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Practical Plays

SECOND EDITION

By Pamela Marx

Illustrated by Cyd Moore



Good Year Books
Culver City, California



Dedication

To Mark and to my mom and dad

Educational Standards

Practical Plays contains lessons and activities that reinforce and develop skills as defined by the International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English as appropriate for students in grades 1 to 5. These include development of a student's ability to adjust use of spoken and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences, enhancement of fluency—i.e., the ability to speak with flexibility and mastery of a variety of grammatical structures and to adjust language for clarity and accuracy—and the building of a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, and appreciate the written word. See www.goodyearbooks.com for information on how lessons correlate to specific standards.

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Preface



Practical Plays contains nine plays for performance by students in grades 1 through 5. The subject areas covered include Halloween, Thanksgiving, Winter Holiday, Valentine's Day, community, the environment, Native American folklore, patriotism, and history.

These plays are designed to be staged or used as readers' theater. They are simple enough for children with no theatrical experience. They are structured so that one or two classes can perform them with each child learning just a few lines. Some children can pantomime. Some can sing. The plays accommodate the logistical limitations for play production that exist in many schools. Most of the plays can even be produced and performed within a classroom setting.

Fewer and fewer children are able to participate in theater experiences in their elementary years. This has resulted from ever-increasing budget cuts and teacher reporting and paperwork burdens that reduce available time. These plays are simple and straightforward. With a small amount of parental help and minimal cost, they should be capable of performance in most any classroom or youth enrichment program. And if you don't need to use them as staged productions, enjoy them as a community reading experience.

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Introduction

Budget cuts in the educational system at all levels are bringing down the curtain on orchestras, choruses, and teachers and aides who might ordinarily help support performing arts programs. Such programs offer important opportunities to build academic skills in the language arts as well as experience and confidence from the simple act of getting up in front of people. Despite funding and testing pressures that continue to shrink the availability of these programs, these opportunities can be among the most memorable—and most rewarding—that a student takes from his or her early school years.

Plays offer children a creative and involving way to build language arts skills. Skills developed through play texts relate to a wide range of standards-based language arts instruction, including development of a student's ability to adjust use of spoken and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences, enhancement of fluency—i.e., the ability to speak with flexibility and mastery of a variety of grammatical structures and to adjust language for clarity and accuracy—and building of a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, and appreciate the written word.

The value of plays as a teaching tool is immeasurably enhanced when they are designed, like the plays in this book, to be used either as readers' theater or as fully staged plays. Because there are generally enough lines in each play to enable each student in a class to have at least one line, students can read along and, with the occasional hat or prop, read or "perform" the plays from their desks. Alternately, if time permits, the

plays here are extremely simple to take from readers' theater to Broadway—school auditorium-style, meaning that students perform them on a stage with simple costuming, sets, and props.

A further demonstration of the value in performing and speaking is the fact that so many adults fear public speaking. The ability to express oneself in front of a group is invaluable to ultimate career success, regardless of one's chosen career path. Those with speaking confidence find opportunities open to them that are lost to others. The groundwork for ultimate success in this arena can and should be laid in childhood.

A young child's experiences can instill the confidence on which he or she will rely as an adult. A single performing experience cannot adequately provide this confidence. From repeated opportunities to perform and to speak publicly, a child gains the sense of accomplishment that comes from a successful experience as well as the important lesson that the world doesn't come to an end if his or her part doesn't go quite as hoped. Both ends of the experience spectrum are important.

Plays are also an important way to drive home social studies, literature, and even science lessons. Plays can breathe life into history lessons, spark interest in exploration of literary characters, feelings, and attitudes, and foster investigation of world cultures and customs.

A final, and perhaps, less tangible, benefit of classroom play production is the enhancement of the overall educational environment at a school. When one group of students performs for another,

both groups of children learn. The performers learn how it feels to put themselves on the line and how they want to be treated by an audience. They learn about responsibility and teamwork. They gain poise and confidence. The students watching the performance learn, not only from the content of the play, but they also learn audience skills. They practice their listening skills. They learn to be courteous members of an audience. They also internalize the notion that if the performing students can do it, they can do it, too. Sometimes appreciative classes write letters of thanks to the performers. Sometimes the principal visits the class to express thanks and give praise. These expressions of appreciation and the cross-pollination that comes from producing plays at a school help break down the walls that sometimes isolate one class from another.

