

The White Elephant — Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	5
The White Elephant A play for acting, based on an Indian folk tale	7
The Mouse-deer and the Crocodile A play for shared reading, based on a trickster tale of Java (Indonesia)	17
Urashima Taro and the World Beneath the Sea A radio play, based on a Japanese folk tale	25
The Raven’s Magic Gem A play for acting, based on a Vietnamese folk tale	34
The Young Head of the House A play for shared reading, based on a Chinese folk tale	43
The Magical Bird and the Tortoise A radio play, based on a Thai folk tale	52
The First Coconut A play for shared reading, based on a myth of Papua New Guinea	59
<i>Folk tale collections</i>	65
<i>References</i>	66
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	67

Introduction

The plays in this collection have been adapted from traditional folk tales from various sources. Folk tales are part of the oral tradition – stories handed down by word of mouth in families and by storytellers in communities. They are stories that have emerged from the lives and experiences of ordinary folk in pre-literate times. *Folklore* is a term covering traditional beliefs, customs, popular superstitions and legends.

Folk tale structure

Many people in western countries are familiar only with western folk tales. Most of these have a similar plot structure and pattern: a problem to solve, three happenings, three main characters, good triumphing over evil. Some are a little more complex.

Asian folk tales are rich in fantasy, adventure and humour. They are splendid for telling, reading and acting. However, some are different in structure from those of Britain and Europe. They have more characters and more episodes, and are less unified. A character may appear, speak once, and not be seen or heard again.

In plays based on folk tales, this provides an opportunity for many students to take a small part. Those who are unhappy about so many minor roles, can double up, one student taking two or more small parts.

Some Asian folk tales have several different versions: for example, there are four versions of 'Urashima Taro' in four collections – possibly more in existence. The most dramatic details, or those most interesting to children, have been selected for inclusion in the plays.

Drama

This collection includes three kinds of drama: two plays for performance, three for shared reading and two for radio. The following points should be kept in mind when helping children.

1. Performance

Acting provides an opportunity for an individual to 'be' someone else, to 'try on' a new role, to imagine how it feels to be another person. Children can be encouraged to forget about themselves and ask, 'How would this person feel, think, speak, move?'

Props and settings have been suggested, but the two performance plays in the collection can be acted without them. Simplicity in presentation is often the key to enjoyment of words and ideas, encouraging children's imaginations to soar.

2. Shared reading or readers' theatre

This form of drama provides an opportunity to enjoy sharing without props or sound effects. The readers sit on chairs facing the audience and look up from time to time as they read. The action of the story is in the imaginations of the listeners. If the whole class is taking part, with large choruses, the choruses can face the readers or the class can sit in a circle. (See *Storytellers*, p. 6.)

3. Radio scripts

Radio plays present difficulties that must be overcome for enjoyment of the drama, but they are worthwhile exercises in listening and speaking. Below are reminders for the children.

When you are performing:

- Remember that you have an audience of listeners. They can't see your faces. Speak clearly and expressively.
- Limit the number of actors, and make sure that the voices are distinctly different. Voices may be light or deep; actors may speak slowly or quickly; they may sound casual or business-like, gentle or bossy. Voices tell the audience something about the character.
- Silence is powerful on radio. Pause, and slow down. Give the listeners time to imagine the characters and the action.
- Do not pass the microphone from actor to actor. Place it on a stand with the actors around it.
- Practise sound effects several times. If you want the sound effects to *continue under*, stand back from the microphone. Make sure that the actor's voice can be heard above the sound effect.
- If you plan to record your play or broadcast it over the public address system, rehearse it several times beforehand. If your recorder has a built-in microphone, place it on a stand or a table, and record with the actors standing around it.
- Find a quiet place to make your recording. Everyone should be quiet so that there is no extraneous noise on the tape. Turn pages carefully; put instruments down quietly; move silently.
- Other classes may want to know how you performed your radio play. A group may perform it in an assembly hall, with everyone watching. The audience will enjoy seeing the process and watching those who are making the sound effects. This can be satisfying after hearing a recording of the play or over the public address system.

