Corrected Play Reviews From March/ April 2002

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Please note that some reviewers and sources were incorrectly cited in the Play Reviews of March/April issue. We have reprinted each review correctly, identifying reviewers and sources. We apologize for the errors.


A- 8-12 Reviewed by Kathy Bruder

This story of the signing of the Magna Carta begins with Stephen Langton, a teacher of theology admired by his former pupil, Pope Innocent. Conflict arises when King John, brother of the late Richard the Lion Heart, discovers that Pope Innocent III has refused his choice for the next Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope, set on having Langton as Archbishop, uses his power to coerce the King into appointing Langton by placing the entire country of England under an interdict (excommunication from the Church). After a few years of rebellion, the King succumbs to the Pope’s proposal and repents of his sins by giving the Church control of England and Ireland. Once Langton is appointed Archbishop, he is appalled to discover the King interfering in Church elections and goes against both the Pope and the King in proposing the Magna Carta. The Pope’s opposition to the Magna Carta surprises Langton, but all attempts to sway him are unsuccessful. Finally, the death of Pope Innocent and King John allow Langton to fully enforce the Magna Carta, which begins the organization of Parliament in England.

The background of the Magna Carta presented in this play is designed to be a historical learning tool. To create major time and place shifts, the script calls for the use of a scrim and spotlight to enhance the effects of a simple stage with minimal furniture and props. Authentic costumes of the royalty and church authorities of the thirteenth-century should be used for optimal effect. The play requires three pre-recorded voices in addition to eight men, one woman, and an optional nine-year-old boy. A minor action character serves as a narrator to keep the audience informed. This play is best for older audiences because of complex concepts and the formal presentation of the information.

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A+ 5-12 Reviewed by Kathy Bruder

Charles Tice Haywood, a sixteen-year-old black abolitionist, wants to do more than write letters to the editor about freeing slaves. Although his father believes that the task of hiding runaway slaves is too dangerous for children, Charles hosts meetings of the Pittsburgh Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society and decides to be a part of the Underground Railroad. Inspired by a letter from Charles, Lydia, a sixteen-year-old typesetter at the local newspaper, visits Charles and discovers he is a conductor on the Underground Railroad. When his father becomes suspicious of his involvement, he is forced to send Lydia in his place to greet two runaway slaves, Vina and her twelve-year-old son Henry. Lydia brings Vina and Henry to meet Charles. While with Charles, Edmund Ruffin, a local white grocer in need of money, bursts in and threatens to give the runaways to the authorities to get the one-hundred-dollar reward. Charles promises to give Ruffin the money if he agrees to leave. Ruffin concedes, and Vina and Henry safely continue their journey to freedom in Canada.

Stirring emotions of the Underground Railroad are conveyed beautifully in this historically accurate play through a delightful blend of slave songs and genuine characters. The cast of three black males, one white male, two black females, and one white female performs with props, furniture, lights, and sounds. In
addition to a narrator playing several roles, an inspirational gospel singer (the North Star) appears throughout the show as she sings various slave songs during scenes and transitions. This play serves as an effective tool in presenting students with a comprehensive look at a teenager’s view of the Underground Railroad and the plight of slaves before the Civil War. Additionally, an epilogue effectively ends the play as it provides further insight into the emotional significance of the Gettysburg Address.


K-12


A 1-9 Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

When Adele’s mother passes away, her father, hoping to lift Adele from her subsequent depression, arranges for her to spend the summer with her Aunt Marichka, a traveling circus performer. Adele tells her experience through the play’s actions with the help of Marichka and her traveling companion, Geordie. In the beginning, Adele is reluctant. She complains about Marichka and Geordie’s hand-to-mouth lifestyle, the discomforts of life on the road, and the training they give her in funambulism, tightrope walking. As they travel from town to town, Adele is surprised to discover how quickly people judge the little group of travelers: children taunt them, merchants refuse their patronage, and police harass them. As Adele becomes increasingly unhappy with people’s prejudices, she begins to find the good in her traveling companions. She comes to appreciate Geordie’s struggles as he learns to read and Marichka’s patience and generosity toward those who are unkind to her. When Geordie is thrown in prison for a crime he has not committed, Adele and Marichka work together to save him. Adele uses all of her newly acquired skills to protect their camper, while Marichka helps the city officials see through their prejudices by reminding them how much they have benefited from circus people. In the end, the three are reunited and happily continue their journey.

