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Family Plays

THE DARK CASTLE

Drama by Sally Netzel



THE DARK CASTLE

“[This play] has a simplicity that never talks down to children, imagination without being contrived, and a spontaneity and involvement with the audience that seems to draw out the most reticent child.” (Ron White, *San Antonio Express-News* about the Trinity University premiere)

Drama. By Sally Netzel. Cast: 6m., 4w. An evil baron who can't stand goodness, laughter and even the faintest glimmer of light tries to destroy the luminosity of a beautiful princess who glows when things go well and dims when things go badly. Dimwit, suitably named but kind, believes people can overcome all obstacles if they work together. To save the princess, he and his friends seek advice, even roaming the aisles asking for help from the audience. *Three simple sets. Costumes: dark and light robes to distinguish characters. Special effects can be elaborate or simple with suggestions at the end of the playbook. Approximate running time: 40 minutes. Code: DC9.*

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The Dark Castle

THE DARK CASTLE

A Play for Children in Two Acts

by

Sally Netzel



Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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SALLY NETZEL

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(THE DARK CASTLE)

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THE DARK CASTLE

Cast of Characters

BARON, the evil ruler of a wicked land

LADY NOZZLE

LADY OGLE

LADY MURMER

} **servants to the Baron**

LUMINA, the sad young duchess, ward of the Baron

DIMWIT, a good young man

HICCUP, a nervous old hermit

SIR SNORT

SIR GROPE

SIR CLAMOR

} **victims of the Baron's evil**

Synopsis

The play takes place in three locales—a room in the dark castle (a throne surrounded by darkness); outside a cave or hut of a hermit (including a well); and one open-road exterior with no specific requirements. Indications are made for blackouts between each scene, but cross-fades will be faster and better, if the scenery allows for them. There should be actor-access from stage to audience area.

Playing time: 45-60 minutes

First presented by Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

PRODUCTION NOTES

Properties

Block of “ice” (perhaps a large plastic cube, or a white or gray cardboard box covered with plastic wrap)—in well

3 balls of “fire”: balls painted with red fluorescent paint and illuminated with a black-light (ultra violet) spot. Luminous paint that glows in the dark works well. A simple method might be to cover red balls with red and blue glitter; a small spotlight, mounted above the juggling area, will give the idea of fire. Simplest of all, of course, is to juggle red balls and let the audience use their imagination; the balls can be concealed with the actor’s hands and in his pockets until the exact moment of juggling.

5 large mirrors, covered with black cloth or turned away from the audience until time to reveal them.

Lights and Special Effects

If the backdrop, furniture, and costumes of the Baron and Servants are black, a fairly bright amount of stage lighting can be used without harming the gloomy effect of the throne room. Lumina’s costume, including a crown, may be made of fluorescent material. A black-light spot focused on her can be dimmed up and down as her brightness grows and fades as called for in the stage directions.

The Hermit’s area and the Failures’ area at Down Right and Down Left should be lighted with carefully focused spotlights which do not spill over into the throne room. In contrast to the throne room, these areas should be very brightly lit when they are used.

No lighting equipment? If this play is presented outdoors or in a church sanctuary or elsewhere without spotlights and dimmers, experienced directors know that good acting can make the audience see anything. If the Baron and Servants say that it’s dark and act like it’s dark, the audience—especially an audience of children—will accept the idea of darkness and enter into the spirit of the show. Dressing Lumina in a very brightly colored costume or bright white costume in contrast to the black costumes of the Baron and Servants will convey the idea of her luminosity. The same process holds true for the mirror scene: The Baron and Servants shield their eyes from the sudden brightness, and the audience will get the idea.

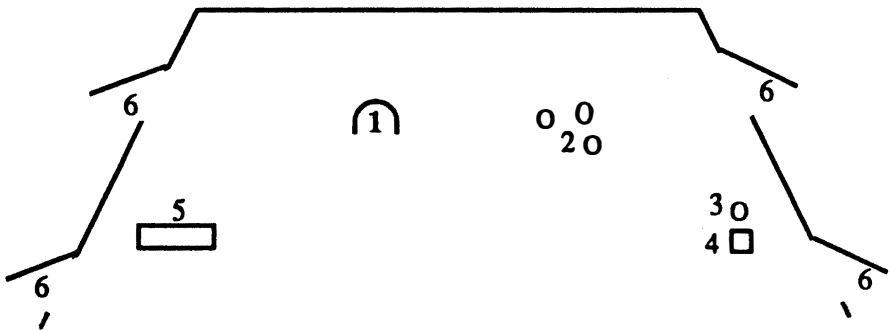
A trap in the stage floor is the easiest method of portraying the Baron's disappearance. If no trap is available, a clever stage carpenter can construct a throne to facilitate his disappearance. Letting the Baron simply "melt" to the floor, completely covered by his cape will work. He may also "explode" off stage or behind the throne with accompanying sound effects.

