

## **Emergence of an Anti-Theatre for the Youth in the United States: The Case of *Punch and Judy* by Aurand Harris**

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The British pantomime, the Punch and Judy puppet show, and the farce are three major dramatic genres that have been discarded by serious adult playwrights to become children's artistic forms in the late nineteenth century. Ironically, these devalued theatrical genres became the very basis for the emergence of an experimental movement in American children's, a movement that peaked in 1970s. A true avant-garde spirit in children's theatre thus bloomed in the United States with children's playwrights who developed new styles drawn from *commedia dell'arte* techniques, absurdist dialogue and grotesque farce.

Aurand Harris, eminent playwright for children's theatre in the United States, creates in 1970, *Punch and Judy*, a tragicomical absurdist play which reflects an important step in the history of twentieth-century American children's theatre. This play, which draws its techniques from the traditional British Punch and Judy show, is in continuity with the well-known French theatre of the Absurd of the adult theatre that traces its origin back to Alfred Jarry's Ubu plays during the 1890s. In *Punch and Judy*, Harris uses the same popular tradition as Jarry the father of French Absurdist theatre used. Namely, Harris presents children with a set of techniques French playwrights in the vein of Absurdism adopted themselves for an audience of adults: Adaptation of popular theatre genres such as *guignols* or Punch and Judy puppet shows of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This study will examine how the Punch and Judy puppet show becomes one familiar source genre for the emergence of an absurdist play in continuity with its homologue in the adult theatre, one that has been influential on a "growing number of younger dramatists on parallel lines."<sup>[1]</sup> Also this study will assess the importance of this innovation in children's theatre in early 1970s against other competing visual mass media targeting children.

Collier introduced the Punch and Judy puppet show in book form in the United States.<sup>[2]</sup> Children's books in series followed the same plot and characterization repeatedly. As a result of this dissemination, more children became familiar with this genre. Theatre historian George Speaight show in his book *Punch and Judy: A History*, rightly asserts about the Punch and Judy, that the Punch and Judy show acquired a new audience although the genre was

gradually disappearing as one form of children's entertainment during the twentieth century.

He admits that

Punch's audience has gradually changed. In the first prints of his appearance in the streets, his audience is composed of adults, mainly in the laboring class, with a few children; this seems to have been the composition of the marionette-show audiences at the eighteenth century fairs. But by the middle of the nineteenth century the children outnumbered the adults, and by the end of the century they practically composed the entire audience...Here, in the streets, on the beaches, in the drawing-rooms, at the end of the long Victorian Age, with the little children gathered around, Punch might seem to have run his course, to have reached his second childhood, and to have had his say (124-125).

On the other hand, Aurand Harris insists that traditions like Punch and Judy puppet shows be re-introduced to his contemporary audience so that children may become acquainted with theatrical forms that were then familiar to children of the preceding century. As he explains in the Preface to his play about his use of the Punch and Judy show,

When I started to write the play, and I did feel that the Punch and Judy puppet show is part of our children's heritage (one which many of them have never had the opportunity to enjoy), I wanted to keep the essence of childlike slapstick fun that has always been inherent in Mr. Punch in whatever country or whatever century he performed. After researching many puppet scripts performed in America and England, I found that although each puppeteer created his own individual play, certain basic scenes and characters were usually included. It is upon these that I built my play. I also found that musical, comical interludes were often used, and I have included these between scenes. I purposely set the play in no particular period...*Punch and Judy* is an action play, one to be seen and heard, rather than read. The movement, the color, the music heighten the mood and the meaning and the fun.<sup>[3]</sup>

Thus *Punch and Judy* achieves a major step in the history of modern American children's theatre because it reflects the desire of some children's playwrights to reclaim a tradition that was born out of their sphere. Furthermore, the use of such techniques also signals an intersection between the history of adult theatre on the one hand and the history of children's

theatre on the other, an intersection which occurred at the initial of the 1960s with the innovation of children's television shows and which has continued to grow throughout many examples outside its national borders.

