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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A 5-adult

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Imagine being a student, white or black, at Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957—the year black students were forcibly integrated into the all-white high school. Kermit Frazier has given us that opportunity in this well-written script.

Both sides of the integration issue are equally examined through the portrayals of what black and white teenagers in that situation must have experienced—emotionally, physically, and mentally. The play leaves us with more questions than it answers, but this is part of the power of the piece. Each person must answer hard questions according to his or her own conscience.

The music is appropriate and weaves both humorous and serious threads into the emotional tapestry of the play.

The play should easily lead to a discussion of human rights, prejudice, and how we make decisions when faced with tough choices.

A cast of well-trained actors—eight women and nine men (both black and white)—as well as various townspeople, businessmen, etc., is required. The original production was first performed at the Seattle Children’s Theatre.

★★★★


A+ 6-9

Reviewed by Shiela Heindel

*H.M.S. Pinafore* is a Victorian England political satire which pokes fun at official pomposness. The operetta takes place on Her Majesty’s Ship Pinafore. A simple seaman, Ralph (Rafe), has fallen in love with the Captain’s daughter, Josephine. Of course this just isn’t done, and the romance is doomed. Josephine is to marry Sir Joseph Porter who is arriving with all his cousins and aunts.
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Buttercup, a peddler woman, has a secret about the Captain and the seaman. She exchanged the two at birth—accidently. All turns out well for all—Captain Corcoran (now seaman) can wed Buttercup; Seaman Rafe (now Captain) will wed Josephine, and Sir Joseph (resigned) will wed Cousin Hebe who has followed him everywhere.

This adapted version is for middle school. It requires six soloists and a chorus of unison or two-part unchanged voices. Solos are non-demanding and easily learned. Performance time is approximately one hour. In the back of the script/score is a glossary of nautical and British terms. The staging suggestions are excellent. If the British wit and nautical terms are understood by all involved, this play is very funny, indeed!


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Kimberly-Kay, a precious pre-adolescent is "banished" to her attic because she trashed her father's office and finds an old friend, Bluster, a treasure chest of folktales collected from his breezy travels around the world. This time, the stories come from America and are woven into one continuing drama. The reoccurring theme is fathers and their relationships with their children. This is emphasized with the reuniting of Kimberly-Kay and her father at the end of the play.

The tales include a Southern United States version of the King Lear story, entwined with Stupid Tom (who turns out to be smarter than he thought), Crazy Jake, a Native American tale, a trickster story of a greedy thief, and The Arkansas Fiddler. It makes a surprisingly effective whole that would introduce young people to a wide range of American folklore.

The action is "Story Theatre" style, with only very limited props and set pieces, relying on effective action and dialogue to move the story along. Casting requires at least four women and six men (with doubling), but may be expanded to as many as 26 roles. The original production was staged at South Coast Repertory Theatre and could be successfully done by other professional or skilled amateur groups.

**A Family**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Through the eyes of a young boy, *The Monster in My Closet* addresses the subject of ridding ourselves of fears by facing them. Jason is afraid of the dark, afraid of dogs, afraid of the bully at school, and most of all, afraid that it’s his fault his father left the family. With the help of an imaginary friend, Jason conquers his fears and learns that grown-ups have fears to battle as well.

Rhythm and rhyme have been used by the playwright to effectively create and build dramatic tension. Throughout the play, cartoon-like humor facilitates the presentation of an otherwise serious subject.

The script would best be performed by professional actors in an environment where lighting can be controlled. Two female and three male actors are required.

★★★★


**B+ 4-6**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

This musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* retains the basic elements of the original story, but has been expanded to include a number of subplots involving village friends, neighbors, and acquaintances of Beauty and her two sisters. The lyrics are appropriate and move the story forward. Music available to the reviewer was limited to three songs on a demo tape, but the songs seemed within the range of average singers.

Although not told in the traditional way, this expanded version works well. The script offers parts for 43 or more actors and would be ideal for an elementary school or community theatre children’s production.

