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Family Plays

THE NEAREST STAR

“Thanks for an entertaining, easy to stage play.”

(Theresa Catellier, St. Vincent De Paul School, Phoenix, Ariz.)

Drama with music. By Jerome McDonough. Cast: 3w., 7 to 10 either gender, extras. The original cast numbered 10 people and that is probably the minimum number of performers who can mount the play successfully. The maximum can be 20 to 30. The greater the number of people, the less the amount of rehearsal time needed, assuming that all cast members will make all rehearsals. Where—or what—is the spirit of Christmas? Three young girls (or young women) set out in search. Like the Three Wise Men, they follow a star. But this star leads to a Christmas tree lot, and every other path leads to more commercialism. Is the Christmas Spirit nothing but a money-making scheme? With the help of some fresh, sing-along songs—and an unexpected assist from someone else—the girls finally find what they’re looking for. The Nearest Star is an ensemble play and, therefore, most members of the ensemble will play multiple roles. The only performers who remain in the same roles throughout the show are the three young girls—Jody, Chris and Cyndy. Others move in and out of their characters and in and out of the “living cyclorama” upstage of the action. The play is suitable for all groups. Area staging. Costumes: winter clothing. Time: today. Place: here. Approximate running time: 30 minutes. Music in book. Demo/accompaniment CD available. Code: N76.

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The Nearest Star

THE NEAREST STAR
A Christmas Parable with Music
by
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Family Plays
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“Produced by special arrangement with
Family Plays of Woodstock, Illinois”

*For Dorothy Ann McDonough and Raenell Roberts McDonough,
the two beloved Mary's in my life.
(Listed in the order of their motherhood)*

And to the original Searchers:

*Janet Duke, Debbie Fleming, Kim Fiel, Tim Purviance, Wanda Kite,
Ivan Calhoun, David Upton, Ami Davis, John Smith, Danny McKinney,
and Shette Halford*

THE NEAREST STAR

Dramatis Personae

THE NEAREST STAR is an ensemble play and, therefore, most members of the ensemble will play multiple roles. The only performers who remain in the same roles throughout the show are the three young girls – Jody, Chris, and Cyndy. Others move in and out of their characters and in and out of the “living Cyclorama” upstage of the action.

Jody – *a young girl, rather on the serious side*

Cyndy – *another young girl, a balance between Jody and Chris but definitely leaning toward Jody’s rationality*

Chris – *yet another young girl, given to saying what is on her mind whether anything is really there or not*

Chorus Roles:

Grocery Woman I – a holiday shopper

Grocery Woman II – another holiday shopper

Vera – Chris’s older sister (may be male; call him Stanley)

Chris’s Mother (may double as Saint Mary)

Chris’s Cat (person portraying a cat)

Cyndy’s Father

Jody’s Mother

Brian – Cyndy’s big brother (heard but not seen)

Carl Starr – proprietor of Carl Starr’s Cars, a used car lot

Lone Star Corral M. C. – male or female host at night club

Luke Loper – country singer (may be female: Lucille Loper)

The Hog Ties – Luke’s back-up group

Supervisor – head of a work crew

Workers – the crew

Christmas Tree Woman – a rough owner of Christmas tree lot

Saint Mary

Saint Joseph

The Christmas Angel

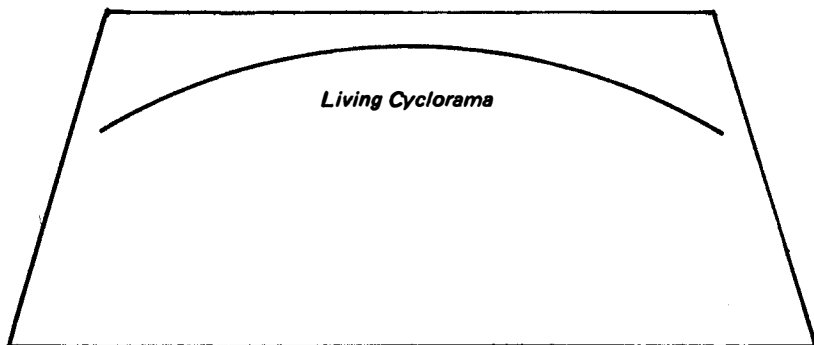
Time: Today

Place: Here

PRODUCTION NOTES

The original cast numbered 10 people and that is probably the minimum number of performers who can mount *THE NEAREST STAR* successfully. The maximum can be 20 to 30. The greater the number of people, the less the amount of rehearsal time needed, assuming that all cast members will make all rehearsals. The nature of the continuous action of the play and the moving in and out of the "Cyclorama" demands that all cast members know what the next move will be at all times. Traffic jams can be a problem, both in scene changes and in "bunching up" of cast members in one area of the stage or another while forming the Cyclorama. Keep the Cyclorama balanced at all times and it will be completely unobtrusive to the audience.

