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Play Reviews

Lesley Larsen
Athena Madan
Harold R. Oaks
Megan Ann Scott

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**A 7+Reviewed by Lesley Larsen**

As Alex tries to cope with a new addition to his family, he discovers that the only way to be happy is to periodically leave his family to go to the “Shrink World.” He uses magical powers that he acquires during his visits to the Shrink World to shrink himself down to the size of an ant. In his new world he finds great friends, namely two ants named Ant Five-Legs and Ant Knows-It. When his adventures with the Shrink World grow more serious in nature, Alex’s parents send him to a psychiatrist, who helps Alex deal with his imaginary world and his new baby sister.

This fun script has great potential for both audience and cast. Younger actors will be able to experiment with some animal/insect imagery and different voices and dialects. Such experiments will not only take the audience to another world, but it will also help them to learn the true message in the play: we all need friends, no matter how small we are feeling.


**A K-6Reviewed by Lesley Larsen**

Short Tree is unhappy. Unlike the other trees in the forest, he is short and unable to see what the world has to offer. He always wishes that he could be taller and more like the other trees. But when the lumberjacks come to the forest one day to look for wood, Short Tree eventually appreciates his stunted frame. He is left alone in the forest—with no one to talk to him, play with him, or to even describe what the world looks like—when he meets a bird who unfortunately cannot sing well. When the bird does sing, most people run and hide or throw things at him. As Short Tree and Bird establish a friendship, they begin to depend on each other. Bird tells Short Tree about the world, and Short Tree provides a comfortable resting-place and nest for Bird. Throughout their friendship the two learn not only how to accept themselves as they are, but also to find beauty in what nature created them to be: a very short tree and a bird who just cannot sing. In fact, by the end of the play, Short Tree remarks how much he loves to hear Bird sing, and Bird tells Short Tree that he is the perfect height for resting. Together, they make new friends and teach each other what it really means to be a friend.

This play in fable form is wonderfully written and is appropriate for all ages. Although the costumes and set might be challenging for groups with smaller budgets, it would be a great exercise in animal imagery for children (and adults). The characters are well-developed, and the script is easy to follow. While it may be harder for younger children to perform, it certainly would be fun and exciting for them to watch. Movement classes or exercises would be beneficial to everyone in the cast to help them be able to communicate without having to use the typical human gestures and would also help the actors to be more believable as animals. The script provides several photos from different professional productions, which give some good insight into artistic choices for costumes and sets.
This short anthology contains three pieces—Clementine, King Kah-Leo-Leo and His Beautiful Daughter, and The Pirates of Pizea. It is designed to help students develop skills in improvisational drama. Limited, therefore, in its consideration of characterization and plot, this review focuses instead on how effectively Hackbarth helps heighten improvisational techniques in the drama student.

The first sketch, Clementine, consists of three precast company members and five audience members who take part in the action. We witness the plight of the darling Clementine after she saves Christmas from the captivity of Black Bart. Thankfully the entire text is not sung to the well-known tune of Clementine—although its consistency in meter throughout is not unlike the song itself—but I sometimes wonder if the play would be more interesting if it were sung. Some clever ideas, though.

King Kah-Leo-Leo sets the stage with four storytellers and seven participating audience members for this story about the kidnaping of the beautiful Princess Diana. This sketch contains highly stylized ideas that would be fun to produce. However, the humor is condescending and derisive in tone—an attitude that underlies all the sketches, but appears most noticeably in this one—which may not be a positive experience for the self-conscious audience member. Nor is this tone consistent with the idealized world of fantasy that this script relies on so heavily.

The Pirates of Pizea is an interesting twist of events that teach the audience, participatory or otherwise, about where “The Treasure” lies. The pirates assume the roles of storytellers and have little to do with the actual action on stage. Audience members fill all other roles, with careful directions from the Pirates.

The concept of this unusual collection is probably of more dramatic merit than the sketches themselves. These are structured to be take-offs or skits and are not intended to be regular drama. The author feels they will be fun to do with little or no rehearsal. Part of the fun will be having the audience members pulled out of their seats while the rest of the audience waits to see who is next. Having a cast who can work well with the audience is essential, as is having an audience that is willing to participate.


