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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Authors
Harold R. Oaks, Rosemarie Howard, Rebecca Hess, Dan Keiter, Donna Moore, and M. Colleen Lewis

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Play Reviews


This adaptation is based on the manuscript and early editions of the Grimm's fairy tale. As the play opens, Hansel and Gretel are happily playing a version of the child's game of keep away, instead of going to the stream to fill a pitcher with water for their mother (not their stepmother). While they hide, they overhear their parents making plans to abandon them in the woods the next day. Hansel slips out that night and gathers stones that shine in the moonlight, so even though they are abandoned in the woods, they make their way home following the path of silvery stones Hansel has made. Hansel is unable to gather stones the following night and so drops bread crumbs the second time he and Gretel are led into the woods by their parents. A large white bird (probably where the angel come from in later editions) directs them to a path by not allowing them to go in any other direction. This path, of course, leads to the witch's gingerbread house. The witch entices them with food and traps them—Hansel in a chicken coop to be fattened for a feast and Gretel in the yard and house as a servant. Ultimately Gretel frees them both by shoving the witch into the oven and releasing hansel from the chicken coop. Led by the white bird, their father appears on the scene. They excitedly show him the witch's jewels and want to return home to share the riches with both their parents. However, while the children have been in the woods the mother, who counseled the father to abandon the children, has died. The children and their father take the jewels and follow the white bird to their home.

A brief introduction to the play explains the playwright's intent in returning to the early versions of the story. The sociological and psychological aspects of the tale are discussed—a help for directors in understanding how to approach a production of this script, which is full of subtext that should be explored.

Six actors (two men, four women) are required. Touring would necessitate modification of the technical requirements. A score of background music is available.

★★★★

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Being popular is important to young adolescents, as are the myriad problems with girl-boy relationships. *Dear God, Let Me Be Popular* has two high school age teens (Sarah and Dan) commenting on and advising four seventh graders on these subjects. Billy (somewhat "nerdy," interested in rock collecting and exploring) likes Elizabeth (very popular, much into clothes, magazines, dating). Jenny (wistful, creative, worried about not being popular) likes Billy but seems unable to get his attention. Steven (huge ego, thinks only about girls, sports and having fun) likes only popular girls, like Elizabeth. Jenny and Billy find mutual interests and each other, as do Elizabeth and Steven, but the audience is pushed to consider what is the best kind of relationship in the long run.

The play was originally done by The SOURCE Teen Theatre of Sarasota, Florida. It comes with a four page study guide that is intended to help guide discussion and activities that will make application of pertinent points with audiences. Suggestions are given to update the play as needed, and the issues are current for this age group. Production is simple and touring would be easy.


Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Dirk and Erin Simpson have traveled to Scotland in search of the Loch Ness monster. They meet two young locals who claim to have seen the monster, to which they lovingly refer as "Nessie", on a number of occasions. As the four young people are trying to call Nessie up from the deep, they encounter Dr. Dalrymple and his comical sidekick, Ian Adequate. The Dr. has never viewed the monster himself and is trying to gather evidence to prove that he does not exist. The children finally succeed in calling Nessie to the surface and convince the Dr. that it is important to believe in things which we cannot always see.

*Nessie* is a fast-paced, imaginative script with lively characters. The story embraces and involves the audience, relaying a positive message. Casting can be done with six actors. The sets are costumes need not be
elaborate. *Nessie* would be best suited for an amateur ensemble of actors, such as a high school drama group performing for young audiences.


B+ 3-6

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Henry likes playing video games, watching TV and playing sports, but these activities sometimes interfere with schoolwork. He gets an "F" and is taken to the library to write a report for extra credit to remove the failing grade. Henry wants to write about Batman or Superman, but the Librarian gives him a book about George Washington Carver, "Peanutman." When the book is opened, Carver appears and helps Henry understand about his times, experiences and the discoveries he made. Folklore sections are included, one about diseases coming to man and Carver helping discover plants to help develop cures and another about misplaced human values.

