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Play Reviews

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Play Reviews


**B 7-10**

Reviewed by Amy E. Jensen

This collection of monologues covers the issues of divorce, personal morality, chastity, faith, misogyny, and abuse. Some of the monologues are humorous: a soccer-player watches in agony as her over-the-top parents play backseat coaches; a wayward daughter tries to convince her mom to get a *Wizard of Oz* tattoo. Others are more serious: a young boy tries to reason away his fathers’ abuse; a girl resists pressure to have sex. This collection differs from most in that it is principle-based. For instance, “Faith: The Final Frontier” is more of a discussion about faith than it is about a character or story. The same applies to “Heads Up,” which follows a young man’s decision not to cheat even when no one would know the difference. This principle-based distinction is a two-edged sword. Although students using these monologues may benefit from the values and situations presented, not all the monologues will appeal to them. The monologues often lack the concision and complexity that might make them material for a great performance. As with many monologues that exist without a full play, these characters generally lack progression and motivation. If more of the monologues were active and had characters acting instead of being acted upon, they could help performers demonstrate their acting ability. Doing this would also help pattern positive ways that teenagers could respond to difficult situations, such as abuse and divorce, without feeling like a victim. All in all, *Slice of Teen Life* is admirable because it doesn’t push its material into sensationalism. It does what it purports: it gives more of an everyday voice to an age group that deserves to be heard.

DeVita, James. *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. 49 pp.

**A- K-6**

Reviewed by Alina Longoria Ballard

Young Huckleberry Finn searches for freedom in an adventure on the Mississippi River with Jim, a slave also looking for freedom. Huck helps Jim, who has been accused of killing Huck, to run from the law. Together they meet new people and learn that life is best when they are with the ones they care about.

This text follows Twain’s original story remarkably well and preserves his adventurous tone. At times, however, certain scenes bog down the action-packed adventure. Overall, the script is skillfully adapted and is a pleasurable piece for children’s theatre.

The play features a cast of eighteen people to be played by teenagers and adults, plus assorted townspeople. The set requires separate pieces for each location.

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**A- 1-12**

Reviewed by Wendy Simmerman

This play is a clever and innovative approach to several fairy tales, woven together seamlessly. The basic story is that of Cinderella, but the play incorporates multiple versions of the story from different parts of the world. Myths from China, India, and Africa are presented in a way that educates the audience while remaining energetic and entertaining. Many scenes occur simultaneously onstage, which creates a blending of stories that works quite well and emphasizes similarities while celebrating diversity.

As few as four actors can stage this piece, or many parts may be provided for over fourteen
actors. The four-person cast calls for two male and two female actors, although gender is non-specific for many of the roles. No set directions are given, although the set does call for items such as puppets, a few small hand props, and sheets of fabric to create rivers. The play is open enough for a very simple, minimal production, or a large-scale, elaborate staging. A song is written for the show, and simple accompaniment is provided. The song is rather long and is repeated many times, which might disrupt the energy level of the show.

The broad approach of this script makes it ideal for a wide range of ages. The humor and energy of the piece would probably appeal to high school students, while the story is simple and clear enough that young grade school students would be able to perform it and enjoy watching it. *The Oldest Story Ever Told* offers a fun and entertaining way to look at multiculturalism and the myths that pervade a society.

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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 spend a day with Mr. Wonka himself at his mysterious chocolate factory. Against all odds, an impoverished boy named Charlie finds a ticket. He and his grandfather join a group of selfish, snobby, spoiled children on a fantastic tour of the outlandish factory. One by one the children disappear: one is whisked away by a chocolate river, another is dumped into the rubbish bin as a bad nut, another swells into a giant blueberry and is rolled away to be juiced, and the other is carted off to be stretched after being formed into a miniature child. Finally, only Charlie is left. Wonka reveals that the tour has been a test and that Charlie, by being the only one left, has passed and will inherit the chocolate factory as his reward, supplying Charlie and his family with lifelong security and happiness—not to mention chocolate.

This particular adaptation arose from a class project directed by George. Though the play follows the story well, much of the dialogue is tired and predictable. George includes suggestions for staging and props, including a technique for making the Oompa-loompas, 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.

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A- K-8 **Reviewed by Alina Ballard**

In a dream, young Woodrow Wilson is taken through various scenes of his life that leads up to his presidency. He first meets Scott Joplin, the most influential ragtime composer of the time. Joplin tells Wilson how his music spread across America like wildfire. Wilson meets a variety of other people who were important in American history, such as Henry Ford, Mother Jones, and Ernestine Kettler. Wilson realizes that each of these people will influence the way he thinks as a grown man and that each plays an important part in his presidency. When Wilson wakes, he has a firm desire to become president of the United States and make a difference in the world.

This play educates the audience by characterizing historical figures and events. The subject matter may be slightly mature for elementary school students. The set can be as simple as representative props. The cast consists of three males, two females, and extras.

