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Play Reviews

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**B+ 4-6** Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert

This play is a delightful story delving into the lives of two young boys as they find themselves in a rash world where each must find himself a true man by the content of his heart. Merlin finds refuge for the infant Arthur to protect him from the wicked hands of the witch, Morgan Le Fay, who is also Arthur’s half-sister. Art grows up a humble orphan in the home of his friend, Kay. Many entanglements create an interesting and complex story. Art searches for himself in a world that sees him as nothing but a squire. A side element concerns the wicked and deceitful Lot who tries to take the sword out of the stone in cunning and crafty ways. The wicked Nyneve tries to make Merlin forget the secret formula to release the sword from the stone. Morgan creates a constant urgency in her quest to destroy Merlin, and keep the boy Arthur from becoming King. The story ends neatly with Arthur finding his parents and taking his rightful place on the throne.

The moral theme prevalent makes it worth the time, talent, and energy needed to produce the show. The script is average but well written, and it lays out a neat story with intelligently written dialogue. The characters are fun and well-rounded for a short, thirty-minute play. Nothing crucial is missing in the story that would leave an audience needing more.

Sets are relatively simple, but costumes are needed to indicate the medieval period. The play was originally staged at the Emmy Gifford Children’s Theatre, Omaha, Nebraska, and should be successfully staged by either professionals of amateur groups.

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**A 4-8** Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert

Ichobod is an easily frightened, superstitious man. He describes himself: “One loud noise, ooops! I jump. I don’t like things that bump, go bang or boom, or rattle, rattle. Yikes! Good-bye I must skidaddle.”

This is a new musical adaption of Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” The lovely Katrina, daughter of the rich Van Tassel, is the most beautiful girl in town. Katrina is the delight of all men, and charms her father into telling the story of the headless horseman at the town’s party—much to Ichabod’s horror. She also charms Ichabod into staying late into the dark of night. Ichabod gets on his old horse to travel home. He is spooked by the town bully Bromes. Ichabod turns the tide and shows the true heart of men and the motivations of different people. The theme is summed up: “Every person lives with a certain amount of fear—bullies most of all.”

The play is done in a modified Story Theatre style. It moves along quickly. The script is well-rounded and enjoyable to read. The songs, chants, rounds, and chorus bits are are superbly done by the Nebraska Theatre Caravan and was intended for touring. It is recommended for professional groups, but advanced amateur groups should also be able to stage it successfully.

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**A- K-6 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks**

This is really more of a classroom exercise than a regular play; but it has interesting elements and should be fun for children and their families. McCaslin gives the following explanation:

*Christmas Fiesta* may be given as entertainment on a stage, or as a party in which all the children take part. Perhaps only the roles of Anselmo and Maria should be rehearsed, and the others allowed to join in freely. All would, of course, need to be familiar with the dances that are used, the song that is sung, and the general background of the fiesta...The production [should] become a festival rather than a play—with the emphasis upon costuming, singing, dancing, and the holiday spirit, rather than upon dramatic form and technique”.

As a way to share Mexican culture and festival, this play is excellent. It is short, easily staged, and should be fun for the children and/or audience members.

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This excellent new work was completed for the International ASSITEJ Congress in Russia last year. It represents some of the best contemporary plays being done in Germany. The age range, style of production, and complexity, are wide ranging. It can be secured from the ASSITEJ Center in Germany, as indicated at the end of this review section. Because of the wide range of plays, each is reviewed separately below.

**Axster, Lilly (translated by Erika Casey), Violin, Cello, Double-Bass: A play written after the separation.**

A violin, cello, and double-bass pose for a “Family Portrait,” accompanied by a string trio (on tape). Above the music we hear the clicking of a camera. Then suddenly the cello and double-bass turn away from each other and the music breaks. So begins this fascinating play about divorce and it’s impact on the child. The parents
are both professional instrumentalists, with a bright and gifted child, Paula, who is struggling with her parents' separation. Music is used throughout the play to illustrate, illuminate, and comment on the action.

