Play Reviews

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**Play Reviews**


B+ 6-9 Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

Marc, Jordan, Jolie, Jay, Cindy, Rink, and Michael share their insights on life and being a teenager in a series of monologues that make up *Hear My Laughter, Feel My Pain.* From dealing with the anger and pain of losing a loved one, to the reflections on being a Christian in a world that is not very kind to those with religious beliefs, we are able to get a real sense of who these kids are. As we look deeper into their lives we not only are able to laugh with them, but to also see their true emotions and pain.

This monologue play is great for a night of one-acts or for individual study as auditions pieces. Scenery and costumes are limited and do not require a lot of preparation. The main focus should be on the acting, which may be challenging for younger actors.


A- 9-12 Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

On graduation day, six high school seniors make a pact to have a reunion every ten years. This simple promise marks the beginning of the Decade Club and strengthens relationships that might have otherwise been forgotten. Every reunion allows the opportunity to examine changes in each other and in themselves. Through the years, they experience the traumas of alcoholism, divorce, loneliness, and abusive relationships. In the end they realize that all of their experiences have made them stronger and better people. The play ends with four of the characters realizing how much they have cared for other members of the group, and eventually two couples commemorate their relationships with marriage. The group realize the impact a small promise made years before had on all of their lives.

This is a great play with many possibilities. Actors will be able to experiment and grow as they play different ages and stages of the character's lives. Although it does contain some serious content, it ends happily and is well resolved. This is an excellent piece for high school production.


B+ 7-11 Reviewed by Athena Madan

A difficulty with some one-act plays is that sometimes the action seems to be rushed or contrived in order for resolution to occur within the one-act frame. Sometimes this leads to a flurry of information; at other times, a brief, superficial coverage. This compilation of one-act comedies is no exception. Though Hamlett has many fun and imaginative ideas, the scripts tend to be more narrative than lively, more stylized than real. However, they are generally fun. The objectives from a comedic standpoint have been achieved. Following are brief synopses of the plots and production notes.

*The Prince's Dilemma* (17 pp.)

Beautiful Yasmine longs to be the 43rd bride of the excellent Prince Ali Babba Yabba Dabba...
Doo, but prophecy has forbidden them to marry until the Prince finds worthy recipients for wives number 42 and 41. Though the Prince has yet to find wife number 42, prophecy has declared when they will meet, how they will meet, and that she will be a foreigner. But all does not find fulfilment as prophesied: the Prince himself has decreed foreigners as illegal, and this particular foreigner is betrothed to one and in love with another. It is a lively mess of confusion as two love triangles collide and characters as well as audience try to make sense out of events, each other, and the inevitable fated conclusion. All in seventeen pages. But, true to the prophecies, they do live happily ever after.

This production calls for 2 female, 4 male characters, and has a running time of 25 minutes. The stylization of costumes and set is simple but fun. Props and sound are also simple.

*The Ghost of Hemstead House* (10 pp.)

The townspeople of Hemstead Crossing find their small rural town in an uproar because of unexpected and unusual excitement. The ghost of Hemstead House is back after thirty years, leaving evidence of her wake in unusual places. Though the Sheriff, Librarian, Schoolteacher, and Bookkeeper know the legends of Hemstead’s past, it is stranger Max A. Million who solves (or rather instigates?) the mystery... almost.

This script is witty without trying too hard to be. The subtlety of its humor is found in the characters’ identities, reactions, and the irony of the situation. Action is kept appropriate to the one-act length, and though characters are intentionally shallow, their stereotypical nature adds to the humor. Probably the most elaborate production requirement is the setting. Cast calls for 4 male, 2 female. Running time: 20 minutes.

*Once Upon a Fairy Tale* (15 pp.)

Three witches, feeling confined within the contexts of their fairy-tale spells, journey to discover the world of reality that exists beyond “the end.” Here they learn that their lives of spellbinding fairy tales weren’t quite so dull after all, and not only were they pretty good at it, but they were also needed in their expertise—for “without them, no one would appreciate the happily-ever-afters.” Their mid-career crisis over, they return home to their haunts, satisfied once more to hear children’s screams ringing in their ears.

This is an imaginative script. The witches are presented as silly more than scary, but still likeable and fun in their silliness. A young audience will identify with the witches’ feelings of inadequacy, and learn that each individual can make a contribution, and that those contributions are needed. Stage requirements demand more effort than most of the plays in this book, but they are flexible, easy to make, and would be fun to mount as a cast. Characters are 8 female, 7 male. Running time: 35 minutes.