Costumes

The Baron and Servants should be covered completely with black robes and hoods. In the premiere production, the Baron wore sun glasses. The Servants might well have bright, colorful costumes under their robes. Discarding the robes at the denouement of the play will add to the happy ending. Lumina's bright costume is discussed above under *Lights and Special Effects*.

To contrast with the occupants of the Dark Castle, Dimwit, Hiccup, and the three Failures may wear light-colored clothes. Dimwit's clothes should be the liveliest. As described in the stage directions, Snort should have a big nose; Clamor, big ears; and Grope, an eye-patch.

The Set



- 1—A black throne
- 2—Position of the Servants in Scene 1; stools or chairs may be used
- 3—Well (Hiccup's cave)
- 4—Bench (Hiccup's cave)
- 5—Bench (for Failures in Act I, Scene 7)
- 6—Entrances and exits through stage curtains

THE DARK CASTLE

ACT I

Scene One

[The throne room in the Dark Castle—windowless and gloomy. BARON sprawls on his throne, dressed in black, emitting evil from every wicked pore. Three SERVANTS, the LADIES NOZZLE, OGLE, and MURMER, hover near him, cloaked and hooded, their features hidden. MURMER speaks in a whisper, NOZZLE has no nasal resonance, OGLE has too much. Suddenly BARON leaps up with a roar, scattering the terrified SERVANTS]

BARON. Arrggh! Hah! Scared you, didn't I? Look at you—quivering, shaking, trembling. I like it! More! Shake, rattle, and roll! Hah! I can think of more ways to make people suffer than anyone in the world. It takes skill, you know, and lots of deep, dark brooding. I work hard at fear and ugliness and hate—and my dear darkness, this black shroud that keeps me alive and kicking. Kicking? That gives me an idea! *[Kicks each of the Servants as he names them]* Lady Nozzle! Oink, oink, pig face! Lady Ogle! Mole-eyed wonder! Lady Murmer! Cat-got-your-tongue! Hah! Not fit for the sight of man nor beast, hiding here with me in my gloom. I shut out the light years ago, cut off the rays of the moon and the stars and the blinding sun with a trowel of black stone, ramming clammy black clay into every cook and branny . . . I mean, nook and cranny.

NOZZLE. No sunlight.

OGLE. No moonlight.

MURMER. No starlight.

BARON. No light at all, because of the cursed curse! If light ever struck me . . .

NOZZLE. You'd droop.

OGLE. Drip.

MURMER. Decay.

NOZZLE. Wither, wizen, wilt.

OGLE. Putrify, fester, rot.

MURMER. Extinguish, expire, explode.

NOZZLE. Fall into the sere, the yellow leaf . . .

BARON. Enough! I hate poetry, and I hate alliteration even more. And if you start to make puns, I will boil your livers in hot oil! [*Kicks them again*] But the curse on me will end soon, and there will be no more light to torture my desires. No one sees my black soul in my dark castle—except you three uglies and Lumina, the one light in my life. Come now, your catechism: Is the castle dark?

SERVANTS. It is dark, My Lord.

BARON. Is the land black and gloomy?

SERVANTS. Black and gloomy, My Lord.

BARON. Are the people wicked?

SERVANTS. Very wicked, My Lord.

BARON. Good! Oooh, I hate that word, “good”! Still, it describes everything the way I want it now, except for one thing . . .

SERVANTS. [*Echoing each other*] Lumina. Lumina. Lumina.

BARON. My Lumina, my prize, my treasure. She still shines too brightly with beauty and innocence. I cannot look upon her. But tell me, my uglies, does she grow dimmer?

SERVANTS. Dimmer . . . dimmer . . . dimmer.

BARON. Hah! I do not have long to wait. Her brightness shall soon glimmer one last glim, and then she’ll be mine!

SERVANTS. But the pledge . . . the pledge . . . the pledge!

