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Dramatic Publishing

Liza and the Riddling Cave

an Appalachian adventure
for children

by John Urquhart

Liza and the Riddling Cave

an Appalachian adventure for children

Drama. By John Urquhart. Cast: 3m., 3w., 2 boys, 3 girls, extras optional. Set in the hills of Appalachia in the mid-1930s, this dramatization moves among various mountain settings nearby. Liza Tucker was born different. She can't talk, but she has an extraordinary ability to solve riddles. Misunderstood by her mother and her neighbors, she lives a reclusive life at the family home place. But after her father fails to return home following a flood, it is Liza who solves the mystery of his disappearance. In this heart-warming Appalachian adventure, Liza and her brother, Jacob, match wits with a pair of mischievous ghosts in a magical cave deep within mysterious Ice Mountain. At the end, Liza wins acceptance, while her mother gains a new understanding of the "kind of magic that holds a family together." *Notes are available in the script containing discussion and details on casting, characters, set and scenes. Open stage. Appalachian costumes of the 1930s. Approximate running time: 75 minutes. Code: LG6.*

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JOHN URQUHART



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LIZA AND THE RIDDLING CAVE was a winner of the Seventh National Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman Playwriting Workshop sponsored by Indiana-Purdue University at Indianapolis and was featured as a rehearsed reading at the 1997 Youth Theatre Playwriting Symposium held at the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis.

This play is dedicated to
Bryony, Molly, Jenn, and Sean.

Like Zeke sez,
"there's nuthin' means more than family."

THE CHARACTERS

Liza Tucker - thirteen years old; mute

Jacob Tucker - Liza's brother; eleven years old

Kate Tucker - their mother

Adam Tucker - their father; wears a beard

Effie Childers - a neighbor

Kyle Childers - Effie's husband

Billy Bartlett - a neighbor boy

Lou Bartlett - one of Billy's sisters

Jesse Bartlett - another sister

Hattie - a ghost

Zeke - her husband, also a ghost

Various Ice Statues (optional)

From the Playwright

This play has enjoyed a rather lengthy developmental process. At every step along the way, I have been aided by creative input from actors, directors, dramaturgs, and audience members. My thanks to each and every one of you. I couldn't have written this play without you.

It was originally called THE RIDDLING CHILD, but because casual American pronunciation makes "Riddling" and "Ritalin" into homophones, there has been an unfortunate measure of confusion regarding the title. Because this is not a play about a medicated child, I have been persuaded to change the name of the play. Should you prefer the original title, as I do, please feel free to use it.

The process of creating this play began in the Winter of 1991 with the help of a group of students from West Virginia Wesleyan College.

Six years later, a new version of the script was selected to undergo a developmental workshop as part of the 1997 Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman IUPUI National Youth Theatre Playwriting Symposium. That experience culminated in a staged reading at the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, directed by Jeff Church. Judy Matetzschk served as dramaturg.

In June, 1998, another staged-reading, directed by Jeff Kennedy, was produced by New York University at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City.

Then, in September, 1998, Larry Snipes directed the first professional production for the Lexington Children's Theatre. Shortly thereafter, it was staged at NYU's Provincetown Playhouse, in a production directed by Nancy Swortzell.

John Urquhart

November, 1998

THE RIDDLING CHILD premiered at the Lexington Children's Theatre in Lexington, Kentucky, on September 24th, 1998, as the first production in LCT's new home on Short Street. It was directed by Larry Snipes. The set and lighting were designed by Eric Morris. Costumes were designed by Vivian Snipes. The Stage Manager was Corina Nusu.

Liza Tucker	Anna Gregory
Jacob Tucker	Zachary Moseley
Kate Tucker	Liz Savage
Adam Tucker	Charles "Chuck" Zavos
Effie Childers	Alicia Mantia
Kyle Childers	Scott Irelan
Billy Bartlett	Brandon Lovell/ Galen McIntosh
Lou Bartlett	Sarah Deery/ Daryl Lynne Ellerbe
Jesse Bartlett	Jordan Barnhill/ Victoria Fath
Hattie	Lauralyn Hungerford
Zeke	Christopher Biddle

NOTES

The Setting

The play takes place in the following locations: the yard of the Tucker homeplace; a berry patch along the path to the Bartletts; a clearing in the woods; various locations on the side of Ice Mountain; and inside the Riddling Cave.

