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Dramatic Publishing

CAPTURE THE MOON

**a play for young audiences
adapted from the Jewish folktales of Chelm**

**by
ERNEST JOSELOVITZ
and
HARRY MICHAEL BAGDASIAN**



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CAPTURE THE MOON was commissioned by BAPA's Imagination Stage, Bethesda, Maryland, Janet Stanford, artistic director, Kathryn Chase Bryer, producing artistic director, and was first performed on June 27, 1998, with the following cast and artistic staff:

KEITH PARSKY Rabbi / Narrator
PATRICK COLLINS Yossel
MICHAEL GREENBERG Berel
JULIE NEWMAN . Shulamis, Lillian Williams, Pants Person,
Peel Person
STEVE WANNELL Mayor, Mr. Williams, Monster,
Pants Person, Peel Person
STACIE PAYNE Faith, Other Townsperson

Director KATHRYN CHASE BRYER
Set Designer MICHAEL KAY
Costume Designer ELEANOR DICKS
Music BARBARA HESS & MACHAYA KLEZMER BAND

* * * *

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The authors dedicate this published version to
Pauline Cocoros Bagdasian
1923-1998

PRODUCTION NOTES

With *Capture the Moon* the set can be as simple or as complex as your time and budget allow. Young audiences have great imaginations: tell them a twig is a tree and they'll see a tree. It's one of the many reasons we love working with young audiences. You might want to go beyond the "this twig as a tree" approach when you produce this play, so we offer the following as a guide.

Start with simple things to denote the shtetl (schtet'-tul) of Chelm, a little village in the "old country" a long, long time ago. The minimum you need is the front of their modest synagogue, a rain barrel and something to which Berel can tie down the moon when it is brought into the village. Add anything else you desire or keep it that simple.

The journey "to the far, far away" calls for the crossing of a "rickety old bridge" which can be mimed and underscored with a creative sound effects track. For our adventurers' first stop along the way, the Williams' village, there's need for the front of a church with a steeple. It does not have to be full-sized so that Yossel can climb up the steeple to "capture the moon." A modest-sized set piece serves well and allows for a rod puppet of Yossel to do the climbing and the tossing of the rope at the moon.

The other segments of the journey can take place on an empty stage or one filled with a variety of scenic pieces. You will need a lake for the climactic smackdown with the monster. A shimmering piece of fabric works very well to represent the lake. It can be easily manipulated to denote the drowning of the monster. It can then be laid out so that

Berel, Yossel and Faith can “row out to the middle of the lake” and Yossel can capture the moon. What about a boat? Remember that “front of a church with a steeple”? A small boat can be created that also doubles as the recessed church door, light enough for Faith to move into place.

About the moon. Just in case you need a place to start, we offer the following: an 18-inch disc on a sturdy dowel about 4 feet in length. At times, it was clipped to a pivot that allows the Rabbi/Narrator to tilt the moon partially behind a curved piece of black masking. This movement enables you to represent the phases of the moon from full to crescent to (and you need this!) “moonless Friday nights in Chelm.” The dowel could be easily unfastened from the pivot to enable the Rabbi/Narrator to hold the moon over the lake and be “captured.” Finally, when they release the moon, the Rabbi/Narrator can easily manipulate its rising high in the sky, replace it on its pivot and create the final “moonless Friday night” for the last scene of the play.

We wish you best of luck with your production.

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CAPTURE THE MOON

A One-act Play

Minimum casting: 2 Women and 4 Men
(4 of which may play multiple roles)

CHARACTERS

BEREL

SHULAMIS

YOSSEL

MAYOR

RABBI

MR. WILLIAMS

LILLIAN WILLIAMS

FAITH

PEEL PEOPLE (2)

PANTS PEOPLE (2)

MONSTER

OTHER TOWNSPERSON

Approximate running time: 50 minutes

CAPTURE THE MOON

AT RISE: *Upbeat klezmer music plays. A lively company of players enters as they chant:*

BEREL. I'm Berel!

