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The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus

By

ERIC COBLE

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Artistic Director, Steve Martin, Managing Director,
and Metro Theater Company, Julia Flood, Artistic Director, Matthew Neufeld,
Managing Director.

Workshopped and presented as a rehearsed reading in April 2018 at the
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as part of
New Visions/New Voices 2018.

The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus was workshopped and presented as a rehearsed reading in April 2018 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as part of New Visions/ New Voices 2018. It was directed by Julia Flood, and featured Tia Shearer as Dust Cloud. The rolling world premiere was produced by Childsplay Theatre and Metro Theater Company and premiered in October 2018 at Childsplay Theatre (Dwayne Hartford, artistic director; Steve Martin, managing director).

CAST:

Dust Cloud Kate Haas

PRODUCTION:

Director Debra K. Stevens
Scenic Design.....Jeff Thomson
Costume Design.....D. Daniel Hollingshead
Lighting Design Cody Soper
Original Music & Sound Design..... Christopher Neumeyer
Stage Manager Rebekah Carriere

It was subsequently premiered in October 2019 at Metro Theater Company (Julia Flood, artistic director; Joe Gfaller, managing director).

CAST:

Dust Cloud Jamie McKittrick

PRODUCTION:

DirectorJulia Flood
Stage Manager Jimmy Bernatowicz
Physical Dramaturgy..... Tia Shearer
Production Assistant/ASM/Props..... Jacob Cange
Production Manager/Technical Director.....Erik Kuhn
Scenic Design..... David Blake
Costume Design.....Dominique Rhea Glaros
Lighting Design Jayson Lawshee
Scenic Painter.....Cristie Johnston

The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus

CHARACTER

DUST CLOUD: A woman experienced in building, 20-40 years old.

PLACE: A pile of junk.

TIME: Now.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The cast may be expanded to fill each character role plus Dust Cloud as the narrator.

Dust Cloud can be played by an actor of any ethnicity or gender (with minor dialog changes).

Make some magic.

The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus

SETTING: *A pile of debris on a bare stage. Pieces of cars, jungle gyms, sticks, bikes, bricks, cardboard, plastic bags, etc. A magical world of junk.*

AT RISE: *A small car hood walks onstage. Or rather it's a small car hood being carried by someone like a shield. We can see nothing but legs moving behind it. The hood stops. Then a head pops up from behind it.*

This is DUST CLOUD.

DUST CLOUD (*looking out at us*). Ah! Excellent! You're here! I didn't think you'd come—I didn't think *anyone* would be crazy enough to—We don't have much time—

(Points to us.)

Get anyone there with you ready—we've all got to be ready before the moon is— (*Measures from horizon to sky with her arm.*) Right there. But you've gotta understand what you're getting into before you can help, you've gotta understand about the Council of Howls, and the Sting Brigade, and the Challenge of The Death Cactus, and ... Sheila!

See, Sheila came from the desert. She grew up like a little cactus plant in the sand and rock and boiling sun of New Mexico. Except she wasn't a cactus. She was an eight-year-old girl.

And what an eight-year-old!

(Begins creating a little figure of Sheila from whatever items come to hand.)

If you could reach up and grab the sun—and not burn your hands off—and pull it down and wrap it up in a little body with constantly tangled hair, some missing teeth, a laugh that shook windows to almost breaking, and eyes that let that inside sunshine BLAST out so that you could just about get a suntan just standing in front of her ...

THAT was Sheila.

(She displays the Sheila figure proudly.)

And like the hot sun, not everyone wanted to be her friend. She gave off too much heat for a lot of the kids at school. But now it was *summer*. See, her house was way out in the rolling hills of New Mexico. The nearest real town was twenty-seven miles away.

(Setting up the environment.)

And only a few kids actually lived near Sheila. So those kids—well, they had no choice but to be friends. And truth be told, those kids, they loved Sheila. They got mad at her, they got afraid of her sometimes, but life with Sheila—was never, ever boring.

So it's important to know that Sheila did not have this adventure by herself. This is the tale of FIVE adventurers—each with their own special role to play. Sheila was just the captain.

(Pulls pieces of junk out to represent each child.)

Dennis.

Dennis was the oldest. He was in *fourth* grade. And he was bigger and heavier than any of them, and *strong*. Dennis was as strong as *three* third-graders put together. He also always needed a haircut. No one was sure what color his eyes were because you couldn't see them under his

hair. But because he was so much older and stronger, Dennis felt like *he* should be the leader of the pack. But that would be like saying that you ordered ketchup and it happens to come with a hamburger. It's just not so. Sheila was going to be the hamburger and Dennis was the ketchup—really *strong* ketchup. And that was that.

(Another piece of junk.)

Leon.

Leon was the exact same age as Sheila, and Leon had the cleverest hands and fingers you ever met. Leon, when he was five, he took apart his dad's entire motorcycle engine! And he almost got it all back together before his dad got home! Leon was skinny and embarrassed about his teeth, so he didn't laugh as much as he should. But when he said something, it was usually very wise and helpful.