The Riddling Cave is a magical cavern of ice that lies somewhere beneath Ice Mountain. It is filled with fantastic crystalline formations, some of which have human form.

In Lexington, the play received a rather elaborate staging. A revolve was used to shift between locales, and all of the sound cues were recorded. The New York production used a bare stage, with only a painted curtain to separate the cave from the other playing areas—and, instead of recordings, all of the sound effects were created live by members of the ensemble, who were seated onstage throughout. Both of these approaches served the story equally well.

However you choose to suggest the locales of the play, do keep in mind that the audience should be teased by the early glimpses into the Riddling Cave, and that this environment should not be fully revealed until Jacob and Liza enter the cave.

The Riddle Song

Inside the cave, the first two verses of The Riddle Song are heard in an echoing, distorted version that repeats continually. It should sound as if it were being sung by an eerie chorus of disembodied voices. The volume and the clarity of the song may ebb and flow, but it is ever present in the cave until the riddles are solved. When heard outside of the cave, the song is mixed with the sound of the wind that blows off the mountain.

The music to The Riddle Song can be found in a variety of sources; two are noted below.

Henry, M.E. ed. Folk-songs from the Southern Highlands. New York: J.J. Augustin, 1938.

The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles. New York: Bramhall House, 1960.

Additional notes referring to The Riddle Song and its use are included in the text.

The Characters

The human characters in the play live on Coldwater Creek, a stream that flows from a spring on Ice Mountain. They enjoy a largely self-sufficient lifestyle in their little valley, supplementing the produce of their small farms with hunting, fishing, and gathering. Kyle and Effie Childers' farm lies downstream of the Tuckers. The Bartlett Place is upstream, on the way to Ice Mountain.

These are relatively poor folk who work hard. Their lifestyle, dress, and customs have been well-documented, and your production team will find a wealth of material to use in representing these people in an honest and straightforward fashion.

Liza

No specific medical explanation is given in the play for Liza's disability, and every actress who plays the role should feel free to develop her own distinctive interpretation of the physical life of this character.

Liza's Signing

Because Liza is mute, she communicates physically. There are indications throughout the script that suggest her actions, but the actress playing this part will find a great deal has been left for her to create and interpret. Careful attention needs to be given to the development of a sign language that will "read" in your theatre and suit your Liza.

Liza signs "riddle" by banging the side of her head with a closed fist. She modifies this sign to signal "got it."

Liza should also have a "sign" for each of the important characters. For example, she strokes her chin with her fingers to indicate her pa, who wears a beard.

Jacob has an exceptional ability to understand his sister's communications. At times it seems as if he can read her mind. This is important, because it helps to speed the play along.

Liza's Inner Voices

There are six choral sequences in the play that reveal some of what goes on inside Liza's head. These sequences can be mixed in the studio and played back on tape, or created live onstage. The lines may be voiced by the character who originally spoke that particular line, or shared among the company. The appropriate orchestration and timing of these sequences will be discovered in rehearsal.

The Ghosts

Hattie and Zeke have been haunting the Riddling Cave since George Washington was president. Their costumes are ragged and worn, and they are bundled up excessively against the cold, with layers of clothing, gloves, scarves, hats, etc. Their costumes and hair appear to be coated in ice crystals—as if they have been literally frozen in time. Though seen by the audience, they are invisible to the characters onstage.

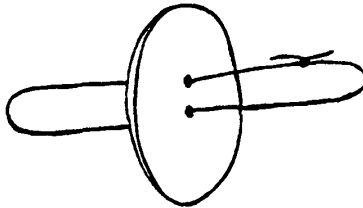
In addition to Hattie and Zeke, the cave contains the frozen remains of others who failed to answer the riddles. These may be seen onstage as "ice statues" possessing human form, or understood to be somewhere out of sight, buried within the icy walls of the cavern, or in the audience.

