

Jack's Adventures With the King's Girl

by R. Rex Stephenson

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DEDICATION

For my brother Phillip and my Uncle Bill.

STORY OF THE PLAY

The play opens when a woman who is collecting mountain folktales asks the gentry family to tell her one. but they do better than that! They act out for her the story of "Jack and the King's Girl." When a Princess has a "witchin'" put on her, Jack decides to save her and collect the reward. It isn't an easy task, especially when he has to sleep over in a haunted house. Along the way he makes some friends who have special skills, however, and ultimately they help him meet every challenge the old witch throws at him. Of course Jack saves the Princess! The widely flexible cast members play a multitude of roles, from fantasy characters, to animals, to "inanimate" objects. The play can be easily performed by a touring company or on the simplest of stages. A variety of sound effects, both musical and man-made, add emphasis and humor. A song book and study guide is also available to enhance your performance. This play is based on the traditional "Jack Tales" folklore of the Blue Ridge Mountains, stories that folks told each other as they did their chores. The majority of the material is drawn from the Virginia WPA folklore collection. Winner of the IUPUI National Youth Theatre Award for excellence in play writing in 1997.

THE CAST

(Widely flexible cast from 10 to 24 actors.)

JACK: A teenage mountain boy.

BILL: Jack's older brother who is in his early twenties.

FATHER GENTRY: An older mountain man; Jack and Bill's father.

MOTHER (MA) GENTRY: An older woman; Jack and Bill's mother.

ISABELLA GORDEN CARTER: a female collector of folktales who is in her thirties.

ADDITIONAL ACTORS: Portray family members (Shauna, Jill, Sarah, Christine, Jason); Witch; Old Man; and many other fantasy characters and things.

By a slight change of costumes the actress that plays Ms. Carter could be any other character, or she could be seated stage right

and simply watch the stories. The goal is that any actor should be versatile enough to play several roles. Females can play a variety of the characters in the play, including Jack or most other males. Actors are also needed to portray trees, doors, beds, fireplaces, and any number of fantasy characters and things. This can be done by the clever use of their bodies.

MUSIC

Enhance your performances with the *Jack Tales Study Guide and Songbook* which includes the music for "Cripple Creek" and many other Appalachian folksongs as well as additional background information and games. Please contact the publisher to order.

PLAYWRIGHT'S PRODUCTION NOTES

A large, painted backdrop is suggested, but if fly space is available several painted drops could illustrate the Gentry mountain home, Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Witches' house. I seldom use realistic costuming, but dress the actors in a manner which suggests the mountain aspects of the story. Actors wear either red or blue-checked shirts; bright, contrasting suspenders; and dark dungarees. Hats are often worn to suggest character; thus See Well wears glasses and a top hat and Hardy Hard Head wears a mountain man's single-feathered hat, etc. Shawls are worn by the mother, and the father may have a cane. The witch should wear a wild-looking wig and can have a simple black cape.

While sets, costuming, and properties are kept to a minimum, sound effects are used throughout the show to augment pantomime action. Stair climbing, punches, falls, doors opening and closing, etc, all call for sound. Any number of instruments and non-instruments can be used to enrich and vary the sounds produced. I use a cowbell, a slide whistle, a washboard, a juke harp, a harmonica, a recorder, and sometimes an electric omni-chord.

In a likewise manner, we use folk music to set the tone, to reinforce the plot, and to strengthen the cultural aspects of mountain life inherent in the tales. Music, of course, is optional. The tales are fascinating with no music at all.

In this play, it is important that the skill and creativity of the actor be channeled toward a particular style of acting: the presentational approach. Whether portraying an animal or human, a fanciful device or a figure from real life, it is important an actor presents a role rather than a three-dimensional character. The aim is to

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communicate someone who is not a real person but rather a character that displays one robust dimension. The goal here is to be precise in the construction of the role so that immediately upon the actor's entrance, the audience recognizes that a witch or a dead body or an animal is being portrayed.

This does not mean the role lacks credibility or is a stilted caricature; the role must always be believable. And not only should the actor be believable, but he needs also to be visual and economical.

These qualities will go far in ensuring that *Jack's Adventures With the King's Girl* is presented in a fast-paced and uncomplicated manner.

It is left to the actors, with a few set pieces, to create location, setting, and passage of time; thus, no attempt should be made to utilize any type of realistic sets, costumes, or properties.

