

Acting Edition

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

by Barbara Robinson

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CHARACTERS

- FATHER (BOB BRADLEY)** – solid family man, 35-38
MOTHER (GRACE BRADLEY) – trim, attractive, 35ish
BETH BRADLEY – the narrator, strong voice and presence, 10-11
CHARLIE BRADLEY – traditional kid brother, 8-9
RALPH HERDMAN – ragged, scroungy, slouching manner, touch of adolescent cool, 12-13
IMOGENE HERDMAN – loud, bossy, crafty, 11-12
LEROY HERDMAN – tough, sure of himself, 10-11
CLAUDE HERDMAN – tough, combative, 9-10
OLLIE HERDMAN – looking for trouble, Claude's usual partner in crime, 8-9
GLADYS HERDMAN – small, wiry, feisty, 7-8
ALICE WENDLEKEN – prim, proper, pain in the neck, 10-11
MRS. ARMSTRONG – largish woman, managerial in voice and manner, 50ish
MRS. SLOCUM – pleasant, motherly woman, 35-60
MRS. CLARK – 35-60
MRS. CLAUSING – 35-60
MRS. MCCARTHY – a younger, less imperious version of Mrs. Armstrong, middle 40s
MAXINE – 10-11
ELMER HOPKINS – 12-13
HOBIE – 9-10
DAVID – 8-9
BEVERLY – 7-8
FIREMAN – 25-30
SHIRLEY – 5-6
JUANITA – 5-6
DORIS – 9-10
REVEREND HOPKINS – middle-to-late 40s
EXTRA ANGEL CHOIR MEMBERS, BABY ANGELS, SHEPHERDS

Total:
4 males
6 females
8 boys
9 girls

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Sets: Much of the action takes place on the forestage in front of the curtain, in short spotlighted scenes. The two interiors—living room, dining room, and church—can be full or partial sets, with minimal furnishing and set decoration. The set piece which serves as a focal point for the Herdmans, stage left, is a simple climbing structure like a jungle gym. Mrs. Armstrong's hospital bed can be a single bed on casters, or a rollaway cot. It is especially effective for Mrs. Armstrong to be elevated above stage level on a movable platform.

Staging and lighting directions given here are for a traditional proscenium stage with usable apron space and reasonably broad light facilities (spotlights, dimming capacity, etc.). The set piece and elevated platform are devices used in the first production in Seattle, and are included here as suggested staging. The play has also been mounted successfully in limited space and less formal settings. In such productions the absence of full sets and sophisticated lighting will seem appropriate to the nature of the play.

The play has no intermission.

A different opening scene is included at the end of this script as a suitable alternate for certain audiences.

The first professional production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* was given by the Seattle Children's Theatre on November 26, 1982.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

(As the play opens the curtain is down. House lights down. Spotlight up on BETH, sitting downstage right.)

BETH. The Herdmans were the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars, even the girls, and talked dirty and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down tool house.

(Spotlight up on set piece, stage left. During BETH's speech the HERDMANS come on from the wings left and position themselves on and around the set piece, with GLADYS at the top level, in a pose reminiscent of the first illustration in the book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.)

There were six of them—Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys—and they went through the Woodrow Wilson school like those South American fish that strip your bones clean. They went around town the same way—stealing things and tearing things up and whamming kids...so it was hard to get away from them. There was only one safe place.

CHARLIE. *(offstage, singing)*

SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER, SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER,
BECAUSE THERE ARE NO HERDMANS THERE.
AND JESUS LOVES US, AS THEY SAY,
BECAUSE HE KEEPS THEM MILES AWAY.

BETH. That's my little brother, Charlie. That's what he said when the Sunday school teacher asked what was his favorite thing about church. Charlie said, "No Herdmans." That made the teacher mad because all the other kids said nice things about God and Jesus

and good feelings. But old Charlie told the real truth—
No Herdmans!