The Spinner

The toy used by Liza at the opening is a variation of "Button on a String" described in Foxfire 6. (New York: Anchor Books, 1980.) I was shown how to make this larger version by my own father, who never gave it a name. For the purposes of this play, I am going to call it a "spinner."

The spinner is made with a circle of cardboard or very thin wood about three or four inches in diameter. Two small holes are punched or drilled opposite each other, on the center line, about 1/2 an inch apart and equidistant from the center. A piece of string 3 1/2 to 4 feet long is threaded through the holes and tied to make a loop. With the spinner in the center, the two ends of the string are looped around the fingers of each hand. Swing the spinner to wind the string. Once it is wound, the hands can be pulled apart, then relaxed to keep the disk spinning and rewinding. Use the thumb and fingers to spread the ends wide when pulling.

To give the spinner more visual interest, try painting it with patterns.



The Spinner

Ice Mountain

There really is an Ice Mountain. It's in Hampshire County, West Virginia, not far from Slanesville. It's widely known as a geographic anomaly; ice *can* be found under its rocks and in its crevices, even in the middle of summer, and it supports plant life native to more northern climates. Geologists speculate that a large piece of glacial ice was trapped and preserved beneath the mountain, but nobody knows for sure—except Adam Tucker and his kids, of course.

Liza and the Riddling Cave

The yard of a cabin deep in the mountains. This is the Tucker Homeplace. The year is 1934.

Behind the cabin, "at the head of the holler," lies Ice Mountain. If we can see the mountain, its character should be mysterious.

Downstage and off to one side is a large, flat rock. This rock may extend beyond the edge of the apron; it may even be placed within the audience. This is Liza's Rock, though it will serve other purposes throughout the play.

As the house lights go down, we hear the music to "The Riddle Song," then a voice begins to sing.

SINGER:

I gave my love a cherry that had no stone,
I gave my love a chicken that had no bone,
I told my love a story that had no end,
I gave my love a baby with no cryin'.

How can there be a cherry that has no stone?
How can there be a chicken that has no bone?
How can there be a story that has no end?
How can there be a baby with no cryin'?

(During the song, Liza enters. She wears a dress with pockets in the front. Her face is dirty and her costume is disheveled. She carries her ragdoll, Ellie. Liza and Ellie make their way to the rock, where they play together. While they play, Liza signs "Liza loves Ellie" and "Ellie loves Liza." Elsewhere on the stage, we see glimpses of Kate and Jacob as they come and go, attending to chores around the homeplace.)

Adam Tucker enters. He carries a sack, and a bridle for the mule. Kate follows. She hands him a list and reviews it with him. They embrace to say goodbye. Jacob runs up. Adam hugs him and tousles his hair as

Kate beams. Liza stays on her rock. Adam walks toward Liza. He stops, waiting for her to come to say goodbye. She doesn't move. Adam crosses to the rock. Liza takes his hand and tries to dissuade him from going. She won't let go. Kate tries to pull her away. Adam stops Kate, then he gently breaks Liza's grip. Kate looks on, disapproving. Adam tries to soothe Liza. Liza tries to give him Ellie. He declines. She presses the doll upon him. He finally accepts the doll good-naturedly. Then Liza signs "I love Pa" to say goodbye. Adam responds by touching her cheek tenderly. Doll in hand, he waves goodbye and walks offstage to the barn.

Unseen by the audience, Adam Tucker takes the wagon down the valley. From her rock, Liza looks over the audience and waves after him. Jacob and Kate stand together and wave. As Kate returns to the house, Jacob steps downstage to address the audience. In the distance, we hear the sound of thunder, followed by rain. Liza remains on her rock. She watches for her father, worry clouding her face.)

