

Elementary Teachers' Evaluations of University Performances for Young Audiences

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Elementary classroom teachers are often the primary "conduits" through which children come to know theatre before, during, and after school field trips to see professional or university productions. Their subjective perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of theatre for children greatly affect their students' growing awarenesses of and personal experiences with theatre. Asking teachers to evaluate individual productions provides producing companies with critical feedback about the factors which promote and inhibit students' understanding and appreciation. At the same time, such evaluations also raise questions about the extent to which teachers determine or distort students' meaning-making experiences, and whether students might discover similar or different personal meanings without teacher intervention. Regardless, a cumulative study of evaluative feedback suggests more effective information for company study guides to educate teachers and students alike in preparation for future productions. While context-specific evaluations demonstrate teachers' opinions about the quality of theatre performances in their local communities, their perceptions of their students' experiences may be compared with similar and different responses among teachers in other school communities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Elementary teachers and their students (ages 6 to 12) attend one of two productions for the primary and intermediate grades staged annually by the University of Kansas Theatre for Young People (KU-TYP)—a traditional field trip since 1966. The purpose of the present study was to synthesize teachers' evaluations of performances from 1977 (when evaluations began¹) to 1995 by analyzing emergent themes and common factors among teachers' perceptions across play content. Teachers' interpretations of their students' experiences within this 18-year period were then compared with children's responses to selected productions in five descriptive studies to help explain similar and discrepant perspectives (Klein; Klein and Fitch).

The Evaluation Form

After each performance, teachers of grades 1 to 3 and 4 to 6 are asked to complete an evaluation form which assesses:

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- (1) their degree of student preparation for the performance (e.g., using the KU-TYP Teacher's Guide);
- (2) the play's meaningfulness to children's lives;
- (3) their students' levels of understanding and attention with reasons for such; and
- (4) other comments about the present production and future play selections.²

Levels of meaningfulness, understanding, and attention are rated on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) and averaged by the number of respondents per question. Answers to open-ended questions provide explanatory reasons for these ratings.

Local school district populations have risen considerably in the city of Lawrence and its surrounding rural areas over this time period. Attendance figures have fluctuated between 680 for each of four performances in 1977 to over 700 spectators for each of five performances in 1995 in a campus auditorium which seats over 1,000 people. While the number of attending teachers per production has ranged from about 80 to 180 teachers over this period, the return rate of evaluations has varied widely from 20% to 63%, with an average return rate of 43% (or 31% since 1988).³ We have no way of knowing whether teachers are too busy to fill out these forms, or whether they respond only when they feel compelled to let us know which plays they like or dislike most and why.

Plays Viewed 1977–1995

Of the 36 plays viewed over the last 18 years, over half (57%) have been adaptations from children's literature and the remaining (43%) have been original plays written for the stage (see Table) (cf. Oaks). While most plays have been chosen from the published U.S. repertoire, European, Asian, and Canadian literature has also varied season selections in keeping with our mission to produce meaningful plays of various theatrical styles.⁴ The most produced playwrights have been Aurand Harris (7) and Suzan Zeder (3).

Plays reflect a wide range of dramatic genres and theatrical styles structured as linear or episodic plots (30) or collections of short stories (6). Genres include animal (5) or modern fantasies (7), fairy tales (4), folk tales and fables (4), legends (3), historical characters or events (5), contemporary realism or social issue plays (4), and science fiction (3). Results from evaluations indicate few consensual opinions among teachers concerning particular genres or styles among these play choices.

RESULTS

Teachers' Preparation

When rating the level at which they prepare students for seeing plays, teachers rely heavily and consistently upon reading the play synopsis directly from our study guide. Many believe that students' familiarity with the story before attendance increases understanding, and synopses alert them to the "age-appropriate-

