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Dramatic Publishing

Ride a Blue Horse

By
Aurand Harris



Ride a Blue Horse

Commissioned and first produced by the IUPUI University Theatre in Indianapolis at the White River State Park Arts Festival.

Comedy. By Aurand Harris. Cast: 9m., 5w., 5 either gender plus extras, or 9 minimum (6m., 3w.) with doubling. This play is a wonderfully theatrical tale about a boy who is different—instead of marbles, he has poems in his pockets. Here is a comedy that is exciting, appealing, touching and also biographically true. It tells the story of a boy from Indiana named James Whitcomb Riley, who was the famous early American poet. Through him, the audience glimpses every gifted child and the special needs of everyone in his special world. Beginning on his 75th birthday, which was proclaimed a national day of celebration by President Woodrow Wilson, the poet recalls his youth. His recollection includes memories of the merry-go-round at the country fair, the old swimming hole, the painful dunce cap at the cruel village school, the bonfires on Halloween, unforgettable little Orphan Annie, the Underground Railroad and the horror of the Civil War, and the medicine show where his poems first won public applause. *Ride a Blue Horse* shows a gifted child coping with a universal problem—being different. The play provides an insight to the cultural view of American traditions from 1849 to 1916. *Unit set. Period costumes. Approximate running time: 55 minutes. Code: R98.*

ISBN-13 978-0-87602-264-1



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www.dramaticpublishing.com

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AURAND HARRIS



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(RIDE A BLUE HORSE)

ISBN: 978-0-87602-264-1

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RIDE A BLUE HORSE

was commissioned by, and first produced at,
the White River State Park Arts Festival,
Indianapolis, Indiana, 1985.

RIDE A BLUE HORSE
is dedicated to
Dorothy and Edgar Webb
Dotti Peek
Della Pachero
Rives Collins
and
Elizabeth Flory Kelly

The premiere performance of *Ride a Blue Horse* was sponsored by the White River State Park Arts Festival and presented by the IUPUI University Theatre at the Children's Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana, June 8-13, 1985, with the following company:

Director J. Edgar Webb
 Production Manager Cynthia L. McCloughan
 Stage Manager Gary Schoppenhorst
 Set Decor/Properties Harrison Hand
 Costume Designer Barbara Heath
 Public Relations Coordinator Marcella Thompson

Cast:

James Whitcomb Riley Keith Dunn
 Mrs. Riley Karen Morgan
 Mr. Riley Norman Graham
 John Riley Gregg Gerling
 Noey Bixler Eric R. Mills
 Gypsy Woman Nadine Guarnaccia
 Schoolteacher Reed K. Steele
 School children Nadine Guarnaccia, Patrick Carr Northam,
 Kimberley Wurster
 Mary Alice Smith Kimberley Wurster
 Sarah Nadine Guarnaccia
 First Slave Hunter Patrick Carr Northam
 Second Slave Hunter Reed K. Steele
 Slave Eric R. Mills
 Dr. S.B. McCrillus Reed K. Steele
 Daisy McCrillus Nadine Guarnaccia
 James (Mac) McClarnahan Patrick Carr Northam
 Sign Bearer Eric R. Mills.

(Cover for the play book designed by Harrison Hand)

RIDE A BLUE HORSE

Adventures of the Young James Whitcomb Riley

CAST

James Whitcomb Riley, the young poet
Mrs. Riley, his mother
Mr. Riley, his father
John Riley, his older brother
Noey Bixler, a neighbor boy
Gypsy Woman
Schoolteacher
Three School Children
Mary Alice Smith, an orphan
Sarah, a neighbor woman
First Slave Hunter
Second Slave Hunter
Slave
Dr. S.B. McCrillus, a Medicine Show Man
Daisy, his niece
James (Mac) McClarnahan, a drummer
Medicine Show Helper
Crowd and Halloween Ghosts

SETTING

Place: Indiana
Time: 1849-1916

(Note: The cast of 19 can be performed by doubling with 9 actors, as suggested below:

