

A Caterpillar's Tale

A Play for Young Audiences
by
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This play is dedicated to all the future butterflies in the audience, young or old.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Periwinkle, a curious caterpillar, feels compelled to find out what happens when caterpillars climb up the Great Tree – and never return! He decides to follow grumpy Thistle who seems to be next to do the climb, but Periwinkle encounters some big obstacles he must overcome including evading the clutches of a black widow spider. Meanwhile, on the ground, Periwinkle's worried "family," Sepia and two boisterous babies, escape their own predators, vicious wasps and a praying mantis, along with a comical pair of hungry flies. Finally, Thistle emerges from his cocoon and Periwinkle learns much more than he ever dreamed possible, and that sometimes secrets are best kept secret.

This play is currently being adapted into a feature length screenplay and as a short script it has done well in many screenwriting competitions.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Flexible cast of 8 to 15. Min: 1 m, 1 w, 6 flexible)

The Caterpillars

THISTLE: The oldest with a rough and sour appearance.

PERIWINKLE: He is the most understanding of all the caterpillars and the most likeable.

SEPIA: She is Periwinkle's future mate.

MAIZE: Maize is what most parents would call a handful, but he is not as much trouble as his best friend, Apricot.

APRICOT: The youngest of the caterpillars, and the most troublesome. She is always eating and has the annoying habit of repeating what others say.

Any of the following characters may be double or triple cast:

The Wasps

MORGAN: She is large and mean tempered.

JUDE: A large friendly wasp who always does what Morgan says.

SKYLER: Same as Jude.

The Flies

MARION: A common housefly.

RICKY: A common housefly.

RORY: A mayfly in a hurry to find water.

The Praying Mantis

MONROE: Almost makes a meal of Apricot.

The Spider

BELINDA: A black widow that almost gets Periwinkle.

The Humans

PARENT: A loving parent.

CHILD: A young child.

**Many of the characters are flexible and can be cast as male or female. Adjust pronouns as necessary.*

The Set

The set should be of a large proportion to make the actors appear small. The great tree should start at stage level and slowly progress up from one platform to a final third platform. The stage, including the platforms, should be covered with plants to appear as if the characters are in a forest or jungle. A few junk items, such as pop cans or bottles, should also litter the set. These items will be useful when the younger characters play hide and seek. These elements could be homemade out of construction paper, boxes and so forth. Nothing resembling standard furniture should be on the stage. The characters are insects, not people.

Costumes

The colorful costumes can either be completely realistic in style or simply suggestive with cardboard cutouts for the legs. One possibility is having the many legs working in conjunction with the actors' own limbs. Three pairs of butterfly wings are necessary. As to the shedding skin of the caterpillars' outer shells, in the natural world they eat their skins, but for the sake of the production, we are saving one and it would be much like that of a snakeskin after it has completed shedding. This could simply be some painted plastic or paper bags to suit the length you want. You could paint it the color of the caterpillar who shed their skin.

Character Notes

The caterpillars should always be eating, especially Apricot. The eating must be stressed, as caterpillars are voracious eaters, except when it comes time for their change, which has been stressed in the script.

Flying could be as simple as the characters waving their wings and pretending to fly. The butterfly actors could go up or over the platforms, pretending to be in flight. It really isn't necessary to go with a suspension system.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: MAIZE is searching for APRICOT who is hidden.)

MAIZE: I know you're here, Apricot.

(MAIZE pauses and then continues looking at various spots on stage. As he searches, we see APRICOT change places just before he gets to her. As Maize looks at one place, Apricot hides in the same place where Maize just searched and so on.)

MAIZE: *(Cont'd.)* Oh, come on, come on out. I'm tired of looking for you. Olly, Olly legs in free!

(APRICOT slowly creeps up on MAIZE.)

APRICOT: *(Pounces on MAIZE.)* Yaa!

MAIZE: *(Scared.)* Aah! *(Falls backward onto the ground.)*

APRICOT: *(Laughing hysterically.)* I got you! I got you!

