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Dramatic Publishing

Tell Your Story

**The Plays
and Playwriting of
Sandra Fenichel Asher**



**Edited by Judy Matetzschk-Campbell
and John Dilworth Newman**

Foreword by Dorothy Webb

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Tell Your Story



The Plays and Playwriting of Sandra Fenichel Asher
Edited by Judy Matetzschk-Campbell and John Dilworth Newman.
Foreword by Dorothy Webb.

Including *A Woman Called Truth* (full length), *Once, in the Time of Trolls*, *In the Garden of the Selfish Giant*, *Everything Is Not Enough*, *Too Many Frogs!* and *Family Matters*

While we might imagine playwrights working alone, collaboration is the hallmark of the playwriting of Sandra Fenichel Asher, one of our country's most produced writers for young audiences. *Tell Your Story* examines six of Asher's finest plays, focusing on how the stories told in the scripts reflect her life, her philosophy, and her collaborative methods of play development. Asher's plays have emerged from a variety of sources including oral histories, traditional tales, young adult novels, picture books, poems, and young people's writings. The playwright's means of telling her stories on the stage have been as wide-ranging as her source material. The introduction of each play places it in the larger context of Asher's dramatic repertory, and the plays are followed by descriptions of how the script was developed and what its development process may teach us about creating new works for and with young people. The book includes a biography of the writer and a description of her other dramatic and nondramatic works. This collection, edited by two directors who wrote their doctoral dissertations on new play development and who have worked with Asher on multiple projects, provides a unique overview of one of the most significant bodies of dramatic literature in the field of theatre for young audiences. *Code: TK7.*

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of
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for bringing so many of Sandy's plays to the stage

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Simply said, Sandra Fenichel Asher is a talented and disciplined writer who creates plays whole-cloth but also adapts stories, even some of her own, into plays. She is equally successful creating stories and novels for young people and adults. With more than 24 plays and more than 30 stories and novels published, Sandy’s achievements are singular.

I first met Sandy when she was an audacious, curly-haired undergraduate at Indiana University. She enrolled in a children’s theatre course I taught in the absence of the regular professor, and Sandy held her own alongside graduate students. Sandy was also a reviewer for the campus newspaper. Her less-than-enthusiastic review of the department’s production of *Lysistrata*, in which I had the title role, was dismissed by some faculty and graduate students as “what can you expect from an undergraduate!” As I recall, she nailed the weaknesses in the production with perception—even if she did find my performance a bit wooden. Her talent as a writer even then was obvious.

Our paths crossed again when in 1963 Sandy was one of more than 600 who auditioned for a place on the *Showboat Majestic*, IU’S summer floating theatre where I was company manager and “housemother.” Sandy’s training as a dancer as well as her talent as an aspiring actress won her one of the 20 coveted spots. The IU Theatre Department, with the encouragement of the former chair, Lee Norvelle, had purchased the last of the original showboats in 1959

and launched its first season in 1960. The *Majestic* plied the Ohio River mostly with overnight stops and performances in small river towns along the way. A few longer stays in Cincinnati and Louisville allowed the company to perform their full repertoire and provided for necessary repairs to be made to the wooden-hulled vessel. In addition to rehearsing and performing, Sandy, along with other company members, pitched in with various tasks such as working in the galley helping the resident cook, cleaning the theatre, stoking the boiler, attending to the concession stand, and working in the box-office.

The company revived a repertoire of melodramas, with a little Shakespeare thrown in from time to time, and worked the audience with a lively carnival-type candy sale followed by a rousing vaudeville performance. Here Sandy's skill as a dancer enlivened the chorus line that ended each show with a rousing rendition of "Down on the Levy" performed with such vigor that the boat would rock in the water.

Years flew by, and when I next met Sandy she was Sandra Fenichel Asher, married, a mother of two, living in Missouri, a published writer of books for young readers, a playwright, and writer-in-residence at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri.

