeland. The strength of family ties, the challenge of separation and the

journey into an unknown future were all part of this extraordinary production of *Salvador*.

To my mind, it exemplified everything that is good about theatre for young audiences. Like *Danny King of the Basement*, it was accessible, beautifully scripted and strikingly designed. It was moving, beyond words. *Salvador* opened the 1998 festival and brought our opening night audience to its feet. It is one of the memories I will cherish the most as I reflect upon the transcendent power of theatre to touch people's lives, whether they are sixty years old or only six. Whatever their age, they deserve authentic stories, well told. In a compelling theatre production, contemporary topics can be discussed in imaginative, poignant and thought-provoking ways which are often difficult to duplicate in other forms.

Sometimes, the productions elicit meaningful interpretations that are unexpected. For example, Craig was fully aware that *Danny, King of the Basement* was working on a number of levels. However, he was surprised at the following.

A noted Jungian therapist came to see the play in Toronto and wrote me a letter in which she said "David, I think it's so brave of you to explore the abandoned child"...I thought I was writing about child poverty but she saw the play as being an archetype for the abandoned child. All three of them were abandoned children so what she saw was that I was exploring my own abandoned child because we all have abandoned children as a part of our emotional and psychological makeup. So that's what makes sense from her perspective but it comes into answering this question because I do work from an archetypical level. (Craig 17)

David Craig went on to describe how he created the character of Danny by examining the work of Charles Dickens.

With that play in particular, my sense of reassurance there was that I compared Danny to the Artful Dodger in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. That's what gave me a sense of

being on solid ground. I thought, well, that's safe. I'll just do the character like the Artful Dodger. The character works fabulously well for Dickens and I'll make my Danny a modern version of the Artful Dodger, kinder perhaps, more imaginative in some ways but with the same sense of joie de vivre. (Craig 17)

Drawing on fictional characters does not appeal to Stefo Nantsou. He prefers to work with contemporary subjects.

I am not that interested in fantasy or *Hansel and Gretel*. I know other artists deal with these myths and legends and stories better than me, in film, television, books and theatre. So I prefer to leave all that up to those who feel passionate about it... Reality rather than myth suits me better. I prefer social realism with expressionistic spinouts rather than goblins and fairies... I prefer dealing in contemporary stories, or historical stories with a contemporary resonance. I like reviewing society as it is. On this point I like dealing in things that are "real"...not necessarily "absolutely true", but that have sense of a reality. Even the most stylized of scenes can have a resonance of reality ... or truth.

(Nantsou 12)

The Stones

The gingerbread house world of *Hansel and Gretel* is, indeed, a far cry from the gritty world inhabited by the boys in Zeal Theatre's *The Stones*, (1996), the twenty-fifth production created by this prolific company. The play, co-written and performed by Nantsou and Tom Lycos, is a dramatization of an internationally covered 1994 incident, in which two Australian boys faced manslaughter charges after kicking stones off a

freeway overpass. Their actions killed a passing motorist. A reviewer speaks to the play's power.

Australia's Zeal Theatre has scooped up numerous awards on its home turf for *The Stones* and it's no wonder: this show ranks with the best theatre I've seen and it's a potent experience for adults as well as its target audience...Every beat in this play is engrossing, not only thanks to the fascinating story but because the performers fill it with such relentless energy. (Oliver)

The first half of the play is a funny, fast and anarchic series of events leading up to the fatal accident. The two boys, who are never named in the production and are referred to only as Shy Boy and Yahoo in the script, keep daring each other to take the bigger risk. They break into a garage, try to light a cat on fire and eventually find themselves at the decisive moment on the overpass.

The way funny turns ugly, and high spirits turn dangerous, then tragic, are the engine of this much-awarded show designed for the 10 and up crowd and equally fascinating to adults. And where two mesmerizing actors, Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou take us is the dark wood where moral ambiguity lives. (Nicholls C3-4)

The bullying that leads up to this point is fierce and the audience can feel the pressure Shy Boy is under as he tries to impress the older boy who is pushing him to act. The script, researched with the detective from the actual case, is funny and yet scary, as the impact of bullying and peer pressure intensifies.

As pressure builds on each boy to prove himself, the pranks grow dumber and more dangerous, culminating in kicking boulders on to the cars whizzing below the freeway underpass. A direct hit shatters a windscreen, ends a life,

destroys a family... The comedy that precedes the tragedy only enhances its shattering impact. (Lloyd)

The second half takes a dramatic turn, following the subsequent police investigation, the interrogation, charging and release of the boys on bail, and the trial and verdict.

Nantsou and Lycos switch roles from kids to cops, simply by unzipping their track jackets to reveal shirts and ties, in multiple configurations. They portray all the roles in this hour-long drama...they are an amazing pair. Each can transform himself from a smart-mouthed, thoughtless, asinine twit of a kid to a serious and overworked policeman in no more time than it takes to turn around. (Carter)

The play is wrenching as it examines the guilt that overcomes the young boy after the incident, prior to his arrest.

SHY BOY. I rode my bike halfway to school and got off near the creek and couldn't help it, I cried a lot because I didn't know what to do. I knew I couldn't be normal anymore. I thought about running away. I was at that spot by the river a long time. I got on my bike. I went home and I told Mum, she looked at me, she didn't move much, she kept just looking and being real still, then she said "Get in the car, we're going to be brave and tell the police". I wasn't going to cry now. I wanted to know what was going to happen to me. I never thought I'd ever kill anyone. I'm only thirteen. (15)

What is equally fascinating about *The Stones* is its refusal to turn the incident into a polarized play about right and wrong. It explores the grey areas of the story with an evocative scene in a bar, where the two policemen, Quinn and Russo, argue about the morality of jailing a thirteen-year-old boy.

