

## Rosemarie Benjamin and the Theatre for Children in Sydney, 1937-1957

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### Abstract

The history of children's theatre in Australia is sketchy about developments before the nineteen-fifties and can be enriched by accounts of earlier experiments such as the pioneering work of Rosemarie Benjamin and the twenty years of her Theatre for Children in Sydney. Drawing on research using the archive of Benjamin's papers and contemporary newspapers, this article develops an appreciation of her approach, one influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory and the model provided by Natalya Sats in Soviet Russia. Authentic children's theatre, drawing on the mythic power of fairy tales, needed to be validated through the careful study of child audience responses. Though Benjamin's approach was wholly theatrical, her ideas were deeply rooted in early English progressive education, before the era of 'educational drama', and she was a tireless advocate of children's theatre as a cultural necessity in its own right. The story of her theatre can thus contribute to our historical perspective on the development of young people's theatre with implications or its contemporary status as well as the changing relationship of 'drama' and 'education'.

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The history of the children's theatre in Australia is an incomplete narrative that speaks of the success stories rather than the forgotten experiments. Accounts of children's theatre such as those of Milne<sup>1</sup> are sketchy about developments earlier than the nineteen-fifties and allude to the important role of 'little theatres' and amateur repertory clubs as the creative hub of attempts to provide alternatives to pantomime and the cinema. Best known as pioneering spirits are Joan and Betty Rayner, the 'strolling players' of Clark's biography, and their Australian Children's Theatre.<sup>2</sup>

The story of the Theatre for Children in Sydney and the work of Rosemarie Benjamin deserves to be better known than the passing mention it receives in Leslie Rees' theatre history.<sup>3</sup> Established in 1937 in Sydney and continuing for twenty years until her death in 1957, the project was far from a transient experiment. Its history has lessons for both theatre and education, for though Benjamin's approach was wholly dramaturgical she was also fully subscribed to the ideals of English progressive education.

As Bolton has shown, understandings of the relationship of 'drama' and 'education' are much changed since the early progressives saw in drama a standard bearer for new educational ideas.<sup>4</sup> How the concept of 'theatre for children' emerged and developed under the stimulus of educational modernism and progressivism is thus worthy of investigation. It is important to understand the early struggle to have children's theatre taken seriously at a time when educators were questioning the baleful influence of mass entertainment.

Benjamin's fervid advocacy also signifies how of theatre for children took on the character of a movement and a cause, advancing new ideas, forging cultural alliances and marshalling public support as well as finding suitable plays, willing actors and venues for productions.

Benjamin's work is interesting in showing how 'new' educational thought embraced theatre as an authentic educational medium, the more so since she tried to transplant these ideas from her English experience to the Australian context. It is argued that though Benjamin's primary

goal was to establish a form of theatre dedicated to children, her real achievement was in softening the attitudes of Australian educational authorities to these new ideas, paving the way for the Rayner Sisters and others to bring theatre experiences into schools.

The article will highlight Rosemarie Benjamin's advocacy and her work as a theorist and organiser, with a necessarily limited account of her playwriting, productions and theatrical ideas. The research draws on the theatre for children archive<sup>5</sup> and contemporary newspaper reports<sup>6</sup> to construct this account, with the hope that this will lead to an appreciation of Benjamin's contribution to theatre history.

## **Biography**

Rosemarie Benjamin was born in 1901, in London, of a wealthy Jewish family and attended Rodean School, Brighton, newly founded to prepare girls to matriculate to the new university women's colleges. Her attitudes were undoubtedly shaped by first-wave feminism and modernist thinking as her independent life would later demonstrate. In her London youth she claimed to have worked as a dramatist and producer, studying dramatic art and voice with Faye Compton and Elsie Fogerty, and to have founded and directed an adult repertory company dedicated to presenting new theatre. She also worked as an organiser of children's play activities, drama coach and producer of plays for young people.<sup>7</sup>

Sometime in the nineteen thirties, Benjamin visited Moscow to study Soviet theatre and saw the children's theatre established by Natalya Sats<sup>8</sup> to present suitable plays for children performed by adult professional actors. This experience profoundly affected her and furnished an ideal she would strive to achieve. In coming years she would frequently refer to her Moscow and London experiences to give international cachet to her Sydney enterprise. Benjamin was not completely forthcoming about her brief contribution as 'honorary organiser' of the Young People's Theatre performances in London in 1936 that were in fact produced by Joan Luxton's company. Joan Luxton was a young Australian developing a London career when she started her own children's theatre in 1927 which operated for nearly a decade, a pioneer indeed.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin apparently intended only a brief holiday when she arrived in Sydney in November 1936 but she clearly changed her plans as the looming war threatened her return to England.<sup>10</sup> She found close friends in Sydney's emigré Viennese Jewish community who with other European refugees would transform Australian cultural life in coming decades. These included Gertrud Bodenwieser, the leading exponent of modern expressionist dance, who encouraged Benjamin's self-belief and linked her dance school to the theatre's activities,<sup>11</sup> and musician and composer Sydney John Kay<sup>12</sup> (Kurt Kaiser). Kay was a financial benefactor who also composed and performed music for Benjamin's productions (and for Bodenwieser's dance classes) before founding the Mercury Theatre in Sydney. Sydney's changing cultural milieu may have seemed to offer a new field of possibilities compared to war-ravaged London.