We met over lunch in downtown Indianapolis and I encouraged her to submit a script to the biennial Bonderman Playwriting for Youth National Symposium competition that I had founded in 1985 at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. The intent behind the competition and symposium was to encourage writers of scripts for young audiences in an open competition and to provide a venue for discussing the plays and the needs of playwrights. A finalist and three semi-

finalists were chosen via a blind reading, so my friendship with Sandy had nothing to do with the selection of her script, *The Silver Saucer*, as one of three semifinalists in 1987, nor with her *A Woman Called Truth* being chosen as one of three semifinalists in 1989. It was increasingly apparent that Sandy was developing into a significant playwright. By 1995, the competition and symposium was able to offer winning finalist playwrights a weeklong residency with a cast, director and dramaturg to support the development of their plays. Sandy emerged as one of four finalists with her script *The Wolf and Its Shadows*. Two other of her scripts, *Joan of ARK 5* (now *ARK 5*) and her highly acclaimed *In the Garden of the Selfish Giant*, subsequently made their way into the Bonderman.

Sandy handles the development process thoughtfully and skillfully. She listens intently, questions, and listens some more. Always receptive to new perceptions, she nonetheless remains in charge of her script and doesn't rush to quick fixes. She makes few major changes during the development process, but after returning to the quiet of her home, Sandy goes back over her notes thoughtfully and decides what is important to her. Then and only then will significant changes appear.

What I admire most in Sandy's writing is the authenticity of her voice. Somehow she has retained the child within her and is able to channel that source into her characters and their actions. Her characters reflect the inner feelings, fears and joys of young people with honesty and clarity and often with humor. Sandy also has mastered the craft of dramatic structure, allowing her to create plays in different forms and styles and plays that appeal to a wide range of ages within one script. She also has a unique ear for diction that creates the rhythms of her characters and simultaneously reveals and delineates characters.

Aside from being an often produced and awarded playwright and author of books for both young people and adults, Sandy blazes trails in other ways. She embraces opportunities to work with high-school students and their directors, community members, and professional theatres. She is excited and open to finding new ways of creating theatre, such as the emerging “theatre for the very young.” Moreover, she opens doors for other playwrights and gives back in significant ways, such as creating websites that feature others, providing critical but encouraging responses to writers, and lending support and leadership through the Playwriting Network of the American Alliance for Theatre & Education (AATE). Sandy is rightly crowned “Queen of the Slam” for organizing venues where playwrights publicly read short excerpts from their current work—a service she has provided for numerous AATE conferences as well as the Bonderman Playwriting for Youth National Symposium.

Although Sandy creates her plays in vastly different ways and in different styles and forms, within the heart of each is honesty, truth and hope that can only come from a playwright with a heart as honest, truthful and hopeful as Sandy’s. Thornton Wilder, who inspired Sandy in her youth, once said, “It is necessary to have markers of beauty left in a world seemingly bent on making the most evil ugliness.” Sandy and her plays are just such markers.

Dorothy Webb



Introduction

“Our stories define us, our place in society, and our experience of the world. They help us to reach within and without—across rooms, generations, borders, barriers, oceans, and years. There’s a traditional Jewish saying that human beings were created because God loves stories. Among all the creatures on this earth, we’re the only ones who can tell them, and that must mean something to each of us.”

—Sandra Fenichel Asher

In Sandra Fenichel Asher’s most popular play, *A Woman Called Truth*, the chorus urges the title character, “Tell your story; it must be told.” As a playwright, Asher has made a career of telling “stories that must be told” in effective ways on stage. She explains:

“Stories are a survival mechanism, an important one. Stories are the way we make sense of our lives—and, when that proves impossible, stories allow us to laugh. Rather than a series of dates and facts, our lives are made up of stories, large and small: good times, bad times, happy times, sad times, all can be woven into our life-story tapestry. I appreciate being invited to write the stories of my life, and I encourage others to recognize, share, and celebrate their stories as well.”