Circus Caravan makes effective use of the power of storytelling. The three characters have great fun relating their tale, teasing each other, and inserting forgotten details into the others’ accounts. They illustrate the story by acting out more than twenty other people with whom they interact. The idea of overcoming prejudice through mutual understanding is clear but not overbearing, and the division between “circus people” and “city people” gives the story a unique flavor.

This play requires a cast of three and a few basic props.

Duffield, Neil. Skin and Bones. 25 pp.

A- 3-9 Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

This play takes place in “a jungle of the imagination,” a world ruled by brutality and bigotry. Its two prominent residents are Jackal and Tiger, who each spend their time trying to get the better of the other. Influenced by Dry Bone, an evil spirit/magician who feeds on the bones of his victims, their routine of intolerance takes on a darker shade. From his hiding place, Dry Bone tempts the two with a pot of honey. He then removes the pot, tricking both of the animals into thinking the other has stolen it. As the conflict between Jackal and Tiger escalates, good-natured Donkey arrives in the jungle looking for a new home. Through her honest kindness, Donkey is able to thwart Dry Bone’s plot, but Jackal and Tiger, insisting that donkeys are not welcome in the jungle, hurt her feelings and send her away. As she prepares to leave, Donkey overhears Dry Bone planning another trap. Dry Bone easily catches Jackal and Tiger. Donkey, however, tricks Dry Bone and manages to catch him in his own magic hunting sack. Jackal and Tiger plead with Donkey for their freedom. Donkey agrees to give them their freedom on the condition that they allow her to
stay in the jungle; they agree. Once freed, Jackal tries to repay kindness with kindness, but Tiger tells Jackal that if she continues to associate with Donkey, she too will be outcast, leaving Jackal with a difficult decision.

Duffield straightforwardly explains in his production notes that this play is about “discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice.” In spite of his didactic intention, he is successful in filling the play with enough humor and suspense to prevent it from becoming intolerably preachy. His plot is obviously modeled on folklore traditions, employing animal characters drawn from different cultures, which makes the play predictable but easy to recognize and enjoy. Duffield makes a conscious effort to not oversimplify the complexity of prejudice, but his open ending may be confusing for some children.

Skin and Bones uses a unit set and requires a cast of three.


A- 8-10 Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

This play is about faith and returning the world to an idyllic place of understanding through people’s actions. It is set on the island of Louanalao where a lepswi, or evil spirit, has taken hold of all life on the island. The lepswi is distorting and deforming everything, causing the people to resort to violence and hatred. Ti Marie is a “strange” little girl whose beloved grandfather dies. Just before he passes away, he tells her how to rid the island of the lepswi: Ti Marie must find the worm snake, Leptotyphlops, and take an egg from it to the “place that must not be named,” between the mountain of male and female. Throughout her journey to find the snake, Ti Marie meets many creatures, each a personification of something such as temptation or violence. These creatures help her discover the path to the Leptotyphlops, but ultimately it is her faith and understanding of her grandfather’s directions that allow her to realize the path she must take. The snake gives her the egg, and she takes it to the “place that must not be named,” defeating the lepswi. All creatures then realize that if they are to survive, they must live as one.

This play is a theatrical telling of a mythical journey. It teaches faith in oneself and the understanding of how all life must work together to achieve peace and harmony. The theme is fairly straightforward but doesn’t feel overly preachy. There is a lot of music and stylized movement and dancing, which augment the central story and add to the theatricality of the piece. There is little deep characterization, but the play functions nicely as an earthy fable.

*The Song of One, or the Journey of Ti Marie* has a cast of three women and nine men. There are no set requirements; props are used to create imaginative locations on the stage.


