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*Dramatic Publishing*



A New-Style Children's Revue With Music

# MAGIC THEATRE

By  
Saundra Mathews-Deacon



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(MAGIC THEATRE)

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## ABOUT THE PLAY

MAGIC THEATRE was first presented at South Coast Repertory Theatre, Costa Mesa, California, as the first in its ongoing Magic Theatre series for children. The author was a member of the resident company, commissioned to develop, write and direct first productions of the three scripts, which were then re-mounted and toured for five seasons. The plays were presented for schools and private organizations all over Southern California.

### Original Cast

Mary Fleming  
Sue Flint  
Mike Fuller

Michael Leininger  
Barbara Leva  
Phil Oertley  
Maeve Robinson

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## NOTES TO THE DIRECTOR

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### CONCEPT AND APPROACH

The key to this script is in approaching it as performance theatre which is highly physical, full of youthful energy, and handled with a boisterous sense of fun. The actors are basically playing themselves as children. In the Opening, they are sorcerers, magicians...celebrating the power of their imaginations. Then, throughout the play, they transform themselves into different characters, feelings or animals to suit the flow, the “magic” of the moment.

For the audience, it should almost seem as though they are watching children at play—seeing the quick change from situation to situation, the surprising and creative transformation from character to character which occurs when kids are improvising.

The first and foremost activity I suggest for you and your cast is to observe a group of children at play. At first, the kids may be self-conscious. But if your actors play with them, and then ask the children to show them how they play “War,” or “Doctor,” or “Cowboys and Indians,” the children will soon become lost in their play and forget they are being observed. You will notice how the kids completely give themselves over to the action, with no self-consciousness or worry that they are looking silly or stupid. In acting, this is called “large commitment,” which you need to work for in your production of this play. Also, this play experience with the children will help your actors handle the direct audience contact in the play sincerely and comfortably.

As rehearsals progress, make sure the actors don’t “comment” on the material—that they do not create distance between themselves and the material by conveying an attitude that what they are doing is dumb. They should always completely

believe what they are doing, just like the kids they watched at play.

Directorially speaking, I suggest creating from the first day, an atmosphere of tremendous freedom and creative experimentation at rehearsals. Actors should be encouraged to try anything and everything, the more exaggerated and preposterous, the better.

In the script, every time an actor says, "I'm fire," or "I'm a yellow submarine," he needs to experiment with many voices, faces, stances, walks, and movement sequences, in order to create a delightful realization of his words.

After all this creative work has been done, it is up to the director to polish and refine all the physical movement and business. The more precision and style, the better. Specific timing will prove to be an asset. Try to hone all the acting with an eye to economy and sharp contrasts.

### ACTING EXERCISES.

Many exercises are helpful with this kind of production; here are a few suggestions.

1. **Follow the Leader.** Play this game as usual, with actors lined up and following the moves of the person in front. Add to this, the actors all singing "Three Blind Mice" as they play the game. When the director calls out, "Turn," the line of actors reverses, the actor who was at the end of the line becomes the leader, and the song changes to "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." The change should happen quickly, so there is no break in action and singing. As the exercise progresses, the director calls out "Turn," more and more frequently.
2. **Adjectives.** Have actors choose an adjective, then develop a stance, walk, voice and facial expression to go with it. Let

them roam the stage while doing this. Keep coaching them to make what they are doing bigger, until their characters are huge and overblown. Then instruct them to interact with the others on stage, one at a time.

3. **Babies.** Have actors improvise being babies, first working alone and then coming together with each other.

4. **Little Children.** Same as babies, only about age five on a playground. This and the previous exercise should take care of actors feeling inhibited about acting “silly”, falling on the floor, making strange noises, etc.

5. **Alphabet.** Have actors recite the alphabet, starting as quietly as they can whisper and gradually getting louder until they end up shouting as loudly as they can. Then have them recite the alphabet again, starting as low in tone as possible and ending as high as their voices will go.

