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Play Reviews

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A- 8+ PB Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

*Emma* is a faithful adaptation of Jane Austen’s delightful story of the same title. Emma Woodhouse is a bright, attractive, and willful young woman. She spends a great deal of her time playing matchmaker between her young friend, Harriet, and all of the wrong people. Emma’s intentions are of the best sort, but her constant meddling in others’ affairs of the heart leads to some very amusing misunderstandings. In the course of her intrigues, she nearly misses recognizing her own true love. Yet all ends well with everyone married to whom they deserve.

This play is full of memorable characters. Care has been taken to maintain all of the language and sensibilities present in the original work. By employing the character of Austen herself to oversee the relating of the story, the author is able to achieve a tightly constructed play devoid of any loose ends in the plot. However, in order to condense the play in this manner, the author employs numerous short, somewhat cryptic scenes. Attention will need to be paid to the staging of this piece. Ten separate locations are indicated in the script. With creativity these scenes can be placed amid a few carefully arranged set pieces and personal props. Because this script is a period piece (1813), necessary considerations should be employed in the costuming. The cast consists of 21 (9 M, 12 F) but may be played by 16 (7 M, 9 F) with doubling.


A- 1-4 PB Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

Burdett has taken four of Shakespeare’s better known plays and made them more accessible to a younger audience. While remaining faithful to the story lines in every detail, she has rewritten the original texts in rhyming couplets. Her adaptations are well suited for reading or performing for children ages 6-10. While older children are certainly capable of handling the language originally employed by Shakespeare, younger children, who may feel intimidated by such, will have no difficulties with these texts. Burdett, a second grade teacher who has worked with children and Shakespeare for over twenty years, understands well that the opportunity to study Shakespeare can enrich the lives of young children. She has provided the means whereby such learning can take place.

Although no specific staging instructions are included in the texts, Burdett does offer a variety of suggestions to parents and educators on cross-curricular and expansion activities. The plays could be staged with a minimum amount of effort. Sets could be accomplished with simple scenic elements, and costumes could be largely suggested and then embellished with a few specific personal props.

A- K-4 Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

*RUMP!* Is an enthusiastic musical adaptation of *Rumpelstiltskin*, the well known fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm. The tale is delightfully told in retrospect by villagers gathered for an annual celebration. The Kingdom is in serious financial distress when quite unwittingly the Miller makes a statement that condemns his daughter to spin straw into gold or his life is forfeit. The Miller’s daughter manages this fantastic feat with the help of a mysterious little man, but when she runs out of items for payment she agrees to give him her first born child after she weds the Prince. When the little man comes to collect, the only thing that will save the child is for the Princess to guess his name. With the help of some bumbling but kind-hearted villagers, the name is discovered and everyone lives happily ever after.

This delightful play is sure to enchant younger audiences. In a light-hearted manner, it explores the consequences of selfishness, deceit, and the lack of courage to stand up for what one believes. The musical can be staged with little or no scenery, but the musical ability of the performers will require special attention when casting. It is written for 20 characters, the majority of which are male (14), but this can change depending on the casting of the villagers. This could be a successful production for community theatres or for secondary school groups to stage for elementary children.


A 2-7 Reviewed by Sara Christiansen

*Lincoln’s Log* is based on the life of Thomas Tad Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln has just been elected into office and is moving his little family to the White House. Tad and his brother Willie have a great many games that they like to play that keep the housekeepers on their toes. As the story progresses, we are taken through various consequential moments in history. Willie passes away, from malaria or scarlet fever, and Tad must deal with his father’s political life and his mother’s unending grief for her son. The relationship between Tad and his father progresses and we are able to see how close they are. Throughout the play, the scenes are narrated by an older and dying Tad, who is reflecting on his years in the White House. The play nears its end with the assassination of the President, and finally concludes with Tad being with his father again.

This would be an excellent play to use in studying U.S. History. The use of puppets would make it very enjoyable for a younger audience. Theatrical effects are used extensively in this play, including the use of shadowing, puppetry, and slides. Each of these, as well as the fact that the story takes place through the eyes of a young boy, will make it easier to keep the attention of a younger audience.

The play could be easily performed by four actors. Tad may be played by a young person or a talented adult. The other three (2 M, 1 F) would be played by adults. Requires period costumes and one set with puppet stage. Recommended for professional companies or very experienced amateur groups.


