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Play Reviews

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A- K-6 Reviewed by Alina Longoria Ballard

Huckleberry Finn, a young boy, and Joe, the slave accused of killing Huck, journey down the Mississippi River in search for freedom. As a team, they meet new people and learn that life is best when they are with the people they care about.

DeVita's text follows Twain’s original story remarkably well. Although written for a younger audience, the roles require teenage and adult actors. The script preserves the same adventurous tone Twain accomplished in his original. In trying to closely follow the book, however, DeVita has created some scenes which work well in the book but which are not engaging in play form and do not move the plot forward. Performance companies should carefully review this script for the appropriateness of language and subject matter for children. The script was skillfully adapted and is overall a pleasurable piece for children's theatre. This play features a cast of eighteen, plus assorted townspeople, and requires separate set pieces for each location.

★★★★

*The following review is of a play written before 1990. However, it has not been reviewed in CBPR, and because it is currently being performed in various theatres across the country, it merits assessment at this time.*


B- 4+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

Willy Wonka has inserted five golden tickets inside the wrappers of five of his delicious chocolate bars that have been distributed across the country. Those who find the tickets will have the opportunity to spend a day with Mr. Wonka himself at his mysterious chocolate factory. Against all odds, an impoverished boy, Charlie, finds a ticket. He and his grandfather join a group of selfish, snobby, spoiled children on a fantastic tour of the outlandish factory. Something happens to all of the children except for Charlie (i.e., being whisked away by a chocolate river, dumped into the rubbish bin as a bad nut, etc.). Wonka reveals that the tour was actually a test and that Charlie, by being the only one left, has passed the test and will inherit the chocolate factory as his reward, supplying Charlie and his family with life-long security and happiness—not to mention chocolate.

This particular adaptation arose from a class project directed by George. Though the play follows the story, much of the dialogue is tired and predictable. George includes suggestions for staging and props, including a technique for making the Oompa-loompas, the tour boat, machines, and other set pieces and props out of cardboard. The play includes twenty-plus characters and is clearly intended to be produced as a class project by young people.

★★★★

* 3+ Reviewed by Alina Longoria Ballard

The great Wizard Thorin and twelve hungry dwarves arrive at Bilbo Baggins’ house expecting to be fed. As Bilbo frantically feeds them, he discovers they are on a quest to reclaim the lost land on top of Lonely Mountain, home of the “scariest dragon.” Bilbo is persuaded to join the company. On his quest, Bilbo is continually blessed with luck. He receives a gold ring that makes him invisible, escapes from the underground caverns of the goblins, and survives a brutal war.

This is a remarkable piece of theatre; it has a magical ability to capture the minds of children and teenagers. The adventures *The Hobbit* takes part in are engaging and risky, including encounters with goblins and a dangerous dragon. The story begins with an exciting exposition and is continually engaging as Bilbo encounters new people and new places. This play has the potential to preserve the great story of *The Hobbit* on stage and teach many children what imagination can create.

An adaptable unit set is recommended because the scenes move rapidly. The humans and Gandalf are played by actors on stilts to make a visual height difference between the dwarves and goblins, who need to be much shorter. There are roles for twenty-nine male actors, but it can be played with a cast of ten if parts are doubled.

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The following review is of a play written before 1990. However, it has not been reviewed in CBPR, and because it is currently being performed in various theatres across the country, it merits assessment at this time.


B 4+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

In this adaptation, Robinette recreates Lewis’ classic tale of faith, love, courage, and the ever-present struggle of good versus evil. Four children staying with a family friend in a large country house discover an old wardrobe that leads to a mysterious world called Narnia. After discovering the extraordinary world, Lucy, Edmund, Peter, and Susan learn that they are part of a prophecy that promises the return of the virtuous leader Aslan and the banishment of the wicked White Witch. Aslan does return and fights alongside the children to eventually defeat the Witch and her minions. Following their triumph over evil, the children remain in Narnia, ruling as kings and queens, until one day they find their way back to the wardrobe and are able to return home at the same time and place as they left.

