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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Harris, Aurand, editor. *Short Plays of Theatre Classics.*

*Short Plays of Theatre Classics* is perhaps the finest collection of classic play adaptations available for young audiences. Virtually every major period of Western drama, from Medieval times to the end of the 19th Century, is represented within the twelve plays, making this collection valuable as both a history and a theatrical text. The updated language and simplified plots make these adaptations particularly appropriate for performances by actors either too young to tackle the original works, or with special needs. Most of the adaptations are considerably shorter than the original plays and are consequently ideal for audiences such as young children, the elderly, and the handicapped who may be unable to sit through a full length play.

While these condensed versions are suitable for touring and for actors or audiences with special needs, they are not (unless otherwise noted) recommended to take the place of the classics in drama curriculum.

Each one of the twelve plays are individually reviewed by Kelli Jo Kerry.

**A**

*The Second Shepherd's Play.*

4+ 14 pp. 7 characters. Royalties upon request.

This skillful adaptation of a Medieval miracle play would be an excellent addition to classroom reading. The play tells the comical Christmas story of the shepherds who forgive a clownish scoundrel, Mack, for stealing a lamb, and are then notified of Christ’s birth by an angel. Written in verse, the play gives the authentic feel of Medieval drama while updating the language enough to make it understandable for modern audiences and readers. This play is certainly stageable and may be used in drama curriculum; however, it would be equally well-used in humanities, history and English classes as an example of medieval drama. *The Second Shepherd's Play* is recommended for ages eight through adult.
Many scholars credit *Ralph Roister Doister* as the first regular English comedy. The play is a predecessor to Shakespeare's drama and an excellent example of action-packed comedy and satire as Roister Doister. The incurable romantic fop is repelled in his unwelcome, amorous advances by an army of household servants armed with kitchen utensils. This adaptation has updated the language while retaining the verse and comedic elements. *Ralph Roister Doister* is recommended for performance by ages junior high and up, for upper elementary through adult audiences.

This clever adaptation of Shakespeare's comic fantasy about a trick played on the Queen of the fairies making her fall in love with a foolish weaver has been adjusted for a child audience. Aurand Harris has succeeded in removing the plight of the young lovers in the original play while maintaining the lyrical language and wit characteristic of Shakespeare. The result is a humorous introduction to Shakespeare, appropriate for children from third grade up, and is free from the romantic intrigue that children may not appreciate. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is recommended for ages five through ten, and to be performed by grades three through eight.

Moliere's classic slapstick comedy, *A Doctor in Spite of Himself*, is an excellent example of 17th Century social satire. The story of a woodcutter who is mistaken for, and successfully masquerades as a doctor, has been translated and adapted to maintain the character of Moliere's original, while still making the play understandable to young people. This play is suitable for both performance and classroom use as it is both stageable and entertaining. *A Doctor in Spite of Himself* is recommended for performances by and for junior high through high school.
A

The Tricks of Scapin.

7-12

26 pp. 7 men, 3 women. Royalties upon request.

As one of Moliere's classic farces, The Tricks of Scapin provides students with an introduction to the familiar plot starring the clever servant who tricks and cheats his way through life, manipulating his masters, and eventually being discovered in his deception.

Junior high and beginning high school students would enjoy both performing and seeing this farce while being introduced to Moliere. The Tricks of Scapin is highly recommended for performance by and for junior high through high school.

A

Goldsmith, Oliver. Edited by Aurand Harris. She Stoops to Conquer.

7-10

24 pp. 6 men, 3 women, servant. Royalties upon request.

This 18th Century comedy, about two sets of young lovers who, through a series of mistaken identities and practical jokes, are brought together, is nearly farcical in its humorous plot and characters. The play is an example of a departure from more socially refined 18th Century comedy, and this adaptation makes the play accessible to young, modern audiences. The dialogue flows well, yet is concise while maintaining the 18th Century flavor. This play is recommended for both performance and classroom use for junior high school and beginning high school drama students.

A

Mowatt, Anna Cora. Edited by Aurand Harris. Fashion.

7+

16 pp. 5 men, 4 women. Royalties upon request.

This satiric comedy, about the foolish snobbery of 19th Century upper class Americans and their pitiful worship of French elegance, mocks American socialite manners as the uppercrust Tiffany family is nearly fooled into marrying their only daughter to a French con man, masquerading as a count. The play is reminiscent of 18th Century comedy of manners; however, it has a distinctly American flair with the back hills hick who saves the day and its reward of virtue. High school students would enjoy producing this play for audiences junior high and up, while teachers may enjoy introducing their students to a historic American play written by a successful American woman playwright.