An independent income enabled her to live, travel and organise new productions. Robert Lloyd, later a well-known stage designer, was recruited as a boy to her theatre club. He remembered Benjamin as 'a Jewish woman of independent means who'd done a lot of experimental work with children in London ... she was like a philanthropist, I think. She funded all these things herself.' He recalled 'a fairly rigorous training' involving writing, performing, designing and making costumes, as well as movement classes with Madame Bodenwieser.<sup>13</sup> Lloyd also recalled the contributions of John Kay (said to have paid the actors' salaries for a time), Thea Rowe, Gwen Friend and Clem Kennedy, all of whom had theatrical careers. Ruth Fink Latukefu, a Jewish refugee who became an anthropologist,

recalled Benjamin's theatre as an important creative outlet at a time when she was struggling to adjust to a new cultural context.<sup>14</sup>

For years, finding suitable premises was difficult and Benjamin finally settled on a studio space in Northcott House in Reiby Place near Circular Quay, which became her headquarters from 1944.<sup>15</sup> After a period of post-war success, she returned to England from 1949 to 1951, apparently sponsored by the British Council to study developments in children's theatre in England, Europe and North America. She appears to have written very little of her experiences.

During the period 1937 to 1957 Benjamin worked assiduously to publicise her cause in the press, writing plays and articles and giving luncheon speeches and broadcasts on the ABC as well as organising seasons of productions with the enthusiastic amateurs. She was seriously ill for months in 1955, closed the theatre at the end of that year when Northcote House was sold and eventually returned to London where she died in June 1957. Though her Sydney obituary stated there were 'plans to re-open the theatre as a memorial', it seems her venture died with her.

### **The philosophy of the Theatre for Children**

Benjamin held strong views of the developmental value of children's theatre and expounded these in a forthright way in articles published in educational and cultural forums.<sup>16</sup> She also published a number of her plays, though much material remains in manuscript.<sup>17</sup> She gives the best account of her work in 'The Story of the Theatre for Children', a guide to accompany a filmstrip for use in New South Wales schools, which devotes some fourteen pages to the principles of children's theatre and twenty more to material garnered from children's audience responses, questionnaires and letters.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin was influenced by Freudian theories of childhood and believed that genuine theatre experiences spoke to the power of the unconscious and could help children resolve emotional difficulties, ideas explored in a substantial paper entitled 'Fears, Fantasies, Guilt and Symbols'.<sup>19</sup>

The uncovering of the unconscious mind by Freud is well described as a great gift to mankind; for therein lies the clue to so many of the psychological upsets, emotional conflicts and mental distresses afflicting children and adults. Through symbols in dreams and fantasies the unconscious mind is revealed.

Plays presented in a Theatre through the use of symbols likewise often respond to the unconscious mind. In the Fairy Tales, as we know, vivid symbols are to be found in profusion, and it is these fairy tales that have formed an emotional background for children of all countries; from this rich source the children take many of their images, their games and secret fantasies of love, romance, cruelty, hatred, sadism and fear ...

The unconscious life of childhood is the rich stuff of children's theatre. Benjamin asserts that whenever children have the opportunity to cast themselves as characters during 'impromptu acting games' they will choose characters according to idealised and gendered types: the beautiful princess, Cinderella, the courageous prince or good knight, or the pirate king, or negative types such as witches, ogres and giants, and through them give play to powerful underlying motivations. For this reason, she considered fairy tales in the works of the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen to be a treasure trove for theatrical adaptation.

It has to be appreciated how new to educational thought were these Freudian ideas at the time, and how enduring they have proven to be. Some thirty years later, Courtney arrived at similar conclusions about dramatic play as 'a reflection of the child's unconscious'.<sup>20</sup> This

psychoanalytic foundation made Benjamin quite particular about how plays were presented to young audiences. Thus, three ‘allegorical figures’ of Jester, Martha and Columbine were employed to mediate the symbolic forces that were ‘in play’, so to speak, to bridge the divide between ‘make-believe’ and reality:

These figures are an integral part of the Sydney Theatre For Children, symbolic of a ‘rainbow arch’ from stage to audience, contacting the children through the MAKE-BELIEVE [sic] of fantasy and meeting them in reality after the plays. These three figures, each having his own role and identity, appear in front of the curtain at every performance. During the Interval they come down from the stage into the audience and talk with children; at the final Curtain they reappear to take those who wish to go with them, ‘back-stage’ to meet the players.

