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The Milk Dragon

By

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The Milk Dragon was originally workshopped as part of New York University’s Steinhardt program for Educational Theatre development series in 2007, directed by Jim Hancock, and received a subsequent workshop production by Utah Valley University in 2015, directed by John Newman.

To my beloved husband, Jim,
Who made me believe in the possibility
of this
Impossible Play

The Milk Dragon

CHARACTERS

MAN:

AZDAK: Scribe of the village.

FATHER

WIZARD: Protector and Keeper of Language.

HARRY: A huge hairless man who is mostly mute.

WOLFER

WOMAN:

BAG LADY

BOY:

ZACK: A boy who sees what others do not.

GIRL:

ABRA: Azdak's daughter, the future Scribe.

SHAPESHIFTER: Voice of the play.

MAX: Half boy/half wolf.

FOOTNOTE: Subordinate to a larger statement; intended to give reference.

MAGDA YATZELTOE: Soothsayer/performance artist.

MAGICAL CREATURES & IMPOSSIBLE BEINGS:

The Milk Dragon: A baby dragon made primarily of light and color, the creative nonbinary force of the forest.

The Darkness: A force of Fear made manifest primarily by sound; has only the power others give it.

Animals of the Forest: Brought to life through objects.

SETTINGS:

ACT I: A village where everything is perfect.

ACT II: The forest where everything is not.

ACT III: Winter where everything is waiting.

CASTING NOTE: MAN and WOMAN should be played by adults. BOY and GIRL should be played by young people. SHAPESHIFTER must be played by a performer who identifies as nonbinary, two-spirit and/or gender fluid.

PRODUCTION NOTES: Information regarding the Milk Dragon and the Darkness, the magical creatures, transformations and images can be found in the back of the playbook.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Milk Dragon has been with me for as long as I have been writing plays; so, it is fitting that it is my last! Over the past 50 years, this story has taken many forms—a musical, a screenplay, a novel—until it finally found its true shape and voice in this acting edition playscript. Every incarnation along the way has taught me something about writing and about life.

The journey began when I was in college, and the first draft showed me that it is possible to write about complex and controversial issues through the lens of fantasy, often with more power and precision than a contemporary setting would allow.

In the 1980s, I was a frequent panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts. This play gave me a place to express my deep concern over cries to end government funding for the arts and calls for censorship. I also began to understand that the burning ember of that discord was fueled by fear—fear of difference, fear of diversity, fear of anything or anyone that threatened the status quo and their sense of privilege and propriety. I wondered—can fear be a character? If so, how can it be made manifest in action?

In 2007, New York University produced a workshop of the piece, which had grown to epic proportion, and, in 2017, John Newman directed its one and only production at Utah Valley University with a cast of 30 and production demands that were beyond anyone's good intentions. I consigned the play to the recesses of my file cabinet and declared it too large and complicated to be held in theatrical form ... in short: impossible!

In 2023, editor Gina Grandi rescued the piece when she included it in an anthology of previously unpublished plays developed at NYU, *25 Years of New Plays for Young Audiences*. Once again, the play told me what it needed, and with Gina's blessing,

I tore it apart, trimmed the cast to five actors, reduced the production elements to chairs, found objects and imagination! The anthology was published in 2024, and I thought the play had reached its final destination.

Now in 2025, our country finds itself in a time of unprecedented social and political turmoil. The forces of fear that smoldered two decades ago have erupted in a conflagration of acrimony, intolerance and political polarity. Once again, the play has become my teacher, as I undertook a final rewrite—sharpening the political edges, deepening the metaphor between reality and fantasy, and more fully embracing the nonbinary characters of the Shapeshifter and the baby Milk Dragon made of light and color.

As I look back over the entire canon of my work, I realize that all my plays have dealt with young people facing perilous life challenges. My young protagonists from have taught me everything I know about courage and compassion. This final play is offered as a cautionary tale in a troubled time for theatre companies brave enough to produce it and for audiences hungry for hope.

—Suzan Zeder
2025

The Milk Dragon

ACT I: The Village

(A large, open white space encircled by a black path.

There are several dozen black chairs of various sizes that connect and stack together to become multiple locations.

Surrounding the playing space is a structure with platforms and shelves at odd angles that hold props and costume pieces: a spoon, a book, a quill pen, a basket, a pair of glasses, a cap. All are black. Hanging from above are five large bells.)