The play was received with much skepticism by the adult community in the United States: *Punch and Judy* was even banned from performance in some schools namely because of its subject matter -- the play presents a kind of "Jarry-*esque*" stage according to which the stage becomes the very place where absurdist theatre and children's theatre ingredients meet. Premiered in March 1970 by the Atlanta children's theatre, Harris's *Punch and Judy*'s innovative qualities rely on techniques French Absurdist playwrights used against the realistic stage, ironically the same qualities that were altogether relegated to children's entertainment during the late nineteenth century. Harris, like Jarry in the adult sphere, is in search of a new type of theatre, one that abandons the conventions of the well-made plays of the first half of the century which drew most of their subject matter from familiar children's stories. Instead *Punch and Judy* is an attempt by one playwright to re-position children's drama historically, aesthetically and politically -- one against concurrent visual mass media for children of the same era.

*Punch and Judy* relies on a set of techniques adapted from the adult theatre. In his own fashion, Harris is in the vanguard of a new trend of experimental plays; plays that use dramatic genres originally geared towards an all adult audience yet discarded by that audience and reclaimed by more familiar avant-garde schools like the French Theatre of the Absurd. Regarding experimental and avant-garde innovations in children's theatre, Harris is in favor of innovative plays, according to him "a healthy sign in theatre," although within a particular agenda and always in the light of other concurring visual media such as children's television programs. Although Harris's position about his art is somewhat conservative, his play points towards a new direction. As he explains about the avant-garde label:

I try to be innovative by writing in new styles (new to theatre for young people)...If the innovations are suitable for children and if they enhance the material, then I say I try them. But if they are just to be different, then I say they have no place in theatre for young audiences because they will only confuse the child. I am suspicious of any play praised as *avant-garde*; too often it is an ego trip for the writer or director who shows little respect for the subject matter or for the child audience. Too often, I fear, *avant-garde* tends to be 'camp' or imitates poor examples from television, or tries to shock, or becomes too sociological and too adult.<sup>[4]</sup>

But before we proceed to the labeling of Harris's *Punch and Judy* as one kind of anti-play in the history of American children's theatre, one must first define the concept of anti-theatre as one specific dramaturgy in the adult theatre. Only then shall we assess its meaning in the history of children's drama as one kind of innovation targeting a new type of audience in a new era.

In the theatre for adults, and according to French Absurdist playwright Eugène Ionesco, any anti-theatre is above all a theatre free of any conventions that he describes in

these terms: "Artistic creation (Ionesco tells us) finds again the fundamental laws, rises up against desiccated theatrical conventions, prudence, and what through an incredible misunderstanding has been called Realism"(Pronko 113). Martin Esslin, British historian of the avant-garde theatre, narrows down this rather broad definition of theatrical innovation and matches the concept of anti-theatre with that of the French Theatre of the Absurd. In his seminal study *Reflections: Essays on Modern Drama* he concedes about the French Theatre of the Absurd that

In its rebellion against naturalistic convention the Theatre of the Absurd entered the consciousness of its audience as an *anti-theatre*, a completely new beginning, a total breach with the conventions of the past. Now that the first and delicious shock effects have worn off, we can see that the absurdist merely emphasized hitherto neglected aspects, stressed some forgotten technical devices, and discarded some unduly inflated aspects of a long-existing tradition of drama. Far from being anti-theatre, they were in the very center of the mainstream of its development, just as revolutionary movements of the past -- Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, or the Expressionists -- that were regarded as the gravediggers of tradition can now be seen as its main decisive representatives (190).

Thus anti-theatre, which is equated to absurdism, expresses a new dramaturgy of an aesthetic rebellion against any attempt at realism on stage. Nonetheless, Esslin points to an interesting paradox: all anti-theatre draws their techniques from long-existing theatrical conventions that have either been discarded or forgotten. Then the question that arises is what are these discarded techniques French Absurdist playwrights reclaimed and which in turn allowed for an avant-garde trend in American children's theatre history? Certain dramatists like Harris have reclaimed the very techniques precursors of Absurdism used to move away from theatrical norms the realistic stage had imposed on their art.

