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Dramatic Publishing

TODAY I AM!

**Five Short Plays
About Growing Up Jewish**

By

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

One Foot After Another

David's Star

The Heart of Buchanan

Wrestling With Angels

Frank and Stein



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(TODAY I AM!
Five Short Plays About Growing Up Jewish)

ISBN: 1-58342-347-8

For Rabbi Jack Paskoff
and Temple Shaarai Shomayim—
congregation, family and friends

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TODAY I AM!

Five Short Plays About Growing Up Jewish

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These five plays may be performed individually, or in any combination as an evening of one acts. Casts may double in more than one play for even greater flexibility.

Total playing time: about 75 minutes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Special thanks to the authors of the stories on which these plays are based for their generosity and advice: Lois Ruby, Jacqueline Dembar Greene, Carol Matas, and Eve B. Feldman. My gratitude, also, to Rabbi Jack Paskoff, Barry Kornhauser, and members of Congregation Shaarai Shomayim, Lancaster, Pa., who participated in the original reading and offered many helpful comments.

TODAY I AM was further developed through a workshop arranged by Amie Brockway-Henson, Producing Artistic Director of The Open Eye Theater, Margaretville, N.Y. A public reading was held at the Skene Memorial Library, Fleischmanns, N.Y., on Saturday, November 19, 2005, with the following directors and casts:

One Foot After Another
Directed by Amie Brockway

BARRY COHEN Luke Beemer
ALMA ROSEN Marie Palko
PAM Mary Small
KEVIN Thomas Hafner
Stage Directions Garrett Fairbairn

David's Star
Directed by David J. Turan

CARA MATARASSO Mary Small
SAM Thomas Hafner
DAVE Erwin Karl

TAMMY Katie Lehn
Stage Directions Jessica Olenych

The Heart of Buchanan
Directed by David J. Turan

SARAH Alex O'Melia
TRACI Cassie Schmitt
DEE DEE Mary Small
MRS. GOLDSTEIN Jessica Olenych
MOLLY Barbara Morrow
Stage Directions Erwin Karl

Wrestling With Angels
Directed by Amie Brockway

JACI Cassie Schmitt
JOSH Luke Beemer
ISAAC Garrett Fairbairn
BECKY Alex O'Melia
MRS. COHEN Marie Palko
Stage Directions Mary Small

Frank and Stein
Directed by Melissa Cooperman

BEN STEIN Garrett Fairbairn
SIDNEY Alexa Abrams
MOM Sharon Abrams
DAD David J. Turan
Stage Directions Brandon Hargrove

The Heart of Buchanan

Adapted from a short story by the playwright
in *With All My Heart, With All My Mind:
Thirteen Stories About Growing Up Jewish*
Used by permission.

CHARACTERS:

SARAH. an eighth-grader
TRACI her classmate
DEE DEE another classmate
MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Sarah's mother
MOLLY. Sarah's sister, in third grade

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Buchanan Middle School.

Approximate playing time: 15 minutes

The Heart of Buchanan

SCENE 1

TIME and PLACE: *Late morning. A row of lockers in the hallway of Buchanan Middle School. Other lockers display Christmas decorations, but SARAH's does not. May be played in front of closed curtain.*

AT RISE: *SARAH, enters, goes to her locker and opens it. She pulls out her lunch bag, opens it, finds a sack of cookies, selects one and takes a bite.*

TRACI *(enters, making her way across stage to class)*. Sarah!

SARAH. Hi, Traci.

TRACI. On your way to the library?

SARAH. Yeah. In a minute. *(Shows her the cookie and sack.)* My stomach's growling. Want one?

TRACI *(takes a cookie)*. Oatmeal! Thanks! *(As she exits.)*
I'll cover for you!

SARAH. Okay. See you there.

(As SARAH fusses with her books, cookie, and contents of her locker, DEE DEE enters and hurries across stage.)

DEE DEE. Hey, Sarah!

SARAH. Hey, Dee Dee!

DEE DEE. Eight more days 'til Christmas break! I can't wait!

SARAH. Right!

DEE DEE. Got your tree up yet?

SARAH (*with forced cheerfulness*). Well...no—

DEE DEE (*without waiting for the rest of SARAH's answer*). Better late than never. See you at choir practice!

(SARAH rolls her eyes, takes another bite of cookie, returns the bag to her locker. MRS. GOLDSTEIN enters, preoccupied with MOLLY, who's been crying.)

SARAH. Mom? What are you doing here?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Sarah! What are *you* doing out of class?

SARAH. I needed a snack. Late lunch is the pits. But never mind me. Is Molly sick?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Not exactly. I got a call from her teacher to come and get her—

SARAH (*notices MOLLY's sniffles; kneels beside her*). What's the matter, Molly? Why the tears? (*MOLLY hangs her head and doesn't answer. To MRS. GOLDSTEIN—*) What's going on?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*through clenched teeth*). I am trying very hard not to blow this thing out of proportion. Bear with me. (*A beat, a deep breath, and then—*) "Find your way in," your dad says. The army moves us, we *find our way in*. San Francisco. D.C. Wherever. But I'm afraid this one-horse bump in the road has me beat.