In a small 19th Century fishing village on the East Coast of Yorkshire, England, live fisher folk and Pierrots. The latter are a traveling Theatrical Troupe who entertain on the beaches on warm summer days to the chagrin of the hard-working fishermen, who see them as lazy and no good.

Tom, a bright, talented actor, woos the shy, pretty fisherman’s daughter, Polly. They fall in love, and Tom proposes that they marry. Polly will help with costumes and travel with the troupe. Over her parents’ objections, she decides to run away with Tom when a violent storm comes up. Tom saves Polly’s brother’s life, and she is given permission to leave with him. But the storm takes the life of Polly’s father, and she cannot leave her family in desolation. Tom promises to write and be faithful, but the letters stop and the spring brings new, different hopes.

Set deep in the somber colors of life against the sea, this play captures the power of the meager existence and the beauty of this people’s language. It offers an excellent range of characters and depth of singing and dancing. It requires a fairly large cast (eight women, eight men) but can be reduced by two with doubling. Actors must be able to perform with a Yorkshire accent. The script contains a resource guide with background on the world of the play, a glossary of terms, sources for slides and music, and a brief
discussion of the accent. Recommended for experienced casts.


**B 4-9** Reviewed by Athena Madan

A group of ghouls and a rattley old skeleton haunt an old theater quite contentedly and so convincingly that no one has come to visit them over 20 years. But when an ambitious acting troupe decides it's time to reopen the theatre's dusty curtains, the group of fiendish friends discover, with a certain dread, that they have forgotten how to scare people away! It's back to school—Ghoul School—to relearn how!

The stock characterization in this script generally works well. Because we are familiar with each character, we quickly identify the situational and dramatic irony (being simple, the ironies do not require that the characters be more than two-dimensional). This draws us into the humor of the play with little introduction. However, with stock characterization comes stock humor—and in addition, the two-man Company's rendition of Macbeth occasionally gives us a few laughs:

**FIRST SISTER:** Where hast thou been, sister?
**SECOND SISTER:** Killing swine.
**THIRD SISTER:** Sister, where thou?
**SECOND SISTER:** I just told you.
**THIRD SISTER:** Not you. Her. *[She points to First Sister]*
**FIRST SISTER:** I forget.
**THIRD SISTER:** Well, say *something*.
**FIRST SISTER:** Okay, okay. Look what I have.
**SECOND SISTER:** Show me, show me.
**FIRST SISTER:** Here I have a pilot's thumb... 
**SECOND SISTER:** Really?

**THIRD SISTER:** How did you get somebody's thumb?
**STRINGS:** *[looking up from script]* Will you shut up and let her finish her lines?
**THIRD SISTER:** *[To Strings]* Is that a real thumb?

**TEASER enters with a FLASHLIGHT turned on**

**TEASER:** *[very dramatically]* "Out, darned Spot! Out, I say!" *[Pause.] I didn't know Lady Macbeth had a dog.*
**STRINGs:** A dog?
**TEASER:** Spot. This is the scene where I open the door to let him out of the castle. To do his job. Right?
**STRINGs:** Spot is not a dog, you nincompoop!
**TEASER:** Well, you don't name a cat "Spot."
**STRINGs:** It's not a cat either!

Cast calls for thirteen (4 male, 5 female, the rest flexible). Running time is approximately 120 minutes. Overall, this is an entertaining comedy, one which young audiences will probably enjoy.


**B- 7-12** Reviewed by Athena Madan

Millar's aptly named sketches are indeed basic, as evidenced by the blatant slapstick humor, shallow characterization, and flurry of empty activity that permeates the stages of these sketches. They may be "fun" to produce but are of questionable artistic value.

A synopsis of each play follows.

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Cabin Calamity. 9 females, 6 males, 2 flexible. Family summer vacations are spoiled as news breaks out of house-burglar murders in their area of the woods. No one is unsuspected, and everyone tries secretly to solve the case, though none of them will admit that they have no idea what they are doing. Playing time: 30-35 minutes.

