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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


A- 1+  Reviewed by David M. Mellinger

*You’re On! Seven Plays in English and Spanish* is an anthology containing both the English and Spanish version of seven plays. Each play is by a different author who represents a particular sector of the Latin culture ranging from South America to the Streets of New York City to Spain. Reviews of each of the plays in the Anthology follow.

Belpre, Pura. *Tropical Memories.*

B 1+

This Puerto Rican tale begins with Carmencita’s grandfather reminiscing “of a time that was full of delight.” Grandfather soon falls fast asleep while Carmencita sings “The Fruit Trees Bud”—accompanied by a chorus. This particular song represents the dreams of the grandfather. In his dream, all the beautiful flowers, trees, and fruit of yesteryear take him back to an enchanted time full of great delight. He is reassured that his dreams are reality because he lives in the dreams of the past, as Carmencita leads Grandfather away.

The play is laced with the beautiful imagery of a lush Garden of Eden that exists in the mind of the grandfather. The inherent beauty of this piece is that it describes the wonderful memories that grandparents can leave with their grandchildren before passing on. Overall, this is a beautiful story; however, it lacks some story development, and the ending is ambiguous. The casting for the play is open with the Chorus and the Coffee Plants, and there are two set characters—Grandfather and Carmencita. The set is an open space that will represent a tropical orchard.

Castedo, Elena. *Luck.*

B+ 1+

Five children are dissatisfied with their life in the valley and want to move to the mountains. They approach five children who live in the mountains and ask them if they will trade homes with them. The children living in the mountains quickly refuse, claiming that the breezes, extra sunshine, and beautiful view of the valley are too good to give up. After the children living in the valley offer them money and explain that the houses in the valley really are in better condition, the mountain children agree to change places with them. Soon after the exchange, the valley children who now live in the mountains decide that they would rather live in the valley after all. They approach the children they switched with and offer them money to change places one more time. The children agree, and everyone is happy—particularly those who are several dollars richer than they were before. Both children come to realize how lucky they are to live where they do.

The central message of this play is that one must be happy with the conditions surrounding one; the grass may appear greener on the other side, but change will not necessarily yield happiness. The play requires a minimum of two actors and has an unlimited maximum, always divided into two groups. The technical requirements are minimal.

Hijuelos, Oscar. *Christmas Fantasy.*

A- 1+

Santa’s elves just can’t seem to get along. As they routinely quarrel, Mrs. Claus tries her best to quiet them because Santa is very nervous today—he has just been named *Time* magazine’s
Man of the Year, and a reporter is on his way to interview him. Furthermore, Mrs. Claus reminds the elves, Santa is always a little on edge during the Christmas season because it reminds him of their lost son whom he accidentally packed away with all of the gifts thirty years ago.

Rico Pollo, the long-awaited reporter, finally arrives at Santa’s workshop. Taking out a pad of paper, Rico proceeds to ask Santa some questions. During the interview, Santa reveals much secret information—his age, why people use Christmas trees and ornaments in celebrating Christmas, why people never see him coming into their houses on Christmas Eve, and why he uses reindeer to pull his sleigh. Santa goes on to tell Rico that all is well in his life except for one thing—the loss of his baby thirty years ago. As Santa finishes his sad tale, Rico makes a startling announcement—his parents had found him under their Christmas tree exactly thirty years before. Rico is the long lost son of Mr. and Mrs. Claus! The three of them happily rejoice.

Christmas Fantasy is a story of hope, lost and regained, in the true spirit of Christmas. The play requires three male and two female characters, as well as five nongender-specified characters. The entire play is set in Santa’s workshop; props are minimal.

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A 2+

This is an old Andalusian story narrated by African Man. He tells the story of a poor shoemaker, Don Gaiferos, who lives across the street from the palace of the prince. The shoemaker is a widower of four years and has a beautiful young daughter named Irene. Early one morning, Irene leaves the house “to water a pot of basil.” At that same time, the prince goes out to get some fresh morning air. As Irene waters the basil, the prince approaches and asks, “How many leaves do you see?” She replies by asking him how many stars are in the sky. The prince, not knowing how to answer the question, decides to leave. At the suggestion of his page, he disguises himself as a grape-seller. Walking down the street selling grapes, the prince comes upon Irene, who sadly has no money to buy grapes. He offers her grapes for kisses—one bunch per kiss.

