Play Reviews

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Editor's Note: This issue includes the review of only one book, but it contains twenty complete plays for young audiences. Nancy Hovasse evaluates each play in Colman Jennings excellent collection.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

See Individual reviews for grade level.

Coleman Jenning’s anthology, Theatre for Young Audiences: 20 Great Plays for Children is a gift to all who appreciate, create, and study theatre for young audiences. This anthology contains some of the finest works in the field. From Aurand Harris' The Arkansaw Bear, which marks the first time an American play for young audiences deals specifically with the subject of death, to The Yellow Boat by David Saar, which celebrates the life of a young artist with HIV, this anthology features exceptional plays created to challenge stereotypes, inspire creativity, and delight young audiences.

This remarkable anthology includes well-crafted adaptations, exciting original stories, clever plays with music, as well as plays that explore a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to the scripts, Jennings has included a brief profile of each of the playwrights whose work is represented in the text. A phenomenal resource, this book is essential to the library of all who are interested in theatre for young audiences.

A review of each play follows.

Robinette, Joseph, Charlotte's Web. All grades.

In collaboration with author E. B. White, Robinette wrote the authorized stage version of the beloved Charlotte's Web. True to the original story, the adaptation tells the story of Wilbur the pig and Charlotte, a talented spider, whose unselfish gift of friendship costs her her life.

Set in three locations, this full-length play requires a cast of four to nine men, five to ten women, and a flexible ensemble. The script offers actors of any age an opportunity to explore characters that are well crafted and lovable. Production values may be simple or complex, allowing the script to work well for either touring or mainstage productions.

Harris, Aurand, The Arkansaw Bear. 2+.

The Arkansaw Bear invites its audience to share in a young girl's grief as she comes to accept her grandfather's death. Confused and sad, young Tish wishes upon a star that she might understand why her Grandpa has to die. Her wish granted, Tish soon meets The World's Greatest Dancing Bear and his accomplice, The Mime, running from The Ringmaster, who has come to take Bear to his final performance in the center ring. Frightened at the prospect of death and all that he has left undone, Bear tries everything to outwit The Ringmaster. With the help of the wishing star, Tish and her friends delay Bear's inevitable finale until they meet the young Arkansaw Bear, who agrees to learn the dances and continue Bear's legacy. With this solution, Bear finds peace and is able to leave this life, knowing he has passed on his gifts and shared his dances.

Requiring a cast of six plus recorded voices, this play is very easy to mount. Many productions choose to include a swing on which to fly in Bear,
but it is not essential. Music is important and should be planned as an integral part of the piece. The author suggests that Bear should not wear an animal mask or animal makeup, so that the young audience can identify with the human qualities of the character.

Sendak, Maurice, Really Rosie. 3+.

Known best for his wonderfully creative picture book Where the Wild Things Are, Sendak offers the book and lyrics for Really Rosie, featuring a character from his popular book The Sign on Rosie’s Door. Rosie, a precocious and highly imaginative young girl, spends the duration of the play producing, directing, and, most certainly, starring in her “movie life.” The not-so-subtle leader of the neighborhood, Rosie commands all the other children, including her poor little brother, Chicken Soup, as bit players in her scenario.

An off-Broadway musical in 1980, Really Rosie is a perfect vehicle for young actors. The characters are accessible and demand the energy that many young ensembles provide. Although the musical score was not available for review, Sendak’s lyrics are sometimes repetitive but clever, with songs dropped into the book as cameo numbers for Rosie and her band of players. The show requires six actors to play the children and three as the unsympathetic adult voices heard from offstage or seen only in silhouette.

