

'Feast Of Bones' – A Writer's Perspective

By Frances Kay

The germ of the idea for this play began, appropriately, as a dialogue between Louis Lovett and myself. He had found an Australian version of the children's tale known to readers in Anglophone countries as 'Chicken Licken' and was wondering how it could also incorporate a war theme.

The Story of Henny Penny, in Walter de la Mare's book 'Animal Stories', published in 1939, is part of a weird collection of unsettling, sometimes cruel, poems, songs and traditional tales. As De la Mare says in his preface 'This is not a suitable book for very young children.' I was already familiar with De la Mare's poetry for children – perhaps the most famous of his poems discussed and learned by heart in school is 'The Listeners', beginning 'Is there anybody there?' said the traveller.... but his choice of material impressed me with its edginess.

This book had made a deep impression on Louis, and I began to share that excitement as I discovered in De la Mare's excellent prologue how well he understands young readers:

"There are people who consider that sad stories, and any story that is the least alarming, are bad for the young; and would even refuse them all fairy tales. They maintain that fairy tales, one of the joys of my young life, only mislead us about the world of the actual, and that we should not be misled. I cannot believe that they do, and have not found it to be so."

I wholeheartedly agree. When writing for children, all we need to do is respect their maturity, recognise their stage of development, and then give them the best experience we can create. De La Mare fully understood the power of nightmare, and harnessed his poet's experience to children's imaginations, to help them confront and make peace with the monsters of the night. Like myself, I felt he personally knew that nightmare world. My stories dig deep into the terrors of childhood, which I experienced as a time of powerlessness only compensated for by continuous acts of imaginative creation, through play-acting and day-dreaming [a much underrated pursuit].

As I read the book, I was more and more drawn to the image of actors as animals with human traits. De la Mare, writing about traditional fairytales, gave me the idea of Louis as a fox:

"...there is no doubt what the tellers of these old tales thought and felt about them. The animals in them, the birds, even the bees and ants, each in its own kind, act very much as humans would if they were in their skins. They are each of them given *man's* intelligence in a certain degree – his common sense, wisdom, courage and enterprise, his heart and feelings; or his stupidity, greed, guile and craft."

I wanted to write a play that captured the sombre, uncertain mood of this book, [published just before the outbreak of the Second World War], seen through the kaleidoscope of Henny Penny and her dilemma: how can we tell if a character is good or evil? And how can we introduce the ambiguities which captivate us as audience – that some characters can be both good and evil, and that good does not always triumph?

I knew from the start that this play would not be for the very young. There is a developmental stage which children reach, usually by nine years old, where they understand the difference between theatrical fantasy and fiction in a way that is not possible for, say, six year olds. Nine is also the magic age when children question the notions of good and evil as they perceive them in their

own lives, from watching real war on television to those 'little white lies' their parents might encourage: 'Tell Grandma how much you loved that dress'.

So I went and listened to children of nine years or more, who could tell me what they thought of fairy stories, and in particular, the story of Chicken Licken, which most children today are not familiar with. Looking at the Ladybird picture book version, intended for preschool children, I can see how shocking this tale might be to a very small child. My own grown-up children remembered this story as being unpleasant, because the characters we have begun to care about are all eaten by Foxy Loxy and his family. This reinforced my strong feeling that a play that has violence and death at the heart of it would not be appropriate for children under the age of nine. Because those elements were going to be essential to the power of my piece.

I also asked these children if a play about the First World War would be of interest. The answer was a unanimous yes.

The two world wars of the twentieth century have an ongoing fascination for adults as well as children, as I had already found when researching for an earlier play for Team Theatre.

'BURNING DREAMS' took its audience into the tenements and docks of 1940s Dublin, where the four main characters struggled daily with the terrible effects of poverty and despair.

Even though the history of Ireland's part in the Great War is not taught in schools, over fifty thousand Irishmen volunteered for the British Army to fight on the Western Front. The very first Victoria Cross [highest military honour for bravery] of the Great War was awarded posthumously to an Irishman – Major Maurice Dease from County Westmeath, in August 1914, less than three weeks after the commencement of hostilities.

