



Dear Parent,

The Des Moines Playhouse's production, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, has been cast and is currently in rehearsal. The play, based on the story with the same title, by Barbara Robinson, is performed extensively all over the world. It is about a mom who is given the job of directing her church's annual Christmas pageant. All goes well until the town bullies, the Herdman kids, wheedle their way into the rehearsals and take over the main roles. The play is funny and yet has its poignant moments as the Herdmans come to understand the true meaning of the birth of Christ.

This is the fifteenth year that The Playhouse has produced the play, and its popularity with actors and audiences remains strong. This year one hundred fifty people, ranging in age from five to seventy, auditioned for fifty-five roles in the play. And during the course of the performances, nearly five thousand people will visit The Playhouse to see the show. We are pleased to count you and your children in that number!

It is possible to enhance the experience of attending the show with the material included in this packet. The exercises, which span language arts, math, science, visual arts, and creative drama activities, can be used either before or after the performance. The exercises target the skills of elementary students. Select whichever are appropriate for your child. Of course, it is helpful to read the story before you attend. The chapters are just the right length for a single read aloud session. You might begin by asking your children to think about difficulties that may arise in an effort to bring some of the scenes to the stage. For example, Imogene is supposed to smoke a cigar in the ladies room of the church!

The exercises in this packet are divided into four categories:

**Read About It! Write About It! Discuss It! Do It!**

You will also find a short description of theatre etiquette to review with your students before you come to The Playhouse.

We are looking forward to sharing *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* with you and your children.

Kathy Pingel  
Youth Programming Coordinator  
[kpingel@dmplayhouse.com](mailto:kpingel@dmplayhouse.com)

## Discuss It! Theatre Etiquette & Conventions

Please discuss theatre etiquette and theatre conventions with your children. The rules for going to a new place are not meant to be overly restrictive. We understand that everyone is more comfortable when they know what is expected of them!

### ETIQUETTE

If your children are very young, it is interesting to begin by introducing the word, "etiquette," and asking what they think it might mean.

If your children are a bit more sophisticated, then you can ask for synonyms for "etiquette" which may include "manners," "rules," "good behavior," "conduct" or even "decorum," "comportment," "protocol" and "propriety."

### GOOD NEWS!

Your children already know good theatre etiquette if they can sit still and listen to you read a story, or if they can go to a movie and be attentive. "When we go to the theatre, just use your story time manners," is a fine way to start. *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* is quickly paced and designed to keep the attention of our young patrons.

### In the theatre, there is no such thing as being "fashionably late."

Everyone should arrive at least 10-15 minutes prior to "curtain time." Curtain time is when the show starts, and we cannot rewind a performance if you arrive late. Trips to the bathroom and drinks of water is best taken care of before the show begins. You wouldn't want to miss anything.

### You could have heard a pin drop!

Since a theatre is acoustically designed for sound to travel, audience members should turn off all cellular phones and pagers.

### Well, hush my mouth . . .

Save your questions and observations for intermission or after the show. If you talk during the performance, you will miss part of it and could make it difficult for others around you to hear.

### This is strictly off the record.

It is against copyright laws to record a play in any way. Please do not use cameras, video equipment or any other recording devices.

## THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

Theatrical conventions are those common practices in the theatre that are accepted by all in attendance. Many of these customs are traditionally accepted by the audience, even by children, without request. However, some may need explaining or discussion.

**Performance space:** Performers are physically separated from the audience. They perform on a stage or in a specifically defined area. The audience sits outside that area in seats that are collectively called the "house." Patrons should not enter the stage area or handle anything they see on stage.



**Use of lights:** The **blinking** of lights in the lobby is a signal for the audience members to take their seats and that the play will begin in about five minutes. **Dimming** of the house lights inside the theatre is a signal that the play is about to begin. **Blackouts** (all lights out briefly) are used as a special effect or to show the passing of time at the end of a scene.



**Playbill:** A theatre program gives written information about the actors and the production. In the Kate Goldman Children's Theatre the children receive a special playbill, P. Bill, Jr. It also contains special activities for kids.

**Intermission:** An intermission is a pause in the performance which lasts only about fifteen minutes at the Kate Goldman. It is a time when audience members can stand and stretch or talk quietly as the crew changes the set.

