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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Covington, Claudia, Dee Walston Carter, and Jody Weatherly. *It’s All Greek to Me*. Contemporary Drama Service, 1984. $18.95. 31 pp.

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Why do we have seasons? Who makes the sun come up each day? Why do we have misery and trouble? All these questions are answered from the ancient Greek point of view in this short introduction to Greek mythology. All is done with contemporary language and humor.

Included are the stories of Pandora’s Box, Minos and the Minotaur, and Pygmalion, along with other examples of the work of the Greek gods’ influence in the lives of men.

With parts for thirty or more, this would be an excellent class project or a presentation by older grades for younger groups. Suggestions for simple, easy-to-make costumes and set pieces are included in the script.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

Little Lord Fauntleroy, adapted from the novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, tells the familiar story of the all-American boy scraping out an existence on the New York City streets of 1888. After the death of his uncle, he is named heir to a fortune and titled the Earl of Dorincourt. Upon traveling to London to claim his birthright, the young lord shares his new riches with those less fortunate, much to the displeasure of his estranged and pragmatic grandfather. His character is tested when questions arise surrounding his inheritance, but the young man proves himself worthy of his fortune and in the process teaches all those around him about grace, charity, and love.

This fast-paced musical requires a cast of eight men, five women, one teenage boy, and two young boys, with some possibilities for doubling. Age-appropriate casting is recommended to properly support the relationships within the play. The piece can be produced with several settings or one unit set, depending on the production concept. Premiered by the Emmy Gifford Children’s Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, this piece would play well for family audiences. Clever lyrics seem to meet the needs of the play; however, the score was not available for review.


Reviewed by Athena Madan

This play chronicles the journey of Timothy, Clarence, and Kendall, three not-so-quaint young boys living in medieval England who aspire to become quaintly knights, despite the mockery of local townspeople. We accompany them and learn through their adventures what constitutes true knightly chivalry.

This script uses colorful, humorous dialogue and does not condescend. The characters are interesting—from names to character quirks to comedic situations: we meet witches like Quivida and Xanabibi; the dragon is Spanish; and Clarence, in kindly surrendering his sash to help a stranger in need, constantly struggles with his ill-fitting britches throughout the rest of the play.
Such elements do not deter our attention, but add to the delight.

This play calls for a large cast of children (thirty plus) and five minimal scene changes. Piano-vocal scores also available.

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Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

The mythic tale of Perseus, son of the powerful god Zeus and mortal Danae, is revisited in Huddleston’s play *The Adventures of Perseus*. A mixed chorus of six to twenty actors uses verse and pageantry to enact the life and adventures of the spirited Perseus. Upon his triumph at the Olympic games, the young man accepts the impossible challenge of retrieving the head of one of the Gorgons, Medusa. Aided by the gods, Perseus goes forth on his adventure exploring the beauty of the Naiad, witnessing the birth of Pegasus and saving his future bride from the horrid Kraken. In spite of his success and victorious homecoming, Perseus and his mother soon learn that the hand of fate can not be changed. A prophecy ordaining Perseus’ role in the death of his own grandfather proves inevitable.

First commissioned in the spring of 1982 by the California Theatre Center under the title “The Greeks,” this clever piece incorporates many of the popular stories and characters of Greek mythology. The use of verse is a bit heavy handed, but the more colloquial characters are charming and accessible to a young audience. Concepts of infidelity, murder, and polygamy are included and may need to be addressed when presenting the piece for young audiences. Production requirements for the piece are minimal, although the use of masks is clearly noted in the stage directions. The piece would be appropriate for production by amateur or professional organizations.

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Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

These reader’s theatre retellings of selected Greek myths introduce young people to a basic part of their Western European literary heritage. Each story though brief is well told in understandable language. Necessary background is outlined to help the novice listener understand and enjoy the tale. Stories include Daedalus and Icarus, Arche and Athena, Persephone and Hades, Promethaus and Pandora, The Saga of Perseus, Echo and Narcissus. Each tale can stand alone, or be part of the larger series.

This would be an excellent classroom exercise to introduce Greek mythology or as an exercise in vocal and limited physical characterization in drama. Each play could be cast separately to include an entire class, or the whole could be performed with a cast of five.

