

Big Theatre for Little People



By José Cruz González

Based on a book by C. Anne Scott

Directed by Graham Whitehead

In Cooperation with Childsplay, Inc., Tempe, Arizona



Big Theatre for Little People
Sponsored by



Student Matinee
2005-2006

SEASON

Dear Educators,

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A couple of weeks ago I bought a green jacket. This surprised people because I often wear very plain colors – lots of black, white, beige or grey. I like to keep it simple, or at least I thought I did. You see, I was shopping with a friend one day and she encouraged me to try on a bright green jacket when I instinctively reached for a tan one. “Try on a color,” she said. I thought, “Ah, what harm can it do?” and tried it on. Then I noticed that I started to feel different wearing the green jacket. I quickly took it off and hung it back on the rack deciding it would probably be a little too much for me.

After I went home, I couldn’t stop thinking about the green jacket. One week later, I went back to the store, tried it on and bought it. In the days that followed, not only did I feel different wearing the jacket, but I also noticed that other unusual things started to happen. From my sudden urge to walk to work instead of driving, to having people I didn’t even know come over and strike up a conversation, things were starting to change. Was the jacket magic? After I thought about it for a while, I started to realize that it wasn’t the jacket that was changing things, it was me – after I decided to let a little color into my wardrobe, that is.

Old Jake’s Skirts is a play based on a wonderful book by C. Anne Scott about a man whose life changes when he discovers a mysterious trunk full of colorful skirts. Reluctant at first, Old Jake soon finds uses for the skirts that begin to brighten up his home and his attitude by allowing color to slowly creep back into his world. In an interview, the playwright, José Cruz González said that one of the lessons in the play is: “A little color in your life is a very good thing.” Color, music, laughter and hope can all be found in *Old Jake’s Skirts*, a delightful story that gives us all the opportunity to celebrate change and its power to give us a new outlook on the things we see every day.

In this guide you will find a variety of resources including a synopsis, interview with playwright José Cruz González, activities and questions. Our hope is that you will find these to be useful tools in preparing a lesson plan, and that seeing the play will only be part of your journey. For questions about *Old Jake’s Skirts* or any Geva Student Matinee program please call 232-1366, ext. 3058.

We look forward to seeing you at the theatre.

Sincerely,



Andrea Stoner
Associate Director of Education

Cast of Characters

Old Jake

Shoestring

Sarah (storyteller)

Young Sarah

E.B. Sweeney

Clarence

Otis Brown

Ellis

Musician

Good Samaritan
Lady 1

Good Samaritan
Lady 2

Good Samaritan
Lady 3

“Rocks, trouble. Rabbits and rocks.”

Old Jake

Synopsis

The trunk in *Old Jake's Skirts* serves as a **catalyst** by setting a chain of events into motion for the characters in the story. Many stories have "trunks" or catalysts that change the characters' lives for better or worse. For example, the ghost of Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol* and the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* take the main characters on great adventures. Who (or what) are the catalysts in your favorite stories?

Jake is a lonely old farmer whose only friend is his hound dog, Shoestring. Jake spends most of his days working the farm, **whittling** and picking up supplies in town at the general store. Driving to town one day, Jake and Shoestring are surprised to find a trunk in the middle of the road. Jake puts the mysterious trunk in the back of his truck and decides to take it to the farm for safe keeping. In town, he leaves a note at the general store in hope of contacting the owner.

The trunk sits unclaimed for quite some time and becomes a backrest for Shoestring, who sleeps curled up next to it all through the winter months. In the spring, when Jake needs Shoestring outside chasing rabbits, he decides to move the trunk, open it up and look inside. When he does, Jake is amazed to find that the trunk is full of cotton **calico** skirts. He immediately slams the trunk shut, fearing that the skirts may be bad luck. A believer in **plagues**, Jake fears that this may be the "year of the skirts."

It isn't until a great storm begins to flood Jake's farm and his house that he opens the trunk again and uses the skirts to stop the water and clean up the mess. After that, Old Jake finds many other uses for the skirts and begins to see the power they hold. When Jake learns the secret of the skirts his life starts to change and he discovers a new world right outside his doorstep.

Whittle: To carve or cut small bits from wood.

Catalyst: A person or thing that causes or speeds up a process or event.

Calico: A rough, brightly printed cloth.

Plague: Something that causes misery or illness.



Matthew Proschold (Old Jake) dances with a scarecrow. Photo by Jannine Doto.



Illustration by David Slonim from the book *Old Jake's Skirts*.

"Just my luck I'd be the one who'd find a trunk full of useless skirts. I mean what good are they for?" Old Jake

Interview with Playwright José Cruz González

Adapt: To change.

