

THEATRE FOR A SMALL PLANET

By Jules Tasca

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STORY OF THE PLAY

The magic of theatre, which has always brought people together to work as one, now weaves three tales from around the world together into 90 minutes of captivating entertainment for young audiences.

In the Chinese play, "The Ten Thousand Treasure Mountain," Little Red Maiden and her older brother, K'o-li, learn from their mother and the wise man of the mountain that riches do not always bring joy. Too bad the selfish dragon learns that lesson the hard way!

In a native American play, "Little Burnt Face," the Cinderella story is retold as Little Burnt Sand becomes the only Indian maiden to see the handsome and powerful Chief Rainbow Mist. Because of her sweet and kind nature, Little Burnt Sand becomes his bride and her older, meaner sisters, Tall Raven Hair and Magpie Feather, regret their earlier cruelty to her.

In the delightful English fairy tale, "The Travels of Farley Fox," we find that curiosity can kill, if not a cat, then certainly other too-curious animals. But goodness does win out in the end as Farley Fox learns his final lesson.

Show the children in your audiences that the different cultures aren't so very foreign at all with "Theatre for a Small Planet."

CHARACTERS

(Ensemble cast of 6 to 27)

ACTORS 1, 2, 3: Help introduce the 3 plays.

CHINESE PLAY

“The Ten Thousand Treasure Mountain”

LITTLE RED MAIDEN: poor peasant girl.

K'O-LI: her older brother, faces temptation.

MOTHER: hard-working, honest, wise mother.

OLD MAN: priest of the mountain, must test humans.

MI-MAI: Old Man's daughter, has keys.

DRAGON: wants all the goodies for himself!

NATIVE AMERICAN PLAY

“Little Burnt Face”

LITTLE BURNING SAND: kind, good Indian daughter.

TALL RAVEN HAIR: her mean older sister.

MAGPIE FEATHER: another.

FATHER: the girls' only parent.

SPRING DOVE: announces her brother's coming.

CHIEF RAINBOW MIST: future leader of Micmacs.

KNOWING HEAD: like a fairy godmother.

ENGLISH FAIRY TALE

“The Travels of Farley the Fox”

FARLEY: the ultimate sly fox.

WOMAN #1: owner of Rooster.

ROOSTER: Oxford type, eats Farley's bee.

WOMAN #2: owner of Pig.

PIG: eats the Rooster. Oink!

WOMAN #3: owner of Ox.

OX: eats the Pig.

FARMER: indulgent parent.

SON: Farmer's spoiled child.

WOMAN #4: owner of Bobby, the dog.

BOBBY, THE DOG throttles Farley.

(Note: Same actress can play all the Woman 1-4 with minor changes in costume.)

COSTUMES

Oriental peasant outfits are worn by Little Red Maiden (in red); K'o-li (in brown); and Mother (in black), who also carries a fan. Old Man is dressed in white, walks with a cane or stick, and has a long gray beard. Mi-Mai is dressed in brighter clothes. Also needed is a green dragon costume.

Native American garb is composed of tunic and leggings in buckskin-like fabrics. Spring Dove wears a more elaborate outfit and carries a tom-tom; Knowing Head has a painted face and a stick with a rattle and feathers on the end; and Rainbow Mist wears a dazzling yellow and orange outfit and feathered headdress. Little Burning Sand wears tattered outfit and skin cap at first and later changes into a white skin dress, silver headband, moccasins, and a yellow and orange beaded neckpiece. Sisters add moccasins and headband when they change.

English women wear 19th-century dresses with aprons and mobcaps. Farley wears a jaunty hat and at the end an academic cap and gown. Farmer and son wear dark working clothes. Costumes also needed for rooster, pig, ox, and dog.

Act I

(With house lights still on, ACTORS 1, 2 AND 3 enter with an inflatable globe and play catch. They may even include the audience in this game.)

ACTOR #1: Just a few facts about this little ball we throw through space: Our planet is third from the sun after Mercury and Venus. We're 24,902.4 miles around. We have 197 billion square miles, mostly water. We're traveling around a star, our sun, right now as we play catch, at 66,000 miles an hour. So, the fastest the average person ever flies is when he's just standing on earth eating an ice cream cone or snoring in bed.

