Play Reviews

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Reviewed by Nathan F. Christensen

In this anthology, Swortzell has collected a sampling of plays from the entire spectrum of Theater for Young Audiences. The book is divided into two parts: Part One, a wide variety of historical texts, each preceded by a clear and insightful introduction; and Part Two, contemporary plays illustrating the wide range of styles TYA can employ and themes it can address. While the general writing quality is inconsistent from one play to the next, Swortzell has done an excellent job of pulling together a variety of texts that will intrigue beginning as well as experienced TYA directors, producers, and actors.

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A 5+

Frederick Douglas is best known for his work as an abolitionist and advisor to President Lincoln, but *Escape to Freedom* focuses on his childhood as a slave. Young Douglas never really knew his mother—he was sold as a small boy to a plantation in Maryland. In Maryland, he worked for a series of masters, ranging from uncaring to cruel. In spite of opposition, he taught himself how to read and began to associate with groups of ex-slaves who had been given their freedom. He was eventually able to use his knowledge to escape to the North, where he became a vocal advocate for the freedom of slaves.

While fairly typical as a biographical play, *Escape to Freedom* is a good play for teaching themes of perseverance and racial equality. The play’s greatest strength lies in its theatricality: Douglas acts as his own narrator, while the setting, time, and characters move fluidly around him. The greatest challenge of the play will most likely be its scenic requirements. Although the setting can be simplified through stylization, the script calls for action to take place in a slave cabin, orchard, Baltimore townhouse, shipyard, country farm, church, slave-breaking plantation, parlor, and train.

This script calls for five men (three black and two white) and four women (two black and two white). The script also calls for the extensive use of music and some stage combat.

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Gozzi, Carlo. *The Love of Three Oranges*.

K-Adult

Gozzi wrote during the craze of Italian *commedia del arte* and this fairytale play is one of his most successful works. Prince Tartaglia has been diagnosed with terminal boredom, and the king offers a great reward to anyone who can cure him. The prime minister, who wishes to gain the throne, enlists the help of the Morgana, a witch, to ensure that Tartaglia does not recover. Fortunately, the servant Truffaldino trips the witch, causing Tartaglia to burst out in laughter, which immediately cures him. Humiliated, the witch curses the prince with an uncontrollable love for three oranges that grow in a far-off kingdom. The prince and Truffaldino travel together until, after many difficulties, they reach the oranges. Inside each orange they discover a princess. Tartaglia falls in love with the princess inside the third orange; the witch tries to thwart their wedding by turning the princess into a dove. Once again, Truffaldino is able to right the situation: he uses the witch’s power to restore the princess to her original form. The witch is transformed into a black cat and driven from the kingdom.
In addition to the engaging and imaginative plot, this play serves as an excellent vehicle for actors at any level of performance experience. In traditional commedia style, the script is written as a series of events, allowing the actors to improvise and develop their own dialogue. The fantasy elements in the script can be portrayed by actor representation or through masks, puppets, and creative costumes. The cast of characters is large—it can accommodate an entire class of young students, or can be doubled for a small, professional troupe. The imaginations of the actors and director are the only limit in developing this script.

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**B 6+**

Carlie compares herself, Harvey, and Thomas J. to pinballs: bounced around from place to place without any control over their own paths. The three are foster children—each from a different family—who have come to live in the home of Mrs. Mason. Carlie came to escape her abusive stepfather. Harvey came after being confined to a wheelchair because his drunken father ran over his legs with a car. Thomas J., abandoned as a baby, had been living with two elderly spinsters who are now in the hospital dying. Each of the children must learn to cope with the difficulties in their lives. When Harvey learns from his father that his mother, whom Harvey has always hoped would return, has no interest in coming to see him, he loses his will to live. Carlie and Thomas J. immediately set out to cheer him up; in the process the three are able to create something of a family among themselves.

Overall, there is very little to either recommend or discourage theater groups from performing this play. It employs various theatrical techniques such as flashback and direct address, but their uneven application drains them of much of their impact. The characters are interesting though not compelling. The dialogue is energetic but not always believable. In general, Harris seems to be more concerned with moving Byar’s novel to stage than adapting it to the theater medium.

This text uses a unit set and has a cast of five actors (including three children) and five voice-over characters.

