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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


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

Young Becky Zaslow is fighting leukemia with the help of her family and a herd of imaginary zebras. The zebras, represented in the real world by a small stuffed animal, offer a refuge where Becky can be without illness and explore complex relationships. In the imaginary African world there are predators—the lions—who may attack the herd at any time. This eventually offers the green monkey, Shlep, an opportunity to prove his courage.

Becky wants to be in a talent show, but when the time arrives, the lions are almost upon her and she is not able to sing with the energy she desires. She demonstrates courage by dealing with her peers without pity and by passing into the African world with dignity as a leader to be emulated. A satisfying immortality is represented in this extension of life beyond the debilitating effects of disease.

This play should be an excellent springboard for exploring a range of ideas and feelings among both those who stay and those who moves on. Calls for a cast of eleven (4 F, 6 M, 1 either) with double casting; larger cast if desired. Recommended for experienced production companies.

★★★★★


**B+ 10-12** Reviewed by Melinda Mathes Wolfer

*Mirror Game*’s story line is established by Bob, Maggie, Luke, and Sara’s agonizing teen problems: low self-esteem, puberty, dating relationships, and school. While trying to grow up and establish identities, these friends become involved in tricky love triangles. Although Bob is attracted to Sara, she is going steady with Luke, a jealous boyfriend who beats her up. Sara will not break off the relationship, because Luke threatens to commit suicide. Meanwhile, in the midst of his infatuation, Bob is oblivious to the attraction that his best friend Maggie has for him. Bob takes advantage of their friendship, eats her lunches, monopolizes their conversations with his troubles, and is insensitive to her needs.

Throughout the play the audience sees the teens in various settings and learns about many facets of their lives. When they are alone (popping zits in a bathroom or smoking in a bedroom) the four characters talk to themselves or have flashbacks of frightening familial events, revealing the abuse that occurs in their homes. Unfortunately, many of their difficulties are perpetuated by abuse suffered at home. Bob is continually belittled by negligent, bickering parents. Maggie takes on responsibility beyond her years by tending to her inebriated mother, who drinks to deal with family stress. Luke is physically abused regularly, following his irrational father’s false accusations. Sara seeks to stay away from home where daily, her mother’s boyfriend beats up on her and her family members.

The adult characters include the four teenagers parents and Mr. Moss, a school teacher. Scenes involving the adults are meant to be portrayed in an expressionistic way: their voices are heard and their silhouettes seen from behind a large screen.
One reason Mirror Game is an excellent play is that it emphasizes that abuse is a learned, cyclical behavior. One of the most heart-wrenching scenes occurs when a father realizes that one of the family pets is missing and wants his son to take the blame. Although the son is obviously not involved with the lost-pet incident, the father bullies and slaps him around until the son confesses. At the end of the scene the audience pities the boy and realizes the boy is Luke—Sara's terrorizing boyfriend—as a child. In the next scene Luke mirrors his father's behavior and slaps Sara around in a jealous rage. The audience simultaneously experiences compassion for Luke as a child, and anger towards Luke as a boyfriend and insight into Luke's irrational behavior.

Mirror Game is also an excellent play because instead of solving the problems and giving a happy ending, it shows realistic, empowering ways to deal with abuse. This play advocates relying on good friends and teachers for help when emotional support is not available at home (Bob, Maggie, and Sara's subplots). It also portrays the positive effects of terminating negative relationships outside the home (Sara and Luke's subplot).

Mirror Game delivers a skillful balance of poignant and provocative subject matter, with humor, light-heartedness and entertainment. It is certain to appeal to youth for years to come. In his introduction, the playwright encourages multiracial casting to reflect our society accurately. This production is also suitable for touring companies, since it can be performed with a minimum of four actors, and scenic requirements are minimal. Because of its emotional content, this play is recommended for experienced performers.