BARON. The cursed pledge! I hate it worse than the cursed curse!

OGLE. You must keep the pledge, My Lord.

BARON. I know! If I don’t, I’m doomed. Sometimes I think I’m doomed if I do and doomed if I don’t . . . but not a day passes when I don’t pause to hate the old Duchess for that cursed pledge!

MURMER. I remember . . .

NOZZLE. Remember . . .

OGLE. “Care for the child Lumina, cherish her. And one day she will chase the shadows from this land.”

MURMER. Remember . . .

NOZZLE. Remember . . .

OGLE. “And when the child brightens into a woman, accept all questing suitors with fair and honorable challenge or . . .”

MURMER. Remember . . .

NOZZLE. Remember . . .

OGLE. “Or you will extinguish . . .

MURMER. “Expire . . .

NOZZLE. “Explode!”

BARON. Enough! I remember! Ugly old bat. Good women are always so annoying. She must have known I would come to want Lumina for my very own, in spite of her sickening shimmer. But I am Lumina’s guardian, and I will be her husband and the Daron of this Buttchy . . . I mean, the Baron of this Duchy!

NOZZLE. Not until the pledge is fulfilled and the curse ends.

BARON. I told you, I remember!

OGLE. So the contest will continue?

BARON. Yes! *[Laughs madly]* I’ve thought of a thousand more impossible tasks for the aspiring young lovers, if there are any aspiring young lovers left in the land. One last trial, for soon Lumina will grow dark, and then she will be mine. The curse ends when Lumina’s light goes out!

SERVANTS. The curse ends . . . ends . . . ends.

BARON. Silence! Here comes the light of my life.

[Enter LUMINA, sweet and sad, and bored. There is a glow emitting from her, either by means of battery-powered LIGHTS in her costume or reflective material and a bright follow SPOT. BARON shields his eyes, never looking at her directly]

LUMINA. Good evening, My Lord Baron.

BARON. Evening? It is morning, my little dove.

LUMINA. Morning? But I thought . . . It is so hard to tell the time with no windows, no light of day or night to guide us.

BARON. We have clocks for that.

LUMINA. But how is one ever sure whether it is ten in the morning or ten at night?

BARON. What does it matter—we do as we please when we please. No law prevents us.

NOZZLE. Because you are the law, My Lord.

OGLE. The law . . .

MURMER. Law . . .

BARON. Ladies, you may leave us! Announce the trials to begin again tomorrow. The contestants will arrive at dawn and proceed forward on their assigned tasks.

[SERVANTS exit]

LUMINA. Their *impossible* tasks.

BARON. Oh, now—nothing is impossible, not for a clever fellow. I only wish to see that you get the very best man for your husband.

LUMINA. [*Doubtfully*] Do you?

BARON. Of course! Why else would your good mother, the good Duchess, have given me this glad duty? Because she and I agreed that only the cleverest, handsomest, and bravest young man could overcome the tasks I set for them.

LUMINA. That's true. My mother would have always done only the best for me. But sometimes . . .

BARON. Sometimes what?

LUMINA. Sometimes I think I would not mind if a young man were not clever or handsome or brave, only if he were kind. Kind young men don't win impossible contests.

BARON. Feeling down, are you? Good, it makes you grow dimmer.

LUMINA. I don't mind. It is very tiresome standing about, glowing. I have nothing to do since it's got too dark to embroider or tat or play solitaire.

BARON. I'll get you a zute or a lither, I mean a lute or a zither, and you can amuse yourself with music . . . as long as you don't bang on it around me. Come, let us go to lunch.

LUMINA. Another thing—someday I'd like to see what I'm eating!

[LIGHTS fade on castle as they exit, rise on next scene immediately]

Scene Two

[At a sunny space in a woods downstage—a well and a hut or cave entrance, DIMWIT and HICCUP are seated, musing. DIMWIT is a brave and good fellow and foolhardy, and therefore worthy of a chance to be a hero. HICCUP is a hermit, suspicious and easily agitated]

DIMWIT. The suitors to young Duchess Lumina will start arriving soon.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. Every year they come, eager and brave and daring.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. And every year they go home, marred and scarred, broken and battered.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. Why is that?

HICCUP. I told you before, Dimwit, if you are going to stay here, you must not ask questions. You know what that does to me.

DIMWIT. I'm sorry.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. It's just that I don't know anything.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. Not much, anyway.

