

## A Feminist Dialogue on Theatre for Young Audiences Through Suzan Zeder's Plays

Jeanne Klein, Gayle Austin, and Suzan Zeder

GA: I come to this dialogue about children's theatre and feminist theory with all the prejudices of an "adult theatre" training, in my case from 1968 to 1988. I never took a creative dramatics [sic] elective and felt simultaneously inadequate about and superior to dealing with children in relation to theatre. The prejudices came down to: children's plays are simplistic, moralizing lessons based on the same old fairy tales over and over, usually performed by gesticulating adults with a mixture of indicating and pandering. Certainly the play scripts themselves were hardly worth adult critical attention.

But as I worked in feminist theory, I began to wonder why certain fields with a majority of female practitioners were slow to embrace feminism: dance, costume design, senior theatre, children's theatre.<sup>1</sup> At a few recent Women and Theatre Program (WTP) conferences I thought, "Why is there never anyone here from children's theatre?" In August 1995 suddenly Jeanne Klein was "here" at WTP, and we knew that the 1996 conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) was to be joined with the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE). Suddenly a real face and body was joining me in talking about putting together children's theatre and women's issues. I realized women weren't "here" because they were busy being "there" at AATE. Here was a kindred spirit, another woman willing to venture into liminal space between fields, where "no man dared to go. . . ." My prejudices started unwinding. We continued to speak by phone and e-mail, and submitted a panel for 1996. We discovered a common interest in the not necessarily biological mother-daughter paradigm.

JK: I immediately called Gayle's attention to Suzan Zeder, the most prominent woman playwright in the field, and suggested that we base our project on three of Suzan's plays which mark the last three decades: *Step on a Crack* (1976) "first brought her recognition as an innovator in scripts for young audiences."<sup>2</sup> *Mother Hicks* (1986) was deemed the best play of the 1980s by professional and university directors in ASSITEJ/USA.<sup>3</sup> *Do Not Go Gentle* (1996), commissioned by the

---

Jeanne Klein is Associate Professor of Theatre and Film at the University of Kansas. Gayle Austin is Associate Professor of Communications at Georgia State University. Suzan Zeder holds the Endowed Chair of Playwriting for Youth at the University of Texas at Austin.

Kennedy Center in 1991 in association with the American Association of Retired Persons, marks Suzan's intergenerational concerns across the life span.<sup>4</sup> While each play may not address feminist issues explicitly or directly, these three plays exemplify the increased professionalism of TYA by tracing Suzan's artistic growth as a risk-taking playwright.

*GA:* For three days in Lawrence Jeanne and I dialogued, making hours of tapes which she transcribed. We performed the dialogue and Suzan gave her response at the 1996 ATHE/AATE conference in New York. The dialogue which follows is a much edited version of some of our emotional exchange during those days in Lawrence and later in New York, trying to share with you a sense of the passion for theory, and practice, we felt then.

*JK:* As Gayle writes,

A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some 'invisible' mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body. It means paying attention to women as writers and as readers or audience members. It means taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (or TYA) takes liberal feminism for granted. We tend to assume that all females and males, onstage and off, are treated respectfully as equal participants in the processes and products of theatre, regardless of age, ethnicity, and class. But these feminist assumptions have not been questioned or examined systematically.<sup>6</sup> Despite the past two decades of flourishing feminist theatre scholarship, the "F word" has seldom been discussed, much less published, in children's theatre circles. Why not? What images, ideas, and expectations does the word "feminism" conjure up in the minds of children's artists and educators? Why have women's ways of knowing children been assumed, ignored, denied, or dismissed so lightly, especially when radical, materialist, and culturalist perspectives weave multiple feminist principles beyond basic liberal notions of equity?

GA: One of our goals is to open up this dialogue to more participants in both TYA and feminist theory. We want to see more serious critical attention paid to TYA plays and performances and more TYA attention paid to feminist issues. This is just one example of applying one part of one feminist theory to criticism of just three plays from Suzan's large canon. We ended up focusing on the influence of older women characters, surrogate mother figures, and on the identity formation of young female characters. But I hope it reflects the fact that we think "theory" can be a useful concept and "criticism" doesn't have to be prescriptive.

JK: Just as feminist theatre critics entered the so-called "race" for feminist theory late in the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> the field of TYA has been slow to embrace feminist theories in dramatic criticism for many reasons. Little, if any, dramatic criticism exists, feminist or otherwise, largely because plays written for children have been undervalued as a repertoire worth studying. Dramatic adaptations from source materials, such as fairy and folk tales, myths, picture books, novels, and historical persons and events, continue to dominate TYA seasons, because the repertoire remains driven by a capitalist market in which parents and teachers purchase tickets for children based on recognizable titles familiar to adults. Thus, few plays (about 20%) are original dramas created exclusively for the stage.<sup>8</sup> Play or performance "reviews" published in the *Youth Theatre Journal* and *TYA Today* are little more than short, descriptive reports or plot summaries, so as not to offend the small circle of TYA family members struggling for national attention and legitimacy. Because theory and criticism are anathema to most TYA practitioners, the field has barely entered any "stages" of feminist literary criticism to expose sexist and racist images in children's plays, to question its assumed practices (e.g., cross-gender casting), or to make its women playwrights more visible to those outside the TYA family.<sup>9</sup>

GA: Developing work dialogically and then presenting it performatively in the presence of the playwright whose work is being discussed has been an exciting creative experience. Editing this performance script and presenting it to a wider audience in written form will, we hope, suggest other exciting possibilities for future work.

JK: Before Gayle and I could embark on our dialogic journey about Suzan's plays, we needed to ask each other "baby" questions about our respective territories:<sup>10</sup>

GA: Why is there no feminist criticism of children's plays?

*JK:* What does a feminist children's play look like?

*GA:* Why do children's plays so frequently use fantasy characters and theatricalism?

*JK:* Why do so many plays entertain children by showing *them* how to play?

*GA:* Is it because children accept these conventions better than adults, or do children "require" theatricalism, while adults seem to "require" realism?

*JK:* Why do we keep comparing children's plays against adult standards which are essentially patriarchal and masculinist?

