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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Bush, Max. *The Boy Who Left Home to Find Out About the Shivers*. Anchorage Press, 1999. 0-87602-72-3. 63 pp.

A- 5-8 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This interesting tale, based on the Brothers Grimm legend, tells of a young man who doesn't know who he is, where he is from, or how to get the Shivers. After an unfortunate experience with a Sexton, who tries to be a ghost, his Father sends him away to "get some sense." He finds a haunted castle, where the king promises him riches and the princess if he will rid the building of ghosts by staying in the castle for three nights. During the course of those three nights he meets two destructive cats and a dog, a corpse that would rather strangle him than play nine pins, and finally has a contest with the chief ghost, winning with his brain rather than with his brawn. At the end, all the promised prizes are his, and he is able to shiver.

Bush has told the tale well, providing characters that are interesting to watch. They are not round characters—none of the characters has a name and we have only limited information about each—but the story is strong and the incidents inventive. Cast requires 8 M, 6 W, and 3 either, but all roles can be played by 7 with doubling. There are some special set and prop requirements, but these can be handled with some invention. Recommended for professional companies or experienced amateur groups.



Dorn, Patrick Rainville. *The Gingerbread Man*. I.E. Clark, 1999. 0-88680-462-0. 31 pp.

B+ K-5 Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

Sally is a city girl staying on her aunt and uncle's farm while her parents are on vacation in Hawaii. Bored and unhappy, Sally does not like life on the farm. In an effort to cheer her up, her aunt makes her a gingerbread cookie. The gingerbread man, however, has ideas of his own as he leaps out of the oven and takes Sally on an adventure to see the traveling players performing in town. Along the way the two meet a karate kicking donkey with a confused vocabulary, a skunk who designs rare fragrances, and a sly fox who almost succeeds in eating the gingerbread man. When they finally reach town they are treated to a hilarious version of Aesop's *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*. In the end, Sally decides she belongs with her family instead of on the road to adventure with the gingerbread man.

This amusing show is full of silly characters and plenty of comedy. Young audiences will enjoy the high-energy chase scenes and narrow escapes throughout the play. A valuable lesson is also taught about realizing where one truly belongs. The cast is extremely flexible, and may be played by as many as 11 with extras or as few as 5 for a touring ensemble. The play may be staged with the 4 locations suggested with simple cutouts, props, or furniture. In addition, the play book contains creative and helpful suggestions for touring to nontraditional performance spaces.



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Glore, John and Silversher, Michael. *Rhubarb Jam*. I.E. Clark, 1999. 0-88680-551-1. 30 pp.

A 3+ Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

Beatrice and Benedick have a misunderstanding, and before they know it they are standing on the threshold of WW4. Beatrice eats Benedick's rhubarb jam scrumpkin. Furious, Benedick hurls the worst insult he can think of and calls Beatrice a stupid Imbroglion. Both children report the incident to their parents, who immediately seize upon the situation and blow it out of proportion. The initial story is enlarged upon until it is no longer recognizable. Soon the leaders of both countries square off and choose allies in what promises to be a huge conflict. Into the middle of all this fury step Benedick and Beatrice. By playing the game "Whyonaccountbecause," they manage to get everyone back to the initial misunderstanding of the pilfered scrumpkin. Everyone agrees that, though very tasty, a scrumpkin is not a good reason to fight a war; so they restore peace and friendship.

This fun and engaging musical shows young people the importance of avoiding or defusing conflicts before they get out of control. Woven into the plot are issues of racism, gangs, and solving problems without using violence. Subtle subtexts throughout the play support these themes on a variety of levels. The play contains enough delightful music and comedy (at times farcical) to keep it from becoming too heavy or didactic.

The play may be staged with as little as one bench and two chairs. The cast consists of 15; however, because the play was designed for touring, four actors (2 M, 2 W) can play all the roles. This is a musical, so the actors should be able to sing. A piano/vocal score and tape of the music are available from the publisher. The script contains helpful production notes for props and suggestions for costuming and makeup.



Jones, Brie. *Improve With Improv! A Guide to Improvisation and Character Development*. Meriwether Publishing Ltd., 1998. ISBN 0-916260-98-4. \$12.95. 135 pp.