HICCUP. Hmmm.

DIMWIT. *[After a pause]* And how will I ever learn anything if I don't ask questions? Like why is the sky blue? And what is grass made of? And where does the sun go at night? And how does the moon rise? How, Hiccup, how?!

HICCUP. *[Hiccoughing violently]* Hic! Hic! Hic! There, you've done it to me! Hic!

DIMWIT. I'm sorry.

HICCUP. Hic! You asked questions, which makes me think, which makes me nervous, which makes me hiccough! Hic!

DIMWIT. I'm really sorry.

HICCUP. I became a hermit to get away from questions! Hic!

DIMWIT. Please calm down. I won't do it again.

HICCUP. All right. I'm calm. You must realize, my inquisitive young man, that there's no point in asking or answering—in this land the right comes out wrong and the wrong comes out right—and vice-versa, for that matter.

DIMWIT. Why is that?

HICCUP. Hic! Because of the wicked Baron in the Dark Castle. Everybody good is bad and everybody bad is good.

DIMWIT. Why is that?

HICCUP. Hic! The usual reasons—greed, lust, evil in general—once things like that get started, they spread like glue and turn everything upside-down and topsy-turvy and vice-versa.

DIMWIT. Why is that?

HICCUP. Hic! Hic! Hic! Stop asking questions! Nobody knows the answers anyway, especially not me! Hic!

DIMWIT. I wish I knew just one or two right answers. Then I wouldn't feel so stupid . . . and I could go out in the world and settle down and get married—things like that.

HICCUP. You're not stupid . . . not too stupid, anyway.

DIMWIT. Then why do they call me "Dimwit"? My name is John.

HICCUP. Hic! Probably because you're too honest. In these wicked days, in this wicked land, only the wicked and stupid can survive . . . and we who escape to the woods. It's a sad time, fit only for evil people and hermits.

DIMWIT. Once the Duchess Lumina marries, she and her new Baron will rule, and the bad Baron will go away someplace.

HICCUP. Dream on, Dimwit, dream on. Let's go in. It's getting dark, and there's nothing more to see anyway.

DIMWIT. *[Indicating audience]* Nothing except those people.

HICCUP. *[Squinting]* What people?

DIMWIT. Those people. Children, mostly. Do you think they're wicked?

HICCUP. What children?

DIMWIT. All of them! Come on closer, I'll show you.

[DIMWIT leads HICCUP off the stage into the audience. This section is ad-libbed. DIMWIT and HICCUP introduce themselves, comment to each other . . . suggestions follow]

DIMWIT. See, Hiccup, here's a girl and there's a boy. How are you? I'm Dimwit, and this is my friend Hiccup. Did you hear about the bad Baron? Have you seen Lumina? I wish I could see her.

HICCUP. Why, they're all over the place! Are you sure we're safe out here with them? Excuse me for getting up so close; I can't see very well. What's your name? Hic! Oops, excuse me! Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies.

[DIMWIT and HICCUP return to the stage after a few minutes]

DIMWIT. You see, there are children, and they're pretty nice ones too. Did you hear them laugh?

HICCUP. Was that what that was? I don't remember laughter.

DIMWIT. I think maybe not all people in this land are wicked or hermits.

HICCUP. Children don't count.

DIMWIT. Why not?

HICCUP. Well, hic! They're too small.

DIMWIT. Not too small to laugh, not too small to play.

HICCUP. There's no room for that kind of thing!

DIMWIT. Then I'll make room!

HICCUP. How? Hic!

DIMWIT. I'll marry Lumina and free the land from wickedness; then there'll be plenty of room!

HICCUP. You're not only a dimwit, you're crazy!

DIMWIT. No, I'm not, and I'll prove it.

HICCUP. You'll get yourself killed.

DIMWIT. No worse than living without laughter. Wish me luck, Hiccup! I'm off to the Dark Castle to seek the hand of Lumina!

HICCUP. You can't go to the Dark Castle. There are monsters there! No one comes back all in one piece.

DIMWIT. But Lumina is there—and I've heard she is good and kind and beautiful. They say her beauty is almost blinding. Farewell, Hiccup! I'm on my way! Wish me luck! *[Exits]*

HICCUP. I'm here if you need me, Dimwit! Hic! Hic! Hic!

[LIGHTS fade on Hiccup, rise immediately on Scene Three]