6. **Gibberish.** Have the actors pair off and improvise a conversation in gibberish, trying to communicate to each other through feeling, volume and tone. Encourage them to use the full range of their voices.

7. **Things in Motion.** Have actors improvise using all their bodies to create one thing that moves. Examples: a railroad train, a popcorn machine, the wind, a merry-go-round, etc.

8. **Sound-and-Rhythm Transformation.** Actors stand in a tight circle, arms around each other's shoulders. Instruct them to close their eyes and get a sense of the group's presence. Then tell them to let a group rhythm and vocal sound emerge, without anyone leading. When this occurs, instruct them to let it change and transform as it will. This exercise is excellent for ensemble playing.

9. **IMPROVISATION FOR THE THEATRE** by Viola Spolin is a fine resource book, full of many good exercises for this kind of play. I recommend "Mirroring," "Pass the Face," and "Pass the Object," as three especially fine ones.

10. Use your own imagination to create exercises to solve particular rehearsal problems as you go along. For example, if you find an actor having difficulty with being a magician in the Opening, have the cast imagine a sorcerer's robe and hat lying before each of them; have them visualize the color, weight and texture; have them "put them on," and give themselves secret magical names in their own minds. Then have them improvise a secret midnight meeting of witches and magicians in a graveyard.

Let yourself enter the fun by creating whatever exercises, games or improvisations are needed to bring life to the script.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

**CASTING.** An acting ensemble of four females and three males. This play can be done successfully with adult, teen or child actors. There should be an interesting contrast within the ensemble, using widely-varying actors who convey a strong sense of unique character, and who are able to playfully surrender to the "child" in them. Also, actors who are vocally free to experiment with making sounds, and physically free to explore large and non-realistic movement are desirable for this play.

**MUSIC.** One guitarist to accompany songs and play transition cues on a simple drum. You may wish to add an additional guitar and/or other instruments. In several productions, effective use has been made of flutes and recorders.



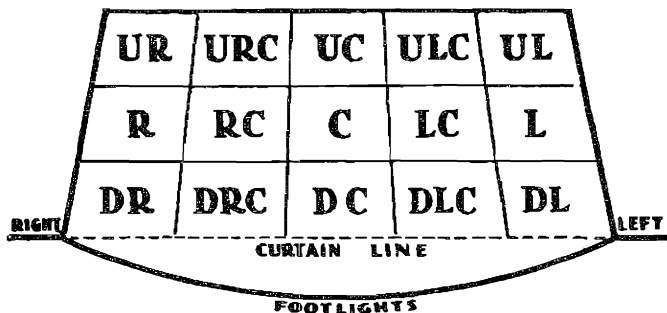
**COSTUMES.** Tights, ballet shoes, and long-sleeved, A-line tunics were used in the original production. The tunics were each to mid-thigh in length, composed of two bright colors, and designed to suggest a shortened sorcerer's robe. Ancient mystical symbols such as an ankh, a star, a sun, etc. were worked into each costume, sometimes around a sleeve, sometimes on the chest or at the hem.

**SETTING.** This play was designed to function as a stationary and a touring show. In the original staging, the only set pieces were two huge banners carried on by the two actors in front of the opening procession. The banners were carried upstage right and left, placed in banner standards, and became the visual and thematic framing for the play. The banners were constructed of natural colored, heavy cotton; they were partially quilted; they were shaped amorphously to suggest roots and leaves; one spelled out "MAGIC" and the other spelled out "THEATRE" in brightly colored and oddly-shaped letters. If yours is to be a stationary production, you may wish to experiment with designing a fuller setting. There should be two entrances up and down stage left, and two entrances up and down stage right.

**LIGHTING.** This play works effectively outdoors in the daylight, or with the simplest of bright, general stage lighting.

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## CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



## STAGE POSITIONS

*Upstage* means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

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**NOTE:** Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

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## MAGIC THEATRE

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Numbers given to ACTORS should only be observed within each sketch, and not consistently throughout the show. ACTOR 6 in one sketch could be ACTOR 3 in another.

