

Folktales and Superheroes



**Stories About Writing and Directing
Children's Theater**

By Betsy Lee Bailey
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Folk Tales and Superheroes – July 16, 2013

One day my little kindergartener son brought home a book from the school library. He insisted that I read it to him that night. It was called **Momotaro, a Japanese Folk Tale**. In the story, demons were continually coming to steal the food and trample the fields of the poor villagers. An old woman prays to have a son to raise who could become the hero to the village. The River Spirit brings her a son in a peach and she presents him to her husband who later trains him in the martial arts. The grown-up Momotaro goes off on a quest to fight the Oni monsters. He is joined along the way by a monkey, a dog and a pheasant who help him (*in their fashion*). They fight the Oni monsters and return victorious.

As we were reading the story, I realized that 5-year-old boys can readily identify with superheroes. **Momotaro - A Tale of Bravery** is really the tale of a Japanese Tom Thumb, Superman, and Jackie Chan combined in one. A pretty potent combination! So, of course, I had to write a little children's Musical for my youngest actors using this unique and interesting folk tale.



First of all, I needed to fill out the population of the story and decide on how to stage it. Japanese Kabuki Theater techniques are time honored and fairly easy to stage since they are so stylized. I decided to employ a few simple Kabuki staging techniques such as a fabric river, character masks, and dancers who interpret a movable forest. Since I knew that I would have many more girls than boys in my

cast, I had to create some memorable female characters. So, what do little girls like more than playing with baby dolls and dancing anyway?

Amazingly, this script and score came together very fast. The music is based on the pentatonic scale and Asian instrumental sounds, but constructed with American Musical Theater sensibilities. We created a large Dragon Castle set, had the cast members create their own fantasy character masks, used dance props such as Chinese ribbon wands and tree branches, and we were set for our performance.



I have always been surprised that this little-known story was so well accepted by an American audience. The children, especially the boys, loved learning the Martial Arts slow-motion fight scene. The girls loved singing and dancing by the rippling fabric river with their baby dolls. They all got to sport their own creative character masks at one point or

another in the show. And they learned a bit about another culture's most famous folk-tale. So, if you need an interesting show for your school or Children's Theater group, try *Momotaro - A Tale of Bravery*.

There will always be a special place in my heart for little 5-year-old Superheroes!

Cooperation is the Key – July 20, 2013

As a part of our jobs, we as adults often attend in-service training workshops. We learn all sorts of things from best practices in our areas of expertise to how to use the copy machine or where the first aid kit is located in the office. Sometimes the trainer will set up trust exercises to help build teamwork. Learning to **COOPERATE** as a team is as important in small companies as in the larger corporate world.

Working with children to get them to learn how to cooperate and work together can be quite a challenge. Young children can be impulsive and self-centered. They need to have experiences to help them look beyond themselves to the needs of others. There are many ways to help children learn to cooperate -- team sports, group projects at school, chores around the house -- and of course, **CHILDREN'S THEATER**.

Doing plays and musicals that are engaging and fun can be a wonderful way for children to learn to do their parts, work as a team, and come to realize that people are counting on them. They can learn that when each person says their line, or sings their part, or dances in their place on the stage they are **COOPERATING** to create a wonderful performance. Their efforts can delight the audience and bring the satisfaction of a job well done.



The story of **Stone Soup** is all about **COOPERATION**. When the traveler comes through the town, the villagers at first refuse to offer him a meal. He goes from house to house getting the same reaction: "Oh, go away! We don't have enough for ourselves. Why would we share with a complete stranger?" But then he comes up with an idea that helps

the villagers understand that if they pool their resources they can all be better off. And as it says in the song:

*"Working together helps one and all.
It can make the hardest job seem quite small.
Cooperation is the key,
The key to getting things done."*

When Applause Isn't Enough – August 9, 2013

We all like validation. A pat on the back for a job well done. A nice compliment when we have done something special. A smile. A kind word. A thoughtful remark about our comment. These are important to help us feel connected to other people and to boost our self esteem.

A second show of a run is usually the hardest. Coming off of a successful opening night, the performers tend to struggle to pump up to the same energy and focus level of the first show. As a director, I always try to think of things that will help. This spring I directed the show "**A**

Successor to the Throne" at an Elementary School. The kids were so excited, bouncing off the walls and hardly contained in their skins for opening night. Then they waited all weekend for the second show on Monday night and for a third show for their peers during school the next day. What they all seemed to want to do was talk about comments from opening night. I shared with them some accolades that I received and then all their hands went up. They nearly all had something to say. So, we just took some time to share.

From listening, I realized that very few of these children had ever had an experience doing a musical play like this. Apparently, the shows the school had done previously had all the standard elements - a handful of leading characters, two or three ensemble numbers sung to a prerecorded accompaniment complete with vocal tracks, and only enough parts for a small cast --- but no one, including administrators, staff or parents, really expected very much. The previous shows were mediocre at best, but adequate enough for an after-school club activity.

What these children were telling me was that they were so pleased that the show had enough meaningful parts for 50 kids and that no one person was the star. They all felt important to the telling of the story. They each had many jobs to do



throughout the show that kept them very busy. They learned some acting techniques and dance steps and they did their own singing!

The comments from the audience and parents to me were much the same. The audience was delighted with the music, and the dancing, and the colorful costumes. They were amazed at how well the children sang and that they could understand every word. Many people said they had read the book **The Empty Pot**, so they knew the story, but they were thrilled to see how it came to life with so much added depth and colorful characters.

The children continued to give wonderful, polished performances

for their next two shows with very few fumbles. They were troupers. I was gratified to know that they got more than applause. I am so pleased that their audiences gave them the accolades and thoughtful critiques that they needed to validate their hard work. **It's true, sometimes applause is not enough!**

What I Love About Live Theater – March 31, 2014

What I love about live Theater, especially Children's Theater, is that each production is so different. Indeed, each performance can be VERY different. The children are just learning how to make their performances consistent. So, sometimes, what just happens can be brilliant but never happen twice. **That's what makes live theater so interesting!**

Opening night was happily a success! This has been the fourth production of "Never Cry Wolf" that I have personally directed.