*The Wedding Bell Blues* (8 pp.)

A demanding bride-to-be is making life miserable with her intolerable requests. In an unexpected turn of events, the fiancé and the employees of Hearts and Flowers, a bridal service shop, discover the cheer of grass that is literally greener on the other side.

Production requirements, including those of the characters themselves, are simple. This one-act has a mentality not unlike that of a sitcom,
where life's problems arise and are solved within a specific time slot, with a few good laughs along the way. Characterization is flat and incomplete; motives are not addressed; the situation is not believable in its triviality. However, there are some elements that would be fun to stage. Production requirements are simple; cast consists of 2 male, 4 female. Running time: 20 minutes.

Author! Author! (8 pp.)
A talk-show host interviews travel author Alice in Wonderland, the real writer behind the pen we know to be Little Red Riding Hood, and cookbook best-seller Snow Charming. Although this is an imaginative and witty script, it would lend itself better as a narrative rather than a dramatic performance. Production requirements are minimal. Cast calls for 2 female and 2 male. Running time: 15 minutes.

The Magic Mermaid (10 pp.)
This is a poetic reading of the well-known English fairy tale. Verse is consistent in rhythm and leaves much room for character development in the reading. This could be successfully staged as reader's theatre, though it may require more rigorous rehearsal for slower readers. There are 3 female and 2 male characters, plus 4 storytellers. This would work well on tour.

Secret Agents in Disguise (14 pp.)
An unobtrusive career woman becomes entangled in an espionage operation, and the plot thickens within the walls of her hideaway home. Unexpected events and unsuspecting characters unravel the truth, revealing this witness as having the most charming secrets of them all. But how could a happy ending have such a mixed up beginning?

There is much action in this script. It would require performers with more energy and improvisational skills than most of the scripts in this anthology. Given the shortness of the play and the pace of action, characters are well-developed, complete with character quirks and habits that make them likeable to the audience. Stage requirements could be more elaborate than they are listed here, but the itemized properties, sound, lighting, and set design would be enough to have a technical assistant involved. Cast calls for 3 male, 4 female with doubling. Running time: 30 minutes.

When There's a Will, There's a Play (7pp.)
Here we meet Will Shakespeare, a struggling playwright with writer's block. He also happens to be someone who people trust to share their problems with. We briefly meet Macbeth, dreading the upcoming visit of King Duncan to his castle; Will counsels him to take a walk in Dunsinane Woods. Distraught Ophelia he counsels to forget her sorrows by taking a lovely swim. To weeping Desdemona he lends a scarf, so that Othello may not notice hers has gone missing. To all his visitors Will says, always with his pen in hand, "Surely you exaggerate. All’s well that ends well. You’ll see.”

This would be an entertaining and educational application to classes studying Shakespeare. Because it is a humorous interaction of the players of the Shakespearean stage, a knowledge of these plays would be needed for full enjoyment of the piece. For the most part, dialogue in this script, maintains the heightened language and iambic pentameter of Shakespeare. For the reader who is familiar with his writings, this should be an enjoyable production. Cast calls for 3 male, 4 female. Production requirements are minimal; this would work well for a classroom performance. Running time: 15 minutes.

Eat, Drink, and Be Scary (12 pp.)
A witch who owns a restaurant feels she is failing as a mother when she discovers her daughter desires to get married. When has marriage ever been a part of a witch's "happily ever after”? So she rolls up her sleeves and begins her retaliation with food, fights, and frights. There are a lot of characters in this script whose appearances, while recognizable and humourous, are brief and undefined in motive. We are left wondering how the current characters are connected with them, why they would appear, and where they even came from. The ending is abrupt.
and unexpected, almost leaving us with a sense that the one-act had once again reached its time quota and needed to find a way out. Though the prop list is small, it contains rather elaborate details, as does the setting, lightning, and sound. There are 8 females, 5 males in the cast, and the running time is 20 minutes.

*Mother Goose Gumshoe* (5 pp.)

