

In the World of Magic

by LEONARD TUSHNET

I got the idea from an advertisement: "To reach the Magic Kingdom, call your travel agent." That didn't mean *our* Magic Kingdom; it meant that travesty of it known as Disney World. But the slogan started me thinking.

I was a local recruiter. Recruiting is practically nil these past hundred years. The United States was never a good source at its best, but still we got adult believers here and there over the years, mainly from lunatic asylums. No more. Patients are either on drugs or having various forms of psychosurgery "to straighten out their thinking." We used to get some changelings, too, but nowadays babies are born in hospitals, and those few that aren't are always under the eyes of their kinfolk. The kids don't read fairy tales any more; they watch TV. When it comes to zero population growth,

we're it. We're minus population growth here in the States. And it's no better in the rest of the world.

How bad conditions were we heard at the international meeting last Hallowe'en. The Chief Grem-lin, despite the glowing report he gave on how effective gremlins were in the developing computer technology, had to admit, nevertheless, that the fouling of things up was being attributed to what the engineers called Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will." That law substituted science for faith, with the result that many gremlins had disappeared through sheer desuetude.

The situation was worse elsewhere. Fungicides and weed killers had eliminated the fairy rings in England. The Irish hadn't seen a leprechaun since the establishment of the republic. In Scandinavia the trolls languished under the bridges because even in the country

districts motor vehicles had done away with pedestrian traffic. In the Soviet Union, Krylov's fables, taught as classic literature, turned off in boredom the generations coming up. German kobolds were displaced by industrial mining. Djinn's passed away with the advent of the pan-Arab nationalism that aped the worst features of Western culture. Brownies had disappeared in the face of labor-saving household devices. In Iran the Shah's new schools taught that peris were superstitions of the ignorant, unworthy of the educated. Hobgoblins were driven away as swamps and marshlands were drained.

We had hoped that LSD and the rising interest in the occult would be of help to us. We were wrong. The LSD users were self-centered, so intent on expanding their minds that they never thought of us. And those occultists who didn't get lost in yoga foundered in satanism, astrology, and I-Ching cards or started their own pseudomythology to attract followers to support them in luxury.

We had nothing to lose and much to gain by trying a novel mode of recruitment. If we couldn't lick so-called progress, we had to bend its methods to our use. I communicated my proposal to Queen Mab, the Zhar Ptitsa, and Morgan le Fay. I got the go-head.

I went about my task systematically. I picked out a store in a low-rent district near a housing project where there were plenty of children. I put in a lot of travel folders describing the wonders of Never-Never Land, Oz, and the Other World. I hung colorful posters of Cinderella's Ball, Rumpelstiltskin and the Miller's Daughter, and the Sleeping Beauty. On the windows I put up big signs: *Send your Kids to the Magic World! An Unusual Experience Every Child Should Have! Special Reduced Rates!*

Of course the rates were cheap. As a matter of fact, I didn't have to charge anything at all. But if the trip were free, no one would have gone. Parents would have thought there was a catch in it somewhere. People, especially poor people, are very suspicious.

Inquiries came immediately. "What airline do you use? ... Do the kids stay in cabins or tents?...Is there a pool? ...How much do the hidden extras come to?...Do you have adequate medical supervision?"

I gave the mamas and papas the travel folders and described the wonders of the trip. "The children take the Magic Carpet from our own private airport. No worry about getting to Kennedy or La Guardia, and no expense. A bus picks the children up right here and

takes them to the airport. They stay at Bluebeard's Castle. The service is out of this world, under the expert direction of Miss Mary Poppins. The children can splash in the Fountain of Youth or ride on dolphins if they like water. Meals are included in the cost of the package. The kids'll love the fabulous desserts: blackbird pie, Christmas plum pie, and the special Billy Boy's cherry pies. They'll have a grand time with the Three Bears, the Three Little Pigs, and Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, not to mention other characters. There's a marvelous zoo with animals right out of Dr. Doolittle and Dr. Seuss..."

Some of the parents were hesitant. They asked about the qualifications of the counselors. I resolved their doubts by having them interview a few girls from Titania's court in their tutus; the mothers loved the idea of their darlings getting ballet lessons at no extra charge. The fathers were pleased on seeing those Captain Hook's pirates I had for the boys.