(Spotlight off BETH. HERDMANS exit stage left. Curtain rises on living room/dining room set. There is a table and four chairs stage right; a door upstage right center; a sofa, lounge chair, end tables, one with telephone, stage left. As curtain rises, MOTHER, FATHER, and CHARLIE enter through the door. BETH moves back to join them. They are returning from church, and all except BETH wear coats. FATHER has a newspaper under his arm. CHARLIE speaks as he enters.)

CHARLIE. I don't care what everybody else said, that's what they really thought. All that other stuff is okay but the main good thing about church is that the Herdmans aren't there, ever. *(CHARLIE drops his coat on sofa.)*

FATHER. *(taking his coat off)* That's not a very Christian sentiment, it seems to me.

MOTHER. *(collecting the coats)* It's a very practical sentiment. Charlie was black and blue all last year because he had to sit next to Leroy Herdman in school. *(She exits to hang up the coats.)*

FATHER. Is he the worst one? Leroy?

CHARLIE. They're all the worst one.

BETH. Ralph's the biggest, so if Ralph gets you...

CHARLIE. That doesn't make any difference. Gladys isn't big, but she's fast, and she's mean, and she bites.

FATHER. I'm sorry I asked. Just stay away from all of them.

CHARLIE. That's what I said. Stay away from them. Go to church.

MOTHER. *(as she enters)* I'm glad to hear you feel that way.

CHARLIE. *(suspicious)* Why?

MOTHER. No arguments this year about the Christmas pageant.

CHARLIE. I don't want to be a shepherd again!

MOTHER. Tell Mrs. Armstrong you want to be a Wise Man.

CHARLIE. I don't want to be *in* it!

MOTHER. Everybody's in it. Think how I'd feel sitting there on Christmas Eve, if my own children weren't in the pageant. Think how your father would feel.

(There is a moment of silence, as everyone looks at FATHER, knowing exactly how he feels on this subject.)

You'd feel terrible, wouldn't you, Bob?

FATHER. Well...actually, I didn't plan to go.

(as MOTHER starts to protest)

You know how crowded it always is, they can use my seat. I'll just stay home, put on my bathrobe, relax... There's never anything different about the Christmas pageant.

MOTHER. There's going to be something different this year.

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. Charlie's going to wear your bathrobe. *(She exits into kitchen.)*

FATHER. *(calls after her)* You just thought that up, Grace!

BETH. *(to CHARLIE)* Why don't you be Joseph? Elmer Hopkins'll pay you a dollar to be Joseph, *(to FATHER)* Elmer's sick of being Joseph all the time just because his father's the minister. Nobody wants to be Joseph.

CHARLIE. Nobody wants to be *in* it!

FATHER. *(to BETH)* What are you going to be this year?

BETH. I'm always in the angel choir.

FATHER. Well, why can't Charlie be in the angel choir?

CHARLIE. Because I can't sing!

FATHER. From what I've heard in the past, that's not a serious drawback. *Away In A Manger* always sounds to me like a closetful of mice.

CHARLIE. *(to BETH)* What do you wear in the angel choir?

BETH. Bedsheets.

CHARLIE. Oh, boy, some choice...a bathrobe or a bedsheet.
Come on, let's go watch TV.

(They start out.)

MOTHER. *(entering from kitchen with coffee cup)* You know,
Mrs. Armstrong works very hard to give everyone a
lovely experience.

BETH. Oh, Mom, Mrs. Armstrong just likes to run things.

(They exit.)

MOTHER. They're right, of course. She directs the pageant,
she runs the potluck supper, she's chairman of the
Bazaar... I think Helen Armstrong would preach the
sermon if anyone would let her.

FATHER. Is that George Armstrong's wife?

MOTHER. Yes.

FATHER. Well, maybe she'll try to manage the hospital,
because that's where she is. I saw George at the drug
store and he told me his wife broke her leg this
morning... She'll be in traction for two weeks and laid
up till the first of the year.

MOTHER. The first of the year! ...Why, they'll have to
cancel Christmas.

FATHER. She's in charge of Christmas?

MOTHER. Well, she's in charge of the pageant, and she's in
charge of the bazaar... I feel sorry for Helen, but who's
going to do all those things?

