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Play Reviews

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B 2-5  Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Mrs. Peck has been left a poor widow with six children by her husband’s untimely death. The family has scraped by so far, but this Christmas looks worse than those before. Despite careful plans and boundless energy, the children are unable to beg the ingredients and a pot for the traditional Christmas pudding. All their efforts seem frustrated and the evening looks hopeless when a bearded stranger comes in, asks a few questions, and offers gifts, food, and happiness. It is not Santa Clause, but the long-lost Uncle Jack back from a successful, several-years-long trip to California, where he found gold.

Freely adapted from an 1859 play by Eliza Lee Follen, this nineteenth-century tale depicts poverty, want, and the various ways people of means have of dealing with the destitute. The characters are interesting and give excellent opportunity for young people to play enthusiastic parts. Scenery and costume requirements are limited. It should be a lot of fun for school and amateur groups looking for an unusual piece for Christmas time that does not deal with religion.


A 2-6  Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This dance-theatre adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s classic sketches the tale with powerful visual dance images that reach to the heart of the story.

The Emperor of Japan sends a book of poetry that describes the wonders of the Chinese Emperor’s Kingdom. The spacious palace and expansive gardens are lavishly praised, but the Japanese writer saves his highest praise for the nightingale. The Emperor is delighted to hear that the writer recognizes the palace for its beauty and especially appreciates the gardens (although he has not visited them himself). More surprising is the singular praise the writer heaps on the unknown nightingale from a distant province. The Emperor immediately demands it be brought to the palace.

Bumbling servants are eventually led to the bird but at first reject it because it does not appear lavish on the outside. But when they hear her song, they vigorously work to bring her to the palace. Only when the sympathetic servant suggests her song could live in the Emperor’s heart does she agree to the palace trip.

Her song delights the house-bound Emperor, but a brightly designed mechanical nightingale with a single predictable song replaces the live bird, who flies back to the forest. The machine wears out, and the Emperor pines away until Death comes for him. The nightingale returns to encourage, cheer, and eventually help the Emperor overcome Death’s onslaught. She then successfully invites the Emperor to the gardens outside the palace to experience the unexpected, lovely, real world.

Narrative elements are kept to a minimum—the poetry is in the dance and music of this version—but the tale is eloquently told. Choreographic suggestions are included, a copy of the music is available on CD, and several photographs of the original Kennedy Center Production are included. Suggested for
professional companies or very advanced amateurs. Requires a cast of four women, two men, all of whom must dance and move well.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

*Journey to the Center of the Earth* is a thin musical adaptation of Jules Verne’s classic by the same name. As in the original tale, the young Axel Lindenbrock prefers to stay home and live vicariously through books rather than face the actual challenge of adventure. However, his stalwart anthropologist uncle, Professor Otto Lindenbrock, soon convinces him that together they should explore the center of the earth in hopes of discovering the secrets buried deep in its core. A trusted colleague, Dr. Ilsa Van Dyke, joins them on the adventure, and the success of the journey and the survival of the explorers are threatened when greed and jealousy tear the party apart.

Although a musical score was not available for review, the lyrics in the script are quite clever, and the musical numbers do serve to further the plot. However, character development in the piece is extremely weak, and the required visual elements could make it difficult to fully mount the production. If simply mounted, the play could be presented as a classroom activity and would offer an introduction to the Verne classic.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

*The Falling Moon* reveals a war-loving kingdom whose King and Princes wage war simply “for the fun of it.” The burning of villages and murder of peasants have become sport to these royals who don’t even remember why they are fighting. Saddened by this troublesome state of affairs, the moon responds by slowly falling from the sky. Guided by the powerful Sorceress, Prophetess, and a willful peasant, Frannie, the young warring Princes are convinced that they must do something to comfort the old, sad moon. Together, the princes and their guides begin a whirlwind journey to collect three items which might bring solace to the moon. Ultimately, the Princes learn important lessons about the price of war and the rewards of kindness.

This fast-moving play is correctly billed by the publisher as “a comedy on serious themes.” Simple characters, speaking in a contemporary dialect set in a pseudo-medieval kingdom, are literally “zapped” from location to location in this rather cinematic script. A full-length play with roles for five women and six men, the casting can easily be expanded to include up to fourteen additional actors. An imaginative script, the production elements could be elaborate or could be accomplished quite simply.


Reviewed by Athena Madan

There is no creature more full of yearning than a young girl or boy. The gestures of childhood seem to be a reaching, grasping, sometimes almost envious striving for a world that lies waiting. For an audience of children, life on the stage becomes a metaphor for all of the yearnings that spell out the meaning of childhood.