The Jester was the central symbol of the Theatre for Children, continued from the days of her London group. The Jester, she says, ‘stands as of old, for the figure of fun and blame, the Fool who must be laugh-maker and blame-taker ... ready to condole, amuse and act as guide, friend and philosopher’. Jester is able to defuse difficult emotions, ‘an emotional lightning-conductor for everyone’s moods’.<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin keenly studied the views of child audiences, believing it was necessary to validate her approach by researching children’s reactions. She continually sought to test her understandings and create a psychologically authentic experience, stressing that young audiences were serious and critical and not to be patronised. Much care was given to the adaptation of stories, script development, costume, the composition of music, lighting and so on. Children’s theatre needed to authentically combine literary, production and audience values.

While authentic theatre was Benjamin’s goal, her educational motivations were paramount, reflecting an engagement with early English progressive education before there was a ‘theatre-in-education’ or an ‘educational drama’ movement.<sup>22</sup> Her desire to authenticate her theatre practice by collecting information from children through interviews and letters reflects contemporary beliefs about the importance of child study in ‘new education’ values. A young woman at the close of the Great War, Benjamin was soon engaged in new educational experiments such as the children’s playground movement. Henry Caldwell Cook’s *The Play Way* was newly published and promoting activity and enactment in educational experience.<sup>23</sup> One can appreciate her missionary zeal in bringing new educational ideas to far-off Australia.<sup>24</sup>

These links between Freudian thought and the new education point to a probable influence on the formation of Benjamin’s ideas. In London educational circles of the 1930s, Benjamin must have come in contact with Susan Isaacs, psychoanalyst and educator. By the time Benjamin was living Sydney, Isaacs was leading the new department of child development at the University of London, had published two definitive works and was widely promoting the new education. There are several hallmarks of Isaacs’ possible influence. First, Benjamin’s emphasis helping children deal symbolically with difficult emotions such as fear, guilt, anxiety, aggression via theatre reveals an understanding of the key role of phantasy in mental life, a leading interpretation of which Isaacs outlined in a famous 1948 article.<sup>25</sup>

Second, Isaacs taught that the ‘new education’ needs to be structured rather than permissive if children are to be helped to manage difficult emotions. Benjamin insisted that theatre needed to be structured via devices like her allegorical figure of ‘Jester’ to help the child to deal with emotional reactions aroused by the play. Third, Benjamin was uniquely committed to the serious study of children’s responses to plays to inform her theatre practice, very likely influenced by Isaacs’ pioneering of close observational methods in child study. Finally, Isaacs

recognised the importance of publicising understandings of child development and the 'new education' ideas and may have inspired Benjamin's own advocacy of children's theatre.

Isaacs was a leading figure in the New Education Fellowship which the next year held its World Congress over several months in Asia and Oceania. Benjamin probably participated in the Sydney Congress, for she was on the NSW committee of the NEF until 1942.<sup>26</sup> This World Congress contributed much to new educational thinking in Australia, as one strand of cultural modernism beginning to permeate the Antipodes.

Benjamin's educational background helped her win publicity in 'women's pages'. In April 1939, an illustrated magazine article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported her bold innovation of a drop-in city playroom where children could paint and play with educational toys. Her English experiences had qualified her to experiment with 'modern methods', asserted the article:

Nobody is better equipped by temperament and experience for introducing modern methods among children than this versatile enthusiast, who worked for ten years in the East End in conjunction with the London County Council. Organising dramatic clubs and playrooms, assisting at Girl Guide and Brownie camps, she was also engaged by the Y.W.C.A. to produce for their dramatic circles, and lectured on different aspects of the theatre.<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin also advanced the broader cultural arguments for children's theatre and succeeded in finding allies sympathetic to her cause. Her desire to create a superior form of children's entertainment would have resonated with others opposing strong currents of philistinism and anti-intellectualism in the relative isolation of the Australian dominion. Benjamin could position her work both as a form of progressive educational development, in tune with the modernising of education according to children's real developmental needs, and as an important contribution to cultural development.

Thus in 1940 she appeared alongside other cultural luminaries speaking at a conference on 'Culture in Wartime' organized by the Central Cultural Council in Sydney. These included poet Mary Gilmore, writers Miles Franklin, Frank Dalby Davidson and Dymphna Cusack, artist Will Ashton and composer Edgar Bainton. Her paper first outlines the concept of children's theatre and then develops the broader cultural argument: 'If we are to build a theatre in Australia with appreciative audiences who will show interest in and lend their support to what is good, we must expose our children to the best, plays as they are now being exposed to the finest music'.<sup>28</sup> Thus Benjamin sought to influence and gain support from both educationally progressive circles and the wider cultural and political interests.