Table 1. Plays Produced by Genre

<i>Year</i>		<i>Author</i>	<i>Adaptor/Playwright</i>
	<i>Animal Fantasy</i>		
91	The Velveteen Rabbit	Williams	Still
90	Winnie-the-Pooh	Milne	Sergel
89	I Am a Bear!	Tashlin	Gauthier
88	Charlotte's Web	White	Robinette
86	Just So Stories	Kipling	Harris
	<i>Modern Fantasy</i>		
92	Crying to Laugh		Sabourin
89	Noodle Doodle Box		Maar
87	Reasons To Be Cheerful		Paper Bag Players
85	The Arkansaw Bear		Harris
84	OPQRS, Etc.		Miller
83	Dandelion		Paper Bag Players
82	Ozma of Oz	Baum	Zeder
	<i>Fairy Tales</i>		
92	The 13 Clocks	Thurber	Sadoff & Bucci
84	The Little Humpback Horse	Ershov	Swortzell
81	Tales from Hans C. Andersen	Andersen	Evans & Anderson
79	Greensleeves' Magic		Jonson
	<i>Folk Tales/Fable</i>		
95	Wiley and the Hairy Man	(Cajun)	Zeder
93	Hansel and Gretel	Grimm	Bush
81	Androcles and the Lion	Aesop	Harris
78	Golliwhoppers	(Americana)	Atkin
	<i>Legends</i>		
94	The Reluctant Dragon	Grahame	Surface
88	Monkey, Monkey	Ch'Eng-En	Jones
86	Don Quixote of La Mancha	Cervantes	Fauquez
	<i>Historical</i>		
90	This Is Not a Pipe Dream	(Magritte)	Kornhauser
82	Jim Thorpe—All American	(Thorpe)	Levitt
80	A Toby Show	(Toby)	Harris
78	Rags to Riches	(Alger)	Harris
77	Steal Away Home	(underground railroad)	Harris
	<i>Contemporary Realistic</i>		
94	The Pinballs	Byars	Harris
80 & 93	Step on a Crack		Zeder
91	More of a Family		Silver
85	Blue Horses		Schultz-Miller
	<i>Science Fiction</i>		
87	The Code Breaker		Conley
83	Starman Jones		Lieberman
79	Lynefeer and the Journey Cloak		Averill

ness” of unfamiliar titles. Few teachers prepare their students extensively through drama or related activities, but many do engage them in pre- or post-performance discussions. Synopses, worded with age-appropriate vocabulary, and discussion questions are considered by teachers to be the most useful sections of the study guides above dramaturgical information and suggested extensions in the classroom.⁵

Though teachers believe that unfamiliar plays require advance preparation, they tend not to use the study guide when the content does not appear “relevant” to what they are teaching according to district mandates. Most teachers request adaptations of “classic” literature on their grade level reading lists from their language arts curriculums, because they perceive theatre as an “extra-curricular” event worthy only as a special “cultural experience.” Ironically, they tend to prepare older more than younger children most, primarily for historical plays and legendary characters (i.e., *A Toby Show*, *Jim Thorpe*, *Steal Away Home*, *Don Quixote*). Likewise, they seem to prepare young children most for familiar more than unfamiliar titles (i.e., *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Tales from Hans Christian Andersen* vs. *Crying to Laugh*), while avoiding discussions of “controversial” plays (i.e., *Dandelion*, *Monkey, Monkey*, *Noodle Doodle Box*). These tendencies carry over into teachers’ ratings of plays.

Ratings of Meaningfulness, Attention, and Understanding

Averaged ratings of meaningfulness, attention, and understanding indicate that productions have been rated “above average” (5.06–5.85), though means of “controversial” and “abstract” plays dilute teachers’ widely divergent opinions. When rating the extent to which each play choice was “meaningful or relevant to children’s lives or education,” both familiar and lesser known works mix freely, despite many teachers’ beliefs that canonical titles are more academically valuable than original plays about personal or family issues.

Primary grade teachers most preferred the classic tales of *Hansel and Gretel*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *Golliwoppers* (a collection of four American tall tales), and *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Least preferred were the adventures of the Chinese Monkey King in *Monkey, Monkey*, *The Little Humpback Horse*, and *Green-sleeves’ Magic*—all of which involved more complex sub-plots.

Intermediate teachers most preferred the classic adaptations of E. B. White’s beloved animal fantasy *Charlotte’s Web*, Zeder’s adaptation of Baum’s *Ozma of Oz*, and Harris’ rendition of an American folk hero in *A Toby Show*. *Step on a Crack*, Zeder’s original play about a girl’s struggle to accept her stepmother, appeared more socially relevant in 1980 than during its 1993 revival. Children’s less attentive responses to the legendary *Don Quixote of La Mancha* were perceived as least meaningful and understandable, along with *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*, an original, expressionistic play about René Magritte’s dream to become an artist, and *I Am a Bear!*, a Québécois adaptation of Frank Tashlin’s story about a bear who struggles to keep his natural identity among factory workers who destroy his habitat.

