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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A+ 4-8 Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

In this incredible anthology, Cullum has put together adaptations of some of Shakespeare's more popular plays, to be performed by young players for young audiences. Much of Shakespeare's exact wording is used, with transitions serving to condense the scripts, to aid in understanding, and to speed the stories along. This is an extraordinary aid for teachers to promote self-discovery, appreciation for literature, and an awareness of art and drama. It allows teachers to help students appreciate Shakespeare through involvement rather than through lectures, which could be dry and boring to young people. Cullum offers many suggestions for performance, such as allowing anyone to play any part or even double or triple casting. For each of the eight plays he puts together an introduction, a scene synopsis, simple costume suggestions, and vocabulary words. The plays in the anthology include Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Julius Caesar, The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, and The Tempest. Designed specifically for classroom use, the number of characters can depend on the size of the class.

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B 9-12 Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

The yearbook staff has just received the published version of this year's yearbook; before they hand it out next week, they take a sneak peak at some of the snapshots taken throughout the year. Through vignettes, in which characters from the background come to life and reenact the events leading up to the taking of the picture, the audience learns more about clubs and groups of people from the school: drama club, chess club, jocks, nerds, and even those who aren't so involved.

The play, written shortly after the Columbine High School shooting incident, revolves around the theme that even though on the outside people may seem a little "weird and different," everyone has similarities and should be accepted by one another.

The plot is simple but effective. It would be best suited for high school students to perform for high school students. The use of special effects like fog and projection could help make the production more technically interesting. The set consists of only boxes or chairs. The play is suitable for anywhere from ten to fifty characters of varying gender.

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B 9+ Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

Following the style of the popular television series The Twilight Zone, this play takes a look at four different stories with unexpected twists. The Stargazer, a Rod Serling-type character, introduces each story by looking through a telescope at each scenario. The first story is about a murder suspect who pleads innocent to the investigating officers of a murder scene where he had been seen. The second deals with a group of college students from another planet working on a secret project. After intermission, we return to a scene about dreams that leaves the audience trying to decide who is dreaming, where the end of the dream is, and where reality begins. The concluding scene is a haunting story shared between college students about a little
girl who disappeared after her father fell asleep while playing with her.

Suspenseful and entertaining, Frankel keeps his audience guessing what will happen next. This play can be done without a set, using basic props (like tables and chairs) and costumes. Sound effects like thunder and branches against glass are also recommended. This play could be done by a high school, but is probably more suitable for a college project. The twenty-eight characters could easily be played with ten or fewer actors.


* 8+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

Seattle Children's Theatre lives up to its reputation as one of the leading companies in the United States that produce new work for young people. This is its second anthology of new plays for young audiences. Ranging from adaptations of favorite classics to new fantasy adventures, this anthology offers a taste of the best that American theatre has to offer. The six plays in the book deal with experiences of youth; they speak not only to young people, but also to anyone who has ever been a child. Each of these plays is a unique experience to be savored by children, parents, teachers, and all others who relish the beauty, the bittersweet, and the inherent adventure of the human experience.

Reviews of each of the plays in the collection follow.


A

Still Life with Iris is an imaginative jaunt through Nocturno, a world parallel to our own where the things we enjoy every day are created and perfected—the inhabitants busily paint spots on ladybugs, rope the moon to pull it in at daybreak, and teach the wind to whistle. All the citizens of Nocturno wear brightly colored "PastCoats." These garments hold within them the memories of their owners. A small tear or lost button may cause the wearers to forget trivial facts; however, if the owners were to lose their coats entirely, they would lose all of their memories—literally their whole identity. Near the land of Nocturno is the Great Island, residence of the Great Goods, rulers over Nocturno and its residents. The Goods compulsively gather one of every thing in their world—the very best one.

In their search to have the best of everything, they decide they must have Iris, a young girl from Nocturno whose mother teaches the wind to whistle and whose father used to rope the moon, until he mysteriously disappeared when Iris was just a baby.

