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Play Reviews

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A+ 2-6 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

The lovely youngest daughter of a poor peasant goes to live with a bear on the promise that her family will have food and wealth. She is about to break a spell but instead activates one that causes her prince to be taken east of the sun and west of the moon and she must find and release him. Her journey takes her to various storytellers, each of which give her physical and verbal tools to use in freeing her prince. The climax with the Troll Princess demands skill and wit but is successful.

This delightful tale is set in Norway and uses the rustic, keen humor and insight of a range of interesting characters to advance the story to a somewhat surprising conclusion. The action moves quickly, performed "Story Theatre" style with minimal props, sets and costumes. It requires two men and four women, but can be staged with a flexible cast of thirty or more. It won the East Central College playwriting competition, was workshopped by The Open Eye: New Playworks and was staged by the Seem-to-Be Players of Lawrence, Kansas. It would be a successful professional work or could be staged by experienced amateurs with imaginative skills in working with Story Theatre.


A K-3 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is part of Smith and Kraus’ Young Actors Series, several books focusing on young audiences and/or performers. Several books in this series will be reviewed in the coming issues of the *Children's Book and Play Review*. This book is typical of the care and attention the editors have given in making the works accessible to classroom teachers and those who work with young people using drama as a vehicle for child development. There is a general introduction (28 pages long) treating such topics as "Attention, Self-Esteem & Personal Empowerment," "Folk Tales & Multicultural Education," and "Working with Children in Production." This last section includes an outline of all elements of production, including "Director's Attitude," "How to Use These Scripts," "Script Changes," "Memorization," "Casting," "Audition-ing," "Color-Blind & Gender-Blind Casting," "Vocal Projection," "Physical Warm-Ups," "Characterization," "Movement," "Blocking," "Rehearsals," "Production," and "Curtain Call & Post-Play Discussion."

Each of the plays in the book may be performed by children in the classroom without fee. Any public performance requires written permission from the publisher and the payment of a fee. Accompanying each play are notes on running time, rehearsal time needed for production, cast size (frequently variable), gender of characters, and production notes, including construction suggestions for scenery, costumes, and properties. Several plays contain foreign language words and phrases. Vocabulary
lists, English translation, and pronunciation guides are included to help both teacher and students deal with non-English words and lines. Each of the plays is briefly discussed below.

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This is actually four short playlets based on the "trickster" tales of Anansi's mischievous adventures. The spider's shape is the topic of "How Anansi Got A Thin Waist." Anansi is hungry and cannot decide which village to visit first to get food. He asks one son to take the end of a rope to the village on the west and his other son to take the end of the rope to the village on the east, and ties the rope around his own waist so he will feel which pull is first. The food is ready at both villages at the same time, and both sons pull at once. Before he is able to tell his sons, his waist is very thin—and has been so ever since. "How Anansi Helped a Fisherman" is about trying to avoid work, but losing. "Why Anansi Lives in Ceilings" has the spider tricking Leopard for survival and finding a good, safe place to dwell. "How the World Got Wisdom" tells of Anansi getting all wisdom from the Sky God, but spilling it (for all to share) in a moment of anger.

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*Drakesbill* (France).

Drakesbill loans his money to the greedy king, but must travel to the palace three years later to try to get the money back. The mythical drake takes along (in his mouth!) a fox, a ladder, a river and a wasp nest (accomplished by having a painted duck's head with a working mouth and a slide behind it for actors playing the "friends" to slide down into Drakesbill's "mouth"). When the king tries various ways to have the duck killed, Drakesbill calls on his friends who leap out of his mouth to deal with each challenge. It is finally the king who is driven from the palace and Drakesbill becomes the new king.

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This play originates from a classic Russian tale of an archer who is given a series of challenges by the wicked and greedy Tzar under threat of losing his head. The archer is fortunate to have a wise horse who comes up with ways of solving each problem and eventually winning both the crown and the Czarevna (Princess). Staging is imaginative and fast moving.

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*The Great Bear* (China).

In this myth, based on how the constellation Ursa Major was created, two young hunters meet Sky Shooter, an archer of exceptional skill. They ask him to join them in a search for adventure. Next they meet Great Listener, The Mountain Lifter, Swift Runner and Sea Swallow, each with exceptional gifts, all of which are used to challenge and eventually defeat the Khan and his warriors.

