Play Reviews


A-K-3 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

A young boy and his mother are playing a memory/imagination game. Each says "In grandmother's purse there is—" then repeats all the previous things and adds an item of his or her own devising. The boy thinks up adventure objects, like a pearl-handled sword, a black knight with snakes around his shoulders, and a giant Punjabi tiger king. The mother suggests an ivory comb and brush, Rimsky-Korsakov music, and grandma's wedding. All these "items" are brought to life by puppet characters who create scenes with the new objects. The contrast between adventure fantasy and more common, "real" experiences heightens until the mother, reacting to her son's accusation that she has no adventure in her life and is "dull," goes off to create her own excitement. The son, left alone, finds the world difficult to deal with without food provided by his mom, and without her tucking him in and showing him love. Each comes to a better understanding of each other and of fantasy and reality, leaving us with a happy ending.

This is an unusual and interesting play. Production requires a number of puppets, and performers (mother and grandmother) must be able to manipulate puppets successfully. Scenes change and grow out of objects on stage. Action is swift and imaginative. The production could travel easily, since it requires only minimal props and depends on imagination to supply background to the action.

The play was originally staged by a professional company in Finland. It is recommended for professional companies with good puppetry support. It could be done by advanced armature groups, with very careful planning and excellent timing.

★★★★

A+ K-6

Reviewed by Shiela Heindel

This is definitely an excellent, compact, quick reference text for elementary teachers who want to use drama in their classrooms. Gene Beck gives practical information and useful tips about all facets of drama: casting, planning the action, costumes, lighting, make-up rehearsals, scheduling, acting, and directing.

The first section of the book (twenty-eight pages) succinctly covers Creative Dramatics and explains how to use it alone and when teaching other subjects. This is followed by a selected, annotated bibliography.

The second section (fifty pages) goes through Ten Steps to a Super Production; this section covers the production process from selecting the play to a Performance Day Checklist, followed by a second selected, annotated bibliography related to play production. There is also a Glossary of Theatre Arts Terms at the end of the book.

Beck includes large cast plays adapted from fairy tales, to which she adds production notes, discussion questions, and enrichment activities. The enrichment activities deal with a particular period of history. For example, *Cinderella* is set in Italy, allowing for discussion of the geography and culture of that land.

Discussion questions, which appear at the first of each play, attempt to get students to go beyond the simple characters and action outline of the original tale. Beck's questions probe the students' feelings about characters' actions and behavior. For example, some suggested questions for *Cinderella* are:

*The Prince and Cinderella knew each other for only a short time before they decided to get married. Does this happen in real life? Why is this desirable or undesirable?*

*In many fairy tales there is a wicked stepmother. Are all stepparents evil? Write a story about a good stepparent.*

*Cinderella seems to think that if she and her sisters married wealthy men they would have happy lives. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?*

*Is marriage a solution to life's problems? Do people ever live happily ever after?*

*Cinderella's family was very unkind to her. Have you ever had anyone treat you badly? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?*

*Cinderella could not talk to anyone about her problems. It is different today. If young people are abused what can they do? Where can they go for help?*
The plays adapted from stories include *Cinderella*, *The Dancing Princesses*, *The Pied Piper of Hamlin*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Magic Pot*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Two Bad Bargains*. These plays may be legally reproduced, and the author encourages teachers to adapt them to students’ needs in the average-sized classroom.

I have included short reviews of the plays contained in the volume. In general, all the scripts are simple with short dialogue lines. Simple but effective scenery is used. Blocking is elementary. All scripts are flexible and adaptable, making them easy to produce in the classroom or for a more elaborate schoolwide presentation. The length of each play is thirty to forty-five minutes.

***

*Cinderella*

**B**   1-6

*Cinderella* is used by Beck to illustrate the section in the book titled "Ten Steps to a Super Production." The fairy tale is original in story line. There are thirteen boys and thirteen girls in the cast as written. This play could easily be performed by first graders. The Roman period of history is explored in the production. The discussion section deals with the family (see questions above).

***

*The Dancing Princesses*

**B+**   1-6

*The Dancing Princesses* is delightful. The story is intact and the script’s dialogue is in elementary school language. Dancing is kept to a minimum and the music can easily be pre-recorded. As written, the cast is for fourteen girls and fifteen-plus boys. Effective questions are asked about keeping secrets and about marriage arrangements. The accompanying educational activities explore France at the time of Louis XVI.