Thus writes Mason in his introductory notes of this collection of plays. In addition to well-known favorites, including *Tom Sawyer*, *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, and *Pinocchio*, this collection also
contains tales from Africa, China, and the Ukraine, all adaptations of classic literature or folklore. The collection is energetic, wide-ranging, and stimulating.

Each play was originally produced by the Minneapolis Children’s Theatre Company, which had the unique condition of relatively generous budgets, big sets, and large casts. This is reflected in the majority of these adaptations, but Mason points out that The Nightingale, African Tales, and Ukrainian Tales are modest in scale and production requirements. He also indicates that all the plays in the collection have been performed successfully by small theatres, schools, and community groups which used imagination and resourcefulness. Mason is willing to allow greater liberties (in double casting, elimination of minor characters, and text-trimming) to those producing these plays than he would to anyone staging his "grown-up" plays.

Below are individual reviews and ratings for each play in the collection. Good reading!

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* 54 pp.

A 4+

Mississippi Belle, I’m bound to leave you
Mississippi Belle, I’m bound to go...
Well my journey is not over
Yet I still have far to go
And I do not fear the river
Or the stormy winds that blow
There’s a time before returning
And a time for moving on
Like the bird that flies from winter
In the morning I’ll be gone
Mississippi Belle, I’m bound to leave you
Mississippi Belle, I’m bound to go...

Tom’s faithful friend Huckleberry Finn, despite all respectable and reputable societal odds, turned out to be so likeable in *Tom Sawyer* that Mark Twain had no choice but to continue his story. Here Huck consciously confronts the identity his family and the town have created for him and proves to all—himself included—his capacity to be all the better for it.

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.* 38 pp.

A 4+

The legend of Tom’s unruly mischievousness and Huckleberry Finn’s unjustifiable amiability live on in this well-crafted stage adaptation of Mark Twain’s classic. A singer, or musical narrator, gives the play a sort of oriental, invisible twist, moving in and out of the action of the play, just as the character of Mark Twain himself both participates and narrates. The romance factor, with Becky Thatcher, plays a less important role than it does in other stage adaptations, which may be more appropriate for children of this age, but does not downplay its effect on Tom’s sense of self. Through it all, as we accompany Tom on his exciting escapades, we see the emergence of his own personal code of conduct: he keeps his word to a friend; he may be scared to death, but he sees things through; he uses his head, keeps his cool, and keeps on trying. It’s still a good code.

This would be a challenging production to stage because requirements are often elaborate. The Mississippi River is the dominant, unseen character of the play, and the continuous action shifts on different areas of the stage designated for their focus. This is a large-cast show (twenty-one male, seven female plus townspeople). Professionals or experienced amateurs are recommended.
African Tales: Kalulu and His Money Farm and Rumpelstiltskin. 28 pp.

African Tales is a narrative mime told primarily by the use of African masks, African dance, and a few choice words in Swahili (although they are not included in the script). In the first tale, a King divides the harvesting chores of his kingdom among the subjects: peanuts for the Warthog, corn for the Lion, bananas for the Zebra, beans for the Monkey, and coconuts for the Giraffe. Lazy, bragging Rabbit promises to grow an impossible crop, but learns that “lies only brings troubles and worries and a sore hide . . .”

The second tale, Rumpelstiltskin, is the German story we are all familiar with, only told as if we were in Africa. The King, in search for an extraordinary wife, summons all the extraordinary daughters of the Kingdom to demonstrate their extraordinary talent. A discouraged miller, wishing there were something extraordinary about his most ordinary daughter, brags she can spin straw into gold. While she cries rather ordinary tears, the strange Rumpelstiltskin comes to her rescue, accepting as recompense her first-born child, unless she guesses his name. Using her queenly resources, she is able to find out his name and keep her child. It becomes a rather extraordinary experience after all.

Cast of eleven+ (three male, two female; the rest flexible). There are no set or stage requirements, so this could be easily staged in an elementary classroom or tour to other classrooms. The flexibility of the script allows for a lot of fun and creative stylization. Original musical score available.

Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp. 41 pp.

Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp. 41 pp.

From names such as Mohammed and Fatmaa, to Marketplace scenes, to customary phrases and Arabic references, there is a definite Middle-Eastern authenticity to this script. This story is well adapted to the stage, full of energy, vitality, and mysticism.

There may be challenging elements in staging this production: The Jinn ( genie) of the Lamp’s entrances are heralded with Rings of Fire; special lighting and sound effects accompany natural disasters, as well as the Sorcerer’s conjuring temper-tantrums; the Carpet really is a flying Carpet; set requirements include a Persian Palace, a Marketplace, and a Pavilion (not to mention there is also a palace in Morocco). The cast is large: twenty-five+, but the script is versatile. Would work well with professionals, experienced amateurs, and perhaps even well-directed elementary or junior high school students. Original musical score available.