*GA:* How does the use of theatricalism reinforce the status quo in TYA?

*JK:* Why do child protagonists frequently struggle against adult antagonists?

*GA:* Will the use of realism and social issues help to mainstream children's theatre?

*JK:* Why do we assume that children live in fantasy worlds with vast imaginations?

*GA:* Why are many children's plays sentimental?

*JK:* Why do some children's playwrights romanticize childhood?

*GA:* Where's gender in all of this? Why does gender become an invisible issue when women appear to dominate a field?

*JK:* How does cross-gender casting de-emphasize sexuality?

*GA:* Why is there a denial of gender and children's sexuality in the field?

*JK:* Why is female sexuality limited to fairy tales?

*GA:* Who controls the development and production of new plays?

*JK:* Who controls children's aesthetic desires?

GA: What social and economic pressures ensure that only “safe” plays get produced?

JK: How can more original plays get produced against market conditions?

GA: How does the parental generation, the children’s theatre practitioner, censor, control, or marginalize both the younger and older generations?

JK: How does ageism operate within the field?

GA: How do women playwrights ghetto-ize themselves by writing plays about age?

JK: To what extent have women’s plays for children been informed by feminist theories? By shifting the focus from child audiences to creating Art<sup>11</sup>—

GA: —and by writing more realistic plays that deal with adults’ social issues,

JK: —is this goal really “better” for child audiences?

GA: —or “better” for adult acceptance? How does mainstreaming children’s theatre into adult theatre lead to self-censorship?

JK: Will theatre for children lose its distinctive differences when it gets mainstreamed into theatre for adult “family” audiences?

GA: Is that what the field wants?

JK: Why haven’t you heard of Suzan Zeder?

GA: (reading from bio) “Suzan Zeder has been recognized nationally and internationally as one of the nation’s leading playwrights for family audiences. Her plays have been performed throughout the world and she is a three-time winner of (AATE’s) Distinguished Play Award. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

JK: According to Susan Pearson-Davis, one of her closest colleagues, Zeder’s playwriting principles have grown instinctively out of her artistic relationships with the material rather than with any set of rules. She “writes *about* children rather than for them, not for any particular social or educational purpose, but because she finds children fascinating and dramatically dynamic.”<sup>13</sup> In writing

*Step on a Crack*, Zeder wrote, “As a writer, I have tried to confront the child within myself as honestly as possible in order to bring you a child of this moment.”<sup>14</sup>

GA: In her preface to *Mother Hicks*, she wrote, “This play came from somewhere and passed through me on its way to somewhere else. . . . The characters and storyline are original and have shaped themselves through me. This play has always moved with its own power. It has told me where it needed to go next, and whenever I came to my desk there were characters waiting to talk to me.”<sup>15</sup>

JK: In *Do Not Go Gentle*, Lillian’s name reminds me of Beatrice Lillie, a comic actress who was a formative influence on Suzan’s love of theatre and writing.<sup>16</sup>

GA: In regard to these three plays, let’s identify the Mother-Daughter figures, biological and not, and their relationships in each play, and also identify the Mothers of Choice, the Imposed Mothers, and the Father figures of each daughter. And then let’s trace each Daughter’s identity formation and her journey to find her identity.

JK: OK. In *Step on a Crack*, we have Ellie Murphy, the 10-year-old daughter of Max who imposes a new stepmother—

GA: —Lucille, who is not her biological mother. As in all three plays, the biological mother is not seen. In *Step* and *Hicks* she’s dead.

JK: Ellie’s Voice, her superego or the distorted image of her identity, acts as a Wicked Step-Mother. Lana, Ellie’s imaginary friend in a toy box, plays her Fairy Godmother, sort of her Chosen Mother until she chooses Lucille at the end of the play. Ellie wants to live alone with her father, Max—

GA: —an inappropriate Mother because he doesn’t discipline her.

JK: Yes, in fact, he gives her junk to play with from his junkyard, like a grease gun.

GA: Lucille wants Ellie to clean her messy room, but she also allows Ellie to tell her “what mothers are supposed to do” (172-174). Max blurts out that he and Lucille are going to Hawaii—a separation from Ellie.

*JK:* But Ellie separates herself from Lucille by running away. After her nightmare on the streets, she returns home and stages the death of Voice in her toy box. She separates herself from this Wicked Stepmother and realizes that she needs a mother.

*GA:* And Lucille is “a perfectly good one” (195):

Ellie: Uhhh Lucille? . . .

Lucille: Yes?

Ellie: I’m . . . sorry I ran away.

Lucille: So am I.

Ellie: Well, I’m back now.

Lucille: I’m glad.

Ellie: So am I. (Pause) Uhhh Lucille, I’m cold.

Lucille: Well no wonder, you kicked your covers off. (Lucille billows the covers over her and tucks her in. Ellie smiles.)

Ellie: Uhhh Lucille, knock, knock . . .

Lucille: Who’s there?

Ellie: Sticker.

Lucille: Sticker who?

Ellie: Sticker-ound for a while, okay?

Lucille: Okay. Good night, Ellie. Sleep well. (Lucille moves away a few steps and crouches.) Good night, Lana. Good night, Frizbee.

Ellie: Uhhh Lucille, they’re not here.

Lucille: Oh. (Lucille crosses to Max and turns back) Good night, Ellie.

Ellie: (Pulling the covers up and turning over) See ya in the morning. (196-197)

*GA:* So the ending implies that Lucille may help Ellie find her own identity later.

*JK:* But would you say that Lucille imposes a new identity on Ellie successfully or not? Or would you say that Ellie already knows who she is and does it on her own—especially in the whole confrontation with Voice, when she tells Voice to go in the box and she puts her childhood away?

*GA:* I would say that, yes indeed, there is less power in terms of the Mother figure influencing the Daughter figure’s identity. The daughter is accepting the fact that she can have a mother who is not her biological mother.

*JK:* Yeah, she has to acknowledge the fact that she needs a mother.

*GA:* So *Step* seems to be about Daughter realizing and admitting that she is a daughter and she needs a mother. Lucille gives the power to name over to Ellie, and Ellie saying, “Stick around,” is, in fact, endowing this identity of Mother on her. And that’s one of the reasons why *Step* is so complex and emotionally honest.

