

The Children's Employment Commission

By Jonathan Bernstein

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Characters

Bradley - an actor, playing a modern child

Vanessa - an actor, playing a modern child

Theresa - a 19th century child laborer

Thomas - a 19th century child laborer

Rose - a 19th century child laborer played by a puppet, voiced and held by the actress playing Theresa

Play begins:

(The child laborers labor for several minutes. Then Bradley enters, carrying a program for the show. The laborers continue to labor while Bradley addresses the audience.)

BRADLEY

Hey ya'll, my name is Bradley and I am one of the actors in tonight's performance of the Children's Employment Commission, based on the ultra-cool English government report of 1842. After a short, yet highly contested election, I was selected by the cast as the spokesperson for the show. You can clap for me. Don't be shy. Show the love.

(waits for clapping, Vanessa enters)

VANESSA

No one (or if people clap add "in their right mind") is going to clap for you. Hey, I'm Vanessa. I came in second in the election, so I get to be the vice-spokesperson.

BRADLEY

Anyways, as a result of my new found powers, I get to make these announcements and

the rules. Pre-rule #1, don't listen to Vanessa, she lost the election and so she's bitter. She probably even voted for me.

Now there are three rules, but, I can change them. But there is also a suggestion box at the back of the theater, on my right side. If you have an idea, write it down, pass it to the person to your left and have them keep on passing it until someone can stuff it into the box. And I promise I will read them later tonight and incorporate them into the show.

I know you all want to get started with the play and you want to see something pretty cool, dramatic or funny. So, with that being said, I hope you're not disappointed with tonight's dramatic re-telling of the Children's Employment Commission of 1842. Now let's give a big welcome of applause to our three child laborers. Joining us straight from the factory floor, it's Theresa Gorman, Rose Maginn and Thomas Byrne.

(The child laborers come forward holding food in their hands.)

THERESA

(eating a potato) I generally get potatoes for my meals, sometimes milk.

ROSE

(eating several potatoes) I have never been to school. I generally get as many potatoes as I want at my meals.

THOMAS

(eating several potatoes and drinking milk at the same time) I get potatoes and milk for my breakfast.

VANESSA

Wow, that is a lot of potato eating. And tell me if I'm wrong Bradley, but we're not talking about yummy French Fries, are we? Can you shed some light on this potato thing?

BRADLEY

Yes I can, thanks to my handy set of meticulously researched index cards full of accurate, thrilling, historical quotes and anecdotes. (reading) "Potatoes constitute a main article in the food of the poor, so much so, that they may be said to depend for their sustenance more upon potatoes than any thing else, particularly for children." - James Thomas Law. *The poor man's garden*, 1830.

Interesting. And yes, you're right, the yummy French Fry didn't hit England until 1860. But did you also know that, (reading) the United Nations declared 2008 the International Year of the Potato. Or that potato is from the Spanish patata? What can I say - it's the global crop of fun.

VANESSA

As lovely as it has been giving you fine folks some background, I think we're all craving something a little more exciting. Am I right? You want to see the action, the child laborers at work! But before we jump back to the 19th century, let's take a look at the equally intriguing modern child, brought to life by two of the finest, most dynamic actors in the biz, namely, Bradley the magnificent and myself. Observe children obsessed with learning, reading, well balanced nutrition and above all else, earning the respect of their peers. Come, let's enter their precious world.

(Bradley puts on a pair of older person eye glasses. He stands before Vanessa, who is seated cross-legged style.)

BRADLEY

Good morning children.

VANESSA

Good morning Mr. B.

BRADLEY

You children are so lovely and respectful. It makes it so rewarding teaching you. How about we start today with some quiet reading time?

VANESSA

How come we always start the week with quiet reading? Can't we do a science experiment or something?

BRADLEY

No, children love to read more than anything else. They find it centering, especially after a weekend full of TV, Wii playing, being ignored by their parents and junk food consumption.

VANESSA

Are you sure you don't need extra prep time because you were partying all weekend?

BRADLEY

No, of course not.