(Lights offstage: Spotlight up downstage left on

MRS. SLOCUM, *telephoning.*)

MRS. SLOCUM. Yes, I'll take over the bazaar, Edna, if you'll
do the potluck supper. I don't know what in the world
we'll do about the pageant, unless... How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. SLOCUM: Spot up downstage right
on MRS. CLARK, telephoning.)

MRS. CLARK. I just can't, Edna. I've got company all
Christmas week... How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. CLARK: Spot up downstage left on MRS. CLAUSING, telephoning.)

MRS. CLAUSING. ...How about Grace?

(Spot off MRS. CLAUSING: Up on MRS. MCCARTHY, downstage right, telephoning.)

MRS. MCCARTHY. Hello... Grace...?

(Spot off MRS. MCCARTHY: Stage lights up on living room-dining room set. MOTHER hanging up phone with stunned expression.)

MOTHER. Bob...

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. I have to direct the Christmas pageant.

FATHER. Does that mean I have to go?

(Stage lights down: Spot on BETH, downstage right.)

BETH. Our Christmas pageant isn't what you'd call four-star entertainment. Mrs. Armstrong breaking her leg was the only unexpected thing that ever happened to it. It's always the same old Christmas story, and the same old carols, and the same old Mary and Joseph... and that's what my mother was stuck with...that, and Mrs. Armstrong.

(Spot out on BETH: Up on MRS. ARMSTRONG in hospital bed stage left. She is in the middle of phone conversation. The phone conversation and the family conversation are to be simultaneous, with the phone conversation to be background. Key parts of MRS. ARMSTRONG's conversation are underlined and should be heard. This dialogue can be blocked, just as movement is blocked, and MRS. ARMSTRONG's speeches are deliberately lengthy and full so the audience can be aware of her droning on in the background.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. ...Tell you again, Grace, how important it is to give everyone a chance. Here's what I do—I always start with Mary and I tell them we must choose our Mary carefully because Mary was the mother of Jesus...

(Spotlight up on dinner table scene downstage right. FATHER and CHARLIE seated: BETH setting the table, pouring water, etc. MOTHER on telephone.)

MOTHER. I know, that, Helen.

MRS. ARMSTRONG. Yes, and then I tell them about Joseph, that he was God's choice to be Jesus' father. That's how I explain that. Frankly, I don't ever spend much time on Joseph because it's always Elmer Hopkins, and he knows all about Mary and Joseph...

CHARLIE. I thought Mrs. Armstrong was in traction. How can she talk on the phone if she's in traction?

BETH. What do you think traction is?

CHARLIE. Like when they put you to sleep?

FATHER. No such luck... Beth, we need salt and pepper... and napkins... *(BETH exits to kitchen.)*

MRS. ARMSTRONG. ...But I do explain about the Wise Men and the shepherds and how important they are. And I tell them, there are no small parts, only small actors. Remind the angel choir not to stare at the audience, and don't let them wear earrings and things like that. And don't let them wear clunky shoes or high heels. I just hope you don't have too many baby angels, Grace, because they'll be your biggest problem...

(FATHER takes slice of bread, hands the plate to CHARLIE, who takes five or six slices, and reaches for butter.)

FATHER. You will leave some for the rest of us, won't you, Charlie?

CHARLIE. I'm hungry. Leroy Herdman stole my lunch again.

FATHER. How can you let him do that to you, day after day?

CHARLIE. How can I stop him? ...Where's the chicken?

FATHER. (to **MOTHER**) Grace, where's the chicken?

MOTHER. (hand over phone) It's still in the oven.

CHARLIE. I'll get it. (He exits.)

(This leaves FATHER alone at the table, as MRS. ARMSTRONG drones on in the background. He is obviously disgruntled about this situation and after a moment he gets up, takes hat and coat from rack at the door, and exits out the door.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. You'll have to get someone to push the baby angels on, otherwise they get in each other's way and bend their wings. Bob could do that, and he could keep an eye on the shepherds too. Oh, another thing about the angel choir. Don't let them wear lipstick. They think because it's a play... (doorbell buzz or chime)

MOTHER. Helen, I have to go. There's someone at my door.

