

Children's theatre has ceased to be just an entertainment. *Smita Nirula* takes a look at the various schools of thought on theatre for children

# Of dreams, fantasies and reality

What is children's theatre? Is it theatre of children, done by children, for children? Or is it theatre done for children? Or is it a both?

Rohan Agashe, founder of Pune's Theatre Academy and a strong exponent of Grips method is a believer having adults perform for children. "When I direct a children's play, I want my actors to become children and just act like them," he says. "To have them act like children could be a mockery."

Though the plays are rooted in reality, there is a difference between the realistic and the ideal and one must not mistake one for the other, he emphasises. The children, for whom the play is geared, must always be kept aware of the fact that the play is, after all, only a play. One of the ways of suggesting this is to have adult actors playing the roles of children and thereby alienating the audience from the actual performance.

There is a school that disagrees with this. "Children have a very rich fantasy life and are constantly play acting," says Bubbles Sabharwal, one of the founders of Kidsworld. "Children are always indulging in dramatic play and this ability is what should come to the forefront. Life is serious anyway, and especially with the influx of the media, the child's imagination has been curbed a lot. Therefore creativity is something that has to be nurtured."

The Grips method is based on the theory that theatre goes beyond sheer entertainment and can be used as a medium of awareness among children and teach them to concentrate on and deal with the daily situations of everyday life.

Highlighting this rather serious ideology is the very creed of the Grips method: "To circumvent ghosts and goblins, gnomes and fairies, miracles, magic and false illusions and to concentrate instead on the day to day situations and problems of life; the aspirations and dreams of the child equipping him to handle this with dexterity."

"No!" cries an anguished Bubbles. "This is exactly what we want to inculcate in child-

en—the ability to dream. They enjoy fantasy and fairy tale worlds. There is a whole enjoyable process of identification with real life characters through fantasy characters...life is too short and too harsh to let our children face it at an early age...don't take their childhood away from them!"

While not sure that stripping away the glorious phantasmagorical world of children's fantasy is a good idea in today's age of harsh realities, one cannot help but make a passionate plea: let our children have their dreams and aspirations. Let them live for a while in a world where the sky is rainbow-hued and there is a pot of gold at the end of it. The harsh realities of our world will be their future soon enough.

A strong trend towards Theatre-in-Education (TIE) has led to the formation of various TIE-Companies. One is the National School of Drama (NSD) TIE-Co. Started on an experimental basis at the National School of Drama in 1989, the idea has grown to involve various other schools and institutions. Active audience participation is an integral part of TIE programmes. While this is an important component in distinguishing them from more traditional children's theatre, the serious nature of the subject matter often ends up as

ence participation, and within the script there is enough flexibility for the audience to question attitudes, to muse with a character or to solve problems that a character or situation presents."

The idea of combining a scripted play along with impromptu dialogue, however, needs to be handled competently in order to be effective. The audience has to be involved in a very clever manner otherwise one can reverse one's intention and end up with totally alienated viewers.

The reverse side of the coin is the theatre of fantasy. Here too, there are two schools of thought. One school thinks children's minds should be set free to create their own sur-

**"Children have a rich fantasy life and are constantly play acting. Life is serious anyway, and especially with the influx of the media, the child's imagination has been curbed a lot"**



A fun-filled education experience: Ruchika's Panchtantra

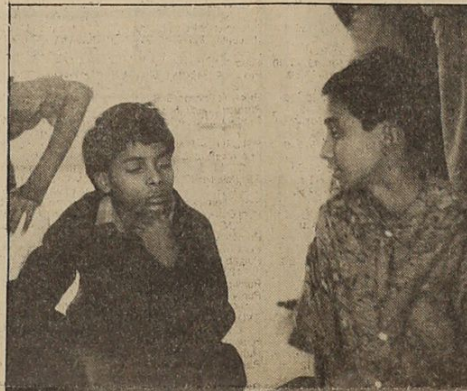
moralistic, ideological

Urmila Jain, coordinator at the NSD TIE-Company feels that "scripts evolve out of audi-

roundings and the strength of a production lies in the story line. The other school stresses lavish sets, make-up, costume, lighting and music.



Teaching children to dream: A workshop by Rekha Jain's Umang



Grappling with the problems of daily life

Often condemned for belonging to the latter school, the Kidsworld people feel that the censure is unwarranted. The "Wow!" in a child's eyes as the

curtain goes up is well worth all the hours and effort spent in creating a chimerical world full of strange beings. Opulence is not an effort to cloak a weak

production. Opulence is a part of the strength of the production.

The other, more stark school feels that a child's vision is limitless. Why then, proceed to put barriers on imagination? Ruchika's production of *Panchatantra* was a happy mix of the two. Elaborate yet practical props and costumes, adults doing a play for children, acting as adults and animals, and minimal and easily assembled sets combined with excellent acting and directorial ability made for a fun-filled, participative, education experience.

So who decides what is right? And what is the purpose of children's theatre? According to Bubbles Sabharwal, "We have to deal with problems related to the children themselves. For instance, if someone has a stammering problem, interacting with other children often cures the child of the insecurity that is obviously the cause. Children interact with children, they learn a lot more

from their peer group than they would from adults."

With the onset of summer, children's theatre workshops will mushroom in the Capital, and we will see a blend of all the schools of thought. The Delhi Children's Theatre, annual festival, *Rani Aur Pintu*, based on the Grips-method production by the TIE, are doing the rounds of the Capital.

Umang should be coming through with production-oriented workshops. Kidsworld is producing an original script in Hindi, *Jungle Book Se Aage...*, the Sahitya Kala Parishad is bound to proceed with its annual children's festival of dance, theatre and art.

And so on and so forth. Parents will bless the workshops and productions, children will go through these microcosmic worlds and the rainbows will shine again. Will there be a pot of gold at the end for you?...

## BRIEFINGS

### THEATRE

**MAVALANKAR AUDITORIUM:** 40th Annual Festival of Delhi Children's Theatre; *Daan Pench, Khusia Batori Nahi Bati Jati Hai*, and *Balmiki Pratibha* presented by D C T Training centres; 10 am and 6 pm; Rafi Marg



People of Marina Beach

### FILMS

**JAPAN CULTURAL CENTRE:** *Nin No Shikaku* (Thirteen Assassins) directed by Eiichi Kudo; 6.30 pm; Kasturba Gandhi Marg

### EXHIBITIONS

**NATIONAL MUSEUM:** *Drawings from Asia*, an exhibition of drawings from the collection of Asia and Pacific Museum, Poland; 10 am to 5 pm; Janpath  
**AIFACS:** Paintings by S Krishnambal; 12 noon to 7 pm; (till April 22); Rafi Marg

**INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE:** *Tiger Crisis*, an



By Rakesh Kumar Gupta

exhibition of watercolours on silk by Gajanan Singh of the Ranthambore School of art; Max Mueller Marg; (till April 24)

**TRIVENI GALLERY:** *Moods in Landscape*, paintings and collages by Sharad Sovani; 11 am to 7 pm; Tanson Marg; (till April 30)