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A Song of Sixpence

CHARACTERS

CLAUDIUS (or CLAUDIA) BOPP, a villager
KING HEMPLEWORTH THE HOPEFUL
QUEEN MATHILDE
MARION MAYTAG, the maid
WEEDLING, m or f, the gardener
GALLOP, m or f, the groom
WHIZ, the wizard
SIR GALUPSHUS THE GROSS, a knight
I.C. FROST, m or f, resident of the Northern Border
SANDY CACTUS, m or f, resident of the Southern Border
BLACKBIRDS, as many as desired

For a smaller cast of 3m, 2f, 3m or f, the following may be doublecast as I.C. FROST, SANDY CACTUS and BLACKBIRDS: MARION, WEEDLING, GALLOP or WHIZ.

TIME: When the black birds nipped the maid's nose...

PLACE: The kingdom of King Hempleworth the Hopeful.
Throne room and other areas may be suggested by simple set pieces.

PLAYING TIME: about 55 minutes

NOTE: Entrances and exits through the audience, although not required, work well in this piece.

A Song of Sixpence

SCENE 1

AT RISE: *The stage is dark. Spotlights pick up each character as needed, in and around the palace of King Hempleworth the Hopeful. CLAUDIUS enters accompanied by a shy and frightened BLACKBIRD.*

CLAUDIUS. Don't be afraid. No one is going to hurt you. (*Indicates audience.*) See? They just want to hear your story. (*To audience.*) Greetings! My name is Claudius Bopp. This, of course, is a blackbird. (*BLACKBIRD caws a shy hello to audience.*) She's a bit nervous. She had a terrible scare recently. She was baked into a pie! (*BLACKBIRD squawks and hides her head under her wing.*) She doesn't like to talk about it, but we both think it's important you know. It all began with a certain nursery rhyme. You've probably heard it: "Sing a Song of Sixpence"? Some of you may be a long way from your nursery rhyme days, though, so I'll refresh your memory. Sing along, if you like, but when I raise my hand like this—(*raises one hand over his head, puts finger of other hand to his lips to indicate "quiet"*) please stop. Watch my hand, all right? Here we go! (*Singing.*)

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye—

(BLACKBIRD quickly covers her ears. CLAUDIUS raises his hand to stop singing.)

CLAUDIUS. This next part isn't her favorite. Let's get through it as quickly as we can. *(Lowers his hand and sings, quickly.)*

Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie.

(Raises his hand. LIGHTS come up to reveal KING on his throne with BLACKBIRDS on the floor in a huddle before him, heads down. CLAUDIUS lowers his hand and resumes singing.)

CLAUDIUS.

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing— *(Raises his hand.)*

BLACKBIRDS *(including one with CLAUDIUS, in a plaintive tone).* CAW! CAW! CAW! CAW!

KING *(singing).*

Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?

(LIGHTS go down on KING. BLACKBIRDS exit, including the one with CLAUDIUS.)

CLAUDIUS *(to audience).* Was it or was it not a dainty dish to set before the king? That depends on whether you're the king or the blackbirds!

(Lowers his hand and resumes singing as LIGHTS come up on KING, QUEEN and MAID, each in his/her own area. They pantomime action as it is sung.)

CLAUDIUS.

The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money. *(Raises his hand.)*

KING. 1, 399, 217, 604. 1, 399, 217, 605. 1, 399, 217, 606.

Oh, my, I do have the most extraordinary penny collection!

CLAUDIUS *(lowers hand, sings).*

The queen was in the parlor,
Eating bread and honey. *(Raises hand.)*

QUEEN. Ummmm-mmmmm, I love honey more than
money 'cause it's so yummy in my tummy!

CLAUDIUS *(lowers hand, sings).*

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes— *(Raises hand.)*

MAID *(singing).*

This is the way we dry our clothes,
Dry our clothes, dry our clothes.
This is the way, we dry our clothes—

(Speaking to audience.)

I had an amazing dream once. I dreamed there was a big white box. And I gathered up all the laundry and threw it into the big white box. And then the big white box made big, weird noises, and shook itself like this: *(shakes)*

ing herself) thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka. (Stands still.) And then all the laundry came out of the big white box, perfectly clean and dry. It was such a wonderful dream! I wonder if it will ever come true? (Sings and shakes.)

Oh, this is the way we dry our clothes,
Thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka ...

CLAUDIUS (*lowers hand, sings*).

When along came a blackbird
And nipped her on the nose.

(CLAUDIUS raises his hand to stop the singing as BLACKBIRDS swoop onto the stage, possibly through audience. One "nips" MAID on the nose. ALL except CLAUDIUS freeze.)

CLAUDIUS. We all know the story up to this point. But what happened next?

(CLAUDIUS waves his arm toward the others as full LIGHTS up and MAID clutches the tip of her nose and yells:)

MAID. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!

(CLAUDIUS and BLACKBIRD exit.)

QUEEN (*stops eating*). Goodness gracious, what was that?
KING (*stops counting*). We're under attack. Load up the drawbridge. Draw up the cannons. I mean, draw up the load. Load up the draw! I mean...what do I mean? Some body do some thing. Do any thing! But do it now!

QUEEN (*leaves her area to approach KING*). Hempleworth! Pull yourself together. This may be a national emergency. How would it look to our citizens if the king went completely to pieces every time there was a national emergency?

KING. How does it look now?

QUEEN. As if they had a fool for a king.

KING. There's your answer.

QUEEN. Hempleworth, you cannot run a kingdom by acting like a perfect fool.

KING. Nobody's perfect, Mathilde, dear.

QUEEN. Oh, Hempleworth, what am I going to do with you.

MAID. Your attention, please! I just said AAAAAAAA-
AAAAAAGH! Isn't anyone going to help me?

KING (*mimes looking out a window*). It's one of the maids.
The one who does the laundry.

QUEEN. Dear Marion Maytag! Don't know what I'd do without her.

MAID. Guess I'll have to help myself. (*Ban dages her nose with a rag from the laundry*.)

KING. She's the one who screamed. Perhaps it isn't a national emergency. Perhaps she's just pricked her finger.

QUEEN. Pricked her finger? On wet laundry?

