1997

Play Reviews

Harold R. Oaks

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**A- 4-8**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Hannah, a young Jewish girl, visits her grandfather at her parents’ insistence. Hannah reluctantly sits for a painting by “Pops,” as she calls him. She hates being different—having dark hair and eyes instead of being like her blue-eyed, blond friend. Pops, on the other hand, is closed about his past, especially his experiences during the war in the concentration camp.

While Hannah plays with a pocket Game Boy, she is visited by two blue aliens who look surprisingly like the figures running around on the screen. These characters, unseen by Pops and Hannah, come to study humans. They are able to activate scenes from the past to help them (and Hannah and Pops) understand more about what has happened. Hannah becomes her namesake, Pops’ older sister, in two scenes in 1943, feeling what she felt and suddenly understanding that it is her history, as well as his. Finally, each feels the connection to the other. Pops is able to talk about his deeply painful experiences, and Hannah is able to give a presentation to her class on the Holocaust.

The structure of the play is unusual, since the aliens serve as a narrative device, but the term “alien” is also used by the human characters to describe how they feel about themselves at times. The transitions seem to jerk a bit, but once engaged, the scenes work. Written to be played by four performers (2M, 2F), scenic elements are minimal and character shifts are made with costume pieces. Staging will require experienced performers, either professional or amateur. The work was originally commissioned by Idaho Theatre for Youth.

★★★★


**A 1-6**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Unless Jack can find three “sillies” more silly than his intended, “Buttons,” and her parents, he will not marry her. He finds several sillier people who cannot count, put on pants, or see the sun, so he returns to marry Buttons.

This light folktale, done story-theatre style, moves quickly as it shifts from place to place and draws quick sketches of the sillies. It should be fun to do and a delight for audiences. There are twenty-five speaking roles (10 M, 13 F, 3 either M/F), but it could easily be double cast, if desired. It may be staged without scenery, with only minimal props and costume pieces by young performers.

★★★★


**A 3-9 & families**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

In 1864, Thomas Woodrow Wilson is playing with his young friends in his father’s church when they spy through a knot hole to see the Yankee prisoners held behind the chapel in Augusta, Georgia. He decides war is not good and hopes there can be a way to prevent it. His minister father comforts him, and Tommy goes to sleep.
dreaming about the future. We go with him to 1915, when Scott Joplin uses some of his music to introduce key national figures (Henry Ford, Mother Jones, Ernestine Kettler) and issues (industrialization, unionization, women’s suffrage). We skip through key times of Wilson’s life that establish his intellectual capacity, his integrity, and the chaotic conditions that brought the U.S. into the First World War. Before Tommy wakes up, we also see President Wilson sign the Amendment giving women the right to vote.

This quick review of history from the ragtime era makes learning a delight. It was originally staged by the California Theatre Center with a cast of five (3M, 2F) who shift through a series of roles and imaginative work with chairs to create everything from a funeral to a ride in a model-T Ford. It is fast-moving and interesting. Production elements are simple and the show is intended to tour. Recommended for professional companies, or very experienced amateur groups.


A 3-9 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman in the United States to become a doctor with a medical degree; Marie Skłodowska Curie won two Nobel prizes for her work in physics and chemistry. These women are the subject of this two-part, story-theatre style narrative. It explores the difficulties and challenges of being accepted in traditionally male fields, and having people believe they were not only competent, but able to excel.

The first act illustrates Elizabeth’s difficulty getting accepted into medical school in 1847, and then overcoming bacterial blindness and prejudice in establishing a clinic in New York. The second act takes the audience to Paris and Marie’s persistence at getting an education at the Sorbonne, her meeting and marrying Pierre Curie, working with him to discover and establish two new elements (radium and polonium), and being awarded her first Nobel prize.

The play is designed to move swiftly in time and space. The play text is supplemented by a forty-page resource guide, including improvisation suggestions, chronologies, short histories, lists of other women scientists, and classroom exercises and activities for Science, Language Arts, Social Studies and the Arts.

Staging requirements are minimal: utilizing platforms, changeable signs, and costume pieces for character changes. The play can be done with a cast of four (3F, 1M) or a much larger cast, if desired. It can work as an informative presentation for young audiences by either professional or experienced amateur performers, or as an excellent classroom exercise that will expand student’s experience and knowledge.

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B 2-6 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Sir Ector comes with his sons, Sir Kay and Sir Arthur, to a tournament outside London. He and a friend lament the loss of order in the kingdom after the death of the last king several years ago, and talk about a mysterious sword buried in an anvil in a nearby church yard. It seems that whoever can pull the sword out shall be king. Arthur is able to do so, and a public meeting is called. Several knights try to draw the sword out, but only Arthur can remove and replace it. Some still question his authority, until Merlin clarifies his true ancestry and is heralded as King.

This is one of the Players Press legend series, intended for classroom production for other classes, parents, and friends. Staging and costumes can be simple or complex, and may be used to help understand the time period and customs of the country.
High School students are signing yearbooks at the end of the year, remembering all the things that have happened, and several of these events spring to life through the memory. There is a wide range of characters, representing the spectrum of modern-day high school students. This is a heavily musical show, also representing a range of musical styles. The language is contemporary, as are the situations these young adults find themselves in.