QUINN. Righto, why don't you and your vigilante mates
go out in the street and hang the two boys, go on,
that's what you want to do, isn't it?

RUSSO. What if it was your father in the car? What if it
was your mother in the car, and she gets a rock
through the chest that kills her and you'll never see
her again? Go on and let them off.

QUINN. And what if it was your ten-year-old girl who was
up there on the bridge and threw the rock? What
would you do then? (27)

In addition to its dramatic intensity, several power struggles permeate *The Stones*, as do themes of self-responsibility and the need to stand up to peer pressure. No simple answers are offered here. Instead, a multitude of questions arise. In my opinion, this ambiguity often makes for excellent theatre.

Theatre artists run a significant risk when creating works about contemporary themes because it is so easy to fall into the didactic trap of telling the kids what their reaction should be, demonstrating the “politically correct” response that is seen as appropriate to a specific topic. For every one of the pieces I selected over eighteen years, I probably saw ten others that patronized their audience by trying to instruct them what to think about a particular subject. These shows wielded a fiery iron of scriptwriting and direction to brand MESSAGE onto the script. If a play was heavy-handed, I rejected it for the festival line-up.

One of our featured artists spoke to this point so beautifully that I included his comment about this topic in the festival programme. Lyle Victor Albert's unsentimental, show, *Scraping the Surface* was about coping with his cerebral palsy as he is entering the minefield of the teen years. “I want to entertain people. If you want to leave a message, you should leave it on an answering machine” (Albert). The theme of diversity was

woven throughout Albert's work without his resorting to moralizing about the subject. This leads us to a discussion of the themes that run throughout the work of the interviewees.

Themes

I asked the interviewees to identify any prevailing or recurring themes and to describe them.

I don't think there is any theme to my work in terms of subject matter or message, but the style of my work I suppose could be described as a theme. People seem to know what to expect of a Tall Stories show – they know that it will be storytelling, that it will be physical and visual and hopefully non-patronizing, innovative and high quality... We don't necessarily aim for our work to be issue based; we don't try to create productions around bullying or drugs, for example. (Jacobs 15)

While Olivia Jacobs has been in the field for eight years, David Craig has been working in TYA for over three decades. As a result, he has had a longer time to consider and identify the themes in his work. He expanded, at some length, on this question and I am deliberately including his answer in its entirety. I believe it is rare, and ultimately valuable, to get such a complete response to a question like this from a Canadian artist at midlife who has dedicated himself to this particular field.

I would say that in the early days perhaps not because I think I was just trying to survive, trying to just give each play a beginning, a middle and end. I don't think I had the kind of control over the medium that I do now. I would say that my overall theme, my vision as an artist, is that we have taken the experiment of individual freedom too far. It has been at the expense of our belonging, our sense of belonging to community. I think we've lost our sense of

community. And as a result, we've become anxiety ridden. We don't know where we belong. We don't belong.

Now the great thing is we can go wherever we want. The community is not holding us back, the way a Mennonite community for instance will hold you back. "You can't do this you can't do that, you have to dress like this, you have to dress like that, you have to think like this, you have to think like that." That is the dark side of community life but those people are happy. . I don't think they have anxiety disorders. I think cancer is...cancer is a disease of rapidly reproducing cells and I think that's what we have: too many opportunities, too many possibilities, and too many choices. I think we've taken it too far. I think we need to move the planet back towards a sense of mutual responsibility and mutual respect.

So in that respect, I think the work of Ibsen is totally outdated because he espoused a kind of individual freedom which I suppose might have been appropriate for people kind of coming out of small towns or villages. Really I suppose it all began in Greece, the notion of the movement towards the individual and there's been peaks and valleys throughout the last two thousand years but right now when I look at the way we're living, the speed at which we're living and our demand for personal freedom, being that I want to be able to watch whatever television program that I want to watch whenever I want to watch it, I want to be able to eat whatever food I want regardless of what season it is or where I am in the world.

I should be able to get strawberries and avocados and asparagus and I'm not saying, you know I'm not saying that I don't want those things. I do want those things. I want them the same as everybody else wants them but I also am beginning to see the cost. So if you look at *Danny, King of the Basement*, it is a story about three kids who make community for themselves because they've been abandoned by their parents. If you look at the story of *Smokescreen*, it is the story of a young man and a father trying to find their way back to community amongst themselves.

And *Dib and Dob and the Journey Home*; in that case it's the metaphor for them being home together, where Dob is wanting to go and find a home outside of his relationship with his brother. In fact where home is ends up being wherever he lives with his brother.

The people working together in *The Book of Miracles* are another example of community. There's another theme and this one came from Robert and I support him completely, this idea that children are growing up alone, that they are not growing up with churches and community centers and play groups. They are not growing up with the same kids all their lives. There isn't the same kind of stability but more important than any of those things, they just don't have their parents present. Their parents are off, busy living and fulfilling their own ambitions. And so there is that abandoned child again. (Craig 22)

All of the themes examined in the works of Craig, Nantsou and Jacobs, in addition to those of Barrie and Reaney, are complex: themes of belonging, loneliness, community, and the justice system.