B+ 3-9 Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

Salmonberry lives along the western coast of Canada. When she is young, her mother gives her a glass fishing float and tells her it will bring good luck. Soon after, her mother dies. Her father remarries, but his job as a fisherman keeps him out at sea for extended periods of time, leaving Salmonberry alone with her unkind, ugly stepmother and stepsister. Instead of the traditional fairy godmother, Salmonberry’s magical friend is a talking seal named Teabag, who gives her another glass fishing float. As in the Cinderella story, Salmonberry attends a dance where she attracts the attention of a Native American prince. As she leaves the dance, one of the floats falls from her pocket. The prince finds it and takes it to the library, where he hopes to find Salmonberry by asking all of the people in the city to explain the story behind the glass ball and its owner. Salmonberry arrives at the library that night after the other townspeople have left, and the Prince follows her home. The two are reunited and soon marry. Together they happily run a restaurant in which the stepmother and stepsister work, cleaning the floors and dishes.

This show’s greatest strength lies in its creative use of the theatrical medium. Teabag
and the stepsister are performed by puppets. Video segments are recommended to enhance crowd scenes, and audience participation can be encouraged during the storytelling sequence. Sometimes Hoogland becomes so caught up in her theatricality that she directs the play through her stage directions, but when taken as suggestions, the stage directions can prove helpful. Unfortunately, Hoogland becomes entangled in two elements of the play: her agenda and the fairytale on which her story is based. The ideas of self-sufficiency, environmental awareness, and the power of story are all important topics, but Hoogland does not seem to trust her story to express them. Instead, her characters spell them out in *bon mot* that are all too often unmotivated by character. Her adherence to the original fairytale also serves to weaken the characters: the stepmother shows no deep motivation for wanting her daughter to marry the Native American Prince, Salmonberry has no reason for running away from the ball, and the Prince has no reason to think that the easiest way to find his love is by asking everyone in the village to tell him stories.

Salmonberry has a cast of nine characters. The set includes representations of the beach, a large rock in the sea, Salmonberry’s house, the community hall (Festival Dance), the library, and the café.

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A 7-10 Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

Somewhere in Australia a garden party is being held in a greenhouse, and a variety of people are assembled: professors, con artists, politicians, historians, botanists, locals, and TV folk. There is no one apparent focus—some of the characters are discussing the renovation of the hothouse into a tourist attraction, others are discussing a rare plant that must be saved, and everyone is talking about money. Through the mayhem, Anna Mai and the Curator of the Tropical House find each other. As they talk, a partial eclipse of the sun begins. The narrative then switches time periods and stories, moving to the myth of the Madagascar Lily—a monster child born under an eclipse. The child grows into a woman, part human, part plant, who eats everything. At night she turns into a stunningly beautiful woman whom the men of the village find impossible to resist. When she begins having hybrid children of her own, the villagers poison her and her children. Her mother curses the villagers, and they also die. Nothing grows in the village for years and years. Between the stories of the hothouse and Madagascar Lily lies the story of the colonialists. Annalies, daughter of a European colonialist and his native slave, is also a hybrid. She falls in love with the water clerk Zaduk and bears his child. He is sent away before learning of his child. To avoid becoming a slave, Annalies becomes a brilliant cook. Surrounding their story of heartbreak are vignettes of European settlers and travelers who came to the land. In the play’s final scene, Anna Mai and the Curator discover that they are related—Anna Mai’s grandmother is Annalies, while the Curator’s grandfather is Zaduk. Just as they make this discovery, the eclipse is completed. A flower blooms in the semidarkness. It is a rare hybrid Lily that no one has seen before. It appears to be from Madagascar.

This play has an obvious postcolonial theme. The characters and the land are inexorably interwoven as each symbolizes the other. The play flows well between the three stories, and its theme is an important one. It is definitely for the more mature student, and would work extremely well when coupled with a workshop or talkback session that explains any ambiguities.

The cast consists of six women and six men. It requires several props, but the set requirements are minimal. The author states that it is her “intention that *Madagascar Lily* be approached theatrically and imaginatively rather than literally.”