Scoop Snoopins is a self-proclaimed "Finder of Lost Characters." Mrs. Humpty arrives, reporting her husband as last seen on the garden wall; his secretary asks for a follow-up on the Muffet girl who ran away. We also meet Mrs. Cobbler, who has so many children she doesn’t know what to do. Scoop Snoopins is ready to make sense out of even the most senseless Mother Goose rhymes.

Because the action is based on events that have already occurred, there is more narration than physical movement on stage. Characters’ appearances are too brief to entice the audience into caring that their problems be solved, even though each audience member will already be familiar with his or her character and situation. Stage requirements are minimal. Cast consists of 4 female, 1 male. Running time: 10 minutes.

*It’s an Okie-Dokie Life* (10 pp.)

A parody of Jimmy Stewart’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but in ten pages, and in the old West. Susannah is the Angel-In-Training, hopeful to earn her wings; Joe is the depressed hero trying to do the best he can, despite dastardly Oliver Parsnip III. With a little help from his girlfriend, his little sisters, the townspeople, and Susannah, Joe is able to overcome the thwarts of dastardly Oliver Parsnip III, and see that his life is better off for his having been around after all.

Given that this is a script condensed from a two-hour movie, Hamlett has done a decent job of editing. The characters and their relationships are usually clear; and when they are not, we can figure it out. We do lose some of the intensity of the original (and it seems the title itself advocates mediocrity), but the message still rings clear: don’t be so pessimistic—life is wonderful.

Production requirements include dimming, spotlight, and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. There are 5 female, 3 male in the cast, plus townspople. Running time: 15 minutes.


B+ 2-6

Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

Erin and Dirk Simpson are visiting London for the first time. They are traveling with Maggie, their Scottish nanny. Maggie takes them to see the Tower of London. While she visits a friend who works in the tower, she leaves the exhausted pair to explore on their own. They end up falling asleep on a bench and are mysteriously awakened by Richard, Duke of York, and Princess Anne, two ghost children whose spirits are confined to the tower for eternity. Erin and Dirk also meet Sir Walter Raleigh, who has been beheaded and often lets the children play games with his detached head. Erin and Dirk play games with the others, but are not willing to let Richard, Duke of York, win in order to teach him that just because he is royalty, he does not always get to win. Out of spite, Richard threatens to force Erin and Dirk to remain in the tower forever. Anne convinces Richard to let them go so that they can enjoy their own lives. Richard concedes and Erin and Dirk wake up to find that their “dream” may not have been a dream after all.

This fun action adventure play can be done with a minimal set and simple costumes for the two present-day characters and period costumes for Richard, Anne, and Sir Walter. It should be fun for younger actors to perform and to experiment with historical events and different time periods.


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**B 10-12** Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

Before graduating, eight friends join together to do one last group thing. They all agree to be tested for the AIDS virus. While none of them believe they are infected, they still take the test, though most of them do not take it seriously. But one finds it is serious. Liza tests positive. This play examines the changes in a teen’s life when faced with the reality of being HIV positive in an uneducated world and the difficulties of accepting her new fate. Denial is Liza’s first response, then depression, and finally, the will to live. The disease affects her friends by forcing them to deal with the issues surrounding AIDS and the possible death of a friend.

While this play has the potential to teach adolescents about AIDS and the emotional factors relating to the disease, the language and subject matter are strong and may need to be reviewed. The characters are well defined, thought at times stereotypical, but do give actors the opportunity to explore emotional and fun characters. The poetic elements of the script open it to several interpretations, yet have the potential to be cliché. It is important to make the changes in time and place clear. Aside form some slightly confusing elements in the script, this play is not only a dramatic lesson, but also a fun story about the bond high school friends can share.


**B 7-8** Reviewed by John D. Newman

This collection offers ten plays by L. E. McCullough that were adapted from American folklore and written with secondary school actors and audiences in mind. The plays are simple to stage and could introduce students to a number of well-known and lesser known folk heroes and heroines, including Johnny Appleseed, Abraham Lincoln, Annie Christmas, and Mother Jones. Many of the plays are book-ended with modern teenagers in contemporary situations in order to provide a context for the students as they view or perform the material.

The plays are quite short, ranging from about 20 to 40 minutes in performance, and most revolve around a single episode in the folk character’s life. The plays can be performed in classrooms without a charge, although any other performance would require written permission from the publisher and a royalty fee.