Different kids, different age ranges, different skills, different stage, different set pieces, different costumes and props, and still the show held up and delighted the audience. It makes me happy that the adults in the audience get the jokes even if the kids don't. And, as I told the



children, **the Little Lambs are the real stars of the show.** They are so cute, the audience can't help but love them! I was pleased that the children remembered their choreography and made their quick changes to make their entrances and only dropped a couple of lines throughout the entire show! *(That is a big, big deal.)* And the one mishap with the scenery was handled deftly by our quick thinking parent volunteers and avoided a disaster. All in all, it was a fun and delightful show. Let's hope we can repeat that energy for two more shows!

I like to watch the audience during the show. I can tell if all is going well by how intent the audience is watching. This famous Aesop Fable is familiar to most of them, so they think they know what to

expect. It is fun to watch them as something unexpected comes along. They lean forward in their seats and look around to try to take in all that is happening on stage. As much is told through action as is through language. The songs and characters performing them are new, too. So when I notice the audience tapping their toes and unconsciously singing along, I know the message is coming across loud and clear. **And by the last chorus of the finale song, the audience is practically doing the choreography along with the actors.** That is a mark of smashing success! That's live theater! Everyone takes part -- including the audience! I love, love, love it!

Endowing Characters with Unique Traits – May 7, 2014

One of the most enjoyable parts of expanding and retelling a story through Musical Theater is endowing the characters with fun and unique traits. As I was thinking about how to expand the cast for my new show "**The Tale of Chicken Licken**," I pondered how to add length and meaningful parts for a larger cast, say 20 to 30 children. The story itself only calls for six characters:

Chicken Licken, Henny Penny, Loosey Goosey, Ducky Luy, Turkey Lurkey and Foxy Loxy.

(I decided not to use Cocky Locky because I had something else in mind for Mr. Rooster.)

In order to get a performance out of young children, they really

need to have their characters brushed with broad strokes. That is to say that any drama or comedy has to be easily understood and modeled from some performance they would have acquaintance with. It helps to be able to relate their actions, vocal inflections, and attitudes to some characters they already know or are familiar with. Then you help them dig deeper to bring out even more through their own gifts. I decided to give each of these main characters alter egos from classic movies and TV characters - Lucy, Mae West, Maverick, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Sam Spade and the Keystone Cops. *(Many of the mannerisms of these*



characters are much imitated in cartoons, and thus familiar when modeled for the children.) The children would not know these characters by name, but the director should and thus have a starting point upon which to base the coaching.

The other difficulty with children's theater is **creating a flexible cast with many parts that could fit either gender**. Often, the girls outnumber the boys by a ratio of at least 2 to 1. But occasionally, the boys will not only outnumber the girls, but outshine them, too, in talent and ability. Since you never know exactly what the make-up of the cast will be for any given show, it is best to have a certain portion of characters that could be played by any age or either gender. So, I decided that the population of this cast would consist of the common fowl found in the typical English barnyard - chickens, ducks and geese with their chicks, ducklings and goslings. By using families of parents and children, that sets up familiar situation comedy to tap into.

In the youngest age group there will always be the children who want to be in a show because they love to sing and dance, but do not necessarily understand **how frightening it can be to be up in front of an audience**. Before actually casting a show for this population, I like to spend time doing acting games. Through observation of the children's' improvisation, movement and interaction with each other I can usually tell which children will ultimately be too shy to actually perform and which ones are good candidates to actually come through with a performance. Then I can cast with confidence the main characters and put others into groups where they can feel more secure.

I think my favorite new characters for this show are **The Buebirds** - Dotty, Betty and Patty - loosely based on the trio singers of the 1940's such as the Andrews Sisters. They have the songs that move the story along and provide the narration for the story within the story. They always stand wing to wing. They move together, sway together, sing together and finish each other's sentences. They are jazzy and very sophisticated and besides that, they are my favorite color. I



guess they are really based on my mother and her sisters (*The Thompson Sisters*). If there are any characters that I happen to know well, it would be the Bluebirds! It has been a delight writing for them!

An Evening of Fun – Nov. 24, 2014

So, the two shows for the Elementary School were performed last Friday evening. We did not know exactly what to expect in terms of audience or back-stage help or even if the lights and sound would function. Turns out that many parents volunteered unexpectedly at the last moment to help dress the actors in their costumes before the shows. Fortunately I had some trained helpers that could guide those parent helpers in just how to help.

The janitor had set up 100+ chairs and we figured some of the smaller children could sit on the floor close to the stage. Word must have gotten out, though, because people kept coming and coming. We had to keep scrounging for more and more chairs. Some teachers graciously opened their classrooms and organized volunteers to transport more chairs for the audience. I was impressed by their swift thinking and the volunteering spirit of the parents. They simply stepped in and set up the chairs and afterwards made sure they were quickly put back in their original places. Many hands made light work. They even helped strike the set and pack up the costumes and props while I managed striking the sound equipment.

The first show, "**The Musicians of Bremen**," was the one I was most worried about. (*Note to self, make sure to ALWAYS schedule a dress rehearsal closer to the actual performance, NO MATTER WHAT.*) This little cast did not get the benefit of a dress rehearsal the day before the performance, and it showed. The children's timing was a little off because it had just been too many days since they had run their show. But the parts they remembered looked good and they had an appreciative audience.

