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The Little Squire of Flanders

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McCaslin, Nellie. *The Little Squire of Flanders*. Players Press Inc., 1996. ISBN 0887344763. Contact publisher regarding price. 20 pp.

Reviewer: Heidi Schiers

Reading Level: Preschool; Primary;

Rating: Significant shortcomings

Genre: Folklore; Fairy tale plays; Plays;

Subject: Drama--Reviews; Knights and knighthood--Juvenile drama; Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages--Juvenile drama; Married people--Juvenile drama;

Theme: Mistaken identity in medieval France

Production Requirements: Minimal. Someone who can do basic or extravagant gymnastics (as the jester).

Acts: 1

Run Time: 30 minutes

Characters: 10

Cast: 4 men, 4 women, 2 can be either man or woman

Time Period: Medieval

Sir Robert has just been knighted, received a kingdom, and married the fair Genevieve. It has been a good day. Unfortunately, he had vowed long before that should he be knighted, he would leave immediately on a pilgrimage to Saint James. The time has already arrived for him to depart from his newly acquired riches and bride. In the year that he is gone, the evil Sir Bernard takes over Sir Robert's kingdom, and Sir Robert believes he has lost everything. He meets a young and devoted squire named Guillaume, who aides Sir Robert for the next seven years in his exile. Together, they rebuild Sir Robert's fortune, and he returns to his castle in hopes of better fortune. While there, he discovers that Guillaume was really Genevieve in disguise, and that she is the one who helped him out and is his dear friend.

The *Little Squire of Flanders* is yet another fanciful tale of a girl masquerading as a boy, but contains none of the complexities or humor which usually accompanies such stories. The major flaw of this short play is that it is too narrative-driven. The basic structure of the play consists of a short scene between Sir Robert and Genevieve at the castle, followed by an announcer who briefly relates the story of the last year, followed by another short scene with Sir Robert and Guillaume in the forest, and yet another explanation of the last seven years by the announcer. The show ends with a short scene between Sir Robert and Genevieve back at the castle. Throughout these short scenes nothing happens. It is a play of talking heads in costumes, without any real conflict. Sir Robert tells Guillaume that perhaps they could purchase a bakery, and the next thing the audience sees is the announcer, telling them that so much time has passed, and in that time the two companions purchased a bakery and later an inn. The play would have been much stronger had it focused on some of their adventures together in those seven years, perhaps at the inn.

The end could have provided a welcome opportunity for conflict. Perhaps Sir Robert could have had to encounter the sneaking, thieving Sir Bernard. Alas, no. Sir Bernard is conveniently away on pilgrimage to make recompense for his sins. Should Sir Robert remain in his comfortable lifestyle with his lovely wife whom he does not know well, or should he instead seek adventures with his faithful friend in far off lands? Instead, in his moment of choosing between the two, Sir Robert suddenly realizes after seven years of oblivion that Genevieve and Guillaume are one and the same. Everything is happy and all problems are surpassed...except that there were none to address.

Like the script, the characters in this play are weak. They have no depth. The audience does not see how Sir Robert feels about his situation or the people in his life. The ladies in waiting have a conversation which does not help to progress the story enough to be in the script, and Jacques the tumbler appears once to perform some cartwheels. To play the role of Pierre would be comparable to playing a piece of scenery. Sir Bernard also appears only once in the first scene, to sneer at Sir Robert. The

announcer might as well have just told the audience that there exists a bad guy who plans to usurp the kingdom. In fact, the announcer has the most important and active role in the play.

Genevieve, as the smart and skilled cross-dresser, might have had the most opportunity to gain some depth, but she is as superficial as the rest of them. She is so completely devoted to her husband that she hardly protests upon his departure, and then waits patiently and dutifully for him without complaint. This is true love. Yet Genevieve waits not just the one year while Sir Robert is away on pilgrimage, but an extra seven as she works by his side. As Guillaume, she does not even encourage Sir Robert to return to his kingdom. The story gives no reason as to why she might have done this. If she loved Sir Robert, why did she not reveal herself to him in their first encounter in the forest, seven years earlier? She might have had a particular motivation for remaining in disguise, but it is not written into the play. Such motivation is left to the whims of freehanded and creative actors.

The play could easily be accomplished with a small cast of children actors. It was the intent of the author to keep the play simple, as is apparent from her stage directions and recommendations for lighting and set, but McCaslin oversimplified. One could read a fairytale or legend and arrive at similar if not more creative and interesting results through improvisation upon the idea. In such a case, things would be happening between people; it would be more active. *The Little Squire of Flanders* is a nice, fluffy play about a knight and a lady, but it is not worth the royalties that it would cost to produce.