

# TEN YEARS AT PLAY

*James Reaney*

I STARTED OFF writing plays at a desk in an office, one of the English Department offices at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia when teaching summer school there about eleven years ago.

My latest theatre has been working on the Book of Genesis with no script, simply a list of images and turning points nailed up on a post where both the actors and myself go occasionally to see what is coming next. On the floor (it's the loft of an old Legion Hall) are strips of coloured tape put there for organizational purposes; also a drummer, a pianist, and a prop table filled with the things you need to put on Genesis with. For example, mailing tubes for the angels to beat Adam and Eve out of Eden with; a long strip of cheesecloth to hold in front of the Eden scenes to give that effect of dream. Cardboard boxes to build the Tower of Babel with, and a green garden hose for the serpent. Anything else we need can be suggested with the human voice or body, and in my Listeners' Workshop at London, Ontario, I usually had 25 of these ranging in height from two feet to six, and in age from three to sixty. Every Saturday morning at ten.

I started off eleven years ago in the midst of marking essays writing a play for a contest (the Stratford Festival-Globe contest as a matter of fact) — completely innocent of what actors, directors, producers could do. And might not be able to do. I was out to tell as strong a story as I could devise, as richly as possible. You end up, of course, giving everybody too much — four hour play with thirty in the cast and a plot that needs a hallful of detectives to unravel; also with no idea how to get help with the monster-child you are trying to bring into the theatre. But everything written down on paper.

Right now, probably I couldn't write down what happened on those Saturday mornings of March 1968, when we finally in the Workshop broke through to doing the Babel sequences with all the rest of Genesis behind us. Just lately I repeated some of Genesis at a workshop with 50 kids and 25 spectators at an

Oak Bay school gym in Victoria, British Columbia. The B.C. kids came up with some new solutions as to how you show the sun or the creation of stars — I'm glad someone videotaped it because otherwise there's no record; impossible to write down, only try it again and see what it's like this time. There are certainly disadvantages to the no-script evolvement of plays, but one thing they do force the people taking part to do is to remember, and where memory fails to make it up again — new.

In a moment I'll give the list of Genesis things that is the core of an hour and more of stage action, the list taking up one normal ditto page: right now I'd like to talk some more about my first play *The Sun and the Moon* which in its original script ran to close on 200 typed pages. In 1965 Keith Turnbull started a Summer Theatre in London, Ontario; I was invited to submit a play, and to co-direct it, a totally new experience for me. Playwrights are eager to see their scripts performed and I agreed to this. By this time the script had been slimmed to 75 pages, the plot cleared up, and the cast decimated. "Why does Reaney always write about Witches?" Marigold Charlesworth is reported once to have said, with I think the implication that I should get over my witch fixation. The plot of the play does indeed involve a strolling witchlike abortionist who comes to a small Ontario hamlet pretending to be the local minister's first light-of-love. His early diaries were tossed out to be burnt and fell into her hands instead. There is a denouement with real identities and false identities sorted out and a young man who works at the local Chicken Hatchery discovered to be the minister's real son, etc. Whatever else it is, at least it tells a story and those who gave into it a bit found enjoyment. My first time directing I found myself completely paralyzed. I did not know what to tell people, how to move, how to make things flow. Now I feel that given this kind of script the all-important person is the bookholder. I hardly knew there were such people; nor stage managers who took down blocking, nor producers who managed the casting, in short all the organization that lies behind even the least expensive amateur Little Theatre production. Besides meeting my own painful ignorance and shyness, I also met situations that recur in the world of amateur theatre around colleges and schools, and little theatres. One wild idea I had, for example, was to drop the script, get everybody together and run through the whole story in mime and improvising it as if we were making it up among ourselves. This idea was pooh-poohed by a really good actor in the cast, who just was not used to thinking of plays in that way; no, there had to be a script and you followed it word for word. What I wanted, of course, was for them and me to get a physical feeling for the design of the play, the sort of thing you do get when you think

