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Dramatic Publishing

The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing

By
DENNIS FOON



Dramatic Publishing
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for Rebecca

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The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing was jointly commissioned by Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia and Young People's Theatre of Toronto. The Mermaid Theatre production took place in September 1994 on tour in Nova Scotia with the following:

Puppeteers Mike Peterson and Bill Forbes

Directed by Jim Warren

Designed by Jim Morrow

Music by Paul Cram

Stage Manager Michael Wallace

The Young People's Theatre production was first presented in Toronto on March 5, 1994, with the following:

SHORT TREE. Andrew Akman

BIRD. Eileen O'Toole

FLOWER, SECOND BIG TREE, BALLOON, TOURIST,

SHADOW, BIG DIPPER Lindsay Collins

JACQUES, ARAGULA, GREEN BALLOON, BIG DIPPER,

BRIDE, MATE Paulette Sinclair

FIRST BIG TREE, BOA, YELLOW BALLOON, SQUIRREL, TOURIST,

FISH, BIG DIPPER, MINISTER, BABY TREE . . . James Fagan Tait

JACK, BLUE BALLOON, NORTH WIND, TOURIST,

ALLIGATOR, BIG DIPPER, GROOM Martin Villafana

Directed by Jim Warren

Set, Props and Costumes designed by. Teresa Przybyski

Lighting designed by. Paul Mathiesen

Music composed and performed by Rick Sacks

Puppet and Mask consultant Trish Leeper

Stage Manager William Jamieson

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

In 1986, I came to Toronto from Vancouver to be the writer-in-residence at Young People's Theatre. I enjoyed my stay at the theatre but found that I was pining for my daughter Rebecca, who was only five at the time. I wrote her every day, filling my letters with puzzles, jokes and stories. One of the stories turned out to be *The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing*, which in its own strange way was a perfect reflection of how I was feeling at the time. The story was later illustrated by John Bianchi and published by Groundwood Books, a little publication that has given me a great deal of pleasure over the years, in part because I was thrilled to have finally written something that wasn't about anything. Just a whimsical fantasy. But my bubble was popped by a child psychologist who informed me that I had written a compelling tale about separation anxiety. And after thinking about it, I was forced to admit that the story was indeed about going away and coming back again. When I was asked, in 1992, by Young People's Theatre and Mermaid Theatre to adapt this little story into a full-length play I was filled with apprehension. I wrote the story for a whimsical little girl who was now a grunge-loving teenager. How could I find that feeling again? It seemed an impossible task. But once I sat down and started working, I began to relax. And began to remember the little girl I wrote the story for so long ago. The peculiar world of this Tree and Bird began opening itself up to me and a larger tale began to emerge, a story not just about fear of loss, but about confronting that fear. Loneliness can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if we cling to it

and ignore the world around us. The Tree gradually discovers that it is only as alone as it wishes to be, for a whole universe is just waiting to be invited in. This play, in its own way, is about opening that door.

STAGING NOTES

The play was originally conceived to be performed by a combination of puppets and live actors. I have now had the benefit of seeing numerous productions of *The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing*, all with greatly varied approaches. The two original productions provide an interesting juxtaposition. Both directed by Jim Warren, they were tremendously successful—and totally different. The Young People’s Theatre production had six actors who used a combination of puppets and masks. The Mermaid Theatre’s touring production was done entirely with puppets and was performed by two puppeteers—with an occasional assist from a backstage crew member. Bear in mind, this was a tour-de-force by two magnificently talented puppeteers, Mike Peterson and Bill Forbes. In the case of mere mortals, I would guess that the show would be more easily performed by at least three puppet manipulators. In the Young People’s Theatre version, the actor, Andrew Akman, was inside the tree, his face appeared in the trunk and he used his arms as mobile branches. The Bird had a few different manifestations. Eileen O’Toole played Bird in costume and mask when interacting with Tree. But when Bird flew, Eileen would manipulate a small winged puppet. After the Bird’s migration to Florida, Eileen operated a very expressive hand puppet. Then upon returning to Tree, Eileen re-

turned as an actor in costume and mask. In the Young People's Theatre version, the Balloons were papier-mâché and worn by the actors, with their faces protruding from the center. Mermaid simply used real balloons connected to rods. I haven't heard if one ever exploded during a performance! The Young People's Theatre production used a wide variety of puppetry styles, everything from paper cut-outs to hand-and-rod puppets. All of the animals were portrayed by puppets, which I think was very wise, given their brief appearances, and the magical effect puppets have on a young audience. Neither production went to great lengths to hide the puppeteers. The tradition of the exposed puppet operator is a long one and rather than distracting, seems to add to the magic.

