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Family Plays



THE JACK TALES

Folktales by
R. REX STEPHENSON

Jack Fear-No-Man
Wicked John and the Devil
Jack and the Robbers
Foolish Jack
Jack and the Witch's Tale
Jack and Ol' Greasy Beard

THE JACK TALES

Folktales. By **R. Rex Stephenson.** Cast: 5m., 5w., flexible. The six short plays, each 10 to 20 minutes long, may be presented individually or in any combination. The Blue Ridge Mountain folktales were collected and dramatized by Stephenson at Ferrum College, Virginia, where he toured the plays with a company of his students—usually five men and five women. From 1975 to 1991, the Jack Tale Players performed the stories 1,325 times to more than half a million people of all ages in 34 states and in England. “We have played to audiences as large as 3,000 people and as small as 12,” Stephenson said. Jack, the teenage protagonist of most of the tales, is the universal underdog who outwits “upper-dogs” like robbers, giants, witches, devils and big brothers. The tales are: **Jack Fear-No-Man.** Jack wins a \$10,000 reward from the king of Virginia for conquering three giants. **Wicked John and the Devil.** The meanest man on earth bedevils the devil. **Jack and the Robbers.** Jack and some runaway animals scare the meanness out of a band of thieves. **Foolish Jack.** Jack is outwitted by some sharp traders. **Jack and the Witch’s Tale.** Jack defeats a witch with kindness. **Jack and Ol’ Greasy Beard.** Jack outsmarts his older brothers and catches a thief and rescues a girl in distress. *An optional mountain music CD of Jack Tales Players music is available. The plays are unparalleled for touring because they require no scenery or difficult costumes and few, if any, props. Approximate running time: 60 to 80 minutes for all plays, 10 to 20 minutes individually. Code: J57.*

Note from author: These Jack Tales can be played by all women, all men, or any combination. “I’ve never had anyone worry about whether Jack was a boy or a girl,” Stephenson said. “I always use girls to play the little devils in *Wicked John*.” Girls have played kings and devils; boys have played old women and mothers. Although the Ferrum College troupe introduces each performance with mountain music and traditional ballads like “Barbara Allen” and “In the Pines,” played on mostly homemade instruments (washboard, washtub bass, wood block, spoons, a jug and a cowbell), no music is required.

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311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098-3308
Phone: (800) 448-7469 / (815) 338-7170
Fax: (800) 334-5302 / (815) 338-8981

www.FamilyPlays.com

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(THE JACK TALES)

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INTRODUCTION

By Nellie McCaslin

An example of an innovative and highly imaginative program is the one developed at Ferrum College in southwest Virginia. Rex Stephenson, chairman of the theatre department, began work with a group of students and a personal interest in the local folklore known as the "Jack Tales." These stories from the Blue Ridge Mountains, which had been handed down through an oral tradition, appealed to Stephenson as having dramatic possibilities. Through group process short plays were developed, and programs that included several of the tales began touring local schools. The success of the programs led to further touring engagements to old age homes, community centers, churches, and veterans' hospitals. Thus the stories that came from the mountain people were given back to them in dramatic form.

The Jack Tales continue to provide rich content for audiences of all ages, and the simply staged short plays have proven a successful format. They have been featured at regional and national meetings of The Children's Theatre Association.—From *Historical Guide to Children's Theatre in America*, by Nellie McCaslin. New York, Greenwood Press



ABOUT THE PLAYS

"The Jack Tales" are folk stories from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, brought there and Americanized by early immigrants from Europe. Professor Rex Stephenson, head of the drama department at Ferrum College, Ferrum, Virginia, recognized the dramatic value of the tales, and in 1975 he organized the Jack Tale Players. Combining the art of traditional storytelling with theatre, he and his students have created a truly unique type of story theatre.

Jack, the teen-age "hero" of most of the tales, symbolizes the eternal underdog who either tricks or outwits the "top dogs"—kings, robbers, giants, witches, devils, older brothers—and comes out the winner. The plays are unparalleled for touring because they require no scenery or difficult costumes and few if any props, and they can be

presented in any space. The first performance in 1975 was given in a school hallway.

Although the Ferrum College troupe introduces each performance with mountain music and traditional ballads like "Barbara Allen" and "In the Pines," played on mostly home-made instruments (washboard, washtub bass, wood block, spoons, a jug, and a cowbell), no music is required.*

From 1975 to the time this book was published in 1991, the Jack Tale Players performed the stories 1,325 times to more than half a million people of all ages in 34 states and in England. "We have played from the South Bronx in New York City, to the Omni in Atlanta, to a VA Medical Center in Los Angeles. We have played to audiences as large as three thousand people and as small as twelve," Stephenson said.

