Play Reviews


Reviewed by Noreen Astin

This story revolves around a patchwork girl made of quilt scraps and cotton who is brought to life with a special potion. Unfortunately, in this creation process, another potion in the lab is accidentally spilled on two other characters, turning them to marble. Several important ingredients must be procured to make a potion that will return them to life, so the patchwork girl and her friends set out for Oz to find these ingredients. Along the way they have interesting adventures and meet many characters, and the play ends happily.

The play provides opportunity for large-scale involvement and participation, and producing it makes a good elementary school project. It does, however, require twenty set locations and a large number of props along with the large cast. Sections of the play could be cut to expedite the story, and perhaps more adventures and characters are included than can be adequately developed within the given time constraints of a children’s play. Also, in the end the much sought-after ingredients are not even needed, since the marble people are returned to life without the potion; thus the entire quest has been in vain. Nevertheless, the play is entertaining.

★★★★


Reviewed by Kim Dudley

This play may surprise some of the skeptics. Although the title may not interest many adults, children are likely to enjoy the play, since the idea stems from a popular movie. The script is short, but rather well-developed. With doubling, the cast could include five men and two women, but the script also offers other possibilities. The play’s only drawback is that the props and set are
somewhat complicated. For example, the script calls for some objects to appear suddenly; the author, however, does offer suggestions for dealing with these technical difficulties.

Jill and Ted are two teenage angels who are sent on a mission to retrieve Abraham’s knife and David’s stone. In the process they change the outcome of certain Biblical events and thus rewrite history. The play treats the stories lightly and with humor. Those who are concerned that young children might be confused by this treatment should avoid the play. In addition, due to laws regarding religion in the public schools, this play may not be appropriate for school groups because it contains many Biblical ideas and allusions. However, it is perfect for church youth groups or even private schools. It introduces the Bible in an exciting way, and it also includes a fair amount of detail. It might be fun to try this one!


B+ 6-adult

Despite the long list of characters, this play with musical interludes was first staged with a cast of five—three men and two women. The forty-two speaking parts could allow for a larger cast. This play does not have an identifiable plot. Rather, Westward Ho! is made up of vignettes. Wild Bill starts the play off by talking, in a rather uninteresting monologue, about the problems kids face today. The play is a vehicle for introducing some facts about America’s Old West.

Among the well-known historical figures who drop in for a few lines in the play are Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Sacagawea, and Colonel William B. Travis of Alamo fame. Some of the not-so-famous characters include Gail Borden and John Stetson. Westward Ho! manages to introduce young audiences to the birth of the Stetson hat and Levi’s as well as to the beginning of condensed milk.

Since the characters come and go quickly (almost frenetically sometimes), actors change roles by using hats and a few props. The rest of the characterization depends on acting ability. Audience participation is called for throughout the play—the audience is asked to sing songs like "Home on the Range" and "Sweet Betsy from Pike," but this part of the play is rather contrived and unnecessary, even risky in that it assumes children know these old songs.

Reading Westward Ho! has motivated me to learn more about some of the people and inventions of the Old West. It is hoped that the play it would do the
same for young audience members. It stimulates a genuine interest in history and the people who created it.

☆☆☆☆☆


**B- K-3**

Mary Randak

This version of *The Little Mermaid* is a musical rehashing of the familiar story. The play is written for a cast of twenty-five or more, but it can be double cast with twelve. It requires a number of specialized costumes and masks and four different scenic locations. The music consists of six songs and reprises, a ballet, and scene change music.

I found this musical to be similar to the Disney version but without the Disney charm. The Little Mermaid’s name is Anemone instead of Ariel. She has a clam companion (Clem Clam) instead of a crab. Her sisters’ names are Shelley, Pearly, Misty, Sandy, and Bubbly. Kids might think this is cute, but I found it condescending.

The plot line is similar to the movie’s except that there are two new characters: Georgina and Borgy. Georgina is a peasant girl who can say only "EEEEW" to everything, even when the Prince decides to marry her under the mistaken notion that it is she who rescued him. She much prefers Borgy, her boyfriend, and the interchanges among the characters, especially in the wedding scene, are very funny.

Overall, however, I thought the play was weak, especially in character development. The conflict with the Sea-Witch is settled too easily for my taste, and the character of Anemone never became real for me. In addition, the music is rather silly, and the stage directions (the ship splitting in two; the prince being rescued from drowning by Anemone) seem unwieldy and unworkable. It would require a very clever and innovative director to take the script beyond farce. This is the sort of reworked fairy tale that has been done in children’s theatre for the last fifty years. It would be nice to move beyond it.