Beauty and the Beast. 36 pp.

Beauty and the Beast. 36 pp.

Mason’s adaptation of this classic tale is well suited for the stage. Characters are younger than “traditional” portrayals, but their youth brings energy and vitality to the bleak English setting of the play. Characters and their interrelationships are well developed and realistic, but this does not detract from the “magic” of the fairy tale that has made it so well loved. The ending is somewhat contrived, but sometimes it really does take a “sudden grief” to make us realize our capacity to feel.

A series of vignettes is employed to tell this story. If the design is not fluid and flexible, it can lack energy. Ideally, the principal element should be lighting. Requires a cast of ten+ (four female, six male).

Kidnapped in London. 24 pp.

Kidnapped in London. 24 pp.

To Mary, Queen, awakening
One bleak mid-winter morn,
Came like a falcon to its King
Fair Jesu to be born.
And though the wind was cold as stars,
And though the shadows, long,
When winter’s cage flung wide its bars
The skylark found his song . . .

This is the song young Corin sings as the play begins. And it is a very appropriate song. *Kidnapped in London* relates his story, not unlike that of the skylark’s—his own awakening, the discovery of his own song, the contribution of his own verse. When Corin is taken by a professional company of actors from all that is familiar to him, we follow his experiences on the dark and dreary downtown streets and witness the change as he discovers his own inspiration behind the song:

**CORIN:** The Warwickshire Hills in spring, Joey. And sometimes—there’s a special place by the river’s edge, see—and sometimes I sit there and sing, or, p’raps, just sit there . . . And once I found a bird there, Joey—just a little snip of a bird—too young to be out and about by hisself. I tried to make him go back to his nest, but he wouldn’t, not him. So we just sang there, together, him and me—just sang. Oh, will ye na come, Joey? Will ye na? Nay, Corin, I will na. I canna, Cory. This is where I live, see? These people . . . This . . . I must live in it. Must, brother. Tis very pretty to sing with a bird, Cory, I do na say it’s not. But to sing for people—real persons, Cory—now that’s something different altogether. It changeth them somehow, if ye know what I mean. But I expect ye don’t, what Cory? That’s something ye’ve to learn for thyself.

**JOSEPH:**

[And so] spring awoke that very day
And warmed December’s dawn,
To hear the skylark’s gladsome lay,
Like dew upon the lawn.

**Children’s Book and Play Review 35**

This is a well-written script with mystical, tangible characters (ten male, three female but flexible) and subtle religious undertones. Although originally staged by the professional company at Minneapolis, it should also be successful with a cast of experienced amateurs. Set and costume requirements are from the period of the Renaissance. Musical scores available through the Children’s Theatre Company.


**A 3+**

This adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Nightingale and The Proverb,* which precedes it, are told in narrative mime through a style inspired by the Peking Opera. What are the morals? *Proverb* teaches us not to be “in such a hurry to get There/that you forget/why you went.” In *The Nightingale,* we learn not to be deceived by glitter and show, but “a true voice/and a gentle heart/are all/you will ever need.”

The cast is small, with five principal roles (one male, four female but flexible) plus other members of the court. The set is minimal: flowing fabrics, shimmering screens, and pastel colors. Could be performed easily in a classroom setting with or for elementary students. Original musical score also available.

*Pinocchio.* 38 pp.

**A 3+**

This delightful adaptation captures the Italian spirit of Carlo Collodi’s fairy tale that is not often portrayed. Characters are fun, feisty, and believable in all their folly: Gepetto is still loveable in his dreamy, absent-minded-professor sort of state; Pinocchio’s innocence and inherent goodness lead to both his downfall and salvation as he wanders the cobblestone streets; the Fox and the Cat, complete with dark suits and smoky cigars, are reminiscent of Mafia thugs. There are even a few Commedia dell’Arte stock characters thrown in to add to the Italian ambiance.
Although originally staged with elaborate settings, the show does not require them. There are fifteen speaking roles (twelve male, three female) plus townspeople. The adaptation would work best with professionals or very experienced amateurs. Original musical score available.

*Treasure Island.* 38 pp.

A 4+

Retaining the dark, melancholic suspense of Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic adventure, this adaptation is well suited for the stage. Like the novel, the entire play is a flashback, the action being forwarded by the narrating voice of Jim Hawkins. In this way, we are given the same description and characterization that Stevenson has so masterfully crafted in his novel. The naturalistic style and pace of the dialogue also make the characters believable, springing from the storybook to a life that only the drama of the stage can create.

This is a fairly elaborate production, requiring special effects with sound and lighting. It is probably the set that would be the most difficult to stage. A professional cast (twenty-one male, four female) or highly experienced amateurs is recommended.