Diner’s Delight. 10 female, 4 male, 2 flexible. The crowd gathers at a greasy spoon diner for breakfast, among them a pregnant woman, and two sisters trying to load their cantankerous old mother aboard the next bus out of town. Things are “cooking” until a couple of inexperienced bank robbers try to hold up the diner and capture an influential customer for ransom. But while they’re busy deciding who’s in charge, the bus leaves without Mom and the pregnant woman begins labor. Playing time: 25-30 minutes.

Aloha Fish. 9 female, 3 male, one little girl. A group of college sorority sisters plan a relaxing camping trip after finals. Some fraternity brothers plan to spoil their weekend solitude, but these plans are thwarted by a wood-dwelling woman who hypnotizes them. Ultimately “the audience will laugh and cat-call like crazy as the guys are forced to wear luau costumes.” Playing time: 30-35 minutes.

Stowaway. 11 female, 7 male, 2 flexible. A nasty sea captain runs a tight cruise ship, but not tight enough to keep a female stowaway from coming aboard and making him fall for her! It’s a change of scenery as the cruise ship is transformed into honeymoon liner. Playing time: 35-40 minutes.

Unhaunted. 6 females, 5 males. A family is buying a home that has been inhabited for two hundred years by ghosts of estranged lovers. Two of the family members discover they can communicate with the ghosts and plan a peaceful negotiation about the haunting of the house. Playing time: 25-30 minutes.

Generally speaking, Millar’s playlets would be fun for the beginning drama student to have a moment on stage. However, it would be precisely that—a moment. Millar’s sketches call for fairly large casts to fill up the stationary playing space with relatively nothing to do. Characterization is stereotypical and incomplete. If, however, we still have difficulty discerning character stereotypes, the accents are scripted phonetically for us. Inconsistencies in the writing—using “she can” and “thou dost” in the same character breath, frequent typing errors in the printing of the script, and errors in the scripted phonetic indication of accents—make the text difficult to follow.


A 7-12 Reviewed by Athena Madan

Fortress is an excellent script that addresses the issues of vulnerability, trust, and interdependence in adolescent relationships:

BILLY: There’s this girl. She’s been following me around for years, and then, all of a sudden, it’s like I’m radioactive. She won’t come near me. But I don’t care, I don’t want her to like me. It’s the people who supposedly like you who can do the most damage.

KIM: Love stinks. It’s like being trapped in a phone booth with sixteen flatulent people who just came from an all-you-can-eat bean dinner. It’s depressing. I’d rather have terminal acne than be in love. Because the minute you actually say “I love you,” you’ve risked everything, nothing will ever be the same. And you’ve opened yourself up to the possibility of a whole truck-load of pain.

This is a good script. It does not condescend. The characterization is well-developed and believable, the dialogue is natural, the situations
are applicable for audience members, and transitions in time and place are smoothly narrated, flowing easily in and out of the action. Notable, too, is Scanlan’s approach to problems. He neither ignores them nor discredit them, nor does he attempt to minimalize or enlarge their magnitude. Instead he suggests that with these problems, there are often no easy answers. As for Billy and Kim, all we know is that past experiences have affected their ability to interact with others in a trusting, open manner. Scanlan suggests that while it may be natural to protect ourselves with impermeable invisible walls, it is important to remember that building these individual “Fortresses” ultimately creates more pain—for it is within these walls that we emotionally segregate ourselves so much that we do not recognize how alone we are.

BILLY: I don’t want anything from anybody. I just want to be left alone, is that too much to ask?
DR. ANGLE: Yes.
BILLY: What?
DR. ANGLE: Yes, it’s too much to ask.
KIM: But, no pain, no gain, right? So maybe there’s the possibility of a whole truckload of happiness, too. I figure we got about a 50/50 chance. And I can live with those odds.

This is an ensemble piece with a flexible cast. The original production consisted of 9 males and 7 females. Because stage and costume requirements are minimal, this would be an ideal touring production. *Fortress* is also available as a full-length play.

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A 6-12 Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

Slaight and Sharrar present a variety of monologues for young men and young women in *Great Monologues for Young Actors*. This well-organized and concise book offers a brief description of the play from which the play was taken and background information on the scene to explain what has just happened in the play to inspire the monologue. The editors give a good selection of both classical and modern pieces. Most of the monologues are of an appropriate length for most auditions (about one to three minutes each). The monologues are also great for class work or for a night of monologues and scenes. While some of the monologues would best be done by mature actors, most of them can be done by less experienced actors or beginners.