The second show was "**The Tale of Chicken Licken**." These 2nd graders had the benefit of rehearsing almost daily during the school day for several weeks. The children knew their lines and songs and dances very well. In fact, they knew each other's parts cold and could have easily switched parts or filled in for missing actors. We almost had to do

that because a few of the actors had been sick during the week. But they came through like real troupers and the SHOW WENT ON! I was very pleased with the efforts of all of these students. Most of them had never been in a production of any kind ever before. More importantly, they each stepped up to take PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY for making this show the best it could be. And I hope they build on that idea of taking personal responsibility in the other parts of their lives from this point on.

Naming Characters – Dec. 3, 2014

One of the most interesting and consuming parts about writing a new play is creating and naming the new characters. I am currently working on a new play for the upper Elementary Graders, 4th-6th (ages 10-12). The story that has intrigued me is one from the Tales of the Arabian Nights. It is a story that I only recently became aware of. It appealed to me immediately for three important reasons. **First, it is not a love story.** (*It is dangerous to have a love story or even anything close to a love story for this age range.*) **Second, it has plenty of the elements kids get excited about** - magic, mystery and adventure. **Third, it has the potential for providing meaningful characters for a large cast.**



Kids love portraying characters that have individual names and some sort of backstories. Who wouldn't? here is nothing very exciting about being Guard #6 or Dancer #5. It is much more satisfying to portray a character with a name and a reason for being -- at least for part of the time. I try diligently to give each child a named character for their featured role and then, have them fill additional parts in the Ensemble. This plan does not always work, but I continue to try anyway.

Why write for a just a generic Troupe of Roma (*or Gypsy*) entertainers, when you could create Barim who plays the guitar, Mona

and Nadia who dance, Jamileh who tells fortunes, Ghalandar who does magic tricks, and Najid who has a trained dancing Bear named Bobak. I will give the children a little information concerning their characters and hope that feeds their interest to go on to fill out more of the backstory for themselves.



Where this story (*in the translation I found*) follows just a few main characters, a Children's Theater piece needs to be expanded to tell the story through dialogue and action and songs and dances involving many characters. That gives me the opportunity to create and name many new and unique characters. I love stories that come from exotic historical settings. There is such a richness in the cultures and languages of these places. And there is no richer or more colorful setting than that of Ancient Persia. The more I do research into ancient customs and architecture and designs and musical styles, the more exciting it becomes. And, for me, it is just plain fun to go through the lists of Ancient Persian names and their meanings to decide what fits each new character. That's when those characters become real to me. They suddenly get a life force of their own and I get inspired by the energy of their emerging personalities.

Naming characters in a new play can be very exciting. You never know exactly how the characters will develop and shape the story or just how they will drive the plot along. Four scenes and three songs into this project and the ride is becoming very interesting! Wish me luck!

Pearls So Rare – Dec. 27, 2014

Over the past few weeks I have been working on the script and songs for my newest musical **“Parizade’s Quest – A Tale from the Arabian Nights.”** The story, as it was told in the version I was working from, had a lot of backstory explained at the very beginning. This wallowing through information really slows down the plot. I had to find some way to include the necessary information, but keep the momentum going. I



decided to cloak much of the backstory in mystery and only reveal a little at a time. The other problem was to create a satisfying culmination for the finale song. One of my daughters read my first draft and suggested that I use the symbol of the precious pearls as a unifying element. So I went back and tried to include "precious pearls" in the plot at important junctures so that when I used it at the end, the message of **"Pearls So Rare"** would tie the whole story together.

Another problem of creating a piece of theater is to decide which characters need to meet the audience through their own theme music. I decided that the Weeping Queen definitely needed her own beautiful theme song **"By Morning's Light"** to help the audience become more sympathetic towards her. Nobody likes to be hit with sadness right at the beginning of a supposedly happy musical. Yet, for the plot development, the Queen's sadness plays a pivotal role. It worked out that her musical theme could also be used for the **"Sultan's March"** music by adding martial drumming. That was appropriate in order to establish that her loss was also the Sultan's loss.

What age range is my target cast? That is an important question to keep in mind while writing the script and songs. Fortunately, I am writing for a school cast with about equal ratios of boys to girls. I also know these kids pretty well because I have directed three plays at this particular school already. I have not pre-cast the show, but I have kept the particular skills of these kids in mind as I have developed the characters. Besides, I had made a promise to give them a show this spring featuring lead roles for as many girls as possible! So, by writing the show based on this story, I have provided good roles for **Parizade** the lost princess, **Jamileh** the Storyteller, **Shazelle** the Speaking (*and tap-dancing*) Bird, **Kazhira** the Weeping Queen, Beheshteh and **Chaman Banoo** the jealous sisters of the Queen, **Mona** and **Nadia** the Gypsy dancers, **Rasma** the Housekeeper, and assorted Maids and Servants and Dancers. I am hoping that some talented dancers audition for **"Parizade's Quest"** so that the dance numbers can be mounted close to how I have imagined them.

My goal in writing for Children's Theater has been to tell stories that have meaningful messages. Titles include stories about **Bravery, Integrity, Sincerity, Cooperation, Work, Honesty, Loyal Pets** dealing with **Fears** and **Change** and **Yearnings**, and now the

paramount importance of **FAMILY**. The "*Pearls So Rare*" as presented in "*Parizade's Quest*" have to do with precious and loving Family relationships. This Musical is turning out to be a wonderful adventure story filled with memorable characters and singable songs and most of all --- a reminder of the importance of **FAMILY**!

Parizade's Quest – Jan. 30, 2015

Pearls so rare!
Pearls so rare!
A family has been reunited,
That's cause for joy.
We are so excited!
We'd be delighted
If you decided to stay___
On this happy day!
On this happy day!



These are the words to the chorus of the Finale song of my latest Children's Musical "*Parizade's Quest, a Tale from the Arabian Nights*." The special message of this story is about the importance of **FAMILY**. As always, writing the show is a mind game, but putting it into production is an adventure!