MRS. ARMSTRONG. ...That they have to wear lipstick, and it looks terrible. So tell them... (doorbell again)

MOTHER. Someone at my door, Helen. I'll talk to you later, (hangs up; doorbell again; starts toward door, calling) Yes... yes, I'm coming...

FATHER. (in doorway) Lady, can you give me some supper? I haven't had a square meal in three days.

MOTHER. Oh, for heaven's sake, it's you!

FATHER. (coming in) I was very lonely at the table.

MOTHER. (as they move down to the table) Well, I guess Helen feels lonely at the hospital.

FATHER. Not as long as the telephones are working.

(BETH and CHARLIE enter with food.)

CHARLIE. I'll bet she told you about no small parts, only small actors.

BETH. And getting someone to shove the baby angels on, and make the shepherds shut up.

MOTHER. Yes. She suggested your father.

FATHER. Does that mean I have to go?

(Spot off family: Up on MRS. ARMSTRONG, in mid-sentence of yet another telephone directive.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG. And, Grace, don't use just anybody's baby for Jesus...get a quiet one. Better yet, get two if you can...then if one turns out to be fussy, you can always switch them...

(Curtain comes down during this speech. Spot on BETH, downstage right.)

BETH. My mother didn't pay much attention to Mrs. Armstrong. She said Mrs. Armstrong was stuck in the hospital with nothing to do but think up problems, and there weren't going to be any problems. Of course, Mother didn't count on the Herdmans. That was Charlie's fault.

(Spot off BETH: Up on LEROY HERDMAN and CHARLIE, entering stage left.)

CHARLIE. Hey, Leroy, you give me back my lunch!

LEROY. Sure, kid, here. *(hands him a lunch bag)*

CHARLIE. *(looks inside)* You stole my dessert again!

LEROY. How do you know?

CHARLIE. Because it isn't here.

LEROY. What was it?

CHARLIE. Two Twinkies.

LEROY. That's right. That's what it was. *(starts to leave)*

CHARLIE. Hey, Leroy! You think it's so great to steal my dessert every day and you know what? I don't care if you steal my dessert. I'll even give you my dessert. I get all the dessert I want in Sunday school.

LEROY. *(interested in this)* Oh, yeah? What kind of dessert?

CHARLIE. All kinds. Chocolate cake and candy bars and cookies...and Twinkies and Big Wheels. We get refreshments all the time, all we want.

LEROY. You're a liar.

CHARLIE. ...And ice cream, and doughnuts and cupcakes and...

LEROY. Who gives it to you?

CHARLIE. (*momentarily stumped*) Uh...the minister.

LEROY. Why? Is he crazy?

CHARLIE. No... I think he's rich.

LEROY. (*pause*) ...Sunday school, huh?

(*Spot off boys: Spot up on BETH, downstage right.*)

BETH. That was the wrong thing to tell Herdmans...and, sure enough, the very next Sunday there they were in Sunday school, just in time to hear about the Christmas pageant...

(*Spot off BETH: Spot up on ALICE and IMOGENE, downstage left.*)

IMOGENE. What's a pageant?

ALICE. It's a play.

IMOGENE. Like on TV? What's it about?

ALICE. It's about Jesus.

IMOGENE. (*visibly disenchanted about Sunday school*)
Everything here is.

ALICE. And it's about Mary. Mostly, it's about Mary.

IMOGENE. Who's Mary?

ALICE. I am... Well, *probably* I am. I know the part.

(*ALICE walks off stage left: IMOGENE watches her go, then looks out at the audience, wearing a cheshire-cat smile. Spot off IMOGENE. Curtain opens on church setting with risers in place. As curtain opens, kids are straggling in, with MOTHER herding them along.*)

MOTHER. Come on, Beth... Charlie, you and David *come*. (*She leads the reluctant CHARLIE to a seat.*) Now, this won't take very long if you all settle down... Today we're going to decide who will play the main roles in our Christmas pageant, but of course everyone will have an important part to play. You know what Mrs. Armstrong