Overall, teachers find that intermediate grade plays have been a bit more understandable and meaningful to their students than primary grade plays which appear to garner more attention among younger children. Though one might expect high attention to increase comprehension, teachers tend to rate understanding lower than attention for younger more than older children, particularly in regard to *Crying to Laugh*, *Dandelion*, *Monkey, Monkey*, and *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*. In these divergent cases, the question arises: Why would children pay more attention to those plays that teachers claim they understood less? In fact, media studies show that high attention indicates how children are investing greater mental effort to comprehend meaning (Salomon). Further analyses of teachers' responses to open-ended questions reveal several primary factors for these discrepant viewpoints.

Reasons for High and Low Attention

In keeping with the popular assumption that "children have weak attention spans" (Hagnell 60), teachers perceive that young spectators require visual stimulations in the forms of constant physical movement, playful activities, and physical humor such as chase scenes. Repeatedly they report that "too much dialogue and too little action" cause restlessness (as if implying that theatre should be a non-verbal medium). Long conversations or speeches, especially by authority figures who "preach" ideas or explain motives, lose attention. "Awesome" special effects hold attention most as children explore how various "stage tricks" work in a medium quite novel to their usual experiences. Paradoxically, young children's focus on spectacle and incidental playful activities actually *diverts* or entertains attention away from grasping thematic concepts (Klein, "Reading Empathy" 62).

Teachers find that frequent variations in visual and aural effects also keep children rapt, but minimalist designs or few set changes are perceived as less entertaining to children. While children expect scenery and lighting to change often on this large proscenium stage, transitional scenic changes trigger shifting in seats naturally as they ready themselves for the next episode. Likewise, audiences desire contrasting changes of pace, and teachers report restlessness during "slower scenes" or when class-time clocks reach the 45-minute limit. However, plays which run 60 to 70 minutes have been acceptable as long as suspenseful climaxes and a "balance of serious and humorous moods" keep children absorbed. Many teachers believe that "heavy messages need comic relief." Of course, novel or sympathetic characters, such as child actors, animals, and puppets, hold attention; and the inability to hear actors due to poor vocal projection or diction and noisy audience members obviously frustrates attention levels.

Teachers' reasons for high and low attention suggest that audiences expect live theatre to mimic television's fast-paced camera cuts. Indeed, actors and scenography act as "cameras" by focusing audio-visual attention on moment-to-moment actions. Yet television studies (Wright et al. "Young Children's Perceptions") show that rapid pacing or "movement for movement's sake" actually decreases comprehension, because young children need time to make meanings of visual details as their selective attention develops (cf. Hagnell).

In my studies, children seldom mention pacing as a factor, but they do confirm their preferences for theatre for its live and visual qualities over television (Klein, "Children's Processing" 12; Klein and Fitch, "Third Grade" 12; "First Grade" 10). In fact, those who prefer theatre are more active, critical viewers because they pay close attention to visual and verbal signs in order to infer thematic concepts. So, if children's attention is held by the novelty of live theatre and its "spectacular" devices, why do their teachers report low comprehension for particular plays? A comparison between teachers' ratings and children's responses to five productions may help to explain these paradoxes.

Reasons for Low Understanding

As in reading literature, teachers believe that "abstract or symbolic concepts go over children's heads"—but what constitutes "abstract" differs by personal definitions. Chivalry, surrealism, authoritarianism, and the portrayal of Native American spirits have been examples of challenging concepts. When fifth graders were asked to infer "the point or message" of *Don Quixote*, less than one-third abstracted the idea that you must believe in yourself, not what you read in books. Most (44%) discussed some concrete aspect of Quixote's life, and one-quarter didn't know—in keeping with teachers' low ratings (3.54) (Klein, "Children's Processing" 11). However, when asked for the "main idea" in *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*, or more specifically, "what René learned," over half (55%) of all children abstracted the concept that "you should follow your dreams," and many (36%) knew concretely that "René wanted to be an artist" (Klein, "Applying Research" 14). Yet teachers rated their understanding average (4.09) and the play less meaningful (3.85) largely because it was "too artsy" and "far out."

