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Princes (and Princesses) of Rhode Island

by Suzanne Ramczyk



As a teacher of performance in the Theatre Arts program, I have always felt the need to keep my hand in the world of professional theatre in any way I can. Since the regular academic year allows me only brief stints as a consultant, writer of program notes, or panelist for a humanities “talk back” series, I am fortunate that sabbaticals allow a wider foray into the professional world. My sabbatical of 1992 with the American Repertory Theatre and my more recent one of 2001 with Trinity Repertory Theatre afforded rich, rewarding, and wide-ranging opportunities. I taught in the Conservatories’ MFA programs, functioned as assistant director to Alvin Epstein of the A.R.T., evaluated scripts for the

literary offices, and embarked on one of my most interesting research projects yet. Little I knew of the journey ahead when early last January, Craig Watson, the Literary Director for Trinity Rep., asked me to assist with research for their forthcoming production of Peter Parnell’s adaptation of John Irving’s best-selling novel, *The Cider House Rules*.

Oskar Eustis and his company were mounting a stage version of Irving’s epic to be presented in two parts with a huge cast and small orchestra. *The Cider House Rules* traces the life of Homer Wells, who is raised in a Maine orphanage by the irascible yet humble and dedicated Dr. Larch. Set against the sweeping saga of American history, the play is a compelling tale of self-discovery, as Homer grows from boyhood to adulthood. There was much excitement centered on this project, which would culminate in the first fully-staged, East Coast production of this play that had previously received several “readings” and one performance in Seattle. Certainly Irving’s name (*The World According to Garp*) and also that of Peter Parnell (writer for *The West Wing*) would bring much notice to this production, as would the popularity of the Academy Award-winning screen adaptation. Additionally, many issues within the piece—orphans, adoption, and reproductive rights—offered prime material around which Trinity could host media and “forum” events. My assignment was to provide the production with background material that

focused on life in New England orphanages from the turn of the 19th century through the 1950s, as well as to conduct interviews with former alumni of Rhode Island orphanages and write a major article, all to be published in *The Trinity Reporter*.

Having decided to confine my research to Rhode Island orphanages, I spent many hours in the “Rhode Island Collection” at the Providence Public Library and in the offices of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families poring over historical documents and records that seemingly had not been opened since their ledgers were filled as early as the 1880s. There were also field trips to the site of the old Rhode Island State Farm and School (now part of Rhode Island College), and even to cemeteries and burial grounds. Interviews were fascinating and, sometimes, emotionally difficult. The journey became more than an academic project, evolving into something poignant that I shall not forget. I became witness to the abandonment or the forgetting of children whose threadbare stories filled the state records. I had to recognize that the state of Rhode Island (like many others) had engaged in the ugly practice of indenturing its children. I learned that the remains of young inmates were removed from the site of Rhode Island College and that several were seemingly “lost” in the process. Only now and then did life-affirming stories cut through the mostly bleak narratives. The following is an excerpt from my article, originally published in *The Trinity Reporter* in April, 2001.

From “A SHORT HISTORY OF SOME PRINCES (AND PRINCESSES) OF RHODE ISLAND”

Over his many years of service to St. Cloud’s Orphanage, Dr. Larch (in *The Cider House Rules*) was known to fling open the door to the boys’ dormitory and shout, “Good night—you Princes of Maine, you Kings of New England!” From a contemporary perspective, such noble appellations, bestowed perhaps to foster the boys’ sense of self-worth, might seem grimly ironic in view of the diverse quality of care received in Rhode Island institutions during the period of Larch’s tenure—the late nineteenth century until the 1940s. Despite the nurturing some children may have been afforded in both the private orphanages and the Rhode

Island State Home and School for Dependent and Neglected Children, it is difficult to imagine orphans receiving any treatment that could be construed as “royal.” However, the quality of care, which was largely dependent upon who was providing the care, ranged from what we might consider appalling today, to an attempt at providing real nurturing, education, and quite often—love.