KING. Well, got a splinter then. From a clothespin. That's possible, isn't it? I can't bear national emergencies. Why, in Kingship school, I flunked every one of them: war, famine, draught, infestation, plague. Whenever the teacher asked me what I would do, I'd burst into tears.
(*Bursts into tears*.)

QUEEN. Hard to imagine.

MAID (*leaves her area to approach KING and QUEEN*).

Your Majesties, may I have a word with you?

QUEEN. Marion Maytag, whatever happened to your nose?

KING. A splinter, perhaps?

MAID. In my nose? What do you think I am, a wood-pecker?

KING. No, no, I just meant...I hope it isn't serious.

MAID. Well, it is serious. A blackbird nipped my nose.

KING (*shocked*). Again?

QUEEN (*shocked that he knows it's not the first time*).

Again?

MAID. And again! Third time this week. I've had it. I quit.

QUEEN. But where will you go? What will you do?

MAID. I've got it all worked out. I'm going to be an inventor.

KING. What are you going to invent?

MAID. A big white box.

KING & QUEEN. What?

MAID. A big white box. I'm going to put all my laundry in it and it's going to make weird noises and shake like this: thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka.

KING. How odd!

MAID. And then all the laundry will come out perfectly clean and dry.

QUEEN. How wonderful!

MAID. Wish me luck! (*Exits, shaking*.) Thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka, thumpa-clunka...

QUEEN. Good luck, Marion! (*Beat.*) I wonder if that blackbird loosened something in her head.

KING. This isn't a national emergency, is it?

QUEEN. No, I suppose not. I don't mind doing the laundry. It won't be the first time.

KING. That's one of the many reasons I love you, Mathilde.

QUEEN. Because I've done the laundry?

KING. Because you're so *capable*. There's nothing you can't handle, be it the laundry or—

QUEEN. National emergencies?

KING (*with a sheepish grin*). Precisely.

(*GALLOP and WEEDLING enter noisily.*)

GALLOP (*his voice a horse's whinny*). S-a-a-a-y, Your Majesties. O-o-o-o-h, my goodness. Teh-eh-eh-ehrrible new! Tell them, We-e-e-e-eedling!

WEEDLING (*comforting GALLOP, but his tone is more wheedling than gentle*). Whoa there, Gallop. Take it easy.

KING. Why it's Gallop, the horses' groom.

QUEEN. And Weedling, the gardener. What can we do for you two?

KING. Nothing important, I hope.

GALLOP. It's the bla-a-a-a-ackbirds, Your Majesty. Flah-ah-ah-ahcks of them everywhere!

WEEDLING. Diving straight at us and ZAP! right on the nose!

GALLOP. It's hah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-rible!

WEEDLING. Whoa, Gallop! Have some respect for the Royal Ears. The point is, Your Majesties, the servants are all running away. They say it's too dangerous to stay here. We've been under attack for nearly a week.

KING. Yes, we know, Weedling. You informed us the moment it began.

WEEDLING. Always ready to serve Your Majesty, in any way I can. Humble, faithful and reliable, that's me. (*Holds his hand out for reward.*) You've always made it worth my while, Your Majesty.

KING. What? Oh, yes, of course. (*Takes a coin out of his pocket.*) Here, an ancient penny from my collection. It's very valuable. It has King Rufus Stubblecheeks on it. They say it's a very good likeness. (*Drops coin into WEEDLING's hand.*)

WEEDLING. Thank you, Your Majesty. You are too kind to your humble, faithful and reliable servant. (*Examines coin carefully, bites it, shows it to GALLOP, etc.*)

KING. Probably.

QUEEN (*to KING*). You've known about those blackbirds for a week and you haven't done anything about them?

KING. Um...well...ah...yes.

QUEEN. But why?

KING. I kept hoping they'd go away.

WEEDLING (*before QUEEN can explode*). Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but this coin is worthless.

KING. Nonsense! There's King Rufus Stubblecheeks right on it.

WEEDLING. We've never had a King Rufus Stubblecheeks.

KING. Uh-oh. I was afraid of that.

QUEEN. You knew your pennies were worthless, and you didn't do anything about that either?

KING. I thought they might be worthless, but I kept hoping I was wrong. Somehow, somewhere, there could have been a King Rufus Stubblecheeks, couldn't there?

QUEEN. They don't call you Hempleworth the Hopeful for nothing, do they?

WEEDLING (*aside*). Ought to call him Hempleworth the Hopeless. Come on, Gallop, let's get out of here. (*GALLOP doesn't move*.) Here's your penny, Your Majesty. Rufus Stubblecheeks, indeed! Well, let's go, Gallop. (*GALLOP doesn't move*.) *Giddyap!*

GALLOP (*instantly animated*). I have to l-e-e-e-ave, Your Majesty. Teh-eh-eh-eh-eh-ribly sorry. If you ever get rid of those bla-a-a-a-ackbirds, I'll come right back. We'd all be h-a-a-a-py to—

WEEDLING. Whoa, Gallop, you neighing ninny. The point is, Your Majesty, we quit. We all quit.

KING. Whatever happened to old humble, faithful and reliable?

WEEDLING. The same thing that happened to King Rufus Stubblecheeks. *Giddyap, Gallop.* (*Runs off with GALLOP*.)

KING. But there never was a King Rufus Stubblecheeks.

QUEEN. There never was an old humble, faithful and reliable, either. That Weedling is nothing but crabgrass.

KING (*tossing coins, sadly*). One. Two. Three. Four—

QUEEN. Oh, Hempleworth, you mustn't feel bad about the pennies.

KING. How can I not feel bad about 1, 399, 217, 606 worthless pennies? Poor Rufus Stubblecheeks. I wonder who he was?

QUEEN. Hempleworth, we have more important things to worry about right now. We have no servants.

KING. I can't do anything about that.

QUEEN. You *must*. You're the king!

KING. Well, let's hope they come to their senses—

QUEEN. Hoping is very nice, Hempleworth, and very sweet, but it doesn't solve problems.

KING. Mathilde, you know I'm as worthless as those pennies in a national emergency. (*Starts to snivel.*)

QUEEN. You are not worthless, Hempleworth! You are going to do something and you're going to do it now. (*KING paces, flustered, trying to think of something to do.*) I'm waiting, Hempleworth.

KING. It's no good. I can't even decide where to begin.