Chorus members set and strike the bench and any hand props used in the show. When not involved in the action, Chorus members stand "on the Cyclorama," that is, forming a living wall behind the action, facing away from the audience, like this:



Setting

There is no set per se. Locations are suggested by the use of a bench, the star, the arrangement of the performer's bodies, and by dialogue.

Costuming and Props

Winter clothing is the norm for *THE NEAREST STAR*. The three girls (who may be eight to 10 years old or teen-agers portraying this age) wear winter shirts or blouses, jeans, and winter shoes. Once their search begins, they add coats. Chris also adds a stocking cap. Other cast members dress similarly, suggesting their various characters by simple accessories or props which they wear or carry as needed. These costume elements and prop items are neatly stored upstage of the Cyc on the floor when not in use.

Grocery Woman I — a handbag

Grocery Woman II — a handbag

Grocery Clerk — a feather duster or apron

Luke Loper, The Hog Ties, Lone Star Corral M. C. — cowboy hats

Chris's Mother — a cup towel

Cyndy's Father — a newspaper

Jody's Mother — a disposable diaper or baby blanket

Carl Starr — loud winter sports coat or top coat

Supervisor, Workers, Christmas Tree Woman — heavy winter coats

Saint Mary — veil (simple remnant of white knit cloth)

Saint Joseph — long robe

Angel — long robe, perhaps a choir robe

Vera — a comb

Saint Mary — an infant doll, life-sized, wrapped in a cloth of the same material as Mary's veil (white material may be used to suggest that the Nativity characters are statues, or they can be played as figurines—the kind used for outdoor Nativity scenes, in which case colored material may be used.)

Angel — a small votive candle

The only widely used prop is a foil-covered star about 12 to 18 inches across, mounted on a black painted stick or clear plastic dowel. The star may be made of heavy cardboard or thin wood.

Lighting

Special lighting effects are unnecessary. So long as the action can be seen by the audience, any lighting is sufficient. The original production was performed in an auditorium which was in the process of renovation and in spaces ranging from elementary school stages to open areas of roughly 10 by 20 feet, so subtlety in illumination was never available.

Music

The three original songs for this play are printed on the following pages. As with all "folk" type music, however, formal musical notation does not carry the feeling or interpretation of the songs. The music is much freer than the written notes suggest. Producing groups are urged to order a copy of the taped music of the show (available from the publisher—I. E. Clark, Inc., Box 246, Schulenburg, TX 78956; telephone 713-743-3232) to understand the approach to each tune. A guitar may be used for accompaniment or the songs may even be sung *a capella* with a pitch pipe providing the opening note. The tape also has a section which may be used as accompaniment for the songs if no instrumentalist is available.



May the love of Blessed Mary and her Holy Son shine out from you and light up the world.

Merry Christmas.

Jerome McDonough

THE NEAREST STAR

By Jerome McDonough

[AT RISE: The Living Cyclorama (CHORUS) is in place, forming a semi-circular background for the acting area. Within it, at far Right, far Left, and Up Center are CYN DY, JODY, and CHRIS, the three children who will tie the show together (they may be actual young children or teen-agers portraying children)]

Music No. 1: "THE STAR"

CHORUS. *[Sings]*

The star! The star!

The star! The star!

Where is my star tonight?

Where is my star tonight?

[Music out. Two WOMEN, one from Right and one from Left, turn in and mime pushing grocery baskets. The LOUDSPEAKER VOICE begins at the same moment that the action begins. Rest of cast becomes a pyramid-shaped display of CANS, Center; a CLERK putting up the display; a "frozen food" LOCKER (two performers facing each other, arms linked – shoppers raise nearest arms to get into the locker) at Right; and a turnstile (two performers standing side by side, facing opposite, outside arms extended from the elbow) at Left. LEFT WOMAN pushes through the turnstile and gets her basket (mimed) and starts heading toward Right along the Upstage "wall." The RIGHT WOMAN already has her basket and searches the "frozen food locker" for something, then proceeds toward Down Right where she is joined by the LEFT WOMAN as they speak]

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE. *[As LEFT WOMAN enters]* We need a price check on Number Three. All carry-out help to the front, please. *[The CLERK working on the display jumps up and hides behind the display]*

[CYN DY, far Right, turns in and listens to the Women's conversation]

GROCERY WOMEN I. *[Aghast]* Did you see the prices on these turkeys?

GROCERY WOMAN II. Did I ever? It used to be the cheapest thing you could buy.

GROCERY WOMAN I. It still is unless you want to gather around the Christmas table and carve the bologna.