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Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Albert is a computer, programmed to act like a human but with superior mental powers. He also has feelings and is sensitive to people. His makers first use him to place people in careers, but Albert becomes bored. He tries being a radio, but without success. He becomes a vending machine, but his tendency to tell people what they should eat (rather than what they want—just a snack) puts him out of business. Then he is a money-matic at a bank, but again he tries to tell people what would be best for them rather than just do what
they ask, so they take their business elsewhere. Next he is a movie star robot computer, but a box office crash. Finally he predicts events to come with success until he predicts an election that is wrong! He can take everything into account, but the whims of the human being. He has found a job with challenge!

This interesting classroom piece could also be performed for audiences in this computer age. It can be performed with a cast of four, or use many more for the myriad rolls required. Technical requirements are minimal.


**A 4-6** Reviewed by Athena Madan

Fear and sweat, thirst and darkness were constant companions on this Freedom Road. Men, women, and children traveled this way, never sure if they could make it to the next station. . . . It was serious business, and no wonder people did not call themselves Abolitionists. Freedom’s flowers bloomed only in hidden places, and in the hearts of caring men and women. Until the Civil War was over and done, freedom grew best in darkness.

This is a well-written story of three slaves who attempt to flee from their masters along the “underground railroad” to northern Ohio. They are helped along the way in the homes, businesses, and back yards of Abolitionists, people who have dedicated their work to eliminate the slave influence at the risk of their lives, properties, and reputations. It is an educational script, clearly and truthfully presented in an intimate setting that does not intimidate.

This would be an ideal touring production, as an introduction to this unique American event prior to and during the Civil War. The cast is small (four men, two women), and setting requirements are simple, since it is a Reader’s Theatre presentation that may have slides and incidental music added. It would be best performed by professionals or very experienced amateurs.


**B K-6** Reviewed by Athena Madan

Life is happy and peaceful in the carefree land of Camelot. King Arthur and Queen Gweneviere are trusted rulers; ladies and knights dance until dawn; flowers talk; and Merlin the Magician has cleverly confounded the evils of the kingdom with Magic—old Fog, the ferocious dragon, has slept unstirred for fifteen years; the local wicked witch, old Morgan LaFey, transformed into a fragrant flower. But on the noisy day of lovely Maid Marian’s wedding to handsome Sir Lancelot, the dragon awakens from his sleep and unleashes the witch from her spell. It is a battle of the magic wits as Merlin tries to restore the kingdom to its blissful state.

*Castles and Dragon*—with its one castle wall and one not-so-ferocious dragon who plays an unimportant role—has imaginative elements, but is rather incoherent as a whole. The element of magic lends itself more believably to chance, and the characters seem ignorant in their state of protected bliss (Maid Marian’s reaction to the awakening dragon: “Oh no, that dragon just can’t wake up now! Not just before my wedding!”). The lyrics, as a whole, ineffectively try to rhyme.

There are twenty-six speaking parts, but these can be easily reduced or expanded. Choreography, costumes, set, and special effects are simple. This is intended to be performed by young people.

A 8-12 Reviewed by Athena Madan

William Shakespeare, born in the countryside, lacked the usual requisite university education, but was a man whose words exposed the very nature of the Elizabethan soul as well as the universe in which the Elizabethan lived. Shakespeare’s love of nature, the stars, the countryside, the flowers, birds, trees, the smell of the earth itself all sang in his poems and plays. And yet his creations are filled with images that will live with mankind for eternity...

Our purpose is to keep his memory alive, to help his work live forever in the hearts of mankind.

So speaks John Heminge, the business manager of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, resurrected in this play that hails tribute to the playwright who brought them fame. With Heminge are counterparts Richard Burbage, generally acknowledged as the greatest actor of his age, giving life to such roles as Hamlet, Lear, and Richard III; comedic relief actor William Kempe, his trademark upstaging of the script make him constantly at odds with Shakespeare himself; and young Geoff, the eager, starry-eyed “boy” apprentice who keeps all them all on track with the indomitable “Book.”

This troupe is our guide, leading us through the countryside and custom of English tradition to the midst of London’s Globe Theatre, where they worked and played; we see how the structure of the playhouse itself influenced the structure of the plays; and by presenting to us a veritable plethora of excerpts from his most memorable plays, we come to appreciate and understand more fully the context of Shakespeare’s poetic and dramatic mastery. This is a clever script, an excellent peek at the workings of Shakespeare’s manuscripts.