Dietz has succeeded in writing a story that journeys into, around, and through the imagination as blithely as a child set free in a meadow. His parallel world of Nocturno is full of imaginative people and unique objects ranging from flower painters and thunder bottlers to individually counted leaves and great barrels of rain. Iris's journeys take us from the secure happiness of a safe childhood, through the terror of losing her mother, into the confusion of not knowing who she is herself, and finally back to a world where her family is complete and safe once more. In many ways, it is a journey of self-discovery in which Iris realizes the power of her own inner strength and rediscovers the love of family and friends. The play requires nine actors, four women and five men, who play twenty-four entertaining characters. The set must be flexible in order to represent numerous locations with minimal effort.


A

Field's adaptation of Dickens' classic tale Great Expectations is vibrant, dynamic, and entertaining. Field shares with us the story of

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Pip, a young labor-class orphan who falls in love with Estella, a girl of a considerably higher class.

The play includes twenty-four characters that can be played by ten actors—six men and four women. Field notes that the play is really a combined effort in storytelling. It is heavily narrated, and the narration should be divided between the members of the ensemble. This play has a wonderful production potential, because it is not intended to be a realistic representation, but rather an imaginative retelling of a classic tale. The twelve-plus locales in the play can all be portrayed on one neutral platform with exposed prop shelves and scaffolding from which the actors can quickly retrieve necessary props and furniture. The script does call for a few larger set pieces—for example, Miss Havisham’s table with the bride cake—which Field suggests should be built on wagons and wheeled on and off stage by the actors.

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*The Book of Ruth* is a touching story of young Ruth and her grandmother, Hannah, who cling to each other and to tradition in order to survive their internment in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Through the course of the play, Ruth makes friends with a lonely boy from school, takes a job picking weevils out of flour in order to get more food for her ailing grandmother, and builds a makeshift oven in a secret room high above the camp. She and her friend David meet an older man, Avram, who teaches them Hebrew.

David and Ruth are afraid that Hannah and Avram will be selected to leave on the next transport, and the children do everything in their power to keep them strong and healthy. When the transport list is finally posted, they are surprised to see only David’s name on the list. Avram, who has been terrified of being selected, decides to go with the boy saying that they are in the middle of lessons and can’t stop now. Hannah and Ruth are left alone in the hidden room with the makeshift stove. Hannah gives Ruth a book full of recipes written on scraps of fabric and bound with pictures Ruth had drawn. Hannah, knowing she will not last much longer, wants Ruth to remember how to cook those foods that link the generations of their family together. In a lovely final scene, the actress playing Hannah becomes an older Ruth teaching her own granddaughter, Hannah, the secrets contained in the old book, the Book of Ruth.

This superbly written play exposes the beauty of a family tapestry woven together with tradition and love. Within the horrifying confines of the prison camp, Hannah holds on to and teaches those things she knows and loves best to the person she knows and loves best. This is a beautiful piece about love, hope, family, and the ties that bind us to past and future generations. The play takes place in various locations throughout the Terezín concentration camp, with the exception of the final scene in present-day America. The cast includes six characters that can be played by five actors—two women and three men. This could be an excellent play for groups on a small budget, because it calls for little in the way of props, sets, technical effects, and costumes.

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*This stunning adaptation strips the classic story down to the essential triangle between Cyrano, Roxanne, and Christian. More specifically, the adaptation points up the insecurity and sad fate of a man who allows fear to overtake him, causing him to hide behind a false front.*

Cyrano first tells a friend of his unspoken love for the beautiful Roxanne. His hopes rise as he is invited to a private meeting with his love and she begins to confess her love for a man in his regiment. His love remains unrequited, however, as Roxanne declares that the man she loves is exceptionally handsome. Having been
and still doesn’t tell his stifling secret. Devastated, he agrees to protect the young man—named Christian—and thus starts on a path of hidden truth and wrenching heartbreak. Cyrano becomes Christian’s poet—writing love letters, poetry, and at times speaking to Roxanne in Christian’s stead. Cyrano sees the couple wed, and still doesn’t tell his stifling secret. Eventually, Christian discovers Cyranos’s true feelings and encourages him to reveal them to Roxanne. Cyrano starts to tell Roxanne that he loves her when Christian is suddenly killed. A world where physical appearance and material wealth are of utmost importance, the message of this play is exceptionally relevant to modern audiences of all ages.

*Cyrano* is a particularly well-written script. All the twelve plus characters can be played by as few as three actors—two men and one woman. This adaptation focuses on the words and relationships between the four main characters—Cyrano, Roxanne, Christian, and DeGuiche—and requires a flexible set and few technical effects.