*JK:* Because it’s also giving Lucille the suggestion of how to be my kind of mother, how to be the mother I need you to be. And Lucille is giving Ellie the space to do that, giving her the permission: “You tell me the kind of mother you want me to be.”

*GA:* And then I will be the kind of mother who will then, hopefully, help you find your identity.

*JK:* But the crucial point here is that Ellie found her identity as a Daughter herself.

*GA:* Yes, which is also true of Girl in *Mother Hicks*.

*JK:* In *Mother Hicks*, Girl is a 13-year-old foundling or another daughter of a dead, biological mother. Her identity image is an old quilt piece marked with the initials I.S.H. Tuc, a young deaf man, narrates the play’s past events in the present as the Chorus verbalizes his sign language. At the beginning of the play, Girl lives with Jake Hammond—

*GA:* —an inappropriate Mother who drinks and separates his family during the Depression. Ella, his wife, is this sort of transitional, stand-in Mother for Girl.

*JK:* But after Ella and Jake leave town, Girl is forced to live with Alma, an Imposed Mother whose husband, Hosiah, is a mortician with a gun. So Girl wants to live with her suspected biological mother—

*GA:* —Mother Hicks who is Mother Earth because Tuc explains her identity to Girl as “earth, air, fire, water, blood, tears, everything” (408). Mother Hicks is Girl’s Chosen Mother, the town’s witch, a mid-wife who heals rabbits in a box—

*JK:* —the same mid-wife who was present at Girl’s—



*BOTH:* —birth.

*GA:* Two scenes, in particular, dramatize Girl's Daughter relationship with Mother Hicks:

Girl: . . . I know who I am.

Mother Hicks: You don't know anything! . . .

Girl: . . . But, Mother Hicks . . .

Mother Hicks: (Turns on her) Don't you EVER call me that!

Girl: Why not?

Mother Hicks: When they call me that in town, they don't mean "Mother." (She turns away from Girl.)

Girl: (Simply) But I do. I know who I am. I know that I am your child.

Mother Hicks: My child was taken. . . .

Girl: She died? . . . (Taking off her quilt piece.) But look at this, you know you've seen this before, it's my name here and the H . . . the H stands for Hicks! (Girl shoves the piece into her hands. Mother Hicks looks at her squarely.)

Mother Hicks: It stands for Home.

Girl: What?

Mother Hicks: Illinois State Home. (There is a pause.) I seen this piece before. I wrapped you in it just after you was born. Your Mother came here from the State Home, scared and all alone, hardly more than a child herself. I helped her with the birthing . . .

Girl: (In disbelief) No.

Mother Hicks: She stayed a spell, but then one day she ran and took you with her. She must have left you in the town on her way to somewhere else.

Girl: And so I am . . .

Mother Hicks: The orphan child of an orphan child.

Girl: That's not true!

Mother Hicks: Yes it is, Little Rabbit.

Girl: Witches is powerful, witches can make things happen, witches is never lonely or afraid, because they've got the power. I am your child and you are a witch!

Mother Hicks: I am not a witch!

Girl: Then what are you?

Mother Hicks: I'm just a left-over person, just like you! . . .

Girl: That's not true!

Mother Hicks: . . . Now, they are coming for you, and you'll go back to town with them, because that's where you belong!

Girl: NO! (Girl runs into the darkness). . . . (1995, 61-62; 1990, 417-419)

GA: At the end of the play, Girl returns to the graveyard where Mother Hicks routinely visits her deceased daughter:

Girl: I'm sorry I ran away.

Mother Hicks: They always go when they's healed.

Girl: But I'm not healed, not yet. But I do know one thing, I know one thing for positive sure; someday things are going to belong to me and I'm going to belong to them. But there's something I need first and I won't be healed until I find it.

Mother Hicks: You look all right.

Girl: I'm talkin' about something inside me, like a piece of me left out and wanting.

Mother Hicks: (Looks at her evenly) You'll never find her. No matter how hard you look, you'll never find that poor scared rabbit that gave you birth.

Girl: I know, that part of me isn't hungry anymore, it's just sad.

Mother Hicks: That woman, Alma, she cares. She wants you back.

Girl: I know, but I can't go back there until I find what I need.

Mother Hicks: What?

Girl: A name. I need a name. So, I wonder, could I have her name? Could I be May-ry?

Mother Hicks: That's her name, it ain't yours.

Girl: But I wish it were.

Mother Hicks: (Simply) Well, you can wish in one hand and spit in the other and see which gets full first.

Girl: Could you help me find my own name?

Mother Hicks: (Looks at Girl) I reckon I could.

Girl: Then I can stay with you 'til we find it, just for a while?

Mother Hicks: Creatures come when they need a healing spell, but when it's done, they go.

Girl: I know. (. . . Girl carefully folds the quilt piece and places it on top of the grave.)

Chorus: Mother Hicks is a witch, people say  
And she lives all alone at the top of Dug Hill  
And she works her magic on the town below.

(She looks to Mother Hicks who nods. Girl pats the quilt piece and leaves it behind.)

Chorus: When a child falls sick  
And there ain't no cause  
And there ain't no cure  
Then everybody knows, that it's witched for sure  
Mother Hicks is a witch, people say.

(Mother Hicks extends her hand to Girl. They rise and begin to exit upstage just as the Chorus finishes their lines.) (1995, 71-72; 1990, 424-425)

*JK:* So Mother Hicks heals Girl by helping her to find her own name and identity.

*GA:* The influence of Hicks on Girl's identity formation is that Hicks is allowing and encouraging her to find her own name, and is saying, "Your name is within you, go and find it." And to me, that is the most unusual way of portraying a Mother of Choice's influence on the identity formation of a Daughter. It's rare in life. It's almost unheard of in drama or literature. It's fresh, it's exciting, and it is by my value what a "good mother" is.

*JK:* Right, right.

