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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Asher, Sandra Fenichel. *I Will Sing Life: Voices From the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp*. Dramatic Publishing, 2000. ISBN 0-87129-971-2. \$7.35. 58 pp.

A- 4+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

I Will Sing Life tackles the difficult experiences and complicated emotions facing terminally ill children who attend the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. An adaptation of a book by the same title, the play is a carefully woven tapestry of poems, stories, and songs by real-life camp participants. Over the course of the play, Adam, a double-amputee; Joe, a victim of AIDS; Pia, suffering from sickle cell anemia; Corey, fighting cancer; Shawn, enduring treatment for leukemia; Tina, also battling cancer; and Katie, paralyzed on one side from a stroke, share their feelings, trials, dreams, and future plans with each other and with two camp counselors. The action of the play flows easily between scenes grounded in the reality of the camp and fantasies acted out by the campers and counselors together. Topics vary from boyfriends to medical procedures, from school experiences to dealing with hair loss. The play offers a peek into the world of terminally ill children at the only place where they are the norm rather than the exception.

Asher has successfully created a piece of theatre that shares the trials of very sick children with the rest of the world. Almost every word in the play is taken directly from writing contributed by campers from the Hole in the Wall Camp. Asher is particularly effective at joining the real world of the camp almost seamlessly with the fantasy world that exists in the children's imaginations. The play has strong continuity, and rather than leaving the audience depressed, or sorry for the characters, the end of the play brings a renewed appreciation for life and a certain confidence in the human spirit.

The play calls for a cast of four males and four females, ages nine to sixteen, and two adults—one

male, one female. The cast can be expanded to include additional campers, if desired. The setting should be free space that transforms easily from various camp locations to the settings for stories and fantasies from the children's lives. Six of the poems in the script have been set to music. Information on the original music can be obtained from Ric Averill, c/o Seem-To-Be Players, P. O. Box 1601, Lawrence, KS 66044.



Brown, Kent R. *Scenes and Monologues for Young Actors*. Dramatic Publishing, 2000. ISBN 0-87129-958-5. \$14.95. 255 pp.

B+ 8+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

Though it is encouraging to see a compilation of scenes and monologues for young actors from well-known authors for young audiences, Brown has succumbed to several problems common to scene and monologue books—many scenes in the book are not well-suited for scene study, and most of the monologues are inactive reflections on past occurrences. Mark Plaiss' *Waiting for the Phone*—a scene for two actors—has little material for an acting study and would be better suited in a directing or design class. Brown's comment about a monologue from *Loving Bess* by Jett Parsley is "Tib is 20. He is talking about Bess, the girl he loves." He is talking *about* Bess—not to her or with her—*about* her. Most acting teachers will guide their students—particularly beginning students—away from this type of monologue. They are difficult to perform well outside the setting of the play. Brown also addresses several monologues to the audience. For an acting class, this may work, but could be difficult in an audition setting, because the auditors would most likely prefer not to be addressed directly. Additionally, the book's title proclaims that it is intended for "young" actors, but many of the scenes in the book

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include characters well into their thirties, forties, or older.

The book, however, is not without merit. A scene between teenage sisters taken from James Still's *Between the Lines* is one example of a strong piece for two young female actors that could be effectively used for scene study in a class or studio setting. Brown also includes an introduction—which includes valuable elementary acting and directing tips—and a useful monologue preparation guide.

Scenes and Monologues for Young Actors includes monologues for men and women, scenes for two actors, and scenes with multiple characters.

Some of the playwrights highlighted in the book are James Still, Sandra Fenichel Asher, Max Bush, Joanna H. Kraus, Ric Averill, John O'Brien, Mike Thomas, Ted Sod, Linda Daugherty, Jonelle Grace, Silvia Gonzales, and Elizabeth Wong. *Scenes and Monologues for Young Actors* would most appropriately be used as a resource book to introduce plays and playwrights to young actors and audiences.



Frost, Helen and Harvey Cocks. *Why Darkness Seems So Light*. Pioneer Drama, 1999. ISBN 2739871-1001. \$10.85. 36 pp.

B- 7-12 Reviewed by Karla Hendricks Huntsman

Why Darkness Seems So Light is based on writings by high school students in Fort Wayne, Indiana, as part of an annual Week Without Violence Awareness Campaign.

The play portrays several scenes of teenage violence and examines the lives of those involved in the situations. Johnny is killed at a party he doesn't want to go to. Ginger faces the torment of knowing that she convinced Johnny to go to the party and then left him to die for fear of being caught in a place her parents would not approve. Whitney is molested by her boyfriend of seven months. Nathan nearly commits suicide as a result of despondency over a family situation. The play is held together by monologues by the teacher of the students and by various characters in the scenes.

In the attempt to present the message that violence is not the way to solve life's problems,

some of the dialogue and monologues tend to be didactic and to either give information that normally would not be present in a conversation, information the characters would already know, or information which is geared simply to point up the message of the play.

The format of the play works well. With permission of the author, judicious cuts and some reshaping could be made in dialogues and monologues to make the play a powerful statement against teen violence.

