

Master Skylark of Stratford

Dramatized by Sylvia Ashby

from a novel by John Bennett

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Young Nick is so enamored of the theatre that when his strict father forbids him from attending, Nick runs away from his home in Stratford-upon-Avon. When a disreputable actor, just released from jail, discovers Nick's beautiful voice, he calls him Master Skylark and forces him to perform with his troupe. Nick's captors treat him well, but he longs for freedom and his home. His captors treat him well, but Nick longs for freedom and his home. His voice eventually brings him to the attention of Queen Elizabeth I. With her patronage and additional help from Master William Shakespeare (who only appears near the end of the play), Nick escapes and returns home, though not before a frightening visit with his captor, now held at Newgate Prison. Here is an excellent picture of the Shakespearean era from a young person's point of view without being about the Bard himself. The action is continuous, one scene blending into another. Winner of numerous awards.

PLAYING TIME: About ninety minutes. Can be performed with or without intermission. An ideal place for one occurs following the Rose Playhouse scene.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

First produced by the Lubbock (TX) Community Theatre at the Regional Arts Center Firehouse Theatre. Directed by Cliff Ashby, with design by Chris Caddell, costumes by Toby Leigh, and sound by Jim Bush.

The following cast of eleven played multiple roles:

Cliff McGaha Brock - Nicholas Attwood

Tim McIntire - Sebastian Carey

Elysse West - Margaret Attwood, Hannah Jones, and Queen Elizabeth

Rob Holton - Simon Attwood and Jailer

Shelby Knox - Susannah Shakespeare, Orange Girl, and Nell

Melissa Stambaugh - Judith Shakespeare, Peg, Mistress Grey,
and Lady Beatrice

Toby Leigh - Mariah Grimes, Countess Du Lac, and Anne Shakespeare

Aaron Jennejahn - Tom Heywood and Ned Simpson

Joe Sherwood - Rob Whitby and Will Shakespeare

Michelle Tucker - Jane and Olivia Carey

Ron Meadows - Philip Henslowe and Nathaniel Giles

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

*Accommodates a large cast (24 or more)
or ensemble cast of 10-12 (5-6 m, 5-6 w)*

NICHOLAS ATTWOOD: Young Stratford teen; sings well.

SUSANNA SHAKESPEARE: Nick's friend.

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE: Susanna's sister.

MARGARET ATTWOOD: Nick's mother.

SIMON ATTWOOD: Nick's father.

SEBASTIAN CAREY: Master Player, Admiral's Company.

PEG: Serving girl, Coventry.

MARIAH GRIMES: Carey's servant.

ORANGE GIRL: Brief role, sells fruits.

ROB WHITBY: Actor, Admiral's Company.

TOM HEYWOOD: Actor, playwright, Admiral's Company.

HANNAH JONES: Baker, St. Alban's.

JANE: Her assistant.

MISTRESS GREY: A customer.

NED SIMPSON: Another customer.

OLIVIA CAREY: Carey's teen daughter.

PHILIP HENSLOWE: Manager, Rose Playhouse.

MASTER GILES: Headmaster, St. Paul's Boys' Company.

QUEEN ELIZABETH: At Greenwich Palace.

LADY BEATRICE: Queen's attendant.

COUNTESS DU LAC: French visitor.

WILL SHAKESPEARE: Actor, playwright, Chamberlain's Men

NELL: Will's housekeeper.

JAILER: Newgate Prison.

ANNE SHAKESPEARE: Will's wife.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING: Cast size is flexible, ranging from 10-24 or more actors.

The script works well with an ensemble of 10-12 actors undertaking some two dozen roles. The Orange Girl can appear, or heard as an offstage voice. More townsfolk can be added to St. Albans scene and more attendants to Court scene.

DOUBLING: Depending on the talents of the individual actors, many combinations are possible. The original production used eleven--five female, six male. Can also be done with five males.

SETTING: Centered at mid-stage, two columns ten feet apart, each with seating. A drawn curtain hangs behind each column; the curtains are suspended from a rod which spans these columns. Though this particular unit set concept is indicated in the script, countless other designs are possible. Cast and/or crew in Page tunics handle some shifts in view of audience. For palace scene, a swag with royal insignia can be hung between columns. Prison locale can be created effectively with no additional scenery: stark, minimal lighting plus sound effects suffice.

ACCENTS: Much of the regional language is built into the script.

