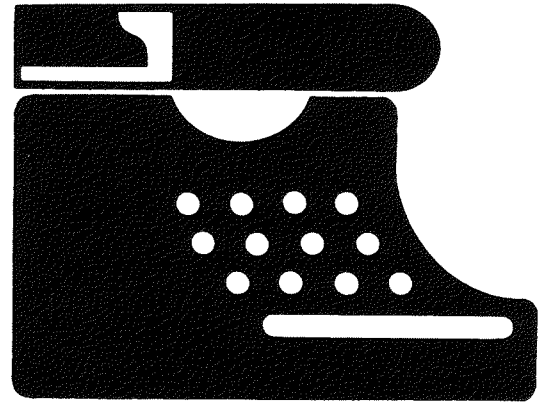


# Teachers & Writers



Bi-Monthly • November-December 1988

Vol. 20, No. 2

## MAKING THEATER

### Developing Plays with Young People

by Herbert Kohl

THEATER DOES NOT TAKE PLACE IN REAL TIME and consists of creating convincing illusions of possible realities. The world of illusion is a very familiar and comfortable one for young people. Imagination—the free play of the mind with possible worlds, beings, and events—is easily engaged wherever children come together. For many children one of the saddest aspects of getting older is the closing down of the imagination as the price of fitting into adult-controlled worlds such as school and the so-called workplace. Too often, growing up means closing down.

This need not be the case. The imagination can and should be nurtured throughout life and the sense of play natural to childhood can be a continuing source of pleasure. We do not have to “grow up.”

Theater is one source sustaining the life of the imagination. For many young people I have worked with, as well as for me, participating in the creation of theater is a source of joy and an escape from the dull routines that school too often represents. Improvisation, acting in classical or modern scenes and plays, and performing plays of one's own all engage the imagination.

Over the last twenty years, I have been playing around with theater in my classes. I had no training, I am not a good actor, and I can't memorize lines. Yet I love the stage, and decided when I was teaching in Berkeley in 1968 to try to teach drama. Seeing and reading plays and discovering Viola Spolin's *Improvisations for the Theater* were my only qualifications to teach drama. I taught in order to learn how

to teach, and my students were wonderful about my fumbling attempts to teach what I was afraid I couldn't do.

One of the students in my first improvisation class, Phil Krauter (who was sixteen at the time), understood how tentative and insecure I was about teaching theater. When acting, he had an intensity and focus that sometimes scared me. There were times when I wasn't sure he was in control of himself, yet he always knew what he was doing with his face, voice, and body. Once we did an improvisation on going mad. Phil went mad, or at least I thought he had. He frothed and foamed and rolled on the floor, and then, like a paranoid, started threatening people. I insisted that all the other students leave the room, resolved to give up teaching improvisation, and set out to bring Phil back to reality. He was taller and stronger than I. I was afraid of him, but somehow my fear has always been tempered by my stubborn refusal to allow myself to be intimidated. I grabbed him and tried to shake him back to sanity. Phil just looked at me and laughed. He was in control all along. He had been acting, and told me that if I wanted to do serious theater I had to deal with serious actors.

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HERBERT KOHL is the author of many books, including *36 Children; Reading, How To;* and *A Book of Puzzlements*. This article is excerpted from his new T&W book, *Making Theater: Developing Plays with Young People*.

Phil is involved in the theater professionally now, but most of the young actors, playwrights, set designers, and technicians I have worked with are not. Yet I hope that their experience with being a part of theater has given them a love for the stage, a continuing sense of playfulness, and an intelligence about performance that will provide lasting pleasure for them and create an audience for Phil's work and for the work of people who are seriously engaged in entertainment and education through performance.

The goals of doing theater with young people are:

- to provide group experiences that break out of the competitiveness (and its tendency to isolate people) that dominates school life

- to learn to be part of an intelligent audience
- to learn how to speak well and control gesture and movement

- to introduce young people to classic and modern drama
- to learn how to create environments for performance
- to have fun being part of the illusory world of theater.

The fun of doing theater with young people is that, playing off the traditions of classic and contemporary theater, myth, fairy tale, and other literature, one can spin out new worlds and share them with others. First approaches to plays are magical. You start with young people who will not be who they are, with some characters, an empty stage, perhaps some props or costumes, and a story outline or theme, and then bring them together to the point where you are ready to share this created world with an audience. When you start out, you can't tell what the final play will be like and that uncertainty, coupled with the experience of living through the development of a performance, is an invaluable educational experience. Performance is not like filling out a workbook sheet or doing what an adult tells you. It emerges from within and from learning to become part of an ensemble. Consequently it provides a great opportunity for personal growth and for the development of group solidarity. And since the stage is illusion, it provides the rare opportunity for a shy child to take center stage, a timid one to be brash, and a bully gentle. A number of students I've worked with have had severe stuttering problems, but on stage they speak and sing beautifully. In some cases, they were even able to transfer the confidence they developed through theater to their everyday speech. You never know what power and energy may emerge from young people as soon as they step into character.

### **The Four Alices and Their Sister Susie in Wonderland**

Last year I did a production of *Alice in Wonderland* with five- to ten-year-old students at the Acorn School in Point Arena, California, where I was teaching. Actually it was a production of *The Four Alices and Their Sister Susie in Wonderland*, a country-western and blues version of *Alice* that owed its spirit and some of its story to Lewis Carroll.

Initially what I had in mind was a simple puppet show version of *Alice in Wonderland*, that had been read to the children during lunchtime over the course of several weeks. I made a very crude posterboard puppet of the Mock Turtle, modelled on Thai stick puppets. There was a moveable hand and head and I played with it in class. The idea was to provide an accessible, easily constructed model of a character you could talk through. I thought the whole *Alice* puppet construction and show would take no more than an hour a day for a few weeks.

