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Play Reviews

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**Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks**

This is a collection of nineteen short selections from contemporary dramatic literature which the author feels will interest teenagers. Brennan has chosen cuttings that reflect current life, primarily in inner-city settings. Included, among others, are selections from *The Colored Museum*, by George C. Wolfe; *Greater Tuna*, by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard; *Reachin’*, by Cynthia L. Cooper; *Falsettoland*, by William Finn and James Lapine; *Reinventing Daddy*, by Gary Bonasorte; *Spic-O-Rama*, by John A. Leguizamo; *True West*, by Sam Shepard; *OUT!,* by Lawrence Kelly; *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, by Ntozake Shange; *Baby with the Bathwater*, by Christopher Durang; and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, by August Wilson. The sequences are often powerful, poignant comments on life for young adults today. They should be useful tools for classroom projects. The book also includes biographical notes on each author.

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**Reviewed by Athena Madan**

She was my aunt so she’s your Great, Great Aunt. . . . I don’t like it here. At night the mist moves up the river banks and hangs over the house; makes the air smell like a rotten cellar. The mist works into the trees and they crack; "sounds like the cracking of bones. . . . She wants something, she’s always wanted something, probably something she can never have, which is why she haunts us. But you, I think you’re something special to her, and I don’t like that. . . ."

So Grandpa explains to Jenny the haunting story of Sondra, the Ghost of the River House. According to legend, Sondra hid a box of jewels and money in the Old House just before her death in 1920. The treasure remains undiscovered; and, to the resentment of many family members, Sondra continues to drive everyone out as her way of protecting the treasure. But through the haunting legacy of Sondra’s strange, sad life that so uniquely parallels her own, Jenny discovers the understanding and self-acceptance for which she so desperately longs, and Sondra discovers she can rest.

This is an excellent script, with strong characterization and text that lends itself naturally to the stage. Sondra develops in character from a rather frightening force into a real person, with real thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams with whom the young audience will empathize. Grandpa, who stays with Jenny the entire time, also provides a sense of safe familiarity.

There are six character roles: 2 children (1M, 1F); 1 adult female; and 2 adult males (2 of the adult male roles are to be played by the same actor). Staging requirements are simple. It could be effectively produced on any level. Originally commissioned by the Grand Rapids Circle Theatre, the play was a winner in the Sixth National Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman Youth Theatre Playwriting Competition.

Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

Adapted from a Japanese folk tale, this script combines elements of several versions of the traditional tale. The story explores the ideas of love, sacrifice and greed. Kokuro, a young Japanese boy, is rewarded for his kindness to an injured crane by the mysterious arrival of a beautiful maiden who offers to become his bride. A poor peasant, Kokuro worries that he cannot support his new bride. To ease his concern, his wife agrees to weave a special cloth for him to sell in the market. Her only request is that he not enter the room while she is weaving. The cloth brings great wealth to the happy couple, but soon Kokuro’s greed undermines their happiness, and the mystery of the Crane Wife and her sacrifice is revealed.

This lovely adaptation of a traditional tale will be best suited for performance by adult actors for young audiences. Borrowing Japanese theatre conventions and a presentational style, the script suggests the use of large puppets, masks, and an ensemble capable of fairly sophisticated movement. The use of percussion instruments by the chorus is also strongly suggested. The script offers a potentially beautiful visual production without the need for expensive scenery and props. It is a strong ensemble piece that will delight young audiences and offer fascinating production challenges for theatre artists.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

* 2-6

*Bambi: A Life in the Woods* was originally produced by First Stage Milwaukee and was first reviewed in manuscript form in this publication over three years ago. It has now been given an attractive publication by Anchorage Press.

This adaptation of Felix Salten’s novel by Jim DeVita contains the elegance and beauty of the original without the cuteness of the Disney version. The story focuses on the maturation of Bambi and his young deer friends in their forest environment, with all its joys, discoveries and dangers. Harm and even death occur, but the play explores the cause and effect, never focusing on the violence itself. Insight is given into man’s relationship to the animals, both in captivity and in the wild. It is a well-told story with interesting, well-drawn characters.

All the animals and birds are played by actors with only a suggestion of “animalness.” Character definition is gained by movement, language and reaction. Space staging, including a suggestion of the forest and meadow, with effective lighting and sound would carry out the author’s intent.

It is an excellent play with concepts that reach far beyond what appears to be a simple story. It can be enjoyed by audiences from middle elementary to family. Effective production will require considerable skill in staging and acting by mature performers. With double casting, the thirteen roles can be played by five women and four men.


Reviewed by Athena Madan

* K-6

This is an excellent script! While creating a more simplified version, DeVita captures the magical unreality of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. Though appearances of most characters are brief, the clever dialogue maintains the pretentiousness of Carroll, helping bring them to life. The characters are delightful, amusing and believable in a land that is not.
Set requirements are minimal. It could even be performed (although not intended to be) on a bare stage with suggested set changes accomplished with lighting and costumes. Requires a cast of nine. Recommended for mature companies with excellent acting skills.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

Cornwaite, in this version of *Villeggiatura*, takes huge liberties in combining Goldoni's trilogy of Italian comedies. The story takes place in eighteenth-century Italy and revolves around two young ladies and their passion for fashion and romance. In vying for the attention of the same man, the two use the manners of the day to shield their contempt for one another. The thinly sketched characters offer a glimpse of the social structure and dictums of the era.

