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Plays for Young Audiences
by Harold Oaks

Each issue of the REVIEW carries a section at the back, of plays for Young Audiences. Most of these are intended for production rather than just reading, and most are intended for adults to perform for young audiences. As these scripts are read, it should be kept in mind that the playbook is more like a score than a novel. The novel allows us to go inside the head and heart of the character in a manner uncommon to the stage. The playreader must "stage" the play in his/her mind, supplying motivation, innuendo, facial expression, body language, etc. It is much like the conductor "reading" a musical score, able to "hear" all of the instrumentation, harmonies, tempos, etc. Plays are oral rather than written language and it often improves understanding to have the play read aloud even if full staging is not possible.

Types of Plays

I have found it useful to group the plays to better understand the range of work available.

A. Adaptations. These are stage versions of literary works, some better than others, some very close to the original and some only using the title. Examples are: Treasure Island (Aurand Harris), The Nightingale (Urquhart & Grossberg), The Little Princess (Nancy Seale), The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins (Dr. Seuss adapted by Minneapolis Children's Theatre), The Odyssey (adapted by Gregory Falls), etc. Adaptations have always been done and will continue; however, securing rights to the original work is sometimes impossible since there is so much more money in television or film production.

B. "Family" plays from New York. If a production is announced as a "Children's" play, audiences either do not pay the ticket prices or they think only of sending their children rather than going themselves. The play may survive, however, by being sold as a family entertainment and several popular and important plays for young audiences have become available in this way. Examples: Peter Pan, Annie, Big River, You're a Good Man Charley Brown, The Diary of Anne Frank, etc.

C. Special Message works. These plays are developed to address a perceived need in the marketplace or in the audience. They deal
with a number of topics and range widely in quality. Examples: *Special Class* (deals with handicapped children), *Metrics Can Be Fun* (teaching metrics), *New Canadian Kid* (problems of immigrants in America), *Doors* (deals with children experiencing divorce), *Arkansas Bear* (the child and death), etc.

D. Theatre Company plays. These are developed by specific companies working together, frequently in an improvisational situation, to develop a work that suits their purposes. They frequently lack literary quality, but sometimes make up for it in innovation. They usually are staged minimally so the production can be toured easily. Examples: *Golliwoppers* (series of sketches based on American folk literature), *Names and Nicknames* (a mean old man gives children nicknames, spoiling their names. A farmer and his wife foil the villain), *Most Powerful Jujus* (based on Nigerian folktale), *Dandelion* (original sketches on several topics), etc.

E. Young Audience Scripts. These plays have been written for young audiences, not based on other media (although the theme or basic story line may be suggested by another work), and are sometimes commissioned by production groups. Examples: *Code Breaker* (teen science fiction dealing with freedom), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (choices of right and wrong in medieval setting), *Androcles and the Lion* (Commedia romp in verse based on ancient tale), *Step on a Crack* (adjusting to stepmother), *Russian Plays for Young Audiences* (collection of five fascinating plays that help understand Russia and her young people), etc.

F. Classic "Title" plays. These are adaptations of fairy tales, sometimes good but often pedestrian, too often staged because the title will sell the show out. There are always several versions available, sometimes more than one even from the same publisher. If you choose to do one of these, check all the publishing houses and read several versions before deciding on the specific script you wish to do. Examples: *Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, Pinnochio*, etc.

G. Plays to be staged by Children. These are works intended to be done by children in school, church, park and recreation settings, etc. They are sometimes didactic, but are often fun and sometimes are intended to introduce the youngsters to subject matter. Examples: *Aesop in the Afternoon* (collection of plays based on Aesop's tales for sixth graders to perform for earlier grades), *Shake*
Hands with Shakespeare (collection of short adaptations of Shakespeare to be done by children for children), Plays Children Love (collection of plays from several areas listed above; final section includes several plays for children to be staged by child performers).