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Dramatic Publishing



GRANDMOTHER TALES

Mutsmag and Ashpet

Traditional tales from the
Blue Ridge Mountains

Adapted by

R. REX STEPHENSON

GRANDMOTHER TALES

Folktales. By R. Rex Stephenson. Cast: 1m., 9w., up to 10 extras of either gender. When we think of Appalachian storytelling, we tend to think of Jack's tales and stalwart heroes like Wicked John. But the mountains have their feisty heroines too, and *Grandmother Tales* is a celebration of two of these free spirits, Mutsmag and Ashpet. Grandmother, who gathers her young'uns with a song and a dulcimer (or a guitar, if that's what you have), narrates in the best story theatre tradition. She invites her listeners to take roles as undertakers, ugly sisters, trees, horses and even a fireplace. The stories she shares are of Mutsmag,



derived from Scottish folklore and sometimes known as Molly Whuppie and sometimes as Muncimag, and Ashpet, a southern Appalachian Cinderella. *Mutsmag* and *Ashpet* go together as a full evening of theatre, but if performed separately, they are an ideal length for a school assembly or competition. *Bare stage.*

Approximate running time: 50 minutes (Mutsmag: 30 minutes, Ashpet: 20minutes). Code: G89.

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DRAMATIC PUBLISHING
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(GRANDMOTHER TALES)

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Dedicated to dear friends, Joe & Jody; Emily Rose & Suzie

“Mutsmag” and “Ashpet” are traditional Appalachian tales that have been told in the Blue Ridge Mountains as long as there have been English and Scotch Irish settlers populating this area. These versions were collected by Richard Chase for the WPA Writers Project and were discovered by Christie Edwards in the Virginia WPA Archives at the Blue Ridge Institute, Ferrum College.

“Mutsmag” and “Ashpet” have been done more than 100 times by the Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre and Ferrum College, toured to elementary schools in Georgia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Virginia. Their first performance as *Grandmother Tales* was given at Radford University by the College of Visual and Performing Arts and the Department of Theatre on December 6, 2003, with the following staff and cast:

Directed by Aaron Davis

Faculty Advisor to the Director, Wesley Young

Technical Direction by W. David Wheeler

The Players

Natasha Antwi
W. Aaron French
Ashleigh Keeran
Emily Ocheltree
Bernadette Shoenborn

Becky Franklin
Lisa Huff
Jesse Leahy
Lissa Pruett
Heather Williams

CAST OF CHARACTERS

“Mutsmag”

Grandmother

Mother

Poll

Betts

Old Lady

Two-Headed Giant

Undertaker, Cabbage-Patch Buyers, One-Eyed Gang, Trees, Three Ugly Sisters, King, Prince, etc.

“Ashpet”

Grandmother/Mrs. Sigmond

Stepmother

Allison

Gertrude

Ashpet

Narrator

Prince

Children, Doors, Horses, a Fireplace, Wedding Guests, etc.

Notes on Casting

By doubling the Mother and the Old Lady in “Mutsmag” and using three actors to play all the “extra” characters and objects, the play can be done with a cast of ten. The play is well suited to a predominantly female cast.

By clever use of a minimum of costumes, several wigs, and the actor’s voice and body, this repetitive use of only three actors not only surprises, but also fascinates an audience. The key here is a presentational style of acting that requires the actor to select one element of the character and make it so recognizable that the audience visualizes the tree, or the fireplace, as well as the Ugly Sisters.

For a larger company, of course, characters like the Three Ugly Sisters, One-Eyed Gang, etc.. can be individually cast.

Director's Notes

“Mutsmag” (approximately 30 minutes in length), and “Ashpet” (about 20) can stand alone when a shorter piece is desired, for a competition play, for example. Some directors have divided Grandmother's narration up among the various actors; this can have the effect of energizing a scene.

No set is required, although a painted drop of the Blue Ridge Mountains creates a nice background. Almost no furniture, and few props, are required; it is basically up to the actors to create objects, setting, and place with the use of their bodies.