***

*The Pied Piper of Hamlin*

**B+**   1-6

This Pied Piper story has a twist to it: the mayor and council tell the people that their only hope of getting rid of the rats is to buy a "Rat Bat," but the council doesn’t have any more money. So the people donate the money to buy this bat. The council is lying—there is no "Rat Bat" for which to send.
The crippled boy of the story hears the council talking and tries to tell the adults, but the adults don’t listen. The Pied Piper comes along, and the children tell him what is happening. When the piper goes to the council, they are about to leave town. The story progresses along the original story line from there. The dialogue is understandable on the lowest elementary level and could be performed by children of that level as well.

The setting for the play is Germany and the enrichment activities deal with that land. The discussion section topics are on truth, disabilities, and solving problems.

***

Sleeping Beauty
B 1-6

This is a simplified version of the fairy tale. For enrichment purposes, the author has set the play in Spain around 1500. It is written for twelve boys and eleven girls and is probably best performed by the older grade levels for the younger. The questions in the discussion section ask about belonging, love, gifts, and beauty.

***

The Magic Pot
B 1-6

A lesser-known Danish tale, The Magic Pot is about a family who, in order to eat, must sell all their belongings. Mr. Pennypincher is the cheat who buys most of the goods. Moo Moo, the family cow, is the last thing to go. Lawrence is supposed to take the cow to market to sell her, but he doesn’t make it that far. He sells the cow to a stranger in exchange for a talking pot. The pot gets the family enough to eat and enough gold to take care of its needs. And Mr. Pennypincher repents of his evil ways.

This is one of the longer plays in the collection, but it still keeps your attention. There are roles for nine boys and twelve girls. Some of the discussion questions deal with fairness, cultural differences, judgment, cheating, family reactions to difficult situations, and responsibility. The enrichment activities explore Scandinavia and Viking times.

***
Everything in the story follows the original up to the point where Snow White's stepmother, disguised as an old woman, leaves her for dead. The dwarfs surround her, thinking she is dead. A neighboring prince and his mother, who are lost, encounter them. When the prince discovers that the girl is Snow White, he immediately tries to wake her. When he sits her up, the apple piece pops out and she awakens. The prince and his mother had been to see Snow White's stepmother and had been told that the princess was dead. Snow White then goes to live with them in their kingdom.

The play is written for eleven boys and eight girls. Discussion topics are good looks, personality, self-esteem, friendships, and physical differences. Enrichment activities are set in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

The Two Bad Bargains

The Two Bad Bargains is the story about Vladimir, a young man who is extremely kind to everyone. His father sends him on a sailing mission. On the journey, Vladimir sells his cargo to free the slaves who are crying in a ship docked next to his. Two of the slaves are from a royal household, a princess and her nurse. Vladimir's father is not too happy with him upon his return, but he forgives him and sends him on another voyage with a full cargo. This time Vladimir sells his cargo to pay for some prisoners' back taxes so they may be free also. It takes two years for Vladimir's father to forgive him this time. Meanwhile Vladimir has married the "slave" princess. On his next voyage, he finds himself in her kingdom. While escorting the princess to her parents, Vladimir is supposedly lost at sea. We find out that a suitor to the princess has pushed him overboard. Vladimir is saved from the sea and reunited with his wife by the old man for whom he paid prisoner taxes. The bargains were good after all.

This play is set in Greece during the first half of the nineteenth century. Seventeen boys and nine girls are included in the play's script. This play would best be performed by children in older grades, but it would still be understood by children in the youngest grades. Family relationships, jealousy, and slavery are topics for discussion. Ancient Greece is the subject for the enrichment activities.
Brill, Michael (Book & Lyrics). *No One Will Marry a Princess with a Tree Growing out of Her Head*. David Jackson (music and orchestration). Unpublished. For information contact Michael Brill, 749 North 67th Street, Seattle, WA 98103. 64 pp.

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

This musical begins just as the princess reaches her twenty-first birthday. It is discovered that she has a small tree growing out of the top of her head. This is the doing of the evil wizard Warstich, the Wicked and Nasty; and only the powerful Wizard, Gimlet, the Good and the Kind, can help. Gimlet must take the princess to the Land of the Winds, where the mighty four winds might be able to break the spell and remove the tree.