QUEEN. Begin at the beginning. (*KING turns left and right, fretting over where the beginning might begin. Finally, he backs into the laundry basket and sits down in it.*) Watch out! Hempleworth! Oh, my goodness!

KING. The laun dry! Let's be gin with the laun dry!

QUEEN. The laundry?

KING. Yes! The laundry needs doing. Let's do it. (*Beat.*) You do it, since you've had experience.

QUEEN. And what will you do, while I'm doing the laun dry?

KING. I'll...do the gardening!

QUEEN. Fair enough. It's a deal! (*They shake hands.*)

KING. I'm doing it! I'm handling a national emergency!

QUEEN. I'm so proud of you, Hempleworth.

KING. Shall we?

QUEEN. Let's!

(They mime working as they sing:)

QUEEN.

Oh, this is the way we dry our clothes,
Dry our clothes, dry our clothes.

This is the way we dry our clothes,
So early Tuesday morning.

KING.

And this is the way we pull our weeds.
Pull our weeds, pull our weeds.
This is the way we pull our weeds,
So early Tuesday morning.

KING & QUEEN.

And this is the way we...

*(BLACKBIRDS swoop in, possibly from the audience.
Two of them nip KING and QUEEN on their noses.)*

KING & QUEEN. AAAAAAAAAGH!

(BLACKBIRDS exit.)

QUEEN. My nose! Ouch!

KING. That really smarts, doesn't it? I don't blame our
servants for quitting. As a matter of fact, I quit, too!

QUEEN. Hemplowth, you're the king. Kings can't quit.

KING. They can't?

QUEEN. No. But queens can. Bye! *(She starts off.)*

KING. Mathilde, get back here!

QUEEN. I was just joking.

KING. This is no time for jokes. This is serious!

QUEEN. I know. What do we do?

KING *(with as much authority as he can summon, nursing
his nose).* The first thing to do is...go inside.

QUEEN. Right. (*They go to throne room area, carrying the bucket of laundry.*) And the second thing we do is bandage our noses. (*They wrap each other's noses with scraps from the laundry.*) There you go, dear.

KING. Thank you. And there you go, too.

QUEEN. Thanks. That feels much better. Now what?

KING. Well, there's plenty to do inside.

QUEEN. So there is. How about the sweeping?

KING. And the dusting.

(They mime action, with or without an actual broom and dustrag.)

QUEEN (*sweeping, and singing a little faster*).

Oh, this is the way we sweep our floor,
Sweep our floor, sweep our floor.
This is the way we sweep our floor,
So early Wednesday morning.

KING (*dusting and singing still faster*).

And this is the way we dust our room,
Dust our room, dust our room.
This is the way we dust our room,
So early Wednesday morning.

QUEEN. The mending!

KING. The ironing!

QUEEN (*singing and miming action, a little faster*).

Oh, this is the way we mend our clothes,
Mend our clothes, mend our clothes.

This is the way we mend our clothes,
So early Thursday morning.

KING (*faster*).

And this is the way we iron our clothes,
Iron our clothes, iron our clothes.
This is the way we iron our clothes,
So early Thursday morning.

QUEEN. Isn't this fun?

KING. Best week of my entire life!

QUEEN. The bread!

KING. The stew!

QUEEN (*faster*).

And this is the way we bake our bread,
Bake our bread, bake our bread.
This is the way we bake our bread,
So early Friday morning.

KING (*faster*).

And this is the way we stir our stew,
Stir our stew, stir our stew,
This is the way we stir our stew,
So early Friday morning.

QUEEN. Dear?

KING. Yes?

QUEEN. We seem to have a new load of laundry.

KING. We do?

QUEEN. Yes. And there are new weeds in the garden.

KING. There are?

QUEEN. And the floors need another washing.

KING. And the furniture needs another dusting!

QUEEN. And once we've done that—

KING. More mending.

QUEEN. More ironing.

KING. We're out of bread, too.

QUEEN. And I'm getting tired of stew.

KING. How about soup instead?

QUEEN. All right.

(KING and QUEEN mime and sing at top speed from here on out.)

KING. Well, here we go! *(Singing.)*

Oh, this is the way we wash our clothes,

Mend our clothes, iron our clothes.

This is the way we sweep our floor,

So early Saturday morning.

QUEEN.

And this is the way we pull our weeds,

Stir our soup, bake our bread.

This is the way we dust our room,

So early Sunday morning.

KING.

Oh, this is the way we wash our clothes,

Dry our clothes, mend our clothes.

This is the way we iron our clothes,

So early Monday morning.

QUEEN.

And this is the way we pull our soup,
Stir our weeds, bake our clothes.
This is the way we mend our floor,
So early Tuesday morning.

KING.

Oh, this is the way we dry our room,
Dust our weeds, stir our floor.
This is the way we pull our clothes,
So early Wednesday—

QUEEN. *Stop!*

KING. Gladly! I'm exhausted.

QUEEN. So am I. Hempleworth, what are we going to do?

KING. Not that question again! I thought I'd settled it once
and for all when we decided to come inside.

QUEEN. It's never settled once and for all, dear. There are
always new problems. But you've done it once, you can
do it again. Now think: What shall we do?

KING. Well...it seems to me—

QUEEN. Yes, yes, go on.

KING. It seems to me we must get our servants back.

QUEEN. I quite agree. But how?

KING. Don't you want to do one?

QUEEN. You need the practice, Hempleworth.

KING. Oh, very well. If I remember correctly, in Kingship
school we were told that when all else fails, call for the
Royal Wizard.

QUEEN. Then do it!

KING (*shouting*). Call for the Royal Wizard!

(KING and QUEEN wait a moment, looking right and left expectantly.)

QUEEN. Perhaps he didn't hear you, dear.

KING. One of the servants usually does this sort of thing.

QUEEN. I know. But you're doing fine. Give it another try.

KING. All right. It's sort of fun, you know? *(Shouting, louder.)* CALL FOR THE ROYAL WIZARD!

QUEEN. It sounds like fun. Queens never get to shout like that. *(Beat, then shyly:)* May I join you?

KING. Of course!

QUEEN & KING *(shouting as loud as they can)*. CALL FOR THE ROYAL WIZARD!

(WHIZ enters in star-studded nightshirt and nightcap, possibly through audience.)

WHIZ. What? *What?* WHAT? Was that an earthquake or was someone calling me?