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*I Dodici Mesi "The Twelve Months"* (Italy).

The play is about a mother and daughter who abuse a stepdaughter, Dobrunka. She is sent into the snowy woods to fetch violets, strawberries, and apples. She meets the months dancing on the mountain, and they change to spring, summer and fall momentarily to grant Dobrunka's request and keep her from harm. But when the daughter, Katinka, is rude and demands to have apples, a storm comes up and she is lost in the snow and frozen. Her mother suffers the same fate, and Dobrunka inherits the house and lands for herself.
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The Little Red Hen (various).

A hard working chicken is ignored by her neighbors until it is time to eat. In this version of the traditional story, the cat, dog, and mouse learn their lesson by having to watch the hen eat a treat in front of them, and when the hen asks for help doing the dishes, they all volunteer so they can share the pie next time. The author uses the play to celebrate holidays (Fourth of July, Halloween and Thanksgiving) by having the plant be pumpkins instead of wheat, and the product a pumpkin pie.

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The Long Leather Bag (Irish).

The long leather bag is where a widow and her three daughters keep their gold and silver, but a witch steals the bag and hides it in her chimney. When the oldest daughter is hired as a maid by the witch, she discovers the bag and takes it, but treats the horse, sheep, goat, and mill poorly, and therefore is caught by the witch and turned to stone. The same fate befalls the second daughter, but the youngest shows caring and concern for everyone and saves herself, her sisters, and the gold.

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Los Mariachis Mexicanos "The Brementown Musicians" (Mexico).

The account varies the traditional story by setting it in Mexico, using the Mexican names for the animals, and inserting a number of Spanish words into the text. The musicians are headed to Mexico City, instead of Bremen town, when they come across Los Bandidos, the bandits. The script includes two songs in Spanish, one of which counts to ten. It should be fun for children to learn and perform.

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Ma Lien and the Magic Paintbrush (China).

Ma Lien loves to draw, but she is poor and has no paintbrush. A wizard gives her an enchanted brush that turns whatever she draws into the real thing. With this wonderful tool she is able to create a water buffalo to help the peasants in their farming, make a door in the prison wall, provide food to hungry people, and get herself and others into and out of troubles. It is an interesting and magical story of a child who becomes empowered.

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Star Story (Lushootseed Salish).

Star Story is a Native American story from the Lushootseed tribe in the Puget Sound region of Western Washington State. It explains the origin of natural resources, such as the sun and moon. Two sisters comment on the beauty of two stars, and are taken for wives to the sky. Elder Sister wishes to return to earth and succeeds in escaping. The baby she bears, Star Boy, is stolen, but later escapes to rescue his Mother and brother from the high class one, the Raven. Then Star Boy has his brother, Pipicik become the sun to give warmth and light to the Coming People, while he becomes the moon to mark the months a woman has a baby in her belly. They finish by naming the rivers and the lakes.

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A 3-8 Reviewed by Dana Keiter

Fears and family relationships of an eleven-year-old boy are the subject of this play. Walter is a creative writer with much insight and sensitivity. His father Matt is an old macho-type athlete and has a hard time connecting with his sensitive son, who has no desire to play sports or be competitive. Walter is harassed at school and...
even his younger sister add to the pressure. She is very athletic and competitive. Matt wishes his son could be more like he was as a boy and like his younger sister, but his “putdowns” only further damage the boy’s self-esteem. Walter’s mother Beth is caring and sensitive and is obviously the more understanding of the two parents. This is a powerful drama about a young boy who wants his father’s approval and acceptance. Eloquently written, this moving, beautiful play deals with an important subject which would be excellent for family audiences as a springboard for discussion.

Casting requires three males and five females, but may be expanded or slightly reduced as needed. The author requests simple staging, supported by imaginative lighting and sound, allowing the focus on the evolving relationships rather than on production elements. It would be appropriate for either professional or advanced amateur production.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

In the small town of Hush, Kansas, a young girl experiences life with a richness and depth that challenges conventional views. Her father tries to understand but is also concerned about what other people think. The frame of reality is stretched further when a national newscaster steps from the television to seek consolation—and a story. The girl Maggie, becomes a national “story,” is followed by demanding fans, and must escape to again find herself. Flowing through the action are a lion and a lamb and reflections on what the world has become in the age of sound bites, talk show “insights,” and the shifting national curiosity for the unusual. This is a fascinating look at the United States, its people, family and personal relationships, and contemporary society.

