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## **Family Plays**

# **The Empty Pot**

Comedy/Drama by  
DEBBIE L. METZLER

Adapted from a Chinese folktale

**Family Plays**

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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DEBBIE L. METZLER

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(THE EMPTY POT)

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# The Empty Pot

## CHARACTERS

SCROLL BEARERS: bring Confucius sayings to the audience throughout the play, specifically between scenes. There may be many Scroll Bearers, all of whom read the contents of the scroll they bear to the audience; may double as SEED DISTRIBUTORS in scene 3.

NARRATOR(S): visible throughout the play to clarify storyline.

SU MING SHU: a young Chinese boy who is known not for his academic talents, but rather, his ability to grow beautiful plants.

EMPEROR: possesses wisdom and a gentle love for nature; no longer youthful, he must choose an heir to the throne.

SUN LI: the emperor's most trusted servant, knows more about the emperor than anyone; his dignity and his loyalty are unsurpassed.

GRANDFATHER: Ming's paternal grandfather; he is the ever-present bringer of wisdom and hope. Ming's biggest advocate.

MOTHER: Ming's mother; she loves him, but feels he does not put enough effort into his scholarly tasks. She has sympathy for Ming, but is still subservient to Ming's father and makes little intercession on Ming's behalf.

FATHER: Ming's father; he is all business, wants his son to prepare his way in the world—stop daydreaming and get to business.

SAM PU: the emperor's arrogant second SON; he prides himself on brain when his brawn fails him.

WONG WEH: the emperor's hot-tempered SON; number one in line to the throne, but too involved with his own looks to care!

MOTHER #1: Sam Pu's mother; she is terribly jealous and will do anything it takes to undermine Wong Weh's bid for the throne.

MOTHER #2: Wong Weh's mother—suspicious and jealous—she wants to be sure nothing stands in the way of the kingdom for her son.

DEAD ANCESTORS (4): spirit guides, they attend to those who are of this world, unseen by the living. Because of his impending passage to the next realm, only Grandfather can hear and see them. They are dressed in flowing garments and colors that represent the four SEASONS.

LU CHI: Ming's sister; she always does what she is told and is very academic, unlike Ming. She has integrity and encourages her brother.

TOWNSPEOPLE: adults and children; one may double as TUTOR, others may double as Scroll Bearers. All are eager to be the best in the quest for the emperor's throne, even if dishonesty is the easiest way!

## SETTING

Interior: The emperor's palace.

Exterior: Ming's garden. The emperor's garden. Along the road.

Optional: A foot bridge.

Sets can be as simple or as elaborate as one chooses, for example, a simple set may consist of pillars at C to signify the emperor's palace; an area R with a small tree, a rock for sitting and some gardening implements will suffice for Ming's home/garden. Most important are the variety of flowers that the Townspeople carry throughout the play. A small bridge can be purchased at any gardening center to represent the path upon which the Dead Ancestors tread.

An elaborate stage would mirror the yin and yang element of Chinese palaces; the anterior or "male" portion of the palace is largely stone with the traditional "lions" on right and left sides of the entrance, and the posterior or "female" area is the lovely garden for which the Chinese are known. Ming's home is modest and therefore simply a wood structure.

## COSTUMING

Whether you're on a tight budget, or have an adequate allowance, one should be sure that the emperor's clothing is exceptional, as well as that of his wives, his sons and Sun Li. Great bargains can be found in San Francisco's Chinatown on hats and flat cloth shoes. Even if you don't live in or near the bay area, shoes and Chinese hats can easily be found online. Be sure to do your homework, though, on hat styles. Some are very agrarian while others suggest a more urban life as well as age and gender! If the play is done in a school setting, put a notice in your school bulletin about costume needs, you'll be surprised at how many people have Asian dress in their closets!

# The Empty Pot

## PROLOGUE

*(SCROLL BEARERS enter with a Confucius saying that is unfurled from DL to DR. As the Chinese read from right to left, they should “read” the saying aloud to accommodate all audience ages and abilities. A welcome announcement can be made at this time as well.)*

## SCENE 1

SETTING: MING’s garden, morning.

*(Many beautiful flowers adorn the set.)*

AT RISE: SU MING SHU sits amongst his garden caring for a flower; NARRATOR’s V.O. can be heard.

NARRATOR (V.O.). In the ancient land of the rising sun, Su Ming Shu, or “Ming” as the other children called him, played happily in his garden ...

