

ANTI-RACISM THEMES IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES:  
TEACHING TOLERANCE THROUGH DRAMA

by

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

ANTI-RACISM THEMES IN THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES:

~~RACISM AND YOUNG PEOPLE: TEACHING TOLERANCE~~

THROUGH DRAMA

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## ABSTRACT

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in Canada is a fairly new, yet rapidly expanding genre which caters exclusively to young people (ages three to eighteen). TYA scripts are works of high quality which address a broad range of subjects relevant to young people. From its roots in children's theatre, TYA has developed a unique style of drama which is both entertaining and educational. TYA playwrights craft tight forty-five minute one-act plays using minimum lighting, sets, and props, and five to six actors. These plays are then taken on tour to schools and community centres where the audience is. Among the subjects of recent TYA plays have been divorce, alcoholism, dyslexia, child abuse, and racism. An increasing number of playwrights (Dennis Foon, Jan Truss, Paddy Campbell, among many) have looked closely at the issue of racism and racial intolerance among young people in Canadian schools and neighbourhoods. These playwrights attempt to show young people the causes and negative effects of racism; in some plays, possible solutions and preventive measures are suggested, while in others, pessimism prevails in that no solutions are evident.

Close examination of a variety of plays on racism written for the three age groups of a TYA audience (3-7, 8-13, 14-18) reveals common purposes, themes, and patterns. In their different styles, the playwrights attempt to define racism and to present forty-five minutes of everyday life to their audience, encouraging these young people to identify with characters and situations like their own. In the often bewildering world of a child, TYA does its best to take that uncertainty, acknowledge it, and show that issues which cause fear and doubt can be

faced and dealt with in many ways.

Finally, TYA plays show young people that they are not isolated in their own peculiar circumstances: adults share their problems and are unwilling to stand by and watch things deteriorate. Although didacticism is an ever-threatening shadow, most of the plays about racism manage to avoid preaching; instead they present the issue, making suggestions as to the whys and hows in their attempt to teach tolerance through drama.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

When we compare a play for young audiences with a play for adults, we see marked differences in structure and length. Because a play for young audiences has to perforce be short (45 to 50 minutes) and focused, we tend to overlook its possibilities for effective treatment of social issues. My objective is to prove that it is possible in a short children's play for a playwright to present a controversial subject such as racism clearly, succinctly, and without resorting to overt didacticism; with this effort, the writers hope that their plays will have a long range positive influence upon the young people who view them.

Racism is defined and presented in various ways in plays for young people between the ages of four and eighteen. I will begin by briefly surveying the history of TYA from its roots in traditional children's theatre to the present before I look specifically at how TYA has handled the sensitive issue of racism among young people in Canada. The plays examined in detail range from those about the Native Indian culture to very contemporary plays about immigrant young people facing racial prejudice in schools and neighbourhoods. I will also look at the writers of plays on racism, comparing their methods, their goals, and their individual styles. The thesis then concludes with brief sections on study guides, school tours, a comparison between TYA and creative drama, and finally, where TYA appears to me to be heading in the next few decades.



### Definition of Theatre for Young Audiences

Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada is slowly coming of age, achieving just recognition and respect which it richly deserves as a viable genre catering exclusively to that largely neglected part of our population (at least in terms of high quality theatre): children. TYA is for young people, not merely children (as implied by the term "Children's Theatre").<sup>1</sup> Indeed, TYA is more than just plays for small children; TYA takes into account young people from age three to eighteen: those pre-school, those in school, and those completing school. TYA may also be family theatre with scripts on themes such as coping with peer pressure, single parent families, and surviving the trials of childhood and adolescence in a dizzy world of social and hormonal changes. TYA plays can be of interest to adults--in fact, many TYA exponents claim they should be of interest to adults--when they deal with realistic subjects, not merely fairy tales and moral fables. However, this is not to say that all TYA scripts are concerned with highly explosive, contemporary social issues. Very often, TYA companies like Carousel Theatre of Vancouver will present high quality modern adaptations of classic literary works like Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Julius Caesar (tailored for grabbing the interest of jaded, television-trained students) or holiday favourites such as A Christmas Carol. Whatever the route taken, TYA playwrights are cognizant of the fact that young people are entitled to quality theatrical entertainment the same as their parents and other adults, and TYA sets out to present these high quality plays for the dual purpose of entertainment and education. Having firmly established itself in Canada (home of a half dozen internationally

renowned companies) and around the world, TYA is moving with verve into its third, very successful decade of producing plays for young people on relevant contemporary social issues.

### History of TYA in Canada

Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada had a promising beginning; unfortunately, it was to suffer a severe setback before forging ahead and metamorphosing into what it is today. TYA had its origins in Vancouver when Holiday Theatre for Children was established in 1953 by Joy Coghill and Myra Benson, who intended it to become a solid base for high quality weekend and holiday entertainment for children. An important part of Holiday Theatre, and one that is a mainstay in most TYA companies today, was the touring group which took plays to parts of the province without children's theatre. In 1969, Holiday Theatre amalgamated with the larger, adult-oriented Playhouse of Vancouver. Amalgamation turned into liquidation, and B.C. saw the slow demise of its first successful theatre for children. The tours continued, and the Playhouse briefly attempted to branch into theatre for the schools with a program modelled upon England's successful TIE (Theatre in Education) programmes (Doolittle and Barnieh 69-71). The school tour continues to be a staple in the lives of Canadian TYA companies. The essential style of the school troupe remains mostly unchanged from its beginnings: "...most commonly, four to six actors performing in a school gymnasium with minimal scenery, props, and costumes, under available light" (Doolittle, "A Canadian Perspective" 12). In terms of efficiency and low cost, the small mobile troupe with its ubiquitous all-purpose van continues to serve the purpose of the TYA companies taking their material to the heart of their audience. The

Playhouse TIE program tried to establish a group of actor-teachers for liaison with the schools, but high costs, combined with a number of other factors, forced the program to fold. In any case, by 1977, Holiday Theatre was dead, but Theatre for Young Audiences was just beginning with the establishment of companies like Green Thumb Theatre, Carousel Theatre, and Kaleidoscope Theatre, which were to build upon Holiday's foundations (which included production of high quality theatrical pieces for children, touring groups, et cetera). Joyce Doolittle and Zina Barnieh in their book A Mirror of Our Dreams emphasize that "during its twenty-four years of metamorphoses, Holiday Theatre established the concept of professional theatre for young people, initiated the first extensive school tours of live theatre to remote areas, commissioned and performed dozens of plays by Canadian authors, and gave many young professionals their first jobs" (73). Knowing that, it is easy to see why TYA in the eighties has blossomed all over the world, thanks largely to the inexhaustible efforts of touring groups from all of Canada's major companies taking original material and performing it wherever they are invited (even sometimes going uninvited). Vancouver's Green Thumb Theatre alone has toured Australia, England, Singapore, Sweden, Germany, and most of the United States, its tour revenues more than adequate to subsidize their less lucrative--but highly rewarding in other than monetary terms--Canadian school tours. All of Canada's major TYA companies, including Toronto's Young People's Theatre (YPT), Regina's solid Globe Theatre (complete with resident playwright, the reliably prolific Rex Deverell), Wolfville's Mermaid Theatre serving the Maritimes, and the three previously listed B.C.-based companies, rely

largely on original material by Canadian authors to fuel their increasingly successful mainstage and touring seasons. Indeed, since 1966, YPT has used almost exclusively Canadian material, and made efforts to induce writers of adult plays to try writing children's plays (Carol Bolt, a very successful author of children's plays--many produced by YPT--is also well known for her adult dramas [Doolittle, "A Canadian Perspective" 17]). And for the Globe, Rex Deverell has devised original scripts based upon uniquely Prairie experiences, while Mermaid Theatre's original scripts highlight the rich lore of the Micmac Indians of the Maritimes. Occasionally, non-Canadian authors are showcased--notably David Holman of England, who has written a number of critically acclaimed scripts for Green Thumb.

Different though their approaches may be, Canada's TYA companies share a common philosophy and a common goal centered unwaveringly on their youthful audience ranging in age from three to eighteen. Their goal: to present plays which are "work[s] of art that [are] specifically prepared for a young audience [and that]...have the same aesthetic criteria as art for any age group. There must be enough substance in a play for children to hold also an adult audience..." (Doolittle and Barnieh 28). Their philosophy: "plays for children should...provide the opportunity to treat life seriously and provide more than slight, bland entertainment" (Doolittle and Barnieh 60). The main idea is to provide high quality entertainment for children which incorporates relevant issues concerning life, especially the life of a child in an adult-oriented, adult-dominated world; this provision of high quality material will in turn urge "our kids [to] learn high standards in theatre and

expect it to say something to them--about issues that affect them....[something that not] much adult theatre does...any more" (Foon quoted in Barker 12). Tony Delamothe, a British writer, in an article about English Theatre for Young People, defines TYA's dilemma quite succinctly as "whether [TYA] should be a doorway leading into the real world, or an escape from it. Taking the former option [as Canadian TYA writers are increasingly wont to do] lays it open to charges of being worthy, dull, or worse still, in these paranoid times, 'politically motivated'. If it takes the latter option, then it is damned as patronizing, mindless entertainment" ("Theatre and Young People-II" 20). TYA writers do indeed walk a fine line between being socially-conscious and being "preachy", a term they dislike being applied to their efforts.

Socially-conscious as TYA may now be, as few as ten years ago it was being roundly stigmatized for its lack of consistent quality by TYA exponents Joyce Doolittle and Zina Barnieh. In A Mirror of Our Dreams, which attempts to be a definitive history and sourcebook of Canadian children's drama, Doolittle and Barnieh characterize children's theatre circa 1979 as insipid and glaringly didactic, performed with reluctance and smirking patronization by out-of-work adult actors desperate for experience--any experience. All the Canadian TYA companies in the seventies trod a proverbially rocky road in their quest for homes, funding, and personnel to give life to their dreams of professional entertainment for children. At that time, already flourishing were Young People's Theatre, the Globe, the now adult-oriented Alberta Theatre Projects (whose founder, Paddy Campbell, is inarguably one of TYA's best writers), and the indigenous Mermaid Theatre. Just establishing

themselves were Kaleidoscope Theatre of Victoria, Carousel Theatre, and Dennis Foon's ground-breaking Green Thumb Theatre of Vancouver. The participation play was THE staple of these groups, and its originator, England's Brian Way, was instrumental in teaching the participation methods to many Canadian playwrights (like the Kramers, who founded the Globe in Regina) who then enthusiastically promoted it in Canada as the only type of theatre for young people. At first, Way's own plays were borrowed and adapted for Canadian audiences; happily, however, Canadian playwrights soon began writing participation plays relevant to Canadians and the Canadian identity. The shift to plays about Canada's cultural heritage as preserved by her Native Indians was a step in this right direction. Finally, a third stage in the evolution of TYA was the focus on the indigenous pioneer plays of the Prairies and the Maritimes (Doolittle and Barnieh 119-123). The next step was a natural one: tackling contemporary social issues which concern our young people, issues which TYA companies previously either had little inclination to address or lacked the time to do so. With the formation of Green Thumb Theatre for Young People under the artistic direction of Dennis Foon and Jane Howard Baker, social issues formerly ignored were suddenly showcased in strong, literate, and penetrating scripts by playwrights like John Lazarus and Foon, himself who tirelessly researched their material by going to the source: children. Issues such as dyslexia, alcoholism, child abuse, sexual abuse, nuclear war, and diabetes were aired. Excuses such as lack of time and funding aside, there was a need perceived by visionary playwrights who set out to pen their views--and more importantly, the views of their target audience--on relevant social

issues. But why did it take so long before plays about these issues were written, performed, and justifiably lauded by critics? Surely children deserved to know about these things as much as angst-ridden adult theatre-goers who drank in Sophocles, Shaw, and Synge? Or did they?

From Children's Theatre to Theatre for Young Audiences: A Necessary Change

A major deterrent to the development of significant theatre for children has always been our attitudes as adults towards these little people. Kids are "short people with no rights," claims Dennis Foon (quoted in Barker 11). Adults patronize their children by fencing them in with rules; by belittling their ability to understand anything beyond Care Bears and G.I. Joe; by refusing to believe that theatre aimed at children can be anything other than "cute" or "charming." The prevailing adult attitude towards plays for children is that "small things for small persons are small in significance" (Doolittle and Barnieh 15). The late Betty Lambert in her article "On Writing Plays for Children: or, You Can't See the Audience From the Trapeze" maintained that children are not imbeciles to be ignored or shoved aside when they are inconvenient; indeed, she viewed a child's life as "filled with ignominy and humiliation and the struggle to become human" (28). Until playwrights decided that children deserved better than what they were getting, theatre for children was pabulum; "Children's Theatre" was a term evocative of fairy tales, stereotypical cardboard characters clearly representative of Good and Evil, happy endings, and contrived cuteness shining through recycled plots. It was little wonder that a change for the better was eagerly embraced by many frustrated playwrights who were

tired of their own pedestrian fare. Veering almost completely away from Children's Theatre's main ingredients--adaptations and retreads of standard fairy tales and legends liberally dosed with sweetness and sentiment--TYA deliberately de-emphasises spectacle and "production"; instead, TYA "sets out with the objective to reflect the concerns and reality of its audience with the hope that the play will give the spectators some tools to better cope with a complex and confusing world....The plays presented are often (though not always) realistic and contemporary with an emphasis on topical social issues addressed from the child's perspective" (Foon, "TYA in English Canada" 253). Original material is the norm, not the exception. Today's TYA playwrights in Canada are treating children as rational human beings who deserve better than the pap which they are served via television and fluffy pieces of Children's Theatre. TYA scripts now deal with wide-ranging issues from peer pressure to teen suicide; nuclear war to gang war; living below the poverty line to living with racism and prejudice. One of the most prevalent and sensitive social issues being addressed with increasing frequency and power in TYA plays is racism in its many covert and overt forms.



## Chapter II

Anti-racism in TYARacism: Its Many Manifestations

Racism is an ugly word, stark in its meaning yet overlaid with layers of camouflage and rationalization. Racism goes hand-in-hand with denial: "There's no racism in this great country of ours...."; or "Who, me? Racist? I just hate ---" (choice of: micks, spics, chinks, wops, polacks, etc.). Racist attitudes are absorbed with sponge-like efficiency by children who are exposed to them by parents who exhibit different degrees of racial intolerance. In turn, these children then taunt their classmates who are not the same colour or nationality, or who do not speak English as their first language, or who dress, smell, or eat differently. With great self-righteousness, the taunters inform the taunted that "my dad said not to play with [you]" (Foon, Kid 30). Children absorb and regurgitate (in painstaking detail) whatever they hear or are regularly exposed to, yet children can also be "reprogrammed" before they reach the age when their attitudes are cemented in comforting familiarity. Playwrights who write plays about racism and its close cousin, prejudice, do so not merely to show that racism exists, but to attempt to educate (or re-educate) children about the causes and results of racism.

Part of the reason for the increased emphasis on multiculturalism, racism, and prejudice in TYA plays is, I believe, a corresponding increase in the social awareness of authors who write specifically for young audiences. Many are dissatisfied with travelling safe and well-

trodden routes--writing "cute" plays with stereotypical characters to teach children that they need to be themselves, that it is all right to dislike their parents, and that a painful adolescence is the required ticket to much-vaunted adulthood with all its perquisites--that their predecessors and some contemporaries have elected. Granted, well-worn themes such as peer pressure and coping with adolescence are still significant; as long as there are young people, they will endure peer pressure and adolescence. However, more and more Canadian writers, especially those centred in urban areas like Vancouver and Toronto where more than half of the schoolchildren possess a first language other than English, are beginning to focus upon these children and the increasing problem of racism and prejudice in integrated neighbourhoods and schools. For these children in urban "melting pots", the vehicle of the play is perfect to show the causes, the perpetration, and eventually the reversal of racist attitudes.

### The Theatrical Arts and its Responsibilities

Why have the theatrical arts accepted a large part of the responsibility to educate children about racism in their environment? The answer appears deceptively simple, albeit two-fold. No one else wants to do it; and no one else can do it with the impact possible in a play.<sup>2</sup> TYA writers are also faced with the dilemma of overt didacticism, something which will be explored further in the thesis. The fact is that a play undoubtedly has the means to reach audiences directly though live, up-front, sometimes very intimate performance and interaction between actors and play-goers. A prime example of the impact a play can have in the delineation and presentation of a sensitive issue such as sexual

abuse is Green Thumb's script Feeling Yes, Feeling No, which "became an abuse-prevention project that toured B.C. schools in the fall of 1984. In it the actors used dramatic scenes to teach children the difference between honest affection and sexual assault" (Barker 12). Similarly, Saskatchewan School Boards have recently implemented an anti-racism project called Fear/Fight, conceived and executed by Globe Theatre under the direction of Rex and Rita Shelton Deverell.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Frost in her article "Notes on the Young Traveller" feels that "theatre deals in personal relationships of love, power, and companionship in adventure....It is [also] people-centred....[and] emotions and feelings can be experienced to the full during the illusion without punishment or consequences..." (24). Children are not intimidated by plays about issues such as child abuse because, although the actors are dramatizing situations which the children may have experienced or seen, there is no threat of recriminations after the performance, no possibility of "consequences." TYA exponents are convinced that all the teaching and preaching in the world are not as effective in reaching a child as his seeing a character on stage speaking for him and to him about life and relationships. In short, telling a child not to be prejudiced is less effective than allowing the child to see a play like New Canadian Kid in which actors demonstrate the ugly effects of prejudice. Valerie Robertson puts it another way: "[Drama in schools] provides a safe, structured means of observing life, compressed into a capsule of time" (46). Increasingly, over the past decade and a half, writers such as Dennis Foon, Betty Lambert, and Jan Truss ("secure in their craft, imaginative in their observation" [Redfern 39]) have been attempting to

teach children about prejudice and racism through plays.

