1992

Play Reviews

Jennie Tobler
Debra Peterson
Mary Randak
Kim Dudley

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Tobler, Jennie; Peterson, Debra; Randak, Mary; and Dudley, Kim (1992) "Play Reviews," Children's Book and Media Review: Vol. 13 : Iss. 5 , Article 7.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol13/iss5/7

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Play Reviews


**A Family audiences**

Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

*A Woman Called Truth* dramatizes the life of Sojourner Truth from the time she was a child in slavery until she made her "Ain't I A Woman?" speech as a free woman. It is told by Sojourner Truth—at times through narration, and at other times through dramatic flashbacks. The play has several ramifications. It is an excellent study of an unusual and important character in American history. It is also a fair portrayal of slave life in that it portrays the different types of slave owners—some of whom were very gentle—rather than making a generalization and stereotyping them, as is often done, as evil and cruel. In addition, the script contains several spirituals, as well as other traditional Black music, which give insight to the culture of that society. Finally, the theme that ties Sojourner Truth's speeches together with her memories is that the justice of the law is for everyone.

The script is written to be produced with minimal props and costumes. It could be staged by adults for audiences of all ages and could be used very effectively in school settings in association with discussion of American history, civil rights, and the women's movement.

★★★★


**B- K-3 Family audiences**

Reviewed by Kim Dudley

The stories of Oscar Wilde are loved by people of all ages. This adaptation of his stories ("The Birthday of the Infanta," "The Devoted Friend," and "The Happy Prince") attempts to tie the three together through the theme of broken hearts.
In "The Birthday of the Infanta," the uncle of the Infanta brings a hideous looking boy to the girl to make her laugh. This boy, the Fantastic, is unaware of his poor appearance until he goes to the palace and sees himself in a mirror. After his realization, the Infanta's laughter kills him because it breaks his heart. This adaptation is so condensed that it does not elaborate long enough on the Fantastic's realization of his appearance and his emotional changes. Nor does it spend enough time on the character development of the Infanta's father.

Similarly, "The Devoted Friend" is a man named Hans who works hard for the miller—his selfish and demanding friend—who has promised him a wheelbarrow in return for his hard work. Instead, Hans is worked to death and never receives the wheelbarrow. Evidently, Hans dies of a broken heart. Because the play makes the death seem more like one from exhaustion, it seems disconnected from the theme of broken hearts.

Lastly, "The Happy Prince" is about the statue of a prince which gives to the poor all of the precious materials that have been used to create him. His friend, the swallow, delivers these riches to those in need. The swallow dies of exposure, and the prince dies of a broken heart—in gratitude for his friendship with the swallow. This story seems more developed than the first two, but it still lacks smooth transitions.

Although the stories are too short to be well-developed, dramatically, they could be used as a worthwhile way to introduce the original stories by Wilde to the classroom. I was intrigued by the plots and inspired to read the texts in their entirety in order to gain detail lost in this adaptation. All three stories require music, and the total number of actors needed ranges from 7 to 11. Miming and simple costumes—with additional pieces to denote specific characters—are integral to the performance. Imagination is the key to this production.


B+ K-4 as adults performing for children; Reviewed by Mary Randak 5-6 with children as performers

The first thing to know about this play is that it isn't like the book. It does use the making-of "stone soup" aspect of the plot; however, the play is really about gender identity and how two girls and one boy earn respect for their choice of a profession in the face of ignorance and misunderstanding by the townsfolk.

Set in a vaguely Medieval time period, in a village called Whisker, Stone Soup's main characters are two knights, Sir Charlie and Sir Lou, who turn out
to be girls in disguise. Each has proven himself/herself strong and brave by killing a mighty dragon; however, when the townspeople discover they are girls, their deeds are discredited and they are shunned. The other principal character of the play is a boy, Rocky Scum, who has the opposite problem. All he wants in life is to become a cook; but everyone laughs at him and refuses to take him seriously. Rocky, Sir Charlie, and Sir Lou become a team in order to face their difficulties. Together, they make a "stone soup" that shows you can’t always believe what you think you see, and everyone receives his or her just reward at the finale.