Costumes should be minimal. By dressing the performers in red- and blue-checked shirts with wide suspenders and jeans, for instance, Mutsmag's Mother or Ashpet's Stepmother may simply add an apron to create her character, and the One-Eyed Gang each add a patch over one eye. The Three Ugly Sisters may put on ugly wigs and perhaps grossly tacky skirts. Ashpet's red skirt should be bright red with lots of crinoline, and Velcro closures for ease of changing.

Two actors create the two-headed giant: one on the other's shoulders. Both actors speak the lines in unison, and their movements and facial expressions should be in sync.



Mutsmag

In the dark, we hear children's voices from offstage:

"You're it!"

"No, you didn't touch me!"

and other improvisational lines that allow the audience to know that a group of children are playing tag. A pool of light comes up on Grandmother, who will be taking the role of the narrator in the plays that follow. She is rocking quietly in her chair. The children's voices subside a bit. She rises, looks around.

Grandma: Now those children are done with their chores, they're running all over, playing games. I'll never get 'em to bed, let alone get 'em to sleep.

Again in the background, we hear joyful noises of children playing.

I know how to get them in here.

She picks up her guitar or dulcimer and begins singing.

The Chickens They Are Crowing

The chickens they are crowing, crowing, crowing.

The chickens they are crowing, for it's daylight.

The chickens they are crowing, crowing, crowing.

The chickens they are crowing, for it's daylight.

At this point, we see the children begin to sneak in, as they have stopped their game and have come to listen to their grandmother singing. She repeats the verse and by this time, they've all gathered around her listening to the song. She stops.

(In a semi-serious tone.) Well are you gonna help me, or are you just gonna sit there like bumps on a log?

All: *(Singing together.)*

The boys go a courting, courting, courting.

The boys go a courting, they stay out all night.

The boys go a courting, courting, courting.

The boys go a courting; they stay out all night.

Girl 1: Grandma, you gotta be the bestest singer there ever was in the whole wide world.

Everyone improvises: "That's the truth and sing us another."

Grandma: Now to me, that sounds like a compliment from a group of young-uns that hadn't finished their chores. That is the quietest you young-uns have ever been. 'Ceptin' when the preacher completely dunked you in the Pigg River.

Mutsmag: We all love to hear you sing, Grandma.

Grandma: You love to hear me sing rather than doing your chores.

Mutsmag: No, they are all done.

All: Yes, we have finished up.

Grandma: Finished up, have you? Well then, it must be bedtime. *(She is teasing them.)*

Girl 1: No, you promised that if we finished our chores, we could have a story.

All: Yes, a story. You promised a story.

Grandma: I recollect that might just be the case.

Boy: I want to hear the story of "Jack and the Bean Tree."

Girl 2: Nah, we always hear about Jack.

Mutsmag: Aren't there any stories where the girl is the hero?

Grandma: You mean the heroine.

Girl 1: Whatever. But there has got to be at least one story where a girl gets to have all the excitin' adventures.

Grandma: Actually, I know two. If my memory serves me. Which one do you want to hear?

Boy: None. I want to hear about Jack.

Mutsmag: Grandma, it don't make any difference. We don't know either story.

Grandma: Well then, I will tell you about Mutsmag.

Lights come up a bit; someone strikes the rocking chair and dulcimer.

This is a story about a girl named Mutsmag. *(She enters.)* Some people call her Muncimeg, and back over in England they called her Molly Whuppie, but it is all the same girl. Now she had two sisters, Poll and Betts, *(They enter.)* They were older than she was, and they didn't like Mutsmag a lick.

The two sisters pantomime trying to hit Mutsmag. She ducks and they hit each other. Sound effect: Cowbell. They fall. Mutsmag rises and smiles.

Now these three girls lived with their mother (*Mother enters.*) in a little house that had a cabbage patch. Our story begins when their mother is about ready to die.

Mother: Girls, I think I am fixin' to die.