Theatre historian Harold Segel in his seminal study *Pinocchio's Progeny* informs us about these forgotten techniques that confirm the many historical intersections between theatre for adults and theatre for the youth. According to him, precursors of Absurdism relied on children's artistic forms of entertainment to escape from Realism in theatre:

The world of the child became newly attractive to artists as a source of opposition, and an antidote, to the conservatism and traditionalism of bourgeois culture... The new enthusiasm of artists for such popular entertainments as puppet shows, pantomime, and circus routines can be seen as a convergence of the rediscovery of both the world of popular culture and that of the child. The enthusiasms and entertainments of children became in a sense those of mature artists (40).

We are reaching an historical intersection although quite an anachronistic one. Whereas the Absurdists like Alfred Jarry used these so-called "forgotten" techniques drawn from the pantomime, the puppet theatre, farces or even techniques drawn from circus routines, Aurand Harris reclaims and reshapes the same techniques to create a new theatre. This new

theatre reflects a political stance because it is born out of its own history and reclaims its legitimization as one particular theatrical practice in the broader history of western drama and not just as a homologue of the adult theatre.

The emergence of an anti-theatre in the history of American children's theatre is issued from three main reactions that run parallel to its homologue in the adult sphere although in a different era. First, this anti-theatre attacks and rejects all kinds of previous formalism. From the beginning of the century and on, this formalism consisted of adaptations of famous fairy tales and other well-known stories read by children in the form of musical plays. L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* and Barrie's *Peter Pan* are such typical instances of this style in the history of children's theatre.

Second, this anti-theatre also rebels on "representational" or realistic style of acting in children's theatre that consisted in producing well-made plays for a family audience. Instead absurdist plays like Harris's *Punch and Judy* adopt an all presentational or non realistic mode of performance geared towards one type of audience: Children. Directors Helane S. Rosenberg and Christine Prendergast provide a quite succinct definition of presentational plays. They claim that

No attempt is made to fool the audience into thinking that this place does exist; the idea is only that it could exist in the realm of the imagination. A presentational play invites the audience to enter another world (adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*), which may be a suggestion or a symbol of life. The audience is often drawn in, even in actual physical participation... The presentational style helps young people focus because it often factors out complex motivation and transforms time and space. Realism gives too much too soon.<sup>[5]</sup>

Martin Esslin applauds the presentational style and admits that theatre for young people "must be able to confront its audiences with the full range and vocabulary of styles, from *commedia dell'arte* to classical verse drama, burlesque comedy, Brechtian alienation, or grotesque expressionistic acting" so that "the young people's theatre may lay the foundation for a more comprehensive and artistically more varied adult theatre in this country." The presentational style Harris adopts in his use of puppets seems to parallel the innovations both Rosenberg and Prendergast point in their study.

Finally, this anti-theatre, which abandons all naturalistic techniques, is intimately related to the emergence of the child as a new type of audience and to the increasing growth of entertainments for children during the first half of the twentieth century. This anti-theatre claims its legitimization over other existing media that have exploited and somewhat 'usurped' the same audience. Finally, the innovation in this anti theatre lies in the unorthodoxy of the representation of childhood and adulthood by these avant-garde playwrights like Aurand Harris and the impact new visual mass media addressing the child had on them.

Yet more questions arise. Is this anti-theatre that presents a so-called "absurd (ist)" style in children's theatre and which uses techniques relegated to various children's forms of entertainment, similar to its homologue in the theatre for adults? Or does it present techniques

that have evolved from its own historical context and independently from that movement? And finally what does this anti-theatre in children's drama react against?

The concept of audience as a changing sociological entity needs to be addressed when discussing the development of such innovation in the history of American children's theatre. To achieve their socio critical roles, post World War children's playwrights competed with two new visual mass media: The growing children's film industry since the 1920s, and children's television programs which had captured that popular audience since the 1940s. These two types of media 'capitalized' on the child as a new audience and courted her as part of their larger popular audience. Their courting has seriously challenged children's theatre to the point of influencing its historical development: The popularization of an avant-garde trend in children's theatre in the 1960s closely parallels the changing status of the child audience within a European and American society, the imagery which that society endorses, and the need by some playwrights to present a new type of theatre.