Sterling, Pamela, The Secret Garden. 3+

A play in three acts with music for five men, three women and a puppeteer, The Secret Garden is a beautiful adaptation based on the book by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Opening with narration shared by the characters in story theatre style, the play unfolds to reveal the familiar, but still captivating, story of ten-year-old Mary Lennox, who is left an orphan in India when her entire household falls to cholera. Sent to live with her lonely, widowed uncle on his estate on the English moors, Mary discovers the key to a secret garden. Befriended by a local boy, the estate gardener, and a precocious robin, Mary takes on the task of bringing the secret garden back to life. In the process, Mary also manages to rekindle the spirit of her young cousin, Colin, who has been held captive by the grief of his lonely father.

Sterling has done a masterful job with this adaptation. In addition to active narration that expedites the story, the characters are well served by succinct dialogue and carefully selected scenes. Appropriate for professional or amateur production, the play does require some sound and lighting. Scenically, the play requires at least representational pieces indicating the interior of Mary’s bedroom in an unspecified British colony of East India, as well as the grounds and interior of Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire, England.

Zeder, Suzan, Wiley and the Hairy Man. All.

Based on myths and stories handed down by natives of the Tombigbee River in the swamps of Mississippi, the imaginative play Wiley and the Hairy Man is a favorite for production by professional and university theatres. As in many of Zeder’s plays, the universal theme is personified through the action of dynamic characters expressing themselves through rich rhythmic language that stays with its audience long after the curtain is drawn.

Featuring young Wiley, his mammy, his dog, and the scary Hairy Man, as well as a chorus of four or more actors who help create the world of Mammy’s home and the swamp, this play deals with childhood fears and the “conjurin’ up” of courage. Believing that his Pappy disappeared at the hands of the Hairy Man, young Wiley sets out to find his foe. Unable to remember the protective magic spells given to him by Mammy, young Wiley must resort to outfoxing the Hairy Man. Wiley does succeed in beating the Hairy Man, but his true victory lies in conquering his own fears.

*According to Coyote* is the least satisfying play in this collection. Since Kaufman passed away before completing the piece, it is presented in this anthology without stage directions on how the play might have been performed. This one-person piece is a composite of mythological trickster-hero tales of the Plains and Plateau Indian Tribes of the western United States, moving from one tale to the other without transitions.  

A mixture of styles, the language of the piece shifts recklessly between colloquialisms, "Hey you big-nosed, weirdo birdbrains, ... you guys wrecked it. Idiots!" to song lyrics which seem to represent a stereotypical, nonspecific tribal language, "Hey ya-hey ya-hey-e ya." Although the playwright’s bibliography emphasizes Kaufman’s success in touring his production of this piece throughout the country, the written work, as presented in this anthology, is not especially intriguing.


The next play in the anthology, *The Mischief Makers*, also deals with trickster tales but is much more fulfilling. A comedy for three actors, this delightful play introduces young audiences to Anansi the spider from Africa, Reynard the fox from Europe, and the Native American trickster Raven. As the play opens, the three are found perched together sharing a totem pole. They have been unknowingly brought together by Nyame, the god of the skies. As the play continues, the three argue over who among them is the best trickster. They work together to play out stories that best demonstrate their finest acts of trickery. In the end, Nyame returns, admitting that he brought the characters together in the hope that they would repent and reform their behavior; instead he has come to realize the value of their deeds and the laughter they bring to the world.  

Appropriate for audiences of all ages, this piece can be produced elaborately or on a shoestring. Although the script suggestions stage action in a theatrical setting, this piece could work very well as a simple touring piece. Rich with instructional opportunities, the play provides a wonderful exploration into the trickster tales found across cultures in literature and storytelling.


Based on Yiddish folktales, *The Wise Men of Chelm* by Sandra Fenichel Asher tells the story of the beloved people of Chelm. The play takes place in the late nineteenth century in a tiny Polish town. Although the play pokes fun at the illogical behavior of the people of Chelm, it has a universal appeal that will tickle the funny bone. Asher weaves together several stories that demonstrate the foolishness of the town's inhabitants. Although ridiculous, the characters are lovable, and a good laugh is inevitable.  