VANESSA

Is it because you're completely unsure if you can take another minute of teaching, let alone the twenty years it will take to get a decent pension?

(Bradley and Vanessa laugh heartily. Bradley takes off his glasses and is now a kid. He sits with Vanessa.)

VANESSA

After some initial resistance, the children find the idea of quiet reading infectious.

(Bradley retrieves a book and does a subdued but mildly infectious dance with it.)

BRADLEY

Hey, I got this book in the library, do you want to read it with me?

VANESSA

What is it? I can't take another book about sharks.

BRADLEY

It's about caterpillars.

VANESSA

Ooh, caterpillars. You know how much I like caterpillars. You shouldn't even need to ask.

BRADLEY

I know.

(Bradley opens up the book and shows Vanessa the picture.)

BRADLEY

After a caterpillar is born, the first thing it eats is its own eggshell.

VANESSA

That is amazing. Why do they do that?

BRADLEY

Because they're hungry.

VANESSA

Seriously, why?

BRADLEY

No, it's true. They're hungry, and before they can eat other things, they need to get the shell out of the way.

VANESSA

I am so fascinated by science. I am going to be a biologist when I grow up.

BRADLEY

Vanessa, I think you're fascinated by me.

VANESSA

Bradley, come on, we're in the middle of a performance. It's inappropriate and it's time we get back to the world of the child laborer. Come (she motions for everyone to follow).

ROSE

(showing the others her feet) I have no shoes. My mother does not like me to go to Sunday-school as I have no shoes or hardly clothes to go in.

THERESA

(showing the others her feet and clothes) I never change my clothes. I have no other clothes than these I have on. I have no shoes at all. But it is not hard work that I do. I have no complaints to make, all my brothers and sisters are very healthy. I sometimes wash my face and hands in the work-room.

(Theresa motions for the others to follow her. The Child Laborers go and wash their faces and hands. Still dripping wet, they lie down to go to sleep, using rough blankets to cover themselves. Thomas begins to speak to them.)

THOMAS

I tried to learn to read at church-school, but then father died and I was forced to look out for my own living. I go to Sunday-school at the church in Hoyle Street, but I have not gone long because I have had no clothes long to go in.

ROSE

Shhhhh, we're trying to sleep.

THOMAS

I learned that Genesis is the name of the first book. David wrote the Psalms and God wrote the Proverbs. "Do not assimilate among evildoers...The light of the wicked will be extinguished. I passed by the field of a lazy man... And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns."

(Bradley and Vanessa come over and pat Thomas, Rose and Theresa on their backs, helping them fall asleep. Slowly, the child laborers begin to stir, with their eyes closed. They are dreaming. When all three are standing, eyes closed, they begin The Dance of the Shoes. The Dance of the Shoes is a wild dance that begins with stomping of the feet.

As the Laborers stomp their feet faster and faster, a loud banging is heard, sending them quickly back to their sleeping positions, from which they immediately awake.)

VANESSA

But they were just getting started.

BRADLEY

They have to get up to go to work.

VANESSA

But they're so young.

BRADLEY

(reading) "Our processes do not require very young children. They are of little use until 12 years of age, and our usual number of hours rarely exceed 10. It is only when some particular kind of work is required that they are required to work over-hours." H. Henderson, partner, St. Anne's Carpet-Works, Lasswade, Scotland

VANESSA

That's crazy.

BRADLEY

Well, that's just one factory (fumbles through his index cards), "here is a girl, aged nine years nearly; takes the sheets out of the glazing boards. Comes to work at four, five and six in the morning...and always goes away at eight o'clock at night." Or, "neighborhood children are frequently employed at much too early an age, under eight years, and from 2 or 3 am to 6 pm."

VANESSA

But how can that one be employed? (pointing to Rose) She's too tiny.

BRADLEY

(reading) "It will be observed that Mr. Murphy, the surgeon, does not think that employment in these works as young children in any way hinders their growth, but I must say that I considered the children small of their age and most of the young women appeared to be short." Frederick Roper, Esquire, Sub-Commissioner.
Or, "The fingers of the little ones are more fitted to handle the small work, which grown up people cannot well handle." Peter Edelsten, Lancashire.