As a writer, you think and think and plan and plan and try to envision all the parts and pieces of the finished production. You design everything from the sets, to the dances, to the costumes, to how the characters talk and move. But then reality sets in. The biggest culprits are limitations of budget and time and of course the actual abilities of your very young actors. How wonderful to have some validation in getting a lot "right" about what you can actually manage to accomplish. But it is sobering to realize what simply will not fly. So, you pare down, regroup, re-imagine, and go on!

The happy thing is that the kids seem to like the songs, the story, and the idea of the costumes that they haven't actually seen yet. Now to get them to memorize their lines, learn their choreography, master the singing of the songs, and accomplish some real acting to tell the story. The first few weeks are so rough. Nobody really has a handle on what to expect. They don't know each other. They don't know their characters.

They have so much work to do. And as the creator and director of a brand new theatrical piece, I just don't have enough words or time to explain what is inside my head.

The good thing is that they have no pre-conceived notions about the story or their characters.

The bad things is that they have no pre-conceived notions about the story or any reference points for understanding the characters, setting or interpretation of the story.

How come they can't just do what I see them do during my dreams at night?

These are kids, after all. Ten, eleven and twelve year olds. There are just a few who have had any experience doing a play or dancing or singing in shows. Fortunately, those kids can be the lead characters and demonstrate to the others how to conduct themselves. Now, if I could just split myself into three or four extra people, we would have time enough to work with all the children on a more individual basis. Don't have that kind of luxury, though. We will just go on the best we can. Perhaps, I will think of creative ways to "steal" extra time in other ways. **After all, what is the first law of the theater? The Show Must Go On!**

Come With Me... – March 26, 2015

*Come with me... and you'll be
In a land 'cross the seven seas.
Over desert and sands
Through an endless expanse
To a place steeped in history.
Come with me... and you'll see
Scenes of danger and mystery,
Comedy, tragedy, parody, melody
All.... On an Arabian Night! ----- Arabian Night!*



In the opener of the newest Musical from BaileyKidsMusicals.com, Jamileh, the storyteller, weaves a tale of mystery and suspense all on an Arabian Night. She tells of a beautiful Queen who still weeps for the loss of her three babies. She does not know that her two scheming sisters

had stolen the babies and floated them down the canal sentencing them to an uncertain fate, while telling the Queen that they had each died at birth. The Queen's pitiful state is a trial for the Sultan. He tries to cheer her, but still she weeps. He finds that going off on frequent marches with the Royal Guards to patrol the borders helps to ease his own pain of loss.

The children, meanwhile, are rescued by the Keeper of the Sultan's Gardens and lovingly adopted. Torab and his wife had been childless for years and thought it a great blessing to find and raise these three babies. Bahman, Perviz, and Parizade grow up with all of the education and advantages that a member of the Sultan's Court could provide, until Torab and his wife die. The three teenagers are left with a country estate, their own education and training, a string of pearls for Parizade, and a mystery. Torab's will also states, "When you look at these pearls, remember that I loved each of you as if you were my own." What could that mean?

Behold! Let the mystery unfold.

Begin! Let this tale of adventure spin!

Come with me... and you'll see ___Scenes of danger and mystery,

Comedy, tragedy, parody, melody ____ All.....

On an Arabian Night! ----- Arabian Night!

Best Supporting Actress... – April 8, 2015



In thinking about casting a nefarious character, my heart is often troubled. Whoever is cast must be of sufficient self-esteem to realize that I am casting them strictly by their acting abilities and not because I think they have evil traits. Fortunately, a pair of just such actresses were available for the roles of Beheshteh and Chaman Banoo, the two jealous sisters of the Queen, in "**Parizade's Quest.**" These girls needed to portray jealousy, and craftiness with a hint of comedy during the course of the play. The audience need not have sympathies with them for their evil deeds. In fact, in the end, their banishment should prove to be satisfying to all.

And yes, I was glad they got a nice ovation for their hard work

during the bows. They gave wonderful performances. So kudos to Kaylin and Candace for being such great Supporting Actresses! You both did a great job!

Antagonist...villain....comic relief... yeah, the supporting actors. Where would the story be without these important roles? Where's the mystery, suspense, and comedy? The plot of a story is mostly served through the doings of the supporting players. It is all well and good to have fine lead players, but without equally good supporting characters, they would have nothing to play off to make them look so good.

Too bad that supporting characters and villains get such a bad rap in children's theater. Without them, the heroes and heroines would not shine. The contrasts between the character traits and individual choices of the protagonists and the antagonists are what make live children's theater so meaningful and instructive.

My goals have been to share stories where GOOD triumphs over evil, where LOVE conquers all, and HOPE springs eternal. Yes, these goals may seem old fashioned, but they are eternal truths and must be championed, especially for impressionable youth. And yet, how can good overcome evil if that choice is not offered in the first place? Hence the need for the villain.

Strong Female Leads – April 7, 2015

In my experience with Children's Theater casting calls, the overwhelming majority of applicants are **females**. Also in my experience, these talented and often-times well-trained dancer/singer/actresses are vying for the same one or two prominent roles in the play. How heart-breaking it is, also, when the pretty little girls are asked to play male lead roles because not enough boys showed up for auditions or because there simply were not enough good roles for girls in that production. Knowing this predicament, I have constantly been on the lookout for stories that could be adapted to feature five or more strong female leads in important roles.