The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing

CHARACTERS

SHORT TREE

FIRST and SECOND BIG TREE

FLOWER

JACK and JACQUES, two lumberjacks

BIRD

BOA CONSTRICTOR

ARAGULA, the Snake Woman

BALLOON, named Nobody

GREEN BALLOON

BLUE BALLOON

YELLOW BALLOON

SQUIRREL, and his MATE

TOURIST, a voice offstage

SHADOW

FISH

NORTH WIND

ALLIGATOR

BIG DIPPER, a constellation of stars

BRIDE, GROOM and MINISTER, three snow people

BABY TREE

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *The scene opens on a forest. Two BIG TREES fill the stage. Dwarfed below them is a very short, very sad tree.*

FIRST BIG TREE. Oh my, will it ever end? All those people, rushing around, living their tiny lives.

SHORT TREE. Where?

SECOND BIG TREE. So dedicated, hurrying to work, cleaning the streets, delivering the mail.

SHORT TREE. I can't see!

FIRST BIG TREE. There's another postman walking down the street, every day, over and over.

SECOND BIG TREE. Humans like jobs, they like to work.

FIRST BIG TREE. And does this postman like the vicious-looking dog waiting for him behind the gate?

(The SHORT TREE strains unsuccessfully to look.)

SHORT TREE. Is it a dog? Oh no!

SECOND BIG TREE. The faithful postman believes that hungry dog won't bite and chew him.

FIRST BIG TREE. I disagree! Dogs always bite postmen. Humans never learn. They just keep making the same mistakes.

SHORT TREE. Tell the postman not to open the gate!

FIRST BIG TREE. Too late. It's chewing the postman's leg.

SHORT TREE. Oh, dear! Poor postman.

FIRST BIG TREE. Humans never learn. Their brains stop growing too soon.

SHORT TREE. Has he gotten away from the dog yet?

SECOND BIG TREE. You talk about humans as if they're wood beetles.

SHORT TREE. People aren't like bugs.

FIRST BIG TREE. Very good! Wood beetles are far more intelligent and creative than humans—

SHORT TREE. Please, what's happening to the postman?

FIRST BIG TREE. I can't believe we're discussing humans again.

SECOND BIG TREE. I agree, it's time to meditate.

SHORT TREE. No, wait, tell me!

FIRST BIG TREE. You should meditate too.

SHORT TREE. I don't want to! Please, tell me what you see! (*The BIG TREES have shut down.*) Why do you always ignore me? You're tall so you can see things over the hill and far away. You can see fire—people squirting each other with hoses and car crash derbies...but I can only see the dirt, green stuff growing around me and a scrawny little flower.

(*The ever-happy FLOWER makes its one cheerful sound.*)

FLOWER. Whee! Whee!

SHORT TREE. Forget it, I'm not interested.

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Oh no, I can see things. I'm just not telling you!

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Sorry, I'm not talking to you, you're too small.

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Oh, so you like wood beetles too?

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Very good! Wood beetles are intelligent and creative.

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. I disagree! Dogs always bite postmen.

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. ...Why do I have to be so short. I hate it. I want to be tall so I can see something!

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. I've had it with this conversation. It's time to meditate!

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. And you should too!

FLOWER. Whee? Whee, whee!

(The SHORT TREE shuts down as darkness falls. Morning comes with a crashing sound and the SHORT TREE wakes up. Two lumberjacks appear pulling the two BIG TREES away. One of the lumberjacks, JACQUES, stops.)

JACQUES. Oh, ow, my back hurts.

JACK. I'm telling you, you don't stand straight.

JACQUES. I stand straighter than you. You slump, you slouch like one of those inchworms.

JACK. Yeah, but I slouch right. You slouch all wrong.

JACQUES. You know why my back hurts? Because you give me a pain. Now excuse me while I do my job. (*He bends over to pick up the BIG TREE again.*)

JACK. You hold it all wrong.

JACQUES. I been holding it this way for twenty years. This is how I do it.

JACK. Okay, it's your back, not mine.

JACQUES. Thank you.

(JACK picks up the ax and looks at the trembling SHORT TREE.)