The next morning, Irene goes out to water the basil only to find the prince, no longer disguised as a grape-seller. He again asks how many leaves are on the basil tree; Irene again asks how many stars are in the sky. He responds by asking her about the kisses she gave to the grape-seller, and she leaves crying. The following morning the prince asks the shoemaker why Irene hasn’t come out to water the basil. The shoemaker explains that she doesn’t want to come out because she was hurt by his previous comment about kissing the grape-seller. Not long after, the prince “becomes sick with melancholia” as he ponders his cruel treatment of the beautiful young lady. The prince becomes so ill that he calls together “a council of the wise” to consult with him. The council decides to call a great magician who wears a hat of stars to cure the prince of his lovesickness. This great magician is actually Irene in disguise. She counsels the prince to marry Irene in order to be completely cured of his love sickness. As she does so, Irene removes her disguise and the prince quickly asks for her hand in marriage. He promises her that “from this day forward, [they] will live with the duende of happiness in [their] hearts.”

Federico García Lorca, one of Spain’s greatest poets and playwrights, brings us a delightful fairy tale that speaks of the importance of treating others with respect—particularly those we love. This particular version is based on Manuel de Falla’s recollection of the original version that has been lost. The play calls for seven male characters and one female character. The set requires two locales; the costumes require nineteenth-century Spanish clothing to be worn by the royalty and peasant characters.

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Ruiz, Denise. *Jump In.*

A 1+

Today is a very special day—Johanna’s birthday. To make her special day even more meaningful, Johanna gets to play Double Dutch with her friends Maritza and Yasmin. But amid all the fun, Johanna’s mother calls her home in desperation, and Yasmin and Maritza look for someone to replace Johanna in the game. Another girl, Ceci, tries to coerce her brother, Eddie, into filling the vacancy by offering him a dollar. He refuses and runs off with the dollar. A minor altercation between Loida, a new girl in the neighborhood, and Yasmin ensues, and all is awry in this Puerto Rican neighborhood.

Later that day, another neighborhood girl, Carmen, advises her friend Loida not to play with Yasmin or Maritza anymore because all they do is treat her horribly and make fun of her thick Puerto Rican accent, a difficult thing to do for Puerto Rican immigrants to overcome in this New York neighborhood. After another contentious bout with the neighborhood girls, Loida is challenged by Johanna to see who can jump Double Dutch the longest without messing up. Loida wins the contest and puts rest to the cruel comments made by Johanna and her friends. Finally, Loida turns to Johanna and tells her that if she wants to be friends, all she has to do is stop bothering her.

This is an interesting story that truthfully deals with some of the tensions experienced in an inner-city Puerto Rican neighborhood among children who have become somewhat “aculturated” to an American way of living and others who have newly arrived from Puerto Rico. At the core of this play is the message that we must accept others for who they are and realize that everyone has hidden talents. Only when we peaceably accept others can we begin to live together harmoniously. The play requires seven female characters and three male characters. The set is an open space that will represent a couple of different locales—a street in the barrio and a kitchen.

Soto, Gary. *These Shoes of Mine.*

A 1+

Manuel is anxious to get a new pair of shoes. His old shoes are worn, ugly, and full of holes; they make the sound of conga drums when he walks. When Manuel’s sister, Elena, walks into the house with three boxes of new shoes, Manuel feels even worse. His mother reminds him that Elena saved her money, while he wasted his buying “a hundred ice creams” for friends. Finally, after much pouting, Manuel’s mother presents him with a new pair of penny loafers as an early birthday present. All is well in Manuel’s world until Angel, the school bully, arrives on the scene, making fun of Manuel’s penny loafers and demanding the dimes that Manuel had placed in his shoes instead of pennies. In anger, Manuel tosses the penny loafers into a box and decides to wear his old shoes from then on.