VANESSA

(something registering) So they like her that way. They want to keep her that way.

BRADLEY

Exactly. Her mother is 34 and also heads pins and has been doing it since she was six. Her brother has been doing it since he was not quite six. And she's headed pins since she was six years old too.

VANESSA

How old is she now?

ROSE

I am about 11 years old.

VANESSA

You're kidding me. How about him?

THOMAS

I am about 12 years old, "going on 13."

BRADLEY

Apparently, very few of them knew their exact ages. Well, enough Q&A, we don't want to upset the factory owners. Everyone, get to work.

(Theresa and Rose begins to "sheet." They sit down and begin putting pins into a sheet. Rose works on a miniature size version of Theresa's work.)

THERESA

(speaking as she sheets) I cannot say if I should like other employment better. I should not understand being at service. I should not know my work, I mean.

(Thomas stands and begins making nails. Vanessa and Bradley go back to their classroom.)

VANESSA

Well, I think we know the work of the modern child.

BRADLEY

Video games and bad TV?

VANESSA

Uh no. Reading! Here. (pulling Bradley back down to the classroom level, where they sit cross legged. Vanessa takes out a book and does a little jig) Look, I found a book for you during library.

BRADLEY

Really? I am touched.

VANESSA

Just be quiet and listen. (reading) In the summer time, the Carlsberg family went to the mountains of Colorado to vacation. They rented bikes and rode the mountain trails. After they used the bikes, they returned them to the shop.

BRADLEY

Who do they give them back to, monkeys?

VANESSA

No, no monkeys in this story.

BRADLEY

Why not, couldn't monkeys run the bike shop?

VANESSA

I guess, sure. When the Carlsberg family returned the bikes to the shop, they discovered that the shop was now run by intelligent and cunning monkeys. This surprised them so much, they decided to end their trip early and return home, never to leave their house again. The end.

(A scream is heard. Theresa slowly backs onto the stage, holding Rose. Rose's entire puppet body is enveloped and mangled in a piece of machinery. Bradley fumbles through his index cards, then finds one to read, the wrong one.)

BRADLEY

(reading) I do not think shorter working-hours are necessary, no! Damn it, which card is it?

(Vanessa grabs the index cards from Bradley, finds the right one and reads.)

VANESSA

We have no dangerous machinery. The machinery employed is not of a very dangerous kind.

BRADLEY

Hey, I know what you're thinking folks. When will this play be over? No, seriously, you're thinking about that poor girl, how sorry you feel for her. She's mangled in machinery, eleven years old. You know what, don't feel sorry for her, she's long dead. Her parents are dead. No one thinks about her anymore and why should they? Society as a whole has progressed. This is not what goes on in England or Europe or the US anymore. So give up your tears and spend them on something else. It's not a real machine. It's pretend. Look, Theresa, show them.

(Theresa pulls the machinery off of Rose and Thomas takes it backstage. Rose shows that she is just fine, does a somersault, a push up, a few things of that order.)

VANESSA

However, at the same time we understand your emotion, the genuine feelings of pity child labor engenders. And yes, it's true, child labor is still extremely prevalent in Africa and Asia. Estimates are that 1 in 6 kids worldwide are involved in child labor to some degree. So, what we're going to do now is to pass out some collection boxes to collect money to combat child labor.

(The entire cast takes boxes and hands them out to audience members to pass along.)

BRADLEY

When it gets to the end of the row please throw it to me directly or if you're afraid to do that, hand it to one of the other cast members.

(Bradley and the cast members collect the boxes. Onstage, Bradley and Vanessa start taking out whatever money has been collected and count it. They also have a piece of paper to calculate the total.)

BRADLEY

We collected a grand total of, drum roll_____ (the cast drum rolls and Bradley then announces the actual dollar amount collected).

VANESSA

Okay, I hope that was helpful and cathartic, but it's time to continue with the play. Where were we? Right, so it wasn't like everyone in the nineteenth century was like "kids work, kids work, kids work!" The whole reason they made this big report was because people were beginning to be like, should kids work? Or at least, if they do work, are their living conditions okay, are they getting the chance to go to school and become educated?