The main problem a TYA playwright faces in presenting the unrelieved ugliness of racism to an audience of children is establishing a medium between no-holds-barred exposure and total alienation of his audience, especially since a TYA audience is usually composed of various age groups and levels of maturity. Themes such as peer pressure and coping with adolescence are still predominant in TYA plays; the plays on racism discussed in this thesis are but a small fraction of the drama being written for young audiences. Until recent years, playwrights have been reluctant to tackle the issue of racial tolerance and integration in their plays. There could be several reasons for this reticence, most important of which is the extreme sensitivity of both the ethnic groups who are the butt of prejudice and the WASP community which would perforce be the target of the arrows launched by reformation-minded TYA playwrights. A secondary and more mundane reason is the lack of adequate funding for performing troupes to penetrate with any degree of emphasis the urban and inner city schools with these plays which are so relevant to this particular stratum of schoolchildren. Instead, it appears that the majority of children who watch TYA plays are from middle and upper-middle class suburban areas, areas with few or no ethnic/minority families in their midst.<sup>4</sup>

Identifying and Characterizing the Three Age Groups in a TYA Audience

The writers of TYA plays dealing with racism among children tend to aim their plays at a specific age group comprised of children between the ages of eight and thirteen. TYA writers are aware that this group is reachable and teachable, whereas those who are younger (aged four to seven) lack the appropriate level of understanding necessary to absorb the whys and hows of racism, and those beyond the age of thirteen are concerned with their budding adolescence, blossoming sexuality, and massive peer pressure. For much younger children in the first age category, plays about Native Indians are entertaining in an informative, participatory way. These plays teach young children about native peoples, their cultures and customs, and encourage the children to be part of the action by chanting, dancing, imitating nature sounds, et cetera. Jon Redfern asserts that "plays for younger children need to be simple and direct, yet...theatre people and educators should never underestimate the capacities of a child's mind" (36). However, when these children reach the age of eight, they are in another group: this group is the one TYA writers concerned with overcoming racism can reach most easily with the message of tolerance and integration. These children can be shown ways to identify and reverse the movement of intolerance and the racist attitudes prevalent in their lives. Group three is the group least interested in hearing about how to deal with racism. Plays about racism aimed at this age group are rare, perhaps because teenagers are far too concerned with such personal issues as adolescence, peer pressure, and sexuality. However, there are two plays written for this group of older teens which do deal directly with the

racism and prejudice experienced by teenagers: Skin by Dennis Foon, and Cornelius Dragon by Jan Truss.

Plays written for young children in group one (ages four to seven) are, with few exceptions, more fluff than substance, the rationale being that children of this age group lack the necessary understanding of all but the simplest of moral issues. Jon Redfern in "The Case For Children's Scripts" maintains that children's plays "can [emphasis mine] contain conflicts to delight and instruct children without being pedantic or jejune" (36). Nevertheless, given a child's brief attention span and his inability to sit still for long periods of time (interest notwithstanding), the plays written for group one need to be effective, yet simple without sacrificing quality. Plays for young children tend not to deal with issues like racism which have little meaning for them; instead, they have to be short and lean heavily towards participation by the audience in order to keep them from fidgeting.

## Chapter III

Plays for Primary School Children

The Clam Made a Face, Eric Nicol.

Chinook, Paddy Campbell.

The Sleeping Beauty, Gwen Pharis Ringwood.

Canadian playwrights who write for a Group One audience (ages four to seven) draw substantially from the rich store of Indian legends for their material, and in this manner inform their audience about the Canadian Native heritage. Through critically-acclaimed plays like The Clam Made a Face, Chinook, and The Sleeping Beauty, playwrights teach young children about how the Native Indian views life and Nature as being inseparable from each other--man depends upon the elements, and upsetting the status quo could bring down the wrath of any number of gods upon the heads of some unsuspecting tribe. Stories and legends about evolution, Nature, and life's common experiences are handed down from generation to generation, varying from tribe to tribe; however, white people have little access to the legends other than by reading about them in books written by other white people, or viewing them in films and plays. Children, especially, are ignorant of the rich lore of Canada's first people, and informing them about Native Indians via well-researched stories--"truth wrapped in the dark cloak of time" (Nicol 10)--is one way to combine entertainment with historical fact and legend to educate children about a culture other than their own.

Because of their limited attention span and their inability to be still for long, children in group one are often encouraged to participate in the plays they are watching. Brian Way, the English playwright who

developed the participation play and brought it to Canada via eager Canadian disciples in the mid-sixties, has this to say about children's participation in a play:

Because of the nearness of actor and audience, it [is] possible for the actor to get deeply absorbed in his part, with the same depth of sincerity that children use in their own play. Once this [is] achieved, the young child would lose the reality of being at a play, and develop a deeper and identified belief in the play and its characters--and, because [he] does not know the adult rules of theatre-going (about paying money and then being quiet) [he] would quite naturally and spontaneously offer advice to those [he] loved, and attempt to intervene against any who might disturb those [he] loved. (Quoted in Doolittle, "A Canadian Perspective" 9)

This is why Eric Nicol and Paddy Campbell involve their audience by making them assume various roles as necessary during the course of their plays. For instance, in Nicol's play the children are given names reflecting some aspect of their appearance ("Eyes-blue-as-the-sea" or "Run-like-the-deer") and turned into visiting Indians at the Potlatch; at other times, they become clams, frogs, fishermen, or whatever group is needed at that particular time; as there are only four hardworking actors, each playing several roles, the need for more people is easily and practically solved by involving the audience. In Campbell's Chinook, on the other hand, the children are asked to help the characters out of sticky situations by imitating nature--making wind sounds to "fly" the actors over the mountains, doing fire dances to melt frozen people, et cetera. They are also involved in simple decision-making when the actors turn to them at crucial points and ask for advice (what Way calls "moments of constructive, purposeful and controlled participation...") [Quoted in Doolittle, "A Canadian Perspective" 9]).



Eric Nicol's The Clam Made a Face (first produced by YPT in their 1971-1972 season) is a "play within a play" about the traditional culture of B.C. Coast Indians, the Kwakiutl. Nicol has set his play during a Potlatch, "a great ceremonial occasion at which the Chief of the tribe put on dramatic entertainments for his guests" (Reid, Introduction, Clam); while at the Potlatch, the audience assume different guises: visiting Indians, wind, rain, animals, et cetera. Enacted during the Potlatch are stories taken from Kwakiutl legends about the Raven, the Whale, the Frog, and Siwash Rock. The legends show the Indian's respect for all creatures and objects of Nature. There is plenty of action to keep the young audience riveted, and four actors busily metamorphose into over a dozen characters. The predominant theme of The Clam Made a Face is one of mutual respect between people and creatures of Nature, an innately Indian viewpoint for many centuries before the white man began to be environment-conscious. Unlike pious-sounding constitutions which claim equality for all men, regardless of race or colour, the Native Indian is practical in his belief that "all the creatures of nature [including man] owe one another proper respect and consideration" (Reid, Introduction, Clam). Treating others the way one would want to be treated results in others returning the compliment by helping in times of need. Instead of killing the helpless whale in the second story, the Indians help it revive and leave; the whale thanks them:

You have been kind to me. You could have killed and cut me up for blubber to eat and whale oil for your lamps, but instead you gave me back my life. (Nicol 14)

In return, he intercedes for the Indians to relieve their fear of the heat wave threatening destruction. In another story, a lady who is

"friend-of-the-frogs" is rescued by her amphibious friends when she is on the verge of drowning. And an unselfish Indian is immortalized in stone for his selfless attitude towards material goods. These stories show the children the benefits of mutual respect between man and nature as well as allow them to participate in the movement of the plots.

One rather subtle touch in Nicol's handling of Indian lore is the relationship between the Chief and his teenage son, Little Bear. Little Bear embodies the modern young Native who, having felt the sting of his heritage and the scorn of the white man, wants to be part of the white man's world--he insists upon being called Henry ("Hank to my friends"), not Little Bear. He scoffs at the old stories because "who cares about a lot of old stuff like that....Today what we want is Batman" (Nicol 5). To Henry, the Caped Crusader who "pows" and "zaps" his way as scourge of the slimy underworld of Gotham City is far preferable to tame stories about birds and fish. He wants to be accepted by his white peers, and he is eager to abandon all ties to his heritage in order to be a modern Indian--a fan of Batman. However, he is drawn into participating in the stories, even taking on a major role as T'elch, the selfless Indian who was changed into Siwash Rock for his repudiation of greed. Ironically, Little Bear is concerned that "the old stories are okay, [but] how do they help [the Indian] with life today? There are so many things [people] need to be happy...a car, a boat, and a house, a stove, [and] a refrigerator" (Nicol 26). However, in the end he becomes part of the Potlatch ceremony and reluctantly (but silently) admits the values of keeping one's traditions alive and one's culture intact in the face of "progress" and the domination of another race.

Chinook, by Paddy Campbell, also dramatizes an Indian legend: the story of the vindictive and cruel Ice-woman and her thirst for year-round domination of the earth. The play has the usual ingredients for an action-packed hour: three courageous young Indians, a villainess who has kidnapped a village elder, a helpful spirit, and of course a roomful of eager helpers to move the plot along at a clipping pace. Before the start of the play, Chinook and Starchild seat the audience and chat with them, much as the actors do in The Clam Made a Face. However, unlike The Clam Made a Face, in which the Chief has a lengthy introduction, in Chinook the situation quickly becomes clear--the storyteller is missing and believed kidnapped by the evil Ice-woman. Chinook, Starchild, and their mute playmate, Rattle, set off to find their elderly friend and bring him home. In the process, they meet the Fire-woman who gives them a warning against the Ice-woman's powers as well as a clue (in riddle form) to her defeat. With the help of the audience who pretend to be a powerful wind, the three young people "fly" over the mountains, find the Ice-woman's cave, confront her, and roundly defeat her in short order. In his article "Treasure Trove, Real and Spurious," Patrick Verriour claims that Chinook's major fault lies in "the characters [which] in this Western Canadian tale are all too familiar" (122). On the other hand, he attributes this weakness to the participatory nature of the play which "relies so heavily on the audience's instant identification with a character" (Verriour 122), and the weakness is balanced by the unique character, the speechless Rattle. Rattle successfully functions as a silent storyteller, miming at the beginning the kidnapping of the old man. Rattle is an imperfect physical specimen because of his muteness,

yet he is the one who is most sympathetic, the one the children identify with when he is hurt in the climb up the mountain. Unfortunately, he is also the butt of jokes and teasing from even his good friend, Chinook:

Chinook: What is the matter with you?...Is someone chasing you? Is something chasing you? I don't see any buffalo roaring at your heels!  
(Rattle is becoming increasingly exasperated)  
Perhaps it is an invisible buffalo? A spirit!

Starchild: Chinook, don't tease him! You know he can't speak. That's very mean and not at all worthy of you.

Chinook: (shamefaced) I'm sorry, Rattle. I was only having fun. I didn't mean to offend you. (Campbell, Chinook 2)

Paddy Campbell, in this little exchange, is aiming to show children that people who are different in any way--like Rattle who lacks speech--are vulnerable to teasing and sometimes hurtful verbal abuse from others who feel superior because they themselves do not have a handicap. Nevertheless, Rattle is the hero of the hour because not only is he the one who gets them into the Ice-woman's lodge (this in spite of an injury sustained on the mountain slopes...), he is also the one with most of the good ideas, like the wind to help them over the mountains.

Simple and straightforward, like The Clam Made a Face, Chinook relates the tale of people helping each other in times of need, sometimes risking life and limb in order to do so. The three friends disregard a specific warning to stay away from the Ice-woman's lodge and they have no qualms about their set course of action: "We have to rescue him...We have to try" (Campbell, Chinook 6, 7). The play demonstrates in a practical way the value of cooperation between people and between man and Nature. It shows that ingenuity and ideas are not limited to the

articulate and glib of speech; that obstacles can be overcome by perseverance (and a little help from one's friends). The action is brisk, and little time is wasted on long explanations (Rattle's mimes are an efficient substitute). The children in the audience are pivotal in the progress of the plot, assuming different guises, offering suggestions, and even "tip[ping] the balance in favour of the forces of good so that the Ice-woman can be banished to the North Pole until the next winter" (Verriour 122-123).

Somewhat different from The Clam Made a Face and Chinook is The Sleeping Beauty, Gwen Pharis Ringwood's adaptation of the classic fairy tale, first performed by students of the Cariboo Indian School at the Williams Lake Festival in 1965. Ringwood lived with the Chilcotin Indians for a time, and on a volunteer basis taught their children "drama, improvisation, choral-speaking, pantomime, language arts and writing...[and] stimula[ting] them to write their own Indian legends..." (Anthony 85). The Sleeping Beauty reworks a familiar tale into a Chilcotin legend with Indian characters and themes; it was written by Ringwood (with the help of a teacher, Sister Germaine) in response to repeated requests by the older Indian girls for a play they themselves could produce (Anthony 85). Set in the Chilcotin area, the play makes use of Indian drums and dances culled from Chilcotin culture to tell the story of Princess Sarita, beloved daughter of the Chief. As the legend goes, Sarita's christening was attended by the Loon, the Wild Goose, and the Coyote, who bestowed upon the baby the gifts of a faithful heart, a strong and courageous lack of fear, and wisdom. The Crow, however, was angry at his exclusion and cursed the princess: she would die on her

sixteenth birthday from pricking her finger on a thorn while weaving a basket. Throughout the proceedings, the drums are constant as is the skillful use of masks and sound effects (the caw of the Crow, the cry of the Loon, the honk of the Goose, and the howl of the Coyote). As in Nicol's play, the people in The Sleeping Beauty show their affinity with their spirit gods and the Nature all around them, as well as their utmost respect for those whose lives are intricately linked with theirs:

Oh Spirits of the Wild Goose and the Loon and Coyote,  
 We thank you for these gifts. We will teach our child  
 to honour you....  
 Now we will dance in honour of the wild things that  
 live in our land.... (Ringwood 8)

There is the promise by the Chief and the elders of the tribe that they will teach their children--as they themselves were taught years before--to honour and respect the spirits of Nature; to give thanks for their goodness and kindness to man as the seasons change. In return, after the curse of the Crow, the other three spirits use their limited powers to temper the severity of the curse--from death to sleep; from loneliness to companionship; from innocence to love.

The years pass until Sarita's fateful sixteenth birthday when she meets an old woman, once a tribe member but now returned from captivity, who is weaving a basket, a skill which has been forgotten because of the Chief's edict outlawing basket weaving sixteen years before. Sarita tries to weave, pricks her finger, and she and all her tribe are soon fast asleep. For one hundred years they sleep while the seasons continue, and the "wild geese flew north, flew south...[the] loons called across lake water...[and the] coyote howled by the burnt-out camp fires" (Ringwood 16). Finally, the prince arrives and successfully fights his

way into the overgrown forest to find and awaken the sleeping princess and all her tribe. Everything resumes functioning, life goes on as if one hundred years have never passed, and in the end, the leader of the chorus intones:

You have heard our (emphasis mine) story of the  
Sleeping Beauty.  
It happened long and long ago  
When the world was small, small world under sky.  
(Ringwood 19)

Again we see the Indian's view of his position in the Universe; he is indeed a small, small part of a "small, small world" and he is grateful to be allowed to co-exist in peace and harmony with all creatures of Nature and spirits of earth, sea, and sky.

All three plays--The Clam Made a Face, Chinook, and The Sleeping Beauty--have in common high quality entertainment value for young children, simple and straightforward plots, poetic language and imagery, and historical information on Indian tribes and beliefs. They stress the Indian's belief in order and mutual respect in the universe being of the highest importance, without which the delicate balance of the physical, spiritual, and natural would be upset to the detriment of all concerned. The audience learn about Indian legends and culture; they do not learn about how the Indians were treated by the conquering white men who were contemptuous of the Indian ways of life and their peaceful co-existence with Nature. Children in group one are unable to assimilate much more than what is given to them in plays like the three discussed. The reasons are simple: young children have a short attention span, and they have not reached the point where terms like "prejudice" and "racism" are anything other than hard-to-pronounce words. Pre-schoolers and primary

children are entertained by action and participation; they fidget when the speeches are too long. In short, playwrights are wise enough to give children what they want in a play, and more importantly, what they can handle.

The Clam Made a Face and Chinook are typical participation plays for young children. Desmond Davis styles the beginning of a participation play as "a preliminary meeting between actors and children before the play proper begins. In this 'preamble' the child may be warmed up to the play (not told the story or explained the theme), or given some practice in some aspects of his role playing..." ("The Participation Play" 22). A child who participates in a play by being a tribe member or a bird or wind is made to feel a part of the play, "a generous and satisfying feeling" (Davis, "The Participation Play" 23). When a child gets older, however, participation is unnecessary because older children are able to sit still longer and they recognize that they are watching actors portraying real people, not real people being themselves.



## Chapter IV

Plays for Intermediate Grades

New Canadian Kid, Dennis Foon.

Invisible Kids (British and Canadian versions), Dennis Foon.

Neighbour, Gloria Sawai.

Madwitch, Paddy Campbell.

The Song of the Serpent, Betty Lambert.

When Everybody Cares, Beth McMaster.

Children in middle and older elementary grades make up Group Two (ages eight to thirteen). Playwrights who write for this group agree that these children are quite capable of carrying on an extended conversation, sitting still for more than fifteen minutes, and understanding more complex social issues. Although admittedly not much can be done in forty-five minutes to reverse stereotypes or reshape preconceptions, a playwright aiming at this specific age group has a purpose. He attempts to take forty-five minutes of a child's life that the child can identify with so that he can hear alternate or questioning voices. Quite often for a majority child, the play is a reinforcement of beliefs or struggles that he has. For a minority child, a play on racism could be an affirmation, a way of saying that other people (especially grownups) know what is going on...what is happening to him, and that it is not right; things should change (Foon Interview). A playwright will admit that he hopes his plays will be effective in saying something relevant to children about issues which directly affect them. Rex Deverell says of his play on prejudice, "My intention was, without apology, to declare...that prejudice is stupid. I will never know whether I significantly influenced anybody's attitude, but I have my hopes" (17). Dennis Foon's plays attempt to do something honest, "to

identify problems in society and [say] 'this is bullshit'; it has to stop'" (Interview). Foon also believes his plays, and others, are a form of "validization...[that actors on stage show children] verbalizing [their] feelings and being listened to by adults. A simple thing but an impossible dream for many young people" ("A Good Seed" 2). Paula Jardine of Vancouver's Public Dreams Society<sup>5</sup> claims that performance of plays for young people is a "healing experience--[a] sharing [of] the process" (Interview). Jan Truss admits "that children's theatre appeals to [her] as a most serious business as it is a rare chance for the child to sit in on a considered and intense bit of life where real people are taking off the masks" ("Soliloquoy" 71-71).