My own grandfather, Edward Thornton Kay, volunteered with one of the 'Pals' Regiments, The South Lancashires, and was very likely to have been injured at Messines Ridge in 1917, the day the Allied mines were detonated. This was the inspiration for the back story of one of the characters in my play, along with the sense of comradeship and a belief that life in the trenches wouldn't be so bad if friendly faces from home were there to share it. This idea, that friends always act together and help each other, is also examined critically in my play.

I hope I have created characters of light and shade, humans with beastly qualities who are survivors, in their different ways; they have learned to lie, cheat and steal, and to enjoy the meat and drink of life when it comes their way, with no questions asked.

The painful memories that we try to cover with laughter and oblivion, the shame of desertion, the guilt of surviving while friends lay down their lives for us – all these give an uneasy subtext to this dark, funny, bizarre story, in a restaurant setting we can all resonate with. For who does not like to eat well, and to enjoy music and jokes, while we indulge our natural desires? Who cares about the destitution and misery in the streets outside?

Theatre Lovett is a company that dares to give its young audiences the truth about the world adults have made. That truth, they acknowledge, is not always easy. So I began to write our play with a free hand and no censorship. This is what makes a playwright's task a joy – being given free rein, our imaginations take wing. During the summer of 2013, I began to write; by the time we reached rehearsal, it was in its seventh draft.

I was unable to be present for rehearsals, but occasionally I would get a message from the battlefield:: Was it too dark? Would the target audience be able to understand it? Did we need more factual information at the top of the show? My answer is always – take it to the children and let them judge. I've always found that if you write the best play you can, with honesty, recognition and respect, your young audiences will get it.

They played to an informal preview audience a few days before it opened and were relieved to find that every nuance was picked up, every irony appreciated.

I then had the pleasure of watching the performances for a week, and about half of my time was spent watching the audience from the safety of the 'Ark' balcony. I saw when they laughed or when they were embarrassed. Did they get the message about who Henny Penny was, too soon? I hung around discreetly as they came out of the theatre to hear their comments. My sense that the age target was exactly right was backed up by the audiences' responses. I longed to ask them questions too – did they go away with a sense of unease about who was the villain of the piece? Did they see the ending coming? To go further here would be to give away some of the plot... but, as I wrote in the Theatre Festivals online blog:

What's this ancient War, that happened a hundred years ago, got to do with us? At the time it was called 'The War to End all Wars.' But a mere twenty years after that, there was another World War, and then other bitter conflicts erupted that killed thousands of innocent people and are still going on today, in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan. War is a fact of our lives; in this play, we try to show how war might be built into our very genes, making it almost impossible to give up our notions of 'enemies' and 'battles.' But our characters' experiences of loss, grief and waste is happily counterbalanced by Theatre Lovett's irrepressible humour, peerless musicianship and high spirits, which for me embody the most lovable aspects of a child's personality; embracing tragedy and comedy in the same day, and always, I hope, ending the day sunny side up.

Frances Kay is a playwright and novelist who has found Ireland an inspirational place to live and work. Since 1990 she has written children's dramas for The Ark, Team Theatre Company, RTE's 'The Morbegs', BBC TV's 'You and Me', Nutmeg Puppet Company [UK], The Bare Hands Project [Cork] and West Cork Arts Centre, amongst others.

In 2009 she directed a production of her play for teenagers about suicide, 'Last Call', which is set in Kerry, for audiences of school students in a co-production with Siamsa Tire, Tralee.

Her first play for Theatre Lovett, 'A Man in Half' was produced at the Helix, Dublin, in 2007.

Her novel for adults, 'Micka' published by Picador in 2010, was the runner up for the 2011 McKitterick Prize awarded by The Society of Authors [UK], and was featured on BBC Radio 4's 'A Good Read' programme.

Her adult novel, 'Dollywagglers', was published in 2014 by Tenebris Books.

She also writes romances under the name of Pan Zador.

In 2012 she became a reluctant exile from West Cork due to serious health issues, and now lives for much of the year in Powys, Wales. Her blog is franceskaywriter.wordpress.com



Essay Commissioned by the Arts in Education Portal, 2018