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B 8-12 Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

Set in ninth-century Ireland, *Blood Lines* tells the story of the conflict between the Celts and the Vikings. Its central character is Freydis Godsdottir, a girl who is a mix of the two races.
The line between the two races is drawn from the beginning of the play as Freydis’s father, Ulfrek Godwinsson, meets to form a trade agreement with a Celtic prince, Niall Ui Neill. The two leaders attempt to maintain peace between their people but know it will only be temporary—too much violence has passed between them. During the treaty meeting between the Celts and the Vikings, Ulfrek’s son Olaf becomes increasingly suspicious of the Celtic leader and his counselor, a Catholic monk. Olaf challenges Niall to a storytelling contest in which each of them tells stories from their cultures’ mythologies. Time passes, and a year later a group of Vikings attack a monastery, killing Niall’s advisor. In retaliation, Niall leads his army to kill Freydis and her family. As the play closes, Freydis and the other characters remind the audience of the elements of Viking culture that have left their mark in Ireland.

In the introduction, Roger Ellis makes the comment that historical plays “work by means of comparison.” Unfortunately, the amount of research required to show the parallels between contemporary America and the Vikings and Celts of the ninth-century would be similar to that required for a production of Shakespeare. For example, a flashback requires actors to speak the regional Irish dialects of A.D. 795. It will also be challenging for the director to communicate to an audience of American youths the significance of the Irish words and place names listed at the beginning and end of the play. Without a deep understanding of the place and time, the audience is left with the plot, which is thin, and violence, which is abundant.

Blood Lines is performed by four men and one woman. It calls for a unit set consisting of a back cloth painted with a Viking long house, a sail suspended from a central pole, and a Celtic cross, “which can be assembled quickly from interlocking sections.”

Ott, Gustavo. Minor Leagues. B+ 7-10+ Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

Vanessa, a fourteen-year-old in a nondescript South American country, is selling a very rare baseball card to Goosy, an American dealer. Vanessa moves in with Goosy and demands that he get a Christmas tree and buys her presents. He does so, always with his eye on the card. Slowly they develop a lovely platonic relationship. Vanessa becomes the child Goosy lost—his son Michael who died. Goosy becomes a parent to Vanessa, whose mother is in the hospital. After two weeks together, an undeniable bond has formed, and each has
changed the other’s life. Goosy finally arranges to have his son buried (he has been cryogenically frozen for six-years), and Vanessa makes enough money to care for her ailing mother. As Vanessa walks away, Goosy realizes that the card she sold him is a fake. He tries to stop her, but then decides to pass on the con.

The characters are deeply symbolic, each representing their country in all its greatness, arrogance, and failings. The characterizations are nevertheless very deep and real, creating a moving story about friendship and understanding. Voice-overs telling the “score” between Goosy and Vanessa tie the action to their original connection: baseball.

_Minor Leagues_ has a cast of two men and one woman. All the action occurs in a five-star hotel suite.


_A- 8-12_ Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

Alternating between dialogue and testimonial, fiction and fact, _Race_ addresses the American “national obsession.” The cast comprises of a black man and woman and a white man and woman. The characters mix “generic dialogue”—the embodiment of stereotypes in both races—with true stories dealing with racism. Talk of white people who aren’t racist, but don’t want to live by black people, is interspersed with the story of Mamie Mobely, whose son, Emmett Till, was killed by two white men because he said one of their wives was attractive. The men’s trial lasted an hour and a half; they were acquitted. A story of a white girl who, in the last year of nursing school, couldn’t get a scholarship because it went to a Hispanic girl with less qualifications is related. Another story is told about a member of the Ku Klux Klan who was forced to work with a black woman demonstrator. He learned to love her as a person and is no longer a member of the Klan.

This is a fascinating play. It flows very well and offers a powerful look into race relations without exploiting the problems of society. It is a very honest look at how people really feel about the race issue in America. This play is best suited for high school students, but could work for mature middle school students as well. The play addresses its important, vital subject with respect and reserve.

_Race_ has a cast of two men and two women and requires a chalkboard but no set.

_Sandburg, R.N. Convivencia_. 41 pp.