ACTOR #2: You have no choice. One airline, one schedule, no free meals. We're all space travelers, whether we want to be or not. We rotate as we fly; every 23 hours, 56 minutes and 4 seconds, we do a turn. Don't knock the rotation. It gives us a chance to get out of the sun and get some sleep and stops people from mowing their lawns.

ACTOR #3: We "star people" have magnetic poles on our little piece of cosmos. We also have salty seas and rain forests and great plains that all teem with life. Some people on our planet are working hard to keep it that way.

ACTOR #2: We're "star people" because the earth itself is believed to be a chunk of our sun star that broke off and decided to go its own way. The funny thing is that, from outer space, we look like a calm of blue peace enveloped in a quiet of white clouds. But if you get in close, you'll see it's not so. We have lightning and earthquakes and tidal waves and sometime wars that chew up the land and the people on it as if they didn't matter at all.

ACTOR #1: We call this event "Theatre for a Small Planet" because, even though once upon a time the earth was a vast mystery to people, today it's a little spaceship we all inhabit. Columbus took three months to cross the Atlantic; the Concorde does it in three hours. Rocket ships in the future will get you around in minutes. So those who used to be foreigners are now neighbors.

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ACTOR #1: *(Cont'd.)* So small we've gotten that...

ACTOR #2: Enough facts. It's time to visit some of the neighbors.

ACTOR #3: *(Pointing to the audience.)* Yes. They're all ready.

ACTOR #2: Fairy tales take us around to our neighbors faster than any machine anyway. Spin the globe.

ACTOR #1: *(Putting the globe on floor.)* We spin the globe and the country that faces the audience is the country whose fairy tale we will tell. *(HE spins the globe, while chanting:)* Round and round, / Spin and spin / Tell us, globe, / Which land we're in!

ACTOR #2: *(Picking up the stopped globe.)* China!

ACTOR #3: China!

ACTOR #1: *(Calling offstage.)* S/he said China! You all hear back there? Keepers of costumes. China! *(Two FEMALE and one MALE begin putting on the costumes of Chinese peasants which are handed to them by others.)* People of props. China! *(ACTORS are handed shovels; large rocks are pushed on stage.)* Keepers of flames and lights, dim the house, please. It's China, get ready. *(House lights come down, stage lights come up.)* Someone cue the dragon! And give him his dinner, so he won't eat any of the actors. *(To audience.)* That dragon eats more personnel around here! *(To offstage.)* Ready? Here we go. The Chinese tale, "The Ten Thousand Treasure Mountain." *(As HE goes off.)* Music up, please.

(We hear the strain of a p'i-p'a, a four-stringed Chinese instrument, or a guitar, playing Oriental strains. This is accompanied by wooden clappers and a drum. Whenever music is called for, this is the sound. A young girl, LITTLE RED MAIDEN, dressed in a reddish peasant outfit, and an older boy, K'O-LI, dressed in brown, dig the earth with shovels. The MOTHER, dressed in black, carries a large folding fan. She opens and closes the fan with a flourish and snap at decisive points in the play.)

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MOTHER: *(To audience.)* High in the mountains here, there is little to eat but roots. Oh, we get by ... most of the time...

K'O-LI: But it's getting late, Mother.

MAIDEN: ... and this is all we can find.

(SHE puts a few roots in a pan.)

MOTHER: *(Looking into the pan.)* I ... I'm not very hungry, children, so you, Little Red Maiden, and you, K'o-li, take these roots for your meal.

(SHE puts the pan on a rock.)

K'O-LI: You are certainly hungry, Mother.

MOTHER: No. The mountain winds have blown away my hunger.

K'O-LI: And all this digging has sapped my hunger. The roots are yours, my sister.

MAIDEN: You're both as hungry as I am. Either we share this meager meal of roots or I'll starve, that's all.

(SHE pushes the pan of roots toward MOTHER. Silence.)

MOTHER: So be it, little daughter, we'll all three of us have a few bites for supper.

(The THREE gather around the pan of roots. As they are about to eat, an OLD MAN with a long gray beard enters. He is dressed in white. He uses a stick as a cane to help him walk. The three see that the old man is feeble and shaky. They regard him. He stops. Mother opens and closes her fan with a flourish and loud clap.)