### **The development of the Theatre for Children**

Rosemarie Benjamin began energetically promoting her ideas from the time she arrived in Australia and was soon giving talks to the Jewish Youth Theatre League (May 1937), broadcasting on the ABC and producing scenes from 'A Midsummer Nights Dream' in a Shakespeare Festival in March 1938. An illustrated article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 'Women's Supplement' headlined how 'Sydney borrows ideas from Moscow' in establishing theatre for young people, followed a fortnight later by a short review of the 'Young People's Theatre' performance of 'Robin Hood':

Formed with the object of presenting suitable plays to children with an adult acting cast, the Young People's Theatre, recently created by Miss Rosemary Benjamin and the enthusiasts she has gathered around her, gave a sprightly rendering of Mary Gay's dramatic adaptation of 'Robin Hood' at the Independent Theatre club rooms on Saturday afternoon. A large number of children, with a sprinkling of adults, showed by their interest and applause that this type of

entertainment is assured of success, especially when acted in no condescending manner. Most of the performers were members of the Independent Theatre or Bryant's Little Theatre.<sup>29</sup>

This production was in the hands of Doris Fitton whose Independent Theatre became a legendary Sydney drama institution. The evidence suggests that Benjamin, rather than 'gathering enthusiasts around her', was dependent on other energetic theatre spirits to stage productions, and find suitable actors and venues. The next year Fitton again produced 'King Melon Comes to Town' for the Young People's Theatre, as Benjamin was now calling her venture. The *Herald's* Women's Supplement described the performances and the children's reactions in a full page illustrated article. She clearly had a talent for garnering support, backed by her ability to impress with her London credentials and her Moscow experience:

I formed a Theatre for Children in London after meeting Natalia Satz and studying the management of her theatre. John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft, Sybil Thorndike, Noel Coward, and many others all promised their help, and we had a most successful launching. Here in Sydney I started the Young People's Theatre and the appreciative response we have already had from children is encouraging us to go on with the work.<sup>30</sup>

Collaboration with others continued. By 1941, Benjamin was working with Thea Rowe and her theatre at Circular Quay, giving performances of 'Peter and the Pirates' by Eleanor Witcombe. Rowe was another pioneer of Sydney little theatres known for her solo costume performance of British folk-songs. Later, she would tour extensively giving school performances of Witcombe's plays with the Lavers' short-lived Children's National Theatre. However, Young's slim biography mentions nothing of Benjamin or children's theatre.<sup>31</sup>

From the early days, Benjamin promoted her 'Children's Theatre Club' as an auxiliary educational activity that remained a feature of the theatre for most of its life. The Club was intended to strengthen children's identification with theatre activities, with members (such as Ruth Fink) acting in plays they had developed, and signifies how dedicated Benjamin was to developing a theatre culture, not simply providing entertainment. The Club was nonetheless a means of bolstering audiences, with free tickets given for the best responses to plays by audience members.

Benjamin was yet to establish a theatre company operating out of its own premises and appeared to be more engaged in building public interest in her ideas. During the war years, the project seemed to stall, with a hiatus from about 1942 to 1944. Though she occupied the Northcote House studio in 1944, Benjamin continued to hold performances in other venues including the Scots Church Assembly Rooms.

Benjamin typically dissembled about her difficulties in explaining the theatre's development. In one version of events she claimed that the theatre formed in 1939 but closed in 1943 for lack of funds, re-opening in 1945 when it gave 35 performances to audiences averaging 200 children.<sup>32</sup> Later she said that that the theatre had been mainly financed by the musician, John Kay, 'who devoted his income to it but lost heavily' when the theatre closed in 1945 for fear of an infantile paralysis (poliomyelitis) epidemic.<sup>33</sup> Such glimpses of her difficulties testify to the tenuous nature of the enterprise in financial, personal and professional terms.

In fact, 1944 saw a surge of publicity about new performances of 'King Melon' and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' and registration of the business name 'The Theatre for Children' and the move to Northcote House. There were Christmas performances of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', 'The Reluctant Dragon', 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'Katherine and Frederick'<sup>34</sup> and this activity continued through 1945.<sup>35</sup> These plays were soon established as the Theatre's most popular and memorable productions. Lynn Campbell<sup>36</sup> played many of the leading parts and became Benjamin's close colleague for the duration. The theatre reached new heights of success, exemplified by illustrated features including pages in the popular *Pix* magazine.<sup>37</sup> At

the same time, parallel developments appeared in Melbourne that acknowledged the Sydney movement.<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin's difficulties did not discourage her advocacy to both theatrical circles and educational authorities. She persuaded the Central Cultural Council in 1940 to pass a long resolution endorsing the aims of her children's theatre and through the aegis of the Teachers' Federation recommended her enterprise to the Minister of Education. The primary object was 'to stimulate the child audience to active interest in the value of the theatre by presenting, with an adult acting cast and good artistic dramatic productions' while stimulating a love of literature and the development of critical judgement.<sup>39</sup> The Minister subsequently endorsed the Theatre for Children as a suitable educational development and Benjamin was then able to claim that in her publicity, though she did not follow through this opportunity to carry her work into schools. In reality she catered to inner Sydney, finding captive audiences in institutions like Barnardo's Homes. Tapping the vast potential of school audiences would have required a different kind of venture to which she was perhaps not suited.

