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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A K-3 Reviewed by Robbie Stephens

*Pushing Up the Sky* is a compilation of seven Native American tales and legends rewritten into plays for young people to perform. The plays are easy to stage, and children will enjoy reading and performing them. The set-up of the plays, including the costuming, characters, and props, are similar to that of narrative mime; the plays thus lend themselves to classroom use and process-oriented performances. Included in this compilation are *Gluskabe & Old Man Winter*, *Star Sisters, Possum’s Tail, Wihio’s Duck Dance, Pushing up the Sky, The Cannibal Monster*, and *The Strongest One*. Each play is prefaced with information about the tribe from which the story originates. Sources and a bibliography are also included.

Reviews of the plays in this work:


A K-3

On the far Northern coast of Alaska live the Tlingit people, who, among other things, carve totem poles. On one totem pole found at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, the story of the Cannibal Monster is carved.

The Raven is the narrator of the story. The Cannibal Monster follows the people around from village to village and eats them for his meals because he is always hungry. Raven knows the people are scared of the monster and don't like being eaten, so he decides to do something about it. Raven tells Brown Bear to shoot the monster in the left heel. Brown Bear tells the people to do the same, but the people are too frightened, and Brown Bear must face the monster alone. When the Cannibal Monster comes at him, Bear shoves the spear into his heel. The monster dies, and the people are very happy and thankful. They decide to burn the monster's body to get rid of it. Raven, knowing this to be a bad idea, tells Brown Bear to tell the people, but none of them listen to Raven or Bear. As the body burns, small things fly out of the fire and smoke and begin biting the people. These little things are what we call mosquitoes.

This play has speaking roles, nonspeaking roles, and a drummer. Costuming is simple, with few props and masks.

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A K-3

*Gluskabe and Old Man Winter* is a tale of the Abenaki people who lived in New England in wigwams. Gluskabe is one of their folk heros. Old Man Winter has decided to stay on so long that human beings are getting sick and starving. The people ask for Gluskabe’s help, so he decides to travel to Old Man Winter’s wigwam. He doesn’t think Old Man can stop or harm him, but he is wrong. On his second try, Gluskabe tricks Winter by bringing the Summersticks back. To obtain the Summersticks, however, he first has to trick the Summer people and steal their Summersticks. He maneuvers his way into the group, dances with them awhile, and then swipes a Summerstick. Gluskabe takes the stick to Old Man Winter, and Summer arrives in the human beings’ land. Because of Gluskabe, we have Summer each year.

The cast for this play is quite large—thirteen or more characters—and includes speaking, nonspeaking, and dancing roles. The set is simple to create using chairs, blankets, and paper, and the
costuming, similar to that of narrative mime, is created using sheets, blankets, and paper.

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Possum’s Tail. 9 pp.

A K-3

The Cherokee people have passed this story down through generations. It is about their favorite trickster, Wily the wise Rabbit. The Cherokee were the only "civilized" tribe when settlers first came to America. They followed the Trail of Tears and now live in Oklahoma and North Carolina.

Possum’s Tail is the story of how Rabbit tricked Possum. Possum is a great braggart who loves his tail and always wants to tell the other animals about how wonderful his tail is. The other animals are holding a meeting, and Possum wants to be the first speaker. Rabbit comes up with an idea to get back at Possum. Rabbit takes Possum to Cricket, who applies a "special" medicine to Possum’s tail, promising that it will appear even more magnificent. Cricket wraps the tail in snake skin and tells Possum to leave it on until the meeting the next day. When Possum stands up and begins speaking, he also starts unwrapping the snake skin. When his tail is completely unwrapped, Possum discovers that all his beautiful hair has fallen off and his tail now looks like a rat’s tail. Possum is so embarrassed that he rolls onto his back, his feet up. That is why, to this day, he plays dead when any other animal comes near him.

This play has a cast of eight characters. If more are needed, other animals can be incorporated into the meeting scene.

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Pushing Up the Sky. 8 pp.

A K-3

Long ago the sky was so low that people could climb into it and tall people bumped their heads on it! The people didn’t like this at all. Many tribes decide to get together and try to change the level of the sky. Seven of the wisest decide they should try to push the sky up. They gather all their people and settle on using the word Yah-Hoo so each person will understand when to push. Everyone pushes, some with their hands and some with long poles. Gradually they push the sky up very high. Today, the sky remains where they pushed it long ago; the stars we see are holes left from the people’s poles.

This is a story from the Snohomish people who live in the Northwest (mainly Washington). The Snohomish catch fish in the ocean and streams and carve intricate totem poles. The story of pushing the sky up comes from a totem pole made for the city of Everett, Washington by Chief William Shelton. There are twelve speaking roles in this play and as many nonspeaking parts as needed.

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Star Sisters. 11 pp.