(Two small pieces of identical debris.)

And the Twins.

The Twins must have had names, but nobody knew what they were. One was Shy, the other was Eager ...

(Rearranges the Twins.)

Or one was Eager and the other one Shy. They were both only six. And they giggled. A lot.

(Jiggles the "dolls.")

"Hee hee hee hee hee."

That's how you always knew they were coming before you saw them. And they just wanted to be part of *anything*, no matter how crazy. They were always fun. And they usually brought candy.

(Brings the "Sheila" figure into the lineup.)

And that was them. Sheila, Dennis, Leon and the Twins.

Our five adventurers who were left.

Alone.

All summer long.

With nothing but time.

And imagination.

And as we all know, that is more than enough to change the world.

And it all started because next to the dirt road that ran behind Sheila's house ... was ... a *Pile Of Junk*.

Someone had left it there.

Just *left* it there.

But it wasn't just *any* junk. It was *magic*.

(Pulling out various pieces.)

There were the sidebars of a swing set, the top bars of a monkey bars, the boards from a teeter-totter, an old red car hood—*this* big—a *slide*, old poles, giant metal springs ... But where Sheila's mother saw a pile of useless metal ... Sheila saw ... the foundations of a city. And she had one. Whole. Summer. To build it.

Leon, remember, was the clever one with his hands; Dennis was strong as three third-graders; and the Twins were fast and cheerful and together they built it. Like this.

(Constructs as she speaks.)

They rested the swing set against the pinyon tree by the dirt road. Then they hoisted the car hood up to rest *between* the swing set and the tree branches—the floor of their house. *This* high off the ground. So of course they needed a ladder.

Ladder, ladder, ladder ...

The monkey bars! Right!

They set them on end ... Voila! Ladder!

They got old cardboard boxes from Leon's uncle's basement to make walls around the floating car hood so it was a room, and ran the teeter-totter boards *across* the air from the car hood to some tree branches ...

That was Monday.

There was much to be done, but this ... *This* was a fine start.

And every day, right after breakfast, they'd get back to work on the fort. Or treehouse.

Or castle. Part of the magic was no one could agree what to call it.

But it was coming along Amazingly.

Until that one day.

It was a Thursday.

Two Different Things happened that day, which would change our heroes' lives *forever*.

The First Thing happened in the morning, just as Sheila was finishing her bowl of Froot Loops, asking her mom for a second bowl—her mother said no, just like she did every single morning. Parents.—And her mother went to work.

So Sheila went outside ... and saw Dennis ... holding ... THIS.

(She pulls out a three-foot-tall orange rubber traffic cone—scuffed, dented, clearly run over repeatedly, but intact.)

An old traffic cone!

It was in the little canyon behind Dennis' house—someone had thrown it there! Can you imagine? It's like someone has a diamond ring that can summon dragons and they just throw it into a little canyon??

But now. Now it was theirs.

The Cone Of Awesome.
Orange Tower Of Power.

And Dennis said—

(*As Dennis.*) “We’re gonna put it right at the main entrance to the fort. Like a special marker.”

But Leon said—

(*As Leon.*) “Doesn’t that kind of take away the whole point of the traps we’re going to build, if you know where it’s safe to walk?”

And Dennis said—

(*As Dennis.*) “Well. Maybe we put it *beside* one of the traps so everyone *thinks* that’s where they should walk, but then they fall in the trap!”

(*As Leon.*) “But most people when they see a cone, they think danger and *don’t* walk where it is.”

This would have gone on all day, but Sheila—she had an idea. She took the Cone Of Awesome, scampered up to the top of the fort—

(*DUST CLOUD climbs to highest point.*)

And placed the Power Cone for the world to see!

(*As Sheila.*) “This way—”

She explained—

(*As Sheila.*) “It marks our fort where people can see it for miles around—all the best castles can be seen from miles around—and if there’s a low-flying airplane coming in just over our heads, they’ll all see the cone and know to pull up and not crash into our amazing castle.”

And nobody could argue with that.

So there the cone sat.

Little did they know that Sheila's perfect idea—this placement—might end up spelling Doom for the entire human race.

But that led to the Second Super-Important Thing that happened that day:

Sheila's mom announced to Sheila:

(As Mom.) “I have to go up to Albuquerque for work tomorrow, and I'll be staying the night. Do you want to come with me—you'll mostly be sitting in the motel room reading a book—or do you think you're old enough to stay here alone for one night, and I'll be back the next day.”

(Sheila's eyes go wide ... then a HUGE grin ... then she stifles the grin as she puts on her best mature voice.)

(As Sheila.) “I think I can handle being here on my own.”

And that was it: Freedom!

(As Sheila.) “Guys, guys, guys!!!”

Sheila ran outside after supper—

(As Sheila.) “Tomorrow night my mom's gone, and I'm gonna cook frozen pizzas and we can stay up till midnight, and maybe even sleep over in the castle!”

This struck everyone as an extremely smart and pleasurable way to spend the evening.

And so they did.

