Children's Dramatic Literature for Libraries, Schools, and Homes

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Children's literature has established a prominent place for itself in our libraries, schools, and homes. Public libraries usually designate a special area for children's books, as do most bookstores. Most elementary school teachers incorporate children's books into their language arts curriculum, and the reading of books to children has become a mainstay of American family life.

Children's dramatic literature, contrastingly, remains obscure. Like the plays of William Shakespeare, children's plays were originally intended to be performed rather than read. As with Shakespeare's scripts, however, children's plays deserve a place in our libraries, classrooms, and homes.

This article is intended as a guide for librarians, teachers, and parents who are interested in supplementing their traditional children's literature with children's dramatic literature. Included are recommendations of play anthologies for school libraries, as well as plays that can be read by elementary students in the classroom and by parents and children in the home.

CHILDREN'S PLAY ANTHOLOGIES FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIES

Children's play anthologies are valuable resources for teachers and students interested in learning more about children's theatre.

The anthologies mentioned in this article, with one noted exception, contain plays written for adults to perform for child audiences and may be beyond the performance ability of elementary school students. Many professionals and scholars in the children's theatre field argue that while elementary students should see children's plays performed by adults, the students themselves should not perform for an audience; their needs are better served by improvisation and process drama. In fact, practitioners generally prefer the term "theatre for young audiences" to "children's theatre" because it emphasizes their preference that formal theatre be presented for children by adult performers. Many elementary teachers, however, disagree with this view and choose to expose their students to great dramatic literature, such as Shakespeare's plays, through the children's own performance of it. These teachers may want to use a similar approach in introducing their students to great dramatic literature written for children.

Copies of individual plays found in these anthologies can usually be obtained from publishers for reading purposes and, with proper copyright clearance and royalty payment, for performance purposes. Publisher information for these plays is generally found at the beginning of each script. The contact information for the publishers listed in this article can be found at the end of this article (p. 11).

While there are many good anthologies now in print, there are also a number of antiquated ones that include numerous marginal plays among a few theatrical jewels. Since these collections may be the student's or teacher's first encounter with children's dramatic literature, it is crucial that all anthologies on the library shelf represent the best the genre has to offer.

If I had to recommend only one children's play anthology for an elementary school library, it would be Coleman Jennings' *Theatre for Young Audiences: 20 Great Plays for Children* (available through Anchorage Press, reviewed in the Sept./Oct. 1999 issue). The collection features
plays from twenty of the best playwrights in the field. The preface provides an excellent description of the qualities that define good children's scripts and thus can help a student or teacher make informed judgments about other individual plays. Most of the plays were originally produced in the 1990s, and the anthology demonstrates both the depth and breadth of the children's dramatic literature which has emerged during the last decade. The collection includes adaptations of well-known children's novels such as Charlotte's Web (Dramatic Publishing) and The Secret Garden (Dramatic Publishing). It also includes challenging, cutting-edge works like The Yellow Boat (Anchorage Press), in which a young boy struggles against a fatal disease with art and imagination; and Bocón! (Dramatic Publishing), in which a boy tells an emigration officer the mythic tale of how and why he escaped to the United States. Two other plays included are Joanna Kraus' The Ice Wolf (New Plays Inc.), in which an albino girl born into an Eskimo village is cast out and becomes a vengeful beast, and Jim Leonard's Crow and Weasel (Samuel French), in which two young men come of age as they undertake a journey of discovery for their people.

Anthologies of plays by Aurand Harris and Suzan Zeder also make great additions to a library's collection. These two key playwrights in the field have writing styles that contrast and compliment one another.

The Theatre of Aurand Harris (Anchorage Press) features fifteen of the playwright's best works, as well as Lowell Swortzell's expert descriptions of Harris' teachings and theories. Harris, who taught elementary students at a private boys' school in New York City for thirty-three years, let his understanding of what engaged his students' attention guide him as he developed his plays. Harris entertains children masterfully with eclectic theatrical styles, identifiable characters, and clear plot lines. The Theatre of Aurand Harris includes classical farces, such as a commedia dell'arte version of Androcles and the Lion and A Toby Show, a turn-of-the-century version of the Cinderella story. It also includes moving dramas, such as Steal Away Home, a play about the Underground Railroad, and The Arkansaw Bear, one of the first children's plays to deal with the issues of death and dying. (All the plays mentioned above are published individually by Anchorage Press.)

