



David Kemp

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## RE-LIVING A CHILD'S WORLD

by Vijay N. Shankar

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**D**arkness on the stage opens slowly like a flower into light and you find a big man sitting relaxed on a sofa. With casual movements, he picks up pieces of paper from a table, takes a drink of water, and starts reading to the audience. There are poems, fiction excerpts and fairy tales about children and his clipped voice takes hold of you. Suddenly you are with a child playing with his dog, or listening to a child whose father couldn't buy him a Christmas present, or hearing a father whose child died on a cold mountain. The experience of childhood and the experience of growing up comes through as David Kemp reads the extracts he has chosen and arranged himself. It is a 70-minute journey into a world we have forgotten or only vaguely remember and not for a moment does Kemp's insistent, at times dramatically flexed voice let you get away from his theme of 'A Child Grows Up'.

Onstage in New Delhi recently with his performance of 'A Child Grows Up,' David Kemp brought an introspective and a bittersweet experience to his audience. The simplicity of what he was doing was also the strength of his performance—it prepared you to follow him unhesitatingly into a child's world in a mood of seeking again the identity and the experience you have lost.

"The essence of it is the sense of being read to," said David Kemp in an interview later. "Everyone has had a childhood that he can identify with and being read to by someone does produce a feeling of innocence and dependence. That is perhaps why it is so effective. For me of course, it is a very personal piece of theatre. And I am always conscious of the fact that

It's my show...I collected it, I directed it and now I perform it. If it doesn't work, it's my fault and that's a challenge I have to live with," said the robust, bearded actor and drama teacher who while on a year's sabbatical from his university has taken his show around the world. "It's inexpensive to perform as all I need is a comfortable looking chair on the stage," he said, "and use a backdrop prop which can be anything at all that is easy to find. In Delhi, for instance, we cut a big branch from what you call a "neem" tree and put that on the stage. But I don't need very much. And my wife, Elisabeth handles the lighting."

Kemp first performed 'A Child Grows Up' about ten years ago when he was teaching at Exeter in South-West England. He also performed the work in Kingston, Ontario in 1967 and has revised it considerably since then. "I keep changing it all the time," said Kemp, "and try to vary the emotional range as much as I can. I choose extracts that are really strong I don't want this to be merely cute or sentimental." The collection of extracts includes prose and poetry from the works of about two dozen authors. The presentation begins with the pessimistic thoughts of an unborn child in "Prayer Before Birth" by Louis McNeice (it is read out by Kemp when the stage is totally dark) and ends with the promise of universal love through the sacrifice of the Holy Child in Oscar Wilde's, "The Selfish Giant." And in between appear extracts from Ben Jonson, Ogden Nash, Charles Dickens and Dylan Thomas.

Yes, the show has taken a great deal of skill that one cannot

gauge from the simplicity of the presentation. And also Kemp's own intense involvement in children's creative drama and live theatre. He is Professor of Drama at Queens and McMaster Universities, Ontario, and said that his main interest is to teach those who teach drama at primary and secondary schools. In fact, while in New Delhi, he led a workshop for teachers at the St. Thomas School and was very interested in what he had to learn about children's theatre in India. "We have very superior attitudes about drama for children," he said, "and normally we feel that such drama has to be brought down to a certain level. But that's all wrong. Children's drama must have its own logic, its own vitality. In Canada we have what we call creative children's drama where there is no script and the children are encouraged to create their own performance. They are given a theme and then left to produce a dramatic performance from their own imagination and experience."

With his involvement in children's drama, as with his show, 'A Child Grows Up', David Kemp has endeavoured to return into the wondrous fleeting world of childhood. He feels that it is tragic that once we grow to adulthood, we are emotionally and intellectually completely cut off from the childhood perspectives and experiences that were the starting point for our present consciousness. "No, you cannot go back to anything, not back to childhood," he said, "but it is good to make a trip there sometimes because that helps you understand your own realities better."