There are twenty-seven characters, fifteen men and twelve women; two of the women's parts could be played by men. The set could be as simple as using a few standard pieces of furniture rearranged in different patterns for various scenes. Costuming is simple, contemporary clothing.



Lazarus, John. *Not So Dumb*. Playwrights Canada Press, 2000. ISBN 0-88754-578-5. \$17.95. 205 pp.

A- K-6 Reviewed by Nathan F. Christensen

In this anthology of plays to be performed by adults for children, Lazarus deals with the difficulties ordinary young people face almost every day. For example, making friends and fitting in are recurring concerns in the lives of the characters as the plays chart their progress from second grade to high school. The first three plays are simple, well-written one-acts that entertain as they try to help children understand the world around them. The fourth play deals with the more serious issues of identity and sexuality and could be considered for more mature audiences.



Nightlight. 33 pp.

A- K-6

Each child has a fear of something that must be overcome. Ten-year-old Vinnie fears Farley, a bully at school. Vinnie's little sister, seven-year-old Tara, fears an ugly green monster living in her bureau drawers. Vinnie and Tara work together to

overcome their fears, trying several methods, with little success. Eventually, Vinnie learns that Farley is also afraid of something—math—and solves the problem by offering to tutor him. Similarly, Tara placates her monster by drawing pictures for it, and she ends up making a friend.

This is a delightful piece of theater. The mood is light, the situations are funny, and the puppet monster will probably be a favorite among children. While being entertained, children learn that their fears can be overcome if the fears are first understood.

This script requires two men and one woman. Technical requirements include a chain-link fence, a jungle gym, a bed, a chest of drawers, and a large puppet monster.

Not So Dumb. [42 pp.]

B K-6

Binnie and Rocky, both age ten, arrive for their special education class at school, but their teacher isn't there. She is at the hospital having a baby. Enjoying their newfound freedom, the children begin looking for their school records in a cabinet marked "Confidential." Vinnie, the biggest "nerd" in school, catches them in the act. Over the course of the play, they learn to understand each other and to appreciate their differences. For example, Rocky is unable to read, but he is skilled with electronics and is able to fix Vinnie's tape player.

In spite of its obvious good intentions, this play is not of the same quality as the previous plays in the anthology. While the scenario is interesting, the dialogue and behavior of the children are not always believable. Nevertheless, the play is entertaining, and its message of mutual understanding is quite relevant to the lives of children and adults.

This play requires a cast of two men and one woman. The scenic requirements include a desk, a rolling office chair, a filing cabinet, and a chalkboard.

Schoolyard Games. 42 pp.

A K-6

Three children at play: Eleanor, age ten; Susan, age nine; and Eleanor's little sister, Binnie, age eight. The world revolves around Eleanor because she's the oldest; at least that's the way it seems. She's smarter, participates in gymnastics, and associates with older kids. She also tries to make sure that Susan and Binnie are aware of her superiority. Susan's feelings are hurt by Eleanor's snobbery, but she finds herself guilty of similar behavior toward Binnie. Susan remembers the sight of her new puppies pushing out the runt of the litter and tries to correct her own behavior. Binnie helps Eleanor realize that being older does not exempt her from being considerate of others' feelings. By the end, the arguments are resolved, and the three girls are friends once again.

In this play, Lazarus has somehow managed to capture the world of childhood. The dialogue and the conflict recreate the innocent frustrations of childhood relationships with friends. While perhaps too simplistic for an adult audience, children should easily identify with the characters, recognizing their own behaviors in the children on stage.

The cast requires three energetic actresses. The set consists of a useable jungle gym, parallel bars, and a railing on which the girls can perform flips.

Secrets. 33 pp.

B 9-12

Victor, Susan, Binnie, and Rocky are facing the challenges of high school. Binnie and Rocky, a couple, have been sexually active for some time before the action of the play begins. Because Victor is shy and virginal, other students at school begin to spread rumors that he is gay. Susan hides her own virginity by spreading false rumors about her own sexual looseness. During a party at Victor's house, Victor and Susan discover that they should not be so concerned about what other people think. The relationship between Rocky and Binnie comes to an end when Binnie learns that

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Rocky has betrayed her trust and had sexual relations with other girls.

This is a rather inappropriate conclusion to this particular anthology of plays. The tone, dramatic structure, and audience are completely different from those of the other four plays. However, the piece is not without merit. It has a strong conflict and some interesting theatrical elements, including the use of masks. Care should be taken before selecting this piece for performance to assure that the subject matter and language are appropriate for the intended audience.

This play has a cast of eight, played by four actors, and uses a simple unit set.



Manning, Mick and Brita Granström. *Drama School*. Larousse Kingfisher Chambers, 1999. ISBN 0-7534-4178-6. \$8.95. 48 pp.

A- 1-4 Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

Drama School is a colorful combination of interesting facts and imaginative ideas to spark children's interest and creativity in the theatrical arts—a basic introduction to theatre. Its strongest merits lie in the instructions for building puppets, costumes, props, masks, and sets in preparation for producing a show. Parents and teachers who give this book to their children and students should be prepared to supply materials and a safe work area, because children will most likely be ready to try the suggestions that dot the pages of this resourceful book. The book is very simple and would probably not hold the interest of children above a fourth-grade level; however, the ideas in the book can be used with children as old as sixth or seventh grade.



