

"IN
MY
OPINION"
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OPINION

By SIDNEY BALDWIN



Children's Theater of Carver Center

The people who are interested in theater in Peoria, in amateur theatricals and especially in children's theater, are missing a valuable opportunity if they do not go to the children's programs at Carver Center, where Juliette Whittaker is in charge.

Juliette is a member of the Corn Stockers, as am I, and when she asked me to come down and see her performance of Rumpelstiltskin, I expected the usual children's fairy tale, but I was very much surprised.

Carver Center has an excellent if small, stage and an auditorium that will hold 300 or 400 people. That it wasn't filled that night was due to a combination of circumstances, but the next time such a play is announced, it ought to be.

In the first place Juliette Whittaker is well trained for her work. She has her MA in theater from the University of Iowa, and she is not only a director of excellence, she is also a writer. She found, early in her training, that it is difficult to get the right sort of plays, not only for children but also for the young people with whom she works. So she writes her own and the version of Rumpelstiltskin was hers. She sizes up her material, the children who want to act, and then she arranges her plays so that there are parts for them.

In Rumpelstiltskin she used her knowledge of comedy to excellent advantage. She had three or four boys who came up to expectation and who show promise for the future. The boy who played Rumpel, a tall

gangly lad who knew what he was doing, had as excellent a costume as I have ever seen on an amateur stage — indeed the entire set of costumes was admirable, especially so since there is very little money for sets and costumes.

But that lack is only a challenge. The scenery was made from discarded window shades. The various levels, which make entrances and exits so much more dramatic, were built from discarded lumber and orange crates. This gives an opportunity for "blocking." Blocking, for those people who don't know the language of the theater, means the relation of the various characters to each other—their movement across stage, their place in the several pictures that a good director sets up.

One special scene, where Rumpelstiltskin betrays his name, was worthy of special notice. A drop of a single tree was silhouetted against the back lighting, where the villain in the woods danced and rejoiced at the lack of names from the queen. The woodsman, who hears the name, was in darkness, except when, for a second, he stood out against the light. His diction was excellent and the whole scene had an eerie quality not often found in amateur performances.

I was interested enough to ask how the tree had been made. They took netting and sewed it together by hand, put the painted tree on the floor over it, and sewed that down. There is no lack of hands to work, some of them skillful, and with a little outside help Juliette Whittaker's little troupe of actors can make a name for themselves outside the walls of Carver Center.

They played Rumpelstiltskin again on a Friday, unfortunately not late enough to have a date given in this column. But the whole winter's schedule was tight enough so that the postponement was not possible. However, there is another children's play to be given in May. It is a Chinese performance.

And as well, her group of young men and women are going to present a play at the various high schools. If they do half as well as their younger associates, that play too, will be worth seeing.

Juliette Whittaker is not only a director, she is a writer whose plays, judged by people who know, are excellent and worth professional attention. I can understand why this is so; watching her children at work, I got the feeling of seeing an old folk tale, combined with the freshness and delight of a park in Paris with the audience watching a Grand Guignol of

"Punch and Judy."

I can assure you that my evening spent in the audience at Carver Center will be worthwhile.

[cut off text:] "Punch and Judy." I can assure you that my evening spent in the audience at the Carver Center will be worthwhile.