

August 27, 1997

To: Jeanne Klein  
University of Kansas

Dear Jeanne,

I've just finished reading "A Feminist Dialogue on Theatre for Young Audiences Through Suzan Zeder's Plays" [in the spring 1997 issue of *JDTC*]. Thanks for sending it to me. What a big, juicy subject to tackle! I applaud your exploration—and don't know where to begin in terms of responding. The frame: Two women talking about feminist theory, applying the analysis to three plays by a female playwright, and focusing on three sets of relationships between characters in the plays. Should I feel left out? I know: I sound like one more guy whining about not getting any respect. As a man (a white man no less; thank God I'm gay), I felt another blow to the head. Dear, dear Jeanne: I accept your impatience with me ahead of time. But if there is no room (or interest?) in the discussion about how a man (or male characters) might fit into the issues of feminist theory, then I wonder how a man can properly respond. I say that because the frame (and some of the subjects that came up) made me wonder if we're talking about feminist theory in plays written for young people—or the gender of the writer writing those plays? Semantics? It's a mistake to generalize writers and their work by gender. While the *gender* of a writer can't be changed (without a lot of trouble)—plays change. For me, that should be the focus. Because of my gender do I feel excluded? In a way. Poor me. I suppose this letter could turn out to be a ghost looking for himself, but I'm going to try and find myself in all this.

The subject of feminist theory and its presence (or lack of) in the field of children's theater is an interesting flag to raise. Maybe it's because we are in the latter part of a decade where the arts in general have taken a measurable beating in American culture by our government and a few loud critics—but part of me felt cut up into even tinier pieces by the questions raised in the dialogue on feminist theory. I was struck by the frustration raging beneath the surface of the dialogue and wondered if left to our own divisive theoretical selves, if we wouldn't just blow each other up anyway in one metaphorical way or another. On a gut level, I related most strongly to Suzan's response to the in-depth analyses of her plays. As a playwright, she impresses me (again) with her sheer courage. The way the dialogue was set up or conducted or edited, it seemed one thing for certain: if these three plays did not conform neatly to the principles of

feminist theory, then there's something wrong with the plays. What the theory (as suggested in the dialogue) doesn't seem to acknowledge, is that a play (and I would argue most great works of art) is seldom a celebration of the perfect, politically correct paradigm. Taken to the extreme, it reminds me of a panel at a recent Words Into Pictures conference called "Get Me A Greek Orthodox Paraplegic African-American Deaf-Mute Weight-Challenged Gay Woman . . . The Political Correctness Debate." While it's clear that you and Gayle (whom I've never met) are operating from the most honorable of intentions, I think you miss the mark when you analyze the plays. Art that engages me is often about our struggles with our flaws. I've often found that in my experiences of listening and reading about what other people make of my plays or productions of my plays—that I learn more about the RESPONDENT than what's being responded to. This seems most painfully obvious if you look at which movies sell the most tickets every weekend. (I raise this as an analogy because the cinema may be the closest thing we'll ever know to a "National Theatre"). Movies successful at the box office tell a shocking story about the tastes of mass culture and little about the STORIES of mass culture. In a similar way, I learned more about Jeanne Klein and Gayle Austin and your passionate quest for answers to feminist values in art than I did about the three plays by Suzan Zeder. And while I found the analysis fascinating and in certain instances breathtaking in its lucidity, the discussion ultimately never rose above a discussion *about itself*. The plays—even the two that seemed to fit most the Feminist Theory Model—were slippery and difficult to pin down. This is where I would ask—no, plead—that we consider very carefully how plays are approached and what lenses (borrowing Suzan's phrase) we use in determining whether or not they qualify as feminist. Every play has its own peculiar, wonderful, elusive doors that lead to rooms filled with floating walls and hidden layers of inner and outer spaces. The challenge is not to predetermine where the pot of gold might be buried—but to be surprised by what we find. There was a feeling in reading the analysis of the three plays that you and Gayle had written your own maps rather than discovered the maps that each play had to offer.

I also found it interesting that you seemed to strongly intuit the need for the rest of us to understand how this information might be put to practical use while Gayle seemed satisfied that the exploration was practical in and of itself. I agree with you: in order for this information (or the essence of the exploration) to make its way onto pages and stages (forgive the rhyme), we're going to need your help or we're going to have to agree that this is fascinating information that will only appeal to people who enjoy theory as theory. I think many of us are on a perpetual search for ways to integrate what we're learning into our daily lives and our work.

Early on, Gayle writes "a feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women." While I absolutely loved that direct, clear definition—I don't think that was what the dialogue "proved." There was deeper agenda—or wish—at work in this analysis. In fact, I don't think Gayle's initial definition is even true! If it were, I would be chagrined to admit that a play with all male characters who spend the entire time talking only about women—no matter what the point of view . . . well, I don't think this is the kind of play that Gayle had in mind. And if that's not the definition, then what? In a letter to the Editor in the 8/24/97 *New York Times Book Review*, Miranda Thompson of Los Angeles writes, "If only more American men would realize that the transition from sexist to feminist values is a human rights struggle that all decent men and boys should support. . . ." She goes on to call sexism a "moral disease." (This letter was written in response to a review written by Russell Banks on the book *Our Guys* by Bernard Lefkowitz). Understanding feminist values as a human rights issue makes sense to me and this may be the point at which I part ways with your estimable company because I feel as a culture we are splintering ourselves, forced to choose between causes—which charities to give to, which places to do volunteer work, which political party to support, which religion to seek, which philosophy to raise our kids by, which schools to send our kids to, and even—hopefully—which plays to attend (will I see an adaptation of a classic book or a new play I know nothing about?). With this plethora of choices that have the potential to shape our roles in the communities in which we live, I cannot condone setting up another Land of Either/Or. Does this mean I'm not a feminist? I believe that I am. Do I write feminist plays? I believe that my body of work shows compassion toward people who are struggling with their flaws on their journeys toward discovery. There are great plays that do not adhere to feminist theory and there are terrible plays that do. And sometimes, there is a play that seems to freely embrace feminist theory (among many other things) and shimmer with its own particular and strange grace. I don't believe that a play's success on its own terms depends on which paradigm it maintains. Frankly, it is less academic than that.

