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Play Reviews

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B 5+ Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Loosely adapted from the novel by H.G. Wells, Jenkins' modernized version leaves invisible much of the tragedy and intrigue of the original. The action has been moved from England of the late 1800s to 1950s America. The only character who remains from Wells' novel is Griffin, the invisible man himself. The rest have been replaced by a fatherless twelve-year-old boy, his mother, and a variety of rural neighbors. Griffin has undergone numerous changes in this adaptation and is left as a very watered down, simplistic version of the original.

If the obliteration of Wells' novel is overlooked, Jenkins' *The Invisible Man* does have some high points. A few interesting themes do come through—such as the vulnerabilities of boys without fathers and examining the uncertainties that arise when scientific advancements bring about changes which are not yet understood. The play also requires very elaborate special effects which could be quite interesting, but have the capability of becoming cumbersome and distracting. Casting requires seven men and three women. Originally staged by The Seattle Children's Theatre, this play would be most appropriate for production by a professional theatre company.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Although published several years ago, I just became aware of this collection of ten short plays addressing the black experience in the United States. Since there is comparatively little work available dealing specifically with the black experience, we will review it belatedly. Several plays are prefaced by a paragraph of history to give background to the reader. Several plays also have production notes that would be helpful for staging. They would be excellent for classroom performance or for full production. A short review of each play follows.

Satchell, Mary. *The Hall of Black American Heroes*.

B 4+

A group of students are taking a school tour of a museum and have arrived at a room devoted to selected blacks who can be role models for those coming after. These young visitors, however, are not much interested and would rather be doing almost anything other than learning about "some old dead people."

But as the display comes to life, they become interested in the lives, achievements, and contributions of Crispus Attucks, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Jackie Robinson, Wilma Rudolph, and Sugar Ray Leonard. Each gives a brief capsule of his/her
experiences as part of a scene involving other characters from their lives.

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Hark, Mildred and Noel McQueen. *George Washington Carver.*

_B+ 4+

The ten-year-old orphan George Washington Carver sometimes has difficulty getting ordinary chores done because he has such a keen curiosity about the plant and animal life around him. Even at this young age he is able to solve problems with growing things that others are not able to. We next see him as a graduate student finishing his Master's Degree at Iowa State University in 1896. Even though he is offered a professorship at his alma mater, he chooses to answer the call of Booker T. Washington to teach research at Tuskegee Institute for a much lower salary and with inferior research tools because he feels he is needed more there. In the final scene, we visit him in his office in 1937 near the end of his career. Two reporters gain an interview and discover the wide range of interests and achievements of this remarkable scientist and humanitarian.

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Winther, Barbara. *John Henry.*

_A- 4+

Based on the ballad, this dramatization of John Henry's race with the automatic hole driller shows us the love and concern Polly Ann has for the powerful John Henry. Also depicted is his superhuman successful effort to beat the machine which costs him his life. Singing and reciting the ballad gives majesty and depth to this short play.

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_A- 4+

Harriet's life as a child growing up as a slave, marrying, and finally running away is told in this verse drama. Intended to be minimally staged, with character voices (rather than action) used to recreate incidents in Harriet's life, this could be effective with a chorus or even in a church setting.

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Satchell, Mary. *Mary McLeod Bethune, Dream Maker.*

_A- 4+

Mary Bethune was going to be a missionary but became a school teacher instead. She dreamed of starting a college and accomplished her goal. All along she inspired young people to think big—to dream of what *could* be—not what had been or is. President Bethune is getting ready for graduation after fifty years as the head of a small private college, when a freshman asks for an interview for the school paper. In telling her story, Mrs. Bethune takes us back to her first teaching position, and we see her ability to help a young boy move toward his dream of becoming a doctor. Next we visit her classroom at Kindell Institute in Sumter, South Carolina, and watch her help an orphan girl determined to follow her dream as a nurse. We also learn of Mary's own dream to have a college. Then we return to graduation day and hear the freshman, Rose, pledge to fulfill her dream of editing a newspaper. Helping young people have and attain their dreams is the true dream of this great teacher.

* * * *

B+  4+

It is early fall in 1822 outside Abe Lincoln's school in Indiana. Two slaves have escaped and are being pursued by their owner. One of Abe's school friends goes to help find the slaves and get the promised reward. Abe, by contrast, helps the runaways get away—in spite of the chance to make lots of money by turning them in.