During free time and art class the kids made puppets— Alice after Alice after Alice, with one March Hare, a few White Rabbits, and an occasional Mock Turtle, Carpenter, Mad Hatter, Duchess, or Queen. As one of the girls explained to me, "After all, there are so many Alices in the story that you can't make just one." She gave me three puppets: a tiny, tiny Alice, an Alice stretched large and out of proportion, and a regular-sized everyday Alice.

I didn't know what to do with all the puppets, and initially thought that we might end up with three or four troupes performing their own versions of *Alice* for each other and possibly for the parents.

We did improvisations with the puppets. The idea was to become familiar with the puppet characters in different situations before reading Lewis Carroll's story again and adapting scenes from it. It was a lot of fun to have many Alices talking to each other and to all of the other characters in ways that freed them from the structure of *Alice* and yet kept them within the spirit of Carroll's work.

During one of the improvisational sessions, a girl in the class said that the puppets were boring. She wanted to be Alice, not just play with an Alice puppet. Everyone in the class agreed and I realized that the play would have to move in this new direction.

I abandon my plans if students come up with more interesting and challenging ideas. There was no harm in trying to do a live *Alice in Wonderland* with the group. So, naively, I asked the children who would like to be Alice. There were five volunteers, one of whom dropped out and opted to be Alice's older sister. So it was up to me and Deborah, the co-teacher, as well as Susan, our aide and the music teacher, to decide who would be Alice. I begged off doing it on the spot and decided to think through the criteria for selection that night.

The more I thought about who should be Alice, the less I could choose and the less I wanted to. I had adapted classical plays for student performance before. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I had twelve Pucks, and since most of six- and seven-year-olds wanted to be Puck, dividing up the role gave each of them an opportunity to speak a few lines of Shakespeare. Besides, Puck is everywhere, and in the spirit of Puck there was no reason why he couldn't have twelve faces. In *Macbeth* we had six or seven witches. After all, what was one witch more or less to the spirit world? So why not four Alices? Any book that has magic mushrooms, talking rabbits, and an entire monarchy consisting of a deck of playing cards is perfect for fantasy and elaboration.

The next day in class I made the suggestion that we have four Alices. The kids were disappointed. They wanted to experience the competition between the four girls who wanted the role. However, I believe that education works best in the context of cooperation and joy, and I had no intention of yielding to their will. Children often pick up bad habits from the culture they are born into; besides, I have never felt obliged to perpetuate things that tear some children down and limit their aspirations.

So it was going to be four Alices and their older sister, but how could we do it in a way that would be convincing and exciting for the children? I discussed that problem with the whole group. We agreed that Alice, like any other person, has many aspects to her character, so there was no reason why four of the parts of Alice couldn't be on the stage at the same

time. In other words, the children didn't want to take turns being Alice or split up the role. They all wanted to be fully Alice, and Susie wanted to have a part that was just as prominent as Alice's. I remember turning to the Alices and saying, "But which one of you is the real Alice?" They all raised their hands and shouted, "Me!"

At this point Susan Spurlock, the class aide and music teacher, started strumming on her guitar and someone in the room sang "Will the real Alice please stand up" and the girls responded, in song, "That's me." I suggested that Susan and the Alices compose a song called "Will the Real Alice Please Stand Up." Here's what they came up with:

### Will the Real Alice Please Stand Up

(Note: During this song the whole cast, with the exception of the Alices, sings everything but the words in quotation marks in the chorus parts. They are sung by the Alices.)

I'm so pretty  
It's a pity  
My neck's so long  
From dusk to dawn

*Chorus:*

Will the real, real Alice  
Please stand up.  
"That's me." That's who?  
"That's me." Uh huh.

Blond hair  
Blue eyes  
Can you tell me why  
I grow so high

*(Chorus)*

My friend is mad  
And he's so glad  
The tea's not hot  
And the mouse is in the pot

*(Chorus)*

What's the matter  
With the Mad Hatter  
Haven't you heard  
He's crazy as a bird

*(Chorus)*

Why me  
Can't you see  
I'm so glad I'm Alice  
In my palace

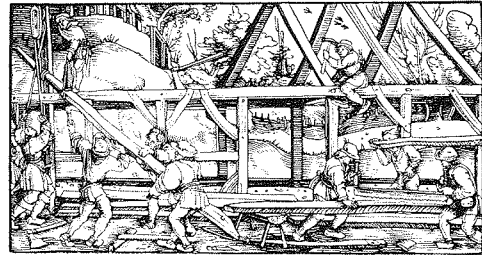
*(Chorus)*

When, a few days later, the children and Susan performed the song, I realized we had moved from a simple puppet show to musical theater. I had to struggle with how far to take the play, how much time to spend on it, and where to fit it into what was already a very full educational program at the school. These problems are common when you are about to get carried away with doing theater and have other educational demands at the same time.

The first thing I decided, after talking with my colleagues, was that the play could not completely take over the work at

the school, even though I was tempted to drop everything else and do *Alice* exclusively. So to do the whole thing, I compromised and spent a half-hour to an hour a day for about three weeks, and then an hour or two a day for a week, and finally two full days before the performance. Fortunately Susan and Deborah, my co-teacher, were willing to be part of the creative process. And we had parents who, as the production developed, contributed generously to costumes, makeup, sets, and props.