In the immediate post-war years, the Theatre for Children enjoyed its greatest success with numerous newspaper stories reflecting her effectiveness as a publicist. These articles sometimes emphasised audience participation as a novel element in her approach. Children were invited to interact with the actors after the performance and to comment on and criticise what they had seen:

The Theatre For Children believes in audience participation. The audience is invited to criticise the plays, players, and direction. The children relish this. The other day after a performance of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', children surrounded the King and asked some difficult questions. You remember that Hans Andersen caused the weavers to pretend to weave a fabric for the King that would be visible only to the wise. They received gold for weaving nothing, for everyone was afraid to say they could not see the Emperor's new clothes. After the performance, one little boy told the King that the weavers would not have attempted to deceive him 'if he had paid them a decent wage'.<sup>40</sup>

In May 1947, the *Herald's* Weekend Magazine featured an illustrated article that bears the marks of Benjamin's skilful promotion, for this outlined the concept of children's theatre, promoted the idea of 'audience as critic' and described the children's audience reactions to several performances including the popular 'Reluctant Dragon'. There were other illustrated stories that year in the same magazine pages. Yet with success came a more critical appraisal. One thoughtful review of Doris Fitton's staging of several plays placed Benjamin's pioneer work in a larger context of influence:

In Australia to-day, as when Mark Twain mentioned it forty odd years ago, the vast educational value of children's theatre 'is but dimly perceived and but vaguely understood, but perhaps it will presently come to be'. Yes, the value has been recognised here in small, sporadic ventures which have generally failed, both artistically and financially, because of the much more culpable failure of Australian Governments and Departments of Education to give the theatre-for-children principle ardent financial as well as 'moral' support.

Rosemarie Benjamin, who has made a lifelong study of theatres for children, notably in London and in Moscow, staged a season of children's plays at the Assembly Hall a year or two ago. Partly because of 'money troubles' and partly because of the unsuitability of the Assembly Hall for any kind of polished stage presentation, the season was a disappointment to many people who had expected this venture to begin an intensive move to make the youngsters of this generation the intelligent theatre audiences of to-morrow.

But the principles of the movement were good, and a new children's theatre, which Doris Fitton has begun at the Independent Theatre with a series of Saturday afternoon performances, has

absorbed those principles into the objectives of this new offshoot of the Independent's brave business.<sup>41</sup>

Thus Benjamin's influence was acknowledged even as she continued to struggle with the question of venues and actors, trying experimenting with outdoor performances in the city in conjunction with the Children's Library Movement. There was further collaboration with the Independent Theatre, though Doris Fitton's memoirs make no reference to these years of cooperation with Benjamin, reflecting perhaps a clash of personalities. Fitton exhaustively lists the Independent's productions for children, which were mostly directed by Haydee Seldon, and which became more frequent after 1957 and Benjamin's death. Fitton looks back with regret that children's theatre 'failed to prosper'.<sup>42</sup>

In 1949 Benjamin returned to England to study developments there under the auspices of the British Council. In February 1951 she spoke about her theatre to the British Commonwealth League at the Minerva Club, Brunswick Square, stating she was 'in England to exchange information and obtain new material, with the co-operation of the British Council and the Arts Council'. Material in her archive suggests that she also visited Europe and North America.

Returning to Australia by air in November 1951, Benjamin's views were reported on arrival by the *Herald*. Though children's theatre was established in Denmark (and elsewhere on the evidence of the archive), she had been disappointed: 'There is no organised children's theatre movement in England, but a lot of work is being done in a private way. Each county has a Drama Supervisor who arranges for mobile shows to visit the schools.'<sup>43</sup>

It seems she was cool about such developments, for in England she would have found that 'creative drama' had come far along through the work of Peter Slade<sup>44</sup> and the formation of the Educational Drama Association. There is no evidence that she entertained the possibilities of educational drama any more than those of mobile theatre.

Moreover, there were other voices speaking with authority on theatres for children, and other organisations providing performances. Allan Ashbolt, later an arts producer, reviewed the situation, noting the problems of catering to children of different ages and applauding Eleanor Witcombe<sup>45</sup> whose plays for children were then launching her long career as a screenwriter. Benjamin is compared in somewhat patronising terms:

Eleanor Witcombe has tried, on the whole successfully, to put local conditions, speech, people and history into plays, to make plots and characters intelligible to children, to use a simple and clean-cut approach that avoids any hint of grown-up patronage or condescension.