Issues of crime and punishment tend to dominate a lot of my work for young people. I am also interested in putting on stage characters and people's stories that one would not ordinarily see on television or read about in the papers. There is an invisible society that the networks and print media don't represent very well, if at all. (Nantsou 9)

Other Zeal productions have included *Joyride* (1992) which is a story, told out of sequence, about the night that ends in tragedy when two teenagers steal a car; *A Secret Place* (1998) about drugs and the youth culture; *Mouse* (2000) about bullying at a private school; and *The Forwards* (2001), about binge drinking and sexual abuse in the football culture.

Artists who are creating works for children do not need to shy away from complexity, difficult topics or significant feelings. At a symposium I attended in Korea in 2001, I heard the acclaimed Swedish director Suzanne Osten speak to this point. I do not have a text of her speech but this quote is from my own notes.

There is nothing that you cannot present to children.
Because there is nothing that is worse than the dilemmas
that they face. Loss, fear, joy, despair, birth, death, longing.
(Osten, Suzanne, ASSITEJ conference, 2001)

Ms. Osten's opinion was echoed in my interview with David Craig.

I don't find children any less capable of exploring deep human feeling. They don't have the same life experiences that adults do but they have the same and perhaps even stronger, emotional responses, feelings of abandonment, feelings of isolation, feelings of joy, feelings of hurt. They

feel all of these things so much more than adults and I find this very, very exciting. (Craig 13)

The topics that can be explored in theatre for children can cover the vast landscape of human experience. As J.M. Barrie and James Reaney discovered, children have the capacity to make the leap to understanding large issues and to respond with deep feeling. American playwright Jonathan Levy wrote:

Their emotions run as deep as ours do: to the bottom. Children have less experience than we have, but they remember it better. What's more, their imaginations are less programmed than ours and their skins are less thick. They can, I am convinced be reached by a play on its deepest level of recognition. And when they are, they can be changed by it, as I doubt we adults any longer can...it can become for a child the prototype, the first formulated instance of some profound human condition. As such, it can become a part of his very deepest experience, and remain a point of reference in his later life.
(Doolittle/Barnieh 65)

To create works with that kind of resonance is a tall order. Since the primary requirement must be an effective play, I wondered if it was possible to develop a list of attributes for an effective play for young audiences. Although such a list would be subjective, it could provide a helpful tool for TYA artists.

Key Elements

To define what constitutes a good TYA play is obviously an elusive task. In order to compile a manageable list, I asked each interviewee to identify only three key elements essential to a successful work for young audiences.

On the basis of their answers, the list will be included in point form in Chapter Four, the conclusion of this thesis. Olivia Jacobs kept her answer brief.

Oh, I have changed these words a million times. But when it comes down to it everything I write is probably a variation on the below. Successful work for young audiences needs to be high quality, imaginative and entertaining. (Jacobs 26)

The first part of Stefo Nantsou's answer is perfectly in line with his approach in *The Stones*. Although he is dealing with painful and violent issues in the play, the script is often very funny.

I favour the use of humour. Good humour makes for powerful drama. An audience will always enjoy a good laugh. They may not "enjoy" a good cry or an uncomfortable tense moment, but a good belly laugh is the best medicine. (Nantsou 26)

Humour is one element used effectively in *The Stones*. A more integral element in this production, I would argue, is its use of music. As the audience enters, the two performers are already pre-set in the theatre, jamming on electric guitars. The atmosphere is immediately set for a hip and current story as the performers, who are both excellent musicians, groove to the music with the kids. By the time the production begins, the performers have already won over this tough age group of junior high students. The students are now ready to pay attention to *The Stones*.

Without the entry point of the electric guitar music, I think this material would be heavy going for a young, restless audience. Instead, they sit on the edges of their seats for this gripping production. Stefo Nantsou describes this approach as being very deliberate and that it is "the Zeal Theatre way" to demystify the theatre for kids. When the audience enters and easily accepts two guys playing electric guitars, any barrier between artists and audience vanishes and there is never any hint of patronizing young people. The respect Nantsou and Lycos have for their audience is demonstrated every time that they do that pre-show. It is reflected here in the final part of Nantsou's answer.

Next would be communicating with an audience on an equal level. That the actor is not some mysterious figure who may or may not have been on a television show...but that the actor is another human being who has a story to tell, and hopefully a teenager may be inspired enough to feel that they are an equal of the actor, rather than the actor being of "higher status" simply because they 'tread the boards'. (Nantsou 27)

David Craig addressed one of the problems faced by many presenters and festival programmers in Canada. In order to control costs, schools demand productions that are suitable for the entire elementary school population. This stipulation often creates unmanageable situations for the artists.

The play has to be appropriate to the age of the audience. Children go through so many developmental stages that there is no play that can be performed successfully from kindergarten through Grade Six, and in this country we are all too often forced into that uncomfortable compromise. (Craig 28)

Talking down to children is an easy solution in a lot of theatre pieces. Over the years, I have seen too many examples of this kind of shallow, condescending work. Particularly in the USA, many theatre artists seem to think that all children want are cartoons. Since I represented Canada for six years on the selection committee for the International Showcase of Theatre for Young People, (1995-2001), it is possible that I hold the Canadian record for watching the largest number of TYA audition videotapes. The Showcase is an annual event attended by hundreds of international producers and programmers looking for TYA works to fill their seasons. I was delighted, for example, to recommend an international showcase for Tall Stories, after presenting their North American premiere. Mr. Craig refers in the quote above to the type of mediocre TYA work we saw far too often, obviously created under the assumption that children lack the

same emotional depth as adults. Additionally, he makes some suggestions that he has found helpful for the genre.