Mutsmag: Oh, Mother, please don't die. I don't know what I would do without you.

Poll: When you die, what do we get? What do I get?

Mother: I guess, Poll, you can have my house. And if'n you take care of it, it will take care of you..

Betts: Then what will I get?

Mother: I guess you can have my cabbage patch, Betts. And remember if'n you take care of it, it will take care of you.

Poll: So if I get the house and Betts gets the cabbage patch, that leaves nothing for Mutsmag.

Betts: Good, I don't like her anyway. Mother, do you think you will be dead before sundown? If you can do that for me, then I can sell the cabbage patch and be off to seek my fortune.

Poll: And I can sell the house and go with you to seek my fortune. And Mutsmag will have nothing so she can't go with us. Do you think you are going to die in the next hour or so? Could you hurry it up?

Mother: (*She crosses to Mutsmag.*) Mutsmag, I am sorry. I have nothing for you but this old rusty knife. (*She hands Mutsmag the knife.*) If you take care of this knife—it will take care of you. Be kind to one another.

Grandma: And then she died.

Mother staggers around a little bit and Betts goes off for help.

Mother: Children, I am dead.

Betts has brought back help; this is an undertaker for Mother, who carries her off.

Grandma: And they no more buried her, when the girls sold the house and the cabbage patch.

Enter two Buyers and they pantomime purchasing the property from the two girls. They exchange money.

Betts: Let's be off, sister.

Mutsmag: What about me? I got no place to live and no money. I got nothing but this rusty old knife.

Poll: That's right. You got nothing.

Poll and Betts start walking away from Mutsmag.

Mutsmag: *(To the audience.)* I'll just follow.

She goes behind them and actors appear as forest and bushes.

Grandma: And that is exactly what Mutsmag did. But she didn't get too close 'cause she knew how mean her sisters were.

Mutsmag sneezes.

Poll: Did you hear something? *(They look around.)*

Betts: Sounded like something was behind us. *(Mutsmag hides behind tree.)*

Poll: Must have been our imagination. Let's go on.

All walk a step or two; Mutsmag stumbles.

Did you hear something?

Mutsmag becomes part of a tree.

Betts: Sounded like something was behind us.

They look, but are fooled by her using her body as part of the tree.

Poll: Must have been our imagination. *(And they walk on; Mutsmag follows.)* I know there is someone following us.

Betts: Me, too. Quick, hide behind the bush and we will catch them.

Poll and Betts hide behind bush, then jump out when Mutsmag walks by.

Poll: We told you not to follow us, Mutsmag.

Betts: You got no money, nothing. And besides, we never liked you anyway.

Mutsmag: Please. Please, let me go with you.

Poll: Nope. That's final. Nope.

Mutsmag: I'll just keep following you and there's nothing you can do about it. So there.

Poll: Mutsmag, I oughta punch you right in the nose.

The forest turns into a doorway; two actors create the door frame and another uses his body to make the door.

Betts: *(After seeing the doorway, Betts gets an idea.)* Why can't she go with us? *(She crosses the doorway.)* I've always sort of liked her. She was always good to do our laundry, wash the dishes, and tend the cabbage patch.

Poll: Are you serious? *(She doesn't know that Betts has a plan.)*

Mutsmag: Oh, thank you, Betts. *(Coming to her.)* Thank you.

Betts: Let's rest here and make some cabbage sandwiches. Mutsmag, you go in this little house that only has *one door* and *no windows*, and use your knife to fix us something to eat. *(Poll has finally caught on.)*

Poll: Yes, Mutsmag, why don't you go in this cabin that has only *one door*, *no windows*, and *a great big lock*, and fix us something to eat.

Mutsmag: Oh, I would love to. You are the best sisters in the whole wide world. *(Goes in door.)*

Betts: Quick, lock the door. *(Poll locks door.)*

Poll: Now Mutsmag, you are trapped, and we can go on our way without you.

Mutsmag: *(From behind the doorway.)* But what is going to happen to me? I am all alone with no food or water, locked in this cabin.

