

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?

End of Freeview

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