Storytellers

The plays in this collection have two to four storytellers to carry the narrative. To increase the involvement of the class, children can read as storyteller groups. It is best to wait until the language of the play is familiar – after one or two performances. If a rhythm can be established and each one in the group reads softly, they will quickly learn to keep together.

Enrichment

The play notes include:

- locating the folk tales in their geographical settings
- background information to enhance understanding of the folk tales, the cultures from which they have evolved and other features of the stories
- suggestions for drama
- suggestions for classroom activities
- literature and folklore links

The White Elephant

A play for acting, based on a folk tale of India

A woman, sworn to secrecy about her husband's visits to heaven – holding the tail of a magical white elephant – tells her neighbour and, when the story spreads, everyone tries to join in on the trip to heaven.

With the children, find India, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Thailand on a map of Asia, and then on a world globe. Several children could borrow books from the library – on elephants and the relevant countries – to display and read in the classroom. Others could search the internet.

Children's enjoyment of the play may be increased if they have background information in the following areas:

- elephants
- white elephants
- areca nuts

Elephants

In Asia, the elephant is highly regarded for its intelligence, strength and docility – its willingness to be trained to do various kinds of work and to carry heavy loads. Elephants have been included in Asian folklore and legends for thousands of years.

White elephants

Long ago in India, people believed that the first elephants were milk-white with large wings. They flew and were able to create clouds.

White elephants, being rare, are valuable and, in the past, were regarded as sacred. In Hinduism (the main religion of India), elephants are sacred animals. One of the most celebrated Hindu gods, Indra, rides a mighty white elephant called Airavata.

Siam (now called Thailand) was once called 'The Land of the White Elephant', and 'The King of the White Elephant' is the proud title once used by the kings of Siam and Ava in central Burma (now called Myanmar).

A newspaper report from Rangoon (the capital of Myanmar) described the discovery of a white elephant (*The Age*, Melbourne, 10 November 2001). Having pearl eyes and whitish, light pink skin, he is regarded as an albino elephant.

Areca nut

The areca nut comes from the fruit of the areca palm tree. Indian people wrap leaves of the betel plant around small pieces of the areca nut, and add a little lime, making a kind of chewing gum.

Drama – performance

- Before acting the play, the children can read it and discuss the characters, the action and the setting, then the feeling and atmosphere of the story.
- They can experiment with different voices for the various parts, and decide who's who.
- As they rehearse, children can read from the script while acting – until they gain confidence.
- During trialling, the children said that the play is too short. You can make it as long as you like by adding more people to the chain of villagers rising up to Heaven.
- Everyone in the class can take part. First they can research and find Indian names, and select one each.
- How will they fly through the air? Perhaps they will weave around the playground, holding onto each other. They could invent dialogue with the next person – maintaining their Indian character by discussing the elephant, and wondering about their journey and their destination.
- Finally, the question 'How big are the fruits and flowers in heaven?' is asked, and each one passes the curious woman's question along the chain.

Classroom activities

1. Ethics: loyalty

- Questions may help the flow of discussion. How difficult is it to keep a secret? Have you ever kept one? How difficult is it to keep a promise? Have you ever broken one? What happened?
- Discussion could include the following topics: best friends, loyalty, being reliable, and the satisfaction of being able to trust a friend, as well as the hurt felt, and the loss of trust when a secret is revealed or a promise is broken.
- Children could create mottos, such as 'I will always keep a secret', and make badges to wear.

2. Creative writing

- Using the above discussion as a basis, the children could write a story or a poem – factual or imaginative – about keeping a secret. They could compile the writings, with illustrations, into a book and give it an appropriate title.

3. Planning and organising

In English-speaking countries a 'white elephant' is something that isn't needed any longer – perhaps an old chair. Sometimes people give their 'white elephants' to a 'white elephant sale' at a fair to raise money for charity. It comes from the story of a king of Siam who used to make a present of a white elephant to courtiers he wished to ruin.