A+ 6+ Reviewed by Nathan Christensen

As Christian armies conquer a Spanish city, three young people from different religions discover their shared humanity. A Muslim boy named Ma’el is driven from his home by Christian soldiers. He flees to the Jewish quarter of the city, where a girl named Ytza befriends him, giving him food and one of her brother’s robes. Disguised in the Jewish robe, Ma’el returns to his home in the Muslim quarter of the city and discovers a young soldier, Nando, rifling through his family’s belongings. Dressed as a Jew, no one thinks Ma’el is a Muslim, and he is safe from the soldiers. Ytza, disguised in a Muslim robe, enters the Moorish quarter of the city and discovers Ma’el’s mother, Mah’di, who is looking for her son. Meanwhile, Nando is employed in the service of the King and Queen, but his conscience forces him to run away when he learns that the King and Queen have publicly announced that all Jews must either convert to Christianity or be executed. Ma’el finally discovers his mother at Ytza’s home, where she has come to rest. Soon, however, Christian soldiers arrive to drive out the Jews who will not convert. Because Mah’di is dressed in a Jewish robe, the guards refuse to believe that she is Muslim. Ytza and Ma’el find Nando, who is planning to go to sea to avoid punishment by the King and Queen. Ytza and Ma’el convince him to risk his own safety to help save Mah’di.

Sandberg is very successful in creating the theatrical world of _Convivencia_. Razmab, a storyteller, ties together the stories of the three young people. Razmab moves through the story invisible to the characters, expressing their feelings and thoughts. The characters express their situations through symbolic, stylized dance. The tightly plotted story combines with music and movement to create a beautiful and moving
story. The prime weakness of the play is its conclusion—the final transition from speaking to dance feels awkward and seems to undercut the climax, but careful staging could easily overcome this.

Convivencia has a cast of five men and two women. Its set should represent the different ethnic regions of the city.


B+ 7-12Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

Gori wakes up and heads furtively to the balcony as though she is expecting someone. Her sister Kalo sees this and intercepts her. Throughout the play there is an air of expectancy. Each sister returns again and again to the balcony while trying to keep the other away. They begin to do their work; they fall into a game in which one of them plays the role of “mother” while the other tells her things she’s never been allowed to say. The audience learns that the girls hate the life style they have been forced to live as women in a patriarchal society. Kalo claims Gori gets everything because she is beautiful, but Gori insists that it is horrible to have men love her only for her body and not her mind. The girls’ deepest desires come tumbling out. They want to fly away from the life they are living and gain a kind of freedom. They talk of a man, a prince, who will rescue them.

Kalo finds a letter Gori had written to an admirer. Kalo teases her about it until Gori finds a letter that was written to Kalo, and the girls discover that both of their “princes” is the same man—they have been duped. They cry and curse their ill fortune but realize that if they are ever going to escape they will have to do it on their own. They break down their door, only to discover that it’s just as suffocating outside as it is inside. They keep going, however, determined to find freedom.

Balcony is a play about freedom and independence. It is a symbolic piece as the girls represent the two types of womanhood valued in a traditional patriarchal society, beauty (Gori) and service (Kalo). This is a very strong play, showing the value of trusting one’s self. The cultural differences are both problematic and enriching. It takes a mature student to fully appreciate this piece.

Balcony has a cast of two women. It is set in their bedroom, which looks like a birdcage with a balcony on the back.


A- 7-10Reviewed by Lindsay Adamson

The opening scene is a Columbus Day pageant at a generic American school. However, as the students recite their lines, the ghost of the island, Chief Guacanagari, appears, calls the real Columbus, and asks him to help him reenact the famous voyage as it actually occurred. Columbus readily agrees, and the two, with the help of the students, begin to present the true account of the voyage.

Searching for the City of Gold, Columbus and his crew land on an island, where they meet Guacanagari and his son Caonabo on the beach. When Columbus and his crew ask about the City of Gold, Guacanagari thinks they are asking for food. Finally, he realizes that the explorers are searching for gold. He and his son draw them a picture of the mountain the gold came from. The explorers think they are telling them to go on to the next island, so Columbus builds an outpost, leaves some men behind to run it, then sets sail with the remainder of his crew and Caonabo, who thinks they are just going to the mountain. When they begin to sail, Caonabo believes they are trying to kidnap him and escapes. The explorers don’t know what they did to frighten Caonabo, so they continue searching. When they find no gold on the second island and realize it must have really come from the first island, they believe Guacanagari had tricked them. They return to his island, only to discover that the men they had left behind had been killed. When they question Guacanagari, they find that their men were killed because they had raped and pillaged throughout the entire island.

