

# A Guide for Teachers

December, 2011

Chattanooga  
**YOUTH THEATRE**  
Centre

*We're Live*



**BEST**  
~~The Worst~~  
**Christmas Pageant**  
**Ever**

by **Barbara**  
**Robinson**

*Directed by Chuck Tuttle*

Co-Producers: Joseph and Carole Blass, Dr. Carol Burns,  
Kristina & Tom Montague



allied arts



the arts   
*changing lives!*

TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION





*Our production of The Best Christmas Pageant Ever will use various ministers from the community to play the role of Reverend Hopkins. Likewise, fire personnel from our area will play themselves at different performances. The minister's and firefighters' names and affiliations will be announced before each performance. We hope that this will add an air of fun and a sense of community to our presentation.*

## Director's Notes

This play has very special memories for me. I first directed a production during the Christmas season of 1999. My wife and I had been living in Japan teaching English when she became "great with child." At first, we thought we'd stay in Japan to have the baby, but we both felt a need to be near family for the birth. So we prepared to leave Japan, not by donkey, but by jet. I knew that being without a job with a new baby was not a great idea, so I sent messages to friends in California where we'd be having the baby, to see if anyone had temporary work for me. I got a message from my friend and mentor (which is a sort wiseman) in Pleasanton, California that he needed someone to direct two productions during the Fall, one of which was *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. I gratefully accepted the offer.

At the same time, I sent resumes to various theatres around the U.S., hoping to find more permanent employment for after the baby was born. I was careful to tell each prospective employer that I wouldn't be available until after the first of the year, as I had a baby on the way. We arrived at my parents' home in Hayward, California instead of Bethlehem, and found there was, unlike Mary and Joseph, a small room waiting for us in that inn of sorts. Upon our arrival, a message awaited us on the answering machine. Rodney Van Valkenburg, Director of Programs at the Chattanooga Theatre Centre in Chattanooga, Tennessee wanted to talk to me about a position at the theatre (he's not the angel of the lord or anything, but a great guy). At this point, I knew very little about Chattanooga, except that it was about the right size town for me and had a song named after it. I remember having a very nice conversation with Rodney. He seemed to like something about me, because in September, he asked me to come to Chattanooga for a face-to-face interview. By the end of my two days here, I was offered the job of Director of Education and Outreach despite the fact that I couldn't start until after Christmas.

In the meantime, I was directing and substitute teaching to make ends meet. The people in Pleasanton knew I had a baby on the way and we had made all possible plans in case the baby came before we opened *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* on December 3rd. It looked like the kid would wait until I got the show open but early in the morning of December 2nd, my wife got her first labor pains. Just after midnight on December 3, 1999, Alexander Tuttle made his debut. Since the actual opening was that evening, and my wife wanted some peace and quiet anyway, I was able to creep away from the hospital (not a stable) and make the opening of the show. No one saw me come in a few minutes before curtain and I stood at the back of the house, watching the play unfold like any other audience member, but with one twist: I understood better than ever the magic of the story of the baby in the manger.

May you also be touched by this story of how a few children, thought irredeemable, are redeemed by the greatest story of redemption. A merry Christmas to you all.

# About the Author

## Barbara Robinson



Born Barbara Webb in Portsmouth Ohio, October 24, 1927, Barbara Robinson started writing stories in the fourth grade. Her father died when she was three years old and she was then raised by her mother, a school teacher for 49 years in Portsmouth. Robinson attributes her success to her mother instilling a love of books in her. At an early age, she was an avid reader.

She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Allegheny College in 1948. She worked as a librarian in Sewickley, Pennsylvania before marrying John Robinson in 1949. She wrote short stories for several magazines and tried her hand at poetry and plays. She wrote her first children's book, *Across from Indian Shore* in 1962.

Her best known work, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, was written in 1972. In 1982, she adapted her book into a play which was first performed at Seattle Children's Theatre in 1982. A television version of the story was produced in 1988.

Of her work, Mrs. Robinson says:

*Since I'm one of those writers whose story ideas spring more from people than from plot, I spend a lot of time with my characters, so they tend to be people I like to spend time with - even the wild and woolly Herdmans, who inhabit two of my books, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and *The Best School Year Ever*.*

Barbara Robinson was made a Broadloaf Fellow in 1962, received the Georgia Children's Book Award in 1976, and the Young Hoosier Book award in 1978. She has two daughters and two grandchildren and now lives in Berwyn, Pennsylvania.

## Selected works of Barbara Robinson



*Trace Through the Forest*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1965.

*Across from Indian Shore*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1962.



*The Fattest Bear in the First Grade*. New York: Random House, 1969.



*Temporary Times, Temporary Places*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.

*The Best Halloween Ever*. New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 2004.



### Sources:

"Barbara Robinson's Web Page." America Writes for Kids. nd.