KING. We called you, Whiz. But what on earth are you doing in your nightshirt at this time of day?

WHIZ. Nobody woke me up. One of the servants always wakes me up. Where are the servants anyway?

QUEEN. They've been gone for over a week.

KING. Have you been sleeping all that time?

WHIZ. I suppose so. I was dreaming that I was on a trip around the world. I'd just arrived in Timbuktu when you called. I've never dreamed my way to Timbuktu before. I was looking forward to seeing it.

KING. Sorry to interrupt your world tour, Whiz, but we've got a national emergency here. All the servants have quit.

WHIZ. Quit? Why? You haven't been paying them with your worthless pennies, have you?

KING. No. They quit because blackbirds have been nipping them on the nose.

WHIZ. How odd! What do you intend to do about it?

QUEEN. We were hoping you could think of something, Whiz.

WHIZ. Oh, I see. Hmmmmmm. (*Wanders around, thoughtfully.*) Hmmmmmmmm. HMMMMMM! Well...

KING & QUEEN. Yes?

WHIZ. I have no idea.

KING & QUEEN. Really?

WHIZ. Really. Nipped noses aren't exactly my area of expertise. Spells, I can handle. Prestidigitation. Prognostication.

KING. What?

QUEEN. Magic.

KING (*disappointed*). Oh. (*With determination.*) This is ridiculous. Someone must have an idea. And that someone must be found!

QUEEN. Bravo, dear! You sound so...kingly!

KING. Thank you, Mathilde. Say! Why don't we have a contest?

WHIZ. A contest?

KING. Yes! A contest for the best suggestion on how to handle those blackbirds.

QUEEN. If you have a contest, you must have a prize for the winner.

KING. Yes, we must. But what?

WHIZ. What, indeed?

QUEEN. I wish I knew.

KING. A wish! A granted wish. Whatever the winner wishes for, we'll give him. How does that sound?

QUEEN. Brilliant!

WHIZ. I wish I could get back to Timbuktu.

KING. Oh, go on, Whiz, go back to sleep. Thank you for your help...whatever it was.

WHIZ. I don't think I remember the way.

QUEEN. To sleep? You just lie down, close your eyes...

WHIZ. No. To Timbuktu!

KING. Solve our problem, Whiz, and I'll grant your wish. I'll send you to the real Timbuktu. Wouldn't you like that?

WHIZ. Oh, indeed I would!

KING. Then get to work. Think!

WHIZ. I will, Your Majesty! A trip to the real Timbuktu.

My, my, my! (*WHIZ exits, possibly through audience.*)

QUEEN. Your plan is working already, dear. You've got the Wizard thinking. And that's not easy! Now what do we do?

KING. "Now what do we do?" Oh, I'm beginning to like the sound of that question! I'll bet I can even answer it, if I try.

QUEEN. I'm sure you can.

KING. We send for our Royal Knight and have him deliver a proclamation to the people.

QUEEN. How impressive! What will it say?

KING. Call for the Royal Knight and you'll see.

QUEEN. Call for the Royal Knight? All by myself?

KING. Be my guest.

QUEEN. CALL FOR THE ROYAL KNIGHT!

(KNIGHT gallops in immediately, riding a wooden hobby horse.)

KNIGHT. You called, Your Majesty?

KING. Well done, Mathilde!

QUEEN (*modestly*). It's a gift!

KING. Sir Galuphus the Gross...

KNIGHT. At your service, Your Majesty.

KING. I have an important errand for you.

KNIGHT. Yes, Your Majesty?

KING. I want you to ride to each and every border of my kingdom. To the north, to the south, to the east, and to the west. (*To QUEEN.*) That's all of them, isn't it?

QUEEN. I believe so, dear.

KING. Good. Well, don't just stand there, Galuphus. Get going!

KNIGHT. Very well, Your Majesty. (*Gallops off.*)

QUEEN. Ah, Hempleworth...

KING. Yes, yes, I know. I'm doing beautifully. I'm masterful, decisive, authoritative. I'm a king!

QUEEN. You forgot to tell Galuphus what to say to people at all four borders of the kingdom.

KING. I'm a fool.

QUEEN. No, you're not, dear. Anyone can make a mistake now and then. Even a king.

KING. Do you think you could call Sir Galuphus back?

QUEEN. I could try. CALL FOR THE ROYAL KNIGHT!

(KNIGHT gallops back in, panting.)

KNIGHT. I've done it, Your Majesty, just as you asked. I've been to all four borders of the kingdom.

KING. Oh, I am sorry, Sir Galupshus, but you're going to have to do it all again.

KNIGHT. What ever you say, Your Maj esty. (*He starts off.*)

KING. Wait! WAIT! I have to tell you what to *say* to everyone.

KNIGHT (*trots back to KING*). Oh. That *would* make the journey more meaningful.

KING. Yes, it would. Now here it is, the Royal Proclamation. "Hear ye, hear ye!" (*To QUEEN.*) That's a good begin ning, is n't it?

QUEEN. Very good, dear.

KING. The king announces a contest for the best suggestions as to what to do about the blackbirds that have been nipping the noses of his servants. Whoever offers the first suggestion that works will be declared the winner and will receive as his or her prize...one granted wish. Guaranteed by their Royal Majesties, Queen Mathilde and King Hempleworth the Hopeful.

QUEEN. Lovely.

KING. On your way, Sir Galupshus.

KNIGHT. Yes, indeed, Your Majesty. (*Gallops off.*)

QUEEN. Hempleworth, I think your idea is splendid!

KING. Thank you, Mathilde. But will it work?

(They shrug and exit as LIGHTS dim.)

SCENE 2

AT RISE: *The Northern Border of the kingdom. A prop or two to indicate cold: a snowman, perhaps. I.C. FROST,*

in parka, boots and mittens, is knitting a huge sweater on enormous broomstick needles.

FROST (*singing “operatically”*).

Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full.
One for my master, one for my dame,
And wah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-unnnnnnn
For the polar bear that lives down the lane.

(*KNIGHT gallops in on hobby horse, wearing mittens and earmuffs. The horse also wears earmuffs.*)

KNIGHT. Brrrrrrr! Excuse me, but I'm looking for any one who lives at the Northern Border of King Hempleworth's king dom. Would that be you, I hope?