There are few writers of plays for young audiences who exemplify dramatic mastery like “Sandy” Asher. An investigation of her plays reveals a deep understanding of the

playwright's craft balanced with sensitive insight into how young people think, feel, and understand the world around them. The result is a body of work with multi-dimensional characters whose voices are honest and authentic. Her work is a blend of craft and heart, skill and soul, theatricality and humanity.

Each of her plays holds the promise of hope, an element Asher finds essential in theatre for young audiences. Asher states, "Childhood and adolescence are not just difficult times; they are times for hope. A person can solve problems. One can learn how to live well. No one can tell children that life is not worth living. They just got here and they are rarin' to go!"

Sandra Fenichel Asher is one of the most influential and widely produced writers of plays for young audiences in the United States. Dramatic Publishing has nurtured Asher's work over the past two decades, publishing more than twenty of her plays. Not only has Asher developed a significant canon of dramatic literature in a variety of genres and styles, but she has also pioneered ways of creating new plays. Thus, this book is both a celebration of the work of this amazing playwright and an exploration of how good plays can be created from a wide variety of sources and in a number of different ways.

It is our goal as editors to examine Asher's scripts not only as the great plays that they are in their own right, but as illustrations of the range of source material from which dramatists may draw their stories and the ways in which that material might be treated. These sources include (but are by no means limited to) life experiences, contemporary and historical figures, novels, picture books, poems, the writings of young people, myths, legends, and tales. The book will also examine the ways in which a playwright can

collaborate with a group of individuals to develop dramatic works that transcend the particular community in which they were developed and speak to all of us.

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S OWN STORY

Sandra Fenichel was born on October 16, 1942. She spent her childhood in a row house on West Diamond Street in a neighborhood called Strawberry Mansion in Philadelphia. One of her favorite memories is of sitting on the steps of Number 3020 with her grandfather. She says, "There was no air-conditioning, and row houses tend to block out each other's light, so everyone took to the steps and sidewalks for fresh air and sunshine whenever possible."

Her block of Diamond Street swarmed with children, her fellow "war babies" and the "baby boomers" who came just after them. Almost every child in the neighborhood who was not an immigrant had parents or grandparents who were. Although her area of the city was thoroughly integrated, ethnic and religious groups remained surprisingly ignorant of each other's lives. Ridiculous stereotypes and superstitions were passed on from parent to child and from friend to friend.

But the mutual motivation to play and explore, to grow and dream bound the children together in that neighborhood that included Fairmount Park, with wide open space for playing pretend, and the Park Theater, a large movie house filled with romantic movie stars. Asher reflects that she and the other children on West Diamond Street acted out the movies over and over again: in backyards, in basements, in bedrooms, in the schoolyard, and in the park. They fought over the best roles, went home angry, called each other on the phone, made up, and acted out some more. The movies

promised Sandy and her friends lives of endless adventure, and they believed in that promise!

Her loud and active play-world with her friends was a huge contrast to her life at home. Asher says that hers was a “house meant for adults”—quiet, sedate, sedentary grown-ups. “Basically I was raised by seven of them who lived there with me: my grandparents, parents, Aunt Becky and Uncle Jack, and my brother, Bobby, eight years my senior and not much interested in his small sister. I was expected to be quiet.”

The playwright’s father was a doctor and his office was on the first floor of their row house. While there were patients in the office, she was not to make distracting noise. Therefore, if not playing outside with her friends, the easiest way to stay out of trouble was to spend a lot of time in her room alone. There, Sandy learned that “inner space is worth exploring and that even when alone, you can find yourself in fascinating company.” Much of her time was spent in a fantasy world where she pretended to be the people she saw in the movies or read about in her beloved books. She states, “I saw no reason why I could not be whatever I wanted to be, and all of those things at once.” This early experience has instilled in Asher’s characters the honest, childlike sense of logic that makes their voices and thoughts so real for the young audience members who encounter them.