Most teachers are not lucky enough to collaborate with other teachers. However, there are many ways in which similar situations can be created. Two classes, working together with parent volunteers and high school and junior high school students, can provide the backup needed to mount a major production, and one teacher and his students, with a few parent volunteers, can also do very fine children's theater. And plays performed in the classroom or for another class can be just as much fun as big productions. Theater can happen anywhere and on any scale and still be wonderful.



For me the central aspect of doing children's theater is to enjoy the fact that it is children's theater and not professional theater. It has to be fun, and need not lead to performance, though if it does, it should play for a friendly audience of children, parents, and other friends, as well as take advantage of the freedom of not having to aim for a move to Broadway. It exists for the sake of the children.

*The Four Alices* developed gradually and by sections. The White Rabbits worked up a comedy routine during recess; the Mad Hatter's tea party gained and then lost "guests." The Mad Hatter's version of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" was rewritten by Susan and the students and turned into a jazzy tune that the four Alices danced to in chorus-line style:

Twinkle twinkle little bat  
How I wonder where you're at  
Up above the world so high  
Like a tea tray in the sky

*Chorus:*

Twinkle twinkle little bat  
How I wonder where you're at

Twinkle twinkle little rabbit  
Why is being late your habit  
You're always rushing here and there  
But never getting anywhere

*(Chorus)*

Twinkle twinkle big fat queen  
I wonder why you are so mean  
You always scream "Off with her head"  
But if you do it, she'll be dead

*(Chorus)*

Twinkle twinkle Mister Hatter and hare  
Teacups spilling everywhere  
Everytime you drink you switch your cup  
And then the dormouse fills it up

(Chorus)

Twinkle twinkle little Alice  
We never see you in a palace  
Wonderland, it is so strange  
When you're there you always change

(Chorus)

The whole outline of the play developed slowly and digressively. There was simply too much in the book for us to use on stage. Time constraints and the size of the class dictated that some things be eliminated and some be overemphasized. The overall outline was simple, too simple for some people, who wanted a finished script to work with from the start. Here is my working outline:

1. A narrator introduces the play and keeps it moving.
2. The Alices and their sister Susie are on stage.
3. White rabbits appear and do something.
4. The Alices and Susie follow the rabbits into Wonderland.
5. Bizarre things happen in Wonderland involving characters from the book and others the students might invent (one invented character at the Mad Hatter's tea party was called Dungeons and Dragons, a warrior who didn't know how to stop fighting and sat at the table stabbing and stabbing away at a tea biscuit, while shouting "Stagger, jabber, dagger, stagger, jagger. . .").
6. The Alices and the whole cast end up at the Court and the Court scene ends with the Alices shouting "You're nothing but a deck of cards."
7. The Alices return to the bank of the river and the unWonderland (the play almost ended this way but Susie didn't want to stay in the "real" world and so she provided the ending by saying, "It's boring here. I'm going back," and plunging down the rabbit hole a second time.).

The body of the play developed in sections, with the students picking their favorite parts. In this way everyone had great latitude of choice. In addition, all the sections of the play could be rehearsed independently (though the Alices and Susie had to rush around from group to group). That way parents and high school students could help fine-tune different sections of the work. I talked to our parent group and asked for help and patience.

For some of the adults and children, this piecemeal and improvisational approach to adaptation was frustrating. They wanted to know at any moment how the final product would look, but I didn't have the slightest idea. Part of helping people improvise plays is to encourage them to accept uncertainty and to realize that the whole endeavor is imaginative and fun; improvisational adaptation is a form of theme and variation on a classical play or story, or the development of an idea: it doesn't need to be predictable. Most of the children had little problem with that openness, but I had to work hard to convince the adults that a performance would emerge from our improvisations on *Alice in Wonderland*. However, I did provide structural diagrams of how the play looked as we progressed. Here is the final structure:

1. Overture and introduction by narrator.
2. Reality with the Alices and Susie.

3. The rabbits come on and do comic routine.
4. The Alices follow the rabbits.
5. Susie sings her song and then runs off after them to Wonderland.
6. They encounter the Caterpillar on a mushroom.
7. Then they encounter the Cheshire Cat and do Jabberwocky.
8. Then comes the Mad Hatter's tea party.
9. Then comes the Court at which the Mock Turtle leads "Won't you join the dance."
10. Then comes the confrontation between Alice and the Queen; Alice says, "You're nothing but a deck of cards"; and everyone throws cards into the air.
11. The Alices and Susie go back to reality.
12. Susie returns to Wonderland.

I created a script as we went along, improvising each scene over and over, exploring character, voice, and movement. At this point, I wanted the children to act rather than to memorize lines and recite them. Improvisation also provided alternatives on stage if students forgot the lines that they eventually were given. As it turned out, many lines were forgotten during the performances, but there was no panic and some of the best dialogue in the play emerged spontaneously when the actors were on the spot before an audience.

A week before the play, there were some children who still were not involved. By that time, the high school combo was rehearsing the songs with the kids and there was a need for sets and a tech crew. Some of the shy children were willing to do the tech work, and others had watched the rehearsals enough to decide how they would like to jump into the production. I've learned to add characters at the last minute and console children who find they can't deal with the pressures of performance, while redefining their roles to keep them in the process. There's always room on the tech and lighting crew, posters and programs must be made, and ushers might be needed. My goal was to involve everyone. If one of the children had not been engaged, the performance would have been empty for me.



We had one dress rehearsal, and spent two full school days dealing with the logistics of costumes, makeup, sets, props, etc. We did two performances, one for the school and one for the community. Then we had a cast party. The essential educational and emotional success of *The Four Alices* was not the quality of the performance, which I think was pretty good, but the fact that everyone played a part and knew that they made a contribution to the whole.

