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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A 3-6, Family Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This adaptation of Felix Salten’s novel contains the elegance and beauty of the original without the cuteness of the Disney version. The story focuses on the maturation of Bambi and his young deer friends in their forest environment, with all its joys, discoveries, and dangers. Harm and even death occur, but the play explores causes and effects, never focusing on the violence itself. The play gives insight into man’s relationship to animals, both in captivity and in the wild. It is a well-told story with interesting, well-drawn characters.

All the animals and birds are played by actors, with only a suggestion of "animalness." Character definition is gained by movement, language, and reaction. Space staging, including a suggestion of the forest and meadow, along with effective lighting and sound, would carry out the author’s intent.

This is an excellent play; its concepts reach far beyond what appears to be a simple story. It can be enjoyed by both middle elementary students and family audiences. Effective production will require considerable skill in staging and acting by mature performers. With double casting, the thirteen roles can be played by five women and four men.

★★★★


Review by Harold R. Oaks

This all starts when Phoebe’s parents, without consulting her, decide to "go after their separate dreams" and get a divorce. Now every weekend Phoebe rides a bus she calls the "Divorce Express" between Woodstock, where she lives with her father, and New York City, to visit her mother. The move requires her to leave her school, friends, and the city she grew up in and adjust to very different surroundings.
Fifteen is not an easy age. Phoebe meets Rosie, who also commutes between parents on the Divorce Express. Rosie introduces her to a new group of kids in the school lunchroom. All of them are complaining about the food, and Phoebe helps them decide to do something about it by staging a "no school lunch" protest. After some difficulties the students are able to help plan the menus and improve the food.

While this is going on, Phoebe meets a new boyfriend, her father meets a new girlfriend, her mother decides to marry Duane (known to Phoebe as "Plastic Pop"), and eventually, necessary adjustments are made by everyone.

Erwin adapted this play from the novel *The Divorce Express* by Paula Danziger. It was first staged at the Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska. It presents difficult situations honestly and with humor. The characters are believable, and the play should lead to productive discussions about the problems and adjustments required by divorce for both parents and young people. The original production utilized a simple unit set with a projection screen, but adjustments could be made if needed. It should be an excellent play for junior high and high school audiences.


Reviewed by Sheila Heindel

Based on the comic strip "Hagar the Horrible" by Dik Browne, this musical has all the original characters in a new adventure. Hagar goes off on a Viking raid, leaving his wife, Helga, and his children, Hamlet and Honi, to keep the home fires burning. He's off to France, but along the way he and his crew meet the scheming Swine Maidens. Hagar feels he needs new stimulus in his life, and in the process of pursuing it brings chaos to family, friends, and crew. The whole play is a satire on a day in the life of a typical family that has teenage children and a husband in midlife crisis. It is entertaining and strikes a familiar chord of recognition in teens and adults. Would be best played by and for teens.

A- K-6 Reviewed by Donna Moore

A discouraged Prince Eric and best friend Gustav the Troll return to the palace after a futile search for a princess. Eric wants to give up the search and just read books, but he must marry to become king. The clever troll causes Princess Astrid to appear out of a fierce storm. The evil courtier Osric, who will lose his place if Eric becomes king, tries to prevent Eric and Astrid from marrying, even though they grow to like each other very much. Tests of bravery, honesty, and sensitivity (the traditional twenty mattresses and pea) are all finally passed, leading to the desired matrimonial result.

The introduction of the ingenious troll and mischievous Osric add interest to this classic tale. Audiences will also like the simple magic tricks played by Princess Astrid. Music and sound effects are minimal. Costumes and sets can be simple or elaborate as desired. Running time is about 55 minutes. Three males and three females are needed.

★★★★


B+ 3-6 Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Both of these plays are intended to be performed by upper elementary children as a class or neighborhood project. The playwright includes basic performance information, writes in a casual style that would appeal to those planning to stage these plays, and gives a good introduction to putting together an amateur performance.

