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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A K-3 Reviewed by Angela Ottosen

Based on Irish folklore, this play tells the story of Rafferty, a small boy with a magic finger and two different-colored eyes. Fearless and courageous, Rafferty is up for the challenge when he is told to rescue the Moon from the jaws of the Great Fish who swallowed it. Joined by his friends Spider Murphy and Finbar Bat, Rafferty uses his magical powers to return the Moon back to its proper owner—the sky above. Full of quips and streams of wonderfully concocted phrases, this play is cleverly written. The characters are wild and humorous, yet somehow believable at the same time. There are great possibilities for creativity in the use of set, costumes, and props. The play is for five actors with doubling.


A Pre-5 Reviewed by Shelley Graham

In a forest, a tame dog and a wolf meet. The dog, intrigued by its wilder cousin, convinces the wolf to return home with him, where they will find food without hunting. Along the way they encounter a hunter, a priest, and a shepherd who warn the dog that a wolf is foolish, evil, and greedy. Using puppets, they tell stories to illustrate their claims. When they have gone, however, the wolf tells the dog through several stories and puppets what wolves are really like and why they do what they do. In the end, the dog and the wolf realize that although they belong to different worlds, each deserves the other’s respect.

The three actors in this play take on numerous characters in several different stories. The exciting mingling of puppetry and live performers illustrates the beauty of storytelling and theatre. On a simple stage, lighting, puppets/masks, and dialogue receive clear emphasis. The stories are based on fables from cultures around the world, and the highly stylized action lends itself easily to imagination and creativity. It can, therefore, be adapted for a range of ages and grades. There is a strong through line, enhanced by the intermingling of stories. The cast calls for one female and two male actors, each with a strong sense of imagination and artistry.


B K-6 Reviewed by Shelley Graham

A widely diverse group of children with different talents and cultural and social backgrounds are all members of the "cool" clubhouse. Throughout the show, kids move in and out of different groups, discussing their similarities and differences, remembering times when they have excluded someone new or different, and commenting on how much better it is now that they know that they are all cool for different reasons. A mom and daughter discuss friendships with people who are from foreign countries, and we learn that sometimes, even parents don’t understand what it means to be different. Girls make fun of people for what they wear; boys make fun of another for still having a teddy bear. One young girl begs the groups not to fight because she recently saw her brother stabbed in a gang fight. The children learn to talk and play with a child with a hearing
impairment, and they discuss the ever-important question of popularity.

The play leaves room for a very large, versatile ensemble cast. With no real lead character, all cast members have a chance to be an important part of a scene. The lines would be easy to memorize, and scenes could be broken down into workable sections. Because the story is so diversified, however, it lacks a real sense of plot, in the traditional sense. It has a tendency to seem more like several small skits, each dealing with a different problem, tied together with songs sung by the group. This makes for nice workability, but it doesn't give the audience a chance to really identify with one or two characters. The didactics aren't couched in an overarching story, but as lessons to be learned. On the other hand, the music is engaging, and each of the "lessons" is one that would be relevant and meaningful to an audience of this age.


Reviewed by Shelley Graham

Each of the plays in this collection are preceded by a section entitled "The Playwright Speaks," in which Kraus describes the play's history and significance. After each play there is a section entitled "Classroom Concepts," in which Rubin offers suggestions for use of the play in the classroom. The ideas apply not only to drama classes, but also to history, English, geography, and other classes as well. Two of the plays, Remember My Name and Angel in the Night, deal with the Holocaust and World War II. Sunday Gold is a play that deals with the gold rush in North Carolina in the 1840s and the issues of slavery and friendship. Mean to be Free is the story of two slave children following Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad to freedom. The first play in the book, The Ice Wolf, offers students an opportunity to discover the culture of the Eskimos and some of their myths. The plays themselves are exceptional, and in conjunction with the ideas that Rubin presents, they have the potential to be more than just artistic experiences. They may encourage research among the students and a deeper understanding of other cultures and periods of history. The plays are easily applicable to students from third grade to eighth grade, and all five shows run about an hour each.

A review of each play follows:

Kraus, Joanna H. Angel in the Night.

Many courageous people during the Holocaust risked their liberty and their lives to help the persecuted Jews escape the torture that awaited them if Nazi soldiers found them. Marsia Pawlina Szul was one such person. She is honored now in the Avenue of the Righteous Parks found outside Jerusalem and in Evanston, Illinois. This play is the story of her courage in harboring a mother, her newborn boy, young daughter, and another young Jewish girl. Pawlina led the Nazi soldiers away from the family, hiding in a homemade bunker in their barn. When she was discovered, she suffered unspeakable torture by the Nazis, yet she remained silent.