Sundays were special days for Sandy as a child. On Sundays her parents dropped her off at the Children’s Reading Room of the Free Library of Philadelphia at Logan Square while they drove off to visit their friends. Asher says she remembers racing down the long ramp and through the tall glass doors to visit her friends: books.

“I adored their worn, dingy bindings all in neat rows and their musty, age-old smell. I believed wholeheartedly in the people I met within their covers: Jo March, Peter Pan and Wendy, Dorothy and the Scarecrow. I remember thinking how wonderful it would be to write a book someone would enjoy as much as I enjoyed those I read.”

She adds,

“I think my fate as a writer of books and plays was sealed for all time somewhere between second and sixth grades, among the library shelves at Logan Square and at James G. Blaine Elementary School. I discovered two strong role models. One was real, the other fictional.”

The fictional role model was Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*.

*“Jo wanted to be special, and so did I. She intended to do it by writing stories. Perfect! I loved to write stories; I was born that way. Until I read *Little Women*, I had no idea that people got paid to do it. Jo March succeeded in making her dream come true and that gave me hope. Information, a dream, a plan, and hope: books can provide all of that and more.”*

The real-life role-model was Mrs. Lomozoff, Asher’s second-grade teacher.

“Mrs. Lomozoff was young, pretty, and madly in love with the theatre. She owned a set of beautiful oriental rod puppets. We used them to act out the tragic ‘Blue Willow Plate’ legend about star-crossed lovers who jump off a bridge and drown themselves rather than be parted. Mrs. Lomozoff loved the story and so we loved it

too. From time to time, she acted out portions of the play Arsenic and Old Lace for us. Star-crossed lovers and arsenic...in second grade!”

Inspired by Mrs. Lomozoff’s theatrical bent, Sandy began making up skits, stories, and dances woven around popular songs for her classmates to perform.

“When my collaborators and I had finished our regular work, we would rehearse my skits for a while and then perform them for the rest of the class. I remember from those days a recurring conversation that went, ‘Teacher, can I take Joycie and Eileen and Barbara and Paul into the cloakroom with me to rehearse my play?’ Her reply was always, ‘Yes, you can and you may.’ She was telling us, ‘You have ability; you have approval. Anything, everything, is possible.’ That message is as inseparable from my teacher’s voice in my mind as our bolted-down desks were from the floor. ‘Yes, you can and you may.’”

In spite of this encouraging teacher, Sandy was held back in her artistic pursuits by a very traditional family. In her parents’ world, the purpose of higher education for a woman was to make her a better housewife.

“That I wrote constantly, practically from infancy, was considered amusing by my family, but certainly not significant. That I had dreams of becoming a professional writer struck them as a safe enough way for me to pass the time until marriage and children came along.”

Eventually, her dedication to her study of dance and her involvement in school and community theatre productions became of great concern to her parents. As hobbies, theatre and dance were considered good things; as career options, they were not acceptable. This became apparent when

Sandy entered middle school and was further reinforced during her high school years as her parents became more vocal about her activities. Being herself at home was not always easy. Nor was it easy at school.

Of these years, the playwright states,

“They say everyone feels like the one true misfit in secondary school, including the quarterback and cheerleaders, and I was certainly no exception. I never quite got the hang of it. I was a reluctant satellite orbiting the edges of the ‘in’ crowd. It’s not that anyone teased me or that I was particularly unpopular. I simply felt uncomfortable all of the time, a lump of protoplasm that could not seem to mold itself into the shape of its container.”

This honest, emotional memory and Asher’s willingness to recall it and feel it again while she writes have given her the ability to create young characters who feel the world around them deeply and speak about what they feel. She writes, “I hope that those who find secondary school an unnatural habitat find comfort in my books, among people like themselves, and like me—struggling to make sense out of strange, difficult, and often painful situations.”