A 7+ Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

This excellent resource book for teachers wishing to instruct their students in the art of improvisation is broken into 20 class-length workshops that progressively address various aspects of improvisation. Each chapter contains the lecture notes, assignment, improvisational exercises, and assessment for that lesson, as well as a preview of the next chapter. Jones stresses that the ideas and activities presented in the book should be used as a springboard for further invention, not as an outline that requires rigid conformity. After working through all the sessions, students are provided with an opportunity to produce an ensemble improvisation. An outline for this improv, entitled "The Remarriage of Dee Dee and Duke," is included at the end of the book. Also included are a sample of a class syllabus and the guidelines that should be observed during each session. Sample handouts are also provided to assist in the student's development of character.

This book is a carefully structured approach to teaching improvisation. The information provides enough detail for the beginning instructor, but gives enough freedom for the veteran teacher to expand the boundaries. This book can also serve as a good resource for actors or directors wishing to hone a specific performance skill.



Kelly, Tim and Fancoeur, Bill. *Wagon Wheels West*. Pioneer Drama Service, 1992. 61 pp.

B 1-5 Reviewed by Robbie Stevens

In *Wagon Wheels West* the citizens and wagon master outsmart "The Snake" and his band of outlaws. Chuck Wagon's wagon train has

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broken down just outside the town of Vinegar Bottle. While waiting for the wheels to be repaired, Chuck is taken in by Sue Flay, the Snake's partner in crime. Sue Flay manages to frame Chuck and convince the Judge to believe he is Snake. In the meantime, the rest of the wagon train are trying to find out who the real bandits are. Candy Kane is kidnapped by the gang of bandits, Wild Bill Hiccup is jailed in place of Chuck, Juanita Fandango—a famous stage singer—is poisoned, and a woman is elected mayor when Smiling Slade Claggett drops out of the race. In the end, good conquers evil in an Old West style shootout, which occurs with the house lights darkened. The gang of bandits and their leader, Snake, are imprisoned, and the wagon train moves on once again.

The original music and lyrics of this melodramatic musical move the play along. This would be good for beginning actors; however, each actor must be able to carry a tune and feel comfortable singing in front of an audience. The action is simple and leans more towards a melodrama than a serious or comedic play. There are ten male roles and nineteen female roles. Extra citizens may be added to enlarge the cast. Specific attention should be paid to the scenes with gunfire in them. Production notes specify the house lights being turned off and taped gunfire being played to produce laughter at the silliness of the amount of fire power they would have used. These scenes can be the most comic of the play.



Kuester, David Allan. *A Holiday Dream*. I.E. Clark, 1999. ISBN 0-88680-550-3. 20 pp.

B K-4 **Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell**

While Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by three spirits on Christmas Eve, Tim is has a dream of his own. Tim is a shy young man with low self-esteem. Because he has no friends, he spends all his time lost in his favorite fairytales. The holiday pixie, Peter, decides that something must be done.

On Christmas Eve, Peter rouses Tim for a magical journey, on which he rescues Hansel and Gretel from the witch, Little Red Riding Hood from the Big Bad Wolf, and Jack from the giant. Peter enlists the help of the audience by having them chant the magical word "courage" each time he rings a little bell. Thus fortified, Tim goes from story to story rescuing his favorite characters from their terrible circumstances. Tim has one of the wildest nights of his life, but in the end he learns that the world is not such a scary place if you don't let it be. All you need is self-confidence and a good dose of courage.

This engaging play will appeal to younger audiences. They will enjoy watching Tim rescue some of their own favorite storybook characters and delight in helping him by chanting the magical word "courage." The cast consists of 12 (5 M, 7 W), but some of the parts may be double or triple cast to facilitate a much smaller cast size. Traditional fairytale costumes are appropriate, and any scenery should suggest storybook illustrations. The only reality in this play is Tim's bedroom.



McC Campbell, Bryan. *Running Upstream*. Eldridge, 1997. 28 pp.

A 7-12 **Reviewed by Emily Van Camp**

"He moves a little slower, talks a little different. But that's all. All you have to do is look in his eyes and you can see the wheels turning a million miles a minute. Problem is, not too many people take the time to look for his eyes, past his arms and legs. Sometimes even me."

Danny Osgood expresses one of the problems facing his younger brother, David, a physically handicapped teenage boy attending public high school. When Danny attempts to enter one of David's poems in the school publication anonymously, his plan backfires, and Danny is given credit for the poem. Through this simple error, the student body and even Danny are forced

to look beyond David's handicaps to the person he is inside.