The second is emotional integrity. Many plays for children do not acknowledge the depths of feeling that children experience and do not reflect it. You have to go deeper than you think. You have to challenge yourself to dig...deeper into your own self, into your own experiences. You have to see that this is not a play just for children. It's a play for you. It's a play for adults. It's a play for everybody. It's just that you have constructed it in such a way that it's simple enough that children will also be able to appreciate it. Finally, that there are certain things, distinct things within the genre of children's theatre. One of them would be no undue use of irony, another that children are generally very narrative oriented. They don't have any interest in dwelling on a moment, or languishing in... poignant silences, which may be terribly filled with meaning. They love to know what happens next. (Craig 28)

I think David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou have provided a substantial list of key elements and I would suggest two more items. When I was programming the festival, there were three fundamentals that I always looked for and I think two of them could be added to the list. First, I sought what I describe as a lightness, a certain subtlety that I saw as a sign of respect for the intelligence of the young audience. That element clearly evident in *The Gruffalo* and *Danny, King of the Basement*.

Secondly, I always looked for a safe entry point into the subject matter. For example, the electric guitar playing was a safe entry point for *The Stones*. The blue facecloth was a safe entry point for *Who's Afraid of...?* Both these elements were the result of specific artistic decisions by the company that made their audiences feel comfortable before they entered into challenging material. (Lastly, I looked for strong

production values. Due to the fact that the festival takes place in superb theatrical venues, I felt it was important to select pieces that used the resources of the facility fully so that children could have as rich a theatrical experience as possible. This final element was specific to the festival and is not pertinent to the list.)

All these elements simply help us to tell the all-important story which writer Christina Baldwin describes as being crucial to humanity.

Life hangs on a narrative thread. This thread is a braid of stories that inform us about who we are, where we come from and where we might go. The thread is slender but strong: we trust it to hold us as we swing over the edge of the known into the future we dream in words. (Baldwin 3)

Values

As we swing out over the edge, we trust the teller of the story, the creator of the work, the performer on the stage. Such trust is our safety net and I wanted to know about the values of the artists that we hand it to so willingly. The values underlying their stories are often difficult to identify. Even when we do work that we love, it can be a challenge to articulate our reasons.

I wondered what underlying values the interviewees might share. When their responses varied so widely, I realized that “values” is a rather loaded term. Although my question also included the words purpose and intention, the interviewees focused on “values.” It is a word which is, perhaps, interpreted differently in various parts of the world.

While Stefo Nantsou assumed I was looking for what is important to him as an artist, Olivia Jacobs thought I was referring to the “morals of the story” children might take away from her work. In my opinion, despite some confusion over the term, all the interpretations of my question yielded such intelligent answers, they speak for themselves.

I value open and honest communication, rather than
“talking down” to young people. I want audiences to feel

and think differently about certain things in society after seeing one of my shows. I would hope that my work could create a platform where audiences might see another point of view, one where the individual is seen as part of a community, and therefore a valuable member of a community, rather than just individual consumers, which is what the media wants from its audience.

I value the presentation of characters and their lives in the context of an egalitarian community, or at least showing the individual in the context of a broader community perspective. I also feel that when I show up to a school, the performance has begun. I “value” being invited to someone's school or festival and theatre and I “value” being seen as a “responsible” and “respectable” member of a community. I would hope I can influence others, whether on stage or in the audience to be 'responsible' and 'respectable' members of their community. Perhaps this is how a better world can be created, one where race and colour or social status are not hindrances to achieving your dreams, where equality is more important than consumerism. (Nantsou 13)

Olivia Jacobs reflected more on the value of creation than any particular value that she chose to emphasize in her work.

I can't even think about “values” in the sense of imparting messages or morals or solutions to issue based problems – that's really not what Tall Stories is about. I suppose our values are about creating work that will inspire a new generation of theatregoers and theatre makers – about

releasing the imagination – about creating something out of nothing – and doing it well. (Jacobs 18)

To suggest the creators of TYA are building the audience of tomorrow is provocative. When I ran the festival, I was often asked to use that particular argument in order to raise funds. The festival operates in a multi-theatre performing arts centre and, as such, requires a large operating budget. According to our advisers, I needed to convince corporate sponsors of the necessity to fund the festival in order for children to grow up to subscribe to the symphony and the resident theatre companies. We could, then, be seen as a valuable recruitment program for the adult companies, who were invariably considered to be much more important than any organization devoted only to children. This approach would be considered a good, conservative investment all around.

I always rejected this particular point, arguing, as David Craig does here, that children deserve to have their own experience of theatre, regardless of who they would become as adults.

I'm not interested in teaching them about theatre. I'm interested in them experiencing theatre. I'm not interested in creating audiences of the future. I'm interested in fulfilling the needs of the audience as they are... My purpose with children has been, I think, to try to hold a mirror up to them. I wanted them to see aspects of their lives, aspects of their feelings acted out onstage. When I've succeeded at that, they've been very, very attentive because they've seen this was something that was made for them and they really appreciate it because much of what they consume is not made for them. It is made for what we think they are or what we hope they are or what we intend them to be, but not who they actually are. (Craig 23)

By respecting their young audiences for who they are right now, David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou are creating works that speak directly to children and teenagers about issues of concern to them.