The early life of Sandra Fenichel Asher has significantly influenced the content and the style of her writing. This is true of most of us as writers. Our individual life experiences and our responses to those happenings form our human character, and it is only natural that the insights gained along the way are the stuff that makes playwrights’ characters their own.

A LOVE OF STORIES FROM A LACK OF STORIES

One of the unifying features of the plays of Sandra Fenichel Asher is a keen awareness of the power of a strong story. Asher observes,

“It has been said that all writers write the same story over and over again, the story of the one thing in life they were born to understand. I have mixed feelings about that. The stories we write may have more to do with those things in life we can never quite understand, the hard rocks we keep trying to wear away with the constant drip, drip, drip of words. I have more than a slight suspicion that I write books for young audiences because I am still trying to figure out what happened, what went wrong, after Diamond Street.”

She continues,

“In a word, what happened was ‘adolescence.’ To reach adulthood, a child must become more like his or her parents. To establish an individual identity, that same child must become less like his or her parents. It is a difficult passage, hard on parents and young people alike. Slowly but surely, as I write my books and plays, I find I have repaired broken bridges to my past and laid old sorrows to rest. I hope I also show readers and audience members that this does happen, that it can be done in our own lives. It takes time and understanding, and a willingness to forgive—ourselves and others—and move on.”

Through an examination of the protagonists in her plays, one can see that Asher knows herself well. Her plays are a balance of reality and optimism that is founded in a true sense of hope. Of this balance she says,

“Stories and plays for young people need to leave them with a feeling of hope. That does not mean that everything has a happy ending, with all loose ends neatly tied. But the protagonist should at least be left facing in a better direction than when the play started.”

By contrast, she adds,

“Adult audiences measure the severity of a play’s message against their own experiences. Young people don’t have that experience behind them to temper what is presented to them. They just got here, and what they are watching becomes a real part of the story of experience they are building up. It is not fair to tell them life is hopeless. Hard, yes. Confusing, sure. Challenging, of course. Books and plays can and do offer comfort, companionship, insight, and skills with which to deal with all of that. That fact is both helpful and hopeful.”

Asher believes that stories can and do help us learn, grow, and understand the things in life we cannot learn and understand without them. She states, “Today, I am more fascinated than ever with the beauty and power of *story*.”

In light of this strong belief and reliance on storytelling, it may be surprising to learn that Asher did not come from a family of storytellers. Her family had deep memories of life before coming to America, of leaving everything behind, of crossing the ocean, about living through two world wars, about relatives lost in the Holocaust. But they never told those stories. The playwright states that this has left “gaping holes in my life where all the people and places and events that came before me ought to be.”

Her personal loss is her readers' and audiences' gain. A strong human story is always at the heart of a Sandra Fenichel Asher play. The playwright states,

“Because of the empty space in my life, where the stories should be, I have spent much of the last twenty years encouraging other people to tell their stories, the stories that will die with each of us if we fail to pass them on. Much of my recent work has been about adding as many different voices to the story-sharing chorus as possible, through the anthologies I have edited, and in the plays I have written. You just never know. When Anne Frank was writing her diary, did she have any idea of the impact it would have on the world? Certainly not. But impact on the world isn't the point. The point is that our stories are unique. Each and every storyteller has something special to add to the vast, unfolding saga of human existence. Our stories define us.”

This book examines the many sources of inspiration found in the dramatic canon of Sandra Fenichel Asher and the means by which the playwright has rendered them. Writers looking at these examples should see possibilities for creating plays that are individual to their own life experiences. This is not a book about establishing a formula for playwriting. In Asher's work, the process of creating each play is a unique journey. However, by examining the playwright's various approaches to generating and developing new work, those looking for fresh approaches to dramatic writing can find their own starting points, pathways, and destinations.

TELLING STORIES WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Asher says of her early plays,

“At first I was completely on my own—isolated as a writer in Springfield, Missouri, reading The Writer and Writer’s Market, entering contests, doing the best I could. My first seven plays were published without any developmental process at all—three by Plays Magazine and four by companies no longer in existence. I had never heard the scripts read out loud, let alone seen them produced.”