Sections of the play also deal with Black Pride. At one point Carver says:

You got it! And those farmers started to raise their faces and their eyes. And they started to think of themselves not as people who had been thrown away or left out . . . a human garbage pile . . . but rather as managers of the soil. They weren’t just learning to be better framers, they were learning to respect themselves, too, by having something they could do well. Now they could look people in the eye . . .

The play utilizes audience participation throughout, calling on members of the audience to come to the stage and be various animals, flowers, etc. It is written to be performed by three actors, but one of the roles can be split, if desired. The Performers must be able to direct and control the audience in their activities. Staging is simple and the play could easily tour.

★★★★★

A- K-6, Family

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

This mythical tale, performed in one act, is based on Japanese folklore. The young hero, Yushi, has fallen from his father’s ship and lost his memory. In the quest to discover his identity Yushi meets The Wise Old Man. The Old Man directs Yushi to the Garden of Shojo-ji where he will be able to learn of his past by means of a dream. However, the mischievous Tanuki Badgers sing and drum on their bellies, trying to keep anyone from falling asleep and dreaming in the garden. Yushi does finally have his dream and it leads him to the Terrible Thunder Dragon. From the Dragon he learns that his is the son of the Emperor. Yushi falls in love with the Dragon’s beautiful daughter and she returns with him to be his empress.

*Yushi* is a wonderfully enchanting script brought to life through the use of Bunraku-like puppets and the beauty of Japanese sets, costumes and music. There is endless creative opportunity in set, prop, lighting and costume design. One female and three male actors are needed with six to ten extras (extras should have a strong sense of physicality and movement). *Yushi* would be best suited for a professional theatre company.

★★★★


B+ 9-12

Reviewed by Donna Moore

Students will identify with the age-old problem of getting involved with a young man who has poor values. A young girl becomes distracted from her friends and future life goals by making unwise choices. This play can be a real "eye-opener" for students as they see the causes and effects of choosing a path that leads to trouble.

This play is flexible not only in casting and settings, but in the wide range of art forms used in production. Mime, Dance, Readers Theatre, and other techniques are all employed. Students will enjoy picking out different types of music which are used in creating moods and enhancing the play’s theme. Production notes are also provided.

★★★★

**B 7-12**

Reviewed by Dana Keiter and Rebecca Hess

The play attempts to answer the question: "Why do we have a social order in which we rank ourselves from the most dominant to the least?" Using the "Socratic Method" of asking questions, the play tries to demonstrate that "the greatest among us are those who we consider the least." The play is designed to be performed by high school age young people.

By role playing situations that rank them in social classes, the characters discover personal prejudices. The "Voice" (teacher) guides them on their journey—which is sometimes funny and at other times sad and difficult. Although the theme is worthwhile, the style of presentation sometimes gets in the way. Perhaps the script plays better than it reads.

★★★★


**B+ Family**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

One of numerous adaptations of *The Secret Garden*, this musical version, unlike the Broadway musical production, focuses more on the interaction between the children, Mary, Colin, and the Sowerbys—and includes a scene in which the Sowerby family is featured as they "adopt" Mary into their family. Although the script is quite well adapted, the magical moment of finding the key to the garden is buried in a "fair going sequence" that seems irrelevant to the forward action of the story.

The music is well written and is within the range of average voices. Particularly lovely is the tune of the theme song, "The Secret Garden."

Most of the action takes place outside of the garden, with the intent that minimal scenery would be required and so would probably tour well. Production notes list props needed in each scene.

Cast requires 11 women, 7 men, a ten or eleven year old boy and girl, and optional extras.

★★★★
It is just outside the city of Cincinnati at a shooting club that fifteen year old Annie Mozee (later Oakley) comes to her first shooting match where she competed against the professional Frank Butler. Annie was the principal gamehunter for Mr. Frost’s hotel. She always shot the quail and pheasant in the head, so he knew she was good, and Annie proved it by beating Frank Butler. That was the start of her long and much publicized career, taking her even to perform and meet the Queen of England.

This is another in the series of plays "Legends in Action" focusing on outstanding young women from history for junior high/middle school students. Most of the play is narration, but McCaslin has been inventive in establishing views, and allowing the quick action of the shooting match to change perspectives. The play would work in the classroom or in limited public performance. It may be played by students and requires limited staging.

