

Away In A Manger, A Baking Pan For A Bed

By Barbara A. Beswick

The week before Christmas
New Orleans, Louisiana 1972

Spotlights came on to reveal the simple structure and props that represented the manger in Bethlehem on the stage of Briarwood Elementary School. Two bales of straw were arranged diagonally from a sawhorse affair. A baking pan was nailed atop it and draped with a blanket. An A-frame of light wood was nailed together to give the impression of the stable roof over the scene below which included some large, papier-mâché “rocks.” The entire background of the stage was covered with dark blue material dotted with glittered stars.

Soft organ music played as the narrator, a rather tiny boy dressed in a bathrobe, approached the podium. His name was “Dwayne,” according to the handwritten program, reproduced on the office mimeograph machine and individually colored in crayons by the members of the cast. “Welcome to the Story of Baby Jesus...written by and starring... everyone in Mrs. Wilson’s first grade class,” he said, his voice hesitant and squeaking with fear into the microphone he held a little too closely to his mouth.

He was met by applause from the parents and relatives filling the room to over capacity. Many guests were forced to stand along the sides and at the back of the auditorium, tilting their programs in the dim light to look for familiar names. A few bulbs flashed as the play began and cameras were made ready for the entrance of the cast.

A little girl named “Bonnie Jeanne Cowgirl Butterfly O’Neill” (according to the program), played the part of Mary. She entered from the wings dressed in a long blue gown and a shawl that covered her hair and flowed to the bottom of her dress. Several blonde ringlets escaped the shawl presenting the visage of a little Red Riding Hood dressed in blue. She looked out at the audience and announced in a loud voice, “I am the Virgin Mary...Mother of Baby Jesus. He will be a teacher when He grows up. He is a very well-behaved Baby.” The audience began to chuckle then broke into applause for “Mary,” who smiled brightly.

Bonnie approached the baking pan. Lifting a doll wrapped in a blanket and holding it up high over its meager bed, she brought it down and kissed it. Then, holding it to her chest, she sat down on one of the straw bales and began to rock the doll, humming loudly.

This was the cue for the next set of actors. All manner of animals began to appear, crawling on all fours from both sides of the stage. Mrs. Wilson evidently had done some serious shopping at one of the many costume emporiums in New Orleans. Each child wore a head covering representing an animal. There were several sheep and pigs, one cow, two donkeys, a bull with horns and even a cat and dog. They moved out to stage front for audience viewing; then were to find locations among the rocks, all the while making their respective noises. They milled about on the stage making snorts, oinks, mews, barks, moos and ba-a-as. A few hee-haws screeched above the cacophony of sounds and the audience, again, fell into laughter.

Mrs. Wilson loudly instructed the children to hurry and find their designated spots as cameras flashed; but a few of them got up and waved at the audience as if to make sure they could be identified under their costumes. One little girl dressed as a pig shouted, "Grandma! This is me—Lois!" Now the audience was out of control.

Mrs. Wilson's hushing finally settled both the animals and the audience while Bonnie, who had been waiting patiently for her cue, reached for a bottle on the floor behind her bale. Another chuckle arose from the audience which built to a roar as she fed the Baby Jesus from the bottle, cooing and rocking Him, then throwing Him over her shoulder to pat Him soundly...until a loud burp erupted (which Bonnie produced with gusto).

Suddenly, a flash of light brightened the back of the stage and a girl named "Cynthia" appeared through a split in the background material. Applause accompanied her walk to the front of the stage which quickly quieted as they anticipated another comical scene. She was draped in a bed sheet cut out in the center to go over her head and flowing in folds to the floor. Here and there, the bottom of the sheet was pulled up and pinned with one of the stars from the background. Silver gift wrap ribbon tied to a necklace around her neck, fluttered all around her, catching the light as she moved. Two metal foil wings were tied to her back with a strip of material around her middle. She held a yardstick high above her, topped by a huge cardboard star covered completely with silver glitter. As she moved, the glitter sprinkled down to the floor, sparkling in the spotlights.

She turned to Mary and yelled: "Virgin Mary! I am the angel sent to tell you of the North Star. This is it!" she announced dramatically, shaking the star and loosening glitter all over Mary. There was laughter and applause as the glitter fell. Then she shook it one more time, for good measure. The glitter had obviously just been applied, to excess, to achieve this effect.

Mary answered, solemnly. "This is the Baby Jesus," she said, putting down the bottle and holding the

doll out to Cynthia.

“I know that! And this star—the North Star—will always shine over this place—forever!” Cynthia shouted.

The children surely did not understand the term *ad lib*; but used it in profusion and with proficiency, throughout their performance. Cynthia evidently realized she couldn’t manage holding the doll and shaking the yardstick at the same time; she gave up the Baby Jesus for glitter, on the spot.

Bonnie responded, “That’s good...because...this is a very dark stable.”

