

Empowering Children through Drama: The Critic's Perspective

Tina L. Hanlon

Ferrum College

My presentation will draw on performance photos, children's drawings and letters, my experience as script consultant, and research on creative drama to discuss R. Rex Stephenson's work dramatizing Appalachian folktales with and for children and young adults since 1975. For twenty-five years I have observed his collaborative process of involving young people in his story-theatre method, transforming tales from regional archives into performances. I've observed children watching performances and volunteering enthusiastically for audience participation. I've also analyzed their drawings and writings afterwards and studied newspaper articles that describe in some detail Stephenson's groundbreaking work in the 1970s as he introduced creative drama into classrooms.

Stephenson helped increase the prestige of marginalized and denigrated regional lore by showing adults who didn't want "hillbilly" stories in schools that traditional tales and songs instill appreciation for "the essence of Appalachian culture and history." While many adults view folktales as trivial entertainment or unrealistic children's amusements, children respond instinctively to their serious underlying themes. When a Jack tale or "Mutsmag" depicted older siblings as bullies, many children told Stephenson that their siblings treated them like that, or drew pictures of Mutsmag teaching her mean sisters a lesson. Some of Stephenson's interactive school performances involved children in making ethical and empathetic decisions, such as whether characters should trust others, or lie to protect Jack from a witch. In Stephenson's recent summer enrichment camp courses,

middle school children participating in all phases of dramatizing “Like Meat Loves Salt” (with a plot similar to *King Lear*) responded intensely to themes about treatment of the elderly, sibling rivalry, and the folly of judging others unfairly.