K'O-LI: Who is this?

MAIDEN: He looks hungrier than we are.

MOTHER: Are you hungry, old one? *(The OLD MAN nods. MOTHER confers with her two CHILDREN.)* You are right, daughter. He is hungrier than we. He is one of the venerable old people who is still incandescent.

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MOTHER: *(Cont'd.)* The world has done its worse to him and his light is still here. Let us offer him our dinner meal. Tomorrow, surely our digging will turn up something more for us.

MAIDEN: I agree, mother.

K'O-LI: And so do I. Look at him. Death's door must be ajar for the poor soul.

(K'O-LI hands the pan of roots to his SISTER. She crosses and gives it to the OLD MAN. The Old Man nods a thank you, then eats.)

MAIDEN: He hardly has strength to chew.

K'O-LI: But he is enjoying the food.

(The OLD MAN gestures to them.)

MOTHER: What is it, venerable old man? *(OLD MAN gestures that he wants to go higher up.)* Higher up. He lives high up in the mountains. He wants to go home.

MAIDEN: Oh.

K'O-LI: He will never make it up the steep paths. Old Father, I will carry you the rest of the journey. Agreed?

(The OLD MAN nods. MAIDEN takes the pan from him. K'O-LI takes him on his back. The OLD MAN points the direction.)

MAIDEN: Now the two are one ...

(K'O-LI carries HIM off. MOTHER opens and closes her fan. The lights dim and music punctuates K'o-li's travels, as he crosses stage a few times with the old man on his back.)

MOTHER: My son must walk ever upward ...

MAIDEN: ... over slopes and cliffs, across mountain streams and rocky ground ... his passenger grows heavier and heavier ...

MOTHER: May the mountain gods be kind ...

(MOTHER opens and closes the fan. Then she and MAIDEN exit. The music stops and the lights come up full. K'O-LI enters with the OLD MAN. He signals K'o-li to stop. The Old Man gets off.)

K'O-LI: Why are we stopping here?

(The OLD MAN, signals K'O-LI to be patient. After a beat, MI-MAI, a pretty young girl, enters.)

MI-MAI: *(Embracing the OLD MAN.)* Father! Father, you're home! I was so worried.

OLD MAN: You shouldn't be ... There is goodness in the world.

K'O-LI: You can speak, old Father?

OLD MAN: When there is need to. K'o-li, this is my daughter, Mi-Mai.

MI-MAI: An honor. Thank you for helping my father home. This kindness will never be forgotten. Never.

K'O-LI: It was the least I could do. We couldn't even treat him to a decent meal.

OLD MAN: This young man and his family are truly one of the wonders of this world, daughter. They have compassion for others and do not realize that it is special, and they are rare. Take off your earring, Mi-Mai, and make them into keys, so that K'o-li can open the mountain cave and have some of its treasures.

K'O-LI: Keys? To the mountain treasure?

(MI-MAI removes her earrings. One is silver, the other, gold. She shapes each one into keys. She hands them to HIM.)

K'O-LI: For me?

MI-MAI: Yes, Friend of Man. On the other side of this mountain there is Ten Thousand Treasure Mountain. At the top is Ten Thousand Treasure Cave. There is a huge stone door at the entrance. Put this gold key in the lock and it will open.

MI-MAI: *(Cont'd.)* Enter and the stone door will automatically close. The gold and jewels take light from the cracks in the ceiling. The reflection lights up the cave like coals in a brazier.

K'O-LI: Gold ... and ... jewels?

MI-MAI: So many, you can't count them. Also vases and carpets and magic machines. Everything. Take whatever you need, friend, for you deserve it. When you are ready to leave the treasure cave, use the silver key in the inside lock. Never lose the silver key or you will never get out again.

(MI-MAI and the OLD MAN go off.)

K'O-LI: *(Crossing DS as MI-MAI and the OLD MAN go off.)*
But ... but all I did was carry your father home. Why should I get keys to so much wealth? Why for a few roots and a piggy back ride do I ...*(HE turns and sees that he is alone.)*... Mi-Mai? Old Father? *(HE looks around.)* Where are you? Mi-Mai? Lovely Mi-Mai? How can I see you ever again? Mi-Mai?