This 19th Century French play is a delightful comedy about the romantic fancies of adolescents. The play, on which *The Fantastics* was based, focuses on two young lovers whose parents pretend to hate each other in the hopes that their children, in Romeo and Juliet style, will fall in love. The ploy works, and the young romantics are permitted to marry following the staged reconciliation of their fathers. High School students would enjoy performing this satire of their own age group, while audiences age thirteen through adult would enjoy its performance.

Rostand, Edmond. Edited by Aurand Harris. *Cyrano de Bergerac.* 31 pp. 11 men, 4 women, spectator. Royalties upon request.

This adaptation of Rostand’s classic tale about Cyrano, the long nosed, lyric lover successfully adjusts the play for a younger audience, retaining the swashbuckling adventure, while minimizing the romance. The resulting play still retains the character of the original, at the same time making it suitable for a younger audience. *Cyrano de Bergerac* is recommended for performance by junior high and up, for audiences elementary through junior high.

Wilde, Oscar. Adapted by Aurand Harris. *The Importance of Being Ernest.* 26 pp. 5 men, 4 women. Royalties upon request.

*The Importance of Being Ernest* is wit at its finest as two gentlemen, masquerading under the name of Ernest, each fall in love with ladies whose highest aspirations are to marry men named Ernest. Following the inevitable complications of taking on two identities, all is discovered and resolved as the lovers are happily united. As a classic example of high comedy, this play would be an excellent addition to English or drama curriculum. The adaptation retains the literary wit of the original, while simplifying the language and shortening the length for younger actors and audiences. This play is highly recommended for children ages eight through sixteen.
Shaw’s *Candida* provides drama with one of the most poignant female characters created. Candida, the play’s heroine, is asked to choose between her minister husband, a kind but foolish man who drastically underestimates Candida’s strength, and Eugene, a seemingly frail yet perceptive youth. Although Eugene understands life and Candida better than her husband could ever hope to, Candida chooses to remain with the more helpless of the two—her husband.

The adaptation closely follows the story line, basically shortening the play and simplifying some of the dialogue. Consequently, this makes the adaptation ideal for classroom use. The philosophical themes of the piece make it inappropriate for young children; however, junior high through high school students would find the play both exciting and challenging.

Beginning in the 1900’s and continuing into the 1930’s, traveling "Toby Shows" were popular throughout rural America. With *A Toby Show*, Harris has created a play using the stock character of the country bumpkin "Toby" who always gets the better of the city slickers. In this particular play, Toby takes the part of the fairy godmother in the Cinderella fairy tale as he foils the plans of the snobbish socialite stepmother, finally succeeding in getting the sweet Cindy (Cinderella) married to a real live prince.

*A Toby Show* is both fun and educational as a fine introduction to a unique period in American theatrical history. Junior high through adult actors would enjoy performing this colorful comedy for audiences of all ages. *A Toby Show* is highly recommended for both classroom work and performance.

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In the play, *Telling Wilde Tales*, there are seven skits based on stories by Oscar Wilde. All of the plays, except one, have a somewhat
sad and melancholy outlook. The first is "The Birthday of the Infanta." In this story a spoiled princess breaks the heart of an ugly, grotesque boy who has never seen himself. When a mirror is brought in for the boy to see what he looks like, the boy is grief stricken. The callous princess does not care for the boy’s feelings but commands him to dance for her. She desires this because she thinks he is amusing. But the boy is unable to dance and he dies of grief because he loves the Infanta and realizes she cannot love him.

A star falls from the sky and a woodcutter finds, at the end of its light, a beautiful child. So begins the second skit entitled "The Star Child." You would think a star child would be especially good, but this is an ill-natured, cruel child who thinks himself above others. Eventually, the star child finds out that his mother is a beggar, but he cruelly rejects and reviles her. Then his face reflects his soul and he becomes ugly. To have his face restored to its former beauty, he must find his mother and beg for her forgiveness. His search teaches him compassion. Finally, he learns to love and finds his mother is a queen. They joyously reunite; but because the star child has suffered so much, he dies soon after he is crowned.

