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May 4, 2010
“Frank on Frank”**

**Frank-Lite:
How the Man who Coined the Phrase “Vacuum Vagina” Fairs in the
World of Children’s Theatre**

As a puppeteer and children’s theatre practitioner, I was particularly excited when it was announced that we would be reading Frank Gagliano’s children’s play *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimble*. Having already read a number of Frank’s plays, I had a pretty good idea of what to expect, and that is: anything! Given the existential and absurd nature of much of his work I knew I would be in for a zany and imaginative ride that would be peppered with a variety of socially relevant themes. I was not disappointed. Despite the fact that *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimble* is a children’s play, these themes are not watered down or over simplified. Far from “talking down” to his younger audience, Frank challenges them to see multiple sides of all issues and understand them on a deeper level than most children’s playwrights. In this paper I plan to discuss some of the deeper themes that Frank explores in *Madeline*

Gimple's fanciful adventures and what exactly sets them apart from "safer" children's theatre.

One of the first major themes that struck me as I read *Madeline Gimple* is the warnings on over pollution Frank displays during Madeline's trip to Litterville. Pollution is a common theme in activist children's theatre, but *Gimple* takes the discussion to a much deeper level than most children's plays do. Like most children's playwrights, Frank discusses some of the negative effects of pollution (potential illness from air pollution) and how to avoid pollution (not dropping litter on the ground,) but unlike most, Frank also discusses the underlying cultural ideology that leads to pollution. At one point the character Chris says of the organization *Impulse INC* "It's an evil society that urges everyone to buy lots of everything. More than we need. So that we'll have more litter." Pg. 17 This is the first play, either adult or children's, that actually exposes the real cause of our countries over pollution: the over indulgence of our consumer economy. Instead of simply telling children what they should do about pollution, *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimple*, makes children aware of the deeper root of the problem, something

that most adults don't learn until college, if at all. It is refreshing to read a play that challenges our beliefs about what a child can or cannot handle or understand. It is my belief that children can comprehend much more than we give them credit for, and I love that *Madeline Gimple* doesn't fall into the tradition "safe" trap found in much of modern children's theatre.

Another great theme of Frank's children's play can be seen in Madeline's journey to Balloon Land. In this world, all the people have been cursed with the disease puppetitis and thus are slowly being turned into puppets by the evil puppet master. What at first seems like a simple example of a common children's literature trope (an evil wizard wreaks havoc on an innocent village) soon is revealed to be an important statement about technology in our society. When the boy Alphonse attempts to break into the castle and confront the puppet master once and for all, he discovers that the puppet master is nothing more than a giant computer controlling other computers that control all the people. The metaphor that is revealed through this discovery is quite obvious, and I believe all children who see the play understand it as well. The giant computer is representing technology

and the current social order in our society. Just as the citizens of Balloon Land have turned into puppets of the computer, we all are now puppets to technology and big industry. Our entire lives revolve around the idea that we must have the latest computer or ipad that it runs who we are and how we think. If we were to examine this social structure more closely, we find that the true seat of power in our country does not lie with congress or the president as we expect, but with the big businesses and lobbyists who pull strings in Washington. It has gotten to the point where we don't know how our own country is run or why it has been set up in this fashion. Although the children in the audience cannot be expected to understand just how deep the Balloon Land metaphor runs, they can wrap their heads around the idea that the citizens are controlled by a force they could never have expected which may not have malicious intent, but produces malicious results. Once again Frank demonstrates his ability to teach complicated messages to children through very simple and concrete images, and not by talking down to his younger audience.

A final theme that runs throughout the entire play of *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimple* is the idea of conquering one's

fear. At the start of the play, Madeline is terrified of the Balloon Man and seeing his true face which is shrouded in mystery behind a mask. Every time Balloon Man threatens to show Madeline his face, she either runs away from him, or contemplates giving into his demands so that she doesn't have to face such horror. At the end of her odyssey, however, Madeline realizes that he is just full of hot air and is no longer frightened of what she cannot see. Once again Frank displays his mastery for demonstrating complex ideas without dumbing down or spelling out exactly what he is trying to teach. What Balloon Man's masks represents for Madeline is her fear of the unknown. Just as many children are afraid of the dark because they don't know what is lurking in it, Madeline is afraid of Balloon Man not because he himself poses a real threat, but because there *could* be something horrifying lurking behind his mask. Once Madeline realizes that Balloon Man himself poses no real threat and is nothing but "hot air" she no longer fears what is behind his mask or him. Frank is telling children not to be afraid of the unknown, as the unknown can do no harm in and of itself. Here Frank is able to communicate his theme without resorting to over used clichés such as the fear of the

dark, but instead invents his own metaphor and utilizes it with condescension or disdain for his younger audience.

There are many more themes that can be found in Frank Gagliano's one act children's play *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimple* that can be explored and analyzed apart from the obvious ones discussed in this paper. More important than the themes themselves, however, is how Frank is able to communicate them. It is all too easy for writers to fall into the trap of talking down to child audiences and treat them with condescension, especially those who generally write for adults. Lucky for the theatre world, Frank Gagliano does not fall victim to this common blunder. *The Hide and Seek Odyssey of Madeline Gimple* is just as real, heartwarming, and truthful as any of Frank's adult works. The themes are complex, yet stated simply enough for any audience member of any age to understand them and not feel babied or patronized. I once heard world renowned puppeteer Frank Oz speak where he said "I do not do some work for children and some work for adults, I simply do work. Good, high quality work." The same can be said about Frank Gagliano. Whether his audience is full of primarily children or adults,

Frank's work maintains a level of social critique and truth that truly challenges us to think about the world we live in and our impact upon it.

Even if at times we may not know what the hell it all means.