One day Manuel receives an invitation to Ceci’s party. The invitation says, “Games and dancing” and “Dress to impress.” Manuel gets dressed for the party and hesitantly puts on his penny loafers. As he arrives at the party, Ceci and everyone else take notice of his new shoes with great admiration. When he returns home, Manuel finds his Uncle Jose in his room. Jose is staying with Manuel’s family because he has nowhere else to go. When Tio Jose leaves the room, Manuel carefully examines his uncle’s old, worn sandals. Manuel pensively contemplates the fortunate life he has had with his family and decides to leave his new penny loafers at the foot of his uncle’s bed with a note. Upon awakening the next morning, Tio Jose is deeply moved by the kind gesture and thanks Manuel for being so kind.

These Shoes of Mine is a touching tale of a young boy who learns to be grateful for the life he has had with his family and of the rewards of giving to others in need. Sato’s cultural accuracy is particularly strong. His writing is rich and engaging. The show’s technical requirements are refreshingly simple. The play requires three male and three female characters.
Storni, Alfonsina. *A Dream in the Road.*

A 1+

This play begins with an impoverished boy asleep in the street. While sleeping, he dreams of several well-known characters—real and fictitious—such as Charlie Chaplin, Little Red Riding Hood, Trifon, Sisebuta, Pinocchio, and Cinderella. During the dream, several events take place: Charlie Chaplin tickles him with his cane, Little Red Riding Hood drapes her cape over him, Pinocchio plays a tune on the harmonica, and Cinderella dances for him. The little boy awakens and realizes that his recent experiences were only a dream. He returns to sleep as the snow falls gently on his face.

Shortly thereafter, all the characters return to sing and dance for him; they also warn him that the wolf, symbolizing death, is near.

This play reveals the fantasy world an impoverished boy creates to bring repose from the difficult circumstances he lives in. The members of this world bring him comfort as death draws near. This play causes its readers to reflect on those who are less fortunate. The play calls for six male and three female characters. Costumes: the boy dresses in rags while all other characters dress as their name suggests.

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Congden, Constance. *The Midwife’s Apprentice.*

A 3+ Reviewed by David M. Mellinger

In Medieval England, Brat, a young abandoned girl, sleeps and scrounges for food on a dung heap with only a cat for a friend. One day, out of desperation and hunger, she begs the village’s stern and crotchety midwife, Jane Sharp, for food. Jane’s response to Brat is “Girl—we believe in work here.” Brat agrees to do whatever the midwife requires of her in order to eat, marking the beginning of Brat’s journey toward self-respect. After many strenuous, work-filled days with Jane, Brat, now called Beetle by Jane, inadvertently becomes the midwife’s assistant.

One day Beetle returns home with some important materials for Jane, including a comb of her own. This marks the first time in her life that she is able to transform the tangles in her hair to curls. Such a transformation of appearance is the cause of an older man mistaking her for a girl named Alyce. Upon her return, Beetle decides to change her name to Alyce.

Alyce soon delivers her first baby in Jane’s absence. From this point on, many families in the village begin to request that Alyce assist with the expectant mothers rather than Jane. These requests anger Jane. One night, when called on to help a woman in labor, Alyce finds that she cannot make anything work to deliver the baby. Jane soon arrives on the scene to deliver the baby successfully. In humiliated desperation, Alyce runs away from the village. However, she eventually makes peace with herself and begins to realize that her place in the world is to serve as a midwife, helping to bring life into the world.

*The Midwife’s Apprentice* is the touching story that illustrates what it is to find one’s place in the world—the source of true contentment. The play also reveals that as an individual begins to envision his or her potential, true identity is formed. There are fourteen male characters and seven female characters in this play. Also, the technical elements for the play are heavy. The play calls for several different locales: the early morning exterior, the woods, the interior of Miller’s cottage, The Saint Swithin’s Day fair, the exterior of the Jane’s cottage, the road going to the manor, the interior of the Baliff’s cottage, Jane’s yard, the exterior of the Blunt’s cottage, the interior of Jennet’s Inn, the exterior of the manor, and the river.

