

Drama in the Classroom



We made it work for us



*Oh, Miss, can we put on a play?
Let's put on a play—it'll be fun!*

Yes, I thought ruefully, it would be a welcome change of pace from the routine of a school day. But what about the time involved? What about the problem of scenery and costumes? What about the acoustics in the hall? What could we do without proper stage curtains? Where could I find a suitable play in a very short time? And would all this time and effort be finally rewarded by the attentive silence of a large audience of grade-schoolers?

All such doubts and concerns faded once the students and I got together to plan the play. After leafing through a few books, we decided on 'Rumpelstiltskin. A fairy tale, I believed, was most suitable not merely because fantasy has fascinated people throughout the ages but, more practically, because I could count on the audience's familiarity with the tale in case some of the action or dialogue on stage should fall short of perfection at the final Showing.

By Christine
Manolescu
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In about three hours I had adapted the story to suit Grade Four and I reproduced copies of the script in time for our first audition. It is essential to schedule about 50 to 60 minutes of uninterrupted rehearsal time every week. In our case, this time period had already been set aside for a specific activity and there was no difficulty. The school principal was enthusiastic about the venture and guaranteed one afternoon to be scheduled for a school performance at year's end. The rehearsals began in mid-February and continued weekly for four and a half months during the lunch period.

Our core group of actors numbered 10 to 12, but this can be varied to include a whole class, if need be. Simply include a few more housemaids who may or may not enter into the dialogue. The king may be attended by several footmen or palace guards who accompany him on and off stage. Other children may represent flowers, small animals or trees in a forest scene. A classroom is most suitable for the early rehearsals. Minor difficulties can be resolved quietly in privacy, without the distractions of other activities going on in the school. Stage facilities are not necessary, either. We had no curtains, props, or a raised stage area at first.

Teacher learns

One important thing I learned during casting was to distrust my preconceived opinions and not to promise any roles without proper auditions. One little girl in my drama group was always so full of frolics that I automatically cast her as 'Rumpelstiltskin.' I was amazed to see that on stage she became as stiff and

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wooden as a broomstick. It turned out that she felt intimidated by the amount of dialogue she had to learn and gladly gave her role to someone else, although we were well into the rehearsals.

And as those rehearsals progressed, the children brought their own artistic ideas to the play, which developed atmosphere and improved the scenes. A particularly good practical idea was to stick gold stars on the players' individual scripts to highlight their dialogue and help them stay focused. At some point, about six to eight weeks before the final performance, it became necessary to use the main assembly hall for rehearsals. We determined, at the start, from which side of the stage each player should enter and exit for each scene and we made sure never to vary these routines. Left of our stage area was a stackroom used for storing gym equipment. In this room we kept extra costumes, scissors, a stapler, a baby doll wrapped in a blanket and a cassette recorder. We also kept a few safety pins handy for emergencies.

In schools where the assembly hall or gym does not have a well-placed stackroom, nearby classrooms, bathrooms or corridors can be used instead. A chalkboard on wheels or a large wooden folding screen can serve to partition off a secluded changing area. Teachers (such as myself) who are not musically gifted can provide musical accompaniment using CDs and audiotapes. For our adaptation of the 'Rumpelstiltskin' play, we used short selections from Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake,' 'The Nutcracker ballet,' and other similar Classics.

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Voice training and elocution is a 'must' that has to come before all other frills. Without adequate voice training, a project of this kind can easily fail. I spent a lot of my time reminding students always to face the audience, raise their voice level, enunciate to the point of exaggeration, and never to hurry through a word. I always sat at the far opposite end of the hall to judge how well the players' voices carried. I harped on diction; later, I stressed feeling and expression.

When patience wanes

Occasionally, patience would wear thin and I would hear grumblings among the actors: *"My part's not important"; "I just have one little line to say"; "Don't think you're so smart because you've got the best part!"* Once, a temperamental little girl flounced right off the set and went home. Meanwhile, I despaired like a thwarted stage director and vowed silently to give her the sack.

"What do you mean your part's not important?" I'd say in exasperation. "What would we do without our housemaids or our trees? If just one person doesn't do his or her share, our whole play falls apart! We all depend on each other. Are you still going to tell me your part isn't important?"

There were also days when my entire group of amateur thespians arrived for rehearsals feeling gloomy and out of sorts. But these were not ordinary classroom situations and, over time, I learned to accept their gaiety, their gloom, their high spirits or their obstinacy with humour and understanding.