- The class could organise a 'white elephant' sale to benefit a charity. Or it could be part of a school fair to raise money for school funding, with every class contributing.

Children will need to list the jobs to be done, and make decisions: how to advertise the sale, when items should be brought, where they will be stored, how they will be priced, who will be in charge of particular aspects ...

4. Folklore link

'The White Elephant' is a story that is as long as you like to make it. It's almost an endless tale. In folklore there are several endless tales. Here is one:

And Then, Bhurrah!

*An endless tale from the Marathi people
of central and south-western India*

Once a storyteller was tired of telling stories, but the children and the adults in his village weren't tired of listening.

'Tell us more!' they said, time and time again.

So the storyteller began to describe a huge flock of birds wheeling in the sky. 'At last, they swooped down and settled in a tree.'

He paused, and the listeners, asked, 'And then?'

'One bird flew from the tree with a sound like *bhurrah!*' said the storyteller.

'And then?'

'*Bhurrah!* went another bird, flying from the tree.'

'And then?'

'Another bird flew away. *Bhurrah!*'

Finally someone asked, 'How long will this go on?'

The storyteller answered, 'Till all the birds have gone.'

- Children could tell the Indian endless tale at home, and report on the responses of adults and siblings. In groups, they could try to create a new one.

5. Literature links

- Display elephant stories in the classroom, including the classic, *Barbar, the Elephant* (Cape). Famous and popular, Barbar is the hero of many books written by French writer Jean de Brunhoff. Barbar rules over the Land of the Elephants with the help of his wife, Queen Celeste, and his old friend General Cornelius. He fights wars with rhinos, escapes from a circus and has many exciting adventures.
- 'The Elephant's Child' is one of the tales in Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (Macmillan).
- Madhur Jaffrey's *Seasons of Splendour: Tales, Myths and Legends of India* (Hodder & Stoughton) includes a great variety of tales from many areas.
- 'And Then, Bhurrah!' and 'Sea-of-Stories', an endless tale from the Tamil people of southern India, are included in Carl Withers' *A World of Nonsense: Strange and Humorous Tales from Many Lands* (The Bodley Head); 'The Fox and the Geese', a German endless tale from the Brothers Grimm – in Richard Bamberger, *My First Big Story-Book* (Penguin Books).

The White Elephant

Cast

STORYTELLER 1
STORYTELLER 2 } individuals or groups
STORYTELLER 3 }
SHANKAR – the Rajah’s chief gardener
LAKSHMI – Shankar’s wife
AIRAVATA – a white elephant
LAKSHMI’S FRIEND
LAKSHMI’S FRIEND’S FRIENDS (any number)
HUSBANDS OF THE WOMEN (any number)
CURIOUS WOMAN

Props (suggestions)

sun and moon – perhaps cardboard discs to show day and night
Rajah’s garden – drawings on the blackboard
garden of heaven – mural
giant areca nut, betel leaf, mango and flower – cardboard or papier mâché

Settings

The Rajah’s garden
Shankar and Lakshmi’s cottage
The garden of heaven
The village street

SCENE ONE

*The Rajah’s garden with SHANKAR and LAKSHMI’S cottage in one corner.
SHANKAR is working in the Rajah’s garden. LAKSHMI is inside.*

STORYTELLER 1: Shankar is the Rajah’s chief gardener. He lives in a cottage in the corner of the garden with his wife Lakshmi.

STORYTELLER 2: He works from dawn to dusk, looking after flower beds, lawns and trees.

STORYTELLER 3: He waters the flowers, weeds the beds, digs, rakes, sweeps the leaves and trims the hedges.

SHANKAR: (*walking to the cottage and speaking to LAKSHMI*)
What a day! I’m so tired.

(*He gets into bed. Daylight changes to moonlight.*)
Why can’t I sleep?