Scene 1: Opening

(Lights up on the company standing beneath each of the bells. The bells begin tolling slowly. The company begins to walk and then run, following the black path in a circle. The bells ring faster and louder and echo. The company picks up speed. The ringing stops. Everyone stops and cups their hands over their eyes.

SHAPESHIFTER comes forward.)

SHAPESHIFTER. Just beyond the horizon where the edge of the sky met the rim of the sea, there was a village where everything was perfect.

WOMAN. There was no hunger.

MAN. Hunger was prohibited in the year W-26.

BOY. The people grew all the food they could eat; no more, no less.

GIRL. And no one wanted more because there was no more to want.

ALL. And this was good!

SHAPESHIFTER. There was no crime.

MAN. Crime was outlawed in the year X-27.

ALL (*cascading*). Thou shalt not

Kill

Steal

Covet

Cheat

Lie!

MAN. And so, no one did.

SHAPESHIFTER. In this Village every family had ...

MAN. A mother.

WOMAN. Woman.

BOY. A father.

MAN. Man.

BOY. A child.

MAN & WOMAN. Either boy or girl.

BOY. Just one.

SHAPESHIFTER. NEVER BOTH!

WOMAN. There was no illness.

MAN. Illness was forbidden in the year Y-28.

SHAPESHIFTER. Everyone lived a cycle of years, and then they went to sleep and were no more.

WOMAN. All evidence that they had ever lived vanished from the minds and memories of those who knew and loved them.

MAN. This was a land without grief.

SHAPESHIFTER. Around the Village, a river ran in a perfect circle.

(MAN, WOMAN, BOY and GIRL begin running, following the black path.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd)*. At night, the river growled and howled and moaned and sighed, and everyone heard it differently.

MAN, WOMAN, BOY & GIRL *(cascading)*.

Men shouting

Women screaming

Children crying

The roar of a dying dragon.

SHAPESHIFTER. Time passed here like smoke.

(Everyone stops. BOY puts on a black cap and becomes ZACK.)

ZACK. In this place, there was a boy named Zack, who knew all about running and nothing about anything else. *(He begins running in place.)*

MAN. Zack, take these apples ...

ZACK. Feet pounding.

WOMAN. Zack, take this wheat ...

ZACK. Heart beating

SHAPESHIFTER. Zack, take this water ...

ZACK. Blood pumping.

Breath filling.

Breath, Breath, Breath!

MAN. In this place there was a man named Azdak, who knew everything about everyone.

SHAPESHIFTER. Azdak oversaw enforcing the laws, edicts and executive orders of the Village.

(MAN takes a quill pen and becomes AZDAK.)

AZDAK. Abra, write this down!

GIRL. In this place, there was a girl named Abra, who knew everything about everything.

(AZDAK hands the pen to GIRL, who takes it and becomes ABRA.)

ABRA. Yes, Father.

AZDAK. On this day, no laws were broken, all edicts and executive orders were obeyed.

SHAPESHIFTER. Disobedience was outlawed in the year Z-29.

WOMAN. Abra wrote everything down in the large black books that held the entire history of the Village.

AZDAK. Someday, Abra, when you are the Scribe, keeping everything safe will be your task.

ABRA. I know, Father.

SHAPESHIFTER. Azdak and Abra were the only ones in the Village who were allowed to read or to write.

MAN. Reading leads to thinking.

WOMAN. Thinking leads to confusion.

BOY. And confusion is just ... confusing.

SHAPESHIFTER. Azdak had a wife once, but she was lost and never found.

WOMAN. And no one ever ...

GIRL. Ever ...

WOMAN. Spoke her name.

SHAPESHIFTER. In this Village, there was one law that everybody knew.

MAN, WOMAN, BOY & GIRL. **No being, belief or behavior shall be tolerated in violation of the law of the common good.**

SHAPESHIFTER. Everyone obeyed.

MAN, WOMAN, BOY & GIRL. We are safe.

We are whole.

We are one and everything is perfect!

SHAPESHIFTER. No one ever questioned.

MAN. Questions were forbidden in the year Z-30.

WOMAN. Difference was disallowed in the year Z-31.

SHAPESHIFTER. In the year Z-32, diversity disappeared.