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Hudson, Chuck. *Yushi and the Thunder Dragon.*

A- K-6 Reviewed by Matt McLane

Yushi is Prince and heir of the throne to the Emperor of Japan. One day, his father takes him on a voyage to a faraway land. In the middle of the ocean, a terrible storm arises and throws
Yushi from the ship. A sea turtle saves him from drowning and takes him to a distant island. When Yushi awakes, he cannot remember who he is. An old wise man tells Yushi that he can discover who he is if he is willing to make the treacherous journey to the land of Shojo-ji—the home of the great Thunder Dragon. He tells him that in Shojo-ji, when the moon is full, he will have a dream that will lead him to the answer he is seeking. With the aid of the sea turtle, Yushi finds his way to Shojo-ji and is invited into the lair of the Thunder Dragon, who is very kind and understanding. There, Yushi learns that the sea turtle is actually a princess and the daughter of the Thunder Dragon. Yushi also learns his own identity and is commended for his great courage and determination in following the dream that led him to the Thunder Dragon. Seeing the Yushi is about to leave, the sea turtle/princess grows sad; the Thunder Dragon transforms her into a beautiful young woman. Together, Yushi and the princess leave Shojo-ji and return to Japan, where they will one day rule as Emperor and Queen.

Yushi and the Thunder Dragon focuses on the importance of following one’s dreams despite obstacles that come while pursuing them. Many rod puppets of all sizes must be built for this production as well as a very large puppet to portray the Thunder Dragon. The script calls for ten actors. At least one must be female and three must be male; the remainder of the cast can be either but they must be able to handle the puppets. Special effects of both lighting and sound play an important part in this production. The set can be as complex or simple as the director chooses. Music is also important, though not complicated, and there is a simple score provided in the script.


B+ 5-9 Reviewed by Matt McLane

This adaptation of Franklin Dixon’s The Secret of Skullbone Island once again introduces its audience to the world of Frank and Joe Hardy. The legend of Skullbone Island has been around Bayport for years. Redbeard the pirate, who once controlled the small port over a century before, cursed Skullbone Island before his mysterious disappearance. Now it seems his ghost has returned to claim his hidden treasure. Back in the Hardy home, a surprise visit from Ms. Elizabeth Callaway—an old friend from Mr. Hardy’s high school years—brings disturbing news; she has been robbed of an ancient artifact worth millions and needs his help. Quickly, Frank and Joe jump on the opportunity to help their father investigate the mystery. Does the robbery have something to do with Redbeard’s ghost? Is Redbeard a ghost at all? Once again, it is up to the Hardy boys, along with their friend Callie, to discover the truth behind the legend of Skullbone Island.

Although The Secret of Skullbone Island is fun and exiting, it is quite predictable, even for young people, which makes the climax a bit dull. However, a last second twist at the very end of the play will leave the audience surprised and delighted. This play is action packed and requires special effects. There are multiple scenes in which the timing of lighting and sound is extremely important. There is also a large number of set changes (around ten depending on the flexibility of the director) to be made throughout the play. The fast pace of this play must be considered when planning these changes. The script calls for six men and three women to fill eleven parts. It is set during the 1920’s but would easily work in a modern setting.


A 5-9 Reviewed by Matt McLane

In this charming stage adaptation of Franklin Dixon’s The House on the Cliff, young Frank and Joe Hardy exercise their wit and investigative skills to stop a smuggling ring and catch a killer. The play begins with Frank, Joe, and Callie—the local Tomboy—paying a visit to a haunted house. By doing so, they throw themselves into an adventure that eventually
causes them to meet up with the Snackly gang—smugglers using the haunted house as a port. They also have to rescue the boys’ father, Mr. Hardy, who has been kidnapped. Thanks to the three sleuths, the smugglers are caught and sent to jail. Because of their valiant efforts in helping to solve the crime, Frank, Joe, and Callie are rewarded five thousand dollars.

