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photo by Bruce McCann

HERE COMES GOSLING!: Reflections on Varied Approaches to a Script for Very Young Audiences

Compiled by Sandy Asher

The following is abridged notes from the 2011 AATE Conference presentation moderated by Lynda Sharpe, with Sandy Asher, Patricia Zimmer, Abby Schwarz, Judy Matetzschk Campbell, and Ric Averill. The session chronicled recent productions and workshops from full immersion to traditional proscenium of *Here Comes Gosling!*, originally written as a picture book by author and playwright Asher and illustrated by Keith Graves. The new play versions of *Here Comes Gosling!* and lyrics were written by Asher with music composed by Averill.

About the Story

Asher's picture book *Here Comes Gosling!* presents a simple story. One of three books in the Froggie and Rabbit series, in this book Froggie and Rabbit prepare a picnic lunch for eagerly awaited guests—Goose, Gander, and especially new baby Gosling. But babies rarely behave as anticipated. Froggie's enthusiastic greeting, "LOVE NEW BABIES!" is met with horrendous honks of discontent. Froggie retreats while the others try in vain to placate Gosling. Though he often protested that he could not wait to meet the new baby, Froggie is now willing to wait as long as the honking persists. While he waits, he hums, sings, and dances. Gosling stops honking to watch, and their friendship blossoms.

From Playwright Sandy Asher: The Dream

In December, 2008, I attended Oily Cart's *How Long Is A Piece of String?* in London, UK with my daughter and 3-year-old granddaughter. The company's sensory-rich, full-immersion style captivated all three generations. I'd never seen anything like it – very young children physically gathered into the world of a story in a way that was meaningful to them, and, at the same time, a theatrical delight for adults. I came home besotted with the idea of creating this kind of theatre. *Here Comes Gosling!* offered a perfect foundation for a multi-sensory script.

I began by thinking how children might be drawn into the story, brainstorming activities and possible song titles, knowing full well that workshops would be needed to refine my ideas. Oily Cart is based in a school. They go into classrooms freely, or bring children into rehearsals. Oily Cart



Traditional proscenium performance at Pollyanna Theatre Company, Austin, TX.

has grants aplenty and can limit the size of their audiences to 20 children. Or five. Still, I dreamed on:

- Children might go with Rabbit to wake up Froggie ... ("Wake Up, Froggie")
- ... and dig up veggies for salad and cake ... ("Spinach & Carrots Are Very Good Things")
- ... and "bathe" in bubbles like Froggie. ("Scrub, Scrubble, Bubble, Bub")

And so on. I sent a proposal to colleagues and got back interest but no commitment. Finally, at the August, 2009, AATE Playwrights Slam in New York, I read my book and announced I wanted—needed!—to adapt it as a full-immersion play. Patricia Moore Zimmer said, "I'm interested," and together we set off on a great adventure. This included applying for a National Endowment for the Arts grant, which helped clarify our thinking (but resulted in no money), and the creation of the first draft, with song lyrics and workshop and production plans.

The Workshops

While Patricia pursued workshops with Ypsilanti Head Start, Northwestern University's Purple Crayon Players (PCP) in Evanston, IL expressed interest in running workshops. PCP members encouraged me to spell out the goals I had for the interactive elements of the script: What did I want to learn? How might they help? They inspired me to get specific. For example:

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ACTIVITY: Spread the picnic tablecloth, “parachute” style.

GOALS:

- **Script evaluation:** Is it clear from the script what’s supposed to happen here?
- **Physical involvement:** This is a very particular task and requires cooperation.
- **Gauge participation:** Do the audience members all volunteer at once? How many can be accommodated? If some don’t volunteer, how can they be encouraged to participate? Are those who still don’t participate okay with that? If they can’t all be accommodated at once, how best to divide them? Can they get the job done? Is this fun? How many adults are needed to help?
- **Timing:** How long does it take to give all of the children a turn?

Eleven goals were spelled out. They continued to evolve with time and experience.

photo by Bruce McCann



From Composer Ric Averill, Lawrence Arts Center, Kansas:

The Music

I had a great time working on the Gosling songs remotely. I worked with an arts-based preschool Tuesday afternoons over the course of about six weeks. I would go into the classroom, have spontaneous story time, and read one of the books. I taught them the first song and they did it pretty well.

I tried to create a balance between sing-able and show-

able, so there’s a consistency of style but fun stuff for the actors to create. Some of the songs felt more like sing-a-longs and others more show driven. The 3- to 5-year-olds were happy to sing or listen.