"Controversial" subject matter has been a bone of contention for several plays in which teachers did not expect students to understand fully. The concepts of evolution in *Dandelion* and death in *The Arkansaw Bear* sparked much debate and derision.irate parents and teachers viewed the Chinese Monkey King as an "anti-Christian" figure because he levitated, meditated, and fought "devilish demons" through "sorcery"—but a group of third graders didn't see the play this way. Instead, over half (55%) focused on his adventures and his monkey family, while one-quarter abstracted the ideas that "you must be smart and brave" "to live forever" like the Monkey King. When asked what they learned, over half (53%) reported learning bravery and good moral behaviors, and the remaining learned something about monkeys (29%) or nothing they could remember (18%) (Klein and Fitch, "Third Grade" 10–11). Yet teachers rated their understanding and the play's meaningfulness quite low (3.59 and 3.83, respectively) by applying Western norms to an ancient Chinese legend.

Similarly, some teachers were offended by the negative portrayal of an authority figure and the death of a dog (a hand puppet) in *Crying to Laugh*. But children saw these fictive aspects for what they were by sympathizing with Mea's inability to cry over her dog's death because Yua forbade it. When asked "what Mea learned," most children (42%) abstracted the concept that "you should express your feelings," while others (27%) knew concretely that "Mea learned to cry because Seluf taught her" explicitly (Klein, "Reading Empathy")

61). Nevertheless, teachers rated their understanding and the play's meaningfulness as above average (5.04 and 5.26, respectively).

Some teachers also grow alarmed by "inappropriate" behaviors which "glorify" anti-social norms on stage. Rather than focus on the prosocial values of friendship, as their students did in *Noodle Doodle Box*, several teachers focused on the characters' name-calling and water-spitting. Yet no first graders in our study mentioned these incidents. The majority (62%) knew the play's main ideas dealt with friendship, sharing, and not fighting, stealing, or lying to people. Even when asked to choose the "biggest main idea" from three photographs, first graders chose the positive notion of friendship (74%) over the negative idea of fighting (13%) (Klein and Fitch, "First Grade" 10). While teachers rated their understanding above average (5.33), they still found the play's meaningfulness less than desirable (4.22) by dwelling on the play's interpersonal conflicts over its prosocial resolution.

Such negative criticisms have clouded teachers' tacit knowledge about the purpose of conflict in drama and its values in theatre. Overly protective teachers have been offended by children's laughter at violence in the forms of physical abuse in *I Am a Bear!* and playing with toy guns in *Step on a Crack*. Even "classic" plays, such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*, have been criticized for their dramatizations of child abandonment and toy destruction for being "too scary for children." While such criticisms demonstrate teachers' fears about the emotional power of live theatre, children as young as seven know that "plays are not real life" (Klein, "Applying Research" 14; cf. Wright et al., "Young Children's Perceptions").

Main Ideas Understood Best

For these reasons, I altered some evaluation questions some years ago to reflect more positive aspects of theatre-going. When asked to describe what main ideas children understood best, teachers confirmed my hypothesis that most students were, in fact, recognizing each play's major themes. "Abstract" ideas related to self-concept, friendship, and prosocial moral behaviors were understood quite well, yet many teachers continued to underestimate their students' knowledge with less than perfect ratings. While familiar play titles continued to garner good ratings of understanding, unfamiliar plays which dealt with relevant family issues (e.g., *More of a Family*) also found favor. However, like most literal-minded children in my studies, teachers also defined "main ideas" as characters' concrete actions with few social applications to personal lives, even for so-called "universal" tales like *Hansel and Gretel*. As one teacher wrote, "They understood the story, but I don't think they got the underlying themes." Even when children don't grasp the symbolic concepts that made such stories "classic," teachers still hold to the belief that "young children should know [fairy and folk tales] as part of their cultural baggage."

Confusing Theatre Conventions

In an attempt to move teachers away from focusing on story content alone, I now ask them to pinpoint the "theatre conventions" which confuse their students

(i.e., “playwright’s script, staging, acting, scenery, costumes, props, lights, sound, special effects, etc.”). Their responses have confirmed children’s desires for and expectations of literal or social realism (e.g., Gardner 104), while suggesting specific areas of information to highlight in our subsequent study guides.