★★★★


**B K-6**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Seven American folk tales are dramatized "Story Theatre" style in this work. The stories move quickly, with music or dance bridges between focused
action segments. The individual stories are interesting, but are not as effective as some others that have enjoyed better embellishment over the years. Originally done with a cast of 12, these tales could be dramatized with fewer cast members, with doubling.


Mountain Fever is a comic melodrama in two acts. The characters are all between 14-20 years old. A hypochondriac pop singer, Eddie Grant, will not sing without his back-up singers, The Redding Sisters. His agent, Larry Penn, always has a "deal" for him, but can never sell Eddie on any of them. Unbeknownst to anyone, Larry has stolen counterfeit plates from a gangster, Big George. The Redding Sisters see Big George shoot Larry, and, fearing the gangster, they flee to the Ozark mountains. Eddie hires a female private investigator to find them, which she does. All is resolved in the end.

Twenty-six characters, plus extras, are needed for this play (some doubling is possible). Although the play lacks literary quality, it does include many unusual characters that young performers would enjoy seeing and/or playing. The non-stop action would also be attractive. Production notes are included and should help in staging.


This adaptation of the story of the English outlaw hero of Sherwood Forest is entertaining and follows quite closely the original Robin Hood story. The additions of Lady Merle (in league with the evil Prince John), the sheriff’s wife (a social climber), and Salome (the sheriff’s silly daughter) bring appeal and new interest to the story. Comedy is dispersed throughout the play and enhances the story line.

A production of this play could easily be done by the upper elementary grades and junior high students. The production notes are simple to follow. The script calls for sixteen characters, two of which can be doubled.

**B+**  4-6  

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This play, part of the *Legends in Action* collection of short plays (or playlets) intended for the upper elementary and middle school students, is effective for the age group intended. Sketches are given from Dolly Madison’s life, showing her interest in entertaining others and her ability to bring social graces and new dishes to a much more popular White House while her husband was president of the United States. Both the introduction of ice cream and the Easter egg roll down the White House lawn are dramatized.

This would be a good project for limited class production, or for a “Showcase” night for parents. Suggestions for simple costumes and sets are given. It should increase the interest of children for this interesting, historical character.

★★★★


**B+**  4-6  

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is another play in the *Legends in Action* collection of short plays (or playlets) intended for the upper elementary and middle school students. Pocahontas and her actions to save the life of Captain John Smith are dramatized in this playlet. It is set in the main room of the long house belonging to Chief Powhatan (Pocahontas’ Father), and deals with the trial of Captain Smith before the Chief and other tribal elders. The trial is proceeded by a ritual to remove all magic powers from the prisoner. This scene includes Native American dance. Production would require assistance to be sure of the accuracy in dramatizing this section. The trial proceeds with various questions and answers, culminating in Smith’s refusal to betray his people, and the Chief condemning him to death. At the moment he is to be killed by the warriors, Pocahontas flings herself on him, pleading that he be spared. Her Father grants her request, if Captain Smith will agree to serve his daughter.

This would be a good project for limited class production, or for a “Showcase” night for parents. Suggestions for simple costumes and sets are given. Research into Native American customs, and questions of the encroachment by the white man upon the Native Americans could be introduced with this play.

Reviewed by Sheila Heindel

*Story Stretchers* is a literature-based approach to planning "Circle Time," centers, and activities organized around themes found in early childhood curriculum. The format is organized by theme or curriculum categories studied by preschoolers, kindergartens, and at child-care centers. Five books are selected for each theme, and extended activities in art, music, drama, science, housekeeping, dressing, cooking, and movement are then presented. Some of the themes are families, friendships, feelings, plants, nature, seasons, cats, and funny tales. Some of the books used are *A Baby Sister For Frances, George and Martha: One Fine Day, The Carrot Seed, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Ask Mr. Bear, Chicken Soup With Rice, Where the Wild Things Are, Millions of Cats,* and *The Bear's Toothache.*

This book is well done. The format is easy and instructive to follow, and the activities are quite exhaustive. As each children's book is introduced, a synopsis and short review is given along with a cover photo. "Circle Time" includes questions both preceding and following the reading of the book. Next the "Story Stretchers" are listed by activity, each of which includes what the children will learn, what materials are needed, instructions for what to do, and things to think about. The end of each theme section includes, bibliographical information on the books used, and additional storybook references. The book contains an excellent index.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

In an old attic, several toys have lived in solitude and contentment for some time. The dolls include three young gossips, one concerned with money and power, and one obsessed with her cracked China face. Constable Ready Steady, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, makes regular inspections accompanied by his faithful horse, Ramona, and pestered by the would-be Mountie, the teddy bear, Scrumptious.