JACOB:

Liza was thirteen then. I was eleven. It was middle of summer - - blackberry picking time. Pa had taken the mule and the wagon and gone to town, but while he was away, it started pouring the rain down. Never seen nuthin' like it. Creeks turned into rivers and the rivers looked like lakes.

Everybody remembers it as the Summer of the Flood, but I remember it as the time when my pa seemed lost and gone forever. And for Liza, of course.

After the river carried off the high water, everybody expected pa to make his way back home. But one day turned into the next, and there weren't no sign of him. No word. Nuthin'. Whole family was worried sick.

(It is now mid-afternoon, five days later. Liza is still on her rock, watching the valley for any sign of her father's return. She's playing idly with the "spinner,"

[see notes] but she can't make it work.

Jacob crosses to Liza, untangles the string, and sets the toy to spinning. As he does so, Kate enters. She sets down a basket of laundry, runs a washline across the stage, and begins to hang the washing. Jacob passes the spinner back to Liza. Liza keeps it spinning for a moment or two, then she gives up. Kate catches Jacob's eye and he exits to attend to his chores. Kate shivers and looks around.)

KATE: You feel that wind, Liza? That's a mighty cold wind for summer.

(Liza does not respond)

It's a sign, child: *(pause)* An' it ain't a good sign neither.

(still no response)

You hear me? *(crosses to Liza)*

Liza?

(Liza looks up)

Any sign of your pa?

(Liza rubs her fingers across her chin as if she were stroking a beard - - her sign for "pa". Then she points down the valley, indicating that she doesn't know where he is. Kate makes no effort to follow her signing.)

There's a riddle for you, girl. Where is your pa?

(Liza makes sign for "riddle")

That's right. It's a riddle. Just like you. *(Kate is trying to be cheerful, but she's clearly worn out and worried.)*

KATE: I never knowed a man so taken with riddling. I reckon that's where you children get it.

(Liza smiles, and signs. Kate frowns.)

I do wish I could get inside your head the way that brother of yours can. *(Kate starts back to the washline. After a step or two, she stoops to pick up something.)* Oh, Liza. Lookee here, child. See what I found. *(she holds up a ring attached to a ribbon)* Your mamaw's weddin' ring, lying in the dirt. *(pause)* Why your pa ever give you this I'll never know. *(Kate cleans the ring on her apron and examines it thoughtfully.)* There's magic in a wedding ring, child. Powerful magic.

(She draws a circle around the ring with her finger. Liza watches.)

It makes a circle, see. And that circle tells a story. The story of love.

(Liza signs "love")

That's real magic, Liza. The kind that keeps a family together. There's no end to that circle, and there's no end to the story of love.

(places ribbon around Liza's neck)

EFFIE: *(from offstage)* Kateeee, Kateeee!

KATE: Over here, Effie .

(Effie Childers enters, out of breath from running.)

EFFIE: There you are! Katy. Katy, I got news. I got news about your husband.

(As Kate and Effie talk, Liza moves closer to listen.)

(trying to catch her breath) I run all the way.

EFFIE: Whoowee! Soon as Kyle told me, I lit out to find you.

KATE: *(sensing that the news is bad)* You're a good neighbor, Effie. *(pause)* Liza's been so worried. She made Adam take her doll. Ellie. Fer company. You shoulda see'd it. That growed man riding off to town with an ole rag doll setting on his lap.

EFFIE: Katy . . .

KATE: Lord only knows what folks in town musta thought. I reckon they . . .

EFFIE: Katy! *(pause)* Will you let me talk. *(gently)* You need to hear what I got to say.

(Liza listens)

KATE: I don't want to hear it, Effie!

EFFIE: *(gently)* They found your wagon. In the river. All covered up with mud. *(pause)* But there ain't no sign of your husband. *(pause)* Kyle sez maybe he tried to ford the river. Maybe the flood got him, and carried him downstream. Kyle sez . . . well, he sez that Adam may be . . .

(Kate turns, catches Liza listening)

KATE: Liza! What are you doing, prying like that! Go on, now. Shoo!

(Liza does, Kate turns back to Effie)

EFFIE: Anyway, my Kyle sez . . .