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A

Ireland is in the middle of a story-drought and needs a hero to save it from a future absence of legends, allegories, or tall tales. Enter Sean Ruadh—Sean the Red—the King of Ireland’s son. Wing draws from traditional Irish tales and mixes them with contemporary attitudes and beliefs. The play opens with Sean anxiously waiting for his time to go out and prove himself a hero. While talking with his mentor, an Old Druid, the Lonely Crane of Inish Kea appears, signaling the arrival of the day that Sean must leave to meet his Fate. The Druid tells Sean that he must search for and save a sister he’s never known who was kidnapped by a giant years earlier. Sean also learns that his mother, the Queen, left in search of the girl and never returned and that his twelve brothers all left on the same mission never to come home. After receiving five quid from his father, the King, and careful instructions from the Druid, Sean leaves on his quest. After giving his five quid to a poor widow so that she can bury her husband, he is joined by a mysterious man called Shaking Head, who accompanies the prince for most of the rest of his journey.

Sean eventually comes to a tower where a girl is held captive and guarded by a giant. He kills the giant, but the girl won’t be free until she completes a mysterious task of which she is forbidden to speak. Meanwhile, Sean has promised the King of the Western World that he will rescue his daughter, Princess Finola, from a terrifying serpentine sea creature called Urfeist (Ur-fay-st). Trying to save her, he comes across a magical sword that can kill an opponent with one blow, and he acquires a magical fire egg from an old hag in a bog. Using these magical weapons, he is able to kill the creature and free the princess, and, at the same time, save the girl in the tower who is, in reality, his long-lost sister. The hag emerges from the bog and reveals that she is the Queen of Ireland who has been searching all these years for her beloved daughter. The reunited family returns home triumphant, and Sean marries Finola with the blessing of the Old Druid. Thus start the numerous legends of Sean Ruadh, saving Ireland from an existence void of narrative entertainment.

This fantastical story is well written and full of action. Wing has successfully updated a traditional story to include modern attitudes and behaviors. Her refreshing approach includes a hero who is perhaps a bit overanxious, a king who is less than willing to send his son out to “prove his manhood,” and self-contained heroines who do not desire nor require saving. *The King of Ireland’s Son* is a delightful journey through a marvelous world full of mythical creatures, ghosts, swordplay, and fun. The play calls for numerous technical effects, and sets and costuming could be very complicated. The play is intended for eight actors, three women and five men, who play twenty-one characters.

An astonishing finale to this remarkable anthology, the play tells the story of Tuc, a deaf man Zeder first introduced to audiences in her earlier play, *Mother Hicks.* Zeder has effectively merged the deaf and hearing world to tell this story of love, loss, pain, and hope.

We are introduced to Tuc Tucker, the only son of a single farmer, as he stands and signs "wind," "water," and "bird." Then, with a sudden clap of thunder, we are transported back to see how Tuc lost his hearing—in a fight against scarlet fever that nearly took his life. Nell Hicks—a midwife whose own baby daughter also dies, and who becomes the subject of vicious gossip in the town—saves him. From here, Zeder draws a vibrant picture of Tuc's life with his father, Jonas. They speak with their souls, having no need for aural or visual communication. Word of Tuc's disability spreads, and soon a representative comes to convince Jonas to send Tuc to the Central Institute for the Deaf. Promises of Tuc learning to understand Jonas' words and learning to speak on his own are tempting, and Jonas finally succumbs. Signing is not allowed at the school, but Maizie—a young hearing girl raised by deaf parents—and other deaf students defy the rule by signing in private and teaching Tuc to sign.

When Tuc and his father are reunited, Tuc is eager to share his new ability to communicate. Unfortunately, the bond they once shared has broken and they are unable to connect. Saddened, Tuc focuses on school and goes home less and less often, until is father is stricken with tuberculosis. He arrives home in time to see his father taken to the hospital and return home in a wooden box. Jonas had arranged for Nell to send Tuc back to school and to keep the best piece of the land so that Tuc could have it when he was ready to farm. Tuc, however, is too grief-stricken to return to school and he stays with Nell.