Into this gentle, selfish world, while Ready Steady is gone, come three pack rats who offer "gifts" to each of the ladies—candy, gloves, face cream (to make cracks disappear), and money. But once the gifts are taken, the dolls find they...
are expected to make a trade—the loss of control of their world. When the Constable returns, he is overpowered and imprisoned in a bird cage by the rats who also demand servitude of their new subjects.

A plan is finally developed, with everyone working together to conquer the rats and restore order. In the process, all learn a bit more about their weaknesses and how to overcome them.

Each character or set of characters has a solo song to help describe her/his point of view. The characters are well-drawn and interesting. Character traits move the plot and self-realization makes the ending possible. Could be played by a cast of young people or by professional actors. Cast of 12 (five males and seven females).


**B+ Pre-3**

Reviewed by Rosemarie Howard

Directed at teachers of preschoolers through third graders, this collection of ideas for using puppets to present poems and songs is clearly written and well arranged. The author introduces the idea of using puppets and gives directions for making three basic kinds of puppets: glove puppets, stick puppets, and paper plate puppets. The collection of poems and songs is divided into nine sections, each dealing with a different topic—the ocean, farm animals, insects, plants, and nursery rhymes, to name a few. Each poem or song is printed in a format transferrable to a 3x5” card for easy reference. Along with each poem or song are clear, detailed patterns and instructions for making the puppets needed to present it. A brief bibliography at the end of each topical section refers the teacher to relevant children’s books.

This book is ideally formatted to give busy teachers a quick and easy way to add some creative puppet play to their classroom activities.


**B- 2-4**

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis & Harold R. Oaks

In an interesting Bible story adaptation, King Nebuchadnezzar is a cruel and powerful leader. He treats his subjects violently, threatening death for anyone who disobeys him. In an attempt to prove his power, the king erects a giant
Golden Image of himself and demands that all his subjects bow down to it. All obey except for three young men. They tell the king they will not worship his Golden Image; they have a greater, more compassionate God. The king has the three thrown into a burning, fiery furnace, and when they emerge unharmed, the king admits the superiority of their God.

The play is more like an improvisationaly based retelling of the story than a close adaptation of the Biblical version. Action is swift, without great care being given to character motivation nor delineation. The adaptation contains some violence as the king has several of his subjects killed for disobeying or displeasing him.

The play requires a cast of at least twenty to thirty and can be performed with cast-created props, set pieces and costume suggestions.


A+ 2-6, Family  
Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Lucy and her fourteen-year-old sister, Terroba, are trying to make sense of a world out of their control. When their widowed mother moves them to their Grandmother Minnie’s home, Lucy is angry about the change. She likes the new home even less when Minnie gets sick and then passes away. Now Lucy is angry at her grandmother for dying and becomes afraid of death. She transfers this fear into tangible objects and refuses to go near Minnie’s things—her portrait or big stuffed chair. Lucy comes to terms with her fears through a dream in which the teen-age Minnie, from the portrait and from the chair, come to life. They share her imaginative play, helping her see beyond anger and fear so she can overcome them.

The play is a skillful examination of the very real fears of childhood, created in a fun and entertaining manner. Characters are well-developed and the dialogue is rich and stretches our world view. York has captured a world, through the eyes of a ten-year-old, and has brought that innocent and uniquely imaginative world to life.

The play would best be done by a professional company. It can be played with a cast of three (two female, one male). The script includes a sketch of the set design, and the costume design for the chair as used for the premier production at the Seattle Children’s Theatre.

★★★★