Best Christmas Pageant Ever

By Barbara Robinson

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This theatre resource guide for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* is designed to be used with students before and after attending the Festival Theatre production. The guide includes information and activities that will increase student understanding of this and other theatrical performances. Those of you who have read Barbara Robinson’s literature for young readers will enjoy seeing the connection between her novel and play adaptation.

Art has a job to do in the development of a creative, concerned, caring society and our children are the perfect place to start. Our mission at Festival Theatre, to make the arts welcoming to all people as an essential part of their well being and for the vitality of the community, is at the heart of all that we do. Live theatre is an excellent way for students to experience the arts and all the inherent benefits, both on stage and as part of the audience.

You may reproduce any and all of the following pages to use as you wish. The information will help you make the most out of your visit to Festival Theatre. If you have questions or would like more information please contact me at 715-483-3387, groups@festivaltheatre.org or P.O. Box 801 St. Croix Falls, WI 54024. Enjoy the show!

Sincerely,

*Amy Klein*

Arts Education Director
Festival Theatre
Happy Holidays!

What holidays do you and your family celebrate? How do you celebrate them?

Thanksgiving. Halloween. The 4th of July. Birthdays. Christmas. Hanukkah. Holidays are special days that we celebrate in special ways called traditions. Traditions are customs and practices that are handed down one generation to the next. People celebrate holidays in many different ways.

Think of a holiday that you celebrate. What do you do to celebrate? Give gifts? Eat turkey? Race turkeys? We all have different ways of celebrating—even the same holiday!

Some traditions are religious. To many, the celebration of Christmas is an important religious tradition. To celebrate, some churches will stage a pageant in which they reenact the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. Someone reads the story of the Holy Family while actors pantomime to bring the story to life. Often, Christmas Carols are sung as a way of setting the mood and beautifying the pageant.

Christmas pageants began in the Middle Ages (500 AD-1500 AD) as a way to teach Bible stories to the people. People wore costumes, pretended to be Bible characters and sometimes used puppets. The word “marionette” means “little Mary.” Later, these plays left the church and were performed on traveling wagons called “pageants.”

Holiday: derived from “holy day”
Jesus Christ: Believed by Christians to be the Son of God who was born to save them.
Christmas: the celebration of Jesus’ birth
Holy Family: Jesus and his mother, Mary, and father, Joseph
Pantomime: Use of gestures and movement to communicate without words
Christmas Carols: Traditional songs about the the Christmas season. “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night” are popular.

Ask a grown up what they remember about Christmas in their childhood.
What are some family traditions that happened every year?
What Christmas traditions does your family have?
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is a play about some characters who are putting on a pageant. The story of their Christmas pageant comes from the Bible, the sacred writings of the Christian religion.

Follow the story map below told with lines from the Bible.

1. In the days of Caesar Augustus, a decree went out that all the world should be taxed.

2. Joseph went to Bethlehem with Mary his wife, who was great with child.

3. And while they were there, she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

4. And in that region there were shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an Angel of the Lord appeared to them. The glory of the Lord shone round them and they were sore afraid.

And, the Angel said, "Unto you a child is born." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host, saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men."

5. When Jesus was born there came three Wise Men from the East to worship him, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

6. Being warned in a dream that they should not return to their own country, the Wise Men departed another way. The shepherds also departed, praising God for all that they had seen and heard. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The Herdman children are the worst kids in the world. They lie, steal, cheat, swear, cause trouble and even smoke cigars!

Beth and Charlie Bradley have to put up the Herdmans at school, but church is safe—because the Herdmans have never been to church.

When Charlie Bradley brags about all the free dessert he can eat at Sunday School, Imogene, Ralph, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys decide to see what it’s all about.

With Mrs. Armstrong out with a broken leg, it’s up to Charlie and Beth’s mom, Mrs. Bradley to direct the play—Herdman’s and all!
From Story to Stage: Barbara Robinson’s
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

Author and Playwright, Barbara Robinson took her small town experiences and turned them into interesting and entertaining stories for young people. Here’s how she became a writer:

I grew up in a southern Ohio river town—Portsmouth—and that small town atmosphere has affected most of my writing.

My mother, widowed when I was three years old, taught school for forty-nine years in that same small town, and her major (indeed, only) extravagance was books. I grew up with, and quickly adopted, the notion that reading was the only way to fill up every scrap of loose time you could snatch.

I had the benefit, as well, of a wide variety of aunts and uncles and cousins, plus the extended family so common to small-town life—the neighbors, friends, teachers, bus drivers, mailmen, local heroes and local neer-do-wells, and even a local blacksmith... great stuff to feed the imagination.

I began writing very early—poems, plays, stories—and just never quit. I attended local schools and then, being both bookstruck and stagestruck, found a college—Allegheny College—where I could satisfy both passions.

I’ve been a short story writer, a playwright; an occasional poet, and finally and most happily, an author of children’s books... happily, because there’s no greater audience than boys and girls who read books and demand that those books be the most exciting, the most mysterious, the most touching, the funniest... the best.

When Barbara Robinson decided to turn her novel into a play, she had to make some adjustments for her story to work on stage.

She had to adapt her original story—or change it somewhat—rewrite dialogue or action or even leave out some parts to make it work on stage.

A Novel to a Play

Characters became members of the cast.

Words that are read in novels, became lines of dialogue actors will say on stage to show how their character feels.