Significantly condensed, Cornwaite's treatment of Goldoni's script leaves much to be desired. The subtractions from the original leave only a skeleton of a story, creating a stumbling sequence of events with little exposition or motivation for action. The translation is poorly executed with dated phrases and choppy dialogue. Multiple locations and period costumes make this a difficult production for schools or theatres with a limited budget. Perhaps the best use of this script is for a classroom reading, introducing students to the work of Goldoni and Italian comedy.


Reviewed by Athena Madan

There are obvious challenges in writing a musical stage adaptation of a story such as *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which Peterson meets with stylized imagination. There are past recollections of other toys and their imagined fates (“Broken!”), the lively addition of a wind-up clock mouse who loves to “Rrrrrrun!” across the playroom, and rhyming lyrics that attempt to provide a sense of three-dimensionality to the sedentary stuffed animals. Although Peterson tries nobly to capture its essence, the magical reality of Margery Williams’ original is lacking.

Here we see the skin horse not as a quiet confidante of wisdom and experience, but rather one who simply exists, one “who has tried and failed.” The rabbit himself is conveyed as being
more simpleminded than innocent. And in the end—probably in an effort to live “happily ever after”—the two friends are reunited: a boy and his pet rabbit, never to part again.

The entire play takes place within the nursery walls. Costumes can be as simple or as elaborate as desired. There are 11 characters (3F, 3M; the rest can be played by either male or female; with the possibility of doubling parts). It could be done as a project by older grades for younger grades in an elementary school.


B K-6 Reviewed by Athena Madan

This musical adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s classic manages to maintain the confusion and silliness of the original, combining and interweaving the two stories into one wondrous journey.

Challenges presented in producing this play include a numerous cast (20+, but it can be done with a cast of a dozen with doubling of parts); five (simple or elaborate) scene changes; characterization, which is superficial and incomplete, as in the book; the obvious illusions of a shrinking and growing Alice (the script remedies this with the use of velcro attachments on Alice’s dress), and the appearance and disappearance of the Cheshire Cat.

The script preserves Carroll’s clever riddles and plays on words, though the imaginative lyrics don’t quite fit with the language of the text. Incidents are manipulated well enough to flow smoothly, even though they are not in the same order of occurrence as in the original. The action moves quickly, and the color of the sketched characters is vibrant enough to catch the attention of audiences.

The author tells in his production notes that the work has been performed with success by either adults for children or by a cast of young people. Set and costumes will require considerable imagination, but can be great fun.


* 2-6 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Eight years, four months, twenty-nine days—enough time to pack a lifetime full of emotional power and strength in brilliant colors; enough time to fill a yellow boat to overflowing with love and older-than-parents understanding of life—and death—when he sails on and on to become one with the sun.

This is the vibrant story of the young artist Benjamin, who has only eight short years to capture a world of experience. It is discovered he is hemophilic, and then, through a contaminated transfusion, he contracts AIDS and eventually dies. His parents sing him a song of three boats, a blue one carrying hope, a red one brimming with faith, and a yellow one filled with love. The blue and red boats return, but the yellow one sails straight up to the sun!

This is a powerful play that explores, creatively and sensitively, the topics of AIDS and death. A study guide is available. Cast of four male, three female. Scenic and costume requirements are minimal. Recommended for professional or very experienced amateur production. Originally produced by Child’s Play, Inc. of Tempe, AZ and Metro Theatre Company, Saint Louis, MO.


B 2-5 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This version of Carlo Collodi’s classic skips through the high points in the puppet’s life, using
music as both bridge and communication tool. Characterization is necessarily sketchy, but the primary plot points are established: lying is a way to get your nose longer, money does not grow on bushes, boys can become donkeys by seeking nothing but pleasure, and the way to become a real person is by showing love and concern for others.

Production requirements are minimal, and there are suggestions on how to solve such things as the growing nose and the whale’s insides, so that even those with limited means could produce this show. Casting could range from ten to a larger number that includes children and townspeople.


B 6-12 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is a collection of James Thurber’s Fables, dramatized Reader’s Theatre style. The fables are similar to Aesop’s famous tales, but with a contemporary slant. Each involves several animal characters and offers interesting characterization opportunities, based on limited physical action, thereby emphasizing vocal variety. Each tale ends with a moral that often adds humor or insight.

These would best be used in a classroom exercise, perhaps also shown to parents and friends. There are six fables: The Crow and the Oriole (Crow leaves his wife for the fickle Oriole and is rejected); The Shrike and the Chipmunks (the well-planned chipmunks get eaten); The Very Proper Gander (misunderstood word leads to being driven out of town); The Foolhardy Mouse and the Cautious Cat (sometimes a foolish mouse beats the odds); The Owl Who Was God (following a blind leader can get you killed); The Truth About Toads (don’t believe everything others tell you). If one person is cast in each role in the six fables, the total would be 46, but with double casting, the whole can be performed by a cast of nine, including the same narrator throughout.

★★★★