After being stung numerous times by a colony of bees, some hunters take Tuc to a hospital, where he runs into a very pregnant Maizie. Tuc and Maizie escape together and head for Tuc's home. Maizie delivers a healthy baby girl and struggles with the decision whether to keep the child and stay with Nell and Tuc—raising the girl in the half-deaf, half-hearing world in which she has struggled her entire life—or leave the child with a family in town. Deciding to leave the baby with a local couple, she asks Tuc and Nell to keep an eye on her. Eventually, Nell asks Tuc to teach her sign, and in a beautiful final scene, the actor who played Jonas returns to participate in Nell's sign education and to reconnect with Tuc. This piece effectively explores the pain of a deaf child struggling to find his place in a hearing world. It is a beautiful expression of life and a hopeful portrait of the human condition.

*Taste of Sunrise* has a cast of twenty plus characters to be played by an ensemble of nine actors. Zeder specifies that two roles should be played by deaf actors: Tuc and Roscoe, a deaf student at the state school. Under no circumstances should a hearing actor be cast as Tuc. This play requires a close association with the deaf community, and every cast member should be able to sign because the entire play is signed as well as spoken. The set is an open space with several chairs and a few props that can be manipulated to represent different locales.


B- 9-12 Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

Jason is a "normal" eighteen-year-old high school graduate who has dabbled in a little bit of everything. He is having tests run at a hospital to find out why he has been so tired lately and finds out he tested positive for HIV. While in the hospital he is visited by his rowdy friends who are high or drunk, makes friends with a stern nurse, has a reality check with a reverend, and learns that his parents are "really great."

Although there isn't much room for character development in this one act, it would probably be ideal for a first directing project at
the high school level. With subject matters like drug use, suicide, euthanasia, death, and debilitating injuries, it might be used as an icebreaker for peer-counseling workshops. Simple set, props, and costumes are needed. There is a cast of ten characters—four men, five women, and one doctor, who could be either male or female.


B- 9-12 Reviewed by Elneeta Timmons

An interesting, but depressing play about Justin, a teenage boy, who feels he doesn’t have any friends other than his father. His jock buddies spend most of their time teasing him and trying to get him to do illegal things. The one peer in the play who does seem to have an interest in him is a girl named Angie. Unfortunately, Justin pulls away from his peers and doesn’t really do anything to try to make friends. Expressing all of these emotions in his journal, the audience is able to understand what Justin is feeling. The most difficult time for Justin comes when his father is killed in a police raid. Justin feels as if there is no purpose to life anymore. Withdrawing almost completely, Justin begins losing hope for his future. Meanwhile, his mother has rekindled a relationship with an old college friend. As they discuss getting married and moving away, Justin leaves, furious that his mother could leave behind so many memories of his father. The play ends as Justin runs off, accidentally dropping his journal. As his mother picks it up and begins reading, a gunshot is heard from off stage.

A play that will probably leave the audience stunned, Nobody Heard Me Cry could be used as a conversation starter for discussions about death, suicide, and loneliness. The characters are unrealistic and stereotypical, Justin being the most realistic character of all. This could be used to enhance a director’s concept that this is the story told by Justin, through his journal, relaying his skewed perception of reality. The lack of resolution in the play should be compensated by a narrative or discussion on “What could have been done?” The current ending might leave the audience with a sense of hopelessness. High school students could perform this play with a unit set consisting of the kitchen/living room in Justin’s house. Costumes would be modern (or from whatever time period chosen for this piece). No special effects—except for the gunshot—are needed. There are twelve characters—six men and six women.


B- 6-8 Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

This musical adaptation is an undemanding treatment of the classic novel. The play opens as Mary Lennox—a young orphaned girl—arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, the forbidding home of her uncle, who has agreed to serve as her guardian. At first, Mary has difficulty finding her place among the many empty rooms of the main house, but she soon makes friends with many of the youth who work on the estate and, in time, discovers her ailing cousin, Collin. She eventually finds a lost key for a garden that has been kept locked since Lilias Craven, the Mistress of Misselthwaite, died after falling from a swing. With the help of the gardener’s assistant, Dickon, Mary brings the garden back to life. The healing of Mary’s cousin, Colin, parallels the renewal of the garden; eventually, the previously invalid boy is able to stand and walk on his own. Craven arrives home from an extended leave, sees his son out in the garden, and promises to never ignore him again.