Because of the attempt to condense Lewis’ chronicle to a sixty-minute play, Robinette’s adaptation is very simplified and lacks much of the wonder and beauty of Lewis’ original narrative. The dialogue is often oversimplified, and the multifaceted action is compressed, losing much of the detail of various events. However, it effectively communicates the basic events of the story. The action of the play takes place in several locales and requires a few careful visual effects, including the death and resurrection of Aslan, the cracking of the great stone table, and several combat scenes. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* includes twenty-two plus characters and could be used as an effective class project.

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Review by Nancy Hovasse

As the title suggests, this interesting anthology provides readers with a diverse look at works related to the Christmas season. Although the book actually includes fifteen plays of various styles and genres, the text is not particularly useful for individual producers hoping to find a wealth of options for any one kind of theatre company. Divided into three parts, Swortzell categorizes the plays as traditional, religious, and nonreligious. With the majority of the plays falling into the nonreligious category, all the works come from the American or European Christian tradition of Christmas.

Reviews of each of the plays in the anthology follow.

A Christmas Pageant. 6 pp.

A Christmas Pageant is a collection of five scenes credited to an unknown playwright. It may have been more correct to credit the play to an unknown stage manager, since the text is drawn entirely from biblical scripture. The script offers little more than directions on when to sing particular traditional carols and descriptions of a series of tableaux to be staged depicting the story of Jesus' birth. The first scene depicts the Annunciation (Luke 1:2-27). This is followed by the nativity (Luke 2:2-7), the shepherds watching by night (Luke 2:16-19), and the adoration by the Shepherds (Luke 2:16-19). The pageant closes with the adoration of the Magi (Matthew 2:9-11).

Appropriate for any group interested in presenting the basic Christmas story with a limited amount of fuss, this pageant can be performed with a minimum of five actors, doubling roles, or as large a group as can fit within a given venue. Although the script is simple, it does offer an outline for actors and the director to build on.

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Harris, Aurand. The Second Shepherd's Play. 12 pp.

Written in England by another unknown playwright during the fourteenth century, The Second Shepherd's Play is adapted here by Harris. The original is considered by some scholars to be the first significant text in reference to Christmas in the English language. Harris has simplified the original complex rhyme scheme and, with limited success, attempted to update the language.

With a cast of four men and three women, the story revolves around Mak and his wife, who have stolen a sheep from three shepherds out guarding their flocks. When the shepherds come to reclaim the sheep, the two disguise the sheep as their newborn baby in a manger. In a comic plot that offers actors an opportunity to play broad comedy, the script winds around itself with a parallel to the birth of Jesus, with Mary lovingly standing by his manger as the very same shepherds are led by an angel to meet the newborn King.

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A play within a play, St. George and the Dragon is a wonderful addition to this anthology. Sigley's adaptation of this medieval Mummer's play is sheer fun. The play begins as men of the village arrive in the local tavern to be cast in an amateur production of St. George and the Dragon. Silliness reigns as the participants are cast in their roles for a variety of reasons—none of which have anything to do with talent. The second act is the performance of the play, granting "real" actors an opportunity to play wonderfully broad and physical comedy.

The play does require a large cast of eighteen or more. All action takes place within the confines of the village hall, with minimal
props. This script offers an excellent opportunity for ensemble work. It does require the cast to sing, but great musical skill is not a necessity.


Dedicated to religious plays, part two of the anthology begins with Hughes’ *Black Nativity*, which is in many ways similar to *Christmas Pageant*. Described as a “gospel-song-play,” the text for Act One is, once again, the traditional Christmas story told by a narrator while a large choir performs sixteen musical selections. Act Two is slightly different, as the narrator takes on the role of a minister conducting a service, inviting all those present to “make a joyful noise.” In addition to eleven musical numbers, the narrator shares the text in this second half with a church elder and a woman giving witness.

As a musical celebration, the script is difficult to review without access to the score. Many of the songs listed in the script are traditional carols, some are known gospel tunes, but many others appear to have been written specifically for the play. A mature gospel choir is necessary for the production of this play because of the amount and style of music described in the script.


A 7

In *The Shepherds of Saint Francis*, Swortzell offers his own version of the very first Christmas pageant ever, as produced by Saint Francis of Assisi. The story begins as Brother Francis and a young novice are traveling the countryside. They venture into Greccio and are surprised to find the villagers void of any spiritual enthusiasm for the advent season because of the heavy taxation and deplorable living conditions they must endure. Brother Francis is brought before the lord of the manor, also an unhappy man despite his wealth. Challenged by the lord to bring joy back to the village, Francis enlists the assistance of the audience and the entire community to enact the Christmas story.

