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Play Reviews

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B+ 4-6 Reviewed by Mary Randak

*Elementary, My Dear Shakespeare* is the result of the authors’ seven-years’ experience in producing Shakespeare’s plays with elementary school children. Both authors are full-time teachers and their book is full of practical, hands-on suggestions for everything from motivating students, to making sure everyone has costumes on time. It is designed as a workbook which is meant to be copied for distribution to all the students in an individual classroom.

This book is intended for students in the fourth through sixth grades. (The authors mention that they have often used both younger and older students in the same productions with great success.) The materials which they offer include games, puzzles, and anagrams, as well as several chapters of written background about Shakespeare and his time. There is also an appendix which provides sample letters to parents, and a design for a Shakespeare Festival program.

The final third of *Elementary, My Dear Shakespeare* is a script of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, adapted by the authors for their students. Included are simple suggestions for scenery, props, lighting and costumes, and a character list showing the number of lines which each character has to learn. As in the first section of the book, there are games and puzzles designed to help students with unfamiliar vocabulary words.

*Elementary, My Dear Shakespeare* is a very down-to-earth, nuts-and-bolts workbook which is meant to encourage even inexperienced teachers to go ahead and try the Bard. Engen and Campbell have used the value of their experience to "take the bugs out" of their production suggestions and to create a play script simple enough for fourth graders to master without difficulty; however, I miss the poetry of the original play. In comparison with *Shake Hands with Shakespeare* by Albert Cullum, *Elementary, My Dear Shakespeare* scores higher in practical details and lower in artistic appeal. It presents a useful addition to the still small library of editions of Shakespeare meant for elementary school children.

★★★★

**B+ 4-6**

Reviewed by Mary Randak

This play, like the authors’ treatment of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is meant for performance by children of the fourth through the sixth grades. The authors have used three narrators in order to reduce the number of lines which any one student might have to learn, and to speed the action of the plot. They have also simplified Shakespeare’s language by rather drastically reducing the length of individual speeches. The result is a play which can accommodate a wide variety of ability levels in its production. The tradeoff, however, is a loss of some of the magic of Shakespearean verse.

As in the script for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the authors have included practical suggestions for lighting, props, scenery, and costumes; puzzles and games to help students learn unfamiliar words; and a list of characters with the number of lines required for each part. This is indeed a foolproof, if prosaic (pun intended) rendition of *The Taming of the Shrew* which elementary school teachers may find very useful.


**B+ K-6**

Reviewed by Noreen Astin

This play is an adaptation of Ken Graham’s familiar tale which first appeared in 1989. The tale deals with a rather gentle and lethargic dragon who is discovered in his cave by a young boy. The boy makes his discovery known, and the townspeople are suspicious. They want the dragon killed. The boy arranges with St. George, the dragonslayer, that he only pretend to kill the dragon. He does so, and the people are satisfied. Eventually, though, the people come to realize that they like the creature, even though he is a dragon.

The message of the play is that people can learn to like animals or people who are different. This version of the story has a beginning and an ending with a different twist: it begins with a boy and a girl on a snowy afternoon who decide to listen to a circus man’s tale about the dragon. As such, the play becomes a story within a play. These characters reappear at the end of the play. These bits seem a bit contrived, but there are also an alternative beginning and ending supplied which simply begin and end the tale in a
straightforward manner. The play is basically a clever piece with a simple, straightforward story. The play could be produced inexpensively and simply if imaginative costuming is used, particularly for the dragon. There is room for imaginative acting and staging, and the show should hold interest and entertain.


A  K-Adult  

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Uncle Remus tales are generally loved by children, as well as adults. This adaptation of several of Joel Chandler Harris's stories about the incorrigible Brer Rabbit, Brer Terrapin, and the always outwitted Brer Fox, and Brer Bear, is no exception. The tales include "Bag Full A Turkeys," "Whipme-Whopme Puddin'," "Bag In De Corner," "Brer Terrapin's Tug O' War," "Brer Rabbit's Laffin' Place," and "De Wunnerful Tar Baby."

Characters use the delightful Southern dialect in which the stories were originally told. The stories flow in and out of each other smoothly and naturally with the help of narrative provided by Brer Terrapin.

The play requires four strong actors. The set and costuming are simple. It would be a good touring show. Presented with skill and imagination, the play would be well accepted by almost any age audience.


B  K-6  

Reviewed by Noreen Astin

*Swords Beneath Camelot: The Quest for Excalibur* is a magical, legendary play that deals with the King Arthur legend. Morgay is an ancient spirit of the earth who rules the caverns where Merlin and the boy Arthur are imprisoned. Long Meg is one of Morgay's enchanted rocks, and she helps contain the prisoners. The Dragon has also been imprisoned there, but he has grown small and pathetic through the years, and his fire has gone out. Arthur demonstrates his kingly kindness by allowing the Dragon to live, even though he originally felt it his duty to slay it. Arthur learns skill in swordplay from the Shadow Swordsmen who imitate his every move as they fight. By taking a cup that could have been poisoned, Merlin arranges with Niniane, the Lady of the
Lake, to help them get the sword, Excalibur, for Arthur. The cup really is the handle of the sword, so the prisoners are allowed to go free and all is restored.

The story is fanciful and entertaining, and it should play well for elementary age children. Actors could be cast from older elementary children and/or adults. There are suggestions for simple costumes in the booklet, but they lend themselves to elaboration if desired. The Dragon costume is the only one that is potentially complex. The set design is simple, and the play could well be used for touring. This play could be used to introduce school discussions about Medieval customs of knighthood and the Arthurian legend. Characterizations are a bit shallow and some of the plot developments are rather hurried and unconnected; but the play should hold interest if directed well.