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When the time came to produce the stage scenery we used metre-wide rolls of white paper and mask-taped them to the blackboard. The children were divided into groups and painted two backdrop scenes simultaneously. We improvised the costumes without much difficulty. For example, the miller wore a loose white shirt under a sleeveless tunic. His cap and mustache were made from remnants, and he carried a stuffed pillowcase, imprinted with the letters FLOUR, over his shoulder. The king's robe was a long purple beltless lady's dressing gown with gold trim from neck to toe. The housemaids borrowed long dresses, with aprons tied over them. Of course, the actors regaled themselves with lipstick and rouged cheeks.

Backstage, I needed the assistance of at least one colleague to calm down the excited performers and get them changed between scenes. I also needed one or two trustworthy persons to detach each piece of scenery at my signal. However, I controlled the audiocassette player with pre-taped musical interludes and I directed the players on stage at the proper times.

When the 'big day' finally came, the hall was filled with well over 200 students from Grades One to Six. Nevertheless, one could have heard a pin drop. Meanwhile, our players were assembled 'backstage' trying to stifle their nervous giggles. On cue, the music started and the play began. Throughout the inevitable mishaps, the children pushed on undaunted, scene after scene. Defying the faulty acoustics, they confidently launched their voices to the far wall. The youthful audience barely stirred, silent and perhaps entranced, throughout.

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Looking back

Among the lasting benefits of our creative venture were the gradual, imperceptible changes that occurred in many of the children over the months of rehearsal and preparation. One slow pupil achieved, for once, some measure of success despite frequent academic failures and disappointments. Two timid, soft-spoken boys, whom I had expected to melt away with stage-fright, actually delivered a powerful performance on the final day.

Clearly, as a cohesive team, all the students had learned to put aside their individual fears, concerns and grievances for the success of a common goal. I am confident that, whatever book-learning may in time pass away, these children will remember their debut public performance as a significant personal accomplishment, a true milestone along the hazily receding path of their youthful years.



LAST CURTAIN CALL

CHRISTINA MANOLESCU is a former Quebec teacher and author of 'The Northern Isle of Dreams,' published by Three Trees Press, Toronto. A copy of her stage adaptation of the Brothers Grimm folk tale 'Rumpelstiltskin' is available free online from Prince Chameleon Press: WWW.PRINCECHAMELEON.COM. This feature article was revised and reprinted from the Manitoba Teacher Magazine, October 1982 © Christina Manolescu. Reproduction authorized



PLAY SCRIPT

Adapted from the original German folk tale, Rumpelstiltskin, retold by the Brothers Grimm in the 1812 edition of 'Children's and Household Tales.'

Characters

Narrator
King
Miller
Miller's Wife
Miller's Daughter, Gilda
Housemaid Cecilia
Housemaid Aurora
Housemaid Natalia
Palace Guardsman
Baby Nurse
Rumpelstiltskin
Royal Guests
Royal Courtiers
Trees in the Wood

Hint: *Place a little gold star beside your character's name on the page each time he/she speaks. This will help you to read your dialogue aloud.*

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SCENE 1: {The old Mill House} Narrator, Miller, Miller's Wife, Miller's Daughter, Gilda

Narrator: Once upon a time, a miller lived with his wife and his daughter at the old Mill house. (Narrator moves to the side of the stage)

Enter Gilda, the Miller's Daughter and her Mother, the Miller's Wife. They begin chatting and laughing together, preparing food, and rattling pots and pans in front of the open fire in the stone fireplace. Soon after, the Miller enters.

Miller: Well, my pretty daughter! You will never guess what happened today!

Daughter Gilda: What?

Miller: (grinning) Guess!

Miller's wife: (carrying a saucepan to the hearth) Don't be so silly. What is it?

Miller: (excitedly to Gilda) You've got three guesses, go on!

Daughter Gilda: Ah, you sold three sacks of flour to the mayor.

Miller: No!

Daughter Gilda: You found a gold coin in the stream.

Miller: No!

Daughter Gilda: I don't know! Someone brought you a special gift!

Miller: No! No! No! Listen, the KING came into the Mill today.

Miller's wife: (with a sour look) You're joking.

Miller: (louder) I said the King himself came today to inspect our Mill.

Miller's wife: I've never heard of such a thing!