*What was it about Old Jake's Skirts that inspired you to **adapt** it into a stage play?*

JCG: I love the simplicity of the story and the beautiful illustrations of the book. Also, I grew up in the farming community on the central coast of California. I knew people like Old Jake. It was such a joy to return to those farming roots when working on the adaptation.

Discuss the design of *Old Jake's Skirts*; how do the miniature wood carvings help to tell the story?

Can you tell us about your choice to use Bluegrass music to tell this story?

JCG: I love music. All kinds of music. I was visiting Louisville, Kentucky several years ago when I walked right into a Bluegrass festival. There were musicians playing everywhere! I was so impressed with the music. I fell in love with it. When I began working on *Old Jake's Skirts* I thought that music would add another valuable element to the life of the story. I think it is a nice addition.



José Cruz González

What has been your greatest challenge in working on this piece?

JCG: The biggest challenge was finding a way to make the play more dramatic than what is in the book. I tried focusing on Old Jake's struggle to keep the farm going. He's had to battle many plagues. When it rains on his farm he almost gives up.

What has been the most fun?

JCG: The most fun for me has been collaborating with a super team of artists including director Graham Whitehead, musical directors Ric Averill and Adam Jacobson, our amazing cast and finally Childsplay, the company that first approached me about the play.

Illustration by David Slonim from the book *Old Jake's Skirts*.

Why should young people see this play?

JCG: I feel young people will enjoy the production because it is a good story, highly theatrical and musically rich. I like the lesson in it as well: "A little color in your life is a very good thing."



In adapting *Old Jake's Skirts* into a play, the director and designers had to create a rainstorm on stage. Discuss how this could be accomplished.

"You see, Old Jake was, after all, a believer in plagues."

Sarah

About this Production

The process for creating a *Big Theatre for Little People* production usually takes place right here in Rochester. The actors, **designers** and **directors** come from all around the country to rehearse and create everything you see on stage. We have a scene shop where we build the sets, a costume shop where we make the clothes and props artisans who create everything from edible records (used in *Meet Me Incognito*) to flying crows (from *All is Well in the Kingdom of Nice*). Our electricians then bring the show to life with lighting and sound effects in the theatre.

The process for *Old Jake's Skirts* is different because the actors, scenery, props and costumes are all traveling from Tempe, Arizona. They are coming from Childsplay, an award-winning professional theatre company for young people and their families. Since last year, the actors have been bringing *Old Jake's Skirts* to theatres and schools throughout the state of Arizona. In November they will travel over 3,000 miles to share the play with us.

The **cast** and **crew** will fly on a plane to Rochester. Their costumes, props and scenery will all be shipped through the mail. Once everything arrives, the actors and **stage manager** will assemble the scenery in The Nextstage. Because *Old Jake's Skirts* is a touring production, the actors are used to setting everything up and performing in different spaces. Once the scenery is up, the electricians at Geva will create a **lighting design** for the show and set the **sound levels**. After just a couple of rehearsals they will be ready for an audience. The show will run for two weeks here in Rochester and then the cast and crew will fly back to Arizona. There they will continue to travel and perform until the show closes at the end of May.



Jenn Taber, Matthew Proschold, Beau Heckman and Adam Jacobson singing a song in Childsplay's production of *Old Jake's Skirts*. Photo by Jannine Doto.

Designers: *They work with the director to create the scenery, costumes, lighting and sound for a show.*

Director: *The director leads the rehearsal process and works with designers to bring a production to life.*

Cast: *The actors in a play.*

Crew: *Stage manager and the people who work backstage.*

Stage Manager: *Someone who supervises the physical aspects in the production of a show and who is in charge of the stage when the show is being performed.*

Lighting Design: *A lighting designer uses many lighting instruments to create the atmosphere of a production by changing the colors, focus and intensity of the light.*

Sound Levels: *The sound designer will check the volume of the sounds in a show and set them to make sure they stay the same for each performance.*

"It's gonna be the year of the skirts."

Old Jake

Bluegrass Music

Immigrant: *A person who leaves one country and settles in another.*



Legendary Bluegrass artist Bill Monroe playing the mandolin.

Acoustic: *An instrument that does not use electronic amplification.*

Vocal Harmonies: *A combination of different voices that sing at the same time and form a pleasing sound.*

Melody: *A pleasing arrangement of sounds.*

Accompaniment: *A part in a music group that supports the lead line or soloist.*

Evolve: *To slowly change forms.*

upright bass. Other characteristics include the **vocal harmonies** which feature two, three and even four parts. When playing Bluegrass, each instrument takes a turn playing the **melody** while the others provide the **accompaniment**. When these musical elements were first combined over 60 years ago, they created a new sound that soon became a popular American style.