I laughed out loud when you asked, "why haven't you heard of Suzan Zeder" (no offense to Suzan). I think it's absurd to assume people have heard of almost ANY playwright. We're simply not a crowd that inquiring minds want to know. Isn't the question really "Why haven't you ever heard of the PLAYS by Suzan Zeder?" Or ANY play written for young audiences? Go to any library and look at the shelf of plays. Plays for young audiences? There will maybe be a few anthologies of plays for children. That's it. Go to schools. Kids are not reading our plays. We're lucky if they're seeing them.

On page 117 you talk further about the need to make women playwrights more visible to those outside the TYA family. Hmm. The agenda feels murky again. What about more visibility for men playwrights "paying attention to women?" Or more to the point, what about more visibility for PLAYS that pay attention to women? It seems to me that it's the play that we should be talking about, not the gender of the playwright. Maybe all this comes down to labels and semantics because while I respect and agree with you and Gayle about the need to pay attention to women, even more important is the need to treat women and men (boys and girls) as equals. To me that is the real issue.

I must take great exception to what you write on page 117. On one hand you voice an advocacy for new plays that made me cheer. Yet almost in the same breath you talk about the lack of dramatic criticism and dismiss the reviews in national publications as "descriptive reports written so as not to offend the small circle of TYA family." I appreciate the demand for good dramatic criticism (and I agree)—but please do not underestimate the devastation that can result in the life of a play when it is misunderstood, badly produced, or simply not liked. The stakes are very, very high. This is a huge country with very little active exchange i.e., seeing each other's work—and so every bit of information that reaches producers affect a play. I say this because many playwrights do not have a safety net, a salary—they only have a handful of pages with two or three years worth of fingerprints and dreams. While playwrights are—and must be—tough and responsible, it is a major accomplishment to get one, two or three productions of a play. The field is fragmented into so many factions regarding what makes a play "good"—that again, context becomes everything. In reading reviews for adult theater, a relationship is developed over time between reviewers and readers. We learn whom to trust by pitting our own tastes against what we read. What amazes me about reviews is how often people assimilate the reviewer's opinion, even quoting them as if they've seen the plays! They form an *opinion* based on the reviews instead of an *experience* based on the work itself. What's especially odd about dramatic criticism for TYA is that often the person doing the writing is not the intended audience. The audience experience IN THE MOMENT is something that can only be reported, it can't be replicated. I'm just not so sure that a review puts the writer (or the audience) any closer to the play itself. If anything, I find that it often does the opposite by focusing on the intellectual experience. It's ironic that while so many people working in theater for adults would like to do away with critics completely because of the incessant damage and disappointments, you're asking why we don't have what they don't want. To be honest, I've held my breath when my plays have been "reviewed" in national publications because I knew the response would depend on who was responding. Believe it or not, even a descriptive paragraph can kill interest in a

play. It can also be very, very helpful. Especially in a market driven by a bottom line that keeps getting more and more bottom, every production of a new play is a gift to the writer and to the evolution of that play.

I found the questions ("baby questions") on pages 118-119 very interesting and a little overwhelming. I could write a lengthy response to any one of them. But a few things jumped out at me. Fantasy characters? Shakespeare did it throughout his body of work. It seems to me that Gayle uses the word "theatricalism" disparagingly as if it were one more thing to apologize for. Of all the things in my work that has come under fire, I never imagined that "theatricalism" might be added to the list. It's one of the things I love about the theater—not just theater for children—but all theater. Theatricalism is another language, it's another tool that we have in theater to tell a story. I love seeing a play and feeling totally satisfied by the theater in it—by that I mean, I love when a play takes place IN THE THEATER. Theatricalism and the status quo? I don't get the connection. If anything, it's the opposite; in an age of ultra-realism, theatricalism is often a challenge for audiences of all ages. I don't think young people "require" it any more than adults "require" realism. The question for me is always "What does the STORY require?" In either case, it must be done brilliantly or it doesn't matter.

I find that your (and Gayle's) admirably concise focus in the dialogue puts restrictions on the plays in a way I don't think you intend. I shudder to think of writing a play that must be one thing and one thing only. If we want to reflect our culture, record our times, shine a light on our futures—a play will be interpreted in many different ways by many people who will attempt to make meaning out of voices, action, gesture. Throughout a play's unpredictable life, it will mean many different things—and everyone will believe his/her experience is right! That is finally a play's ultimate mystery, not its failure.

Sending you my best wishes,  
James Still  
Venice, California

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