Thirty-three, the full quota, signed up. We left on Midsummer Eve. The boys and girls, carrying their suitcases, lined up to get on the Parnassus bus. Most of them were giggly; a few had tears in their eyes when they kissed their parents good-by. The air was full of last-minute advice. "Don't forget

what I told you about washing behind your ears!...Remember it's not nice to pick your nose in public!...Make sure you flush the toilet when you go!...Bring daddy back a little souvenir!...If you go on a hike, put on shoes, not sneakers!...Drink all your milk!...Don't use up all your spending money the first day!...Call us up collect if you get homesick. The counselor will tell you how...Have a good time, sweetie!...Good-by, honey, good-by!...Good-by, good-by!"

The kids chattered and sang songs in the bus. I sat next to the driver, where I could keep an eye on him. He was Phaeton, the only one available who could handle a vehicle. He was a show-off; so every time he started to speed up or get careless with the white lines, I pointed to the sun, still not setting, it being daylight-saving time.

Twilight lowered over our stopping place at Sleepy Hollow. That's when I should have called the whole thing off. The children got out of the bus and looked around. I tried to herd them onto the Magic Carpet, but they balked. "Where's the airplane?...I thought we were going on a 747!... Where's the control tower?...Where are the other planes?...I'm not going on no propeller job! My father paid for a jet!" I made all sorts of excuses, cajoled them, and finally got them

seated on the Magic Carpet.

It rose quickly, and in the twinkling of an eye we were in Fairyland. I expected them to be amazed at the speed of our travel, but all I heard was grumbling. "Too fast. I couldn't see anything... No seat belts or nothing...I didn't have a chance to see how the toilet works...We didn't get anything to eat on the ride."

Do you think they ooh-ed and ah-ed at their first sight of Fairyland? Not on your life! The hazy golden sunlight, the terraced gardens, the vivid flowers, the castles and the turrets, the fairies themselves, floating over their heads, fluttering their iridescent wings — nothing impressed them. "What is this? A movie set?... Where are the rides?" And above all, "When do we eat?"

My carefully prepared reception fell flat. So did Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, bowled over by the rush of kids to the picnic tables set up in the outer courtyard. For a moment I toyed with the idea of calling the Old Shoe Woman, but only for a moment. I realized that the children had to get acclimatized, so to speak. After all, the purpose of our having them was to propagandize them, to show them the wonders of imagination, to awaken them to the glories of fantasy, to have them believe in us. Otherwise, they would grow up

hard-headed pragmatists, and would wither away in the gloom of skepticism and modern "relevant" pedagogy.

I admit my patience was sorely tried. They complained about the ambrosia and nectar we served them. "No soda pop?...No hamburgers?...No hot dogs?...No ice cream?" The evening's entertainment board them. They hissed Ariel and applauded Caliban at the wrong times. They groaned at the March of the Wooden Soldiers and at the Nutcracker. I was glad at last when the Sandman came around.

"Maybe they were overtired and nervous from the trip," said the Fairy with the Blue Hair. "What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"A general tour," I answered. "Down the Rabbit Hole, through the Looking Glass, Ali Baba's Cave, the Gingerbread House."

The Fairy with the Blue Hair nodded. "That should be fun for them. And at the end let them play with the Cloak of Invisibility. That'll be even more fun."

Tastes in fun have changed. The children liked the thrill of falling down the Rabbit Hole but refused to walk through the tunnels. "Where are the cars?" they asked. They sneered at the chess pieces and trampled on the rose garden. They overturned and broke the jars in the Cave. At the Gingerbread House they said the

shingles were too spicy, the peppermint columns too sweet, and the rock-sugar windows too hard to eat. The first boy to put on the Cloak of Invisibility began to lift the girls' skirts. The girls squealed and tittered. I had quite a time getting it off him. Day Two was a flop. Every minute I was plagued with "Where are the rides?...Don't we go swimming?...Where are the cowboys and Indians?...Where's Donald Duck?...Where's Mickey Mouse?...And Superman."

I was flexible. If they wanted rides, I'd give them rides. The third day we divided them into four rotating groups; one each for the Enchanted Swans, the Storks, Pegasus, and the Cockhorse. I didn't see them until evening. "How did you like the rides?" I asked them.