The White Elephant

(He tosses and turns. AIRAVATA arrives in the garden, and begins plucking and nibbling the grass.)

SHANKAR: Oh! It's midnight, and I haven't had a wink of sleep. *(Sitting up and looking out the window.)* A huge, white elephant! I've never seen a white elephant before!

STORYTELLER 1: Shankar remembered stories his mother had told him when he was a boy.

STORYTELLER 2: She told about the gods who dwelt in heaven.

STORYTELLER 3: Indra, their king, rode Airavata, a beautiful white elephant.

SHANKAR: This must be Airavata. If I hold on to his tail, he will take me back with him, and I will see the wonders of heaven. *(He tip-toes out and hides behind a tree near AIRAVATA.)*

STORYTELLER 1: Airavata eats the tender leaves of saplings.

STORYTELLER 2: He eats the half-ripened fruit of the mango trees.

STORYTELLER 3: Shankar waits, and doesn't protest, for he wants to go to heaven.

(Dawn is breaking.)

AIRAVATA: *(trumpeting)* Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!

SHANKAR: It's time for Airavata to leave. *(He runs and grasps AIRAVATA'S tail.)*

SCENE TWO

The garden of heaven.

STORYTELLER 1: Airavata rose like a bird.

STORYTELLER 2: He flew high above the clouds.

STORYTELLER 3: Shankar looked down.

SHANKAR: The Rajah's garden is just a speck, far away. And now we've landed.

(He lets go of AIRAVATA'S tail.)

This must be paradise.

The White Elephant

(He walks around.)

- SHANKAR: Oh, what a beautiful garden!
- STORYTELLER 1: Shankar spent the day touching the leaves ...
- STORYTELLER 2: ... looking at the flowers and ...
- STORYTELLER 3: ... tasting the delicious fruit.
- SHANKAR: What enormous trees – ten times larger than those on earth. The flowers are ten times as pretty. The fruit is ten times as tasty.

(The sun sets.)

Oh, Lakshmi! You will be worrying about me. *(stopping and thinking)* I'll take her something – a present from heaven. This areca nut is as large as a coconut. This betel leaf is as big as a banana leaf.

- STORYTELLERS: Shankar and Lakshmi loved chewing areca nuts and betel leaves.
- AIRAVATA: *(trumpeting)* Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!
- STORYTELLER 1: Shankar ran and grasped Airavata's tail.

SCENE THREE

The cottage and the village street.

- STORYTELLER 2: In a few minutes Shankar was back in the Rajah's garden.
- STORYTELLER 3: He rushed home to his wife.
- LAKSHMI: *(angrily)* Where have you been all this time?
- SHANKAR: Don't be angry. See what I've brought you. *(He gives her the areca nut and the betel leaf.)*
- LAKSHMI: Where did you get such giant-sized things?
- SHANKAR: From heaven, of course. Listen! I'll tell you what happened.
- STORYTELLER 1: Shankar told her the whole story.
- STORYTELLER 2: At first she didn't believe him.

The White Elephant

- STORYTELLER 3: But, eventually, the nut and the leaf convinced her.
- SHANKAR: You must keep this a secret. Be careful not to tell anyone.
- LAKSHMI: I promise I won't tell.
- STORYTELLER 1: But Lakshmi liked to talk, and she found it difficult to keep her word.
- STORYTELLER 2: And, when Shankar made another trip to heaven and returned with an enormous mango...
- LAKSHMI: This is the most delicious mango I have ever tasted in my life.
- STORYTELLER 3: ... it was harder still for Lakshmi to keep the secret.
- STORYTELLER 1: From his third visit to heaven, Shankar brought back a giant flower...
- STORYTELLER 2: ... whose fragrance filled the cottage.
(SHANKAR *goes out and works in the garden.*)
- STORYTELLER 3: Soon after, Lakshmi's friend came visiting.
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: (*sniffing*) What wonderful perfume you are using! Where did you get it?
- LAKSHMI: That's not perfume. It's the fragrance of my giant flower.
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Where did you get it?
- LAKSHMI: Shankar gave it to me.
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Where did he get it?
- LAKSHMI: (*after a pause*) Can you keep a secret?
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Of course I can.
- STORYTELLER 1: So Lakshmi told her friend the whole story.
- LAKSHMI: Now promise you won't tell anyone.
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: I promise.
- STORYTELLER 2: But Lakshmi's friend was a gossip.

