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Dramatic Publishing

A VILLAGE FABLE

by
JAMES STILL

A play adaptation of *In the Suicide Mountains*

by
JOHN GARDNER

Music
by
MICHAEL KECK

(90-minute version)



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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JAMES STILL

From the novel *In the Suicide Mountains* by JOHN GARDNER
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(A VILLAGE FABLE - 90-minute version)

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For Peter Brosius

Thanks for never giving up.

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of A VILLAGE FABLE must give credit to John Gardner as the author of the novel and James Still as the dramatizer of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The names of John Gardner and James Still must also appear on separate lines, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and must appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. In all printed material about the play, both John Gardner's and James Still's names will be equal in size.

On all programs this notice should appear:

**“Produced by special arrangement with
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Originally Commissioned by the
Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum

Premiered by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth

A VILLAGE FABLE (then titled *In the Suicide Mountains*)
was developed in part with the support of New Vi-
sions/New Voices at the John F. Kennedy Center for the
Performing Arts.

A VILLAGE FABLE (then titled *In the Suicide Mountains*)
was developed in part with the support of the Sundance
Playwrights Laboratory.

“Life follows art; words can grow teeth and eat tigers.”

— John Gardner, *In the Suicide Mountains*

A VILLAGE FABLE was originally commissioned by the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum and premiered at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth on March 3, 1997 under the title *In the Suicide Mountains*. Direction was by Peter C. Brosius, scenic design by Joseph D. Dodd, costume design by Casey Cameron-Dinmore, lighting design by Lloyd S. Riford III, sound design by Michael Keck and choreography by Betsy Fisher. The stage manager was Harry Wong III. The cast was:

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Chudu | EJ Manganag |
| Christopher | Junior Tesoro |
| Armida | Sheilah Sealey |
| Child/Clarella | Lisa Omoto |
| King/Six-Fingered Man | Ray Campaignha |
| Armida's Mother/Stepmother | Cynthia See |
| Armida's Father | Michael Pa'ekukui |

All of the actors also played Villagers, Storytellers, Suitors, Royal Advisors.

Thanks also to the actors who participated in the development at the Kennedy Center: Regi Davis, Jane Beard, Scott Morgan, Elizabeth Pringle, Michael Jerome Johnson, Michael Chaban, Audrey Wasilewski and stage manager Jeff Hill.

And the actors who participated in the development at Sundance: Christine Avila, Richard Rice, Fred Sanders, David Spencer, Laura Leigh Walsh, Greg Watanabe, Karen Malina White, Trevor Williams, stage manager Kris Edwards, dramaturg Vinnie Murphy and resource persons Len Berkman and Ron Grimes.

The revised, expanded version of *A VILLAGE FABLE* opened at The Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis on September 3, 1999. Direction was by Peter C. Brosius, musical direction by Michael Keck, choreography by Michael Chvala, scenic design by Joseph D. Dodd, costume design by Lydia Tanji, lighting design by Geoff Korf, music composed and soundscape by Michael Keck and fight direction by Gregory E. Hoffman. The stage manager was Clara J. Westberg. The cast was:

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Chudu | Mark Povinelli |
| Christopher | Brian Munn |
| Armida | Leah Curney |
| King/Six-Fingered Man | David Cabot |
| Armida's Mother | Monica Scott |
| Armida's Father | Dennis W. Spears |
| Armida's Stepmother | Ann Kim |
| Clarella | Camila Borrero |
| Suitors | Simon Anthony Abou-Fadel, Noah Bremer, David Cabot, Brian Munn, Dennis W. Spears |
| Advisors | Simon Anthony Abou-Fadel, Noah Bremer Ann Kim, Amy Sevick |
| Villagers | Simon Anthony Abou-Fadel, Noah Bremer Camila Borrero, Jodi Ellion, Ann Kim, Monica Scott Amy Sevick, Dennis W. Spears |
| Village Children | Erin N. Hampe, Elizabeth Peterson Mike Plantan |

From the Playwright

In adapting another writer's book for the theater, not only is there the precarious navigation between literature and performance but also a very mysterious relationship between writers. For *A Village Fable* I was committed to faithfully re-imagining the spirit of John Gardner's story into a daring, funny, dark piece of theater that tells a tale of three misfits overwhelmed by a rigid, unforgiving society. It's not only a parable about self-esteem and suicide, however, because the architecture of the world they journey is such a particular place.

From the beginning I was moved by Mr. Gardner's world and characters. The challenge, then, was to create dramatic structure in that world and to theatricalize the inner mythologies of its characters. It was the three principal characters in Mr. Gardner's story that I was most anxious to preserve and celebrate in the translation from book to stage. All three have been crushed in their fights for dignity and their rights as individuals. Theatrically, I was drawn to the tension of that premise—that these three characters have every reason to believe down to the bottom of their souls that killing themselves is in some way a redemption, a way of taking control, of finally claiming power that's been denied them. Suicide—for them—is a last resort, a hard-earned conclusion that is a result of a dark terror lurking in a world ruled by conformity.