FROST. Can't give you a precise answer on that, son. The actual border might be here— (*indicates a spot on the ground*) or it might be here— (*indicates another spot*) or it could very well be over here. (*Indicates a third spot.*) There's a marker, you see, a pretty little stone thingama-jig, that says, “King Hempleworth's Kingdom. Official Northern Border. Greetings, Stranger. Welcome, Friend.” But I haven't seen it since the last thaw.

KNIGHT. When was the last thaw?

FROST. Eighteen-oh-three.

KNIGHT. Eighteen-oh-three! But that would make you over 200 years old!

FROST. Yup. Things keep well round here.

KNIGHT. I'm not keeping well at all. I'm freezing. Ah, what are you knitting there?

FROST. A sweater.

KNIGHT. A sweater? But it's enormous. It'll never fit you.

FROST. No, but it'll fit my polar bear.

KNIGHT. You have a polar bear?

FROST. Round here, you can't *not* have a polar bear!

KNIGHT. Oh. Well, would your polar bear mind if my horse and I borrowed a little bit of its sweater while we're here? We're so cold.

FROST. Oh, my, no. Help yourself. I'll just knit around you.

KNIGHT (*pulling a corner of the sweater around himself and horse*). Oh, thank you. That feels much better.

FROST. I.C. Frost, at your service.

KNIGHT. Pardon?

FROST. I said, I.C. Frost, at your service. That's me. I.C. Frost. At your service.

KNIGHT. Oh! Pleased to meet you. I'm Sir Galupshus the Gross, here with a proclamation from King Hempleworth.

FROST. And I thought you'd come just to visit me. Nobody ever visits me.

KNIGHT. I'm not surprised. Why do you stay here?

FROST. It's my duty. I've been guarding this border since 1802.

KNIGHT. Guarding it from what?

FROST. I forgot in 1857.

KNIGHT. And yet you stay here?

FROST. Where else would I go with a name like I.C. Frost?

KNIGHT. Beats me. Well, the king has a problem and he needs your help.

FROST. Does he? Did he say it just like that? Did he say, I need the help of I.C. Frost?

KNIGHT. Something like that.

FROST. See, you do your job long enough and you do it well and somebody's bound to recognize your talent and devotion. The king himself, hey? What can I do for the old gent?

KNIGHT. He's not old. In fact, he's young. For a king.

FROST. Young? Why, he's at least as old as I am. He passed right by here in 1802. Laid that stone I was telling you about. Right here. Or over there. Or wherever the fool thing is.

KNIGHT. That must have been this king's grandfather. Or maybe his great-great-great-grandfather.

FROST. You mean to tell me Old King Hempleworth is...

KNIGHT. Dead? Probably so. But don't cry! You'll freeze your cheeks!

FROST. Poor old King Hempleworth. I'll miss him so. Not that I've seen him in the last century or two, but still... What's the new king's name?

KNIGHT. Hempleworth.

FROST (*cheering right up*). Oh, that's all right then! As long as there's a Hempleworth on the throne, there'll be an I.C. Frost on the Northern Border. Or near the Northern Border, anyway.

KNIGHT. It's nice you feel that way. But getting back to the king's problem: Blackbirds have been nipping the noses of his servants.

FROST. Ridiculous. I'm the king's servant, and nobody's been nipping my nose.

KNIGHT. Well, I don't suppose you get many blackbirds up here.

FROST. None at all. That's it! That must be what I'm guarding the border against. Blackbirds! And I'm doing

a good job of it, if I must say so myself. Thank you, son, for bringing it all back to me. I'm guarding the border against blackbirds. I ought to remember that for another hundred years at least.

KNIGHT. At least.

FROST. But you say there are blackbirds nipping the noses of the king's servants. Present company excepted.

KNIGHT. Of course.

FROST. They must be crossing another border somewhere...

KNIGHT. No doubt. And the king wants to know what to do about their nipping. Because all of his servants have quit.

FROST. Why, the little quitters. Isn't that disgraceful! I've never quit and I never will. As long as there's a Hembleworth on the throne, there'll be an I.C. Frost—

KNIGHT. Ah...ah...ah...CHOO!

FROST. Gesundheit. On the Northern Border.

KNIGHT. Thank you. (*Talks with a "code in da nodse."*) Could we get on with the king's problem? I don't think I can last much longer up here.

FROST. Oh, I am sorry. I was hoping you'd stay for tea.

KNIGHT. Hot tea? Oh, I'd like that!

FROST. No. Iced tea.

KNIGHT. Of course. Never mind then, thank you. Well, do you have a suggestion? About the blackbirds and the nipped noses?

FROST. Oh, sure. Knit yourselves some little nose covers. You could put bells on the tips. Or pompons. Or tassels that flap in the wind. That ought to keep the blackbirds off.

KNIGHT. Say, that's very good!

FROST. I ought to have a pattern here some where. (*Pulls out a ragged magazine.*) *The Complete Book of Frozen Stitchery.* Let's see. Boots for your penguin. Mittens for your walrus. Sweaters for your polar bear. Oh, I'll need that one. (*Rips out the page and stuffs it in his parka.*) Warmers for your nose. Here we are. (*Rips out that page and gives it to KNIGHT.*)

KNIGHT. Thank you! If your suggestion works, you get a granted wish from the king. What would you wish for?

FROST. I wish...I wish I could remember what I'm guarding the border against.

KNIGHT. Blackbirds.

FROST. Blackbirds! Of course! Bless you, son. No, there's nothing I'd wish for. I've got everything I need.

KNIGHT. That's good to hear. And I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Frost. (*Unwraps sweater and hands it to FROST.*)

FROST. Call me I.C. So long, son. Drop up again soon.

KNIGHT. In the summer, maybe.

FROST. Summer? What's that?

KNIGHT. Oh, dear. Goodbye, I.C. (*Gallops off, sneezing another loud and violent sneeze as he goes.*) AHHHHH-CHOOOOO!

FROST. Gesundheit, Galupshus! (*Settles in, knitting again, and singing.*)

Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?

Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full.

One for my master, one for my dame,

And one for the polar bear

That lives down the lane.

(*Looks offstage.*) Hey! There you are, you big rascal. Come here, I need to measure this sleeve.

(He exits. LIGHTS fade.)

SCENE 3

AT RISE: *Back at the palace. KING and QUEEN are trying on a variety of colorful nose covers.*

KING. What do you think, Mathilde?

