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Family Plays

Remus Tales

Adapted by
Stanley Vincent Longman

From the stories of
Joel Chandler Harris

Remus Tales

IUPUI / IRT Bonderman Award Winner

Premiered at the Summer Repertory Theatre
of the University of Georgia.

Comedy. Adapted by Stanley Vincent Longman. From the stories of Joel Chandler Harris. Cast: 4 characters, either gender. This play is a story theatre adaptation loosely based on folktales in Harris' *Uncle Remus*. *Remus Tales* features stories of the underdog. Brer Terrapin has the two zombie-like big critters of Brer Bear and Brer Fox set the stage, which depicts a stretch of the Big Road. Brer Rabbit comes along, wakes the big critters from their lethargy, and plays such pranks on them that they get mighty mean. Brer Bear and Brer Fox try everything to outdo and outwit the little rabbit and terrapin, but these two finally play one last trick on them that strikes them dumb. Then Brer Terrapin has those two zombie-like big critters take the set apart, back to what it was. This award-winning play has had successful productions throughout the country. *Simple set, somewhere in Georgia. Suitable for touring. Neutral costumes with animal-piece overlays. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: R95.*

Family Plays

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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Adapted for stage by
STANLEY VINCENT LONGMAN

From the stories by
JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS

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311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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A NOTE ON THE TITLE

These tales are adapted from the tales Joel Chandler Harris published first in the Atlanta Constitution and then in two volumes that appeared in the 1880s. Harris presented the stories as told by a black Uncle Remus to two white children out on a Georgia plantation.

There is no Uncle Remus in this stage adaptation, however. These are stories associated with his name, but rooted strongly in folk tales, especially those of West Africa involving the character of Anadse. Among them, one can find variations of virtually all of these stories, including the famous "lar baby." They are tales of the underdog. Typically, they feature Brer Rabbit's clever one-upmanship in the face of the overbearing strength of Brer Bear and the foxy maneuverings of Brer Fox. The delight of these indigenous African stories should not be diminished by any association they may have with American race relations. In production, the play has aroused the amusement of all. Putting Uncle Remus in the background and the stories in the foreground, with the help of Brer Terrapin, frees the audience to enjoy the stories on their own terms.

This play was first performed as part of the Summer Repertory Theatre of the University of Georgia in July, 1974, with the following cast:

Brer Terrapin Michelle Morain
Brer Fox Taylor Pope Lawrence
Brer Fear Terrence X. McGovern
Brer Rabbit John N. Carson

The production was directed by the author, and designed by William D. Meyer.

CHARACTERS

Brer Terrapin

Brer Fox

Brer Bear

Brer Rabbit

PLACE: Along the Big Road, somewhere in Georgia

TIME: Any time

v

REMUS TALES

The full stage set consists of a platform stage center with a ramp at one end and a step at the other. In front of it is a tree stump, a hollow log lying on its side and a large trunk mounted on casters, with a rope at one end to allow it to be pulled around like a child's wagon. Above the platform are two small, two-fold flats depicting a bit of the neighborhood, the Big Road on the ramp side of the platform and the Pond on the step side. Between these two is a small briar bush above the center of the platform. All other props for the play are stored in the trunk, and brought out when needed.

(At the Outset, none of these things are on stage at all except the platform with its ramp and step. The two-folds are off to one side, set up backwards concealing the other props and the actors. Eventually, Brer Terrapin appears pulling the trunk-wagon. Brer Bear is pushing the trunk along from behind and Brer Fox rides on top, both of them in a sort of catatonic daze. All actors wear an anonymous garb such as black slacks, turtle-neck shirts, black shoes, with a distinctive overlay for the particular animal character: Brer Terrapin might wear a vest with the suggestion of a shell on its back, Brer Fox over-sized trousers with suspenders and a fox tail, and so forth. Brer Terrapin hauls the trunk into stage center, looking intently upstage. He motions Brer Bear to sit down. Brer Bear sits beside Brer Fox on the trunk, both with their backs to the audience. Brer Terrapin stands back to, studying the platform.)