These Jack Tales can be played by all women, all men, or any combination. "I've never had anyone worry about whether Jack was a boy or a girl," Stephenson said. "I always use girls to play the little devils in 'Wicked John.' I normally travel with 10 actors—5 men and 5 women." Girls have played kings and devils; boys have played old women and mothers. "Claire Jennings, the drama teacher at Luray High School in Virginia, did a series of these plays on the Skyline Drive with a company of eleven actors, ten of them female," Stephenson said.

In this playbook you will find acting editions of six of the most popular tales. They may be presented singly or in any combination. All six together provide approximately 90 minutes of entertainment and fun to audiences from pre-kindergarten to grandparents and great-grandparents.

*An audio tape of Jack Tale Players music is available from the publisher. It may be used with performance if the producer wishes.

Critical Comments

"Clapping, screaming and rolling with laughter, students in Grade K-4 and teachers at Park Avenue Elementary School listened to the Jack Tale Players."—*Danville Register*

"A simpleton named Jack has been giving some sophisticated lessons in fantasy and reality to students in Richmond Public Schools."—*Richmond News Leader*

"Rex Stephenson is a genius at taking history and making it interesting."—Anna Wentworth, Dramatic Critic, WVTF-FM

"I haven't seen our students react more favorably to any presentation since I have been at the Martinsville High School and that covers a decade."—D. R. Hensley, Assistant Principal

"Every so often in our day-to-day patients' activities program, we are rewarded with an outstanding entertainment event that stands above all others."—Benjamin McConnell, Recreation Specialist, Veterans Administration Hospital

PRODUCTION NOTES

By Rex Stephenson

In these plays it is important that the skill and creativity of the actor be channeled toward a particular style of acting: the presentational approach. Whether the actors are portraying animals or humans, fanciful devils or figures from real life, it is important that they realize they are presenting role rather than three-dimensional characters. Their aim is to communicate someone who is not a real person but rather a character that displays one robust dimension. The goal here is to be so precise in the construction of the role that immediately upon the actor's entrance, the audience recognizes that a devil or a giant or an animal is being portrayed.

This does not mean the role lacks credibility or is a stilted caricature; the role must always be believable. And not only should the actor be believable, but he needs also to be visual and economical. These qualities will go far in ensuring that *The Jack Tales* are presented in a fast-paced and uncomplicated manner.

It is left to the actors, with a few set pieces, to create location, setting, and passage of time; thus, no attempt should be made to utilize any type of realistic sets, costumes, or properties. To ensure that I depend primarily on the talents of the actor, I restrict the use of set pieces to several 2' x 4' x 2' brightly painted wooden boxes and two folding chairs or rocking chairs. They are used to form all settings and locations. For example, Saint Peter's Heaven is fashioned by putting two of the boxes together and pantomiming the opening and closing of the Pearly Gates; also, in *Jack and the Robbers*, one box is stood on end and this additional height suggests the roof of the house.

I seldom use realistic costuming, but dress the actor in a manner which suggests the mountain aspects of *The Jack Tales*. Actors wear either red- or blue-checked shirts, bright contrasting suspenders, and dark dungarees. Hats are often worn to suggest character; thus, Wicked John wears a mountain man's single-feathered hat, and the undertakers wear tall black top hats. The devils could wear horns. Saint Peter comes the closest to a full costume when he wears a choir robe and a chain with a key around his neck.

While sets, costuming, and properties are kept to a minimum, sound effects are used throughout the show to augment pantomimed action. Stair climbing, punches, falls, doors opening and closing, etc., all call for sound. Any number of instruments and non-instruments can be used to enrich and vary the sounds produced. I use a cowbell, a slide whistle, a washboard, a juice harp, a harmonica, a recorder, and sometimes an electric omni-chord.

In a likewise manner, we use folk music to set the tone to reinforce the plot and to strengthen the cultural aspects of mountain life inherent in the Jack Tales. Music, of course, is optional. The tales are fascinating with no music at all.

One further point: if story theatre is to achieve its fast-paced and uncomplicated style, the director needs to rely on the actor's ingenuity. In a clever and unexpected manner, the actor can create trees, bridges, bushes, show passages of time, or changes in location. Children are delighted by these small surprises; however, the director must make certain that there is sufficient detail to ensure that the audience will instantly recognize the thing being represented.