MAN, WOMAN, BOY & GIRL. And no one noticed.

SHAPESHIFTER. The bells began every night at sunset.

(One by one, the bells begin tolling.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd)*. And as the Darkness came, iron notes hammered down upon the town.

WOMAN. Upon the fields.

GIRL. Upon the streets.

BOY. And everyone ran to their houses.

(The company grabs chairs and sets them up like houses.)

MAN. Slammed their doors.

WOMAN. Shut their shutters.

BOY & GIRL. Locked and bolted.

SHAPESHIFTER. The sound devoured the day.

The town turned inward and swallowed itself.

Scene 2: Zack's House/Abra's House

(ZACK and MAN turn their chairs to face each other. MAN picks up a bowl and spoon and becomes ZACK's FATHER. SHAPESHIFTER places a third chair between them.)

ZACK. She's home.

(SHAPESHIFTER picks up a large black spoon and sticks it into the top rail of the chair.)

FATHER. Yes, Zack, she's home.

ZACK. She's different. When I look into her eyes, I can't find her.

FATHER. She's the same as she's always been.

(SHAPESHIFTER turns the spoon slightly to face ZACK.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(as ZACK's mother, monotone)*. I love you, Zack.

ZACK. She spoke to me.

FATHER. Of course.

ZACK. I missed you, Mother.

SHAPESHIFTER *(as ZACK's mother)*. I love you, Zack!

ZACK. When will she be herself again?

FATHER. Soon.

ZACK. How soon is soon?

SHAPESHIFTER. Soon the meals would be cooked, the bread baked, the clothes mended and what passed for normal would return to the house. But Zack knew his mother would never be the same. None of the women who went to the Time Away were ever the same again, and no one knew why.

(Lights shift. MAN moves to another locale.)

MAN. In the center of the Village was a squat stone structure called the counting house because everything in the Village was counted up and written down there in the big black books.

(MAN moves into the counting house as AZDAK. ABRA sits, writing in a large black book. SHAPESHIFTER and WOMAN move in slow motion as the river around the black track.)

AZDAK. The river is wild tonight.

ABRA. Hmmmmmmm.

AZDAK. It sounds like a woman weeping.

ABRA. You say that every night.

AZDAK. That's what it sounds like every night.

(ZACK turns the chairs into a bed and lies down.)

SHAPESHIFTER. Zack lay very still on his bed waiting for sleep.

(ZACK raises his hand above his head and wiggles his fingers casting shadows.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd)*. He could not see his fingers.

ZACK. Maybe that's what happens at night. Everything just disappears. Is that what happened to Mother at the Time Away? She went there my mother and came back a shadow? WHY?

SHAPESHIFTER. And with that question came another ...

ZACK. What happened to her?

SHAPESHIFTER. Once the questions started, he could not stop them. *(Whispering.)* Why do we run?

(ZACK turns his head sharply to find the voice.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd, whispering)*. Why do we run inside and lock the doors and bolt the shutters as soon as the Darkness comes?

(ZACK looks in the other direction.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd, whispering)*. What is outside the windows?

ZACK. What IS outside the window?

MAN. The air emptied.

WOMAN. The sky shifted.

ZACK. Why is it forbidden to look outside?

SHAPESHIFTER. Zack touched the sash of the shutter, and the window shattered!

(ZACK hurls over the back of the chair as if he is being sucked out the window.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd)*. The night poured into his room in waves of darkness.

Scene 3: The Milk Dragon's Journey

SHAPESHIFTER (*cont'd*). A light came by the road with a strange clattering sound, tiny hooves on cobblestones.

(ZACK sits up and looks out the window watching.

The journey of the Milk Dragon is rendered by patterns of colored light that progress across the stage to beautiful, slightly ominous, music.)

MAN & WOMAN

(dissonant harmonics).

Indigo

Amethyst

Azure

Cerulean

Sapphire

Jade

Emerald

Ochre

Umber

Orange

Crimson

Magenta

Indigo

SHAPESHIFTER (*cont'd*).

Tongues of fire

Trailing ribbons of flame

Zack shut his eyes

But the light danced

Inside his eyelids

And exploded in his brain.

SHAPESHIFTER (*cont'd*). Zack whirled around and found himself staring into the alabaster eyes of a creature that had no name, no shape—nothing but the unbearable brightness of its being.