A K-3

Star Sisters comes from the Ojibway people, also known as the Chippewa, who were centered in the Great Lakes region and lived in a manner similar to the Abenakis. Two sisters, named Red Star Sister and White Star Sister, choose which star they would like to marry before falling asleep one night. During the night, the Red Star and White Star come down from the Sky Land and take the sisters back with them to be their brides. When the sisters awake, they are in Sky Land. There is nothing to do in Sky Land but peak down through the stars, and over time, the sisters want to return home. They miss their family. Red Star and White Star agree that the sisters should return, so they lower them down from Sky Land in a basket. The basket becomes stuck in an eagle's nest. Red Star Sister and White Star Sister ask several animals for help before the Wolverine agrees to help. He gets them down safely, but then expects them to clean and cook for him, and live
at his home. The sisters trick him and escape back to their village.

This play has a cast of more than thirteen characters, the majority being the Star people who look through the holes in the sky. The scenery is simple, and the costuming consists of shirts with fringe, paper, masks, etc.

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_The Strongest One._ 8 pp.

**A K-3**  
Reviewed by Harold Oaks

The Zuni pass this story to their children. Ant wants to know who is the strongest of all. He is warned about how small and weak he is, and the other ants tell him to be careful. He is curious, though, and ventures into the world. He meets snow, sun, wind, house, mouse, cat, stick, fire, water, deer, arrow, and big rock. Each says he/she is not the strongest because the next one either covers it, drives it away, puts it out, or is eroded by the next. In the end, even Big Rock admits the ants must be stronger, because he is being eaten away by them all the time.

This is a simple, fun story told with the kind of repetition that attracts young children. They will be delighted by it, and especially by the fact that size is not the only determining factor in strength. This could be staged with adult players, but could also be done using child actors. There are seventeen speaking parts, and more can be either added or doubled, depending on need.

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_Wihio’s Duck Dance._ 9 pp.

**A K-3**

The Cheyenne originally lived in the Great Lakes region but later moved to the Great Plains. Wihio is their very clever trickster, but he foolishly loses everything in the end because of his greed. This play requires at least ten actors.

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A very hungry Wihio sees a group of ducks and invites them to his house for a dance. The ducks decide to go, even though they are apprehensive and do not trust Wihio completely. Wihio tells them that this dance requires them to dance around the fire with their eyes shut. If they open their eyes, the smoke will make the ducks’ eyes turn red. Wihio agrees to beat the drum for them as they dance. As the ducks dance, Wihio captures them one by one until the fourth duck opens his eyes. He sees what Wihio has been doing, and all but two manage to fly away. Wihio quickly places these two ducks in the fire to cook. As he is doing this, he hears someone squeaking. He climbs the tree to make the squeaking noise stop, but the tree branches capture him and hold him fast. Just then, Coyote comes along, smells Wihio’s dinner, and quickly eats up both ducks. The wind blows Wihio free, but it is too late, and Wihio is still hungry. This story explains why Wihio is always hungry and why the coot always has red eyes.

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**B+ K-2**  
Reviewed by Nathan Christiansen

Shusha wants to have adventures like the ones in her book. The Story Snatcher, however, wants to get rid of all stories and books by eating them, and has taken Shusha’s new storybook. Shusha’s doll, Shareen, comes to life to aid Shusha. With the help of the audience, they are able to save the story and help the Story Snatcher see the error of his ways. The audience becomes another cast member and adds excitement to the plot.

This would be an excellent play for young children. The set could be fairly simple, but some of the costumes could be more elaborate, especially those of Story Snatcher and a Tree, which are both quite animated. The play requires three or four actors with good improvisation skills and an ability to lead audience participation. The script seems a little difficult to read at first but
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holds some interesting possibilities for creative productions.


A- K-6 Reviewed by Angela Ottosen

Mr. and Mrs. Brown are unsuccessful at forcing vegetables down David's throat at the dinner table. As a member of the Grocery Store football team, he is discouraged over their loss to the Candy Factory team. While daydreaming over cooked carrots and spinach, he finds himself in a magical garden where grow some highly eccentric vegetables and their Onion King. The Onion King and his followers are desperate to defeat the Sweets Queen and her minions after the market for vegetables has gone to pot. David and his football buddy, Tommy, work together to find justice for their veggie friends and lessen the powerful temptations of their enemy, the Sweets Queen. After the queen is bound, David and Tommy realize their love for treats and find a way to let veggies and sweets co-exist.

*The Magic Garden* could more appropriately be titled "David in Veggie-land," because of its clever way of portraying plants as people. The script is well-written and flows nicely; each line seems to melt into the next. Humorous and entertaining, this play has the potential to capture any audience, regardless of age.

Casting decisions could make or break the show. Each body shape, size, voice, and expression should be considered while choosing actors to personify the veggies. If done skillfully, the corny nature of *The Magic Garden* could be replaced with quality. Suggestions for staging and costumes are included in the script, including costume sketches for main characters.


