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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews

Burgess, Clark B. *Just So...And Other Stories*. Seattle Children's Theatre, 1994. $10.00. 93 pp.

A K+ Fam Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

This script includes adaptations of four traditional tales: *Ears, Eyes, Legs and Arns; The Crab that Played with the Sea; Mother Thunder and her Son, Lightening;* and *Yung Ta'il Mends the Sky*. This is a fresh look at these time-honored fables which includes verbal storytelling, movement, mural painting, and sign language.

The script has been tailored to be performed by three women and three men, all capable of signing, with one or two painters creating the landscape. This script is a terrific blend of spoken and signed language, which would be equally captivating for both hearing and non-hearing audiences.

★★★★


A- K-8 Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Daugherty's play is based on the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. The little mermaid, Pearl, wants to visit the world above as her ancestors once did. However, because of the threat humans now pose to mermaids, Pearl is forbidden to go to the surface. When Pearl sees Prince Stefan fall from his ship during a great storm, she risks her own life by going to the surface and carrying the young prince to safety. Pearl falls in love with the prince, but the only way she can see him is by giving her voice to the Sea Witch. In return, the Sea Witch makes Pearl human with one condition: the prince must ask Pearl to marry him or Pearl will be doomed to become sea foam and be washed away with the water. With the help of the Great Mother, Pearl and the prince are married and the wicked Sea Witch is destroyed.

This is a strong adaptation of Andersen's original tale. The stage directions do suggest some elaborate sets and costumes which have the potential of being very exciting; but the play could still be well done on a smaller scale. Five males and two females are needed, with various extras. This play could be successfully produced by a professional, semi-professional, or community theater.

★★★★
Dinosaur takes place at an excavation site within a museum. Museum director, Judith McKay, hopes the excavation will prove the existence of what she believes to be the world’s largest dinosaur, the mighty Megaminaisaur. When Judith receives a visit from her young daughter, Mallory, she is so engrossed in her work that she is incapable of making time to spend with her visiting daughter. In order to entertain herself while her mother is busy working, Mallory tells incredible stories and composes poems. One of her poems turns out to be a magic incantation which takes Mallory and her mother back in time. In the course of this adventure, the two learn the true importance of a mother-daughter relationship.

The most interesting character in Dinosaur is Mallory. Her dialogue is clever and her character well-developed. The remaining characters are not as well defined. The time traveling scenes could be quite mesmerizing if done well, but would take a fairly substantial financial investment. Casting requires five actresses and two actors. This play would be best suited for a professional theater.


Adapted from As My Sun Sets, a memoir by late Squaxin tribeswoman Joyce Simmons Checka, The Rememberer presents an accurate, dimensional understanding of some of North America’s native peoples. This heartfelt drama revolves around the life of a Northwestern Indian girl who is taken from her native tribe by force and placed in a government-run boarding school. At the school, the young girl is made to abandon her native language and customs, in support of the belief that the Indian’s savage heritage must be killed in order to save the person. The girl has been designated “The Rememberer” for her tribe and must find a way to deal with this new white man’s world while still holding on to the stories of her people.

The Rememberer has much warmth and spirit. It casts an illuminating light upon the myth of the Native American, discrediting the stereotype of the commonly known “cowboy and Indian” story. The visual imagery is compelling. The dialogue is strong and well-conceived. The cast of characters includes five men, four women, eight children, and various dancers and musicians.

**A- 7-12**  
Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This lively, simplified version of the Bard’s comedy begins with a rap song and then uses multiple narrators to bridge the narrative. Identical twins are separated in a shipwreck. The girl, Viola, disguises herself as a page serving Duke Orsino and is sent to win the love of Olivia on behalf of the Duke. But Olivia finds the disguised page attractive and makes advances that are repulsed by the distraught Viola. When the lost brother, Sebastian, appears and meets Olivia, she immediately invites him to dinner and makes advances that are welcomed by the young man. Olivia seeks a minister, and they are wed. The twin confusion is heightened by the subplot of Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aquecheek, and the unfortunate Malvolio; but all works out well in the end.