The use of accents depends on the talents of the cast. For the country folk of Stratford and St. Albans, a more rustic accent would involve dropping final "g's," harder final "R's" and perhaps more trilled "R's" at the start of words. A bit of Scottish, Irish, or North Country inflection would also help. Cockney suits such characters as Mariah, Henslowe, and Jailer. A touch of Stage British fits the other roles. With a smaller cast, accents help distinguish between an actor's multiple roles.

COSTUMES: For a minimum cast, consider a basic costume to which pieces are quickly added or subtracted: wigs, aprons, pinafores, kerchiefs, turbans, shawls, hats, vests, capes, etc.

SONGS: Included in the script are lyrics for two songs, "The Sky-Lark's Song" and "Pack Clouds Away." Both are from the original book, but the second song has no music. Melodies for these songs can be created, or another Elizabethan song selected. The third song, "Greensleeves," is generally available.

GIUITAR: Heywood and Olivia can fake strumming to offstage guitar.

GALLIARD: Start with slight curtsy or bow; step left on left foot; hop on left foot with right knee bent in front; hop again with right knee bent in back. Spring right on right foot. Continue, if desired, by repeating hops on right foot. Arms are curved, one raised above head, other waist high.

TIME AND PLACE

Action begins April 30, 1597, Stratford, England.

SCENE SUMMARY

STRATFORD: The Admiral's players arrive; Nick's dour father will not allow him to attend the festivities. When the show is cancelled, Nick runs away to Coventry to see the players.

COVENTRY: On route, Nick meets Sebastian Carey, an Admiral's player just released from jail. Carey befriends Nick. Hearing him sing, Carey decides to exploit the boy's talents. Nick performs with the company.

ST. ALBANS: Carey promises to help Nick return home, but deceives him instead. Escaping, Nick ends up in his captor's hands, when Carey manipulates St. Albans townfolk.

LONDON: Nick discovers Carey's young daughter Olivia. Phil Henslowe, manager of Admiral's Company, refuses to employ the boy, but Carey will not free Nick. Hoping kinsman Will Shakespeare might help him return to Stratford, Nick flees--again without success. Nathaniel Giles accepts Nick into his famous St. Paul's Boys' Company. This transaction gains Carey a considerable sum, to gamble away.

GREENWICH: Performing for Queen Elizabeth, Nick rejects her invitation to remain at the Palace. Annoyed, she finally agrees to help him meet Will Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE'S ROOM: Nick gains his freedom and manages to meet Will. From playwright and friend Tom Heywood, they learn Carey has been jailed for the murder of a gambling companion; Carey begs Nick to visit.

NEWGATE PRISON: Carey asks Nick's forgiveness, attempting to reveal certain secrets. Disturbed by the other prisoners, he asks that friend Will come instead.

STRATFORD: Accompanied by Nick and Olivia, Shakespeare returns to sign final papers for his new home, a happy occasion for the family. At first, Simon rejects his wayward son. All loose ends are tied up when Carey's secret bequests are revealed; plans for Olivia's future are settled; Nick's reconciles with his father and reunites with his beloved mother. All's well that ends well.

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(AT RISE: Attwood home, early evening. USR, rustic table with two stools; DSL, a wooden bench. Merry Elizabethan MUSIC fades. Shouting gaily, three young teens enter DSL: NICK ATTWOOD, SUSANNA SHAKESPEARE and her younger sister JUDITH.)

YOUNGSTERS: Hark, hark, the lark,
The dogs do bark!

The players are comin' to town!

SUSANNA: Some in rags!

JUDITH: Some in tags!

NICK: Some in velvet gowns!

(MARGARET enters with wash basin and towel. YOUNGSTERS rush over, speaking at once.)

NICK: Mother, the whole town's buzzin'. Like a swarm o' bees!

JUDITH: Mistress Attwood, all o' Bridge Street was lined up with folks!

SUSANNA: To see the Admiral's Players ridin' through town.

MARGARET: *(Smiles.)* Do na be jabberin' at once now.

NICK: We watched 'em--banners wavin' in the breeze--

JUDITH: Red flags decorated with a ship--

SUSANNA: In honor o' the Admiral, o' course.

JUDITH: An' trumpets a yard long!

(THEY march around table, noisily miming trumpets.)

NICK: *(Waves cap.)* Players swingin' their fancy caps.

MARGARET: Decked out in silks an' velvets, I expect?

JUDITH: An' belts with great silver buckles!

SUSANNA: Cheerin' loud enough to set the crockery dancin' on the shelves.

JUDITH: An' they were singin' too!

End of Freeview

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