Play Reviews


Shining Princess is the story of “Kaguya Hime,” one of Japan’s most familiar folk tales. Moonbeam, the daughter of the Moon King, is sent to earth as a baby and hidden inside a magically glowing bamboo. She is discovered by a lowly bamboo cutter who takes her home to his childless wife to raise as their own. As she grows, Moonbeam’s beauty and grace is known far and wide. Suitors come from far away only to be rejected until she meets the Emperor with whom she falls in love. The Moon King returns to claim her as his own and demands her return to the sky. A battle ensues between the forces of the Emperor and the Moon King, resulting in Moonbeam departing her beloved earth to reign in the heavens.

Originally written for a large scale production, *Shining Princess* is versatile enough to be scaled down for classroom or touring. Although heavy on props and scenery, adjustments can be made to accommodate smaller areas and budgets. The cast ranges from a minimum of 14 to as many as 30 depending on doubling. The sound tape designed for the show would be a must for production. It utilizes Japanese themes and instruments which are electronically produced to create the various moods of the play. Actors could range from fourth grade to adult.

This play would be challenging to produce and enjoyable for the audience. It’s combination of magic, humor, and adventure is appealing to elementary age children.

—Christine Bartlett


This is an adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic story of a spoiled little English girl, Mary, who, after having been brought up in India, is sent to live with her uncle in England. She is confronted with her equally spoiled cousin, Colin, who is confined to a wheelchair. Because of their eventual friendship, they discover the locked garden and help each other overcome their self-centeredness.

The story is handled skillfully at the beginning of the script and it is entertaining. We are shown a believable world with good dialogue. The play sets up a conspiracy to undermine the health of Colin by the housekeeper and his doctor uncle, who would inherit the manor if the boy dies. The children discover this and the doctor is dismissed. The script, however, handles this too early and the climax is achieved too fast and with little conflict. The
reconciliation between the children and Colin’s father is also done too quickly and much of the tenderness of the book is lost. It is unfortunate that the emotional buildup from the original is not brought into this script. Even with these difficulties, it is still a good script with some sections working very effectively. —Donna Williams


This is very close to the original fairy tale. The settings can be quite simple — a house, a chair, a wood bin, and indications of a wall. The garden can be represented by a rock and a planter of radishes. After the witch has stolen Rapunzel, the “garden” area is changed to a tower where the girl is kept. The stage could then be cleared for the desert scene or it could be played in front of the curtain.

The script calls for six characters, and a narrator who is used to describe the transitions from scene to scene. The dialogue and story line are complete and simple although there is one chase sequence which is not absolutely necessary. There is a sweet moment where the Prince teaches Rapunzel how to dance. The stage directions in the scene where the witch pushes the girl out of the window need to be more clear. The characters are rather two dimensional, but that is the hallmark of a fairy tale. It is the simplicity of these characters representing good and evil which appeals to young children.

I think this would play well to all grammar school children, but particularly to the younger grades. —Gayanne Ramsden


*The Fir Tree* is a combination of ballet, song, puppets, and pantomime. The story centers around a small fir tree and a selfish, little boy who are both unhappy because they are not “big.” They are sure that when they have grown up they will be happy. It is not until too late that the fir tree realizes he was happy all along. During a dream sequence, the fir tree tells the little boy to “wake up” and enjoy who he is now, before it is gone. When the boy awakes, he understands that happiness is not centered in himself, but in what he can do for others.

Props and scenery tend to be numerous, yet are simple and imaginative — particularly the fir tree which must “grow” during the performance. The tree and rabbit are puppets manipulated by cast members who also can double as other characters. As few as five performers are needed for the piece; however, I question the need to have the narrator also play the tree. This could cause several staging problems which would be solved by adding an additional cast member. Lighting could be a problem as the script depends heavily on
light changes for the different seasons. This fact limits the possible production spaces; however, I believe the season changes might be achieved, instead, through simple costume and prop changes.

The music is a wonderful addition to the script. Each character has special themes which together are interwoven to create the desired moods. The vocal score is obviously written to accommodate highly trained, professional voices. The characters are expected to run the full range of scales, often within one song. An example is with the Narrator/Fir Tree character — the first being in the lower register, the second in the high. The same problem exists with the Boy, who’s voice must be capable of lowering as he grows in age.

I would recommend production by an adult company for elementary age children.
— Christine Bartlett.


