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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

C Boettcher-Tate, Karen. *Sam and the Serpin-Snake.*

In the Kingdom of Posst, the King cares for nothing but making money and acquiring possessions. He lives in luxury with his wife, two spoiled daughters, and his son Sam. Sam tries to get his father to take care of the peasants, but the king cares nothing for their deprivation. Because the king had refused to help others, Hilda the Hag and the Gloombas take all the king’s wealth. The only way to get it back is for someone from the kingdom to go to the dreaded Serpin-Snake and bring back one of his scales. Sam volunteers and in the course of the play, he gains courage, the king learns kindness, and true love is found.

The lessons this play teaches are very good although they could be conveyed more subtly. Also, the tongue in cheek humor does not always come off and often ends up just sounding silly. Younger children, however, would enjoy the Gloombas and the Serpin-Snake. This play would work best for a class project.

—Gayanne Ramsden

B+ Church, Jeff. *Dick Whittington and His Cat.*

The English legend of the orphan Dick Whittington, who eventually became Lord Mayor of London three times, is retold in this musical play by Jeff Church. Dick makes his way to London in the company of some rogues, and on his arrival is befriended by the kind Mr. Fitzwarren. A stranger gives him a cat and tells him the cat will bring Dick good luck. The cat does kill the mice in the dismal attic Miss MacGrundy, the grouchy old cook, condemns him to sleep in. Mr. Fitzwarren’s daughter, Alice, who has not spoken for years, speaks up for the cat and tells Dick that Miss MacGrundy has put the cat on board her father’s merchant ship. Dick sets out to reclaim the cat. He does find and rescue the cat (and Alice as well) on the ship of a fearful pirate. At this point the story seems to lose its forward motion and abruptly ends in a rather disappointingly limp resolution. This is disappointing because up to this point—three fourths of the way through the play—the story is intriguing and well-written. We want to know what happens to Dick and his cat. The ending leaves us feeling like the
playwright was in a hurry to end the play within a limited amount of time, or that he just didn’t give as much thought to the ending as he did to the rest of the play.

In spite of the disappointing ending, it is an entertaining play and would tour well. The cast of seventeen can be reduced to nine by double casting characters. It would perform well for both child and adult audiences. The play was performed at the Kennedy Center with gobo lighting effects and simple set pieces. The designs for the gobos and set pieces are included with the script.

—Rosemarie Howard/Gayanne Ramsden

B+ Dorn, Patrick Rainville. *Nutcracker.*

On Christmas Eve, Marie’s brother, Fritz, receives a large wooden nutcracker from his mysterious godfather, Drosselmeyer. Drosselmeyer tells the children the nutcracker is actually a prince enchanted by a wicked mouse king. Fritz thinks the nutcracker is useless and ugly and gladly hands him over to Marie. When the children are sent to bed, Marie takes the Nutcracker to her room. As she sleeps, the Nutcracker, along with Marie’s other toys, come alive. They defend Marie from the mouse king. The toys are almost overcome, when the now wide-awake Marie throws her slipper at the mouse king and kills him. Marie and her toys accompany the Nutcracker to Toyland to help him defeat the mouse queen and break the spell he is under.

This musical version of E. T. A. Hoffman’s "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" uses well-selected excerpts from Tchaikovsky’s "Nutcracker Suite." Lyrics, which help move the story along, have been added to some of the melodies.

Because the story is so well-known and loved, this version would probably work well for family audiences—parents and children through age 12.

—Rosemarie Howard

A Dubay, Brenda Joyce. *Just So Stories.*

Five of Rudyard Kipling’s delightful animal tales have been skillfully adapted for stage. "How the Camel Got His Hump," "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin," "The Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo," "The Elephant’s Child," and "The Cat That Walked by Himself" are the
Just So Stories that are brought to life by two sisters and several other actors performing animal parts. The younger sister reminds her studious older sister of the fun they used to have reading Rudyard Kipling’s tales aloud. She convinces the older sister to leave her studies for awhile and play out some of their favorite tales.

Much of Kipling’s original beautifully-written prose has been retained by the playwright. Although directed at a K-6 grade audience, it is an interesting, well-written play that would be enjoyed by both adults and children. The simplicity with which it could be staged would make it an easy show to take on tour. If necessary, the play can be shortened by eliminating one or more of the stories. Puppets might be very effectively used in creating at least some of the animal parts.

—Rosemarie Howard/Gayanne Ramsden

B

Hydenn, Bill. The Clown Prince.

K-4


This is a story about a prince and princess, who are betrothed but who do not desire to marry each other. They have never met, but neither can bear the thought of a loveless marriage. The princess runs away rather than marry and disguises herself as a gypsy. The prince dresses himself as a clown and also runs away. The two meet in the forest and form a traveling act, become friends, and then fall in love. Eventually they discover their true identity and are delighted to know that they are already engaged.

The Clown Prince has an enjoyable plot and younger children would like the magic and clown acts. It would play well for a class project to be presented to younger children. The plot begins well, but the climax is told rather than shown, which weakens the play. However, its humor and gentleness is a welcome relief compared to so much of the fare that children see in the media. I recommend this for grades K-4.

—Gayanne Ramsden

C

Kelly, Tim. Robin Hood, the Musical.

4-6


Robin Hood’s adventures with his merry men have been adapted into a rather cartoon-like series of episodes. The action takes place in and around Sherwood Forest and Nottingham Castle. Robin and his men rob the Sheriff of Nottingham and the Lady Merle, who, along with Maid Marian and her servant, are on their way to the Sheriff’s
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Castle. Maid Marian and Robin renew their acquaintance. Robin and his group try unsuccessfully to convince the two girls to stay in the forest. After being robbed by Robin and his men, Lady Merle vows to avenge herself and plots to trap Robin by offering a golden arrow as the prize in an archery competition to which the entire county is invited. Of course, Robin shows up in a disguise, wins the arrow and escapes unscathed.