Some people understandably try to protect their children from having to face anything difficult. They want to preserve the innocence of the childhood years. What they fail to recognize is that children are already in the arena, facing huge issues such as loneliness, racism, fear, violence and peer pressure. As artists, Craig, Jacobs and Nantsou enter that arena and help children to deal with its complexities. Accordingly, their plays provide working examples of how powerful TYA can be in the lives of young people.

This chapter has explored the work of the three writer/directors and the critical reaction to it. *The Gruffalo* looks at fear. *Danny King of the Basement* explores homelessness and poverty and, according to at least one expert, the abandoned child. *The Stones* examines bullying, violence and issues of criminal justice. The discussion of the plays is significant to this thesis because it exemplifies the motherlode of material available to artists devoted to TYA. Their subject matter can cover a vast topography of topics.

By digging into the values that underlie the work, we have arrived at a better thematic sense of what motivates artists to produce these plays. One of the hallmarks of postmodern culture is the breakdown of the nuclear family. David Craig addresses this issue with the single parent family in *Danny, King of the Basement* and later, in his discussion of his work, when he reiterates the need for today's children to find community wherever they can. Olivia Jacobs finds wisdom in classic stories that resonate for today's children by illuminating the heroic journey of Mouse in *The Gruffalo* and by confronting the issues of divorce and step-parents in *Mum and the Monster*. Stefo Nantsou's and Tom Lycos's *The Stones* concerns issues of crime but it also raises multi-leveled questions about the provocative arguments for both innocence and guilt.

As we move into the next and final chapter, we will identify what compels artists such as David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou to work in a field that provides them with the opportunity to create works such as these.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MESA

CONCLUSIONS

*Another world is not only possible. She is on her way. And on a quiet day,
if you really listen, you can hear her breathing.*

– Arundhati Roy

In surveying this landscape of creation, I have spent the past several months scraping through the layers and digging into the narrative strata of ideas presented by David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou. I have tried to place them into historical context by looking at the work of J.M.Barrie and James Reaney.

With all of the materials explored, I can climb the mesa of our combined experience. The mesa, defined as an isolated flat-topped hill with steep sides, found in landscapes with horizontal strata, is where I can now draft a map through this landscape (Oxford 906). This chapter will answer my thesis question, offer some reflections on the journey, make suggestions and help me to scan the horizon for a look to the future.

Thesis Question

My thesis question was “What motivates an artist to specialize in theatre for young audiences?” My research shows that they may be motivated to specialize in TYA for the following reasons:

Artists who specialize in TYA have an independent streak. They choose to work outside traditional theatre structures. They prefer the autonomy of forming their own companies in order to have control over their artistic output. They work outside of the mainstream, creating the shows they choose, whenever they choose. They do not want to have content, scheduling or budgets dictated by others.

Even within these companies, they like to work collaboratively. They reject the confines of a hierarchy. The number of creative partnerships I encountered was

intriguing. Two of the interviewees have each worked with one writing/performing partner for years and one has worked with a producing partner for years. All these working situations are egalitarian and demonstrate a refreshing lack of ego by artistic directors in the workplace. I base this opinion on my own experience of working in Canadian regional theatres, where the artistic director is often elevated to a decision-making pedestal that makes the opinions of other company members irrelevant.

Each of the interviewees display a steady artistic confidence which is leavened with respect for their working partners. Nourishing each other creatively, the partners provide immediate feedback, suggestions and perspective. "I've learned to be more sparing with text and he [Toby Mitchell] has learned more about physicality and making visual pictures. Every year our artistic process becomes more combined" (Jacobs 17). "What I brought to our writing partnership was comedy...and what [Robert] brought to it was a desire and a willingness to go into the shadows, to go into the darkness, to make people cry" (Craig 16).

These artists prefer the challenge of playing to an audience that provides honest, unpretentious responses. The reactions they receive from young people are immediate and imbued with a potency that is missing in far too many adult audiences. "If an adult sees bad acting, they may lie and tell others how good it was, depending on what others think, what is ...trendy or what a reviewer tells them to think" (Nantsou 19).

They are sometimes able to examine issues from their personal lives in their work. "For me, there has to be a personal connection to the material. There has to be something about it that is touching me in my life" (Craig 16).

Unlike Barrie and Reaney before them, they are not using children and their ideas for research as a way to make theatre for adults. They are motivated to create theatre for and about children. They make works that validate the feelings of children and they find artistic satisfaction in doing so. "My purpose...has been to hold a mirror up to them. I wanted them to see aspects of their feelings acted out onstage" (Craig 23).

They are idealistic and confident that their work can make a difference. They speak freely about building a better world and the satisfaction that comes from trying to

create one. “Perhaps this is how a better world can be created, one where race and colour or social status are not hindrances to achieving your dreams” (Nantsou 13).

They feel that children have the same emotional depth as adults and that their work for this audience can be equally meaningful and powerful. They respect young audiences and see childhood as a “huge reservoir of dramatic incident and situation” (Craig 19). This “reservoir” holds an endless amount of material that can be transformed into content for works onstage.

They enjoy the gratitude that is expressed when they tackle a difficult subject. The feedback can be in the form of “grateful letters from others, thanking us for providing them with a way to talk to their child about something they were going through” (Jacobs 3).

TYA provides the artists with the opportunity to work at a high conceptual level. They are not working with existing materials but creating their own original works. “What we tried to do was explore aggression, particularly male aggression, through schoolyard games as a metaphor for global conflict”(Craig 10).

