Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


*Bird Boy* is an American Indian tale of the artistic boy Little Wolf and his desire for strength and power. Small and weak, Little Wolf cannot pass the manhood test that is given to the young braves of the Indian tribe. He cannot shoot a bow and arrow, or run like the wind. Because he had brought shame to the tribe, he is banished to the mountains for two moons. There he meets the Great Eagle who gives him strength in exchange for his soul. Eventually, Little Wolf, under the spell of Great Eagle, becomes part bird, and while he can fly, he can no longer touch the ground. With this new strength and power, Little Wolf returns to his tribe and enslaves them. Then one day, wolves come to destroy the tribe, and Little Wolf, remembering past friendships, saves the tribe. He then wants to return as a boy to his village but he is still under the spell of Great Eagle. But the village chief says that love is greater than hate and fear, and calls upon the children in the audience to help Little Wolf. When the children call for Little Wolf, he is saved and the Great Eagle is destroyed. The tribe comes to accept Little Wolf and appreciate the importance of those who are different.

This is a well-written play that would capture the interest of young audiences. The characters are well developed and the theme—that true strength comes from love, not power—could lead to an excellent discussion if the play were performed for schools. However, the *deus ex machina*, where the audience resolves the conflict between Little Wolf and Great Eagle is too easy. Also, up to that point, the play seemed to be an authentic Indian tale, whereas the contrived climax takes away from the mythic qualities.

The play would be excellent for children to view, or even for classroom readings; however, the production would be difficult for children to perform as the play calls for special effects: there would be some problems flying Little Wolf as he becomes part bird. There also needs to be some carefully choreographed fight scenes. The script would play well for elementary-age children, kindergarten through sixth grade.

—Gayanne Ramsden

According to an ancient law, the kingdom of Toodle-ooo will revert back to its original owner if Princess Emma Lou is not betrothed within the next three days. But the attractive, bright, and clumsy princess is "bereft of spirit" and lacks charm. Of all the forty princes in the kingdom, she will have none but Bucky Grodlebucket, who screams and runs at the sight of her. So, a la The Wizard of Oz, and accompanied by the kingdom's "charm" school teacher, Emma Lou embarks on a quest to visit the Big Ragout (pronounced Ragoo). On the way, she meets three groups of people (The Slimes, the Ragbottoms, and the Witches) who give her advice on how to be charming. The Big Ragout, who turns out to be a phony, is defeated by the teacher; Emma Lou learns that Bucky likes her but is shy; and the kingdom is saved.

This script is full of inconsistencies and contains some real "groaners." The dialogue, while trying to be "hip," borders on the ridiculous. The music, though upbeat and modern, leaves one unfulfilled. I can, however, see this working for an assembly with a discussion afterward. Some pre-teens and adolescents can identify with Emma Lou's attempts to be charming or "cool" by wanting to walk, dress, and look like everyone else, while others can identify with the shy Prince Bucky.

Teens through adults can perform this for audiences from third through eighth grades. The setting can be simple or elaborate, making it easy for touring, and the costuming can be modern or traditional.

—Dianne Breinholt


Brian Kral is decidedly at the forefront of today's authors for Young People's Theatre. "Troubled Waters" demonstrates that. The play is highly theatrical, well constructed, with interesting characters that tend to border on a stereotype, but in this cast, it doesn't matter.

It is an issue play—a moral play that doesn't preach. It presents a problem to the audience—the mercy killing, for ecological reasons, of hundreds of starving deer in Florida's everglades in 1982, an actual incident. From the various points of view of a sensitive 13-year-old boy; his older brother, a newly commissioned park ranger; his sister, a college student; and his closest friend, an Indian girl, two years
older than himself, we come to see the conflicts and differing opinions about the ecology and what to do with the endangered deer.

In its theatricality, the play has moments of high drama, but also moments that could become comic or farcical if not handled properly by the production staff. The deer are played, very starkly, by actors. If the play is underplayed, the show would not work to its crushing impact—the shooting of the deer—and if overplayed, it could become silly and unreal.

The show would play well for fifth graders but the best audience, I feel, would be teenagers who can identify with the characters who are all teenagers.

If there is a flaw in the play, it is in the climax where a shot from an unknown gun scares the deer that the 13-year-old boy is trying to help. The deer then runs and becomes entangled in barbed wire. The boy's brother must shoot it to put it out of its misery. It either seems too easy, or too convenient. However, the overall writing is strong and believable and the play works. I must also remind the reader that this version is a pre-publication version of a work in process with unfinished revisions. The published version may very well have solved these problems.