JACK FEAR-NO-MAN

Cast

Narrator

Page

King of Virginia

Giant 1

Giant 2

Giant 3

Jack

Giant's Wife

Notes

The script calls for a total of eight characters. These can be all males or all females or any mixture that suits the needs of the director; i.e., king can be a queen, a wig will allow giant's wife to be played by a male, etc. The giants create their size simply by characterization. They are one-dimensional characters; their movement and language suggest size. No attempts should be made to enlarge them by use of stilts or lifts in shoes; while some size is gained, movement is hindered. (I once saw a production where the giants wore high heels to stomp around with; they reminded me more of Bolero dancers than evil giants.)

Only two chairs are used. One chair is set center at the beginning of the story. It serves as both the king's throne and stoop tree. The other chair is brought in by giant's wife and becomes giant's kitchen. All other tables, rocks, knives, etc., are simulated. The king should wear a crown; the giant's wife can wear an apron or bonnet, but unless gender roles are switched, no other costumes are needed.

—*Rex Stephenson*

JACK FEAR-NO-MAN

NARRATOR. Lots of the old stories about Jack and his experiences in the Blue Ridge Mountains include tales about giants. This is one of the best known. It is called "Jack Fear-No-Man." This story happened about two miles from Buffalo Gap, where the King of Virginia lived.

PAGE. *[Enters]* This is the King of Virginia and I am his page.
[KING enters]

KING. I am the King of Virginia and this is my page. And I love trees, little trees, middle-size trees, giant trees. I love trees. *[Sits]*

NARRATOR. Now, this King had a problem, because there were these three ornery giants that liked to wander around the Blue Ridge and terrorize the kingdom. *[Enter three GIANTS. They are loud and boisterous and walk in unison. Preferably they should enter from rear of audience and make their way through the house. When they arrive at the stage, they begin speaking:]*

GIANT 1. We . . .

GIANT 2. . . . terrorize . . .

GIANT 3. . . . the kingdom!

NARRATOR. Well, the giants liked to harass the King by tearing up his most beautiful and most precious trees. *[GIANTS spot imaginary tree, surround it, and pantomime tearing it out of the ground (SOUND EFFECT: washboard). They lift it up]*

GIANT 1. Let's go . . .

GIANT 2. . . . harass . . .

GIANT 3. . . . the King. *[The GIANTS carry tree and mime dumping it on King's lap (SOUND EFFECT: bell). GIANTS laugh loudly and exit]*

NARRATOR. The King got tired of this and he decided to offer a reward. *[KING whispers to Page]*

PAGE. Ten thousand dollars to the first man who can kill the three giants. Ten thousand dollars to anyone that can kill the three giants.

[JACK enters and crosses to Page]

JACK. Page, I'd like to try to win that reward and kill those three giants.

PAGE. You'll have to see the King about that.

JACK. All right, where is he?

PAGE. Right there. *[Impatiently; pointing to King]*

JACK. You mean that funny-looking little guy with the tree on his lap?

PAGE. That's our King.

KING. And the crown on his head.

JACK. Oh, sorry. *[Crosses to King]*

KING. What's your name, boy?

JACK. Jack.

KING. I'll tell you, Jack, you can find those three giants every day 'bout three o'clock down by the ol' stoop tree.

JACK. Thank ya, King. *[Starts to leave]*

KING. Wait a minute, boy.

JACK. Yes?

KING. Could you help get this tree off my lap?

JACK. Sure.

KING. Page, help him. *[PAGE and JACK mime lifting tree with tremendous difficulty—it's heavy. KING slides under it and rises with great dignity]* Come, Page. *[PAGE drops his end of tree and exits with KING. JACK strains, doing a balancing act, to keep tree from falling]*

JACK. I've heard of being left holding a bag, but I never heard of being left holding a tree. *[Finally he can hold it no longer and lets it drop (SOUND EFFECT: bell)]*

NARRATOR. Jack went home that night and did his chores, got up early the next morning and went looking for that path that led to the old stoop tree. *[A chair represents the tree]* Beside it was a great big rock and Jack got himself an idea. *[JACK mimes the actions described by the Narrator]*

JACK. *[Looks at rock, then back up at tree, gets idea. Prepares to lift rock, grabs it, strains, but cannot lift it. Tries again. Looks around and spots Narrator]* Excuse me, sir.

NARRATOR. Yes, Jack?

JACK. Could you help me put this rock up in this stoop tree?