The third story is "The Happy Prince." The Happy Prince is a gold and jewel adorned statue who gives all his wealth to those in need. He has the aid of a swallow, who, in helping the prince, stays too long in the cold climate and freezes to death. Then God sends an angel to find the two most precious things in the city. The angel returns with the lead heart of the Happy Prince and the body of the swallow.

In the "Nightingale and the Rose," a nightingale gives her life’s blood so that a red rose may bloom and a young man can claim his love. After the bird dies, and the rose blooms, however, the young man’s love rejects the rose and the young man rejects love. The nightingale has died for nothing.

Another story as equally sad is that of "Little Hans and Big Hugh." Little Hans gives continually to his friend, Big Hugh, and Big Hugh thinks that friendship alone is enough to give. Little Hans neglects his own garden which supplies him with food helping Big Hugh’s family. When one of Big Hugh’s children thinks they should give something in return to Little Hans, Big Hugh chastises the child and says that friendship is enough. Finally, one night, Little Hans goes out into the snowy night to bring a doctor for one of Big Hugh’s children. He gets lost and drowns in the attempt. The narrator of this story tells the viewers to draw their own conclusions.

In "The Fisherman and His Soul," a fisherman falls in love with a mermaid. The only way he can be with her is to lose his soul. He goes to a witch, who, for the price of a dance, tells him how to lose his soul.
But when the fisherman is finally freed of his soul and joins his mermaid, they are both cursed and they die. They are put in a common grave.

In the final story, "The Young King," the king who is about to be crowned realizes that the price of his gown, scepter, and crown have been the labor and lives of his subjects. He realizes it is too high a price. He uses the wealth from the crown and scepter to build a school and hospital for his subjects and gives his robe to the poor. Then he reigns in peace and wisdom all his life.

All of these stories are poignant and touching. They are held together by a narrator and they could easily be produced using few sets and the minimum of costuming. The stories could easily lead into a post play discussion for they are thought provoking and have interesting morals and themes. It would play best to junior high through adults.

—Gayanne Ramsden


A queen, having seen the Bird of Light, pines for it and will die if she cannot see it again. Her three children go off in search of the bird to save their mother. They must pass through the Forest of the Night, the Sea of Serpents, and climb the Magic Mountain in order to get the bird. However, on the Magic Mountain is a witch who turns to stone whoever tries to climb the Magic Mountain. As the children travel through the Forest of Night, they help a beggar who gives them a napkin that will fill with food whenever the owner wishes, a purse that is always full of money, and a belt that will fill the wearer’s head with stories. All three gifts help the children, but it is the belt that the witch desires and to obtain it, she leads the children to the Bird of Light.

This is an interesting tale that, if properly choreographed and staged, would make an enchanting play for younger children. The script, however, does call for the children to fly on the bird and this may be difficult for a mature productions. It could, however be done in a stylized manner where the children and bird only pretend to fly. It might be interesting to make this a Chinese tale and use Chinese story theater staging with few props that are used symbolically.

The songs in this play are too long for the amount of story development they give; however, the mood of each piece goes along with what is happening when it is sung. The melodies are singable in
a reasonable range for average singers. Most of the songs are good, but I would leave out the "Nitwits" song. It reveals the queen’s despair, but we’ve already heard her say it. The lyrics of the play are somewhat pedestrian and not very original; but the story itself would be enjoyable for younger children if very visual staging were used. There is much that is told in this story and not shown, so it would need some clever business as the children move through the forest, sea, and mountain.

—Gayanne Ramsden

B+  Kravis, Marcia (adapted by). *The Velveteen Rabbit.*

This well-known and loved children’s classic is the story of a boy who loves a velveteen rabbit so much that the rabbit becomes real.

The playwright makes effective use of a narrator and music to move from one piece of action to another. Judging from the sample tape, which is performed by children in kindergarten through second grade, the play has been written for children to perform the adult, as well as the child roles; however, I would prefer to see adults playing the adult roles. The adaptation is true to the spirit of the book. The music, which is included in the script, is adequate, although somewhat repetitious, and it is written in a reasonable range for the voices of young children. There are no tunes you would walk away humming after a first hearing. The lyrics add to, and usually move the story along.

This adaptation would be a lot of fun to use for an elementary school classroom or school drama production. It requires a minimum of 19 actors and singers. The set and costumes could be as simple or elaborate as the director chooses to make them. There are also suggestions for the set design in the script.

—Rosemarie Howard