Paula tries various ways to address the problem, including acting out a funeral for herself that might bring her parents together again and a pretend wedding that ends with her parents getting married instead.

The parents struggle as well. We see their frustration in trying to deal with this child who does not want to accept this new reality of two apartments and separate lives. Paula finally puts her hopes on her parents playing together with her in her school fête. She tells her mother: “You have promised to play with me. Promises must be kept.” But in the end, Paula finds the ability to play alone in the fête and to acquire the ability to live on in spite of the difficult circumstances.

This is a powerful, creative, striking play. It ranges over the symphony of emotions in such a human condition. Staging is simple, requiring the audience to fill in realistic set and costume elements, but the sound accompaniment, and acting must be superb. It is recommended for professional companies, or very advanced amateur groups.

Hawemann, Horst (translated by Penny Black).
*Empty Space—Chair Taken.*

A- 6-12

HE sits on a chair on an empty stage. He calls for a glass of water, then an apple. No one comes: no one answers. He tells of many people trying to get him off the chair - all without success.

SHE comes, and there are a series of questions and challenges, giving us an abstract view of early teen courtship. He finally stands because of her. She is the motivation to do things beyond sitting beyond limited existence.

This play is an interesting, absurdist approach to teen relationships. It is sure to raise questions and provide discussion. Staging is very simple.

It could be performed by professional companies or by talented, well directed, young people.

Herfurtner, Rudolf (translated by Anthony Vivis).
*The Forest, the Forge, and the Dragon.*

A 4-12

This is an interesting reinterpretation of the Wagnerian myth. The task of the play is to have Wise Old Owl successfully sew together the severed child, onto the tapestry of life that represents man and woman, into a peaceful union to parent the child.

War is the ruling force in the world, slicing the tapestry apart and leaving fire, smoke, pain, suffering, and death behind. Mother Hind and Wise Old Owl discuss the rearing of a child who could mix both qualities of male and female to overcome aggression, hate and war.

Finding and rearing Sigfrid and Viland become battles between Mother Hind and Owl, on one side, and the war hungry Meema and Serf on the other. The drive for war and power seems to be winning when Sigfrid forges the magnificent sword “Grim” and goes to battle the Dragon who is a protector of earth and its inhabitants. However, in this adaptation of the myth, the Dragon successfully changes the war-hungry Sigfrid to a “whole” person, capable of granting mercy and bringing peace.

This interesting work combines symbolism with action and poetry. It moves beyond realism to challenge the reader to consider basic issues addressing human kind. At the same time, production elements are relatively simple, making it a very producible play. Because of the multilevel content, I would recommend it only for professional or very experienced amateur production.
Jankowiak, Günter (translated by Bettina Lindemann & Rod Lewis). Jesper's Luck.

A  3-6

Nine-year-old Jesper eats liquorice as he imagines himself dead so he can see his parents feel sorry for the way they have treated him. His dream includes a girl in his class whom he likes so he can see her weep also. Then we realize he is an adult telling us of his past.

In his second speech to the audience he clarifies the intent of his dream. He wants to see these people love him, but he realizes that being really dead is no good because you can’t do anything then—not roller skate, nor eat candy, nor anything! However, imagining helps to make things a bit better.

Next, there are flash-back scenes to show how Mother and Father “only loved him when he was good.”

Then Lucky and Penniless (good and bad luck) appear and help Jesper work through his problems with some more imaginative improvisation including king and princess who speak only in rhyme. Jesper fences with a rival prince and drives him offstage. Then his father comes on, but Jesper is able to hold his own, even with him. We see Jesper become a father, and have twins of his own whom he names Penniless and Lucky, after the friends who came by so long ago.

This is an excellent, imaginative piece that explores the power of attitude change on life. The characters are interesting and the dialog works. It is simple to stage and the eleven characters can be played by a cast of five. It will be most successful when performed by professional companies or very experienced amateur groups.

Knappe, Gerd (translated by Marc con Henning). Wisperloud and Prettysmart.

