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The Arkansaw Bear



Drama

by

Aurand Harris

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“When this Aurand Harris play premiered at the University of Texas ... it proved controversial not because of its language or its story, but because of its subject matter and its target: it’s a play written for young people about death.”

— *The Austin Chronicle*

The Arkansaw Bear

Drama by Aurand Harris. Cast: 1w., 5 either gender. Saddened and bewildered at her grandfather’s approaching death, Tish runs to her “special tree.” There, in a world of fantasy provided by her wish on a star, she meets the world’s greatest dancing bear. He is old, like her grandfather, and is running away—from death. In trying to help him, she begins to understand the meaning of both life and death, which helps her to cope with her own sadness. The play blends realism and fantasy, pathos and humor. It is delightfully theatrical, with music, magic and dance, enthusiastically applauded by children’s audiences and family audiences. *The Arkansaw Bear* is an important work by America’s foremost playwright for young audiences, sparkling with entertainment while also dramatizing, with poignancy, a universal truth. *One set. Modern and animal costumes. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: AE8*

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The Arkansaw Bear

Drama by

AURAND HARRIS



Dramatic Publishing Company

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Quotes from press reviews of the premiere production of *The Arkansaw Bear*, presented by the Drama Department, University of Texas at Austin:

“A totally enjoyable play, which serves an important need in children’s theatre today—a need for a serious play about death.”

(Carla Frierson, The Daily Texan)

“Important theatre ... equally effective for adults ... powerful enough to touch anyone’s emotions. A lovely, daring play with a loving performance.”

(Alan Jenkins, Austin American-Statesman)

“A marvelous play, full of charm and vitality, that makes a strong, reassuring statement even as it entertains so delightfully.”

(John Bustin, Austin, Texas)

To the many people who helped with the research, the writing and the tryout production of *The Arkansaw Bear*—including John Donovan, George Eells, Sally Elliott, Coleman Jennings, Romaine Pauley, officers of the Eta Delta Alumni of Phi Mu at U.C.L.A., Natalie Schafer, and the members of the company of the premiere performance at the University of Texas at Austin.

The premiere production of *The Arkansaw Bear* was given by the Department of Drama, University of Texas at Austin, March 20–29, 1980, in the major Theatre for Youth Series.

The Arkansaw Bear

by Aurand Harris

A World Premiere Production

Directed by Coleman A. Jennings

Choreography by Sara Elizabeth Egelston

Scenery by Charles Beyer

Costumes by Paul D. Reinhardt

Lighting by Jeff Zucker

Cast:

Mother.....	Lauren Schneider
Aunt Ellen.....	Susan Carson
Tish.....	Suzanne Standerfer
Star Bright.....	Wendell Grayson
Mime.....	Bill Fagan
World's Greatest Dancing Bear.....	Randall Rapstine
Announcer.....	Dan Butler
Great Ringmaster.....	Eric Porter
Little Bear.....	Nancy Bacon

Production Staff:

Assistant to the Director.....	Daphne Hodges
Pantomime Coach.....	Steve Elkins
Stage Manager.....	George Edwards
Technical Director.....	John Cleavelin
Master Electrician.....	David L. Jameson
Assistant Technical Director.....	Vincent Herod
Assistant Costume Designer.....	Debbie Smithee

Production Crew Heads:

Carpenters	Doug Rosson
Lighting.....	Adam Gomez
Sound.....	Les McGehee
Costumes.....	Richard Mays
Properties	Rebekah Jones

Faculty/Staff Supervisors:

Scenery.....	Matthew Grant
Costumes.....	Paul D. Reinhardt
Lighting.....	David Nancarrow
Master Electrician.....	David L. Jameson
Master Carpenter.....	Steve Parks
Property Master.....	James Pringle

For this premiere production, Aurand Harris served as playwright-in-residence in the Department of Drama of the University of Texas at Austin. *Yankee Doodle* and *A Toby Show* are other Harris plays which have been premiered by the Department of Drama in recent years.

In conjunction with the premiere production of *The Arkansas Bear* the Department of Drama sponsored “Children and Death: We owe them the truth,” a symposium on how children are helped to cope with death. The panel consisted of: Alan Friedman, Literature; Ira Isco, Psychology; Leonard Kaja, Hospic Group; Elizabeth Polk, Children’s Literature; Sherry Kafka Wagner, Television; and Sheila Witten, Parent.