Not only do the characters lack depth, but the supposed conflict between the Sheriff of Nottingham and the poor peasants, represented by Robin Hood and his men, does not exist. No one would fear this Sheriff of Nottingham enough to pay the extra taxes he has imposed. Lady Merle is the wicked plotter and makes the Sheriff look like a foolish country bumpkin at every turn. It would help if the Sheriff’s wife were portrayed as evil and plotting. But she and her daughter can think only of pleasing Lady Merle with the hope that Lady Merle will provide the girl with a rich husband.

There are some fight scenes involving staves and swords, as well as the archery contest, that would need to be carefully staged.

The music is lively and melodic, but the multiple verses of several of the songs have make them tiresomely repetitious. It would take some creative staging to compensate for this.

Fourteen players are required for the play. Additional players may be added as desired to play Robin’s men or towns people at the fair. This play would best be presented by or for ages nine through twelve.

—Rosemarie Howard

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C  Kelly, Tim. The High School That Dripped Gooseflesh.

This musical horror spoof takes place in Mandrake High as the students prepare for "Grad Night." While decorating the gym, one well-meaning but poor, studying student unfolds this tale of mystical beauties and mythical monsters in the hopes that it will satisfy his English teacher’s demands for an essay assignment. Despite numerous sophomore fatalities, the stories’ heroes save Grad Night while finding true love.

Kelly’s mocking of typical teen slasher films is obvious, giving the play an appeal for high school students familiar with "blood and guts flicks." However, as teen slasher films generally lack substance or gripping plot, so are these same weaknesses found in The High School That Dripped Gooseflesh.
Consequently, this weakens the play and makes it unsuitable for performance by or for any non-high school age.

—Kelli Jo Kerry


A bundle of a baby boy is orphaned by Sherakhan, the tiger. He is protected by Bagheera, the panther, and is raised by the wolfpack until he is ten years old. At that time, he must choose whether to continue in the jungle or to be the human man-child he has become.

This elaborate struggle of coming of age is emphasized by the unusual circumstances of the jungle and the challenge of being different in a society of animals. He only wants to be left alone to be able to continue as one of the wolves, but is forced by the wolves, themselves, to recognize his differences, and eventually by the bear and the panther to recognize his uniqueness and his ability to manipulate things using the strange hands which none of the other animals possess.

It is an interesting story with well-drawn characters and a pointed climax. I feel this story works well for audiences and would produce excellently on stage. It requires a jungle-gym type setting that allows the monkey and other animals to move around freely to create images of the jungle. In these days of heightened environmental awareness, it draws a sharp contrast between man’s insensitivity to his environment, and the careful balance which must be preserved in nature.

—Harold Oaks


I’m afraid that in this play, we have another cutsie version of a fairy tale. This time "Little Red Riding Hood" and the "Three Little Pigs" is combined into one tale with the wolf as the bad guy. The stories intertwine with the common denominator, the wolf, who wants to eat everybody. However, at the end of the story, the wolf is foiled, and instead of eating the pigs, or Little Red Riding Hood, he is forced to eat Grandma’s custard.

Fairy tales can be effectively parodied if they have wit and clever dialogue and a theme which ties the story together. However, to be good satire, intelligent dialogue is also required. *Who’s Afraid of the*
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*Big Bad Wolf* does not have any of these requirements and the dialogue is weak and uses sick humor.

So many adapters of fairy tales do not seem to realize that to a child, these stories are serious and capture their imagination. Some advocates of fairy tales have said these are maturation stories that deal with the difficulties of growing up. Mr. McCabe seems not to have realized the beauty of these old tales when he bowdlerizes them, leaving them only "cute" and without content.

—Gayanne Ramsden

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In *Fool of the World,* a peasant named Dmetri, who is unsure of himself and very inept, learns that he has the power within himself to do marvelous things. At the beginning of the play, Dmetri learns that any man who brings the Czar a flying ship can marry the Princess. Wanting to do this wonderful feat, Dmetri is discouraged until he meets a man named Peter who, with the help of a puppet named Ivan, teaches him that everyone has magic within themselves. Dmetri is then able to make the flying ship, goes to the city, and he and the Princess fall in love. The Czar, horrified that his daughter could love a peasant, tells Ivan to bring him the heart of a cloud. Once again, Dmetri sets out and does indeed find the heart of a cloud. But in the process, he loses his flying ship. Although the Czar is enchanted with the heart of the cloud, it is an ephemeral thing and dissolves into the air. The Czar is upset, but Dmetri tells him that he has everything he needs within his own heart. The Czar, impressed by Dmetri's wisdom allows him to marry the Princess.

This is a participation play with music. Unlike many participation plays where the audience is extraneous to the action, in this play the audience helps move the action forward. The script also has ample notes and direction on how to direct the audience, and most of the pantomime involving the actors is explained clearly—except how to build or pantomime the flying ship. This information is somewhat vague.

The show would tour well and if necessary, the cast can be reduced to four. If the cast is limited to four, and one person is the spider and the cloud, it would be best if this person had a creative dance and movement background. This script would play best on an arena or thrust stage, or in an acting space rather than a proscenium stage. Although the story is quite charming, the language is somewhat
simplistic and even with younger children, well-written dialogue is important. Also the scene where the Princess falls in love with Dmetri is a little abrupt. On the whole, however, the play would perform well for the lower grades.

—Gayanne Ramsden

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