River, Jose. *Marcela de la Luz Lights the World*. Dramatic Publishing, 1998. ISBN 0-87129-894-5. 52 pp.

A 5+ Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

This charming play is about Maricela de la Luz and her brother Riccardo, who go on a great

fairytale-like adventure one sunny winter day in San Diego. The adventure begins when a huge blizzard suddenly hits San Diego, and only San Diego. As the siblings fight off polar bears and other creatures, they learn that the Sun God, Hunahpu, has been captured. In order for everything return to normal they must find Loki, the trickster God who kidnapped Hunahpu. This isn't as easy as it sounds. While looking for Loki, the children encounter numerous mythical beings, like a cyclops, a seven-headed Hydra, Jason and the Argonauts, and a happy and sad face whose bodies disappeared when Hunahpu vanished. After facing numerous challenges, young Maricela and Riccardo are able to find Hunahpu, who restores everything to its original state.

This very imaginative play requires a creative and professional group. This play contains mild profanity and may be offensive to some audiences. A lot of Spanish is also used throughout the play. The use of puppetry could enhance this play. The nineteen characters can be done by three men and three women.



Schenkkan, Robert. *The Dream Thief*. Dramatic Publishing, 1999. ISBN 0-87129-951-8. 75 pp.

B+ 3+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

The Dream Thief is the story of two children's quest to save their father's life. Dream Thief has stolen Daddy's dreams. As a result, Daddy cannot sleep; he becomes listless and loses direction in his life. Frightened, Mommy takes him to the hospital, where two pompous doctors are incapable of explaining anything to her. To the children—Susan and Jamie—it seems their father might die. That night in the hospital they see Dream Thief ride Night Mare into Daddy's room to take more dreams from him. The children follow Dream Thief out the window and into the world of Nod. While in Nod, they encounter characters most people meet only in their dreams—Winken, Blinken, Green Eggs, and Hamlet, to name a few. With the help of new-found friends—Hop Along, Sandman, Twinkle (as in Twinkle, Twinkle, little star), and REM—the children are able to face and

defeat Bedbugs, Night Terrors, Dream Thief, and finally Chaos himself in the effort to free the thousands of stolen dreams held captive in Morpheus, the capital city of Nod. With the return of his dreams, Daddy is finally able to sleep and recovers quickly from his mysterious illness. For a moment, Susan and Jamie think the adventure was all a dream, until Chaos is heard, reminding them that he is ever-present—the bad is always part of the good.

Schenkkan has succeeded in writing a wonderful piece of fantasy-action adventure for the child in all of us. Through Susan and Jamie, the audience is allowed to face and conquer many common fears—the threat of losing a loved one, journeying to places unknown, facing and defeating those who keep us from reaching our goals, and ultimately, freeing our dreams, enabling them to lift us beyond what we may have expected of ourselves. The play has a cast of twenty-six characters, which can be played by eight actors (three children, five adults). The script includes detailed descriptions of several settings and some complicated special effects. Puppets may or may not be used, depending on director's preference. Recommended for higher education institutions or professional troupes.



Snipes, Larry and Vivian. *The Fisherman and His Wife*. New Plays Inc., 1999. 30 pp.

A K-4 Reviewed by Shelley Graham

In a rickety hut by the seashore live the Fisherman and his Wife. Growing tired of cabbage stew and water, the Wife sends the Fisherman off to the shore with a kiss and a plea to catch flounder for dinner. He has a somewhat productive day fishing, catching a log, a crab, and finally a flounder. The unfortunate, or perhaps fortunate, "catch" is that this flounder is really an enchanted prince, who convinces the Fisherman not to eat him. When the Fisherman returns home empty-handed, his wife scolds him for not at least asking for a wish from the prince-fish. She sends him back the next day to ask for a nice cottage with a garden, chickens, and ducks. He does so, and their wish is granted. The Wife, however, is not

satisfied, and she sends him back to ask first for a castle, then to be King, and then to be Pope. The Fisherman does as he is told, despite his reservations. Her final wish is that she might control the rising and the setting of the sun. The Fisherman asks the flounder for this wish, and then he is told to go home and meet his wife, who is now "where she belongs." He goes home to greet her, standing happily at the door of their rickety hut, content with her new station.

Though it is a typical telling of an old tale, with no particularly riveting twists of plot or character, this version is innovative and exciting in its own way. It relies heavily on audience participation. The sets and costumes can be simple, using the children's imaginations to create their own believability. The flounder doubles as a storyteller and speaks most often from the audience. By the end, the children are asked to create a virtual hurricane with their mouths and hands, working not only to engage the audience but also to build suspense. The script gives suggestions for movements and stage business to be incorporated by the children, but it is open to creativity and accommodation for specific audiences. There are easily recognizable patterns throughout the tale—characters speaking sometimes in verse and sometimes in prose, patterns in sound effects made by the children, etc. As soon as children know they are allowed to stand and sit and move as directed, they will be watching with great eagerness for their next opportunity to be part of this absorbing mix of fantasy and imagination.