(Lights fade on K'O-LI. Music comes up. Then lights come up dimly on MOTHER and MAIDEN. Mother opens and closes the fan.)

MOTHER: K'o-li ran back to us as fast as he could and told us the whole story.

(Music stops as K'O-LI enters and joins THEM. Lights come up full.)

MAIDEN: Then this is our lucky day, Mother. There is treasure and we have the keys.

K'O-LI: I have strong shoulders. I can carry a whole basket full of jewels back here. We can buy a castle.

MAIDEN: ... and the fanciest dresses with fur sashes.

K'O-LI: ...and a herd of horses to ride ... and livestock for food.

MAIDEN: ... and servants to slaughter and cook them. And we can have our own room ... rooms even. And bowls of fruits and sweets to nibble on.

K'O-LI: It'll all cost a lot. I will go back for basket after basket of gold. We will hire guards to make sure no thieves are able to...

MOTHER: Wait! Children, before you become monarchs who'll need soldiers to protect your wealth, wait.

K'O-LI: What is it, Mother? You do not have the face of joy that wealth brings.

MOTHER: I had wealth long ago. My brothers and sisters constantly warred over the riches of our family. For me, great heaps of gold are a curse. That is why I left my family and chose to live in the hills with your dear departed father. There was always hard work, but there was always closeness, too.

MAIDEN: You mean K'o-li is not to enjoy the gift from the old one and his daughter?

K'O-LI: You reared us correctly, Mother. For we would be fools to continue to scrape the earth for roots, while I have a golden key to a better life.

MOTHER: There is truth in what you say. Eating turtle roots day after day does make for a dull life.

MAIDEN: Then we can take something. Oh, thank you, Mother!

K'O-LI: Yes, I will be on my way right now. Sister, fetch me two baskets that I might carry back as much as I can ...

MOTHER: No ... Go to the Cave of Treasures, my son, but listen carefully. Take only that which will help us live better. Take a tool that will make our work easier, rather than emeralds that buy only the envy of our neighbors.

K'O-LI: But...

MOTHER: I have made up my mind.

MAIDEN: K'o-li, you know when Mother has made up her mind... and something to make our work lighter is better than nothing. K'o-li...

(HE kisses MAIDEN, then MOTHER. He crosses DS.)

K'O-LI: I will obey my mother. The fire of life has burned longer in her than in me, and she is wise ... but she surely does not seem so...

(MOTHER opens and closes her fan. Music comes up. Lights fade except for a spot on Mother.)

MOTHER: Higher and higher than he had ever climbed before, my K'o-li went, where the air is as thin as silk. His heart pounded like the heart of a bird flying against the wind. My son's thoughts were decorated with diamonds and precious stones. Oh, mountain gods protect the adventures of the young.

(The music stops. MOTHER exits. K'O-LI, out of breath, enters the spotlight.)

K'O-LI: At last! The entrance to the cave! No, the entrance to heaven. Ten Thousand Treasure Cave, just as the beautiful Mi-Mai told. Here ... here is the keyhole! Oh, that I really do have the keys. Stupid K'o-li, stop wasting time. The gold key. *(HE takes out the gold key and fits it to one of the stones that acts as the cave door. Wooden clappers punctuate the moment.)* It fits!

(HE opens the stone door and enters. The stone door closes as the spotlight goes out. Christmas or varicolored lights come up and mottle the stage floor and set. The lights are the precious stones. K'o-li enters, awed by the treasure.)

K'O-LI: *(Continued.)* Oh! Ohhh! No one would believe so many precious gems. Look at it! Just look at it all! All the kings of China haven't got so much. I ... I ... could be ... that is, we could be richer than anyone in the world. *(Simulating picking up what he sees.)* Gold, silver, pearls as big as my nose. Rubies. Emeralds and...

MOTHER: *(Offstage.)* Listen carefully. Take only that which will help us live better. Take a tool that we might work easier...

K'O-LI: I will ... I promised I would ... My mother's taught me to be honorable ... I will obey her ... *(HE crosses to a seed grinder with a crank handle.)* Here's a paltry seed grinder. It will help us grind the roots we dig and make our meals tender. I'll take this ... and so I leave you, dark tempting cave of beauty ... *(HE picks up the grinder and takes out the silver key.)* The silver key to get out. I leave all this with nothing but a simple seed grinder ... but some day when my mother has burned all her fire and passes on, I will come back – I have the keys. I will only pretend to obey her for now. Someday I will come back for all of this. I don't care what she thinks. As far as I am concerned, this is all mine. I earned it. I found it. I own it.