"Big deal! Coney Island's got better!...No Ferris wheel!...No merry-go-round!...No crack-the-whip!...Dumb birds just flying all around and going nowhere!...And the ones on the lake! They were for the birds, ha-ha!...That stupid horse went flying instead of galloping like he should!" No one got to Banbury Cross because no one mounted the Cockhorse. "That's for babies!"

Next day was for water sports, the prospect of which delighted the children. We went to Swan Lake. They watched Undine for a while

before they began using her as a target for pebbles they picked up. They paid no attention to the Water Babies. I overheard one girl saying to another, "So what if they're living underwater? They're little babies, and you know what they showed us in sex education class — all little babies live in a big water bubble inside of their mothers' bellies before they get borned." They firmly objected to going into the water nude. "My mother told me never, never, never to let anybody see me...My father warned me about people who fool around little boys...Boys and girls can't be naked together! That's dirty!" I gave in. The boys wore wee, wee trunks and the girls even tinier bikinis. They were wild in the water, scaring the Kraken and pulling the mermaids' hair. They seemed to be having a good time, but I still heard complaints. "No sand. How can we build if there's no sand?...I'm laying here two hours already and my skin's the same. My mother'll whale me if I come home without a tan...They don't have any big water toys...Or plastic beach balls...Or waves for jumping."

Meals were a constant headache. The kids drank the Purple Cow's milk readily enough, but they turned up their noses at the other varieties of food provided. They ate grudgingly of the pickled

peppers, the gentlemen's eggs, and the curds and whey. They clamored for what we didn't have: potato chips, fudgicles, and cokes.

I had planned that the fifth day was to be unorganized. The children could wander around freely and do what they wanted. Always a fairy or two would be at their sides to tell them stories or play hide-and-seek or other games with them. After breakfast (of Captain Jenks's pork and beans, which they wolfed down with appetite, more so than with the Mama Bear's porridge which they had had up to now), when I told the children they had a free day, a babble broke out.

"Where's the TV? If there's nothing to do, I want to see cartoons...That's not fair! My mommy and daddy are paying for me to have a good time, and you're supposed to provide entertainment!...I want to buy things. Where's the five-and-ten?" Some children started weeping. The thought of a day on their own frightened them. They were accustomed to being directed. A few boys came to me asking for bats and balls. Several girls grabbed a fairy and tried to pull off her gauzy wings. I sensed the spreading hysteria and announced a quick change of plan. During the early part of the day the elves would take the boys for a hike in the woods and

the pixies would teach the girls twirling. Loud applause. In the afternoon, we'd have a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Groans. In the evening we'd have fireworks, with an extraordinary demonstration of fire-eating by Loki. Cheers. Only a couple of voices called out, "Don't we ever get to see any movies?"

It was a wonderful day. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself and herself. Only two incidents. One of the boys snatched Aladdin's Lamp and dented it by kicking it around. A girl amused herself by catching will-o'-the-wisps in a bottle.

Everyone (on the staff, that is) congratulated me. They were eager to see what the next day would bring, when the boys and girls would be given a brief span of time to use magical powers. Once they'd have such an experience, they'd never forget it. We had high hopes.

Alas! All went awry. The depravity of those children cannot be imagined. The weavers of dreams wove tales of violence, blood, and murder so horrendous that even Jack's Giant shuddered. The painters of illusion painted pornography, puerile of course because they were only children, but pornography nevertheless. The jumpers and climbers and levitators pelted those on the ground with coconuts and breadfruit. The

growers grew monstrous hybrids. The theranthropes fought each other with fang and claw. Despite the lecture before the powers were endowed, pointing out that magic should by preference be beneficent and, if not that, at least mirth-provoking, never malicious, the children used their powers to torment others as no witch would dare to.

The witch situation caused the most trouble. As soon as the first one appeared, all the kids wanted to become witches. The first one was a clever girl. She taught the others the abracadabra, and — behold! — the sky was full of witches riding brooms. They looped-the-loop, they tried to topple each other, they yanked at cloaks, they knocked off peaked hats. I had to call for help from Grimalkin. The deveil-cats sprang into the air. Each seized a witch and spat at her, transforming her back into a little child with amnesia for the charm.