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**B- 6+**

Set in contemporary Australia. *No Worries* is a musical that tells the story of Matty Bell, who lives with her parents on a ranch in the outback. She loves her life in the outback—helping her father with the sheep and playing on her school basketball team. But ranching is quickly dying out as wild animals and drought plague the area. Matty’s parents decide to move to the city so her father can find work as a taxi driver. Furious that she has to leave her home, Matty decides to stop speaking. Her parents become increasingly frustrated with her silence, and she is made fun of by the children at her new school. Finally, Matty becomes friends with Binh, a Vietnamese girl who is also having a difficult time fitting in at school. As Matty begins to understand that she is not alone in her new home, she begins to speak once more.

Unfortunately, this script is plagued with mediocre writing. Most of the story lacks any sort of driving conflict. The lyrics are maudlin and poorly crafted. Members of the ensemble are employed as many of the props in the show, but the technique comes across as a demonstration of the author’s cleverness. Similarly, the presence of a narrator who explains all of the theatrical conventions and reiterates each event in the story is condescending.

*No Worries* uses a unit set and has a cast of twenty characters.

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**B 9+**

Two rats are in a baby’s crib in a slum neighborhood. As the play begins, the younger
rat, Bobby, arrives from the most terrible place he has ever imagined—a neighborhood without any trash on the streets and where his mother has just been exterminated. He has come to the crib hoping to team up with Jebbie, who has won possession of the best territory in his neighborhood. After winning Jebbie’s trust, Bobby swaps stories with him, and the two commiserate the difficulties of life as a rat. The conversation is interrupted, however, by the stirring of a black baby who has been sleeping in the corner of the crib. Bobby has been told how good black cabbies taste and is anxious to bite it. Jebbie, however, has experienced too much violence in his life and has become protective of the child. Bobby, horrified to hear this, threatens to tell the rat community that Jebbie has gone soft. To protect his reputation, Jebbie fights and kills Bobby.

Dramatically compelling and surprisingly funny, the only drawback of this play is that it wasn’t written for children to perform or watch. As a dark satire on greed and the cycle of violence, it is very well written. Most amusing, perhaps, is the rats’ skewed reflection of human nature, which presents things generally considered good as though they are bad. The premise may disturb younger children, and the characters frequently use strong language.

*Rats* calls for a cast of two men, and one black man or woman. Suggested setting is a blank stage.

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Hughes, Langston. *Soul Gone Home.*

A 9+

A young man has just died of tuberculosis. As his mother sits by the body, wailing in grief, she wishes she could hear his voice just once more. To her surprise, that is what happens. Her son sits up and begins to tell her how unsatisfied he is with his short life. She reminds him of all of the sacrifices she made for him, but while he is grateful, he is still unhappy. He wishes she had been able to provide sufficient health care and lessons in “manners and morals.” Finally, when the ambulance comes to take him a way, the boy lies down once more.

This is a moving and lovingly written play. The dialogue is compelling, and the characters are believable. Consideration should be given to the appropriateness of the language and subject matter.

*Soul Gone Home* has a cast of one woman and two men and requires minimal set.

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A 6+

Maggie and Magalita are two names for the same girl. Maggie is the name she prefers, having experienced a rough transition when she and her mother moved to America many years earlier. Now, Abuela, her grandmother, has come to live with them. Maggie, haunted by voices of children taunting her because of her differences, feels uncomfortable around her grandmother, who speaks only Spanish and cooks strange food. As Maggie and Abuela spend time together, they begin to learn from one another: Abuela hesitantly begins to speak English, and Maggie learns to be more understanding of the difficulties Abuela faces in adjusting to a new country. When Abuela dies unexpectedly, Maggie realizes how much she loved her grandmother. She learns she cannot ignore the parts of her life that make her different from everyone else.

This beautiful and tender play deals with issues beyond the exploration of race. It deals with the challenges of fitting in and accepting one’s own uniqueness, pertinent issues for most young people. Much of the dialogue is in Spanish, but Kesselman does an excellent job of interspersing enough English translation within the dialogue so that those who do not speak Spanish can understand it.

This play has a cast of three women and one man, plus the prerecorded voices of several children. The action takes place in a variety of locations, and scenic requirements may be a challenge. The play contains some profanity (diety).