Running Upstream takes an honest, realistic look into the life of a not-so-average young man. McCampbell's characters are recognizable and easy to relate to. The real power in the use of language and circumstance will help audiences identify with, and hopefully better understand, those who may not be just the same as we are.

The cast calls for three females and three males. Set designs are simple. This play is very accessible to its intended audience.



Morris, Vera. *Legend of Pocahontas*. Pioneer Drama Service, 1995. 38 pp.

B+ K-5 **Reviewed by Robbie Stephens**

Almost every American is familiar with the story of Pocahontas. This play draws from the legends we have heard. Pocahontas is about ten years old during this play. She is a prankster who is great friends with Captain Smith and the Pilgrims. Her father, Chief Powhatan, does not like the Pilgrims, and has left them to their own devices during the winter. Pocahontas continually tries to persuade Chief Powhatan to give the Pilgrims some food. During the play, we are introduced to more of Pocahontas' friends, including various forest creatures and the Spirit of Mother Earth. Matters come to a head when Captain Smith is away and one of the citizens of Jamestown decides to capture Pocahontas and hold her for ransom. When this news gets back to Powhatan, he declares war on the settlers, stating his warriors will attack at dusk. Captain Smith finds out about the kidnapping and releases Pocahontas. Together they return to her village to persuade the chief not to attack. During the ensuing action, Pocahontas saves Captain Smith's life. Because of the law of the Algonquin's, Pocahontas and Captain Smith are now brother and sister. As such, her tribe and the city of Jamestown restore peace, and Chief Powhatan helps the settlers.

This play keeps the dignity of both the settlers and the Indians, but does show the medicine man in a slightly menacing way. The Legend of Pocahontas requires eleven female and seven male parts, with three animals that could be played by either. The cast could be enlarged by using extra Indians, settlers, or forest spirits. It could also be reduced in size by having the Wordspinner and Mother Earth played by the same actor and doubling some other roles. Scenic and costume requirements could be minimal.



Riosley, Lane. *Pecos Bill's Wild West Show*. Encore Performance, 1990. 22 pp.

B K-2 **Reviewed by Robbie Stephens**

This play is flashy and loud, with little substance. The characters are not deep and appear to have no real feelings—they are folklore characters, played for humor. The play is set in the present time, with Pecos Bill's show from the past. The characters, thinking they are still in the past, cannot understand why there are no horses out back or wagon trains in the distance. Pecos Bill recounts his history—how he was found on the prairie, got his name and horse, saved the longhorns, and almost married. These are just a few of his tall tales. His stories are acted out by a cast of 2 other males, 2 females, and several puppets. Three extras could also be incorporated.

Pecos Bill's Wild West Show would be useful for those studying tall tales or folklore. It would help to bring the stories alive for them.



Hamill, Tony, ed. *CLASS ACTS: Six Plays for Children*. Playwrights Canada, 1992. ISBN 0-88754-487-8. 376 pp.

A Various **Reviewed by John D. Newman**

Canadians probably know much more about children's theatre in the United States than

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Americans know about Canadian children's theatre. This volume of six children's plays, from Playwrights Canada Press, may go a long way in reversing that one-sidedness.

The plays in this collection were originally produced by Canadian Children's theatres in such places as Toronto, Ontario, Vancouver, and Regina. The plays represent a wide variety of styles and approaches, from the innovative adaptation of *The Secret Garden* to the absurdist piece *Beware the Quickly Who*. The collection features several plays aimed at younger children, including *Mandy and the Magus*, *The Copetown City Kite Crisis*, and *My Best Friend is Twelve Feet High*. It also includes an engaging ensemble-created piece, *Love and Work Enough*, which is better suited to more mature audiences.

Each play is prefaced with a brief biography of the author and a brief history of the play's development, which provide the reader with a glimpse of children's theatre in Canada. Brief passages supplemented by a preface could put the plays and playwrights in context, and would provide an introduction to the Canadian children's theatre profession to readers beyond the country's borders. The plays in this collection were originally produced between 1972 and 1991; perhaps the Playwrights Canada Press will produce a similar collection of Canadian children's plays that were created during the 1990s.