QUEEN. Charming, Hempleworth. *(Tweaks his nose.)*
Tweak!

KING. Ouch! What did you do that for?

QUEEN. I couldn't help it. Your nose looks so cute. I just
had to give it a little tweak. *(Tweaks him again.)* Tweak!

KING. Stop it, Mathilde!

QUEEN. I'll try. *(A moment's pause, then:)* Tweak!

KING. Mathilde!

QUEEN. That was the last. I've got it out of my system
now. *(Pause, then her hand starts toward his nose.)*

KING. Mathilde!

QUEEN *(pulls her hand back, gives it a little slap with the
other hand)*. That's it. I'm through.

KING. Which do you want, tassle, pompon or bell?

QUEEN. Oh, I don't know. Could I try them all on first?

KING. All right, but hurry. I'm eager to test them out.
(Calling offstage.) Whiz? Galupshus? Have you chosen
yours?

(WHIZ and GALUPSHUS enter, wearing nose covers.)

WHIZ & KNIGHT. Yes, Your Majesty.

KING. Very good. Let's get started. Whiz and Galupshus, you handle the garden. Mathilde and I will work on the laundry. Are you ready yet, Mathilde?

QUEEN (*modeling her nose cover*) How does this look?

KING. Terrific. (*Tweaks her nose.*) Tweak!

QUEEN. Hempleworth!

KING. Let's go.

(*ALL march "out" and get to work. Their song and actions take on a see-saw effect.*)

WHIZ & KNIGHT.

This is the way we pull our weeds—

KING & QUEEN.

Dry our clothes—

WHIZ & KNIGHT.

Pull our weeds.

KING & QUEEN.

This is the way we dry our clothes—

WHIZ & KNIGHT.

So early—

KING & QUEEN.

Monday—

WHIZ & KNIGHT.

Morning.

KING & QUEEN.

This is the way we—

(BLACKBIRDS enter, nip ALL on the ears and fly off.)

QUEEN. My ear! It nipped me on the ear!

ALL. Me, too!

KING. Inside! Hurry! *(ALL hurry "in.")* You know what this means, don't you, Galupshus?

KNIGHT. I'm on my way again, sir?

KING. You've got it.

KNIGHT. But, Your Majesty, I have a terrible cold. So does my horse!

KING. Go south this time. That ought to help.

KNIGHT. Very well, Your Majesty. *(Picks up hobby horse and trots off.)*

KING. Good luck, Galupshus!

KNIGHT *(offstage).* Thank you, Your...ah...ah...ah... CHOO!

ALL. Gesundheit, Galupshus!

KING *(noticing QUEEN before mirror).* What are you doing, Mathilde? Those nose covers are no good.

QUEEN. Oh, I don't know, Hempleworth. We could make a new style of it. Something simple for daytime, something a little more elegant for evening, and something comfy-cozy for the night. Here, try this one on.

KING. I don't want to.

QUEEN. Please? Just for me. Pretty please?

KING. Oh, all right. *(Puts on nose cover.)* There. Are you satisfied?

QUEEN. Not quite.

KING. What do you mean, "not quite"?

QUEEN. I mean... (*sidles up to him and tweaks his nose*)
TWEAK!

KING. Oh, no! Help!

(*KING runs off, QUEEN chasing him playfully.*)

QUEEN. Tweak! Tweak! Tweak!

WHIZ (to no one in particular). I'll bet they don't carry on
like that in Timbuktu!

(*WHIZ exits. LIGHTS dim.*)

SCENE 4

AT RISE: *The Southern Border of the kingdom, a desert. A beach umbrella or other prop indicating heat. SANDY CACTUS is found swinging a floppy beach hat and chanting sweetly.*

SANDY.

Bat, bat, come under my hat
And I'll give you a slice of bacon.
And when I bake, I'll give you a cake
If I am not mistaken.

(*Swoops hat down, looks inside.*) Nothing! Tricky little critter. (*Chants, more threateningly.*)

Bat, bat, come under my hat
And I'll give you a slice of bacon.
And when I bake, I'll give you a cake
If I am not mistaken.

(Swings hat, looks inside.) Still nothing! Phooey! (Angry now.)

Bat, bat, come under my hat...

(KNIGHT enters crawling and dragging horse; both KNIGHT and HORSE wear sunglasses.)

KNIGHT. Water! Water!

SANDY. Water? In the desert? Where?

KNIGHT. I need water!

SANDY. Of course you need water. We all do! But there isn't any water in the desert. If there were water, it wouldn't be a desert, would it?

KNIGHT. You mean, you haven't any water?

SANDY. Well, that's an entirely different question. Sure, I've got water. It's the desert that doesn't have any water. This is the desert. All this sand, got it? I'm a person— Sandy Cactus is the name.

KNIGHT. Could I have some water?

SANDY. Well, now, that's a third question. What do we have thus far? Fact: The desert does not have water. Fact: I do have water. Question: Could you have some water?

KNIGHT. Please?

SANDY. Sure. Why not? *(Hands KNIGHT a canteen.)*
There you are.

(KNIGHT drinks and shares some with his horse.)

KNIGHT. Oh, thank you.

SANDY. Think nothing of it. Think, instead, on the answers to our three questions. In summary: No, Yes, and Why not? Isn't that fascinating?

KNIGHT. Not really.

SANDY. My dear man, you must continually challenge your mind or in this climate it would very soon evaporate, dry up, blow away. Poof! You wouldn't want to lose your mind, would you?

KNIGHT. I'm not sure I already haven't.

SANDY. Think fast. If you can think, you've still got it.

KNIGHT. What should I think about?

SANDY. Look around you. Ask a question. Seek an answer. Those are the laws of survival around here.

KNIGHT. What...uh...what were you doing with that hat?

SANDY. Good question. I was chasing bats.

KNIGHT. Chasing bats? In the desert?

SANDY. Of course. Any fool can chase bats in a cave. But to chase them in the desert, now there's a challenge worthy of my attention.

KNIGHT. Have you ever caught one?

SANDY. Never.

KNIGHT. Then why do you go on doing it?

SANDY. Don't you see? It's the perfect challenge. Fact: I must keep my mind active. Fact: There are no bats in the desert. Fact: No matter how long I chase bats in the desert, I shall never catch one. Therefore: I will always be challenged and never lose my mind.