Another anthology of Harris' works, Short Plays of Theatre Classics (Anchorage Press), includes of twelve historical comedies that Harris adapted for his elementary school students to perform. These plays include the medieval farce The Second Shepherd's Play (Anchorage Press), Molière's The Doctor in Spite of Himself (Anchorage Press), Edmond Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac (Baker's Plays), and Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (Anchorage Press). Since these plays were intended for child rather than adult performers, I recommend these plays, more than the others mentioned in this article, for elementary student performance.

The anthology Wish in One Hand: Spit in the Other (Anchorage Press) comprises eight plays by Suzan Zeder. In her plays, Zeder emphasizes the emotional truth of the stories and characters, and her scripts can be appreciated on many levels by both children and adults. Editor Susan Pearson-Davis' introductions trace the development and evolution of Zeder's work and demonstrate the complexities of writing good plays for young audiences. Among the eight plays are Wiley and the Hairy Man, a rhythmic version of a scary southern folktale, and two contemporary plays, Step on a Crack and Doors, which explore the issues of step-parents and divorce through a mix of realism and fantasy. (All three plays are published by Anchorage Press.)

Roger Bedard's Dramatic Literature for Children: A Century in Review (Anchorage Press) is an excellent reference for those who wish to learn more about the history of children's theatre. Because the text is written on an academic level, it is probably more appropriate for teachers than for students. Some excellent plays in this book are not found in any other collections. Frances Hodgson Burnett's A Little Princess (not available individually) is a well-structured melodrama in which a young schoolgirl cheerfully endures a series of reverses until her good fortune is restored. Stuart Walker's The Birthday of the Infanta (not available individually) is a moving
adaptation of the Oscar Wilde story in which a princess breaks the heart of a deformed boy who dances for her on her birthday. In Arthur Fauquez's *Reynard the Fox* (Anchorage Press), a group of animal characters try to thwart the trickery of the title character, only to dupe themselves with their own unscrupulous actions. While there are several strong scripts in this collection, some are more useful as historical examples than as producible works.

Finally, *Seattle Children's Theatre: Six Plays for Young Audiences* (Smith and Kraus) is an excellent sample of plays developed in a modern professional children's theatre. *There's a Boy in the Girl's Bathroom* (not available individually), Louis Sachar's adaptation of his popular novel, includes a large cast of elementary school students who are inspired by a controversial school counselor. *Afternoon of the Elves* (Dramatic Publishing), adapted by Y York from the book by Janet Taylor Lisle, tells the story of a fourth grader who is single-handedly caring for her invalid mother. *The Rememberer* (not available individually) by Steven Deitz tells the true story of a Squaxin Indian girl who is given the responsibility to be the "rememberer" of her people's history and culture but who is forced to forget her native heritage at a government school. Most of the plays in this collection center around elementary-age children and would make excellent reading material. However, since the plays are among the most challenging to perform, it may be best for students to experience them on the page rather than on the stage.

Many issues of *The Children's Book and Play Review* include descriptions of play anthologies as well as individual plays. Some of these collections would also make excellent additions to a school library. If the usual paperback acting editions of individual plays are hardbound, individual plays can be included with the anthologies in the library.

**CHILDREN'S PLAYS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS**

If elementary school students are encouraged or assigned to read children's plays as well as children's books, the teacher will need to help the students develop certain skills necessary for reading dramatic material. When students move on to middle schools and high schools, and eventually to colleges and universities, they will have to read numerous plays in addition to novels. Students, however, rarely receive any instruction or training in how to approach a dramatic text. These suggestions can help your students develop individual reading strategies.

First, teachers should be sure that students understand the basic format of a stage script and may, at first, need to help their students discern which words are character names, lines of dialogue, and stage directions. There are many different text styles in printed plays and, while there are no hard-and-fast rules about what is capitalized, italicized, boldfaced, or underlined, students need to be able to find the clues that will help them to understand the format of the text.

Second, since it can be difficult for children to keep track of a large cast of characters, teachers ought to help students develop strategies to remember and identify the different characters. These strategies will vary from student to student, depending on their learning styles, so it may be best to explore a variety of approaches. Visually oriented students may find it helpful to sketch the characters from their descriptions in the cast list. Aurally oriented students could speak the lines out loud using different voices for each character. Some kinetically oriented students may find it helpful to assume the posture of the characters or to act out the story in their own space as they read it.

Third, teachers should use any possible opportunities for their children to experience live theatrical performances. Many elementary school students have never seen a play performed and lack the necessary reference points that will enable them to imagine how the text might be presented on the stage. Touring theatre groups often present plays in elementary schools, and many theatre groups offer student matinee performances during the regular school day.