Since those early years, Asher has embraced collaboration in her playwriting. In 1987, her play *The Silver Saucer* got her invited to the Indianapolis event that became known as the Bonderman Symposium to see a reading of the script. That led to her involvement with the American Alliance for Theatre & Education (AATE), and eventually to other situations where she was exposed to what was going on in theatre for young audiences—and to people who began to express interest in working with her. This interest resulted in a number of commissions of new plays on a wide variety of subjects. Those commissions, coupled with her growing personal interest in collecting and presenting the personal stories of other people, moved Asher toward more collaborative approaches in creating her plays.

“Community-based works” have offered Asher endless inspiration and the opportunity to explore different themes and conflicts with her own unique voice. Even working with the stories that are contributed by other people, the play that results is distinctly Asher’s.

Her first community-based play, *From Memory to Hope*, commissioned by Temple Israel in Springfield, is an excellent example of this process. Asher writes,

“I was handed 500 pages of transcribed interviews with the ten oldest members of the congregation and had to

find a shape for all of that. The goal was a readers' theatre presentation of an hour or so. I had to condense the voices, find the action, impose a shape."

The process of assembling other people's stories goes far deeper than simply compiling other people's words. As a playwright, Asher says that she forms a dramatic question about the material in her own mind, "and ultimately, the answer to that dramatic question is my own."

For *Family Matters*, a more recent community-based project, Asher was commissioned to conduct writing workshops with teenagers at the University of Utah's Youth Theatre, as well as several other sites around the country, and to create a play based on family relationships. Asher's dramatic questions included, "What is a family?" "How do families communicate, or not communicate?" and "How do family members help and hurt one another—and why?" Some of the stories in the script are based on single contributions while others are composites of several. The presentation includes a frame story of a family struggling to spend time together as well as self-contained dialogues, monologues, and recurring chants that reflect the themes of the play.

Playwriting is always collaboration, be it with living people or with the historical record. Asher states,

"When I think I understand the answer to the question I have drawn from the source material, I draw on the primary-source voice of those I'm writing about to support my conclusion in a dramatic and entertaining way. For example, for a script like Across the Plains, I was looking through all of the material on the Donner Party I could find for the answer to the question, 'How did Mrs. Reed get herself and her children through that

horrible experience?’ Mrs. Reed did not write down her thoughts, so I had to find an answer for myself.”

TELLING STORIES WITHIN STORIES

Sandra Fenichel Asher’s love for stories spans many cultures and time periods. Her plays feature classic tales retold with Asher’s unique voice and within a new dramatic structure. When Asher has drawn source material from myths, legends, and folktales, she has often woven the overarching story of the play from the strands of several related stories. By doing so, she is able to tell shorter stories on stage without stretching them beyond their natural playing time. This approach demonstrates the interconnectedness of stories and how stories lead to and emerge from one another. It also allows the playwright to explore themes in unique ways.

In *Once, in the Time of Trolls*, adapted from several Norwegian folktales, three women guide the heroine in her journey as she seeks to rescue her prince and find lasting happiness with him. Each woman tells how she found contentment in life. The accumulated understanding gained from these stories furthers and reinforces the protagonist’s growth and development.

For *Too Many Frogs!*, Sandy Asher adapted her own picture book, extending the book’s brief plot to include three classic tales. The book’s frame story focuses on Rabbit, who reads himself stories, and Froggie, who invites himself to listen to them. The audience enjoys seeing these stories enacted in puppetry just as Froggie enjoys playing them out in his imagination. This serves to strengthen the point of identification between Froggie and the audience while

supporting the conflict between Froggie and Rabbit. The result is strong dramatic action.

When Asher combines stories in her scripts, the ways in which she brings them together are unique to each work. Her other plays that combine shorter stories into an overall story arc include *The Wise Men of Chelm* and *The Wolf and Its Shadows*, the former based on a collection of Yiddish “fool stories” and the latter on tales that have been told about wolves in various cultures.