I finished my sixth week with them playing all six songs on a baby grand, singing with and for them, and remembering the books we read and the fun we had together.

My only disappointment was in not being present to hear how the songs played with the young audiences. I hope each cast personalized them and had as much fun as I had composing them.

From Director Patricia Moore Zimmer, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI:

November 2010: Workshops at Head Start. Experimented with structures Sandy was considering. Tried out a number of interactives and songs.

A couple of things informed my interest in this play: my love of preschoolers and an interest in redefining the nature of participation.

[What is the difference between immersion and participation?](#)

Sandy and I were in a lot of conversation about this. I love what she eventually wrote into the script:

“This is a ‘full-immersion’ play, meaning that the children are encouraged to enter the world of the story and be involved in it through their imaginations and their senses. The difference between ‘full-immersion’ and ‘participation’ theatre can be subtle, but to this playwright’s mind, participation theatre involves the children in meeting specific needs of the story while full-immersion theatre uses the story to meet developmental needs of the children.

“The picnic blanket raising and lowering activity is not about getting the blanket positioned correctly in order to advance the plot. It’s about a theatrical context in which a group of children experience together the delightful lift and fall of the blanket. Ideally, a balance is maintained between allowing the children time to enter the world of the story and experience it as fully as possible and keeping up the pace and professionalism of a satisfying theatrical performance.”

I connect full-immersion theatre to “second lining,” the New Orleans brass band tradition that “melds the pomp of a courtly function and the spontaneous energy of a block party.” My husband, musician Dennis Zimmer, describes it as such:

“Second-lining creates an environment that is catalytic to response ... but gives you the freedom to respond at the

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photo by Sandy Asher

level you feel comfortable with rather than dictating what the response is supposed to be. Nobody's going to tell me I'm doing it wrong."

Is it that with participation theatre, the actors require some kind of response in order to continue with the story?

You don't have that in second-lining. The music goes on regardless of what the second-liners do, though it does entice them to action. In *Here Comes Gosling!*, the action of the play continues and the audience is invited to come along.

From Teaching Artist Abby Schwarz, Purple Crayon Players, Evanston, IL:

The *Here Comes Gosling!* creative drama workshop on the Northwestern University campus was planned and led by Purple Crayon Players teaching artists. Participants were ages 2 to 4, accompanied by a parent or guardian. We played, imagined, read, sang, and danced over a span of five Sundays. We used Sandy's development goals in planning each hour-and-a-half session.

For example, Sandy wanted to know how children would respond to the music in the script. Our first session was music-heavy; we sang three songs in their entirety. This seemed to try the children's attention spans, and it was difficult for them to learn lyrics if there were more than one or so lines. In following workshops we opted for shorter cuts of the songs and made use of repetition—something we learned is crucial in working with this age group.

Sandy also wanted to explore the use of the picnic blanket. The script calls for three rounds of parachute-style fluffing. While it may seem like a lot, we found this activity sustained preschoolers' interest well. Oftentimes, it was the most uproariously fun moment.

We also used pantomime to dramatize parts of the story, such as baking a carrot cake and making spinach salad. We found this very successful, especially when teaching artists invited the children to participate in one big group pantomime, such as all imagining a gigantic bowl and circling around it.

One major discovery was the effectiveness of engaging our preschoolers' senses through tactile activities. One of my favorite moments was when we brought in real carrots, spinach, and flowers and had the children explore them through touch and smell. We brought white balloons into the room as bubbles while they were giving their sock puppet Goslings a bath. They had a great time playing with the bubble-balloons.

Here Comes Gosling! is rich with themes and characters for teaching artists to expand upon in an interactive workshop



Full-immersion production at Eastern Michigan University Theatre of the Young, Ypsilanti, MI.

setting, and the activities called for in the full-immersion script were both effective and fun.

From Patricia Moore Zimmer: The Full-immersion Production

March 2011: Performances at EMU Children's Institute, Ypsilanti Head Start and EMU Library.

"I wanted to share with you a reflection on our children's experience. When asked about their favorite part they all described one of the interactive parts of the play ... the bath ... the picnic cloth ... picking the veggies ... and picking up the yellow goose feathers!"

-Teacher, EMU Children's Institute

Cast size: 4 animal characters (plus puppet)
3 helpers (ensemble members who assist children as needed)
Stage manager also functioned as a helper
Music director played guitar and sang
Oboe and Clarinet player

The multiethnic cast included a blend of graduate and undergraduate performers.