☆☆☆☆☆
Moving Day is a delightful and imaginative piece to which children in grades two through five might easily relate. The play centers around two best friends, Willa and Sam, who begin an "elite club" only for girls who are best friends. The twist comes when they discover that Willa is moving. The play deals with the anxieties and fears children have as they face separation from their friends.

This performance can be enjoyable for all involved. The set is very simple because all the scenes take place in the clubhouse. The play requires only two female actors and one male actor, who plays Willa's little brother, Benji. The characters are realistic and imaginative. This is sure to bring a winning response!

Square Eyes. Unpublished. Inquiries to JoAnne James, 314B 6th Street N.W., Calgary, Alberta, CANADA T2N 1R9. 3 roles.

This play takes a practical approach to the common problem of illiteracy. It attempts to motivate children to learn and read by showing what life might be like without that opportunity.

David is a nine-year-old boy who idolizes and idealizes his father. Jackie is David's best friend. The two boys are entering a lip synchronization contest, but they cannot perform in the contest until their book reports are done. David observes Jackie enjoying a book and reading with her mother. In the interim, the audience learns that David's father cannot read, and we see the challenges that face those who are illiterate. When David approaches his father, his father's illiteracy is made known. After listening to his father, David, for the first time in his life, feels motivated to learn how to read. He decides to forsake his "square eyes"—a reference to eyes that watch too much television—and read instead.

This could be a valuable production for many children who have not considered the alternatives they will face if they fail to get their education.

**B- 4-6; family audiences**

*Reviewed by Kim Dudley*

You Don't have to Die is a serious play based on a book written about a young boy named Jason Gaes. The story deals with Jason's real-life bout with cancer. In the play this problem is presented realistically. After a dream in which Jason meets a devil's helper, he decides he wants to live. His actions from that time forward are for that sole purpose, and in the end the chemotherapy treatment is successful; Jason will live.

The play sets out to help people understand what it's like when a child has cancer, but the result is a happy ending which leaves the impression that it is easy to recover from cancer as long as one's mind is set on life. The ending seems too simple for such a complicated play. The power of the mind though incredible, sometimes is not enough. This play seems to defeat its own purpose, because not all children are as lucky as Jason.

This play could be done with simple costumes and a flexible set, as indicated in the production notes. It requires strong acting because it is a serious topic. If done properly, the play could provide great insights into the trauma that a family with a sick child experiences.


**A- 10-adult**

*Reviewed by Jennie Tobler*

The source material for this play is a collection of essays written by Virginia Cary Hudson; in the essays she describes her experiences as a ten-year-old girl living in turn-of-the-century, small-town America. These essays are extremely clever, humorous, and insightful to an adult audience because they reveal how children perceive the social constructions that surround religion and etiquette. They reveal that too often we tend to focus on rituals and rules, forgetting the meaning or purpose behind our actions. The play adheres very closely to the book, using Hudson's language extensively, and adopting the structure of little vignettes that bring to life her individual essays about different events in her life. As such, the play speaks to an adult audience in the same way that the book does.

My concern is that the deeper meaning would be lost on children, and that they would incorrectly interpret many scenes (like the one in which the children
baptize a little boy in a rain barrel) as being humorous because of the disrespect for authority the children seem to display. But the script would be very fun and insightful for an older audience if some of the technical difficulties (like what to do with all the water on stage after the rain barrel tips over) are worked out.


C+ K-6

Reviewed by Noreen Astin

This story is the first episode in the life of the female adventurer Lucky Hightops (so named because of her shoes) and her two cat helpers. In this episode, the dynamic trio travels to a planet that is run by criminals who happen, literally, to be dogs. The three justice-seekers right all the wrongs being committed in the solar system, one by one. They outsmart the evil dogs, find the captives, show that right will prevail, and that a woman and two cats can defeat a whole gang of cunning dogs, especially dogs who kidnap and steal.

Like the others in the series, this script offers the audience an action-packed series of adventures. The costume and makeup possibilities can be interesting, even if done simply. The story offers humor, and a strong female character is the protagonist. The play shows that the best weapons in a contest are not always the most obvious ones, and that mental sharpness can prevail against brute strength. A delightful paradox is presented in the character of a very ferocious mother dog who is a cute, ribbon-wearing, pastel poodle.

The story is a bit silly and pointless, as well as unrealistic; its only virtue seems to be its somewhat doubtful entertainment value. The characters are undeveloped and somewhat one-dimensional, and the solutions are too simplistic to be believable. But the story is happy and light, and it could be a harmless and enjoyable class activity.

**C+  K-6**

Reviewed by Noreen Astin

This story is the second installment about Lucky Hightops, an explorer who enjoys adventure and who is assisted by two cats. These three characters travel through space to the Crab Nebula to establish order in the universe, and they have a series of conflicts with an evil crab leader, several clams, and other creatures. The three protagonists eventually free some captives, conquer the evil forces, and establish justice in that part of the stellar system.