Miller: Best of all, His Highness even asked me about my family.

Miller's wife: (scoffing) Hah!

Daughter Gilda: (sounding amazed) He did?

Miller: Yes, and I told him: Your Highness, I have the most beautiful daughter in all the world.

Daughter Gilda: *(sounding amazed)* You did?

Miller: Yes! And then I said: My daughter is so clever she can spin all this straw into gold!

Miller's wife and Daughter Gilda: *(together)* **WHAT!**

Miller's wife: You blockhead, you know very well she can't do that!

Miller: Never mind! It worked! The King wants you to come to the Palace today!

Miller's wife: *(to the Miller)* Are you mad?

Daughter Gilda: But Father, how could you tell such a lie!

Miller: It's just a little lie—it's nothing. Not to worry!

Daughter Gilda: But when the King finds out, he'll punish us!
(Gilda begins to cry)

Miller: No, he won't. When the King sees how beautiful you are, he'll forget all about it, you'll see!

Daughter Gilda: I can't—I daren't go!

Miller's wife: I won't let her go!

A loud knocking is heard at the outside door.

Miller: You must go; there's the King's guardsman come to get you!

Loud knocking continues. Looking fearful, Gilda stares at her parents. Gilda's Mother appears anxious. Gilda's Father gestures for Gilda to hurry. Gilda walks reluctantly toward the door and offstage.

SCENE 2: {Palace Dungeon} King, Miller's Daughter Gilda

A spinning wheel is set up in one corner of the dungeon along with piles of straw. The only padlocked door contains an iron grate. Enter the King, followed by Gilda, and heralded by the royal fanfare of trumpets.

King: And now begin your task! When you have spun all this straw into gold, for your reward you will become Queen.

Daughter Gilda: Oh, Your Highness, please...please don't lock me up in here. I'm afraid—

King: Afraid?

Daughter Gilda: —of little mice that scamper around at night!

King: Never mind! I want to know if your father is telling the truth. Tomorrow I shall see for myself.

Daughter Gilda: Oh, but please—

King: And beware if your father has lied. Believe me, you will both be punished!

Exit the King. In a desperate mood, Daughter Gilda kicks a heap of straw on the floor. She searches everywhere in the dungeon for a way to escape. She thumps with her fists against the stone walls and starts to cry.

SCENE 3: {Palace Dungeon} The Miller's Daughter Gilda, a funny looking little old man, Rumpelstiltskin

Enter Rumpelstiltskin, suddenly.

Rumpelstiltskin: Oh, pretty maid! Weeping all alone! What is your trouble?

Daughter Gilda: (wiping her eyes and looking up slowly) Who are YOU?

Rumpelstiltskin: I'm a friend. Just a friend!

Daughter Gilda: (looking around the dungeon suspiciously) But where did you come from?

Rumpelstiltskin: Never mind that! Tell me why you're crying.

Daughter Gilda: Why am I crying? Why? Because if I don't spin all this straw into gold by tomorrow...

Rumpelstiltskin: Well?

Daughter Gilda: I'll be locked up in this dungeon forever! (She starts to cry again)

Rumpelstiltskin: But why?

Daughter Gilda: My father told the King that I could spin straw into gold—and the King believes him.

Rumpelstiltskin: (contemptuously) Spin straw into gold? Is that all? *Hah!* That's easy-peasy!

Daughter Gilda: (wiping her eyes) No, it isn't.

Rumpelstiltskin: Well, for me it is!

Daughter Gilda: (shakes her head in a gesture of disbelief)

Rumpelstiltskin: I tell you what, I'll do the job for you.

Daughter Gilda: You will?

Rumpelstiltskin: Yes, I promise, by morning it'll all be done—!

Daughter Gilda: (interrupting) Oh, but how can I thank you?

Rumpelstiltskin: —in return for a gift.

Daughter Gilda: (quickly taking off her ring) Of course! Here, take this.

Rumpelstiltskin: (disdainfully) No, I don't want it.

Daughter Gilda: (taking off her gold chain necklace and offering it to Rumpelstiltskin) Take this, then. It's all I have!

Rumpelstiltskin: That's no use to me! Promise me your first-born.

Daughter Gilda: (sounding shocked) What—!

Rumpelstiltskin: Your first-born child!

Daughter Gilda: No, no, I can't promise that!

Rumpelstiltskin: Oh well then—

Daughter Gilda: (loudly) You know that's impossible!