BRADLEY

Yet other 19th century people were obsessed with other stuff, like our friends at The Labourers' Friend Magazine circa 1841:

"No vegetable grown in the field or kitchen-garden has ever given rise to so many experiments, theories and discussions, as the potato. It may be truly said of it, quot homines tot sententiae, which may be translated or paraphrased thus," I am so down with the potato, I bathe with the potato.

VANESSA

(she takes the next index card from Bradley) But trying to say on topic here Bradley,

other people were taking the plight of the working class very seriously, like Robert Carmichael, a factory owner, who said "the actual condition of the working classes is very bad and...caused in a great degree from the high price of provisions and the pressure of taxation....the working portion of the community find it hard and difficult to procure anything like proper sustenance for themselves and families."

BRADLEY

Trying to stay on topic, let's stay focused on the plight of the children.

VANESSA

That's what I was talking about.

BRADLEY

You were quoting a factory owner.

VANESSA

Well, if a factory owner is talking about it, then obviously it an issue for the working class itself. And you were talking about people obsessed with potatoes, which is completely irrelevant.

BRADLEY

I am trying to make this interesting.

VANESSA

You're an idiot.

BRADLEY

I will not be insulted.

VANESSA

How about we hear the actual kid's perspective. Maybe we're overblowing things, maybe they were happy to work at the factories.

THERESA

My father died four years ago from working in the coal mines. My mother has had a hard time of it, as I am the eldest of five children. I have been working at Mr. Flower's, as a sheeter, about 12 months. I get a shilling a week now, I am only a beginner. I have only to put the pins in the paper, it is not hard work. I am not tired at night. I like the work I am at. I have never been ill since I was at it. I sit down at my work, there is a fire in the room to keep us warm. I give my wages to my mother, it is very clean work that I do.

ROSE

My father was killed some years ago by a fall of stones in a quarry. I was taught to read when young, but I lost it all now. I play before I come to work and when I come home I play at hoop as the others do. I like the work well enough. I go to chapel and learn my Catechism. I learn my duty towards God, and my duty towards my Neighbor - to love him as myself, and to do to all men, as I would they should do unto me.

THOMAS

I do not know my age exactly, as my mother has been dead four or five years, she died of fever while father and she were stopping at the Grassmarket, Edinburgh. My father was a showman and after his death I was picked up by some person, and taken to the House of Refuge for the Destitute. They brought me to the nail works. We start at six in the morning, and lay by half past ten at night. It is very sore work, I like it fine. (he pauses) Come closer.

Closer.

Closer.

(all the other actors get very close to Thomas)

My master, Andrew Pott, told me to say I like the work fine.

But our work is real slavery. I got struck some time since by one of the men and my arm was knocked out of joint, which prevented me from working three or four weeks. I ran away twice, but they brought me back again and gave me many licks. At least we have no chaining down now. They used to chain you down and flog you for three or four days if you ran away. It didn't happen to me, but I heard about it and I believe it. Indeed, it is killing work. One boy, George Drummond, died here yesterday. The constant standing has sorely oppressed my ankles, so as to send them clean out of shape. At night I dream about having proper shoes to stand in and a change of clothes.

VANESSA

What would you say if I told you Mr. Fairbairn, the man who runs the whole nail works operation, said the usual number of hours do not exceed 10?

THOMAS

(Thomas snarls and laughs) For him I'm sure they don't. He only needs a few hours to count his money. But for the rest of us, it's six am to ten at night. Not much more, not ever less. He's a damn liar. Come closer.

Closer.

Closer.

If I ever met Mr. Fairbairn or my master Andrew Pott late at night, when they couldn't see my face, I would do to them what William Bailey did to Frederick Hopkins. I'd push a piece of red-hot wire into their eyes.

BRADLEY

Uhhh, lunch time! Lunch time!

VANESSA

Wash up! Wash up!

BRADLEY

That means Vanessa and I get to wash our hands with thermostat controlled water, moisturized soap and plenty of disposable towels. Awesome.