Palmer, Jen. "Robinson, Barbara Webb." The Pennsylvania Center for the Book. 2001.

# Further Discussion

## Christmas Memories

In our production the story is told by an older version of Beth Bradley, looking back on her childhood. Many Christmas stories are told as memories from our past (*A Child's Christmas in Wales*, *A Christmas Story*, *A Christmas Memory*). Memory has a way of focussing in on the most important parts of our lives. Plays do the same thing.

### Questions:

- Why does Beth remember this Christmas Pageant?
- What memories do you have of a past Christmas?

## Redemption

Stopbullying.gov defines bullying as involving:

- Imbalance of power
- Intent to cause harm
- Repetition of events over time

By this definition, and what we are told in the story, the Herdman's are bullies. Beyond that, they lie and smoke and steal. Yet we seem to root for them. Why? Every good Christmas story is about the redemption of someone from bully to good guy. From Ebenezer Scrooge to the Grinch, we seem to have a need for these characters to change. Perhaps it's because we all carry a bit of a bully inside of ourselves and by watching their transformation, we are transformed ourselves. Redemption is what Christmas is all about and we diminish ourselves if we don't believe that every person deserves a chance to be redeemed.

### Questions:

- Why are the Herdmans bullies?
- How does the Christmas pageant change the Herdmans?

## Beth vs. Imogene

The story seems to revolve around the two characters of Beth and Imogene. Beth, as the teller of the tale must have been profoundly influenced by the events. Imogene, more than the other Herdmans, seems captivated by the pageant and playing the character of Mary. These girls are the same age, yet come from very different backgrounds.

### Questions:

- Why does Imogene want to play Mary or even be in the Christmas pageant?
- What is it about the Herdmans in the Christmas pageant that makes it so memorable to Beth?
- Who are Imogene's friends?

## Words to Think About

*Here are some words used in the play that may be new to your students. Have them look them up.*

**Bureau** - Imogene: "We put Gladys in the **bureau** drawer."

**Bazaar** - Mother: "...she runs the potluck, she's chairman of the **bazaar**...I think Helen Armstrong would preach the sermon if anyone let her."

**Colic** - Alice: "I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus, as if he had **colic**."

**Decree** - Maxine: "In the days of Caesar Augustus a **decree** went out that all the world should be taxed."

**Pageant** - Mother: "This is going to be the best Christmas **pageant** ever."

**Refugee** - Beth: "They look like **refugees** or something."

**Revenge** - Gladys: "I'd call it...**Revenge** at Bethlehem."

**Traction** - Charlie: "I thought Mrs. Armstrong was in **traction**?"

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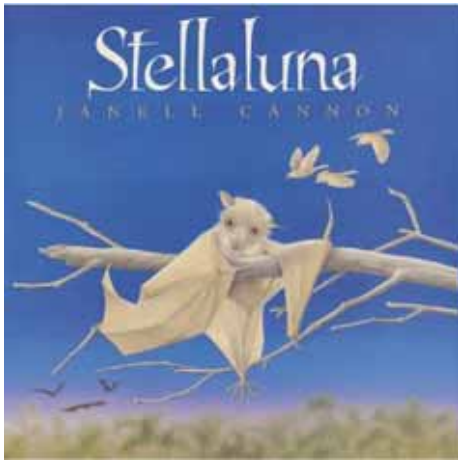
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The Emeroror's  
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Seussical Jr.  
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Stellaluna  
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## The Chattanooga Theatre Centre Staff

Producing Director.....George Quick  
Communications Coordinator.....Jan Belk  
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Education Director.....Chuck Tuttle  
Youth Theatre Director.....Maria Chattin-Carter  
Technical Supervisor.....Warren Brady  
Resident Costumer.....Scott Dunlap

# Teacher Evaluation Form

## The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

School \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your answers to the following questions by putting an X next to the appropriate number or giving a short explanation.

1. Did your students appear to understand what was happening in the play?

Did not  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Did

2. Did any portion(s) of the play seem to confuse them?

Y                      N                      (If yes, please identify.)

3. Did your students seem attentive most of the time?

Did not  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Did

4. What segment(s) seemed to lose your students' attention?

5. Did your students discuss the play freely after seeing it?

Did not  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Did

6. How meaningful was this experience (in an educative sense) to your class?

Not very  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Very

7. How does this production compare with other CTC productions you have seen?

None seen      Worse      1                      2                      3      Equal      4                      5      Better

8. How does this production compare to other theatres' programs you have seen?

None seen      Worse      1                      2                      3      Equal      4                      5      Better

9. Did you find this study guide helpful?

Did not  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Did

10. What is your overall rating of this production?

Poor  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      Excellent

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this form. Please return this form by mail, fax, or email i to:

Chattanooga Theatre Centre  
Attn: Chuck Tuttle  
P.O. Box 4023  
Chattanooga, TN 37405

Fax: 423/664-1211  
chuck@theatrecentre.com