### On Cast Parties and Performances

When you do drama with young people, the first thing to plan is the cast party. The party has to be fun for the actors and technical crew as well as for parents and friends. Before beginning work on a play, I like to imagine the party, and think back from there to the steps necessary to get to that celebration. Thinking backwards in time allows me to anticipate what might go wrong and plan ways to avoid obvious mistakes.

First I imagine ways the cast party can fail. For example, someone might be sulking in the corner because he didn't get the part he wanted; or someone might be tense and angry because he wanted to participate but was afraid. Some parents might feel their children had been treated unfairly. Some students might feel that others had put them down for the minor roles they played, lines they forgot, or entrances they missed. The joy of being part of the theater can easily be lost in an atmosphere of jealousy and competition, and that's what I try to prevent. When doing theater with young people, you should pay as much attention to the pleasure of the participants as to the success of the performance. Successful cast parties become the criterion for the success of the whole theater program.

Moving backwards in time from the cast party to the performance, rehearsals, development of the script, and improvisations, try to imagine all of the mistakes that could prevent students from being part of an enjoyable experience that has contributed to their growth.

Some of the problems I've imagined emerging at the cast party are:

- A child who has refused to participate in the production stands in the corner sulking, or sneaks around the room spilling soda and insulting the actors. My fear of this makes me remember, even at the last possible moment, to push recalcitrant children into the production no matter how much they resist. Have them hold the script while you prompt, or have them knock on the stage three times to signal the beginning of the action, or have them put posters up in the community, take tickets, seat the audience, or be in charge of the costumes and props.

It doesn't make any difference how small the role is. What is essential is that every child have a sense of belonging, of being useful. Teachers have to learn how to create useful work for reluctant and scared children and to encourage them to take larger roles the next time around. Over the years, I've found that having a few unfilled jobs just before the performance provides the opportunity for even the most reluctant of students to help out and feel that the production could not happen without them.

- Jealousy is something to avoid at the cast party at all costs, even if it means four Alices, two Hamlets, twelve witches, or forty-eight dwarfs. Jealousy can spread throughout a cast party and throughout the class over the rest of the year, becoming a major impediment to learning. So I

try to devise strategies to avoid the star syndrome and all of the disappointments that can emerge if someone doesn't get the part he wants. Again, one of the guiding principles of young people's theater is that it is not a route to TV or Broadway.

One way to get around the problem of jealousy is to provide every student who wants a part with one he or she feels is appropriate, and not to care how much revision or adaptation this may involve. Some people have told me my attitude is foolish, that I should pay more attention to teaching students how competitive and harsh the world is. My response is that I don't have to teach that—the kids already know it. I prefer to provide them with the love, success, and communal feelings that are all too lacking in that hard world everybody wants to prepare them for.

- Moving from the cast party back to the dress rehearsal, I try to figure out what specifically might go wrong. Lines might be forgotten; props can disappear at the last minute; the set could be only half finished by curtain time. Students have to be told this, and how to fake it when something goes wrong. I like to show the performers how to recover from disaster. Some recovery methods are:

- To keep on talking no matter what you're saying
- To use a prop, examine something on the set, and in general mutter about waiting for something important to happen
- To step out and talk to the audience out of character
- To begin a conversation with another actor on stage
- To tell the audience to be patient, and show your composure.

All of these depend upon having one person in each wing who is prompting and can be turned to for help, and another person whose specific job is to follow the script and hunt down missing actors.

It's better to anticipate disaster than encounter it unprepared. If someone misses an entrance, it's always possible to produce an instant monologue or dialogue while the director runs around looking for the absent or absconded actor. With five-, six-, and seven-year-olds this is a particular problem, as urinary and bowel control tends to decrease as performance time approaches. When you and the actors on stage anticipate this, the scared and incontinent ones can recover, perform, and have a good time at the cast party.

- The details of a dramatic performance are as important to young people as they are to members of the Royal Court Theatre or the New York Shakespeare Festival. Children who don't like their costumes or makeup, or who feel that their props are cheap and unconvincing, spend time apologizing for them and can be bores at cast parties. Therefore, it is of particular importance to ask actors to participate in the designing of makeup, costumes, and props.

- Performing is difficult for children who don't understand the play, and that means not just their roles, but the whole of the drama. To be able to feel good about what they have been a part of, they have to know what it is all about. Improvisation, discussion, and diagrams help give everyone a sense of the whole. All of the actors should know what is happening onstage when they are in the wings. This is especially true if you have adapted a play to the needs and personalities of your actors. One technique I've used during rehearsals is to have members of the cast who are not on stage sit in the audience and watch the action. I also encourage them to help me with blocking (deciding on the positions

and movements of actors) and to make any suggestions for improving the performance. In addition, I act as a stand-in for the lead characters several times and have the actors watch from the audience so they can get a feel for what *they* might look like on stage. Then I suggest that the actors take turns directing scenes or parts of scenes. I encourage the fullest possible participation of the students in the whole process.

- Thinking of the cast party, you have to imagine the proud parents. Therefore you should think carefully about how to prepare an audience for student performance. A young person, who feels she or he has done very well and worked very hard, can be devastated by an offhand comment at a cast party. If your mother or father doesn't praise you, or if someone else's parents put you down, it can ruin the whole evening. For that reason, it is important to make it clear to parents that performance is part of the process of the development of imagination and, if necessary, make them realize that thinking that the school auditorium is just a step away from Broadway is not good for their children. Of course, the more you involve parents in small aspects of the performance and have them see and participate in improvisation, rehearsals, costumes, and sets, the more they will feel that they are part of what their children are doing. It is also good to involve them by having them prepare a potluck dinner for the cast party; after performing, children are hungry.