The audience roared and then Cynthia raised her star again. “And you will have visitors...with gifts—so get ready!” She swooshed her wand in front of Bonnie then moved behind the manger and stood with it held up high, ready for shaking if the need arose.

The robed narrator stepped up to the microphone again and said, “Here comes Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary.” The program listed the part as being played by “Joey.”

Joseph went directly to Mary and, obviously, forgoing his lines, took a snatch at the doll. They struggled a bit as the audience craned to see what was happening. Finally, Bonnie demanded, “Joey! I mean—Joseph! Say your lines!”

Joey as “Joseph” had his own agenda. “But I wanna hold the Baby Jesus, too!” he whined while Mrs. Wilson whispered prompts from behind the curtain. She probably checked her watch, too, as she attempted to hurry her little brood along through the production that seemed to be taking unexpected sidetracks. Joey ignored her while the audience chuckled and hooted and Bonnie finally relented.

“Okay. But just for a minute...and you hafta sit down to hold Him.” Joey eagerly took a seat on the other bale and Bonnie handed him the swaddled doll. “Now, be careful,” she said, staying close to keep an eye on him. “Don’t drop Him! My Nana just bought Him last week at Kmart!”

That was the end for the audience and they roared with laughter as Bonnie attempted to wrestle the doll back from Joey. Mrs. Wilson’s children were out of control and she realized that she would have to step in and take charge. But she didn’t need to go on stage. Just then, the bull (“Charles”) meandered over to Joseph and began poking at him in the back with his horns while, evidently, giving him a harsh ultimatum. More laughter from the audience accompanied the action as Joseph turned around in annoyance to swat at the bull. But the bull persisted until Joseph got up, resignedly, and returned the Baby to Mary who immediately laid Him on her bale of straw to readjust the swaddling clothes while giving

Joseph a scowl.

Mrs. Wilson prompted Mary from behind the scenes and she sat down primly on her bale as Joseph walked to the front of the stage. The audience quieted down only after Joseph raised his hand—a technique that Mrs. Wilson had thankfully taught her students—then he continued: “I am Joseph, the husband of Mary...and the father (he put emphasis on that word) of the Baby Jesus. I promise to protect my Baby (he turned to Bonnie with a matching scowl), and make Him very pure.” He was met with thunderous applause to which he reacted with a smile saying, “I told you so!” to Bonnie. Then, taking an ad lib bow, he joined the angel at the manger.

Cynthia stepped forward and added, “And the Baby Jesus will be King of the whole, entire world!” Then, with a shake of her stick, she sprinkled glitter over the manger and Joseph—who swatted at his head to fend off the falling glitter—garnering more applause.

Now, three boys appeared wearing bathrobes and gold paper crowns. There were evidently three redheaded boys in Mrs. Wilson’s class. The narrator announced, “Three wise men followed the star to visit Mary. They brought pricey gifts...I mean priceless gifts,” he reiterated after a loud whisper from Mrs. Wilson. Again, the audience could not maintain control and the laughter continued as the first boy (Kurt) approached the edge of the stage. “I have brought gold for the Baby Jesus,” he said, loudly, holding up several net bags of gold chocolate coins then placing them at Mary’s feet. The second (Jake) announced he was bringing “franks and cents” from a faraway land as he swung a florist vase off the stage from which issued the smoke and smell of burning incense. And a third (Jimmy) brought a cigar box to the front of the stage and threw handfuls of what he called myrrh before closing it and presenting it to Mary. A footnote on the bottom of the program alerted the audience that “myrrh was replaced with parsley flakes since the children couldn’t find myrrh anywhere in New Orleans.” After each presentation, Cynthia shook her star...and the animals became increasingly agitated.

Now Charles, having gotten away with butting Joseph earlier, began to butt rocks and other animals. And the baaing, oinking and mooing began all over again, in earnest. But Mary had one last line and she stood and raised her hand to calm the audience which was, again, out of control. Mrs. Wilson whispered loudly to the animals; but they did not heed. Finally, Mary stamped and feet and shouted. “All you animals! Hush up and lay down! I’m not finished yet!”

The animals stopped and dropped in their tracks, with one last bark; and the audience held back all but a few uncontrolled giggles as she spoke. “And the Baby Jesus grew up to be a teacher...just like I said.

And the angel was right, too. He became the King of all men. And Joey—I mean Joseph...was His father...’til the end.”

At this point, Cynthia went wild with her stick as she walked among the animals, throwing glitter everywhere. Some of the animals began to sneeze as Mary gently placed the Baby Jesus in the baking pan. The spotlights faded and went out as the audience showed their appreciation with applause and cheers. The Christmas holidays had begun with laughter and joy, in a little corner of New Orleans.

This story is an excerpt from Book III of The Sensuous Disciple, an unpublished novel by Beswick.

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