The Arkansaw Bear

CHARACTERS

Tish

Star Bright

Mime

World's Greatest Dancing Bear

Great Ringmaster

Little Bear

Voices: Mother

Aunt Ellen

Announcer

SCENE

The present. Somewhere in Arkansaw.

The Arkansaw Bear

(As the house lights dim, there is a glow of light on the front curtain. Over a loud speaker a man's whistling of "O Susannah" is heard. The curtains open. TISH walks into a large spot of warm light at L. The whistling dims out. TISH is a little girl and carries some hand-picked flowers. She listens to the voices, heard over a loud speaker, and reacts to them as if MOTHER and AUNT ELLEN were on each side of her, downstage.)

TISH. I've come to see Grandpa.

MOTHER'S VOICE. No, dear. No. You can't go in.

TISH. But Mother—

MOTHER'S VOICE. No, Tish! You can't see Grandpa now.

TISH. I picked him some flowers. These are Grandpa's favorites.

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE (*TISH's great aunt, elderly, gentle and emotional*). Quiet, child.

TISH. But Aunt Ellen—

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. —The doctor is here.

TISH. The doctor?

MOTHER'S VOICE. Tish, dear.

TISH. Yes, mother?

MOTHER'S VOICE. Grandpa had a turn for the worse. His heart—

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. Oh, it's the end. (*Cries quietly.*)

TISH. The end?

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. The doctor said ... no hope.

(TISH reacts.)

MOTHER'S VOICE. Don't cry, Aunt Ellen.

TISH. Is Grandpa going ... to die?

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. Yes.

TISH. No! He can't.

MOTHER'S VOICE. We all have to die, dear.

TISH. I know. But not Grandpa. *(Starts to move.)*

MOTHER'S VOICE. Stop. You can't go in.

TISH. Why can't he live forever!

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. You're too young to understand.
Too full of life.

TISH. I have to tell him there's a circus coming. I saw a poster with a bear.

MOTHER'S VOICE. It doesn't matter now.

TISH. Yes, it does! Do something!

MOTHER'S VOICE *(firmly)*. We've done all we can.

TISH. But not enough! I ... I didn't do enough!

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. Quiet. Quiet.

TISH *(softly)*. Yes, if I'd been quiet so he could sleep. And—
Oh! Once when I was mad, I said ... I wish he was dead.
Oh, I didn't mean it, Grandpa. I didn't mean it.

MOTHER'S VOICE. Hush, dear. It's not your fault. Grandpa loved you.

TISH. Then why is he ... leaving me? *(Pulls away as if being held.)* Oh, let me go!

MOTHER'S VOICE *(sharply, becoming edgy with emotion)*.
Yes. Go put the flowers in some water.

TISH. He liked the pink ones. Now ... he'll never see them.
Oh, why ... why does Grandpa have to die?

MOTHER'S VOICE *(sternly, trying to control and cover her grief)*. Run along, dear. Run along.

AUNT ELLEN'S VOICE. Keep away. Away from his door.
Away ... away.

(The voices of MOTHER and AUNT ELLEN overlap and mix together, as they keep repeating, "Run along," "Away," "Run ... run," "Away ... away," "Run," "Away," "Run ... away; run ... away." They build to a climax in a choral chant, "Run ... away.")

TISH. I will. I'll run away. Up the hill ... to my tree ... my tree.

(TISH runs, circling to the tree which is at R, and on which the lights come up. The circle of light on the first scene dims out, and the chanting of the voices stop. TISH stands alone by her tree in the soft light of evening. She brushes back a tear, shakes her head, and throws the flowers on the ground. She sinks to the ground by the tree, hugs her knees, and looks up. She sees the first star, which is out of sight. Quickly she gets up, points to the star and chants.)

TISH (*cont'd*). Star light, star bright,

First star I see tonight,

I wish I may, I wish I might,

Have the wish I wish tonight.

I wish ... I wish ... Oh, Grandpa ... why? (*Goes back to tree.*) Why do you have to die?