**Applause:** In the theatre, the audience shows its appreciation of a performance by a polite clapping of hands. Usually applause comes at the end of a scene, an act or for a curtain call. If a particularly exciting moment, song, or special effect occurs during the play, an audience may spontaneously applaud.

**Curtain call:** At the end of a performance, all the actors come back onto the stage to take a bow and acknowledge the audience's applause.

### TAKE TEN!

Take ten minutes and "stage" your entrance. After discussing etiquette and theatrical conventions, practice coming to the Kate Goldman Children's Theatre by making your living room into a theatre. As the children stand outside the room, blink the hallway lights as a non-verbal signal to come into the room. Have them take their seats and talk quietly until the lights in the room are turned off. Have a child come in and "take the stage" (the front of the room) while the others settle in. Finish with a bow and appropriate applause!

## Read About It! The Author's Biography!

**Barbara Robinson** was born in Ohio in 1927. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Allegheny College in Pennsylvania in 1948. Mrs. Robinson is the author of about fifty short stories and several children's books including *The Best School Year Ever* and *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, for which she won the Georgia Children's Book Award, Young Hoosier Award and was named Pennsylvania's Author of the Year. She also wrote the play and film script for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Robinson says that she writes as much for herself as she does for the boys and girls who read or see her work. "If I don't find the story interesting or funny, if I don't enjoy the characters or care what happens to them, I don't think boys or girls will either," she says. Robinson currently lives with her husband in Pennsylvania and has two grown daughters. Every year Mrs. Robinson visits several schools and theatres that perform the play. In 1999, she visited The Des Moines Playhouse to see our production of the show. She stayed afterwards to sign autographs and chat with the cast. It was enjoyable for everyone.

## Write About It! A Letter to the Author!

Mrs. Robinson loves to hear from the children who read her books and see her play. Write a letter to Barbara Robinson and tell her who your favorite characters were and why, or you might describe what your favorite scene was and why. Who knows? Maybe you'll get a letter in return! Send letters to:

**Mrs. Barbara Robinson  
c/o Avon Books  
1790 Broadway  
New York, New York 10019**

**Parent Aside:** Some children may notice that Mrs. Robinson lives in Pennsylvania but their letters will be addressed to New York. Explain "c/o" means in "care of." The letters are sent to her publisher, Avon Books. The publisher passes the letters along to her. Have your children find where the publisher is listed in the front of the book and explain what a publisher does.



## Discuss It! Questions About the Story!



After reading the story or seeing the performance of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, use the following questions to spark discussions:

🎁 Imogene, Claude, Ollie, Gladys, Ralph and Leroy are the Herdman kids. They have names that are very unusual. Why did the author choose to give the Herdman kids names that you don't hear every day?



🎁 Why do the ladies of the church agree that this was the best Christmas pageant ever in the church, even though it was very different from any other pageant they had seen?

🎁 The Herdman kids have a bad reputation in town. What does it mean to have a bad reputation? What did the Herdman kids do to earn a bad reputation? Are there things that the Herdmans did that prove they don't entirely deserve their reputation?

🎁 Gladys plays the Angel of the Lord as though she is a superhero. Why?

🎁 Leroy constantly bullies Charlie into giving him a dessert from Charlie's lunch. Discuss what a bully is and why someone becomes a bully.

🎁 Everyone agreed that the Herdmans were responsible for the pageant which was the best one ever. Do you think that people's attitudes towards the Herdmans will change now? Why? Do you think that the Herdmans will change their behavior now? Why?

**Do It! Design a Wanted Poster!**



The Herdman kids: Gladys, Ollie, Claude, Leroy, Ralph and Imogene are trouble-makers. Design a "Wanted Poster" for the capture of the five Herdmans.

**WANTED! THE HERDMAN KIDS:  
Gladys, Ollie, Claude, Leroy, Ralph and Imogene**

Wanted for \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

## Do It! Illustrate the Story!

Choose one event in the story to illustrate and then compare the different interpretations, or give a different event to each child, and the end result is a fully illustrated story board of the play!

## Write About It! Single Sentence Reviews!



Here are examples of books reviews for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. These reviews do not give a summary or short description of the events in the story, but instead describe qualities about the story that would appeal to readers by using adjectives.