#### The Foci of Group Two Plays

Plays written primarily for young people in Group Two cover a wide range of social issues which affect these children: divorce, sexual abuse, alcoholism, violence in the school, and racism. The greatest impediment to the success of these plays in gaining their hard-earned credibility is the omnipresent shadow of didacticism (which in most definitions implies preaching and moralizing). As a term, didacticism then has negative connotations and is used primarily as a slur, a way of reducing, limiting, or trivializing a play's content. TYA playwrights cringe defensively when asked about didacticism in their plays. Dennis Foon is emphatic that "if a play is heavily didactic [and he defines the word as weightily expositional and political in intent], it is not a good play or even good literature" (Interview). Paula Jardine agrees that didactic theatre is political theatre and as such to be avoided at all costs (Interview). However, if we were to understand didacticism as

merely teaching something, then we can certainly say that all plays for young people--indeed, all plays per se--are didactic because they teach something, be it something innocuous like "share and share alike" or something more complicated. TYA plays aim for equal doses of education and entertainment; in plays for young people, content is often labelled educational. However, any play--be it comedy or tragedy--has content, and any play has educational and entertainment value (Foon Interview) even though most playwrights agree that aiming for didacticism (in an educational sense) is very limiting to a writer's creativity and honesty.

Doolittle and Barnieh note that "some theatres for Young Audiences believe their role to be social catalysts to make their audiences actively aware of the needs for change" (27). Many feel that their purpose is "to challenge the thinking of young people, to provoke questioning...[not] a didactic one, to tell them what to think or believe" (Delamothe, "Theatre and Young People" 26);

...We're dealing with an audience which is very much alive today and the work we do for them has got to concern them today. (Delamothe, "Theatre and Young People II" 21)

Children of today have been jaded by television, their thinking shaped by He Man, Hulk Hogan, and the Huxtable Clan. If a play aimed at young people is anything other than honest in its approach to issues like racism, these young people will be the first to spot it because they are "highly conscious of their social environment and recognize cliches..." (Robertson 48). As well, "today's young people face enormous contradictions that can be frightening" (Solomon 12).

The plays dealing with racism, written for Group Two, tackle these contradictions and show, among other things, that contradictions need not be frightening or overpowering if they are faced and dealt with right away before they take over. Plays like Foon's New Canadian Kid and Invisible Kids deal with immigrant children who face racial discrimination and prejudice in their adopted lands. Gloria Sawai's Neighbour is about immigrants in Alberta's prairies, while Betty Lambert's Song of the Serpent follows the misadventures of an Indian lad victimized in B.C.'s gold rush days. Madwitch is about an old Indian woman who is taunted and teased by ignorant schoolchildren, and Beth McMaster's When Everybody Cares is a futuristic tale about an unwanted robot. In all these plays, the young people face prejudice and hatred because of their skin colour or their nationality. Preconceptions are revealed and disposed of while ways of dealing with the problems of racism are explored. No answers are given, because in real life there are no answers to racism. Instead of preaching the message of "love thy neighbour" as in overtly and saccharinely didactic plays, Foon, Sawai, Lambert, Campbell, and McMaster teach ways to deflect or divert the fog of racial prejudice.

Thus Group Two is the audience for which the bulk of plays about racism and racial prejudice are written. The plays which I will examine can be easily divided into three categories: the immigrant experience in an urban setting (New Canadian Kid and Invisible Kids); the immigrant experience in a rural setting (Neighbour); and blind prejudice (Madwitch, Song of the Serpent, and When Everybody Cares).

The Immigrant Experience in an Urban setting

Urban centres in Canada are teeming with immigrant families to the point where Immigration Canada has begun establishing more stringent criteria for entrance into this country.<sup>6</sup> It appears that immigrants flock to large cities because the chances of finding work there are apparently higher than in more rural areas. Vancouver alone boasts substantial pockets of immigrants Chinatown, the second largest on the North American continent, the original Japanese ghetto (Powell Street), Little Italy (Commercial Drive), Little India (Fraser Street), and Greektown (West Broadway) are the largest clusters. As a result, immigrant children--those whose first language is not English--far outnumber English-speaking Canadian children of Anglo-Saxon descent. One might assume, therefore, that there would be fewer problems for new immigrants to Vancouver who enroll in urban schools with a large proportion of non-white children. However, the opposite appears to be true: immigrant children are still the butts of racism and discrimination by their new peers. Children who do not speak English or who look different are automatically tagged for ridicule, harassment, and sometimes violence. Dennis Foon, a prominent Canadian playwright for young audiences, conducted a series of workshops at Lord Roberts school in Vancouver in the spring of 1980, the results of which became Immigrant Children Speak. The script was developed by new Canadian children at the school who interviewed each other in order to find out common experiences and backgrounds. From that script, Jane Howard Baker developed the idea of having the immigrants speak English and the Canadians speak gibberish. Out of this collaboration emerged New Canadian Kid, written to show what

it is like for a person who comes to a new country and "experiences culture shock, a trauma that is intensified by negative reactions coming from people already resident in the country" (Foon, Kid 46).

How does a typical immigrant child cope with being thrown into a new culture which includes a new language, new food, new customs, new clothing styles, et cetera? How does he cope with people who appear to dislike him intensely for no apparent reason but that he is of a different race or colour? How does he help his family to assimilate if they too are having problems overcoming racial barriers in the work force or the neighbourhood? In fact, how does he survive from day to day in order to become a Canadian in reality as well as name? The paradox about living in a large urban centre like Vancouver is the claustrophobic feeling of living close together coupled with the alienation of typical city living. One could, for example, live in an apartment building for years and not know a single neighbour in all that time; or co-workers could work together in close proximity and not scratch the surface of intimacy. In the same way, a child who is new to a school is surrounded by hordes of lively children eddying constantly around him; at the same time he is isolated by his newness. Any obvious racial extraction, any natural shyness, and anything but a good command of English, and he is a prime target for harassment by stronger, more confident children.

Dennis Foon has written three plays delineating in some detail the immigrant experience in an urban setting: New Canadian Kid takes place in a nameless city in Canada, Skin in Vancouver (and, in another version, Toronto), and Invisible Kids in London, England (later adapted into a

version set in Toronto with appropriate Canadianization of typically British references). The children are all different races and ages, but they end up sharing a common trait: determination not only to survive, but to overcome racial discrimination in order to make it better for succeeding generations of immigrants.

New Canadian Kid was first performed by Green Thumb Theatre in their September to December, 1981 B.C. tour and at the Calgary International Festival for Young People that same year. Its unique plot device garnered it critical and popular acclaim. Foon's stage notes for New Canadian Kid are quite specific:

Because the play is attempting to show the audience what it is like to be in a country without the language or customs, the Homelanders speak English and the Canadians speak gibberish, a nonsense language invented by the actors in each production based on the dialogue I provide. (6)

A very simple device--ingenious in its simplicity--forces the audience to feel to a small degree what it would be like to be unable to speak or understand a language everyone else seems to know. We are in a key position to empathise with the hapless Nick when he is first faced with his new schoolmates, Mug and Mench, who literally overwhelm him with a barrage of greetings and curious questions. How does it feel to be a new Canadian kid? With his play focusing upon just such a kid--one of thousands of young immigrants to Canada--Foon has allowed his audience to experience a few of the problems faced by an immigrant child in a strange country with equally strange language and customs.

Nick is from Homeland, a name significant for its connotations of roots, security, and permanence. He and his family are preparing in the first scene to leave for their new home in Canada. The reasons for the move are unclear, but the inference is that the family hopes Canada will hold better opportunities for them; much as early immigrants to the golden land of America dreamt of boundless and equal opportunities, so the mother confidently predicts that "Canada's going to be good for all of [them]" (Foon, Kid 7). She and no doubt her husband are positive and optimistic, reassuring Nick that he will love his new country.

With the entrance of the two Canadian kids, Mug and Mench, Nick (and the audience with him) are plunged into a strange world of gibberish even though we can follow their conversation somewhat by focusing upon their body movements and facial expressions. Even so, an audience would be thoroughly disoriented at first by lines like "Es su quit-toe vos mat-ma-tea-ko homevorko? (Did you finish your homework?)" (Foon, Kid 9). Mench has a walkman which she lends to Mug who promptly begins to gyrate in time to the music. In walks Nick. Because he speaks English (Homelander), the audience promptly identify with him--after all, we have just spent a puzzling five minutes trying to decipher gibberish. Because Nick does not speak their language, the two kids are frustrated in their attempts to explain simple things like standing for their National Anthem. It is but a natural progression to the next scene when Mug patronizingly shows Nick how to work a "magic" conk-you-bay-tor (calculator). When Nick shows great facility--something he should not have done as a new kid, let alone a new immigrant kid--in working this "sophisticated" Canadian device, he inadvertently makes a fool of the



arrogant Mug and thus creates his first enemy.

When lunch time arrives, the differences between Homelander and Canadian are again underscored, this time by the lunches produced: by Mench a Big Mac, by Mug a giant Hershey bar, and by Nick a tasty Homelander concoction packed in his precious bowl. It is now obvious that Mug radiates a sullen hostility towards Nick while the friendly Mench feels somewhat sorry for Nick and makes attempts to be kind. However, all proceedings skid to a halt when a strange odour wafts through the room:

Mug: (sniffing) Eksta fuma? (Whewwwww! What's the smell?)  
 Mench: Ee bee raunchto. (It is pretty strong.)  
 Nick: ...I don't smell anything.  
 Mug: Lowd--che cha grongay. Una fido musta poopit.... (God it's awful. Some dog must have pooped or something...)  
 (Foon, Kid 21)

When it turns out that Nick's food is the cause of the odour, there is an elaborate charade, a quick grab by Mug, and Nick's bowl ends up broken. With the destruction of the bowl given to him by his Homelander friends as a farewell gift, Nick feels the shattering of his last precious tie to his homeland and his old friends. While he battles with the taunting Mug, Nick hears for the first time the word "Sgak," a gibberish rendition of "a variety of cultural/racial slur words infamous in the English vocabulary" (Foon, Kid 22).

In the following scene with his mother, Nick is at first reluctant to tell her the truth behind his early arrival home. In his hurt and bewildered state, he accuses his mother of lying to him: "You told me I could learn to speak English in a week. It takes forever!...They talk so fast...I don't know what they're saying, I don't know what they want!"

(Foon, Kid 24). However, on the advice of his mother to ignore Mug, Nick prepares to do just that. To his surprise, he makes friends with Mench, who patiently teaches him the very North American sport of "bersebolo" (baseball). Slowly, but surely, the perseverance and resilience of Nick pay off and he becomes acclimatized; he learns to eat Canadian food like "reiner ruff" (hot dogs), "grosta mac" (hamburgers), and "tosta puff" (french fries); "And [his] English? [He] could speak okay" (Foon, Kid 29). But when Mug reappears on the scene, he subjects Nick to a cruel truth about prejudice against immigrants from Homeland:

- Mug: Me popay dichay pax bolo mit chay. (My dad said not to play with him.)  
 Nick: Your dad won't let you play with me? Why not....  
 Kway nax?  
 Mug: Porska sue es Sgak. (Cause you're a Sgak.)  
 Nick: Because I'm a Sgak? What does that mean? Quel do Sgak mos? (What does Sgak mean?)  
 Mug: Sgak mos es shtot vos shtat. (Pokes Nick with a bat.) (It means I hate your guts, Sgak.) (He sniffs and coughs.) Poo! Porkay dis Homelanderers fumato see fay. (Why do Homelanderers stink so much?) (Foon, Kid 30)

Mug has no idea what Sgak means, but he knows his father hates Sgaks, so therefore Mug hates Sgaks. Obviously parroting his intolerant and racist father, Mug informs Nick that all Homelanderers smell bad. Mench, thoroughly embarrassed and discomfited by the nasty exchange, informs Nick, when he insists upon knowing what Sgak meant, that "it's a name for Homelanderers.... [Be]cause they hate Homelanderers[.]" (Foon, Kid 31).

When Nick returns home, he makes another discovery about the plight of Homelanderers in Canada: his father, a teacher in Homeland, has been unable to practice his profession in Canada because no one will hire a Homelander to teach Canadian children. As a result, he has had to

scramble for jobs and count himself lucky to be working the long hours he does at his menial job. Meanwhile, Nick's mother has lost the optimism she had before she arrived in Canada. As an adult Homelander with no English, she is unable to function in even simple situations like grocery shopping. Unlike Nick who is surrounded by English daily so that he cannot help but pick up the language with a child's facility for mimicry, Mom is trapped in her house, too timid to try making friends with no doubt indifferent or even hostile neighbours. She has just returned after a humiliating experience at the supermarket where she was stopped and yelled at by a strange man to the point where she was so nervous she dropped her groceries and ran home. The more she had shrunk from him, the louder the man had yelled as if a higher decibel level would magically cause understanding to dawn in her:

Mother: ...They were all yelling at me, louder and louder.  
They thought I was a fool.

Nick: You're not a fool, mom. Maybe they were trying  
to help.

Mother: Maybe they thought I was stupid.... (Foon, Kid 33)

However, with grim determination (like her son), Mom memorizes two key phrases to retrieve her groceries, and marches off to do so. The Homelanders are going to survive through sheer perseverance and force of will to overcome the prejudice they continually face strangers in a strange country.

Nick's assimilation is gradual but steady, as he brings his Canadian friend Mench home to meet his mother (whose first reaction is understandable hostility). Because Mench defended Nick against Mug, she was physically hurt by Mug, and now Nick wants to let his mother know of Mench's friendship. Nick and his mother have a dialogue in which they

verbalize a dilemma faced by many immigrants--the retention of their own culture and customs in the midst of their efforts to assimilate their new country's ways:

Nick: But we live in Canada. My friends are Canadians, yours are all Homelanders. You just sit in the house all day because you're afraid of Canadians--you won't learn to speak English.

Mother: I will but not in my home. Outside we can be like them. But in here, we keep our traditions, our memories. (Foon, Kid 39)

To Mom, it is still "us versus them" while to Nick, if they are living in Canada, they should mingle with Canadians. Mom and Dad's friends are all Homelanders; strangers in a strange country tend to find each other and band together for security--Chinatown, Little Japan, and societies for Philipinos, West Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese all prove the need for friends of the same race and culture in a foreign land.

In the last few scenes of New Canadian Kid, Foon shows his audience that racism and prejudice work both ways; Mom is not about to greet Mench graciously--she is suspicious towards Mench's reactions. However, in the scene when Mench tastes Homelander food for the first time, we see that prejudice is bred by fear of the unknown as well as ignorance. Mom and Mench become friends when they are allowed the opportunity to meet over common ground: food. Mug, on the other hand, is trapped in his ignorance, an ignorance fostered by his father who hates Homelanders for whatever reason. Nevertheless, Nick recognizes Mug for what he is--a bully: "...They're everywhere. Picking on people is an international sport" (Foon, Kid 42). In the end, Foon advocates a tried and true method of defusing bullies: if a bully gets no reaction, or even the opposite reaction from what he wants, his thunder is stolen. Thus, no

matter how often or how loudly Mug calls Nick "Sgak", Nick merely smiles and thanks him. Soon, the sport loses its sparkle because the victim is determinedly unaffected: "It took a while but [Mug] finally stopped bugging [Nick]" (Foon, Kid 45). Idealistically, the ending has Mug and Nick on the same baseball team and Mom learning to speak English in a week.<sup>7</sup> Realistically, it obviously takes longer for an immigrant to overcome the prejudice facing him, to the point where he is finally accepted as a bona fide Canadian. Maybe that will never happen to some immigrants; maybe some do not want to relinquish their national identity to assume a Canadian one. Foon has merely shown in this thought-provoking little play a bit of what it is like for a new Canadian kid to assimilate into a bewilderingly different culture and not only to battle blind hatred, but to overcome it in a peaceful and mature manner. The intense research which Foon and his colleague, Jane Baker, conducted among the immigrant children of urban Vancouver yielded a wealth of stories and images from which he drew the story of Nick; one cannot help but feel the authenticity of some of Nick's cries of frustration and bewilderment when he is picked upon merely on the basis of his race.

The most poignant (and unanswerable) question that Nick voices is after Mench tells him about people who hate Homelanders: "What did we do? It's not fair!" (Foon, Kid 31). Fairness has little to do with racism and vice-versa, as we see in another play of Foon's which he wrote as a companion play to New Canadian Kid when Kid was touring England a few years ago. First produced by Unicorn Theatre for Children in London, England, on January 19, 1985, the play, Invisible Kids, is about a group of London schoolchildren who are faced with racism and prejudice in forms

ranging from the subtle (the bureaucratic delays in issuing British passports to immigrant citizens) to the frighteningly obvious (a man unleashing his killer Alsatian on a helpless coloured child). The title refers biting to the whites in the play who treat immigrants as invisible people, and who want immigrants to go away "back to where they came from," to "just disappear" (Foon, Invisible Kids 23). The child who refuses to be invisible is Georgie; having applied three years previously, Georgie's family still have not received their British passports without which Georgie cannot go with her class to France on a field trip. Georgie and her friends are justifiably indignant because Zola Budd<sup>8</sup> got her citizenship papers in less than a week due to her status as an Olympic runner; indeed, despite the fact that "she's from South Africa [and] she never even lived [in Britain, she] got her citizenship overnight while [Georgie has] been waiting three years!" (Foon, Invisible Kids 22). Georgie echoes Nick in her passionate cry that "it's not fair!"

Georgie, Vince, and Thiun are non-white children whose playmates, Sam and Chris, are white. Even so, according to the director's notes, Chris is the only child who is "visibly" white. Multi-racial casting for this play is a requirement laid down by the playwright himself;<sup>9</sup> thus we see an Asian playing Thiun the Vietnamese boy, perhaps a black Georgie, or an East Indian Vince.<sup>10</sup> The play begins innocently enough with some schoolchildren playing after school in a large London school playground. However, when white Christopher strolls in, the first thing he does is call Georgie a name which she understands to be a racial slur. Granted, name-calling among children is common, but Georgie is quite aware that

the name Chris calls her refers specifically to her colour. To Chris it was a joke which "sort of slipped out...that's all, like if chewing gum fell out," but to Georgie, "that word is no joke" (Foon, Invisible Kids 5, 4). They resolve their differences when apologies tendered are accepted, but the fact that a friend would be insensitive enough to use racial slurs only emphasizes the ease with which these slurs "slip out."

They are distracted by Sam's promise of a secret when another child enters--a Vietnamese boy named Thiun who not only speaks English passably, but is proficient in Vietnamese and Cantonese and has a smattering of French and Russian. He soon adds a sixth language to his large repertoire: British slang (in an amusing exchange during which Vince tries to convince the baffled boy that wicked is good and really wicked is really good).<sup>11</sup> The problem of the play quickly becomes evident as we learn that the kids' class is slated for an exciting field trip to France in a few weeks. They are soon full of plans for enjoying this treat when Georgie casually mentions that she lacks a passport, without which she cannot go into France. The problem appears to be a lackadaisical government which, although the application was made years ago, has taken "awhile to process it..." (Foon, Invisible Kids 14). No indication is given that Georgie will receive her passport, although she is quite confident that it will arrive soon because she has been a resident of London since the age of two.