VANESSA

And for the child laborers, well, they will be lucky to get some semi-clean ice-cold water and an old rag to use to wash up before they eat. But technically they don't eat lunch at all, only breakfast, dinner, and tea, so let's call this dinner time for them.

BRADLEY

And for our good friends, the audience, it's time for rule #1.

(Thomas clandestinely steals the food out of Bradley's lunch box.)

VANESSA

Yay! (singing) Rule number 1, Rule number fun, Rule number get your hair out of a bun!

BRADLEY

Thank you Vanessa, that was lovely.

VANESSA

It was, wasn't it?

BRADLEY

Okay, here is rule #1 and this is going to take some work on your part. Each audience row has to be in alphabetical order, by first name. Now, I am not going to tell you how to do this, so for instance, you could make up your names, so that you can all keep your current seats. So the first person could say their name was Arthur, then Beatrice, then Catherine, then David, then Edward, you get it. Or you can actually all introduce

yourselves and rearrange yourself by actual first name. Just know you will be checked later and those in order will get candy and those not will get punished. Now go.

(The audience either does what Bradley asks or they do not. The cast washes up for eating while the audience rearranges or (or perhaps does not rearrange) themselves. Bradley and Vanessa get their lunch boxes. The Child Laborers take out their food as well. When the audience appears to be done rearranging (or not rearranging) themselves, Bradley and Vanessa begin lunch.)

VANESSA

Want to do a blind trade?

BRADLEY

What's that?

VANESSA

You close your eyes and you pick out one thing from my lunch and it's yours to keep. But it has to be the first thing you touch and you have to let me do the same to your lunch.

BRADLEY

I don't know, maybe all the things in your lunch suck.

VANESSA

Possibly. But maybe all the things in your lunch are even worse – that's the game. I read about it in this game theory book in the library. Come on, it sounds really fun.

BRADLEY

Naw, maybe another time.

VANESSA

Fine, I'll just do it with someone from the audience.

BRADLEY

You can't do that.

VANESSA

Sure I can.

BRADLEY

But it's not in the script Vanessa.

VANESSA

What is that, some kind of rule?

BRADLEY

(sings) Rule, rule, rule, rule.

VANESSA

(sings) cruel, cruel, cruel, cruel.

BRADLEY AND VANESSA

(sing) Cruel rule, cruel rule, rule cruel, rule cruel, cruel rule #2.

BRADLEY

No audience interaction not called for in the script.

VANESSA

But I really want to do a blind swap. So now I have to either do it with you or do it with the child laborers, and all they have is potatoes and they're not really my thing. Why do you have to make everything so difficult?

BRADLEY

Fine. I'll do it.

(Vanessa takes out a blindfold. The child laborers come and help bind Bradley so that he looks like a prisoner of war under interrogation. It should look like he is being tortured, so putting his feet into a bucket of water or things of that nature would be appropriate.)

VANESSA

Are you ready?

BRADLEY

What is going on?

VANESSA

Take.

(Vanessa thrusts her lunch box in front of Bradley and he fumbles with his hand to find something. He finds an apple and pulls it out. He pulls off the blind fold and looks at the apple.)

BRADLEY

An apple. I hate apples.

VANESSA

What are you talking about?

(She hits Bradley.)

VANESSA

Apples are delicious. They are super tasty.

BRADLEY

This is a disaster. I totally lost my appetite. I don't know if I can go on.

VANESSA

Sorry Bradley. You can give it back. But I still get to take something from your lunch. Fair is fair.

BRADLEY

Whatever, my lunch is ruined. Let's keep on going. I'll keep my apple. Laborers.

(The Child Laborers come forward and bind Vanessa up like a prisoner of war as well, but for her there is a strong feminine/girlie theme to the visuals, like the ropes are pink and have Hello Kitty designs on them.)

BRADLEY

Are you ready?

(Vanessa mumbles something.)

BRADLEY

I can't hear you.

(Vanessa mumbles something.)

BRADLEY

I still can't hear you.

