**Theatre for the Young Child**

Drama is concerned with activities in which children participate. It is now time to consider the value of theatre—theatre for the child, which takes the child as a spectator and with theatre by the child, which treats the child as a performer. What roles do these two activities have in the education of the young child?

Theatre is an adult communication form, involving the simultaneous operation of several sets of symbolic language. How does the child relate to it? It seems that at the stage 7-12, the child, through application and systematic instruction, begins to acquire mastery of skills. This is the best time for creative drama, exposure to theatre, and can learn to use the language of adult theatre.

Significantly, in traditional Indian thought, seven has been designated as the age at which the child begins systematic application to the language and systems of adult thought. This process is not considered complete till the age of 16. “Branmacharya”, or the stage of learning, initiation and study, extends, from about age seven to about age 16. This almost exactly reflects the pattern described by the modern theorists of child development. But what of the child before seven?

**The Child as Spectator**

Theatre is a powerful tool of symbolic communication. It is also a wonderful introduction to the literature and ruch cultural tradition of our country. Some exposure to it is desirable even at a young age. But it is a complex art form and may not be easily understood by difficult. Besides, there are many theatrical “conventions” to be understood and Indian performing arts are rich in a variety of forms and styles. So the young child may find theatre bewildering, confusing and incomprehensible.

The span of attention at this stage of childhood is short. The young child may become restless, bored and tired by long exposure, and often mat go to sleep in the midst of a performance. The three or four-year-old may also become frightened, if the show contains masks, unfamiliar appearances, and loud noises. If the child is seated far away from the stage, he may feel overpowered. Familiarity with te forms is attained by repeated exposure, but it should be done for short periods and in a context that makes the child feel safe and comfortable.

Theatre is best experienced by the young child with the family. The child can sit in an adult’s lap, ask questions, sleep, go away and take in as much as he is capable of at the time. A visity to a theatrical performance by a group of preschool children accompanied by the teachers may be less desirable or feasible. Of course, children love and enjoy short performances by magicians, acrobats, jugglers, dancers, animal trainers and other entertainers who are commonly found in fairs and festivals, and as roving street performers.

In some parts of the country, there may some times be special performances of plays for children. The Children’s Little Theatre, with branches in the major cities of India, Sudha Karmarkar’s children’s theatre troupe in Bombay which also tours Maharashtra, and Mehr Contractor’s puppet group in Ahmedabad perform theatre both by and for children. Theatre groups around the country now occasionally perform special children’s shows, or run theatre workshops for children. Most of these activities are intended for the older child, but the younger ones can benefit by them too.

There are fewer instances of children’s theatre in rural areas, the most outstanding example being the Children’s Theatre Wing of the Theatre Village in Karnataka, run by leading theatre personalities. Rural theatre ventures too mostly aim at the older child.

A performance for children should be introduced and followed up by discussion to enable them to get the most out of it. The teacher may tell the story in advance to the children, or, it it is a story they already know, she may remind them about it just before the show, and ensure afterwards that children have followed the story. Opportunities should also be found for the children to act out what they have seen.

For young children, classroom performances are best, because they can be geared to their interests and capabilities. Puppet show, especially if they allow the children to become familiar with the characters are good, and so are performances by travelling entertainers like acrobats, magicians and dancers.

In urban areas, today, it is likely that many children are exposed to movies, and in some places, even to television. What has been said about theatre holds good of these media also. To a certain extent, exposure is worthwhile; but mass media are not the most important medium of learning at this stage.

**The child as Performer**

The young child at this stage does not act to impress others, but for his own enjoyment, and, as the teacher can see, for his own development and learning. Yet time and again children are made to climb on to a stage and take part mechanically, in a show, for the sake of the spectators, usually parents. Should children be made to take part in such performance? What is the value of such shows? What are the positive and negative consequences for children?

The primary value of theatrical performance by very young children in a nursery school, balwadi or other pre-school centre is for adults. For the parents, is is a matter of pride and joy to see their children performing on the stage, giving living proof of their talents and abilities. It is usually the best way to bring the parents to the school. For the teacher, it is often seen as a proof that she has been teaching the children and performance by the children at the “parents day” plays a very important role in the total programme of the institution. It cannot just be ignored or abolished.

What about the positive and negative effects on children? On the positive side, some social training is definitely given in the course of preparation. The children learn to wait, to take turns, to get dressed up, to be patient, to work together, to cooperate, and to be disciplined. This kind of training, through participation in a team project spread out over a long period and involving coordination of a variety of complex tasks, is best given to an older age group. Often the preparation time, the waiting time, the type of discipline enforced and its demands on children are too much for the young child.

There are other negative effects also. Constant prepetition during preparation may make the child bored, restless, and lose concentration; the subject matter may be inappropriate for young children to act; they may become physically tired out by the strain.

Even more serious are the consequences of the selection and completion that usually appear in such programmes. Instead of all participating, only a chosen few are given a chance. Some children get many chances to perform, while others are left out. Some are given prominence and praise, while others are neglected. Not only are the best-looking, the most vocal and the most aggressive selected but the shy, the quiet and the diffident, who need the most chances to participate, do not get an opportunity at all! So the most self-confident become still more self-confident, while the weak become weaker. Comparisons are made and competition instead of cooperation is encouraged. The social values encouraged to far are counteracted.

Does this mean the there should be no more “annual days” – or performances by children? Not at all. If the teacher has arranged enough drama activities throughout the year, there is no harm in allowing children to take part occasionally in such a show. The danger is only if the show becomes all important, the main objective and the purpose for which all drama activities are arranged, and if the teacher is not watchful to guard against pitfalls. The “annual day” serves a very important purpose, and cannot be got rid of. But it should be balanced by providing enough of other things, and by involving as many children as possible in it. A useful strategy is to provide many informal occasions during the year for parents to observe the work of their children. In this way, the children’s performance will get the attention it deserves, while the formal show will not receive undue emphasis.