SARAH (*incredulous*). Buchanan?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*looks at the lockers*). Well, at least you don't have Christmas decorations on *your* locker.

SARAH. Of course not! What are you talking about?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Shouldn't you be in class?

SARAH. Study hall. I'm in the library. More or less. They never check. Tell me what happened!

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*another deep breath, and then—*). Okay. Here goes: Molly's teacher called to inform me that Molly got "a little upset" this morning. Seems the third grade has a play they do every year for the "Christmas assembly." And all the little shepherds, including Molly, are supposed to kneel in front of the manger, and bow their heads to the baby Jesus. A *manger scene* in a third-grade classroom—can you believe it?

MOLLY. What's a "manger scene"?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Those little statues, of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus.

MOLLY (*nods her head*). Oh. Yeah.

SARAH. So there's a manger scene in their classroom. What's the big deal?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. This is a *public school*. It doesn't belong here.

SARAH. Well, yeah, *technically*, but this is *Buchanan*. We're the only Jews in town. The only non-Christians, as far as I can tell. There are Christmas decorations all over the place.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. I have no problem with that. Homes, shops, whatever. *But not in the public school!*

SARAH (*still not getting it*). I'm singing carols in choir. I've even got a solo!

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Don't remind me.

SARAH. *Mom!* It's just *music*.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. It's *religious* music.

SARAH. Are you telling me I shouldn't do it? Because choir was my "way in" at this school. And singing carols doesn't make me Christian any more than singing *opera* would make me *Italian!*

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. I know, I know. I'm not *telling* you anything.

SARAH. I'm old enough to make my own decisions—

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. *And* old enough to understand what you're doing. *And* you've always been great at "finding your way in." (*Subtly indicates MOLLY.*) But it's not that easy for everyone.

MOLLY (*knowing full well she's being talked about*). I didn't want to bow to the baby Jesus. I'm *Jewish!*

SARAH (*kneels beside MOLLY again; they hug*). Of course, you are, Molly.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. So her teacher tells her to go sit in her seat while the rest of the class rehearses.

MOLLY (*tearing up again*). I didn't want to sit all by myself, either!

SARAH (*sympathetically*). Oh, Molly! Come on, don't cry!

(*MRS. GOLDSTEIN also kneels to comfort MOLLY. MOLLY turns from SARAH and buries her face against her mom's shoulder.*)

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. These people are *educators!* How can a school put an eight-year-old child in this position?

SARAH (*standing*). They don't mean to be hurtful. They just don't get it.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*standing*). I don't think they *want* to get it. (*Imitating teacher.*) "I had no *idea* that our Christmas celebration would put *pressure* on your child, Mrs.

Goldstein. Molly is not *required* to participate in our play. She can spend rehearsal time in the second-grade classroom and sit with them while we perform.” (*Raising her voice, beside herself with fury.*) Wouldn’t *that* be a comfort!

SARAH (*wincing at her mother’s raised voice*). Mom! Sssshhhh! You’re going to get us *all* in trouble!

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*lowering her voice*). Sorry.

SARAH. People around here just can’t *imagine* not having Christmas. That’s what my friend Traci said when I told her we don’t have a tree and we don’t go Christmas shopping because *we just don’t celebrate this holiday*: “I can’t *imagine* that!” she said. And she was *really trying!* Everyone else she knows celebrates Christmas.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. I’m not in charge of what other people can or can’t imagine. I’m in charge of my daughter.

SARAH. So what are you going to do?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Right now, I’m going to take Molly home. And try to calm down. I’ll call and talk to her teacher again in the morning.

MOLLY (*worried*). What are you going to say?

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Well...how about...that maybe you and I could help change the play?

MOLLY (*aghast at the thought*). We *can’t* change the play!

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Why not?

MOLLY. Because that’s the way they *do* it!

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*not understanding what that means*). What?

SARAH. Molly’s right. The whole Christmas assembly is set in stone. The choir’s been singing the same carols in the same order since this school was built. With the

same readings from the New Testament and the same little scenes—

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. Wait a minute! You never told me about the *readings*. That's not an assembly program. That's a church service!

SARAH. It's a *tradition*. The whole town shows up to see it. Parents and grandparents who were in the same program when *they* were in school here.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. But it's not right! It's not even *legal*.

SARAH. *Mom!* Will you please *get a grip?* *It's right for Buchanan.* And we're just passing through.

MOLLY. I want to go home.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN. That's where we're headed, sweetheart.

MOLLY. Not *here*. *Washington*. We didn't have a manger scene before...

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*with a weary sigh*). Oh, dear. This is not a battle an eight-year-old should have to fight. Certainly not all alone. (*Wipes MOLLY's tears and takes her hand.*) Let's go, Molly. I think we both need a nap.

SARAH. Bye, Molly!

MOLLY. Bye, Sarah.

SARAH. See you later, Mom.

MRS. GOLDSTEIN (*ruefully*). After choir practice?