SHULAMIS. I'm his wife, Shulamis!

YOSSEL. And I'm their son—their son, that's me, Yossel!

MAYOR. And I am the mayor! Elected, selected, lauded, applauded...

RABBI (*cutting off the MAYOR who might just go on and on*). And me, I'm the rabbi.

SHULAMIS. We're all from the long-way-away long-time-ago very little town of Chelm.

(The entire company is now assembled onstage. Everyone is neutrally dressed in plain clothes to which they will add costume pieces as they play each part. Music plays under as they continue to speak to the audience.)

RABBI. Our story is about this boy, Yossel.

YOSSEL. Shalom.

RABBI. And he's going to need your help. When he needs your help, you need to say (*displays placard with the words on it, and says to audience:*) "Hold on, Yossel!" (*RABBI leads as the audience practices this two more times.*)

MAYOR. That's splendid! Isn't that remarkable!? Awesome! Fabulous!

RABBI. This story takes place in the "old days." How old? Last week? Before that. Who here can name an old invention? (*Extemporize.*) "The Old Days" is even older than that. It was so long ago that people dressed differently then. In "the old country" they dressed in home-made clothes. (*He hands clothes to other performers and as they dress...*)

YOSSEL. Papa, what does that mean, "the old country"?

BEREL. Well, son, people in America come from all over the world. (*To audience.*) Like where your grandmother and grandfather, or their parents or even their parents came from. They call those places, "the old country."

SHULAMIS. Most people in "the old country," like here, lived in little villages. Jewish people like us lived in villages we call "shtetls." People who lived in shtetls dressed differently from everybody else.

(*The RABBI hands out yamalkas and babushkas.*)

RABBI. The men wear tzitzit. And yamalkas on their heads. The women wear babushkas.

SHULAMIS. And instead of churches... (*A church steeple appears as in the distance.*) We go to a synagogue.

(*The synagogue—no steeple—as if mid-distance, appears upstage.*)

MAYOR. And the people of Chelm are different, singular, unique from every other shtetl.

BEREL. Why? Because we are thinkers.

YOSSEL. We think about lunch...

SHULAMIS. ...about washing the clothes...

YOSSEL. ...games.

RABBI. But we also have big thoughts. For instance ...

(The cast, dressed as the people of Chelm, stops and stares at BEREL who is seated and thinking.)

MAYOR. Is your papa sick?

YOSSEL. No.

MAYOR. He's tired?

SHULAMIS. No.

YOSSEL. He's thinking.

ALL *(impressed and understanding)*. Oh.

YOSSEL. Papa, what are you thinking about?

BEREL. I'm thinking. Why does it get cold in the winter and hot in the summer?

ALL. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

(The people assemble around BEREL as he is thinking.)

RABBI. On this question, Yossel's father thought for an hour. *(They hold, look at BEREL and wait a moment.)* For a whole day. *(He rises, a thought about to break through, only to sit again, in deep thought again.)* For ... two days ... three.

(BEREL stands up, as if out of a daze, his expression brightens.)

SHULAMIS. So?

MAYOR. Tell us.

YOSSEL. Papa?—why does it get cold in the winter and hot in the summer?

BEREL. I think... during the winter, we burn wood in the stoves for the heat. This heat gradually warms up the air so that by the time summer comes, the days are hot. In the summer, the stoves are used very little—only for cooking. Therefore, the air cools gradually month by month. When winter arrives, it is actually freezing, so the stoves are lit and the whole process is repeated all over again.

MAYOR. What an amazing thought!

RABBI (*patting him on the back*). Congratulations!

MAYOR (*shaking his hand*). Excellent! (*Continuing, to individuals in audience:*) Isn't that a fantastic idea?

RABBI. So you see, we Chelmites are thinkers. Little thoughts...

YOSSEL. Holidays, desserts...

RABBI. Big thoughts...

MAYOR. "Winter... spring... stoves..." Incredible!