If it is impossible for teachers to get their students to a performance or get performers to come to the schools, teachers may show their
students versions of plays on video. Some, but by no means all, of these versions are presented theatrically rather than cinematically and would be the next best thing to a live performance. One of the best such videos is the 1977 television production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (available through amazon.com), which is presented with minimal scenic elements. The characters employ pantomime rather than handling physical objects. PBS regularly presents recent Broadway plays and musicals, many of which are filmed during live performances. Carefully selected excerpts from these videos, used in direct instruction under fair-use policy, can help students visualize how a play is successfully transferred from the page to the stage. It is especially helpful if students read a section of the text before seeing it performed.

Most of the plays mentioned in connection with the anthologies can be obtained from the individual publishers listed at the front of each script. These plays could be made available in the classroom library or distributed to all the students in a classroom with a set of paper-bound scripts. In addition to the plays in the collection, a number of individual plays work well in the classroom. First is James M. Barrie’s original version of *Peter Pan* (Samuel French). This classic play about the boy who refuses to grow up is one of the most enduring, popular children’s plays ever written. A classroom set of scripts for this play may be difficult to obtain (see note on publishers later in the article), but an individual copy could easily be added to the classroom collection. Related to Barrie’s play is Shay Youngblood’s play *Amazing Grace* (Dramatic Publishing), in which an African-American girl proves to her friends that she can do anything, even play the title role in *Peter Pan*.

James Still has written several plays dealing with important social themes, transcending the themes to achieve universality. *Hush: An Interview with America* (Dramatic Publishing) is an unusually constructed theatrical collage that portrays the story of a blind girl who sees peaceful visions of angels and lions amid a world of violence. *Just Before Sleep* (Dramatic Publishing) presents a homeless family in which the young son dreams of seeing a real opera and the mother dreams of providing for her children. *Amber Waves* (Samuel French) tells the story of a farm family who struggle to hold onto their land and lifestyle in the face of harsh economic hardships. These plays would make strong additions to thematic units.

A number of good children’s plays deal with the Holocaust, which is now a part of the curriculum of many schools, districts, and states. Goodrich and Hackett’s stage adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Dramatists Play Service) is often read in secondary schools but is perhaps beyond the average elementary reader. Celeste Raspanti’s *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (Dramatic Publishing) tells the story of a young woman struggling for hope in a ghetto school from which students were sent to the concentration camps. Joanna Kraus’ *Angel in the Night* (Dramatic Publishing) is about a non-Jewish young woman who, against her parents’ wishes, provides for a Jewish family hiding on her family’s farm. Cherie Bennett’s *Anne Frank and Me* (Dramatic Publishing) puts Anne’s story in a more modern context as a 1990s girl begins to believe the claims of Holocaust deniers until a time warp brings her face to face with the real Anne Frank. *Good-bye Marianne* (Anchorage Press), by Canadian Playwright Irene Kirstein Watts, is an autobiographical play telling how the playwright, as a child, was taken out of Nazi Germany through the "Kindertransport." An excellent anthology of Holocaust plays, *Voices: Plays for Studying the Holocaust* (Scarecrow Press, reviewed in the May/June 2000 issue), would also be excellent for classroom use.

Dramatic Publishing features a wide selection of stage adaptations of popular children’s books. These plays include Newbery Winners, such Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars* and Ester Forbes’ *Johnny Tremain*, as well as other classic children’s novels, such as E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* and C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Magician’s Nephew*.

A number of famous children’s books from the turn of the century and earlier have also come into the public domain and been adapted into
scripts. These scripts are available through Dramatic Publishing Company, Samuel French, New Plays Inc., Anchorage Press, Baker's Plays, and other publishing houses. I suggest students read the original books first before examining how they were translated to the theatre. Some of the time-worn classics with numerous stage versions include L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (as well as many other "Oz books"), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

Many adaptations of well-known fairy tales are available through most children's play publishers. One of the masters of this genre is children's theatre pioneer Charlotte Chorpenning, whose published adaptations are split among Dramatic Publishing Company, Samuel French, and Anchorage Press. While there are many viable adaptations of these stories, be aware that there are more unsuccessful adaptations than there are successful ones. A teacher should not assume that a good book or story will necessarily make a good play, and should read several adaptations of public domain works to find one that serves as the best example of children's dramatic literature.

In obtaining reading copies of children's plays, I have found that publishers who deal exclusively or extensively with children's plays, such as Anchorage Press, Dramatic Publishing, and New Plays Inc., are more than willing to sell me classroom sets of plays for a unit on children's theatre in my high school theatre class. However, publishers who publish some children's plays but are more centered in the adult genres, such as Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service, have been suspicious and reluctant when I have inquired about classroom sets of plays or even when I've ordered single copies of several plays for my classroom library. Explain to the publisher how you intend to use the scripts, and be prepared to take no for an answer. If reading copies of plays are to become more available to libraries, schools, and homes, and if publishers are to support these new uses of their materials, it is crucial that we establish a reputation of integrity in following copyright guidelines and in paying appropriate royalties for performances.