This play examines how history is formed and makes one question how they understand the past. Columbus is not portrayed as evil, but he is certainly not a hero. The macrocosm of this epic
centers in the microcosmic relationship of Columbus and Guacanagari. Misunderstanding, greed, racism, arrogance, and ignorance are all in the forefront of this piece. It is a good play for older students who are able to understand the value of unanswered questions.

City of Gold has a cast of five men, but can have transgendered casting. It has no set requirements, but utilized props and costumes.

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A - K-6 Reviewed by Kathy Bruder

After trying to paint Alice’s portrait, a painter in a waistcoat casually walks into the picture frame. Astonished, Alice discovers that she can walk into the painting as well. Upon entering the painting, she spots a hurried white rabbit in a waistcoat consulting a pocket watch. Alice is intrigued when he walks into a peculiarly small door and continues to search for him. Alice finally becomes small enough to enter the door. Her journey continues as she earnestly tries to find and follow the White Rabbit, meeting several unusual characters along the way. Alice hears about an authoritative Queen and determines to meet her to find a way home. Eventually Alice’s opportunity comes, but she is accused and put on trial by the entire Royal court. When Alice is found guilty, everyone unjustly blames her, chases her, and tries to chop her head off. The White Rabbit helps Alice escape back through the painting. Once again, Alice finds herself with the painter, who finally explains to Alice that the painting is all “in the eye of the beholder.”

This imaginative and familiar story is trimmed and adapted to accommodate the stage well. The set can be as simple or as complex as the director wishes, with most of the action occurring on a unit set. Several props and costumes are needed for most of the scenes, and a minimum of six actors (three male and three female) is required. With the exception of Alice and the painter/White Rabbit, all the other characters can be played with a minimum of four actors, who play a total of twenty-four different roles. Although the play covers a fair amount of the original book’s characters and action, the director should be aware of the off-the-wall nature of the dialogue and quick scene changes.

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A - K-6 Reviewed by Kathy Bruder

The Brothers Grimm and Mother Goose Inc. have been fairy tale business rivals for over two hundred years. The Brothers Grimm always use twisted tactics to gain an edge in the fairy tale industry, and a perfect opportunity appears when Mother Goose leaves her responsibilities to Simple Simon so she can go on her long-awaited vacation. Simple Simon makes poor financial decisions that cost the company money and attempts to compensate by agreeing to broadcast a live television special with the Brothers Grimm. At the broadcast, they successfully mix up several fairy tales until Mother Goose arrives and saves the day. In order to encourage children to use their imaginations, Mother Goose and the Brothers Grimm agree to combine to form the ultimate fairy tale company—Goose and Grimm Inc.

Familiar fairy tale characters are given new dimensions and comic twists in this entertaining musical. Only minimal props and a simple set are needed. A relatively simple piano score accompanies the script; many of the catchy songs provide solo opportunities for a handful of characters. The script calls for six male, nine female, and twelve other actors who can be either male or female. Overall, this musical provides a fun way to encourage kids to read books instead of watching T.V.

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B+ K-5 Reviewed by Kathy Bruder
Walter M. Pinkle, known as Mr. Pink, is astonished to discover that “Pink’s Salvage,” his beloved junkyard, will be shut down by the city because it is not in compliance with the new beautification ordinance. The local neighborhood children are equally disheartened to discover that their playground will be taken away. Determined to help their friend Mr. Pink, the children are inspired by their leader Patch to work together to spruce up the junkyard. The children are disappointed when Mr. Pink is upset to find his junkyard filled with brightly colored tire swings and seesaws. Yet, after Patch explains to Mr. Pink that they were just trying to help, he forgives the children and the junkyard is saved—changed from “Pink’s Salvage” to “Pink’s Park.”

Although shallow characters present an anticlimactic storyline, this thirty- to forty-minute musical provides a fun opportunity for children to sing and dance. In addition to Mr. Pink and Patch, any number of children can be cast in the ensemble. Although several props are needed for some songs, the set remains the same throughout the play. The play has simple dialogue and lyrics, and a prerecorded tape and a piano/vocal score are available from the publisher if needed. In addition, the script requires the choreographing of several dance numbers.

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