ACTOR 1 is backstage left. The OTHER SIX ACTORS are out of sight somewhere at the back of the house, behind the audience. House lights go out and general stage lights come up dim. ACTOR 1 furtively sticks out an arm onstage, then quickly pulls it back. Then he sticks out a leg, and pulls it quickly back. He inches out onstage to center, with his back to the audience, looking sneakily to his left and right. Then he turns front, sees audience, is shocked. He runs downstage a few steps and tells the audience, "Shhhh!" He furtively checks off down right, then off down left to make sure no one is hiding. He is satisfied in his search, crosses down center, and calls in a stage whisper to the waiting but unseen ACTORS).

ACTOR 1: It's okay now. Everyone who doesn't believe has gone away! (A pause. ACTORS in the back come into sight of audience and stage whisper first verse of the following chant in a stationary position. They use the remaining three verses to proceed down the aisles in rhythm with the chant, building it vocally and creating an eerie and commanding mood. Have ACTORS in the procession experiment with slow, rounded and inviting movements. By the end of the last verse, they should be in a horizontal line across downstage).

ALL: (Slow)      COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                         A MAGIC LAND, A MAGIC LAND,  
                         COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                         JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION.

(Faster)    THERE'S MONSTERS HERE IN THE  
                  MAGIC LAND  
                  THE MAGIC LAND, THE MAGIC LAND,  
                  THERE'S DRAGONS TOO, IN THE MA-  
                  GIC LAND,  
                  JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION.

(Faster)    THERE'S TALKING TREES IN THE  
                  MAGIC LAND,  
                  THE MAGIC LAND, THE MAGIC LAND,  
                  THERE'S GHOSTIES TOO, IN THE MA-  
                  GIC LAND,  
                  JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION.

(Slow)      COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                  A MAGIC LAND, A MAGIC LAND,  
                  COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                  JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION,  
                  JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION,  
                  JUST USE...YOUR IMA...GI..

(Pause. A quick change into a fast and bright unit of introductions. In these introductions, all the other ACTORS actually say the name of the ACTOR being introduced, while that ACTOR does some sort of physical acknowledgement, like a bow, a twirl, a forward roll, a stylized pose, etc)

1. My name is...(GROUP says name).
2. And I'm called...(Name)
3. They call me...(Name)
4. I'm...(Name)
5. And I'm...(Name)
6. People call me...(Name)
7. And I'm known as...(Name)

(Quick change back to eerie mood created earlier)

ALL: (Slow stage whisper) But we can change our names, every day if we want, because we're...(Look around furtively)...magic. (They nod)...(Look again)...magic, (They nod)...(Third look, then loud and very long, they say)...M-A-G-I-C! (As they swoop quickly into two vertical lines, one up left and one up right, facing in. The next six lines should be done quickly, with each ACTOR moving across and downstage on his line. The actions should travel quickly and almost overlap. Each line should be realised with lots of sound and movement)

4. I can be an eagle!
5. I'm fire!
3. I turn into a storm cloud.
6. I become a snake!
2. I'm a cyclone!
7. (Slower) I'm the wind!(Some wind sounds from this ACTOR after the line, while getting into place. There should now be two groups of three ACTORS, one down right and one down left. They have switched sides of the stage. ACTOR 1 crosses slowly down center)

1. And together we can become...(Other SIX move in on this line to make a semi-circle around ACTOR 1. Their arms are up, palms out, and pointed stage left.