SARAH (*insistent*). *Yes.* (*MRS. GOLDSTEIN shakes her head as she and MOLLY exit together. SARAH glances at her watch.*) Whoops! (*She grabs her bookbag, slams her locker shut and hurries off in the opposite direction as the lights fade and end scene.*)

SCENE 2

TIME and PLACE: *Later that day, after school. The auditorium. May be played on a bare stage.*

AT RISE: *MUSIC is heard, the introduction to “Deck the Halls.” SARAH, DEE DEE and TRACI enter. They wear choral robes and carry lighted candles. The three face the audience, forming a triangle at center, with SARAH downstage of the other two. At some point during the first song, MRS. GOLDSTEIN enters DR and stands facing the DL corner of the stage, where MOLLY will eventually appear. MRS. GOLDSTEIN is motionless and expressionless, a figment of SARAH’s imagination.*

SARAH, DEE DEE & TRACI (*singing*).

Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
 fa la la la la, la la la la
 'Tis the season to be jolly,
 fa la la la la, la la la la.
 Don we now our gay apparel,
 fa la la, la la la, la la la.
 Troll the ancient Yuletide carol.
 fa la la la la, la la la la.

See the blazing Yule before us,
 fa la la la la, la la la la.
 Strike the harp and join the chorus,
 fa la la la la, la la la la.
 Follow me in merry measure,
 fa la la, la la la, la la la.

While I tell of Yuletide treasure.
fa la la la la, la la la la.

(MUSIC changes to the introduction to “Oh, Come All Ye Faithful.” At some point during this song, MOLLY enters DL. She is dressed as a shepherd. At first, she stands still and expressionless, facing her mother at right. She, too, is a figment of SARAH’s imagination.)

SARAH *(singing alone)*.

Oh, come all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant.
Oh, come ye, oh, come ye
to Bethlehem.

(During the next part of the song, MOLLY slowly kneels and bows her head. SARAH doesn’t look directly at her, but her face reflects what she’s seeing in her mind. She goes on singing, but begins to stumble over her words.)

Come and behold him,
born the the king of angels.
Oh, come let us adore—

(She hesitates, picks up the song again—)

Oh, come let us—

(She hesitates again.)

Oh, come let us adore him—

(She hesitates again, standing there uncertainly, to DEE DEE’s and TRACI’s confusion and dismay. MUSIC plays on a moment and then stops. MOLLY rises and exits left. MRS. GOLDSTEIN turns and exits right. A beat, and then SARAH blows out her candle and runs off left. DEE

DEE and TRACI look at each other in amazement and freeze. LIGHTS fade and end scene.)

SCENE 3

TIME and PLACE: *A few minutes later. In front of SARAH's locker. May be played in front of closed curtain.*

AT RISE: *SARAH enters, upset but determined, and walks quickly to her locker. TRACI hurries in behind her. SARAH gets her backpack ready for the trip home during the following dialogue.*

TRACI. C'mon, Sarah! Let's go back in.

SARAH. I can't, Traci. Not yet.

TRACI. I told Mr. Blake you had an upset stomach. It's not too late—

SARAH. I have to do this, Traci. You go back and finish rehearsing. I'll talk to Mr. Blake afterward.

TRACI. How can you just...*let everybody down?*

SARAH (*thinking of her family*). Not...*everybody*.

TRACI. Mr. Blake is going to go *ballistic*. You're a *soloist!*

SARAH. He can replace me.

TRACI. Before *Saturday*? We're singing for the Businessmen's Association, remember? So they'll all dig deep in their pockets and give us money for the trip to Chicago. It's *important!*

SARAH. I know.

TRACI. I don't think you do! It's a *big deal*, Sarah. This choir has never made it to the semi-final competition before.

SARAH. You'll do fine without me—

DEE DEE (*runs on*). Is it true? Are you quitting, Sarah?

TRACI. Oh, great, if she knows, everyone knows—including Mr. Blake.

SARAH. I'm not *quitting*, Dee Dee. I'm just not going to be in the Christmas program.

DEE DEE. They're all saying it's because you're *Jewish*!

SARAH. I am.

DEE DEE. Really? I didn't know that!

SARAH. You never asked.

DEE DEE. Why would I? (*She stares at SARAH a moment, making SARAH—and TRACI—uncomfortable.*) I've never met anyone who was *Jewish*.

TRACI. Well, now you have. Dee Dee, would you mind—?

DEE DEE (*ignoring TRACI and still staring at SARAH*). What does that *mean*, exactly?

TRACI (*feigning ignorance*). That you've never met anyone who was *Jewish*?

DEE DEE. No! *Being Jewish*. (*To SARAH.*) Does it mean you're not a Christian?

SARAH. Well, that's not what it *means*, but, no, I'm not a Christian.

DEE DEE. You're a *heathen*?

TRACI. That is so rude!

DEE DEE. I'm *trying* to understand. (*To SARAH.*) Are you saying you don't believe in Jesus?

SARAH. I believe he existed. I don't believe he's God.