- A cast party can become a bore if only a few children get the credit for the performance. It takes a lot of effort to negate, at least in its most invidious forms, the gloating that children often indulge in when they think they're stars. Improvisations help because everyone gets to play all the roles in those informal exercises. If there are multiple performances of a play, I like to have different children play all the major roles in each performance. If the actors put down the tech crew, I'll turn off the lights and suggest the play be rehearsed in the dark. If they make fun of the prop master or

the kids in charge of sound effects, they might find themselves fighting with invisible swords or waiting on stage, in the middle of a scene, for the sound of a phone call that never comes.

The goal is to create a sense of community through theater, one that just might spill over to the rest of the time the class spends together and even to life beyond the school.

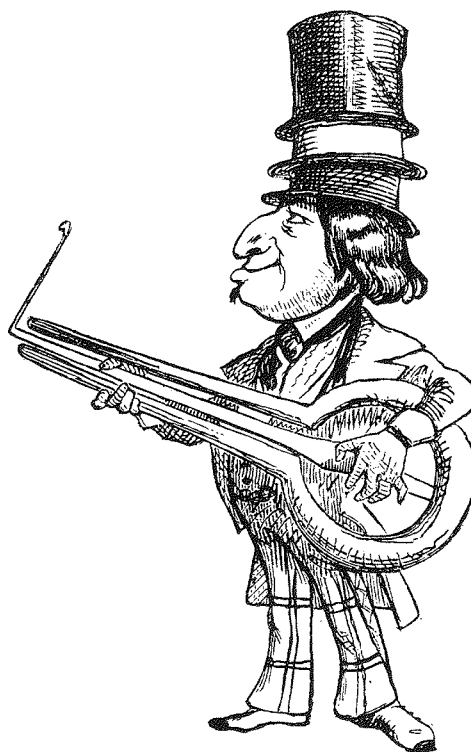
- No matter how hard you try, there will be some kids who hate the cast party and won't be part of the play. It is important to learn that there are times when it will be impossible to get everyone involved. Expect trouble, and don't let it destroy the whole process. Keep on trying to get the most reluctant ones involved in the next performance or in the cast party itself. They can plan it, serve food, call parents, set tables. If none of this works, offer them a piece of cake and suggest that there is a good part for them in the next play. Or back off and see if poetry, mathematics, science, computers, music, or dance might be their modes of expression. And plan the next group activity so that you might have a better chance of getting them involved.

Recently I've been playing chess with five- to eight-year-olds. We have a chess club that meets once a week and I set up games so students can learn some of the sophistication of the game. A few weeks ago one of my students, Galen, who's six, beat me and, as proud as he was, tried to console me for losing. I laughed and told him that the goal of teaching is to have your students be decent people who are better and smarter than you are. It was a pleasure to see him acquire chess skills and use his mind in such sophisticated ways. That feeling was the same feeling I have when I see my students on stage, playing with ideas and taking control of their voices and bodies in ways I could never do. There is perhaps no greater pleasure one can get as a teacher than that of stepping back and grinning like a proud parent at the cast party of a play that has worked for everybody. ●

## PLUG



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# WRITING RIDDLE POEMS

## Secrets Meant to Be Shared

by Nan Fry

ONE OF THE FIRST TIMES I USED RIDDLES IN teaching writing, I was working in the Poets-in-the Schools program with a fourth-grade teacher who had a strong interest in writing but who resented my intrusion into his class. The students, caught between two authority figures with different ideas about poetry, were rather tentative and subdued. The problem, I thought, was that the teacher had a formal, conventional view of poetry, while I had a looser, more free verse approach.

Because I was writing riddles myself, I brought some in. I asked the students to describe an object, animal, or natural force—or to imagine how it would describe itself—mysteriously but accurately. We had already worked on comparisons, so I encouraged them to use metaphors or similes. Their response was dramatic. They wrote quickly and were bursting with eagerness to read their poems. They listened to each other carefully and tried valiantly to unravel even the most obscure riddles. The teacher and I were delighted. The focus was off us and where it belonged—on the students and their work. Perhaps it was the feeling of having a secret—and of knowing the answer—that energized the students, making them eager to share what they'd written. A riddle, I realized later, is a secret that's meant to be shared.

I also realized that the joke was on me. Though I had seen the teacher as too traditional in his approach to writing, the most successful session I had with his class involved one of the oldest forms of poetry. Riddles first developed orally, so we don't know how far back they go in human history, but the earliest known examples were inscribed in cuneiform on Babylonian clay tablets around 2200 B.C. A riddle is featured in the Hebrew story of Samson's wedding celebration, and the ancient Athenians entertained each other with riddles at their feasts. According to tradition, Hesiod stumped Homer by asking:

What I caught, I left behind,  
What I brought, I didn't find.  
What was the catch?

(Lice)

The riddle of the Sphinx (What walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening? Answer: a human, who crawls as a baby, walks on two legs as an adult, and uses a cane in old age) is integral to the story of Oedipus who, like all tragic heroes, had to learn what it means to be human. Riddles occur, often with

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regional variations, in folk literature, nursery rhymes (such as "Humpty Dumpty"), and fairy tales (such as Grimm's "A Riddling Tale"). Riddle poems flourished during the Middle Ages, and some of the finest were composed by the Anglo-Saxons, some time between the seventh and the ninth centuries.