MAIZE: That wasn't funny.

(MAIZE starts to go after APRICOT but all of a sudden Apricot screams for her life and sounds as if she's being killed. PERIWINKLE quickly enters.)

PERIWINKLE: What's going on?

APRICOT: Maize was gonna trample me with all his big feet, Periwinkle.

MAIZE: No, I wasn't. I wasn't gonna do anything. And my feet aren't big!

APRICOT: Are too!

MAIZE: Are not! Yours are!

APRICOT: Are not!

MAIZE: Are!

APRICOT: Not!

PERIWINKLE: All right! That's enough from both of you.

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(SEPIA enters from SL appearing quite worried. She goes over to PERIWINKLE.)

SEPIA: Periwinkle, I...

PERIWINKLE: *(Notices Sepia's distress.)* Wait. *(To MAIZE.)*

Why don't you and Apricot go and eat some more leaves?

MAIZE: Oh, all right.

APRICOT: I bet I can eat more than you can.

MAIZE: Bet you can't.

APRICOT: Can!

PERIWINKLE: Go!

(THEY both run off SR.)

PERIWINKLE: What is it, Sepia?

SEPIA: Mulberry is gone. I think he went up last night.

PERIWINKLE: I see.

SEPIA: What can we do? Everyone keeps disappearing.

PERIWINKLE: They aren't disappearing, Sepia. We know where they've gone.

SEPIA: *(Upset.)* Yes, but all we know is that they go up the Great Tree and never come back down.

PERIWINKLE: Now calm down, Sepia. Why don't you go and squirm up our friends, and I'll wait here for you?

(SEPIA exits SR and PERIWINKLE speaks to himself.)

PERIWINKLE: *(Cont'd.)* I wish I knew why our friends leave or where they go.

(THISTLE enters SR and overhears PERIWINKLE.)

THISTLE: You know where they go, and you know what happens to them.

PERIWINKLE: No, Thistle, I don't.

THISTLE: Of course, you do. They are called, and they crawl up the Great Tree. Mulberry was only one turn older than I am, and he felt the call.

PERIWINKLE: Call?

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THISTLE: Yes, he was summoned to climb the Great Tree and to go up.

(APRICOT, MAIZE and SEPIA enter from SR. APRICOT responds to her favorite word.)

APRICOT: Climb? I love to climb.

PERIWINKLE: We all love to climb, Apricot.

MAIZE: Not me! I hate climbing.

APRICOT: *(Laughing.)* Yeah, you sure do, Maize. Whenever you start climbing you freeze like a rock and cry for someone to help you down. For a caterpillar you sure are a chicken.

MAIZE: I'm not a chicken! You take that back!

APRICOT: Make me!

(MAIZE chases APRICOT, but Apricot climbs a nearby plant, causing Maize to stop in his tracks.)

APRICOT: *(Cont'd.)* Slow legs! Slow legs!

MAIZE: Come down here, Apricot!

APRICOT: No, you come up and get me. I dare you. *(Starts laughing.)* Or are you afraid to climb?

MAIZE: You better be quiet!

APRICOT: Maize is a chickenpillar. Maize is a chickenpillar.

MAIZE: I'll show you who's a chickenpillar!

PERIWINKLE: Maize, please be quiet.

MAIZE: No, she called me a chickenpillar.

PERIWINKLE: Well, you are a chickenpillar. We all are.

(Calls of protests from the OTHERS.)

PERIWINKLE: *(Cont'd.)* Now, everyone, please be quiet. What I mean is that all of us, as of late, are scared to climb. *(Pause.)* Because we all fear what may be further up the Great Tree. *(Pauses and looks at the others.)* For those of you who have not heard, Mulberry took that climb last night.

MAIZE: No, not Mulberry.

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(EVERYONE becomes quiet and looks at each other.)

MAIZE: *(Cont'd.)* I don't understand.