KATE: I don't care what your Kyle sez! Man's got legs, he can walk home.

EFFIE: *(Pause)* Then where is he, Katy? It's been three days since the rain quit.

KATE: Mebbe he took to higher ground. Mebbe he's trying to come over the mountain.

EFFIE: *(pause)* Over Ice Mountain?

(Kate takes a moment to digest this)

KATE: Mebbe.

(Adam Tucker enters. He is somewhere on the side of Ice Mountain. He is wet, but he's in good spirits. When he speaks, Liza reacts as if she can hear him, though she can't really. She only senses his danger. During Adam's scene, she stays perched on her rock "on the lookout." Lights isolate Adam and Liza. Kate and Effie freeze.)

ADAM: *(entering)* Whooe. I tell you, this is one big mountain.

(He stops climbing and reaches into the sack he carried at the beginning of the play. He pulls Ellie out. The doll is very wet.)

There you are. I hope the ride's not been too wet and bumpy in the bottom of that sack. My apologies, Ellie. This isn't a very dignified way to dry off.

(squeezes Ellie, water runs out of her) I only wish you could do the same for me. *(sets her down, pulls out a pocket watch)* I may have lost the wagon, but at least I'm bringing Ellie back safe and sound. Any luck, we'll be home for supper. You can bet Liza's on the lookout. Waitin' on her Pa.

(hears the Riddle Song from the cave)

You hear that, Ellie? *(he looks around)* Sounds like singing. Where's it coming from?

(With Ellie in his hand, he crosses to the mouth of the cave. As he nears the opening, the sound grows louder. He becomes enveloped in blue light, to which

he is oblivious.)

ADAM: It's the wind making that noise, Ellie. Listen to it. It's blowing right out of this cave. *(listens)* No wonder folks say there's ghosts on this mountain. Now Ellie, I'm gonna have a look inside. You wait right here and be my lookout, alright. Just like Liza.

(Adam enters the cave as the voices grow louder. Once he disappears, the singing and the blue light fade. Liza's special fades. Kate and Effie unfreeze. Liza is still troubled by her feelings. Effie notices.)

EFFIE: *(crossing to Liza)* She's not gonna have one of her fits, is she?

KATE: Don't pay her any mind.

EFFIE: *(snorts)* That child's nothing but a waste of food, Katy. Can't she do no chores?

KATE: Don't be foolish, Effie. I'd rather try an' teach the mule to sing.

(Kate takes Effie by the arm and leads her away from Liza. The women turn their backs and confer quietly. Stung by Kate's words, Liza decides to show her mother that she can help. She goes to the line and tries to hang the wash. She makes a real mess of it, dropping clothes on the ground, throwing them over the line all bunched up, and pinning them one on top of another. Nevertheless, we can see that she's pleased to be helping. Finally, Kate notices Liza.)

(explosively) Liza! What do you think you're doing! Get off them clothes!

(Startled, Liza pulls on the line. It breaks and all the clothes tumble to the ground. Liza falls on top. Kate crosses to Liza and pulls her up roughly.)

Them's clean clothes! Clean clothes! I spent all

morning with that washing! That ain't helping, Liza!
That ain't helping!

(Kate shoves Liza downstage. She falls heavily and scuttles to her rock.)

KATE: What am I gonna do, Effie? She can't do nothing right.

(music)

INNER VOICES # 1: *(The lights dim onstage, except for a special illuminating Liza. The voices build and Liza's feelings mirror the build.)*

That ain't helping, Liza. *(Kate)*
Can't she do no chores? *(Effie)*
She can't do nuthin' right. *(Kate)*
Ain't doin' you no good. *(Effie)*
Can't do nuthin' right. *(Kate)*
Can't do nuthin' right. *(Effie)*
Nuthin' right. *(Kate)*
Nuthin' right. *(Effie)*

(pause)

Can't do nuthin' right. *(Liza)*

(The lights are restored onstage. Liza remains withdrawn.)

EFFIE: *(gently)* You're gonna need help, Katy.