This adaptation uses somewhat flat characters and lackluster dialogue to portray Mary Lennox’s story. However, as a beginning project for an inexperienced class or troupe, it could be useful. The score is not demanding. Even beginning musicians and singers should be able to easily master the songs. This is recommended for use in schools as an introduction to formal musical presentations.
The cast of twenty includes thirteen women and seven men, plus optional extras as desired.

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A- Reviewed by Nathan F. Christensen

The Young Conservatory comprises the educational wing of California's American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.). As part of their program, A.C.T. commissions new works specifically for performance by young actors. The resulting scripts are published in their *New Plays* series.

Reviews of each of the plays in the collection follow.


A 6+

Set in Denmark in 1898, this theatrical fairytale seems to draw upon *The Snow Queen* and *Peer Gynt* for inspiration. One winter, Analiese and her boyfriend, Christian, visit an aviary, where they meet an actress named Nina Iversen, who seems strangely attracted to Christian. The next day, Christian disappears, and Analiese sets out in a small boat to find him. While Christian lives at Nina's home in the north, reading Strindberg and attending dances, Analiese suffers hunger and exhaustion. On her journey she meets a dim-witted boy, an amorous young opium addict, and a robber-girl named Sigrun. When Analiese finally finds Christian, he decides to return home with her so they can marry. Analiese, however, says she has no interest in marrying him—she only wanted to make sure he was still alive.

While the "liberated" ending is not wholly unexpected, this is an exciting and innovative piece of theater. The story is interesting enough to sustain the interest of younger viewers, but is also thought provoking enough to interest a more sophisticated audience.

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B 11+

Life is difficult for Monty. His time at home is made unpleasant by an alcoholic, abusive father; at school the other students ridicule him for always carrying a Bible. Monty's one friend is Thayer, a rebellious outsider. When Corvette, another boy at school, mysteriously disappears, Monty discovers that Thayer is a recruiter for a child pornography ring. Monty advises Thayer to tell the police about the pornography ring and Corvette's murder, but after doing so, Thayer feels overwhelmed by life's problems and hangs himself in the high school chemistry lab.

*A Bird of Prey* is a bleak, hopeless portrayal of the world that adolescents face, where survival is the ultimate goal and adults are too wrapped up in their own problems to provide any help. This is a well-crafted piece of theater, but performance companies should carefully consider the appropriateness of the theme, subject matter, and language.

This play has a cast of eleven actors and requires a unit set.

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B- 7+

*Second Class* is composed of a montage of vignettes about the life of high school students. The title refers to the learning that takes place outside of the classroom. Scenes include two girls who decide to cut school, a review of messages written in a yearbook, and a boy who comforts a brother who has been teased because of some scars on his back. Among the most theatrical scenes is one in which actors speak the thoughts of two characters, and another in which two students carry on a conversation using prerecorded phrases.
Overall, this piece is disappointing. While some of the scenarios seem to have strong dramatic potential, it is never fulfilled. The shortness of the vignettes results in poorly developed characters and unnatural, expository dialogue. The idea that learning takes place outside of the classroom is an idea already familiar to most students, and the individual scenes are too underdeveloped to be insightful. A more effective idea might be to have students develop their own scenes based on their life experiences.

This script requires a unit set and eight or more actors.


A 9+

Rita Potter is a woman full of dreams. After countless failed attempts to start various businesses, Rita looks to her son and his friends to succeed beyond her own ability. To Rita's dismay, her son Warren seems content with repairing cars, and his girlfriend turns down a college scholarship in order to be a mother. Feeling unfulfilled and unappreciated, Rita runs away with Warren's friend, Jimmy Reeves. Eventually the relationship with Jimmy fails as well. Rita returns to her family and must come to grips with the reality of her life.

Slaight has created in Rita a strong and compelling character. The tale of her struggles is filled with humor and pathos. Rita's choice to run away with a younger man is initially disturbing, but the consequences of her decision, including the damaging effects on her family, are not romanticized.

This play was written for performance by young actors, but might be better served by professional or secondary education groups. The unit set is divided into two playing areas—a kitchen and storage shed in the Potters' back yard.

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