A-  4+

Several heroic people who helped make the Underground Railroad work are represented in this colorful choral reading. Several speaking parts set off the storyteller and chorus in describing the exciting life of this unique American institution. Even John Henry is called upon to help dig a "tunnel" for the railroad.

This work should help young people want to know more about this "transportation system" and those who played key parts in its operation. The language is colorful and descriptive. The play should be great fun to perform.


B  4+

This work is written as an eight stanza poem that could be done as a recitation or choral reading. It could be combined with pictures and perhaps some action, although neither of these is specified in the script. The poem describes the heroic actions of Cristus Attucks, the first person to die for freedom in the American Revolutionary War.

Satchell, Mary. *Daniel Hale Williams.*

B+  4+

The scenes of this play briefly depict the life of this black medical pioneer who founded Provident Hospital in Chicago and headed Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C. The play focuses on his reaching out to help people all over the nation.

Fisher, Aileen. *"I Have a Dream"*

B+  4+

Dramatizations of Rosa Parks' bus protest and the decision to boycott the buses in peaceful protest introduce the work of Dr. Martin Luther King. But this is more of a program with slides than it is a play. It does contain an excellent capsule of Dr. King's work, with excerpts from his "I Have a Dream" address. With well-selected slides, it could be most effective.


A-  1+ Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

A stage adaptation of *The House on the Cliff* by Franklin W. Dixon, *The Hardy Boys* is a very entertaining piece. Frank and Joe Hardy are witnesses to some strange occurrences at an old deserted mansion. They discover that a gang of smugglers is using the mansion as their hideout and that the leader of the gang is keeping the boys' kidnapped father there. Frank and Joe rescue their father and help bring the smugglers to justice.

The elaborate special effects in *The Hardy Boys* account for the majority of its entertainment value. If done well, this could be a very exciting production from a visual standpoint. The story is somewhat predictable, but keeps the mood of the
original novel intact. Casting requires six men and two women with some doubling. This would be best suited for a professional theatre.

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B+ 4-9 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This short version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is faithful to the original story, but is intended to be done as a bilingual production. All the lines are repeated in both English and Spanish, and may be delivered by the performers or by narrators who can translate into the "other" language. Staging is very simple, consisting of a circle of players with their backs to the audience forming the cyclorama against which the production is staged. Players wear a neutral outfit and add costume pieces to define character.

This would be an excellent piece for bilingual work either in the classroom or as a full audience production on a limited budget. Pacing and coordination would be very important to make it work effectively, but the detailed production notes at the beginning and end of the play should help.

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A 2+ Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

*Sara Crewe or What Happened at Miss Minchin's* is adapted from Francis Hodgson Burnett's 1905 book, *The Little Princess*. The play begins with motherless Sara being placed in a London girl's school, as her father must stay in India to conduct business. Sara is treated like a princess by the school's head mistress, Miss Minchin, until her father loses his fortune to bad investments and dies in despair. Sara is left alone and penniless. She is allowed to stay at the school, but only as a servant, living alone in the attic with only scraps to eat. However, Sara remains strong and kind and is rewarded by gaining the friendship of a peculiar little monkey who ultimately changes Sara's life for the better.

This is an entertaining adaptation which contains numerous messages which are important and relevant for children today. Sandberg's script clearly demonstrates the importance of being kind to all people despite their appearance and economic condition, and the ability of a child to depend on her own inner strength. The story of Sara, growing up in difficult times and having to take care of herself, is something many children, unfortunately, can relate to.

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B+ 3-10 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

The play can be cast with seven females and two males, with some doubling. Production would be appropriate for community, semi-professional and professional theaters. This play is an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale of piracy and buried treasure. It is set as a play within a play. Stevenson's step-son Lloyld convinces his step-father to allow his school class to dramatize the story. The result is a very low-tech approach to staging which allows for children of all ages as well as adults to participate. It also keeps the budget to a minimum as benches are the main articles of scenery and other props may believably be made of found items. In staging this play myself, I found that although it takes some work on the part of audiences to accept this convention at the beginning, children are totally enthralled by it.

This play is well suited to a community or classroom production as its technical requirements are so small. While most of the parts can be divided as desired among different age groups and boys and girls, the play does require two strong
male leads to play Llolyd and Jim Hawkins. Many of the other leads can be doubled.

In sum, this treatment of Stevenson's story has much to offer in the way of fun and excitement, particularly for beginning drama students. To my ear, the dialogue sounds stilted in places when it is taken directly from the book, but the action is engaging and the author has done an excellent job of compressing a complicated plot into a show of approximately one hour's running time.

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