

Pushcart Players

Study Guide to Production & Activities

A SEASON OF MIRACLES



Holiday Stories Adapted and Written by Ruth Fost
Music Arranged by Larry Hochman

"A Season Of Miracles" is a collection of holiday tales from different cultures including Christmas, Kwanzaa and Chanukah. Stories within this play are O. Henry's "The Gift Of The Magi," E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Nutcracker," "The Kwanzaa Kite," an original tale set in Nigeria, and "The Chanukah Miracle." Crafted and set to music with the timeless tone of each classic piece, this magical presentation is designed to warm the hearts and perhaps change the perspective of young audiences as they think about the true meaning and spirit of the holiday season. As for miracles? They are within us all and at the heart of each story, known as the gifts of love, kindness, caring and sharing.

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Prologue –

T'was the night before Christmas
And Chanukah too.
Kwanzaa was happenin'
And everyone knew
That all 'round the world,
Folks in their own way –
Were fixing and fussing
For a grand holiday....

Thus begins “*A Season of Miracles*,” continuing with the introduction of Clara and Fritz (siblings from “The Nutcracker” story) who are anxiously waiting for the 10 o’clock chime. This is the time when the doors of the Great Room will finally open. Here they will see the magical tree, laden with decorations, and the holiday gifts and surprises that await them. They open a book to help pass the time and as they move from story to story, it comes to life for us, the audience, to enjoy. The first story they read is “*The Gift of the Magi*.”

“The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry



This is perhaps one of the most precious of holiday stories – one that readers and audiences enjoy hearing over and over again. A young loving couple wants only to make each other happy. Having a pitifully insufficient amount of money to spend on gifts, the young bride, Della, decides to cut her splendid, long hair and sell it. With the money she gains for her hair, she buys her husband, Jim, a silver chain for *his* prized possession, -- an heirloom pocket watch. In the meantime, unbeknownst to Della, Jim has sold his watch to get the money needed to buy special decorative combs for Della to wear in her beautiful hair. With neither hair for the combs or a watch for the chain, Della and Jim realize that they, after all, have the most precious gift of all -- their love for each other and the great joy and fulfillment of giving.

Discussion Points

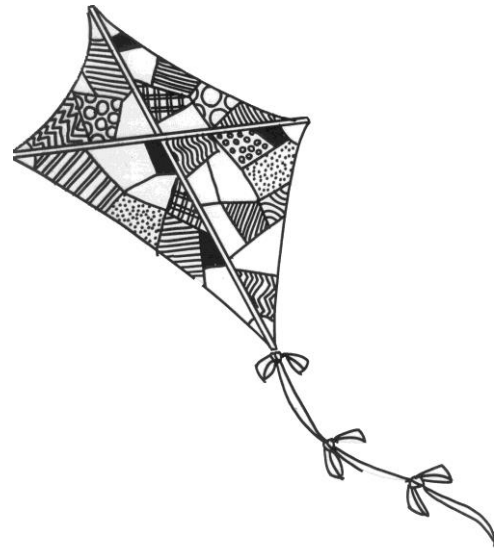
In this story, Della and Jim’s happiness comes from “giving” rather than “receiving.”

- What does this have to do with the spirit of the holidays?
- What can we learn from Della and Jim?
- What do you think Della and Jim learned about themselves?
- Fast forward to Christmas the following year. Imagine that Della and Jim still have little or no money to buy each other gifts. If you were writing the story, what would you have them do on this Christmas?
- Discuss “values” and “perspectives” (i.e. focusing on what we *have* rather than what we *don’t have*; counting our blessings, etc.)
- Create a project for the Holiday season in which you will prepare a gift by doing something or making something for someone in need.
- Share stories or anecdotes about having done something for or given something to someone that made them happy.

"The Kwanzaa Kite" by Ruth Fost

Set in Nigeria, this is the story of a little girl, Kito, who wants to be like her older brothers and sisters and make a kite for the *Kwanzaa Festival of the Flying Kite*. They scoff and tell her she is "too young," but she is undaunted and resourceful. Over time she finds many opportunities to collect pieces of fabric and string. With patience, industry and artistry, Kito creates a patchwork kite, which, in the end, is the most beautiful of all! Everyone wants a kite like hers. So Kito and her family go into the business of making Kwanzaa kites that they sell in abundance each year at the marketplace.

