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# The Play's The Thing Or Is It?

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## **Curtain Up!**

John Inman, Heinemann, 0 434 94380 0, £4.50

## **Let's Make a Play!**

Monika Laimgruber. Julia MacRae. 0 86203 082 X. £3.95

## **Make Your Own Theatre**

Peter K. Alfaenger, Blackie, 0 216 91085 4, £5.95

## **Let's start with a story.**

Once upon a time when the modern curriculum was very young, there was an extra and special activity called The School Play. This tended to win friends and influence people by spreading light amongst the performers and sweetness throughout the catchment area. In short, it was a Good Thing. Then came Child Drama. Thanks to Peter Slade, Brian Way, Dorothy Heathcote et al we began to realise not merely that the Play wasn't in fact the Thing, it wasn't even Good. On the contrary, it made enemies and repelled people by spreading sourness throughout the catchment area and darkness amongst the performers. Overnight - give or take a decade or two - Theatre was *out* and Therapy was *in*. And we all began to live happily ever after.

Of course, in thus summarising the origins and advance of Educational Drama I'm exaggerating ... slightly. What's certain is that without the luminous pioneers I've mentioned it wouldn't have dawned on us that far from being 'extra' this special activity might even be *central* to the curriculum. So far, so very much better. Yet there was one small, unresolved problem. Whatever the tactical need for playing it down (or downing the play) it wasn't possible to ignore completely the new unmentionable Theatre. What was to happen to the dramatic arts? How should they take their place alongside, say, the writerly arts or painterly arts or musical arts? Amidst all the *doing* of Drama wasn't there bound to be an element of *showing*, too? Hence arose a second wave of reformers - Christopher Parry, John Hodgson, Gavin Bolton - who started, painstakingly, to re-establish severed connections.

This is still going on today, a development I enthusiastically support. Which will explain why I hate John Inman's **Curtain Up!** so much. It turns an activity I love into something Amazingly Boring. Worse, it puts back the clock by feeding every prejudice about Theatre that's likely to afflict the wary Therapist. Yes, John Inman, I agree **Curtain Up!** makes no great claims for itself - a sort of family amusement first-aid kit for when the telly breaks down. I recognise that you pull off the difficult trick of talking directly to junior-age children without once looking over your shoulder to check out the grown-ups. I'll even admit to being charmed a bit by the same wry personality you project on screen. But what's it all in aid of, may I ask? True, no great harm will be done by your front-room concert-party and funfair and circus - or even your Cinderella with its woefully flat script. The point is that no great *effort is* required either. Kids will come away from the book with the notion that magic . can be made with a few tricks of the trade and a certain breeziness of manner (kindly tell that to your next producer). Successful Showbiz - let alone Theatre - surely demands deeper roots than this, not to mention greater risk-taking and a more sustained commitment. As an introduction to 'the wonderful world of entertainment' **Curtain Up!** has all the profundity, poise and penetration of a motto in a Christmas cracker. Fortunately, it's so drably produced most youngsters will remember it for about the same length of time.

Much more haunting is Monika Laimgruber's **Let's Make a Play!** Though she's no more of a child -drama expert than John Inman, she hedges her bets shrewdly by presenting. story-style, a group of children working up their own version of Briar Rose. Narrative is kept to a minimum. The thrust of the book lies in the pictures full page for the most part, and often double-spread - which lead us from the first idea of a show, through the details of preparation and rehearsal, to the final triumphant performance. No advice is given, no problems are solved. But what does come across strongly in these busy, distinctive, colourful illustrations is a feeling of real children at play. rather than at a Play. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there's also a rich sense of theatrical tradition made accessible even to the youngest reader.

The same sense pervades **Make Your Own Theatre**, written and illustrated by Peter K. Alfaenger. At first sight his brisk, tuppence-coloured cartoonery looks lightweight... until the sharpness of his observation is noticed and the craftiness of his diagrams. Take page 24, for example, which offers an instant, wordless insight into the rigging-system for stage curtains. Or the line drawings at the head of pages 30 and 31 - almost all you need to know about making masks conveyed in six, quick sketches. His text, moreover, even in translation, gives impressive support. Here, too, his aim is brevity and clarity:

*'Costume is not necessarily a means of improving an actor. It is extra information for the audience.'*

- a remark that's obvious once it's been said. He's equally adept at cutting philosophical cackle:

*'The theatre isn't natural... The theatre isn't reality'. A natural effect in the theatre has to be re-created so it's a new reality. '*

- equally obvious, and equally beyond the ken of many a Method- monger and psycho-dramatist. Alfaenger's thumbnail accounts of lighting and design, language and movement are enough to stage -strike any tyro of middle-school age yet always he keeps instinctive faith with Child Drama principles: the games, routines, experiments and improvisations he suggests are the kind to be found in any good studio or classroom. For him it's as if the split between Theatre and Therapy had never occurred. He provides bright and lively evidence that Drama, when operating at its highest level of achievement, is composed of those elements that are common to both children's play and to theatre. What a relief to find such joyous seriousness after the superficiality of the unspeakable **Curtain Up!**

Don't ring us, John Inman, we'll ring you.

## **The Play's the Thing - or is it?**

These reviews are a curtain-raiser to an occasional series on Children and Theatre which will appear in **Books for Keeps** next year. We will be looking at what Theatre has to offer children and young people, discussing different ways of

approaching it, hearing from people who work in and write for the theatre, reviewing and recommending books and plays.

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