(There is star music, tinkling with bells. From above, a small swing starts descending. Magic star light spots on it STAR BRIGHT stands on the swing, which stops in mid-air. Music dims out.)

STAR BRIGHT. Repeat, please.

TISH. I wish ... I wish ...

STAR BRIGHT. I know you are wishing. That's why I'm here. But WHAT? Repeat, please.

TISH (*sees and goes near him*). Who are you?

STAR BRIGHT (*slowly and proudly*). I am the first star out tonight! (*Happily*.) I did it! I did it! I did it again! (*Excitedly*.) First star ... first star ... first star out tonight! (*To TISH*.) It's the early star, you know, who gets the wish. What is yours? Repeat, please.

TISH. Can you make a wish come true?

STAR BRIGHT. I've been making wishes come true for a thousand years.

TISH. A thousand years! You're older than Grandpa.

STAR BRIGHT (*sits on swing*). Old? Oh, no. I'll twinkle for another thousand years.

TISH. And then?

STAR BRIGHT (*cheerfully*). Then my light will go out.

TISH. Like Grandpa.

STAR BRIGHT. But there will be a new star. It's the great pattern ...

TISH. I'll never have another Grandpa.

STAR BRIGHT. ... the great circle of life. In every ending there is a new beginning.

TISH (*fully realizing it*). I'll never see Grandpa again. I'll never hear him whistle. (*Begins to whistle "O Susannah"*.)

STAR BRIGHT. Your wish? What is your wish?

TISH. I wish ... I wish Grandpa could live a thousand years!

STAR BRIGHT (*startled*). What? Repeat, please!

TISH (*excited*). I wish he'd never die. Nobody would ever die! Everyone live forever!

STAR BRIGHT. Oh, no, no, no! Think what a mixed up world it would be!

TISH (*speaks intently*). I wish ... I wish I knew why ... why

Grandpa has to die.

STAR BRIGHT. That is not a quick one-two-buckle-my shoe wish. No. That is a think-and-show-it, then you-know-it, come-true wish.

TISH. Please.

STAR BRIGHT (*with anticipated excitement*). Close your eyes. Whisper the words again. Open your eyes. And your wish will begin.

(TISH closes her eyes. STAR BRIGHT claps his hands, then motions. There is music and beautiful lights. STAR BRIGHT is delighted with the effect.)

STAR BRIGHT (*cont'd*). Very good! Repeat, please. (*Claps and waves his hand. Again there is music and beautiful lights.*) Excellent! Thank you!

(The swing with STAR BRIGHT is pulled up and out of sight. The full stage is seen, lighted brightly and in soft colors. [Never is the stage dark, eerie, or frightening.] It is TISH's fantasy. The large tree is at R, and open space with beautiful sky. MIME appears at R. He is a showman, a magician and an accomplished mime who never speaks. He wears a long coat with many colorful patch pockets. He is NOT in white face, but his face is natural, friendly and expressive. He enters cautiously, carrying a traveling box, which he sets down at C. On the side the audience sees, is painted the word, "BEAR." On the other side is painted the word, "DANCING." He beckons off R. THE WORLD'S GREATEST DANCING BEAR enters R. He is a star performer, amusing, vain and lovable like a teddy bear. He does NOT wear an animal mask, nor is the actor's face painted, frightening or grotesque, with animal makeup. He wears his traveling hat. He hurries in, worried and out of breath.)

BEAR. I must stop and get my breath. *(Pants heavily.)* My heart is pounding. *(Looks about.)* Are we safe? *(Frightened.)* I don't see him. I don't hear him. Yes, we have out run him.

(BEAR motions and MIME places box for BEAR to sit.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. Where ... where in this wide whirling wonderful world ... do you think we are? Switzerland?

(MIME makes pointed mountain with his wrist, runs his fingers up and down the "mountain," then shakes his head.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. You are right. No mountains. England?

(MIME opens and holds up imaginary umbrella, holds hand out to feel the rain, shakes his head.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. You are right. No rain. India?

(MIME leans over, swings one arm for a trunk, then other for his tail and walks.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. No elephants.

TISH. Excuse me.

(They freeze. TISH comes to them.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. I can tell you where you are. You are in Arkansas.

BEAR. Quick! Disguise. Hide.