TERRAPIN: It seem to me like they told me there was gwine to be a gathering of folk here to watch these tales of our'n, but I don't see nobodys in these parts. I allow if we just sit here, sooner later somebody bound to show hisself.

(He sets down a tree stump he has been carrying and settles himself on it to wait for an audience.)

I never knowed it to fail: every time we come along trailing that trunk of our'n full of ham bones, hornet's nests, briar bushes, and tar babies, somebody would come along to watch.

(The three sit there, backs to the audience. Sonner or later -- and Brer Terrapin may have to improvise a bit -- someone in the audience is going to make some kind of noise. Brer Terrapin turns himself slowly around and looks the audience square in the eye.)

Well, I declare. There they be, surc enough. They been settin' there on the wrong side of us all this time. Don' know which side is which, they don'.

(Brer Bear and Brer Fox don't move. Terrapin moses along the front of the stage, looking the audience over.)

You folks just got to have your little joke, I suppose. I take my hat off to you: that's my kind a joke, that is. Manys the time I just crawl into my shell and watch all sorts of carryin'-on, with people thinkin' I is just a rock in the road. Ol' Uncle Remus used to say he couldn't help how his stories went: he told them just as they was told to him. Well, I ain't got no control over how these stories go, neither. I have to tell 'em just like I seed 'em with my own two eyes. I'm Brer Terrapin, which is short for land turtle, and I'm the fastest creature on the Big Road.

(He mimes a slow, easy running-in-place. Then he notices Brer Bear and Brer Fox. He turns the trunk around so they are facing the audience. Both of them stare vacantly ahead as if they had been struck dumb.)

These two bumps on the log . . . they is Brer Bear and Brer Fox. You heard tell of them. Just now it don' look like they

got much life in them. Fact is, they don'. They was struck dumb by one of the bigges' and bestes' tricks li'l Brer Rabbit ever play on them. They ain't been the same since. Hey, you two -- get yourse'ls off'n your hindparts and set us up a stage. Fetch me that Big Road and set her up.

(Brer Bear and Brer Fox don't move.)

YOU HEAR ME TALKIN'?!

BEAR & FOX: We hear you, Brer Terrapin.

TERRAPIN: Well, then, let's get goin'!!!

(The two move to the back and take a two-fold flat and set it up above the platform. It depicts a stretch of the Big Road. Brer Terrapin supervises the goings-on from his tree stump, giving directions adlib. Eventually the whole set is in place: the other two-fold depicting the Pond, the little briar bush, and the log. These last two are taken out of the trunk, the bush placed above the center of the platform, and the log is set down left roughly opposite Terrapin's stump. The trunk is wheeled to the extreme left stage. When all this is finished, Brer Bear and Brer Fox sit back down on the trunk.)

TERRAPIN: That's a right nice piece of work, that is. Never knowed it to fail: every time we get that stage all set up, long 'ud come Brer Rabbit, prancing 'long the Big Road, lippity clippity. Sure as rain falls down and flowers grow up, he be comin' 'long.

(There is a pause. Then, sure enough, Brer Rabbit swings out from behind the Pond flat, hops along the platform and goes off behind the Big Road flat.)

There. Now we's ready to start. Skidaddle you two!

(He hands Brer Fox a burlap bag and a gun. Brer Bear and

Brer Fox start out of their trance, chuckle and go off behind the Pond flat. Terrapin then goes on with his story, as Brer Rabbit re-appears, takes a home-fashioned arrow out of the trunk and settles himself on the log where he pantomimes whittling. Terrapin himself takes out a placard hooked over ropes on the lip of the trunk to announce the first tale: "BAG FULL A TURKEYS.")

