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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A K-8, families

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

*Conestoga Stories* is a story-theatre adaptation of incidents taken from journals and histories from the American prairie pioneer period, 1865-1895. Most of the stories are set in Nebraska, since this work was first presented by the Nebraska Theatre Caravan, but they are typical of much of the Midwest and West during the period. The play starts with loading the conestoga wagons—deciding what could and would be taken, what the trip might be like, views of the Native Americans to the encroachment of the white settlers, and what life was like in the sod houses built in the upper Midwest in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Each story is acted out as it is narrated for the audience. Sound and lighting effects create what is not created in scenic detail.

The power of this work is its honesty and the close reliance on original sources, which are listed in a bibliography at the end of the play. The authors have also used song and dance to move the action along during exposition sections. The play is written to be acted by a company of five women and four men, with all but one doubling. It would be possible to use a much larger cast. Good musical/sound accompaniment is essential.

★★★★


A- 5+

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Gabby, a teen-aged boy from Honolulu, has been sent to spend the summer on the tiny island of Satawal with his blind Grandfather. The Grandfather is a Navigator, and he wants Gabby to learn the ways of traditional Navigation. Gabby’s experiences on Satawal gives him a new understanding of himself and the meaning of friendship and love. He learns that listening with one’s eyes can be more importing than actually seeing.
This play is a rather insightful look at the Micronesian culture, unfamiliar to most Americans. Accurate portrayal of the lifestyle and language of the Micronesians is essential. It is suggested in the production notes that people from the Caroline Islands, or people of Native Hawaiian, Samoan or Tongan origin be involved to assist with pronunciation, body language, and clothing. With double casting the eleven roles can be played by five men and two women.

The life-styles and practices of the people of Sawawal is intriguing and maintains interest in the play despite some slightly stereo-typical, dated dialogue from the American teen-age characters.


B+ 5-9 Reviewed by Donna Moore

*Angel of the Battlefield* is an entertaining and informative portrayal of the life of Clara Barton. It depicts the courage and bravery of Clara, who devotes her life to caring for others. The play has three scenes: (1) When Clara is eleven years old and forfeits going to school in order to care for her older brother who had been hurt in an accident; (2) When Clara is a school teacher who, although of small stature, is able to interest and control her classroom including the rowdy boys; and (3) When Clara is a nurse during the Civil War. Here we see Clara as a responsible leader who exhibits courage and compassion as she agrees to go the second mile to help out a wounded soldier.

*Angel of the Battlefield* runs between 10 and 15 minutes. McCaslin does not try to cover the wide range of Clara’s contributions beyond founding the American Red Cross, but the play will help spark discussion and interest, and should stimulate further study. It is an excellent resource for an upper elementary and middle/junior high school students. It would be most effective as classroom or readers’ theatre. The cast consists of ten women, eight men, extras, and a storyteller. The stage requirements are minimal.


B+ 19 pp. Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

The Players Press series of plays by Nellie McCaslin focus on the contributions of women to various aspects of American life. This play deals
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with Anna Cora Ogden Mowatt who wrote "Fashion," the first American play by a woman. The play was popular in both this country and in England.

The usual format of this series is followed, with a "Storyteller" providing needed narration and introducing & bridging the action. Anna Cora and her brother and sister are preparing a play for their Father's birthday in the 1830's. This scene includes the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from Midsummer Night's Dream. From this interest in theatre as a child, Anna Cora becomes a playwright and the second scene (1845) lets us see Anna Cora and her family as they see the positive reviews for her play and she is asked to appear as a professional actress. The final scene has her giving a curtain speech as she closes her stage career in 1854. The play is best used in classroom, or as reader's theatre, to stimulate discussion and interest in this historical figure and her play. It calls for a cast of five females, four males, and a storyteller (either sex). Adult roles can be played by young people.

★★★★


A- 4-8 Reviewed by Donna Moore

Prelude to Fame portrays scenes from the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, a book that helped influence attitudes about slavery just prior to the Civil War. McCaslin uses the play to stimulate interest in this historically important woman. Prelude to Fame is in three scenes. The first is in 1819 when Harriet is starting school as a child. She demonstrates a love for books and a gift for writing. Scene two comes several months later where she is publicly praised for a composition she has written. In the third scene the audience sees her as a young mother in 1845 who gathers her children to tell them stories. The audience sees Harriet's genuine compassion as she cares for two boys whose mother is a slave, as well as many other homeless children of slaves who had come from Kentucky and Ohio. She talks with her children about characters and story elements she will eventually include in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

This play would be most successful for classroom, reader's theatre, or educational theatrical productions. Mercy and kindness are demonstrated for discussion. The cast consists of seven boys, seven girls, a storyteller, and extras. It is targeted for a middle/junior high school audience. Production notes are included. The play runs approximately 15 minutes.