*GA:* It seems like there's a progression from *Step* to *Hicks*: from the more simplistic or less complex idea that the stepmother can help you find your identity by becoming a "mother," to the more complex idea that the Mother of Choice can help you find your identity by saying look within yourself. *Do Not Go Gentle* seems like a kind of backward movement to me; but, of course, who's saying there should be a chronological progression anyway?

*JK:* Exactly. But while the identity formations of Ellie and Girl are very satisfying because their Chosen Mothers allow them to discover these identities for themselves, this journey becomes very problematic in *Do Not Go Gentle*. Who is the protagonist in this play? Whose journey do we follow?

*GA:* This to me is like a bigger choice. It's pretty obvious in the other two plays who the daughter is. The daughter is child and protagonist. But in *Gentle*, it's

not nearly as easy to pick out the protagonist. Maybe there's not an intention to have a single protagonist?

*JK:* It feels like Lillian, Kelly's 84-year-old grandmother, wants to be the protagonist. But she's an invisible ghost, she's dead. This is a memory play about her flashbacks in the past.

*GA:* And playing out the influence of the past on the present, while her family cleans her house for an estate sale after her death—just before the Persian Gulf War.

*JK:* They're trying to solve the mystery of why she painted pictures on the walls now covered with sheets. In Act I, Lillian acts as a ghostly narrator to get in all the exposition about past family relationships. She is the physically absent, biological mother of Windsor, Kelly's father—

*GA:* —but also sort of a repressed mother to Joanna, her niece; because Joanna says, "I'd pretend that she was my mother and I was her only child" and that Windsor was "a founding child she took in" (27). See, to me the most interesting thing here is Joanna who, in fact, could really be the Daughter figure. She is the repressed Daughter figure to Lillian and is also at the same time the repressed mother to Kelly. So, as always, I think that the repressed needs to be talked about. It's where women hide things, and maybe some men do, too, but I don't care. Women do it more consistently. Finding the coffee cup that still has Lillian's lipstick on it (28) has more authentic emotion than almost anything else in the play, and yet Joanna is a marginalized character who almost disappears after the first act.

*JK:* But Lillian is simultaneously absent and present on stage during the whole play—

*GA:* —as opposed to the other plays' biological mothers who are just absent and have stand-ins. And yet somehow Lillian doesn't feel as strongly and singly the protagonist as in the other plays—which may be Zeder's point. The figure who seems the most likely candidate in this structure for being the Daughter is the granddaughter, Kelly.

*JK:* Yes, Kelly is Lillian's 13-year-old granddaughter, the daughter of Joyce, her biological mother who remains invisible in this play—like Ellie's and Girl's mothers.

*GA:* At least she's not dead.

*JK:* Kelly lives with her father, Windsor—

*GA:* —another inappropriate Mother, a colonel in the Air Force who wants to play with military guns. Windsor keeps separating Kelly from her friends by moving her around the world.

*JK:* But Kelly wants to live with—

*GA:* —Lillian who is Kelly's Chosen Mother or her Fairy Godmother who plays "Madame Lillian, Reader-Advisor":

Kelly: You're a fortune teller?

Lillian: . . . People come to me and I tell them what I see in the crystal ball. If people come seeking help, they usually know their own answers, I just help them find them.

Kelly: Can you tell my future, Grambie? Are we really going to have to move to Hawaii? . . . I just want to stay in one place for a while.

Lillian: I know.

Kelly: No you don't. Nobody does unless you've done it and done it. . . . I'm sick of it, Grambie.

Lillian: Have you talked to your dad about how you feel?

Kelly: What good would it do? He'll just say what he always says, "It's not a move, it's an adventure." Some adventure!  
. . . (38)

*GA:* When Windsor gets reassigned overseas in Germany, Kelly runs away from her parents while at summer camp and goes to Lillian's house.

*JK:* But Lillian is hiding Buddy (or Nobody) in her house, a 12-year-old neighbor boy, and teaching him how to read and write:

Lillian: What are you doing here?

Kelly: Surprise! Don't tell on me, Grambie.

Lillian: You're supposed to be at camp.

Kelly: That's what's so perfect. Everyone thinks I'm supposed to be somewhere else! . . . You and I are the only ones who know where I really am. . . . I am going to live with you.

Lillian: Come and sit by me. . . . I'm at a time in my life when I'm slowing down and you're at a time when you're just speeding up. . . . You need your parents now.

Kelly: You don't want me.

Lillian: I want you to be my granddaughter. I want you to be my friend, but I am 83 years old and I can't be starting again with children.

Kelly: Not children, Grambie, just me.

Lillian: I'm sorry.

Kelly: You don't want me.

Lillian: That's not true.

Kelly: Yes, it is. . . . (63-66)

*GA:* So Kelly runs away back to camp. After Lillian's death, Kelly finally tells her father:

Kelly: Right after we went to Germany, I wrote Grambie this terrible letter. I said I hated her, I never wanted to see her again, I wished that she was dead. (77)

*GA:* And then she figures out one of Lillian's paintings—a picture of Windsor “crashing in a plane” (78):

Kelly: How did Grambie know to paint my nightmare?

Lillian: It was mine too. . . . Look at the fear. . . . and let it go. . . . (78-79)

*JK:* Not only do they share nightmares about Windsor dying in war, but I just remembered that Kelly has Lillian as her middle name.

*GA:* But that's the imposing of the name, rather than looking for the name from within. And the looking for the name within is done with Buddy, but it gets lost because it happens midway somewhere through the second act, when we haven't really known Buddy, except for half an act anyway. And that's why the play's journey is diverted into two roads.

*JK:* You keep calling him Buddy, as Lillian does, and I call him Nobody, the name he gives himself. I find Nobody to be the Girl of *Hicks*, and Lillian is the Hicks of *Hicks*. Lillian is helping Nobody to find his identity and his name by teaching him language through art, by painting the walls of her house.

GA: But the actual climax of the play is with Lillian and Kelly. After Kelly and the rest of the family discover Nobody, he reveals the mystery of Lillian's paintings by yanking down each drop cloth. As an invisible presence, Lillian asks, "What do you see?"

Kelly: It looks like a girl without a face.

Lillian: I haven't finished the face.

Joanna: And she's juggling something.