Immediately after this exchange, we see another telling example of a white child attempting to demonstrate his supposed superiority over a non-white child in a scene reminiscent of the con-you-bay-tor scene in

New Canadian Kid. Chris (in a subsequent running gag throughout the rest of the play) shows Thiun a fancy gymnastic move, saying, "Bet they don't do this in Vietnam" (Foon, Invisible Kids 14). Thiun easily "proceeds to top him....Again Chris performs a gymnastic move and is totally outclassed by Thiun who brilliantly executes a series of flips" (Foon, Invisible Kids 14). It is when the kids are all standing on their heads in imitation of Chris that Vince returns with a disturbing and chilling tale of victimization because of racism:

Vince: Yesterday after school...walking home. There was this man walking his dog. An Alsatian. He called me a name.  
 Chris: What did he call you?  
 Vince: The same thing you called her yesterday.  
 Chris: I said I was sorry. I'll never do it again.  
 Vince: I know you won't. But he will.  
 Chris: But you're just a kid.  
 Vince: He yelled, 'go back to your country.'  
 Georgie: He what?  
 Sam: But this is your country, you were born here.  
 Chris: Did you tell him? Did you tell him you were born in London? (Foon, Invisible Kids 16)

Obviously the man gave no thought to such trivial details as Vince's right to call Britain home; he merely saw the colour of Vince's face and assumed Vince had to be from somewhere other than Anglo-Saxon England. The fact that he picked a child upon whom to spew his venom indicates the extent of his hatred for all non-whites. Vince continues his tale:

I wanted to but I kept walking. And then he yelled it again, 'go back to where you came from!'...But this is where I come from, this is my home, this is where I have always lived!... He knew that, he didn't care, he didn't like who I was...Then he took the lead off his big Alsatian and set it on me.  
 (Foon, Invisible Kids 16)

In this speech is seen the helplessness of a child against the inexorable wave of hatred generated by a racist; indeed, the helplessness would be increased since Vince has no doubt been raised in a culture which



emphasises respect due to one's elders. Vince knew he was undeserving of the hate flung at him; but he was unable to voice his own defence, partly from fear and partly because he knew it was useless to try and penetrate with mere words the wall of alienation and ignorance the man had erected and fortified over the years. The man would not have heard him. Indeed, in his haze of hatred, the man released his killer dog and urged it after Vince, a move which could very well have resulted in tragedy had Vince not managed to run quickly enough. Georgie rightly notes that it is not the dog's fault while Sam insists that the man who trained it is the man responsible for the actions of the dog. Like Mug who parroted his father without really understanding what he was saying, the dog was only following orders from his master. In the following exchange, Foon again emphasizes that the way to combat racism and fear is to show no fear, give no reaction to fuel the hatred, but merely let the vilifier run out of steam. Thiun demonstrates how to defuse a potentially dangerous dog; the same way as one faces down a dog--"you see, you give dog nothing, he has nothing to chase, nothing to bark at, nothing to fear..." (Foon, Invisible Kids 19)--one has to face the bare facts of racism and to acknowledge the roots of it. In short, one has to realize that racism springs largely from fear and ignorance of another culture or nationality and act accordingly. Significantly, the song to bridge the scenes at this point is "Ghostbusters", implying that fears, like ghosts, need to be banished by facing them and exposing them for what they are: insubstantial.

Georgie's problem, however, assumes quite substantial proportions as the day of the field trip draws closer, with no sign of the necessary passport. Young as these children are, they exhibit a cynicism beyond their years, a jaundiced view of life which has been forced upon them as the result of the prejudice they have faced all their young lives. Vince informs Georgie that she, unlike the white Zola Budd, has feet "the wrong colour...[Georgie is] the wrong colour..."(Foon, Invisible Kids 23).

- Chris: I don't get it. Can they really do that? Just because your feet aren't white?
- Georgie: They say they don't, they told my mum it was just a backlog in the office. But Zola Budd didn't get backlogged.
- Chris: I don't believe it. This is terrible. It's not right.
- Thiun: My father told me they want us to go away.
- Chris: To just disappear?
- Georgie: But I'm here, I'm not invisible! I'm here....  
(Foon, Invisible Kids 23)

Georgie's friends are not content to let Georgie miss the field trip because of the government's reluctance to process her passport. Their solution? Circulate petitions which will then be taken to parliament and be proof positive that kids, at least, are not content to be seen and not heard, or worse still, invisible. Even though they are torn between loyalty to Georgie, their friend who has been wronged, and going on that exciting field trip, all except Samantha--a Lacoste<sup>12</sup> freak delirious at the thought of her intended shopping spree--opt for loyalty, and the play ends upon a cautiously optimistic note: Vince and Georgie set off to deliver the petitions.<sup>13</sup> The question remains whether anyone will pay attention to two non-white children on a BMX, clutching a handful of petitions regarding such a trivial administrative matter as a delayed passport for one immigrant child:

Sam: Do you think it'll work?

Chris: You mean, Mrs. Thatcher, will she do anything?

Thiun: Maybe. Maybe not.

Chris: At least we're doing something. (Foon, Invisible Kids 35)

Is Foon advocating that children cease to allow themselves to be pushed around like pawns and "do something" about injustice and prejudice?

Asked about his views on children in society's heirarchy, he is adamant that "on a societal level, children are treated as second class citizens. Considered too underdeveloped to partake in decisions affecting their lives, denied their rights...[they are] left wide open to victimization both inside and outside the family" (Foon, "A Good Seed" 2). The kids in Invisible Kids make a decision to fight for their rights; they follow through and throw off the cloak of invisibility by speaking up, but whether they will achieve their purpose is open to debate.

Because Invisible Kids was written specifically for a British audience who would understand the references to Zola Budd and Margaret Thatcher, when it came time to produce the play in Canada, Foon had to draft a Canadian version with appropriately Canadian references. In his view, however, the Canadian Invisible Kids is not as successful because Canada does not have quite the same metaphors as Great Britain. First produced by Fountainhead Theatre of Toronto (a Black Theatre group) in September, 1986, Invisible Kids in both Canada and Great Britain has been mounted primarily by multiracial theatre companies for the simple reason that these groups have the personnel to play racial roles. Again in preparation for the re-drafting, Foon interviewed "dozens of people in

Toronto: children, educators, immigration officials, lawyers, social workers, and experts in Race Relations...[and] heard story after story of racial incidents and attacks, of kids' difficulties with children and adults both inside and outside of school" (Notes, Invisible Kids Canada).

The biggest script change occurs in the problem that Georgie has: it is not Georgie herself who is unable to get a passport for a trip, but Georgie's older sister who has been denied entry into Canada for an additional two years. The entire family with the exception of the grown sister came to Canada years before; now the sister is waiting in Jamaica for the necessary paperwork to be processed for her application. Instead of Zola Budd getting a quick change of citizenship, the Canadian Georgie talks about the differences between European immigrants and West Indian (Black) immigrants:<sup>14</sup>

Georgie: It's easy if you're from England or France or Switzerland. My dad says people from Europe only have to wait two months.

Chris: What?

Georgie: But if you're from India or South America or Africa you wait a year or a year and a half or even longer.

Chris: What?

Vince: Cause we're the wrong colour, that's what!

Sam: ...they just don't have enough workers in the offices to do the work any faster.

Georgie: They do in France.

Sam: Well, that's just too bad, isn't it? That's just the way it is.

Georgie: It's not fair. (Foon, Invisible Kids Canada 22)

Instead of Margaret Thatcher, the kids are going to send the petition to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (hilariously misspelled by Georgie as "Mulooney"<sup>15</sup>); as well, they contemplate contacting Barbara Frum of the Journal on CBC T.V. Georgie voices her heartfelt

disillusionment and bitterness about the situation:

They don't want us in this country. If they did, we wouldn't have to fight for our rights all the time...They don't care....All they know is that we're a different colour than them and they don't like us. (Foon, Invisible Kids Canada 28)

Be it in England or Canada, children of other races (especially obviously coloured ones) undergo racial prejudice in a plethora of shapes and forms. Children are well aware when they are not wanted or are merely tolerated for inexplicable reasons, and they seldom have the opportunities to voice their feelings as the kids in this play do. With Invisible Kids Dennis Foon shows his audience that it is possible to do something about racism, no matter how ludicrous the action might appear--it is something active. If the children do not start combatting racism against themselves, the cycle continues into the next generation.

It is obvious in these plays that Dennis Foon, at least, feels that adults are by no means the main victims of racial discrimination, but that children too suffer from racism and injustice. The kids in Invisible Kids are young, yet they have learned some very unpleasant truths about colour barriers and white supremacy in Western countries. They combat their discrimination by appealing directly to the highest authority in their land, the government, trusting in their childlike faith that Mrs. Thatcher will not only personally read their petition, but will herself get the appropriate government branch working immediately on Georgie's passport. Indeed, the incredible optimism of these kids--tempered, but not dampened by Thiun's guarded "maybe. Maybe not"--is what Foon notes in his preface to the play: "these children still in primary school have a great sense of hope, a belief in their

ability to change things. Maybe this play is an attempt to reinforce that sense of the possibility for change. A small thing, but something" (Author's Note, Invisible Kids, Britain). On the other hand, he is somewhat less positive about older children, noting that "by the time [they] reach secondary school, they seem to become overwhelmed by many painful contradictions" (Author's Note, Invisible Kids, Britain). This belief of Foon's is quite evident in the third play which he wrote about racism and discrimination, one that is powerful in its portrayal of five teenagers (one East Indian, two Vietnamese, and two Native Indians) who undergo various degrees and forms of racial discrimination in Vancouver. Four survive; one commits suicide from despair. The play is entitled simply Skin because the play focuses upon the awful reality of the major part skin (pigment or "the external covering of an animal body" [Random House Dictionary]) plays in the pecking order of mankind; Skin will be discussed in greater detail in a later section dealing with plays for older teens.

### The Immigrant Experience in a Rural Setting

Contrary to large urban centres which have huge concentrations of immigrants, rural areas of Canada, especially the Prairies, are not heavily populated by immigrants. As well, unlike cities where people are packed together like styrofoam chips in a packing box, rural areas have more breathing space. Neighbours live five kilometres, not five metres apart. Most rural inhabitants are hardworking farmers whose main concern is their crop and whose secondary concern is the weather. If one farmer's fields suffer from blight, chances are that all the other fields suffer too. Adverse drought or heavy rains are quite impartial in their destructive courses. Everyone is too concerned with nurturing his crops to worry about his neighbour's skin colour. At least that appears to be the case in the play Neighbour, by Gloria Sawai, a transplanted American actress and creative writing teacher. Neighbour was written for Alberta Theatre Project's TIE programme and taken on tour in the Calgary area in April and May, 1980.

A neighbour by definition is someone who lives next door or nearby; a neighbour is also "a fellow human being" (Oxford English Dictionary). The neighbours in Gloria Sawai's play Neighbour are two immigrant families on the Alberta prairies. One family are the Nords from Norway, the other the Bouchards from Quebec. The community they live in appears to be peopled largely by immigrant families: Per Nord and Giselle Bouchard go to school with "Joe Pilconas, Lithuanian; Nestor Gogol, Ukrainian; Mike Retivov, Russian; [and] Fred Schmidtke, German" (Sawai 14). These children have little problem getting along regardless of their different nationalities--they are all Canadians. The problem, as

we soon discover, lies with the mothers of the two children, Per and Giselle. Mrs. Nord and Mrs. Bouchard have little good to say about each other even though neither has the slightest information other than gossip and hearsay. Kirsten calls the widow Bouchard and her daughter "those [emphasis mine] people...foreigners...[and] strangers...[who] believe in strange things" (Sawai 3). Marie, on the other hand, informs Giselle that she "must be careful of such people" (Sawai 3). The amusing aspect of these exchanges is that both women suspiciously call each other strangers and foreigners even though technically they are both immigrants to this community.

Kirsten Nord is having a hard time adjusting to life on the prairies. She does not like the area because the vastness of the land with its endless deep carpet of golden grain frightens her. She is a woman tied to the sea and deeply superstitious about the land. The loneliness of the Prairies and the insistent howling of the winds combine to deepen her self-imposed isolation:

Magnus: She gets frightened in the evening. I will go in and...

Per: ...Is mama all right?...

Magnus: She is lonely.

Per: But why? There are people. Why does she stay away from people? Like today in town. Why doesn't she visit like the others? And go to things?

Magnus: She was raised differently. It's hard to change sometimes...

She left her own country and her own people. She came to a strange land that seems to her so desolate. She thinks even God does not dwell in this land. (Sawai 11, 12)

Because of her fear of the land, Kirsten has refused to open herself up to interact with her neighbours, all people of the land. Ignorance of others has made her prejudiced against what she perceives are strange and



foreign ways. Her husband, Magnus, has adapted and tries the best he can to encourage Kirsten's own acceptance and assimilation.

Meanwhile, Marie Bouchard is an independent widow with a child and a farm. Her independence is obviously a mark against her in Kirsten's estimation, as are her Catholic beliefs. Marie is unhappy that Giselle appears to be forgetting how to speak French, and to be noticing boys. She has fond and persistent memories of Quebec before their immigration to Alberta and her husband's death on the farm. She cautions Giselle to remember:

Marie: ...you needn't be so friendly with the others....  
The Norwegian with the gloomy mother. You should be polite of course. But not so friendly...

Giselle: Per Nord? How can I be so friendly with him?  
He lives five miles from us.

Marie: ...You do walk with him sometimes. I heard about that in the town.

Giselle: Well, he lives on the same road. We both have to walk on it. There's only one road.

Marie: But...there are two sides to it. (Sawai 15, 16)

Just as there are two sides to the road, there are two sides to every issue. Marie and Kirsten see one side: the side that says the other woman and her family are strange and foreign, to be avoided whenever possible. What they do not see is the other side: the side that says that on the prairies, a neighbour is a fellow human being, regardless of where he is from, who he is, or how far away he lives. A neighbour is also essential to one's survival on the prairies or in any isolated rural community.

As neighbours, the immigrant families of community help each other out because cooperation ensures survival; isolation ensures death. Kirsten's spirit is dying inch by inch because she lacks stimulation from anyone other than Magnus and Per. Marie, on the other hand, is flourishing because, although she has nothing to do with the Norwegians, she has not isolated herself. Although her husband died during a blizzard years before, Marie has held the farm and kept it going, mostly because of her neighbours' willing help during planting and harvest times.<sup>16</sup>

The time for harvest arrives yet again and Magnus prepares to go and help "the Lithuanians" (nameless individually, but identified readily by their heritage as are all the other immigrant families in this community). Meanwhile, Per has to go to school, and on the way he meets Giselle studiously keeping to her side of the road according to her mother's orders. From either side of that common road to a common destination, the French girl and the Norwegian boy argue about their respective native tongues, insult each other roundly, and take turns yelling out stories incomprehensible to the other. Both are parroting their mothers' opinions on their cultural heritages, but neither really has the heart to keep up the ridiculous distance, especially as they are both on the verge of being late for school.

So far in the play we have been able to see the Nords and the Bouchards only separately in different scenes even though Per and Giselle have moments together. In scene six, however, both households are on the stage with the spotlight alternating between them. When Magnus informs

Kirsten and Per that the neighbours are starting at the widow Bouchard's the next day, Kirsten is appalled, especially when she learns that Per has been seeing Giselle and learning French from her:

But that is not all Per will learn. He will learn more. Then more. When will it stop? When it is too late. When he has left all the old ways and he is no longer a Norwegian. That's what comes of living so close to others. Mixing with strangers. (Sawai 24)

For Kirsten, a neighbour is a stranger. Because she still feels like a foreigner and is unwilling to let go of her Norwegian ways, she regards her neighbours prejudicially, stigmatizing them as foreigners. Her deepest fear appears to be that her beloved family (especially young and impressionable Per) will lose their cultural heritage and identity in this new land, that they will no longer be Norwegians.

The focus shifts to Marie and Giselle, who are preparing for their neighbours' arrival to harvest the next day. Because of her widow status, Marie has had help from all her neighbours in planting and harvesting each season since her husband's death. However, Marie's mind wanders to her plans for after the harvest. She intends to sell the farm and move back to Quebec, much to the dismay of Giselle whose own memories of Quebec have been dimmed by her experiences in Alberta.

Suddenly, both women break off their conversations to listen to something only they appear to hear.

Marie: I had a strange feeling just now. Like something was out there.

Kirsten:...Something else. You didn't hear? (Sawai 27)

The something they think they hear is a swarm of locusts which descends upon the community with devastating fury, eating everything in sight and

destroying the promising wheat fields (and the hopes and dreams of the entire community) in mere minutes. This is the incident which pushes Kirsten to the edge of her own control. The nameless fear she has been harbouring ever since she came to the prairies has taken shape and the harrowing experience has left her all but catatonic. As well, because of her well-known aloofness which some, including Marie, fear to be mental instability, her nervous breakdown is all but ignored by the other women in the community who are too concerned with their own families' losses. This isolates her even more within her own suffering and fears.

When Giselle next sees Per, she innocently offers up a prayer to the Virgin Mary for Kirsten's recovery. To her shock, Per is furious: "If you say those words again, my mother will die and go to Hell" (Sawai 36). The basic religious differences between Per and Giselle, Protestant and Catholic, are yet another barrier between them, causing misunderstanding and hurt feelings. Because neither the Bouchards nor the Nords are willing to forget their homelands, to various degrees they find their assimilation into their new home awkward and difficult. Magnus Nord tries to explain it to the listless Kirsten:

Always before I tell you--forget about Norway, don't think about the past....But I think now, maybe I make a mistake. ...Our past is part of us. Like Norway is part of us... and we cannot throw it away....It is important then--to think about what has gone before. To remember...yah, it is important. But then, because we do remember, we can build a home even in a strange place. Even in this new land. Here, among strangers.... (Sawai 37)

The two children make separate efforts to bring about détente between their mothers and to rouse Kirsten from her dangerous lethargy at the same time. Giselle needles, coaxes, and shames her mother into thinking about a visit to the Nords', at the same time as Per bursts in with the news that his mother is "not feeling so good" (Sawai 40). When the Bouchards arrive in haste, Kirsten is sitting in silence while Magnus and Per bustle about preparing for visitors as if all were normal. After great initial awkwardness, the Norwegians and the French-Canadians finally find common ground: Per and later a revived Kirsten proudly show their treasures from the old country. Kirsten and Marie establish common interests in crafts and begin to swap tips on embroidery and crocheting. The breakthrough comes soon enough:

Kirsten: Would you care for a piece of bread, Mrs....Mrs....