★★★★

A  7-adult Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

This is a strong adaptation of Bram Stoker’s novel and retains all of the mood and mystique of the original. It is the story of Count Dracula’s journey from Transylvania to Whitby, England and the terror which he brings. In England Dracula strives to find a bride to return with him to Transylvania. The majority of the action focuses on the family and friends of Dracula’s first victim in England, Lucy Westenra, as they try to stop him from adding to his ranks of the "un-dead."

The play is very well crafted, but, as in Stoker’s original, it contains much violence. This is not the light-hearted version of Dracula that has often been adapted. It is very descriptive in telling of the evil foundations and work of Dracula, containing many mature ideas and themes. This work would be inappropriate for young audiences but may be an intriguing piece for teens and adults. An effective production would require mature performers and some fairly complicated scenic design.

★★★★


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

This excellent stage adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s masterpiece follows the original with attention and care. Character development is rich, utilizing much of the original language to brightly color each of the characters. The Yorkshire, England country feeling is abundant, laying a carpet of green to help the two love-starved children discover the beauty and warmth of both nature and relationships.

The recently orphaned Mary is brought to dreary Misselthwaite Manor to live under the care of her embittered, widowed uncle, Archibald Craven. She is befriended by a young servant, Martha, and Martha’s brother, Dickon. They help Mary discover the hidden secrets and treasures of the Manor, as well as those within herself. One of the discoveries is her cousin, Colin, believed to be crippled and sickly and therefore the shame of the household. After the two children meet, Colin begins to take some control of his life and goes with Mary to see the Secret Garden she has discovered. As the beauty of Colin’s mother’s garden is restored, so also is Colin’s strength under the love and care of Dickon and Mary. Father and son are reunited in a moving final scene.
Production requires strong scenic and costume support, and a mature cast some of whom must be able to handle Yorkshire dialect. This is an excellent family audience piece which both young people and their parents will enjoy.


Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Teachers, librarians, and parents will find *Puppet Plays: From Workshop to Performance* a practical and easy-to-understand guide to using puppets with children grades K-6. The book is divided into three sections.

Section One deals with puppet construction, stages, and scenery. Simple ideas for making stick puppets, felt hand puppets, and styrofoam head puppets are given, including patterns and instructions for making and using the puppets. Ideas and instructions for several easily made stages are provided. A brief bibliography of reference books on puppet stages, as well as a list of companies from which a stage may be purchased, is provided.

Section Two gives practical advice on putting together a puppet making workshop for children. Everything from preparation to a final performance is covered in a simple, straightforward way.

Section Three contains eight scripts for performance by children and the puppets they make. At the beginning of each script the following information is provided: puppet making notes, a list of characters, scenery and prop needs, and suggestions for music. A brief synopsis of each play follows.

*Star Light, Star Bright* (8 characters, 6 pages).

Star Bright, the evening star, decides she will no longer shine. She is tired of granting the wishes of selfish people. She tells Big Star she is going to Earth to see if she can find one unselfish person, and that she will not shine again until she does. She meets Wendy, who is trying to beat a reindeer to the top of the mountain to wish on the evening star. Disguised as Mrs. Bright, she offers to help Wendy use a shortcut. As they reach the top of the mountain, Gray Cloud, Star Bright’s enemy, catches up with them and puts a blanket over Star Bright. Wendy uses her wish to help free Star Bright from the blanket. Star Bright returns happily to the sky to shine knowing there is at least one unselfish person making wishes on Earth.
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*The Town Mouse & the Country Mouse* (6 characters, 8 pages).

This is the traditional Aesop’s fable dramatized very nicely for puppets.

*Percy’s Tale, or Behind the Doors* (6 characters, 8 pages).

Percy, the bookworm, and his friend Magic the Owl, help two friends Taran Tarantula and Wolfgang Wolf rescue Cinnamon Bear from Flame, The Dragon by proving to the Dragon that there are stories about good bears, spiders, and wolves. The play encourages children to read.

