

Excerpt terms and conditions

This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest you read the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly

10 Plays for Children and Families

Written by

Y YORK

Edited by

MARK LUTWAK

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., or as otherwise noted in the Copyright and Licensing Information herein, without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our website: www.dramaticpublishing.com, or we may be contacted by mail at: THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., 311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including, but not limited to, the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved.

For performance of any songs, music and recordings mentioned in this play which are in copyright, the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained or other songs and recordings in the public domain substituted.

©MMXVI by
Y YORK and MARK LUTWAK

Printed in the United States of America
All Rights Reserved

(DON'T TELL ME I CAN'T FLY:
10 PLAYS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)

For inquiries concerning all other rights, contact:
Bret Adams Agency
448 W. 44th St.,
New York, NY 10036 • Phone: (212) 765-5630

ISBN: 978-1-61959-158-5

Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly

10 Plays for Children and Families

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Adaptations	
<i>Getting Near to Baby</i>	11
<i>Eggs</i>	65
<i>The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi</i>	113
Original Plays	
<i>the Portrait the Wind the Chair</i>	155
<i>The Last Paving Stone</i>	207
<i>Mask of the Unicorn Warrior</i>	239
<i>River Rat and Cat</i>	277
Listening Plays	
<i>The Forgiving Harvest</i>	313
<i>Nothing Is the Same</i>	361
<i>Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly</i>	399

Introduction

When Y York's adaptation of *Afternoon of the Elves* was first presented at the Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices Festival in 1993, more than a few people took notice. The American Alliance for Theatre Education gave *Elves* its Distinguished Play Award in the adaptation category, and the play went on to be produced at most of the professional children's theatres in the United States (as well as in Canada and Australia).

The *Children's Book and Play Review* spelled it out, "This excellent script, filled with powerful and descriptive dialogue, may help children better understand those who are different from themselves. It shows how easy it is to make judgments without really knowing a person, and how those judgments can not only be inaccurate, but hurtful." The play is also dramatic, exciting, and very funny. It was a significant new addition to the pool of mature and quality dramatic literature for young people.

Prior to this, Y had never written a play with a TYA audience in mind. But truly, this was no more Y's first play for children than it was just Y's next play. As artist after artist, reviewer after reviewer, and adult audience member after adult audience member continues to discover, as did Mark Cofta of the *Philadelphia City Paper*, "Labels be damned, great theater deserves an audience—children, family and all."

Y writes from the heart, with her full mind and being. She trusts her entire audience and approaches all of her work with equally rigorous dramaturgy. If you were to ask her, she would tell you that the differences between her plays for young people and her plays for adults lie in their central characters and their concerns, not in their style or "message."

And indeed, long before Linda Hartzell commissioned *Afternoon of the Elves*, Y had written plays with young primary characters. Her 1986 one-act play *Life Gap* (anthologized by Broadway Play Publishing in *Facing Forward*), about a family battling poverty and a controlling do-gooder, is centered on two brothers, Rudy and Randall, who prove to be the central protagonists, comic motor, and moral center of the struggle.

This play included several themes common to many of Y's plays: the dynamic tension between siblings, the clear vision of youth, and the complexities of meaningful relationships in a painful and difficult world. Without a trace of sentiment, Y wraps her most serious questions in wry humor. She toys with language, making surprising choices in words and grammar to reveal the surprising subtext beneath.

Life Gap was followed by two full-length plays (published by Y's "adult" publisher, Broadway Play Publishing), *Rain. Some Fish. No Elephants.* (1989) and *The Snowflake Avalanche* (1993).

In the former, a nuclear family featuring two sisters confronts an apocalyptic future drowning in a literal deluge of acid rain, genetic engineering, species extinction, and re-institutionalized racism. In this dystopia, this “science fiction variation on *You Can’t Take It With You*,” the family attempts to fight back with idiosyncratic, personalized sabotage. When their struggle inadvertently frees a member of the society’s black, bonded servant class, they suddenly find themselves without an ideology to move forward. Their intuitive generosity is no match for the realities of revolution and history.

Again, the two young people drive the story and provide its comic and moral center. They use the resources at their disposal—fragments of stories, games and rituals—to struggle towards change and understanding. It was at an exuberant student matinee of the show at the New Theatre of Brooklyn, that Y first became aware that her audience might be wider than she thought.