This adaptation was originally done for secondary school production and should work well for both performers and audience. About sixty percent of the lines are Shakespeare’s, and the rest keep much of the spirit of the original. The drinking scene with Toby Belch and Aquecheek might need some adjusting considering teen alcohol abuse problems. Settings are minimal, costumes could be suggested rather than period, and the play should be fun to do as either a classroom project or for full production.

★★★★


**B 3-6**  
Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Hans, a cobbler, and his wife Maren enjoy a hearty meal of pancakes, but they argue about who should return the borrowed griddle. Both stubbornly refuse to speak first and be the one who must return the pan, even when the coachman and then his master come for some repaired shoes. Finally, Hans speaks to save Maren from a beating and also returns the pan, to the delight of his loving but triumphant wife.

This Danish folktale illustrates the obstinacy of some people, using that trait as a basis for humor. This play is part of a series of dramatizations of folk stories from various countries. It would work well in a classroom presentation or as a modest performance for others.

★★★★
Lin Foo sells the fritters his widowed mother has made and hides the money under a stone so that he will not lose it while playing with his friends. When he returns, however, the money is gone, and he begins to sob, for he and his mother need the money to survive. Just then the wise magistrate An Li arrives, and upon discovering the cause of Lin Foo's grief, orders the stone arrested for having stolen the money. The trial of the stone is held the next day in the presence of all the villagers, who laugh when the stone is condemned and beaten. Because of their conduct, the magistrate finds the villagers in contempt of court and orders each one to pay a small fine. As the last person tosses his coins in the jar filled with water, the magistrate orders the man's arrest, saying he is the thief because oil from the fritter basket came off the coin as it was dropped into the water. The money is thus returned to the widow and her son.

This is an excellent retelling of a Chinese legend in Asian style, using a visual property person, a small band on stage, and simple costumes and sets. The script contains production notes for properties and costumes, and describes the style of production to be used. It would be excellent for in-class or public performances, especially to help young people understand and appreciate Asian culture.

Four stars.

Matenko is an aging court jester who forgets his jokes and can no longer jump and juggle. He and his wife are retired and living in a small cottage near the palace, but their pension to purchase food has been forgotten by the royal court. The old man and his wife, in desperation, devise a plan to get some money to buy food. The wife wipes her eyes with the last bit of food in the house—an onion—and goes to the Queen and tells of her husband's death. She receives fifty gold coins to bury him and take care of herself for the rest of her days. With this success, Matenko is inspired to wipe his eyes with the onion and visit the King with the news of his wife's death. He succeeds in raising 200 pieces of gold!

But as the couple count their money, they see the royal husband and wife approaching their cottage. They splash flour on their faces and play dead, but leap up to play a last joke on the king and queen, who forgive them.

This adaptation of an old Polish folk story is told with vigor and spirit. It will delight young audiences and should work effectively as a classroom project or as a
modest presentation. Seven men and four women are required, but more courtiers could be used. Set and costume requirements are minimal.


**B 3-6 Fam**

Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis & Harold R. Oaks

Olson’s adaptation of *The Jungle Book* is loosely based on Rudyard Kipling’s novel. The play begins with Nathoo, the grownup Mowgli, narrating the story of how death and fear came to the jungle. Nathoo and his wife meet a young boy from the jungle to whom he tells his adventures of growing up with the animals, his parents, brothers, and friends. Scenes include finding the man-child and determining who shall care for it, the cobra’s lair, and the fight with the tiger. Production style is dance-drama, with only suggestive costume pieces for the animals and a strong Indian flavor to all elements of the production.

The play can be cast with eight performers, if six take multiple roles. Sets and costumes will require careful attention to style and artistry. The production was originally staged at Minneapolis Children’s Theatre and would be best staged by a professional or semi-professional company.

This adaptation fails to capture the intensity and energy of Kipling’s classic novel. The characters are not as well developed and the storyline lacks fluidity. There is a very strong environmental message in this adaptation, and artistic staging would be required to carry the production.