Rumpelstiltskin: No matter! Suit yourself, I'm leaving now—
(Rumpelstiltskin turns to leave)

Daughter Gilda: (desperate) **No, please, all right then, I promise!**

In response, Rumpelstiltskin does a merry little dance and quits the stage. With a tragic expression, Daughter Gilda walks offstage in the opposite direction.

SCENE 4: {Royal State Room} Narrator, King, Queen Gilda, Royal Courtiers, Palace Guardsman, Miller, Miller's Wife.

Narrator: And so, in the end, the old man kept his promise. Next morning, the King came into the dungeon and found all the straw spun into gold. As promised, young Gilda became Queen. (Narrator moves to the side of the stage)

The Royal Wedding ceremony: Following the regal fanfare of trumpets, the King, wearing royal clothes and a crown, enters the state room. Gilda, dressed in royal clothes and a crown enters the state room from the opposite side of the stage. Accompanied by ceremonial music, the King takes Queen Gilda by the hand and they walk together and sit on their thrones at the centre of the stage. The Royal Courtiers, in procession, accompany the King and Queen. Various Royal Guests, including the Miller and the Miller's Wife dressed in their finest clothes, join the Royal Courtiers in the state room. One by one, all the players gradually leave the stage.

Music Continues during a **SHORT INTERMISSION.**

NARRATOR enters on the left and exits on the right, holding up a printed sign that says: **ONE YEAR LATER**

SCENE 5: {Royal State Room} Housemaids: Aurora, Cecilia, Natalia

Enter 3 housemaids (Aurora, Cecilia, Natalia) carrying pails, mops, dusters and brooms. They begin to dust the walls, sweep and scrub the floors to the tune of courtly music.

Aurora: I'm so excited! Hurry up, now. It's almost time for the Royal Christening.

Natalia: (stopping to lean on her broom) But the Queen seems so unhappy! What is the matter with her?

Cecilia: *Shush!* (She looks around cautiously) Her Highness is worried about the baby.

Aurora and Natalia: (together) Why?

Cecilia: The baby nurse told me. It's a secret, listen...

The three housemaids huddle together, whispering. Enter Queen Gilda, wearing a crown and dressed in royal clothes. She sits on the throne. In awe, the three Housemaids curtsy to Queen Gilda and hurry away with their buckets, mops and brooms. Enter the Baby Nurse with the New-born Prince.

SCENE 6: {Royal State Room} Queen Gilda, Baby Nurse, New-born Prince

Queen Gilda: (looking at the New-born Prince) Oh, I have this terrible feeling...

Baby Nurse: But your Highness, don't worry! Nothing bad will happen. What would a little old man want with a baby?

Queen Gilda: (putting her hands over her eyes in an attitude of grief) I don't know!

Exit Baby Nurse with the New-born Prince; she looks puzzled; she is sighing and shaking her head.

SCENE 7: {Royal State Room} Queen Gilda, Rumpelstiltskin

Enter Rumpelstiltskin. Queen Gilda, still seated on the throne, looks shocked and frightened.

Rumpelstiltskin: My lady (bowing low) I have come to claim my prize...as you promised. Remember?

Queen Gilda: (Slowly shaking her head) Please, kind sir, do not do this terrible thing!

Rumpelstiltskin: (Pausing in hesitation, turning to the audience and gesturing comically with outstretched hands; then giving a long-drawn out sigh) *Ohhhhh*, my greatest failing is my soft heart! (Turning back toward Queen Gilda) Listen, dear lady, if you can guess my secret name, you can keep the child! (Holding up three fingers) But you have only three guesses and three days!

Exit Rumpelstiltskin.

SCENE 8: {Royal State Room} Queen Gilda, Palace Guardsman

The Queen, still seated on the throne, stares tragically into space. Enter a Palace Guardsman.

Queen Gilda: (to the Palace Guardsman) Did you hear that wicked old man?

Palace Guardsman: I heard, Your Highness.

Queen Gilda: What am I going to do? It's hopeless.

Palace Guardsman: Maybe...not!

The Palace Guardsman bows to Queen Gilda and turns to go.

Queen Gilda: Wait, where are you going?

Palace Guardsman: To follow that scoundrel.

Queen Gilda: Oh, do be careful!

Palace Guardsman: Your Highness, say nothing to anyone till I return. I promise to do whatever I can.