The book reads like a fable, a tellable tale, a repeatable story (appealing characters, adorned language, long ago and far away ...). I've tried to retain a sense of language that belongs to a fable and the rigors of its own world which I discovered to be distinctly theatrical and rhythmical. I wanted to find a visual/textual language that allowed the story to remain strange, muscular and timeless. The world of *A Village Fable* is a deep, dark culture sharing more similarities with the Brothers Grimm, Ingmar Bergman and *Mother Courage* than Victorian literature and po-

litically correct Disney tales. I made the decision not to make any bald attempts to provide cheap access to the play's world through contemporary colloquialisms. The elegance of the story is that the struggles of these characters ARE contemporary. With great patience and care from Peter Brosius, my breakthrough in the process occurred when I began experimenting with rhyme, rhythmic language and the use of sound. This eventually gave way to song and music (and the decision to bring in composer Michael Keck with whom I have collaborated many times). Telling this story within a stricter meter created its own peculiar dramatic tension, and a language that is economical and darkly poetic.

For the production of the play at the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, we expanded the play to a running time closer to ninety minutes. It was a testament to Mr. Gardner's novella, that after several years and workshops and productions of the earlier, shorter version of the play (also available from Dramatic Publishing), we were able to roll up our sleeves, dig even deeper and fall in love all over again with the world of *In the Suicide Mountains*.

A small technical note: "Chudu" is pronounced "Chew-doo." "Armida" is pronounced "Ar-MEE-duh."

Enjoy.

— James Still

A VILLAGE FABLE

The 90-minute version
For an ensemble cast (minimum 7 if doubled)

CHARACTERS

CHUDU

PRINCE CHRISTOPHER

ARMIDA

THE KING

A CHILD

ARMIDA'S MOTHER

ARMIDA'S FATHER

ARMIDA'S STEPMOTHER

CLARELLA

THE SIX-FINGERED MAN

SUITORS, ADVISORS, VILLAGERS, STORYTELLERS

A VILLAGE FABLE

(An empty space. From the darkness we hear several voices, and people appear.)

VOICES *(sing)*.

**This is a song about some stories that you've
never been told
Stories kept secret from the young by the old
There's a Village in a Valley next to mountains in
the sky
A Village in a Valley Where a River Ran Dry.**

(They assume the roles of people and animals of the village, singing.)

ALL. **The children always listen**

The dogs always howl

MEN. **The women always gossip**

WOMEN. **And the men always growl**

ALL. **The sun comes out**

The world goes 'round

A nail sticking up will be hit. Back. Down.

VILLAGER. **Always stir the batter in the same direction!**

ANOTHER VILLAGER. **Combing your hair after dark
makes you lose your memory!**

AND ANOTHER VILLAGER. Rats will leave you alone...
if you write them a letter—

CHILD VILLAGER. And seal it with butter.

VILLAGERS (*sing*).

**Don't pull a kitten's tail on Thursday
Never give a chicken away on a Monday
Only change a horse's name on Friday
It's bad luck to kill a deer on Sunday**

**Walk on the right, all the houses are white
Counting the stars will bring trouble from Mars
Wear black socks! Just blend in!
Lock all doors! So... when:**

**The sun comes out
The world goes 'round
A nail sticking up will be hit. Back. Down.**

(The village marketplace. People sell food, goods. The atmosphere is lively, energetic, social, specific.)

VILLAGER #1. Get your pine cones!

VILLAGER #2. Snake skins!

VILLAGER #3. Dandelions here!

VILLAGER #4. Bird nests!

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. In the Village in the Valley
Where the River Ran Dry—there was one thing people
wished for more than jewels—

ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. One thing they
wished for more than kisses—

AND ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. Even more than gold!

CHILD. Mama! I'm thirsty!

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. They wished—for water.

ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. But the river had long ago run dry, and the hearts of the people grew as thirsty and brittle as the grass that had dried up all around the village.

AND ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. High in the mountains in the sky—there lived a monster—

CHILD (*correcting him*). A TERRIBLE monster.

AND ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. A terrible monster who had made the river run dry.

ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. No one had ever seen him—

CHILD (*correcting him*). No one had ever seen him AND lived to *tell* about it.

ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. But everyone had heard of—the Six-Fingered Man.

CHILD (*correcting him*). The NOTORIOUS Six-Fingered Man.

AND ANOTHER VILLAGE STORYTELLER. But since it was impossible to defeat the notorious Six-Fingered Man, they did their best to forget him. And looked for other monsters to blame for all their troubles.