The Snowflake Avalanche ran further with the themes of environmental holocaust and societal racism. Thomas, a member of a Northwest Native tribe devastated by an oil spill, has walked across the continent to wreak revenge on the oil company he holds responsible. Russell, a passionate, progressive African-American attorney, provides his defense. As their two worlds intersect and collide, as each struggles to understand the other, the larger world starts to change. Whales push tankers back to shore, the earth begins to revolt, and Russell and Thomas’ families begin to address the fight ahead. Tim, Russell’s young son, teams with an imaginary spirit friend to explore the heating vents of his home, tackle pollution and articulate the larger challenges.

Seattle Weekly wrote that this “ambitious modern fable concerning ecological disaster, race relations and the human condition ... conspires to bring massive, global issues to a human, even comic plane;” the *Seattle Times* said that “York has a real flair for wry, intelligent humor ... *The Snowflake Avalanche* forgoes preaching for a gentle hopefulness that we can set things right on the planet and learn to understand each other better;” and *The Bellevue Journal American* foreshadowed this entire anthology, calling the play “an adult play which children can enjoy.”

So, in 1992, it may have been more than just fate that inspired Peter Brosius to assemble a panel of writers to address a group of children’s theatre artistic directors on the challenges and rewards of working with actual, living playwrights. Y remembers being asked to discuss their worst experiences as playwrights in commissioning situations. Since the three writers—Steven Dietz, Jon Klein and Y—had nothing to lose with this particular group of producers, they went for broke. The panel is historically remembered as a comic romp, as the three regaled the crowd with anecdotes and asides. At the end of the session, Linda Hartzell approached the three with commissioning offers for Seattle Children’s Theatre, soon to move into its new facility.

Steven wrote *The Rememberer*, and has gone to create a body of work for young people, including *Still Life With Iris*, his adaptations of *Honus & Me*, *Jackie & Me* and (with Allison Gregory) the immensely popular *Go, Dog. Go!*

Jon adapted *The Hardy Boys in the Mystery of the Haunted House*, followed with *The Hardy Boys in the Secret of Skullbone Island* and went on to his widely produced adaptation of *Bunnacula*.

Y adapted Janet Taylor Lisle's Newbery Honor Book, *Afternoon of the Elves*, the story of a young girl who fights peer pressure to understand a "strange girl" next door.

Unlike the vast majority of stage versions of children's books, this is not a "page to stage adaptation." Y used none of the novel's dialogue, insisting that prose dialogue and stage dialogue serve different purposes. Through the honest play and interplay of the children with each other and with the adults in their lives, she forged a living stage alternative to the book. Word-for-word there is little overlap between the play and the book, yet time and again, young people articulate that the theatre experience is equivalent to reading the book.

The play revisits many of Y's themes, including fear of the "other" and the limits of personal generosity in a complicated, political world. Her young protagonists flow easily between the world of play and that of adult responsibilities. Y reveals their story through clear-eyed, unsentimental, yet often comic dramatic action. Unlike many "dark comedies," Y does not write a funny first act followed by a tragic finale; she writes true, so humor and pathos alternate, stepping on each other's toes throughout.

In the two decades since, Y has written or adapted more than two dozen plays for young people, often writing them simultaneously with "sister" adult plays or screenplays that share themes and characters.

The plays in this volume fall into three rough categories: adaptations, original plays and what Y calls her "listening plays."

The adaptations were all commissions. This is not surprising, because TYA theatres need "titles" to sell tickets to the gatekeepers who bring the children and because rights issues are thorny and often beyond the resources and patience of individual writers. American theatrical rights are almost always entwined with their film rights. As such, publishers are reluctant to allow playwrights permanent access to underlying rights. A playwright may write a complete script that may never be performed again, because the publisher has reserved the rights for a film or for another adaptation. It's the reality of the terrain.

Y has had some bitter losses in this area. Her brilliant adaptations of *Frog and Toad (Forever)*, based on the Arnold Lobel stories, and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, from the novel by Elizabeth George Speare, can be read in script form, but may not be legally performed onstage. While Y has great empathy and sympathy for the holders of the original rights, it nonetheless stings to invest in and then sit on these "orphan scripts."

While *Afternoon of the Elves* remains Y's best-known adaptation, Y selected *Getting Near to Baby*, *Eggs* and *The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi* as representative adaptations for this volume.