TELLING STORIES ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

In addition to combining related stories in creative ways, Asher is also able to create contemporary stories about children from traditional tales and published stories. The resulting dramas highlight enlightening parallels between the source material and the experiences of modern children.

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant takes its title from the Oscar Wilde tale, which is enacted in creative play in one scene of the play. But the focus of the script is Asher’s modern-day characters: an eleven-year-old girl and her nine-year-old friend as they deal with the foreboding issues of death and separation. The frame story and famous tale are connected more by theme than plot, as they both show how walls between people are built and breeched and how healing and growth can occur when those barriers are removed.

Other plays by Asher that feature child characters include *I Will Sing Life, Romeo and Juliet—Together (and Alive!) at Last*, and *Somebody Catch My Homework*. These plays present children who make decisions, face the consequences,

and are sometimes more successful in meeting their challenges than the adults in their lives expect them to be.

As Sandy Asher has written about teenagers in her books and plays, she has rendered a more optimistic and sympathetic picture of them than is generally painted in the popular media. Asher's plays for adolescent actors feature young adult characters that stand in relief against the age-old stereotype of the self-absorbed teen. More often than not, Asher's adolescents are intensely curious about the world beyond them and deeply concerned about the welfare of others.

In *Everything Is Not Enough*, adapted from Asher's own novel, the young protagonist is discontented with his comfortable, protected lifestyle. In the course of the action, the young man seeks to understand those whose lives are different from his own. Other plays of Asher's, including *We Will Remember* and those in the collection *Dancing With Strangers*, also feature teens who seek to understand people and problems beyond their own life experiences.

BEING A LIVING STORYTELLER

While Sandra Fenichel Asher began writing her plays in isolation, publishing them before ever seeing productions, she has become one of the most collaborative writers in the field. She travels widely to participate in staged readings and workshops in professional, university, and secondary school settings to hear how her words on the page communicate on the stage.

During these residencies, Asher offers formal talkback sessions with the audience as well as informal discussions with directors, cast members, designers, and producers. She

leads classroom sessions and participates in workshops that help students to see their potential as playwrights, poets, and storywriters. She listens to the work of student playwrights and offers them feedback. As much as any writer in the field, Asher has established the idea that the playwright is a living artist who can be as active in the production process as any member of the production team.

In addition to involving young people and adults in the creation of her works, Sandy Asher has initiated programs that assist other writers in developing their own scripts and getting their material into the hands of potential producers. As a writer-in-residence at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri, Asher ran playwriting contests, created directories of plays for young audiences, co-founded websites that feature writers for young people, and co-directed a small theatre company that helped get award-winning scripts on stage. Through her work with the Bonderman Symposium and the American Alliance for Theatre & Education, she has hosted “playwright slams,” co-directed the Playwrights In Our Schools program, and maintained an annual directory of new plays. These programs, described in more detail in a later chapter, demonstrate that writers can not only develop their own work but also assist and support the work of others who are creating new works for young people.

SAMPLES OF ASHER’S STAGE STORIES

The six plays included in this anthology are a few of the dozens in Sandra Fenichel Asher’s eclectic canon. A description of her other plays and a list of her theatrical and non-theatrical works are included at the end of this book. The half-dozen plays included in this collection were selected to illustrate the variety of sources that have

inspired Asher as a dramatist, the diversity of ways in which she has treated her wide-ranging subject matter, and the different processes by which the scripts have been developed.

A Woman Called Truth remains Asher's most popular play, with over 300 productions since it was first presented in 1987. The play is based on the life and speeches of Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave who managed to free her son through legal means and later became a speaker and advocate for the abolition of slavery and the suffrage of women. The playwright drew her material from Truth's autobiography as dictated to Olive Gilbert as well as from the writings of those who knew the title character during her lifetime. Asher's structure enables Sojourner Truth to tell her own story using a flexible ensemble that creates all the needed settings and characters.