They can be leaders, not followers. Unlike the artists who file into a regional theatre rehearsal hall to begin work on a play that has been performed dozens of times, they are originators whose starting point may be nothing but an idea. They “enjoy making something from nothing. And doing it well” (Jacobs 18).

They have managed to avoid being pigeonholed into one aspect of theatre. Stefo Nantsou and David Craig both write, direct, produce and perform. Olivia Jacobs does all of these, except perform. Although adult theatre may provide similar options, TYA often provides this kind of opportunity for young artists starting out. Right out of theatre school, David Craig described his first experience of TYA. “Instead of just being hired to pick up a script, learn the lines and do the text analysis, we were creating something new...so I was drawn, from a very early age, to be involved in all levels of the creation of a play” (Craig 5).

TYA provides these artists with opportunities to travel and present their work internationally. This is the result of economies of scale. Whereas productions for adults are often too expensive and cumbersome to tour, TYA productions are generally small

and portable enough to travel. International festivals give TYA artists unique opportunities to meet and exchange ideas, which sometimes lead to collaborations. For example, Zeal Theatre, has worked with companies in numerous countries, including Canada, who chose to offer their own production of *The Stones*.

Whereas it would possibly be more difficult to have their own work produced as frequently if they were creating for adults, TYA gives them ample chances to have their own plays done. "I've never had a play that hasn't been produced. I've created a world for myself in which that wouldn't happen" (Craig 22).

They are attracted to what I would identify as a certain discipline to economize artistically. They take a large story or concept and distill it into its simplest terms so that it can be understood by the young audience. The stories they share are as important and engaging as those for people of any age but must be performed with the utmost simplicity. To do this, the artists must be disciplined about what they are trying to say, avoiding anything extraneous. "It may be that all you need are two sticks and a box. It's how you use them that makes the difference"(Jacobs 16).

TYA provides artists with the opportunity to work in a wide variety of theatrical styles. "If you were to line up ten of the top TYA plays in a given year, you would probably find a vast range of style and it would be a much larger range of style than you would find if you lined up a season of plays at a regional theatre" (Craig 10). Their TYA shows can range from including puppetry to mask to movement, from full- scale productions to simple storytelling.

Some find satisfaction in the physical work involved. "...it's monastic in its simplicity and rigour ...I found the effort involved in setting up the sets... loading in loading out, satisfying. I like working hard"(Craig 30).

Others find that TYA provides them with an opportunity to make their politics come alive. "This also suited me fine as a young lefty actor/writer, this thought that one could do powerful plays for young audiences with an aim at challenging right-wing dominant media content" (Nantsou 2).

Although school touring can be difficult, it offers a guaranteed audience base that is difficult to duplicate in adult theatre. The companies, which they lead, each play to a

full house on arrival at a school. "I was playing for six hundred people a day. Why trade that to perform to sixty-three adults in some drafty place in the evening?"(Craig 7).

They are process-oriented. They receive satisfaction from working on the building blocks for each play, doing the research, holding the workshops, writing, casting and directing the rehearsals. They enjoy each phase necessary to bring their work to the stage. "The experience of being an artist in the present moment...is what has given me the most satisfaction...it's the process"(Craig 21).

TYA provides them with certain parameters that force them to make their work very specific and clear. For starters, the plays have to run under an hour, have a small cast and be portable. "These limitations have been enormous but they have powered me creatively...I think otherwise I would have been, as many artists are, faced with too many choices" (Craig 23).

When all is said and done, they are also motivated to specialize in TYA because they love the work, as exemplified by the following excerpts from their interviews.

The work itself is not challenging, the work is too inspiring
and too much fun to be challenging. (Nantsou 22)

I had a particular sympathy for children. I don't know why
I do...I find them fascinating. (Craig 30)

It is...hugely rewarding...what might make me want to
abandon it? Not that much, to be honest. (Jacobs 29)

To conclude, among the reasons that artists may be motivated to specialize in TYA are that they can be independent of traditional theatre structures, work collaboratively in creative partnerships, play to audiences who provide honest feedback, work at a high conceptual level, have fun, travel and exchange ideas with international colleagues, explore the full range of dramatic incident /situation, and maintain their ideals while being disciplined about how to distill complex stories into accessible productions.

Reflections

As I deliberated on these motivations, I was encouraged to add insights of my own. After all, I spent twenty-seven years working in TYA as a producer, playwright and administrator. What motivated me?

It was a combination of idealism and a search for excellence. I wanted to do work that I found inspiring. I have tremendous respect for the capacity and curiosity of the young audience. I reflected back on the challenge of selecting productions for the festival. Every year, we had over six hundred applications for sixteen production slots. I looked back through my festival files to see if I had ever tried to articulate my reasons for being there. The academic in me needed to substantiate every opinion on the thesis question, even my own. In several interviews, I talked about knowing I had found a special show when the hair on the back of my neck stood up and there were far too many photos of me wearing a red clown nose. However, I think this quote, with help from Pablo Casals, captures my motivation. It is from my own message on the occasion of our tenth anniversary, (CICF Programme 1996):

Spend May 21-26 with us as we honour ten glorious years of championing the power and intelligence of children. It's hard to believe but my twelve-year-old daughter was only two when the Festival began. The priorities I have as a producer reflect the ones I have as a mother. Like every parent, I want the very best for Gemma. I want her to know that the world is wide and that her life is filled with limitless choices. The Festival is ideally placed to illuminate this for every child. Each programming decision made here is grounded in tremendous respect for the young audience and their abundant futures. Pablo Casals put it best "In all of the world, there is no other child like you, In the millions of years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. And look at your body! What a wonder it is. Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers,

the way you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything.” Come to a festival that personifies the belief that each and every child can change the world. (James 2)

I remember having that quote on my office wall for years. How could I be anything but inspired by Casals’s words? I waded through every application and trudged off to see as many of the productions as I could, in order to find the very best works to bring to Canada. I wanted to inspire children, to show them greatness. I sat through more bad productions than I care to remember. I was motivated to find the best because I wanted nothing less for my own daughter.