One further point: if story theatre is to achieve its fast-paced and uncomplicated style, the director needs to rely on the actor's ingenuity. In a clever and unexpected manner, the actor can create trees, fireplaces, bushes, show passages of time, or changes in location. Children are delighted by these small surprises; however, the director must make certain that there is sufficient detail to ensure that the audience will instantly recognize the character being represented.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

My daughter Janice first got me interested in the Jack Tales. She brought home a copy of Richard Chase's book and while I was reading the stories to her, I realized not only their dramatic possibilities, but also their unique ability to express a way of mountain living that was quickly passing away. I applied to the Virginia Commission for the Arts for a grant to research and develop the Jack Tales into dramatic form and spent the next two months collecting folklore material in the Library of Congress, in the Virginia WPA Folklore Collection, and with every storyteller and local historian I could find. The late Raymond Sloan, a former WPA collector, became my primary informant and he put me in touch with many mountain folk who shared with me not only their stories, but also their hospitality.

That was 24 years ago. The first production of a Jack Tale was to Mrs. Rabon's 2nd grade class, where we performed in the hallway of the Ferrum Elementary School. We have now performed more than 20,000 shows, not only in Virginia, but in elementary and secondary schools ranging from the South Bronx in New York City to small elementary schools in England.

JACK'S ADVENTURES WITH THE KING'S GIRL

(The stage is dimly lit. A large painted drop portrays the Blue Ridge Mountains. JACK enters with a trumpet, and he stops center and begins playing "Cripple Creek" as a means of signaling other mountain folk that it is time to make music! LIGHTS come up to reflect late afternoon. The other ACTORS enter one at a time. They greet each other and play their instruments. The instruments could include: harmonica, guitar, autoharp, banjo, spoons, wash-tub-bass, washboard, tambourine, cowbell, etc. At the end of song, BILL enters. {The music can be omitted.} When the lights come up the Gentry family is doing pantomime chores.)

BILL: That's enough music-makin' ya'll. We've got chores to do.

ALL: Ahhh...

(Improvise "Do we have to?" or "One more song?" etc. CARTER enters stage right. She talks to the audience. The GENTRY FAMILY and their friends all put down instruments and begin to pantomime doing chores. Some are shucking corn, peeling potatoes, doing embroidery work, re-soling shoes, snapping beans, mending the porch.)

CARTER: *(To the audience.)* Hello. My name is Isabella Gorden Carter and I have traveled all the way up here to the Blue Ridge Mountains to see if I can find anyone that can tell me a Jack Tale. *(Turns to everyone on the porch.)*
Hello.

ALL: Hi.

(EVERYONE waves.)

CARTER: Are you the Gentry family?

FATHER: We sure are. *(EVERYONE nods or gives other signs of agreement.)* Are you lost?

CARTER: No. I have traveled here because I heard that your family tells the old (*SHE crosses to HIM.*) stories and sings the old ballads.

FATHER: Yes, we do, but you see we already sang all those songs for that English man. (*To BILL.*) What was his name?

BILL: Cecil Sharp. About ten years ago we sang lots of the old songs for him.

CARTER: Yes, I know. That's how I came to hear about your family. My name is Isabella Gordon Carter, and I was hoping that your family could tell me some folk-stories, like you sang for Mr. Sharp.

BILL: Well, we done sang all the songs we know for Mr. Sharp. Besides, it's time for chores now.

MA: Yes. It's work time now.

CARTER: I came up here after the sun had gone down because I thought all your chores would be done for the day.

FATHER: (*Laughs.*) Nah, you see, here at the Gentry home we do chores all the time ...'cept on Sundays. During the day time the men go out and plow the fields while the women go down to the river and battle it out with the laundry. And at night we have to do all those drudgery jobs that didn't get done during the day.

(ALL of the Gentry family begins to pantomime doing the work they describe.)

SHAUNA & JILL: We're shucking the corn.

SARAH: I'm peelin' taters.

MA: I'm doin' a little embroidery work for Cousin Ellie's new baby.

JACK: I'm just sewin' the sole back on this here shoe.
(Sticks TOM with needle.)

TOM: Ouch! And I'm gettin' the sole sewn back on my shoe.

CHRISTINE: I'm snappin' beans.

JASON: And I'm mending the porch.

End of Freeview

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