The play can be staged simply with a cast of as few as 18, or with many more by expanding the chorus. Costumes and set pieces would not be difficult to secure. Designed for high school performers, this show should be successful if the producers have solid musical and dance support.

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Clarissa must clean up her room so her Grandmother can stay in it during her visit. But Clarissa hates to clean her room, especially her closet. The closet produces a variety of characters (pirates, monsters, fish, angels, even Robin Hood’s merry men) and adventures before Grandma and Clarissa finally conquer it. Musical numbers support the action and mood of this play. It should be great fun to do and will be much appreciated by young people who are always told “Keep your room clean!”

Casting requires three female and two male, plus extras, and has been done with as few as five and as many as twelve. The set requires one child’s bedroom set, with extraordinary closet and costumes to match. Originally staged by Childsplay, Inc., of Tempe, Arizona, this production could be successfully toured but does require a talented and capable cast. Recommended for professional companies, or very experienced amateur groups.

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Two tree houses stand across from each other, divided by a chain-link fence. These become analogies of two countries, people, or families—any group that finds itself in conflict with another—separated by a man-made, artificial barrier. A “game” is started to see who will move...
their three house, but it soon escalates to the creation of “bombs” (firecrackers in an empty coffee can) that will “blow up” the tree house of the one who loses, or cheats.

Then come secrets—lies, and half-truths to smear reputations and break up developing friendships. There are references to adults behaving irrationally, and the children are seen following their pattern. But in the end, reason and courage win, and the fence comes down.

This would work well as an allegory for discussion about conflict, race relations, and ethnic or religious conflict, so that root causes could be examined and discussed. Production is relatively simple, requiring either detailed or suggestive scenery and contemporary costumes. Casting requires 6M, 5F.


Two young people are going on a lunch date. Each seeks advice from a friend on how to establish a relationship. The boy’s mother, a beautician, becomes involved and happens to come with a friend to the restaurant at the same time. An uncle gets a new job playing guitar and serenades the young couple. There isn’t much plot; but, on the other hand, it shows what makes the world go around for young teenagers.

This is a sensitive, carefully drawn, picture of life for young people struggling to work things out together and having sometimes more help than they want or need. Characters are well drawn and there is opportunity for considerable humor in looking at the depiction of teens and adults, in this dramatic world. It has been performed at several secondary schools and could easily be done with a young-adult cast. The central characters are Latino, and there are several Spanish phrases used, but all understandable within the context of the play. The script includes a glossary of Spanish words and phrases.


Stone Soup, The Emperor’s New Clothes, and a tall tale from Tennessee are presented storytelling style. Songs reinforce messages of pride and prejudice, drive points home, and open and close the play.

The two soldiers in Stone Soup come to the town of Shar-Not, find the town lives up to its name, but are able to make their soup when the villagers provide ingredients. Motivation to contribute is not clear in the script, although their selfishness is, and one wonders at the complete change at the end when all are willing to share.

In The Iron Man, a conceited wrestler is physically outdone by Granny, Mother, and Girl; but he becomes stronger through their instruction, wins the wrestling match for the state of Tennessee, and comes back (with renewed respect for the girl) and marries her.

The Emperor’s New Clothes follows the Hans Christian Anderson plot, but spends more time on the colorful pitch men by giving them two songs, while the Emperor has none.

Originally written for a cast of eight, the three playlets could be cast separately with twenty-five or more. Scenery is minimal, and costumes are changed by addition of a hat, scarf, or other accessory. A complete musical score is available for $10.

* 4+ Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

Originally commissioned for production at the George Street Playhouse, this powerful piece explores the memories of Holocaust survivors Eva Schloss and Ed Silverberg, childhood friends of Anne Frank. Ed Silverberg, separated from his family at the age of sixteen, hid in Holland and then Belgium, in an attempt to escape the terror of the war. Eva Schloss, at the age of thirteen, spent two years in hiding before being held prisoner in the most notorious concentration camp under the Nazi regime—Auschwitz Birkenau.

*And Then They Came for Me* features actors playing young Eva and Ed interacting with actual videotaped interviews of Ms. Schloss and Mr. Silverberg (videotaped in 1995 and 1996). A multimedia project blending videotaped oral histories, story dramatization, and interaction between live actors and video, this highly theatrical piece takes us further than the Anne Frank pieces previously available by literally bringing us face to face with the inextinguishable spirit of two Holocaust survivors.

Recommended for professional production. Performance would not be successful without the video material. Rental of original video is currently available through George Street Playhouse, 9 Livingston Ave. New Brunswick, NJ 08901.

★★★★


B 9-12 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

At a ten-year class reunion, Missy remembers the one classmate everyone seemed to like picking on. Carl didn’t dress well, had zits, had difficulty in class, and was pushed and shoved in the halls and the lunchroom. His mother died when he was young and his father was abusive. After graduation he thinks things may get better, but the old high school crowd finds him at work and starts picking on him again. No longer able to take it, he commits suicide.

This short play explores a problem often seen among teens when they pick on those who are different. We can recognize the character types and even what they say to each other and to Carl. This would be a useful classroom exercise to open discussion on this topic. It is intended to be performed by students with minimal scenery and properties.

★★★★