Poll: I don't know and I don't care.

Betts: Maybe you will die. *(Betts and Poll laugh and then exit.)*

Grandma: Now Mutsmag just sat down on the floor of that cabin and commenced to cry and cry. But do you know whose cabin that was? Why, it belonged to a whole band of ornery robbers.

Cabin turns into the Robbers. Robbers swing around: they have a patch over one eye, one has a gun or a sword.

And they were called "The One-Eyed Gang."

Robber 1: What are you doing in our cabin?

Mutsmag: My sisters locked me in.

Robber 2: Well, we best kill her and be done with it.

Robber 3: Unless she has something to buy her freedom with.

Mutsmag: I got nothing but this rusty old knife, which is the total inheritance from my dear departed Ma.

- Robber 1:** That ain't worth nothing. I am sorry about this, but you are going to have to die.
- Robber 2:** You understand, don't you?
- Robber 3:** We'll bury you with your knife if that makes you feel any better.
- Mutsmag:** (*Robbers start towards her.*) Wait! Wait! What if I can tell you where you can get some cash money?
- Robber 2:** Then we might not kill you.
- Robber 1:** No, then we wouldn't have to kill you! We *could*, but we wouldn't have to!
- Robber 3:** We would, however, have to vote on it. We are often called the Democratic One-Eyed Gang.
- Robber 1:** All in favor of not killing Mutsmag if she tells where we can get some cash money, say "Aye."
- All:** (*Including Mutsmag.*) "Aye."
- Robber 1:** All those in favor of killing her, say "Aye."
- Robber 2:** "Aye."
- Mutsmag:** He voted twice. (*Pointing to Robber 2.*)
- Robber 1:** Did you vote twice?
- Robber 2:** I am sorry. I just get so excited. You know I love to vote.
- Mutsmag:** It doesn't make any difference. The vote was 4 to 1. (*Robbers look around and count themselves.*) I voted.
- All:** Oh . . . (*Now they understand.*)
- Mutsmag:** Now here's where to get the money. My sisters, that locked me in this cabin, sold my ma's house and cabbage patch for cash money and they are walkin' down this here road.
- Robber 1:** I know a short cut. Let's be off to get that cash money.
They start to exit.
- Mutsmag:** Wait! First, you've got to promise me not to kill them. Not that they shouldn't be killed, but they are my sisters. All the kin I got in the world.
- Robber 1:** Well, I don't know about that.
- Robber 2:** No, we don't know about that.
- Robber 3:** We have to vote on it.
- Mutsmag:** I will tell you their names, which will make it much easier for you to

rob them. They won't be suspicious, you see, just curious.

Robber 1: Let's vote. Do it by a show of hands this time. All in favor of not killin' the mean sisters even though they ought to be killed, raise your hand. (*All raise their right hands.*) All in favor of killing the mean sisters 'cause they ought to be killed, raise your hand.

Robber 2 raises left hand. Everyone looks at him.

Robber 2: Well, this hand didn't get to vote. (*He slowly lowers his hand.*)

Robber 1: So we don't kill them. Let's go rob them.

Again, the Robbers start to exit.

Mutsmag: You could do me one favor, though. After you rob them and swear that you're not going to kill them, could you tie them up in a tree?

Grandma: Now the robbers knew a shortcut, and they stole all the sisters' money. (*They pantomime action described by Grandma.*) And they tied them up to a tree. (*One of the robbers becomes the tree.*) After they had been out there in the hot sun for two or three hours, along came Mutsmag.

Mutsmag: Hello, sisters. (*Trying to act surprised.*) Fancy meetin' you here.

Betts: Mutsmag, we were robbed.

Poll: And tied to this here tree.

Betts: And left out in the boiling sun.

Mutsmag: (*Walking around tree.*) Well, I wondered about that. I would think bein' tied to a tree would be right uncomfortable.

Betts: Get us loose!

Poll: Yes, get us loose.