*The Cat & Mouse in Partnership* (2 characters, 6 pages).

This is an adaptation of a tale by the Brothers Grimm, in which a cat and a mouse set up housekeeping together. They store a pot of fat under the church altar as a winter supply of food. The cat eats the fat bit by bit, until it is gone. When it is winter, the mouse suggests they go to the church and eat the fat. The mouse sees the cat has eaten it and begins to accuse the cat. The cat answers the mouse by eating him.

*The Forest Princess* (9 characters, 15 pages).

A king and queen wish their son to marry a neighboring princess, Princess Rottina. He does not like her because she is vain and mean. While walking in the forest one day he meets Felicia, a charming girl who loves animals so much they talk to her and help her. Princess Rottina comes to the castle to try to win the Prince, but is unsuccessful. The Prince brings Felicia to the castle and introduces her to his parents as the girl he wants to marry. The King and Queen agree, if Felicia can perform three tasks in three days. The tasks seem quite impossible, but because of her friendship with the animals and her knowledge of the forest, she is able to perform them and marry the Prince.

*The Land of Rainbows* (5 characters, 11 pages).

Billy has "imaginitis," because adults have told him the sky can’t be painted yellow, leaves can’t be purple, and there is no such thing as a unicorn. With the help of his friends Cotton the rabbit, and Pelly the pelican, he sets out to find the cure in the Land of Rainbows. After a journey which includes crossing Raindrop Mountain and defeating the Rain Witch, they arrive in the Land of Rainbows, where Billy finds his lost imagination.
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Cousins (6 characters, 9 pages)

Lynnette is coming to spend some time during the summer with her cousin Amy who she hasn’t seen since they were both five (three years ago). Amy worries that she and Lynnette will be so different that the summer won’t be any fun. After Lynnette arrives, both girls discover that although they have differences, they do like some of the same things and that the summer will be full of good times after all.

The Smartest Person in the Village (9 characters, 5 pages)

An innkeeper wakes one morning to find that he has been robbed. He knows it must be one of his five guests because no one has entered or left the inn all night. His helper, John, is sent to bring the judge. The judge questions each guest, but each of them denies being the thief. John suggests that they send for Jeanetta, the smartest person in the village. The innkeeper agrees. Jeanetta asks that a big black kettle be brought out. She tells each guest they must touch the kettle and that when the person who is the thief touches the kettle the cock will crow. After each person touches the kettle they show their hands to Jeanetta. She knows which one is the thief, because he doesn’t have an soot from the kettle on his hands. He was afraid to touch it because the rooster would crow.


Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

This well-written book on dramatizing literature is directed at teachers of children grades preschool through six. The material presented has been tested in the classroom with a wide range of students, including LEP, ESL, and gifted.

Background and instruction for the teacher or group leader are found in the first four chapters which treat the following topics: Principles of good acting, mechanics of putting a presentation together, how to dramatize the stories used in the book, and a model lesson based on the story of The Lion and the Mouse.

Chapter five is devoted to eight of Aesop’s fables. Each story includes: the illustrated story, exercises for dramatizing the story, and ideas for follow-up classroom activities such as art activities, critical thinking questions, and research ideas.
Chapters six through eight include undramatized versions of twenty-seven of Aesop’s fables, a method for adapting the stories for dramatization, ideas for developing reading through dramatization, and a brief, but helpful bibliography. This would be a highly useful book to add to the library of any elementary school teacher looking for a proven way to interest children in reading.


**B+ 7-12**

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Sixteen teenage boys and girls have been invited to participate in auditions for a special workshop production at the Professional Actors School of Theatre Training Camp. The teens are preparing for their audition by participating in an intensive week long workshop. As we watch the kids rehearse their musical numbers, scenes and monologues we come to know each one’s hopes, fears, strengths and weaknesses. We learn of the positive effects and fulfillment the theatre can bring to young people.

This musical has the potential of being a positive experience for young actors. The script is a strong vehicle for exploration of personal artistic strengths and weaknesses, despite the fact that the writing is a bit trite and stereo-typical at times. The music is light and the vocals are not difficult. There is opportunity for strong dance numbers but the dancing could easily be adapted to the abilities of the performers.

The cast consists of ten teenage girls, six teenage boys, one adult male and one adult female (could be played by teens). No formal set pieces are required and costuming consists of basic rehearsal clothes. This is a show written specifically for teenagers in the performing arts.

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