This play is inspiring, even more so because it is based on the real actions of one brave young Polish woman. The characters are loveable—we suffer with them throughout the play—and we are grateful to learn of the love, respect, and adoration the Jewish characters feel for Pawlina, their savior during World War II. Every child should learn stories such as these, which reaffirm our faith in humankind in the midst of some of the worst examples of man's inhumanity to man. The play deals with these concerns in a delicate but touching manner, and all who see it will be grateful for women like Pawlina Szul, an angel in the night. The first and last scenes require the main characters to be approximately forty years older than they were during the war, but double casting is possible. Running time is approximately one hour.

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Anatou is an Eskimo girl born with pale skin and blond hair. An anomaly among the other Eskimos, she is estranged from the rest of the village and blamed for a famine that occurs. When her parents leave in search of food, Anatou finds herself alone amidst the insufferable villagers. Before long, they banish her from the village. She travels into the forest—which no Eskimo should ever do—and speaks with the Wood God. She begs him to turn her into a wolf so that she will not remember what it was like to be hated and to be an outcast. The Wood God consents, and for the rest of the winter, she lives happily as a wolf with the other animals. But one day in the early spring, she defies the Wood God’s orders and ventures into the nearby village. Shot with an arrow by a villager, she suddenly remembers all the hatred she feels for the village. In an act of revenge, she kills the hunter. The village hunts her deep into the forest, where she perishes because of her hateful act.

This is a wonderful play for exposing young audiences to different cultures and traditions. It also gently teaches the importance of tolerance of those who are different, as well as the value of love instead of hate. There is no “happy ending” in the traditional sense, but the script is stronger and truer for it. Staging and scenery would pose the greatest difficulty for performance, but the script lends itself to interpretation and the abstract. The script also leaves room for creativity in costuming, which can range from simple masks to elaborate animal costumes. Running time is about one hour.

Kraus, Joanna H. Mean to be Free.

Hedy and Tom are two slave children who hear the call of Moses (Harriet Tubman) one night and take the opportunity to escape their plantation in Maryland and follow her on the Underground Railroad to Freedom. They travel a cold, hungry, difficult road to the home of Thomas and Sarah Garrett, devout Quakers who hide fugitive slaves in their house. With faith, courage, and much reassuring from Moses, the children make it safely to the Canadian border where they mean to be free.

The story of a difficult journey is told expertly through the eyes of these two children. We have an opportunity to see a bit of their life on the plantation and come to appreciate their sufferings for something we all have taken perhaps—freedom. The plot moves forward steadily, with new obstacles at every turn. The characters are real and loveable; even Linda, who complains throughout the entire journey, earns our affection as she struggles to keep up with Moses. Mean to be Free is a wonderful opportunity for young audiences to get to know more about history and heroines like Harriet Tubman.

Kraus, Joanna H. Remember My Name.

During World War II, Jewish families were separated forcefully into concentration camps, children being placed in one area and parents in another. Sometimes, however, Jewish families separated themselves, before they were found by the Nazis. This is the story of one such family, the Simons, who send their daughter, Rachel, to live in Auvergne by herself until the war is over. Rachel gets a new French name and must begin an entirely new life on her own, as if the Jewish girl she once was never existed. Now Madeleine Petit, she finds a kind priest who helps her to the village of St. Laurent des Pins and finds her a place to live. She stays with Mme. Barbire and learns to make lace, attending school under Suzanne Fleury’s tutelage. The Nazis watch her and the school very closely—no one is safe, even in a small town. After several frightening instances, they hear British reports on their contraband radio that the war is over. Rachel’s father returns for her as promised, but alone. He promises to stay in St. Laurent des Pins for a bit, to give himself time to recover from the horror of the concentration camp, from losing his wife,
and to give Madeleine time to say farewell to the wonderful people who kept her safe.

Once again, a young girl is the heroine of a tale of courage and fortitude during a time of tremendous turmoil. Rachell Madeleine is real and loveable, someone young people will be drawn to. The plot is thick with intrigue and suspense, as well as humor and happiness. Though the happy ending is slightly marred by the death of Rachel's mother, it accurately represents the situation of many Jewish families after the war. The play moves gently, but with moments of excitement that impel its progression to the climax. Though it isn't based on a true story, it is based on situations that were common during World War II. Running time is approximately one hour.