ALL: "Echo!" (One at a time from left to right, and as they say it, move their hands to touch the hands of the person on their right. The word, "echo" is spoken softer each time, until it trails off)

6. Or we can be...(Others watch while ACTOR 6 starts slowly taking steps with arms bent at elbows, and adding "ch" sounds in rhythm—this is the beginning of a train which will move in a circle around center stage. Others fall into line, imitating ACTOR 6. "Train" slowly picks up speed and momentum and becomes recognizable as a train to audience. Person at end can be the caboose, moving backward and using one arm waving downward as the light, making a "ding-ding-ding-ding" sound. Once at full speed, 6 can use one hand to mime pulling the whistle and making a high, shrill, "toot-toot" sound)

ALL: A rail-road-train! (Another toot and the train starts to slow down, then comes to a halt, ACTORS miming and making sound of steam escaping. End in semi-circle center stage. 4 steps down center)

4. And we can turn into...(Transition into spider. 4 is the "head"; other ACTORS form circle around 4 facing him and stooping far over, joining arms with each other. They are the "body." As they move into this position, they can make high, cackling sounds)

ALL: (High voices) A...("spider" should bob in place on each of the following, slowly-spoken words)...big...black...spi-der! (Now spider takes four giant "steps" down-stage, with a high, group "spider" sound on each step. Work out the steps carefully, so the ACTORS' leg movements look spidery)

4. (ACTORS frozen in spider form) Or, if we want, we're... FIREWORKS! (4 becomes the lighted fuse of a fire-cracker, "sizzling" down into the group around him, which then explodes at random. Each ACTOR leaps, twirls, falls, making firework sounds. All ACTORS end up lying or sitting scattered around the stage)

1. (Stand and cross down, and others follow suit) And the reason why we can do all this stuff, is because we're all really-truly, honest-to-goodness, gen-u-ine...

ALL: Magic...(Look around, shout) MAGIC...(Look to each other, then whisper) Yeah.

1. (This introduces a bright, fast unit. Other ACTORS move into straight, horizontal line downstage as 1 talks to audience). And do you want to know where our magic comes from?
4. It comes from the magic spell! (All ACTORS look at him while he reaches, smiling, up his sleeve to get the scroll on which the magic spell is written. It's not there; he is shocked and dismayed)

ALL: The magic spell!

(Following lines are rapid fire from one end of the line and back again)

1. (To 2) Where's the magic spell?
2. (To 3) Have you seen it?
3. (To 4) You were supposed to bring it.
4. (To 5) Do you know where it's gone?
5. (To 6) Who left it behind?
6. (To 7) We'd better find it!
7. Maybe it's in here. (Looks in 6's hair)
6. I know where it could be. (Checks 5's armpit)
5. Let's look here. (Opens 4's mouth)
4. Maybe it's...(Looks under 3's foot)
3. Do you think...(Looks in 2's ear)
2. I bet I know! (Looks down 1's tunic)
1. (Wailing) IT'S LOST!

(General pandemonium. ACTORS are all over the stage and in the audience, looking for the magic spell. One ACTOR picks up kids in audience from their seats and looks underneath them. Another sniffs and points up the aisles like a bird dog. Someone goes around stage, calling, "Here, magic spell, here, magic spell," as though calling a dog. Another ACTOR listens with his ear to the stage floor; someone else rushes around the audience, asking kids if they know where the spell is. This is the first incidence of ACTORS directly contacting audience; make it effective. After a bit, 6 goes offstage and returns up center with scroll, calling, "I found it! I found it!" Others run back onstage, ad-libbing and crowding in right and left of 6. 6 quiets them, a solemn moment is created, and then 6 lets the scroll unroll. It should be held high and released to unroll quickly. If it is very long and quite thin, it's funny. All ACTORS gasp, reacting to the magic of the unrolled scroll. Then they all quickly move their lips while silently "reading" the scroll, moving their heads jerkily left to right. When finished, they all let out a long, "Ahhhhhh!" in admiration. Then 6 quickly re-rolls scroll, takes it offstage and returns to group. This starts the last unit of the Opening, which should be played with tremendous, hushed power and intensity)

1. (To OTHERS) Well, are we ready?

ALL: (Whispered) Yes.