The Mystery of the Haunted House is filled with action and humor—ideal for young audiences. The author uses parts of the story strategically to stress safety procedures when involved in potentially dangerous activities. However, these messages do not overpower the plot. The play calls for six men and two women to fill the ten roles. There are multiple set changes and many special effects required for this production, including sound effects for the haunted house noises, and motorcycles and boats having to move across the stage in multiple directions. Also, the second act has a number of extended fight sequences that should be carefully choreographed.


A PreS+ Reviewed by David M. Mellinger

Mario is the son of Mama and Papa Bellini, proprietors of a subway station newsstand in Times Square, New York City. Business is not very good for the Bellini family, but Mario convinces his parents that business will improve—he is sure of it. One day, as he is cleaning a dustbin, Mario finds a cricket named Chester from the meadows of Connecticut. Attracted by the smell of a liverwurst sandwich, Chester had jumped into the picnic basket of some New Yorkers returning from Connecticut to New York. Chester then ended up in a pile of dirt in Times Square.

Upon finding the cricket, Mario pleads with his parents to let him keep Chester in the newsstand, assuring his parents that crickets are always good luck. Despite the company of Tucker the mouse, Harry the cat, and his best friend, Mario, Chester longs for the serenity he once enjoyed in the meadows of Connecticut. Chester is particularly anxious to return home because of a hostile Mama Bellini, who blames him for many of the family’s troubles, such as a ripped five dollar bill and the time the newsstand caught fire. She believes that ever since Chester arrived, he has been nothing more than a bad luck omen for the family. Such events have even begun to distance Mario and his mother because of her contempt for the creature.

However, their luck soon changes. Mr. Smedley, a friend of the Bellini family, tells the story of Chester the cricket (and Chester’s ability to sing opera) over the radio. As a result, people from everywhere flock to the newsstand to hear Chester sing; consequently, they buy newspapers from the Bellini family, helping business thrive.

When Autumn arrives, Chester longs for his home in Connecticut more than ever. His friends Mario, Tucker, and Harry regretfully, but understandably, see him off at the train station and wish him a safe return home.

The Cricket in Times Square is a beautiful story of friendship among a young boy, cricket, mouse, and cat. It illustrates the importance and even necessity of friends helping each other out, regardless of the hardship involved. This play excels on many levels—the characters are well-developed, the dialogue is believable, and the use of musical numbers helps to powerfully propel the action of the story. The play requires twelve actors—seven male, two female, and three that can be of either gender. A puppet is used to play Chester. For the set, there are two locales represented—a train station and the Bellini family newsstand.


B+ K-5 Reviewed by Matt McLane

In the land of Bushveld, Bhubesi the lion is king of the animals. Bhubesi lives among his animal friends—the hare, baboon, hyena, mongoose, and others. Together they introduce the world of African animal folk tales. Among those told are the stories of how animals got
their tails (and why the baboon did not), and why monkeys must live in trees. Each of these tales contains a lesson about the importance of character and honesty, and the pitfalls of greed and laziness.

This play, when performed in an ideal, well-equipped venue, requires an immense amount of special effects and intricate sets specified in the production notes. However, the notes also give thorough instructions on how to produce this play in amateur settings with adequately equipped halls and also venues where there is "less than basic technical equipment." Six actors (male or female) are required to fill the eight animal parts. The production notes give specific directions on casting, such as making sure that larger cast members play the larger animals. The morals taught in this collection of folk tales are both relevant and good; however, there is inconsistency in how the animals are portrayed. For instance, in one story the baboon is depicted as greedy and sneaky, and the story ends with the lion declaring that the baboon must be punished. Then, in the very next story, without any resolution from the previous one, the baboon is depicted as the hero. This is only one example within the play that could leave children confused concerning the importance of consequences for our actions. However, this play is highly entertaining. Through costumes, music, poetry and plenty of audience participation, young audiences will surely be captivated by these enchanting stories.

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A 4+ Reviewed by David M. Mellinger