"Parizade's Quest" is just such a story. The play opens with a storyteller (*female*) reciting her story to a master storyteller (*male*). He

gives her some pointers and tells her he would like her to start over again but this time they will try out the story on "these good people here" (*audience*). The audience dutifully applauds to give their encouragement, and **Jamileh** begins again. Master Ghalandar promises to be with her and lend support throughout the retelling. In fact he, he inserts more than **Jamileh** actually expects -- *"Why not, it is an unexpected twist. You want to lead the audience on adventures in the mind and just when they think they know what to expect --- you surprise them!"*

The character of **Jamileh, the storyteller**, however, goes on to control the entire story including jumping in to play other characters to move the plot along. The actress for this part needed many skills, not to



mention having a great memory. Because she was included in nearly every scene, she had no choice but to have the entire show memorized. Fortunately, just such a talent appeared for auditions. Sixth grader **Ellie** gave a stellar performance as Jamileh, the storyteller, the Gypsy dancer and fortuneteller, the Old Woman, and was the glue that held the whole production together. She is quite the triple threat -- a beautiful singer, actress and dancer and she even learned some tap dancing (*new skill*) in order to do the Finale.

Models and Inspiration – April 6, 2016

Hard to believe, but it was one year ago precisely that a friend told me about the story of "**The Speaking Bird.**" She said that it was a tale from the Arabian Nights stories that she had only just become aware of. She had been struck by the notion that it would make a great Children's Theater play or better yet, a musical. I happened to be looking for a new project at just that moment. She liked the piece because it was not a romantic "love" story, but a reuniting of a family "love" story. When I read it, I liked it because it had great elements that make for good theater: mystery, comedy, magic, fantasy characters ---



and a bonus for children's theater --- the opportunity for good roles for more than one GIRL. **A beautiful "weeping" Queen, a "lost" princess, a clever storyteller, two jealous sisters, Gypsy dancers, and the magical Speaking Bird.**

Creating a fantasy character that must be acted by a human can be a daunting task --- unless you have a great model for inspiration. One of my friends has a bigger than life persona and a rare and unique personality. I informed her frankly one day that I intended to model a character for my new play after her. And, in her inimitable fashion, she answered, "Absolutely! I have always thought that I would make a great character. You'll have to invite me to see the show!" So, with permission granted, I set off to give Shazelle, the Speaking Bird the funniest lines and the sassiest attitude possible! Thanks, **Anne-Marie!**

But, then there is the casting dilemma. As a director, you wonder if you will have a young actress come to audition with the talent and ability to pull off such a character. Fortunately, just such a girl showed up. **Lizzie** was perfect for the role. She summoned enough inner "sassy attitude" to play this over the top character.

Here are the two of them together after the last show of "**Parizade's Quest.**" And as Shazelle, herself, says in the play, "***Girl, I am here to make sure the story is told right! I am the magic and mystery! Comedy, too!***" And she really was! This wonderful fantasy character was a pure delight!



"And trust me, honey! I am telling the absolute truth!"

Depending on the Weather – August 10, 2015

Outdoor Summer Theater Camp programs are always a bit risky...even in an arid climate. When we moved from Maryland to Utah a few years ago, I fell in love with a house that had a wide cement patio in the back that I envisioned would be perfect for outdoor theatrical performances. I had been doing Children's Theater for years and had given performances in utilitarian schoolrooms, church halls, and on the oddest stages imaginable. Here was a house that had a perfect stage area and a nice grassy area for the audience to sit. So, we bought the house.

The first show we did was actually produced and directed by my daughter and her friends, "**Never Cry Wolf.**" I helped with costumes and sets. They had pretty good weather...up until show time in the evening, that is. A big wind came up and started to blow the drapes and set pieces away. Some of us helpers jumped into action and grabbed the drapes and set pieces from behind and held on for dear life! That was a very long 45 minutes, but we kept the show from blowing away! (*Lesson #1 - Winds tend to come in by late afternoon.*)

The next summer, my daughter and her friends produced another show, "**A Successor to the Throne.**" This time the monsoon rains came mid-week and flooded the house and threatened the set pieces and drapes we were starting to hang. But by show time, the weather cooperated and the performance went smoothly. (*Lesson #2 - Beware of monsoon rains in Utah.*)

The first show I did in our backyard was "**Stone Soup.**" During the two weeks of rehearsals we could not have asked for better weather. Sunshine and cool in the mornings. What I did not anticipate was how hot the cement patio could be by the evening of a 100-degree day. The children were going barefoot and really had a hard time. The day before had been a perfect 75-degree day! They were real troupers,



but it was tough. (*Lesson #3 - Evening performances can be brutal in hot weather!*)

The next production I did in the backyard was "**The Tale of Chicken Licken.**" I figured that I would benefit from lessons learned in the past and have the performance in the cool of the morning. We encountered rain mid-week, but by the show time on Saturday morning, conditions were good. By all accounts, the audience and performers were not in discomfort during the show. All went well. (*Lesson #4 -That was a June performance.*)

This year, because of the Tabernacle Choir Tour in late June/early July, I elected to schedule the Summer Theater Camp performance for August 8th. I had been told that the monsoon rains usually did not come until late August/early September. Well, this year 2015 has been a very odd weather year. We had a mild winter with barely any snowfall, a wet spring, an incredibly hot and dry June, and monsoon rains in early August. I watched the weather forecasts like a hawk and hoped and prayed for good weather---at least for the show. We had rain storms that pulled our rehearsals inside during the mid-weeks, but fortunately my house could absorb the activity of the 27 "kidlets." But big thunderstorms with lightning, fierce winds and drenching rains were in the forecast for the weekend. As the day approached, we did not dare put up any of the drapes or set pieces until the danger of the storms had passed.



By midnight Friday the forecast changed and predicted sunshine and clear skies by showtime Saturday morning. My husband and I got up at 4:00 am and began arranging the drapes and sets. At 7:00 am my nephew came over and helped set up chairs and shade canopies for the audience. It was a lot of

work, but we got everything set up in time for the audience to start

coming at 9:00 am. The agreement I stated up front was that we would set up a few chairs but everybody else would need to bring their own or sit on blankets on the grass. It was so wet, though, that we laid out all the tarps we had.