Many consider Bill Monroe to be the “Father of Bluegrass Music.” Bill and his brother, Charlie, began playing together in the 1920s and 1930s. After going their separate ways a few years later, Bill brought together a new group called “Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys” and their Bluegrass style gained a significant following in the 1940s. In 1946 Earl Scruggs, a young banjo player also hit the scene with a record called “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” that was used in the film *Bonnie and Clyde*. Soon after that, Bluegrass bands started to form all across the country.

Bluegrass has **evolved** over the years and continues to influence musicians today. Elements of traditional Bluegrass music can now be found in the styles of Folk, Americana and Country to name just a few. Today Bluegrass in its many forms continues to be performed and enjoyed throughout the country and across the world.

Bluegrass is a combination of many different styles of music from several different cultures. Some believe it first began with **immigrants** who settled in the Carolinas, Tennessee and Virginia. Their songs about everyday life later became known as “mountain music” or “country music.” Those early songs were then influenced by other forms of American music such as Jazz, Gospel and The Blues to become the Bluegrass style we know today.

What sets Bluegrass music apart is its unique grouping of **acoustic** instruments, most often the **fiddle, banjo, mandolin, acoustic guitar** and

Fiddle or Violin: *A stringed musical instrument that was created around the 16th century. It has four strings and is played by pulling a horsehair bow over the strings.*

Banjo: *A four- or five-stringed musical instrument with a hollow body that is usually covered with a snare drum top that is played by either plucking or strumming the strings.*

Mandolin: *A musical instrument with four pairs of strings. They are usually played by plucking or strumming the strings.*

Guitar: *A six- or 12-stringed musical instrument with a long neck that is attached to a wooden pear-shaped body.*

Upright Bass: *The lowest sounding instrument in the string family. It can be played with a bow or by plucking the strings.*



*“She’s an old pile of tin,
Nobody knows what shape she’s in.”* Musician

From the Musical Director Ric Averill



Ric Averill

What is your musical background?

I've played piano since 2nd or 3rd grade and began writing music when I was eight. I added violin as a second instrument in the 5th grade. I have since learned mandolin, four-string tenor banjo, some guitar and organ. I can play most string instruments and all **keyboards**. I have composed and arranged music for theatre for years and have composed a songbook for children as well as several musicals. I've also written two operas for young audiences. I hold a Bachelor's of Music in **Composition** from the University of Kansas.

Why does the style of Bluegrass music work so well for Old Jake's Skirts?

The music seemed to fit the mood of the piece and we knew, as a touring production, that we could probably create a strong score with one professional musician and other folk and **percussion** instruments. That way we wouldn't need to use any recorded music. Mostly, though, it was the mood.

Did any particular Bluegrass musicians influence your work?

Oh, so many of the **dustbowlers** – Pete Seeger, a bit of Jimmy Rodgers, Woody Guthrie – and then just a bunch of general fiddle tunes we all loved. Plus some old time revival-type songs that are used in Old Jake's transformation.

Can you tell us about your process? Where did you begin?

We had two full weeks of **development** for the piece. The first week was in May of 2004 when I went to Phoenix to simply **workshop** the piece as a participating musician. I wrote a few **themes** before arriving and took my fiddle, mandolin and had them pull a guitar and banjo for my use once I got to Tempe. The workshop was with the resident company and we made quite a few discoveries. It was at least a year before the final production was put into motion. That workshop was fun and productive.

The following winter, I worked with Adam, the musician you'll see in the show. Adam and I collaborated to further develop the music. I then **arranged** the music for both voices and instruments.

What do you hope the people who see Old Jake's Skirts will walk out of the theatre with?

A sense of this wonderful character and how a simple bit of color from the passing of one person's life brings new life to another.

Keyboards: *Slang for any instrument that is played by pushing down keys, for example piano and organ.*

Composition: *The art of writing a work of music.*

Percussion: *Musical instruments which are played by shaking or hitting with the hand or a stick, including drums, cymbals, bells and rattles.*

Dustbowler: *A person from Oklahoma, Kansas and Northern Texas affected by a drought in the 1930s.*

Development: *The process of working on a new script.*

Workshop: *The first rehearsals for a new play.*

Theme: *A recurring melody.*

Arranged: *A piece of music that has been changed for different instruments or voices.*

How does the music help to make the play more dramatic?

Are the skirts magic? Why or why not?

"You're always my first customer of the day, Jake."

E.B. Sweeney

From Page to Stage

Over the years many books have been adapted into plays, films and even television programs. When adapting a book into a play, the playwright must decide which parts of the book (s)he should use to tell the story on stage. The book will often include more details than can be incorporated into the **script**, so (s)he must choose the events and characters that are most important in telling the story. Then it is up to the director, designers and actors to bring the story to life on stage.

Script: *The written form of a play.*

Before seeing the play, read *Old Jake's Skirts* as a class. Then, using the suggestions below, discuss how you would adapt the story and brainstorm about how you would transform the book into a play.