The script is appealing because it contains a great deal of action. Costuming the crab and clams requires imagination. The talking forest could be imaginatively staged. The moral of the story, that right will prevail, is wholesome, and the tale is generally entertaining and positive. There is humor in the script in several places, and there are some positive insights into life. The animals in the play are interesting, and the main character is a very capable female, in contrast to much traditional literature. There is some clever word play in words/phrases like "scurvy scallops" and "obnoxious oyster." The "hugugs" are characters who enjoy hugging, and they add an interesting twist, although they are not essential to the story. This play also introduces the concepts of science and space fiction in entertainment and literature; this could be used as a springboard for discussion.

There are weaknesses in the script, however. The concept is somewhat inane, and many of the lines are corny. The story does not have any obvious value except entertainment, and even that could be strengthened. The characters are flat and stereotypical, and some of the plot action seems contrived to make sure that the good side team wins. Finally, the last conflict is solved too easily; thus it seems unrealistic even for an unrealistic play. Nevertheless, the play does have some merit and could be a fun class exercise.

★★★★


**B-  K-9**

Reviewed by Noreen Astin

This third episode in this series is set in the future. The intelligent female protagonist, Lucky Hightops, joins with a dog from Canis Major (another clever
name); with the assistance of two cats, she overcomes a ghostly spaceship and the Robot King with his life appliance assistants (a clever idea).

The action is fast-paced and well structured in the style of science fiction. The play could be performed by elementary or junior high school actors. The roles and sets are simple. Costuming, makeup, and some set pieces offer opportunity for creativity. There is also opportunity to use music to create suspense.

The author provides several suggestions to help make the play work. The actors must be sure to speak the difficult jargon very clearly, or else young audiences will not understand it. Also, the terms "iambic pentameter" and "anapestic" should be defined and used correctly in order to be of value as a teaching tool. My criticism is that it seems inconsistent for Lucky to resort to using weapons when she has spoken against them and is so suited for a battle of wits against the Robot King. The ending sequence, with all of the appliance assistants running out of battery power at once, seems contrived. Killing the robot in the end also seems unnecessary; he could have been converted to the good team. However, for the most part this play is enjoyable and could be well received by young audiences and performers alike.


B+ 4-8

Reviewed by Jennie Tobler

This play, commissioned by the Seattle Repertory Theatre for the 150th anniversary of Columbus's voyage, purports to tell the true story of the discovery of the Americas. In the beginning, it characterizes Columbus as an arrogant, unthinking fool in his refusal to believe that he is somewhere besides India. The plot focuses on the conflicts that arise between the Spaniards and the native Americans because of misunderstanding and miscommunication about the location of the fabled city of gold. These conflicts eventually result in many violent deaths. The theme lies therein: fear and ignorance result in violence, while understanding and empathy result in peace. At the end of the play, Columbus redeems himself by learning to understand and appreciate the native American culture, but it is too late. The damage has already been done.

While the theme is serious, the play itself is lightened by clever characterizations and amusing interchanges between the Spaniards and the native Americans. These interchanges take place entirely in English, so some convention must be adopted in production to make it clear that the characters are actually speaking different languages. As written, it is unclear at first why the
characters are miscommunicating. However, when these technical difficulties are resolved, the play will provide relevant historical information as well as teach young audiences to relate to people who are different.

★★★★★


A 6-adult Reviewed by Kim Dudley

This play is based on a true, compelling story. The play opens as ten-year-old Moon Shadow leaves China for the "Land of the Golden Mountain," America. He soon learns that America is less than he imagined: he finds the reality of harsh immigration procedures, segregation, and racial hostilities. He learns many things from Windrider, his father, and other relatives, but his real education comes from watching his father realize his dream of building a "flying machine." Through a series of intriguing events, including threats and dreamlike encounters with the Dragon King, who encourages Windrider to follow his heart and to once again become a dragon, Windrider is able to finish the plane. Unfortunately, the plan crashes and is destroyed. Anxiety abounds.

The play ends with Moon Shadow and his father choosing to bring Mother from China rather than build another plane. Moon Shadow's powerful ending quote is "We always talked about flying again. Only we never did. But dreams stay with you, and we never forgot."

This play intrigues even the skeptics. The story line alone is enough to hold attention. The play captivates the entire audience because they desire to see the plane fly; few, if any, feel satisfied with the decision not to build another plane. The drama invites people to achieve their goals at any cost. The play deals with a variety of issues, as already mentioned, and it can be performed with a very small cast. The costumes and set may require some time because they can be elaborate, but the time would be well worth it.

★★★★★