Play Reviews

George Nelson

Harold Oaks

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Harris, Aurand. *Monkey Magic.*

An effort to bring another’s culture into our own society needs to be encouraged, but there is an inherent danger that must be addressed. That danger comes in losing the form and content of the original culture’s literature—in this case, the Chinese Story Theater. In this play, *Monkey Magic,* it is a dramatic error to compile together all the stories in which one character appears, the monkey, to create a single play—with western standards. This is what *Monkey Magic* has attempted to do.

In *Monkey Magic,* the gods have given the monkey the power to make people happy, and with his gift of magic he enters into the stories and intervenes on behalf of the characters. In most cases the nature of his intervention robs the characters of developing a solution they could have managed themselves, and deprives the play, as a whole, and the individual stories, of any meaningful conflict.

One of the stories in this script is the story *The Lost Slipper,* the Chinese version of Cinderella. The rich content of the story becomes a simple scene in a sequence of nine other stories that are equally rich in content. The other stories, *The Rooster Calls the Sun,* *Time for Tea,* *The Magic Kettle,* *Master of Tricks,* *One Ghost, Two Ghost,* *The Foolish Four,* and *The Princess and the Kite,* are treated in the same fashion in which beautiful stories become trivialized by the interference of the Monkey.

We have funny situations in the play, but the rich material is poorly exploited. With strong performances, the show could carry and be enjoyed by audiences. Still, the missing sequences of the stories will create a void and leave many to seeking for the fullness that could have been accomplished by use of the real qualities of the Chinese Story Theater.

The script appears to be directed at very young audiences, Pre-K through first grade.

—George Nelson

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The trilogy of adaptations of C. S. Lewis books, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Magician’s Nephew*, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by Glyn Robbins and published by Samuel French (London), has problems making the transition from books to plays. The major problem with these adaptations is apparent in each script as Robbins does not move the action and the power of the written word onto the stage.

In most cases, the important story line, conflicts, and character development of the plays happens off-stage and is then shared with the audience through an expositional speech of the character that has just gone through this harrowing experience. This style robs the characters and the audience of any real growth and development, and resigns the script to a simple retelling of the well-known stories.

There seems to be a lack of focus in the scripts because Robbins attempts to stage the small details of the books rather than zeroing in on their main theme. Not every book can be made into a staged adaptation, but it appears that the most important elements of theatricality have been left out of this adaptation.

Missing from the scripts is the meat of the books and their ability to help the audience come to grips with important concepts like personal humility and strength, admitting mistakes and overcoming them, personal struggle and self-sacrifice, overcoming selfishness and personal gratification, hard work and dedication, and the theme that goodness will always win no matter what earthly rewards might suggest. These scripts only brush at these concepts. The characters on stage do retell the stories, but those who know from whence they came will feel shortchanged.

—George Nelson


This musical is a combination American western and traditional melodrama, brought together under a musical format. The story involves Molly, a Pennsylvania farm girl, whose father dies, leaving her the farm. She has always wanted to go West and participate in all of the things she has read about in the "Wild West Gazette." She is tricked into trading the farm for the deed to a bogus gold mine in Dry Gulch, Arizona,
the home of the legendary Peppermint Kid. She goes to find the mine and her hero. The Kid had been created as a publicity tool to help advance the town, but he doesn't tell Molly that he's a fake. Eventually this is discovered, the plot is worked out, and the Peppermint Kid and Molly (renamed Montana Molly) go into the movies and make their fortune.

The piece is fast-moving, should be quite entertaining, and would be a fun evening in the theater. One of the strengths of the play is the portrayal of Molly as adventuresome and daring, and the Kid as a less than courageous hero, thus breaking stereotypes. However, the play is weak in that it tends to tell episodes rather than to show them. It starts rather slowly, though it picks up toward the middle. It is rather unique in its plot, therefore making a piece that audiences would enjoy.

—Harold Oaks

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Surface, Mary Hall. *Round Pegs, Square Pegs.*

The play is set in a futuristic, imaginary world. The arms race is represented by two "round" characters and two "square" characters. Each of these is a pair, father and son. The children are "spun" by the adults to determine the eventual placement of the remaining non-round and square beads on a large abacus, upstage. The two children become friends and eventually devise a way to resolve the conflict between their fathers.

The conflict and its resolution are appropriately important, but the writing tends to be pedantic rather than believable, even in this fictional dramatic context. The play also trivializes the ideological differences between East and West, and while the arms race is deplorable, a child should be given some understanding of the legitimate differences in the two viewpoints. As well as being simplistic in plot, the play’s characters need greater depth and dimension. Mary Hall Surface has written stronger plays than this one.

—Harold Oaks

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