Marie: Bouchard. Marie Bouchard.

Kirsten: Oh. You are my neighbour. (Goes to the door)  
Magnus? Per? Come. Quickly. We will have coffee now. We will have bread and coffee with our neighbour.

Magnus: Did you hear that, Per? We are going to eat now. We are going to sit down with our neighbour and have some bread. (Sawai 48)

Thus the Bouchards and the Nords break bread together, an action symbolic in both faiths of brotherhood and remembrance.

Gloria Sawai, unlike Dennis Foon, has not chosen to look at the plight of the immigrant child in a strange culture, battling against indiscriminate racism. She has, instead, focused on the parallel problem of prejudice among immigrants themselves. In this play, there are no characters who are not immigrants from other lands. They are from all over the world and they have all chosen the wheatfields of Alberta to settle into a community as diverse as the United Nations assembly in

order to begin new lives. Russians are neighbours with Germans who are neighbours with Norwegians, et cetera. Interestingly, all these different races share light skin and mostly Aryan features, so maybe co-existence is not a problem, per se, because they are essentially all white. However, within this community of immigrants, there is still a problem with individualism and strong nationalism--the neighbours know each other by nationality more than by name (for example, Magnus mentions he will be going to the Lithuanians', then the French widow's place to help harvest). The title of the play, Neighbour, is significantly (and, at first, awkwardly) singular. The appellation "neighbour" in this play signifies acceptance, a common bond going beyond people who live near each other. When Kirsten calls Marie "neighbour", the lines are erased and the shields are down. Even though it takes a tragic crop destruction to bring Kirsten and Marie to an understanding, the fact remains that there is finally a meeting between these two neighbours over bread, coffee, and craft tips. The Norwegian woman and the French widow become "my neighbour, Kirsten" and "my neighbour, Marie."

Like Nick's mom in New Canadian Kid, both Kirsten and Marie are unwilling to let go of their pasts, their memories, their mother tongues, and their ties to their homelands. However, with Magnus' encouragement, Kirsten will soon be able to use her past to build upon for her future and the future of subsequent generations. The children of this community, represented by Per and Giselle, will sink their roots into Albertan soil as the first generation to grow up in this new land. Nevertheless, there will always be differences to tease each other over as is very clearly shown in the last exchange between Per and Giselle:

Giselle: (to Per) Tuk tuk tuk. All I have to say about that  
is--Norwegian makes no sense whatsoever.

Per: Then from now on I'll speak only French. Ticka tacka  
ticka tacka.

Giselle: Oh. You are just simply...impossible. (Sawai 48)

However, it appears that for Giselle and Per, "impossible" is merely a  
word, not an insurmountable barrier.

## Blind Prejudice

Like Neighbour, Paddy Campbell's play Madwitch (first produced by ATP in 1973) is set in the prairies; unlike Neighbour, Madwitch is not about a community of people helping each other despite racial and national differences. Madwitch focuses upon a major North American problem: the relationship between Whites and Native Indians, between conqueror and conquered. The Native Indian was driven from the land of his forefathers into a limbo of existence in reservations, or he refused to surrender his land and his identity, choosing instead to fight and die with dignity. Those who remained on the outskirts of White settlements--the "tame", accepted Indians--lived as barely tolerated outcasts viewed by the Whites as drunken leeches on respectable society. Because his source of livelihood, hunting, was denied him, and because he failed abjectly at farming, the acceptable White way of life, the Indian found himself with no way of maintaining even a semblance of dignified life; as well, he was now addicted to "firewater", introduced by the White man and an easy form of escape from reality. Denied equal education, equal job opportunities, and equal rights as Canadians, the Canadian Native Indian became an anachronism, despised by Whites and firmly kept in his place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In Madwitch we see one such anachronistic Indian living on the outskirts of a prairie town just before Canada entered World War II.

Madwitch is about ignorance and an overactive imagination combining to stir up hideous prejudice against a harmless old Indian woman living alone on the edge of town. The instigator of the trouble is a young girl named Joanie who, on a dare, goes up to the woman's door to taunt her with a childish rhyme. When confronted with what appears to be a hideous



witchlike apparition (Campbell, Madwitch 46), she drops her brand new pencil case and runs for her life. Later, unwilling to reveal her own part in the proceedings, Joanie fabricates an elaborate story about the mad witch trying to grab Joanie in order to do her harm, and Joanie barely escaping but dropping her pencil case in the monumental struggle.

Joanie's father and their neighbour Mr. Klassen, a recent immigrant from Germany, set off to try and retrieve the pencil case. We soon discover that the old woman has been the butt of kids' taunts for many years; she is almost an institution in the town:

Gerald: (looking around) This place hasn't changed in twenty years!

Klassen: You been here before?

Gerald: Oh sure. When I was a kid we used to fool around here all the time.

Klassen: Was the old lady here, then?

Gerald: Seems she's always been here. Seems she's always looked the same as she does now, too.

(Campbell, Madwitch 53)

Gerald later implies that being an Indian, the old woman is not to be trusted: "Well, you can never tell with these people" (Campbell, Madwitch 54). In the ensuing few minutes, the men give free rein to their imaginations when they discover some sinister-looking lines on the wall of the house: voodoo? A spell? After all, she is an Indian. Before we know it, the police are mentioned; in the minds of the two fathers, the old woman has been judged, sentenced, and hanged on the evidence of a high strung eleven year-old and a few lines drawn with purple pencil crayon.

Gerald complacently reassures Klassen that the "government has some kind of special laws for Indians...[that] in Canada we...take special care of Indians..." (Campbell, Madwitch 57). Klassen quite shrewdly

deduces that these "special laws" are discriminatory in the same way as Hitler's laws for Jews were designed especially to prey upon one race of people. Because the time of the action is 1939--the brink of World War II--when Hitler was already moving to conquer the world and establish Aryan supremacy while eliminating unwanted Jews, Klassen's words are significant; himself a victim of blind racism, he is now cautious about his own perpetration of injustice resulting from prejudice. Nevertheless, he and Gerald set off for the police station.

As the voice of reason in the midst of mounting hysteria, the constable, Laurier, is drily sarcastic in his deflation of the two men's self-important revelation of a witch in their midst. He puts everything into perspective:

...Look, Hitler is running amok over Europe, the world is on the brink of disaster and you guys are worried about some poor old Indian woman who's never bothered anyone!  
(Campbell, Madwitch 62)

The irony which arises in this scene is that Klassen is now fretting over what he sees as Laurier's prejudice--against Germans (Campbell, Madwitch 63). Meanwhile, neither he nor Gerald is willing to admit that they would never have thought anything about the whole incident if the woman had been white and not quite so obviously and eccentrically Indian.

The final confrontation erupts when Joanie, now worried about the consequences of her lies, tries to retrieve her pencil case on her own and comes face to face with the old woman herself. The woman haltingly explains her desire to write her name--the symbols on the wall--and Joanie begins to help her fill in the lines. Suddenly, two hysterical fathers bent on saving a poor child from a witch burst in and cause total confusion with their accusations of evil:

Gerald: God knows what might have happened if we hadn't got here.

Klassen: She had the girl in her power! Joanie was making the symbols! (Campbell, Madwitch 69)

When Laurier fills in the lines himself to form the name "Mary", the men are revealed as ignorant and foolish, acting upon little other than preconceptions about Native Indians (about whom they know little but assume much) and a flimsy tale spun by a child eager to escape punishment for her own carelessness.

As gently as he can, Laurier tells Mary she has to leave her home and her memories of a happy childhood before the white men came and took everything and everyone away. Whether the "place where people are good" to which Laurier will take Mary is the reservation or the institute for the mentally ill is left open to debate (Campbell, Madwitch 70); the fact remains that Laurier at least is aware that she will not be better off remaining where she is because of her age, her obvious senility, and her Indian heritage, all of which combine to make her a prime target for discrimination.

The ending of Madwitch is devastating in its simplicity and its revelation of the cyclical and self-perpetuating aspects of racial prejudice. The old Indian woman is taken away and thus is no longer available for others to abuse and shun; in her place--for someone has to be a target--is a new victim, someone who represents the enemy in wartime: a Nazi. When Laurier breaks the news that war has been declared upon Germany, Gerald exclaims, "My God," he and Joanie look at Klassen, and father hustles daughter off with a lame excuse about a late supper. Klassen is abandoned with speed and stands alone at the end of the play while voices of unseen children are heard:

Hitler is a Nazi, Hitler is a Hun  
And old Kraut Klassen--he is one! (Campbell, Madwitch 71)

Instead of Madwitch who will be gone, the children--and their parents--have a new target: the Kraut, Klassen.<sup>17</sup> Campbell shows that people will always have someone to act as a scapegoat for their prejudice. It does not matter whether the victim is a Native Indian, an immigrant German during World War II, a child from India or Homeland or Vietnam, or a person with a skin colour different from the norm of that area--people will designate others whom they deem unfit for respect, friendship, or sometimes even basic human rights.

Paddy Campbell is pessimistic about racial prejudice ever being overcome. By establishing a new scapegoat at the end of her play, she is in effect stressing the never-ending nature of racism and intolerance. Campbell is less didactic in her approach than either Foon or Sawai, and she does not, like the other two, give her audience ways of facing and grappling with racism. The end of her play is not positive--the children do not learn about the evils of racism; they continue to do what they have always done: focus on someone "different" and victimize that person in the ways only imaginative children can dream up. When the war is over (if Klassen survives), there will undoubtedly be a new outcast--perhaps another bewildered immigrant; perhaps a handicapped or retarded person; perhaps a senile person. But there will be someone else. Campbell makes that quite clear.

Betty Lambert's play The Song of the Serpent also focuses on the plight of the Indian in a White dominated society. First presented by Holiday Theatre of Vancouver in a production directed by Jane Heyman in 1967, Serpent is set in the very early days of gold-mining fever in

fledgling British Columbia. The play involves, among other things, standard "touring company melodrama" characters plus "just a touch of miscegenation, rape, illegitimacy, racist conflict, and drunkenness" (Cover, Serpent). The main protagonist is a teenage half-breed named Jason who knows where to locate a legendary gold mine belonging to his Indian uncle who has been unjustly charged with the murder of his white partner.

When the play begins, we are introduced to the colourful inhabitants of a little mining town on the Fraser river. Indeed, the first character to speak (or sing) is quite colourful: he is a black ex-slave grandiosely named Billy De Luxe, the town's barber. Described as a "negro fop" by Lambert, Billy De Luxe is cynical, self-assured, self-mocking, and staunch in his refusal to get involved in anything that is not his business. He establishes his difference from the rest of the town by repeating the phrase, "Folk like me, and folk like you" (Lambert, Serpent 3, 5). Accepted, but not befriended, living in the town but not part of it, Billy later sings a song which sums up his philosophy of life:

Never did nothin' for nobody, nobody did nothin' for me.  
 ...It's a rotten world and I don't care!  
 ...I'm free!... (Lambert, Serpent 21, 22)

Billy is an observer of life, with a jaundiced and self-deprecatingly humorous slant in his view of people, especially white people. When Jason, the young nephew of the accused murderer, Old Cariboo, comes into the town seeking a way to exonerate his uncle, it is Billy who summarily dismisses the lad's hopes for justice:

Billy: An Indian killed a White man.  
 At least that's what they say.  
 An Indian killed a White man.  
 That's evidence any day....

They're going to hang old Cariboo,  
 They're going to hang him high.  
 An Indian killed a White man, son,  
 And so he's got to die.

Jason: Yes! They're all white men on that jury. They're all white, and they'll hang Yezih because he's an Indian. (Lambert, Serpent 6)

Billy is the one who points out that what should prevail (justice) is not what ends up prevailing; to the claim that "[Old Cariboo] will get exactly the same treatment from the judge as [a white man] would or [even]...Mr. De Luxe [himself]...", his reply is a knowing "at least that's what they say" (Lambert, Serpent 7).

Jason is aware of the foregone conclusion to the trial and is frustrated by his own helplessness in the situation. A half-breed, he is scorned by both the white man and red man; scarred by the rejection, he is bitter and defensive, vowing that if he ever found the white man who fathered him and then callously abandoned his mother, he would kill the man. Burned by injustice and prejudice against his dual heritage, he nevertheless views everyone who is not Indian as the enemy; he has chosen to recognize only his Indian blood and his Native ties, repudiating his white blood by repudiating all whites. Ironically, because in his own view all non-Indians are white and all whites are enemies, he accuses Billy of being white. In a way, Jason has inadvertently focused on Billy's own assimilation of white culture and behavior which Billy himself appears unaware of:

Jason: You're all the same, you white men!

Billy: White men? White men? Take a good look, boy.

Jason: You're not Indian.

Billy: No, I'm not Indian.

Jason: Then you're just the same, a white man, a liar, and a cheat.... (Lambert, Serpent 9)

Because of his volatile nature and his pride, Jason carelessly reveals his knowledge of the location of a legendary gold mine called the Serpent Mine. He is then coerced by two villains (one of whom is purely comic relief--a goon named "Knuckle-Under" who is constantly being cuffed by his marginally brighter companion) who unashamedly exploit him for his usefulness. The fact that Jason is young in addition to being a half-breed renders him vulnerable to the evil intentions of the dastardly duo. Greed is the sole motivation behind their actions, as it is behind the actions of the Hudson Bay Clerk, James Wright, a self-pitying drunk who (in true melodrama tradition) turns out to be Jason's father. Wright agrees with the ingratiating arguments of the villains that Jason is in need of trustworthy partners, and persuades Jason to allow them to "stake" him in his hunt for the missing (and presumed dead) partner of his uncle.

Later on in the play, Lambert contrasts the greed of whites with the generosity of Indians:

Jason: ...when we give away, we become more than ourselves...It is very difficult to give everything. You must be great.

Priscilla: Give everything away? How odd. With us, it's quite the other way round. With us, the richest man is the one who keeps everything for himself.  
(23)

Jason does not care greatly about the gold; he is primarily concerned with saving his beloved uncle by finding the partner. In the process, he leads the group to the mine and is then, along with Wright and Wright's niece Priscilla, forced into working the mine for gold. In a neat plot twist, who should turn up on the scene trailing behind him the missing partner but Billy De Luxe himself.

Unbeknownst to the group, Billy had pondered over the exploitation of Jason by the white men (including the unwitting James Wright) and decided that as a fellow outcast he should render whatever assistance he could to the young boy. All the while, he maintains his distance, claiming to be merely taking a stroll, unexpectedly coming upon the hiding partner, and just happening to lead the man to the mine: "Funny, ain't it" (Lambert, Serpent 43)? The climax is explosive--literally--as the mine blows up. The action then winds down and in true melodrama style, everyone and everything is resolved in a happy ending.

However, although the play claims to be little more than a standard melodrama with all sorts of stereotypes and more action than deep themes, we are not left empty at the end. Through the play we are exposed to several glaring instances of racism in bygone days (which in some ways are very little different from today). Granted, we are aware that Native Indians were subjected to horrendous prejudice and discrimination; but Lambert shows us that Canadians treated their Native Indians in the same way Americans treated Negroes down South. Who, then, are we Canadians to condemn slavery? Certainly, Americans who enslaved blacks were no worse than Canadians who blatantly exploited Native Indians. The veneer of civilization is thin:

Billy: [to Corrigan, Knuckle's partner] Hello Slaver, ain't you read the news? Ain't you read the news? Slavery's illegal in this country. Down South too, ever since you lost the war.

Corrigan: You keep a civil tongue in your head, Boy. Back where I come from, we got ways a dealing with them as gets uppity, we got ways... (Lambert, Serpent 18)

To Corrigan, a black man (a boy) had his place--below the white man's heel. With no qualms, he exploits Jason, another non-white and thus to



be classed with Billy as a "slave." Meanwhile, Old Cariboo is accused of the murder of his white partner on very flimsy evidence and would most certainly have been found guilty by an all-white jury.

Similarly, Old Mary in Madwitch is metaphorically tried, judged, and sentenced by a jury of two white men on the flimsy evidence of an imaginative pre-teen girl. "You can't never trust an Injun" (Lambert, Serpent 13) is the rationale for any discriminatory, prejudicial, or exploitative actions against Indians. Lambert shows that 1866 is not that different from 1939 or 1988 when it comes to the position of the Native Indian in Canadian society. Moreover, she focused upon the breakdown of racial barriers when the situation warrants cooperation of all concerned: a black man comes to the aid of a half-breed and two whites in order to vanquish an evil which defies race and colour. Apparently overtly didactic in its maintenance of good triumphing over evil, The Song of the Serpent nonetheless presents the racial intolerance of 1866 in a rather ambiguous fashion.

Billy De Luxe is a black man, the only one of his colour in a community of whites, who begins the play by clearly separating himself from the rest of the town. However, he ends the play by singing a slightly altered version of the song's refrain: "Folk like me and [emphasis mine] you" (Lambert, Serpent 48, 49). Accused of white instincts by an Indian, Billy nevertheless steps out of his isolation to help the young man extricate himself from an exploitative situation. Jason, on the other hand, begins the play with a tirade against white injustice and greed; he also vows revenge on his white father. In the end, he is close friends with an upper class white girl and discovers

(and apparently accepts) his white father who had been exploited with him by the villains. Rather facilely, the play ends with son and father reconciled, and negro fop putting his arm around white saloon dancing girl (the hint of miscegenation along with Wright's liaison with Jason's mother). In contrast to the pessimism of Madwitch, The Song of the Serpent is guardedly positive and tidies loose ends up in the end by having Billy De Luxe sing "...Folk like me and you" (49).

When Ontario Multicultural Theatre Association sponsored a National Playwriting competition in 1976, plays were entered that had to have "'a definite multicultural flavour, emphasizing tolerance and understanding among peoples and races, while instilling pride in one's own heritage, regardless of origin'" (quoted in Wilson D57). Beth McMaster's entry (which was subsequently awarded third prize) was When Everybody Cares, a futuristic play about a robot who is rejected as an unwanted minority by his human neighbours.