Other organisations, of course, have been doing an excellent job, even though none has yet discovered or encouraged a dramatist of Miss Witcombe's calibre. Rosemarie Benjamin's little playhouse near Circular Quay looks after tiny-tots and juniors; the Woollahra Open-Air Theatre stages some refreshingly uninhibited romps during the summer months; and, at the Independent, Haydee Seldon maintains a high standard in adaptations from run-of-the-mill fairy stories.<sup>46</sup>

Thus by the mid-fifties, Benjamin's was one among several ventures for young audiences, competing with each other and with cinema and before too long, television. Yet she must have felt her efforts were not in vain. In early 1955 she was still the indefatigable publicist, with a flurry of correspondence before recurrence of serious illness and her hospitalisation for several months in late 1955. Then Northcote House was sold and she was forced to close the theatre. Her illness worsened and she eventually returned to London where she died in June 1957.

## Conclusion

Drawing on her papers and contemporary newspapers, this article has sought to develop an appreciation of the Sydney Theatre for Children as an ideal and cultural enterprise to which Rosemary Benjamin dedicated a good part of her life. Benjamin's movement for children's theatre contributed to, as it was carried along by, the creative currents of the war-time and post-war Sydney theatrical scene that pre-dated subsidised professional theatre and the educational drama movement.

Perhaps like other experiments in children's theatre, Benjamin's project was only sustained by her dominating personality and strong convictions, yet sustained it was for some twenty years until 1957 when the organisation faded after her death. Her genius was promotional rather than organisational, for the evidence suggests that she relied in the early years on others such as Thea Rowe and Doris Fitton to mount productions.

Benjamin's approach to children's theatre was distinctive in combining theatre and progressive education values, and she was of her time in being able to express a coherent vision in these terms without felt polarities or contradictions. She was committed to creating an authentic form of theatre but one whose main impetus was the 'new education' of the nineteen-thirties and its respect for children's creative and imaginative life. Her approach represented emerging modernist understandings of education based on developmental psychology, and these forces later led to the incorporation of drama into the formal curriculum. The Freudian ideas informing Benjamin's psycho-dramatic understanding retained their power in educational contexts for many years.

Yet the reality fell short of the vision. She lacked the organisational genius of Joan and Betty Rayner whose experiments in youth theatre from 1929 to 1931 taught them the difficulty of establishing 'little theatre' for children, when they quickly realised the problems of reaching larger audiences, sustaining the theatre financially and achieving professionalism in performance.<sup>47</sup> It was only after long years abroad performing as 'wandering troubadours' that they returned to Australia to establish their mobile Australian Children's Theatre, travelling ceaselessly across the southeast of the continent to bring performances to school audiences. If the Rayners found educational authorities more amenable to children's theatre in the 1950s, this was certainly due to the earlier efforts of Benjamin and others in earlier decades.

Compared with the adaptable Rayner Sisters, Benjamin hardly changed the fundamentals of her approach and adhered to her Russian ideal of state-sponsored, adult professional performance. In fact, her little theatre barely resembled its model. Audiences were always small and she struggled financially and depended on the willing hands of amateurs. Whereas the Rayners drew deeply on folklore to fashion an imaginative cultural pluralism in their performances, Benjamin never moved in her Freudian convictions about myths and fairy tales. The Rayners discounted this position as they discounted the value of audience participation so dear to Benjamin.<sup>48</sup>

There was a certain rigidity in Benjamin's approach and the high expectations she created as an advocate and ideologue were inevitably disappointed. A viable model of children's theatre needs to resolve the relationship to formal education but Benjamin never grasped the nexus, despite her winning the endorsement of state education authorities. It seems she did not entirely approve of the swing towards educational drama that she found in her tour of post-War England and further afield. If there was a reluctance to change, and a somewhat precious attitude, it may be traced to a deep educational progressivism and possibly a mistrust of formal education as an arena for her work. She could not conceive, as others could, of bringing theatre into the school.

Thus Benjamin should be remembered as an idealist and uncompromising advocate of children's theatre, 'selling the story' over many years with remarkable perseverance, consistency and effect. She was perhaps a better theorist and ideologue than she was organiser and producer.