Lillian: I would have given you stars for eyes and a moon for a mouth,

Windsor: It's Earth, she's juggling the planet Earth.

Joanna: Look at her hair!

Kelly: It's a rainbow!

Lillian: All the colors of the earth and sky.

Joanna: And there's some writing here. "Kelly Lillian Barron."

All: "Citizen of the World!"

Kelly: It's me! Dad, she forgave me! (80-81)

GA: So, unlike *Step* and *Hicks*, Lillian imposes an identity onto Kelly as a girl with an unfinished face which she labels "Citizen of the World" as a means of forgiving Kelly's anger against her. In *Hicks*, Tuc uses Earth as a metaphor to explain Mother Hicks, not to force her identity. She already has her identity and is secure enough to say to Daughter, "Find your own." Whereas in *Gentle*, Lillian superimposes Earth as an identity onto Kelly. This Mother of Choice is pretty busy finding her own identity.

JK: Yes, the play is about Lillian's own identity journey to heal her grief, to give forgiveness, and to remember flashback memories. She paints herself as an "enormous" "terrifying" angel with "fire for hair and fiery wings of flame" and weeping eyes (82).

GA: Yes, but Lillian expresses her identity by painting others' identities on the walls (81-82). The impactful thing for them is the pictures themselves, not how they got there. The play loses its immediacy—

JK: —because Nobody is narrating the second act.

GA: The immediacy of Lillian's journey is lost because we see the results of it, not the making of it. Her journey is just not as interesting because she never

does “rage against the dying of the light,” like the poem that keeps running through her head (8). She paints pictures.

*JK:* Well, but that’s her raging.

*GA:* Yes, it is her raging, but it’s happened in the past. Most of the action is the *result* of Lillian’s rage, her paintings, and *their* influence on Windsor’s and Kelly’s identity formations, and Buddy’s to some degree.

*JK:* Got it. You know, there’s a part of me that likes Mildred, the estate sale organizer, best because she provides comic relief.

*GA:* Because she is the most immediate and she doesn’t go back and forth in time.

*JK:* Exactly! She’s trying to hurry people up, to get these characters to move and they won’t. They keep interrupting the present action so they can reflect on the past. She’s the hurrying Mother who’s trying to clean up Lillian’s messy rooms. I find it fascinating that Lillian feels like Ellie 74 years later who still has a messy room—

*GA:* —and who still doesn’t have her identity. Which leads me to say, there’s a disruption here. Suzan isn’t listening to herself. She’s listening to this outside voice, which is the Adult; which maybe is a way of listening to her own adult, but she’s losing her inner Child which is the basis of her *identity*.

*JK:* That goes back to my first impressions. I wrote, “Lillian is the ‘mouthpiece’ of Zeder’s poetic word-images.” Like *Step* and *Hicks*, this play begins and ends with verse, Dylan Thomas’ poem:

And you, my children, on that sad height,  
Curse, bless me now, but  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage, against the dying of the [light].

*GA:* Her last words, and they weren’t even her own (8).

*JK:* This play feels gentle—



*GA:* —But the play itself has so little outrage, and the line is saying, “Do not go gentle,” so the play is contradicting itself. It shows female identity in old age, as in youth, always under threat of being usurped by middle-aged males—because Windsor is trying to dictate Lillian’s life as well as his daughter’s life.

*JK:* But it’s Kelly who rages against her father and against Lillian.

*GA:* Like *Ellie and Girl*, all three *Daughters* express anger as a means of not conforming to their assigned “feminine” roles.

*JK:* And all three plays involve guns as masculine or phallic symbols of violence.

*GA:* But in each play the Maternal power of healing tries to diffuse the Paternal power of using guns and violence. And the box images in each play are all female metaphors of wombs.

*JK:* Suzan also used boxes as her metaphoric image in her 1987 keynote address for a (IUPUI) children’s playwriting symposium.<sup>17</sup> She spoke of the commissioning box, and the children’s theatre style box, and the age group and one-hour time boxes—

*GA:* And the theory-type box and the I-don’t-want-to-be-put-in-a-children’s-playwright box—

*JK:* —And the successful-formula box which prevents the field from growing. In these three plays, I think there’s healing going on. Healing is a big issue for Zeder.

*GA:* Because in all three cases, the literal Mother is not on the stage. The biological Mothers are not seen. They’re invisible or dead.

*JK:* So the *Daughters* are looking for healing and finding their healing through these Mothers.

*GA:* Surrogate Mothers. Nancy Chodorow’s feminist theories of psychoanalysis seem really applicable to these plays. She stresses the infant’s early preoedipal bond with the mother and how the daughter’s separation from the mother takes longer than the son’s separation from the mother. In my book, I wrote it this way:

When the girl reaches adolescence, she is struggling to separate out from her mother, but at the same time feels the close bonding. Mothers 'desire both to keep their daughters close and to push them into adulthood,' which makes the daughters anxious and 'provokes attempts by these daughters to break away.' This 'leaves mother and daughter convinced that any separation between them will bring disaster to both' (135). The adolescent girl knows she is not really part of her mother, but may not feel the boundary between them. In separating, she may criticize her mother, or may 'idealize the mother or the family of a friend'; she 'may try in every way to be unlike her mother' and may 'idealize a woman teacher, another adult woman or older girl, . . . and contrast them to her mother' (137).<sup>18</sup>

*JK:* So all three Daughters separate from their Chosen or Imposed Mothers by running away as the crisis of each play; and all three eventually return home to appropriate Mothers: Ellie to Lucille, Girl to Alma, and Kelly to Joyce.

*GA:* Each Daughter goes back and forth between the Mother and the Surrogate Mother in a kind of liminal rocking.

*JK:* This whole business of naming, of language being so crucial to their journeys, the Daughter's discovery of self, fascinates me. The whole business of finding a name and having a name "is worth more than regular."<sup>19</sup> Because when you've named something, when you've given it a word, then it has more meaning. It's embodied, it's complete, it feels good.

*GA:* It has an identity.

*JK:* Exactly, that's what naming is—identity.

*GA:* And feminist theory gets off on that a lot, too.