Despite the standards-based value of play reading and production, performing arts programs are pushed aside as testing pressures—on both teachers and students—mount. This is truly unfortunate because, in addition to fostering attainment of standards-based skills, reading and performing plays develop other values and skills in children. Testing has a value, but it does not teach children how to problem-solve, work cooperatively, or understand the importance of teamwork, all valuable life skills that tests simply cannot evaluate or value.

Play Production

Practical Plays contains nine different plays designed to address the concerns and fears many teachers have about producing plays with children. First, their structures are flexible enough to accommodate different performance needs. Second, they are designed so that the scripts are easy to memorize. Finally, the plays contain historical, multicultural, or other educational themes so that you can integrate them into a classroom curriculum. The plays in this

book can be used by one class or by several classes working together. While much of the supplemental text assumes that teachers will be using this book, the activities and plays can be used with youth groups, clubs, and recreational programs.

Why are the plays in this book so easy to produce and perform? Several factors differentiate these plays from so many other children's plays.

- The plays in this book are flexible.

Flexibility is absolutely necessary when you attempt to produce an amateur play with children. Stages and staging areas vary in size and entry and exit paths. The numbers and ages of children vary. Desired lengths of performance differ. The plays in this book can be adjusted to meet these various challenges and needs. This is the primary reason these plays are called “practical.”

Sometimes youth volunteers produce plays as an after-school or student enrichment opportunity. In these settings, children in grades 1 through 5 might be involved in the same production. The plays in this book can accommodate such wide differences in ages. While the plays generally specify how many characters have parts and how the parts should be split up, these specifications are suggestions only. When your play involves children of many ages, be flexible about adding lines and parts, even if those parts are really only walk-ons.

When looking at the plays and the listed character parts, remember that if you have lots of available talent, you can split up many parts to make more speaking parts possible. In addition, you can increase the number of lines in any play by including student ideas for “ad libs.” Conversely, children can double up on lines if fewer actors are available, assuming the available actors are comfortable with memorizing lines. If they are not, feel free to cut out lines. Many lines in any play are not absolutely necessary to further the action. This

elasticity in the number of actors that are necessary and, conversely, that can be accommodated, gives you tremendous flexibility. This flexibility makes it simple to undertake the plays in this book.

- The lines in these plays are repetitive and easy.

These plays are written in such a way that the parts are not terribly demanding. Everyone, or nearly everyone, in a class or youth group can have at least one line, and you should encourage this. Sometimes children are hesitant about asking for or taking a speaking part. If, however, children know that everyone will be given a line, even the most reserved child will step up to the mark. The more children who take and perform lines, the more who receive valuable speaking experience. For those who have more than one line, the lines are largely repetitive to make learning easy.

- The plays cover themes that reinforce classroom curriculum and behavioral standards.

The plays cover a number of different themes. They can be used for either curriculum enhancement or as holiday program material. Each play sends a message, such as the value of cooperation, the fallacy of judging people on appearances, or the importance of thankfulness.

Costumes and Scenery

Don't let concerns about costumes and scenery stop you from doing a play. The plays in this book are easy to perform and stage. If you must sew costumes and paint scenery, you'll do fewer rather than more plays. Therefore, "the simpler, the better" is a good motto.

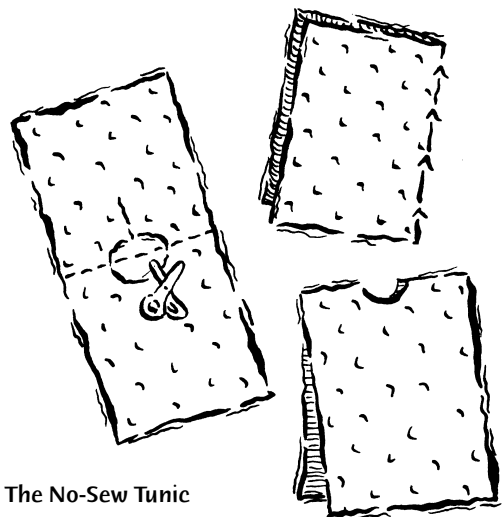
Scenery is largely optional. The audience focuses its attention on the actors and what they say. Accordingly, when time, help, and resources are limited (as they usually are), don't worry about scenery.