—Mike Perry


The play flows well as it follows its central character, Takunda, a 14-year-old girl, through the problems surrounding her father's political activities in Rhodesia. These problems cause him to be taken away for "questioning" by the police. After he departs, the play follows Takunda as she searches for the meaning of it all through her associations with the people in her life. In this play, all those in Takunda's life are affected by her father's "political" actions. Her mother, her uncle, her father's closest associate (who turns out to be the informer, the cause for the questioning in the first place), and her grandmother, all reap the sorrows of political and neighborhood retribution. The family is shunned and decides to return to their home country. Takunda's relationship with her girlfriend and a budding relationship with a new boy are affected and torn apart because of the blindness of racial prejudice. The world the author creates is a fascinating one. Again we see the unjust, imperfect, adult world through the eyes of a teenager. That is how it should be in drama for young people.

Takunda is a play about the inequities of racial prejudice. It is a strong effort, but one only for older teenagers as there is some swearing. It would be a very hard play for most groups to produce. It has an all-black cast which would be essential
for the play's success. The folksongs which are not published with the play, and the language of the Rhodesian peoples are difficult. The play does maintain suspense well as Takunda makes her decisions to become the adult, to work for a living, and wait for her father after all the others have left.

This play makes a very strong statement against racial prejudice and I can recommend it for that reason. But I must stress that it is written for a more mature young audience—eighth or ninth grade to adult. It plays on a bare stage and uses minimal props. Partial costumes suggest the different characters played by the actors. Its theatricality seems to be sound. This is a play in the process of being written and any of its minor problems, not mentioned here, could be smoothed out or eliminated by further productions and rewrites. Then again, they could not.

—Mike Perry


James Still has adapted Margary Williams' classic tale of how a toy rabbit becomes real, in a stage version of the Velveteen Rabbit. Mr. Still has stayed close to the original story although he has added a narrator, the little boy who owns the Velveteen Rabbit, grown into a young man. While Mr. Still has kept many of the same characters in the story, particularly the toys, he has introduced an older brother, Ben and a bully named Tiger. The older brother works well in the story, but there seems to be no purpose for Tiger. The toys, however, add to the fun and give movement to the piece, as well as clarifying the differences between regular and real toys. Unlike the Velveteen Rabbit and the Rocking Horse, Velveteen's friend, who are made real by love, the other selfish toys do not come alive.

The play calls for inventive characterization and could be costumed either simply with heraldic accessories, or more elaborately. The set also could be either simple or more extensive.

This play could easily tour and could be acted by adults or children. Overall, it is very good, although the writing is somewhat pedestrian. It does, however, adhere to the sweetness of the book's message: love can make you real.

—Gayanne Ramsden

We meet Troll Hag and her ugly baby in the forest. Then a human father, mother, and baby enter the woods. Troll Hag steals the human child and leaves her ugly baby in its place. We then follow the Humans as they try to raise Troll Baby. The father wants to kill it, starve it, beat it, but the mother won't let him. She feels a loss and tries to fill the loss with the presence of Troll Baby. In the end, the human child returns and tells us of his life with Troll Hag.

The overwhelming theme is that love conquers and replaces all things lost. It is a universal theme and fairly well supported through the play. This version uses Story Theatre techniques as a device to move the plot and help the action flow smoothly, but the logic of the circumstances does not. The husband and wife have a very illogical relationship, now good-now bad, as they argue over the presence of the Changeling. They berate then love then hate each other. It seems inconsistent.

The ending is abrupt and contrived and not satisfying. The resolution happens too easily. The recounting of the parallel stories of Troll Baby and Human Child should be shown, not merely stated as a summation at the end. It is undramatic. Supposedly, whatever the humans have done to or with Troll Baby, the Trolls did to or with Human Child (thus the theme of love and kind treatment). But this is only told to us at the end by the magically returning Human Child. We never see the events as they are happening. All of the action takes place with Troll Baby among the Humans.

It is an interesting story, on the whole, and well worth telling, but I don't think that it has been fully realized. I feel the play is disjointed. There are many rhymed couplets or verse scattered, seemingly by chance, throughout the play, mostly coming in the narrative portions, but it seems inconsistent and loosely tied together. Some of the translated lines seem silly, almost trite, and grated on me as I read them. It reads like a translation, not like it was written for the English reader/audience. Maybe the translation is too literal or faithful to the original Swedish version. There does not seem to be enough invention on the part of the translator to make the story live for American audiences.

The play is very short—probably about 30 to 40 minutes. I feel it could well be expanded and fleshed out to help us care for the characters. As it is I don't feel an empathy for anyone. Human Father hates Troll Baby who is totally obnoxious. Human Mother appears maniacal and demented in her loving care for this Troll Baby. Farmhand and Maid are stereotypes, unnecessary to the plot, and not developed at all. We never really come to know Troll Hag or Human Child. Human Child's appearance at the end of the play shows us a loving sensible character—how did he become such? That story would have made this play much more interesting.

—Mike Perry