RABBI. This story is about one BIG THOUGHT, and one strange answer, and one great adventure. It all started...

MAYOR. In the old days, in the Old Country, in the shtetl of Chelm, Friday night, when we go home from the synagogue.

SHULAMIS. That's not a problem on most Friday nights, because there is light from the moon.

BEREL. But on some Friday nights, like on this Friday night, there is no moonlight.

RABBI. Imagine it's very dark. If you could see in the dark this is what you would see.

(In blue light, everyone crosses the stage from different directions and they bump into each other, say "excuse me," "beg your pardon," then move along.)

RABBI. For a grown person, getting bumped in the dark...

(He gets bumped into.)

ANOTHER PERSON. Excuse me.

ANOTHER PERSON. I'm so sorry.

ANOTHER PERSON. Oh! Pardon me!

RABBI. ...is annoying.

YOSSEL. But for a *little* person walking home from the synagogue on a dark moonless night... *(He gets bumped and falls.)* this is a problem. A big problem that hurts. *(He gets up.)* I tried staying behind my father, holding tight to his coat...

(NARRATOR/RABBI holds up the placard and points to the words, encouraging the audience to say, "Hold on, Yossel!" as BEREL and YOSSEL walk along. Except BEREL makes a sharp turn and YOSSEL gets bumped right down.)

YOSSEL. I thought about carrying a torch... *(YOSSEL gets out matches and torch, begins to light it.)*

SHULAMIS *(taking them away)*. But you know very well that playing with fire is too dangerous.

BEREL. Then we had him try a warning whistle.

(They're walking along, YOSSEL blows loudly on the whistle once, twice, three times. Everyone makes way for him, but then the MAYOR comes running on.)

MAYOR. What's the matter!?! I'm here! Who's in trouble?! (*But it's dark, so the MAYOR crashes into YOSSEL, knocking him down. Then, goes from person to person explaining:*) I didn't mean it. I had no idea. Really, I didn't see him. I am so sorry. (*Turns to audience.*) I am, believe me, repentant, remorseful, I'm ashamed, regretful. (*MAYOR sees that SHULAMIS has tied a pillow to YOSSEL's tush.*) A pillow! Of course! What a fine solution! (*MAYOR crosses stage to speak to audience on other side.*) Don't you think so? A terrific idea—don't you think?—a loving mother's idea.

YOSSEL. That should do it.

(*Just then, the MAYOR, crossing back to address another part of the audience, bumps into and knocks down YOSSEL.*)

MAYOR. Oh! Sorry!

SHULAMIS (*hugging her little boy*). Surely there's something we can do.

RABBI. So everyone in the village did what everyone in Chelm does best. They *thought*, thought about the problem very carefully. They thought and thought and thought.

(*Thinking music is heard. Everyone sits and thinks, including the RABBI. One of them rises, paces, stops, raises his eyebrows, raises a finger ... NO.*)

MAYOR. A fire! (*Showing them.*) We'll build a stupendous, tremendous, great big fabulous fire ... !

SHULAMIS. Too dangerous.

MAYOR. Oh.

(Silence. Then:)

SHULAMIS. A lamp! Two lamps!

MAYOR. Remarkable! What a stupendous idea!

BEREL. Mr. Mayor, we don't have enough money.

MAYOR. Oh.

BEREL. And lamplight isn't very pretty at all, compared to ... the moon.

MAYOR. The moon.

BEREL. The moon!

ALL *(looking up to ...)*. The moon!

MAYOR. We'll capture the moonlight.

RABBI. So when the moon's not here, we'll still have its light.

YOSSEL. ...to light our way.

MAYOR. Astonishing idea!

RABBI. But how?

MAYOR. Oh. Yes. How?

(BEREL and YOSSEL have already dragged out a barrel of water.)

BEREL. Watch. Wait. And you'll see. *(The moon rises, first as a sliver, then higher and a crescent...higher, half-moon...until it is a full moon high in the sky.)* Now!

YOSSEL. Look!

