

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

***The Princess and the
Pea***

by Barbara Field

Based on the story by Hans Christian Andersen

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Characters:

- PRINCESS FIDELIA
- PRINCE VAL
- KING
- QUEEN
- LITTLE PRINCE (PRINCELET)
- MIDDLE PRINCE (PRINCELET)
- VOLUMNIA
- COUNSELOR
- THE COOK
- MAW
- GOG
- RAFE
- KING TATABUS

Ensemble includes princesses, members of the court, and royalty and servants of countries that Val travels to.

THE COURT:

This is a medieval court. The king rules by divine right, and all gladly acknowledge the power of royalty, but within the castle there is a certain informality. For everyone, from the King to the lowest servant, works. So, unless noted, all levels of society are in and out of the great hall, mingling easily.

In short, this is a castle filled with good-natured people in a superstitious agrarian society.

Scene One: Departure

The hall is a whirlwind of activity. Wool is being spun, yarn is being dyed, and work has already begun on a tapestry. Servants hurry to and fro on errands. Herbs hang drying from the ceiling, as well as skeins of wool. (This wool will gradually change in color-family, from extremely dull and muted in scene one, then brightening gradually each time we return to the Great Hall, until it is brilliantly colored in scene six).

Today, however, the atmosphere is more agitated and tense than usual. People bump into each other. Everyone is helping to pack the traveling wagon which young Prince Val will take on his journey. This wagon is a strange affair, with all kinds of cubbyholes and surprises. Into it go the usual accoutrements of travel, plus a number of gifts in enamel boxes, maps, and some highly scientific instruments which will be described later on.

Into this chaos wanders Prince Valentinus Carolus Maximus the Fifth, heir to the throne of this kingdom. He's really a nice, forthright young fellow, and the last thing he wants to do is set out on this trip in search of a wife. However, he is obedient to his father, and he will go. His sense of humor and courage will stand him in good stead on the trip.

Prince Val is followed by the Princelets, who are two small boys. They sneak up behind him, leap up on him, and pull him down onto the floor for a wrestle. He pretends great surprise, and plays with them for a moment. Their giggles add to the noise and confusion, and finally he tries to contain their wriggling bodies so he can talk to them.

VAL Hey! Hey, listen! (He gets them under control.) Little brothers – (They make one last move to grab him.) You've got to let me go now -

PRINCELETS You let us go! (Val does. They tackle him again. He subdues them.)

VAL The sooner I leave, the sooner I'll be back. Then I'll teach you two a thing or two, I promise – (They wriggle.) Listen, you imps, I've got to go! (The King decides it's time to intervene).

KING Young princes should behave.

PRINCELETS No, no! Val's got to stay.

VAL Papa says stop. Papa commands you to stop! (The King points silently to his crown. They stop.)

MIDDLE PRINCE Will you be gone long?

VAL It could be months. Years, perhaps.

LITTLE PRINCE Val? Why do you have to go?

VAL It's time for me to marry. But first I have to find a wife. (*The boys giggle.*) Not just any old wife – she's got to be a bona-fide princess.

MIDDLE PRINCE Will you kiss her?

VAL When I find her. If I find her.

LITTLE PRINCE I saw you kiss a serving girl -

MIDDLE PRINCE - I saw you kiss another!

KING This is serious business, you sprouts.

PRINCELETS Why?

KING It's the royal order of succession, do you understand? (*They shake their heads. It's time for a lesson.*) I am the king. But when I die my oldest son must wear the crown... And when he's gone, his oldest son... (*The little boys join in, chanting by rote.*) ...must wear the crown and when he dies his oldest son- (*The king nods in approval.*) – Good, you've got the idea. That's how it works. Now tell me, where do these sons of sons come from? They come along after the prince marries. It just happens, yes, that's how it works. – Ah, one thing more: he must marry a princess, of royal blood.

VAL So long as her blood is blue, it doesn't matter what the rest of her is like, a fact that's sad but true.

The Queen lifts her eyes from her needlepoint, turns around, gazes at her son ... but says nothing.

KING Princes have duties... inescapable. And that, I fear, is yours. (*He turns to his younger sons.*) A prince can't up and marry any girl –

COUNSELOR For it is written that no imposter, no counterfeit...

VAL -He means 'no fake' –

COUNSELOR ... Will do. For it is written that a counterfeit queen would bring bad luck to the whole kingdom for... for... (*He searches for the information.*) ...for sixty-seven years.

The Princelets are impressed at last.

KING That's why our wisest counselors throughout history have devised four scientific tests –

COUNSELOR - Carefully calculated –

KING -To measure if a princess is –

COUNSELOR -Or isn't –

KING -What she claims to be. Your mother took those very tests and – shall I tell you a secret?