Editor's note: Playwrights Canada Press is publishing a series of play collections from different authors that represent the 1990s. But I agree that a larger anthology with a representative collection from across Canada and the Theatre for Young Audiences spectrum would be a valuable addition to the literature. HRO.

A review of each play follows:

Bolt, Carol. *My Best Friend is Twelve Feet High*.

B+ K-3

This play revolves around five children who wrestle for control of their club and pursue several adventures through creative play. Much of the conflict among the children revolves around whether Alice, the youngest child, can be accepted as a full member of the group. Relegated to the role of "Mope the Dog," she soon discovers the dramatic possibilities of her supposedly subordinate character.

Creative play is naturally dramatic, and the basis of many published scripts. These scripts succeed best when the creative play of the children rings true and when the characters and relationships change as a result of the stories the children enact. In this play, the children are well drawn, and their efforts to control the club and the storylines are very believable. However, while Alice's struggle for acceptance resonates in the beginning of the play, it culminates in a fairly trite and unsatisfying resolution. The songs in the play do not advance the plot, but clash with the more realistic style of the club scenes. The interaction between the children is generally more interesting than the stories the children create.

This play demonstrates the playwright's sensitivity and insight into the lives of children and their creative play. The characters are convincing, but the plot does not quite measure up to the characters who play it out.

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Deverell, Rex. *The Copetown City Kite Crisis*.

A- K-3

This play is set in Copetown, which could represent any modern city in North America. The town's chief industry is kite-making, and the factory's "secret process machine" makes it possible to create kites that will actually enable children to fly. However, it is discovered that the machine is responsible for the air and water

pollution that plague the once pleasant community. Sol, a young adolescent, discovers the secret of the pollution and tries to get the machine shut down so that his friend Nancy, who is made sick by the polluted air, won't have to move away. Sol begins to realize some of the complexities of the issues and learns that the mayor and the factory owner have tried to suppress the truth about the machine.

The play inducts the children in the audience into the role of factory workers and allows them to vote and decide whether or not to go on strike to get the machine shut down. There are two possible endings to the play, depending on the audience's choice. Each ending explores some of the consequences of the decision.

The play is reminiscent of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, in which the town physician's discovery of pollution in the town's new hot springs resort is met by denial and violent opposition by the townsfolk, who depend economically on the tourist attraction. The *Copetown City Kite Crisis* tells the same theme in a manner which a young audience can easily comprehend. The young characters take the significant action of the play, and in the end, the audience assumes the protagonist's function, determining the outcome of the plot and characters.

The stakes in the plot are clear, but the issue is somewhat oversimplified. Although the playwright strives to give equal weight to each option, the ending demonstrates a definite environmental bias. If the machine is shut down, the town suffers minimal economic impact, but if the machine continues to operate, the environmental impact is devastating. The play represents a bold approach to a significant social issue, but its reach just slightly exceeds its grasp.

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Grant, Cynthia; Lazier, Katie; Lederman, Anne; Mackay, Eva; Norrie, Marilyn; Sample, Peggy; Swain, Heather D.; Vingoe, Mary; Wendt, Cathy. *Love and Work Enough*. Canada Playwrights, 1984. 47 pp.

A 5-9

This engaging theatrical collage was created by nine women who researched and dramatized the stories of Canadian pioneer women. The piece premiered at Theatre Ontario and toured schools with a four-woman ensemble. It is a recipient of the Donna Mayor Moore Award, which honors outstanding children's theatre.

The play follows several independent women as they define their roles in the Canadian frontier of the nineteenth century. The characters are well-drawn and engaging. Anna Jameson is an English lady who describes her misadventures as she travels along an early roadway. Lady Frances is a dignified woman who strives to maintain her lifestyle in a rustic backwater town. Bridgit O'Shaugnessy is a spirited serving girl who marries above her class in the less rigid New World social order.

The presentation style of the piece is unusual. The stories are presented through an effective combination of dialogue and first-person narration. The episodes portray a wide variety of situations, linked with entertaining folk songs, dances, and a moderated version of bawdy "charivaree" play. The piece is unorthodox in both its creation and its resulting structure. The script is published in the name of the collective, and the lack of individual ego is apparent in the work. The play is not centered around a traditional plot line with a clear beginning, middle, and end; however, the creators of the piece have found an alternative structure that is uniquely suited to the material. The story moves along on its own power and according to its own rules. This character-centered work is a refreshing contrast to the many plot-centered children's plays currently in publication.