PERIWINKLE: None of us do, Maize.

MAIZE: But why? Why did Mulberry go up?

THISTLE: Because it was his time. Mulberry turned five times. It'll be my time soon, then Periwinkle. Eventually, we will all climb up the Great Tree.

APRICOT: I'm scared.

MAIZE: *(Going to APRICOT.)* It's okay, I'm scared too.

APRICOT: *(Playful.)* See? I told ya', you was scared.

(MAIZE starts to give rebuttal.)

PERIWINKLE: Everyone is afraid of the unknown, Apricot.

THISTLE: What unknown? We know what happens. We are called and we climb. There should be nothing to fear, for if we are called then it must be for a reason. It is not our place to question, nor to fear it.

(The OTHERS look to one another.)

PERIWINKLE: But why? That is what I want to know. What is further up the Great Tree? Why are we called to climb it? And why do we not return? I need to understand this. For example, you claim humans are our enemy when I believe they are not.

THISTLE: They are our enemies. I haven't met a human yet that didn't want to harm us.

PERIWINKLE: But I have.

(OTHERS adlib: You have? When? etc.)

PERIWINKLE: *(Cont'd.)* A human picked me up just after I had turned.

SEPIA: Did it hurt you?

PERIWINKLE: No, it was a young and an old human, and they touched me gently and put me down. They had another name for turning.

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PERIWINKLE: *(Cont'd.)* The older one called it shedding.

She told the young human that I was shedding my skin.

APRICOT: Shedding? What a funny name for turning.

THISTLE: Humans are strange and dangerous creatures.

They go around crushing us. They are worse than our enemies, the wasps and the flies.

PERIWINKLE: You're wrong. You're wrong about the humans, and you're wrong about going up the Great Tree for understanding.

THISTLE: I'm not wrong. What else could it be? Has anyone who has climbed ever returned?

(OTHERS shake their heads, say no, etc.)

PERIWINKLE: And that is why I feel we need to find out why. It is the fear of the unknown that is scaring us all.

Once we know what happens after we climb, we will not fear the unknown any longer.

THISTLE: We must not question the call. We are called for a reason, and we should follow that call to wherever it leads us.

PERIWINKLE: But are you not the least bit curious as to what's up there?

SEPIA: Is there no way for us to find out?

PERIWINKLE: There is one way.

(EVERYONE except THISTLE. How? Tell us? etc.)

THISTLE: I know what you're thinking, Periwinkle, and I feel it is wrong.

SEPIA: What do you mean?

MAIZE: I don't understand.

APRICOT: Me neither.

MAIZE and APRICOT: Tell us.

THISTLE: Periwinkle intends to follow the next one who is called to climb. Isn't that right, Periwinkle?

(OTHERS adlib: ah's and oh's, etc.)

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SEPIA: But is that wise?

THISTLE: No, it's not.

PERIWINKLE: Then how are we to find the answer to this mystery?

THISTLE: Maybe we aren't supposed to.

SEPIA: Maybe there isn't an answer.

PERIWINKLE: Look at you! You're all frightened little squirmers, afraid of the unknown. I offer to find the answer and you run further away. I'm taking all the risk, not you.

THISTLE: If you are not called, then you should not go. Only those summoned should climb. I am eldest now that Mulberry is gone. So, it's only fair that I should decide this.

PERIWINKLE: You can't make this decision, you're not objective. You will be the next to climb.

THISTLE: That has nothing to do with my judgment.

SEPIA: What are we going to do? Soon there will be none of us left.

APRICOT: I'm getting scared again.

MAIZE: Me too.

PERIWINKLE: That is why I must climb with Thistle to find the answer. Do you want to keep living in doubt and fear?

APRICOT: No! I don't like being scared.

PERIWINKLE: Then allow me to climb with Thistle.

SEPIA: I think Periwinkle should be allowed to go.

MAIZE: So do I.

APRICOT: *(Looking at others.)* Me too!