*JK:* And we asked to what extent, if any, are these plays informed by feminist theory? Well, they're not; but that's why I come back to the language and the use of meaning in defining and in creating identity through a name.

*GA:* And I would not say the plays are not informed by feminist theory, but playwrights cannot help being influenced by what's—

*JK:* —what’s in the air

*GA:* —in the air. I think that some of what’s in the air did inform all three plays. But it feels to me that if it were a little bit more articulated, that maybe practitioners would get other handles on how to produce the plays. So I guess what I’m theorizing now is that part of the reason that *Mother Hicks* works as well as it does is because it does allude to this usually unarticulated loss of the Mother. And at the same time, it dramatizes a fairly successful separation, from the memory of the Mother through this surrogate Mother, and then a potential, hinted at future separation from the surrogate Mother; which to me is more positive and constructive because the surrogate Mother is not saying, “Here’s your identity,” but “Find your identity yourself.” Which to me feels like a more successful way of dealing with the merging, the separation, the pain, the pleasure, and the need ultimately for the separation to happen, than for a mother to continue to manipulate the daughter through saying, “OK, this is your identity, dear. You better take it.” And probably that identity is going to be fairly close to what the mother wanted herself to be.

*JK:* That is the summary of how Chodorow’s paradigm applies to these three plays. But now, how do practitioners, such as directors and actors, apply this criticism?

*GA:* For me, it’s fulfilling enough to be able to explain how Chodorow’s theory operates in these plays. It helps explain why or how audiences make meanings in plays. The meaning of the play is not the little tag-on thing at the end of *Do Not Go Gentle*—where it’s spelled out in a little slogan. The meaning is the thing that the people in the audience have to put together and make for themselves. It’s always a balancing game between putting in too many dots for the audience to connect, versus putting in so few dots at such great intervals that anything at all could be constructed and, therefore, the audience is frustrated and doesn’t even try to connect them. That’s my metaphor. And this is dramaturgy.

*JK:* But why am I having a problem with Chodorow’s model? I think it’s because you have to put your trust in the fact that the psychoanalytic unconsciousness of all this is conscious for audience members at some point, whether during or after the show; or it becomes conscious at some point years later—that the mother-daughter bonding and the merging and separation and attachment from breast feeding echoes back throughout a woman’s life, and it’s not articulated, but it’s still there. And I guess for me that takes a leap of faith, of believing—that you have to believe that on an unconscious level, it still exists.

But I'm an empirical structuralist. I pay attention to what's visible on the stage or the printed page.

*GA:* I know you're still worried about what use this kind of criticism is going to have for practitioners. I'll tell you what I think. Criticism, if it's good, survives and enters the subconscious of directors, actors, and producers who select seasons. It's not a one-to-one correspondence between criticism and directorial concept or acting choice, but it enters the databank of information surrounding the play, to be used selectively by whoever wants to. In children's theatre there is no body of criticism yet. Let's wait and see what happens when there is.

*JK:* But let's not wait to include the criticism of living playwrights themselves. Suzan?

*SZ:* This is a very strange position for a playwright to be in. Usually when this sort of critical analysis takes place, the playwright has the good sense to be dead, or at least a decorous distance away. Sure, we get reviews all the time, which we pretend to ignore while we wait for the other shoe to drop. Most reviews have as their destination point a kind of judgment: good or bad, rave or pan. This verdict is, in some cases, literally life or death for a particular production. No wonder playwrights get a little jumpy at the term "criticism."

But critical analysis is, or should be, quite a different matter, particularly when it is serious and thoughtful and well researched. Reviews often place the playwright and the critic in adversarial positions, even if the reviews are good. In the scholarly world of critical analysis, both the creator and the critic ought to have the mutual goal of illuminating texts rather than passing judgment. The moment the scholar-critic steps into the role of "judge," the only role left open to the playwright is either pandering gratitude or neurotic defensiveness; both are clearly counter-productive in this sort of discourse.

Critical analysis at its best borrows a set of spectacles from a stranger and uses them to look at a friend. In this case, the "lenses" are those of feminist thought and theory, the "stranger" is Chodorow (who most probably never heard of any of these plays), and the "friend" is the three plays under consideration. The purpose of borrowing these spectacles is, or should be, to see more clearly the structures, relationships, and themes that are actually in the plays, in order to provide illumination of their creative contexts. These spectacles allow a reader to see something not seen without them, to deepen understanding, and to explore the many possible meanings in a single text.

The tricky part of theoretical spectacles is that they must be crafted to enhance, not to blur it. If you use the wrong spectacles to look at the world, your

first impression is that something awful has happened to the world—it is out of balance, *it* is somehow wrong. But the problem is not with the world—it's with the damn glasses!

Now, Gayle and Jeanne have picked up some feminist spectacles and have taken a look at three of my plays. For the most part, in two of the three plays, the lenses are appropriate and the critical discourse is illuminating and insightful. Both *Step on a Crack* and *Mother Hicks* have at their core Mother/Daughter relationships and issues of identity formation. So, the particular model they have chosen to illuminate the text works well to chronicle the journey to identity formation and to articulate the variety of mothering roles: Mothers of Choice, Imposed and Surrogate Mothers.

I must confess that I am always taken aback when I read or hear of these kinds of labels being applied to the characters in my plays, since none of this is ever intentional on my part. When I write a character, I am rarely consciously aware of trying to present an interpretative meaning. I am just running as fast as I can to keep up with what the characters “tell me” they need. For example, when I named Girl “Girl” in *Mother Hicks*, it was not to make an ideological point about identity. It was because the character simply refused to allow herself to be named. I remember with total recall the moment I realized why I could not find her name—because no one had ever given her a name. Bang! In that moment a symbol was born. If playwrights kept looking over their shoulders at these “unidentified flying symbols,” plays would never get written. We'll leave that to the scholars!