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Kraus, Joanna H. *Sunday Gold.*

A 3-8

The Gold Rush hit North Carolina in the 1840s, and in a little mining town called Gold Hill, there lived a small girl with big dreams. Lizzy works as a rocker in the gold mine with her father. Barely twelve, she earns her keep and does her best to be a good girl. On her way home one evening, she sees a pair of red leather boots with glass buttons and a black patent leather toe. Never has she wanted anything more than those boots. Never, that is, until she hears Dr. Thornton telling her pa about the new common school that is going to be built in Gold Hill. Just as the boots represent to her a higher class of living, so does an education represent her way out. She soon realizes, however, that she has considerable freedom compared to her friend Annie, a young black girl who is "fixin' to be sold to the meanest plantation owner in South Carolina." Although Lizzy finds her chance for an education glittering in the stream below her, she offers the nugget to Annie and helps her buy her freedom. In the end, her pa has a change of heart, and it looks like she might get to go to school after all.

A lot of research obviously went into the writing of this play, and it makes for an interestingly authentic-feeling piece about gold mining and two little girls who want more. Once again, Kraus writes unforgettable characters to whom young audiences can easily relate. Staging may present a small difficulty—i.e., the necessity of a horse and heavy mining machinery in one scene. However, with the stylization or "theatricality" the author suggests, it's workable. The play teaches that there are things more important than material possessions, and that good things come, eventually, to those who will do good to others. Running time is approximately one hour.

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A K-3Reviewed by Angela Ottosen

According to Alexander, Australia would be an ideal place to live—or at least escape to! Alexander is having a rotten day, and he receives no sympathy for his trials. His hardships include waking up with gum in his hair, losing his best friend, suffering in the dentist's chair, and being yelled at after messing up his dad's copy machine at the office. Not a soul seems to care as six-year-old Alexander faces these traumatic events. He eventually receives sympathy when his mother sings his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day-to-sleep. Alexander realizes that people in Australia must have bad days, too.

This play with music is based on Judith Viorst's book bearing the same title. A favorite childhood story for many, this play brings to life the characters of the book. Lyrics and text in this play are both very well written and contain much humor. Adults can play the characters effectively if they portray them as young children. Set changes need to be swift in order to create fluid transitions between scenes.

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Reviewed by Mindy Boam

A K-5

A collection of seven short scripts by the Paper Bag Players is presented in this book, along with ideas for costumes and props. Famous for their usage of paper bags and cardboard, the Paper Bag Players put out this book so that children could put on plays of their own quickly and inexpensively. The plays are all short, averaging a page and a half each. They are based on a variety of topics, ranging from getting lost in the mall to taking a bath. The plays are all simple and fun. If you are looking for a play with instructive elements, however, you will not find it in this collection. For example, "Lost in the Mall" is about a family getting separated in the mall. When they find each other, instead of making it a learning experience to teach the audience what to do in such a situation, the Mother says, "Never mind. We're all together now." The collection does afford children the opportunity to put on a show of their own.


Reviewed by Tracy Twitchell

A K-1

The premise of this book is sound: “Children are motivated to read aloud when they feel they are contributing in a meaningful way, rather than just because they are next in the circle.” The text contains numerous reproducible, short thematic plays for young children, broadly arranged by seasons. While they are best suited to reading, they may also be produced. The book also contains excellent cross-curricular and extension activities for each play.


Reviewed by Shelley Graham

B K-3

Swishwooshtinkle is a Windy Wizard who casts spells and summons gusts of wind. He lives in a dusty old place called Crumblestumbletumbledown House, which is magically able to speak to him. Swish tells the house of his embarrassing inability to sneeze, and together they decide to get Swish an assistant to help him sneeze. A little girl by the name of Belinda is chosen, and she spends the rest of the play trying to find ways to make him sneeze. She tries everything, even placing two furry caterpillars under his nose to tickle the sneeze out of him, but nothing seems to work. It is only when she realizes that Swish doesn't have a handkerchief that she is able to help him sneeze.

The interesting characters in this play are sadly underdeveloped. There are some wonderful ideas throughout the play that just don't quite come to fruition. Characters like The Winds and The Caterpillars have the potential to be fun and exciting, but they are given only brief moments in a story that could use a little more complexity. Playful songs in several scenes can be used to create some of the needed urgency for Swish to Sneeze, and Belinda has potential to engage young audiences in the action. A couple scenes present staging difficulty (a talking house and characters inflating like balloons and floating into the clouds), but there is room for creativity. Roughly eighteen characters, with room for extras or double casting as needed. Running time is approximately one hour.


