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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


C- 7-12  Reviewed by Gayanne Ramsden

*Who Shot Willie?* is a spoof on detective stories. As the curtain opens, the audience sees Willie’s body on the stage. A few minutes later, two people enter, each with a gun. Hearing a noise, they hide on stage as Willie’s wife, Henrietta, enters. Upon seeing the body, she calls the police. When the policewoman, Gabby, arrives, she and Henrietta try to solve the murder. At the end of the play, we find that Willie is alive and is only following the stage directions in the script.

While one of the players says they are like characters in a play by Pirandello, not knowing when they are real people and when they are only characters, this play seems to have no point in the dual parts. There is no theme or reason for the author to have used this device. We can only assume he was trying to be “clever.” However, neither the dialogue nor the plot are able to carry off this interpretation of an avant garde play.

The play is, however, somewhat amusing, and it might be good for a junior high school or high school drama class. The play requires only a few props and no period costumes, but it does require a curtain at the back of the stage.

★★★★


A K-3  Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

This adaptation of the traditional story of Puss in Boots is an audience participation play with optional music. A short, well-written preshow introduces each character as the actors prepare for the show and lets the audience know their participation will be needed during the show.

Puss and Simple meet when Simple rescues Puss from drowning in the river into which a frightful ogre has thrown Puss, for catching one of the fish. Both are homeless and decide to be friends and help each other. Simple gives Puss
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a pair of boots and Puss decides to help Simple find a place to live. Together (with some help from the audience), they capture a peacock which Puss delivers to the resident king as a gift from his master, the Marquis de Calabra. The king wants to visit the Marquis, so Puss must find a suitable castle for Simple to claim as his own. Puss tricks the ogre into changing himself into a mouse, devours him, and delivers the ogre’s castle to his master, Simple. Clarissa, the king’s daughter, and Simple, who have become friends, decide to marry and everyone lives happily ever after.

Audience participation is consistently required throughout this show that early elementary-age children would appreciate and enjoy. Clarissa and Simple have characteristics that young children would identify with: they are sometimes clumsy; and they are learning and not afraid to say they don’t know something, or that they can’t yet do a thing well. Both are looking for a friend who will understand and appreciate them for who they are.

A minimum amount of scenery and props, and four double-cast actors would be needed to perform the show. It would tour easily. The optional music was unavailable to the reviewer; however, the lyrics are included in the script and a note suggests that producers have the option of creating their own music or sending for the music used in the original production.


C- K-3 Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

This play is a fanciful tale about Tom (a young boy who seems always to be hungry) as he encounters his Uncle Morton’s collection of paintings. Because his uncle has not given him enough dinner to satisfy him, Tom wanders among the paintings, admiring the realistic looking fruit. He finds he is able to remove the fruit from the paintings; but in mid-bite, realizes that he cannot remember how the paintings looked initially and worries that he will be punished for ruining them. Rembrandt materializes from his self-portrait and offers assistance. Rembrandt, however, gets carried away with his freedom and, convincing Tom to accompany him, takes a walk through town and marvels at the amazing changes that have occurred since his time. The two accidentally join a party where Tom’s parents are guests; but the adults assume Rembrandt is Uncle Morton. Tom avoids having to provide explanations by rushing back to his uncle’s home and fixing the paintings just as his parents arrive.

The play contains some humorous moments which are good in that they go beyond those in the storybook. The potential exists for interesting observations about modern society as Rembrandt encounters it for the first time; however, as
in the storybook, this potential is never explored. The conflicts that are occasionally introduced seem so contrived and are resolved so quickly and uneventfully that they lack purpose.


A 7-Adult Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

The Troubles: Children of Belfast is a musical about the racial and religious tensions in Ireland. It is set in Ireland and begins with a leprechaun who addresses the audience directly and gives an introduction to the play. Then the company, in chorus, provides extensive historical background about the development of the conflict to be dealt with in the play. This introduction contains extensive information that may be difficult to understand in such an abbreviated presentational form; however, the chorus does effectively establish that however complicated the reasons for the conflict might be, it manifests itself as hatred between the British Protestants and the Irish Catholics. This idea is elaborated on throughout the play with vignettes that show the common people and the children—those who wish only to be free from fear and violence—victimized by, and succumbing to violence themselves.