According to social commentator Neil Postman, television viewing and its socio critical role are intimately related to the needs of the audience and its status. Postman argues those successful children's programs "display what people understand and want or they are canceled."<sup>[6]</sup> According to him, the success of the object represented depends on the child's need to see herself reflected in her social reality. In a chapter entitled "The Disappearing Child," Postman criticizes the socio critical role of these visual media and notices that the shift in child imagery in films has affected the status of the child itself and society's perspectives on childhood. Postman's portrait rests on his argument that since the 1950s, television drama and children's films have presented images of children as what he labels "adultified" and precocious, while the adult characters have sometimes become "childified" and immature, images that have blurred the distinctions between the child and the adult as two distinct social entities (Postman 120-142). This blurring has affected the postwar children's theatre and the subject matter of plays.

The blurring in adult and juvenile perspectives correlated with the spread of the television and the film industries are crucial to understanding the ideology presented in postwar American children's avant-garde theatre. Unlike the early twentieth-century children's theatre that presented the child's perspectives through images of "little adults" behaving like children (such as in Barrie's *Peter Pan*), postwar children's avant-garde theatre presents an altogether different image of both the child and the adult. These shifts in conventional imagery of childhood and adulthood are reflected in American children's playwright Aurand Harris' *Punch and Judy* (1970) who fuses both the child's and the adult's perspectives through the revival of the stock puppet Punch.<sup>[7]</sup>

Harris's use of a live Punch as the effigy of a rebelling "childified" adult figure matches the abandonment of the prewar idealized child model that consisted of miniature adults behaving like children. Instead Harris's Punch, a live actor acting like the puppet, is a symbol of a clever trickster, a "childified" adult figure whose artistic talents are ultimately praised though condemned to be antisocial by all the other adult-like stock characters of the play like Judy his wife, the Doctor or the Policeman. Throughout the play's two acts, Punch repetitively beats the other adult figures with his slapstick, particularly his wife Judy; a source of comedy for children.

It is true that Judy is introduced to children with a nagging attitude and an overall domineering posture. She is wearing an apron and plays other roles than that of housewife. Holding her broom as a tool ready to inflict physical punishment, she exercises her power over Punch by hitting him without remorse in a rather mechanical mode that reminds us of pantomimes (1.1). Her conflicting relationship with her husband Punch challenges traditional views on women's roles and is presented to children as a figure of motherhood that is certainly problematic. Her constant struggle with Punch is a caricature of gender relations and a challenge to the more traditional values that were usually present in children's plays – mothers are not always right. Judy's typical representation as a nurturing mother has been transformed in this play into an effigy of female authority. Thus Judy's role is not being just a housewife but rather one kind of authority to Harris's childified Punch. Thus despite his wrongdoings and multiple rebellions against his domineering housewife Judy, Punch nevertheless remains an attractive figure to the child audience.

Harris's adaptation of Punch into a "childified" adult character is epitomized in Punch's method to dispose of the adult characters he confronts. Whereas beating and sometimes murdering his antagonists have been Punch's well-known method in traditional Punch and Judy shows of the late eighteenth century, Harris reduces Punch's violence to mischievous pranks that do no lasting harm and are aimed at those who unquestionably deserve the blows. Harris has intentionally adapted the traditional English Punch and Judy puppet show for the needs of the young audience. For instance, to stimulate interest in the characters, Harris transforms the puppets into human actors in the prologue and converts them into their original form at the conclusion of the play. Unlike the traditional Punch and Judy show, Harris's plot is simplified and emphasizes a succession of short confrontations that involve Punch. The scenes have only two characters, whose movements are limited to those of a puppet, beating one another with a slapstick. The violence traditionally granted to Punch has been tempered by Harris through a careful treatment of Punch's "childified" behavior such as when he tosses little Punch out of the window. Toby is coincidentally nearby to catch him as stage directions indicate and Judy holds the baby in a subsequent scene to underscore the fact that the baby has not been harmed by Punch's actions. Harris makes sure that children understand that adult behavior is not always correct and ironically has Punch's "childified" persona transformed into that of an adult when he tells his audience PUNCH. Every father wants to throw a crying baby out the window. I did it! (1.4.183)