**A- 6+**

With a storyteller acting as narrator, *The Snow Wolf* tells the legend of an Eskimo girl, Anatou, who is mysteriously born with blond hair and fair skin. Although her parents love her, the other villagers believe that she will bring bad luck. Any time misfortune strikes, Anatou is held to be the cause, and when her parents disappear during a hunting trip, Anatou is driven from the village. Afraid and angry, Anatou wanders the forest, which is guarded by the mysterious Wood God. She begs the Wood God to change her into a wolf so she can forget that she looks different than everyone else. After becoming a wolf, however, she begins to seek revenge, killing several hunters from her old home. Anatou realizes too late that she has become consumed by her anger. After stopping to free an old friend who has become stuck under a fallen tree, Anatou is found by the hunters and shot. As she dies, her body changes back into its original form, and the villagers realize how cruel they have been. Anatou, now a spirit, gives up her anger and forgives the villagers.

Although the stage directions indicate elaborate scenic units, the storytelling format of the play allows it to be performed simply to great effect. Sufficient research could also enable this play to expose the audience to the culture and mythologies of early Northern peoples. Much of the dialogue feels slightly stilted, as if it had been translated from another language, and reminds viewers that they are watching something drawn from another culture. The themes of bigotry, anger, and forgiveness are pertinent. *The Snow Wolf* has a cast of fifteen characters.

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Medoff, Mark. *Big Mary.* 33 pp.

**8+**

*Big Mary* is based on the bizarre historical account of a circus elephant in Eddington, Tennessee, that kills her trainer and is tried for murder. Eddington is a town divided: city people versus circus people; whites versus blacks; adults versus children. The marriage of a town woman to Big Mary’s trainer has heightened the division between the town and circus people. Big Mary’s trainer turns responsibility for the elephant to a young man named Red, telling him that Mary will love those who love her. Red treats Mary unkindly, causing her to bolt. She rampages through town, scaring the people and eventually killing Red. The townspeople direct their pent-up frustration against the elephant. Big Mary is tried, convicted, and hanged. The town continues with the same divisions it harbored before the incident.

In spite of the strange events of the story, this is a powerful play. The use of narration shared between characters and the stylization of costumes and props makes the play itself a sort of circus, pointing out the absurdity of the characters’ hypocrisy. This text may be a challenge to stage, but under good direction it can be performed by student, amateur, or professional groups.

*Big Mary* uses a unit set. The original production used forty student actors, but it is possible to perform it with twenty or fewer.

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**A 3+**

Valere is willing to go to any length to marry his sweetheart, Lucile. His only obstacle is her father, Gorgibius. Fortunately, Valere has a clever servant named Sganarelle who is willing to help. Sganarelle creates a diversion by convincing Gorgibius that he is a great doctor. Everything goes according to plan until Gorgibius discovers Sganarelle without his doctor costume. Sganarelle makes up a story that he is the doctor’s estranged twin, and Gorgibius makes it his responsibility to reconcile the two brothers. Sganarelle is forced to climb in and out of the parlor window in order to maintain the
illusion that there are two of him. In the end, Valere and Lucile marry, and Sganarelle is rewarded for his cleverness.

This is a very entertaining farce. It can be viewed as a social commentary on gullibility, but for most it is just a lot of fun. This translation, clear and easy to understand, provides a great introduction to French neoclassical comedy.

This play requires a unit set with two levels of playing area. It has a cast of five men and two women, but the gender of some characters can be altered according to need.


B 9+

The world of Medea and Jason’s children has become divided. Their parents live in a “classical” incomprehensible adult world, while they live in a modern one that must deal with the consequences of the adults. What is more, their parents are getting a divorce. Scenes, most likely drawn from Seneca’s treatment of the Medea legend, are interspersed with scenes of the children discussing their mother’s depression, contemplating suicide, and trying to run away. The girl has a disturbing dream, which portrays the story’s traditional ending: Medea murders her two children to revenge herself on her husband. The children finally enter their parents’ world and see that only unhappiness will come from their parents remaining together. They comfort their mother and encourage their father to leave.

On the positive side, this is a very well written and theatrical work. It becomes almost surreal through its combination of past and present, and it is an interesting portrayal of two characters—the children—who should be much more involved in the traditional story of Jason and Medea. This is an excellent play for youth who have dealt with divorce, or possibly for adults who need to understand how their behavior affects their children, to perform. It is not recommended, however, for a general youth audience. It presents life as a gloomy and confusing world dominated by adults.

*Medea’s Children* has a cast of two men and four women. The setting is divided into a “classical area,” “children’s area,” and the nurse’s room, which is described as “a diving board.” This play contains very strong language.

Stein, Gertrude. *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters*.