Benjamin did not live to witness the changes that would transform the educational and cultural ground of children's theatre—the advent of television and the retreat of cinema, the rise of state-subsidised professional theatre and the incorporation of drama in the school curriculum. Yet as Milne concluded in 1998, as the dominance of theatre in education faded there were new opportunities for the revival of children's theatre in its own right, beyond the specialised youth theatre that professional theatre companies have pursued as an integral part of their work. Surely Benjamin would have been gratified to see how the movement for young people's theatre has managed to endure. Thus, an appreciation of enterprises like Benjamin's 'Theatre for Children' has much to contribute to a richer analysis of the youth theatre as a movement, to an understanding of the dynamics involved, not only organisational and artistic capacities but also the role of powerful ideas and their public advocacy.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Milne, 'Theatre in Education: Dead or Alive?' in Veronica Kelly (ed.) *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998) 151-161 and Geoffrey Milne, 'Setting the scene: commercial and amateur theatre before 1953' in *Theatre Australia (Un)limited. Australian Theatre Since the 1950s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): 116.
  - <sup>2</sup> Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Joan and Betty Rayner: Strolling Players* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1972).
  - <sup>3</sup> Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama: From the 1830s to the late 1960s* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970): 387.
  - <sup>4</sup> Gavin Bolton, 'Changes in Thinking about Drama in Education'. *Theory into Practice*. (1985) 24: 151-157.
  - <sup>5</sup> The archive comprises scrapbooks, press cuttings, scripts of plays, musical scores, log books and production records, business records, promotional flyers, correspondence concerning the theatre including letters from children, photographs, personal notebooks, typescripts of articles and collected children's theatre material from overseas. There are also several surviving costumes.
  - <sup>6</sup> The digitization of Australian newspapers by the National Library of Australia has enabled a comprehensive search for Benjamin's public advocacy over the period and enabled cross-referencing with material preserved in the archive.
  - <sup>7</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, *The Story of the Theatre for Children*, Script and 35mm filmstrip produced for NSW Primary Schools. Sydney: Filmstrip, 1949?). Online: [digital.slv.vic.gov.au/dtl\\_publish/pdf/marc/3/2125895.htm](http://digital.slv.vic.gov.au/dtl_publish/pdf/marc/3/2125895.htm). Viewed 19 May 2014.
  - <sup>8</sup> 'Natalya Sats', *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. Online [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natalya\\_Sats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natalya_Sats). Online (17 March 2012).
  - <sup>9</sup> Poster for Young People's Theatre performances, April 1936, listing the members of the Joan Luxton Children's Theatre Company, and 'A Children's Theatre' in an article 'Theatre in Britain', *The Argus* (1 October 1927):8.
  - <sup>10</sup> 'Theatre for Children: Miss Benjamin's Plans', *Courier Mail*, (27 January 1937): 11.
  - <sup>11</sup> 'Gertrud Bodenwieser', *Australian Dictionary Of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 1993). Online: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bodenwieser-gertrud-9532>. Viewed 13 November 2013. There are two letters from Gertrud Bodenwieser to Benjamin in the archive which indicate they had a close relationship, with Bodenwieser seeking to validate and encourage her friend's achievements.
  - <sup>12</sup> 'Sydney John Kay', *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. Viewed online [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney\\_John\\_Kay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_John_Kay) (13 November 2013).
  - <sup>13</sup> Robert Lloyd and James Waites, 'Robert Lloyd interviewed by James Waites' [sound recording]. Transcript. (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004): 39-40.
  - <sup>14</sup> Alice Garner and Ruth Fink Latukefu, 'Ruth Fink Latukefu interviewed by Alice Garner', [sound recording]. Transcript. (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2010). Fink Latukefu recalls '... there was a children's theatre run by a woman called Rosemary Benjamin at Reiby Place, and she encouraged us to write plays. So in 1941 I'd written this play 'Tramps Become Gentlemen' and acted in it. And so there was an outlet, not in the school itself, for things like that to be more creative.'