KATE: We don't need no charity. *(Kate begins picking up the washing.)*

EFFIE: You can't do everything yourself.

KATE: *(turning on her)* Adam Tucker is alive, Effie Childers. Jacob and Liza's pa is coming home. From wherever he is. An' I don't want to hear otherwise.

EFFIE: Maybe so. But what if he ain't. What then, huh? What

will you do? You can't run a farm with a half-grown boy and a half-witted daughter.

(Jacob enters carrying a load of freshly cut kindling.)

JACOB: *(setting down the wood)* That's not true, Miz Childers. Liza's not half-witted at all. Just cause she can't talk, folks say she's backward. *(Jacob raises one finger in the air to make his point. This could be Liza's sign for her brother.)* But that don't make it true. And she's better than anybody when it comes to riddles.

EFFIE: Well, you can't eat riddles.

KATE: *(ignoring Effie)* Done your chores?

JACOB: Yessum.

KATE: You're a good boy, Jacob.

JACOB: Any word? Bout Pa?

(Kate hesitates and looks at Effie sharply. After a beat she shakes her head "no.")

You reckon he'll be home for supper?

KATE: *(forcing a smile)* Jacob, have I ever told you a lie?

JACOB: No ma'm.

KATE: Good. Now run along.

(Jacob smiles uncertainly and takes the wood to the house. Kate avoids looking at Effie. An uncomfortable pause ensues.)

EFFIE: Well, I can tell when I'm not wanted. You need anything, Katy, you holler. You hear me?

(Effie starts to leave as Jacob returns.)

JACOB: Miz Childers.

EFFIE: *(turning back)* Yes, Jacob.

JACOB: I seen your chickens in the woods.

EFFIE: That's where they live now, Jacob. *(to Kate)* I wish that good for nothing husband of mine would fix the hen house.

KATE: Jacob, put my washing on the porch and hurry back.

JACOB: Hey, this stuff is all dirty. How come . . .

KATE: Never you mind.

JACOB: Yessum. *(takes clothes to the house)*

KATE: Effie, I'm going to fix a blackberry cobbler for supper. If there's anything'll bring Adam Tucker home, it's my blackberry cobbler.

EFFIE: When you come to your senses, Kate, you'll find me up the house. Just remember, Kyle and I, we're willing to help.

KATE: Thank you, Effie, but I got help. *(she looks at Liza sadly)* I got Jacob.

(Effie exits as Jacob re-enters. He has a willow switch in his hand.)

JACOB: Say Ma. What's got two hookers, two lookers, four stiff standers, four down hangers, and one switchabout?

KATE: I got enough riddles in my life, boy.

JACOB: Ah, ma, it's a cow. Look! *(he makes horns on his head with his fingers)* Two hookers, see!

(Jacob playfully pantomimes the following in an attempt to cheer up his mother. Liza is beginning to

come around, and he includes her as well.)

JACOB: Lookers! *(makes circles around his eyes with his thumbs and forefingers)* Four legs, they're stiff standers. *(drops to all fours)* And the downhangers is the teats! *(uses one hand to represent the hanging teats, or he squats and pantomimes milking)* And a switchabout. *(holds the switch on his rear end and 'switches' it back and forth)* Get it? A tail! Moooooo! Moooo!

KATE: That's the silliest thing I ever heard.

(Liza claps delightedly and Kate beams. For a moment or two, it seems as if the family's troubles have been forgotten.)

Now, you tell me somethin'. What's got the head of a cat, the tail of cat, but tain't a cat?

JACOB: Head of a cat, tail of a cat, tain't a cat?

KATE: Well?

JACOB: Dunno.

KATE: Give up?

JACOB: No.

KATE: I haven't got all day.

JACOB: Ah, Ma!

KATE: I got chores to see to.

JACOB: Ma! Alright! Alright. I give up!

KATE: Tuckers never give up, boy. What would your pa say?

(As Kate turns to leave, Liza claps her hands to get Jacob's attention. When he looks her way, she makes