**CHILDREN'S PLAYS FOR HOME READING**

While many, if not most, parents read books to their children, very few parents think of reading plays to them. Even those of us who work with children's theatre may not think of sharing plays with our children in this way. Since most parents unwittingly add theatrical elements to their readings, it seems only logical that theatrical works could be added to the family reading repertory.

Like many mothers and fathers, I find myself unconsciously creating voices for the characters as I encounter dialogue in a children's book. In the case of David Wiesner's almost wordless picture book *Tuesday*, my children and I have developed a sort of "soundtrack" as we "read" it together. When plays are read together, children become performers of the dialogue.

If a parent or parents were to read a play with one or more children, perhaps the most conducive plays to read would be those with relatively small casts or those in which dialogue occurs between only two or three characters at a time. Of the plays mentioned previously, the following could be read fairly comfortably by two to three readers: *Bocon!, Crow and Weasel, Androcles and the Lion, A Toby Show, Steal Away Home, The Arkansaw Bear, Wiley and the Hairy Man, Step on Crack, Doors, Afternoon of the Elves, The Rememberer, I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, and *Good-bye Marianne*. The following plays, most of which are written for small touring casts, also work well at home.

A handful of good scripts are written for only three actors. Lowell Swortzell's *The Mischief Makers* (New Plays Inc., *Theatre for Young Audiences* anthology) pits three legendary tricksters (Raven, Anansi the Spider, and Reynard the Fox) against each other as they present their stories and try to prove their own superiority. As each trickster enacts his or her story, the other two tricksters play the supporting roles. In Sandra Fenichel Asher's *The Wolf and His Shadows* (Anchorage Press), a wolf, a dog, and a man explore various complimentary and derogatory stories told about wolves. In Y. York's *The Portrait, the Wind, the Chair* (Dramatic
Publishing, Seattle Children's Theatre anthology), a couple of sisters, alone at home after school, go on an imaginary journey in order to distract themselves from their fear of a storm. Kathryn Schultz Miller's A Thousand Cranes (Dramatic Publishing, Theatre for Young Audiences) uses Asian theatre styles to tell the story of Sadako, who dies of leukemia in the wake of the Hiroshima bombing before she can fold a thousand paper cranes.

Other plays are written for casts of four. While three people can fairly comfortably read from one script, four readers may require a second copy. Aurand Harris' Huck Finn's Story (Anchorage, The Theatre of Aurand Harris) offers an abridged version of the boy's journey down the Mississippi River. New Canadian Kid by Dennis Foon (Playwrights Canada Press) features an English-speaking boy who moves into a new school where the other students speak in gibberish. In The Crane Wife (Anchorage Press, 20 Theatre for Young Audiences), a man's mysterious wife weaves a valuable cloth for her husband, but the man learns too late what a terrible sacrifice his wife had to make to satisfy his greed.

The plays I've listed can be easily read by two to four readers in a family situation. As families become more comfortable reading plays together, they can probably take on almost any children's play. As you look through the play summaries in The Children's Book and Play Review, you may wish to order reading copies for home use.

CONCLUSION

Children's dramatic literature could enjoy a wider reading audience and a greater notoriety in libraries, elementary schools, and homes. The more the general public are acquainted with good children's plays, the more they are likely to demand productions of these quality scripts. The more the general public attend good children's theatre performances, the better they will be able to appreciate the written texts of these plays. While live theatre has only a small fraction of the following of today's television and film audiences, a better understanding of theatre will increase the general appreciation of quality film and television productions.

Dramatic literature has found its way into our home bookshelves and into our English classrooms. It seems reasonable that dramatic literature for children should find its way into our elementary school libraries and classrooms, as well as into our homes.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR PUBLISHERS:

Anchorage Press, Inc.
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Baker's Plays
1445 Hancock
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Phone: (617) 745-0805
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Website: www.bakersplays.com

Dramatists Play Service
440 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016
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Fax: (212) 213-1539
Website: www.dramatists.com

Dramatic Publishing Company
311 Washington Street
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Fax: (800) 334-5302
Website: www.dramaticpublishing.com

New Plays Incorporated
P.O. Box 5074
Charlottesville, VA 22905
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PLAYS


----. *The Portrait, the Wind, the Chair*. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 1994.


**BOOKS**


