

## **Empowering Children through Drama: The Dramatist's Perspective**

**R. Rex Stephenson**

Professor Emeritus of Drama, Ferrum College

Most people involved in children's theatre would agree that children have a natural desire to perform. I believe that giving children something worthwhile to perform is the first and most important consideration. The late Nellie McCaslin noted that television created generations of spectators and the best way to counteract that is to take children out of the audience and put them in a play that allows young people to interpret a literary classic or folktale. She wrote that "a good play... should stimulate thought in both performers and audience" (*Creative Drama in the Classroom and Beyond*, 2006). Since 1975 I have been adapting Appalachian folktales (as well as classic children's books), directing performances, and performing with actors of all ages, in creative drama workshops for children, touring productions with college-age performers, and summer enrichment camp courses for middle school children.

In the folktale adaptations we use Appalachian folklore from a Virginia WPA collection. Ironically, although we have performed in many Appalachian schools, originally I encountered resistance from teachers and principals who didn't want "hillbilly" stories in schools, until a Richmond news headline and our school visits convinced them that "Simple Jack Tales Educate." When performing for children, we often bring audience members on stage—to take the part of animals in "Jack and the Robbers," for instance. With examples from several Appalachian tales I adapted, I will discuss my experience leading young actors through a collaborative creative process from story to drama, to produce a performance to share with others.