An ideal script for amateur thespians, church, or community groups, the script requires little to no scenery, and costumes can be easily suggested. This piece could be performed in any venue and would be especially fun to produce with multigenerational casting.


A 7

The libretto for Menotti’s opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* adds a wonderful Italian flavor to this collection. The story follows the arrival of the Three Kings to a small village where Amahl, an optimistic disabled boy, and his pragmatic mother struggle to make ends meet. Tempted by the wealth of the Kings, the mother attempts to steal from them to feed her hungry child. The sympathetic Kings forgive her weakness and explain that they are traveling to see another mother and child—Mary and the Christ child, Jesus, sent to forgive all our sins. Overjoyed by this news, Amahl says farewell to his mother and travels forth with the Kings.

One of the most popular musical works of the season, professional and amateur companies have produced this opera since its television premier in 1951. With a cast of six, plus the chorus and dancers, the opera offers wonderful production possibilities. With only the libretto available in this text, Swortzell has provided an opportunity for readers to appreciate the strength of the book on its own significant merits.

**A 8**

Part three of the anthology, which consists of nonreligious plays, begins with *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, most popularly known as a ballet by E.T.A. Hoffman. The story begins with the familiar characters of Marie and Fritz, two children eager to begin their Christmas celebration, and Uncle Drosselmeier, who brings the children a wooden soldier nutcracker as a gift. Once everyone else is in bed, Marie is visited by an army of toy soldiers, led by the handsome nutcracker and a seven-headed Mouse King who stage a war in the living room. Waking up from what appears to have been a bizarre dream, Marie tries to tell her family of the strange happenings. Her story is interrupted by the arrival of Drosselmeier, accompanied by a young man who looks remarkably like the handsome nutcracker.

Offering a broad scenario and descriptions of the action without providing much dialogue, the text is more narrative than script. Encouraging large gesture and mime, this adaptation is quite theatrical. Requiring no fewer than eight actors, this play can be adapted for any kind of production situation. With simple or elaborate sets, props, and costumes, this traditional story is bound to capture the imagination.

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**A 8**

Horovitz’s adaptation of *A Christmas Carol: Scrooge and Marley* runs very close to its origins. The poetic language and sympathetic characters so well-crafted in the original are not only preserved, but celebrated here for a new generation. Visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, the venerable Scrooge, known for his miserly ways and nasty disposition, experiences a change of heart that is bound to warm the soul and ignite the holiday spirit.

Fabulously theatrical, this script offers rich possibilities for directors, designers, and a very large cast. Although the story can be shared with simple production values, clever designers will find plenty to do in creating the stunning visual world of this play.

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**A 6**

Everyone knows the popular children’s story that starts with the line “’Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house . . . .” In *A Visit From St. Nicholas or The Night Before Christmas*, Swortzell offers his own version of the origins of these famous lines. The story takes us into the living room of Clement Clarke Moore, a professor of classical literature, as he entertains his children with this simple verse. Harriet Butler, Moore’s cousin and a teacher with connections in the publishing field, requests permission to submit the piece to the local paper. Concerned about his reputation as a scholar, Moore rejects the idea and destroys the poem. The children are at first heartbroken, but they decide to reconstruct the poem by acting it out. Embarrassed by his own behavior, Moore attempts to make amends with his children and gratefully accepts their gift of his poem.

A full-length comedy for two men and four women, this piece offers producers a straightforward, entertaining holiday option perfect for production by school groups, amateurs, or professionals. The script does require an interior unit set with period-style (1822) costumes.

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**A 8**

This one-act play depicts a family through the generations as they literally and figuratively
come and go from the Christmas feast. Production requirements include a simple set with a large dining room table set for dinner, flanked by a door on either side of the stage. Entrances through one door represent an addition to the family (i.e., birth or marriage), while exiting through the other represents departure from the family (i.e., illness or death).

With a minimum cast of thirteen (eight women, five men), the script requires actors to age significantly throughout the play. The author suggests simple costume pieces to aid this transition. With wonderfully simple dialogue, the relationships within the play require actors of skill to fully mine the complexity of the text.