Riley
Mother
Father
John
Noey/Second Hunter/ Medicine Show Helper
Gypsy/ Ellsworth/ Sarah/ Daisy
Teacher/ Slave/ Doctor
Rolling/ First Hunter/ Mac
Basset/ Mary Alice)

RIDE A BLUE HORSE

(Lively band music. On the stage R, is a hat rack with various hats. At L, are four stools. Riley enters, wearing a stylish top hat. He smiles and tips his hat to audience. He is in high spirits. Music out)

RILEY

How do you do. I am very honored— I am very pleased that you — and children everywhere in America — on this day October 7, 1915 — are celebrating — MY birthday. I thank you for the hundreds of letters you have sent telling me that you like the poems which I write.

(With childish enthusiasm.)

Today is, indeed, a special birthday — bands playing, flags unfurled, parades — almost as good as a circus.

(Takes off hat.)

I bought this hat for this occasion. I will keep this hat and it will be my memory of you and of today's celebration.

(Remembering.)

I have many memories.

(Looks at hat and chuckles.)

And I have worn many hats.

(Goes to hat rack, R.)

I don't remember my FIRST hat, but they tell me it was a small, home-made, baby's bonnet.

(Puts top hat on rack. Takes bonnet off rack and puts it on his hand. His hand becomes a puppet, his fingers and thumb "talking" as the mouth.)

And they said, even as a baby, the first sounds I made were little gurgling RHYMES.

(Holds hand up for baby and "talks" with great fun, stressing the rhymes.)

"Yoo-hoo, Coo-coo. Ba-ba, da-da. Moth-er, broth-er. See-me, Need-me,

(Cries.)

FEED-me!"

(Cries comically like a baby, then cradles bonnet in his arm. He smiles happily.)

Yes, I have many memories of my childhood. Some of my memories I write in my poems. I remember my loving mother.

(MOTHER enters.)

My good father.

(FATHER enters.)

And John, my older brother, who was my best and truest friend, always.

(JOHN enters.)

MOTHER

(Holding an imaginary baby, crosses, and she, FATHER and JOHN stand in a family group.)

We will call the baby, James Whitcomb, after our friend, the Governor of Indiana.

FATHER

(To baby.)

It is an important name, young man. A name you must live up to!

MOTHER

(Visualizing.)

James . . . Whitcomb . . . Riley. It has a nice sound.

FATHER

John.

JOHN

Yes, sir.

FATHER

Say "Hello" to your little brother.

JOHN

(Eagerly.)

Can I hold him?

MOTHER

(Gives imaginary baby to John.)

Be careful. He is so little, so helpless.

JOHN

Look. He's smiling right at me. He likes me!

(Tickles baby and talks baby talk.)

Citchy-chitchy coo-oo. Coo-oo-oo-OO-oo.

FATHER

Now, John, you have a buddy.

JOHN

That's what we'll call him. Hello — BUD!

(Family freezes.)

RILEY

The first hat I do remember was a little brown cap with a round button on top.

(Takes hat from rack.)

And I do remember the first time I wore it. It was a memorable day — a day I will never forget. We hitched the horses to the buggy and Mother and Father and John and I drove down the pike — and went to the county fair.

(He puts cap on. MUSIC: "The Animal Fair." All the cast enters — a balloon seller, school children, acrobat, juggler, etc. All sing:

We went to the county fair,

Oh, the sights that we saw there;

(All freeze in moving position, while one actor speaks.)

A woman that be, as tall as a tree,

And a man with rubber hair.

(All move and sing.)

We went to the county fair,

We saw a juggler there,

(All freeze. One speaks.)

Who hung by his toes, and on his nose

Balanced a kitchen chair!

(All sing and move.)

We went to the county fair,

Oh, the music we heard there;

(All freeze. One speaks.)

A fiddle played "Hi Diddle Diddle,"

To dancers in a square.

(All move and sing.)

We went to the county fair,

Rides and glides were there;

(All freeze. One speaks.)

A big balloon, as big as the moon,

Went sailing up in the air!