Reviewed by Nancy Hovasse

A 6-12

This collection contains several plays originally available as single copies. Although
some of these works have been reviewed as individual plays in past issues, they are reviewed again as part of this important new collection.

Surface has done our field a great service with *Most Valuable Player and Four Other All-Star Plays for Young Audiences* by creating an anthology of works that are perfect for junior and high school audiences. This often ignored audience will revel in these five plays that speak directly to their life experience and emotional journey. Producers, both educational and professional, will appreciate Surface's largely optimistic yet honest storytelling.

In his insightful introduction to the anthology, Graham Whitehead offers what he considers to be the "underlying mantra" of this collection: "We must embrace the responsibility of making choices and living with the consequences." Although the anthology could be described as offering social issues plays, the scripts are well crafted and character driven so that they do not seem to preach. Instead, they offer glimpses into various situations in which individuals have choices to make with life altering repercussions.

In this anthology, Surface has assembled plays that capture the emotional journey of the young characters she creates, as well as the imagination of the audience. Dealing with a plethora of real life, contemporary issues, participating in these plays either as actor, audience member, or simply as reader will provide junior and high school age students with the knowledge that at least one playwright is listening.

A review of each play follows:

**Most Valuable Player.**

_Most Valuable Player,* created collectively with the California Theatre Center in 1984, provides contemporary young theatre audiences an entrée into the racial strife in America during the 1940s. At the center of the play are the life and ultimate triumph of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play professional baseball for an American major league ball club. Opening with Robinson's childhood, Surface expediently renders his journey from a child spurned from a neighborhood ballfield because of the color of his skin, to winner of the 1949 "Most Valuable Player Award." Littered with racial epithets, the script illustrates the injustice that has victimized African Americans throughout the past century. Fortunately, the integrity of Robinson as the protagonist supports the dramatic action of the script well enough that the audience is not distracted by the offensive language.

A perfect script for touring companies, it can be produced with five actors using very minimal sets and costumes. As with many of the plays in this collection, the script demands a great deal from actors, who will be called upon to play multiple roles. The script also poses challenges to the director; the staging of several different baseball sequences is crucial to the success of the production.

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**Prodigy.**

_Prodigy * begins with Wolfgang Mozart's early childhood when his gift for music is nurtured by his doting, playful parents. Quickly, the script progresses to only a few years later when Wolfgang's musical genius is revealed. The play darkens as Leopold Mozart assumes control over every aspect of his son's life in an effort to ensure his success, inevitably losing sight of the boy behind the music. A dutiful son, young Wolfgang surrenders his own needs to assuage his father's misguided desires.

In the playwright's notes, Surface asks that _Prodigy * be "considered as a piece of music—each scene following smoothly into the next, with minimal scenic adjustment." To this end she has named each scene with familiar musical terms—prelude, allegro, in tempo misurato—to define the tempo implicit in the scene that reflects the fluid emotional journey of the primary characters. With only slightly heightened language, Surface adequately transports the audience to Europe in the eighteenth century. Producers may take the same approach and only minimally suggest the period in sets and costumes through the use of appropriate silhouettes. With some doubling, the script can be performed with a minimum of
eight actors. Although it would be nice to cast an actor capable of performing the works of Mozart, it is not necessary for a successful production.

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_Dancing Solo._

_Dancing Solo_ depends on the metaphoric language of modern dance to tell the story of Kara, an adolescent whose life has become a labyrinth of dysfunctional relationships. Using the theatrical device of a choreography session with David, her dance teacher, Kara is encouraged to tell the story of her relationship with her alcoholic mother and drug-dealing boyfriend. Unaware of Kara’s combustible emotional state, he continually coaches her to “dance what you feel, tell your story,” while she responds, “Can’t I just repeat a pattern I know?” Although the analogy between the choreography and the emotional state of the dancer is accurate and clever, the dialogue goes a bit too far to ensure that the audience sees the parallel.

This piece is the most challenging of the five offered. Since the emotional journey of the protagonist is represented through movement as well as dialogue, the script requires actors (three women, two men) and a director with an understanding of dance as a metaphor and the ability to do it well. The staging needs of the play are limited to the suggestion of a dance studio with free-standing dance bars, two stools, and frames representing rehearsal mirrors.