*(Enter GRANDFATHER, who looks on from behind.)*

NARRATOR (V.O., cont’d). Ming was known throughout the village for his beautiful flower garden; everyone knew HE could make ANYTHING grow!

GRANDFATHER *(after a moment)*. Yet another beautiful flower, my son? Soon you will fill the entire village with them.

MING. Good morning, Grandfather. Every morning, I find a new flower that comes to me for care; their blossoms are their way of saying thanks. They seem to like it here.

GRANDFATHER. The perfume lingers in the air and drifts upward to the emperor’s palace; he will be jealous; he too loves his garden.

MING. I’ve seen his garden on the hillside. It is beautiful. But I think there are plenty of flowers to go around.

GRANDFATHER. Indeed.

*(Enter MOTHER and FATHER; she is in the lead, but steps aside to let FATHER pass. FATHER disturbs the peace with his demands.)*

FATHER. MING! You are late! Your instructor is here and you are playing with petals and dirt! I ought to ...

MOTHER (*calmly moves MING out of the way of FATHER's swat*). Wash your hands and prepare yourself, Ming. Enough of this idle time.

(*MING quickly exits; MOTHER follows. FATHER looks on disapprovingly at MING. He is unhappy with GRANDFATHER but is very respectful of his elder.*)

FATHER. Father, Ming needs to focus on his studies; how will I ever create a leader of this boy if he is constantly digging in the dirt? That is no place for a true leader.

GRANDFATHER (*after a moment*). You see that the flowers gather here; they know they will be protected, cared for and recognized. Every variety—those who bear fruit, those that attract the wild birds, those who beautify—all come here to be cared for by MING. How then does a good emperor care for his subjects? (*Pause.*) There is much that can be learned in a garden.

FATHER. Ming would rather busy himself in the garden than attend to his mathematics and science; I am afraid he is not applying himself. We have spent centuries rising above toiling in the fields, and I do not want Ming to have the dishonor of taking our family back in that direction.

(*At this, LU CHI, TUTOR and MING come running out of the house, LU CHI in the lead; MING has his hands clasped as if carrying a small object; LU CHI is screaming; the TUTOR has tried to kill a small spider that MING wants to spare.*)

LU CHI. Aaagh! Put it down; it is horrible!

TUTOR. MING! Now where are you going?!

LU CHI. Get it away from me!

MING. It can cause you no harm and it will live freely in the garden!

TUTOR. Your parents do not pay me to save every bug that crawls across the floor! Now get back here and tend to your studies at once!

(*MING runs to his GRANDFATHER and gently places the spider into his hand; GRANDFATHER turns and gently places the spider on a flower as he exits.*)

FATHER. What is the meaning of this!

TUTOR (*flustered*). There was a spider on his desk, and I simply gave it a flick, and ...



FATHER (*interrupts*). Enough, MING!

(*Both the TUTOR and MING immediately freeze.*)

FATHER (*cont'd*). Go back inside this instance! You will not make a mockery of your studies!

(*LU CHI exits into the house in a huff.*)

MING. Yes, Father; forgive me.

(*MING moves toward the house; FATHER glares at the TUTOR as he follows MING in the same direction; both exit. FATHER exits shortly behind. Lights dim. Isolated light, SCROLL BEARERS enter with a Confucius saying that is revealed to the audience.*)

SCROLL BEARERS. Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.

## SCENE 2

SETTING: *The EMPEROR's palace. It is ornate with engraved stone and wood. A veranda is seen with a plant or two, and beyond this is the EMPEROR's garden in which many flowers and plants grow.*

AT RISE: *NARRATOR sets story. The EMPEROR enters and looks out over his garden from his veranda; his loyal advisor, SUN LI, enters.*

NARRATOR. The emperor of the land loved all nature, but especially flowers; every day he could be seen standing quietly amongst the beautiful flowers in his garden. But the emperor was growing old and knew that it was necessary to choose a successor to his throne.

SUN LI. Forgive my intrusion, your most honorable emperor; I wanted to be the first to wish you well on the day of your birth, but I see that the flowers have bid you well before me.

EMPEROR. Ahh, Sun Li, my most trusted friend and advisor; you have served me well for these many years, for that I am grateful, and though the flowers spoke first, I accept your wish with the same honor.

SUN LI. The villagers will gather soon to hear announcement of a successor to the throne.

EMPEROR. Yet they shall have no such announcement.

SUN LI. Shall I make apologies and have them gather again in the fall?