A- 4-7 Reviewed by Emily Van Camp

Charley and her parents are members of a touring acting company. Because they follow their work from city to city, Charley is forced to deal with the challenges of being the new kid. Finding a friend in an elderly landlady, Charley begins to realize her place in the world and the good that
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she has to offer.

*The Chicago Gypsies* is an enjoyable story of a girl’s struggle to discover herself. The characters are realistic and well drawn, and the plot is easy to follow. The segues between the scenes are particularly smooth. The play weighs heavily on conversation and dialogue as opposed to action.


**A- 6-12 PB** Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

Joseph is a child of the forest reclaimed by a minister from the wolf family who was raising him. The minister believes that bringing civilization to Joseph will prove once and for all the supreme nature of the human soul. This begins the correction of Joseph from wolf to boy. Joseph is bewildered by the hard, flat, silent world that now surrounds him, whereas once all of nature spoke to him. The story unfolds aided by the halting word of the “Traveler.” As the play progresses we come to understand that the Traveler is a mature Joseph who slowly learned that objects are followed by words, that humans walk on two feet, not four, and that he does not truly belong in either world.

This is a tightly constructed play. Although young audiences will quickly associate Joseph with the character of Mowgli in other literature, the depth and compassion of this work enables it to stand on its own. The author is careful to let each character share their own point of view without imposing a sense of bias. The play is written for a cast of 5 (3 M, 2 F). The staging can be accomplished with simple scenic elements, but attention to details in the costuming is necessary. Each character wears a mask at the beginning of the play. The play provides excellent and challenging character roles in the parts of Joseph and the Traveler. Recommended for profession or very experienced amateur companies.


**A- 9-12** Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

The students of Jacksonville High School must first learn to cope, and then try to heal, after the tragic death of two classmates. Lisa’s brother, Jacksonville’s All-State quarterback, loses control of his car after drinking too much at a party and causes an accident that takes his life and the life of another student, Heather. Lisa is tormented by guilt because she knew of her brother’s drinking problem and feels that she did not take sufficient action to stop him from driving while drunk. Heather’s brother, Kurt, is burdened by his own guilt. He also had been drinking and had called Heather to come pick him up. If he had not called, she would not have been on the road that night. Tension increases when the football team wants to place a roadside cross for Brad next to the one that is being erected in Heather’s memory. Aren’t the crosses meant to remind us of the victims? In the end the loss of these two youth becomes a cross for all to bear.

The tragic results of teenage drinking and driving are addressed with surprising depth in this one-act play. The writer deals frankly with the pain, torment, and confusion of those left behind to cope with the tragedy. The subject has been presented in a mature manner and is best suited to high school students. It should serve as an excellent springboard for discussion with young people.

The cast consists of 16 (5 M, 5 F, 6 extras) with the possibility of doubling if necessary. The set requirements are minimal for this production and no costuming beyond what a typical teenager would wear is required.

A 9-12  Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

This powerful, effective work is aimed at high school age youth. It deals with various forms of substance abuse in a way that does not talk down to the audience nor preach to them. It is set up so that the simple consequences of personal decisions are made clear. McDonough worked with counselors and law enforcement agencies to get a sharp focus on the characters, situations and consequences involved. The playwright requires that a phone and address list of local, regional and national substance abuse organizations be printed with the programs for each performance, and that counselors be available for audience members who want to talk after the show. A list of national numbers are provided in the preface to the play.

Abuse areas covered: pills, inhalants, snuff, PCP, marijuana, alcohol, poly drugs, cigarettes, rape drugs, LSD, heroin, and crack. In each scenario, an abuser recounts his or her experience, and is followed by an “Outcome.” The writing is direct and accurate for the character, and powerful in describing outcomes that grow naturally out of the circumstances.

Staging is simple. Cast size may vary (3 M, 2 F, 9 either) with doubling, but may be expanded if desired. Easily toured.


B+ 3-7 PB  Reviewed by Emily Van Camp

The evil Dogsbreath Devereaux is scheming to take over the Hanover D. Cash Clinic to inherit a fortune. With the aid of his brutish cohort, Nurse Hilde Hatchet, Devereaux attempts to marry and then murder the wealthy widow and clinic owner, Lotta Cash. The loathsome plan becomes complicated when a virtuous and innocent nurse, Wendy March, comes to work at the clinic.

*The Dastardly Doctor Devereaux* is a typical melodrama complete with a lecherous villain, a beautiful young heroine, a handsome and nobel hero, and a cast of quirky comedic characters.