There was a time the creatures 'long this Big Road din' pay each other no nevermind. They just went 'bout their business. They pass each other on the Big Road with scarcely a "howdy" and go on their way. But all that was to change. Time came when they wun't be happy of a day less'n they been tormentin', sassin', or otherwise annoyin' each other. The day that all began was the day Brer Fox set off a-huntin' turkey. Brer Rabbit been sorta lazin' 'bout most all mornin', thinkin' he maybe just a bit hungry, but too lazy to do anything 'bout it.

(Brer Tarrapin moves off to the side and settles on the trunk. Brer Rabbit whittles away at his arrow. Brer Fox enters from behind the Pond flat, now fully alive and in character as the wily fox. He is carrying the gun and bag Terrapin had given him out of the trunk. Just as Brer Fox is crossing the platform, Brer Rabbit stops him.)

RABBIT: Howdy, Brer Fox.

FOX: How yourself, Brer Rabbit?

RABBIT: Where you goin' with that big empty bag?

FOX: I'm fixin' to bag me a bag full a game. Hear they is a flock of wild turkeys up above the goober patch.

RABBIT: That so? 'Spect they make some good eatin'?

FOX: Yep, hear they is right plump. Care to come 'long? Might catch a bird or two yourself.

RABBIT: That right neighborly of you, Brer Fox, but I got other fish to fry, I do.

(He turns away from Brer Fox who sort of eyes him, considering if he might just shoot that rabbit and save himself the trouble of looking for dinner elsewhere.)

FOX: I mighty sorry, but I believe I try my hand at it anyhow.

(He moves off, circling behind the Big Road flat. Brer Terrapin comes forward.)

TERRAPIN: Brer Fox, he was gone all day and he had a monstrous streak of luck, Brer Fox did, and he bagged a sight of game. By and by, toward the shank of the evening, Brer Rabbit sorta stretch himself, he did, and allow it mos' time for Brer Fox to get 'long home. Then Brer Rabbit he went an' mounted a stump for to see if'n Brer Fox was comin'. Sure enough, here he come. Quick, Brer Rabbit take offn his shirt - - Without his shirt on, he don't look like Brer Rabbit anymore; he look like any old rabbit, an' Brer Fox couldn't tell the differments. Then Brer Rabbit take that arrow he been whittlin' at, an' stick it under his arm, an' lie hisself down on the Road, 'sactly like he dead.

(Of course Brer Rabbit has been doing all those things. Brer Fox enters from the right, carrying a bag chuck full of turkeys. He stops and looks carefully at the dead Rabbit lying here, legs in the air. He studies him, moves him a bit with his toes, and examines him from all angles.)

FOX: Hmmnt! This here rabbit dead. He look like he been dead a long time. Look like somebody done shot him. He dead, but he mighty fat. He the fattest rabbit I seed in a long time. He sure look right tasty, he do . . . *(He tests one of Rabbit's legs.)* but he just a bit stiff, an' that might mean he been dead too long. 'Sides, I ain't got room left in my bag. *(Fox disappears.)*

TERRAPIN: Brer Rabbit, he ain't sayin' nothin'. Brer Fox, he sorta lick his chops, but he went on and left Brer Rabbit laying in the Road. Directly he was outa sight, Brer Rabbit, he jump up, he did, and run through the woods to get 'fore Brer Fox again.

(Brer Rabbit jumps over the bush and goes behind the right flat, then reappears. He lies himself down on the Road, arrow under his arm just as before. Pretty soon, along comes Brer Fox, still carrying his heavy bag of turkeys.)

FOX: My, my! Here's another one of those rabbits. An' he just as fat as the first one. *(Brer Fox looks over the dead rabbit even more carefully, studying and considering.)* This here rabbit musta got shot, too. Some hunter in these parts don't know what he's about, leavin' all these rabbits around. These rabbits just gwine to waste. Wonder how many more they be on up the Road.

(He looks up the Road. Rabbit snickers. Fox turns abruptly, but all's quiet. Then, he studies the carcass just a little more, and makes up his mind.)

I'll just leave my turkeys here a minute whilse I go 'long back an' fetch that other rabbit. Then I'll just string the two of them together an' haul 'em 'long home. That's what I'll do.