Setting: *Where the story takes place.*



Costume rendering
by designer Liz
Ihlenfeld.

Before the play

Choose six major events in *Old Jake's Skirts* to retell the story.

Make a list of all the characters in the book, and then choose 10 to include in your adaptation.

How many different **settings** are in the book? How many would you use in the play?

If you could have five props (items the actors hold or use), what would they be?

After reading *Old Jake's Skirts*, discuss which three scenes in the book could give the general idea of the story's beginning, middle and end. From these scenes create three tableaux (frozen pictures) with four to five students.

After the play

Discuss the similarities and differences between your choices and the playwright's.

What did the playwright add to the play that wasn't in the book? Why do you think he made that choice?

If you could change one thing about the adaptation what would it be?

What other stories would make good plays? Why?

Photo of Jenn Taber (Sarah) by Jannine Doto from Childsplay's production of *Old Jake's Skirts*.



"I used them skirts to mop the water and dirt and they're used up just like me." Old Jake

Interpreting Rain

Create a rainstorm in your classroom! With the teacher as the director, have all the students sit in a circle to recreate the sounds of a rainstorm. Begin by having everyone rub their palms together softly to create a light rain, then have them snap their fingers as the larger raindrops start to fall. As the storm grows stronger, have students gently tap their legs with their palms and shift into clapping when the storm is at its peak. Ease back through the motions as the storm dies down and finally stops.



Above: Jenn Taber (Sarah), Matthew Proschold (Old Jake) and Beau Heckman (Shoestring) use the skirts during the rainstorm to soak up the water. Photo by Jannine Doto.

Below: David Slonim's rendition of the rainstorm in C. Anne Scott's book *Old Jake's Skirts*.



The Audience – The Final Piece

“The public sometimes thinks an artist is a television set – something comes out, nothing goes back. They don’t realize that if they can hear me, then I can hear them – their coughs, the electronic beeps from their wristwatches, the squeaking of their shoes.... The art of performance depends on the relationship between the musician and the audience. In the concert hall, each motionless listener is part of the performance. The concentration of the player charges the electric tension in the auditorium and returns to him magnified....The audience grows together and becomes a group. There’s the impression of a journey undertaken together and a goal achieved.” **Pianist Alfred Brendel**

This is a quote from a musician, but everything he says applies to the theatre, too. When you come to see a play, the actors are aware of you. Unlike a movie or a television show, the audience can affect or influence what happens on stage. Actors can hear the audience laugh, cry, become restless, or become still and silent with concentration. The mood of the audience can affect the mood of the performance – this is why we say that no two performances are alike, because no two audiences are the same.

We hope you enjoy the show. While you sit in the audience, please remember that you are a part of the theatre journey. You do not take that journey alone; please respect the people who are on the journey with you and allow them to enjoy the play also.

How does the actor who plays Shoestring create the character without wearing a typical dog costume? Without talking, how does Shoestring communicate with Old Jake?

Tell Us What You Think

Please write to us or send us pictures! You can send them to Andrea Stoner, Associate Director of Education, Geva Theatre Center, 75 Woodbury Boulevard, Rochester, NY 14607. We are always interested in knowing what our audiences think about our plays, especially . . .

- The most fun part
- The part that surprised you
- The most exciting part
- The part you talked about on the bus on the way back to school
- The first thing you told your family about the play when you got home
- The part you’d like to see again
- The part you thought about the most afterwards
- The moment where you noticed the set
- The minute where you noticed a costume
- The most interesting sound that you heard
- The part where something unexpected happened

“That dog’s grown near ten foot since I seen him last.”

E.B. Sweeney

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Childsplay, Inc., Tempe, Arizona
www.childsplayaz.org

Info on Bluegrass Music

www.roughstock.com/history/bgrass.html
www.ibma.org/about.bluegrass/history/index.asp
www.bluegrass-museum.org
www.bluegrasscountry.org

Website of Award-winning books for Children

www.slco.lib.ut.us/children.htm

Recommended Reading

The First Four Years by Laura Ingalls Wilder
A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck
Three by Sea by Edward Marshall
Plain Girl by Virginia Sorensen
Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain by Robert Burch

Recommended Recordings

O, Brother Where Art Thou Soundtrack, Lost Highway
The Very Best of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, MCA Nashville
Pete Seeger's Greatest Hits, Sony
The Three Pickers, with Ricky Skaggs, Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs; Rounder / Pgd

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“Awwwwwwww”

Shoestring

Tickets Still Available



By Paul Maar
Adapted and Translated by Anita & Alex Page
Directed by Sean Daniels

February 7-10 and February 14-17
at 9:45 am & Noon

Recommended for grades K-6

Call 232-Geva (4382)



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