(In the village marketplace:)

VILLAGER #1. Get your pine cones!

VILLAGER #2. Snake skins!

VILLAGER #3. Dandelions here!

VILLAGER #4. Bird nests!

A VILLAGE STORYTELLER. In the Village in the Valley
Where the River Ran Dry—there lived an UGLY hump-
backed dwarf—who went by the name—“Chudu” ...

*(The sound of whistling. Someone approaching. Every-
one in the market stops, listening to the whistling.)*

VILLAGER #1. Is it—?

VILLAGER #2. Could it—?

VILLAGER #3. Would it—?

ALL VILLAGERS. SHHHHHH!

*(The VILLAGERS freeze, listen. The whistling gets closer.
Everyone in the market is tense, cautious.)*

VILLAGER #1 *(whispering)*. It's HIM!

VILLAGER #2 *(panicking)*. Oh dear!

VILLAGER #3 *(fainting)*. Oh, God!

ALL VILLAGERS. He's near!!!

*(Everyone in the market tries to resume their normal ac-
tivities.)*

VILLAGER #1. Pine cones! *(Gossiping with other VIL-
LAGERS.)* Chudu can turn a child into a wish!

VILLAGER #2. Snake skins! *(Hissing.)* His mother was a
goat ... his father a fish!

*(The other VILLAGERS whisper “CHUDU, CHUDU,
CHUDU” rhythmically in agreement.)*

VILLAGER #3. Dandelions! (*Nodding.*) Chudu has weeds growing out of his chin!

VILLAGER #4. Bird nests! (*Warning.*) Chudu can shake you right out of your skin!

(A funny-looking man—bearded, hunchbacked, half-man and half-goat—enters the marketplace. He whistles and is full of hope.)

CHUDU (*to anyone who will listen*). What a beautiful day! (*The VILLAGERS turn away.*) A beautiful day for a walk! (*CHILDREN hide in their mother's skirts.*) Hello!

VILLAGER #1 (*startled by CHUDU*). Chudu makes your heart FLOP!

CHUDU (*tries to make contact with another VILLAGER who moves away*). Hello!

VILLAGER #2 (*turning away*). Chudu makes your ears POP!

CHUDU. Hello...

VILLAGER #3 (*looking away*). Chudu makes your temperature DROP!

CHUDU (*trying to get someone to look at him*). Hello?

CHILD. Did Chudu make the river stop?

CHUDU. No, I—

(The CHILD's MOTHER grabs the CHILD and pulls her away. The MOTHER begins the chant and the other VILLAGERS join in tensely, to one another, out of the sides of their mouths.)

MOTHER VILLAGER.

Don't touch Chudu

Never look him in the eye!

ANOTHER VILLAGER.

He's a dwarf!

AND ANOTHER VILLAGER. **He's a freak!**
 TWO VILLAGERS. **If you touch him you will die!**

THREE VILLAGERS. **Don't touch Chudu**
Never look him in the eye!

ANOTHER VILLAGER. **He's a goat!**

AND ANOTHER VILLAGER. **He's a fish!**

ALL VILLAGERS. **If you touch him you will die!**

(One by one, the VILLAGERS pull their hats down over their eyes to avoid meeting CHUDU's gaze. They chant with bodies turned away, hats over their faces. CHUDU goes to each of them, one at a time, trying to find something to buy. The crowd whispers, chants, screams:)

ONE VILLAGER.
Chudu is different!
Never look him in the eye!
Chudu is evil!
... A blizzard in July!

CHUDU (*sings*).
I need some food ...

TWO VILLAGERS.
Chudu is different!
Never look him in the eye!
Chudu is evil!
... A blizzard in July

I need to eat

THREE VILLAGERS.
Chudu is different!
Never look him in the eye!
Chudu is evil!
... A blizzard in July

How much is that?

ALL VILLAGERS.
Chudu is different!
Never look him in the eye!
Chudu is evil!
... A blizzard in July

CHUDU (*sings*).
I'll take the beets ...

(*CHUDU reaches for a beet and the MERCHANT pulls it away before he can touch it. Pause, breath. Then acceleration.*)

| | |
|--|-------------------------|
| VILLAGERS. | CHUDU (<i>sings</i>). |
| #1. He has teeth just like a saw blade! | A bit |
| #2. And his skin is like a mushroom! | |
| #3. And his legs are short and crooked! | A beet |
| #4. And his ears are big and hairy! | |
| #5. And his nose looks like a cherry! | Some food |
| #6. Both his eyes are strange and scary! | |
| #7. He is very-very-very-very ... | To eat? |

(*They can't think what else to call him.*)

ALL. UGLY!!!!!!

CHUDU (*looking at them*). But you don't know me, I'm really not that strange. (*He tries to make contact.*) Let me show you— (*VILLAGERS look away.*) If I could I'd probably change who I am—but I am Chudu ...

