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Play Reviews

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**A 4-8, Fam**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

A new dam has been built in the Cumberland River Gorge in Kentucky. Families that have lived for generations in houses and farms are being forced to move to higher ground, out of the way of the "tide." Granny Haw wants to die and be buried next to her husband, even if she has to defend herself with a shotgun. Geneva, her fourteen-year-old granddaughter, stays with her, works with her, and finally convinces her she has more living to do. Both teenager and grandmother learn together that life changes and we must change with it; we must grow and progress and be of service.

The play, based on the book *The Final Tide* by the same author, captures the language and character of the late 1940s in the Cumberland Mountains. The story is told with sensitivity and tenderness, not making anyone a villain or trying to make comments outside the experience of the well-developed characters.

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**B K-4**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Mother Goose has gone to medical school, become Dr. Goose, and set up a clinic in Nurseryland. She has some interesting cases: a crooked man who wants chiropractic adjustment; a boy with burns on his bottom from jumping over a candle, a blonde juvenile delinquent who breaks into a bear’s house and gets fleas, and many others. The play relies on knowledge of nursery rhymes. If played at farce pace with imaginative players it should be entertaining for a range of audiences. It could easily be played by junior high or high school students for elementary children. It has a flexible cast of 9 females, 6 males; but parts can be doubled for touring with an ensemble of 4 females, 2 males. Set and costume requirements are minimal.

**A K-6**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Kimberly-Kay doesn’t believe in stories. She would rather her Mother read to her from the encyclopedia than from a story book. A "child of tomorrow," she gets her entertainment elsewhere. Then one night the "Breezes" come, bearing a thousand tales from all over the world. They tell and act out three; one from Mexico, one from Japan, and one from middle Europe (the land of Austro/Hugaro/Italo-Beederburg!).

The company creates trees, houses, screens, and a range of sounds that carry Kimberly-Kay (and the audience) on the winds of imagination to experience these entertaining places. Dance and music heighten the artistic communication. At the end of the "dream," Kimberly-Kay has a new respect for stories and more insight into herself.

Production requires improvisation, an ability to interact sensitively, and imagination. Scenic requirements are simple, but they must be used effectively to be successful. Full production will require some dance sequences. Cast may be small, with multiple casting, or large (the original production used a cast of 38). May be performed by adults or high school students. Has been staged by several professional theatres for young audiences, as well as by several high schools.


**B 9-12**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Four high school boys break into a gym at night and accidently lock themselves in. They had only planned on playing basketball, but now they find it necessary to learn more about each other as they try to keep calm and find a way to get out without drawing too much attention to themselves.

In the process each boy tells about himself—his background, attitudes, and problems. Flashbacks help us see life from each point of view. Violence is a way of life, at home and with peers. We wonder if it is the only way they can interact with the world.

Developed to be played by four blacks, it has been adapted to be played by any race cast. Language is gritty but without profanity. The overpowering need to find other ways to resolve conflict is dramatically demonstrated.

**B Fam**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

“*Posadas*” is a Spanish word for “inn or dwelling,” as well as the name of a pre-Christmas tradition practiced in many Latin American countries. This tradition has been dramatized in a bi-lingual presentation that is intended to celebrate the Latin culture as well as promote intercultural understanding.

*Posadas* reenacts Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay when they arrived in Bethlehem. Each night for nine nights they knock on the doors of people who live in their neighborhood. Each night for eight nights they are refused entrance. On the ninth night they are admitted, and all the family’s friends and neighbors join in a party that includes eating, drinking, and breaking a pinata.

Spanish Christmas carols are an important part of the play, and the script includes suggestions for obtaining appropriate carols. Each part is spoken in both Spanish and English. The script gives several alternative methods for staging and dialog. Staging and costuming are simple, and the play could be performed in a variety of settings successfully. The play could be performed by junior high or high school students as well as community theatre groups and would be enjoyed by family audiences.

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**B 6-Adult**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This production takes a unique approach to the telling of Aesop and his fables. It is set in the Temple of the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Aesop has been accused of stealing Apollo’s cup and is condemned to death. Though, in reality innocent, he is accused because of a fable he told that revealed the "hollowness" of Delphi. The play, however, leaps to higher ground as the Greek gods Athena, Hades, Iris, and Zeus himself appear to plead, hear, and judge the storyteller/thinker Aesop. Several of his fables are told or acted out, or both, some by the gods themselves. But in the end the Fates have the last word.