THISTLE: You're making a horrible mistake. I can't allow this, and I won't! *(Storms off SL.)*

APRICOT: I think he's angry. *(To PERIWINKLE.)* I'm sure of it.

SEPIA: Are you certain you want to do this?

PERIWINKLE: I need to know, not only to help all of us, but to satisfy my curiosity as well.

SEPIA: I understand.

APRICOT: *(Loudly.)* I'm hungry!

SEPIA: *(Changing the subject.)* Then why don't we go home and eat? I just picked some fresh leaves.

MAIZE: Sounds great!

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APRICOT: Yeah, great! (*THEY start to go SR and APRICOT stops.*) Periwinkle, how come so many humans dislike us?

PERIWINKLE: I hate to say this, but I think they dislike us for eating our leaves.

SEPIA: What's wrong with that? That's why they're here. I was born on these leaves.

(*OTHERS adlib: yeah, etc.*)

APRICOT: We gotta eat, don't we?

PERIWINKLE: Of course, we do. Everything must feed.

APRICOT: I don't understand.

PERIWINKLE: Well, you all know about the wasps.

(*THEY all look up at the sky. Adlib: O-o-h yeah, etc.*)

SEPIA: What about them?

PERIWINKLE: Well, they have their reasons for carrying us off.

(*OTHERS adlib: Why? I don't know. etc.*)

PERIWINKLE: (*Cont'd.*) Let's just say that it's so they can feed their babies who have to eat too.

APRICOT: I don't understand.

SEPIA: I think I do. (*Whispers in APRICOT's ear.*)

APRICOT: That's what they do to us? (*SEPIA nods.*) They feed us to their babies! Yuck!

MAIZE: Well, if a wasp ever gets me, I hope I make her sick.

APRICOT: I'm sure you will. You already make me sick.

MAIZE: Why you...

(*MAIZE chases APRICOT off SR. The OTHERS follow laughing. THISTLE enters SL speaking to himself.*)

THISTLE: He won't be following me. I'll see to that. He's wrong, and I will stop him somehow.

BLACKOUT

Scene 2

(LIGHTS up on PERIWINKLE sitting on a plant CS. SEPIA enters SL. She crosses over to him.)

SEPIA: What are you doing, Periwinkle?

PERIWINKLE: Thinking.

SEPIA: You do that a lot.

PERIWINKLE: Do I?

SEPIA: Yes, but I love you for it.

PERIWINKLE: I love you too. I just wish I knew. *(Looks up at the Great Tree.)*

SEPIA: Why are you dwelling on this so much?

PERIWINKLE: I don't know. I just feel I must know what has happened to those who have climbed.

SEPIA: You really don't believe as Thistle does?

PERIWINKLE: No, I don't. I don't think we should continue to live in fear without knowing the facts. All I need to do is follow him and find out, then I can come back and tell all of you what happens when we climb.

SEPIA: Like why those who have climbed ever come back?

PERIWINKLE: Yes. That's the mystery I want to solve.

SEPIA: What do you think happens to them?

PERIWINKLE: You'll laugh if I tell you.

SEPIA: Have I ever laughed at things you've said before?

PERIWINKLE: No, but you might this time.

SEPIA: Try me.

PERIWINKLE: Well, you know how after we turn, or shed, as the humans say, that we're bigger than we were before, and our colors more brilliant?

SEPIA: Yes.

PERIWINKLE: Well, I think the same thing happens when we go up the Great Tree.

SEPIA: Then why don't they come back down?

PERIWINKLE: That's the part of the mystery that I don't understand. I think we change, but I don't know what kind of change happens.

SEPIA: Are you really going to follow Thistle up the Great Tree?

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PERIWINKLE: Do you think I shouldn't?

SEPIA: I'm worried. I don't want you to get hurt.

PERIWINKLE: Do you think Thistle would hurt me?

SEPIA: No, of course not. Thistle would never harm you.