We live in the shadow of a mountain. The sun did not shine over the mountain until 8:49 am precisely. Fortunately it did its work and dried things out on the stage sufficiently by 10:00 am that we could set up the sound system just in the nick of time. The 110+ audience members took their places and the show went on. **"Momotaro, A Tale of Bravery"** The kids did their parts as if there had been no worries at all. Whew! It was a miracle!

Elementary School Theater Skills Classes – Oct. 12, 2015

Have you ever had that realization that what you had planned for your students just wasn't enough? Well, I went into the project of teaching two **After School Drama Club classes** with lots of ideas about what to do for the different age groups. And then those ideas went out the window when I met the children for the first time. I have two classes. The first is for 1st and 2nd graders. The second is for 3-6th graders. I did not choose the age ranges. The older group kids are great. Turns out that I knew all of them and they are seasoned performers. We will do many things that will be fun and exciting.

The younger group, however, I did not know. There were seven girls and one boy in that group. After working two times with them,



it became clear that they needed a story to motivate them to learn acting skills. So, I bit the bullet and wrote them a little show. The script came along quickly. I decided to retell the Aesop Fable ***"The Ants and the Grasshopper."*** I needed the characters to have equal line loads and a few songs they all could sing together. It made sense to have our boy

cast as the Grasshopper since he is twice the size of any of the little girls. Besides he has a good singing voice and loves to move.

So, after a couple of days of writing now, I am to the point of polishing up the three songs. ***"The Ants Working Song," "Summer Loafing"*** (for the Grasshopper), and the Finale ***"Pay Now and Play Later."***

I decided to use the John Maxwell quote as the MORAL of the tale: ***"You can pay now and play later OR you can play now and pay later. Either way you have to pay."***

Since this is a **Theater Skills** class, I thought we could do an in-class Recital for the parents. Out in the hall of the school yesterday, I found a large flat cardboard box. I asked the custodian to snag it for me so that I can use it to create an Ant Hill set for this little show. The costumes will be very simple. I have some black T-shirts and knit pants for the girls to be "ants." I will make "feelers" with black pipe cleaners attached to little headbands. I have a green T-shirt for the Grasshopper and a green fedora hat to which I will attach green pipe cleaner "feelers." He will also have an Ukulele. I will also make a tiny golden crown for the Ant Queen and possibly let her have a cute royal cape.

P.S. Been thinking about how the class can perform this show as a Workshop production but put it on a Main Stage. Went to a thrift store Saturday and found a foldable screen that I think will help me tell this tale without much scenery at all, with just suggestions of props, and hints of costumes. Hope it will work!

The Ants and the Grasshopper – Nov. 3, 2015

This little musical, **The Ants and the Grasshopper**, came about in a burst of inspiration brought on by some desperation. One of the Theater Skills classes I began teaching this Fall had eight First and Second Graders - 7 girls and 1 boy. I was planning to just let them learn skills by working with Acting Games, short skits and songs, but it soon became clear that they needed a story that would catch their fancy in order to develop acting skills.

I quickly searched through many materials and decided that I just

needed to write them a show. Obviously, I needed to tailor the parts to the personalities I had. The boy had a great voice and could move. It made sense to cast him as the Grasshopper and give him some "Gene Kelly savoir-fare." The girls needed clearly defined traits in order to bring their characters to life. So, I gave each Ant one main emotional character trait such as "Effie, Miss Efficiency," and "Winnie, the Whiner."

When working with 6-7 year olds just one hour per week, there are certain things you just plan for. They will not remember directions from week to week, so you drill, drill, drill all of their **LINES** and **BLOCKING**. They tend to be shy and speak with small voices. So, you drill, drill, drill about **PROJECTING** the voice. They like **COSTUMES**, so you'd better have them! Costumes really help both the children (*and the audience*) imagine the characters and bring them to life. **CATCHY SONGS** are very important to a children's show. The songs are the loudest, brightest, and most unified part of the production. Better make them the best they can be. The songs must carry the setting, emotions, and message of the tale. The audience should be able to go out singing the songs with the kids on the way home. (*That's when you know you've done your job as a author and director.*)

The message of "**The Ants and the Grasshopper**" is taken from a quote by John Maxwell. He said, "**Play now and pay later, or pay now and play later. Either way you'll have to pay.**" Works perfectly for this wonderful Aesop Fable.



PERFORMANCE: These First and Second graders gave a darling premiere performance of "**The Ants and the Grasshopper.**" They donned their little costumes and used their props, sang their songs, danced their dances, and delivered their lines before an appreciative audience of family and friends.

Because this was an "in class" recital, we asked the audience to imagine the backgrounds and sets (*particularly the Ant Hill that was just a screen*). The children did not have to worry about problems that come with using a stage - lights,

sound, microphones, or curtains. They just performed to their best abilities. They stole the hearts of their audience.



In the end, the Grasshopper recommended to the audience that he had learned his lesson. Instead of always loafing and singing and dancing during the summer, he was going to make time to store up food for the winter. He learned that it truly is better to ***"Pay now and play later."*** The

Finale song was catchy enough that the whole audience joined in singing the reprise. What a fun show!

The City Mouse and the Country Mouse – Oct. 25, 2015

When choosing a piece for a class to perform, there are basically three options to choose from -- full production with costumes, props and scenery, etc.; Reader's Theater with no costumes, props, or even blocking; or Workshop with limited costumes props and suggestions of scenery as necessary. Depending upon the time constraints, your choice may be simple to make. In my case, the Workshop scenario was the best, and probably ONLY option.

I have been working with a group of eight 3rd to 6th graders in an after-school club Theater Skills class. These students have all been in shows before and desperately wanted the class to have a performance before an audience. The problem is that they have very few rehearsals to pull it all together. So, I picked a little 10-minute mini-musical for them that



would challenge their acting skills, but would be short enough that they could memorize lines and movement and songs and blocking within their very limited time constraints. The students will also be responsible for their own costumes, except for mouse ears and tails that I will supply. They have just a few more class periods to work. Hope they can learn quickly and work well together.