KNIGHT. No, but you might go a little batty! (*He cackles at his own joke.*)

SANDY. I don't get it.

KNIGHT. Never mind. I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here.

SANDY. No, I hadn't wondered yet. But that's very good.
A new question to ponder. I'll give it a try. Say, fellow,
what are you doing here?

KNIGHT. I'm here to deliver a proclamation from King
Hempleworth.

SANDY. Never heard of him.

KNIGHT. But he's your king.

SANDY. Didn't know I had a king.

KNIGHT. Where have you been all your life?

SANDY. Right here.

KNIGHT. Don't you ever go anywhere else?

SANDY. What for? Plenty of questions to ask right here.
Plenty of answers, too. Then there are the bats, of
course. They keep me busy.

KNIGHT (*rolling his eyes*). Of course.

SANDY. But it's good to know there are other places with
other questions. Think of it: a whole world filled with
untried questions. Gee. I'd like to tackle one or two. Just
for the fun of it.

KNIGHT. Go on.

SANDY. All right. Who is this King Hempleworth? And
what does he want? And what's a king, anyway? And...

KNIGHT. Wait a minute! One at a time!

SANDY. I'm sorry. I got quite carried away. A whole
world of questions. It's very exciting, you know.

KNIGHT. Yes, well, King Hempleworth is in charge of
this whole country and he has a problem and he'd like
your help.

SANDY. Seeking an answer, is he? Oh, I like him already.
What's his question?

KNIGHT. His question is, what can he do about the black-
birds that are nipping the noses of his servants?

SANDY. Oh, that's a beau! It's got real style.

KNIGHT. Any suggestions?

SANDY. Let me see. Fact: Blackbirds are nipping the noses of his servants. Question: What do we do about it? Answer: Get servants without noses.

KNIGHT. There are no servants without noses.

SANDY. Hmmmm. Well, let me think again. Fact: Blackbirds are..hmmmm. Blackbirds, noses, servants. Can't get rid of noses. Don't want to get rid of servants. There fore: Must get rid of black birds! There you have it, get rid of the blackbirds!

KNIGHT. Yes, but how?

SANDY. Ah, a new question! Lovely. Fact: Have blackbirds. Fact: Must get rid of them. Question: How? Answer: Capture them.

KNIGHT. In what?

SANDY. Oh, you are very good at this! Fact: Must capture black birds. Ques tion: In what? An swer: In your hats!

KNIGHT. Our hats?

SANDY. Of course. If it works for bats, it'll work for blackbirds.

KNIGHT. But it doesn't work for bats. You've never caught one.

SANDY. A mere technicality. Your challenge is not as great as mine. As you yourself pointed out, I have no bats in the desert. But you *do* have blackbirds.

KNIGHT. That's true.

SANDY. Of course, if you really don't care a bit for style...

KNIGHT. Yes?

SANDY. I hear some people use nets. It's disgusting, but true.

KNIGHT. What's wrong with it?

SANDY. Bat, bat, come under my net? It doesn't rhyme!

KNIGHT. Oh, I see.

SANDY. Good. And now, back to my challenge.

KNIGHT. Wait! If your suggestion works, you'll get a granted wish from the king. What would you wish for?

SANDY. Question: What would I wish for? Answer: I wish...I wish...I wish I could catch a bat! No! No, forget I said that! If I catch one, the challenge will be over and then what will I do? I don't wish for anything. I've got every thing I need. The desert, my hat...and no bats.

KNIGHT. Very well. Goodbye, then.

SANDY (*already scanning the area for bats*). Goodbye, goodbye. (*KNIGHT gallops off*) Bat, bat, come under my hat. COME UNDER MY HAT, YOU FUZZY LITTLE WEIRDO!

(*Runs off, madly swinging hat. LIGHTS fade.*)

SCENE 5

AT RISE: *The palace. KING and QUEEN enter, armed with nets and large, fanciful hats.*

KING. An excellent idea, Mathilde, using both nets and hats.

QUEEN. Style and practicality, I thought. One way or the other, it's bound to work.

(*They take a few practice swipes at one another with hats and nets. WHIZ enters, also with hat and net, followed by GALUPSHUS.*)

WHIZ. Your Majesties, if I might make a suggestion...

KING. I wish you would, Whiz. You haven't been much help up to now.

WHIZ. Yes, well, I think we ought to pretend to be gardening and doing the laundry. We'll hide the nets until the moment the blackbirds swoop down upon us. Then, swish! We've got them.

KING. Good thinking, Whiz. And about time, too.

WHIZ. Thank you, Your Majesty.

KING. Mathilde and Galupshus, you take the laundry.

Whiz and I will do the weeds. Attention! (*ALL line up, wearing hats and shouldering nets.*) Hup, hip, hip, hip. Hup, hip, hip, hip. (*ALL march into garden and laundry area.*) Company, halt! Begin work.

(ALL put down nets, sing and mime action.)

QUEEN.

Oh, this is the way we wash our clothes,

KNIGHT.

Wash our clothes,

QUEEN.

Wash our clothes.

KNIGHT.

This is the way we wash our clothes.

QUEEN & KNIGHT.

So early Monday morning.

(ALL pause, waiting anxiously for the attack, which doesn't come.)

QUEEN *(whispering)*. Where do you suppose they are?

KNIGHT. They couldn't have guessed about the nets, could they?

WHIZ. Let's hide them better.

(ALL move nets farther away from themselves.)

KING. Back to work. *(Singing.)*

This is the way we rake and hoe,

WHIZ.

Rake and hoe,

KING.

Rake and hoe,

WHIZ.

This is the way we rake and hoe,

KING & WHIZ.

So early Tuesday morning.

(Again, ALL pause and wait, cringing.)

KING. Where could they be?

QUEEN. I can't stand the suspense.

KNIGHT. Maybe they've flown south for the winter.

WHIZ. It's spring.

KNIGHT. Oh. Right.

WHIZ. I think they can see the nets.

KING. You may be right, Whiz. Let's hide them all over here. (*ALL pile their nets in a corner.*) Now, one more try. (*Singing.*)

This is the way we sow our seeds,

QUEEN & KNIGHT.

Fold our clothes,

KING & WHIZ.

Sow our seeds,

QUEEN & KNIGHT.