GROCERY WOMAN II. The way everything's going up, I may not get my Christmas spirit together this year.

GROCERY WOMAN I. Me either.

[CYNDY reacts with concern. The WOMEN push their carts back toward the Cyc as CHRIS and her sister, VERA, and a cast member playing her CAT move to Down Center. The CAT purrs against Chris and rubs against her legs]

VERA. *[Shaking her comb at Chris. The fray begins]* How many times have I told you to leave my things alone?

CHRIS. I didn't hurt anything.

VERA. Didn't hurt anything? Look at my comb.

CHRIS. There's just a little hair on it.

VERA. Hair off the cat!

CHRIS. Her hair's prettier than yours, anyway.

VERA. I oughta smash your nose.

CHRIS. Then it'd look like yours.

MOTHER. *[Entering from Cyc, Up Right]* Stop it, you two.

VERA. She used my comb on the cat!

CHRIS. She stepped on my turtle last week.

VERA. It was in the shower.

CHRIS. He was dirty.

MOTHER. Stop it this instant! You act more like three-year-olds than eight and ten.

VERA. She's a creep.

CHRIS. She's creepier.

MOTHER. Go to your rooms, both of you. Go on. *[Each exits to the Cyc, VERA to Up Right, CHRIS to Up Center, CAT to Up Left Center]* Even fighting during the holidays. The spirit of Christmas has sure skipped us this year. *[MOTHER exits to Up Right Center]*

[Cyc is complete as JODY turns in and starts to drift slightly toward Center. She stands thinking as CYNDY turns in and starts to cross to her]

CYNDY. Jody! Hi! Whatcha so serious about?

JODY. Something our minister said this morning.

CYNDY. [*Arriving Down Left beside her*] What? [*As Jody starts to speak, CHRIS, standing on a bench Up Center, having mimed opening a window, calls to them*]

CHRIS. Hey! [*She whistles to them, CYNDY and JODY turn to her*]

CYNDY. Chris! Come on out.

CHRIS. I don't think I can.

CYNDY. Why not?

CHRIS. Oh, my dumb sister got me sent to my dumb room. Isn't that dumb?

JODY. Try to come out, anyway. We've got a problem.

CHRIS. OK. [*Calling*] Mom, can I go out?

MOTHER. Not until you apologize to your sister.

CHRIS. Oh, all right. [*Calling to sister*] I'm sorry, Veeee – rraaaaah! [*Making this last sound like addressing some under-rock-living creature*]

MOTHER. I suppose that will do. Don't be long.

CHRIS. [*Already moving, stepping from the bench and approaching the girls, Down Left*] What's the problem?

JODY. Christmas.

CHRIS. Christmas is no problem.

JODY. The Christmas spirit is. Our minister says it's gone.

CYNDY. My Mom said that, too.

CHRIS. So did mine. Hmmmm. What is it, anyway?

CYNDY. Why, it's . . . [*puzzled*] It really is missing.

JODY. And what do you do when something's missing?

CHRIS. What?

JODY. Find it, you dope.

CHRIS. Oh.

CYNDY. Do you suppose it's something you can actually find?

JODY. Maybe not like finding a glove or a book, but I've got a feeling that it's still around someplace. We just have to look hard enough. The question is, where do we start? [*Pause for a beat or so*]

CYNDY. I know. The star!

CHRIS. The star?

CYNDY. The three wise men followed a star. Maybe that'd work for us.

JODY. Hmmmm. There are three of us. We're wise. [*Looks at Chris*] Mostly.

CHRIS. [*Insulted*] Hey!

JODY. It's a beginning, at least. We'll get hunting right after supper.

CHRIS. *[A little spooked]* After dark?

JODY. How many stars do you see out now?

CHRIS. Well . . .

JODY. Meet me here at 6:30.

[They move back to their Cyc positions, JODY confidently, CHRIS and CYNDY a little apprehensively. MUSIC up. The entire CHORUS turns in and assumes relaxed sitting positions, looking upward toward the "stars" as the intro of "THE STAR" plays]

Music No. 2: "THE STAR" reprise

CHORUS. *[Sings]*

Verse 1: Christmas Star in the winter night.

Where is my Star tonight?

Christmas Star, bring us heav'nly sight,

Where is my Star tonight?

Chorus: Guide our steps and light our way.

Lead us through the dark.

With your wondrous bright display,

Brighten our troubled hearts.

Verse 2: Christmas Star, our guiding light.

Where is my Star tonight?

Christmas Star, make our pathways right,

Where is my Star tonight?

[Repeat chorus. Then tempo slows to brushed chords for conclusion:]

The Star! The Star!

The Star! The Star!

Where is my Star tonight?

Where is my Star tonight?