EMPEROR. No, spring will be here soon; it is the season of renewal; I cannot ignore such an important tradition. It would be unwise to anger the ancestors by changing the rules they have set forth. And yet ...

SUN LI. Even the most ancient bamboo takes exception to the coming storm.

EMPEROR. Yet remains sturdy and does not break in its wake. We will gather this day, but my dreams have left me no answers. My sons care only for themselves ...

*(Enter WONG WEH and SAM PU, the EMPEROR's SONS, in attire for Taekwondo, bickering.)*

WONG WEH. Hah! I have defeated you again! Admit that I am the strongest!

SAM PU. You are the strongest—smelling! You are a cheater!

WONG WEH. YOU are a sore loser! You don't even do that well!

*(SAM PU picks up a vase, ready to smack his brother with it as MOTHERS #1 and #2 enter.)*

EMPEROR. What is the meaning of this intrusion?!

*(SAM PU freezes with vase overhead.)*

MOTHER #1. Sam Pu! That vase has been in our family for centuries!

MOTHER #2 *(to EMPEROR, conniving)*. Sam Pu has always had such a bad temper.

EMPEROR. In only a short time the villagers will gather to hear an announcement of the successor to the throne! You two! You are like oxen in a garden! Strong and stubborn, you trample everything in your path!

WONG WEH *(to SAM PU)*. Hah! I am surprised you got that vase over your head, you puny ...

MOTHER #2 *(interrupts)*. Wong Weh!

*(She quickly moves to his side and grabs his ear, exiting as he winces in pain. MOTHER #1 sidles up to EMPEROR as SAM PU puts the vase away.)*

MOTHER #1 *(snidely)*. He is such a peacock, that one. One would only need a mirror to distract him from his duties to the kingdom if he was emperor.

EMPEROR. Leave me to my misery, woman. I have a very difficult task before me.

*(MOTHER #1 quickly escorts SAM PU offstage; only SUN LI and the EMPEROR are left. After a moment:)*

EMPEROR *(cont'd, to SUN LI)*. This task is like a large stone; I have looked at it from its many sides, sometimes it appears larger than at other times, yet it still weighs as heavy. Where did I go wrong? Surely I have been a good father, have I not?

SUN LI. Of course, your excellence. It seems your sons are like fledgling birds; you feed them and nourish them, yet you cannot predict when they're going to poop on you.

EMPEROR. Well said, my trusted advisor, but still I have no answers.

SUN LI. I will leave you to the silence; perhaps there you will find your answers.

*(SUN LI exits; EMPEROR moves back to the veranda and gazes out at his garden as the DEAD ANCESTORS enter. They are dressed in the colors of the seasons.)*

SUMMER *(to others)*. This decision weighs heavily on the honorable king.

FALL. And yet, the answers are all around him.

SPRING. I do not understand; it appears the possibilities are few, and yet ...

WINTER. Perhaps with some guidance ... *(To SPRING.)* Take this. *(Hands SPRING a peach blossom branch.)*

FALL. Aahh, I am beginning to see your plan ...

SPRING. What do I do with this? He will see me!

WINTER. He cannot hear or see you; we move in the next realm. He lives in the physical world and will not see us until it is near his time to leave this earth. Move the branch in a circle above the emperor's head, nine times ...

*(SPRING begins to move the branch in a circle above the EMPEROR's head.)*

SPRING. Like this?

WINTER. Yes.

FALL *(to SUMMER)*. It will be like waking up to a new day ...

SUMMER. With new sight in his eyes and new thoughts in his mind.

WINTER. Come, let us leave him to discover his new path.

*(All DEAD ANCESTORS exit in a swirling, flowing movement. The EMPEROR turns toward the audience, at first with the look of puzzled thoughtfulness, then with the expression of a new idea on his face. He gestures to show that he has a new plan.)*

EMPEROR. Sun Li! Sun Li come at once!

*(SUN LI enters with a knowing expression on his face.)*

SUN LI. How may I serve you, my wise emperor?

EMPEROR. I believe I have found a solution to my dilemma, my trusted advisor; step out here with me and I will explain ...

*(The EMPEROR guides SUN LI to the veranda where they both look out into the royal garden. Lights dim.*

*Isolated light, SCROLL BEARERS enter with a Confucius saying that is revealed to the audience as the set is changed.)*

SCROLL BEARERS. Wealth and rank are what men desire; but unless they be obtained in the right way, they may not be possessed.