NARRATOR. You want to put a rock in a tree? All right. *[Together they lift the rock, and JACK gets up on the chair. JACK doesn't have the rock securely and he sways over Narrator and almost drops rock (SOUND EFFECT: Slide whistle). NARRATOR steadies Jack]* Do you have it, Jack?

JACK. I got it now. Thanks a lot. *[This steadying business can be repeated several times]*

NARRATOR. Sure enough, 'bout three o'clock . . . *[GIANTS enter]*

GIANT 1. It's three o'clock.

NARRATOR. The three ornery giants came down the path. *[When they get in front of Jack, JACK mimes dropping the rock on Giant 1's head (SOUND EFFECT: whistle and bell sound for rock falling and hitting Giant on the head)]*

GIANT 1. *[Stumbles, holds head, etc. He assumes he has been hit by Giant 2]* What did you go and hit me for? *[Pushes GIANT 2, who bumps against GIANT 3 (SOUND EFFECT: bell). GIANT 3 falls (SOUND EFFECT: bell)]*

GIANT 2. I didn't hit you. *[Pushes Giant 1 (SOUND EFFECT: bell). GIANT 3, somewhat disoriented, gets up]*

GIANT 1. Why you . . . *[He swings at GIANT 2, who ducks (SOUND EFFECT: whistle). GIANT 1 trips over Giant 2 and hits GIANT 3, who falls (SOUND EFFECT: bell)]*

NARRATOR. Well, those three giants started fighting among themselves.

GIANT 3. *[Getting up, speaking to Giant 2]* What did you go and hit me for?

GIANT 2. I didn't hit you!

GIANT 3. Who did?

GIANT 2. *[Indicating Giant 1, who is still on ground]* He did. *[GIANT 1 is very unsteady, but he rises slowly unaware the other two are blaming him]*

GIANT 3. Well, let's get him.

GIANT 2. Yeah! *[GIANTS 2 and 3 make a big production of getting set to charge at Giant 1. GIANT 1 has risen but is somewhat unsteady on his feet. GIANTS 2 and 3 charge at GIANT 1, who bends over to tie his shoe. GIANTS 2 and 3 bump heads (SOUND EFFECT: bell). With great dramatic flair, GIANTS 2 and 3 roll and stagger off stage]*

NARRATOR. Well, two of the giants killed themselves, so that only left one giant *[GIANT 1 exits]* for Jack to worry about. *[JACK climbs down from tree and exits]* Jack went home, did his chores, and the next day he *[JACK re-enters]* went along that same path, to that

same stoop tree and that same big rock, and he got the same idea.
[JACK follows Narrator's direction]

JACK. *[Determined, he tries to pick up rock, but still can't]*
Excuse me, sir.

NARRATOR. *[Annoyed]* Again?

JACK. Just one more time.

NARRATOR. All right, get up in the tree. *[JACK looks puzzled but gets in tree. NARRATOR lifts rock with great style and throws it (SOUND EFFECT: slide whistle) to Jack, who catches it but almost falls out of tree. NARRATOR catches him and helps him get the rock up above his head]* You got it?

JACK. Yeah!

NARRATOR. You sure?

JACK. Yeah!

NARRATOR. Good! *[Slaps him on the back and JACK almost drops the rock (SOUND EFFECT: bell)]* Well, about three o'clock along came that last giant. *[GIANT 1 enters, coming down path. JACK throws rock (SOUND EFFECT: whistle and bell) like before but misses. GIANT 1 notices rock and eventually looks up at tree. JACK shapes his body to look like tree. GIANT is fooled at first. GIANT turns away but looks back to re-check and discovers it is Jack]*

GIANT 1. I got you now, boy, and I aims to kill ya!

JACK. *[False bravery]* You can if'n ya want to.

GIANT 1. *[Puzzled at bravery]* What's your name, boy?

JACK. My names is . . . Jack Fear-No-Man!

GIANT 1. *[A bit worried]* Jack Fear-No-Man, I'm gonna take you home with me.

JACK. That's right nice of you. *[Starts to step out of tree, but steps into Giant's arms. GIANT throws him over his shoulder and carries Jack around stage]*

NARRATOR. Now this Giant had never met anyone who had stood up to him before, so he decided to see just how brave Jack Fear-No-Man really was.

GIANT 1. Jack, you see my woods over yonder? *[He points Center]*

JACK. Yes, sir.

GIANT 1. I bet that I can carry more wood at a turn than you ever could.