The White Elephant

STORYTELLER 3: She hurried away and told her closest friend.

LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Promise not to tell anyone.

LAKSHMI'S FRIEND'S FRIEND: I promise.

STORYTELLER 1: And so it continued until all the women in the town knew.

STORYTELLER 2: Then they told their husbands.

STORYTELLER 3: Before long, the whole town knew Shankar's secret.

STORYTELLER 1: One morning, everyone flocked to the cottage.

EVERYONE: Shankar! Take us on your next trip to heaven.

SHANKAR: (*angrily to* LAKSHMI) What a fool you are!

(*to the villagers*) All right. Come to the royal gardens tonight.

SCENE FOUR

The Rajah's garden at night, and the garden of heaven.

STORYTELLER 1: That night, there was a strange scene.

STORYTELLER 2: Everyone gathered in the royal gardens and hid behind a tree.

STORYTELLER 3: The trees swayed in the wind, but the people were as still as statues.

(AIRAVATA *arrives and starts eating.*)

STORYTELLER 1: Even when Airavata appeared, no one made a sound.

STORYTELLER 2: They all stood as still as statues until dawn.

(*The dawn breaks.*)

AIRAVATA: (*trumpeting*) Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!

STORYTELLER 3: Shankar beckoned. He rushed and grasped the elephant's tail.

STORYTELLER 1: Lakshmi held on to her husband's feet.

STORYTELLER 2: Her friend held Lakshmi's feet.

STORYTELLER 3: The friend's husband held his wife's feet.

The White Elephant

- STORYTELLERS: Another man held his feet. That man's wife held her husband's feet, and so on, and on.
- STORYTELLER 1: Airavata rose into the air with a long chain of men and women trailing after him, the Curious Woman being the last.
- STORYTELLER 2: Each one clung to the one above.
- STORYTELLER 3: During the journey, the last woman was dying of curiosity.
- CURIOUS WOMAN: (*to her husband*) Lakshmi told us that the heavenly fruit and flowers are very, very big. Ask your friend above to find out how big.
- STORYTELLER 1: So the husband asked the man above him.
- STORYTELLER 2: The man asked his wife, who asked the woman above her.
- STORYTELLER 3: The woman asked her husband, who asked the man above him, and so on.
- EVERYONE: (*passing the message to the next person*) How big are the fruits and flowers in heaven?

(*The message reaches SHANKAR.*)
- SHANKAR: (*to LAKSHMI*) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.
- LAKSHMI: (*to her friend*) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.
- LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: (*to her husband*) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.
- STORYTELLER 1: And so Shankar's reply moved along the chain to the curious woman at the end.
- STORYTELLER 2: But she wasn't satisfied. She repeated the question.
- CURIOUS WOMAN: (*to her husband*) How big are the fruits and flowers in heaven? I must know now.
- STORYTELLER 3: So the question was repeated once more all along the chain until it came to Lakshmi.

The White Elephant

- LAKSHMI: (*imploring*) Please Shankar. You must tell her immediately how large are the fruits and flowers in heaven.
- SHANKAR: (*angrily*) Each fruit is ten times as big as a fruit on earth. The areca nut was this big...
- STORYTELLER 1: He let go of the elephant's tail to demonstrate with his hands, and...
- STORYTELLER 2: ... the whole chain of people...
- STORYTELLER 3: ... from Lakshmi down to the Curious Woman,
- STORYTELLERS: ... came tumbling down to earth.