When Richard Robot is first introduced, there is a telling exchange about the level of racial tolerance in this little town of Fairway:

Janet: Richard's new in the area.  
 Richard: We just moved onto Elm Street.  
 Leon: Oh yeh, into the house where the Chinese family was.  
 Richard: That's right.  
 Leon: They certainly didn't stay in this neighbourhood long...I mean the Chinese.  
 Richard: They didn't seem to like it.  
 Janet: I can understand that. Some people weren't very nice to them.  
 Richard: That can happen when you're different.  
 Leon: Yeh, I guess you should know.  
 Janet: Leon!  
 Richard: That's alright. I'm used to it, Janet. We were the first family of robots in our last neighbourhood, too.  
 Janet: That must be hard.  
 Richard: Sometimes it is. It depends on the people. Anyway, I'm proud to be a robot. We may have our shortcomings, but we've got a lot going for us.  
 (McMaster D63-D64)

Several facts are established in this revealing dialogue between the new robot in town, his new-found friend, Janet, and Janet's not-so-accepting friend, Leon, who classes Richard with the last unwanted people in the neighbourhood--the Chinese family.

To begin with, the neighbourhood which in effect drove away the Chinese family by being mean and discriminatory will most likely not accept the new robot family any more easily. In addition, the Robots have obviously moved into Fairway to get away from a previously unfriendly neighbourhood in which they were, again, the "first family of robots..." (McMaster D64). Implied in this phrase is the fact that the Robots have not yet found acceptance in any other neighbourhood; that is why they have moved onto Elm Street (ironically into the house vacated by yet another family of outcasts).

Another robot might have taken offence at Leon's snide remark about being different; however, Richard is described as "used to being part of an minority group" (McMaster D57) and he chooses not to take offence. In fact, he demonstrates his own maturity and levelheadedness by affirming his pride in his electronic heritage. His pride is not, however, excessive; in fact, he even admits to shortcomings. But overall, he recognizes his uniqueness and his need to be proud of himself. He is eager and friendly in his quest to make new friends, and he willingly helps out with anything he is asked to do.

Unfortunately, Leon is tame in his attitude compared to Simon and Dagmar who are disgusted that Richard has moved into the neighbourhood. Simon deliberately says, "When the Chinks moved out, I thought we had nowhere to go but up, and now look at this!" (McMaster D68). Racist insults are hurled at Richard, who remains unruffled in his belief that not all people are this crass in their attitude towards minorities. He realizes that racial intolerance is based primarily upon ignorance:

Richard: Have you ever known a robot before, Simon?

Simon: Fortunately I've managed to escape up until now.

Dagmar: Your luck's run out.

Richard: I'd suggest you at least give us a chance to prove ourselves. (McMaster D69)

Sadly, Richard's suggestion points to the truth that a minority child has to prove his "worth" in order to be accepted by majority children in many instances because of the automatic rejection tendered by the latter as the result of ignorance. Simon and Dagmar represent two such ignorant young people as they reluctantly "allow" Richard to play with them; at the first sign of faltering on Richard's part, however, they roundly stigmatize him as a "clunker" and a "stupid, creaking tin can" (McMaster D72, D71).

In much the same manner as Mug in New Canadian Kid, Simon and Dagmar victimize the obliging and hapless Richard in order to "prove" their own superiority over robots. Their jeers are reminiscent of other plays we have examined in which kids taunt other kids who are "different." They play a dirty trick on Richard by putting a magnet on a ball he is supposed to put into a basket, and when Janet threatens to expose them, Richard quite knowingly says, "don't bother...if it weren't the magnet, it would be something else" (McMaster D76). Based upon nothing but ignorance and insecurity with a liberal dose of blind hatred, Simon's attitude is chilling in its implications when he coldly states, "the sooner that creep and his whole rattling family get out of here, the better it'll be for all of us" (McMaster D78).

Fortunately for Richard, he soon has a chance to demonstrate his own unique qualities when he extinguishes a threatening fire with his hand, thus saving Simon from a nasty burn. Simon and Dagmar come face to face with the fact that "different" does not mean "inferior." Indeed, if

everyone were the same, life would be quite dull--in Simon's case, if Richard had not been a robot, he would not have been able to douse the fire and save Simon. Richard's song "What really counts" insists that while "a robot is quite different...still he's just like you!" (McMaster D84). He turns out to be so helpful to everyone that he ends up in great demand, literally pulled in three directions by people who want his help (McMaster D92-D93). Of course, all is well at the end of the play, and the audience is left with a final song whose third verse sums up the attitude we should all have towards visible minorities:

In everyone there's something good, just waiting to be found!  
 There are things that make a man worthwhile whatever job he's in,  
 But it matters not how he looks or talks, or the colour of his skin!...  
 Let's all pull together as we build the land,  
 Let's build a better future with a helping hand!  
 The load will be lighter, if everybody shares,  
 Everyone matters when everybody cares.... (McMaster D94)

Because this play was written specifically to encourage racial tolerance and understanding while stressing pride of heritage, it is quite didactic--and rightly so. Using a robot to represent a visible minority allows Beth McMaster to emphasize sensitive points without fear of offence or rejection. Slurs are specifically directed at the robot's physical appearance and metallic makeup, while Simon's sneers at the deterioration of the neighbourhood are all too familiar to other visible minorities in Canada like East Indians or Blacks. Setting it in 1990 and having a non-human in the minority role makes the play that much more universal--in a way like New Canadian Kid--because kids will readily accept the premise and do their own application without much urging. McMaster also differentiates for her young audience prejudice arising

from rejection of someone's racial or ethnic heritage, and plain rejection of someone for anti-social behavior or something similar. In a running gag, an incompetent would-be magician insistently demonstrates his "tricks" only to have them repeatedly fail with disastrous results for his victims. On each occasion when he botches a trick and is confronted by furious victims, he accuses everyone within range of "prejudice", claiming that everyone is against him. Put side by side with Richard Robot, however, he is patently ludicrous in his claims.

#### Comparison of Purpose and Technique

Because Dennis Foon wrote the majority of the plays under discussion, it is all too easy to compare the other plays to the Foon plays and to discount the differences in intention and technique from one playwright to the other. However, there are distinct differences in the goals and approaches of each of the writers whose plays I have examined thus far in this thesis. Dennis Foon believes that TYA is "the last and most effective form of popular theatre that we have; it cuts across cultural, racial, religious, economic, and social strata" (Interview). In his plays for young people, he deals with many issues other than racism, but ultimately he attempts to "do something honest, to identify problems in society and [say] 'this is bullshit; it has to stop'" (Interview).

Gloria Sawai's main focus is not, like Foon's, on the prejudice faced by immigrants in a new land, but on the often ridiculous preconceptions and stereotypes held by immigrants about fellow immigrants. She appears to be saying that racism is not confined to whites against visible minorities, but that it is practiced with gusto

among white immigrants against each other. Sawai advocates tolerance and cooperation, learning to overcome ignorance, and willingness to admit faults. In these ways, immigrants can make their assimilation easier for themselves and their families, and a community of diverse ethnic groups can fuse to be a Canadian community dedicated to the common needs and goals of that group. Yet while they focus upon assimilation, immigrants should not renounce their proud ethnic heritage, but remember the land of their ancestors and pass those memories and keepsakes on to future generations so that their adopted land is enriched by the addition of these other ethnic cultures.

Paddy Campbell is the least positive of the playwrights under discussion in her assessment of racism and intolerance. She shows the mindlessness and the endless nature of racial prejudice by beginning and ending her play with apparently childish ditties about a "madwitch" and a "Nazi Kraut" who are, in reality, an old Indian woman and an immigrant German. She gives no answers to the problem of prejudice; unlike Foon, she does not offer any ways of coping with racial prejudice and racial discrimination. She merely shows the bleakness of life as it is for people who are outcasts by virtue of their ethnic origin or their Native heritage. Also disturbing is her emphasis on the continuation of the prejudice through the children of that town who are doing the same things their parents did when they were children.

The theme of how whites treat Native Indians is also prominent in The Song of the Serpent which, as Betty Lambert herself put it, "may be written as a touring company melodrama, but it's hardly innocuous" ("On Writing Plays" 28). Lambert was certain that "children recognize the



banal...[and] the cheap;" for that reason she "never restricted [her] subject matter. [She] always wrote about the things that were bothering [her] at the time" ("On Writing Plays" 29, 28). In The Song of the Serpent, Lambert shows, among other things, the way white people have historically treated the Native Indian, taking advantage of the simplicity and stoicism of the red man. By making Jason a young half-breed, Lambert stresses the plight of one who not only is an outcast from the white community, but through no fault of his own has been made into a freak and abhorred for his mixed blood.

Beth McMaster, on the other hand, concentrates her play on self-seeking young people who ostracize a robot because it is not human like them. By setting her play in the future--1990--and making the outcast non-human, McMaster universalizes her theme in much the same way as Foon's play New Canadian Kid has a universal application. An audience of children would identify with a robot whose squeaks and rattles do not endear him to his already hostile neighbours, but whose metallic makeup ends up saving his fiercest villifier from a fiery accident. Because the rules of the competition to which McMaster submitted her play were clearly delineated--the play had to emphasize "tolerance and understanding among people and races, while instilling pride in one's own heritage, regardless of origin" (Wilson D57)--there is no doubt about McMaster's intent and no doubt that the message gets through in the end.

## Chapter V

Plays for Secondary Schools

Skin, Dennis Foon.  
Cornelius Dragon, Jan Truss.

There are very few plays dealing with racism which are aimed at a Group Three audience; however, rare though they may be, there are such plays which look at the problems of racial intolerance along with the very pressing concerns of peer pressure and self-discovery in a time of change and confusion in life. Skin, by Dennis Foon, and Cornelius Dragon, by Jan Truss, are plays which highlight the problems faced by immigrant teens in both an urban setting and a rural setting. Both plays also have very strong emphases upon peer pressure and self-identity in their plots.

Like New Canadian Kid and Invisible Kid (both the British and the Canadian versions), Skin was written after intense preparation<sup>18</sup> by Dennis Foon who conducted many interviews with immigrant young people in both Vancouver and Toronto, educators, and race relations experts. "The characters in this play are fictional but their experiences are not invented" (Playwright's Note, Skin). Skin was first produced by Green Thumb Theatre in March, 1986, in Vancouver. According to Foon, it was developed as a "logical extension of the work done in New Canadian Kid. More than fifty percent of Green Thumb's audience is non-white, so the issue of racism is of extraordinary concern. New Canadian Kid is generalized in its approach to racism, and is therefore quite universal"<sup>19</sup> (quoted in Lanauze 19). "Skin, however, looks at specific questions and issues affecting specific groups, and indeed, specific age groups" (qtd. in Lanauze 19).

Skin is starkly prefaced with four actors alternating short phrases describing a body...an average person. Constant repetition gives this thirty-second introduction a rhythmic, almost hypnotic feeling. Actor one begins with a statement of height, actor two weight, et cetera, until all four actors end up echoing the simple, poignant phrase "I feel" (Foon, Skin 1). Only after this do the three main characters introduce themselves individually and more fully: Phiroza, the East Indian girl; Karen, the Native Indian; and Tuan, the new Vietnamese immigrant, a displaced boat person. The play has no single plot line, as such, and no single story to tell; what it has, in fact, are several stories which are separate in their developments, but parallel in their revelations about racism and its adverse effects.

Phiroza's story is a common one in Vancouver. She has been in Canada since she was four years old, but previously lived outside of Vancouver proper. Her problems did not start until she moved into Vancouver and a new school where she encountered for the first time racial slurs about her being from Pakistan ("paki" being a common racial slur directed at all East Indians). At pains to correct them, she discovered to her dismay that "they really didn't care who [she] was or where [she] really came from" (Foon, Skin 3), they just saw the colour of her skin.<sup>20</sup>

Karen, on the other hand, is more Canadian than any white Canadian has a right to call himself: she is a Native Indian. A quiet, docile student brainwashed into thinking herself stupid, she has no idea she is being constantly discriminated against because of her race. More to the point, she does not want to know; she does not want to acknowledge the

discrimination because to do so would mean she has to react and risk being branded a "troublemaking Indian" when all she wants is acceptance from the white community upon which she is dependent. Cousin Sabrina, conversely, is a rabble-rousing activist who is well aware of discrimination against Natives, and she is vocal in her battle to gain respect for herself and her people, respect that includes service for Natives in expensive restaurants. She cannot believe Karen's attitude of acceptance, her deliberate ignorance of blatant racism practiced by, among others, her teachers and counsellors at school.

The remaining character is Tuan, a boat person from Vietnam who has been sponsored for immigration by a Vancouver church group. Responsible for a younger sister, his main concern is for them to survive and for him to earn a living while simultaneously going to school to learn English. Luckily he finds another Vietnamese who speaks Chinese, and they become friends. Like Karen, Tuan wants mainly to maintain the status quo by being inconspicuous. When Lo, his new friend, urges him to fight back against bullies who pick on him in the school hallway, Tuan's response is simple:

Tuan: I've seen enough blood. I've seen enough death. We've both seen war.

Lo: It's a war here too.

Tuan: ...you call this a war?

Lo: In a way. You think they like you?

Tuan: Those guys don't. But it's not the same for all of them.

Lo: Yes it is.... (Foon, Skin 9)

Tuan is naive and trusting in the same way as Karen is naive and trusting when she says, "People are people. Some are jerks and some are nice. They don't treat you different just cause you're native" (Foon, Skin 18). Both of them think they will be the exception if there is a rule; that

they will not be the butts of racial discrimination because they themselves are not looking for trouble, but actively seeking assimilation and peaceful co-existence with their peers and their community. Still optimistic, they have not yet learned to combat the inexorable tide of racism, to try and stem its movement against them and others like them.

First to fight back is Phiroza, and she is as surprised as the boys who taunt her: "six evil looking guys with their mouths dropped open and eyes bugged out, like this: (she demonstrates) I guess they were a little surprised" (Foon, Skin 10). Nevertheless, Phiroza also learns to survive in another, less blatant, manner. Faced with a situation in which she has to make a quick decision when a boy she likes makes a move to know her better, she denies her East Indian heritage and becomes, without a blink, Persian. Cautiously, she prevaricates without any outright lies (or so she justifies to herself) until Todd assumes what she wants him to assume, that she is Persian. After that, it is easy for her; she has a champion in Todd who fights for her in the mistaken belief that she is undeserving of the taunts directed at her. However, the trials involved in maintaining a deception of that proportion prove too much for her, and she finally confesses--only to find that Todd does not care what country she originated from. He cares for Phiroza, the person, because he has seen beyond Phiroza's colour and gotten to know her as an individual.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Phiroza admits that it had been she who had been paranoid: "I guess I knew from the start how he felt about me. I just wasn't sure how I felt about myself" (Foon, Skin 29). Because of the rejection she had suffered at the hands of her peers, among others, her own self-esteem had plummeted to the point where she had herself despised her heritage and had wanted to be something more "acceptable."

Meanwhile, Tuan learns firsthand about the gritty realities of being an immigrant without English and without defenses against discrimination. He is summarily fired from his humble janitorial position for no other reason than that he is not white. His supervisor feels some remorse, but she too has to survive by following orders:

Mrs. Paul: No more job. You're through. No more work.  
 Tuan: No work.  
 Mrs. Paul: Right, right, you get it.  
 Tuan: Why no work?  
 Mrs. Paul: You're good, son you're one of my best men. It's nothing personal.  
 Tuan: Personal?  
 Mrs. Paul: Forget it, just forget it. It's not up to me.  
 Tuan: Up to me?  
 Mrs. Paul: Look, the guy who owns this building complained.  
 (Foon, Skin 14)

Tuan is fired not for incompetence, but because he is the wrong colour, according to the owner of the building. Despite this setback, Tuan continues to survive, but his friend, Lo, does not fare as well. In fact, Lo has been steadily deceiving his family back in Vietnam by writing to them about his non-existent job, his non-existent five-bedroom house, and his non-existent prospects. For him, the racial discrimination is insurmountable, his pride has been battered by constant rejection, and he finally tires of crashing into the wall in endless attempts to scale it. He commits suicide, escaping the pressure in the only way possible for him. Tuan survives, but he does not know why:

When I found out Lo was dead, it was such a puzzle. Why should I live and Lo die? We were so much the same--why not me? (Foon, Skin 30)

Skin is about survival; it is about overcoming the odds; above all, it is about racism. It is about the mindless racial discrimination practiced against certain groups of people about whom negative preconceptions are held. In particular, it is about how people who are

visibly non-white suffer from prejudice more than those who are white. Karen, for instance, is constantly being told by Mr. Lizard that she is a loser who will never be able to survive in an academic program in school. Why? Lizard's preconceptions about Native Indians include the belief that they are intrinsically lazy and stupid, good for only beadwork and woodcarving. All Native Indians, according to Mr. Lizard's perceptions, are shiftless leeches upon our benevolent government, just waiting for any excuse to get drunk (Foon, Skin 17). In another scene, Karen is the witness to a shoplifting attempt by a white teenaged girl. When the girl is caught, she "apologise[s] to the store keeper...[and he] accepts her apology. The girl says goodbye and leaves" (Foon, Skin 23). The storekeeper then turns to the silent Karen and accuses her of shoplifting because "everytime her people come in here they walk out with half the stuff on my shelves" (Foon, Skin 23). The policeman voices a commonly-held misconception of Native Indians based upon ignorance and stereotyping (with a liberal dose of Hollywood added): "You may not be in trouble now, but you'll end up just like the rest of them, drunk and living in the skids, hooking and stealing" (Foon, Skin 23). Helpless against the policeman's authority and hostility, Karen has to undergo the indignity of being questioned and insulted about her race. It strikes her that Sabrina has been right all along:

This is Canada. In 1986. But it happened, it really happened. I know most police aren't like that guy. But some are. And how many people are too? I started thinking about...the names little four and five year olds have called me--where did they learn that stuff? I didn't teach them. Who did? (Foon, Skin 24)

The incident strengthens her budding resolution to prove everyone wrong. It takes courage and perseverance, but Karen tackles academic subjects and proves that she is not "like the rest of them," that she is bright

and capable when she is allowed to break out of the straitjacket of racist stereotyping in which the white man has encased the Native for decades. The question raised by Karen's story is, why does she have to work three times as hard to prove herself just because she is a Native Indian?