Where the lenses of this particular critical analysis obscure rather than clarify is in Gayle and Jeanne's attempt to apply these spectacles to *Do Not Go Gentle*. This play does not lend itself to this model for a number of reasons. First, *Do Not Go Gentle* is a much more complicated play than the previous plays. Both *Mother Hicks* and *Step on a Crack* have a single, clearly delineated protagonist and a unified arc of action. *Do Not Go Gentle*, on the other hand, depicts the complex pattern of intergenerational relationships. Both Jeanne and Gayle had trouble identifying a single protagonist. I'm not surprised. I never intended a single protagonist; this is a choice not an error.

Second, *Do Not Go Gentle* is not about Mother/Daughter or Mother/Mentor relationships. It was never intended to explore this theme, except tangentially. Indeed, two of the most important relationships in this play are between Lillian and her *son*, Windsor, and between Lillian and the neighbor *boy*, Nobody. Unfortunately, these male-female relationships don't fit the feminist model as neatly as the patterns in *Step on a Crack* and *Mother Hicks*. Lillian's relationship with her granddaughter, Kelly, is important, but not as the primary carrier of the action. Both *Step on a Crack* and *Mother Hicks* are essentially

concerned with women and girls, but *Do Not Go Gentle* opens the frame of reference to include the “no man’s land” of Mother-Son and Surrogate Mother-Surrogate Son relationships. This does not fit the model imposed by Gayle and Jeanne. Is this the fault of the play, or the limitation of the model?

Third, what is important in *Do Not Go Gentle* is not any single “dot” but the spaces that exist between the dots. Many of the relationships in this play do not find the kind of simple resolution we see in both of the earlier plays. There is a great deal left unsaid between the characters here. Things don’t wrap up neatly leaving a yearning for what has been left unresolved. This makes the ending more ambivalent and, in some ways, more emotionally engaging. What Gayle sees as a step backwards, I view as a leap forwards in my evolution as a playwright. I believe this is what accounts for the power of this play in performance. Of all the plays I have written, none, to this point, packs the emotional wallop of the ending of *Do Not Go Gentle* when it is well done.

I do not intend to offer this much detail on this particular point in an attempt to “defend” *Do Not Go Gentle*. This dialogue is a discourse not a defense. There is a larger point here. In some cases, the lenses of analysis may become blinders. Instead of clarifying the internal dynamics of a particular play, the lenses blur and confuse and do a disservice to both the play and the model. Noted Gestalt therapist, Fritz Pearls, once said: “If the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, it’s amazing how everything begins to look like a nail.” Enough said.

So, how should we look at and analyze a play? First, I think it is important to read without assumptions and agendas and to read *carefully*. Both Jeanne and Gayle have assumed that the biological mother in *Mother Hicks* is dead. This is not the case as I have just finished a prequel to *Mother Hicks* and Girl’s biological mother is very much alive. They assume that Lillian has drawn herself as the “Killing Angel” in *Do Not Go Gentle*, where there is nothing to suggest this. Also they have stated that Lillian imposes an identity on Kelly by drawing her as a “girl without a face.” As one very perceptive member of the panel audience pointed out, the fact that Kelly is drawn without a face is an indication that Lillian has left Kelly’s identity up to her. I happen to agree; indeed, that’s why I chose this particular “picture” for Kelly, to leave her identity open-ended. What is important here is not whether this interpretation or Gayle’s interpretation is “correct.” Such an open-ended metaphor as “girl without a face” can be read in a number of ways. This multiplicity of meanings should be encouraged and explored, instead of attempting to nail down a single proof to make a particular point which reinforces a preconception.

Critics should be careful not to confuse the playwright and the play. Both my “inner child” and I were somewhat amused by the statement: “Suzan

isn't listening to herself. She's listening to this outside voice, which is the Adult; which maybe is a way of listening to her own adult, but she's losing her inner Child which is the basis of her *identity*." It is the purview of the critic to examine, clarify, and contextualize elements of a text; but when they start getting into assumptions about what kind of voices the playwright is, or is not, listening to, that verges on clairvoyance.

I think we must also be careful to remember that the true measure of a play is how it impacts an audience in performance, not how it does, or does not, support or illuminate any particular theoretical framework. If the theory allows us to see more deeply into this mystery, then the exercise is a worthy one. A play is a bit like a butterfly. The poor creature you see pinned upon a lepidopterist's chart may be biologically a butterfly, but that sad specimen in no way captures the astonishment of a Monarch in flight on an afternoon in autumn. The challenge to all of us concerned with making and talking about theatre is to keep the theory grounded in the practical world of the sensory experience of theatre. Without some way of taking into account the kinesthetic, emotional, sensory experience of the living theatre, we are dealing with the shadow rather than the substance of the play.

I do not mean to suggest that the application of feminist theory to my plays or to other works of children's theatre is not a valid undertaking, quite the contrary. This process has given me some very valuable insights about my work. In the past few months, I have been working with another scholar, Susan Rae Applebaum, who is in the midst of similar research into the Mother/Mentor models in contemporary theatre.<sup>20</sup> Applebaum's excellent study applies theoretical frameworks from noted writers<sup>21</sup> dealing with identity formation of adolescent girls and applies them to three plays, one of which is *Mother Hicks*.<sup>22</sup> In the confluence between Applebaum's study and this dialogue, I found myself dealing with rewrites for my newest play, *The Taste of Sunrise*, which happens to be the "prequel" to *Mother Hicks*. The reading and thinking about both feminist and psychological models gave an added dimension to my quest to find the character of Nell Hicks as a young woman. I found myself exploring the impact of nurturing, not just upon the adolescent in need, but upon the Mother/Mentor herself. I asked myself, "How is the need for healing experienced by the healer?" "How does the act of mentoring fill an aching place within the mentor?" These two questions led me into some valuable character development, and for that, I am grateful.

I am not sure if we have really begun to answer the "baby" questions set forth by Gayle and Jeanne at the beginning of this document. If these questions lead us upon journeys that result in the exploration of new territory for young audiences, deeper thematic content, better crafted plays, and more intelligent and

informed discussions, then great! If, however, the lenses of inquiry are blinders which prevent true insight and impose a particular prescriptive agenda, then neither the field of children's theatre nor the wider context of theory and criticism is well served.

