

This competition offers people of all ages the chance to write a play. The prizes are meaningful – publication and a production, as well as some cash. Let's hope it inspires a wide range of writers, first-timers as well as experienced, to express an idea, tell a story or allow their imaginations to take off. A competition deadline is a useful spur. Personally I have always needed to work to a deadline, sometimes self-imposed, often set by the company commissioning the play. Without it, there is always the temptation to put it off or start and then give up or to think and think, drink lots of coffee, but never put pen to paper ...

Why write a play for children or young people? Quite simply because they are the most exciting or potentially rewarding (not necessarily financially) audience. Yes, they can be a difficult audience, a volatile audience; but they are also far more willing than an adult audience to suspend their disbelief, enter into the spirit of the performance, and become emotionally involved. For me there is no greater buzz than to witness a full house of children responding positively to one of my plays – and this response might include rowdy, excited participation as well as rapt, wide-eyed silence. An adult audience is pretty boring. They will sit politely and applaud at the end, even if they don't enjoy the play. Children are too honest to do that. So the writing and performing of a play for children or young people becomes a real challenge, a heady roller-coaster ride, by no means a soft option – but so thrilling when it works!

The competition offers a range of possibilities, apart from the prescribed choice of audience age (up to 12 and 12 to 16). The play might be for adults to perform to children. It might be for children or young people to perform. It might be for very young children. It might be for a small cast or a large cast of children in a school or youth group. It might involve physical performance, puppetry, mime or music. In my book, *THEATRE FOR CHILDREN: GUIDE TO WRITING, ADAPTING, DIRECTING AND ACTING* (Faber) I rejoice in the wide range of themes possible in this sector – contemporary stories, myths and legends, stories with animals or inanimate objects as characters, plays

with something serious to say, plays to make the audience laugh, plays to educate, plays to entertain. What a choice!

The competition comes at a time when there is more interest in children's theatre than ever before. When I wrote my first children's play in 1967, there was very little going on, apart from the work of a few inspired pioneers like Caryl Jenner (Unicorn) and Brian Way (Theatre Centre). Now there are many companies, large and small, catering for all age groups, most notably the under-5s, which has become a growth area in recent years. More training establishments include children's theatre in their courses, and more young actors, directors and designers now see it as a career rather than as a step on the ladder towards 'real' – adult – theatre.

The picture is not perfect, of course. There are still big funding concerns. The necessary and right low seat prices is seldom reflected in grant or sponsorship, making it difficult for companies to balance their books. Few critics and reviewers – Lynne Gardner in *The Guardian* is a notable exception – take the work seriously or cover it regularly. Box office demands mean that too many plays for children are adaptations of well-known books. And children's theatre is still perceived by many, inside and outside the theatre profession, as being in the second division and less important than theatre for grown-ups. Profile and status are still low.

But the Trinity Guildhall Competition treats its subject with admirable seriousness, and suggests that children's theatre may soon be regarded as a subject worthy of academic study, as well as a vibrant and equal partner of the other performing arts, such as opera, ballet or mime. Indeed, pretentious though it may sound, I believe children's theatre is an art form and should be respected as such. Hopefully, this competition will help it gain such respect.

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