*No One Will Marry a Princess* is a well-constructed musical with lively songs, entertaining lyrics, and effective comedic moments. It offers a variety of visual humor that children would enjoy and is scripted in such a way that there are many humorous moments for older audience members as well.

The show can be played with as few as seven performers, with some doubling. The music and set requirements and the visual effects and costuming, although very entertaining, could be a bit complicated, perhaps making it difficult to perform without adequate staging capacity and budget. Colored set and costume designs are available from the author. This fast-paced, fun production has with an amusing surprise ending and the potential of captivating audience members both young and old.


Reviewed by Shiela Heindel

*One Magic Christmas* is a short musical about a young boy's selfishness. The boy, Matthew, wants a certain bicycle. Everett the Elf helps Matthew and his sister, Mary, resolve the misunderstanding caused when Matthew breaks Mary's crystal snow scene. Matthew's accident unleashes the fury of the Ice Queen and her Chiller-Dillers. Mary suggests that they go to the North Pole and ask Santa's help in getting the Ice Queen back into her snow scene. At the North Pole, the Ice Queen problem is solved, but Matthew spies "his" bicycle and more trouble ensues. Santa again comes to the rescue. Musical reindeer take the children home, and Christmas morning they wonder if it was all a dream.
The music is catchy and the lyrics carry the play along nicely; much of the plot is resolved through song. It plays about one hour. At times the dialogue seemed sappy—this play is definitely for younger elementary-age children. The characters were shallow even for fantasy people. The "flying" sequences would present a problem for any but a professional theater unless those scenes were adapted.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Two men looking for oil shale stumble upon a prehistoric cavern where dinosaurs have lived since they disappeared from the surface of the earth millions of years ago. One of the men gets very excited about how rich and famous he can become with this discovery, and he goes around snapping flash pictures, frightening the beasts, and disturbing their fragile lifestyle. The dinosaurs become alarmed and try to get rid of the "no-necks," but without success. Finally they do a special dance and collapse. Peek, the invasive "noneck" human, rushes off to find reporters, scientists, and others who will "appreciate" this great find. His companion, Bunk, deciding this new world would be better left undisturbed, covers the entrance and leaves. The dinosaurs revive when the "nonecks" are gone and have a victory celebration dance.

This unusual play is performed with shadow puppets on a large twenty- by thirty-foot screen, with a narrator in front of the screen who interprets the dinosaur sounds for the audience. (The dinosaurs "speak" to each other about these strange intruders.) There is also a musician who creates the "voices" of the dinosaurs and produces the sound atmosphere. The script includes some suggestions for staging. The original production utilized three dancer-manipulators to create the ten-plus various dinosaurs, with three men play the two "nonecks" and the narrator.


Reviewed by Rachel Young

Olsen’s powerful adaptation of Shelley’s Frankenstein is a brief glimpse into the life of Victor Frankenstein and the results of his fateful monster creation.
It begins with the discovery of the ill Victor by an English arctic explorers. Victor tells them of his attempts to escape from this monster and the tragic story behind the creation of it. The story flashes back as Frankenstein recalls the past. Part of his childhood is reenacted, as is his youth as a medical student. The play ends in the death of Frankenstein, and the pleads of the creature to die with him.

This play would be best performed by a professional company or an advanced armature group. Since the content deals with the intense questioning of human life, control, and death, it would be best presented for audiences over age twelve. It could be a very powerful production, relying on good lighting and at least the suggestion of multiple settings to clarify the complicated storyline.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Showman Buffalo Bill is about to start his famous touring show once again, even though it is a bit tattered around the edges. He is interrupted by Calamity Jane, Sitting Bull, and Wyatt Earp (now all ghosts), who remind Bill of his tendency to bend the truth and exaggerate the stories about the development of the West. We are then given a series of vignettes which show how the "common" people were the real heroes who dealt with the problems and settled the West.

This interesting approach to Western American History may help audiences consider a more mundane interpretation of our settlement. It could also interest young people in some historical events, such as the building of the transcontinental railroad or the discovery of gold in California. But the abridged treatment of the problems of the Indians and the brief treatment of many other historical events may tend to trivialize important historical occurrences. To work well educationally, it would need to be part of a larger context.

**Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard**

The coyote is a frequently used character in Native American mythology. In this Nez Perce transformation myth Coyote rescues the people from the Monster who has swallowed them. The Monster inhales deeply and swallows Coyote also, but Coyote is clever and travels down the Monster's throat to where the people are trapped. Together they build a fire which makes the Monster sick, but it does not make him free the people. Coyote then uses a stone knife to cut away at the Monster's heart. The Monster's heart is so strong that it takes five knives to kill him. After all the people escape through the Monster's mouth, Coyote carves the Monster's body into portions and distributes them throughout the world, showing where each tribe of people will live.


**Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard and Rachel Young**

This book is a very thorough guide to producing, rehearsing, and performing a story theatre presentation in an elementary school setting. The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains information on: the mechanics of producing and directing a play, setting the scene, a model step-by-step rehearsal schedule, and informal classroom dramatizations. These instructions are clearly and concisely written.

The second part of the book contains five scripts that have been tested in elementary classrooms. The plays are diverse in origin, including tales from South America, Japan, Native Americans, Africa, and England. A brief description of each play follows this review.

Included with each play is (1) a brief synopsis of the story, along with a bit of background information; (2) acting exercises specific to the performance of the story; (3) production notes, which in each case includes directions for teaching simple dance movement to enhance the telling of the story; (4) specific suggestions for costumes that are simple and easily obtained by classroom teachers and their students; (5) specific suggestions for instruments used for sound effects; (6) story questions and research topics; and (7) a selected bibliography.

Each script is clearly written and contains specific cues for the sound effects and for crew and actor movement. This book is highly recommended for any
elementary classroom teacher who would like to use drama to enhance the regular curriculum. The plays could also be used by a professional touring company, which could perform the plays as part of a presentation and workshop for teaching teachers how to use drama in the classroom.


Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

*Jack and the Beanstalk* is a familiar English folktale. Jack’s mother sends him to sell their cow and he trades the cow for some magic beans. His mother throws the beans out of the window in her anger at receiving nothing better in return for the cow. The beans sprout into a giant beanstalk. Three times Jack climbs the beanstalk. First he returns with a bag of gold, then a hen who lays golden eggs, and finally a talking harp. On the third trip the giant discovers Jack and runs after him. Jack beats the giant to the bottom of the beanstalk and chops it down. The giant is killed in his fall and Jack and his mother live happily ever after.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This short African folktale is about a farmer who discovers he has talking yams, trees, rocks, and a talking dog. The farmer runs to a fisherman only to discover that he has a talking net. Next these two meet a weaver with talking cloth. All of them rush to the chief to tell their story. He doesn’t believe them until his stool talks too. All then rush off into the bush!

The play is written to involve a whole class of students in production. Some are storytellers, some the characters, some the rocks, yams, net, and so forth, and some are in charge of sound effects. Care has been taken to make the story reflect the feeling, form, and style of an African tale. It is an excellent piece to introduce students to the culture and open study of traditional Africa.
The Crane Maiden is a popular Japanese folktale that tells of a poor man and woman who live in the forest. One cold winter day, the old man goes in search of twigs to build a fire. He discovers a crane caught in a trap and frees her. Not long after this, a young woman comes to the couple’s door and asks for shelter, saying she has lost her way in the forest. The old couple invites the maiden to stay with them. During the night the maiden weaves a beautiful piece of cloth. She presents it to the old couple and tells them to go sell it so that they will never be poor again. They cannot bring themselves to sell it because it is too precious, so the maiden tells them she will weave another piece of cloth for them to sell. She cautions the couple that they must not look at her while she is weaving. Of course, they are too curious and take a peek. They discover that it is a crane weaving, the one the old man rescued from the trap. The crane flies away. Time passes and in the spring they are able to bid a final farewell to the crane maiden when she flies over their cottage with her friends.


This Mayan legend tells how the gods created human beings, or the corn people. The Moon Goddess and the Sun God create the world and all the animals in it. Although all the animals are able to make sound, none of them can praise the gods. First the Moon Goddess creates some people out of mud, but they fall apart. Then the Sun God creates some people out of wood, but they are rigid and understand nothing, so the gods destroy them. Then the Magic Grandmother creates people from corn dough. These creatures praise the gods and thank them for life. But the gods are still not satisfied because the corn people know too much, so the gods blow a mist into the corn people’s eyes, making it so they cannot see as much as the gods.