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The Orphan Train

Rebeca Wallin

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Play Review

Title: The Orphan Train

Author: Aurand Harris

Reviewer: Rebeca Wallin

Publisher: Anchorage Press, Inc.

Publication Year: 1998

Number of Pages: 59

Production Requirements: Production possible with bare stage but set can be more elaborate; 9 stools; period clothing.

Estimated Run Time: 1 hour

Number of Acts: 1

Number of Characters: 25

Cast Requirements: 3-6 boys, 6 girls, 1-5 men, 1-8 women

Time Period: 1914

Reading/Interest Level: Primary, Intermediate

Rating: Outstanding

Review

"We ride the orphan train, the orphan train, Deserted, unwanted children, seeking, searching for a home." So opens the first of eight vignettes, each telling the story of an orphan that has been placed on a train in New York City to be sent to a new home in the west. Based on a real historic practice that spanned over 75 years and placed over 250,000 children, this play focuses mainly on the positive side of the practice – six of the eight children end up in happy situations or homes despite some hardships along the way.

As would be expected from well-known playwright Harris, the rich storytelling and dialogue immediately convey character and transport the audience to a time and place in the past. Though each scene is short, four to nine pages, character and situation is conveyed succinctly so that the audience instantly sympathizes with and cares for the characters. Though, as mentioned before, the darker side of the practice is not explored in this script it is a good introduction to the facts for young audiences. The possibility for a bare-bones set and props, short running time, and opportunity for post show study and discussion make this play a good choice for an educational tour, though actors that can believably play young children are a must.