Some modern and contemporary poems that focus on familiar things—a green pepper, a door, a pair of shoes—have much in common with Anglo-Saxon riddles. In both cases, the poet uses metaphor and precise descriptive details to present the object in a fresh, surprising way. Depending on the amount of time I have and the class's interests, I sometimes use riddles as part of a sequence that includes object or persona poems or both.

First I emphasize the use of sensory detail and metaphor. As I've said before, a riddle must be both mysterious and accurate. Mystery makes it challenging, and accuracy makes it fair. Without careful and detailed observation, the audience is apt to feel cheated or frustrated. For example, the fourth grader who wrote:

I am white. I fly. I sing and dance.  
I feel so good. I fly over the sky.  
Who am I?

knew she was describing a fairy, but the rest of us didn't have a clue. It's probably better to encourage students to write about real things or beings, but even these can result in vague riddles. Here, in contrast, is a poem, also by a fourth grader, that is accurate but not mysterious:

I'm grey and weigh two tons.  
I always carry a trunk.  
I have wrinkled legs. And I kill peanuts.

In spite of the lack of mystery, there is much here that is delightful: the internal rhyme, the word play, the distinctive voice. I especially like the precise detail of the "wrinkled legs." It shows how accurate observation can provide a fresh perspective.

In presenting riddles to a class, whether of fourth graders or college students, I often begin with one of two warm-up exercises. Both involve collaborative list-making. In one case, I might ask the students to come up with a list of comparisons, encouraging them to start with their immediate experience: what does the blackboard look like? What does the air conditioner sound like? This grounds them in the senses and also gets them thinking metaphorically. Or, if we've already worked on comparisons in class, I might talk to the students about how poetry derives much of its energy from strong action words and ask the class to come up with a list of such verbs (*creep, slither, ooze, etc.*). This helps them to think concretely about movement and to imagine the sensations that accompany it.

In selecting examples to bring to class, I've found that students respond particularly well to riddles by their peers. I usually also bring in a contemporary poem or an Anglo-Saxon riddle. In discussion, I touch briefly on points made in the warm-up exercise, noting the use of sensory detail, metaphor, or strong verbs. I don't have any hard and fast rule about this sequence: sometimes we discuss examples first and then go to the prewriting exercise; at other times I start with the warm-up. Either way, most of the class time is spent with students writing and reading their own riddles. I haven't tried having a class do a collaborative poem, mainly because I feel that a riddle results from an intense contemplation of an object by an individual:

I live in a clear, hard shell.  
 With my sticky underside  
 I curl round myself.  
 A single foot extends  
 to the toothed edge.  
 If you pull me,  
 I'll bite myself,  
 peel off  
 in strips  
 for you.

When I wrote this riddle, I was staring at a roll of scotch tape on my desk. I tell students this in order to stress the importance of looking at ordinary objects and to show them how observation can release the imagination. To encourage the use of concrete details, I sometimes ask questions that focus on the senses: what would it feel like to be a blade of grass or a truck tire? What would it see? Hear? Smell? How would it move? What would its friends or enemies be? Would it have any secret knowledge?

Do they run with the wind?  
 Or do they flee from it?  
 They sprout up as yellow  
 blossoms of sun  
 Then they turn grey and  
 slip into the breeze  
 Why do these proud creatures  
 run? These lions of the  
 sun

(Dandelions)

—*Junior high student*

I look at the world  
 Through one large eye.  
 I have a long body,  
 I reach up toward the sky.  
 My children are your food,  
 My beauty is your pride.  
 I do not move,  
 I cannot hide.

(Sunflower)

—*Junior high student*

Things go through me  
 The wind takes me over  
 I can be many different sizes  
 I can be soft or very brittle  
 I can be many different colors  
 But I am always there  
 You can never get rid of  
 me—I always come back.  
 I am hair.

—*Junior high student*

Riddles disorient us. They focus on the ordinary and make it seem mysterious. Often they do this through metaphor. On the other hand, figurative comparisons can also make the remote or alien seem familiar, even cozy. The Anglo-Saxons had a particularly metaphoric turn of mind. The language they used in their poems was full of kennings, compounds that could be substituted for common words. For example, instead of saying "ocean," an Old English poet might say "whale-road," "gannet's bath," or "the wind's playground." The sun might be called "the world-candle," the body a "bone-house."

A golden jewel on a sea of blue,  
 A sea filled with white fish.

(Sun and clouds)

—*Junior high student*

My house is not quiet, nor am I loud.  
 Our lord set us within deep walls,  
 shaped the road we travel together.  
 I am swifter, sometimes stronger  
 than my home; he will last longer.  
 At times I may rest; he must run on.  
 I dwell in him as long as I live;  
 if we are parted, I will surely die.

(Fish and river)

—*Anglo-Saxon*

Both of these riddles seem like expanded kennings if we see the sun and clouds as sky-swimmers and the river as the fish's house. Kennings emphasize the similarities between the natural and the human, perhaps making the expanse of the ocean or the sky seem less threatening. At the same time, their authors recognize other species as equal partners sharing the world with us. A similar view informs this riddle by a fourth grader:

I can live for 1,000 years.  
 I touch the clouds every day.  
 I drink water without a cup.  
 Who am I?

The answer is a tree, which emerges in the third line as a kind of giant straw. While the first two lines emphasize the great age and height of the tree, making it seem almost mythical, the third line brings us down to earth with a familiar yet unexpected detail.

To see a tree as touching the clouds suggests awe more effectively and sensuously than a direct statement could. Emily Dickinson said, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" good



advice for a riddle poet. Dickinson herself wrote riddles, including the anthologized “I like to see it lap the Miles,” which uses extended metaphor, and the less familiar “Drab Habitation of Whom?,” a series of comparisons for a cocoon. In “Metaphors,” a riddling self-portrait, Sylvia Plath uses a series of comparisons to explore her contradictory feelings about being pregnant.