I was looking for the best artists in the field of TYA and I was lucky enough to find many of them. They are what motivated me. Isaac Newton once wrote: “If I have seen a little further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”(Newton) I have often thought of those words, throughout this look at the landscape of endlessly interesting material about TYA.

This thesis has given me insights into some of those giants. With a view to encouraging excellence in TYA, I felt it would have been remiss of me not to ask them to contribute to the following.

Touchstone: Suggested Guidelines for a TYA Production

According to the Oxford dictionary, a touchstone is that “that which serves to test or try the genuineness or value of anything” (Oxford 187). The following list comprises the elements of an effective TYA production suggested by David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou. It is embellished with input from me, added after synthesizing all the research and reflecting on my own experience. It is, of course, highly subjective, but it is framed with the input of three experienced writer/directors and one producer. Between us, we have over seven decades of experience in TYA. Since we have each seen countless shows succeed and countless others fail, this list may serve to map out a guideline, a touchstone of sorts for practitioners.

The key elements for an effective TYA production are that it should:

1. Not condescend to the audience but treat them with respect. They are fully rounded individuals. They have their whole lives in front of them and they are listening.
2. Be impeccable with text. What you say matters.
3. Be of high quality in text, design, casting and production values. Don't scrimp just because your audience happens to be short.
4. Be imaginative. Look around for sources of material. Use current events, fables, myths, archetypes. Don't be afraid to use material from your own lives.
5. Contain humour.
6. Be appropriate to the age of the audience. Remember your four-year -old self. Compare him/her to your thirteen-year-old self. Honour that difference.
7. Be entertaining.
8. Have a safe entry point into the material. Offer something familiar so that when you introduce the unfamiliar, your audience will be there, right beside you. They will be ready to take the ride because you made sure they have their seat belts on.
9. Avoid irony. The young audience just hasn't lived long enough to "get it."
10. Be narrative oriented. Avoid poignant silences. Let them know what happens next.
11. Possess a certain lightness that demonstrates respect for their intelligence by avoiding overt messages. Don't brand "message" onto your work.
12. Have emotional integrity. Delve deeper into feelings than you think. Go deeper into yourself. Inspire them with big ideas, big experiences.
13. Take risks. Take lots of them.

A Map to the Future

I reflect back upon many discussions about productions that took place at the Calgary International Children's Festival Colloque. This was an annual discussion that was attended by artists, the public and a large number of theatre students. Always eager to encourage young artists to consider TYA work, I often asked the professionals at the

Colloque what advice they would provide to students who may be considering work in this field. With a view to hearing from potential role models, I asked my three interviewees the same question: If you were facing a room filled with artists willing to consider becoming practitioners in TYA, what advice would you give them?

I would have to say that you had better be good at it. If not, then do mainstage stuff because most of them are hopeless and most of that work I consider terrible... Attitude is 90 percent. The skill is the ten on top. You need an attitude that does not belittle a young audience who will smell that like a dog smells fear, and a teenage audience will hate you for it. This only makes my job harder the next time I go into a school to set up. Let me draw a distinction here between teenage audiences and under tens. A child of six will be happy enough with a finger wagging over the top of a backdrop. They may find it funny, amusing, comical, and hunger for more. A fourteen year old would rather bite the finger than smile at it. So that finger had better be good, or forget it and get a real job. And don't use TYA as a stepping stone, just for a job, the bottom of the ladder, hoping to climb higher. That just isn't the right attitude. And the results will be obvious. (Nantsou 19)

Olivia Jacobs was concise and wise in her response to this question.

Stop thinking about making theatre for young audiences – it immediately sets you apart from “them”. Think about telling great stories brilliantly. (Jacobs 22)

Naturally, I had to have at least one of the interviewees challenge the final question.

What advice would I give them? You know, I would challenge the question. It's not so much what I would tell

them because I think they would need ... to have it inside of them. It would be a calling, I suppose. So I would test that calling ... my first reaction is to say don't do it...the reason I would say that is because I want ... to test their calling...They need to convince me that...they really want to do this... because they love it, because they think it's great, because they think it's fun, because they think it's creative, because they think it's exciting, because they have respect for their audience and for themselves...and if they truly can say that and if they can make the financial sacrifices that are necessary, then fine. ...It's more that I would want to see what was already there, what they had inside. I have one person working with us now who I think might be one. I haven't told him anything. All I am going to do is give him opportunities and see whether he rises to the challenge. I was given opportunities and I made the most of them. (Craig 40)

Clearly, David Craig, Olivia Jacobs and Stefo Nantsou possess that calling and they have all made the most of their opportunities. Their passion and commitment to the field has been and continues to be significant. These are gifted, thoughtful and gutsy artists who would most likely succeed at any form of theatre they selected. The fact they are devoting much of their creative lives to TYA work is providing young audiences around the world with unique plays which are thought-provoking, original and created just for them.

