

## Censorship...and Self-censorship



Suzanne Lebeau

I began to write for young audiences thirty years ago because I wasn't happy with the plays for these audiences that I was performing in. I had fallen in love with an audience. I wanted to offer children the best theatre: accessible, democratic, contemporary, new. But new compared to what? There was no repertoire to point the way, few models to reject or contest. So I developed a culture of questioning. The questions came from the relationship with the audiences (children) – and from outside – adults' opinions about our work and their comments about childhood and its relationship with life, art, and theatre.

The first question with which I "bothered" myself remains just as current forty years later: **who knows and can decide what is best for a child?** Who can decide what's best for two hundred children in a theatre who don't even know what they will see? At that time, I defined "best" as a credible dramatic situation, and complex characters with a backbone and a language for talking about the world trying to stay close to the children I observed in theatres

and visited in the classroom to hear them talk, in their words, about their lives and concerns. I wrote my first plays, which both children and adults seemed to like or not like equally ... Usually, the adults had a direct connection (teacher, parent) with the children.

In 1980, my son was 4 years old and I wrote *Une lune entre deux maisons* (*A Moon Between two Houses*) for very young children, drawing on what I had seen, deduced, and learned about their physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional development, trying to see the world with my eyes at the same level as theirs, letting myself be inspired by their language skills, which I found movingly simple ... The audiences, children from 3 to 5, were perfectly attentive from beginning to end of the show. The experience of *Une lune entre deux maisons* convinced me to stay in close contact with children during the writing.



The following year, I wrote *Les Petits Pouvoirs* after a year of workshops. The show was a success among both children and adults and never raised discussion about the form, which was in fact, quite innovative.

I was wondering what to write next when Gervais Gaudreault came back from a tour with a novel: *Quand j'avais cinq ans, j'm'ai tué* (*When I Was Five I Killed Myself*, also published under the title *Burt*). I was bowled over by this novel, which described a society and its taboos through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy. I decided to adapt it for the theatre. The day of the première, you could cut the emotion with a knife. The children were attentive, silent with that thick silence that I look for when I go to the theatre; the adults were frightened and distressed. **For the first time, I felt that there were limits to what could be presented to children** and that these limits came not from the audiences that I wanted to reach but from the adults around those children.

I was bombarded with questions for which I had no answer. Do we have the right to show children situations that they haven't experienced? Do we have the right to upset them? Do we have the right to leave an ending in suspense, to not give a conclusion, especially when the story stirs up complex societal debates? How can



adults agree not to take a position and leave children in uncertainty? I answered with other questions. In the world of art, where sensitivity is the greatest strength, how can artists take a definitive stance? In their public role of spokesperson, in which adults are authorities before young audiences, how can they agree to give clear, simple answers to complex issues? Do artists have the right to talk to children about the world in which they live, which is imperfect and sometimes terrifying or must they invent a more reassuring world?

I was impressed by the debate that arose and relieved to have provoked the debate with a text that I had not written but chosen. This position gave me the distance to receive the adults' powerful reaction and analyze the situation in order to understand the extraordinary dichotomy between the adults' response and the children's. While I was being harshly taken to task with explanations that children do not experience such situations, I was following the story of a ten-year-old girl victim of incest in a small Quebec village. The inquiry revealed that not only had this little girl been abused regularly by her father for five years, but she had recruited orgy companions at school and that some thirty children had also been victims of this man, her father.

The experience of *Gil* and the story of the little girl led me to wonder about the idyllic conditions of

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childhood, the fragility of children, and their claimed sensitivity. Who are the children who fill the theatres? Human beings in perpetual biological, emotional, and intellectual change, who are forming their critical sense, their way of being in the world and being themselves, who observe mechanisms of adaptation and rejection, who reproduce the behaviours they see and the words they hear.

I decide to look to children for answers to a censorship that adults impose with good intentions as much as lack of knowledge of childhood. I discovered, working with children, that they are never as weak and easily influenced as adults believe. On the contrary, they are poorly informed, perhaps, but always curious, open to outside realities that they perceive or suspect, concerned about the state of the world and its inhabitants.

Although I was able to negotiate the expectations of adults and reject their diktats, I know that the "limits" imposed by the fact that adults are performing for an audience of children ensnare me in other ways, more difficult to identify and control. Can I immerse myself in what moves me, touches me, speaks to me at this time in my life, as an adult, as a woman, as an artist, and as a human being, without reflecting on what I can and want to arouse in the audience? The questions have been refined over the years; they have changed colour and vocabulary, but they are still there. What should we call them? Doubt? Responsibility? Censorship? Self-censorship? These questions are the path to follow.

#### **About Suzanne Lebeau**

Suzanne Lebeau is a globally awarded playwright and theatre maker from Quebec's *Le Carrousel* theatre. Suzanne's career spans over three decades in groundbreaking work for children and young people. Suzanne has 25 original plays, three adaptations, and a number of translations to her credit and is internationally recognized as a leader in playwriting for young audiences. She is among the most-performed Quebec playwrights in the world, with more than 130 productions of her works on four continents. Her plays have been published in many countries and translated into 18 languages.

Suzanne Lebeau's exceptional contribution to the flourishing of theatre for young audiences has earned her numerous awards and distinctions, including the Governor General's Literary Award for Drama in 2009; the Prix Sony Labou Tansi des lycéens in 2009; and Prix des Journées de Lyon des auteurs de théâtre in 2007 for *Le bruit des os qui craquent*, a play première by *Le Carrousel* and *Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui* in 2009 and staged in 2010 by the *Comédie-Française*. In 1998, the *Assemblée internationale des parlementaires de langue française* made her a Knight of the Order of the Pleiades for her body of work, and in 2010 the Government of Quebec awarded her the Prix Athanase-David, the most prestigious career recognition for Quebec authors. Suzanne taught writing for young audiences at the National Theatre School of Canada for 13 years and acts as a consultant for young authors in Canada and other countries, contributing to the emergence of new written works. <http://www.lecarrousel.net>

