

Isaac Wants a Wife

A play to introduce children to acting

Ask the children to get into threes; a father, a son and a servant. (Count the children earlier so you are prepared for it if there are one or two left over.)

The teacher summarises the scene suggesting the sort of lines that might be said, stopping regularly to elaborate by question and answer, so the sense is clear to the children.

The father is going to start off the play by giving a soliloquy. This is where he tells the audience that it is time his son, Isaac, got married, because he, Abraham, wants to see grandchildren before he dies. He claps to summon the servant, who on arrival bows and says 'Shalom' (or 'Salaam' or 'Peace').

The father repeats what is on his mind and sends the servant, Eliezer, to fetch the son. Isaac, on arrival, is told that he is to be married. He objects at first but he is an obedient son and eventually asks whom he will marry.

Abraham explains that Isaac cannot have a wife from among their neighbours, who have a different religion, nor from very close relatives because of the dangers when they have children. A wife will have to be sent for from more distant relatives.

Unfortunately, Abraham is too busy to select a wife for Isaac, so they ponder who can be sent as a matchmaker. They decide on the reluctant servant who claims he knows nothing about women. Abraham says that Eliezer is good at choosing cows at the market and is sensible enough to find a good wife for Isaac. He asks Isaac to describe the sort of wife he wants Eliezer to find.

Finally the father and son leave the servant looking worried and tell him to start on his journey as soon as possible.

Having built up this analysis, the children spend a short time practising the scene in their groups of three. This is the moment to solve the problem of the odd ones left over and rescue the children who are obviously dreading having to perform. It proves a good opportunity for getting to know your children.

A volunteer group performs its version to the class and then other groups take their turn, trying to improve the dialogue. Some may prefer to write the dialogue as a task to do at home; don't force groups to perform.

The following lesson, the teacher starts off by having a general discussion on the different customs regarding marriage, developing ideas that came out in the children's plays, e.g. desirable

virtues in a marriage partner. This is usually an opportune moment for bringing in cases where parents make the choice and the points for and against this practice. Groups who did not get a chance to perform previously may now act scene one as a revision exercise for the class, (alternatively: the best group).

Scene Two will only be performed once. A volunteer becomes Eliezer as the teacher talks through the action. Four children can become two camels. In fact there were ten camels but you may wish to dispense even with two. To be a camel, one child leads, standing upright, whilst the other child bends, holding the first child's waist. (It is advisable to practise the camel sitting and standing before seating Eliezer. The front half of the camel kneels first.) The second camel is carrying (imaginary) presents as the bridal price (the opposite of the English dowry system). At some stage of this lesson it is useful to explain that bridal prices were a protection for women, e.g. in Africa where little girls were not a welcome addition to the family until this custom was established. You can go on with as much sociology or anthropology as you know and your class can take.

Eliezer journeys to the centre stage, faces east, raises his arms and prays remaining standing. The teacher tells the class what Eliezer is praying; it is a telegram prayer (the sort of prayer not to be recommended but it was an emergency). Eliezer is asking that the woman who offers water to him and his camels should be the one he asks to marry Isaac.

Eliezer sits by the well and the action is ready to recommence with ad lib words from the children. Three volunteers come to the well. It doesn't matter what they say as long as they don't offer water to the camels.

Rebekah is needed next. The parts can be dished out as you go along; this keeps the audience attentive. When Rebekah has made the offer which Eliezer is waiting for, he explains the situation and asks to see her father. In fact, her father is dead, so Rebekah says she will take Eliezer to her elder brother, Laban. They climb on to the camels and exit.

The play can conveniently stop there but if further scenes are required for later occasions, a third scene would be at Laban's tent.

For dramatic purposes, Laban is having a feast. All the class can take part even remaining in their own desks. First, two servants are chosen to offer food and wine. No props are needed, just imaginative description on the part of the teacher. The wine might be in goatskin bottles the legs tied together to make a shoulder strap and the neck of the bottle is where the head would have been. The food could include a wide variety—but not pork! This is an excellent moment for getting the children to suggest foods and sorting out what might have been used in those days.

Two belly dancers can be enlisted. When Laban is chosen, the whole class can be trained to stop or start on a series of claps from him. The class can continue feasting whilst a Rebekah and an Eliezer are found for this scene as it takes very little time to explain the situation. When Rebekah brings Eliezer, Laban claps for silence. It is rude to ask visitors questions until after they have

eaten; so Eliezer is fed and entertained. Then, after the customary belching, he explains his business. Laban asks Rebekah if she is willing to marry Isaac and the match is arranged.

A fourth scene could be an anxious Isaac waiting for the arrival of his bride with his father trying to reason him out of his fears.

Though these scenes tell a Bible story, the lessons have two other major aims:

To build up the teacher's relationship with the class in controlled situations so that further activities may be attempted later.

To develop an awareness in the children and appreciation of different customs and attitudes regarding marriage. A little of such discussion when children are younger prepares the way for more serious discussion when they are older.

I reverse my classroom for such occasions, acting scenes at the back. If there has to be any practical reorganisation it is useful to have a friendly drill, e.g. with a whistle. Practise this first and it should be easy to change the room with the minimum of fuss. This is particularly useful if you want to get the children back to their places for written summaries (which can be just a simple play outline: title of scene and list of characters.)

A tactical point: always calm down your children at the close of the lesson. They may have other lessons to go to and you have other teachers to live with.

Biblical reference for story of Isaac and Rebekah: Genesis 24.

Postscript

A New Testament story useful to introduce children to acting is The Good Samaritan as a series of tableaux. The characters must get their faces and bodies as expressive as possible to illustrate the action but then they must keep perfectly still.

Divide the class in half. In each half, appoint one boy to be a traveller. He is waving goodbye to his wife. For convenience' sake, dispense with the donkey. Make sure the two characters remember what they will be asked to portray then sit them down to watch as you move on to arranging the next tableau. Another person' plays the traveller. Lie him down and artistically arrange three muggers about him. After that there is the scene with the traveller and the priest passing by; then the scene with the traveller and the Levite passing by. Yet another person plays the traveller with the Good Samaritan helping him. Finally there's an innkeeper (with all spare bodies being the guests) as the Good Samaritan helps the traveller into the inn.

One half of the class arranges themselves in these tableaux whilst the other half becomes the audience. One child tells the story pointing at the various scenes. Reverse roles and let the other half of the class have a go to see if they can improve on the scenes.

Small groups wouldn't need to divide in half. Wealthy groups or photographic clubs could take snapshots of the tableaux for use in future lessons. Don't dress up; it takes away the immediacy.

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