(Music continues as all exit humming. RILEY stands alone.)

RILEY

There were balloons and banners, and the smell of popcorn and sausages. But most of all I remember — the merry-go-round.

(Carousel music.)

The tinkling music — it went round and round, and the horses — went up and down. It was a wonder to behold! But there was one horse — one horse that was different from the rest. He was — a little BLUE horse. And it seemed to me he lifted HIS feet — to different music. I rode the BLUE horse, and we went around and around. Oh, the joyous feeling that bubbled inside me! I wanted to sing out, to tell the world the joy I felt! But I didn't know what words to say,

(Carousel music up softly.)

Ride a blue horse,
There's one waiting for you;
Ride a blue horse,
Make a dream come true.

(RILEY goes to hat rack, puts cap on peg and exits.)

NOEY

(NOEY BIXLER, a young boy, barefoot, runs in L, calling excitedly.)

Come on, John. Let's go swimming. Out to the old swimming hole! John? Whatcha doing?

JOHN

(Enters, barefoot.)

I'm making a bird house — with a sloping roof and a real lightning rod!

NOEY

We've fixed a jumping log at the swimming hole. We can dive in the water!

(Has great fun, holding nose, jumping up as if jumping off a log.)

Yippee! Ee-ee-ee-EE! Splash! Come on.

JOHN

I have to look after Bud. Mama's gone to Church Circle.

NOEY

Bring him along.

JOHN

He can't swim. Bud's too little.

NOEY

Put him on the bank. Come on!

JOHN

Bud. Bud! Get your straw hat. We're going to the swimming hole.

(Boys cross L, singing lustily, "Old Dan Tucker," playing tag or leap-frog. They circle to C.)

JOHN

Don't it feel good to have your shoes off and go barefoot!

(Boys pantomime taking off ALL their clothes, as they talk.)

NOEY

And shed your winter flannels, and feel the sun hetting up your chest. Yippee!

(Pounds "bare" chest happily and gives an Indian cry.)

JOHN

Papa says over near Terre Haute there's a swimming hole so deep they ain't no bottom.

NOEY

They say river pirates buried their treasures in some of the deep boles.

JOHN

Treasures? Maybe there's gold buried in OUR swimming hole!

NOEY

Let's find out!

(Stretches.)

Ain't it grand to have your clothes off — and go
(Laughs, delighted with the daring of it.)
— NAKED! Come on!

JOHN

(RILEY enters, wearing knee pants and a little straw hat.)

You sit there, Bud, and be a good boy. The water's too deep for you.

RILEY

(Sits cross-legged.)

I'll make mud pies!

NOEY

Naw. That's woman's work.

JOHN

You can make up words. Sky.

RILEY

(Enjoying the game.)

Fly.

JOHN

Trees.

RILEY

Bees.

JOHN

Blue bird.

RILEY

(Worried.)

Don't know a word.

NOEY

Why is he making rhymes? That's girl stuff! He ought to climb a tree, rob a bird's nest.

JOHN

You guard our clothes, Bud. Don't let no bears get them.

RILEY

I won't. I'll watch them.

NOEY

And don't let no gypsies get them. There's a camp up the road. Come on. Last one in the water is a pickled pear!

(NOEY and JOHN exit with loud cries of joy, R.)

RILEY

(Happy making imaginary mud pies, he sing-songs to himself.)

Patty-cake — patty-cake; Make it — bake it; Buy! A schalocate pie!

GYPSY

(Enters L, with bag. She does not see RILEY. He is too busy to see her. She stops, looks off.)

Who is in the water? Splashing up the mud! Two skinny little monkeys! Ha, you take from me — my pool. I take from you —

(Sees their imaginary clothes.)

Yes! I take your shirts, your britches, and — your underwear!

(Laughs. Pantomimes putting clothes into bag.)

May a big turtle aqueeze your nose and bite your toes!

RILEY

(Sees her.)

Hello.

GYPSY

(Surprised.)

You?

RILEY

Do you want to buy a pie?

GYPSY

I want to go into the water.