A play in one act with a cast of six players—four men and two women, with some doubling—this production is suitable for actors of all ages. The simple and flexible production needs make this show ideal for touring.


*Crow & Weasel* is the most complicated script in this collection. This "creation fable," as it is called by its author, is not based on Native American lore, although it does seem to emphasize the values and traditions of the native North American people. Fulfilling the prophecy seen in Mountain Lion's dream, young Crow and Weasel set off on a journey into unknown parts of the world. They are sent to explore the "Land Where Dreaming Begins." On their journey they are forced to explore the depths of their friendship, courage, wisdom, and faith.  

This full-length play is fairly cinematic and requires full production support as well as an imaginative director. With representative costumes and masks, the play can be produced with as few as seven actors who would act many
different characters. Rich in imagery and movement, this script is best served by an adult company performing for young audiences.

Kraus, Joanna Halpert, *The Ice Wolf*. 4+

This touching story teaches important lessons about prejudice, *The Ice Wolf* provokes questions about how we treat those who are different. The story begins with the birth of Anatou, an Eskimo whose pale hair and skin make her different from the rest of her tribe. Fearing the fair child to be an omen of evil, the villagers cast her out to fend for herself after the death of her loving parents. Alone in the world, Anatou runs to the forest and enlists the aid of the wood god, who turns her into a wolf. After some time in the forest, Anatou's curiosity leads her back to her village, where her pain and hatred erupt as she attacks those who had cast her out. Seeking revenge on the wolf, the villagers hunt her, threatening the animals who had sheltered her. In the end, the villagers and Anatou learn the price of hatred and the value of compassion.

In a tremendously compact and well-written script, Kraus has created a play full of breathtaking images and extremely playable action. With the entire story of the play taking place in a small, isolated Eskimo village, Little Whale river, and the forest, the possibilities for stylized production elements are endless. Requiring a minimum cast of fifteen, the script offers wonderful opportunities for mask and movement work. Although the imagery in the script deserves full production values, the script is strong enough to allow a successful minimalist production approach as well.

Hines, Kim, *Home on the Mornin’ Train*. 3+

Skillfully weaving the story of a group of African American slave children en route to Canada on the Underground Railroad with the story of a group of Jewish children en route to Switzerland hidden by sympathetic gentiles, *Home on the Mornin’ Train* displays horrifying parallels in world history. Although the play deals with the atrocities of the past, it also celebrates the phenomenal spirit of our children. Through the courage of her young heroines and those who assist them on their journeys, Hines helps her audience appreciate the good in humanity even in its darkest hours.

Though this play is laced with familiar music from the African American and Jewish cultures, Hines does not always motivate the musical selections—but the emotional impact of the pieces is clear. Costumes, sets, lighting, and sound for this play can be minimal. Due to the nature of the script and age of the characters, this play would be appropriate for production by adult or young performers.

Palmer, Greg, *The Falcon*. 3+

Adapted from a centuries-old Russian folk tale, *The Falcon* is a fairy tale that confronts gender roles and societal expectations. As with his musical adaptation of *Snow White*, Palmer portrays the heroine choosing her own path while knowing full well that nothing ends “happily ever after” and that there are always sacrifices and choices to be made if she is to create happiness on her own terms.

This pseudo-fractured fairytale requires a cast of six with doubling. Moving swiftly between locations, the characters set up their primary world, and then take on roles within the fairy tale as the storyteller begins to spin his tale. With story elements borrowed from Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, and Rapunzel, Palmer’s style sometimes makes the play read a bit like three plays in one. The play offers opportunities for elaborate costume and staging and would be appropriate for actors of high school age and up.