The story was already well known to them, "**The City Mouse and the Country Mouse.**" However, their challenge is to bring it to life with new characters and situations and to master speaking in a "Country" dialect. They are actually having fun experimenting with interpreting the lines with a drawl or a twang. My job is to allow them some free experimentation, gently guiding them to speak with just enough character, while maintaining clear enunciation for the audience's sake.

Another aspect of this Workshop presentation is to perform the piece without props or scenery. In fact, they will be performing on just the front risers of the stage. They will be the "warm-up" act for the main production (*which incidentally will have the scenery set up already for their show on the stage*). Their task is to interpret the story complete with songs and movement on the front risers through their excellent acting abilities. They think they are up to the challenge. They are raring to go. I wish them the best of luck!

Over the Briny Sea – Feb. 8, 2016

While doing research to begin writing "**The Adventures of Dick Whittington,**" I knew I needed to write an authentic sounding sea chanty for the sailors to sing. I came across the most charming description of what a sea chanty really was and knew in an instant that was what I wanted to recreate. The article stated that in the heyday of merchant sailing (1600-1800's), one of the most important skills a sailor had to possess was a ready singing ability. The sailors used songs to help them in their labors aboard ship. The tempo and rhythms of the songs



kept the routine hoisting and pulling chores synchronized and safe. The caller would sing out the verses and the crew would answer with the refrains. The verses could literally go on endlessly.

Now the topics of the authentic sea chanties I researched were definitely not appropriate for use with Elementary Schoolers. So I endeavored to come up with a topic that was G-rated and relatable to my young actors. I also learned that the sea chanties could be either in triple meter or duple meter. I elected to have the boys sing about sailing over the briny sea in 6/8 time. In the story, the ship is setting sail from England about 1600 to go trading in Morocco. I even tried to use some authentic nautical terminology. (*Not easy to enunciate quickly in rhythm.*) It is fun to hear the boys continue singing the song going down the hallway after rehearsal. They must enjoy singing it. The boys have been learning a little dance combination, too. All variations of walking, hopping, and changing directions. So far, so good. The movements seem simple enough that even the less coordinated look good doing it. Soon we will add the costumes and then we'll be in business.

Four Rehearsals to Launch Date – March 6, 2016

In two weeks, we premier "***The Adventures of Dick Whittington.***" Friday was our first trial run in costume. This was a real adventure. The two assistants did their best, but clearly we need more backstage help. Once the children understand how exactly to wear their costumes, things should go easier. My big idea for this show was to have the children wear one basic outfit and then don extra pieces to give them a different look in different scenes as needed. The problem was that the children did not remember very well the instructions I had given them as to what to wear and in which scenes. And the helpers really had no clue, either.

I don't know if this is because we live in the space age, but I have discovered that the majority of these children (ages 8-12) do not regularly **tie** or **button**. As I recall, in my youth, those were skills we had mastered before entering kindergarten. I guess everything now is velcro or stretch to fit. The big hold up for getting the costume pieces on and off is undoing buttons and tying scarf belts. If these kids don't master these skills quickly, I may need an army of volunteers backstage

just to help get the kids in and out of costume parts and pieces. And I thought it was such a simple costume plan.....

We have yet to paint the scenery and work with the body mics. But once we have the set pieces in place and can hear the dialogue and singing better backstage, we should be in business. Now if my backstage recruits come to the next few rehearsals, maybe my anxieties will diminish.

Our stage is difficult to deal with. The way the curtains are hung so close to the walls leaves no room for getting set pieces and props, let alone actors, easily onto the stage. We have to be very creative.

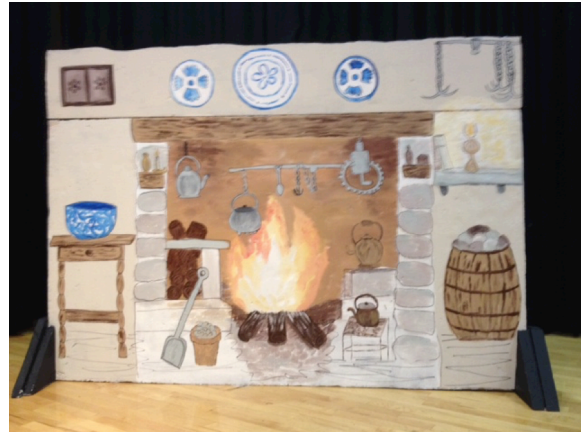
The other day, I went to see a very good production of "Seussical the Musical" done at another elementary school in the area. I could not help feeling envious. The stage had curtains that actually worked to let actors onto and off of the stage. They had good lighting and speakers. They must have rented not only the sound system, but a sound engineer to run it. They had at least 20 kids wearing body mics! And I was most envious of the fact that they had a lot of good parental support and 12 main helpers for the directors. They had a core ensemble of about 30 students and included another 40 students in the big numbers -- only 5th and 6th graders. There is a lot of talent in that school.

I kept thinking how nice it would be to have helpers and good parental support. Sometimes I feel like I am a committee of 1. Oh, well, the show must go on!

Sing-Along Experiment – March 21, 2016

Well, despite some last minute issues, the Premiere of the new children's theater production of "*The Adventures of Dick Whittington*" went very well. The grand experiment of having the audience join in singing some of the songs even worked better than expected. I think that sending a CD home with the actors actually insured that the families would learn the songs as well. The audience seemed to be very engaged and enjoyed being included in the action!