If it's a choice between limited costuming and having scenery at all, always opt for the costumes. Children love to think about their costumes—even if they are just deciding which of their regular clothes are appropriate for a character.

While costumes of some sort should always be encouraged, they need not be a big sewing ordeal. The plays in this book often call for children to be costumed in dark pants and white shirts. Where appropriate, you can add what is best described as a "no-sew" tunic to this simple costume.

To make the No-Sew Tunic:

1. Take approximately 1½ to 2 yards of a half-width width of fabric (18 to 30 inches, depending upon the overall width of available fabric).
2. Fold this piece of material in half widthwise. Cut a hole for the head and a 5- to 6-inch slit down the back to allow for easy wearing.
3. Use 40- to 50-inch pieces of yarn or fabric strips to tie tunics at the waist.



The No-Sew Tunic

This simple costume base can serve well in many contexts with only slight variation as to fabric, length, and cut. For example, a costume of dark pants, a dark no-sew tunic, white sleeves, and a white paper collar gives you an instant Pilgrim.



A Halloween Play:

The Haunting Contest

This play uses a Halloween story to relay principles of cooperation. It uses the classic Halloween characters of witches, ghosts, scarecrows, and jack-o'-lanterns to move the plot line along. In "The Haunting Contest," the Goblin Council must decide who will get the opportunity to haunt on Halloween. Should it be the speedy witches or the bright jack-o'-lanterns? Perhaps the noisy ghosts or the scary scarecrows should have the chance. The Goblin Council decides that, to have a successful Halloween haunt, all the goblins must work together.

Why Should Children Perform This Play?

This play takes typical Halloween characters and places them in a situation in which they must all work together to have a successful Halloween haunt. There are several reasons why you might want to perform this play.

First, many of the lines in this play rhyme. Others are in near-rhyme, providing the opportunity to discuss the difference. Performing a play that has repeating rhymes reinforces the sounds and rhythms of verse. It can reinforce classroom lessons on verse and rhyming as well as serve as a jumping-off point for written rhyming exercises.

Second, many of the lines are recited or sung by characters in groups in unison. As such, this play may serve as a less intimidating introduction to play performance than a play in which all children speak individual lines.

Third, this play involves three performance skills—recitation, song, and a limited amount of dance. As such, it is an opportunity for children to perform in several ways as part of one effort.

Finally, the theme is cooperation. Because Halloween falls early in the school year, this theme is a good one for that time of year. As children start the year, teachers try to instill a disciplined, but cooperative, spirit in their students. Through rehearsal and performance, this play will reinforce those behavioral standards at a critical point in the school year.

How Should I Prepare Children for Performing This Play?

Halloween is an exciting time of year for elementary-school children. They enjoy the art of the season, the stories, and the prospect of dressing up. Performing the play in this chapter helps channel some of that energy. Concurrent with the preparation process for performing the play, classroom activities can include thematic art, cooking, and math activities that involve the major character groups of the play and writing activities that reinforce both rhyming skills and creative thinking.

Performing Activities

The suggested activities in this section are designed to help children with their acting responsibilities in “The Haunting Contest.” When undertaken with some of the other preparatory activities suggested in the Introduction, they give students a good grounding in the performance skills needed for this play.

- 1. Sing Along.** Prepare children for the songs in this play. There are six different songs, which are all sung to familiar melodies, to move the action along. Each song’s words can also be chanted. To help children learn the words to the songs, ask them to memorize the lyrics of the songs for weekly poetry recitations. If the children will be chanting rather than singing the songs during the performance, ask that they prepare their recitations with inflection and dramatic effect. They can work in character groups to do this. If children will be singing and you have a tape or CD of the recorded songs, play this during art, craft, and clean-up times to reinforce the words and how the words fit with the melodies.
- 2. Character Pantomime.** Engage children in pantomime exercises that help them explore the characters in the play. Scarecrows should be wiggly; their arms shimmy and shake and their knees bend so that they undulate up and down. Witches stir a big pot of brew. Jack-o’-lanterns sway from side to side slowly and stiffly; they can adopt funny faces and such other attitudes indicated by the lyrics of their song. Ghosts sway and wave their arms in an eerie way. Take two- to five-minute pantomime breaks from time to time to let children work on their pantomime skills. As you identify children with particularly effective pantomime ideas, have them demonstrate these in groups of three or four in front of the class.



Character Pantomime