TERRAPIN: And with that, he dropped his bag o' game and loped back up the Road after that other rabbit. Soon's he outa sight, up jump Brer Rabbit. He snatch up Brer Fox's game an' put out for home.

(Brer Fox has gone back behind the flats. Brer Rabbit runs off between the flats carrying his shirt and the bag. Then we see Fox pass between the flats and re-appear on the right. He crosses up onto the platform where the first rabbit had been. He can't find it. He looks high and low.)

FOX: Now, where you suppose that rabbit got to? This is sure enough the place where I saw that first rabbit, but he nowhere in sight. Maybe he weren't so dead after all. *(He considers the possibility.)* Hey! I better run back up the Road an' leastwise get that second rabbit. *(He runs as fast as he can around the flats and finally re-appears huffing and puffing on the left at the place where he left the bag. The bag and the second rabbit seem to have gone.)* This was the place, wasn't it, where I saw that second rabbit? Or was it further 'long up the Road? I don' rightly 'member, but it sure seem like this was the spot. Now where that rabbit get to? Come to think of it, where my bag o' turkeys get to, too? I put them down right here. Where they go? *(He looks high and low, even under the platform, but that bag is clean gone.)* I sure got a strong 'spicion somebody done stole those turkeys, an' the day gon' come when I find out who, that's for sure! When I find out who that is, that who better watch out, 'cause I can be mighty mean when I gets crossed like this, I can get mighty mean, I can . . . *(He takes his gun and goes off grimly, thinking how mean he can get.)*

TERRAPIN: Well, Brer Fox went 'bout the neighborhood 'spicionin' everbody. Somehow he never did think too much on Brer Rabbit. Mostly he cast his dark eye on Brer Bear. An' he watch that Bear careful, studyin' his every move. Meanwhile, the rabbit family had themselves a big feast, with turkey an' stuffin' an' all. *(He takes another burlap bag out of the trunk, this one stuffed with feathers. He flips a new placard out, with the title "WHIPME-WHOPME PUDDIN".)* Of course, after the feast was over, they had all those feathers left, an' Brer Rabbit had to figure how to get rid of them. Finally, he got an idea, an' he stuff all them feathers in a bag like this, an' set off down the Big Road.

(Brer Rabbit re-appears, takes the bag from Terrapin, and goes off. Brer Bear appears and sits on the log, where he enjoys the morning sun after his own fashion.)

Pretty soon, Brer Rabbit come to a place in the road where he meet with Brer Bear.

RABBIT: Howdy.

BEAR: Heighdy, Brer Rabbit. *(Just before Rabbit disappears on the other side Bear realizes there is something intriguing about that bag he's carrying.)* Hey! Whatchyou got in that bag?

RABBIT: This bag here?

BEAR: Yeah, that's the one. Whatchyou got there?

RABBIT: *(Coming towards Bear.)* Oh. . . this is just something I'm takin' down to the mill to get grinded up. *(He puts down the bag as though it were a heavy weight.)* It sure is a long, hot walk to get to that mill.

BEAR: What kinda stuff is that you takin' to the mill? Is that wheat, or rye, or barley, or maybe is it alfy-falfy? *(He tries to take a peak inside, but Rabbit don't allow it.)*

RABBIT: Tain't none of those things.

BEAR: Well, then, what is it?

RABBIT: *(He crosses right and then left to be sure no one overhears what he is about to say.)* This here, Brer Bear, is something very valuable. This is winniannimus grass.

BEAR: It is?!

RABBIT: Sure is. Winniannimus grass. Soon as the miller gets it grinded up, it gon' be worth ten dollars a pound. An' it's right heavy as it is.

BEAR: Is that so? Winniannimus grass, hun? What's that?

RABBIT: Don't you know nothin' 'bout winniannimus grass?

BEAR: Nope. What is it?

RABBIT: Winniannimus grass is the grass rich folk buys when they wants to make whipme-whopme puddin', they do.