CHILD (*correcting him*). Chudu ... the Goat-Man!

(*The VILLAGERS pull away and disappear. But the curious CHILD sneaks back out and moves toward CHUDU to get a closer look. CHUDU lights up when he sees the CHILD approaching. He tries to charm the CHILD, whis-*

ties, the CHILD whistles back. Delighted, CHUDU magically produces a cup of precious water out of his shirt-sleeve. The CHILD gratefully accepts the water and just as she is about to take a sip, her MOTHER violently yanks the CHILD away.)

MOTHER (*chanting: warning, to the CHILD*).

Don't touch Chudu
Never look him in the eye!

CHILD. But I'm thirsty!

ANOTHER VILLAGER.

He's a demon who knows magic
If you touch him you will die!

(The VILLAGERS shrink from CHUDU, whispering to one another. The CHILD looks at all the frightened adults. He moves toward CHUDU and looks back at the adults who stare and cower. The CHILD looks back at CHUDU and suddenly throws the water in CHUDU's face. Satisfied, the VILLAGERS disappear. The market disappears. The CHILD runs off. Adding insult to injury, the CHILD runs back on, throws the empty cup at CHUDU and runs away. CHUDU is stunned.)

CHUDU (*sings*).

**They never look me in the eye
Looking deeper, deep inside**

**Am I everything they say?
If I am I must be mad**

They won't even shake my hand

I am Chudu...

(Spoken.)

Chudu the Goat-Man. *(He exits, alone.)*

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. The Village in the Valley
Where the River Ran Dry—was ruled by a king who
was so powerful he didn't need a name—people just
called him “the King.”

ANOTHER STORYTELLER. The King was famous for
never losing a war and as his riches grew—it seemed the
King had everything a man could want.

AND ANOTHER STORYTELLER. Everything except a
son. He had nineteen daughters, each of them strong and
smart—but the King wanted a son.

KING. I want a son!

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. He wanted an heir to the
Royal Throne.

KING. I want an heir to the Royal Throne!

ANOTHER STORYTELLER. And finally, the King got
everything he wanted.

KING. Finally! I have everything I want! *(Holding the
baby up to the crowd, triumphant.)* A son! The Heir to
the Royal Throne! Prince... Christopher!

CROWD *(cheers)*. Hail to Prince Christopher!!!

(The KING proudly holds the infant PRINCE in his arms.)

KING *(sings)*.

He'll slay dragons, ride horses, win battles in war
He'll love politics, government, power and more,
he'll—

(The baby PRINCE suddenly lets out a blood-curdling scream. The KING is horrified and exits holding the baby like a piece of rotten fruit.)

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. It was the beginning of a very—complicated—relationship.

(The KING returns with PRINCE CHRISTOPHER as a little boy.)

ANOTHER STORYTELLER. Hundreds of gifts poured into the Royal Castle for Prince Christopher.

KING *(looking over the gifts, pleased)*. Solid suits of armor. Prized horses. The best swords. *(Holds up a violin.)* What's this?? *(The KING tosses the violin aside. The BABY reaches for the violin.)*

AND ANOTHER STORYTELLER. From the first moment Prince Christopher laid eyes on that violin, something stirred deep inside him.

(The BABY begins to play the violin. A crowd watches.)

VILLAGER. How can such a tiny baby make such a beautiful sound?

(More people from the village gather around the BABY playing the violin. The KING watches, amused but alarmed by his son's gift.)

KING *(explaining to people watching the PRINCE)*. It's a phase.

VILLAGE STORYTELLER. Five, six, seven years old and the prince couldn't stop playing.

(CHRISTOPHER finishes and the crowd applauds. The KING goes to CHRISTOPHER and shares the crowd's accolades. He grabs the violin but CHRISTOPHER holds on tightly. The two of them grip the violin—smiling at the crowd. The KING whispers tensely so only CHRISTOPHER can hear:)

KING. This WILL stop. *(Tense.)* Right?

(The PRINCE begins to play the violin again.)

ANOTHER STORYTELLER. Eight, nine, ten years old and the music didn't stop.

(Twelve-year-old CHRISTOPHER plays his violin in the village square for an enthusiastic audience who dance to CHRISTOPHER's wild music. Suddenly SEVERAL GUARDS pick CHRISTOPHER up and carry him off to the KING. He continues to play. The KING thrusts his sword toward CHRISTOPHER. Though he is playful, there is an edge, he means business.)

KING. You're twelve years old, Christopher!

(Out of desperation, CHRISTOPHER awkwardly uses his violin bow as a sword and playfully tries to spar with his father. There is something likable and charming about CHRISTOPHER's clumsy attempt to play his father's game.)