Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A- 2-6  Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Jenny Johnson falls asleep reading a book about Native Americans and wakes up in an Indian village in 1650. She meets several members of the tribe, including Hooma (Grandmother). They teach her about their ways and she learns to value these new friends and their customs.

This is an excellent piece to introduce young people to Native American culture in an interesting way, from the point of view of a contemporary girl who asks questions about things and learns quickly. Native American costumes, to suit a local tribe, would be best to maintain the spirit of the work. Several of the customs and some of the words and phrases used in the play are from the Lay-na’pays Tribe from west central Pennsylvania and add authenticity. Casting requires three females and four males.


A  K-6  Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Orphan Boy, without family to teach him, is despised by the other boys in the tribe. But when Clan Chief’s Son is taken away by Moon, it is Orphan Boy (with the help of his spirit family, Sky Grandmother and Little Sky Sister) who rescues him and helps Moon to put on a gentle face.

This delightful tale is adapted from the native folklore of the Pacific Northwest, in particular a story from the Thunderbird Clan of the Tlingit Indians. Careful instructions are included for creation of masks, costumes, and dances to preserve the Native American heritage of the story. Designed to include considerable audience participation, performers (5 M, 2 F) will need to be skilled in drawing, controlling, and using audience contributions. The play was commissioned and originally mounted by Stage One: The Louisville Children’s Theatre. Performance by professionals is recommended, but very experienced amateur groups will find the work challenging. Staging will require research to maintain the integrity of the costume and set pieces.

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

This dramatization of Anna Sewell's classic novel, *Black Beauty*, captures the spirit and point-of-view of the original story. Imaginatively written to help the audience envision the sweep of the countryside, and the feeling of a bit in the mouth, the play should motivate an understanding of, and appreciation for horses. Harris uses a story theatre style to use much of the original language to describe events from the story; but is still able to stimulate the mind to "see" the houses, barns, and people. The story describes the world of horses into which the young colt is born, his early experiences and training, his brushes with social custom and with death. Through it we better understand, not only the animal world, but our human world as well. It is an excellent play.

The play was premiered at Stage One, Louisville, Kentucky during Kentucky Derby Week. It requires professional performers, or very experienced amateurs. Settings and properties are suggested only, or can be mimed. Costumes may be simple or more complete. A cast of ten (4 F, 6 M) is required.


**A 7-8** Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert

Grace is a strong little girl who does not let the toils of life get her down. During the story, she embraces various challenges concerning friends, school, being different, and a divorce between her parents. Grace feels she is in the middle and is at fault. She shows her strength through her ability to envision new worlds with the help of her "Jellybean tree", a fantastic tree that produces not only delicious, chewy jellybeans, but a delightful (though troubled) alien from outer space who thinks he has been rejected by his parents. Grace helps him understand his parents still love him and that he should return home, and in the process, comes to understand and deal with her own circumstances. Her strength and ability to deal with challenges, through the help of her alien friend, gives her the opportunity to find herself and her voice to deal with life's situations. The moral of this play is to support and "hug" one another as we struggle with the challenges of life.

When, in a fun, light-hearted way, Grace breaks the fourth wall to chat with the audience and explore options and situations, we are drawn into the action. The play is well written, with various flashbacks and futuristic scenes. I felt that there were strong messages covertly written into the story to provide parents with suggestions for dealing with children and divorce. The children's lines and interactions also provide young people with a point of reference to relate to and learn from. The thematic elements and character development are excellent.

The play was originally produced by the University of South Alabama and could be staged by professionals and experienced amateurs. Scenery and costume requirements are minimal.