*The Man-Child* opens with the hustle and bustle surrounding the eve of Allen’s Bar Mitzvah. Miriam, Allen’s widowed mother, makes every effort to ensure that the occasion is
perfect. Stealing away from her preparations, she presents her son with his late father's own gold Bar Mitzvah ring, which she has been saving for this special day. Provoked by his young friend Herb, Allen begins to doubt whether the ring is actually gold. To test the ring, he bites it, denting the precious gift. Realizing his error, Allen's remorse causes him lie to his mother, challenging his own sense of integrity. In the end, his mother's quiet example of devotion helps him come to terms with his own actions, face the truth, and perform his Bar Mitzvah with pride.

The most realistic play in the collection, *The Man-Child* is well written and original. With a cast of ten actors, the play is divided into three parts to be performed without intermission. The set and costumes needed are straightforward, with the action occurring in three areas: the main area is a kitchen and living room arrangement; the second is a small bedroom; the third is the pulpit of the synagogue.

Still, James, *Hush: An Interview With America.* 3+

Created as a co-commission with Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona, and Metro Theatre Company of St. Louis, Missouri, *Hush: An Interview With America* is an excellent example of Still's artistry. A poetic play full of rhythmic language and fluid reality, this play is a surreal dream scape for the stage. Performed by a flexible ensemble of at least five actors, the play is suitable for mainstage or touring productions.

"An almost twelve-year-old-girl" who eats only fruit loops, Maggie Parks lives alone with her father when their quiet life in Hush, Kansas is disrupted by Jana Roberts, an overly ambitious news reporter who literally enters their living room through the television set. Jana soon learns that Maggie sees an angel and is visited in her backyard by a lion from the Los Angeles Zoo. Hot for the headline, Jana breaks the news to a nation hungry for a miracle. Before long the entire country, including a psychotic fan named T-shirt and an overly zealous FBI agent, is pursuing Maggie. Comforted by a lamb and a spirit named Eve, Maggie and her father are reunited, and Maggie reaffirms that "Angels and Astronauts both begin with the letter A."

Loomer, Lisa, *Bocón!* 5+.

"Anytime there is war and refugees" is how Loomer describes the time period for her play *Bocón!* Opening in an American courtroom just over the border of Mexico, the Judge demands information from young Miguel about his flight from his homeland. Miguel launches into the story of his village people, who are suffering at the hands of brutal soldiers who arrest them for simply living their lives. As his story continues, it evolves into an imaginative inner journey symbolizing the struggle of a young boy who searches literally and figuratively for his own voice and the courage to speak out against the oppressive government that has stifled him.

With six actors playing over fifteen roles, this script requires some actors to speak both English and Spanish. The set should be minimal and flexible, allowing for a variety of quick location changes. The author suggests that one of the characters use a large mask that distorts the human size. A creative and enjoyable theatrical piece, this play also explores the important issues of human rights and citizenship.

Carlisle, Barbara, *The Crane Wife.* 4+

Adapted from a Japanese folk tale, *The Crane Wife* combines elements of several versions of the traditional tale. The story explore the ideas of love, sacrifice, and greed. Kokuro, a young Japanese boy, is rewarded for his kindness to an injured crane by the mysterious arrival of a beautiful maiden who offers to become his wife. A poor peasant, Kokuro worries that he cannot support his new bride. To ease his concern, she agrees to weave a special cloth for him to sell in the market. Her only request is that he not enter the room while she is weaving. The cloth brings
great wealth to the happy couple, but soon Kokuro’s greed undermines their happiness, and the mystery of the crane wife and her sacrifice is revealed.

This lovely adaptation is best suited for performance by adult actors for young audiences. Borrowing Japanese theatre conventions and a presentational style, the script suggests the use of large puppets, masks, and an ensemble capable of fairly sophisticated movement. The use of percussion instruments by the chorus is also strongly suggested. The script offers a potentially beautiful visual production without the need for expensive scenery and props. It is a strong ensemble piece that will delight young audiences and offer fascinating production challenges for theatre artists.