A 9+

“Three sisters who are not sisters” and “three brothers who are not orphans” decide to spend the afternoon enacting a murder melodrama. In a series of short sequences the children are “murdered” one by one. The last surviving child drinks poison in a fit of depression. As the children get up at the end of their play they wonder: “Did we act it? Are we dead? Are we sisters? Are we orphans? Do we feel funny? Are we dead?”

Stein, best remembered for her line “rose is a rose is a rose,” created a genre of her own; *Three Sisters* is one of the most accessible of her plays. In spite of its macabre plot, the script is entertaining and thought provoking.

This play has a cast of six people and requires a unit set. It can be produced by students or a professional group.

Strindberg, August. *Lucky Peter’s Journey*.

A- K-Adult

Peter grew up inside a bell-tower, raised by a cold and cynical father. One day, his grandfather, an elf, grants him a chance to see the world. Once in the world, Peter meets Lisa, who provides advice on how to find happiness. Not understanding her advice, Peter tries to find happiness in money, power, social reform, etc., but still feels empty. Finally, Peter overcomes his selfish nature, decides to marry Lisa, and finds happiness through hard work.
Lucky Peter is very much an epic play in the style of Peer Gynt. While the voyage of self-discovery may not be fully understood by younger audiences, or may seem a trifle heavy to adult audiences, it is a theme to which most people can relate. Much creativity is demanded in the production of this play, which has seven settings and a cast of at least twenty-six characters.

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Swortzell, Lowell. Punch and Judy.

B K-Adult

Punch and Judy has become an icon of children’s theater and puppetry. Hook-nosed Punch, though light-hearted and innocent, lacks compassion and remorse for his wrongdoings. When bitten by a dog, Punch confronts its owner and knocks his head off with a stick. He then throws his own baby out a window, and when his wife Judy complains, he beats her senseless. Punch then meets a series of characters; each interaction ends with a similar result. Finally, after Punch has beaten away even the devil, Judy returns. She tells Punch that their baby is okay, and she’ll return to him if he will promise to throw away his stick. He does so, and they “dance happily as the audience applauds.”

In this introduction to Punch and Judy, Swortzell addresses the violence in the play but seems to have difficulty justifying it. He explains that he did limit much of the violence in the original texts, and that most children do not seem disturbed by the violent actions of the puppet characters. Regardless of its appropriateness for performance, Punch and Judy is an important piece of theater history.

Punch and Judy has eleven characters, who should be played by puppets and can be performed by one person.

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A- K+

“A Visit from St. Nicholas,” one of America’s best-known poems, provides the first description of Santa Claus as the jolly figure known today. This play is a fictionalized account of Clement Moore presenting the poem to his children. The children are thrilled by the poem, but Moore refuses to consider the request of Harris, a houseguest, to publish it. He fears that such a frivolous poem would tarnish his reputation as a serious scholar. When Harriet tries to make her own copy of the poem, Moore throws the original in the fire. He later feels guilty for doing so and tries, unsuccessfully, to remember the poem. His children, however, are able to remember it word for word; they present the complete poem to their penitent father as a gift from St. Nicholas.

A Visit from St. Nicholas pretends to be nothing more than what it is—an entertaining but poorly disguised history of the well-known poem. Overall, this would be a charming play to perform for the holidays.

The text calls for three children, three adults, and a set that includes two bedrooms and a living room in the Moore house.

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A 3+

The oldest known play written for performance by children, Jack Juggler is built on a plot first used by Plautus. Jack is a clever young servant who has been insulted by Jenkin Careaway, a hypocritical servant his age. Jenkin is sent on an errand by their master, but he spends his time gambling and stealing apples from the market. When he returns home, Jack, disguised in Jenkin’s clothing, uses physical intimidation and tricks of logic to convince Jenkin that he (Jack) is really Jenkin. When their master and mistress return and find that Jenkin has not accomplished his errand, they punish him for his laziness and for “making up” silly stories about meeting himself on his way home from the market.

By the end of the play, the viewer feels sympathy for the confused, ill-treated Jenkin, but the play is very funny and quite enjoyable.
Swortzell simplifies the original language to make it easier to speak and understand. The script contains lots of dialogue and some long monologues, which may appear daunting to young actors, but provide a challenge not beyond possibility.

It is recommended that this play be performed by sixth grade to adult actors. It has a cast of three men and two women, and requires a simple unit set.