This would be a fun play for fifth or sixth graders to perform. Its theme—of being one’s self no matter what others may think—is appropriately handled for this age group. The play is full of absurd, humorous characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Tizzle who speak English completely in their own way, and four generals (Bigbottom, Moaner, Groaner, and Wahwah) who would all be great fun to play. Suggestions for costumes and set pieces are included with the play.

My only criticisms of Stone Soup have to do with structure and language. The author has put so many things into her play that the unity of the plot seems forced. For example, she has given each set of characters a distinctly different manner of speaking, and I found this overdone, cf "I squooshed them nasty dragons," from the villain Rafferty Scum. Nevertheless, for children, the play will be a lot of fun—if not great theater—and there is a lot to be said for fun.

Drive

Unpublished. Inquiries to Children’s Theatre Company and School, 2400 Third Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55404.

B+ 3-5 Family audiences Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

Beauty and the Beast is an adaptation of the fairy tale of the same name. The play adheres to the traditional tale where Belle replaces her father as the Beast’s prisoner in his enchanted castle. The Beast repeatedly asks Belle to marry him, and she eventually falls in love with him, breaking the spell of enchantment and returning the Beast to his human, princely form. The play avoids the monotony of other tellings—where the tale consists of repeated encounters between Belle and the Beast in which he proposes marriage and she refuses—by introducing a faux Belle who meets and dances with the prince while the real Belle witnesses the meetings in her dreams. The delightful characterizations of Belle’s siblings also lend interest and humor to the plot.

Although somewhat reminiscent of the Disney film adaptation of Beauty and the Beast, this play has several unique elements and would play well to family
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audiences. There is potential for elaborate costume and set design; but these technical elements might just as easily be kept simple.


B K-8 Reviewed by Debra Peterson

This play is a bizarre, humorous adaptation of the fairy tale Seven with One Blow. The tailor demonstrates his cleverness by tricking two of his friends, Berta and Martha, into give him large samples of jam while he purchases only small amounts. The royal family, comprised of the king, the queen, and the princess, comes to warn the villagers about the giants. They no sooner do so, than a family of giants appear and kidnap the princess to be a toy for the girl, Teeny-Tiny-Tina. The tailor plays tricks on the giants and rescues the princess. He proposes and she accepts. The king and queen retire from their duties, and Berta and Martha are invited to live with the tailor and princess as jam makers.

Preschoolers and younger elementary school children would be most entertained by the fast-paced action and dialogue. Some parts of the play move more rapidly than others. The dialogue of this play makes it quite humorous, though not of great artistic merit. Junior high students might enjoy presenting it to the younger grades.


B-K-6 Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

Ramona Quimby is an episodic play based on the trials and concerns of a third-grader, Ramona, as she interacts with her parents; her sister, Beezus—who at times acts as narrator; her friend, Howie; and several other characters. Although Beezus’s role as narrator is more convenient than necessary, the other characterizations are delightful and remain true to those created by Cleary in her books. Many of the episodes seem designed to carry messages about how to relate to other people in a family and/or peer group. These messages, for the most part, are not preached but are left for the audience to discover. Other
episodes are purely theatrical, particularly those where the script calls for dances.

The script contains many technical problems. The dance scenes require many actors. All of the scenes are elaborate, and the scene changes are immediate and complex. For example, Ramona and Beezus move to the final scene—the first day of school—from a wedding scene where they both have been wearing bridal dresses. The stage directions indicate that the costumes and set change, but doing so would require a considerable pause and necessarily disrupt the feeling of continuity that the playwright is trying to create. Other complicated stage directions call for the use of multiple mirrors, many different actors simultaneously playing Ramona during a dance sequence, and a scene where Ramona sees herself on television.

These problems could be alleviated by a judicious cutting of the script and simplification of the sets and costumes. In such a form, the characterizations would be compelling, and the messages would carry well.


Reviewed by Debra Peterson

The hospital, Bedside Manor, is threatened with closure due to a staff member—psychiatrist, Dr. Fred—who has given out inside information about the hospital and created confusion with other medical personnel. The last group of interns left the hospital because of Dr. Fred. Now there is a new group of interns; but if they leave as well, the hospital will be closed. One of the interns, Dr. Huggems, faints at the sight of blood and has failed other internships. He needs to be successful at Bedside Manor just as much as Dr. Jekyll, the chief of staff, needs him and the other interns to stay—to avoid closing the hospital. So much for the conflict in the play.