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**B 7**

A contemporary comedy with young characters more willing to invest in the power of their hard drives than the spirit of Christmas, *Kringle's Window* takes a light-hearted look at a generation grown too cynical too quickly. Angry twelve-year-old Becka struggles with the news that her parents may get a divorce. In order to fit in with the popular crowd, Becka tells her eight-year-old sister Boomer that there is no Santa Claus. Luckily, Mrs. Rosen, a strange woman who lives in a tree, arrives just in time to help orchestrate a much needed reconciliation within this rather dysfunctional family.

Originally written as a screenplay, the script is extremely cinematic and still begs for that medium. With multiple interior and exterior locations, as well as some significant scenes focusing on Becka's computer screen, directors may find it difficult to design a set that will accommodate the script without the aid of a wide-angle lens and the ability for close-ups. With a cast of thirteen, plus elves, the script is appropriate for young actors.

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Lebow, Barbara. *Tiny Tim is Dead*. 60 pp.

**B 9**

Vastly different from every other selection in this anthology, *Tiny Tim is Dead* will haunt readers with a painfully realistic look at Christmas for the homeless. Developed by Lebow, with the cooperation of the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women, and St. Luke’s Community Kitchen, the play takes place on Christmas Eve in a makeshift dwelling where five adults and one child spend their days and nights living on the street. When they attempt to stage their own telling of *A Christmas Carol*, anger and violence erupt as the hopelessness of their individual situations becomes all too apparent.

Although this play will not appeal to producers as typical holiday fare, it does serve to remind readers that, for many, the holiday season has nothing to do with roasted chestnuts and presents under the tree; instead, it is just another day in their struggle to survive. Perhaps most appropriate for production by groups interested in social issues, the full-length play offers an opportunity for discussion and reflection.

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**A 6**

*The Match Girl’s Gift: A Christmas Story* is far more optimistic than the original penned by Hans Christian Andersen. In Brooks’ adaptation, Lizzie, the poor young match girl, is full of dreams and fantasies of the perfect family that lives inside a beautiful Fifth Avenue mansion. She is so enamored with the fantasy that she builds a miniature of the house out of matchsticks as she waits in the cold outside the house, hoping for a glimpse of its inhabitants. With the aid of her grandmother’s spirit, Lizzie, through a series of dream sequences, is given the chance to spend time inside the house and learns that the perfect family she had imagined has many flaws. In a final twist, Lizzie is taken in,
and the family members are forced to see each other in a new light.

Although the end of this adaptation is rather melodramatic, the script offers the traditional title with a happy ending. Featuring a cast of seven (three women, four men, and carolers), this piece would work well for theatre with multigenerational casting. Turn-of-the-century costumes, as well as an exterior and interior of an elaborate brownstone, are needed to create the environment for the story.

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*A Partridge in a Pear Tree* is ideal for public schools that require some kind of holiday programming without religious implications. This simple one-act play is built on the popular holiday carol of the same name. Using mime and storytelling techniques, production requirements are limited to a couple of benches, simple costumes, and a cast of six (two men, two women, and two either) and a chorus.

The story begins as Simon, a charming birdcatcher, is nearly tricked into marrying Tib, a kind young woman whose nosy mother leads her astray. As the entire population of the town is drawn into the play and song, Simon realizes he is in love with Tib in spite of his future mother-in-law. All in good fun, he turns the tables and catches Tib in her own game, taking her for his bride.

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Based on the story by Dylan Thomas, Brooks and Mitchell have adapted *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*, which progresses from morning till night, reliving the events, sights, and smells of Christmas day. As the adult narrator and then as a boy within the action of the play, Thomas shares his boyhood memories.

With a large cast of approximately twenty-six, the script requires interior and exterior locations in Wales. The script also suggests that music play a large part in the production, with lyrics rewritten to fit the melodies of well-known carols.

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Gratefully, Sworzell has contributed his own three plays to this collection, which may prove to be the most readily producible by amateur theatre groups. However, Sigley’s adaptation of *Saint George and the Dragon at Christmas Tide* and Horovitz’s adaptation of *A Christmas Carol: Scrooge and Marley* are clearly the jewels in this collection. In addition, Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* remains an outstanding option for theatres that are prepared to deal with the significant musical demands of the operatic score. An enticing array of works, this anthology offers a varied menu for anyone interested in sampling works of the season.

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