The records of the State Home, from the time of its inception in 1884 through the 1920s, provide a startling lesson in Rhode Island history. First of all, no matter the nature or the origins of their life problems, the abused, the depressed, the true orphans, and the merely poor children were all treated the same. Often, entire sibling groups were deposited in the Home, only to be placed out to different families, with no guarantee of being returned to their natural parent(s). Further, the home was a “work farm,” requiring labor of most inmates. Most shockingly, record books from the 1880s through the first two decades of the twentieth century contain a column to register the children’s “indenturing.” Many children had up to six different placements. Throughout the 1920s, the “indenturing” column was not filled in, but accurate recordings of “allowances” paid to each child clearly substantiate the continuance of this practice. Boys were placed on farms where they performed labor in the orchards, worked with livestock or cleared land, and girls were destined for household work. There were also incidents of girls as young as fourteen years of age being adopted by single men, only to be married to these same men a year or two later.

This seemingly grim picture continues. Many children were returned (often several times) for being “willful” or “stubborn;” and although incidents of abuse are only sketchily recorded, one can surmise the presence of physical and sexual abuse that may have accompanied these indentured, non-loving placements. If returned too many times for “bad” behavior, the children were transferred to the reform schools: boys to Sockanossett

and girls to Oaklawn, both in Cranston. Finally, early in the era, it seems that placement was simply a task of “pick and choose.” Conceivably, people could arrive at the orphanage, state their needs, and take whomever they wanted. Certainly there must have been some true and even loving adoptions, but these are difficult to ferret out amidst the bleaker picture.

However, this picture must be viewed in the context of the times. The lifestyle and care of the children in the State Home represented a marked improvement from that which the inmates had previously experienced in their lives. The children were rarely true orphans, usually left by indigent or single parents, and had frequently been enduring lives of almost unimaginable hardship. Often they were refugees from the State Almshouse, where they lived with all types of indigent adults, as well as the ill and the insane. The State Home provided a safe and comfortable haven for these unfortunates. An article in *The Providence Journal* in 1890 praised the Home’s comfort, noted that the cottages were scrupulously clean, cited an abundance of food, and documented plenty of toys scattered about. Additionally, the State Home reflected the then contemporary view that work afforded a solution to dependency and oppression. Further, the state required that even indentured children receive two more years of schooling, clothing, and physical care.

For a much smaller number of children in private insti-



Saint Mary’s Orphanage

tutions, life in this same period could be quite good, without the threat of indenturing. In 1929, the superintendent of The Jewish Orphanage of Rhode Island noted in his Annual Report that "...provision was made so that the boy and girl might prepare for life through social contacts, dramatics, art, music, outdoor and indoor sports, and many other activities." The children were required to work their own vegetable gardens, work that in all



likelihood was not comparable to indentured farm labor. St. Aloysius, which also required farm work of the 15,000 inmates under its care over the years, recorded the pride it took in the care provided 240 children and in the large number of sisters who taught them, sewed for them, fed them, and provided for all their physical and spiritual wants. In the 1920s, there were eight school grades, as well as instruction in carpentry, sewing, and music. In 1948, *The Providence Journal* reported that "...here 178 running, shouting, skylarking children find none of the opposition that greets so much of youth's exuberance."

One of the most successful of the "privates" is St. Mary's, still in operation today, though not as an orphanage. In 1889, the annual report noted that household work was required of the children but that great care was taken to apportion work according to the individual child's strength. The Annual Report of 1907 attested to the children's happiness, noting that "...[there is] much sorrow and regret manifested by the children when the time comes for them to leave St. Mary's, and the pleasure with which they return to visit their old friends, is sufficient proof of the happiness of their young days." The numerous subsequent reports thoroughly document this happiness; however, these reports are continually in counterpoint to the ongoing dissatisfaction with the orphanage's limited capacity.

Therein lies the shortcoming of the private institu-

tions: so few of the needy children could be admitted to share in the much-touted wholesome, happy lives. Every Annual Report published by St. Mary's attests to this discrepancy. For example, in 1909, 123 applications were made and 22 children admitted, and in 1920, 147 applied and 22 were admitted. St. Aloysius handled many more children over the years, but the great majority of indigent or needy children in Rhode Island went to the State Home. Further, all institutions shared a common deficiency. The histories of the private, as well as the public institutions, are replete with the ongoing "hue and cry" for the need for more resources of all kinds: monetary, physical, educational, and professional. Thus, the presence in Rhode Island of any of Dr. Larch's "royalty," may have been dependent on the resources available at any particular time. Further, although the degree of royalty achieved by some of the inmates in the institutions may have been higher in the "privates," Dr. Larch would surely have been able to find "princes," and even "kings," in both types of institution, when taking into account the lives so many of the children had left behind.

—Suzanne Ramczyk is Professor of Communication Studies and Theatre Arts