**2+** Reviewed by Braden Gregory Bell

Two spelling bees--2 Bee and Not 2 Bee--are desperately looking for a girl to represent them in "The Miss Spell Contest." They find a willing, if somewhat unremarkable participant in a young girl named Margaret Anne. She has been a looser most of her life and is not a good speller, so the bees take her to the Land of Spell, where they and their queen introduce her to many characters to help her learn basic rules of spelling. The play then carefully builds to Margaret Anne's climactic win at the Miss Spell contest.
This is an outstanding script. The writing is layered so that adults will enjoy the play as much as (or maybe even more than) the young people. The lyrics and lines are clever. The play solidly teaches some very basic and helpful rules of spelling that anyone will find useful. Moreover, the clever way in which the rules are taught are sure to stick in the participant’s head.

There are nineteen characters that can be played by a minimum of ten actors. There are seven characters who must be female; the others could be played by either male or female. There are four roles for 12- to 14-year-old girls, but these roles could also be played by young-looking adult actresses.

Minimal scenic and costume requirements make this show very producible on any level, professional or amateur. It would also be ideal as a touring production.

(For information contact Mindy Manley Little, c/o MVO Records, 12532 Cunliffe Rd. W.W., Vashon Island, WA 98070)


A- 7-12 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

A group of CODfish (children of divorce) come together on stage for a simulated therapy session where each tells his/her story. There is a full range of examples. Some try to save the marriage; some are still struggling to accept one parent; others find it difficult to communicate with the custody parent. All are struggling; some are finding successful ways to cope. Sharing experiences seems to help.

This work is intended to be used in connection with available counseling. It is intended to open minds and hearts, help young people to cope with the failings of their parents, and hopefully help them to not repeat the parents’ mistakes in their own lives. It could be successfully used in a classroom setting, or presented to a small audience with proper preparation (as noted in the forward). It is intended to be played by teens.


A- 5+ Reviewed by Braden Gregory Bell

In order to best the sanctimonious and moody Malvolio, the rest of Lady Olivia’s household conspire to play a practical joke on him.

The play is an adaptation of the low comedy plot in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. By removing it from the regular text, the joke on Malvolio is made more clear and understandable for young viewers. The language has been kept true; the feeling and flavor are very much intact. This is an excellent introduction to Shakespeare’s work.

The play does not condescend. It demands attention and thought from the audience, with the result being that viewers will be both entertained and stretched. Although young audiences may not catch every joke, seeing the play will be well worth their while, and they should catch enough of the humor to make it entertaining, especially since much of the humor is broad, physical comedy.

The play would best be mounted by a professional or very skilled amateur group who understands Shakespeare. The original production was staged by Dallas Children’s Theatre and El Centro College. Scenery and props are minimal, and costumes need only be suggestive of the period, although they could be as elaborate as desired. The script calls for 2 females and 4 males, although the clown could be performed by either male or female, making it 3 of each.

A K-6 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Way back yonder in Wolpen Creek, there lived a boy named Jack, with his Mam. The cow went dry and was sold for beans that grew to reach the sky. Jack climbed up and met The High Tall Giant Woman and her Giant husband (they both loved tadwhacker stew) but it all worked out all right.

This delightful retelling of the beanstalk story was originally staged by Lexington Children's Theatre and carries the flavor of Appalachian mountain folk tales. It is meant to be staged as a participation piece in three quarter round, to an audience seated on the floor. Audience members take the part of the cow and chicken and help with various sound effects. The eight parts are played by four performers (3 M, 1 F). Handling the audience participation requires experienced personnel.


A 10-12 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Kara is preparing a dance routine for a competitive entrance examination for a summer dance school. She is using her dance to describe and materialize emotional reactions to personal memories and experiences of the past few weeks. The dance ranges from smooth and graceful to disjointed and jerky. It encompasses a mother with an alcohol problem, a boy friend who is dealing drugs to get quick cash, and a friend who feels a lack of trust. There is a powerful culmination as all the disparate elements come together in Kara’s dance, and we are left to wonder how it will be resolved.