Action of the play flows from place to place and from reality to fantasy. It requires two male, two female and additional players of either gender, capable of playing several roles. The play was originally co-commissioned by two professional theatre companies: Metro Theatre Company, St Louis, MO; and Childsplay, Tempe, AZ.


A+ 2-8 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This is a collection of three Canadian plays for young audiences which were all originally staged at the professional Young People’s Theatre in Toronto, Canada, and represent the excellent quality of work being done in that country. All three are reviewed separately below. They are all professional quality works, but might be staged by experienced amateur groups with success. All deal with moral values from unique points of view, and will challenge audiences and performers to examine their attitudes and standards.


Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert

*Naomi’s Road*, adapted from Joy Kogawa’s book, is the powerful and touching story of a Japanese Canadian Family forced to live in a Relocation Camp during the second World War. We first see the family living happily together prior to Pearl Harbor. But then we witness the escalation of fear and the resulting hatred, pain, and suffering. The story revolves around Naomi
and her perspective of the events. We see her love for dolls, her dependency on her mother, and her need for friends and acceptance. But when her mother goes to Japan to take care of her grandmother, she is unable to return to Canada. This becomes the first negative influence of the war on Naomi. Next the home is lost, the father is located at one camp, the children in another, and the two children must learn to live in a relocation camp with their aunt. Naomi almost dies but a white girl saves her. The prejudices cease, and the two girls become friends. The story ends with the brother and sister singing in a church the songs that their mother sang at the beginning of the play. This gives an optimistic ending of hope, holding onto the memories while pressing forward.

This play was first staged by the professional Young People’s Theatre, Toronto, Canada, but would be appropriate for advanced amateur production as well. Casting requires three males and four females, with doubling.

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*B+ K-4 Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert*

*The Nightingale* is adapted by Lazarus from the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. It is the sensitive story of a plain bird with a beautiful voice who offers love and service to its friends. The emperor is a gullible and sickly man who is controlled by the evil, manipulative music maker. He coaxes the emperor to cage the bird so he may always have its music on hand. The author suggests that man imprisons that which he cannot control. The side story delves into the life of the farmer who is in love with the palace maid. Their love blossoms and in the end results in the emperor in allowing their marriage. The main message of this play is that the love of friends works miracles, and pride must be abandoned to serve those you love.

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*A 3-7 Reviewed by Tracy Lybbert*

Pinocchio is a beautifully entertaining piece utilizing both puppets and actors to reveal honest ramifications of ill behavior. Pinocchio sets out to explore the various facets of life, to find himself, and understand his inner voice. He runs into villains who steal his money, false friends who do not respect adult advice, individuals who are willing to work and share, and also Christ-like characters who give and sacrifice for each other.

The most meaningful character, the spine line of the play, is Blue Girl. She is in the majority of the scenes giving and providing Pinocchio with his innermost needs. In the end of
the play, she becomes the blue donkey and takes on the death that Pinocchio should have received from his injuries as a donkey in the circus. He goes to her, and she explains that she loves him completely and must die for his life. He comes to the end of his initial journey of becoming a man. He learns a complete and honest love. He crumples his wooden heart and places it on her. For the first time in the play, he gives his honest love and devotion to some one other than his selfish frailties. For the first time, he works with the townspeople to provide Geppetto with the nourishment and rest so greatly needed. These two acts of kindness make Pinocchio real. It began on the inside, and results in an outward appearance change as well.

The play was a bit grotesque in several places such as the cricket being killed the first time he tries to direct Pinocchio for good and the cat’s paw being bit off. This is easily overcome by the powerful messages presented in each of the scenes. The themes and morals reinforced in this play make it worthwhile for children to watch, feel, and learn from Pinocchio’s adventures.

This play was first staged by the professional Young People’s Theatre, Toronto, Canada, but would be appropriate for advanced amateur production as well. Casting requires six males and three females, with doubling. It also requires a number of scene changes which can be done with suggestive settings, costume changes, and excellent sound support.