This is the way we fold our clothes,

ALL

So early Wednesday morning.

(*ALL pause, look, listen—to no avail.*)

KNIGHT. Nothing.

QUEEN (*sits on ground*). I'm tired.

WHIZ (*sits*). Maybe they're gone.

KING (*sits*). Wouldn't that be wonderful?

KNIGHT (*sits*). Easier than catching bats in the desert.

ALL (*sighing in relief*). Ahhhhhhhhh! (*BLACKBIRDS swoop in en masse.*) AAAAAAAAAGGGH!

(*KING, QUEEN, KNIGHT and WHIZ scramble to their feet and run for their nets while BLACKBIRDS swoop about, nipping noses. In the confusion, hats are knocked off, KING, QUEEN, KNIGHT and WHIZ net each others' heads to ad libbed cries of "There's one!" "Gotcha!"*

"Watch out!" and so on. BLACKBIRDS exit, leaving OTHERS trapped in a tangle of their own making.)

ALL (*ad libbing*). Help! Help! Ouch! Let go! You let go! I can't! (*Etc.*)

(After a moment, they freeze in mid-struggle. CLAUDIUS enters with one BLACKBIRD and speaks to the audience.)

CLAUDIUS. Hello, again. Remember me? Claudio Bopp. You're all caught up now, on what happened after the blackbird nipped the maid's nose. And somebody does know what to do about it, even if these folks don't. Watch and see! (*Removes nets from OTHERS' heads, unfreezing them.*)

KING. Oh, thank you, young man. I thought we'd never get untangled.

CLAUDIUS. Claudio Bopp, at your service.

KING. You wouldn't happen to know what to do about those nipping black birds, would you?

CLAUDIUS. I might. And then again, I might not.

KING. What do you mean?

CLAUDIUS. I mean, I think I know, but there's only one way to be absolutely, positively sure.

KING. Tell us!

QUEEN. Please!

CLAUDIUS. All right. Ask the birds.

OTHERS. What?

CLAUDIUS. *Ask the birds.* You've obviously made them angry. Ask them how to set things right.

KING. But how do I talk to a bird?

CLAUDIUS. Same way you talk to me.

KING. Really? (*CLAUDIUS nods. KING clears his throat, attempts to speak to BLACKBIRD, hesitates.*) Oh, I feel so silly.

QUEEN. Go on, dear. It's worth a try.

KING. Oh, very well. (*To BLACKBIRD.*) I'm truly sorry if I've angered you and your friends in some way, but I don't know how to earn your forgiveness. Could you tell me how?

QUEEN. Please?

CLAUDIUS. Now, lis ten. Lis ten to the birds!

(He gestures to BLACKBIRD. OTHER BLACKBIRDS may also enter and join in.)

BLACKBIRD(S). Be kind! Be kind! Be kind! Be kind!

KING. I can't quite make out what they're saying.

CLAUDIUS (*to audience*). Will you help the birds out, please? All together now. Be kind! Be kind! Be kind! Be kind! (*Raises his hand for silence.*)

KING. Be kind! They're telling me to be kind!

CLAUDIUS (*lowers his hand*). Have you been unkind to them lately?

KING. Well...I did order twenty-four blackbirds baked in a pie.

BLACKBIRD(S) (*approaching angrily*). Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw!

KING. But I'll never do it again. I promise!

BLACKBIRD(S) (*approving and moving back*). Kind! Kind! Kind!

CLAUDIUS. They for give you.

KING. You mean our national emergency is over?

QUEEN. It is, dear.

KING. I did it! I handled a national emergency!

QUEEN. I'm so proud of you, Hempleworth.

WHIZ (*shaking KING's hand*). Nice going, Your Majesty.

KNIGHT (*shaking KING's hand*). Good work, sir.

KING. Thank you. I couldn't have done it without all your help. (*To CLAUDIUS*) And especially yours, Claudius Bopp. And I owe you a reward. One wish. Whatever you like. Just ask and if it's within my power, it's yours.

CLAUDIUS. Well, I could use six pence every day.

KING. Is that all?

CLAUDIUS. Yes, I don't need very much, but I do like to feed the blackbirds their pocket full of rye.

KING (*searching in his pockets*). Sixpence. Sixpence. I'm afraid my pennies are worthless. Six of them would be six times as worthless. Unless—do I dare to go on hoping? (*Takes CLAUDIUS aside*.) Say, have you ever heard of King Rufus Stubblecheeks?

CLAUDIUS. Oh, sure. I read all about him in school.

KING. Really?

CLAUDIUS. He was king of Quagmire about four hundred years ago.

KING (*whips out a penny*). Is that him?

CLAUDIUS. A very good like ness, sir.

KING. Mathilde, my pennies aren't fakes! They may be worth their weight in...pennies! Oh, one must never give up hope. Claudius Bopp, I'm going to make you my Royal Knight, protector of the birds. And you may feed your feathered friends from the royal rye. On your knees for the dubbing. (*CLAUDIUS kneels, as OTHERS gather admiringly, including BLACKBIRDS*.) Hmmmm You'll

need a more knightly name. Sir Claudius the Clever?
Bopp the Benevolent? Which do you prefer?

CLAUDIUS. Bopp the Benevolent has a fine sound to it.

KING. Very well. (*Uses a net handed to him by WHIZ.*) I hereby bop you Sir Dub the Bedevolent. (*OTHERS try to hide their amusement.*) Wait, that's not right. I hereby dub you Sir Bopp the Benevolent, Royal Protector of the Birds!

WHIZ. Three cheers for Sir Bopp!

KNIGHT. Hip, hip—

ALL. Hooray!

KNIGHT (*encouraging audience to join in*). Hip, hip—

ALL. Hooray!

KNIGHT. Hip, hip—

ALL. Hooray!

CLAU DIUS. I thank you all, very much.

KING (*singing*).

Sing a song of sixpence—

ALL.

A pocket full of rye
Four and twenty blackbirds

CLAUDIUS.

Fly across the sky.
Listen to them calling,
And listen to your king:

KING.

There's nothing quite so dainty as
A wild bird on the wing.

ALL.

No, there's nothing quite so dainty as
A wild bird on the wing.

(OTHERS step aside to let BLACKBIRD(S) swoop freely across stage. LIGHTS dim. End of play.)