The music is monotonous and lacks creativity. The dialogue is predictable and fairly empty, but could be made enjoyable by a polished acting company. The set and costumes are simple. Devereaux calls for a cast of 16 (6 F, 4 M, 6 either) with a larger cast if desired.


B+ 4-8 PB  Reviewed by Sarah Christiansen

This is the story of a small Idaho town in desperate need of water. Their crops are dying and they will all have to sell their land and move away if they don’t get help fast! They hold a town council, and one of the town members, Noah Count, tells them that they need to go to the Busy Beaver Corporation and convince Miss Sue Duse to give them some water. They all agree to send the young and handsome Spud. The entire town ends up following Spud to the city to make sure that he doesn’t get into any trouble. Soon after, they realize that Miss Duse was just a pawn in the hands of Noah Count, who had been holding the deeds to their water. Noah Count escapes the townsfolk and kidnaps their children, holding them hostage on the top of the dam. He threatens to blow them up with dynamite, but with Spud’s quick thinking they are able to save the children and throw Noah over the wall of the dam. Fortunately, as Noah sinks the dynamite goes off under water, blowing up the dam and irrigating the fields.

This cute play would best be performed in classic, melodramatic style. The people of Tatertown are simple, as should be the set design and costuming. The script calls for 16 (9 M, 7 F, plus extras).
St. John, Billy. *The Great Ice Cream Scheme!* 

B 4-8 Reviewed by Sarah Christiansen

This setting is a small ice cream parlor owned by Pop Sicle. A young man, Robin Baskin, has an exciting new idea for the future of Pop Sicle’s ice cream, but he never gets a chance to share it. Meanwhile, I.C. Custard, the villain, is plotting to steal the secret recipe to Pop’s famous ice cream. His accomplice, Parfait DeLux, succeeds in stealing the key to the ice cream parlor from Robin and sneaking back to the kitchen to steal the recipe. Upon doing so, she finds Custard practically frozen, having been locked in the freezer. As she is thawing him out, Robin returns to discover DeLux and Custard attempting to steal the recipe. All of the other parlor workers, including Pop himself, show up and a large brawl ensues. The heroes succeed in catching the villains and Robin finally has the opportunity to share his idea: to open a chain of ice cream parlors, which sells not only the famous vanilla ice cream, but many additional new flavors made by mixing in the toppings.

This melodrama would work well as a production staged by secondary school students for younger audiences. Costumes would be simple and the set requirements are minimal. Cast calls for 11 (5 F, 6 M), but more could be used at the discretion of the director.


B- 5-9 Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

This adaptation of Charles Dickens’ novel falls short of its mark. Intended to chronicle the coming-of-age of young David Copperfield in 19th century England, the play employs numerous short, cryptic scenes in order to span nearly twenty years. David’s early life of poverty and misery, first at his family’s estate and later in London, are depicted in Act I. Act II begins five years later as David, now successful and trying to make his own way in life. Misfortune quickly overtakes him, however, as all of his closest friends and relations lose their fortunes at the hand of the despicable Uriah Heep. In the end, justice prevails as fortunes are restored, evil-doers are punished, and David is married to the lovely Agnes Wickfield.

The structure of this adaptation allows for very little character development. As a result, the characters are flat and not engaging. The technique of employing the actors as both characters and narrators adds to this problem by forcing the actors out of character to provide narration at frequent intervals. In addition, the language of the play is contrived and lacks the manners and tone of the original work. Suggestions are given on staging the ten different settings contained in the play. Production notes are also provided for the music and necessary props. Helpful ideas are furnished as well for the period costumes. The cast consists of 15 men, 13 women and 7 flexible extras. Doubling is possible if necessary, and the large role of David can be played by two actors—one as the child and one as the young man.


A 5-12 PB Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Thistle has come up with a new approach to poetry at the upper elementary and secondary school level. This text focuses on the student who has problems with either English language or classical text. It assumes the need for a careful, simple approach that will introduce students to unusual and significant material in a new and
Thistle starts with a basic introduction to dramatization that assumes no background in theatrical studies. Then it suggests ways to adapt material, using her techniques, followed by a wide range of examples which comprise the majority of the book. These examples include lyrical poetry, ballads, nonsense verse, historical narrative poetry, and performing poetry by many well known poets. The book also contains a 40+ page text for a performance to be presented to an audience that encompasses a variety of material.

Thistle also includes directing, acting, property and costuming notes for the works suggested. This is a valuable new tool for the classroom.