about *Macbeth* after having seen it, or watch a ballet version of *Hamlet*. I have a feeling that *Twelfth Night* started with thinking about a clown with a little drum: and that's the way I would direct it. Gather the cast around, listen to the drum, improvise along the main lines of the Shakespeare plot and then start adding the text. Well. Amateur theatre is more frequently obsessed with such goods of this world as lighting, physical production and the private ego: all that these things could support — the meaning of a play, the feel of souls, words and their magic — gets forgotten. It can't be bought, so it can't be of much value. Some typical scenes go like this: (1) Mr. Reaney, when are we having a technical rehearsal? Reaney replies, "We're not." Gasp of shock, disbelief this play is really a play. (2) Bertram is not going to show. Why? Well, he'll come to the rehearsals, but I doubt very much if he'll make any of the performances. (3) Listen, stop bugging me about the way people used to act in church when you were a kid. I know pretty well, and I'll do it the night of the performance. (4) Edwina likes to get inside a production and destroy it from within. It goes without saying that this was, even at the very first, when my inexperience let it flourish, not the total picture, and eventually what I have described either disappeared or ceased to matter under the influence of actors who could forget themselves, and of technical things that worked with the play. I remember being particularly grateful for the know-how behind the costumes which re-created the very difficult world of the thirties. The shoes (from Segal's) were good enough to fool my mother. What I learned most, however, was not to avoid writing scenes that come on top of one another as in a movie (someone pointed this out to me as a fault when I could see a thousand directional ways around the crack in the play's performing surface), but to get away from that backstage mystique of the bunch of ego atoms, some bitching, others suffering gladly, and all for the sake of *My Fair Lady* or *Lil Abner*. The tendency in the society in which I lived was to see drama as, first, something somebody else wrote thousands of miles away, and as something that you could evolve physically, as out of a can. I wanted a society where directing a play is not equated with stage managing, where the important rehearsal is not the technical rehearsal, where the lighting, costumes, all that money can buy disappear and what we have instead is so much group skill and sense of fun in imagining out things that richness re-appears all over the place for nothing.

**H**ERE IS THE LIST I promised earlier:

**REVOLT OF THE ANGELS: WAR IN HEAVEN**

**SING:** "Jacob and the Ladder" — spiritual — everybody comes in "climbing ladders."

- (a) Let's all go to Sunday School — hum, drum fingers on the floor for the rain on the roof.
- (b) the Minister reads the first verses of Genesis.
- (c) the People suddenly start chanting those verses, each word repeated three times!

**CHAOS! CHAOS!**

- (d) the people divide into the hands of God, or the colours taped on the floor.

**"WE ARE THE HANDS OF GOD"**

**"ON THE**

**FIRST DAY — let there be light and there was**

**SECOND DAY — he divided the waters**

**THIRD DAY — dry land and grass**

**FOURTH DAY — sun, moon and the stars**

**FIFTH DAY — fish, great whales and birds**

**SIXTH DAY — animals and man**

**SEVENTH DAY — he rested"**

Before going on I think I should do some sketching in of what is happening because of this list: The revolt of the Angels starts when a young child is raised by the oldest person who generally plays God. Some angels bow, others retreat and mill and then attack. Groups menace, press force fields of presence at each other, topple over at invisible signals to do so and then the Christ Child on a chariot of shoulders with whirling arms for wheels pushes the evil angels over a cliff. Don't ask questions — just do it. The room is empty, then people coming in with their Bibles on their heads and that unearthly quiet of Sunday Afternoon. Get a score of people quietly drumming their fingers on the floor of an old Legion Hall and you'll see what I mean. All of this splits open in the chaos sequence. Everybody making strange sounds. Out of this come ten people who mime the hands of the Creator. With skill and work you can get an effect of thumbs, index fingers, hands moulding planets, only it's a finger with a waist, not a joint. Get

the people in the hand group to make up songs about being the left little finger of God and so on. Then these hands chase the chaos people around until they have kneaded them into a ball of human mud — like a football scrimmage which then slowly starts revolving and we're about at the second day already. Here some lie down and ripple; others create a fountain, endlessly lifting infants up, up into the clouds. For the fourth day several balls of people: sharp hand rays for the sun; blunt the hands for moonlight, and wink the hands for starlight. Or talk to the actors — they have their own solutions; for example a kid in Oak Bay did the sun by simply crouching down as if in worship, whereas in London, Ontario the hands flared out. For Fish two bigger people propel a smaller person around who agilely “swims” while being held in mid-air. For birds a band of people have earlier withdrawn — what for? — well now we know. They have been making a host of paper darts which now come floating over our heads as that part of the list gets chanted. For the making of man, actors lie down on the floor as the various parts of Adam: a whole body for a limb. The Hands of God command various actions such as “Beat your heart” and “raise your arms.” The various bodies making up Adam generally work together to make the somewhat eerie illusion that there is a huge giant out there on the floor, struggling to get up. Have a big discussion here about Frankenstein and are we a monster or are we Adam etc. There's been piano and drum going all the time here and over a month or two of Saturday sessions the whole group of Listeners evolved chants and imagery and sounds.