In Act I, we have a very dramatic presentation of theatre history and the setting for Shakespeare's writing. There is an exchange between a "Wise Guy" and the cast. Their dialog explains and develops Shakespearean techniques. The intent is to encourage audience participation in the production. In Act II, there are abridged scenes from A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Twelfth Night, Merry Wives of Windsor, and Macbeth. The final scene is a brief presentation of Shakespeare's life and works.

The major thrust of this play is to present Shakespeare as a major playwright in a historical context and to demonstrate how he relates to students and audiences today. The play achieves this purpose. The cast is large but flexible. The setting is unique and simple. It also requires the use of a rear slide projector. This play should be an excellent work for teaching Shakespeare to contemporary audiences, and it's fun, too.


A 9-12 Reviewed by John Tolch

Greek to Me provides an energetic, engaging look at how theatre developed—from the first actor who spoke aloud to the idea of using scenery. That premise flows into a variety of scenes from the great plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Scenes show how drama developed—both tragic and comedic—and how drama was important to ancient Greeks. The purpose is to show the audience how and why theatre developed in this classic period.

This script is well devised and should be an excellent introduction to theatre as an art form. It should work well in high schools to make theatre history lively and entertaining. The set is simple and uses rear slide projection. Costumes are simple and should not break the bank. Lighting can enhance the production, but there are no

A+ 9-12 Reviewed by John Tolch

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special effects (except for the rear projection). Casting is very flexible and can be done with anywhere from 12 to 50 actors. This should be a fun, artistic way to teach the development of drama.


An anthology of four African tales adapted for the stage, *African Folktales* would be fun for children to perform. The script is complete with ideas for costumes, makeup, music, masks, and intermittent interludes. There is much movement, music, and sound with ideas that are amusing and magical but educational. In addition, the fun-loving characters (mostly animals) are clearly more clever than their silly, half-witted human counterparts. The short lines are reinforced with movement, making them easy for children to memorize. Korty's easy-to-follow suggestions are thorough, ranging from simple to elaborate, though presented in such a way that the performance would not be limited to these suggestions. The play requirements themselves are simple and flexible. For an elementary teacher with limited theatre experience, this book would be a useful reference.

Following is a brief synopsis of each of the African tales:

**The Man Who Loved to Laugh.** A happy-hearted Man saves a snake from an unjust death and is rewarded with a feather that will give him the magical ability to hear animals talk. Only there is one condition: if he tells anyone about this ability, he will die. Through the events that follow, this tale teaches indirectly the importance of happiness, understanding, and trust.

**Mr. Hare Takes Mr. Leopard for a Ride.** Nonchalant Mr. Hare decides to teach Mr. Leopard a lesson in being polite, even if he is big. For this pair, brain is bigger than brawn.

**Ananse’s Trick Does Double Work.** Ananse uses uncertified fear against Old Hag to lure his industrious friends into giving him all their food instead of selling it at the market. But soon his friends discover that their loss is Ananse’s gain, and they devise a plan for him to get their goods back.

**The Turtle Who Wanted to Fly.** Wistful Turtle sings his plaintive plight. He can’t run very fast, swim very far, or dance very well. All he can do is sing. But what he really wants to do more than anything else is fly! He befriends two pigeons, discovers that flying isn’t all it’s touted to be, and realizes it’s pretty good to be his singing-turtle-self after all.


A- 3+ Reviewed by Tabatha Odom

Fun describes this play — fun to read and probably even more fun to produce. This modern King Arthur story is in comic form—modern-day dress and language with the classic story of Camelot. Merlin has been put under a spell to sleep and wake up in 1500 years, but he oversleeps and wakes up in the present. He is supposed to take a modern hero back to save Camelot, but he selects a boy named Artie and one of his friends (by accident). The friend is a girl named Gwen. They go back to the days of Camelot and modernize the place. They defeat the evil Morgan La Fey with a little help from the knights.

This would be a delightful script for older students to stage for younger students. The props and sets need not be elaborate; the authors suggest...
being innovative to lend additional fun to the play. Music is available in score or tape form.