[MUSIC out. CHORUS rises back to original positions. The three GIRLS and three PARENTS turn back in, forming three separated pairs. All three pairs will do all exchanges up to the "Brian" section, but to save time, only one person will be heard at a time. The effect is that of three identical, simultaneous conversations. JODY and CHRIS both talk to Mothers, CYNDY to her father]

JODY. Mom, can I go out for awhile? *[Parents turn to kids]*

CYNDY'S FATHER. It's nearly dark. Where are you going?

CHRIS. We're trying to find something.

JODY'S MOTHER. We?

CYNDY. Jody and Chris and me.

CHRIS'S MOM. What are you looking for?

JODY. The Christmas Spirit.

CYNDY'S FATHER. The . . . ? Well, don't wander too far. I'll have Brian tag along and keep an eye out for you.

CYNDY. *[Opening door]* But we want to do it ourselves.

CHRIS'S MOM and JODY'S MOM. *[Opening doors, looking out at the skies and the darkness]* I don't think you should . . .

JODY and CHRIS. But, Mom . . .

CYNDY'S FATHER. *[Calling to Mothers]* It'll be all right. I'm sending Brian along. *[MOTHERS nod, relieved. Instructions resume as GIRLS put on coats. CHRIS also adds a stocking cap]*

CHRIS'S MOM. And be back . . .

JODY'S MOM. . . before eight. You need to help me get your baby sister ready for bed.

CHRIS'S MOM. . . help me clean up the house before the Christmas company arrives.

CYNDY'S FATHER. . . help me haul some trash out of the garage. I'm depending on you now.

KIDS. *[Variously]* I'll be back. *[They meet Down Center]*

JODY. Everybody ready?

CYNDY. Yeah. Big brother and all.

JODY. It's OK.

CYNDY. He promised to stay way behind us. *[Calling toward Cyc]* And don't you forget it!

BRIAN. *[He will always just be a voice coming from the Cyc. He does not turn in nor become part of the picture. It is probably best to have one boy always play the part but he is never actually "seen"]* You think I want to be seen with you? This is crazy.

CYNDY. Oh, be still.

CHRIS. Sure is dark.

JODY. Just look for the star, will you?

[On the cue, ". . . will you," the CHORUS disperses to Down Right. One chorus member stands on the bench, Up Right, holding up the prop star. One member becomes CARL STAR, a late-night TV-type car salesman. The others become a rough approximation of a CAR. Two kneel and sit back on their heels and crouch, their hands forming a circle in front of their faces, suggesting the headlights and front fenders of the car. Another leans over between them, head down and

toward the front, suggesting the hood. Two others kneel on all fours, suggesting the doors. If there are other cast members, they find positions in the "car" or remain on the Cyc]

CYNDY. *[The GIRLS survey the skies]* There are so many of them.

CHRIS. And how do we follow a star, anyway?

CYNDY. This wasn't such a great idea.

JODY. Now let's think. There are stars all over the place, not just up there. *[Pointing Right]* Look! Let's see what that is. *[As they approach, they are spotted by CARL STAR. He wears a bright winter coat]*

CARL. Why, good evening, little ladies. Carl Star of Star's Cars here. *[Shakes their hands or at least Jody's since she is leading the pack. GIRLS remain tentative, toward Center]* Your folks interested in a low-mileage, one-owner, double-sharp little bit of four-wheeled Christmas joy?

CHRIS. Uh . . .

CARL. Where are your folks, anyway?

JODY. They're . . . coming.

CARL. I'll bet they're right proud of you girls. Sisters, are you?

CYNDY. Yes!

CHRIS. *[Carried away]* Identical triplets. *[CYNDY and JODY look at her as if killing would be only a beginning. CARL looks from one to the other]*

CARL. Identical . . . ?

JODY. I think I hear my mother calling. *[Toward Left]* Coming, Mama.

CHRIS. I didn't hear anything.

CYNDY. *[Casually pinching her arm]* Yes, you did, Chris.

CHRIS. *[Wincing]* Maybe I did.

JODY. *[Edging the others back toward Right]* Thank you, sir.

CARL. Wait! Let me show you this little honey. Tell your parents about her. *[Opens "door," reaches in and turns on the key. SOUND by the CHORUS of a particularly dismal engine turning over. The whole car shakes]* Hear that baby purr? Perfect holiday colors, too. One red door and one green one. *[Calling louder and louder as they fade away]* I'll throw in a horn that toots "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly"! . . . In stereo! *[They are gone; CARL is frustrated. The car sound dies with a final gasp. CARL slams the door, which makes the sound, "Slam!" when it is shut. CARL gives the fender/tire a kick. That tire makes a loud sound of air escaping and the entire car leans toward Center. CARL storms back to the Cyc. Freeze]*