The question raised by Phiroza's story is, why does she feel that she would be more acceptable if she were Persian and not East Indian? Both girls react to pressure exerted by racism and racial discrimination in their lives. They both have to prove something: Karen to people who call her stupid and a born loser; Phiroza to herself. Karen comes to the realization that she is a Native Indian who, like countless numbers of her people, has been belittled into believing that she is incapable of achievement. In her last scene with Mr. Lizard when he informs her that she has managed to pull her grades up enough to take a full academic load next semester, she aligns herself with cousin Sabrina and all the rest of the Natives who have been discriminated against in their history of subjugation to the white man:

...You [referring to Lizard] say you were just pushing us [emphasis mine] but all it did was make us feel stupid and worthless. Cause you do, you do think we're stupid. You never thought I could do it, you never did. You just made me feel like a fool but I made it anyway, in spite of you. (Foon, Skin 26)

Phiroza proves something to herself when, unable to stand the deceit any longer, she finally tells Todd the truth:

So Todd kept thinking I was from Iran. But I was really sick of the lie. I had to be so careful about everything I said to him. I wanted him to meet my family--but what if he started asking my dad questions about life in Persia? I decided to tell him the truth but it wasn't going to be easy. (Foon, Skin 27)

Telling the truth when it could mean losing one's credibility as well as



one's friends is never easy; in Phiroza's case it would have been easy for Todd to reject her for her lies and for her real racial heritage--Persian is more exotic than East Indian, at least in Vancouver.

However, Phiroza proves to herself that trying to change in order to fit someone else's desires is not as easy as it looks, and being oneself without apology takes courage (especially in the face of rejection). Her self-esteem had suffered from the racial slurs she faced daily, and she really was unsure how she felt about herself; consequently, when confronted with the possibility of Todd's asking her out, she opted for deception instead of honesty because she feared his reaction might be all too familiar. Telling him the truth clarifies her feelings about herself and her racial heritage, solidifies her pride, and reminds her of the value of self-esteem.

Tuan's self-esteem is not in question as much as his puzzlement at his survival in life. As a character, Tuan might well be an older version of Thiun, the Vietnamese boy in Invisible Kids. Just as Thiun tempers his optimism with caution at the end of Invisible Kids, Tuan acknowledges that "it is as hard to look forward as it is to look back. So [he] live[s] for today. For each moment. And live[s] as best [he] can" (Foon, Skin 30). For Tuan, life is always going to be uncertain for someone like him--an immigrant from Vietnam whose English is always going to be accented, and who daily lives on the edge of survival, dependent upon the good will of people who do not have much love for coloured foreigners.

Skin ends the way it begins, with the three characters introducing themselves. This way, the audience sees that these are not isolated stories, but stories which repeat themselves endlessly with different characters in the casts, different backgrounds, and different endings. Phiroza, Karen, and Tuan are by no means the only ones who go through racial discrimination and racial prejudice; indeed, Foon means them to represent countless faceless "youth living in Vancouver and Toronto" (Playwright's Note) whose stories never get told. He states clearly that although "Canada is a progressive country and its record with race relations is not all that bad compared to other countries...there is much work to be done: problems need to be addressed, not denied" (Foon, Playwright's Note, Skin). In this play as in the other two examined, Foon has indeed presented some problems prevalent in race relations in Vancouver, Toronto, and London, and he has addressed these problems by showing how children who are victimized by racism handle it: with perseverance, upbeat optimism, dogged faith in the system, stoicism, cynicism, caution, or ultimately escape.

Two versions of Skin were written: one set in Vancouver and one set in Toronto.<sup>22</sup> In the Toronto version, Karen Wilson, the Native Indian girl, becomes Jennifer Malcolm. Jennifer is black with a Jamaican father and a Trinidadian mother; Jennifer herself, however, was born and bred in Ontario. Geographically speaking, Toronto has a preponderance of blacks (especially with the arrival of many Haitian refugees in the past few years) while Vancouver has a large number of Native Indians; Foon then decided to reshape one character, Karen, into a black character with appropriate dialogue changes. Like Karen, Jennifer is quite sure that she "never had any problems cause [she] was black. [She] didn't think

anybody really did--except [her] cousin Delacy" (Foon, Skin Toronto 3) who, like Karen's cousin Sabrina, opens Jennifer's eyes to the discrimination faced by blacks like them in Metro Toronto. Jennifer is at first very reluctant to credit Delacy's story of one white woman on a bus who did not want to sit next to Delacy:

Delacy: ...You should have seen her face!...Maybe she thought I had rabies...or my colour would rub off on her.

Jennifer: Maybe it had nothing to do with you at all.

Delacy: Right, Jennifer.

Jennifer: You don't know for sure why she did that.

Delacy: Well it doesn't take much to figure her out.

Jennifer: There could be a million reasons other than you're black.

Delacy: You really think so, Jennifer?

Jennifer: Yes, Delacy. Yes... (Foon, Skin Toronto 3)

Like Karen, Jennifer is victimized by the reptilian Mr. Lizard who tells her that she is lazy--stereotypically so in the best Tinsel Town tradition of the shiftless, shuffling blacks of the American South. He figures that black students have but one advantage over whites: a "natural" athletic ability. Despite the fact that Delacy is "terrible at sports...everybody thought [she] had some special qualifications" (Foon, Skin Toronto 10). With determination and perseverance, smarting from Delacy's remarks about her naivete, Jennifer succeeds in pulling up her grades to allow her to transfer to a collegiate school, bound for eventual university entrance. It is a steep hill to negotiate because she has to acknowledge her own head-in-the-sand attitude towards racism, preferring previously to party and lose herself in Bryan Adams' gravelly tones, ignoring in the process the slurs and the stares. When she finally realizes that "some things are more important than parties" (Foon, Skin Toronto 15), she begins to see that she has been brainwashed into thinking that all she cared about was parties; railroaded into the

vocational program because of preconceptions about her colour, she found it far easier to be lazy as she was tagged, than to swim against the tide of streaming:

Delacy: Only thing you had to learn was not to believe what they said about you.

Jennifer: That I was lazy?

Delacy: Because you were black.

Jennifer: Oh come on Delacy. This is Canada, everybody's the same here. This isn't Alabama or South Africa or England.

Delacy: You really think so?

Jennifer: Yeah.

Delacy: What about when people stare at you?

Jennifer: It's no big deal.

Delacy: And the stuff we both went through at school-- everybody just assumes you're lazy and no good-- you think every white person in this country goes through that too? (Foon, Skin Toronto 15)

Like Karen Wilson, Jennifer has always had potential which has been relentlessly suppressed by those who felt that her colour denoted a corresponding lack of academic ability; she too has to battle to overcome preconceptions and discrimination in order to go to university and train to be a teacher. As a teacher she will then use her experiences and her new-found insight to try and do her part in stemming the inexorable tide of racism in the progressive country of Canada.

Karen/Jennifer and Phiroza demonstrate the sometimes overwhelming desire in teenagers to conform while at the same time (paradoxically) to rebel. Teenagers want to be like everyone else at school--dress alike, talk alike, think alike--but they want to be seen as rebels by their parents and other authority figures. On a teenager's list of priorities, names rank high. Imagine, then, if a new student in school is not only from another country (somewhere over in Eastern Europe), but is burdened with a singular name like Cornelius Horatio Dragon--originally

Dragonoffskiwitch, an unpronounceable mouthful which his father mercifully shortened to Dragon. The young protagonist in the play Cornelius Dragon is caught between his parents' (especially his mother's) old world values and his great need to be accepted by the Canadian kids in his new school. Racism and racial prejudice against immigrants is a prominent theme, but so is the insistent domination of peer pressure and the need to be oneself in the midst of pressing conformity.

Cornelius Dragon is a play by Jan Truss, who has written numerous other plays and novels for young people. Although the play was workshopped by Joyce Doolittle's class in TYA at the University of Calgary in 1983, the first fully-mounted production of Cornelius Dragon was given by senior theatre students at Brookwood Secondary School in Langley, B.C., as the senior entry in the Langley Drama Festival on March 7, 1987.<sup>23</sup>

Cornelius is a young man when he appears at the beginning of the play and tells the audience about his childhood and teen years. Central to the action and to his character (his last name is evocative of myth and legend) is a set of wind chimes whose delicate tinkling is reminiscent of dreams and fantasies. Cornelius strikes the chimes to signal a flashback or put an end to a painful memory. He begins the play with a monologue which informs the audience about his background--Eastern European--and his father's plight as an immigrant whose skills (as a tailor) are useless, not to mention anachronistic, in their new country and who ends up as a janitor at Cornelius's school. Mr. Dragon is in the same position as Nick's father in New Canadian Kid. Both men are skilled at a profession, but they are unable to practice those skills in a land

in which they are foreigners and lack command of the language. When Cornelius remembers those days when he used to help his father clean the school halls, his most vivid memories are of how the other kids taunted him about his name, his clothes, and his menial work. They would chant "Corny, Corny, Cornelius" and jeer that "his mother don't speaky the language" (Truss, Dragon 32).

Cornelius' mother is very much an old world immigrant, complete with black scarf and shawl and broken accent. She is reminiscent of Nick's mother in New Canadian Kid: she too dislikes having to speak English; she too had great hopes, now dashed, for their new lives in Canada; she too is afraid to leave the sanctuary of her house to face her neighbours. Her husband, like Magnus Nord in Neighbour, wants to assimilate, wants his wife to "...get out more. Dress like the other women. Talk to people so [she learns] to speak the language" (Truss, Dragon 33). The plight of the Dragons is typical of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Pride battles with survival; survival is paramount; pride is ground into the dirt and survival takes first place:

Father: It is not so bad. Enough to eat. No police, no soldiers at the door. We speak our minds--almost. For Cornelius this will be the land of opportunity.  
(Truss, Dragon 34)

It is upon Cornelius that these two older people place their hopes and dreams for the future: Cornelius, their only son, will "make well...[in this] land of opportunity" (Truss, Dragon 34).

The main reason for immigration from a third world country to a first world country like Canada is the chance to "make it." People want to have a better life if not for themselves, then for their children. To this end, parents push their children to achieve scholastically so that

these children will then gain wealth and power via their intelligence and their capitalistic opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Cornelius is duly invested with his parents' hopes for a better life; he is expected to achieve high scholastic scores in order to go to university. In a scene with his parents, Cornelius brings home his report card on which is a mere "A" for English, a fact that drives his mother to strong hysterics, his father to lose his temper, and Cornelius to despair.

After a disastrous party where Cornelius musters up the courage to ask the popular and pretty Kathy to dance, only to be repulsed in no uncertain terms, he runs away, declaring, "I'm getting out of here. I've had enough. I'm getting out. Running away from all this shit. Leaving. Getting out. Getting out" (Truss, Dragon 38). He cannot stand the humiliation of discrimination and rejection anymore and, unable to bear the incessant pressure from parents and peers, he takes the easiest route out: running away from it all.

At this point, the play veers off into a surrealistic hallucinatory sequence with Cornelius dragging himself through a desert. He meets up with a cowboy carrying a saddle and looking for a runaway horse. Joyce Doolittle claims that "the character of the cowboy...is haunting. He is an example of the dark side of the 'outsider'...[in the scene whose] mood...is reminiscent of the desert scene in Peer Gynt, Ibsen's fantasy journey play" (Eight Plays 8). The cowboy leaves Cornelius half dead in the desert after he takes the boy's wallet. Interestingly, even in his delirium, Cornelius lies to the cowboy, claiming for his name the innocuous-sounding Jim Black.

The final scene is also somewhat difficult to interpret at first, but its basic function is to exemplify the other strong theme in the play: self-acceptance and self-pride. Upon his recovery in the desert, Cornelius stumbles upon a fleabag "circus" with an all-purpose female performer, a surly ringmaster, and a decrepit lion whose roar is courtesy of a portable tape recorder (which breaks down at the crucial point). In this scene, Truss also seems to be aiming a few barbs at the popular assumption that an audience of children are easily fooled into accepting anything as quality entertainment:

Bill: Yah. Remember that one what kept yelling, That's not a real lion--

Girl: And that one who screamed at me Why don't you get a white horse?

Bill: Kids, kids. Know too much for their own good these days.

Girl: No sense of magic. (Truss, Dragon 56)

Cornelius dons a clown outfit and as Jimbo the Clown entertains the audience. Not only has he renounced his name, he has renounced his appearance. However, at the end, he encounters a "person" swathed from head to toe with only hands and feet showing. In a conversation with this person, Cornelius Horatio Dragonoffskiwitch discovers that "it" is a girl with the equally singular name Arathusa Zeigleman. In their subsequent exchange (Truss, Dragon 54), they admit their attempts to deny their true selves and their heritage--one by hiding behind a new name and a clown suit, the other by donning layers of unisex clothing and the claim of being nobody. They both discover that the other is running away as well, physically and metaphorically. Finally, like butterflies from their cocoons, the two young people remove their disguises, revealing their true selves and accepting each other for who they are, funny names and all. Cornelius has the last lines:



(He sounds the wind chimes as at the beginning. Confides to the audience as at the beginning.)

Hi. I am Cornelius Dragon. Cornelius Horatio Dragon, for that matter.

(He points to props, discarded clothes...)

The actors. The masks. The props. The pretences--and me.

And I am Cornelius Dragon.

That's all. (Truss, Dragon 55-56)

The older Cornelius has accepted his identity--name, immigrant status, pushing parents, repulsing peers, and all--and he is content. "That's all" implies that he will no longer try to add to, subtract from, or change his identity; as well, it implies completeness, wholeness in self-acceptance, and pride in his ethnic heritage.

Like Skin, Cornelius Dragon deals with racial prejudice against immigrants and integrates that theme with that of peer pressure and the struggle for self-identity and self-acceptance. The equal emphasis (in fact, a stronger one in Cornelius Dragon) on the latter issues shows that Skin and Cornelius Dragon appeal to their targeted audience because their plots focus on the pressing concerns of teenagers world wide. Dennis Foon and Jan Truss can also show teens quite clearly what their peers from other countries go through as immigrants or members of visible minorities.

## Chapter VI

Conclusions

An examination of TYA and the subject of racism and young people is not complete without a brief look at the performance of a TYA play along with relevant topics both abstract (emotional impact, effectiveness) and practical (the role of study guides).

Emotional Impact

All the plays examined throughout this paper were written specifically for performance in front of an audience of young people, whether in gymnasiums, barns, or theatres. As I have examined the texts of these plays, I have looked at their structure, their purpose, their rationale, and their style. However, I do not discount the emotional impact these plays can--and do--have upon their young audiences. Villains and hero/ines are easily identified: the villain is the aggressor; the hero/ine is the victim. In most of TYA productions, the performers are adults playing young people in situations culled from real life. Watching the actors on stage re-enact a scene about name-calling or discrimination, children in the audience can easily identify with what is happening and whom it is happening to. They are appalled at Vince's account of the Alsatian set loose upon him by a racist; they squirm with Phiroza in her increasingly elaborate web of lies; they are uncomfortable when faced with Mary, the harmless old "witch."

Emotional manipulation, although sometimes a perjorative term, is indeed part of the technique of a TYA playwright who wants to get across a point (about racism, for example). However, the emotional involvement

of a school audience during a play is then balanced after the play by directed (but usually informal), rational discussions of the issues presented. The feelings of the audience are brought up and reasons for these feelings are posited (for instance, why did we feel angry at Mr. Lizard for his treatment of Karen/Jennifer and Sabrina/Delacy?) TYA aims for emotional impact and audience identification, and scripts are painstakingly crafted to blend humour, pathos, and facts in a compact forty-five minutes of action and dialogue.

Quite often, the action and dialogue of a play is augmented by the presence of non-verbal elements such as music, dance, and mime. In some plays--in particular, the plays for primary grades--music and dance are of great importance because Native Indian cultures traditionally stress them in their rituals. Most of Dennis Foon's plays utilize contemporary music to bridge the short scenes, while Cornelius Dragon has substantial sections of mime incorporated throughout (the party scene, part of the desert scene, and the circus scene). Non-verbal elements enhance action and dialogue in any play, and particularly in plays for young people, because the combination serves to draw the audience more fully into the production and, consequently, into the issues concerned. Music, mime, and dance may also act as tension relievers (or sometimes tension escalators) in the midst of the action, while in primary school plays, they are often an excuse for frenetic audience participation.

Degree of Effectiveness

When a TYA company such as Green Thumb Theatre or YPT or Mermaid Theatre take their plays into the schools, there is always the question of effectiveness, especially if the play deals with a particularly sensitive issue such as alcoholism or broken homes or racism. How are the students affected by these plays, and is the effort worthwhile? Obviously the effort is worthwhile or else there would be no touring companies roaming the highways of Canada and playing to captive audiences in drafty, acoustically impossible gymnasiums year after year. As to effectiveness, most TYA companies encourage feedback from educators and students alike through use of questionnaires and informal after-performance chats in classrooms. Any self-respecting company who receives fan mail keeps the positive ones and tries to forget the negative ones. Green Thumb is no exception. Mounted on the walls of their offices are testimonials--touching, sometimes hilarious--to this company's effect on their audience: "your play really made me sit up and take notice" (Orwen Williams, Grade seven); "Come more often, we need you in our school system" (J.E. Brodeur, Hastings Elementary School); "the neat ideas will probably help a lot of kids" (Claire, Grade six).

Conversely, if a play receives negative feedback from more than one source, it is re-evaluated and either re-worked or discarded entirely from the repertoire. Because the school tour is the bread and butter of most TYA companies, they must keep abreast of their school audience in order to continue being able to present plays dealing insightfully and sensitively with relevant issues so that their impact is maximized. One device which TYA companies use to deepen the effectiveness of their plays

is study guides prepared specifically for teachers by teachers to ensure maximum benefit to teachers and their students.

### Study Guides

Study guides are designed by the theatre company touring the various schools to aid student understanding of the play being presented. In essence, the guide contains discussion questions, group activities based upon the play's concepts and issues, role playing suggestions, and further secondary material related to the subject of the play. Each guide states objectives and suggests methods by which teachers can elicit responses from their students to meet these objectives.

In an examination of a sample study guide for the play Skin, we see that a definite progression is evident: Lesson One deals with characters, Lesson Two with concepts and definitions, and Lesson Three with questions. All three lessons are to be given before the students even see the play so that they will be prepared to view the performance intelligently and knowledgeably. Lesson Four then asks the question, "So...What do you think?" (Van Reisen 3). Lesson Five deals with societal values which dictate behavior, and lesson Six focuses on ways of handling discrimination. The guide then lists community resources and contacts including TEAL (Association of B.C. Teachers of English as a Second Language), B.C. Multicultural Education Society, Heritage Language Association of B.C., BCTF Program Against Racism in Schools, OASIS (Oriental Adjustment Services), and many others around the province. Lastly, there is an annotated list of films available on multiculturalism and racism.

Before the students are to watch a performance of Skin, their teacher is provided with the guide and urged to use it to prepare the audience. First of all, they work on simple character identification, including pronunciation of names and the reading by selected students of the opening statements of the play. Once the characterizations have been grasped, the students are encouraged to "speculate": about possible problems faced by Karen and Tuan; about the use of masks; about sets and spacing.