This story represents and illustrates the seven principles of Kwanzaa: Unity, Self-determination, Collective Work and Responsibility, Co-operative Economics, Purpose, Creativity and Faith.



Discussion Points

- Some facts about Kwanzaa
Kwanzaa (KWAN-zaah) is a cultural holiday based on ancient African harvest celebrations and customs. It was begun in 1966 by an American college professor, Dr. Maulana Karenga, and is designed to provide people of African descent all over the world with pride in their past and plans for their future. Kwanzaa, celebrated from December 26 to January 1, is a time of joining together to honor the heritage and traditions of Africa; a time of commitment to working together to make the community a better place to live; and a time to celebrate the past, present and future of people of African descent.
- Special symbols of Kwanzaa
Fruits and Vegetables – symbolize the harvest
Seven Candles – one black, three green and three red are lighted – These symbolize the Nguzo Saba (en-GOO-Zoh SAH-bah) or seven principals to be carried into daily life throughout the year. They are as follows:
 - 1) *Unity* – Umoja (oo-MOH-jah) – To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.
 - 2) *Self-determination* – Kujichagulia (koo-jee-cha-goo-LEE-ah) – To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.
 - 3) *Collective Work and Responsibility* – Ujima (oo-JEE-mah) – To build and maintain the community together and help solve the problems of our sisters and brothers as though they were our own.
 - 4) *Co-operative Economics* - Ujamaa (oo-jah-MAH-ah) - To build and maintain stores, shops and other businesses and profit from them together.

(Special symbols Continued...)

5) *Purpose* – Nia (Nee-ah) – To make a collective vocation of the building and developing of the community in order to restore the traditional greatness of the African heritage.

6) *Creativity* – Kuumba (koo-OOM-bah) – To always do whatever is possible to leave the community more beautiful and beneficial than when it was inherited.

7) *Faith* – Imani (ee-MAH-nee) – To believe whole heartedly in our people, our parents, our leaders and ourselves.



- Each of the Nguzo Saba (seven principles of Kwanzaa) is addressed in some way in the story of “*The Kwanzaa Kite*.” Ask students which principles they recognize and how the characters and situations illustrated the principle.
- Have students design their own Kwanzaa Kite, either by drawing a picture or by making one out of paper or fabric.
- Make a bulletin board display of miniature Kwanzaa Kite drawings or cutouts.



"The Chanukah Miracle"



With the style and rhythm of the classic "Wise Men of Chelm" tales, this original story also takes place in the village of Chelm where everyone means well, but sometimes take three steps forward and one step back to move ahead two. In this story, a farmer loses his hayfork as he travels through the town of Chelm. Kitzel finds a hayfork in the road and he and his friend, Motke, decide that it is a Menorah. They polish it up, put candles on the tines and bring it to the synagogue. The villagers are amazed and word quickly spreads about this big, shiny menorah. People come from far and wide to see it, including the farmer who recognizes it as his hayfork. An argument ensues as to whether it is a menorah or a hayfork and the dispute is brought to the wisest person in Chelm. She suggests that it may or may not have been a hayfork, but once it is made into a holy object, such as a menorah, it must remain a menorah. The farmer objects but when the wise person says that Kitzel must pay the farmer to keep the menorah Kitzel objects. Humor saves the day and a spirited Hora (dance) celebrates the miracle of the moment.

Discussion Points

- Some Background Information

The Chanukah celebration is rooted in a miracle that happened to the Jews thousands of years ago in the land of Judea. The king of Syria, Antiochus ordered the Jews to give up their religion and worship the Greek gods instead. Some did, but others refused. One was Judah Macabee who formed an army and after three years was successful in driving the Syrians out of their land and reclaiming the Temple that belonged to the Jewish people. The Macabees went to rekindle the eternal light (known as the N'er Tamid) but found only enough oil for a single day. They filled the lamp with the small amount of oil, knowing it would take them at least a week to get more oil. Then, a miracle happened. The tiny amount of oil lasted for eight days, and the eternal light was still burning when they returned.