(BEAR and MIME hurry to R. MIME quickly takes from one of his pockets a pair of dark glasses and gives them to BEAR who puts them on; then stands beside BEAR to hide him.)

TISH (*recites with pride*). Arkansas was the 25th state to be admitted to the union. It is the 27th in size, and the state flower is apple blossom.

BEAR. Who is it?

(MIME pantomimes a girl.)

BEAR (*cont'd*). A girl?

(MIME pantomimes a small girl.)

BEAR (*cont'd*). A little girl? Tell her to go away. To run away.

(MIME pantomimes to TISH. BEAR hides behind tree.)

TISH. I have. I have run away. Have you run away, too?

(MIME nods.)

TISH (*cont'd*). Why?

(MIME looks frightened off R, then puts finger to lips.)

TISH (*cont'd*). Who are you?

(MIME takes a card from a pocket and presents it to her. She reads.)

TISH (*cont'd*). “A Mime.” You never speak.

(MIME shakes his head, and “walks” in one spot and tips his hat.)

TISH (*cont'd*). “A Magician.” You do tricks!

(MIME pulls handkerchief from sleeve.)

TISH (*cont'd*). “Friend.” You give help.

(MIME touches handkerchief under her eyes.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. Thank you. I was crying because my Grandpa ... he's going to ...

(BEAR, without glasses steps out from behind the tree, does a loud tap dance step and poses. MIME turns the traveling box around and with a flourish points to the word painted on that side of the box. TISH reads it with amazement.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. Dancing.

(MIME turns box around again. TISH reads.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. Bear.

(MIME motions to BEAR who steps forward.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. I've never met a bear. I've never seen a DANCING bear.

BEAR *(to MIME)*. Should I?

(MIME nods.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. Shall I?

(MIME nods.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. I will! My Spanish hat.

(MIME jumps with joy and gets hat from box. BEAR motions to TISH who sits on the ground.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. Be seated, please.

(MIME holds up a hand mirror, which he takes from a pocket, holds it up for BEAR to look at himself, and fixes the hat.)

BEAR (*cont'd*). To the right ... to the right ... Ah, just right!

(MIME motions and a spot light comes on. ANNOUNCER'S VOICE is heard over a loud speaker.)

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. Ladies and Gentlemen: Presenting in his spectacular, special, Spanish dance, the World's famous, the World's favorite, the World's Greatest Dancing Bear!

(MIME motions and Spanish music is heard. BEAR steps into the spotlight. He dances with professional perfection a Spanish dance, but he does not finish. At a climactic moment, he stops, holds his hand against his heart and speaks with short breaths.)

BEAR. Stop the music.

(MIME motions. Music stops.)

BEAR (*cont'd*). Dim the light.

(MIME motions. Spot dims out.)

TISH. What is it?

BEAR (*breathing heavily*). He is near. He is coming.

TISH. Who?

BEAR. He is almost here. Hide. I must hide. He must not find me.

(MIME points to tree.)

BEAR (*cont'd*). Yes, the tree. Hurry!

(MIME helps BEAR to tree.)

TISH. Who? Who is coming?

BEAR. The box. Cover the box.

(BEAR disappears behind the tree. MIME sits on traveling box. BEAR's head appears.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. Talk.

(MIME mime-talks with hands and face.)

BEAR *(cont'd)*. Louder!

(BEAR's head disappears. MIME motions for TISH to talk.)

TISH. Talk? What about?

BEAR *(head appears)*. Arkansas. *(Head disappears.)*

TISH *(recites nervously)*. Arkansas has mineral springs, natural caves, and ... and ... diamond mines. *(Looks off R and whispers, frightened.)* I don't hear anyone. I don't see anyone.

(MIME motions for her to talk.)

TISH *(cont'd)*. Arkansas was first known as the state of many bears. *(Looks and whispers, mysteriously.)* There isn't anyone. Nothing. Just quiet, nothing. Who is he running away from?

(MIME motions "shh," then runs L to R and looks, then motions for BEAR to come out.)

BEAR *(comes from behind tree)*. He didn't find me. I escaped ... this time. *(Pleased, but short of breath.)* My traveling hat. We must go on.

(MIME takes Spanish hat and gives BEAR traveling hat.)