A- 5-8 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

It is January in the inner city. An African-American boy enters a flower shop. He wears a gang jacket and moves about the shop looking vaguely at the flowers and plants, then puts his hand in the pocket of his jacket and moves toward the sixty-year-old woman who owns the shop. But instead of a gun, he hands her a piece of paper. She suspects it is a hold-up note, but instead it's a letter from the local priest introducing the boy as being in Green Thumbs, a youth rehabilitation program that places young people in florist shops to work for minimum wage during court-ordered probation.

The boy is all bravado as he tells of stealing a car, thus making him a “juven-ile offender” rather than just a “juven-ile delinquent.” He even agrees with his friend to use his job at the shop as a front to deliver drugs. But over the next few months he grows fond of the old woman and eventually stays to help her when she becomes ill. When his friend comes to see why the flower/drug delivery isn’t being made, the boy says he is staying to help the woman and goes so far as to give back his gold chain, earring, and gang sweater. This costs him a beating but saves his life (his friend is killed in an argument with the drug dealer). This play focuses on one boy—one life influenced by another. It offers some hope in the face of despair. The characters are well developed (2 boys, 1 priest, 1 older women); the language is believable, the setting simple. The message is clear but not pedantic. Recommended for professional theaters or very experienced amateur groups.


B- K-6 Reviewed by John Tolch

Scene 1 introduces the main characters and establishes that Mr. Toad is conceited, flamboyant, and reckless. Toad announces he will buy a motor car and the animals go off to lunch. Sc.2: An eerie night scene. Field mice are discovered by the Weasels (thugs). There is body whacking with caps. Weasels plan to attack Mr. Toad. Sc.3: Farm women discuss Toad’s terrible driving record. Sc.4: Toad Hall. Badger and others get Toad to mend his driving craze, only to find out he can’t give up the pleasure. Badger and others decide to lock Toad in his room until he comes to his senses. Sc.5: Weasels chant “down with Toad.” Sc.6: Toad’s bedroom. Toad plans his escape from the other animals. Sc. 7: Outside Red Lion Inn. Toad comes to the inn, discovers a red car and steals it. Sc. 8: Courtroom. Toad appears before the judge. He is sentenced to 20 years in jail. Sc.9: Prison cell. There is a plot to free toad. Sc.10: Scene between Barge woman and Toad. Toad is disguised as a washerwoman. Sc.11: Badger, Rat, and Mole inform Toad that the Weasels have taken over Toad Hall. Toad is given a pardon. Toad plots to get rid of sentries. Sc.12 & 13: A tunnel. Weasels are partying. Animals plan attack. They chase away the weasels. Toad is reformed and mends his ways. Sc.14: Dining Hall. Party time. Toad closes scene with a new craze—golfing. End of play.

The play is very episodic, as can be seen from the story line above. The play must move rapidly, and I suggest there can be no attempt at realism, only suggestions of animals, scenes, and costumes. There are many props. Lighting can help very much but could be a problem for some producers. The theme of the play centers on a rogue character, and if it is not done properly, it could send the wrong message to young people.

B- 6-8 Reviewed by John Tolch

Cinderella (that isn’t her real name) labors away for her wicked aunt and evil cousins. Her stepmother believes that learning just monopolizes the time a woman can spend being beautiful, so she burns all the books in their cottage. Cinder manages to save a copy of Romeo and Juliet, which she reads whenever she gets a chance, but that also gets burned. With a little help from a silly fairy godmother, Cinder attends a palace ball and impresses the Prince. After Cinder flees the ball, the Prince looks for a woman who can complete his Shakespearean quote. When he finds the woman with an intellect to match his own, (Cinder) he snatches her up, learns her true name, and they live happily ever after.

I see very little reason to do this play. The characters are weak; the dialog is very simple and sometimes tawdry. There are set changes that could be a major problem in a work this short. I’m not sure we learn much from Cinderella’s memorizing Romeo and Juliet as an intellectual requirement for finding her prince—or vice versa.