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A- 1-4 Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

Nate (A.K.A. the Great) is a detective who solves mysteries in his neighborhood. Nate’s latest mystery involves a picture, a box, and a painted tuna fish can. With the help of his assistant, Kate, and his smart, faithful dog, Sludge, Nate is able to solve the case. Based on the *Nate the Great* book series by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat, this adaptation captures the flavor of the “B” movies it springs from, playing on repetition and discovered clues that lead to solutions for the small mysteries in Nate’s neighborhood. Nate wears a fedora and trench coat as he sleuths out the answers to these local mysteries.
This would be a fun show for groups to do. Setting and costume requirements are minimal and the characters are colorful. Casting calls for 4 females, 3 males, 5 flexible (including 2 dogs), and 1 male musician.


A K-6 Reviewed by Megan Ann Scott

With an elegant mix of Japanese tradition and Hans Christian Anderson charm, The Ugly Duckling, adapted by Sterling, takes us through the heart-wrenching journey of a young swan who discovers his true identity. Even before he hatches, the Duckling is different. His slow hatching, oversized egg, and odd-shaped body give neighbors many reasons to tease him. Finally forced away from his mother, brothers, and sisters, the duckling leaves his home with Rooster pecking him the entire way! Next he must deal with the hissing and flapping ninja geese, then the Hen and the Cat. They, too, force him out when he fails to produce an egg. Left all alone to fend for himself, he discovers a wise Carp, who advises, "To wish for the possible will give you strength. To wish for the impossible gives only sadness." Slowly maturing through the adversity of winter, the Duckling escapes death just in time to discover what spring is like after winter, and what being a swan is like after being just a duckling.

Sterling starts each scene with a Haiku. The stage is set for a Kabuki-style drama. Japanese Kabuki (music [ka], dance [bu], and action [ki]) is a crucial element to the steady flow of the play, and should be explained to the audience. Stage directions use this theatrical form by indicating certain actions, such as a pond created with a blue ribbon or a gunshot symbolized by a gray ribbon. Also, the use of the twelve songs throughout the play gives the presentation additional creative elements and invites the audience to extend their creativity. Recommended for experienced groups.


* 5-8 Reviewed by Megan Ann Scott

Gently, James Still creates the fragile world of a family of three who is “down on their luck” and living on the streets. The mother, Sonia, tries desperately to hold her family together after their apartment burned down and their father is killed in the fire. The boy, 14-year-old Justin, adopts many of his father’s mannerisms, such as chewing gum and listening to opera. Withdrawn and unwilling to share his feelings about the fire and his father’s death, Justin rejects the social worker and everyone else, and turns to a man of the street for direction. Meanwhile, he still tries to fit in with a boy his same age in school. Justin is torn between wanting to live a normal life, and taking care of his sister and mother. His conflict is heightened when Tara, his ten-year-old sister, doubles over with stomach pain and must be taken to the hospital. When the first hospital refuses to help the family without insurance, Justin must do all that he can to guarantee that his sister gets the hospital to care for her bleeding ulcer. In a carefully crafted climax, Justin races through the city in a non-lucid state trying to find his dead father. He relives the final moments when he last saw his father. The threads of storyline and characters weave together in a fluid manner with smooth, connecting scene changes, and creates a cross-stitch image of what homelessness is really like and the important role of sticking together.

Just Before Sleep is a powerful piece, recommended for professional theaters or very experienced amateur groups. The characters are well developed. The playwright unfolds the story a little at a time, and in doing so keeps the audience wrapped in what the characters are doing and what will come next. The pace is driving as characters enter one scene while the action is taking place in order to change scenes and continue the action. The strong writing of Still, characteristic of his other works, draws vivid
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images through the use of symbolism, repetition, movement, and lyric verse. The required city sounds and effects and the beginning and the end of the show might need special attention, but other costumes and set pieces should be easy to supply.