(Vanessa mumbles some more. Bradley takes out the mouth binding that was preventing her from talking.)

VANESSA

I was saying that binding my mouth is not in the script.

BRADLEY

So? Improvisation is allowed among the cast, just not with the audience.

VANESSA

Yeah, but you can't torture me.

BRADLEY

It's not torture, it's friendly, fun torture. It's torture for the sake of fun, which means it's not even torture. Need I remind you that "a defendant is guilty of torture only if he acts with the *express purpose* of inflicting severe pain or suffering on a person within his custody or physical control." My express purpose was 1. theater and 2. fun. So relax.

VANESSA

All right.

(They bind up Vanessa again and put back the mouth guard. They bring out Bradley's lunch box. Bradley opens it up and Vanessa puts her hand inside, moves it around and then starts to mumble.)

BRADLEY

Just pick something already.

(Vanessa mumbles some more.)

BRADLEY

Damn it, take something.

(Vanessa moves her hand inside the lunch box, but doesn't get anything. She mumbles for a long time. Bradley hits her or otherwise inflicts pain on her. Vanessa screams and takes out her mouth binding.)

VANESSA

I was saying there's nothing in the lunch box you idiot.

(She turns the lunch box over to show it's empty and then hits Bradley with it. Bradley screams out in pain and anger.)

BRADLEY

Thieves! Thieves! There are bandits about!

(The Child Laborers come forward with their food. Bradley runs off to search for his food. Vanessa watches the child laborers.)

THERESA

My mother had nothing to give me today, there was rot in our food.

ROSE

Would you like to share my potatoes? I have more than enough for me.

THOMAS

Enough of stinking potatoes. I filched something good today. Something you'll want to eat. Come closer if you want to take a peek.

(They come closer.)

VANESSA

(calling to him offstage) Hey Bradley, I think you might want to check this out.

THOMAS

Closer.

(Theresa and Rose climb on top of him making an awkward pyramid. Rose tickles Thomas.)

THOMAS

Too close!

(They climb off of him and just look very closely. Thomas takes out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.)

THOMAS

A curious looking sandwich, with the edges cut off to mask the treasure inside, creamy mashed peanuts and fine preserves.

(They admire the sandwich. Thomas allows them to look closely, but not touch it.)

BRADLEY

You can't have peanuts in the theater, what if someone is allergic?

VANESSA

Shhh.

(Thomas takes a yogurt out.)

THOMAS

A curdled creamy milk, with sweet fairy dust to spread on top.

(Thomas takes out an apple.)

THOMAS

A fine apple, firm, no blemishes, no rot. Red and shiny like a hot pincher, ready to scold your lazy behind.

(He smacks Theresa on her behind.)

THERESA

How dare you!

THOMAS

Ah, come on there. I'll share my grub, so smile at me. Look here, a tanker of clean water, free of bugs, grime and disease. Ready to quench my, rather our, thirst. All this I pricked from a gentleman who left his provisions free for the taking, like a happy fool full of drink. Come, let us eat and dance!

(The child laborers eat.)

BRADLEY

(really fuming) Oh, it burns me, seeing him with my yummy treats.

VANESSA

Oh come on, your lunch doesn't even sound good. You didn't have any dessert. An apple? Hello, you had a hissy fit when you got an apple from my lunch. Look, I have all this good stuff I can share with you (she starts dumping stuff out of her lunch box) crackers, cookies, candy, cake, chocolate, croissants. We can share. Leave them alone. They're child laborers. This is like the best day of their lives.

BRADLEY

But they stole from me.

VANESSA

Not from you. From some random dude who turned out to be you. It's not personal.

(Vanessa and Bradley eat. When they are finished eating, the child laborers begin the Dance of the Shoes.)

VANESSA

Look, they're doing the Dance of the Shoes.

BRADLEY

What's that?

VANESSA

I don't know, that's what the stage directions say.

BRADLEY

You're not supposed to read the stage directions out loud and besides, how can they do the Dance of the Shoes without shoes?

VANESSA

Especially if it's tonight's big show stopper.