Adapted from Rudyard Kipling’s classic tale of adventure, *Jungalbook* is true to the original in its grim depiction of violence and power as animals struggle to define the hierarchy of the jungle world. Traded for the carcass of a freshly killed bull, the mancub Mowgli is adopted by Akela, the leader of the wolf pack. Protected throughout his life by Bagheera, the panther, Mowgli is naive and vulnerable, unaware of all that threatens his very existence. As his protectors grow old, Mowgli is forced to learn about fear and survival. In the end he must face his own past and find a way to join the humans who live beyond the jungle.

With a large amount of doubling, this play for actors of all ages can be performed by an ensemble of eight actors. The author goes to some length to suggest a specific production style for his script. He suggests that only human characters wear masks, excluding Mowgli, and that the various animals be depicted through movement and voice rather than costuming. He also suggests that costumes be limited to “playground clothes” such as shorts and tennis shoes. He describes the set as a simple jungle gym without any dressing to represent vines or foliage. Following this simple description, theaters of all kinds can accomplish a production of this script with ease.


*A Thousand Cranes* opens with the introduction of a twelve-year-old Japanese girl, Sadako, and the bombing of her home in Hiroshima. Using the image of folding a thousand paper cranes, the story progresses toward the inevitable diagnosis that Sadako has leukemia. Comforted by her parents and her best friend, Kenji, Sadako undergoes the painful and debilitating treatment for the disease that has taken over her body. Filled with anger and resentment over the war that has brought such pain to her life, Sadako is visited by her deceased grandmother, who helps heal her spirit and prepare her for her own passage leaving the completion of the paper cranes to all those who may follow in hope of a more peaceful world.

A tremendously moving piece, the script requires skilled movement and music. Set pieces should be representational and minimal, while the piece offers an opportunity for elaborate mask or puppet work and stylized costumes.


*The Yellow Boat* shares the true story of Saar’s son, Benjamin, a young visual artist who was born with hemophilia and acquired HIV through a blood transfusion at the age of six. Although the character of Benjamin does die of AIDS, the play is not about death, nor is it a sad epitaph to a young boy. Instead, it is the celebration of the life of a young artist whose courage and sense of humor survive in the memories of his family and friends. The story is told through a series of scenes that depict his life and death—Benjamin pantomimes drawing pictures which come alive through an ensemble who play his parents, friends, doctors, school teachers, and administrators. The journey includes a visually stunning yet simple illustration of the
inevitable infection by the virus at a time when AIDS testing was not part of our regular blood screening process.

The playwright has included a great deal of accurate, accessible, and appropriate information about AIDS, making the play an excellent choice for theatre groups who wish to include AIDS education in their season for young audiences. This play with music is cinematic with a fluid use of time. The cast is made up of three actors who play Benjamin, Mother, and Father, as well as an ensemble of four additional actors who play multiple roles. Because of the nature of the script and the multiple locations needed, the set should be simple and flexible without trying to be realistic. Simple props and costume pieces should be used to transform the playing space to suggest location and time change. The piece has been produced successfully by adult actors for young audiences as well as cast age appropriately.


Set in the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, Gollobin's play *Selkie* is a precious gift to this generation of theatre artists and audiences. Written in the dialect of the Norn, the dialogue is musical. It is difficult to just read this play and not ache to read it out loud. This imaginative work offers many opportunities for creativity in design and direction. Because of the complexity of the play, it should be considered for production by adult companies performing for young audiences.

The story, borrowed from the myths of the seal people, allows its audience to see the light and darkness of the ancient tale. Margaret, a selkie, is captured by a young fisherman as she sheds her seal skin and transforms into a woman on midsummer’s eve. He steals her seal skin and hides it. Remaining human until she can find her seal skin again, Margaret gives birth to a daughter, Ellen Jean. Part human, part selkie, Ellen Jean is born with webbed hands. A life filled with the whispering of secrets and the shame of being different, Ellen Jean risks everything to free her mother and find a home for herself in the sea.