Miss Nightingale

Adapted by Walt Vail
From the story by
Hans Christian Andersen

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STORY OF THE PLAY

When the Empress of China reads a book from the Emperor of Japan, she learns about a wonderful bird in her very own garden. Surprised by the rich and vivid description of Miss Nightingale, she demands the bird appear in her court that evening. When Miss Nightingale appears, the court is disappointed by her drab, gray appearance. However, she makes up for it with her beautiful birdsong, so lovely it even moves the Empress to tears. Impressed, the Empress decides to have a silver cage built, to keep the bird forever in court.

Just then a gift is received from Japan, a marvelous mechanical bird, studded with jewels and diamonds, a bird which sings its own mechanical tune. With the attention on the new gift, Miss Nightingale steals away, back to the freedom of her beloved forest. When the Empress learns Miss Nightingale left court without permission, she is banished, and if she returns, she will be put to death.

Years go by, and the mechanical bird slowly wears out beyond repair. The Empress grows ill and on her deathbed there is no birdsong to give her a reason to recover. Death visits, and takes away everything that makes her a living Empress: her crown, her sword, and her flag. But before Death can take away the Empress's life, the life-giving song of the Nightingale is heard once more. Death is so taken by its beauty, that Death retires to her own garden. The Empress is restored to health, and Miss Nightingale sings on, for there is such beauty in her natural song that all of us will want to live forever.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 W, 6 Flexible)

EMPRESS: The royal lady of China.

TSING PEH: First Lady-in-Waiting. She is a very grand and self-important person who will seldom even speak to persons of lower rank ... unless she needs them for something.

MUSIC MISTRESS: Writes about the birdsong.

LOO SEE: Kitchen maid.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: The bird, gray and drab in color but with a beautiful voice.

COO TOO: Second Lady-in-Waiting.

DEATH: A dark figure.

CASTING NOTE: Although written for an all female cast, any roles other than Miss Nightingale may be played by males, if desired.

SETTING

Many centuries ago in the grand room in the palace of the Empress of China. In the center of the room is her golden throne. In the background, doors open onto the Empress's famous garden. In Scene 2, a royal bed should be moved on to the side of the stage.

SOUND EFFECTS

Beautiful nightingale bird sounds*
Several bars of Oriental music
Cow mooing
Dog barking
Crow cawing
Trumpet
Artificial bird chirping or music box musical notes
Ominous drums
Voices

**NOTE: The actual bird song of the nightingale can be found in sound effect CDs through online shopping. The lyrics to Miss Nightingale's song may be spoken softly over the background of a birdsong effect, or, alternatively, sung to a simple melody of your own composition, or using the playwright's sheet music available when a cast set is ordered.*

PROPS

Large book the Empress reads
Glass of water
Box containing the mechanical bird and a note
Crown
Sword
Flag

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: A BIRDSONG is heard. It is late afternoon. The birdsong fades out. ENTER MUSIC MISTRESS.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: *(To audience.)* Welcome to the palace of the Empress of China. As you can imagine, the palace is made of the finest porcelain, crystal, silver, and gold. But even finer than the palace is the garden of the Empress of China, just beyond that door. Think of the most beautiful roses and lilies and white silver bells, of tiny dwarf pines and swaying palm trees. Think of tulips, and rosemary, and hedges of green trimmed into the most fantastic shapes of elephants and alligators and giraffes. Think of bricked walkways that wander on for miles, where one breathes deeply of the scent of honeysuckle. Yes, that is the marvelous garden of the Empress of China, a garden so big that it travels into the forests and the fields and the lakes, so far away that even the head gardener has no idea where it ends. So is it any wonder that it contains secrets that even the Empress knows nothing about? Oh, but here she comes. I'd better get back to my work. I'm in the middle of composing a brand new imperial ballet suite, inspired, of course, by the Empress's garden!!

(EXIT MUSIC MISTRESS, humming a bit of her composition, perhaps dancing a bit on her way. ENTER the EMPRESS, who is reading a book, and also looking rather annoyed.)