A-  2-8

This is an unusual play, more like a clown show or performance art. It is a series of short actions by seven performers, with names like Herenow, Goneagain, Lookround, Giveitone, Rightbehind, Allowme, and Costumeon. They generally follow their names. Giveitone, for example, carries a club and “gives one” [a hit] to other characters. Rightbehind follows other characters in their actions and frequently their lines. It is fast-paced and would take performers with excellent physical and vocal skill. There is one sequence at the end of the piece, based loosely on Moliére, that is more conventional. If played with skill, it could be very entertaining.

It is played on a bare stage but requires good lighting (a spotlight chases one of the performers) and some simple props. Recommended only for professional performers or very experienced amateurs.

Martin, Christian. Ciggie and Swiggie.

B-  9-12

A young woman, Ciggie, and an old man, Swiggie, have an extended conversation without clear meaning. This short work reads like theatre of the absurd, but it wanders without apparent point. Ciggie smokes and, near the end of the play, shoots up (perhaps dies—there is some conversation about death). Swiggie drinks and has wasted his life on the bottle. He likes acting, but the effort is too much for him. Perhaps in performance, this work would be more effective, but in the written form, I had difficulty discerning the point.

Staging directions are also incomplete: “Background noise as described” is repeated several times in the script, but there is no “description” of what is to be produced. It
appears to be staged on a nearly empty stage, with simple costumes.

Schöbel, Manuel (translated by Penny Black).
Beanpole Really Wants To.

A 2-6

Beanpole is a bright child who wants to go to school, but his Mother has died and his Father is upset and impatient. Beanpole comes to school anyway, and is told by the Inspector (teacher) that he cannot stay. Beanpole resists and gains a chance to explain why he had problems with the entrance examination, and with his Father, at home. He and the Inspector act out a series of scenes with each taking roles to help the audience understand this bright, shy, disturbed child.

This is a very interesting, two-person play. It flows from scene to scene and accumulates story and message. It challenges teachers and parents to understand the child—to ask and listen. Setting and costume requirements are simple and the show would be easy to tour. Performers need well-developed acting skills. This play is recommended for professional theatres or very advanced amateur companies.

Waechter, Friedrich Karl (translated by Nana Ortix).
EXWYZED: A Clown's Play for Three Clowns and One Musician.

A 2-6

This performance piece contains far more stage direction than lines, but the images and action spring to life from the page. The ANXIOUS ZED is blown into the ring/stage with his chair. He cannot find a place to sit, but finally overcomes his doubts and sits. The BEAUTIFUL WY floats in, “serenely calm and compose.... floating over the sawdust covered ground.... as gracefully as a summer cloud in the sky.” With delicacy and tender music, these two fall in love, only to be separated by THE MIGHTY EX whose goal is to capture the girl for himself. WY inspires ZED in battle, but the two men lay each other low in the dust. The music of Spring awakens them, bringing the lovers together and challenging the bully.

This delightful work requires dexterous performers with excellent physical skills. The sensitive accompaniment of THE LEADER OF THE ONE MAN BAND is also vital to theatrical success. There are limited staging requirements, but the complex scenario will be most appropriate for professional performers, or very advanced amateurs.

Zadow, Ingeborg Von (translated by the author).
Pompeenia.

A 2-8

Nola and Tani are talking about a trip Nola is to make to Pompeenia. She wants to go, but at the same time she wants to stay with Tani whom she has grown to love. Tani, for his part, suggested the trip would do her good, but now feels the pain of the pending separation.

The play is written in simple language, with short, direct lines. It carries the power of being apart from the one you love. They describe their hearts breaking, then falling apart, but with the reassurance that when they are back together: “We’ll fix it. When you’re back again. We’ll make it whole again.” When Nola leaves, Tani listens for a moment, then touches the place that Nola just left, and says her name. It is a powerful moment.

Presenting this work will require two very capable, sensitive performers, and a director who is able to capture the delicate nature of the script and characters. The setting and costume requirements are very simple and make the play easy to tour. Recommended for professional companies, or very advanced amateur groups.