Exit Palace Guardsman. Exit Queen Gilda in the opposite direction.

SCENE 9: {The Forest} Trees, Palace Guardsman, Rumpelstiltskin

The Trees (who previously played the part of Royal Courtiers) march slowly and stiffly onstage and take their positions within the forest. Rumpelstiltskin appears onstage hobbling and capering, indicating his gleeful mood. The Trees make a murmuring sound as they wave their branches in the wind. The Palace Guardsman creeps through the forest and hides behind a tree trunk, silently observing and listening.

Rumpelstiltskin: (croaking)

*Deep in the Woods I Creep Tonight
While all the Good Folk Are Asleep Tonight
Early Tomorrow I Shall Awake
And the Queen's Little Baby I Shall Take
Who from Afar Has Not Heard of My Fame?
For Rumpelstiltskin Is My Name!*

The Trees echo the last line of the song three times, louder each time: **For Rumpelstiltskin is HIS name.** The Palace Guardsman creeps away unseen. Exit Rumpelstiltskin capering victoriously. The wind blows loud and strong. The Tree Branches sway in the wind. One by one, the Trees leave the stage slowly and stiffly.

SCENE 10: {Royal State Room} Queen Gilda, Palace Guardsman, Baby Nurse, New-born Prince

Enter Queen Gilda, looking anxious; she sits on the throne. Enter the Baby Nurse carrying the New-born Prince. Soon after: Enter the Palace Guardsman, breathless and tired; he bows to Queen Gilda.

Palace Guardsman: Your Highness, don't despair, I know the name of that wretched old man (The Palace Guardsman whispers in Queen Gilda's ear.)

Queen Gilda claps her hands and gazes upward in a gesture of gratitude and joy. Rumpelstiltskin appears suddenly, looking serious and threatening. The Baby Nurse and Palace Guardsman react at once to protect the New-born Prince.

Rumpelstiltskin: (triumphantly) Here, I am, my lady. Come to collect my prize.

Rumpelstiltskin moves toward the New-born Prince, hands outstretched ready to snatch him away. The Baby Nurse shrinks backward, holding the New-born Prince close.

Queen Gilda: Wait, give me one last chance! I have three guesses—as you promised. Remember?

Rumpelstiltskin: (shrugging his shoulders) As you wish!

Queen Gilda: Is your name...Hadrian?

Rumpelstiltskin: No, you'll never guess! (shaking his head, stretching out his hands to grasp the New-born Prince.)

The Baby Nurse steps backward with the New-born Prince. The Palace Guardsman reaches for his sword.

Queen Gilda: Wait, is your name...Methuselah?

Rumpelstiltskin: (chuckling derisively) No, no, no! (Rumpelstiltskin's fingers twitch eagerly above the New-born Prince)

The Baby Nurse steps back further, shielding the New-born Prince. The Palace Guardsman pulls out his sword.

Queen Gilda: Is your name...Rumpelstiltskin?

Rumpelstiltskin: (Rumpelstiltskin's outstretched fingers are poised in mid-air; he pauses outraged) Someone told you! (louder) IT'S NOT FAIR! Someone MUST have told you! (Howling and ranting in fury, Rumpelstiltskin stomps offstage with an echoing crash of thunder).

Queen Gilda: (smiling and tearful at the same time) Come, Nurse, the danger is past. That wicked old Rumpelstiltskin will never come back, I hope! And now, it's time for the Christening today! Let's choose a grand royal name for *our* child.

SCENE 11: {Royal State Room} King, Queen Gilda, New-born Prince, Faithful Palace Guardsman and Royal Courtiers (who previously played the role of Trees in the Forest) Housemaid Cecilia, Housemaid Aurora, Housemaid Natalia, Baby Nurse, and various Royal Guests including the Miller and the Miller's Wife, dressed in their finest clothes.

The Royal Christening ceremony: Following the regal fanfare of trumpets, the King enters the state room. Accompanied by ceremonial music, the King takes Queen Gilda by the arm; they walk together and sit on their thrones at the centre of the stage. The Baby Nurse joins the Queen, while holding the New-born Prince. The Royal Courtiers, in procession, accompany the King and Queen. Various Royal Guests, including the Miller and the Miller's Wife, join the Royal Courtiers in the state room. Dramatic ceremonial music continues. All the actors face the audience and take their final bow.



LAST
CURTAIN
CALL

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