

25 November 1997

Dear Jeanne and Gayle,

After reading your dialogue and the responses by Suzan Zeder and James Still, I feel the need to add an additional perspective to the conversation. As you know, I'm not a scholar of children's theatre, but I am familiar with several varieties of feminist theory and have applied some of them, in combination with other critical tools, to specific plays. I've also talked with Jeanne at some length about her use of feminism in discussing children's theatre, and in theorizing new approaches to its production. I've admired Jeanne's efforts to put her ideas on the stage, not as a way of imposing feminist ideas on children, but to open up their experience of theatre and make it as interactive and creative as possible.

I was not surprised to hear Jeanne call herself an "empirical structuralist" for I know she is most comfortable with those varieties of feminism that identify structural elements in a play and highlight them to make the audience aware of a play's underlying assumptions—something that kids are quick to note and discuss in her post-show sessions. Her studies of specific audiences supply the empirical data. Nor was I surprised to hear Gayle speaking from a variety of feminist positions, keeping in mind (as she does in her book *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*) that the best scholarly results are produced by a careful match of approach to text. It seems to me, therefore, that while the main focus of the discussion hinged on the identification of various mother-daughter relationships, how they originated, and how they demonstrated options for the audience, other elements in the discussion begged to be discussed further, using perhaps different vocabularies. One "paradigm" isn't enough; even the notion of using a paradigm may be counterproductive.

Let me give an example. After the wonderful series of "baby questions" probing the current status of children's theatre and scholarship about it, Gayle proposes identifying in three plays by Suzan Zeder "the Mother-Daughter figures, biological or not, and their relationships in each play, and also . . . the Mothers of Choice, the Imposed Mothers, and the Father figures of each daughter."¹ She continues, "And then let's trace each Daughter's identity formation and her journey to find her identity." Right away I'm both intrigued and irritated. What has determined this approach? Why are the characters divided into these

categories? Later Gayle makes an important connection to Nancy Chodorow's theories of mother-daughter bonding and separation, work that builds on earlier psychoanalytic theories of identity formation. It's familiar territory for anyone who's worked in feminism, and I can see that it provides a good place to begin. As we get into the first two plays, the labels are valuable for sorting out the child-characters' bewildering array of options. Soon, however, the labels themselves become confusing. Why, in *Mother Hicks*, is Jake Hammond an "inappropriate Mother"? Is it necessary to co-opt all figures, male and female, to a position judged on whether they are good or bad nurturers? I'm not sure Chodorow would say so.

But, you might say, the point here is to see these plays differently—in other words, to put the focus just on the issue of nurturing because it is so often ignored. All right. Let me give another example that will probe a bit further into your unspoken assumptions about identity formation. As the discussion continues on *Mother Hicks*, Gayle comments, "The influence of Hicks on Girl's identity formation is that Hicks is allowing and encouraging her to find her own name, and is saying, 'Your name is within you, go and find it.' And to me, that is the most unusual way of portraying a Mother of Choice's influence on the identity formation of a Daughter. It's rare in life. It's almost unheard of in drama or literature. It's fresh, it's exciting, and it is by my value what a 'good mother' is."² Now I'm in complete agreement with Gayle about the value of this scene for audiences, young or old. Suzan's work strikes me as powerfully innovative in this way. But let's be careful here. In the two long passages taken from *Mother Hicks*, nowhere does Suzan Zeder say or imply that Girl's identity is already *within* her. Suzan does say that Mother Hicks admits she could help Girl find her name, but this finding is not treated as a search for something that already exists. To imply that might suggest that essence precedes experience, and I suspect from what Suzan has written that she doesn't believe that. I don't think either of you believe it either. Most feminists don't. Here the psychoanalytic paradigm has tripped up the discussion, and cultural feminism needs to look outward to radical feminism. In other words, rather than putting the characters in structuralist categories separate both from the author's intentions and the audience's expectations, we might talk about how these characters reshape familiar cultural behaviors. To re-cast one of your own questions, how does Suzan make gender visible? How does *Mother Hicks* make us aware that Girl is actively constructing herself? Or, remembering that radical feminism points us beyond the family romance to broader economic and cultural influences, is there a sense in which Girl is finding ways to choose her path among the limited set of options that her environment offers? The assumption that Girl's identity is simply dormant or repressed seems too simple here.

Suzan seems to be saying much the same thing about your critique of *Do Not Go Gentle*. Here, though, the crux is your focus on finding a single protagonist, i.e. following the linear model of realism so amenable to patriarchal readings of identity formation—flawed hero makes mistake, suffers, comes to a realization, acts (or doesn't act) on it. I'll refrain from speculating about the alternative Suzan offers to the single protagonist; she makes her own case here much better than I possibly could.

I hope no one will take my comments as a dismissal of your dialogue or the need for feminist scholarship in the field of children's theatre. Far from it! I'm not sure James Still appreciates what Gayle means when she says, very simply, in her book: "A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women."³ James seems to interpret this to mean that now we don't write about, speak to, or hear men any longer. Hence he calls for attention to a more "universal" "human rights struggle": "my body of work shows compassion toward people who are struggling with their flaws on their journeys toward discovery." I don't question James's intentions or the accuracy of his statement, but he is back on the ground that liberal feminism shares with linear realism, i.e. a frame of reference that assumes, first, an essential subject, and, second, that given our flawed identities as subjects, our tasks are those of fixing ourselves and redressing those inequities that remain in society. As Jeanne says early in the dialogue, this attitude takes the gains made by equal opportunity programs as equivalent to a fundamental dismantling of patriarchal culture. Although women, minorities, and gays and lesbians have made gains, of course, that dismantling has not yet occurred. So for me the gender of the playwright, like the race of the job candidate, is still a painful issue, one it is necessary to keep visible. Our struggle is not just with our flaws but with the limitations that a homophobic, racist, misanthropic society imposes on *all* of us, limitations that hurt *all* of us—white, heterosexual men too. What's encouraging is that Suzan Zeder and James Still both seem to be working on these issues thoughtfully and creatively.

I sense that James is right about the need to pay attention to what Suzan calls the "boxes" that often determine how plays are written, distributed, and staged. Here James is speaking radical feminism by paying attention to economic and, in this case, institutional factors. The word "box" is not a metaphor, i.e. another image or paradigm by which to organize one's response to Suzan's plays.⁴ Instead, it's a metonymy, a figure that reaches out beyond the text to the world and how the world is shaping that text. Again, Suzan has said it better: "The challenge to all of us concerned with making and talking about theatre is to keep the theory grounded in the *practical world* of the sensory experience of theatre" [emphasis added].⁵

I believe that all of us in this discussion are "on the same page" in many ways. But, as Jeanne notes, our uses of language shape who and what we understand each other to be and know. By framing the discussion in an accessible way, you have opened a door that I hope will invite others to begin talking and writing about children's theatre in feminist terms. It's essential that we find ways, as the two of you have done here and as Suzan also has in *Do Not Go Gentle*, to share the focus among multiple characters. Perhaps the feminist teaching model of the person in dialogue, rather than the lecturer who fills empty vessels, is appropriate here too. Please continue this discussion. It's a vital, and often overlooked, element of theatre research.

Iris Smith

Notes

1. Jeanne Klein, Gayle Austin, and Suzan Zeder, "A Feminist Dialogue on Theatre for Young Audiences Through Suzan Zeder's Plays," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 11.2 (Spring 1997): 120.
2. 125.
3. Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990) 1-2.
4. Klein, et al., "Feminist Dialogue" 131.
5. 137.