JACK. What about this one?

JACQUES (*turns*). Are you crazy? This tree's too little. You want it for toothpicks?

JACK. It would be better for your back if we cut smaller trees.

JACQUES. And if we cut all the little trees, where would the big ones come from? What a pain you give me. What a pain!

(The lumberjacks exit, dragging away the trees. The SHORT TREE, stunned, can only utter a stifled scream.)

BIG TREES. Noooo!

SHORT TREE. Where are they taking them? How can they do that?

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. I didn't want that! Please, bring them back!

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Stop it! Don't you see what happened? They've been cut down! They're gone!

FLOWER. Whee!

SHORT TREE. Quiet!

(JACK enters, and the SHORT TREE watches him, terrified.)

JACQUES *(off)*. Hurry up!

JACK. I'm coming, I'm coming! I just forgot something!

JACQUES *(off)*. What?

JACK. There it is! *(He picks the FLOWER and puts it in his shirt.)* What's a day without flowers? *(He exits.)*

SHORT TREE. Nooo! Not the flower too! I'm sorry, come back! Please! They're gone. All of them. My eyes barely open and they're all gone... I'm alone. Very alone. Very, very alone. Why didn't they cut me down too? Because I'm only good for toothpicks. I think I'd be happier as a toothpick. At least I'd have company. I'd be with hundreds of other toothpicks in a jar at a restaurant. And then someone would lift me up after a nice meal and use my point to pick food from between their teeth. And then they'd chew me up and spit me out. It would be better that way. It's what I deserve. Come back, you lumberjacks! Come back and take me too! Anything's better than being all alone. *(There is a horrible squawk, offstage.)* Oh no. Did they hear me? Are they coming back? *(The noise is heard again. The SHORT TREE winces.)* I can take it. I'm not afraid.

(The noise comes closer and the SHORT TREE trembles. The noise begins to take shape into a kind of song. The SHORT TREE winces again. The BIRD enters, with a suitcase on her back.)

BIRD (*singing*). On top of spaghetti, all covered with peas...

SHORT TREE. Ow, ow, ow, ouch!

BIRD (*singing*). I met a poor snowball, then somebody wheezed.

SHORT TREE. Please, stop, please!

BIRD. Stop what?

SHORT TREE (*opens its eyes*). You're not a lumberjack.

BIRD. No, I don't believe so.

SHORT TREE. Then what was that horrendous noise?

BIRD. That was not a noise. That was my song. I was singing "On Top of Spaghetti."

SHORT TREE. But you were singing out of tune. And you had the words all wrong.

BIRD. In what way did I have the words wrong?

SHORT TREE. It's not "I met a snowball." It's "I lost my poor meatball."

BIRD. Oh. (*She sings.*) I smelled my poor meatball, then somebody wheezed.

SHORT TREE. Ow ow ouch! Stop it, please!

BIRD. If I stopped singing, would you mind if I rested under your branches for a little while?

SHORT TREE. Not one bit. As long as you do not sing.

BIRD (*sighs*). I'm not used to getting this kind of criticism.

(*The BIRD takes the suitcase off her back and unpacks.*)

SHORT TREE. I'm sorry. It's just I'm having a very bad day.

BIRD. How unfortunate. What kind of very bad day are you having?

SHORT TREE. You see those stumps?

BIRD. Lumberjacks. How terrible.

SHORT TREE. They even picked the flower that only said,
“Whee whee.”

BIRD. And now you’re alone.

SHORT TREE. I’m not ready to face the world by myself.
The big trees protected me. Mostly they ignored me but
at least they were there. I don’t know what to do.

BIRD. Did you know you have excellent branches?

SHORT TREE. Pardon me?

BIRD. Most tree branches are too high up to keep the sun
out of my eyes and the rain off my head. Yours are just
the right size.

SHORT TREE (*blushing*). Pshaw. (*After a beat.*) Really?

BIRD. I mean it. I like your branches...But I don’t know if
I like you. I haven’t known you long enough.

SHORT TREE (*disappointed*). Oh.

BIRD. But I do think it is safe to say that I will soon grow
to like you and we shall become friends.

SHORT TREE. Oh, good!

*(The BIRD sees something small squiggling in the
ground.)*

BIRD. What’s this I see?

SHORT TREE. Are you looking in that hole?