A 1-6 Reviewed by Wendy Simmerman

This clever and magical retelling of the classic story *Pinnocchio* will charm children as it tells of Pinnocchio’s creation by Geppetto, his many misadventures that teach him moral lessons, his rescue by Geppetto, and finally, his transformation into a real boy. It has broad, slapstick humor, such as a Punch and Judy show acted out onstage, but also explores deeper themes of parent-child bonding and honesty with one’s self and others. Added songs set this show apart from other versions and help maintain the high energy pervading this piece.

Pinnocchio calls for a fairly detailed set and some complex lighting effects. Even for a very minimal production, lighting and scenic design would be an endeavor. The story takes place in multiple locations and involves thunderstorms, fairs, and underwater escapades. Pinnocchio’s nose must also grow visibly onstage. The cast could consist of as few as nine actors, but there are easily parts for more than forty-four. The script breaks the nine-person cast into six men and three women, but many of the roles are not gender specific. The songs move the action of the play along and support the production nicely. In spite of the length, the show moves quickly and should keep a young audience enthralled.


B+ 2-5 Reviewed by Amy E. Jensen

Harold and Chester, the Howard family’s cat and dog, respectively, are the center of family attention until the night the Howards bring home a bunny found at a showing of *Dracula*. Although the Howards may be oblivious to suspicious details, Chester begins to suspect that something is amiss. His fears are realized when the Howards find fang marks in drained vegetables. Convinced that the bunny, nicknamed Bunnicula, is a vampire out to destroy the family, Chester takes all measures to get rid of it. This leads the Howards, and even Harold, to think that Chester is not only jealous but also a little insane. Chester is forced to withdraw, and an uneasy treaty is formed when Bunnicula is put on a vegetable juice diet and life seems to return to normal.

The set is slightly enlarged to fit the perspectives of Chester and Harold, since the story is told mostly from Harold’s point of view. The script calls for two men, two women, two boys, and one puppet (Bunnicula). Although Chester is a male part, he is played by a female. This musical adaptation from the popular children’s book captures much of the humor of the book. The music, written in treble clef, is included in the script. Some of the original songs are quite catchy; however, a few of them only add new storylines that aren’t developed and do not further the story, and this lapse contributes to a lack of energy in the middle of the show. The ending isn’t entirely resolved, but the play concludes with strong possibilities of friendship among the animals. Additional storylines include Chester and Harold’s problematic relationship as well as the responsibility that comes with owning pets. The play is somewhat dated by a reference to the Clinton administration, but the play’s characters make the piece real and enjoyable.

Lindsay, Eleanor V. *A Little Princess*. Eldridge, 1998. 74 pp.

B 3-8 Reviewed by Wendy Simmerman

This adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic relates the familiar story of Sara Crewe and her riches-to-rags-to-riches adventure. Sara is placed in an English boarding school, enjoying all the attention befitting someone whose father is extremely wealthy. When word arrives that her father has died and his fortune has been lost, the cruel headmistress banishes Sara to a life of scullery and hard labor as a servant to the other girls in the school.
Through a series of events, Sara becomes acquainted with the next-door neighbor, who turns out to be her father's former business partner. In a tidy reversal of fortune, Sara inherits a diamond mine and then lives happily ever after with the neighbor, and the cruel headmistress gets her comeuppance.

The cast is fairly large, requiring thirteen to sixteen actors. Each actor could play multiple roles in a smaller cast. Thirty-two scenes take place in a variety of locations. Even with the most minimal design, the set may pose problems. A rather large number of props are called for in the script. The length of the play might challenge young actors (grades three to five), while older junior high actors might be bored by the story. For an audience, it is probably best suited to an elementary school level. At times the script is didactic and expository, though probably not enough to distract a young audience. This adaptation is relatively well done, and a creative approach could overcome the inherent problems in the play.


* 3-12 Reviewed by Alina Longoria Ballard

The great wizard Thorin arrives at Bilbo Baggin’s house with twelve hungry dwarves, expecting Bilbo to feed them. As Bilbo frantically does so, he discovers that Thorin and the dwarves are on a quest to reclaim the lost land on top of Lonely Mountain, where the “scariest” dragon is said to still live. Bilbo is asked to join the group so that their total number is fourteen rather than thirteen, which is considered bad luck. He initially declines, but runs after them, realizing he will regret not going. Bilbo is continually lucky: he gains 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 with a magical ability to capture the minds of children and teenagers. The adventure Bilbo takes part in is exciting and risky. The story begins with a captivating exposition and continues to be engaging as Bilbo encounters new people and places. This play teaches children what imagination can create. An adaptable unit set is recommended as the scenes move rapidly. The humans and Gandalf are played by actors on stilts, which creates the visual height difference needed between them and the much shorter dwarves and goblins. There are twelve roles for twenty-nine male actors, but the play can be performed with a cast of ten if parts are doubled.


Reviewed by John D. Newman

“Anya Rosen, you’re a dreamer.”

Seventeen-year-old Anya has heard this refrain all her life, first from her immigrant father and now from her fellow factory girls, who respond skeptically to her plan to wage a general strike. It is 1909, and she and the melting-pot group of workers at the shirtwaist sweatshop have little power and even less money. When Anya convinces the other girls to take to the picket line, their efforts bring attacks from their boss’s thugs and time in jail from corrupted judges. The male workers, originally reluctant to assist, come to support the cause, as do some high-profile society girls who bring national attention to the effort. Anya’s hopes grow dim when she and her compatriots are thrown into a notoriously brutal prison and lose one of their numbers to tuberculosis. Anya confronts all her challenges, however, including her nagging self-doubts about the effectiveness of their sacrifices.