B 4-6 Reviewed by Athena Madan and Harold Oaks

The McDonoughs are down and right out of luck. Pa McDonough has been killed by a runaway horse, their mare Blackie swells up and dies, and Jack the Horse Thief “legally” steals their newly acquired mare, Dolly, which they had got for practically free. It’s up to little Jimmy McDonough to hit the Shamrock Road in an effort to get Dolly back. Little People (The Leprechauns) guide his way, and traveling circus Gypsies find sympathy in his unlucky plight. It literally is a two-ring circus, but through it all, the luck o’ the Irish prevails: The McDonoughs and Dolly are reunited, and Jack the Horse Thief (with a little Gypsy magic) is awakened to a sense of justice.

There is a sense of fun in the script, drawn from the colorful language and “travellin’ folk” characters. Action is quick, and several songs and possible dance numbers may allow students to become familiar with Irish folklore and culture.

Characters are mostly sketched and, although the title page calls it “A Musical Play,” there is no reference to music being available for the eight songs in the script. The cast is flexible, with nine main parts (5M, 4F) plus groups of travellin’ people, gypsies, and leprechauns. The show could perhaps be done by young people, but the lines may be difficult to memorize because they attempt to capture the Irish dialect. Several scene changes also offer a challenge for mounting the production.


A 9-12 Reviewed by Tabatha Odom and Harold Oaks

Judy’s Antigone is adapted from Sophocles’ play of the same name and has the same plot. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and her story is also tragic. She must choose between following the law of the gods or the decree of the king, a decision that could cost Antigone her life. The author has modernized some of the language (set it in the most “free” of free verse), but the overall Greek feeling and power remain. It is intended to represent the ongoing conflict between man’s artistic and spiritual powers and his sometimes destructive nature. But there is no easy villain and there should be no easy answers. The author asks for “a contemporary experience of mythic proportions.”
The play contains odes that are meant to be performed with live music (created by the cast or musicians) or chanted in stylized, ritualistic manner to provide commentary and advance the action. With careful work, this could be an excellent experience for both performers and audiences. Recommended for experienced performers, high school and up.


A- 4+ Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Young Jim Hawkins helps Billy Bones, gets a treasure map, goes on a voyage, and has many exciting adventures. This adaptation of the Stevenson classic follows the original in character and dialogue. The action is swift and compelling, and the turns of plot keep the viewer wondering who will have the treasure when all is over.

Settings are briefly described and need not be elaborate, even though action takes place in an inn, on board ship, below decks, and on the island. Sound effects and lighting will be required to help set location and enhance the action. There are some violent scenes with guns, swords, and knives. This version was staged professionally with suggested double casting. Very experienced amateur groups may wish to try it, with expanded casting beyond the 16 speaking parts (15 M, 1 F).


* 4+ Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Chuda (the dwarf), Christopher (the neglected prince), and Armida (the blacksmith’s daughter) are each rejected by the village and left alone. They don’t feel they control their lives, and in a last futile effort to take control—or escape—they resolve to jump off a high mountain cliff. But there they meet the six-fingered man—who does not eat bread, but thrives on misery, pain, and loneliness! This loathsome creature first encourages, then cajoles and finally tries to force the three to jump, but when faced with the actual pain and consequences of such a thing, they fight, singly and together, to defeat this personification of self-loathing and destruction. But the six-fingered man’s undoing comes by the sweet song of an improvised violin rather than by the sword, and in the end he bursts out crying and literally dissolves into a puddle of tears that brings back the river of life to the whole village below.

This play about death and life captures the pain of dejection and the resolution of a strong, purposeful existence. Still has not only made the characters come alive for us, but has also made them embody some of our own fears, dejection, dishonesty, and pain. This play was originally commissioned by the Center Theater Group/Mark Taper Forum, where it is currently being staged, and was developed at both the Kennedy Center New Visions/New Voices and at the Sundance Playwrights Laboratory. It was also directed by Peter Brosius for the Honolulu Theater for youth. It calls for a cast of seven (4 male, 3 Female), all playing multiple roles. Recommended for professional theaters or very experienced groups who are able to work with sophisticated material.

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