And then that night, Dennis had the good idea to play hide-and-seek ... with passing cars. You would lie on the ground beside the dark dirt road behind Sheila's house. And as soon as you heard a car coming down the road, or saw its headlights, you would *race* up into the tree fortress and just *barely* get in before the passing car lights slid over you so you weren't *caught*. So *you* knew you

were tucked safe in the fort and the passing car would have *no* idea you were there!

And it worked. There weren't a lot of cars going down the dusty road, but the kids would lay beside the fence, and when a car DID come, BOOM, into the fortress to hide!

Over and over! They never got caught!

And the night got later and later. Until the moon was right—
(*Measures horizon to sky.*) there.

And Then.

The Moment *Everything* Changed.

They were all sprawled in the dirt and weeds in the darkness, waiting for the next car to drive down the dirt road, guessing what kind of aliens might be on which planets. The Twins—"hee hee hee" as per usual.

(*As Sheila.*) "But if it's a heavy planet it has more gravity, so aliens would have to be light just to move—like jellyfish—"

(*As Dennis.*) "No, they'd just get splattered flat. Like peanut butter."

(*As Sheila.*) "Like living peanut butter?"

(*As Dennis.*) "Yeah."

(*As Sheila.*) "That's cool."

And Leon yells "CAR!" And they RAN!

(*Moving all the little figures around and into the fort.*)

Like mice exploding from a cheese house, like water drops exploding from a water balloon hitting the asphalt, BOOM. All these little bodies ran, ran, ran, ran up the monkey bar ladder—lights getting closer—the Twins into the fort—lights closer—Leon up and into the fort—lights on the tree now—Sheila's into the fort, she tries to give Dennis a hand—

(*As Sheila.*) “The lights are ON you, Dennis!”

But she pulls him up. Twins: “hee hee hee,” Leon: “Shut up Shut up!” and the car—or rather truck, it had to be a truck it was so loud and heavy, RUUMMMMMBLING by on the dirt and rock road and the children clump silent, a blob of breath and dirty clothes. “Hee hee hee,” “Shut up!” The truck is going past them in the dark as all the other cars ever did. “Hee hee hee,” “Shut up!” Past them ... past them ... and then ... it stops.

The truck stopped.

And so did all their hearts.

They were not laughing now. They were not breathing.

Silent.

Dark.

Then—

CLICK-CREAAKK.

(*Quietly ...*)

A truck door ... opening?

Now their hearts *doubly* stopped.

Instinctively, as one body, they all turned to Sheila. And she knew what she had to do. She had to look.

Still silent.

Still dark.

She moved quietly, so so quietly, to the eyehole in the cardboard wall. And she looked out at the truck. The moonlight made it so you could see, just barely, and the truck was a pickup truck. And old. And rusted. And BIG.

The biggest truck she'd ever seen. Like WEIRDLY big.

And the door was open.

And someone was getting out.

One foot went—

CRUNCH. On the gravel.

(More scared, quiet, to us ...)

And then the other.

CRUNCH.

And she stared. She wasn't breathing, she needed every single ounce of her life to see in the dark, see who was coming. And she *did* see. Someone was walking from the truck ... back toward the fortress.

Right toward them.

Except it wasn't a someone.

It wasn't even human.

What it was ...

Was a Coyote.

A real-life wild animal coyote. But walking on its hind legs, wearing dusty cowboy boots, a faded jean jacket, and sunglasses. At night! He stood about this tall—

(Gestures 5-6 feet.)

And he was walking toward their fortress ...

(As Dennis, squeaking.) "What ... what is it?"

(As Sheila.) "I ... don't ... know."

She was frozen.

WHOOSH.

As Sheila stared, not breathing ... the coyote JUMPED off the ground ... flew through the air, and landed—

WHOOMP.

(Never taking her eyes off the "roof" overhead, speaking very, very quietly.)

On the roof.

The Twins may or may not have peed at this point.
But no one screamed. No one *could* scream. No one had
any breath.

But they waited.

Was this their last night on earth? Had those pizzas been
their last meals? Were they about to become a meal?

*(SCUFFLE SCUFFLE SCUFFLE—something walking
overhead ...*

DUST CLOUD watches ...

Silence ...)

BOOMP!

The coyote jumped *off* the roof back to the road!
Sheila peeked back out the eyehole—Were they safe? Had
they been quiet enough? Were they—

And she saw it.

The coyote ... was walking back toward his giant pickup
truck ... holding the Cone Of Awesome! He had stolen
their Cone Of Awesome right off the fort! He set it deep
in the back of the flatbed of his truck ... and he walked
back to the driver's door—he was going to leave! He was
going to just steal their orange Cone Of Awesome and
drive away and—

NO!

(Again, acting all this out with the figures.)

Sheila was moving, she shouldn't have been moving, this
was a BAD IDEA, but she was moving, that was *their*
cone, not some sunglasses-giant truck-coyote's, and she
was *not* having this, she *ran* straight for the truck—WHAT
IS SHE THINKING?? IS SHE CRAZY?? IS SHE—