While the scripts generally reflect good story-telling, they are more narrative than most good adolescent scripts, which tend to reveal characters through action and dialogue rather than description and monologue. The endings tend to be didactic and act as the morals of the fable-like plays. The modern teenage characters in the framing scenes exist only to be taught by the adult purveyors of wisdom and remain one-dimensional. Although the author is a renowned folklore scholar, an experienced school performer, and a credentialed playwright, he makes some of the same assumptions and errors that celebrated adult playwrights often make as they attempt to write dramatic literature for young actors and audiences.

Plays Included are:
- *Johnny Appleseed and Willie Crabgress*
- *The Flames of Hell (Les Flammes d’Enfer)*
- *Abe Lincoln for the Defense*
- *The Spledid Voyage of Kitty Doyle*
- *Annie Christmas and the Natchez Trace Bandits*
- "*You’re Live with Big Foot Wallace!*"
- *Greta Nilson’s Magic Mare (La Caballa Blanca)*
- *When People Could Fly*
- *The Seven Chan Brothers of Paiute Pass*
- *The Most Dangerous Woman in America*

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Larsen et al.: Play Reviews 33

Children’s Book and Play Review 33

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Vera Morris tells the enchanting story of Thumbelina and her experiences with the Prince and the other creatures who live along the banks of the river. In her adventures, Thumbelina is sold into slavery by the evil Widow Toad, but manages to escape with her friend Fish. After many attempts to rescue her, Prince finally is able to save Thumbelina and take her home to the Land of the Little People.

This would be a great play for junior high school students to perform for younger audiences. It is challenging to the young actor because of the many different animals in the play. Set and costumes can be a challenge, but the script contains helpful, creative suggestions. Willing students ready to take on the task and have fun with this show should enjoy it, while younger audiences will be delighted with the range of animal and human characters.


Ten-year-old Talyana lives with her father in a small house at the base of the Ural mountains in Russia. They are visited by Babushka, an old grandmother who has lost her way and is cared for by father and daughter. Babushka tells the girl about the Domovoi, who lives in the stove and is a protector for families that keep the fire burning bright through the long Russian winter. When Father walks Babushka back to her home, Talyana calls out the Domovoi and secures his help in trying to find more malachite stone for her father to carve so they can have food. They go to the woods and find the Golden Doe Talyana has dreamed about. This lovely deer magically gives the girl more stones and even some gold. Talyana discovers that many years ago Zavokochik, a greedy landowner, found Talyana’s Mother and tried to drag her off to his home, but she turned into the Golden Doe.

After Talyana gives the stone to her father, they are visited by Zavokochik, who claims Talyana has stolen from him and leaves only when he is given the gold. After Talyana’s father carves all the stone, Talyana and the Domovoi return to the Golden Doe to find more, but the doe is caught by Zavokochik, and now he wants her to be his slave. Instead, Talyana uses Zavokochik’s own net to capture him, Mother is freed, and all live happily ever after.

This Russian folk tale is told with charm and delight. The Domovoi is an interesting and unusual creature, and the Babushka is sure to delight. The ending seems less well developed than other parts of the play. Scenic elements are simple allowing for easy staging. It can be played by a cast of four (2 male, 2 female), all of whom must be able to sing.


This collection of mature, realistic scenes was compiled by two acting teachers from the Young Conservatory of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. The scenes were originally compiled for training talented young actors in a professional context. The cuttings are taken primarily from the realistic plays of contemporary regional, off-Broadway, and Broadway playwrights such as Horton Foote, Timothy Mason, Reynolds Price, Robert Schenkkan, and Tom Stoppard. Most of the characters in the 58 scenes are adolescents, most of the rest in their early twenties. There are only
a few older adult characters and no characters younger than thirteen.

The scenes are taken from cutting-edge works and expose young actors to some of the most prominent and promising playwrights of our era. The scenes are uniformly rich and well textured. Most of the scenes have identifiable, playable objectives, which are more often achieved through dialogue than through physical action.

The introductions to the scenes are concise and provide the actor with most of the necessary background information for the scene. The book wisely stresses the need to study the entire play from which the scene is taken and provides an extensive index with information on how to obtain the various scripts. The book is also prefaced with ten “etudes,” one-page open-ended scenes to which many different contexts could be applied.

Many scenes deal with teen and adult sexuality and other “mature themes.” While the scenes generally explore these topics in a discrete and intelligent manner, the content may make the collection more appropriate for college theatre programs than for most public high school programs.

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