The dramatic structure (and content) of several texts have posed problems for many teachers who teach—and expect—only “well-made play” forms in literature. Non-linear, episodic structures, complex sub-plots, and play-within-play frames have been sources of some perplexity, even though first graders have shown themselves quite capable of finding linear through-lines in such “absurdist” plays as *Noodle Doodle Box* (Klein and Fitch, “First Grade” 9). Though 5-year-olds know how to distinguish fantasy from reality (Wright et al. “Young Children’s Perceptions”) and 7- to 12-year-olds confirmed this ability in the surrealistic play *This Is Not a Pipe Dream* (Klein, “Applying Research” 14), some teachers still perceive that their students are incapable of making such formal distinctions. More likely, older children are reacting to unrealistic actions which counter their social experiences in the real world as they grow away from accepting fantastical plays. Children do tend to ignore discussions of offstage characters, such as Dulcinea in *Don Quixote*, but first graders can follow offstage events from the context of characters’ behaviors and sound effects (Klein, “Children’s Processing” 11; Klein and Fitch, “First Grade” 9). Teachers report that young children also want to know whether ambiguous characters are good *or* bad in keeping with their black and white worlds of poetic justice. Figurative language in the forms of riddles, puns, and irony also puzzles young developing minds (cf. Winner).

Acting conventions, which artists often take for granted, challenge children’s cognitive abilities to transform states of being into alternative states simultaneously (Flavell, et al. 135–36). Teachers report that some youngsters grow confused when the same actors play different characters, or when two actors play one persona or an older and younger character, or when actors alternate between two characters. Children are quick to point out when an adult actor does not act the child character’s age, or when cross-gender and multi-racial casting and dialects counter their stereotyped social experiences.

Similar problems with transformations show up again in students’ confusions over minimalist scenery which changes in place and compresses the passage of time on one stage. Some children dislike having the same platforms or objects mean different locales for multiple purposes, and they want designs to specify realistic details for clearer definitions of settings and characters. Costume choices get called into question, especially when designs differ from picture books or expectations for animals or fantasy characters. Though teachers report that recorded voices cause some bewilderment, older children do know that these vocal sounds signify on- or off-stage characters’ thoughts (Klein, “Applying Research” 15). Knowing which conventions help or hinder students’ knowledge of theatrical forms assists producers in making staging and design choices for future productions.

DISCUSSION

Naturally, these evaluations may reveal more about Lawrence teachers' personal meanings (and my interpretations of their perceptions) than what their students may actually perceive and interpret. When students report that they dislike novel or bewildering conventions of plays or productions, teachers may confuse these aesthetic tastes and preferences with students' understanding of thematic concepts. Inevitably, teachers' evaluations of their students' understanding of productions reflect their professional estimations of the broad range of learning styles between first and third graders and between fourth and sixth graders. Their students' abilities to make meanings of plays vary tremendously within each of these six grade levels and within each socio-economic neighborhood school. Thus, some teachers welcome the challenge of thought-provoking concepts for their students, while others may underestimate their students' abilities to discern "abstract" ideas with less-than-perfect "grades." Choosing plays which address these diverse perceptions according to teachers' specific grade-level expectations becomes a constant balancing act for producers who deal with captured school audiences. When individual teachers do not have control over their students' theatre attendance by school district policy, their evaluations of their students' understanding will inevitably reflect a wide range of opinions based on their experiences with specific groups of students in their individual classrooms.

Teachers' evaluations of their students' attentiveness may also reflect the focus of their own attentions during performances. Some teachers may be thoroughly engrossed in performances, while others may keep a constant eye on their students' behaviors to ensure that their children demonstrate proper audience etiquette. Obviously, when students grow restless, teachers' attentions will be diverted from the fictive stage world to the performance factors which caused these noisy disruptions. In such cases, performances, more than children, may be held responsible for keeping attentions rapt; for as one teacher believes, "In children's theatre a good production elicits absolute silence by virtue of the interest engendered."