Staging requirements are minimal, though the actors frequently use costume “props.” This could work very well as a touring production. Professional actors (three male, one female) with indefatigable energy would make this an entertaining and educational piece.


A K-6 Reviewed by Athena Madan

A charming stage adaptation of Kenneth Grahame’s book about a young boy and the friendly neighborhood dragon. Though this dragon’s passion lies in poetry, watercolor, and arid landscapes, the townspeople summon the heroic Saint George to liberate them from their “man-eating scourge.” Only the friendship between boy and dragon creates a lighthearted, unsuspecting conspiracy so that all may live happily ever after in this land of long ago.

This is an artistic script with delightful dialogue and very likeable characters. It may be adequately performed by professional or experienced amateur companies. The cast calls for 8+, five men, three women (although some parts do not have to be gender specific). The only staging requirement is that of imagination—costumes and set can be simple or elaborate. Includes simple musical melodies as suggestions.


A 3-5 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Cool Dude Mr. Mind, “a highly intelligent and practical superbeing whose great poser is his own self-respect and self confidence,” bursts on stage to help his young friends understand more about violence. He teaches them the definition of violence with a verse:
Violence hurts you or another
It hurts our things, our bodies or each other.
Violence hurts our feelings, too.
Violence hurts when it happens to you.

He demonstrates with a series of short vignettes dealing with the “pass down” nature of violence (boss to worker, worker to wife, wife to child, bigger child to smaller child), the consequences of violence (having to pay for damage to another person’s property), and alternative behavior (anger and violence are not the same thing; we choose to act—no one makes us do it). Breaking the chain of action-reaction is an important focus, and should help audience members consider alternatives to violent acts.

Performance time is spent on verbal as well as physical violence—putting others down and name calling. And care is taken to both discuss and illustrate that to become angry is natural and okay, but we should then control the anger by pausing to think before we react.

Cause what I feel, I feel, but
What I do... I choose.
When you feel yourself get tense
Stop, 2, 3—Breathe, 2, 3,
Think your way to sense.

This work, written and developed for the professional theatre CLIMB based in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is best done by professionals or very experienced amateur groups. It should be used most effectively as part of an entire program on antiviolence. The script is designed to be played by four performers, with a video (available from CLIMB) to supplement the live action.

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A K-3 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Seven-year-old Jeff loses a race because he trips on his six-foot, talking, Amazon parrot, Bixby’s cage. Jeff accidentally hits Bixby with the front door, giving Bixby an “OWIE,” but it was an accident because he didn’t mean to hurt her. However, he gets angry because of the race and takes it out on his pet by trying to fight with her, then kicking her cage, calling her names and finally pulling out some of her feathers.

Patrick, older and wiser at twelve, helps work through this situation, sorting out intent (Bixby didn’t mean to have Jeff fall on the cage) and defining violence as hurting someone’s body, things, or feelings—on purpose. He also clarifies the difference between being a tattletale, and reporting things that have happened. Then Patrick shows Jeff and Bixby a video of Cool Dude Mr. Mind—a fictional Superhero who raps an antiviolence message for the characters and the audience:

Violence hurts you or another.
It hurts our things, our bodies or each other.
Violence hurts our feelings, too.
Violence hurts when it happens to you.

But Jeff forgets when he gets angry at Bixby and then learns that anger and violence are not the same. The first is a feeling and the second an action. The one does not have to lead to the other. Then he learns “What I feel, I feel, but what I do... I choose!” from Dr. Brain and the Rappers. So it’s all right to feel, but turning anger into violence is foolish. Take time to choose what to do. He suggests: “Stop 2, 3. Breathe, 2, 3. Think your way to sense.” Jeff uses his new knowledge when confronted by the bully, Kevin, and overcomes his anger and avoids violence.

This excellent springboard for self-examination and behavior analysis should work
well for the target audience. It is being made available to experienced groups for the first time by CLIMB Theatre Company, which will also rent the video and assist in seeing that the work is used properly. The play can be done by four talented castmembers with multiple casting, as described in the script. Recommended for professional companies or very experienced amateurs.

★★★★★