(ZACK cries out in pain and wonder!

Blackout.)

Scene 4: The Next Day

(Lights up on ZACK, collapsed over a chair.)

SHAPESHIFTER *(cont'd)*. When Zack woke the next morning, his eyes felt like shattered glass.

MAN. Zack, run this wheat over to the threshing house.

(MAN hands him a bundle of wheat. The moment ZACK touches it, a shaft of golden light hits him and whirls him around.)

MAN *(cont'd)*. Hey there, you got it?

ZACK. Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.

WOMAN. Zack, run this water over to the community tank.

(WOMAN swings a bucket to him and as soon as ZACK touches it, a shaft of blue light hits him and causes him to stagger.)

WOMAN *(cont'd)*. Be careful. You'll spill it.

ZACK. Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am.

GIRL. Zack, take these apples over to the counting house.

(GIRL heaves him a sack of apples. As soon as ZACK catches it, he is hit with a shaft of red light.)

ZACK. AHHHHHHHHH!!

SHAPESHIFTER. And so it went all day. Zack ran with the wheat, the water and the apples, just as he did every day, but today everything was different.

(ABRA sits atop a very tall stool holding her quill.)

ABRA. What have you got there?

ZACK. Apples.

ABRA. I can see that.

ZACK. How do they look?

ABRA. Like apples.

ZACK. Do they look different to you?

ABRA. Different from what?

ZACK. How they looked yesterday.

ABRA. No. You come here every day with wheat, water and apples, and I write your name down in this book.

ZACK. That's my name?

ABRA. What does it look like?

ZACK. Squiggles. My eyes? What do they look like?

ABRA. Eyes.

ZACK. They feel like they're on fire.

ABRA. Well, they're not.

ZACK. Can I ask you a question?

ABRA. You just did.

ZACK. Did your mother go to the Time Away and never come back?

ABRA (*suddenly angry*). You are a very stupid boy and that is a stupid question. I never had a mother.

ZACK. Everyone has a mother.

ABRA. Well, I don't!

ZACK. Why not?

ABRA. She just never was.

(The bells begin tolling. Everyone looks up!)

ABRA (*cont'd*). You better run for home!

ZACK. Haven't you ever wondered why we run?

ABRA. NO!

ZACK. Why not?

ABRA. Because, because, because ... it's what we DO!

(The stage darkens with every peal. The company picks up chairs, whirls them around and brings them down like slamming doors.)

FATHER. Zack, son. Hurry! Hurry!!

(ZACK runs. He gets to his door, just as the bell stops. ZACK's FATHER slams the chair down just before ZACK gets there. ZACK pounds on the chair like a closed door.)

ZACK. Father, it's me! Let me in!!

FATHER. It's forbidden to open the door after dark.

(ZACK runs from door to door, to no avail.)

MAN, GIRL & WOMAN *(a mantra)*. We are safe. We are whole. We are one!

ZACK. Help me! Somebody! Help me!

MAN, GIRL & WOMAN *(a mantra)*. **We are safe. We are whole. We are one!**

(Lights shift to ABRA and AZDAK.)

ABRA. Someone is outside.

AZDAK. That's impossible.

ABRA. I can hear him. It is someone shouting "HELP."

AZDAK. It's the river.

ABRA. Since when does a river have words?

ZACK. Help me! Somebody please, help me!

(The colors of the Milk Dragon begin to cross the stage.)

MAN & WOMAN (*dissonant harmonics*).

Indigo

Amethyst

Azure

Cerulean

Sapphire

Jade

Emerald

(*ZACK huddles outside the door with his arms over his head.*)

ABRA. We must do something.

(*ABRA starts toward the door. AZDAK grabs her and pulls her back.*)

AZDAK. It is forbidden for children to disobey their parents.

(*ABRA jerks her arm away, and AZDAK raises his hand in anger.*)

ABRA. It is illegal for a parent to strike their child!

AZDAK. These are our laws. They are what keep us safe.

One day it will be your job to see that they are obeyed.

ABRA. But what if—

AZDAK (*interrupting*). There is no what if! We are safe. We are whole. We are ...

AZDAK & ABRA. one.

(*The colors of the Milk Dragon move directly to ZACK, who stands in wonder in a cone of swirling color.*)