The medical personnel deal with the realities of hospital life through inane, abstract humor. Huggems comes to terms with his fear of blood after dreaming that he is expelled from the internship. He manages to bandage Dr. Jekyll's finger. Dr. Fred is then exposed by a bum who hangs around the hospital, and is arrested by two undercover policemen. The chaotic chase and capture is recorded by a visiting news team who are piloting the television show "This WAS Your Life."

The problems at Bedside Manor are dealt with and solved almost superficially in a fast, unbelievable manner which is meant to be comical and slapstick—although some of the issues presented may be quite serious. The
characters are under-developed and as a result, it is difficult to understand their true feelings. They are presented in a flat dimension of hectic confusion.

This play might be confusing to young elementary children due to the large casting, and the abstract, pointless humor.


B-  K-3 Reviewed by Debra Peterson and Jennie Tobler

This play is told (through flashback) from the point of view of Joel, the main character. It tells a sweet story about Joel who can now look back and see himself as a lonely young boy. In the flashback, his older brother, Jim, has pets; but Joel has none and he badly wants one of his own. Jim offers to let him have one of his ducks or a baby kid; but Joel wants something that belongs only to him. One day, a flock of geese flies over the farm and one is shot and wounded. Joel takes it home and helps it to heal. The goose learns to trust him; Joel learns the joy that comes from kindness, and the two become very devoted to one another. However, in the spring, the flock of geese flies over the farm again, and Joel learns that he must let his pet go if he really loves it.

The play carries a wonderful message, but its form is stilted. The script is laden with songs that halt the development of the story in order to explain the emotions the characters are experiencing. As such, it reads almost as a psychological exploration: not much action takes place, and the message is very didactic. In addition, the song lyrics often seem contrived and extraneous to the plot and the theme. The score was not available for review. Musical concerns aside, the script would be very simple to costume and tour. Elementary school children might enjoy producing it for their peers.


B+  7-12 Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

This play is a series of short, dramatic vignettes dealing with serious issues that face teenagers today: sexually transmitted diseases, sexual responsibility, date rape, teen pregnancy, teen suicide, and teenage traffic fatalities. These
vignettes are introduced by characters who speak directly to the audience and who provide statistical information about the subjects. The scenes of the play grew out of improvisational sessions conducted with teenagers in the Phoenix, Arizona area. As such, the mood is serious, honest, and straightforward, and the language truly speaks to the teenage audience. The overriding message of the play is that each individual must take responsibility for his or her own choices; but there is also a wonderful support network of parents, friends, teachers and counselors, medical workers, and clergy to assist teenagers in dealing with the questions and problems they face daily. The play is intended to spark discussion and to encourage students to seek help in making their decisions.

My criticisms are that the characters are often stereotyped and there may be too many topics attempted for one play. The vignettes are very short and do not provide much closure. They might be more effective if used separately so that the topics may be explored in more depth. On the other hand, grouping them together in this way does show the wide range of problems that may face any teenager, and, as such, may speak to a larger audience. The script is written for high school students to perform for their peers. The costuming and staging are extremely simple to facilitate touring and performing in secondary school settings for intimate audiences. It is stressed that a qualified counselor should be on hand to direct post-performance discussion.


A 5-8, Family audiences Reviewed by Kim Dudley

*In A Room Somewhere* is a wonderful musical written by Suzan Zeder. It deals with five main characters who are dropped, one by one, into a mysterious room with no windows or doors. Each character is already established—including a musician and a law student—but in this room, objects that belonged to these people (represented by life-sized dolls) keep appearing that take the characters back into key moments in their lives. These flashbacks—of sorts—allow the other characters and the audience insight into the character experiencing the flashback. The play illustrates the importance of understanding others and accepting them.

The room Zeder sets up is very specific, including lumpy objects covered by neutral colored sheets of silk. The objects in the room, however, are vividly colored. The largest object is an abstract piece which is supposedly a clock with no numbers and only one hand. This feature is central since the play takes place in one hour and deals with the concept of losing time. Also, in a sense, the play...
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deals with discovering what "makes people tick." Although the room is detailed and specific, the requirements could still be feasible for amateur performance and touring. The musical score was unavailable for review, but would only add to this already motivating and imaginative work. This piece would definitely hold the attention of any classroom.

★★★★