The theme, that violence and hatred are self-defeating, is couched in several unusual presentational formats. Three scenes are described by an on-stage character as in a continuing soap opera. Another scene is a mock game show. Several scenes take place in a pub where a comedian tells jokes that revolve around political and religious prejudices. While extremely effective, these formats speak more to an adult audience than to a child audience; however, the play could be used effectively with junior high and high school audiences as a way to introduce study and discussion about the situation in Ireland. As such, it is a very important, educational play. The musical score was not available for review.

**A K-6, Family audiences** Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Instead of trying to combine Lewis Carroll's story of the looking glass with "Alice in Wonderland," as some playwrights have attempted to do, Mr. Geisler has simply and successfully focused on adapting the looking glass adventure.

In story theater fashion, Alice Liddel (the original little girl Alice—to whom the stories were first told), now a 60-year-old woman, sets the scene and moves the show smoothly through each transition—into and through the looking glass land to the final scene, back in her living room.

The dialogue, which is well-chosen and flows smoothly from scene to scene, is true to the delightful language and style of Carroll's original.

Staging should be simple and uncluttered. The set is a giant chessboard with Miss Liddle's present-day living room suggested on one side. Aside from what is used in the living room, all other props or scenery are brought on and taken off by the actors who appear in each of the eight squares as Alice makes her way through them to become a queen.

Imaginative and colorful costumes and props, along with well-rehearsed actors, would bring this script to life for elementary-aged children, as well as for family audiences.

The play requires six actors, four of whom are double cast. Playing time is about one hour.


**A K-adult** Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Aurand Harris’s adaptation of the book *Pinballs*, by Betsy Byars, is a thought-provoking, well-written drama depicting heart-rending situations that today’s children encounter. Three children—Carlie, a 15-year-old girl; Harvey, a 13-year-old boy; and Thomas, an 8-year-old boy—come to Mrs. Mason’s home as foster children. Carlie is there because her second stepfather beat her; Harvey has two broken legs, courtesy of his alcoholic father; and Thomas is an orphan who was left on the doorstep of two very old women who are now sick in the hospital.

At first read, the story’s ending seems to be too good to be true; but more thought reveals that the play is structured like a fairy tale: the good guys, the bad guys, the conflict, and the resolution—where the good guys win. In this
case, the good guys are the children who have someone willing to help them have the strength to keep loving and helping each other as they deal with the ugly problems life has presented. The bad guys, unfortunately, are parents who have deserted their children physically, emotionally, or both. Mrs. Mason’s house acts as a safe place for the children to come to grips with themselves and win their individual emotional battles.

The character of Carlie dominates the story. She is a typical 15 year old, simultaneously repulsively obnoxious and totally lovable. At the beginning of the play, Carlie feels like she and the other two children are merely pinballs in a pinball machine, whacked about by the whims of life. At the end of the play, she realizes that she does have power to direct her life. Mrs. Mason has the patience to allow each of them to sort through their anger and grief. Carlie and Mrs. Mason are the catalysts for bringing about the healing that happens.

Although some of the lighting effects might pose a touring problem, it would be worth trying to work out the problem. The set could be simple. Actors required: one 15-year-old girl, one 13-year-old boy, one 8-year-old boy, one adult female, one adult male, and the recorded voices of five other people.


B+ 9-12

Reviewed by Gayanne Ramsden

*Fortress* is a contemporary play about two teenagers, Kim and Billy. Both have had difficult childhoods—Billy was traumatized when he learned that he was adopted, and Kim was physically abused by her father. Kim and Billy are the main characters in the play, while other parts are played by different members of the ensemble who change character by making some small costume addition.

While the play is primarily narrated by Kim, the story is mostly about Billy who has withdrawn from his family and who has no other friends except Kim whom he often rejects. Finally, with the help of a psychiatrist and Kim, Billy is able to allow another human being to be his friend.