This unusual play will require some knowledge of the Greek myths to be fully understood, but would, perhaps, serve as an interesting introduction to such a study. Production elements required to create the dramatic effects are extensive. As written, the play focuses more on the life and times of Aesop
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than on his stories, which are often used to advance the main plot (saving Aesop’s life). As a middle school or high school production it should draw considerable interest. It was originally commissioned and presented at the Arkansas Arts Center Children’s Theatre.

✦✦✦✦


B+ K-6, Fam Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Fourteen-year-old Beatrix Potter sits in her third floor bedroom drawing and dreaming about her animal friends. She is interrupted by the maid, Jane, who brings unwanted advice and supper. It is Christmas eve, but nothing different is to be done. There is no tree, no celebration, not even any special Christmas treats on the dinner tray. Beatrix dreams about what Christmas should be, and the fantasy, filled with animals she will later use to tell her stories, appears before our eyes.

This image fades as Beatrix’s younger brother, Bertram, who has been away to boarding school, comes rushing in to share the evening. The two children are befriended by Cox, the butler, who understands their loneliness and helps them find ways to celebrate the holiday. The "real" scenes are interspersed with the animal fantasies that capture the vibrant spirit of Potter’s stories. The production culminates with a magical mixture of animals and humans around newly decorated Christmas trees.

This is most like an English Christmas Pantomime, heavily produced, with a large cast (51 in the original production at the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis), magical sets and costumes, and live music. It can be produced more modestly; the script contains suggestions for staging and music. Emphasis of the work is more on spectacle than character development and plot, but it should prove a delightful Christmas treat for audiences.

✦✦✦✦


* 3-Adult Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is an excellent stage adaptation of Tomie de Paola’s picture book by the same title, commissioned and first presented by The Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis. We only recently became aware that it was available
for production, so are reviewing it now, even though it was produced over a
dozen years ago.

The author indicates the play was inspired by and based on de Paola’s book. It begins with the young child Giovanni and follows him as he juggles produce to help sell it for a family, then becomes a performer with a roving Commedia troupe. Here he is trained as a clown, able to draw crowds, money, and love from audiences and members of the company. But at last he leaves them too, to go on his own, culminating in a performance for the Doge, who asks him to stay at the palace to entertain visitors to the court. But he refuses, wishing rather to share his gift with the common people. He becomes old, unable to juggle or earn a living, and he finds himself in a church at Christmas, watching the Procession of the Gifts for the Holy Child. After the formal procession departs, he, too, wishes to give a gift—the only one he has, of juggling. He does his special performance before the Madonna and Child, but the effort is too much and the final "rainbow of balls" drops about the aged performer’s body. But the priest, who has been watching from the shadows, sees the statue of the Holy Child with the golden ball in His hands and a warm smile on his face. The gift of the Clown of God has been accepted!

Professional or semi-professional production will be required to bring out the range of possibilities in this script. It contains a range of color, imagery, and theatrical excitement that should delight audiences of all ages. There is also singing, dancing, and a number of scene changes to reflect the passage of time and location for the central character.

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A 3+ Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis and Rachel Young

Ama, a young fisher-girl, and her hand-puppet friend White Crane are sent by Ama’s dying grandfather on a dangerous journey to the legendary center of the universe, Mount Sumeru. They must save the village from the Demon-with-the-Changeable-Face who has driven all the fish away. Along the way they meet the comic samurai, Sukeroku, and Jiro, his clever manservant, who help Ama overcome the evil power of the Demon. The Demon has many disguises, such as the Demon of Thunder and Lightning, the Evil Water Sprite, the Ferry-Boat Driver, the Mistress of the Mists of Forgetfulness, and Snow Woman, whose cold embrace brings death. Each must be dealt with and overcome.

Kabuki theatre conventions are used throughout the play. These include black dressed property people who provide scenic elements and assist in creating theatrical effects; use of masks by property people to play multiple characters;
the Sound Maker, who creates live sound using a small drum, wood sticks, cymbal, triangle, and large drum; and abstract, suggested settings rather than "realism." This style is coupled with "story theatre" techniques to allow the action to move quickly and with dramatic effect.