RILEY

No GIRL goes in the swimming hole!

GYPSY

I go! In the daylight! In the night!

RILEY

You swim at NIGHT!

GYPSY

I float — and I sing to the moon. Sometimes I long to be a mermaid.

(Explains to him.)

A fish.

RILEY

A fish? I druther be a bird — and fly.

GYPSY

Ah! If I were a fish, and you were a bird, together — we would make merry and sip dew — from the dewberry. And eat bread with butter — from the buttercup.

RILEY

(Joining in her game, happily.)

And butter from the butterfly.

GYPSY

(Exploding with joy.)

Oh, little one! We sing songs together! Let me see your hand. I will tell your fortune.

(Takes his hand.)

I see —

RILEY

What?

GYPSY

Look! LOOK!

(Amazed.)

There is a STAR in your hand!

RILEY

A star?

GYPSY

You are a special person

RILEY

I am?

GYPSY

(Impressed.)

You will become great. You will become known, acclaimed, applauded!

RILEY

Me?

GYPSY

Oh, little one. I must come bearing gifts to you.

(Mysteriously.)

I will give you a magic, gypsy rhyme.

RILEY

Magic?

GYPSY

But remember, you can only use it once, so say it **ONLY** when you are in great need.

(With musical lightness.)

"Oh, gypsy fiddle,

Fiddle-dee-de;

Grant a wish to me."

RILEY

(Delighted, chants the rhyme and imitates her gesture.)

"Oh, gypsy fiddle,

Fiddle-dee-de;

Grand a wish to me."

JOHN

(Off.)

Look, Bud! We got something for you.

NOEY

(Off.)

He's a little fellow, just like you!

(Boys enter R.)

See. We grabbed a little fish. Catch!

(Throws imaginary fish to RILEY.)

JOHN

Look! There's a **WOMAN!**

NOEY

A **GYPSY WOMAN!**

JOHN

We ain't covered!

NOEY

We ain't got no clothes on!

(They try to cover themselves with their hands.)

JOHN

What'll we do?

NOEY

Hide!

JOHN

Where?

NOEY

Behind a bush!

(Hides behind an imaginary shrub.)

JOHN

A tree!

(Hides behind an imaginary tree. RILEY puts "fish" in his straw hat which is on the ground.)

GYPSY

Yes, hide! Hide, little naked jay birds!

NOEY

(Peeks over top of "bush".)

Where's our clothes?

JOHN

They ain't here!

NOEY

Bud, you was to watch them! I'll get you, Bud Riley!

GYPSY

Touch him NOT! He is a special one.

NOEY

We ain't got no clothes.

JOHN

(Points at GYPSY.)

You stole them.

NOEY

You took them!

RILEY

Did you?

(Pause.)

Did you take them?

GYPSY

Yes! You take my pool. I take your britches and your underwear.

(Laughs. Boys look down at their "naked" bodies, give a cry of alarm and "hide".)

RILEY

I promised — I promised to guard them. Give them back.

GYPSY

To them, I give the back of my hand!

(Turns to go.)

RILEY

Wait.

GYPSY

What?

RILEY

(Loudly.)

"Oh, gypsy fiddle,

Fiddle-de-dee;

Grant a wish to me."

GYPSY

(Smiles.)

Ah, little one, you are smart.

(Laughs.)

You are brave. What is your wish?

RILEY

Give them back their shirts.

GYPSY

Close your eyes. And when your name is twice-told, open your eyes, and behold.

(He closes eyes. She mimes throwing clothes from her bag to ground near him.)

JOHN

She's giving us back our clothes. Why?

NOEY

She's gone batty. She's gone cuckoo!

GYPSY

It is done. Open your eyes, little one. Goodby, special one.

(Exits L.)

RILEY

(Opens eyes.)

They're here! Thank you, Miss — Gypsy.

(Looks around.)

Miss — Fish?

NOEY

Bud got our clothes back!

JOHN

How did you do it?

RILEY

Words. Words can make magic.

(Gets up, holding imaginary wriggling fish.)