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- <sup>15</sup> In 1946 Northcote House also became the home of The Metropolitan Theatre established by director and producer May Hollingworth whose Metropolitan Players from 1943 had brought dramatic entertainment to troops in camps around Sydney. It endured until 1949. Online: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hollinworth-may-10522>
- <sup>16</sup> These include a number of papers not cited elsewhere in this article: Rosemarie Benjamin, 'Mummy, is it true?' *Studies in childhood*. (Sydney: N.S.W. Publications, 1938), Rosemarie Benjamin, 'A Theatre for Children in Sydney' *Soviets Today*, Australian Friends of the Soviet Union (November, 1939) and Rosemarie Benjamin, 'Theatres for Children' *Education*, Journal of the NSW Department of Education (November 15, 1940). Other references follow.
- <sup>17</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, 'The Turnip' and 'Katherine and Frederick' in Barton, F. K. (ed.). *Nine Plays for Play Days (for Upper Primary Classes)* (Sydney: Shakespeare Head Press, 1947) and Rosemarie Benjamin, *The Theatre for Children Presents 'Rumpelstiltskin'* (Sydney: Witton Press, 1950).
- <sup>18</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, *The Story of the Theatre for Children*. Sydney: Film Strip Sydney.
- <sup>19</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, 'Fears, Fantasies, Guilt and Symbols'. Unpublished typescript (Theatre for Children archive, no date). No authorship is claimed on this typescript and it may not be Benjamin's original work.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard Courtney, *Play, Drama and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Dramatic Education*. (London: Cassell, 1968): 260. This work was substantially revised in 1989.
- <sup>21</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, *The Story of the Theatre for Children*, 2.
- <sup>22</sup> Richard Courtney, *Play, Drama and Thought*, 44-48.
- <sup>23</sup> Henry Caldwell Cook, *The Play Way: An Essay in Educational Method*. (London: Heinemann, 1917).
- <sup>24</sup> During the war years Benjamin served briefly as a committee member of the New Education Fellowship (NSW Branch).
- <sup>25</sup> Isaacs, Susan. The nature and function of fantasy. *Int. J. Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 1948, 29, 73-97.
- <sup>26</sup> Newsletter of the NSW Chapter of the New Education Fellowship, October 1942, noting her resignation.
- <sup>27</sup> 'A Theatre for Very Young People: Sydney Borrows Ideas from Moscow', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Women's Supplement (3 April 1939): 13.
- <sup>28</sup> Rosemarie Benjamin, 'Theatres for Children', in *Culture in War-time*, Proceedings of a conference held on September 1, 1940 in the Rooms of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, Sydney. (Sydney: The Council, 1941).
- <sup>29</sup> 'Robin Hood: Enterprising Venture—Young People's Theatre', *Sydney Morning Herald* (17 April 1939): 6.
- <sup>30</sup> 'King Melon Comes to Town: Fun at the Children's Theatre', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Women's Supplement (2 July 1940): 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Phillip Young, *Thea Rowe: Scenes from a Life* (Sydney: Phil Young, 2007): 61-63.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Topics of the Week', *The Mercury* (Hobart), (18 October 1947): 45. This article noted that 'several organisations are determined' to provide performances for children in Sydney.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Eager Audience', *Sydney Morning Herald* (26 April 1946): 14.
- <sup>34</sup> 'A Theatre for Children', *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 January 1945): 5, and 'Christmas Plays and Music', *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 December 1944): 5.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Children Enjoy own Theatre: New Project Succeeds', *Sydney Morning Herald* (2 December 1944): 9, and
- <sup>36</sup> Lyn Campbell was the stage name of Colin Campbell McIntyre (1904-1976) who trained as an artist in the Julian Ashton School and worked as a respected Sydney interior designer until the nineteen sixties. In the nineteen thirties he assisted Louise Lightfoot with costume design for her First Australian Ballet. He met Benjamin during the war and soon became a leading collaborator in stage design, production and performance of leading roles including the much-loved 'Reluctant Dragon', 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. It seems that Benjamin intended Campbell to continue the theatre's work, since he was named as 'Honorary Co-director' by 1955. Campbell's copies of photographs taken of 1953-1954 productions identify some fellow actors Brian Vicary, Trevor Hulme, Barbara Maxwell and Faye Levii.
- <sup>37</sup> 'New Theatre for Child Audiences', *Pix Magazine* (3 February 1945): 18-19.
- <sup>38</sup> Innes Cameron, 'Children Love Play Acting—And Should have Their Own Theatres', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 10 July 1945): 8.
- <sup>39</sup> Central Cultural Council, Minutes, 10 December 1940.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Eager Audience', *Sydney Morning Herald* (16 April 1946): 14.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Children's Theatre', *Sydney Morning Herald Magazine* (7 October 1947): 11.
- <sup>42</sup> Doris Fitton, *Not Without Dust and Heat: My Life in Theatre* (Adelaide: Harper and Row, 1981) 180.

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- <sup>43</sup> 'Theatre for Children, Health for Mothers' *Sunday Herald* (11 November 1951):17.
- <sup>44</sup> Peter Slade, *Child Drama*. (London: University of London Press, 1954).
- <sup>45</sup> Eleanor Witcombe spent forty years spent working as a dramatist and scriptwriter from about 1941. Her papers document her involvement in a wide range of dramatic work including nine projects for children's theatre and 47 children's radio drama projects (Papers of Eleanor Witcombe, 1941-1987, National Library of Australia, NLA MS 7739 [manuscript] and the separate papers of the Children's National Theatre, National Library of Australia, NLA MS 8418).
- <sup>46</sup> Allan Ashbolt, 'Plays for Children', *Sydney Morning Herald*, (27 August 1953): 7.
- <sup>47</sup> Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Joan and Betty Rayner: Strolling Players*, 29-33. While it may be true that the Rayner's early 'Young People's Theatre' from 1929 to 1930 was the first theatre for children in Australia, Clark's account (133) somewhat uncritically accepts their view that there had been no developments of significance before the sisters brought their mobile theatre back to Australia in 1949.
- <sup>48</sup> Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Joan and Betty Rayner: Strolling Players*, 144.