

# THE BIRDS

Adapted from Aristophanes

By Claudia Haas and Richard Cash

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## STORY OF THE PLAY

Three children are sent on a mission by their mother and when they cannot fulfill it, they embark on a journey that leads them to the Great Birds' Nest in the Sky. There they hope to live "free as a bird" away from all the constraints of home, school and life as a child. As they strive to build their utopia, they find themselves unwelcome by the birds and compromising their values to achieve their ends. Instead of living "free as a bird," they find the birds trying to outdo the humans in a far more complicated society than the human one they left behind.

The cast is a mixture of children, meddling gods and goddesses and a rich array of bird characters. *The Birds* was originally written by Aristophanes, an ancient Greek playwright, as a satire on man's society. In this loose adaptation, Aristophanes' humor and satire are left intact as the play pokes gentle fun at society's institutions. The Greek style is also present in the form of a Nature Chorus that moves the plot along. To offset the wordiness of classical theatre, however, there is a lot of movement so that the scenes are fast-paced. It is a delightful way to introduce students to Greek classical comedy with strong, varied roles for everyone. The production can be as simple as ancient Greek theatre or as complicated as your budget allows.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**  
*(1 m, 7 w, 28 or more flexible)*

**NATURE CHORUS:** 4-10 actors and actresses.  
**MOTHER:** (F) Mother of the three children.  
**MOTHER NATURE:** (F) Head of the Nature Chorus.

**CHILDREN (Siblings)**

**DISMENE:** (F) Pessimist. Always sees the cup as half empty.  
Finds worries where none exist.  
**DICTORIOUS:** (M) Controlling (Why, even dictating!). Has all the  
answers. Speaks, then thinks.  
**MAGICALA:** (F) Dreamer with magic in her soul.

**GODS AND GODDESSES**

**CELESTIALETTE:** (F) Goddess of the Sky. Imperious.  
**MISCHIEFMAKER:** Celestialette's child; as name implies.  
**BUREAUCRATOS:** The "Red Tape" God.  
**EVERREADY:** Bureaucratos's aide. A "god-in-training."  
**MESSENGERIA:** The Messenger of the Gods.

**THE BIRDS**

**GUIDANCE:** A wise, know-it-all crow who is a guide.  
**PLEASANT PHEASANT:** Just the nicest of game birds.  
**QUACKER DUCK:** A game bird who talks too much.  
**GOOSEY:** An overdramatic, silly game bird.  
**QUASI QUAIL:** A deep thinking game bird.  
**REGAL ROOSTER:** Preens a lot, a regal game bird.  
**GROUSER GROUSE:** Morose game bird; born to complain.  
**BELUGA JAY:** Military legislative bird. Blue jay.  
**FLINCH:** A sweet but vacant songbird; a spy for Beluga jay.  
**WARBLER:** Another.  
**MYNOR BIRD:** The lawyer, legislative bird.  
**FIREBIRD:** (F) Beautiful, vain, legislative bird. A poet.  
**PARAKEET:** Bitter legislative bird; the housing inspector.  
**SLEEPING BEAUTY:** (F) A diplomatic legislative bird. Can't stay  
awake during the day. A nightingale.  
**PRATTLE PARROT:** Epops' reluctant aide.  
**EPOPS:** King (or Queen) of the Birds, half-bird and half-human.  
Uneasy in the position. Lazy, likes to eat.

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**CAST NOTES:** *All roles are flexible except where noted. For smaller casts, use Mother, Mother Nature and Messengeria in the Nature Chorus. Finch and Warbler are also parts that can be cut. A goat/bird puppet plays the role of Goatee.*

**Running time:** About 80 minutes.

**MUSIC:** Use harp music under the Nature Chorus and trumpet music for Messengeria.

### **SETTING**

One set, as in Greek theatre, connoting countryside and Cloud Cuckooland. Heavenly balcony is used by the gods. Below balcony, hanging fabric can be used as an entrance for the Nature Chorus and for the Parakeet's office. During the children's journey, the Nature Chorus is scattered all over the stage with the lightning bolts and later with the clouds. The children journey around them.

On either side of the heavenly balcony are small columns that can be stacked into two large ones. After the children reach Cloud Cuckooland, the column blocks can be scattered and used as nests, seats in the legislature, etc. Scene changes are done through lighting.

**Scene 1 - THE TRADE**

*(AT RISE: NATURE CHORUS appears, carrying sticks with streamers. They are the "wind.")*

NATURE CHORUS:

From ancient lands we come to show  
Man's folly in the world below.  
We watch, we speak, we criticize.  
But all is seen with benevolent eyes.  
Today we are wind; there is change about.  
Look for us in different forms throughout.  
Leave go of your world as we travel through time  
To visit with birds and spirits divine.  
Come join us now as we traverse the land  
And witness a story of strife close at hand.  
The farms are failing and people anew  
Are scuttling forth to cities askew.  
Three youngsters now afloat *(The CHILDREN are brought  
on by members of the CHORUS and freeze.)*  
Have been charged with a mission.  
To sell their treasured goat; their one last possession.  
Take heed from our chorus as this tale unfolds.  
The story before us that waits to be told.

*(The CHORUS exits and MISCHIEFMAKER tiptoes on and places seeds in MAGICALA'S hands. Mischiefmaker waves at the audience and exits. The CHILDREN come alive.)*

DICTORIOUS: I don't believe you did that! The minute my back is turned you make the most lamebrained trade in the history of the human race.

MAGICALA: It's not lamebrained. They're mystical. You'll see.

DISMENE: We can never go home again. Mother will never accept this trade. We'll be splitting wood for the rest of our lives. We're doomed.

MAGICALA: She'll come around when she understands the importance of these seeds.

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DICTORIOUS: (*Speaking very politely as if to MOTHER.*)  
Hello, Mother dearest. I realize we used to have a goat.  
But we have made a splendid trade. Instead of a very  
useful, beloved goat, we now have six worthless seeds!

MAGICALA: Enchanted seeds.

DICTORIOUS: Ah yes! Mother, did I mention that the seeds  
are enchanted? In what way, you ask? Why, I really don't  
know. Do we have proof that the seeds are enchanted,  
you may ask? Well, not exactly ...

DISMENE: Doomed. We're doomed. Why doesn't the  
earth just swallow me up right now? At least I won't have  
to face Mother.

MAGICALA: (*Not very convincingly.*) She'll understand.  
(*Pause.*) Later. Much later.

DICTORIOUS: How can I expect Mother to understand  
when I don't understand? The farm has failed. We need  
money for our move to the city. The goat was our last  
chance. I don't see how these seeds can improve our  
situation.

DISMENE: Once she finds out what we've done, we'll have  
to stay away for weeks, months, maybe even years before  
she'll be happy to see us.

DICTORIOUS: That's it! If we stay away long enough, she  
will be so happy to see us safe that she'll forgive us  
anything!

DISMENE: And how will we live? Those six seeds won't  
keep us fed.

DICTORIOUS: (*Sarcastically to MAGICALA.*) I don't know.  
If they're enchanted maybe they will.

MAGICALA: No! You can't eat the seeds! We have to  
figure out their magic first!

DICTORIOUS: Relax. Those six seeds couldn't keep a bird  
fed! Let's take stock of the situation. We can't go home  
yet. So, why don't we turn this into an adventure?

DISMENE: I don't like adventures. They scare me.

DICTORIOUS: Listen, we didn't want to go live in the city,  
right? Mother says the cities are full of lawyers who will  
sue you if you look at them sideways and inspectors who  
won't inspect unless you bribe them.

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