*Holiday in the Rain Forest*

The Kane and the Montrose families compete with each other to have the most memorable vacation experience. Mrs. Kane decides that the only exotic place left to go on a vacation where the family can get some great pictures to "bore" their neighbors with is a Brazilian rain forest. Family members pack their bags and soon find themselves in a one-room hotel where all guest services are provided by one person who wears many hats. Their discovery of the rain forest and its importance is aided by Jack and Melvin, two friendly alligators, and the Stone People. They return without slides, but with an awareness of
man’s relationship to and responsibility for taking care of the environment. Sixteen actors are required, seven if parts are doubled.

Kabuki Gift

Ti-ti, the daughter of mayor Rum-ti, has been promised in marriage to the warrior Bah-low from the next town in order to maintain peace in the region. Her true love, a poor man named Roe-nye, is not considered worthy of her by Rum-ti. Roe-nye consults the town’s wiseman, Tu-bah, asking his advice on finding a present for Ti-ti that will make her father see he is worthy of her. He has great difficulty finding a proper gift; but finally, in exchange for some sushi, the three Whistling Wind Women give Roe-nye the secret of true love. He returns to the village just in time to interrupt the wedding of Ti-ti and Bah-low, and all ends happily.

The play contains some clever dialogue and is intended to be performed in the kabuki style of theatre. The book does not explain clearly the kabuki style of theatre, so the reader or producer would need to do some extra research into this traditional Japanese theatre form. Twenty-seven actors are required, eight if parts are doubled.


Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

We first meet the cat, the stepsisters, and the stepmother. Cinderella enters the scene to rescue the stepsisters and stepmother from a mouse, which has long since departed the room. The fairy godmother has an apprentice who is sent ahead disguised as a waif to see if Cinderella is truly worthy of the fairy godmother’s help. Cinderella’s lovely ball gown magically appears in her mother’s trunk (conveniently offstage), so there is no need for quick on-stage changes of appearance. The stepsisters are played comically and are not taken too seriously.

Except for a bit of direct moralizing at the end, this play is a fun and entertaining piece of theatre that would work well in an educational or community theatre setting, played by or for children. It would also work for a touring company. There are many audience asides, and the audience seating area is sometimes used as part of the set.

Thirteen women and seven men are required. Additional party guests may be added. Production notes, including set suggestions and property

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requirements, are included at the end of the script. Some waltz music is required for two dance sequences.


B+ 7-9

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

The Cinderella story gets a new twist in this telling. It comes as a play within a play at a middle school in urban America. Ella plays the Cinderella character, but she acts more like the ugly stepsisters in early scenes. We discover later what motivates her and come to a better understanding of life for today’s teen. The play also mixes in some "magic" by Mrs. Madrina, supposed by the kids to be a substitute teacher, but really Ella’s Fairy Godmother.

The author teaches middle school and knows her characters and students well. The play has the vitality and drive of today’s teens. They should enjoy playing with this updated version and perhaps experimenting on their own with others in the same way. Cast can be twenty-six or more, or cut to eighteen if roles are combined. Teens playing for teens is the intent of this work.


A- K-6

Reviewed by Donna Moore

A Commedia troupe consisting of Columbine (the clever, common troupe leader), Arlequin (the mischief-maker), Punchin (bombastic, proud, with a big nose), and Rosetta (the country girl who fancies herself a lady) come to do a play. After some argument, they decide on the classic Princess and the Pea. Parts are assigned and costume pieces added. The prince needs a princess, so he advertises for one, ignoring the objections of his mother. Many princesses apply. We see several without merit, but the last one seems promising. She is tested by the queen in various ways, but she passes. Then the pea is placed under twenty mattresses, and she passes this final test also.

This is a fresh retelling of classic material. The players will captivate the interest of audiences. Costumes and properties are pulled from the company trunk. Other scenic and sound effects are created by the performers. Cast of two males and two females.

**B+ 4-12**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Bobo the gullible is sent to search through time and space for a half hour lost by Princess Zenza. As he journeys he meets others who commission him to find other lost items—a lost temper, a lost reputation, and a lost daughter. He returns to Princess Zenza’s kingdom as a hero, having found the lost half hour. He also reunites a mother with her lost daughter and finds his true love.

For the most part, the music is well-written and singable. It is integral to the production and requires experienced singers. The play is intended to be performed by adults for children.

Production notes and suggestions for flexible casting, sound effects, and a prop list are included with the script.

★★★★