EMPRESS: *(Reading aloud.)* "But Miss Nightingale is the best of all!" Miss Nightingale? Why, I know nothing about her. Is there such a bird in my kingdom, and in my own garden, and I have never heard of it? *(Reading again.)* "But Miss Nightingale is the best of all!" Imagine my having to discover this from a book! *(Calling.)* Tsing Peh! Tsing Peh! Come in here at once!

(ENTER TSING PEH.)

TSING PEH: *(Curtseying very low.)* Your Imperial Majesty. I await your pleasure.

EMPRESS: Tsing Peh, in this book there is said to be a very wonderful bird called Miss Nightingale, who lives in my kingdom, in my own garden. This book tells me that Miss Nightingale is better than anything else in my kingdom. Her song is more enchanting than the sound of the silver bells that grow on the flowers in my garden. Her music is so delicious that fishermen forget to draw in their nets at night, lying still in their boats to listen. Tell me, Tsing Peh, why have I never been told anything about Miss Nightingale? Why do I have to read of this in a book?

TSING PEH: I have never heard her mentioned.

EMPRESS: I have just mentioned her.

TSING PEH: But, Your Imperial Majesty, she has never been presented at court.

EMPRESS: I wish her to appear here this evening to sing to me. The whole world knows what I possess, and I know nothing about it!

TSING PEH: Your Imperial Majesty, if I may say so, you must not believe everything that is written. Books are often mere inventions, even if they are not full of outright lies. Writers of books may even be magicians, wizards, and blasphemers.

EMPRESS: Tsing Peh, if you value your life, listen closely to what I am saying. This book was sent to me by the Emperor of Japan. Therefore, it cannot be untrue. It was written by the chief poet of the Emperor of Japan, after a visit to my garden last summer. Because of his poet's visit, the Emperor of Japan now knows more of what is in my garden than I do. And I must learn of it from a book belonging to the Son of the Sun! Tsing Peh, if I were a more violent person than I am, I would be about to fly into a terrific rage.

TSING PEH: I thank the heavens for your temperate nature.

EMPRESS: I will hear this Miss Nightingale. I insist that she be here in my court tonight. I extend my most gracious protection to her. But if she is not forthcoming, I will have the whole court trampled upon by the imperial elephants after supper.

TSING PEH: Does that include your First Lady-in-Waiting?

EMPRESS: It includes you, Tsing Peh.
TSING PEH: I have never heard of Miss Nightingale before, but I will seek her. I will seek her diligently, your Imperial Majesty.
EMPRESS: You will find her, Tsing Peh.
TSING PEH: Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. *(Curtseys low.)*

(EMPRESS EXITS to her garden.)

TSING PEH: Music Mistress! Come in at once! *(Offstage, the SOUND of an Oriental instrument that has been playing under stops abruptly.)* Music Mistress!

(ENTER MUSIC MISTRESS from one side of the stage, as TSING PEH calls to the other.)

TSING PEH: *(Continued.)* Coo Too, Second Lady-in-Waiting! You are needed here at once! Coo Too!

(ENTER COO TOO.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: *(Furious.)* Can anything be so important that it must interrupt the composition of the imperial ballet suite?
COO TOO: *(Annoyed.)* What is it, Tsing Peh? I'm very busy embroidering a fresh golden pillow for her Imperial Majesty.
TSING PEH: *(Imperious.)* Do you want an elephant's foot to crush your Chinese guitar? Would you care to have your imperial golden pillow trampled?
MUSIC MISTRESS: What an idea!
COO TOO: That's an abominable thought.
TSING PEH: But I didn't think of it. The Empress did. Music Mistress, you are to blame for this. Why have you never told us of Miss Nightingale?
MUSIC MISTRESS: Miss Nightingale? Who is that?
COO TOO: I have never heard her mentioned. Is she larger than a breadbox?
MUSIC MISTRESS: She has never been presented at court.

