



# A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Children danced for us in Singapore — they practiced long hours, wore elaborate costumes and make-up, and took their participation seriously. When the music played, they danced beautifully. When the music stopped, they beamed with pride.

We knew there would be questions about the appropriateness of this performance; but we decided that since this was part of life in Singapore, the performance of children would be an appropriate way for culture to be shared with participants at World Forum 2000.

My colleague and friend Kirsten Haugen (who wrote for the *Beginnings Workshop on Creative Dramatics* in the September issue) and I have been having a cyber-conversation about all of this since our time together in Singapore. Is it appropriate for children to perform? What do they get out of it? Is there one answer or several to these questions?

Kirsten has been observing the effects of different cultural expectations on her sons during their recent sojourn in Indonesia and shared some of her personal reflections from outside a culture, looking in:

“I really have fewer answers now than I’ve ever had. A striking thing here is how much art in this part of the world seems to be so focused on reproducing rather than creating — partly because of tradition, and partly because of tourism. The same could be said for performing arts, which typically focus on the retelling of traditional stories, using traditional costumes and puppets of incredible detail and beauty. The cultural implications are immense and, by necessity, reach down to impact early learning experiences, teaching children the essential skills and codes, allowing them opportunities to practice and perform. I still believe kids should not be pressured into being mini-adults, but the balancing act is more nuanced than I would previously allow myself to see.”

Perhaps the key is in these words, “. . . than I would previously allow myself to see.” When we allow ourselves to just be *in* another culture (this can be in another culture in our hometown as well as another culture across the globe) and to ask *why* rather than making judgments, we quickly discover that many choices may be good ones. The important issue seems to be that when we work with young children we ask ourselves *why* as well. When we have asked good questions, sought the advice of others, and reflected thoughtfully on our practices, then whatever choices we make are likely to be to the benefit of the children in our care.

*Our six-year-old class was getting ready to act out a story, but Ginny, my teaching partner, and I needed a wicked king. Who could that be? Why not Erik? Perfect! We plunked a crown on his smiling head and from that moment the wicked king issued his decrees from his wheelchair (now throne). I don't know if years later Erik remembers that moment, but during our time together he often talked about his powerful reign. And we thanked the serendipity that prompted us to make him king.* 