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Plays by School Children (Abstract)

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PLAYS BY SCHOOL CHILDREN (ABSTRACT)

By GEORGE P. BAKER, Professor of English, Harvard University

This is not an effort to force plays by school children into the regular curriculum. It cannot be denied that because of the strong dramatic instinct in the child, plays, both under supervision and without supervision, connected with school courses and unconnected, are now given by children. On the whole, plays given not as a part of the school course are preferable, for this acting should be made to seem, so far as possible, not work, but pure pleasure. The all-important question is that of supervision and method. The play should be carefully selected, and the children should be trained not, as mere puppets, to imitate what some trainer takes to be the traditional way of interpreting the parts, or the right way, but to make them think as much as possible for themselves, and obtain the broadest individual development from the experience. In this case, it is not so much that "the play is the thing," but the development of the children acting. There can, of course, be no question as to the possible gain for the child in enunciation, pronunciation, and bearing before an audience. Such training may do much, however, to dispossess the child of the deeply rooted American idea that any play is little more than a means for some star to display himself or herself: the child may come to understand that a play is rightly produced only when each person in the cast works with proper self-subordination for the total effect. Here is co-operative labor. At the present time few mature people, in reading plays, feel or see them as different from a short story or novel. By such acting, the child comes to understand and distinguish between the two co-operating arts of the drama and acting. He should come, also, to understand that only in action can any play be properly judged. Such acting may train the imagination to large personal results. The child is self-centred. In such work, by his imagination he gets out of himself into the minds and conduct of others. That means an enlarging sympathy and, possibly, less selfishness. The objections that time cannot be spared for this acting, and that such work will send children upon the professional stage, are weak; for the children will act whether we supervise them or not, and nothing so takes the glamour from the stage as coming to understand how much

hard labor successful production of a play must mean. Finally, the drama which seems to be developing among us demands an intelligent, sympathetic public, a public with standards for the drama and the art of acting. Such acting by children will most quickly provide that necessary public.