**B + K-5**

Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This musical fantasy tells the story of the baby Princess Honey, who is cursed to prick her finger on her sixteenth birthday and die, all because the fairy Mysteria was left off the christening invitation list. The spell is softened to one hundred years of sleep by the loving first fairy, Diaphanus. When the spell is about to be broken at the end of the one hundred years, there is conflict between the two fairies. Everything is happily resolved as Princess Honey is awakened by Prince Oliver’s kiss. The playwright has added a resolution scene which takes place at the christening of the next generation’s firstborn daughter. The fairies are all properly invited, and the child is given the name “Mysteria,” making her the favorite of the previously disgruntled fairy.
This version of Sleeping Beauty was premiered at The Fantasy Playhouse in Lynbrook, Long Island. It has some interesting new characters: Whipper, the wizened grumpy old seamstress who sews with and without magic; and Roger, the page who grows wiser as the play progresses. The extensive songs should be easily learned and performed.


Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This short one-act production is adapted from the play Will the Showboat Show Tonight? by Shubert Fendrich. It has stock hero and villain characters, but adds some interesting twists to both plot and character. The showboat is in financial trouble since the Captain died, and the performance tonight is vital. We see several parts of the acts that will take place if all goes well. Rufus Bilge is determined to see that things don't go well. With the help of Sadie Larue, whom he has promised to make his first mate when they take over the showboat, he plots to eliminate the romantic lead in Romeo and Juliet. Their plot, however, is overheard and thwarted by a ventriloquist's dummy, and all ends well.

Showtime on the Showboat would make a reliable class project or an entertaining half hour show for an audience. Casting requires six women and five men. Setting and costume suggestions are included, as is music for the two songs sung by "The Flower Sisters"—a female trio.


Reviewed by Mary Randak

This play combines elements of several traditional fairy tales told in unexpected and humorous ways. It is a continuation of the story of the Frog Prince, who as it happens, only became half human after his transformation; hence, King Wartimer is still half frog. His daughter, Lilly, though completely human, is quite plain in appearance, and finding a suitable husband for her is driving the king to distraction. He has prepared a contest for Princess Lilly's hand, but alas, there is only one contestant—Prince Dudley, who considers himself less than princely with his severe hay fever. Wicked Witch Wanda, who had enchanted the king in the first place, has discovered with the aid of her magic mirror that Princess Lilly is actually the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. Thus, the witch wants to use her "frog" magic
again and this time, transform the princess. Her plans are thwarted however, by the
King’s Fairy Frogmother, so the Prince and everyone live happily ever after.

The play is a combination of a lot of fun and some very nice messages, such as
the idea that real beauty lies within, and that one does not have to consider oneself
a hero in order to succeed. Princess Lilly is also admirable in her ultimatum that
her wishes be taken into account and her refusal to be given away as a prize. The
ten speaking parts offer rich opportunities for humorous characterization and are
equally divided among males and females. There are also court members and
townspeople with small speaking parts, making this an ideal play for classroom
presentation. Set demands are minor, and costumes could be easily and
inexpensively made.

Lyrics for several songs are included, although no score is offered by the
publisher. There are several dance numbers which offer the possibility of humorous
improvisation (notably, King Wartimer’s song “The Frogman Flip”).

★★★★

York, Y. Afternoon of the Elves. Seattle Children’s Theatre, 1995. $10.00. 56
pp.

A 1-8 Fam Reviewed by M. Colleen Lewis

Adapted from the Janet Taylor Lisle novel of the same name, Afternoon of the
Elves is a poignant story of poverty and privation. The script investigates the
difficulties of a friendless child who must care for her emotionally and physically
invalid mother. In order to escape from her arduous life, the young girl creates a
fanciful elf village from the trash in her backyard.

This excellent script, filled with powerful and descriptive dialogue, may help
children better understand those who are different from themselves. It shows how
easy it is to make judgments without really knowing a person, and how such
judgments can not only be inaccurate, but also hurtful. Casting includes five
actresses and one actor.

★★★★