When the NEA grant didn't come through, we decided to do the production on a shoestring (about \$3300).

Ypsilanti Head Start and the EMU Children's Institute provided audience and playing space (small gym/multi-purpose rooms). The public performances took place at EMU's Halle Library in an airy room filled with natural light.

Audiences at Head Start and Children's Institute

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averaged about 40 children per show. Public performances ranged from about 15 to 30, averaging about 20 per performance.

Funding issues that prevented Head Start from busing children to campus led to our decision to do a limited tour. The set was designed to fit into a panel van. Undergraduate students designed costumes and a graduate student designed the set and props.

The Traditional Proscenium Production

While work at EMU continued, Judy Matetzschk-Campbell indicated interest in *Here Comes Gosling!*, but not with a full-immersion approach. Because of her long history of collaboration with Matetzschk-Campbell, and the very real possibility that many theatres would be unable to attempt a full-immersion play, Asher then developed a traditional, proscenium stage script as well.

From Director Judy Matetzschk-Campbell, Pollyanna Theatre Company, Austin, TX:

Several years ago, I worked with Sandy on the first professional production of *Too Many Frogs!* at Pollyanna Theatre Company. The piece already had a great audience because families and teachers loved the book by the same title, and the play was strong and filled with great characters.

I fell in love with what I call "The Odd Couple of Children's Theatre," Froggie and Rabbit. We've all met a Rabbit who loves routine and a Froggie who has so much enthusiasm it just can't be contained. We've all witnessed what happens when two such characters meet. The result is natural comedy that springs straight out of character choices. It was with great joy that I watched children as young as 3 and adults as old as 80 enjoying the same play. I jumped at the chance to produce "*The Odd Couple meets Three Men and a Baby.*"

Our company does not have a space that facilitates full-immersion theatre. I think it's a major strength of the piece that it can be staged in many ways.

Here Comes Gosling! was produced at The Long Center for the Performing Arts Rollins Studio Theatre in May, 2011, in Austin, TX. The theatre is a black box that seats approximately 180. We staged it in a modified proscenium style with the audience on risers facing the action.

Thematically, this play is appropriate for very young audiences because of the topic of waiting. Young children spend huge chunks of their lives waiting: for Mom or Dad to get home, for naptime to be over, for their friend to come play. I vividly remember waiting for my sister, Joan, to be

born. I was so excited to meet her, but had no idea she would do so much crying. When would this baby be big enough to play with me? Memories of waiting drew me to this script.

The challenges of putting a book on stage are huge. With our production designer, Ia Enstera, we recreated the style in our use of color, form, and line. We especially tried to create costumes that were faithful to the book while providing the actors freedom. The goal was to take those images into a fully realized theatrical world.

Did very young children enjoy the play and relate to the action when the story was told in a traditional theatre format? Yes. We had children as young as two, plus even younger siblings. Did anyone get too wiggly and have to be taken out of the theatre? No. Is this theatre for the very young? Yes, it is.

* * *

So it was that through this process, the *Here Comes Gosling!* story developed into free-standing workshops, a 35-minute traditional play, and a one-hour, full-immersion script, both suitable for mainstage and touring. The AATE presentation was an exciting exercise in gathering together and reflecting upon all of these approaches as the playwright looks toward Gosling's future.

Sandy Asher is the author of 25 books for young readers and the editor of five collections of fiction. As Sandra Fenichel Asher, she's published more than 30 plays for adult and young audiences, three of which have been honored with AATE's Distinguished Play Award.

Ric Averill is a playwright, composer, director, and actor who serves as the artistic director of theatre, film, and performing arts at the Lawrence Arts Center in Kansas. Averill's published work may be found at Dramatic Publishing.

Judy Matetzschk-Campbell is the founder and producing artistic director of Pollyanna Theatre Company in Austin, TX, a company that develops and presents new plays for young audiences. Campbell is a graduate of The University of Texas at Austin where she earned an MFA in Theatre for Young Audiences and a PhD in Dramatic Text Criticism.

Abby Schwarz is a senior performance studies major at Northwestern University and is the outreach director for Purple Crayon Players. She is also a founding member of For Youth Inquiry Performing Health Collective.

Patricia Moore Zimmer directs and teaches at Eastern Michigan University, where she is a professor of Applied Drama and Theatre for the Young.