Overall the script is very workable and amusing. Character development is well established through clear and animated dialogue. The cast is flexible, requiring at least five, but it may be expanded. Movement or dance training would be helpful. The script is appropriate for professional production, but it might be staged by talented young people with careful training and direction. The playbook contains detailed character descriptions, a pronunciation guide, definition of Japanese stage terms, an outline of traditional movement and postures, notes on the use of music and sound effects, and both descriptions and line drawings of costumes and property pieces.

The plot is original (not based on folklore or legend), but some character names and superstitions are based on tradition and are used effectively in the production. These are discussed in the back of the script and may be interesting for both cast and audience members. There is also a brief bibliography that lists books that might be helpful in staging and understanding the play.


Reviewed by Rachel Young

Mossy Cape weaves together the Lear folktales and elements of Cinderella from folklore and literary history, sets it in the post-Civil War South and gives us a delightful play. "Ole Daddy" decides to divide his plantation between his three daughters; the division is dependent on their ability to tell him how much they love him. The two older girls swear their "undying, unending, overpowering love." The youngest, Candra, says more honestly that she loves him, but no more than a daughter should; that "I love you more than biscuits love butter." He becomes angry, does not allow her to explain her answer, and disowns her. He then gives all his property to the older sisters, who banish Candra to the muddy swamp. There she meets Adassa, a "magic woman" who gives her the Mossy Cape and instructions on how to use it. The heart of Preston is won, he loses the girl and cannot find her anywhere, but she is revealed by Adassa and becomes his wife.
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In the meantime, "Ole Daddy" has also been banished by the ungrateful daughters, along with his faithful servant, Talbot. They wander in the muddy swamp until they are taken in by the new mistress of Cypress Plantation and given rest.

The play moves quickly, character development is adequate, and dialogue captures the color and style of the Old South. It is an interesting way to introduce King Lear to young readers and watchers, and should be of interest for a wide range of production groups.

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B K-3 Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Two of Beatrix Potter’s stories, The Tale of Peter Rabbit and The Tale of Benjamin Bunny have been combined in this adaptation. Peter is told not to go to Mr. McGregor’s garden, and of course, that is exactly what he does. After stuffing himself on the garden produce, he cannot find his way out of the garden, and he loses his coat and shoes as he tries to evade Mr. McGregor. He makes it safely home. Days later, he and his cousin, Benjamin, return to the garden and, after retrieving the coat and shoes, encounter a cat which keeps them hostage under a basket. Benjamin’s father rescues them and all return home safely.

The adaptation is true to the original story. However, the characters are not very well-rounded. Each has an exaggerated characteristic that is all we get to see for the entire play. This is irritating, especially the "tee-hee-heeing" and lisping of Flopsy, who is supposed be an "adorable" seven-year old, but who acts more like a four- or five-year-old. There seem to be some places in the script where it would be better to leave out some of the dialogue and let the actions tell the story.

Although the music was unavailable to the reviewer, lyrics for optional songs are included in the script. Most of them don’t really move the story forward.

This would work as an elementary school classroom production. The script requires 4 male and 5 female actors.

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**A- 1-5, Fam**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

*Aesop! Aesop!* combines 15 of the famous moralist’s well-known fables in a comic, musical review that will interest and entertain children as well as adults. The music is well written and enhances the production, giving each fable a unique style. Many of the stories could be performed with broad, almost slapstick humor.

The script in its entirety runs approximately one hundred minutes but is structured in such a way that the director may shorten the production by using only some of the stories. An author’s note states that the show has been successfully performed for elementary schools in the New York metropolitan area. Costume, set, and prop requirements are minimal, making this an easy show to tour.

A flexible cast of five to eighteen actors is required. The show would best be performed by high school students or adults for an elementary age or family audience.

★★★★


**A- 7-Adult**

Reviewed by Donna Moore

Startling contemporary takeoff on *Alice in Wonderland.* Alice is in wonderland on an LSD trip. The play begins as sixteen-year-old Alice arrives home from a party, where she has been given some LSD. On a whim, she decides to take the drug while talking to her friend Cindy on the phone. In graphic detail, we see Alice begin to experience the horrors associated with a bad LSD trip.

This play is a riveting educational experience of LSD, alcohol abuse, and codependency. The language is blunt and there is some profanity that is optional. This play should not be chosen for entertainment.

The play should be effective in various educational settings such as alcohol and drug abuse programs. A cast of 11 is required. Mood music and a video are also available from the publisher.

★★★★