Once, in the Time of Trolls weaves several Norwegian folktales into a play that is more than the sum of its parts and stands as a unique story of its own. The overarching plot is Asher's retelling of the familiar "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" tale. As Katrina makes her journey to rescue the enchanted prince who has been captured by the Troll Princess, she encounters a woman who does what pleases others, another who does what pleases herself, and a third who does nothing at all.

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant uses the Oscar Wilde tale as a point of departure to tell the story of eleven-year-old Maggie and her mother as they spend the summer at the house of Maggie's dying grandmother. A younger girl, Brianna, perceives similarities between Maggie's bitter grandmother, who chased the neighborhood children from her yard, and the giant who drove the village children from his garden. While Maggie and Brianna act out the story in

creative play, Wilde's tale serves as background and counterpoint to the main story of the two girls confronting death, honesty, and change.

Everything Is Not Enough was adapted from Asher's own young adult novel. For both the book and the play, the writer took her own life experience of breaking from her parents' expectations and placed it in a fiction that retains the emotional reality of its source. Although the basic plot and characters were already established in the novel, Asher made different choices in rendering them on the page and on the stage, demonstrating the capacities and demands of each genre.

Too Many Frogs! was adapted from Asher's popular picture book. Since the plot of the book would be too short to fill a full-length play, the writer adds three well-known children's tales (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *The Elves and the Shoemaker* and *The Ugly Duckling*) and uses them, in the main plot, as the stories that the reclusive Rabbit reads to his uninvited guest Froggie. The tales were carefully chosen and are told so as to illuminate the relationship between Rabbit and Froggie.

Family Matters was drawn from stories the playwright solicited from several groups of young writers that center around issues of family relationships. The resulting script demonstrates Asher's literary skill in helping others to share their own stories while establishing her own story arc from a mosaic of individual contributions.

Too Many Frogs!



Pollyanna Theatre Company, Austin, Texas featuring Alex Garza and Skip Johnson. Photo: Judy Matetzschk-Campbell.



Lexington Children's Theatre, Lexington, Ky., featuring Warwick Johnson.

Family Matters



Youth Theatre at the U, Salt Lake City, Utah. Photo: Amy Oakeson.

In The Garden of the Selfish Giant



Pollyanna Theatre Company, Austin, Texas, featuring Mia Young and Betsy McCann. Photo: Bruce McCann.

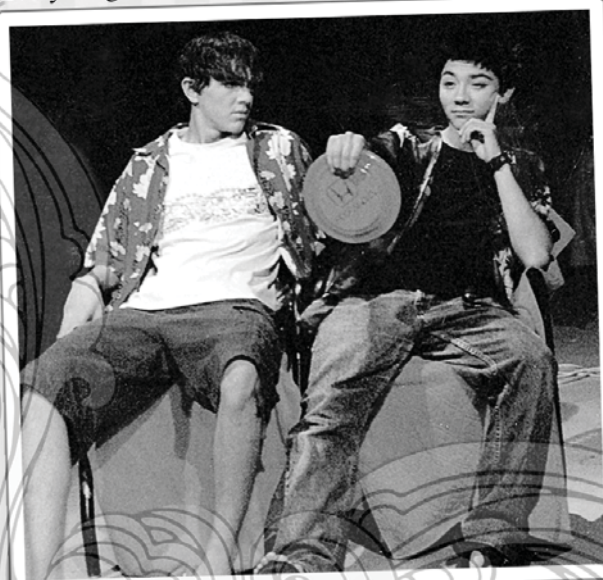
Once, in the Time of Trolls



Seem-to-Be Players, Lawrence, Kan. Photos: John Gary Brown.



Everything Is Not Enough



Highland High School, Salt Lake City, Utah. Photo: Beth Bruner.

A Woman Called Truth



The Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre, Omaha, Neb. Photo: James Keller.