(1) SING THE BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN

- (m) Adam and Eve get tangled with the Serpent
- (n) they are banished from the Garden
- (o) Cain and Abel — a big session here doing scenes with parents and children, improvising out one's past sulks at parental favouritism. Abel can be some infuriatingly sweet child.
- (p) the story of Lamech — to go with the curse on Cain; Lamech shoots someone by mistake and again fascinating conversations about justice with the cast. Also about the Bible, since no one seems to know about Blind Old Lamech and the naughty boys who gave him the bow and arrow to play with — just invented.
- (q) Adam, Seth, Methusaleh and Enoch: Adam lived for 930 years and he died

Seth lived for 912 years and he died

Methusaleh lived for 969 years and he died

Enoch lived for 365 years and was taken to heaven on a chariot of fire!

This is done with a mime that involves four people walking across the room, getting older as the rest of the cast chant off the centuries. The chariot of fire involves a monumental group of people bunched together with whirling arms for wheels.

(r) SING THE OLD ARK'S A-MOVERING

(s) everybody gets drowned except the good people and the animals. Again, a group of people form an ark, and other actors get inside the ark. This ark glides around the room, occasionally trampling some strong swimmer in his agony.

(t) sacrifice — the colour lines make songs about the new rainbow

(u) Nimrod the Tyrant/Tower of Babel/Ur of the Chaldees/  
Abram escapes.

We build a tower out of cardboard boxes. Then every one starts speaking a different language — whole mornings are spent in finding out just how many languages the cast knows. In the Ur scenes, all put paper bags over their heads and answer roll calls by numbers they have made up. Break them up into groups and let them discuss regimentation etc. Abram refuses to answer by number, insists that he is Abram and escapes from paper bagville.

One morning in June 1968, I watched the Listeners' Workshop do Genesis before an invited audience. There had been no dress rehearsal, we were not worried about forgetting, there were lots of people in the group who were directing from inside the mass of actors. And it unfolded, like some homemade thing out of brown paper with all sorts of fascinating rough edges and accidental effects. In the Babel sequence the ingredients of the tower engulfed anything moveable in the room the audience wasn't sitting on. I think there were some participants who had just arrived that morning, but it made no difference — they were folded in to the goings on.

**M**Y EXPERIENCE IN MAKING UP PLAYS then lies between the two poles I have been describing, and I would now like to list some titles so arranged: *Three Desks*, *Killdeer*, *Easter Egg*, *Sun and Moon* . . . and . . . *Listen to the Wind*, *Colours in the Dark*, *Names and Nicknames*, *One Man Masque*, *Geography Match*, *Donnelly*, the Genesis I've been talking about.

If I were to tell the story fully of the first group of plays, what would a few peaks be? First of all, the finding of a director who was interested in new plays, encouraged me to finish *Killdeer*, and who really gives in her productions a sense of listening, and this director was Pamela Terry who at the time was working with the Toronto Alumni. Secondly, just watching rehearsals in class rooms, factory lofts, renovated synagogues, green rooms, and then waiting for audience reactions on opening nights in a gamut of places — lofts again, university auditoriums, little theatres and big theatres. This particular group of plays are constructed like rivers in voyageur journals. You go smoothly along in an apparent realistic way, and then there is this big leap — which director, actors and audience have got to take, or is it just bad dramaturgy? and are they going to take it? Let me give an example. At the end of *Easter Egg* one night some one came up to me and said, “But no one ever feels he has to get married just because he killed a bat.” The murder in *Desks*, the circle dance in *Killdeer* (well, the whole trial scene), the recovery of the “idiot” boy in *Egg* have all at one time or another produced a feeling of “rapids” with audiences and the occasional muttering actor. I’m still working on this; one solution is to declare myself mad — I don’t think the way other people do, and what to you seems melodramatic, surreal, arty, etc., etc., to me seems utterly *verismo* and Zola. An interesting case in point: *Killdeer* first had a really wild scene where the old judge had a heart attack, caused in a Richard III way by the villainess suddenly revealing a lurid scene from his past. After I wrote that out, Margaret Avison came up to me and said, “I liked it the first way — more poetic.” There are signs that maybe if I hold on eventually the audiences will be also impelled by ripples from the *zeitgeist*, i.e. the imagery in the new pop music and the uprush of sympathy for dream visions. This was most apparent in a recent production of *Egg* at Simon Fraser with music from a Big Pink track (the pianist is from my home town, by the way) and, with Kenneth imprisoned in a polyethylene bag for most of the evening, what I would call a Strawberry Fields approach. And I didn’t feel that scrunch feeling, “here we come to the rapids,” that I had with earlier audiences, sometimes, and, of course, back in the age of the Johnny Mercer lyric.