Setting (where the novels takes place) becomes the arrangement of furniture and scenery on a stage called a set.

Props, or items important in the story are carefully selected and given to the actors to use in telling the story.

If you have read Barbara Robinson’s novel Best Christmas Pageant Ever, how do you think the Herdman’s rascally behavior can be shown on stage? What parts of the novel do you think are very important to tell the story how Robinson wanted it told?
Staging the Story

Theatre Conventions

When you attend a play, you agree to pretend. You agree to pretend that the stage action and characters are real—in other words, suspend disbelief. To present a story on stage, actors and other theatre artists often rely on theatre customs. These customs, or conventions, are accepted ways of acting or doing something on stage.

A Narrator is a person in the play who talks to the audience. The narrator sets up the story and explains what will happen or has happened. In the *Best Christmas Pageant Ever* watch for two narrators: the narrator of the play and the narrator of the *play within a play*.

Lighting allows the audience to see the actors and is used to create different times of day, moods, and places. Pay attention to the color and intensity of the light in this production. How is different types of light used in different parts of the show? How does it help to tell the story?

Choreography is planned dance movements that the actors follow. Actors spend a lot of time practicing their dance choreography so that they all move together and at the right times. These dance movements tell you a lot about the characters and help to tell the story. As you watch this play, observe what the choreography tells you about the Herdmans and who they are.

Putting a story on stage involves a lot of problem solving. Set designers, costume designers, props masters (people who gather props), and directors, use what they know and what they imagine about the script to create that tells the playwright’s story well.

Here are some problems that had to be solved for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. How might you solve them?

You may use lights, sound effects, music, actors, costumes, and props (objects) in your solutions.

**Problem 1:** The original story was written in 1972—almost 40 years ago! Festival Theatre’s production set the stage version in 2009 (today). What things would you use to make this story modern?

**Problem 2:** During the show, there are five telephone conversations that happen in different places, between different people but all on the same stage. How can these very different places be shown on one small stage?

**Problem 3:** Parts of the play are set in many different places— at home, at school and in church. How can you show a-play-within-a-play?

Before the play: Who do you think the narrator should be? After the play: Who was the narrator? Why do you think this character was the narrator?
**Listening for Lines**

*Playwrights* are people who write plays. They write lines of dialogue for the actors to speak. The dialogue gives us information about the story, the characters, and the way the characters feel about one another and their situation. The way the actors deliver (speak) their lines also tell you a lot about the character—something that makes the character convincing or **believable**.

*Actors* experiment with different ways to deliver their lines before they decide which best works to both tell the story and shed light on their character. Try delivering these characters’ lines in different ways (happily, angrily, fearfully, proudly, sadly, etc.)

“They steal, too—if you shake the birthday bank it doesn’t make a sound, because they stole all of the pennies out of it.”—Alice, talking about the Herdmans

“You think it’s so great to steal my dessert every day and you know what? I don’t care if you steal my dessert. I’ll even give you my dessert. I get all the dessert I want at Sunday school.”—Charlie Bradley, talking to Leroy Herdman

“We’ve never once gone through the whole thing and the Herdmans still think it’s some kind of spy story. It may be the first Christmas pageant in history where Joseph and the Wise Men get in a fight and Mary runs away with the baby.”—Mrs. Bradley, talking about the pageant

“Hey, unto you a child is born!”—Gladys Herdman

When you attend *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, listen for these lines and for how they are delivered and observe what the tells you about how the characters feel.

What do these lines of dialogue from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* tell you about the story? What do they say about the characters? About how they feel? After trying different ways of saying them, which line deliveries worked best? Why?
The Part that YOU play

To prepare for presenting *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, seven adult actors and two complete casts of youth actors, 28 in all, memorized their lines, practiced their movements and learned the shows songs. They worked with director Scott Dixon who helped them move about the stage and play their parts well. The costume and set designers planned with the director to create a look that was correct. The stage manager is ready to make sure everyone on stage and backstage does the right thing at the right time. All Festival Theatre needs now is YOU.

YOU

YOU have a part to play in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. You are the audience. Your part requires you to listen carefully and watch closely.

Please laugh or applaud if you enjoy the play, but remember that you and the actors are in the same room. Talking or whispering to friends during the performance will distract the actors and other audience members.

Help them play their parts well by playing YOUR part well!

Reacting to the Performance

Do you think the Herdman children were really bad children?

Mrs. Bradley got stuck directing the Christmas pageant when she really didn’t want to. Do you think she did a good job? Was it a good idea to let the Herdmans in the play?

What do you think when traditions change? Should we try to keep our traditions the same always?

What was your favorite part of the play?

Who was your favorite character?

What character do you think changed the most?

Opportunities for Arts Education abound at Festival Theatre!

For information on our Youth and Family Theatre Series, Creativity Workshops, Summer Creativity Day Camps, Artist in Residency programs visit [www.festivalthear.org](http://www.festivalthear.org) or contact Amy Klein, Arts Education Director at 888.887.6002
The Good in Everyone

The Herdmans seem to be the meanest kids in town--but are they really so bad? Christmas is the perfect time to think about the good in people--the good in ALL people.

Come up with a compliment (an expression of something good or praiseworthy) for all the Herdmans.

Ralph:

Imogene:

Leroy:

Claude:

Ollie:

Gladys:

Now, think up a compliment for each of your classmates. As a special gift, share the good things you thought of with each person!