The theme of Punch and Judy unites the unrelated episodes in the absence of a strong story with overlapping events. The theme, symbolized by the actions and character of the stock puppet Punch and explicitly stated in dialogue and song, is that although one may have a desire to defy the traditional restraints society imposes one is nonetheless punished. This is why although Punch is aged appropriately for his audience; Harris transforms his traditional roles as father and husband into that of a trickster child. Punch's "childified" behavior is overstated through his refusal to accept institutions pertaining to adult society and his desire to be only in the company of children. Whereas some songs stress Punch's effigy of an antisocial being, others present him as a childlike, innocent character such as when he sings nursery rhymes like "Humpty Dumpty." Along the two acts of the play, Punch always shows his pleasure with the children's presence and occasionally takes them into his confidence, as when he tells them in an aside how he plans to repay the doctor for his "cures": "I'll pay him back every whack he gave me! Are you ready? Shut your eyes" (1.3.177-178).

With the creation of a live "childified" adult puppet, Harris engages his child audience with moral issues, and as director Coleman A. Jennings emphasizes with the realization "that as one attains such freedom one becomes less than human." Through the live "childified" Punch, children learn that rebellion past a certain point is inadequate to enter the adult world.

As challenging as Punch may be for the field of children's theatre, Harris's adaptation of the Punch puppet into a "childified" adult nonetheless fulfills the changing status of the young audience in the early 1970s and matches some children's playwrights' desire to abandon the prewar idealized child model presented in children's theatre. Hence his use of such an effigy of adulthood coincides with the merging perspectives Postman locates in television shows. Punch's "childified" persona runs parallel to one of the many images of children's television programs and films after 1950. Harris's adaptation of the Punch character into a live adult figure may be juxtaposed with similar "childified" adult characters Postman points out.<sup>8</sup>

This concept of fused adult and juvenile perspectives, rather than of literally merged audiences, is presented for the first time in postwar children's theatre. These parallel developments also argue that children's theatre needs to be studied in conjecture with other children's visual media in each era. Finally they also point to new directions: the first and most important one being not only the popularization of the entire field of children's theatre itself but mainly its appropriation of techniques and types by the children's film industry in the early 1990s. Harris's *Punch and Judy* as one kind of antiplay may be a convenient way for playwrights like Harris to bridge children's viewing habits, to lead them to an understanding of a live theatre that they had not yet seen as well as to be introduced to a new type of character: One that is not familiar yet not totally removed from their world.

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[1] See Martin Esslin, "Preface," *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961; Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1973) xiv.

[2] In Chapter IX "Punch and Judy," in Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History with a List of Puppeteers 1524-1948* (New York: Harpers & Brothers Publishers, 1949):116-155.

[3] See Betty Jean Lifton, ed., *Contemporary Children's Theater*. New York: Avon Books, 1974: 190-191.

[4] In Lowell Swortzell, ed., *The Theatre of Aurand Harris: America's Most Produced Playwright for Young Audiences: His Career, His Theories, His Plays*. New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1996: 98.

[5] Both authors provide an excellent chart that opposes representational (realistic) plays to presentational (non-realistic) plays with specific examples and the differences both styles incur on plot, characters, time and space, setting and costumes, dialogue, acting and audience's response in Rosenberg, Helene S., and Christine Prendergast. *Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983: 22-24.

[6].Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* New York: Delacorte Press, 1982: 126.

[7] In Coleman A. Jennings, *Six Plays for Children by Aurand Harris* .Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1986 :157-202.

<sup>8</sup> Characters such as Laverne, Shirley, the crew of the Love Boat, the company of Three, Fonzie, Barney Miller's detectives, Rockford, Kojak and the entire population of Fantasy Island in Postman, 126. Also

for a history of children's television shows, see Nancy Signorelli, *A Sourcebook on Children and Television* (New York, Westport, CT, London: Greenwood Press, 1991) particularly Chapter One "The History of Children's Television" for an extensive compilation of children's popular programs of the 1960s through the 1980s.