Evaluations of a play's "meaningfulness to children's lives or education" also vary by teachers' personal beliefs. Their opinions may depend on whether they expect play choices to match their language arts or social studies curricula, or whether they believe that theatre can extend alternative educational values not covered directly in daily lesson plans. Clearly, many teachers view the meaningfulness of performances freely with open minds within the concrete frameworks of each theatrical context like their students, while others view play choices through the restrictive norms of how people "should" behave in both real and theatrical worlds. Like social learning theorists who believe that children model everything they see and hear on stage, some teachers want and expect all fictive characters to conform to strict behavioral standards. When teachers' expectations are thwarted by conflicting moral values or non-realistic styles, they may criticize play choices and artists for not staying within the boundaries of "easy," "fun-filled," "light-hearted" entertainment or "escapes" from real world dilemmas.

But children's emotional worlds are not limited to joy and happiness. Theatre also offers a safe and constructive means of expressing sadness, anger, fear, and

disgust, and many teachers do acknowledge that these negative emotions are a healthy and meaningful part of living and growing up (e.g., "Some said they didn't pay attention to the sad parts because they didn't want to feel sad"). When children express confusion over their mixed feelings, they are indicating their growing abilities to distinguish among equivocal emotions as they share characters' frustrations and conflicts within fictive frameworks (e.g., Harter and Whitesell 84–86). Teachers can help clarify these emotional experiences by exploring how theatre dramatizes human situations in comparison to young lives, rather than blaming the medium for intensifying or promoting human conflict.

Children of all ages tend to view stories from inside fictive frameworks more than from their general knowledge of the outside world. For example, in comparing teachers' and students' responses to *Big Klaus and Little Klaus*, Martha Rhea (65) discovered that children judged Little Klaus "realistically, within the universe of the play as set forth by the production," while teachers judged him less objectively by applying outside moral codes "into which they tried to fit the production." I have come to believe that a once-a-year, one-hour play has very little effect on changing the moral values of child audiences raised full-time by families, schools, and the pervasive mass media. Instead, I believe that plays affirm the values that children already hold and bring with them to theatrical events. Yet increasingly I ask myself to what extent are children literal thinkers by virtue of their cognitive development, and to what extent do teachers inculcate concrete reasoning according to curricular outcomes? Either way, artists face the paradox of expanding students' and teachers' creative imaginations with divergent thinking, while balancing children's preferences for realism against more non-realistic innovations. Children's actual interpretations of theatre need to be made more visible to teachers (and parents) to prove the life-affirming values of theatre outside the classroom.

Teachers' evaluations over the years have helped me to appreciate the conflicting values they face in their classrooms among students, parents, and school administrators. We all want what is best for children, and we all have different and equally valuable ways of providing them with meaningful educations to enhance their lives. As in many school districts across the country, teachers are consumed by re-writing curricular outcomes to raise educational standards which address parents' desires for greater accountability. Given the fact that theatre is not a basic subject area of most elementary curricula and that few elementary teachers take theatre courses for their pre-service or graduate educations, most classroom teachers are not aware of the content of theatre as a discipline in its own right (e.g., the National Theatre Standards). Thus, when they attend plays with their students, many tend to focus on the content of each play choice to justify why school trips are a mandated part of their district's curricula.

These realities have led me to refocus teachers' attention on why our university theatre chooses specific plays and how each play extends our mutual educational goals. Based on teachers' evaluations of our study guides, I now make curricular extensions more explicit based on the district's grade-level textbooks. I also devote less space on background information about the play's content and more space on how directorial concepts, casting, staging, and design choices il-

illuminate metaphoric concepts. Teachers also appreciate "Knowing What to Look For During Performances" as a way to focus their students' attention on solving characters' problems and using their imaginations to view theatrical forms from artistic perspectives.

We have also added a letter to parents (that the district copies on the back of parental permission slips for field trips) which explains the play's story and why we have chosen to produce it for their children. This letter also invites parents to attend the final run-through rehearsal so they may preview the performance and discuss any concerns they may have about the play with us. These letters appear to have lessened the phone calls that teachers and principals sometime receive from parents when they question the content of unfamiliar plays or hear inaccurate rumors begun by information included in the teachers' study guides.