Other poems that use metaphor within the list structure include Wallace Stevens’ “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” and Craig Raine’s “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home,” which is a delightful series of metaphorical riddles. Here is the Martian’s description of a common household object:

In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,  
that snores when you pick it up.  
If the ghost cries, they carry it  
to their lips and soothe it to sleep  
with sounds. And yet, they wake it up  
deliberately, by tickling it with a finger.

It is, of course, a telephone.

Metaphor can be humorous in riddles. Charles Simic’s “Watermelons” is—without the title—a delightfully playful poetic enigma. A similar sense of whimsy informs some of the Anglo-Saxon riddles. In one, a plow “sniffs along” like a dog with its nose to the ground. The Old English poets employed sly sexual innuendo as well, as their two “Key” riddles show. (One is more explicit than the other, but both are decidedly phallic.) Older students often enjoy such double-entendres.

Be careful with me—  
I’m rigid and frail,  
transparent and small.  
I’ll be hard to find if  
you let me fall.  
Sometimes it’s hard for me  
to get in but simple  
to get out. I can  
hurt you real bad if  
you don’t know what  
I’m about.  
I suck and kiss Iris  
real tight, but break  
us up before you go  
to sleep tonight.

(Contact Lenses)

—Tony Howard, *Corcoran art student*

I live in a dark house.  
The white gate opens,  
but I never leave.  
Rooted to the floor,  
I flop and wag,  
poke into crevices  
slide into ridges,  
bathe in juices.  
Though I’m soft  
and tender, I’m also  
a weapon. A whip.

(Tongue)

—Nan Fry

Riddles frequently use paradox, another source of their ability to mystify and disorient us. Such seeming contradictions that make a surprising kind of sense stretch our minds, enabling us to imagine other possibilities beyond the literal or logical. Perhaps because it pushes against the limits of language, paradox is often associated with word play.

I’m a circle.  
My coat is glass.  
I have two fingers  
but I don’t have hands.  
I run every day  
but never walk.  
I tell you something  
but I can’t talk.

Built on a series of contradictions, this poem was written by a fourth grader who had recently come from China. Perhaps because English was still new to him, his metaphors are delightfully fresh—his clock has fingers rather than hands. The final paradox expresses a theme that occurs often in riddles, especially when they give voice to the voiceless.

Many first-person riddles are spoken by creatures or things that are usually silent. I suspect that this aspect of the poems appeals to young children who are bursting with things to say but are so often told to be quiet. Perhaps riddles help them to consider or explore other ways of communicating—including the written word. One fourth grader, writing about a book, said:

I talk a lot but don’t have a mouth.  
I show a lot but don’t have hands.

She had not seen the clock riddle or this Anglo-Saxon poem:

I was by the shore, near the sea-wall  
at the surging of waves,  
settled firmly in my first state;  
few saw my solitary home,  
where at dawn the brown wave embraced me.  
I never knew I was fated to speak  
mouthless over the bench in the mead hall,  
to exchange words. That is the wondrous part,  
uncanny to a mind that cannot understand  
how the knife point and the right hand,  
the man’s mind and the blade together,  
pressed me purposefully, so that I should,  
while we two are alone,  
bring a message meant only for you,  
speak it at once, so that no man may  
spread far and wide our savings.

(Runestaff or reed pen)

By allowing the silent to speak, riddles enable us to see the world from a non-human point of view. We are thrown off balance, not only because we don’t know who or what is speaking, but also because we think of speech as a uniquely human ability. As a result, we experience a sense of dislocation, seeing our familiar environment from a strange, new perspective.

I am soft and fibrous.  
You wear me, although you don’t like me.  
I am beautiful in myself,  
But when I like something,

I stick to it  
Because it is my Maker.  
I was born in a dry, windy place,  
where no human lives.

—*Junior high student*

Beaten by a hammer, my head was hurt  
by sharp tools, scraped with a file.  
Now I swallow all who stand up to me.  
Surrounded by rings, I strike hard  
at the hard thing, pierce the hole from behind.  
In the dead of night, I drive out the guard  
that keeps my master from his pleasure.  
I pull back my nose, last barrier  
to this hoard, when my lord desires  
to take his treasure, left by those  
slaughtered at his command.

—*Anglo-Saxon*

I found the first of these riddles particularly disorienting. It takes an ordinary nuisance—a fuzz ball on a sweater—and presents it in surprising, even religious language. I didn't understand the last line, but when the poet explained that it was about a dryer, it made sense—and it also made that common appliance seem exotic and mysterious. In the Anglo-Saxon poem, the speaker is a key. It not only tells us how it was made and how it works, but it also seems to judge the lord who gained his wealth (and perhaps his woman) through slaughter.

The sea fed me, water concealed me,  
and waves covered me as I rested close  
to earth, footless, my mouth open to the flood.  
Now some man wants to feed on my flesh.  
He doesn't bother with my bony rind  
but rips open my side with a sharp  
blade and eats me, ravenously, raw. . . .

(Oyster)

—*Anglo-Saxon*

By providing a persona, riddles give writers an opportunity to explore feelings difficult to express directly.

I am hard.  
I beat up things.  
My hand is like stone.  
I hate things.  
You can hold me.  
My pants are black.  
What am I?

(Hammer)

—*Fourth-grade student*

I sparkle  
and endure the screams of  
the wind  
And the small, sharp  
pain of nuts hitting me.  
Beings stare at me,  
and look through  
me, as if I am  
nothing.