(HE puts the silver key into the stone door. Clappers. Blackout. Lights come up again on MOTHER, MAIDEN and K'o-li standing around the seed grinder.)

MOTHER: I remembered my brothers' and sisters' goodness decayed by riches and ... I admit, son, that I prayed hard to the mountain gods that you would keep your head. The sight of the treasure brings temptation that coils round a person's will like a python.

MAIDEN: Real treasure, K'o-li?

K'O-LI: Pearls like piles of snow. Gems that gleam like a cat's eyes. Golden masks with tongues of rubies. Brooches with diamonds that burn light into your eyes. And there were ...

MOTHER: K'o-li, forget all that. You have chosen well. This grinder will cut our work by ten times. We will chop roots in this and have plenty of time left over for games and story telling.

(LITTLE RED MAIDEN turns the crank on the grinder and sesame confections begin to pour out.)

MAIDEN: *(SHE puts a basket underneath the grinder and cranks out more sesame confection.)* Mother, look!

K'O-LI: She has put nothing in the grinder and yet it gives forth... *(Takes one.)* ... sesame cookies!

(HE turns the crank. More confections drop out.)

MAIDEN: How can this be, Mother? Without sesame seeds or sugar or anything? How can this be?

MOTHER: It is because your brother has chosen a magic grinder. Let us take this basket and share our good fortune with others.

(THEY take the basket and go amongst the audience and distribute the treat. The festive movement is broken by the sound of a roar offstage. Loud music follows. MOTHER gathers K'O-LI and MAIDEN to her side. After a beat, a large DRAGON enters the stage and roars.)

K'O-LI: A dragon!

MAIDEN: Mother, I am afraid!

MOTHER: We will hide here amongst the people.

(The THREE sit in the aisles. The DRAGON roars again.)

DRAGON: Where are they? *(Crossing DS.)* Where? I demand to know where they are. *(May move into audience but does not see MOTHER and CHILDREN.)* Are you hiding them? I hear this family has a magic grinder that gives out delicious sesame cakes. Why should they have that and not me? Why? *(HE roars.)* I'm hungrier than anything in China. I have a belly five barrels big. Thus, by virtue of appetite, the magical grinder should be mine! *(HE roars then sees the grinder.)* Here it is! Right here in the open. Stupid peasants. I'm gonna take it and have all that sweet sesame for myself. For me! Me! *(HE cranks the grinder but only pebbles come out.)* Stones! Stones! I want sesame! *(HE cranks again. More stones.)*

DRAGON: *(Cont'd.)* So...so for that skinny peasant family, for those worthless root-diggers, you give forth sesame and for me ... stones?! One more chance... *(HE cranks the grinder but gets only stones once more.)* Stones! *(HE roars and circles the stage.)* Well, if you won't give sweetness to me, I will make sure you don't give it to anyone! *(HE roars, then destroys the grinder.)* A minute ago there was a marvelous machine. Now there is none. That is called dragon magic.

(Laughs and roars as HE exits. Slowly, MOTHER, MAIDEN and K'O-LI cross back up on stage to look at the remnants of the grinder.)

MAIDEN: Can you fix it?

K'O-LI: No, he has destroyed it!

(MAIDEN starts to cry.)

MOTHER: It will be all right, Little Red Maiden.

MAIDEN: But the magic fed so many.

MOTHER: K'o-li still has the keys to Ten Thousand Treasures Cave.

K'O-LI: Of course, Mother. I would give them up for nothing in this world.

MOTHER: Then return to the mountain cave to find some other implements for us to use.

(SHE takes MAIDEN in her arms to comfort her.)

K'O-LI: I will run all the way. *(HE kisses MOTHER and MAIDEN. To the audience.)* I will run with gladness. I long to see again my treasure that will some day make me a master of everything.

(MOTHER opens and closes the fan. The lights fade. When they come up again with music, K'O-LI, MAIDEN and MOTHER stand around a large stone mortar and wooden pestle.)

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