This play is ideal for a secondary school production. It features strong adolescent characters that take action and make a difference for themselves and others. The script could be cast with a largely female ensemble of anywhere from eight to twenty students, each of whom would have a role worth exploring and researching. The labor movement needs to be dramatized, but it often eludes dramatization. Mercatti has effectively dramatized a real incident from a movement that shows today’s
young people that they can indeed change their world.


A 8-12 Reviewed by Amy E. Jensen

Brandon and John are almost polar opposites, but that doesn't keep them from being best friends. When John's dad goes on yet another month-long business trip, Brandon convinces his parents, Ann and Jerry, to let John stay at their house. The adjustment isn't easy, however. Brandon isn't used to sharing his parents, and he doesn't appreciate their frequent reminders that he is less responsible than John. In frustration, Brandon talks badly about John, only to discover that John heard everything. Brandon tries to apologize while shooting some hoops with him. During their game, the two boys chase each other into the street, and John is hit by a car. His subsequent death sends the family into shock. Unlike Anne, Jerry refuses to talk about John's death with anyone, including Brandon, and says that Brandon just needs time and space. Brandon, however, is so upset that he can't remember or believe John died. He leaves home, thinking that he can find John and apologize to him again. The situation escalates until Anne finds Brandon, makes him remember John's death, and then forces Jerry to acknowledge his feelings. Brandon and Jerry have to confront their emotions—guilt, anger, and grief—and try to find a way to move forward.

*Outside In* may be hampered by its sloppy editing, but its story and characters are entirely compelling. Complex characterization and story structure propel the play forward with real energy. The most powerful aspect of the show is its focus on the friendships between John, Brandon, Anne, and Jerry. *Outside In* succeeds in presenting weighty issues without reverting to simplistic or didactic shortcuts. However, the play hastily resolves itself, undercutting the reality it has attempted to create. In the hands of a strong director who can develop the ending, this play could be a rewarding experience for older audiences that can relate to Brandon and John. The cast consists of one male, one female, and two teenage boys. The staging of the show indicates several locations in and out of the house, but it does not necessarily require a complex set to create what a couple of blocks and good lighting can easily do. To help the audience differentiate between past and present, a specific device, such as lighting, will be necessary. In the vein of *Ordinary People*, *Outside In* could help audiences openly address death and point out the need to celebrate the lives of people they have loved.


B 4+ Reviewed by Allison G. Belnap

In this adaptation, Robinette recreates C.S. Lewis's classic tale of faith, love, courage, and the ever-present struggle of good and evil. Four children staying with a family friend in a large country house discover an old wardrobe that leads to Narnia, a mysterious world. After finding this extraordinary world, Lucy, Edmund, Peter, and Susan discover that they are part of a prophecy promising the return of the virtuous leader, Aslan, and the banishment of the wicked White Witch. Aslan does return and fights alongside the children, eventually defeating 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 to the same time and place they left.

Because it attempts to condense Lewis's chronicle into a sixty-minute play, Robinette's adaptation is very simple and lacks much of the wonder and beauty of the 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.


(See p. 17 for review)


Reviewed by Amy E. Jensen

Even though she didn’t want to return, Dorothy is back in Oz, along with Uncle Henry and Bill, their pet chicken. Transported to Oz during a voyage to Australia, the threesome must face the terrorizing Wheelers, the cruel Langwidere, and the selfish gnome king, Roquat. Villains aside, what really wreaks havoc on the adventurers is the question of time. When Dorothy meets Tic Toc, the robot that brought time to Oz, she finds she can change time—minutes, days, and years. She decides to turn time back to three years previous, the time before Uncle Henry had his stroke and was forced to use a wheelchair. The change, however, affects all of Oz, and Dorothy finds that going back in time causes more problems than it solves. With the help of Ozma, the ruler of Oz, Dorothy sets everything right. Ozma asks Dorothy and Uncle Henry if they will stay in Oz—where Dorothy will once again banish time—or return home. Dorothy and Uncle Henry decide that although escaping time would have its benefits, they want to enjoy new days and new experiences together, so Ozma helps them leave Oz and return to their ship.

Time Again in Oz has enough twists and turns in its script that its path goes beyond yellow-brick predictability. This is due partly to the inevitable passage of time, but mostly to the musical’s great characterization. Dorothy is a self-aware teenager who hates the idea of being out of Kansas again; Uncle Henry is out for just one last adventure; Lasngwidere and Roquat are as villainous as they can be. The writing is tight and enjoyable—the wordplay of Bill and Roquat will keep audiences on their toes. If the stage directions are followed, this twelve-actor play (seven men, five women) is literally a spectacular production and requires multiple moveable sets, a substantial element to the play’s fun and scripting. However, smaller productions could also succeed with this fast-paced and enjoyable show.