JOHN

Where are you going?

RILEY

To throw the fish back in the water.

NOEY

What for?

RILEY

And it will float, like her — and tonight — they will both sing to the moon!

(Exits R.)

NOEY

Now HE'S batty! He's gone cuckoo.

JOHN

Get your clothes on.

NOEY

Afore she comes back!

(They quickly grab imaginary clothes.)

JOHN

Here's your pants!

NOEY

Where's my underwear?

JOHN

Hurry! Come on!

NOEY

Wait for me!

(They ad lib excitedly, and run off R.)

(A hand school bell is heard ringing. Then TEACHER enters L, still ringing the bell. He is impressed with his importance and is comical in his affectation.)

TEACHER

Lesson time. Lesson time. Take your places, young ladies and gentlemen. Take your seats, properly and with decorum.

(Two school girls and a boy enter L, representing the whole class. They put stools in place and sit.)

Good morning, dear scholars. Good morning to you.

(He motions for them to rise, and he sounds a musical note, "Ah".)

THREE CHILDREN

(Stand and sing loudly, bored and off-key.)

Good morning to you,

Good morning to you,

We're all in our places
With bright shining faces;
Good morning to you,
Good morning, dear teacher, to you.
(He motions. They sit.)

TEACHER

(Delighted, having an audience, he comically exhibits his learning.)
First, the morning roll-call. Mistress Rollins.

ROLLINS

(Stands.)

"Work ILL done must be TWICE done."
(Sits.)

TEACHER

Be certain YOU masticate and assimilate those instructive words. Master Ellsworth.

ELLSWORTH

(Rises, mind blank, then grins and shouts.)

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
(Sits.)

TEACHER

You have — with repeated repetition — recounted that same axiom each morning.
Mistress Bassett.

BASSETT

(Rises. Teacher's pet.)

"Respect those who know more than you. And speak only what is true."
(Sits.)

TEACHER

Well enumerated and well enunciated. Master Riley.
(No answer.)

Master James Whitcomb Riley.

(He looks at empty stool. Children giggle.)

RILEY

(Runs in, out of breath.)

Yes, sir.

(Sits on stool.)

TEACHER

You are late AGAIN.

RILEY

Yes, sir. I —

TEACHER

Do not inform me that you were detained conversing with a butterfly!

RILEY

No, sir. That was yesterday.

(Children giggle.)

TEACHER

Silence. Remember you are young ladies and gentlemen.

(To RILEY.)

I am waiting, Master Riley, for an answer to my interrogation.

RILEY

I stopped —

TEACHER

Yes?

RILEY

And helped —

TEACHER

Yes?

RILEY

A doodlebug.

(Children giggle.)

TEACHER

James Whitcomb Riley, this time you have digressed, dallied — DOODLED! — once too often. You will sit in the corner —

(To class, changing his voice.)

which is the right angle of a square —

(Again commanding.)

— and place upon your head a conical shape on which are fashioned these letters: D-U-N-C-E.

(Pulls RILEY up by his ear.)

RILEY

Yes, sir.

(Children giggle, as TEACHER places stool. RILEY sits, facing audience and puts on dunce cap which TEACHER gives him.)

TEACHER

Silence! And now young scholars, the clock has crept to that happy hour — multiplication time! Master Riley, being at the bottom of the class, you will recite and reiterate the Three Times Table.

RILEY

(Stands.)

One times three is three. Two times three is — is — is six. Three times three is — is — is ten.

TEACHER

Certainly NOT. Class, three times three is . . . ?

ROLLINS

Eight.

ELLSWORTH

Eleven.

BASSET

Nine.

TEACHER

Drill! We will DRILL until three times three is DRILLED into each and every cranium. Begin.

CHILDREN

One times three is three —

(RILEY continues to mouth the table, as the three children turn and tease him.)

Bud Riley, he-he-he,

Is as dumb as he can be!

(Innocently.)

Four times three is twelve.

(Repeat teasing.)

He's so dumb — that

He can't spell dog or cat.

(Innocently.)