The play is a serious piece that would probably appeal to high school students as it deal with the feeling of alienation that teenagers often experience. It would be easy to costume, and the set is simple, consisting of chairs arranged differently to denote different rooms.

The script, on the whole, is well-written, although some of the speeches are very long and would take a talented actor to perform. Also, there is some confusion regarding the time sequence in the story as it is unclear when Billy was in a car accident. However, the play is quite good overall and would be enjoyed, either as a classroom piece, or as a high school production.

**A- Pre-4**

Reviewed by Mary Randak

This is a lovely participation-oriented adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's story of "The Little Mermaid." There are four characters: Despina, the mermaid; Naiad, her friend; Malvina, the beautiful-but-evil sea witch; and Prince Steffan. Members of the audience are used in a variety of roles including sailors, fish, birds, wind, and sound effects. The play involves children in the production from the very beginning. Naiad enters as a sort of prologue and invites children to come up as "bubblers" to make soap bubbles for Despina's entrance, and as sailors to man the ship of Prince Steffan. The children are invited to participate in many parts of the play, including the climax: the breaking of Malvina's evil spell.

I think this play, as a whole, is nicely done. The plot is simple, the characterizations and language are good, and the piece has plenty of theatricality built into it. My only complaint is that the character of Naiad, who has most of the exposition, is not always very believable. Malvina, the evil sea witch, however, has great lines and is sure to get the audience involved in her character. This play would be excellent for a small, adult company, touring schools or libraries. It has a very simple story line which is basically familiar to everyone (courtesy of Disney), and it could be performed with a set as minimal as Despina's treasure chest, a rock, and some bushes to suggest the castle garden. Although it is written to be performed on a stage, it would work very well in a more intimate setting such as a school or library multi-purpose room. It does require actors who have experience working directly with children, however.


**A K-6**

Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

Much of this play is done in flashback as an old man looks out over Commerce Valley, an industrialized metropolis, and describes to a young boy how the valley looked when it was Treasure Valley, the richest and most beautiful land in the world. His story tells how Treasure Valley was turned into a desert by the Southwest Wind as punishment for the greed of Hans and
Schwartz, the two brothers who own it. The King of the Golden River gives them an opportunity to return the valley to its original splendor by climbing to the source of the Golden River and casting three drops of holy water into the stream. Both brothers try, but on their journey up the mountain, they see people in need of water. Because they refuse to help these people, the water they carry becomes evil and they fail, being swallowed up by the river and turned into dark stones. Gluck, their generous, innocent younger brother, succeeds in his journey because he gives his water to those in need and, as reward, the king of the Gold River appears and gives him the three drops necessary to restore the valley. The play ends by returning to the present where the old man reveals his identity as Gluck and makes a plea for saving the valley.

The moral of the story is overt, yet it does not read as such. The characterizations of the three brothers are delightful, as is the language. Costumes, sets, and staging are simple, but offer many possibilities for innovation and creativity. This play would be well-used in an elementary school setting as part of a unit about pollution and ecology. The play carries a timely message and would tour well.


A- 4-12

Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

This play is a description, told in flashback through the eyes of Eleanor Roosevelt, of her experiences at Allenswood, a school for girls where she developed her definitive character traits. It begins with a slide show of Roosevelt’s life which she narrates, and then takes dramatic form to show several moments of her life at the school. She learns to form her own opinions, to speak her mind, and to tolerate and value differences in others. Of particular importance is her friendship with Jane, a brilliant young girl who cannot control her temper. Eleanor must abandon Jane when she realizes that Jane has tried, selfishly, to keep Eleanor from making friends with any of the other girls. At the end of the play, Eleanor returns to the present to describe briefly how the skills she learned as a result of these experiences helped her throughout her life.

This play is primarily a character study. While it contains useful historical information and has good thematic content, it lacks dramatic conflict. However, it would be very simple to stage and would tour well. The characterizations are very good, and the play would be useful in a classroom setting to introduce discussions of women in history, developing self-esteem, etc.