



Old plays made new

Adapting royalty-free scripts for a new generation

BY MAUREEN JOHNSON

I know that if you are a theatre teacher who has been teaching for any length of time, you must have on your bookshelf an anthology of short plays from the forties, fifties, or sixties written for children. Your memories of these plays might be fond but when you begin to read through them, you may discover that the dialogue and situations can be very dated and almost impossible to do with your students today. Don't give up on those old scripts. This past fall my students took some of those plays, breathed new life into them, and performed them for an appreciative young audience.

I found the anthology we used at a college book sale at Oberlin College in May. I was very lucky to find a number of theatre books, and the price was a dollar for an entire bag. (Most libraries have discount book sales and are excellent places to find old theatre books.) This particular anthology was entitled *Little Plays for Little Players*, a collection of fifty non-royalty plays for children edited by Sylvia E. Kamerman and published by Plays, Inc. in 1952. The preface of the book explained that it contained plays for production by students in the primary grades, with plays about good health, safety, and manners that could teach young children in ways that were "unique and effective." I agreed and put the book in my brown paper bag, paid my dollar, and went home. I stashed the books I purchased on the bookcase in my attic.

I got a call in August from the prin-

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cipal of our lower school. He asked me if this fall one of the drama classes might be interested in performing a play about manners or being thoughtful and kind to each other. He thought that the plays would begin the discussion of several themes he wanted to run throughout the year in the lower school. I told him that we'd be thrilled to prepare a performance. I immediately went looking for the book I bought in May.

Play selection

I found the book and picked six of the very short plays to produce: *Friendly As Can Be*, *Green Leaf's Lesson*, *The Good Health Trolley*, *All Houses Are Haunted*, *First Aid First*, and *Doctor Manners*. (All of these plays were royalty-free, but if you try the same thing yourself, check the anthology you are using to see if royalties must be paid rather than assume it comes free.) These six plays had themes that matched the lower school themes. *Friendly As Can Be* is described by the authors as a play about kindness to animals. It shows the right way to take care of a dog. *Green Leaf's Lesson* tells about a leaf who is afraid to change colors. One little leaf discovers that if there are others around to help you out, change can be a good thing. *Good Health Trolley* is about a bus ride where each character talks about good eating habits and exercise. *All Houses*

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Are Haunted is about home safety, *First Aid First* is about how to take care of a playground scrape, and *Doctor Manners* is about the importance of good manners.

All of these themes were current and relevant and exactly what the lower school principal wanted for our young students. But the plays themselves had characters with names like Strange Boy who said things like,

No. I guess not
but don't be snooty.
I've come to warn you
I feel it's my duty.

Or Maizie, a girl, who said things like,

I must be polite at table
For it's surely very rude
To make other folks unhappy
So they can't enjoy their food.

Could I get my ninth and tenth grade students excited about performing these plays? And what could we do to update them while remaining true to the playwright's original intentions?

The more plays I read, the more I was reminded of a gentler time, the 1950s—a time of television sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. But the themes of kindness and good manners are still applicable to today's youngsters. The musical *Seussical the Musical* also came to mind. This musical takes some tried and true Dr. Seuss stories and brings them up to date with some lively dialogue and songs. "Horton Hears a Who," "McEligot's Pool," and "Horton Hatches the Egg" are some of the tales told in *Seussical*. When I saw the show this summer, I fell in love with it. There is a wide variety of song styles—blues, ballad, gospel—and the acting style is broad and energetic. Maybe my Acting One class of ninth and tenth graders could use these styles to bring their scripts to life in the year 2004. When a play was written in rhyme, we would make it sing-song. When a character was afraid, we would make him shiver and shake. When a situation was cheerful, we would pour more energy

into its portrayal. We would try to "Seuss-ify" them.

Costuming and props could also help. Wild, colorful tie-dye T-shirts and crazy hats could be added, and props could be made larger than life for most of the plays. We decided to give it a try.

The first read-through

The first read-through was a bit difficult at the start. My students groaned at certain lines and laughed outright at others.

"Mrs. J, how old is our audience going to be?"

"Grades one, two, and three."

"Okay... It might work."

"Trust me."

And they did. I showed them the tie-dye T-shirts and talked to them about the props. When we read *Doctor Manners*, I mentioned larger than life stethoscopes and scales and they began to get excited about the possibilities of doing such a show. Eventually, it became a challenge to Seussify as much of the performance as possible.

We began by rehearsing all six plays. Once we got them blocked, we timed them. They were running an hour and a half and we only had forty-five minutes. The program had to be cut. The students discussed which plays they wanted to perform. In their opinion, the best plays were the ones they had the most fun performing. I had to agree because when they were having fun with the material, the energy of the play was infectious. This was important because even though the dialogue might sound old fashioned, the upbeat delivery of the message would engage the young audience.

They chose to do *The Good Health Trolley* as the opening, which ran ten minutes; *All Houses Are Haunted*, running fifteen minutes; and *Doctor Manners*, also at fifteen minutes.

The set and the rehearsals

For the set we used blocks of varying sizes. For the first play, the blocks became a trolley car. For the second, we piled them on top of each other, creating multiple levels for the performers to use, and for the third, the blocks

became a doctor's office and waiting room. The performers changed the set at the end of each play, and we used some high energy music to cover these changes. If cast members finished their assigned changes quicker than others, they improvised a crazy dance to help enliven the waiting time.