This serious drama is set in a dance studio, where all the flash-backs are made by moving the dance bars and stools, and using the mirror frames as entrances. It focuses on current challenges and how one must still deal with the past. It is effective theatre, well written, with fully drawn characters. Only professionals or very advanced amateur groups should attempt this work. Casting requirements are minimal (3 F, 2 M).


A 7-8 Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert

GULLIVER: The truth is that you don’t hate mankind, you love it.

SWIFT: No! No! NO!

GULLIVER: That’s why you sent me traveling for sixteen years and seven months.

SWIFT: I heartily hate and detest those animals called men.

GULLIVER: But you heartily love John, Mary, and Thomas, that animal called man and woman. The individual. That animal called Lemuel Gulliver. ME!

SWIFT: Yes, yes, yes! You’re right. I do.

GULLIVER: That animal called Yahoo [human]!

SWIFT: How can anyone love Yahoos?

GULLIVER: We must because that’s who we are.

These climactic lines sum up the amazing and adventurous travels of Gulliver in the many different lands, situations, and people with whom he associates. He encounters the good and bad, the selfish and generous, the loving and manipulative. He hates the evil, selfish, destructive side of man, but still cannot reject them completely. He still lives among them and accepts them.

This is an artistically, well-crafted script, based on Jonathan Swift’s classic novel. The lines, words, characters, and dialogue are intriguing and delightful to be a part of. The script
gives much creative freedom, challenge, and fun in creating the various worlds Gulliver visits. The themes and the ways in which the themes are revealed are fantastically done.

There are several staging suggestions that will aid production. There are over forty characters in the play, but a number could be double cast. Action moves quickly from one location to another, with only a minimal suggestion of scenery.

★★★★


* 2-6 Reviewed by Harold Oaks

Marianne, who lives in Berlin, Germany, in 1938, is getting ready for school. She fusses about a math examination scheduled for that day, but she won’t get to take it because she will no longer be allowed to attend school with the “Aryan” children, for she is a Jew. Her contacts with other children are colored by her heritage, and she erupts in rage and frustration to one of them. Her parents are very concerned for her welfare. The old baker, Mr. Altmann, whose shop has been broken up because he is Jewish, has his own way of protesting, which he describes when he gives Marianne a triangular-shaped pastry:

Marianne: A Haman’s pocket—but you only bake those at Purim.

Mr. Altmann: Not anymore. When they started to attack our synagogues, I thought to myself, what can I do? If I talk back they hit me, smash my shop, take me to prison. Maybe they do that anyway. But all my customers, the Jewish ones anyway, will understand why they eat Haman’s pockets all year round.

Marianne: They will? *(She’s enjoying the jelly-filled pastry.)*

Mr. Altmann: Of course. What do you do in the synagogue when you hear the Purim story?

Marianne: We shout and clap and play noisemakers every time we hear the cruel Haman’s name.

Mr. Altmann: Right. And to celebrate the courage of our Jewish Queen Esther and her father, we remember how they persuaded the King to get rid of the tyrant who wanted to kill all the Jews. That’s why we have a party and . . .

Marianne: Eat Haman’s pockets.

Mr. Altmann: These pastries celebrate victory, peaceful victory over force . . . Tyrants don’t last forever, and have you noticed, Haman begins with the same letter as someone else we know? God forbid I should mention him. *(He makes the sign of an “H” in the air, then takes a cloth and pretends to erase it. MARIANNE giggles.)*

This powerful, informative play deals with the *Kinderrtransports*, created by the British government to save Jewish children. Ten thousand children were transported (without their parents) out of Germany over the ten months it operated. Marianne was one of those children. The play lets us see why she had to leave, and the emotional cost to her and her parents.

*Goodbye Marianne* was first staged by Carousel Theater, (Vancouver, Canada) with a cast of two women and one man, who played all seven rolls. Professional production is recommended, but a very experienced amateur group should also be successful. Staging requirements are minimal and the show could be easily toured. The playbook also contains an excellent five page glossary of terms related to the play and the time period.

★★★★