★★★★


A K-6 Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

This play tells of the inspiration given to St. Francis to help him write the Christmas pageant. St. Francis is joined by a young man named Loene who feels that it is his calling in life to follow St. Francis. In their journeys, they come across an old shepherd who is forced to take care of the landowner's sheep, no matter what. The shepherd is forced to work every day, even holidays. When asked why he doesn't attend church, even on Christmas, the shepherd states that he had too much work to do and that he would not understand the story anyway, because the service was all in Latin. St. Francis and Loene then get the idea that in order to make the story of the birth of Christ more accessible to those people who were lacking in social status, they should tell the story in the form of a pageant.

A fabulous story, this play is entertaining and enlightening. It is ideal for children and adults alike. Because the play does tell the story of the birth of Christ, its theme is religious, so it may not be appropriate for some settings. But those who want to get a new take on Christ's birth should read or perform this play. It really is a fun, educational tool for all parents.

★★★★★


A 3-9 Reviewed by Lesley Larsen

Liza, a young mute girl living in the mountains of West Virginia, and her brother Jacob set out on a search for their missing father, missing ever since a flash flood swept his wagon away. Almost everyone in the community believes the father to be dead; even the mother doubts that her husband survived. But Jacob and Liza refuse to give up hope. While they are picking blackberries one day for their mom, they decide to look for their father on the “haunted” Ice Mountain. Jacob and Liza communicate through the use of signs, and unfortunately Jacob is the only one interested in trying to understand and appreciate Liza's form of communication. Through the “inner voices,” we as an audience are able to understand Liza's thought process and participate more fully in the discovery of the father. Although everyone in the town thinks that Liza is unintelligent and incapable of doing anything constructive, Liza proves them wrong by solving the riddles of the magical cave, rescuing her father, and bringing him safely home. At the end of the play we find that the town, and especially her mother and father, now accept Liza as a bright and lovely young lady.

This would be a fun play for any junior high or high school to produce. The set and costumes are arranged so that they could be done very elaborately, but they may also be done in a minimal style for schools with smaller budgets. The southern accents would be a fun, refreshing change for most student actors who are used to doing everything in “everyday” speech. The actress playing Liza faces a challenge of having to communicate with people without using words. It is also important to remember the ensemble element of this piece. Because of the jumps in setting, the play requires that everyone in the show be good actors, able to draw focus when
necessary and give it to other people when the scene calls for it. This is an exciting work.


**A- 8-12** Reviewed by Lesley Larsen and Harold Oaks

By comparing the choices of a contemporary gang member in Newark, New Jersey, and a Nazi war criminal, the authors suggest the life directions that seem to merge together, including the harrowing trials of a young German during the late 30s and 40s and of an African American teenager living in a gang-infested society.

The play works better on stage than on the page. The reader sometimes has difficulty following the story as it jumps from the 1940s to the present. In production, it gains power from the quick shifts of time, since we know the results of the historical period and can see the implications in our time. It should lead to some very useful postproduction discussions. Recommended for mature production groups.


* 2+ Reviewed by Harold R. Oaks

On a windswept hill, a boy signs “wind,” and the breeze whistles in our ears; he signs again, and we hear a brook tumble over stones; he signs “bird,” and birds sing for us. Thus begins this story of the boy Tuc, a character we got to know as an adult in *Mother Hicks* (Anchorage Press, 1986). As Tuc remembers the past, we relive it with him—a journey through an audio-centered deaf school, past superstitious, prejudiced townspeople, and the death of his beloved father.

The father’s passing is echoed in the haunting, signed (and voiced) refrain:

> How can there be world,  
> And father not?  
> How can there be earth and sky?  
> How day?  
> How light?  
> How breath?  
> How life?  
> How can there be Tuc,  
> And father not?

The journey is an insightful one, helping us see the world through the eyes of this gifted, “handicapped” young man. We struggle with the “establishment,” people’s views of those who are different and are gratified to see some sort of resolution in selected issues. It is a powerful, moving work that represents some of the best we have to offer in this field.

The cast is nineteen, but can be as small as eight with doubling (suggested in production notes). Actors must be able to sign for all speaking characters, and voice is a must for all signing characters. Optimum cast size is nine, to assist with interpreting. Recommended for professional or very experienced amateur production.