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A- 6+

Collin and Ian have decided to spend the day fishing. While doing so, they discuss Colin's homework assignment to write a short play. Without the characters realizing it, their discussion of playwriting parallels the world of the play in which they live. They talk about setting (the river), action (fishing), characters (a girl wanders past, looking as though she wants to talk to them), etc. After passing through conflict (a bully) and a *deus ex machina* (the girl and bully end up having a lot in common), the boys leave to fish in another spot.

This is more a fun educational tool than a dramatic text, and the author admits as much in his foreward. Within the texts are good demonstrations of many of the elements of drama. The dialogue is witty, and the text is indeed performable, but actors looking for a plot-driven script will be disappointed.

The text calls for a unit set and has a cast of four characters (three male and one female).

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A- 6+

*Dragonwings*, based on the novel, is the story of a Chinese boy, Moon Shadow, who moves to live with his father in California during the 1920's. Moon Shadow has heard that California is a land of golden mountains, protected by dragons. Instead, he finds his father, Windrider, working in a laundry. Windrider has not given up his dream, however. The two work together to earn money so Windrider can build his invention—an airplane, much like the one made by the Wright brothers. Despite poverty and discrimination, they complete the airplane, taking it on one successful test flight. Windrider than decides not to invest further time and money in its development. He realizes that his family are more important to him than his invention, and they decide to raise money to bring Moon Shadow’s mother to America.

In adapting his book to the stage, Yep does an excellent job of finding specifically theatrical ways to tell the story. He draws much of his inspiration from Chinese opera, including several scenes of stylized dance. While the characters are not drawn with great depth, they represent a side of American life not often explored. Their struggle to achieve their dreams in the face of adversity is patently universal.
Some elements of the play may require special attention to ensure clarity. Dragon Wings uses a unit set and has a cast of seven characters.

York, Y. Afternoon of the Elves. 50 pp.

B- 8+

Hillary Lenox has reached the difficult age when “fitting in” seems like the most important thing in the world. Jane and Allison have begun to let her associate with them, but the relationship is tenuous at best. This new friendship is threatened by her association with Sara Kate Connolly, the girl living next door to Hillary who is ostracized by the children at school. Hillary becomes friendlier to Sara Kate, however, when Sara Kate shows her a miniature village that has appeared in the Connolly’s garbage-strewn backyard. As the two spend more time together, Hillary is impressed with Sara Kate’s independence. Soon, she discovers that Sara Kate literally has to take care of herself because her single-parent mother has an incapacitating illness. Sara Kate fears that she and her mother will be separated if an adult discovers her secret. In the end, Hillary’s mother discovers Mrs. Connolly’s condition; Mrs. Connolly is hospitalized, and Sara Kate is sent to a foster home. Hillary is left to tend the elfin village alone. Her subsequent depression prompts her parents to strengthen their relationship with her.

As would be expected from a writer such as York, this is a well-crafted piece. It is compelling, and the dialogue is intelligent, although it may seem too intelligent to be the words of fourth graders. The play’s main drawback, however, is its message: children should not share their dark secrets with adults because of the terrible consequences. It presents children as lost in a world of adults who are self-indulgent and incapable of understanding their children. This play could be appropriately performed for adults, but directors should strongly consider its content before performing it for children.

Afternoon of the Elves calls for a cast of five women and one man. The setting calls for a representation of the Lenox and Connelly backyards, the interior of the Connolly home, the school, and city.


5+

Wiley and his Mammy live in a house on the edge of a swamp. Wiley is afraid of the Hairy Man, who “got” Wiley’s father many years before. He wants to stay home and hide, but Mammy knows that he has to confront his fears if he ever wants to conquer them. They learn from Mammy’s conjuring book that anyone who can trick the Hairy Man three times will be free from his power forever. Wiley tricks the Hairy Man twice with his Mammy’s help, but the Hairy Man uses a spell to prevent Mammy from helping a third time. Thinking quickly, Wiley tricks the Hairy Man once more and is able to free his Mammy, defeat the Hairy Man, and conquer his fears.

The writing, message, and theatricality of this play are all exceptional. The characters speak the dialect of the South, creating a world based in reality but filled with magic. The dialogue is clean, well paced, and very witty. The message that a child can overcome his/her fears is clear but not overbearing. The play uses a chorus of actors who serve as narrators, sound effects, set pieces, etc. Overall, this is an exciting and very entertaining piece of theater.

This play uses a unit set and calls for a cast of eight: two men, a woman, and five of either gender.