TSING PEH: Have you never heard of anyone except who has been presented at court?
COO TOO: I don't think so.
MUSIC MISTRESS: Anyone who has not been presented at court is hardly worth hearing about.
TSING PEH: That may be true. But the Empress has commanded that Miss Nightingale appear in court tonight. If she does not appear, the entire court will be trampled upon after supper!
MUSIC MISTRESS: Then let her appear, whatever she is!
TSING PEH: Before she can appear, she must be invited to appear. And before she can be invited to appear, she must be found! Now start looking for her at once!
COO TOO: Certainly, Tsing Peh, certainly. Music Mistress, you search in that wing of the palace, while I search in this one. Tsing Peh, search this room while we are gone.
TSING PEH: That's better. We simply must find Miss Nightingale.
COO TOO: Yes, I'm wearing a new kimono tonight for supper, and I don't wish it to be trampled upon!
TSING PEH: Go, go!

(COO TOO and MUSIC MISTRESS EXIT, while TSING PEH quickly starts searching in some rather silly places. After a moment, Music Mistress RE-ENTERS.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: Tsing Peh?
TSING PEH: Have you found her already? Wonderful --
MUSIC MISTRESS: Tsing Peh, can you give me some idea of ... for whom I am looking?
TSING PEH: She's Miss Nightingale ... a bird ... she sings so beautifully that fishermen get caught in their own nets ... now, look!

(TSING PEH resumes her search.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: Oh, a bird! *(ENTER LOO SEE.)* Ah, Loo See. Tell me, have you seen anything of a bird in the palace?

LOO SEE: A bird in the palace? No, I have not.
MUSIC MISTRESS: Well, if you do, be sure to tell us about it at once.

(EXIT MUSIC MISTRESS. LOO SEE stops and watches TSING PEH in her search. Tsing Peh notices her looking.)

TSING PEH: Kitchen maid, don't you have some imperial dishes to wash in the kitchen?
LOO SEE: No, Tsing Peh. Forgive me for staring at you so impolitely, but I have never before seen you on your knees looking under the imperial furniture. Are you also looking for a bird in the palace?
TSING PEH: A bird! Do you know of one? One that sings more enchantingly than the silver bells in the Empress's garden?
LOO SEE: Has the bird a name?
TSING PEH: Miss Nightingale, Loo See. A strange bird that no one in court has ever heard of before!
LOO SEE: I thought you meant Miss Nightingale. Heavens, I know her very well. In the world outside of the imperial court, she is known and loved by all of the people.
TSING PEH: Ah! That explains why she has never been presented at court!

(ENTER COO TOO.)

COO TOO: I have all of the courtiers in the east wing of the palace looking for Miss Nightingale, but none of them can find the bird.
TSING PEH: Never mind, Loo See knows Miss Nightingale!
COO TOO: That's nice. Is she a friend of yours, Loo See?
LOO SEE: Yes. Every evening the cook allows me to take scraps from the kitchen table to my poor, sick mother, who lives down by the shore of the Empress's blue lake. On my way back at night, when I am tired, I rest in the forest, and then I hear Miss Nightingale. Her song brings tears to my eyes, and makes me feel as if my mother were kissing me.

COO TOO: Forgive me, but I don't see how any bird that is a friend of the common people and of a kitchen maid can sing at all.

LOO SEE: Would you like to hear her for yourself, Coo Too?

COO TOO: Not especially …

TSING PEH: Would you rather be trampled? Call the Music Mistress at once, and tell her we have found the bird. We will all go to the forest to invite Miss Nightingale to court.

COO TOO: If you say so. *(EXIT COO TOO.)*

TSING PEH: Loo See, little kitchen maid, would you like to take your sick mother some royal bird's nest soup each night, instead of scraps from the table? Do you think she might get well on a diet of frog's tongues dipped in warm honey?

LOO SEE: That might speed her recovery.

TSING PEH: I will obtain for you a permanent place in the royal kitchen. You will have permission to watch the Empress eat her breakfast for one year. Your new title shall be Imperial Breakfast-Watcher. All is yours for taking us to find Miss Nightingale, for the Empress has commanded that the bird sing to her in court tonight.