A 3-8 Reviewed by John D. Newman

After their parents are suddenly killed in a boating accident, four recently orphaned children overhear social workers deciding their fate. Rather than risk being split up, Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny run away to live by themselves in the woods. It is the Great Depression, and times are tough, but with hard work, ingenuity, and determination, the siblings thrive until they are taken in by their mysterious grandfather.

Field's economical dialogue and convincing characterizations make the script as moving as it is simple. While saturated with old-fashioned optimism, the play speaks to contemporary young people who either fantasize about making it on their own or who face the daily reality of caring for themselves and their siblings. The play yields itself perfectly to classroom discussions and activities, based around such questions as "what would you take from your home if you could only take one thing?" and "what would you need to do to survive on your own?"

The adult and child characters in the play are equally well developed. The twins, practical Jessie and nurturing Henry, make a perfect team in leading the family. Young Violet appreciates even the smallest niceties in the family's rough shelter; and young Benny, who struggles with learning disabilities, demonstrates his cleverness by taking things at his own pace and finding his own way of doing things. Sarah Calder and Samuel Truman, the social worker and doctor who find and support the children, are charming, sympathetic, and yet human in their fumbling. The mysterious grandfather proves a worthy antagonist to the children's independence and yet undergoes a believable mellowing at the end of the play.

This script would be especially welcome to children's theatre producers with conservative audiences. Production rights are administered through the Seattle Children's Theatre, and
reading scripts are available for a nominal fee from Rain City Projects.


Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

Stephen Foster, considered America’s first composer, is profiled in this short musical performance with narrative. It tells of some events from his life and presents simplified versions of some Foster favorites, such as “Oh, Susannah,” “Camptown Races,” “Old Folks at Home,” and others. The booklet includes both music and narration, with suggestions for staging, costuming, and dramatization. There is also a short history of Foster. Performance time is about twenty minutes for this interesting class activity.


Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

This musical, intended for performance by young people, tells the stories of seven school children and what they did during one summer. It also tries to explain why they don’t like to return to school in the fall.

Familiar songs are used to tell the story, which is narrated through a dialogue between the teacher and her students. Suggestions for props, costumes and scenery can help the organization of the production. All music and songs are included.


Reviewed by Mindy Boam

Author Mark Twain narrates his classic tale Huckleberry Finn, following his young protagonist through his many adventures. To escape his drunken father, Huck fakes his own death and heads down river with Jim, a runaway slave. The two meet up with several colorful characters, including a pair of con artists and Tom Sawyer. Their escapades include Jim getting caught and Tom getting shot. All works out well in the end.

The script moves along at a good pace and is well-worded. The use of a Twain as the narrator helps abridge the story, but it is not very creative. Twain steps in and out of the action by becoming Tom Sawyer, and Huck turns to the narrator to be reminded of what happens next, thus constantly reminding the audience they are watching a play. The set and costumes need not be elaborate; they need only suggest what is going on, since the action will carry the story on its own. Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn was originally staged professionally by the Yellow Brick Road Show company.


Reviewed by Nathan Christiansen

Baba Yaga, a Russian folk character, is an old woman who lives in the forest and is thought to eat children. She has a special black sunflower with magical powers. Maryushka, an orphan girl living in a village near the Baba Yaga’s forest, discovers the black sunflower and takes it back to her own garden. Some geese steal Maryushka’s brother and take him to Baba Yaga. Maryushka...
finds Baba Yaga’s home, saves her brother, and also learns that Baba Yaga has true kindness.

This is a fascinating adaptation of an old Russian myth. The characters are charming, and the lyrical style, using both song and rhyme, make it fascinating to read. Puppets could be used for some characters. This imaginative work was originally produced by Emerson Stage, following the 1995 New Visions/New Voices workshop at the Kennedy Center. The publisher has included several sketches and pictures from the original production, with designs by Rafael Jaen (costumes) and Danila Korogodsky (scenic design). Even with some actors playing multiple roles, it was staged with a cast of thirteen, and used live music created by two musicians. Overall, a wonderful play that audiences of all ages will enjoy.


B+ K-3 Reviewed by Nathan Christiansen

Wilberforce Wilson, a young boy in the second grade, begins a new school that is extremely different and scary for him. The teachers seem mean, and the principal is even more intimidating. All the students are trying to get at him, but Wilberforce doesn’t let this influence his own behavior. When he finds a magical fountain, things begin to change.

This charming play lends itself to a young audience, for they would enjoy much of what was shown. Costumes might be difficult for portraying the animals, but everyone else would be easy. Scenery could be set up without many difficulties. This is a fun play children can identify with.


A- K-5 Reviewed by Nathan Christiansen

This musical about the life of Martin Luther King Jr. moves quickly through outstanding events in his life. The booklet includes music, songs, and fifteen sections of spoken lines for children to recite. Some suggested activities, like a crossword puzzle, are included at the back of the book for further classroom involvement.