During the rehearsals, the students worked very hard on making the play larger than life. The Seussification of the play involved broad gestures, emphasis on rhyming lines, and facial expressions that resembled the illustrations in Dr. Seuss's storybooks. The rhymes in *The Good Health Trolley* like "Skate you must if fun you seek / Exercise! You can't be weak," and "Fresh clean air so it's sung / Destroys bugs in your lungs!" were delivered with cartoon-like expressions. Some students added funny voices. Exaggerated gestures were added. Imaginative blocking used all of the levels that the blocks provided. Anyone who dropped in during our rehearsals would think that we were doing some kind of circus act. But we all worked hard at refining and polishing the shows to make sure the message came through.

All Houses Are Haunted used exaggerated posing at the end of each speech delivered by an actor playing a household object. (The students played things like cooking pots and irons.) When the cooking pot said, "I'm a long handled cooking pot. / I and my handle get very hot," the performer would pose and freeze with her hand outstretched at the end of the speech. The iron would say, "I'm an iron. If you leave me connected / your whole future life may be sadly affected," and then pose with a look of exaggerated sadness on her face.

Doctor Manners was a gentle play that had a variety of youngsters going to the good doctor to get cured of their bad manners. This became the students' favorite play. It had the funniest props. We used an oversized tongue depressor, a scale with a large arrow that pointed to "RUDE" or "NICE" and an assortment of futuristic, Star Trek-like devices used to dispense treatments for good manners. By making the props larger than life, the whimsi-

cal style was enhanced. In *Seussical*, a very large magnifying glass is used to show Whoville, and a very large fuzzy ball is used by Horton to represent the piece of fuzz that he finds. These huge design elements inspired us to do the same with our props.

The students used improvisation to exaggerate the blocking, too. For example, the entrance of the character named Maizie began with a simple walk-on. With each rehearsal, Alexia, the student who played Maizie, added more movement, first skipping and then running into the room. The entrance matched the out-of-control character she was playing but this blocking was not part of the original script. Alexia also jumped up and down on the scale and the arrow would point to "RUDE" with every jump. The normal way of entering a room or standing on a scale was magnified to Seussify the play. It was a wonderful addition to the play and something that the audience laughed about and commented on.

All the students added more and more exaggeration with each rehearsal. At times, I had to step in and refine these additions to make sure the message was still being conveyed. But the funniest student addition was a commercial that was added to *All Houses Are Haunted*.

Two students, Zach and Ethan, worked on a mock-commercial for a CD on home safety. This commercial was performed in a break we added to *All Houses Are Haunted*. Zach wrote up a preliminary script. As he and Ethan performed it, the entire group made suggestions for improvised songs that could be added to the CD, making it wilder and wilder with each addition. One song was "Don't Put Your Finger in the Socket," and it was sung in a suave, Frank Sinatra-style ballad. The cast then added some screaming girls who sighed with every line sung. "Little House of Horrors," "Don't Drink That Poison," and "Twenty-Four Hours of Ambulance Sirens" joined the tracks on the CD. The students added broad, musical theatre-type blocking to one, and loud funny noises to the others. By the day of performance, the commercial had been "Seussified" and grown

to five of the funniest minutes in the show.

Performance day

The day of performance was fraught with last-minute adjustments. One cast member had the flu, and there were lots of acting one jitters. Would the young audience like what we had done with the plays?

The first, second, and third graders filed in, the lights dimmed, the music began and the cast entered the space with energy. The tie dye T-shirts filled the stage with color and the audience moved with the music. The audience never lost sight of the real messages of the plays, and they had a blast with the acting style that brought the plays to life.

A group of plays like this could be toured to elementary schools, nursing homes, and day care centers. If touring is out of the question, you might invite some local elementary schools to your theatre and perform it for them. Some teachers at our school remarked that they thought parents would like to see the shows because they were very funny and the students had done such a great job with their performance, so a showcase isn't out of the question.

Reflection

As I look back on the experience, I would allow more rehearsal time for the show. The acting one students were not familiar with this way of performing. It took time to layer the performances with the exaggerated acting style. More rehearsal time would have given the class more time to improvise and we might have added more crazy commercials to the show. Perhaps by reading some of Dr. Seuss's stories, the class would have understood from the beginning what I meant when I said I wanted to Seussify the plays.

I also wish I had had a better idea of how long the six shows were running. It was disappointing to the students to do only three of the six shows. I now have a better idea of how long the shows might run with the addition of all the whimsical elements.

More time was also needed for the creation of the larger than life props

used throughout the show. Next time, I would add at least two class periods for prop creation. Overall, the project needed more time; we would give this project two months of rehearsal instead of one.

After the performance, the students reflected on the project. Some students said that they were skeptical about the script at the first read-through but that they were really proud of the final performance. They said that it was fun to try to discover ways to make the 1950s plays work in 2004. They liked learning a new style of acting and really liked the improvisational quality of the performance. Other students liked the colorful costumes and big props. Everyone loved working on the commercial for the CD about home safety.

We got feedback from the youngsters in the audience when they wrote a thank you note to the cast. They liked the CD commercial, the wild costumes and the “funny acting.” Their teachers discussed the performances in their classrooms and told me that the themes of the plays came across loud and clear. Good health, home safety, kindness, and good manners were taught in a way that made a very strong impression on their young students.

The Seussification of our plays worked very well. My acting one class gained experience with a new performance style, and they discovered how to dig into scripts that seemed remote and dated at first and make a performance that their audience would appreciate. They honed their improvisation skills and even added original material together. It just took a little creativity and imagination to see that these old plays could be a lot of fun for everyone.

My next project? There have got to be some old detective plays from the 1940s around here somewhere...

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