LOO SEE: Oh, how pleased Miss Nightingale will be! She has never before received a royal command. But tell me, Tsing Peh. Will she still be allowed to sing for the common people? Without that, both she and they will be unhappy.

TSING PEH: We shall see, we shall see.

(ENTER COO TOO and MUSIC MISTRESS. LIGHTS start to go down gradually as it grows darker outside.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: What is it? Has the bird been discovered already? And I have had every courtier in the west wing searching every stick and story of the palace!

TSING PEH: Lead us, Loo See. We are ready for our journey.

LOO SEE: Oh, it will not be necessary for you to go and find her. It's getting dark already, and I'll locate her quickly in the trees by listening for her song. I'll bring her back.

LOO SEE *(Continued.)* I'll only be a moment. Listen for her song. It's better that you hear her first, I think, before you see her.

TSING PEH: Don't fail us, Loo See. Very soon, the Empress shall want Miss Nightingale's performance.

LOO SEE: Light the golden lamps, and arrange the royal flowers. Prepare yourselves and the court for her appearance. I won't be long. And listen … listen and you shall hear her, and know immediately why she is the best in all the kingdom.

(EXIT LOO SEE into the garden. LIGHTS down outside, it grows a bit darker.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: Well, I'm listening, but I don't hear anything.

COO TOO: Neither do I.

TSING PEH: Light the golden lamps. Arrange the royal flowers. We've very little time to spare!

(THEY begin arranging the court for MISS NIGHTINGALE'S appearance. From the garden, the SOUND of a cow is heard.)

MUSIC MISTRESS: *(Listening.)* Oh, there we have it. What wonderful lung power for such a little thing as a bird! But I have certainly heard that sound somewhere before!

TSING PEH: You silly woman! That's only a cow bellowing. You can see the herdsman driving her in from the meadow. Even I can tell a cow from Miss Nightingale.

MUSIC MISTRESS: A cow? Are you sure?

TSING PEH: Get back to work.

(THEY again arrange the court. From the garden, the SOUND of a DOG is heard.)

COO TOO: Ah, there we have it! Perfect pitch! No wonder this bird is best in the kingdom. No other creature can sustain a note so unwaveringly!

TSING PEH: Ridiculous! That's nothing but one of the imperial hounds howling at the first imperial star to twinkle in the sky. You can see him on the crest of that hill. Coo Too, you are the only person in this court who would mistake a hound's howl for Miss Nightingale.

COO TOO: Well, I defy Miss Nightingale to sing better than that.

TSING PEH: Let's hope she can. Otherwise, we may be trampled in spite of finding her. *(THEY return to their work. From the garden, the SOUND of a CROW is heard. Listening.)* Ah! Now there we have it! That is the cry of a bird if I have ever heard one. It must have a magnificent beak in order to make a sound of such nasality!

COO TOO: That's a crow! A crow stealing corn from the imperial vegetable patch!

MUSIC MISTRESS: You can see the impudent bird flying away, laughing raucously at you, Tsing Peh!

COO TOO: Yes, because you were so stupid as to think a crow was Miss Nightingale!

TSING PEH: If that is a crow, then where is Miss Nightingale? I'm getting worried, for the Empress will be with us at any moment, and still I have heard no birdsong!

COO TOO: Patience, Tsing Peh. You will be trampled soon enough.

MUSIC MISTRESS: Perhaps when you are in heaven, you will hear the song of Miss Nightingale at last.

(A nightingale BIRDSONG is heard.)

TSING PEH: What's that? Can you hear it?

MUSIC MISTRESS: How beautiful! A sound like bells of purest crystal!

COO TOO: That is the most delightfully coquettish sound I've ever heard. How beautiful!

TSING PEH: With such a voice, surely Miss Nightingale must be the most beautiful and colorful bird in all the world.

COO TOO: Isn't it extraordinary that we have never heard it sing before! Wait until the Empress hears it! She'll declare a holiday.

End of Freeview

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