They see my  
insides.  
It's embarrassing,  
Really.

(Window)

—*Junior high student*

In the midst of all that hard, stony anger, the speaker of the hammer riddle says, "You can hold me." All riddles are ambivalent: they conceal and reveal. They contain an invitation to "look through" them and find the answer, the secret that is meant to be shared.

Ultimately, the secret is connected to the writer's sense of self. I am not suggesting, however, that teachers focus on the feelings or the person revealed in the riddle. In *Sleeping on the Wing*, Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell give some good advice on this point when they emphasize the importance of "talking about the poem and not the student."

Though guessing the answer to a riddle has all the excitement of discovering a secret, the result may be anti-climactic. According to Emily Dickinson, "The Riddle we can guess/We speedily despise." Such post-riddle letdown is not inevitable, however.

A riddle draws its audience in, involving them in actively imagining the scene the poem creates. Once the answer is glimpsed, a shift in perception occurs and everything falls into place. A good riddle won't be drained of energy or excitement when this happens; rather, it should stand up to being reread as an object or persona poem. There should still be an element of mystery or surprise left, some new way of perceiving the subject of the poem. If enough care has been taken to include accurate sensory detail and fresh, original metaphor, the riddle will be strengthened rather than deflated by its solution. When the small mystery of the riddle is solved, we should be left with an expanded sense of larger mysteries.

Sly and slippery, I'm not  
what I seem.  
You look for me as you might

for a fish in a river.  
All is moving light  
and shadow. Suddenly you see

something hovering—there—by the bank,  
blending into the weeds, so close  
you could touch it.

*Of course, you say. I should  
have known. But you're wrong—  
it's important not to know.*

I come to you nameless,  
wanting you to find me,  
here in the weeds.

But when you name me,  
remember all you don't know  
and how it gleams.

(The answer)

## Riddles from Corcoran School of Art First-Year Students

Three thin men in  
a small round box, with a big picture window  
and a floor that fights shocks,  
each running a race with slowness and speed.  
Spectators count laps  
absentmindedly,  
always starting over  
9, 10, 11, 12,  
1, 2, 3, 4,  
6, 7, 8, 9,  
three predictable men  
each thin as a line.  
A pulse on a pulse,  
almost always on time.

(Watch)

—Nici Tietjen

With my mammal skin stretched to its fullest  
I serenade the jungle. I am of wood and skin;  
my voice bridges your subconscious and boards  
your body. I am forever in the pocket.

(Drum)

—Doug Ischinger

Endless microscopic organisms dwell in my belly,  
swimming about and tickling.  
A pair of webbed, slimy feet paddle across my chest  
to the safe floating platform just out of my reach.  
A cattail pokes and thrown stones skip, forever  
disturbing my glassy outside.  
And in the fall my life dries up, not to  
be seen until the early spring melt.

(Swamp)

—Ella Hurley

I live on the smoothest sheets of glass  
and watch everything, never closing my eyes.  
Sometimes I lie on still water in the forest and  
show the animals the sky.  
And when I'm hurt, I scream  
and break into thousands of pieces,  
or I just float away.  
And if I'm angry and you come  
too close, I might just show you yourself.

(Reflection)

—Colleen Hanlon

## Notes on Resources for Riddles

I often use examples from the work of student writers, but I also draw on other resources.

*Life in Greece in Ancient Times* by Paul Werner, translated by David Macrae (Friburg: Productions Liber, 1977) includes a selection of Athenian riddles.

Several translations of Anglo-Saxon riddles are available. Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Exeter Book Riddles* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988) is perhaps the most comprehensive. I also recommend the handful of riddles included by Burton Raffel in his *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1971). My own translations are published in *Say What I Am Called: Selected Riddles from the Exeter Book* (Washington, D.C.: Sibyl-Child Press, 709 Dahlia St., N.W., 1988). Those interested in reading the riddles in the original Anglo-Saxon will find them, along with a glossary and extensive notes, in Craig Williamson's *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

In *A Book of Puzzlements: Play and Invention with Language* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), Herbert Kohl has a chapter on riddles that includes examples from British and African folklore and from student writing. *Crosbie's Dictionary of Riddles* by John S. Crosbie (New York: Harmony Books, 1980) contains a lot of the "Why did the chicken cross the road?" type of trick questions, but it also includes traditional riddle poems. *The Scott, Foresman Anthology of Children's Literature*, edited by Zena Sutherland (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1984), contains a section on Mother Goose and contemporary riddles.

For a discussion of the use of riddles by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens, see Mervyn Nicholson, "Reading Stevens' Riddles," *College English*, Vol. 50, Number 1, Jan. 1988, pp. 13-31. Brian Swann also considers Dickinson's use of poetic enigma in "Who is the East? and Other Riddle-Matters," *Poet & Critic*, Vol. XI, Number 1, Autumn 1983, pp. 58-70. Swann analyzes riddles drawn from traditional sources, contemporary writers, and student work.

Two contemporary poets whose work I often use in class are Sylvia Plath and W.S. Merwin. Plath's "Mushrooms" is a persona poem that—without its title—works well as a riddle, as do some of W.S. Merwin's shorter pieces, such as "Full Moonlight in Spring" and "Song of Man Chipping an Arrowhead." If I am doing a sequence that includes persona poems, I might also bring in Merwin's "A Contemporary."

*The Whale's Scars* (New York: New Rivers Press, 1974) by Brian Swann contains original riddles and translations. He has also published two books of riddles for children: *Tongue Dancing* (Boston: Rowan Tree Press, 1984) and *A Basket Full of White Eggs* (New York: Orchard Books, 1988).