We were not without difficulties, however. Earlier in the day, I learned that the boy who had been working for a couple of weeks learning to pull the curtain would not be there for the show because he had a Scout camp out that night. So, one of the boys in the cast coerced another friend to take home a script and learn the cues. He did his best, but the Curtain cues were a little off. And two of the girls who had been working stage crew during rehearsals decided not to show up, so the two remaining stage crew people had much more to do. And a beleaguered stage manager got stuck holding up a piece of scenery during an entire scene because it had lost its supports during the set change. *(Cute set painting, though, thanks to Lynn Stallard!)*



At first, I was encouraged when so many adults came to help with "hair and make-up" before the show started. But it turned out that they all wanted to watch the performance. So we ended up not having enough helpers backstage during the actual show. Hence, the disheveled state of some of the actors who came out with costume parts and pieces on backwards or inside out.

The most heart-wrenching moment of the evening though was watching one of the lead characters try to sing when she had laryngitis. I ended up singing her solo while she acted it out. Poor thing! We hope her voice is back for tonight's performance!

Live theater at the Elementary School level --- gotta love it!

Amazing Substitutions – March 22, 2016

Our second performance of "*The Adventures of Dick Whittington*" was triumphant on many levels. I was amazed at how the cast supported the substitute players and helpers to make the show go smoothly. And kudos must go out to the children who stepped up to fill in for missing actors! We even had some brand new backstage helpers

that rose to the challenge and made our cast look good! Many thanks!



Cast of "The Adventures of Dick Whittington" - Provost Elementary March 2016

The list of casualties included one "mouse" with a broken toe, a dancer with a broken arm, a missing Narrator who had gotten confused with when her community children's choir concert actually was, and a family that had a funeral that day. Fortunately, the broken toe and arm did not keep the actresses from performing. The funeral was early enough that the family made it back in time for the show. But the choir concert did prevent our Narrator #3 from performing. Luckily, one of her friends that had been helping on stage crew stepped up to the plate, memorized the lines, cues and movements and did a great job filling in. And another dancer handily changed her position in the **"Spices and Perfumes"** dance to fill in for Narrator #3 so that there would not be a hole. Whew! But the great news was that our little actress with the laryngitis Friday night recovered her beautiful voice and gave a brilliant performance! Yay!

I don't think the audience noticed or could even appreciate what went on backstage to make this performance happen. I told the kids that these kinds of things happen all of the time in live theater. I told

them that this experience of juggling parts and covering for the missing actors was even something that seasoned professionals have to deal with. They were getting a real world experience. I was so proud of them that they hung together and made everything go smoothly!

Can We Help? – March 29, 2016

So, getting all of the props and costumes and set pieces and extraneous stuff made, assembled, painted, sewed or otherwise collected and set up at the venue usually takes me the entire course of the run. And I do most of it by myself. But getting all of that stuff broken down and packed away after the last show usually happens very quickly thanks to a lot of useful helpers. This time, though, our last show of ***"The Adventures of Dick Whittington"*** was during the middle of the school day and not that many helpers were available. In other words, the few backstage helpers just had time to gather and box up the costumes. That left me alone to pack up my van to take things home at my leisure. It took me about a week to finally retrieve and transport all of the stuff back to my house. *(Washing costumes, sorting, organizing and putting everything away may take another month!)*



My husband let me use his truck to haul away the last of the oversized items. I always tried to go over to the school during lunch times when I knew the door nearest the stage would be unlocked and the attendant teacher would be willing to hold it open for me as I hefted boxes outside. The last day, just as I was wondering how I would move

the biggest props and set pieces, a bunch of 6th grade boys suddenly appeared.

"Can we help?"

"Absolutely! You couldn't have come at a better time!"

They were happy and energetic helpers. They made short work out of loading the bulky props into the truck and moving the large flat sets down to the storage tunnel. But, the payback for me was how excited they were to tell me how much they enjoyed the show. When they looked at the set pieces, they were quick to tell me that they remembered the scenes that they were used in. "I know what this is!" they would say. Then they would proceed to sing the song they recalled from that scene. "This is....***There is too, too much to do! There is too, too much to do...***" or "this is... ***Over the briny sea, boys! Over the briny sea!***" They even tried to do the sailor's little jig!

These boys had not been in the show, they had just come to watch it several days earlier when we performed for the student body. I frankly was surprised to find that kids seated 'way in the back of the gym were engaged enough to follow the action of the show, let alone to remember the songs! That really gave me a thrill. They not only remembered the words, but got pretty close to recalling the tunes, too!

Kind of renews your faith in humanity, doesn't it?

Red Butte Gardens Summer Theater Camps – July 26, 2018

During June, my daughter Cami directed two of my Children's Theater productions at Red Butte Gardens in Salt Lake City. The camps are each just one week long, so the material had to be short and



manageable. She did "**Stone Soup**" with a group of 7-10 year olds and "**The Ants and the Grasshopper**" with 4-6 year olds. As you can see, the living wall in the "Orangerie" was a beautiful backdrop for the show.

The children provided their own costumes and helped create their own props and scenery. Here the Ants march in carrying their enormous corn kernels.

Each show needed to tie in with nature because the camps are associated with the Gardens. So of course, the instructors wove in learning about "nature" as the children learned their songs, dances, and lines. It was a lot to master in just 5 days! They also colored giant autumn leaves and glittered huge snowflakes!

I actually got to watch the second show. The little children were delightful. They sang and danced and delivered their lines amazingly well for having so few actual hours of practice time. They met for three hours Monday through Friday and had to learn three main songs and two dances. They also had to have time for doing their crafts and learning about nature and playing at recess. So, they probably only got eight hours of actual rehearsal time.



The message of the story is to **plan ahead** like the Ants do in gathering food all summer so that they have enough stored for the winter. The Ant Queen tells the shivering Grasshopper (*who desperately wants a place to stay during the winter*) that **"You can either play now and pay later, or pay now and play later. Either way you'll have to pay!"** (*John Maxwell quote*) The Ants invite the Grasshopper to entertain them while they dance and play all winter. He learns that the Ants drive a hard bargain! After playing the ukulele for them all winter, he decides that he will make sure he always plans for the future!

Kudos to the kids! They did a great job!