Mutsmag: (*Interrupting.*) Then you don't like bein' tied to that tree.

Betts: No, you idiot. Now get us loose.

Mutsmag: (*She pulls out her knife.*) Ask nicely.

Poll & Betts: (*In mean voices—they cannot be nice to her.*) Sister, cut us loose. Please!

Mutsmag: That didn't sound very nice to me. I would think that unless you two wanted to spend forever tied to this tree, you could be nicer to your baby sister.

Betts: Never! Never! Never!

Mutsmag: Then I'll be on my way. (*She starts off.*)

Poll & Betts: (*Nicely this time.*) Please cut us loose, Sister.

Poll: Pretty please.

Mutsmag: One more thing. You gotta promise I can go with you.

Poll & Betts: (*Nicely.*) We promise. (*Meanly.*) Cut us free!

She frees them from the tree.

Grandma: Off the three girls walked. And when it started to get dark, they came upon a house.

They pantomime the action described by Grandma.

When they knocked on the door, (*Old Woman enters with a lantern or a candle.*) this ugly old woman invited them in.

Old Lady: Step into the light. Step out of the dark.

Sound effect: creaky door opening.

You sure are three pretty young and tender things.

Poll: Will you feed us?

Betts: Yes, we are right hungry.

Old Lady: Feed you? That's what you want. I don't know; my man's not home. A fragile, defenseless woman like me ought to be careful 'bout who she lets in.

Poll: We're trustworthy. We just want shelter from the dark and food for our stomachs.

Old Lady: Yes. Yes, I see. But to cook for the three of you?

Betts: No, no. This is our servant girl, Mutsmag. She would be happy to cook all the food, wash all the dishes, and clean your entire house.

Mutsmag: Servant girl? Me?

Betts: And a mighty fine servant girl she be, too.

Old Lady: Good. I could use some help. Girls! (*She calls out.*) Girls!

The Ugly Sisters enter; they are even uglier than the Old Woman.

These are my three lovely daughters. They can cook just fine, but what they fix is usually awful.

Sister 1: It's her fault. She uses too much salt.

Sister 2: No, it's her fault. She uses too much pepper.

Sister 3: It's not my fault if they don't like salt and pepper.

Old Lady: Come, Mutsmag. I will show you to the kitchen. And you girls can stay here and entertain each other. (*Secretly to her daughters.*) And

see if you can discover any important information about these three girls that seem all alone in the mountains.

She and Mutsmag exit.

Sister 1: (To Betts.) Got any family?

Betts: Nope.

Sister 2: Then no one would miss you, if you sort of disappeared.

Poll: Not a soul.

Sister 3: Have you talked to anybody along the way?

Poll: Only some robbers that stole our money.

Sister 1: All alone and poor.

Betts: I have a question for you. Do you have a Pa?

Sisters: Yes. (*They cackle knowingly.*)

Poll: When do we meet him?

Sister 2: Sooner than you would like.

Sister 1 & 3: Yes, yes. (*They cackle as before.*)

Grandma: Meanwhile, Mutsmag had made them all a fine dinner and they ate their fill. And just before they went up to the loft to go to sleep, the old woman gave each of her three daughters something.

Old Lady: All of you will go to sleep in the loft, and I want to give my three pretties these lockets to wear tonight. (*She hands them lockets.*)

Sister 1: Why do we have to wear lockets to bed?

Old Lady: Because I want you to! I am your mother. Don't argue with me.

Sister 2: They will get all tangled up around our neck, and I won't be able to get my beauty sleep.

Sister 3: (*She holds locket up.*) It will probably make me choke.

Old Lady: Believe me, these lockets will keep you three safe.

Sisters: Keep us three safe?

Old Lady: Now to the loft and good night.

Old Lady exits; all girls either lie down or stand up stage right. A quilt could help to suggest a bed. They stand behind it in the medieval fashion of a comic bed.

Grandma: It weren't long till five of those six girls were fast asleep. (*Five of the girls snore.*) However, Mutsmag had found something curious.