This is another in the series of short, multicultural plays intended for classroom or limited public performance. Minna Lamourrie is a young white girl who is captured as a young child by the Micmac Indians and is raised by them for ten years. She is then discovered by white settlers and taken back to her kin in Northern New England. Five years later she averts a war between the Indians and white settlers by warning the Indians of a pending attack, thus saving bloodshed on both sides.

This play, like the others in the series, is intended to share information rather than focus on artistic depth. Characters are sketched, but believable. Dialogue is understandable and motivated. Staging is simple and effective. The play accomplishes what it sets out to do in helping us better understand two different cultures and the heroic efforts of one young person to preserve both.

**Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks**

This playlet is a dramatization of the saying "Too many cooks spoil the pudding" from American folklore. It is intended to illustrate how sayings, or proverbs, might have first started.

*Too Many Cooks* is set in Alabama, although there is no indication in either dialogue (no dialect is used) nor description to indicate it is the Southern United States. A family of young women and their Mother are providing dinner for a group of men who are coming to help cut wood. Each girl does a part of the dinner. The Mother makes "Indian Pudding", a specialty dish of hers. At one point she needs the salt and asks each of her daughters (all of whom are busy at the moment) to bring it to her. Each say they will do it as soon as they can, and each does, putting in a generous helping, resulting in a very salty pudding. "Too many cooks spoil the pudding!"

Character development is adequate, story movement is rapid, and the punch line is delivered effectively. Staging is simple. This piece could be used in classroom or as part of a more public presentation. It could be played effectively by jr. high/middle school students.

★★★★


**Reviewed by Dana Keiter and Rebecca Hess**

This is a musical version of Charles Perrault’s story, done in the style of English pantomime. It is non-stop and playful. The story is of a poor boy who inherits a cat (Puss) who possesses magical powers. Puss helps the young lad obtain prosperity, a princess, and a happy-ever-after. The script is clever (extensive word play), humorous, and encourages audience participation. It is fast-paced and is should keep most youngster’s attention. the music is simple, but a nice addition. The story helps teach the importance of "believing in oneself." The play gives young people the opportunity to experience the English pantomime style, which in this version, includes having the Miller’s son (Principal Boy) played by a woman, and the Queen (Pantomime Dame) played by a man. The characters are interesting. Over-all, a fun adventure for all involved. Although written for the young audience member, adults should also find it entertaining.

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

A piece about the female gender to be performed by an all-female cast, *Crash Course in Herstory*, is meant to produce an appreciation for women in both genders. *Herstory* is a narrative recital with a number of interlude pieces, which explores the influence of women in the world from the time of Adam and Eve to the present.

The play attempts to cover an enormous amount of information in a playing time of just under an hour. The narrators move rapidly from one historical event to another in a rather clumsy and disjointed manner. The interlude pieces are often awkward and of questionable relevance. *Herstory* makes a valiant effort in addressing a very significant topic, the importance of women in the evolution of humanity, but the manner in which the material is presented does not award this valuable issue its proper worth.

Two female narrators are required, and there may be as many "bit players" as the director feels are necessary. Sets and costumes are minimal. This piece would be best suited for a jr. high or high school setting.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is a short Halloween skit that would be fun for a secondary school group to perform either in class or for a larger audience. Pam and Larry are out together late in the evening. They have been to a movie and a palm reader, who told Larry to beware of "the mark of the wolf". Pam, who has misplaced her glasses, sees the full moon and then continues her incessant monologue while we watch Larry transform into a werewolf. He tries several times to "get" her, but each attempt is either a miss or is diverted by something Pam does (bending over to take a rock out of her shoe, for example, while he flies by overhead). Eventually Pam finds her glasses in her purse and sees that the "moon" was really just a Shell sign. Larry spits out his teeth and is suddenly transformed back, but Pam suggests they come again next week when there will be a full moon—and the play ends.

Parts for one male and one female. Setting could be minimal, but there must be some light control and the metamorphose into the werewolf will take careful planning, but it would provide some fun for students.