From there, the students are led into a focused discussion on defining "stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, institutionalized discrimination and racism" (Van Reisen 3). They are urged to try and clarify the terms through their own personal experiences. They are then asked to "hypothesize why an individual would practice racism...and how even the most innocent of stereotypical remarks can create prejudice leading to discrimination" (Van Reisen 3).

Pre-performance questions are then collected and listed; the students are encouraged to keep them in mind in order to voice them after the performance is over. Now prepared and armed with some thought-provoking ideas on the nature of the issues dealt with in the play, the students are ready to view the performance of Skin. The audience know who the characters are, where they are from, what problems they could face, and why. An unprepared, uninformed (or misinformed) audience with false preconceptions would not derive any benefits from watching Skin, whereas a prepared audience would be able to grasp Skin's message far more clearly and easily. Thus, a prepared audience is a receptive audience, a sensitive audience, which will understand Dennis Foon's

stated objectives in the guide:

[I want to] have audiences better understand the life experiences of visible minority kids--to try to break through some of the stereotypes, to see how racial incidents affect the victims--and to trigger discussions on what we can do about problems when we see them.

Most kids from visible minorities don't need to be sensitized to these problems--they live them everyday. I would hope that Skin gives them the message that they're not alone, that many people are aware of the problems and are working on them. (1)

After the play, students may question the actors, but more importantly, the students themselves are asked questions to make them think and re-think their pre-conceptions, their value systems, and their personal experiences and feelings. Most of the suggested questions deal with stereotyping and discrimination and lead straight into Lesson Five on "The Danger of 'Should'" (Van Reisen 4). The objective of Lesson Five is to allow students to see how society dictates their values which in turn control their behavior and give rise to prejudice because someone or some group does not hold the same values.

Lesson Six, the final lesson, focuses on the handling of discrimination, identifying different ways of doing so, including: "ignore, avoid, confront, beat the system, accept, give up[, and] share" (Van Reisen 5). Thus, the study guide takes the students on a structured and penetrating journey through the maze of racism, prejudice, and all that is connected with them. The questions suggested are non-threatening, non-accusatory, and non-judgmental. They are, instead, encouraging, experiential, and thought-provoking in order to create a basis for affirmation or re-affirmation of values and attitudes towards fellow human beings. The most important stress in this guide appears to

be that discrimination, prejudice, and racism can be combatted in a variety of ways--that "no one method is best for all situations" (Van Reisen 5).

### TYA versus Creative Drama in the Schools

Theatre for Young Audiences is essentially scripted plays performed by adult actors in front of an audience of young people. The companies which perform these plays may or may not have a building they call home to which they can bring their audience. They go on tour to the schools in their particular province, taking theatre to their audience instead of expecting their audience to come to them. Even companies with buildings have extensive school tour programs to bring to the small rural communities quality theatre for young people.<sup>25</sup> Most of the people involved at both ends (the performers and the educators) are agreed that bringing live theatre into the schools allows children to experience what they may not ever have experienced otherwise: plays written, produced, and acted specifically for them.

On the other hand, not all educators favour the TYA route of creating and performing set theatrical pieces for young people. There are those educators who feel that Creative or Developmental drama is at least as important (if not more so) than TYA. For Creative drama exponents such as Brian Way (England), Nellie McCaslin (U.S.A.), and Richard Courtney (Canada), Creative drama is experiential drama whose place in the school curriculum, fought for and hard won within the past few decades, is vitally important in the development of the whole person (Way 2). McCaslin emphasizes the seriousness and utmost importance of play and creative games by children to help develop their emotions and



intellect (vii). She also advocates--more so than Way--the creation of plays by children: from ideas to scripting to performance, wholly the work of students in the class. This approach is totally opposite to that of TYA, which presents a prepared work to children for their enjoyment and edification. TYA sometimes expects an audience to participate (usually young children from Group One), but on the whole TYA tries to build a feasible actor-audience relationship whereby the former is acting on stage what the latter often experiences in life--a kind of mirroring. Creative drama, on the other hand, is a "hands on" approach to drama, encouraging young people to create and experience for themselves what TYA would tender in carefully prepared fashion. Brian Way takes the difference one step further; he distinguishes between drama and theatre in the school curriculum: a way of life versus a subject.

In a way, TYA is crossing the boundaries between themselves and Creative drama in their production of Study Guides. An excellent example is Green Thumb's Study Guides for their plays: all of them include suggestions for role playing and, for young children, creative craft activities like drawing and puppet-making. Essentially, the main differences between TYA and Creative drama are rooted in the amount of input the students themselves have in the creative process of the play. Way was instrumental in starting the "participation play phenomenon" in Canada, attempting to bridge the gap between TYA and Creative drama by having the audience actively involved in creating the plot and making decisions varying from simple to crucial.<sup>26</sup> Two of the plays for Group One discussed earlier in this paper (The Clam Made a Face and Chinook) are prime examples of the uneasy alliance between TYA and Creative drama.

Finally, TYA exponents will admit that their prime concern is to write and produce high quality pieces of live theatre for their young audiences. Creative drama supporters will continue to lobby for drama's rightful place in all school curricula so that students will have the opportunity to themselves create dramatic pieces from personal experiences. Obviously the two ideologies can and do exist in relative harmony. Schools with drama in their curriculum are still being visited by TYA companies year after year with new offerings for an ever-changing audience of young people.

From its beginnings as Children's Theatre until the present, Theatre for Young Audiences has undergone a growth and a refinement of its goals and ideals. The growth continues as TYA enters its third decade of presenting high quality theatrical entertainment aimed specifically at a young or family audience. Whether it be modern adaptations of classic literary works, purely entertaining musical fare, or gripping scripts about contemporary concerns, TYA is wholly dedicated to excellence in entertainment for young people. In tackling issues which directly affect young people, TYA is doing something which adult theatre has never done: acknowledge that children are important; children are part of the world and are affected by the same universal concerns which affect their parents and other adults. TYA playwrights have proven emphatically that the limits of a TYA play are not binding. Indeed, Dennis Foon, Jan Truss, John Lazarus, Paddy Campbell, and others have shown that it is possible in a short children's play to tackle relevant contemporary issues affecting young people, and to do so clearly and succinctly without resorting to condescension. Moreover, TYA treads with increasing adeptness the fine line between socially-conscious and overt (and preachy) didacticism.

TYA playwrights juxtapose contemporary issues like racism and alcoholism with classic children's literature themes like children working alone to solve important problems, children showing up their ineffectual parents or other adult authority figures, journey to selfhood and self-pride, et cetera (Doolittle, Eight Plays 7). Playwrights like Dennis Foon, John Lazarus, Colin Thomas, Rex Deverell, Paddy Campbell, Jan Truss, and many others are tireless in their research and preparation for their plays, often going straight to their target audience, children,

for first-hand views and personal experiences with relevant social issues. Thus, TYA addresses contemporary social issues from the child's perspective, creating original material which is topical and focused. Indeed, Sara Lee Lewis, in her article "TYA on the Road: Canada's Intrepid Ambassadors", states that "the tedious trendiness of adult theatre is not usually evident among TYA companies, who struggle to provide a significant number of original productions each year" (41).

One of the social issues which concerns TYA is racism (including intolerance and discrimination), prevalent in the lives of children in both urban and rural areas of Canada. Racist attitudes are carelessly handed down from generation to generation, often just by children observing them in their parents' behavior. Studies have proven the existence of racism in schools and playgrounds where children reject other children for not being the same colour, or holding the same values, or believing in the same creeds. Playwrights have become increasingly aware of the need for plays addressing this issue of racism and how to eliminate it from the lives of children in this generation so that the chain can be irrevocably broken.

In plays like New Canadian Kid, Invisible Kids, and Skin, Dennis Foon presents his view on how visible minorities are treated in Canada, and how that trend can be halted. He aims his plays on racism at both minority and majority children: he wants the former to gain some measure of affirmation and the latter to get a clearer picture of what racism is and how they can be part of the solution, not the problem. Like many TYA playwrights, Foon aims to educate by showing, rather than by preaching; to challenge young people to think about issues which are important to

them on a personal, community, and global basis. Children of the television generation have few opportunities to view live theatre, and fewer opportunities to be part of a theatrical experience that aggressively challenges them to think and to question the rights and wrongs, the moralities and immoralities, the positives and negatives, of relevant social issues. In an age where children measure their self-worth by He Man, their problem solving skills by Rambo, and their family structure by the Huxtables and the Keatons,<sup>27</sup> there is an ever-increasing need for honest portrayals of young people faced with everyday problems which they themselves need to solve with sheer hard work and determination, not by pressing the buttons on the remote control.

For little children (Group One), plays about native Indian culture are entertaining, yet educational. For older children (Group Two), plays dealing with racism are more intense, focused upon how young people faced with racial discrimination may handle the immense pressures caused by being foreigners in a hostile environment. The plays also show young people how they often behave to someone from another land or culture; as well, these plays tackle the enormous contradictions faced by pre-adolescents, contradictions which, though they can be overwhelming in their scope, need to be faced and dealt with to reduce their impact. The plays for Group Two discussed earlier deal with a variety of characters in the Canadian mosaic. All these characters are in one way or another outcasts from their particular society because of their colour or race. There is an assortment of blacks, East Indians, Native Indians, and invisible minorities like Scandinavians and Germans, who all demonstrate the disturbing roots and ramifications of racism among young people in schools and communities in both urban and rural areas. Finally, a Group

Three audience, being older, will view plays on racism with intelligence and some knowledge; wisely, however, Dennis Foon (Skin) and Jan Truss (Cornelius Dragon) have juxtaposed the theme of racial intolerance with the more urgent teen concerns of peer pressure and self-discovery.

TYA is now an accepted form of theatrical entertainment which fulfills a unique and pressing need for quality live theatre for young people and families. TYA also uses theatre as a vehicle for education with scripts on diverse subjects such as nuclear war, dyslexia, schoolyard violence, vandalism, bag ladies, sexual abuse, and racism. In writing these types of plays for young people, TYA playwrights are saying that young people deserve the chance to "observ[e] life, compressed into a capsule of time" (Robertson 46), and to perhaps gain affirmation or new insights into their own lives as young people in a world not designed for them. TYA is not out to change the world or even to try and improve it, merely to show it clearly in a non-threatening, entertaining, yet definitely thought-provoking way to their chosen audience: those special people called children.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that the term Children's Theatre is full of ambiguities because it also includes scripts written by children for performance by children.

<sup>2</sup>Interestingly enough, television appears to have begun looking at teenagers in a realistic, quite gritty manner in a show called Degrassi Junior High. The episodes focus on such tense issues as epilepsy, teen pregnancy, cheating, drug and alcohol abuse, birth control, and generally coping (or not coping) with adolescence. While it is not the first show dealing primarily with teens at school, Degrassi Junior High appears to be the first to deal with young teens (aged 12 to 15) and their particular problems and pressures without resorting to stereotypes, cheap emotional exploitation, or a laugh track. 21 Jump Street addresses the same types of teen problems from a high school perspective.

<sup>3</sup>Say No to Racism! - The Fear/Fight Project was an all day TIE experience for grades five and six dealing with racism. It was developed by Rex Deverell and Rita Shelton Deverell in conjunction with the Globe Theatre of Regina and the Saskatchewan School Board. A team of six actors went to about forty schools selected by the Saskatchewan School Board. They spent the entire day with a group of grade five and six students (about thirty) exploring various dramatic scenarios or learning modules. These include "Time Machine--A History of Racism", "Roots--Cultural Pride", "Name Calling", "New Kid", and four others. The students would take on roles and participate in fictional situations (for example, a new kid at "Cherry Hill Elementary" dies on the playground as the result of racism), then break out of their scenarios and discuss their roles, feelings, problems, and solutions. The Deverells developed this project because of their concern with the problem of racism against Native Indians in Regina. They are now endeavouring to polish the project modules and package it for future use in other provinces of Canada.

<sup>4</sup>Funding seems to be a major reason for suburban schools being able to afford theatrical entertainment several times a year. As well, priorities play a large part. In an inner city school with lower income families attending, all extra monies go to replacing vandalized property, buying textbooks, funding special needs programs, subsidizing lunches, et cetera. On the other hand, higher income families in more affluent suburban areas are able to contribute to fund-raising drives, while the budget is not overly strained by the aforementioned costs at urban schools. Practically speaking, an urban school might use its "entertainment/culture" budget to bring in speakers on crime prevention, family planning, or vocational interests; a suburban school with a similar budget would be busy deciding between Axis Mime, Green Thumb Theatre, or a

motivational speaker.

<sup>5</sup>Public Dreams Society is a performing Visual Art company, community-based, and stressing participation through workshops and social events. The society is working to integrate multi-racial groups in community theatre and artistic projects. The society's director is Paula Jardine, formerly with Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto.

<sup>6</sup>Recent news headlines (March, 1988) detail the efforts of Immigration Canada to repel thousands of Turkish refugees (who took sanctuary in churches), because everyone has to wait his turn on a long list of petitions for official entry into the country.

<sup>7</sup>A non-native speaker with no English takes longer than a mere week to learn a language as convoluted and idiomatic as English.

<sup>8</sup>Zola Budd gained notoriety first of all by being the first barefoot runner in modern Olympic history. She was fast; she was also, however, barred from Olympic competition in 1984 because of her South African citizenship (South Africa did not participate in the Olympic games that year). In a desperate move, she applied for British citizenship just prior to the 1984 games in order to qualify for competition as a British citizen. In a controversial decision, Britain granted Budd her request in record time, and she went on to compete--but not to do well--in the games.

<sup>9</sup>Dennis Foon asserts that the lack of roles for non-whites in Canadian theatre is a blatant disgrace, considering the multicultural mix in this country. He places the blame solely on the "male, white echelon who run the theatres and view them as a place to build their power bases rather than a place for art" (quoted in Wake). He himself has written two plays which call specifically for non-white actors/actresses and which cannot be done with an all-white cast and make sense at the same time.

<sup>10</sup>London is multicultural in its mix of people crowded into the heart of the city. It has a large immigrant population of East Indians, West Indians, and Asians; it also has a high incidence of racial tensions and race-related crimes. As well, racism is evidenced not only in whites against coloureds, but in different races against each other.

<sup>11</sup>When the kids urge Thiun to say "Chris is a big fat wally" in his several languages, he complies but he changes the sentence to say "Chris is a human being" because he has obviously had his sensitivity heightened by the hurtful remarks he himself has endured in his short life time. He is now unwilling to say anything hurtful about anyone even though he could have got away with it. He maintains his



personal integrity and honour while at the same time tactfully gains acceptance from the other kids.

<sup>12</sup>A reference to a trendy line of casual clothing embossed with an alligator.

<sup>13</sup>A subtle reference to persistence paying off appears periodically through this play when Vince talks about his desperate desire (his need) for a BMX bicycle, something his parents can ill afford. However, Vince is undeterred and threatens to continue asking until such time as he wears his parents' objections down. In the end, he accomplishes his mission: he does indeed get his cherished dream bicycle; moreover, he achieves what appeared to be nearly impossible through sheer dogged persistence. Foon seems to be advocating this tactic of perseverance to achieve goals in the overcoming of racism.

<sup>14</sup>In the past few years, because of political unrest in many of the Caribbean islands (notable Haiti), thousands of West Indians have applied for immigration to Canada. They have settled primarily in Ontario and Quebec.

<sup>15</sup>Loony is a pun on the new Canadian dollar coin and the Prime Minister's state of mind (according to his detractors and anti-Free Traders).

<sup>16</sup>Marie refers to the fact that the neighbours had organized a search party for her missing husband and had brought his lifeless body home.

<sup>17</sup>Klassen is, ironically, a very common Mennonite surname in Prairie Canada. It matters not that Klassen is a German Jew--or perhaps even a German Christian, we are not sure--his name identifies him as a German, therefore a Nazi. In the same way, Mary is Indian; therefore, she is mad and a witch.

<sup>18</sup>Skin was originally going to be performed in tandem with New Canadian Kid on Green Thumb's England tour. However, after some thought and many interviews with English schoolchildren of immigrant families, Foon came to the conclusion that Skin was inappropriate in many ways for the English audience. He then wrote Invisible Kids based upon his research in London, and produced it as the companion piece to New Canadian Kid in place of Skin.

<sup>19</sup>In fact, New Canadian Kid has been embraced by audiences around the world, including the U.S., England, and Australia, as New Kid.

<sup>20</sup>Interestingly, Phiroza herself is quite perturbed at being labelled a Pakistani when she is in fact a high

caste Parsi from Bombay. As well, in India the caste system is so deeply entrenched that discrimination against the lower classes is taken for granted and very evident throughout the country.

<sup>21</sup> Foon deliberately leaves open the question of whether Todd would have allowed himself to get to know Phiroza if he had not been deceived into thinking she was from Persia. Perhaps he would not have been able to overcome his own preconceptions and the peer pressure.

<sup>22</sup> The Toronto Version is going to be published by Playwrights Canada in the summer of 1988.

<sup>23</sup> The play may be performed by as few as four actors, although it was workshopped by eleven and performed by a cast of seven at Brookswood. A party scene and a circus scene both need crowds and are "peopled" by balloons mounted on poles (a "pole of crowd" is how the stage directions put it). Thus, Cornelius is the only character who does not double as someone else.

<sup>24</sup> A recent Time magazine cover article (July, 1986) on Asians in American universities focuses on how Asian students, mostly immigrants, through sheer perseverance and hard work, are easily outdistancing Americans in University entrance exams and in grade point averages at such prestigious institutions as Harvard and Yale.

<sup>25</sup> Touring the schools is an exhaustive, round the clock job as this typical day in the life of Globe Theatre's touring group demonstrates: four to six actors (travelling in a converted mobile home) adhere strictly to a daily schedule of shows at each town. They perform a 9 a.m. show for Division One students (grades 1 to 3), a 10:15 a.m. show for Division Two students (grades 4 to 7), break for a quick lunch, and then do a two hour play for the high school(s). Finally, they pack up and drive to their next destination.

<sup>26</sup> Rex Deverell's play The Copetown City Kite Crisis literally had two endings ready for implementation according to how the audience (as unionized factory workers at a pollution-producing kite factory) voted at the end: to strike or not to strike.

<sup>27</sup> Aside from American shows and commercials which feature an increasing number of Black performers, television and movies have been adamant in stereotyping other visible minorities (e.g. the ubiquitous Chinese cook, the East Indian servant or mystic, the Japanese soldier, the Native Indian Tonto-clone, et cetera).

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