B 2+

These two tales are told to us through the Bandurist, the traditional traveling storyteller, with ad-lib interjections by Ukrainian actor-dancers. *The Fat Cat* gives us a cat so fat he will not chase a mouse, so he is banished to the forest. There he meets a husband-seeking fox, marries her for her cakes, is introduced as the most ferocious animal of the forest, and has experiences to prove it! *The Chatterbox* is the story of gullible Tusya, who cannot keep quiet. When her husband finds a bag of gold, and in his efforts to claim it as his own manages to convince her that he found it growing on a tree, she learns some things are best left unsaid. These are energetic, humorous tales, told simply for the telling among this lively group, more than for any didactic value.

There are five principal roles (one male, one female, the rest flexible) plus townspeople and dancers. With the exception of one character, the ages are unimportant. The set is minimal, reflecting the simple, brightly painted flats which a group of traveling players might carry with them from place to place. Would work well for an elementary audience.

★★★★


A 4-6 

Reviewed by Jette Halladay

An excellent resource for teachers, *Plays from Mythology* is exactly what it professes to be: a dramatic resource for teachers to use with studies in other disciplines. The anthology includes twelve myths from the following cultures: Aboriginal people of Australia; Celts of Ireland; Nordic tribes of Scandinavia and Germany; Buddhists of India; people of Greece and Rome, Ancient Sumaria, Ancient Mesoamerica, Egypt, China, Nigeria; and Native American cultures.

Each tale is scripted with economy and purpose. The characters are simple and engaging. McCullough has included simple blocking and music, but makes it clear that teachers should feel free to explore with their own imaginations and circumstances. Typical running time for each tale is fifteen to twenty minutes. The myths are written for children to perform for other children in a classroom setting or to be combined and adapted for a school.

★★★★

**B 9-12** Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

*Under the Influence* explores the painful relationship between substance abusers and those who become victims of their disease, the co-dependents. Relating in graphic detail, horrific true incidents of physical and emotional abuse, neglect, suicide, and even incest, this play is meant to shock and disturb the audience. It is not filled with hope, but instead, offers an honest look at the worst in human nature.

The play has a few scenes that involve more than one character, but most of the play consists of monologues. The fifteen main characters are primarily teenagers. Each has a rather lengthy monologue that confronts the individual whose addiction has in some way affected his or her ability to maintain an emotional balance. The monologues are performed in a manner that substitutes the audience for the abuser. The playwright emphasizes the use of a mobile as the central set piece. Throughout the play, each character removes or adds to the mobile creating an imbalance to the structure—an obvious metaphor of the imbalance created in the life of the co-dependent. The play requires minimal technical support and offers many roles for young actors. Because the piece raises some important issues, it would be wise to provide an opportunity for postshow discussion guided by a professional substance abuse counselor.

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**A Pre-2** Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This outstanding classroom handbook by Thistle (other titles: *Dramatizing Myths & Tales-Creating Plays for Large Groups*, and *Dramatizing Aesop’s Fables, Creative Scripts for the Elementary Classroom*) provides the elementary classroom teacher with another excellent tool for introducing “formal” drama to children. In this most recent publication (working with a new publisher), Thistle suggests the use of the simple, colorful language of classic Mother Goose rhymes to teach English in an exciting, nonthreatening, and purposeful way. By using the whole body, Thistle reaches beyond the obvious use with young children who are playing with sounds, rhymes, and images. Her work makes language real, sensual, and fun!

Short, instructive chapters give excellent ideas for classroom control, encouraging participation, stimulating effective stage speech, and evaluating and advancing the work being done by students. She uses a range of theatrical techniques, but phrases them in language understandable and usable by classroom teachers not trained specifically in theatre. There is a chapter on simple settings, costume pieces, and rhythm instruments to heighten the dramatic experience and utilize a fuller range of talents of the children. She gives a detailed model lesson using Little Miss Muffet as an example, including “Reflection,” a form of evaluation.

The central part of the book are Thistle’s word and picture dramatizations of the following Mother Goose Rhymes: *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep; Hey! Diddle, Diddle; Hickory, Dickory, Dock; Humpty Dumpty; Jack and Jill; Jack Be Nimble; Little Bo- Peep; Little Boy Blue; Little Jack Horner; Little Miss Muffet; Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary; The North Wind Doth Blow; Oh, the Grand Old Duke of York; Old King Cole; Old Mother Hubbard; Sing a Song of Sixpence; and Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.*

The book concludes with sections on the history of each of the Mother Goose Rhymes used in the text, a discussion of the rhymes as literature, suggestions for research and language activities, an activity level index for all the rhymes used, a subject index for Mother Goose across the curriculum, and a three-page annotated bibliography of additional resources.

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### Children’s Book and Play Review

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