BIRD. Oh, my salivating taste buds! A most scrumptiously
shaped, perfectly brunch-sized, plump-luscious worm!
*(The BIRD starts pulling on the worm. It turns into a
major tug of war.)*

SHORT TREE. Don’t strain yourself, Bird.

BIRD. Strain? It’s fun! *(The BIRD loses grip of the worm
and slams into the ground.)*

SHORT TREE. Are you all right, Bird?

BIRD. Of course! I'm just working up an appetite! (*The BIRD grabs the worm again, and again slams into the ground.*)

SHORT TREE. Oh, Bird, don't let the worm hurt you.

BIRD. Hurt me? A worm? I eat four dozen of these creepy crawlers every day! I'm just playing with it!

SHORT TREE. Be careful.

BIRD. Ha! This bird always gets its worm! (*The BIRD grabs the worm with total determination, begins to succeed, and speaks through its closed beak.*) I told you! A cinch! (*Ever so slowly the worm emerges. And emerges. And emerges.*)

SHORT TREE. You eat four dozen of those every day?

(*The BIRD is soon dwarfed by a BOA CONSTRICTOR.*)

BIRD. Well they're not like that. (*To the BOA.*) Excuse me, but I do not believe you are a worm.

BOA. I am not a worm. I am a gigantic snake. I am a boa constrictor.

BIRD. Well it was extremely rude of you to disguise yourself as a worm in order to eat me.

BOA. I was not disguising myself. I was peacefully slumbering in that hole, having a siesta when something started pulling at my tail.

BIRD. You happen to have a deliciously appealing tail tip. It's the rest of you that is indigestible.

BOA. Let's see how digestible you are. (*The BOA lurches at the BIRD, who deftly leaps away. After a few tries, the BOA gives up in frustration.*)

BIRD. Are you giving up?

BOA. No. I don't do chases.

BIRD. You hardly even tried.

BOA. I'm not hungry.

SHORT TREE. Then why did you attack Bird?

BOA. Because it's the serpenty thing to do when someone attacks the tip of your tail.

BIRD. You mean you're not even interested in eating me?

(The BOA starts winding around the SHORT TREE.)

BOA. Not in the slightest.

BIRD. You don't even want a taste?

SHORT TREE. Bird!

BOA. Anyway I don't eat birds.

BIRD. Not even a nibble?

BOA. I'm a vegetarian.

SHORT TREE. What's a vegetarian?

BIRD. Someone who only eats vegetables.

SHORT TREE *(to the BOA)*. Make yourself right at home.

BOA. Thank you. Your trunk is quite comforting.

BIRD. I've never met a serpent like this before. What is a boa constrictor doing in this part of the world, anyway?

BOA. I was with the Flying Svengali Circus, the star of Aragula the Snake Woman's show. One day, in front of a sold-out audience, I crawled into a loop for our greatest act: the living lasso. She spun me and spun me, fast—faster! The crowd cheered! But then she lost her grip. I flew through the air, right past the tent top—and I kept going!

SHORT TREE. And then what happened?

BIRD. It didn't sprout wings so it must've crashed.

BOA *(nods sadly)*. When I woke up, I was in the middle of nowhere. I looked and looked for Aragula in vain.

Finally I gave up. I crawled into that hole and swore I'd never come out again—until you pulled me out.

SHORT TREE. This is very sad. You must be the loneliest snake in the world.

BOA. Aragula the Snake Woman may have been merely human, but she was the only mommy and poppy I ever had.

SHORT TREE. If I was tall, I could see far away and find her for you. I can't help you at all.

BOA. My mommy-poppy is gone forever.

SHORT TREE. I know what it's like to lose someone. If only you could find her.

BOA. If only...

(The BOA and the SHORT TREE slowly turn and look at the BIRD. Pause.)

BIRD. I suppose I could have a look.

BOA. Could you?

BIRD. Don't expect any miracles.

SHORT TREE. Good luck.

BOA. Thank you. *(With great fanfare, the BIRD takes a running start and launches off into the air. The SHORT TREE and the BOA watch the BIRD disappear into the looming sky.)* I couldn't survive another day above the ground without my Aragula. She saved my life when I was a weak, abandoned and sickly snakeling.

SHORT TREE. What happened to your parents?

BOA. They were made into travel bags. Aragula saved me. Everything I am today I owe to my foster mommy-poppy. Will I ever see her again? *(The BOA begins crawling into the hole.)*