The Fairy Godmother laughed at my long face that night. "Don't worry," she said. "Those kids have learned a lot in the past six days. We'll all be as real to them from now on as their playmates."

"I hope so," I said. "I hope so."

The last morning we had Momus and Comus tell stories. Very unsuccessful. Lots of yawning during the first story. The second

was interrupted by a little boy who got up and said, "That's all garbage. I can tell a better story." He could, judging from the applause when he finished an involved tale about the battle between the Mafia and a gang trying to muscle in on the drug traffic. I called off the storytelling.

After lunch we had a treasure hunt. We arranged for everyone to find something of value: for the girls tiny glass slippers, a gold ring, a silken scarf, or a cameo brooch; for the boys a little silver hammer, a jewel-encrusted spinning top, fancy leather gloves, or an opalescent hoop. The kids had a ball. No trouble, no complaints at all. Their eyes glowed as they carefully stowed away their finds in their pockets and purses. Then came the final game — following the rainbow. They ran and they leaped through the fields of daffodils and tulips, over hill and dale, until they reached the pot of gold. I watched benignly at first while they tried to empty its inexhaustible store of gold pieces. Then I got worried. They were throwing away their precious gifts for the worthless gold. I called out to them, "Children, that's only fairy gold!" but they paid no attention to me. They kept on scrambling for the gold. All except two, a girl and a boy. The boy, brown-haired and dark-skinned, stood dreamily

fingering his silver hammer. The girl, whose dull expression had set her apart from the others at the beginning, fuddled with the gold ring on her finger; her eyes were starry as she mumbled.

Time was up. The children, so laden with the gold pieces they could hardly walk, staggered off to where their suitcases were already waiting on the Magic Carpet. The Sandman came. We started off and in a twinkling of an eye were at the Hayden Planetarium. There I harnessed a comet, and we rode back on its tail to the travel agency office, arriving there just at dawn and just before the first parents arrived. I told the children to wait on the sidewalk and went inside. I locked the door and pulled down the window shades. I left the transom open and perched there invisibly so that I could see and hear what the children would tell their parents.

I shouldn't have. The parents scolded the kids for bringing back so many dried leaves in their pockets. ("I told them it was fairy gold!" I whispered.) The children shrieked at their parents for sending them "to such a dumb place. A lot of actors and actresses all dressed up like clowns and no space rockets and no submarines and no real airplanes, not even a helicopter!" My heart sank. "...The food was awful, Mama! Can I have

spaghetti for lunch?... They kept showing us magic tricks like in assembly in school until we got tired of them...No death ray guns...No Western acts. No rodeos...No horseback rides like they promised...I'm so hungry! Will you make me a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich when we get home, please, Mommy?...We didn't have ice cream once, not even snowballs!...When we went on a hike, I was frightened by all the wild animals roaming around, even a big wolf with terrible sharp teeth!...Bending sticks instead of batons like the high-school girls have!...A fake treasure hunt!...Can I have a chocolate malted on the way home, Daddy?" And very softly in their parents' ears, "Girls wearing only short slips you could see right through!...Boys with such tight body suits I had to blush!"

The papas consoled their disappointed daughters; the mothers gathered their frustrated boys to their bosoms. "I'm going to call Bess Meyerson," one woman said. "I paid out good money to that crook!" Another cried out, "The Action Reporter on Channel 5! He'll do something fast." A man growled, "The kids thought they'd get a real kick out of this trip, but it was like everything else — hokum." And his neighbor, hugging his son and daughter to him, muttered, "A guy that'd take advantage of little

kids like that ought to be lynched!"

Only the boy with the silver hammer and the girl with the gold ring seemed happy. The girl, her mouth drooling as she sang a nonsense song, walked home hand in hand with her mother, who wept all the way down the block. The boy stumbled after his father, who looked despairingly at him when he failed to answer his questions, being lost in his thoughts.

When I got back I took a look

into Merlin's Mirror of the Future. The little girl was a young woman rocking in a chair in an institution, smiling vacantly into the distance. Only when she fingered the gold ring hung like a locket on a piece of string around her neck, did stars appear in her eyes. The little boy was a poet breaking his heart strings for the unlistening ears of a workaday world.

I resigned as recruiter.