But it’s tiresome waiting for either the audience to catch up, or for one’s own imperfect self to mature and steady, so after watching the Peking Opera at the Royal Alex one evening I decided to try writing a different kind of play altogether. That is, a play where it’s all rapids. In *Masque*, *Names* and *Geography Match* I proceeded with mostly lists of names which are chanted; well, *Masque* isn’t like that, but you should see the list of props. In *Names*, the words are all shouted

eventually *against* somebody. Here, a director whose production of *The Enchanted* I had seen many times with the feeling again that here was somebody who listened — John Hirsch, midwifed the script with the additional mime and movement I hadn't quite realized would be necessary and a group of actors appeared at Manitoba Theatre Centre who caught on beautifully to the bare stage, just words and you approach. Then I was ready to write a script so odd that nobody seemed willing to chance it, and I had to direct it myself — *Listen to the Wind*. Here was a play about young people putting on a melodrama. Their predicament throws light on the inner play; the inner play throws light on their tragedies. The big thing was a chorus of youngsters who were on stage sitting or kneeling most of the time, and a prop table presided over by a girl who became almost the pivot of the whole production, also a book holder in a rocking chair, also a piano, a drummer and a guitarist. Whenever a sound was needed the chorus provided it; whenever someone needed a prop they walked over and got it. The miming of the coach scenes is an example of the whole method: whenever the actors had to go from one manor house to another, a boy appeared with a wheel which he coasted along, they following him behind running in time with him. Before they get into the coach they walk or limp or whatever; once in the coach they glide along with it. Coconut shells for hoofbeats and gravel sounds are provided by the chorus. Someone in mathematics remarked to a friend that the longest distances took the shortest coach rides, whereas the shorter the distance the longer the ride. I have been thinking about that remark ever since. Out of this play which broke with reality completely, used shorthand for everything, forced the audience to provide lighting and production and sets and even ending (on a Saturday morning after the Hamilton performance, I met a student on the street who said, "That's the first play I've ever seen where there were six or seven endings") — out of this play sprang all the rest of recent activities—the Listeners' Workshop came out of the young people in the chorus who wanted to go on. From their activities were devised embryonics for *Colours* and *Donnelly*. The key word, so far as I am concerned, is "listen."

So, out of the development between the two theatres I've been discussing, eventually — came my first commissioned play *Colours in the Dark* (Stratford 1967, directed by John Hirsch). There should be a discussion of it, but aside from the fact that it has been described elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the best thing to say is that *Colours* is all the other plays and experiments I've been talking about. With its 42 scenes, multiple characterization, improvised music, bare stage, magic lantern images — it almost couldn't help be all the other plays as well as a re-tell of the Bible. In



the sabbatical year I am now enjoying I've been working on *Donnelly*, or *The Biddulph Tragedy*, an attempt to apply what techniques I've collected to a story in the past with all its longhand archival detail. When I started this play about an Ontario family who were massacred by their neighbours on the night of February 3, 1880, I could tell that a lot had changed since the English Department office at Acadia. I kept seeing all the Donnelly events in terms of two viewpoints that cross — *some tell it this way/some tell it this way*: the Donnellys were at heart decent people who were persecuted/the Donnellys were mad dogs who *had* to be destroyed. This resulted in stage movement, scene settings, speeches that form St. Patrick's X's. *Listen* and *Colours* also had patterns behind them. I wonder if this sense of design I didn't have 11 years ago comes from the intervening workshop experiments. There I've got used to eliciting flows of power and movement, got used to watching for the currents of these flows as they come out of people playing with other people the game of mimicking reality. This is the way Hirsch and Terry direct and this is what I want my plays to be wrapped around — the delight of listening to words, the delight in making up patterns (scribbling with your body/bodies) of movement for fun and in play.

<sup>1</sup> *The Stratford Scene 1958-1968*. Clarke, Irwin, Toronto, 1968. Alvin A. Lee's book on Reaney (Twayne, New York, 1968) contains accurate maps of most of the plays mentioned.