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While not all ensemble pieces are successful, this piece seems highly effective and is remarkably entertaining.

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Ledoux, Paul, adapted from Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden*. Canada Playwrights, 1991. 114 pp.

A 2-6

The Secret Garden tells the story of Mary, an embittered young girl who has been recently orphaned and is sent to live in a lonely English manor with her reclusive uncle and his invalid son. Mary discovers a long-neglected secret garden, and as she cultivates it, she revives her own spirit and the spirits of those around her.

While there are numerous published adaptations of this classic children's novel, this script warrants particular attention. Ledoux uses two young girls, Eileen and Geraldine, in some of the same ways that the ancient Greeks used the chorus. The girls act out the story of *The Secret Garden* in their nursery, first with dolls and doll houses and later with role-playing. They present concisely the prologue of the play, in which Mary's parents die of a plague in India, and they add appropriate childlike perspectives and mannerisms as they retell the events. Once the more traditional dramatization of the story begins, Eileen and Geraldine provide bridges between scenes and foreshadow what is yet to come. Although not always present on stage, the girls often shadow the characters, react to them, and ask insightful questions about them. While the framing characters add to the overall effect of the script, the dramatization of the scenes certainly stands on its own merits. Ledoux is especially adept at revealing character and plot through playable, physical action.

The script is tighter than most adaptations of the same material, though it does grow slightly tedious in the second half, as is the case with most adaptations of this story. This is a very stage-worthy adaptation of the novel.

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Nicol, Eric. *Beware the Quickly Who*. Canada Playwrights, 1973. 54 pp.

B+ 4-8

The back cover of the anthology explains, "On one level, it is lively and exciting fun, with words about the quest to find identity, and on another level it is a funny satire about the constant and elusive search for Canadian nationalism." The play begins with Johnny, a young "everyman" character, being called out of the audience by the mysterious Who. Johnny, pressed to define his own identity, finds himself at a loss. He is led through a series of whimsical encounters with various allegorical characters who try to convince him to accept various identities. Sequentially, Johnny is convinced that he is a giant, dwarf, girl, bride, boy, dancer, maple tree, hero, and baby. Johnny is finally told that he is a composite of many things, with an English mother and a multinational father.

The dialogue is clever and witty, but perhaps too mature for a younger audience to grasp and appreciate. The plot makes sense in a nonsensical way, although some of the episodes are difficult to follow. The American reader has a sense that he or she is an outsider to the Canadian in-jokes and is missing the references of many of the characters, concepts, and punch-lines. While the young protagonist makes some decisions and takes some action for himself, it is generally the more adult characters around him who make things happen and make the discoveries. The piece, although innovative and unusual, is probably better suited to adults than children.

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Tremblay, Brian, music by Arden, Leslie. *Mandy and the Magus*. Canada Playwrights, 1984. 47 pp.

A- K-3

Mandy is disappointed when it rains falls on her birthday and she cannot go to the zoo. When told to play with her younger brother Michael, she uses him to vent her frustrations. After he accidentally breaks one of her toys, Mandy banishes Michael from her room and wishes she never had a brother. Suddenly Mandy's doll, Mr. Davenport, comes to life and offers her a chance to wish her "brother-troubles" away. She gives away all her "pleases," "sorrys," and "thank yous" to the mysterious character known as "The Magus" in order to gain her wish, and suddenly Michael disappears from her life. After discovering how much she misses him and how important her three lost phrases are to her, Mandy ventures forth with Mr. Davenport to make the Magus reverse the spell.

The script is well suited to lower elementary school audiences. It makes good theatrical use of creative play and would probably be quite entertaining. While it is difficult to judge the effectiveness of songs by the lyrics alone, they seem to move the story line and provide a means for relevant sentiments and ideas to be expressed. Mr. Davenport's wish offer at the beginning of the fantasy sequence is intriguing and unusual, although the resolution of the fantasy becomes somewhat predictable.

This short play is probably best suited to touring. It requires a cast of four, with a double-casting plan that is integral to the play. The play could be staged simply and effectively in an open space in an elementary school. The script also yields itself to outreach activities related to wishes, sibling relationships, and courtesy.