One of the great pleasures of writing for and about young people is the fact that children invariably understand plays better than critics do. It is ironic that when *Mother Hicks* first opened in Seattle thirteen years ago, the critic of the *Seattle Times* stated emphatically that this was not a play for children, that children would never understand its complexity. A whole sixth grade class wrote back to the paper. One young boy offered to explain the play to the critic, who, he thought, obviously had not understood it. The children's response was published under the headline, "Dear Critic, We Think You Are Nuts!"

At I stated in the beginning of my response to this dialogue, we should not confuse thoughtful, intelligent critical analysis with journalistic reviews. The work of my colleagues presented here has an entirely different focus and intent and has as much to teach as it has to learn. We can also learn much from the children in our audiences, who are, after all, the experts of their own experience.

## Notes

1. Sue-Ellen Case mentions children's theatre as a "domestic, social-service project" that may further "reproduce a ghetto for women's talent" unless feminist critics provide alternative interpretations, in *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 55.
2. See Susan Pearson-Davis, ed., *Wish in One Hand, Spit in the Other: A Collection of Plays by Suzan Zeder* (New Orleans, LA: Anchorage, 1990) 127, which includes *Step on a Crack* (131-197) and the 1986 published version of *Mother Hicks* (353-425).
3. Margaret McKerrow and Sharon Oppenheimer, eds. "Best Scripts of the Eighties, New Directions for the Nineties," *TYA Today* 4.2 (Spring 1989): 5. Zeder subsequently revised *Mother Hicks* in 1995 for a production at the University of Texas at Austin. This script, created from the 1986 play and 1994 screenplay, is available from the playwright.
4. Suzan L. Zeder, *Do Not Go Gentle* (Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 1996).
5. Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990) 1-2.
6. Lin Wright, "Creative Drama: Sex Role Stereotyping?," in *Women in American Theatre*, eds. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown, 1981) 266-273.
7. Patti P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theory of Theatre: Revolution or Revival?," in *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics*, eds. Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler (Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1995) 100-130.
8. Harold R. Oaks, "What's Happening in Theatre for Young Audiences?," *TYA Today* 9.2 (Mar. 1995): 13.
9. Jo Beth Gonzalez first applied feminist criticism in "Problematising the Inclusion of Marginalized Cultures in Aurand Harris' *Yankee Doodle*," *Youth Theatre Journal* 9 (1995): 97-108. Davida Bloom recently developed a useful model in her thesis, "An Application of Feminist Dramatic Criticism to Theatre for Young Audiences," (California State U-Northridge, 1996). See also



Elizabeth Green, "Female Gender Role Representation in Realistic Plays for Young People," thesis, U of Kansas, 1975; Catherine Dezseran, "Form and Content in Plays for Youth Dealing with Serious Subject Matter," *Youth Theatre Journal* 2.2 (1987): 3-11; Roger L. Bedard, "Charlotte B. Chorpenning: Playwright and Teacher," in *Spotlight on the Child: Studies in the History of American Children's Theatre*, eds. Roger L. Bedard and C. John Tolch (New York: Greenwood, 1989) 85-98; and Mary Hall Surface, "Playwriting for Young Audiences and Multicultural Influences: Does *Sleeping Beauty* Have Anything To Do With Them?" *Youth Theatre Journal* 2.1 (1987): 22-25.

10. While these questions will not be "answered" here, we offer them to stimulate future intersections between feminist criticism and theatre for young audiences.

11. Zeder (and others) argue that age factors are less important than creating professional theatre "concerned with the unique perspective of young people." See her "White Paper Update," *TYA Today* 9.3 (Nov. 1995): 29; and, also her "Keynote Address" in *Children's Theatre Symposium: Articulating Critical Standards*, eds. Dorothy Webb and Della K. Pacheco (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U Printing, 1988) 4-5.

12. In *TYA Today* 9.3 (Nov. 1995): 5.

13. Pearson-Davis 1990, xvii. See also Susan Pearson-Davis, "Female Protagonists in the Plays of Suzan Zeder," in *Women in American Theatre*, eds. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987) 273-275.

14. Preface to *Step on a Crack*, in Pearson-Davis 1990, 133. All subsequent citations of this play are taken from this anthology.

15. In Pearson-Davis 1990, 355. All subsequent citations of *Mother Hicks* are taken from this anthology and from the revised 1995 manuscript.

16. In Pearson-Davis 1990, xxi-xxii.

17. In Webb and Pacheco, 1988, 1-8.

18. 66. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978).

19. In *Mother Hicks*, 1990, 362.

20. Susan Rae Applebaum, "Scaling the Wall with Help: Adolescent Protagonists and Mentor-Mothers in Twentieth Century American Theatre," a dissertation in progress and a paper presented to the National Women's Studies Association conference, Skidmore College, June 15, 1996.

21. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992); Elizabeth Deboid, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993); and, Barbara White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), among others.

22. The other two plays are *From the Mississippi Delta* by Endesha Ida Mae Holland and *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers.



Spring 1997: Race and Ethnicity

A Journal of the Arts in the South

## The Southern Quarterly

*Want to find out what kind of journal SoQ is? In upcoming issues you will encounter some folks you may know and some you haven't met.*

*Special issues in the works: Studies in Gender, Representing the South: New Studies in Photography, Zora Neale Hurston, Harry Crews, Printmaking in the South, Tennessee Williams: The Non-Dramatic Work, Southern Visionary Artists, Donald Harrington ...*

Interested?

*Subscribing is easy. Just fill out the form below and mail it in.*

*Easier yet, visit the SoQ World Wide Web Home Page*

**[www-dept.usm.edu/~soq](http://www-dept.usm.edu/~soq)**

*and sign in from there.*

.....

I want to find out for myself what kind of journal SoQ is, so please enter my subscription:

1 year (4 issues) \$18 individual;  2 years (8 issues) \$32 individual;

1 year (4 issues) \$35 institutional;  Sample copy \$7.00 (prepaid)

\$5 postage for international subscribers.

TOTAL ORDER  Payment Enclosed  Bill me

Please send information on back issues

(Single copy prices and availability vary)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
City, State, ZIP

Mail to: **The Southern Quarterly**, Box 5078, The University of Southern Mississippi,  
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5078