Getting Near to Baby, adapted from the novel by Audrey Coloumbis, and *Eggs*, based on the novel by Jerry Spinelli, both investigate death and loss, two of Y's other common themes. This section is filled out with *The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi*, based on the Kipling story, although most people actually remember the story from the 1975 Chuck Jones animated film.

While these plays are clearly based on original work by others, Y gets inside the material and integrates it into her own thinking. She is more than simpatico. She creates new dialogue, characters and circumstances to reinvent the original stories, themes and styles in her own stage language. At their hearts, they are true to the books, as Y has read them. While treating the essences of the originals with the greatest respect for their authors and for their beloved readers, she has absorbed them into herself, and the plays emerge as fresh works for the stage.

Other adaptations have included two more Jerry Spinelli novels, *Crash* and *Stargirl*; the fairy tale *Little Thumbelina*; Jon J. Muth's *Zen Ties*; Oliver Jeffer's *How to Catch a Star*; a musical based on Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* titled *The Upside of Down* (with Amanda Jacobs); and a hip-hop version of *Othello* (created with an MC and DJ.)

The original plays included in this volume all sprang from casual suggestions and/or production circumstances. Y can trace all but one of these back to specific conversations, although I am sure that the other partner in these talks might be surprised to find that out. Although there are great arguments for including *Accidental Friends* or *Bleachers in the Sun* or for that matter *Rain*. *Some Fish*. *No Elephants.*, we felt that these four offer great breadth.

The Last Paving Stone and *the Portrait the Wind the Chair* play well to upper elementary or "tween" audiences; *Mask of the Unicorn Warrior* was commissioned for teens and *River Rat and Cat* is aimed at the youngest theatregoers. Each script toys differently with language.

The final section of this anthology includes the "listening plays." Each emerged from a set of circumstances in which Y immersed herself in the worlds of others, hearing their stories, watching their lives. In each case, she was given a mandate and resources to listen and then to write a play.

The Forgiving Harvest, *Nothing Is the Same* and *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* are arguably Y's strongest plays, because of the intense dialectic between the real people sharing their stories and Y's own vivid imagination. She had to honor both her respondents' experiences and her own sense of dramatic reality. The tension between the two has created rich worlds that are as deeply meaningful to the communities that helped shape them as they are to Y.

These are neither documentary plays nor are they adaptations. Nonetheless, they carry some of the same responsibility to source material that adaptations carry. While Y has corresponded and conversed with the authors of prose that she has adapted, the interaction pales in comparison with learning face-to-face from the subjects of her plays.

Nonetheless, they are Y's plays. Because, as with her original stories and her adaptations, they don't become plays until she has taken them into her own being. They work their very way into her brain cells and heart cells and stomach cells and become raw material for the stories she crafts for the stage.

Anyone not knowing the source materials for the plays in this volume would be hard-pressed to separate them into these categories. First, and foremost, they all have heart. Y loves her characters. She feels for them, bleeds for them, and wants to heal them. She recognizes their struggle in this big world of ours.

The plays all respect their audience. She uses no omniscient narrators or expository devices. She trusts that an audience of any age can watch and empathize with human behavior (even when the characters take the shape of animals). She believes that language is a great deal of fun but that its importance onstage is to reveal subtext or dramatic action. The language is but the surface of a roiling sea. Y's dramaturgy is fierce. Her structures are complete. Her plays trace a journey worth taking.

Y does not believe in tragedy without comedy. She believes that humor is the path to engagement and understanding. Laughter lubricates the emotions. It lubricates the eyes. Someone said that humor has the greatest integrity because true laughter cannot be forced.

The play that Y is writing, whether it is from an original story or from the story of another, is fully informed by how Y is engaging with the world at the time she is writing it. Societal themes of the environment, xenophobia and racism pervade her plays. They are shot through with the personal, human efforts to understand death, loss, friendship, family and generosity.

This appreciation for the work of Y York is as subjective as one could possibly write. Y has been my partner in art and life for 35 years. Y's plays, particularly those for young people, fully document the struggles we have undergone together to make sense of our historical, political, personal and spiritual world. It has been my good fortune to direct readings, workshops and/or productions of most of Y's plays. I deeply hope that you feel some of that good fortune as you read, consider and perhaps stage these scripts.

—Mark Lutwak