An adjective is a word that describes a noun. Underline all of the adjectives in the books reviews.

"Wiry-tough, tender-hearted, unsentimental and consistently funny, the books is in the classic tradition of American humor."

*The London Sunday Times*

"One of the best Christmas books ever."

*Publishers' Weekly*

"The book is outrageous, lively, funny and wonderful. The Christmas story takes on a strangely moving depth of meaning and shines through with a new brilliance."

*Denver Post*


### Take Ten!


Now children can write their own two-sentence play or book review using at least five new adjectives that describe the story of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.





## Write About It! Personal Paragraphs!



 Imogene bullies Alice into letting her have the role of Mary in the Christmas pageant, even though it is a part that Alice wants very much. Alice responds by giving in to Imogene's demands, but then tattles on Imogene all the time. Write a paragraph about a time when you were bullied, and tell what you did about it.

 A Christmas pageant is a *tradition* in many Christian churches. Write a paragraph about what makes a tradition, and then describe a tradition in which you participate at church, in a club, with your family, or at school.

 When Mrs. Bradley reads the Christmas story to the Herdmans for the first time, they do not understand many things. The Bible says that the baby Jesus was wrapped in "swaddling clothes." Ollie Herdman thinks that means "wadded up" clothes. Write a short paragraph about a word or phrase that you misunderstood when you were younger. Describe the time that you heard the word and what you thought it meant. Then tell how you came to know the real meaning of the word.

 Everyone is sure that the Christmas pageant will turn out horribly. The minister of the church even urges Mrs. Bradley to cancel it entirely. Write a paragraph about a time when you thought something you were doing would turn out badly, but it actually turned out to be great!



## Draw It! Design a Play Logo!

Every play needs to have a *logo* or picture that is representative of the story. This logo is used on posters, in ads and on the playbill (program). A logo is usually simple and will catch people's attention so that they will read the rest of the information like the dates and times of the show and the price of the tickets.

Design a logo for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* that will capture people's attention. Then use it on a playbill cover, newspaper ad or a poster to advertise the show.

A **playbill cover** must contain the following information:

Logo	Your design
Title of the Play	The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
Author's Name	Barbara Robinson
Theatre's Name	The Des Moines Playhouse



A **newspaper ad** must contain the following information:

Logo	Your design
Title of the Play	The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
Author's Name	Barbara Robinson
Theatre's Name	The Des Moines Playhouse
Dates of the Show	December 9-18, 2005
Box Office Phone	(515) 277-6261



A **poster** must contain the following information:

Logo	Your design
Title of the Play	The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
Author's Name	Barbara Robinson
Theatre's Name	The Des Moines Playhouse
Theatre's Address	831 42 <sup>nd</sup> Street, Des Moines, Iowa
Dates of the Show	December 9-18, 2005
Ticket Prices	Adults \$16 Students \$12



## Do It! Explore Definitions!

The vocabulary words at the bottom of this exercise come from the stage directions in the script of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. **Stage directions** tell the actors how and where they are supposed to move, how they are to speak a line, or what they must do with an object.

Children can look up the meanings of the words in the dictionary or on-line. The vocabulary words and their meanings can be used in a variety of ways:

Once the children understand the meaning of the words, they can perform the accompanying stage direction and have another child or parent guess the meaning.

After the children understand the meanings of all of each other's words, they can play a modified version of "Simon Says" in which the participants respond with facial expressions and hand gestures only.

Simon says, "Be defiant."  
Simon says, "Be frantic."  
Simon says, "Be absorbed."



<b>Absorbed</b>	(Alice was <u>absorbed</u> with what she was writing in her journal.)
<b>Confidently</b>	(Mrs. Bradley <u>confidently</u> walked to the front of the church.)
<b>Confidentially</b>	(Mrs. Clark spoke <u>confidentially</u> to Mrs. Slocum about the bad habits of the Herdman children.)
<b>Defiantly</b>	(Claude <u>defiantly</u> demanded the role of a wise man.)
<b>Flails</b>	(Mrs. Armstrong <u>flails</u> her arms when she talks about how the Christmas pageant is ruined.)
<b>Flummoxed</b>	(Mrs. Bradley was totally <u>flummoxed</u> when Gladys hollered, "Shazam!")
<b>Frantically</b>	(The firemen ran <u>frantically</u> throughout the hallways of the church looking for the fire.)
<b>Persistently</b>	(Leroy <u>persistently</u> demanded that Charlie give him the desserts in his lunch.)
<b>Raptly</b>	(Imogene <u>raptly</u> stared at the baby she had laid in the manger.)

