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Instruction and Delight in Moses Goldberg's Plays for the Maturing Child

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The theatre is not a set of separate kinds of plays for different ages, but a continuous art form, inviting an increasing sophistication.

Moses Goldberg, *Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and A Method*

Throughout his careers as a children's playwright and as a director of children's theatre, Moses Goldberg has focused on the personal and aesthetic development of children as audience members. Drawing on his training in developmental psychology, Goldberg has attempted to delineate the stages and changes that characterize children's needs and interests in the theatre in light of both their emotional and intellectual development and their natural inclination, from a very early age, to represent and interpret their experiences through play and dramatization.

Appropriately, he calls his approach Developmental Theatre, a concept that encompasses a consideration of the evolution and history of theatre as a social phenomenon and the ways in which theatre affects the perceptions and attitudes of the playgoers. In his essay "The Theatre: A Side View," Goldberg posed the questions that guide the practitioner of Developmental Theatre: "How does the theatre become increasingly relevant to the life of the growing individual?" and "How does the art of theatre emerge from our basic inner needs?" (127; 128).

Questions such as these, Goldberg believes, would require a change in the perspective from which theatre critics usually operate. Traditionally, the tendency has been to describe what Goldberg has called the "surface manifestations of theatre," such as forms and styles of presentation and play text. In contrast, a critic approaching dramatic art from a developmental perspective would be concerned with theatre as an ongoing process, examining, for example, the transformations that theatre has gone through in various eras of history, and the stages in aesthetic maturation that can be nurtured by the theatre experience.

In order to investigate the latter—namely, how aesthetic maturity

develops in the theatre—Goldberg has argued for the establishment of a theatre that would function as an experimental research laboratory, in which the expertise and methods of the theatre artist and the behavioral scientist would be used to discover how particular characteristics of plays affect audience members at different stages in their development, and, consequently, how specific characteristics of the playgoer can guide theatre artists in their effort to develop plays that are both entertaining and personally relevant. For example, the playwright who works in a developmental theatre laboratory could study such factors as the nature of the audience's identification with stage characters of varying ages, its responses to particular performance styles, play topics and themes, and the degree to which the age of the playgoer determines his or her response.

It is within this philosophical and artistic framework that Goldberg continues to develop what he has described in *Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and A Method* as "a 'master plan' for the child's theatrical exposure" (101). Translated into theatre practice, Goldberg's plan is a carefully sequenced continuum of theatre experiences that is rooted in his sense of the changing needs, concerns, and interests of children from early childhood through adolescence. The author of over twenty plays and the director of at least twice that number, Goldberg has developed his theatre pieces for specific audiences in order to nurture their sophistication as playgoers and to increase their knowledge of various theatre forms and styles. And although he has been critical of practitioners of children's theatre in this country who, in merely setting out to cater to the interests of children, sacrifice sincerity to marketability, he believes it is possible to write *for* children without necessarily writing *down* to them. He addressed this issue in *Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and A Method* when he wrote

It is not wrong to know one's audience What is wrong, in my opinion, is to allow one's conceptions of the audience to dictate completely the material and treatment of the play The creative artist's first duty, as anti-social as it may seem, is to

himself, to his art. If he pleases both himself and his audience, he ought to. But he can...

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Throughout his careers as a children's playwright and as a director of children's theatre, Moses Goldberg has focused on the personal and aesthetic development of children as audience members. Drawing on his training in developmental psychology Goldberg has attempted to delineate the stages and changes that characterize children's needs and interests in the theatre in light of both their emotional and intellectual development and their natural inclination, from a very early age, to represent and interpret their experiences through play and dramatization.

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It is not wrong to know one's audience . . . What is wrong, in my opinion, is to allow one's conceptions of the audience to dictate completely the material and treatment of the play . . . The creative artist's first duty, as artist, as it may seem, is to himself, to his art. If he pleases both himself and his audience, he ought to. But he can never please his audience and not himself without violating his artistic integrity (121).

Goldberg's six published plays reveal what he has in mind for the various audiences for whom he writes and produces plays. Collectively, these plays span the continuum he has developed. *Witches* has dramatization of "Hansel and Gretel" and his adaptation of the Aladdin

story are performed for younger children not experiencing live theatre. *The Outlaw Robin Hood*, *The Man's Cottage*, and *The Analysis of Mowgli # 4*, contained in that order, are intended to lead children gradually toward adult concerns as audience members. *The Wind in the Willows*, on the other hand, contains the elements of what Goldberg calls "family drama," a distinct category that he established for plays that, because of their content, themes, and styles, can appeal to audiences of all ages. Each of these plays highlights a specific stage in the maturation process that Goldberg emphasizes for playgoers.

Developed as participation plays for audiences from approximately five to eight years of age, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Aladdin* are intended to help children make the transition from the spontaneous, imitative play of infancy, in which they are the main characters, to the aesthetic participation that characterizes the audience's behavior during a formal staged performance. As traditional theatre pieces, these plays occasionally give children an opportunity to become involved in the development of the plot, often because a character needs help in solving a problem, while at other times, they require the audience to keep its distance by witnessing the unfolding of a story. In either case, the distance between the audience and the players is always meant to be slight; Goldberg's directions call for an arena style production in which the actors establish a bond with the children as soon as they are seated in the auditorium by interacting with their role and by moving among them freely throughout the performance. Thus, Goldberg extends the play's action beyond the fourth wall and into the sides of the audience, so that the young playgoers are not only enveloped by the experience but also have a hand in helping to create it.

The participation play is also meant to introduce children to the basic conventions of a theatre performance by allowing knowledge of these conventions to emerge naturally out of the characters' actions and dialogue. The characters, sometimes in role and sometimes out of role, that is, as actors performing a play and responsible for keeping it running, demonstrate, rather than explain, such concepts as role, stage set, costume, and the difference between stage illusion and reality. In *Hansel and Gretel* and *Aladdin* the audience is introduced to these concepts during a vigorous, often racy puppet show, in which a



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