BEAR: An' they pays ten dollars a pound to get it, do they?
(*Rabbit nods.*)

Well, I tell you, Brer Rabbit, why don' you just let me carry that heavy bag 'long to the mill for you. Maybe I can get a taste of this grass soon as the miller gets it grinded. I'd be pleased to carry it, seein' as how you gettin' so tired walkin' so far.

RABBIT: Well, I mighty 'bliged to you, Brer Bear. I believe we can walk along together.

BEAR: (*He picks up the bag.*) Hey, this here bag ain't heavy at all.

RABBIT: Oh, that's partly 'cause you the strongest creature on the Big Road, and partly 'cause winniannimus grass takes on more weight the more you walks with it. You can get plenty rich if'n you walk around carryin' winniannimus grass long enough.

BEAR: That so, Brer Rabbit?

RABBIT: That so, Brer Bear!

TERRAPIN: Talkin' after this fashion, Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit set off in the direction of the mill with the bag full o' turkey feathers. After they walked along some while, Brer Rabbit looked back and seed Brer Fox comin' along behind. He sorta chuckle to hisself.

RABBIT: Brer Bear, I got to set myself right down here an' rest a spell. You just go right ahead to the mill. I'll meet you there directly.

BEAR: You want me to take this winniannimus grass on to the mill by myself?

RABBIT: You do that. I just got to rest myself a moment.

BEAR: Whatever you say, Brer Rabbit. I reckon there ain't no hurry. I'll just walk this grass 'round a bit, makin' it get heavier.

(Bear walks around in circles, and then goes off chuckling. Rabbit sits down on the tree stump to wait for Fox.)

TERRAPIN: Brer Rabbit din' have to wait long 'fore up come Brer Fox. Folks on the Big Road now gettin' to be right friendly one to another.

RABBIT: Heighdy, Brer Fox. Nice weather today.

FOX: Heighdy yourself, Brer Rabbit.

RABBIT: What you catch the other day when you go a 'huntin', Brer Fox?

FOX: I cotch a handful of hard sense, Brer Rabbit.

RABBIT: If I'd a knowed you was after that, Brer Fox, I'd a loant you some of mine.

FOX: I got my 'spicions 'bout what was goin' on, I do.

RABBIT: Oh, I do, too, Brer Fox. Just a minute ago I seed Brer Bear go by totin' a big bag over his shoulder. You see him walkin' in circles further on down the Road there?

FOX: *(He squints on down the Road.)* What's he got in that bag?

RABBIT: He say it some kinda grass he takin' to the mill to get grinded, but if'n you ask me, I'd say thens turkey feathers

in that bag. See, I pluck one of them outa there myself. *(He holds up a feather for Fox's inspection.)*

FOX: That sure enough is a turkey feather. Why, that no-good, low-down, sneakin' thief! He done stole those turkeys off'n me, he did. an' when I gets crossed like that, I can get mighty mean, I can . . . *(He takes his walking stick and sets off after Brer Bear, thinking how mean he can get.)*

TERRAPIN: Brer Rabbit, he sorta mosied 'long after Brer Fox, chuckling to hisself, knowin' that pretty soon he gon' see a big spectacle when Fox come chasin' Bear back down the Big Road. Now, when Brer Fox catch up with Brer Bear, first he decide to play 'long with him a bit.

(Brer Rabbit moves off left after Fox. Then, Brer Bear enters from behind the right flat, followed by Brer Fox.)

FOX: What you got in that there bag, Brer Bear?

BEAR: I got me a heap o' winniannimus grass in there, Brer Fox.

FOX: Winniannimus grass? What's that?

BEAR: Ain't you never heard of winniannimus grass, Brer Fox?

FOX: *(Mimicking Bear.)* Huh-uh.

BEAR: Winniannimus grass is the grass rich folk use to make whipme-whopme puddin'.

FOX: Is that a fact?

BEAR: That is.

FOX: Whipme-whopme puddin'?

BEAR: That right. Whipme-whopme puddin'.