PRINCELETS Yes! What?

KING If she hadn't passed them all... I'd have been broken-hearted. (*He beams fondly at his wife.*)

QUEEN I set my mind to passing.

He crosses to her, kisses her hand. Maw and Gog happen by with the calipers. The king takes them.

KING Now this instrument, applied to the ankle-bone of a candidate, will tell to the hundredth part of seventeen whether a girl is fit to be a queen.

QUEEN (*Still Sewing, to Val.*) One small detail it can't determine: is she kind, is she gentle, wise?

KING My dear woman –

QUEEN Well?

KING If she's genuine, she'll be all that and more – (*Gog passes with a small box. The king takes it.*) Here's another clever test. Resting inside the box is a golden needle, see? (*He takes the needle out.*) There's the hole, tinier than the eyelash of a gnat. A true princess can thread it with a spider's cobweb –

COUNSELOR - A test I myself invented long ago. I can't even see the needle, now, much less the hole.

QUEEN A queen needs better-than-average vision, I agree. But there are many ways of seeing that tests simply cannot test –

KING I wish you wouldn't meddle in affairs of state. (*He hands back the box; Maw crosses with a little rack containing three flasks. The king takes it.*) – Here's another good one, an accurate test of sensitivity. Each flask contains pure Attar of Roses –

PRINCELETS What?

VAL Papa means perfume.

KING Three kinds, though they look the same. But one's made from roses white as snow, one from roses golden as the summer sun, and one from velvet blossoms of rich red. Now... which is which?

The little boys sniff, and shake their heads.

PRINCELETS Can't tell. Don't know.

KING A true princess will take one sniff –

COUNSELOR -One dainty whiff is all she'll need to tell you which is which –

KING The final test – (*He takes a series of head-rings from Gog. They are held together by a little chain, and all the rings are gold except for one red one.*)
-is a set of head-rings, strictly calibrated –

COUNSELOR - Call it our 'crowning achievement' –

KING If the red one fits –

COUNSELOR -Snug, but never tight –

KING - You may be sure that she’s a princess, born and bred.

QUEEN On the other hand, you may care as much about what’s inside her head -

KING My dear, enough! The sun rides high in the sky, the time has come.

QUEEN That, at least, is true. Is the wagon ready?

COUNSELOR Everything seems to be in place. We’d be best off, but I confess I’d rather sleep at home in my own bed, with my dear old woman by my side! (*Volumnia weeps, they embrace.*) Well, we must do what we must do. I’ll let you spoil me when I return, and bring me soft pillows for my head, and footstools for my feet, and lovely puddings made by your own hand for me to eat. (*He tried to kneel to the King, but his knees can’t quite bend.*)

KING Old friend, don’t kneel to me today. I’ve trusted you with my dearest treasure. Godspeed and farewell. (*He turns to Val.*) Prince Valentinus Carolus Maximus, may good fortune ride on your wagon and guide you to a true and worthy wife.

VAL Milford – Papa – I’ll do my best, for ‘we must do what we must do.’ Mama, by the time I get home I think that tapestry will be half-done.

QUEEN Take care, my son, and – wait! I forgot! (*She brings out a cloth sack and a tiny vial.*) Here, take these with you. Herbs and simples, made from good green plants I know. This, for aching bones. And this: when you’ve reached the outer corners of the earth and there’s no place left to look... drink this. It will give you courage for the long trip home.

VAL Mama—

QUEEN And don't forget: our tests are very scientific, but some things can't be measured or calibrated – *(She hugs him. The Princelets try to hold him back.)*

PRINCELETS Stay! Don't go! Take us with you! No! No!

VAL *(Going.)* Guard the castle, sprouts. ...Oh you lucky little sprouts...

PRINCELETS Why?

VAL Because you were never cursed with the sad burden of being born the first. Maw, Gog, come on, we're on our way – *(Maw and Gog start off with the wagon. Val turns and takes one last look.)* And may the fairest princess win the day! Farewell!

He goes. Lights fade out.

Scene Two: On The Road

And so they travel. The sun rises and sets many times. The terrain changes.

At each destination, they meet a new potential princess but there is always something wrong with her. This is a great opportunity for your cast/director to be creative! Maybe she can't dance. Maybe she walks on her hands. Maybe she likes running but the price doesn't. etc. Feel free to add as many potential princesses as needed for your cast and be as silly as you would like.

By the end, the companions are very weary

Lights fade out.

END OF PREVIEW. PURCHASE PERUSAL FOR FULL SCRIPT