None of us would ever harm each other. But there could be many dangerous things up there.

PERIWINKLE: I'll be careful.

SEPIA: I'm not going to be able to persuade you to stay, am I?

(PERIWINKLE gives HER a look.)

SEPIA: *(Cont'd.)* I didn't think so. Okay, you go, but you come back to me. All of you, in one piece. Promise?

PERIWINKLE: I promise. Now I need to see if I can find Thistle and calm him down.

(THEY hug each other, and PERIWINKLE leaves SR. SEPIA sits and thinks about the conversation she's just had with PERIWINKLE when she hears laughter off SL. She climbs a plant and hides. APRICOT enters being chased by MAIZE.)

APRICOT: *(To MAIZE.)* Chickenpillar, chickenpillar. You'll never catch me.

MAIZE: Just you wait, you little worm. I'll get you.

(APRICOT quickly climbs up on a plant near SEPIA and stares down at MAIZE. Apricot doesn't see Sepia.)

APRICOT: Come and get me, come and get me. You can't! You know why? Because you're a chickenpillar.

(APRICOT starts laughing, while SEPIA slowly creeps behind Apricot and grabs her while making a buzzing sound.)

APRICOT: *(Cont'd.)* Help! A wasp has me! Help! I'll make you sick if you eat me!

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(SEPIA drops APRICOT, and Sepia and MAIZE both laugh hysterically.)

MAIZE: *(Still laughing.)* Now, who's a chickenpillar?

APRICOT: *(Rubbing one of her legs.)* That wasn't funny.

MAIZE: It was funny to me. Wasn't it funny to you, Sepia?

SEPIA: Yep, sure was.

MAIZE: You definitely made Apricot squirm.

(SFX: Suddenly there is the real sound of wasps in flight.)

SEPIA: *(Cont'd.)* Do you hear that?

(MAIZE and APRICOT look at each other. They are terrified.)

MAIZE and APRICOT: Wasps!

SEPIA: Hide!

(THEY hide under some leaves. The three WASPS enter and land on a nearby leaf.)

MORGAN: I was sure I saw something.

JUDE: I believe you, Morgan.

SKYLER: Yeah, you have great eyes. You don't see any humans, do you?

MORGAN: Humans! I'm not scared of any humans. You saw what I did when they bothered our nest.

SKYLER: Boy, you buzzed them good. You had them running all over the place; it was funny.

MORGAN: Well, I had a good male wasp to help me.

(The CATERPILLARS slowly start to crawl away during the conversation.)

JUDE: Ah, thanks, Morgan.

MORGAN: Not you, I meant John.

JUDE: Oh, him again! I wish you'd quit taking about John.

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SKYLER: Yeah, it's always John this or John that! What about us?

(APRICOT knocks over a can and suddenly the WASPS are on full alert.)

MORGAN: What was that?

JUDE: Humans?

MORGAN: You two take a look around.

JUDE and SKYLER: Who me?

MORGAN: You see any other wasps around? Yes, you two.

(JUDE and SKYLER start to fly off to look but they quickly fly back to MORGAN.)

JUDE: What if it's a human?

SKYLER: I'm with Skyler. What if it's a human? We're not that fast you know.

MORGAN: I know.

(MORGAN flies up and looks around. The CATERPILLARS slip under some plants, hoping not to be seen. Morgan buzzes around for a moment then returns to her perch on the leaf.)

MORGAN: I guess it was nothing.

JUDE: Yeah, I guess it was nothing.

SKYLER: Yeah, nothing.

MORGAN: There's nothing here to feed my children.

JUDE: What's she taking about? How is she going to feed her children?

SKYLER: Don't you know anything? She lays her eggs inside caterpillars and when the eggs hatch, her babies eat the caterpillars from the inside out.

JUDE: Oh, gross.

MORGAN: You calling me gross?

JUDE: No, I'd never do that, Morgan, because you scare me big time.

End of Freeview

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