## Do It! Research Fire Safety!

In this story, the firemen come to the church because they think a fire has started in the church bathroom. Of course, there is not a fire. Imogene was smoking a cigar in the bathroom and that created a lot of smoke. But, even when firemen suspect there is a fire, they still respond right away.

Use the internet or make a call to your local fire department to find out the answers to the following questions:

How does a smoke detector work?

How much smoke does it take to set off a smoke alarm?

What other safety devices should be in every house and building in case there is a fire?

Water from a household tap comes out at about 2 gallons per minute. How many gallons come out of a fire hose in a minute?

What are the evacuation procedures at your school? At your house? At your church?

Why is it important to keep calm during an evacuation?



## Do It! Puzzle It Out! Word Search!

Find small words by selecting and combining some letter of the play's title. Within *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* are hundreds of smaller words that can be made by just choosing and rearranging some letters:

pants, page, trim, beat, vest, resting, stamina, severe

Divide children and parents into teams to search for the most words and/or the longest words.

**A variation is to limit the list to words that apply to the play or the characters:**

trim tree, Beth, giant mess, sheep

They may have to stretch their imaginations to make the words connect with the story.



## Do It! Bake an Applesauce Cake!

The ladies at the Bradley's church gathered to bake applesauce cakes. Unfortunately, the cakes got burned and could not be eaten. When you bake your applesauce cake, be sure you keep track of the amount of time that it is in the oven!

Use a 9 x 9-inch square pan  
Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Cream thoroughly: (To cream is to soften the butter, then mash it and the sugar together with a fork until it is creamy)

- \_ cup butter or shortening
- \_ cup sugar



Add and continue creaming until light and fluffy:

- 2 eggs

Set that mixture aside, and then sift together:

- 2 cups sifted all-purpose flour
- \_ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- \_ teaspoon cinnamon
- \_ teaspoon salt



Add the sifted ingredients to the egg mixture, then add:

- 1 cup thick, lightly sweetened applesauce

Pour batter into a greased pan and bake about 30-35 minutes. You know for sure that it is completely baked through if you insert a toothpick into the center of the cake and it comes out clean.

Dust with:

- Confectioners' sugar

Serve warm or cold. Goes well with ice cream!

## Do It! Cooking Math!

While the applesauce cake is cooking, try to answer the following cooking questions:

The ladies of the church had to make several applesauce cakes. How much better would you need if you wanted to make 20 applesauce cakes? How many eggs? How much cinnamon?

If you only had a small pan and you wanted to cut the recipe in half, how many eggs would you need? How much applesauce? How much salt and sugar?

## Do It! More Number Problems!



The following passages come from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Read them and follow the instructions for using the numbers in an equation.

1. "It was a terrific fire—two engines and two police cars and all the volunteer firemen and five dozen doughnuts sent up from the Tasty-Lunch Diner. The doughnuts were supposed to be for the firemen, but by the time they got the fire out the doughnuts were all gone. The Herdmans got them—what they couldn't eat they stuffed in their pockets and down the front of their shirts. You could actually see the doughnuts all around Ollie Herman's middle."

### Easy!

How many vehicles were at the fire?

### A Little Harder!

How many doughnuts are there in five dozen?

### Hard!

If Ollie, Gladys, Leroy, Imogene, Ralph and Claude each took an equal amount of doughnuts, how many would each have?

2. "The teacher knocked over the Happy Family dollhouse and a globe of the world, and broke the aquarium full of twenty gallons of water and about sixty-five goldfish."

### Easy!

How many things did the teacher break?

### A Little Harder!

If five children pick up all the fish, how many fish must each child pick up?

### Hard!

There are sixty-five fish swimming in twenty gallons of water. If each fish had the same amount of water to swim in, how many fish could swim in one gallon of water?