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# Editor's Preface

It gives me great pleasure to present the plays of Max Bush in this collected edition of his best work. Some of the plays here have been unpublished until now, and naturally I'm proud to be able to introduce these to a wide readership. Others, of course, already enjoy the reputation of long production histories or the prestige of regional and national awards standing behind them. All the dramas, however, have been successfully produced on community, educational and professional stages across the nation, giving tens of thousands of young spectators and their families moving experiences from their hours spent in the playhouse.

Having worked with Max on numerous occasions over the past fifteen years, I've come to regard him as one of those very special kinds of playwrights, a brilliant author who *prefers* to write for young audiences. And as a writer, Max understands these audiences very well: their impatience to be entertained, their desire to be awed, their suspicion of condescension or preaching, their delight in experiencing a good tale and their highly vocal, highly emotional involvement in the world of the play.

Max's scripts are filled with all these elements and more. For the adventurous imagination, he offers characters like the courageous (and swashbuckling) Queen Meaghan in *Aalmauria: Voyage of the Dragonfly* or the quietly-heroic wizard Robin of *The Crystal*. In *The Emerald Circle*, Max deals with the painful and often embarrassing emotions associated with friendship, dating and competition; while *Rockway Cafe* explores the problematic fantasy life that many teens enjoy with their television heroes and heroines, as well as with their parents. Finally, Max's adaptations of classical tales drawn from the works of the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault offer "old Kool-aid in new bottles": stories that have captured the imaginations of millions, yet presented here afresh without old-fashioned sentimentality or condescending moralizing.

Broadly speaking, the plays in this collection can be classified under three categories: adaptations of classical tales (*Puss In Boots*, *Rapunzel*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Boy Who Left Home to Find Out about the Shivers*); heroic fantasy-adventures (*Aalmauria: Voyage of the Dragonfly*, *13 Bells of Boglewood* and *The Crystal*); and contemporary plays of social and psychological issues affecting young adults (*Rockway Cafe*, *The Emerald Circle* and *Ghost of the River House*.)

While the *range* of Max Bush's plays is certainly very impressive, what is most remarkable to me is the *modern sensibility* that infuses all of them. Even with his adaptations of classical tales where he adheres closely to all the original details of his sources, treating them with great respect, he will flesh-out his characters with a modern psychological understanding that makes them accessible to contemporary spectators. And his constant use of folklore and myth in all his plays makes them enjoyable and provocative for adults as well as for younger audiences. The reader, the teacher or the stage director will find in these scripts very little sappy, "feel good" escapism; but instead, will discover much challenge for a young theatregoer's sense of ethical behavior, personal identity and psychological health.

It is this feature more than any other — the modernity of Max's inspiration — that first enticed me to undertake the task of assembling his plays in one volume. And having edited three previous anthologies of new American playwriting, I felt more attention needed to be drawn to the impressive outpouring of new work devoted to young audiences. This is a sector of the American theatre that has suffered great neglect for too long, despite the fact that the past two years have witnessed a surge in professional children's theatre productions across the United States that has spelled box office success for many producers.

More important, however, than this recent renaissance in playwriting for young audiences, is the fact that children's theatre in the U.S.A. — and abroad — has undergone a subtle yet readily identifiable shift in its rhetorical posture towards the spectator. No longer, that is, are producers with "sugary breakfast cereal" the only purveyors of children's theatre. Scripts that contain packaged wisdom blandly handed down from one generation to the next, plays that razzle and dazzle but which remain far removed from the problems facing modern youth or plays that resemble the puerile "kidvid" escapist entertainment which gluts our television programming and movie theatres are gradually being pushed aside by more thoughtful, serious writing. The growing trend towards modernity in new writing for young audiences — *modernity* in themes, characters, situations, dialogue — is everywhere apparent; and Max's work ranks among the very best that American writers have been producing over the past ten years.

Finally, a word must be said for what I like to call the literary quality of these plays. I have only seen six or seven of them in actual performance, the others I've read several times. But even just on the printed page, Max's scripts contain a life that is vital, vivid and makes for compelling reading. Max is truly a "wordsmith." And this is no accident, I know from working with him as his editor: there were times when he spent weeks laboring over the choice of phrase, deliberating the appropriateness of a stage direction or berating me for changing his punctuation, before finally giving me approval to go ahead with a script. Additionally, Max religiously attends as many rehearsals and productions of his new plays as possible, regarding each script as a "work in process," before committing himself to a final version. In so many places, therefore, Max Bush's writing—both in prose and lyric poetry—is muscular, engrossing and rich with the resonance that evokes feelings of pity, fear, awe, compassion and delight.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tony Kushner has decried the state of children's theatre in the United States, calling it the reflection of "a society that seems to offer its children only a future of diminished expectations." He calls instead for a repertoire of "dangerous" plays for young audiences: plays which challenge the failing *status quo* and which unflinchingly address those social and psychological problems that have affected young people throughout history.

I think it is within the context of this psychological, social and spiritual no-man's land of modern society that Max's plays are best understood and appreciated. For young spectators they are like a beacon; for the adult viewer they are engrossing and provocative intellectual adventures; for directors they are wonderful theatre; and for producers I would venture to say they can be the keys to box office success.

— R.E.