Once study guides "set the stage" for spectatorship, teachers' evaluations of productions also function as "performance reviews" regarding the artistic quality of specific shows. In my opinion, the quality of our university productions over the years has varied considerably among faculty- and student-directed and -designed plays performed by college students. Many teachers have raved over the "excellence" of specific productions, even when I have considered the same shows to fall short of my own artistic standards. Likewise, some teachers have criticized the same artistic choices in productions that I believe to have been examples of my proudest artistic successes. As many professional companies know, newspaper reviews and box office receipts often differ from artists' perceptions of theatrical excellence. Balancing our aesthetic tastes and desires for more innovative theatre with teachers' and parents' preferences for familiar titles and particular styles remains a challenging opportunity to change community perceptions of and expectations for professional and university theatres for young audiences.

As Director of KU Theatre for Young People, I choose and propose plays on the basis of quality scripts which address primary and intermediate grade levels, while attempting to alternate familiar and unfamiliar titles annually to balance teachers' expectations with my personal aesthetic tastes. However, our university theatre production committee decides play titles primarily on the basis of whether production requirements can be built within a three-week time frame at the beginning of each semester, and teachers' curricular preferences receive lower priority. These discrepant criteria in deciding annual seasons, along with other political and economic factors within the community, have led to a re-evaluation of our program by the Lawrence school district for the coming years. Finding plays which satisfy multiple needs between our university theatre and public schools continually challenges my artistic priorities and visions of our present and future theatre audiences.

As TYA company missions adjust to changing ideological perspectives, teachers' evaluations of productions can continue to inform us about how young audiences experience the theatre we produce for their educational entertainment. When producers are unable to interview groups of children directly after each performance, teachers can let us know the concepts and feelings they perceive

their students found most compelling in classroom discussions. Understanding which plays and staging choices work best for children can better ensure that each theatre experience provides rewarding aesthetic pleasures for students, teachers, and artists alike.

NOTES

¹ The original Teacher's Production Evaluation Form used in 1977 may be found in Davis and Evans' book (291–292). The adjusted 1995 form is attached here as an Appendix.

² Additional questions regarding children's discussions and comments, the incidents which caused excessive excitement and fear, and rankings against previous KU-TYP productions have been omitted here for the sake of brevity.

³ The total number of attending teachers per production and the return rate of evaluations was not recorded until 1988 and thereafter. Earlier estimates are based on the number of responding teachers and attending spectators, which varies by the number of rural schools that choose to attend annually.

⁴ See the complete KU-TYP mission statement in the 1995–96 Marquee of *TYA Today* 9.3 (November 1995): 66.

⁵ This finding is based on results of evaluations of the KU-TYP Teacher's Guide begun in 1988.

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APPENDIX

University of Kansas Theatre for Young People Teachers' Evaluation Form

TEACHERS: Please assist us in our evaluative efforts by answering these questions based on your students' perceptions. Return forms to KU letterhead address or Lawrence Director of Fine Arts. Evaluations are read and summarized by KU-TYP and sent to Lawrence district office and county schools for distribution.

1. To what extent did the children in your class appear to understand what was happening in the play?

lo							hi
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

2. What main ideas from the play and applications to children's lives did children understand best?

3. Which of the following theatre conventions confused children and for what reasons? (playwright's script, staging, acting, scenery, costumes, props, lights, sound, special effects, etc.)

4. To what extent did the children in your class seem attentive most of the time?

lo							hi
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

5. What scenes or moments held their attention most and for what reasons?

6. What scenes or moments caused children to look away from the stage and for what reasons?

7. To what extent was this play choice meaningful and relevant to children's lives or education?

	lo						hi
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

8. How do children think this production ranks with the other TYP productions they have seen?

	lo						hi
NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

9. Please indicate the level at which you prepared the children for seeing the play:

7	Extensive preparation (including all below)
6	Engaged in some related activities
5	Discussed background and thematic concepts
4	Told or read the story/synopsis
3	Told them the title of the play
2	Told them we were going to a play
1	No preparation

	lo						hi
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

10. Which sections of the Teacher's Guide were most useful or effective?

11. Which sections of the Teacher's Guide were least useful or effective?

12. Additional comments in regard to this production:

13. Additional comments in regard to future KU-TYP productions:

14. What drama workshop topics and experiences would benefit you and your students most?

Thank you for your invaluable assistance in helping us provide the best in theatre for young audiences.