We used to say... that we produced feasts, not fast food.

We wanted our plays to engage on multiple levels. We wanted to take these multiple layers of meaning and render them into something, which is simple but not simplistic.

This has always been and will always be as challenging an artistic endeavour as anything for adults. (Craig 27)

Young audiences are no less intelligent or capable of feeling than adults. They have just not lived as long. The challenging works these artists create for children is respectful, compelling, and often, extremely beautiful. The material they continue to tackle, in their plays, include the challenges that affect children in an increasingly confusing and complex world-issues such as violence, loneliness, divorce, fear, poverty, loss and alienation. I believe it is precisely in the realm of works for children that an exploration of these difficult issues belongs. Childhood is when we dream our biggest dreams but it is also when we wrestle with our demons and learn to face our fears. It is a time when we define and learn the strategies we will draw upon for our whole lives.

To characterize productions for children as inferior, simply due to the age of their audience, is to dismiss a rich vein of theatrical literature filled with meaning for people of all ages. When plays for young audiences touch us, they can be imbued with so much honesty that they quietly speak to the children we once were. “What is astonishing about Reaney’s production is the sense of play, of freedom, of creation before one’s eyes” (Macpherson 10). If we allow ourselves to witness “creation before our eyes” and listen very carefully, we can hear the distant echo of what it was like to play.

A door swings opens to that childlike part of ourselves that can be spellbound. If we allow ourselves to listen, age becomes irrelevant. There exists in TYA a directness and simplicity that I often find lacking in theatrical work for adults. When we connect with the child inside, we touch the very best part of ourselves.

As I consider the future horizon from this mesa of research, I see a vast plain of tremendous promise for TYA. It will flourish, but only with support for new and emerging artists. They might need a map, at least when they are first starting out on their journey and they will most certainly need encouragement. I maintain that the most important direction is for universities and theatre schools to encourage the best and brightest theatre students to consider the field of TYA. This is important work and it must be valued highly as a career path. Young audiences should consistently have the work of brilliant writers, accomplished designers, innovative directors and riveting actors. They deserve nothing less.

Artists such as David Craig, Stefo Nantsou and Olivia Jacobs are leading the way into an abundant landscape, ripe with possibilities and brimming with ideas. My hope is for them to cultivate such rich fertile ground along the way that new and emerging artists will have no choice but to follow them.

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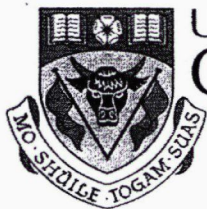
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Appendix A: Ethics Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS REVIEW

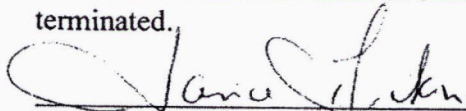
This is to certify that the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary has examined the following research proposal and found the proposed research involving human subjects to be in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on *"Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects"*. This form and accompanying letter constitute the Certification of Institutional Ethics Review.

File no: 4315
 Applicant(s): Joanne James
 Department: Drama
 Project Title: Perspectives on the Creation of Theatre for Young Audiences
 Sponsor (if applicable):

Restrictions:

This Certification is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the project and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modifications to the authorized protocol must be submitted to the Chair, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board for approval.
3. A progress report must be submitted 12 months from the date of this Certification, and should provide the expected completion date for the project.
4. Written notification must be sent to the Board when the project is complete or terminated.


 Janice Dickin, Ph.D, LLB,
 Chair
 Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

2005/03/30

Date:

Distribution: (1) Applicant, (2) Supervisor (if applicable), (3) Chair, Department/Faculty Research Ethics Committee, (4) Sponsor, (5) Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (6) Research Services.

Appendix B Interview Questions

1. What brought you to theatre for young audiences in the first place? Was there something in your own childhood that made you want to create work for children or was this a decision that came after you began your professional career? What was it that intrigued you?
2. In your opinion, what is the best aspect of working with young audiences? What is its deepest reward in terms of artistic satisfaction? For example, is it the ability to make a difference? The audience response? The questions that the children ask after the performance?
3. Young audiences are known for their ability to take imaginative leaps. How does your work differ in approach (ie., text, direction, performance, use of metaphor) from working with adult audiences? What kinds of things have you been able to do for children that you would be unable or unwilling to do for adults? Can you provide some examples?
4. What stories do you find important to tell? Why?
5. Where do you find your source material?
6. Have you worked with your own dreams in your creative work? What about myths, fables?
7. Who have been your greatest influences? Why?
8. Has there been an ongoing theme to your work? If so, can you describe it?
9. What has been your most important achievement in this work? By this, I don't necessarily mean the one that has brought you the most recognition but the one that has had the most meaning for you as an artist.
10. What has been your biggest challenge in this work?
11. In terms of values, what do you think are the most important ones that your work has tried to impart? What purpose or intention do you have when creating a work for young audiences?
12. What are the three key elements that you would identify as being essential to a successful work for young audiences? In this context, components could be as varied as humour, familiarity with the story, avoidance of "talking down" to an audience, action.

13. The world of TYA is often thankless in terms of media recognition, monetary rewards. What is it about this kind of theatre work that compels you to continue creating it? On the flip side, what is it about this kind of work that might make you want to abandon it?

14. Have you had any turning points in your creative life that have influenced your work?

15. If you were facing a room filled with artists willing to consider becoming practitioners in theatre for young audiences, what advice would you give them?