To this day, Jews celebrate Chanukah to mark the victory over the Syrians and the re-dedication of the Temple. Chanukah is known as the Festival of Lights because it lasts for eight days to commemorate the miracle of the oil for the eternal light. It is symbolized by the lighting of the Menorah, -- one additional candle each night until all eight candles are lit plus the "shammes," a ninth candle that sits higher than the others and is used to light the other candles.



In our story, Kitzel and Motke find something in the road that they decide is a Menorah.

- Have you ever found something and not recognized it for what it actually was?

Share a story about this with the class. Or make up a story and tell about it. *(This can be a written, oral or draw-a-picture exercise.)*

- Do you think Kitzel and Motke used their imaginations when they found the hayfork? Why?

- Discuss the concept of “thinking outside the box.”

- Do you believe in miracles? Why? Share stories about “miracles” that may have happened to you or your family or a friend.

- Read the newspaper and find a story (or stories) that may be about “miracles.” Share these stories with the class.

In our story, the wise person says, “We must not be deceived by outer appearances. Things are not always what they appear to be. We must look inward to find one’s true nature.”

- Discuss the concept of not judging something by the way it looks; defining or judging ourselves or others by how they look or what they wear. (“The Emperor’s New Clothes” is a good story to tell and discuss to illustrate this point.)

The Nutcracker by E.T.A. Hoffman

In this abbreviated version, adapted from E.T.A. Hoffmann's classic tale, Clara and Fritz have been waiting all day for the doors to open for the Christmas Eve festivities. The moment finally arrives, and it is indeed magical. Joy is abundant, until Fritz, Clara's younger brother, damages the Nutcracker that she found under the tree and instantly adored. Godfather Drosselmeier mends the Nutcracker and sends Fritz off to bed. Clara lingers a bit longer and falls asleep in a chair by the Tree. Clara dreams of a battle between the Mice and the Nutcracker and his men. She throws her shoe at the Mouse King, and once again, has come to the Nutcracker's rescue. He is grateful and takes her on an enchanted journey. When Clara is awakened, she tells her mother about the voyage and is surprised when the doorbell rings and Godfather Drosselmeier enters with his nephew, who bears a remarkable resemblance to her dear new Prince, the Nutcracker. The story wends its way to a beautiful Christmas Fairy Tale ending.

Discussion Points

- So much of Clara and Fritz's day has been the "anticipation" of the surprises of Christmas. Have students share stories by telling or writing about a favorite "surprise" (or "disappointment") when Christmas (or Chanukah or Kwanzaa) finally arrived. Have younger students draw a picture and tell about it.
- Discuss Fritz's behavior toward Clara when he saw how much she loved the Nutcracker. Ask students to share their own "brother/sister" stories on Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanzaa.
- Ask students to discuss the following:
 - How much of what happens in "Nutcracker" do they believe is part of a dream?
 - What parts do they believe really happened? Why?
- Do a creative drama exercise (improvisation) on one small section of The Nutcracker story (i.e. The battle between the mice and the toy soldiers; A journey into an enchanted forest; Waking up from a beautiful dream).



(Continue...)

Note: This can be done in a variety of ways – either by narrating a section of the story and having the entire class work at the same time; or by dividing the class into small groups of 3 or 4 and letting them each decide an episode they'd like to present. Have them work for a few minutes and then have each group share their work with the class.

General Activities

- Have a multi-cultural holiday party. Have students pick (or you assign) one of the holidays to work on. Have them make a holiday decoration for the class room for their holiday (search the web for symbols such as a Dreidel, Fruits and vegetables of the Kwanzaa Harvest, Christmas Ornaments, etc.).
- Research foods connected with each holiday. Prepare them in the classroom or have students bring in “samplings” for everyone to taste.
- Make your own wrapping paper or gift containers with colors and designs for each of the holidays.
- Learn some songs or music or rhythms from each of the holidays. Sing them at your holiday party.
- Dress up in costumes or costume pieces that represent each of the holidays and their country of origin.

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