1. (Looks to audience) Then, here...we..go. (All steal, with great unreleased energy, downstage into a horizontal line)

ALL: (The spell must be spoken hitting the rhythm. Start very slowly and quietly, but with power. Create pre-



cision gestures for each line, and build the spell to a gigantic release of energy on the last word, which sends the ACTORS reeling backward. They should leap, twirl, do backward rolls or somersaults, and end up scattered on the floor upstage. Create a strong sense of magic having been released)

MAKE A CIRCLE WITH YOUR HEAD.  
THINK UNTIL YOUR BRAIN TURNS  
RED.

MAKE YOUR STOMACH JIGGLE, QUICK,  
WISHING IS WHAT DOES THE TRICK,  
ONE, TWO, THREE, MAKE...MAGIC!

(A pause. All sit or lie, stunned. They look around the stage, sensing the power. Next seven lines are a slow build. ACTORS stand on their lines)

1. It's here. I can feel it!
2. It's here. I can taste it!
3. It's here.
4. I can hear it!
5. It's here.
6. I can smell it!
7. It's here. I can see it.

ALL: (A pause. Then, in hushed voices to each other...)It's here!

TRANSITION. All transitions will work from one basic pattern: ACTORS freeze at the end of a sketch, there is a slight pause, the musician plays Drum Cue 1, which signifies the end of a sketch. Then the ACTORS move into place for the beginning of the next sketch, using the rhythm of the first verse of the processional chant in the Opening, to get them there.

Each transition will vary, as you will see later, and serve to introduce the theme of the next sketch. For this first transition, they walk in rhythm to their next places, chanting the words of the first verse)

ALL:                   COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                          A MAGIC LAND, A MAGIC LAND,  
                          COME WITH US TO A MAGIC LAND,  
                          JUST USE YOUR IMAGINATION.

(After the last line, the actors freeze in place. Musician plays Drum Cue 2, which signifies the beginning of a sketch)

## JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE

(The effectiveness of this sketch depends on hugely exaggerated and stylized differences between the six characters. TALLY and SHORTY play off of each other and are a pair, BALDY and HAIRY are a pair, and PLUMPY and THINNY are a pair. Each character should develop a highly distinctive stance, walk, facial expression, voice, and character sound, like a grunt or a giggle. If the physical descriptions are wrong for your cast, change the lines to fit the contrasts in your actors)

**STAGING:** Place NARRATOR far down right. Place TALLY and SHORTY left center, BALDY and HAIRY upcenter, and PLUMPY and THINNY right center. At opening, all six characters have their backs to the audience. The convention is that they are each in their separate houses.

- 3: (NARRATOR) Once upon a time, there was a kingdom full of wonderful people! (SIX CHARACTERS turn front and mime opening their front doors, coming outside and doing various business, such as sweeping the walk, picking a flower or reading a newspaper. After a pause, speaking continues). The people were wonderful, because they were all different from each other, and that made their kingdom a very interesting place to be. (SIX CHARACTERS stop business and freeze) There were tall people...
4. (TALLY) I can reach a lost kitten, high up in a tree!  
(Brief mime, followed by "character sound", and freeze)
3. And short people...
5. (SHORTY) (Moving in front of TALLY) You can see

over me, when I'm standing in front of you! ("Character sound" and freeze)

3: There were hairy people...

7: (HAIRY) (Business on line) My hair keeps me warm on cold winter nights. ("Character sound" and freeze)

3: And bald people!

1. (BALDY) (Business on line) Look! You can use my head for a mirror! ("Character sound" and freeze)

3: There were plump people...

2: (PLUMPY) (Going and grabbing THINNY on line) I'm nice and soft to hug. ("Character sound" and freeze)

3: And thin people, too!

6: (THINNY) I can fit in little, tiny places! (After wiggling in the tight grip of PLUMPY on the line, "character sound" and then freeze)

3: It was a wonderful kingdom full of different, special people. But then, one day, the special people started getting jealous of each other.

5: (Breaking freeze and angrily confronting TALLY) I wish I could reach lost kittens like you can.

4: Well, I wish people could see over me when I stand in front of them. (The PAIR freeze facing each other in combative attitudes)