BEREL. The moonlight...is in the water...in the barrel... *(Slaps a lid on the barrel.)* There! *(YOSSEL drapes himself over its lid.)* Guard it.

RABBI *(holds up sign)*. Hold on, Yossel!

BEREL. Every minute. Every hour. Every day.

RABBI. On the first day, the cold wind blew.

(A hard harsh wind is heard, everyone reacts.)

BEREL *(holds up sign)*. Hold on, Yossel!

RABBI. On the second day, it rained and rained some more.

(We hear torrential rain falling, everyone reacts.)

BEREL *(holds up sign)*. Hold on, Yossel!

(Meantime, the moon sinks, first as a half-moon, then a crescent, then a sliver on the horizon...until the sky is dark again.)

RABBI. The night was moonless again, and very dark. Imagine it is very dark. If you could see in the dark, this is what you would see.

(In blue light, everyone assembles around the rain barrel, but the MAYOR stops on the opposite side of the stage, thinking he's in the right place.)

MAYOR *(to YOSSEL)*. You haven't moved, haven't let anybody get into the barrel, haven't let anything out of the barrel? *(Into audience.)* Wasn't this a great idea? Capture moonlight in the water...in the barrel. Are you ready, Yossel, to open the barrel?

YOSSEL. Yes.

MAYOR. Oh, oh. *(Heads across stage to group as he says:)* Splendid! Magnificent! *(Bumps into someone.)*

Excuse me. (*Making a speech.*) We are about to witness a great moment in the history of our little shtetl, which will make our children safe from the darkest darkness. No more bumping into things! No more falling down! No more...! (*He mimes continued speechmaking as...*)

RABBI. Not everybody was as sure as the mayor about this idea.

SHULAMIS (*to audience*). Moonlight in a barrel, does seem a little far-fetched.

ANOTHER TOWNSPERSON. Moonlight? In water? (*She shrugs.*)

MAYOR (*as if continuing*). ...the glorious, the radiant, the heavenly moonlight, will shine forth! Now! Young man! Let there be light!

(*YOSSEL gets off the lid, grabs it. He takes a dramatic pause and then lifts the lid off the barrel. Nothing happens. Everyone looks into the rain barrel.*)

MAYOR. Let there be... (*Sticks his head in the barrel.*)
...a little light. (*Farther in.*) A tiny speck... (*Gurgling underwater.*) ...of light?

RABBI. This caused the Chelmites to do what Chelmites always do...think. For an hour. For two hours. For the entire night and into the next day.

(*Thinking music plays. The Chelmites think, the lights change, and it's daytime. SHULAMIS speaks.*)

SHULAMIS. Water puts out fire. Moonlight is like fire. So, I think, the water put out the moonlight.

ALL. Ah!

MAYOR. That's it! Indubitably! But...then...what...will... we do?

BEREL. If we can't capture moonlight, we must capture the moon itself.

MAYOR. Brilliant idea! We are going to go up into the sky! *(Then he realizes the enormity of the thought.)* ...and...and take the moon down?

(They all look up at the sky.)

SHULAMIS. It's really high.

BEREL. We'll have to get to the top of our tallest building.

RABBI. Which is our synagogue.

MAYOR. Great idea! The synagogue! Right to the very top! Wonderful!

ALL. Our synagogue. *(They look at the synagogue.)*

RABBI. But it's only twelve feet high.

MAYOR. Oh.

YOSSEL. There's one building that is very tall. *(Points.)*
That building, over there across the river.

MAYOR. You mean... Oh. No-o-o-o.

BEREL. But Yossel is right. It's the—I think they call it a steeple, of their...what do they worship in?

RABBI. A church.

ALL. The steeple of their church.

MAYOR *(not too loud)*. That's a terrible idea!

RABBI *(to audience)*. In those days there were no cars, no trains, no airplanes, so people didn't travel a lot. So the Chelmites had never been to the village across the river...and the people across the river had never dared visit Chelm. So the Chelmites were very scared.

MAYOR. We don't know those people.