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_Broken Rainbow._

Set in “a middle-income neighborhood in Montgomery County, Maryland (or any suburban area near a large city),” _Broken Rainbow_ is an honest observation of contemporary suburban life from the perspective of teenagers from disenfranchised minority groups. African-American Gina (seventeen) and her brother, Damond (nineteen), live next door to Italian-Jewish-American Joel Cohen (eighteen) and his mother. Joel and Gina discover a common love for music and are in the very early stages of friendship. Joel and Damond’s lives intersect with much less harmony when Joel goes to work for the same trash collecting business as Damond, and the two are assigned to work the same truck. Driven by his concern for the environment, Joel sees this job as an opportunity to make a difference. Damond, on the other hand, sees the job as simply a means to an end. The relationship is further strained as Damond taunts Joel with racial slurs, then fails to show up for their work shift. Joel is finally pushed too far when Damond is awarded a coveted managerial internship.

The play requires a flexible set design that allows for fluid movement between the multiple locations called for in the story. A great piece for touring because of the small cast size (four actors), the script invites much discussion and could be the catalyst for exciting postshow activities with proper facilitation.

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_Blessings._

_Blessings_ is the most realistic play in the selection. Set in a cabin in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, this play deals with the battles and victories of Rene, a high school freshman with severe dyslexia and an auditory perception deficit. On a weekend get-away with her mother and some family friends, Rene is forced to spend time with Katie, also a freshman at the same school, but an overachieving perfectionist. The two girls appear to be as different as could be imagined. The weekend, however, provides an opportunity for Rene and Katie to learn what they have in common.

An even more important relationship develops in the play between Rene and Jesse, a twenty-nine-year-old man who lives in the basement apartment of the cabin. A bit of a recluse, Jesse spends his time making redwood framed mirrors and taking care of the cabin and its visitors. Jesse introduces Rene to the beauty of his simple poetry while Rene challenges him to learn to read aloud. This wonderfully gentle play will provide young audiences an opportunity to meet the human side of their peers who struggle with learning disabilities.
With a cast of seven actors (four women, three men), this play calls for a realistic set and costumes. Lighting needs are fairly simple. It would be best if produced in a theatre rather than on tour. Like all the other plays in the collection, casting young actors in the teenage roles would be an exceptional opportunity for them to speak dialogue that is manageable and appropriate in their development as young artists.


A K-6Reviewed by Shelley Graham

As the bitter winter winds rush through the poor city streets of Imperial Russia, young Anya and her father, Victor, fight Alexander II's tax collectors to keep their precious "spot" on the street where they sell birds. Anya is enchanted with the young tsar, Alexander "Alexi" Nikolaevich, and though they have never properly met before, Anya is certain that she can convince the tsar to change his severe laws and promise that Victor can keep his spot. Alexi, however, has other problems; the law requires that he marry a true princess. He has three days to do it, and the only princess left is Masha, a bossy, domineering shrew. Though Alexi seems enraptured by Anya, he is unwilling to grant her request that he travel outside the palace walls to visit the poverty-stricken and suffering city. With the help of two scoundrels, Alexi travels inside a burlap sack outside the city walls and is forced to see the wretchedness that his laws promote. Alexi promises Victor that he will not lose his spot, and the whole company travels back to the warmth of the palace, where the spurned Masha has lost patience and threatens to leave. When it seems the tsar's hope of marriage is crushed, an old King of a distant Russian province comes to the palace for help. He tells the queen of his shipwreck long ago and the daughter he lost and has been searching for ever since. Victor tells the queen that he, in fact, is not Anya's father, but that he found her one evening along the shore after a bad storm. The queen makes the essential connection, but to prove Anya's royal heritage, she places a tiny pea underneath the myriad of blankets and mattresses on Anya's bed. When she awakes the next morning, disheveled and sleepy, the queen is convinced of the depth of her sensitivity, both physical and emotional, and Alexi and Anya are married.

Not the traditional story of the princess and the pea as I remember it—but much better! The dialogue is creative and engaging, the characters are comical, human, and heartwarming, and the plot proves more intricate and more exciting than other "watered-down" versions of this delightful tale. The cast may be as small as ten, but is flexible to be as large as twelve or more. Costuming and scenery is versatile, with great room for creativity. The action moves quickly, pushed forward by both plot and character, and at a running time of approximately one hour, it is will easily engage kindergartners and sixth graders alike.