Two robbers, Bago and Rago, pick the pockets of several townspeople and try to rob a soldier who has found a silver whistle—a magic silver whistle. But he tricks them when the genie of the whistle comes and drives them off stage. A magician is successful in stealing the whistle from the soldier, and he uses it to make himself rich and important. The magician also becomes the judge who convicts the soldier of deception and puts him in prison. The repentant soldier befriends a bird by helping him get out of the prison building, and the bird, in gratitude, steals the whistle and gives it to the soldier. The soldier frees himself and returns the whistle to the princess who originally lost it. She sees that the whistle has caused many problems for her and her kingdom and decides to neutralize the whistle and free the genie to live a normal life. The many turns of plot in this play also involve audience members in making sounds and helping to advance the plot. The play moves quickly, although not always plausibly, toward its conclusion. The characters are drawn in broad, old strokes like the dark lines in a child’s coloring book. There are director’s notes, at the back of the play, that describe problems from earlier productions and suggests possible ways of dealing with them.

The play was written in England for teachers to perform for the primary grades, but could be performed for early elementary aged children (K-4) by either adults or children. If children were the performers, most of the audience participation should be cut because I question their ability to control the audience at the times it is required. This play would be fun to tour as it is easy to stage, and could also be used to promote classroom discussions.
—Harold R. Oaks and Christine Bartlett.

How does a ten-year old come to understand the death of her thirteen-year old brother? This is the topic of the play *You Don't See Me* by Kathryn Schultz Miller. Stephanie’s brother Jimmy has died. They have been fast friends, always playing and working together. Before he died, he helped her on a science project for school. She thinks a special machine they made for the project can make people invisible and that Jimmy has simply become invisible to other people. This pretend fantasy develops into an attempt by two other characters to steal the secret invention from Stephanie and Jimmy. Jimmy is played by a mime, communicating only by gestures to Stephanie. Eventually, the imaginary Jimmy tells her he must go, gives her a hug, and disappears for good. She then realizes that he is gone and will not return and is able to accept comfort from her parents. She is also able to discover self-worth in realizing that she has completed the shoe box camera for the science project and is able to face life once again.

The play effectively addresses a difficult problem for young children in dealing with death. Unfortunately, the play does not use the word “death,” and perhaps its usage by the parents would be helpful in coming to a full realization of what has happened, both for audience members, as well as for the characters on stage. However, the play is touching and should be of interest to students, and open up the possibility of discussing death in the elementary classroom. —Harold Oaks

Still, James. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. From the story by Margery Williams. For production rights contact the Emmy Gifford Theater.

This play, originally staged by the Emmy Gifford Children’s Theater in Omaha, Nebraska, is a free adaptation of the original children’s classic. It has been updated with references, as well as in the structure, to make it appear as a contemporary work rather than the classic period piece that the novel represents. It tells of two brothers, their relationship together, and their love of their toys: a horse and a rabbit. The story draws its strength from the original when the rabbit becomes “real” because of the love given to it by the four-year-old Stephen. Stephen becomes ill, and the toys are disposed of because of the possible germ contamination in them. Then a toy fairy intervenes and, for the traditional happy ending, turns the rabbit and the horse into a real rabbit and a real horse.

The strength of the work lies in the relationship between the brothers which is not nearly as well developed with the rabbit. The play, I believe, would play well for young audiences and has the potential to work as a touring piece as well. It is a nice piece, but it loses the color of the original because of the change from the classic style. — Harold R. Oaks

Aubrey The Snowflake is a modern, make-believe story about a snowflake who is so anxious to begin winter that he falls too early. In his efforts to keep from melting, he makes new friends with the leaf and the buddy bars. His encounter with the cold, cold heart almost causes him to give up all hope of attaining his dream of winter play. A twist of fate helps Aubrey to escape the cold, cold heart just as the first winter snowfall begins. Aubrey is now free to be who he is, a dancing, glittering snowflake.

The story, though a bit over simplified, is fairly well written. Geared for lower elementary age children, it provides an avenue for creative expression and roll play with a potential for fun. The script is flexible, utilizing as few as five players, but capable of handling as many as you desire by adding additional snowflakes. Set and costume requirements are simple and easy to accommodate. This play could be presented in any space using a piano accompaniment or the available sound tape. Music is lively and simple for children to learn. The parts are easily playable by young children.

Aubrey would make a good class project or program for parents. Some production notes and choreography/mime suggestions are included. —Christine Bartlett.