BRADLEY

It is? Why didn't you say that? There is no way they're doing the dance of the shoes without shoes.

VANESSA

I guess they'll just have to use pretend shoes.

BRADLEY

That's insane. Look at how many shoes there are in this room. I have an idea. Can somebody please give these kids some shoes? Not to keep, just for tonight's performance. And if you're infirm, or have smelly feet, or feel weirded out by others wearing your shoes, then feel free to keep your shoes to yourself. Unless no one volunteers and then we'll have to come into the audience to scavenge. But let me tell you a little story to put your mind at ease. When my brother was in high school, in ninth grade, this senior Bill Mavis, asked to borrow his shoes to play basketball in, and he let him and the shoes came back all disgusting and sweaty, but only two days later they were dry. Now show of hands, who is lending their shoes?

(Bradley and Vanessa go into the audience to collect shoes. If no one volunteers, they individually coax shoes from audience members. If they cannot get anyone to volunteer, they get a bunch of shoes stashed at the back of the theater. Theresa tries to put normal sized shoes onto Rose, but they do not fit.)

ROSE

They do not fit. I have no shoes.

THOMAS

What's this?

(Inside his own shoes, Thomas finds a pair of little tiny shoes for Rose.)

ROSE

Shoes for me!

(Thomas puts them onto Rose. Then the child laborers dance an exhaustive, enlightening, inspired, energized and elated Dance of the Shoes.)

THOMAS

(screams and points to one of the audience members) Ahh, I see Master Pott! Let's make off before he sends us to be chained, whipped or worse.

THERESA

The shoes!

THOMAS

Ahh!

ROSE

We must return them.

(They take off the shoes and wildly return them to the audience before running off.)

VANESSA

And we must return to our script.

(Bradley puts on his old person teacher glasses. Vanessa takes a seat in the classroom.)

BRADLEY

Continuing on our theme of world cultures, today we are going to learn about China.

VANESSA

Ooh, are we going to make lanterns?

BRADLEY

Nope, even better.

VANESSA

(shoots up her hand) Dragons?

BRADLEY

Better than dragons - fireworks!

(Bradley takes out a book on fireworks and begins to read it aloud.)

VANESSA

Oh, awesome. I love the Fourth of July.

BRADLEY

Did you know that fireworks were invented by the Chinese? The earliest recorded reference to them is from the 1100s, but likely they were invented even earlier.

VANESSA

I actually already knew that and shouldn't instead of saying they were invented, we say they were discovered? Because all their ingredients already existed, but were just waiting for the right person to put them together.

BRADLEY

Perhaps, I'm not sure.

VANESSA

Well, I know a lot of things that you don't know. My life isn't memorized on index cards and in scripts. I can improvise. I can come up with clever things to say on my own. I'm not just an actress.

BRADLEY

We have a script here Vanessa, with things we can improvise and things we cannot. That's the deal, deal with it.

VANESSA

(mocking Bradley, she holds up her hand like a puppet and speaks in another voice)
That's the deal, deal with it. That's like your favorite line of the show, and you know what, it's not that funny.

BRADLEY

(ignoring Vanessa and continuing to read) Fireworks were used to ward off evil spirits, celebrate feasts and to pray for good things. The end.

VANESSA

That is such a great book, I always love reading it.

BRADLEY

Oh Vanessa, you've read it before?

VANESSA

That's what I was trying to tell you. Look at who's taken it out of the library.

BRADLEY

I believe you Vanessa. So now let's get to the best part, we get to make fireworks!

(Bradley takes out a sack full of fireworks ingredients.)

VANESSA

You can't be serious. Isn't that incredibly dangerous? Couldn't we lose our eyes, hands, toes?

BRADLEY

Yeah, but there was this set of instructions included with the book, so I thought we could...

VANESSA

Instructions? In the book? Let me see that.

(Bradley hands her the book with the sheet of paper hanging out. Vanessa begins to read it aloud)

Things you'll need to make fireworks:

- 1 fuse
- 1/2 teaspoon of flash powder
- Glue
- Scissors
- Nails
- one paper tube
- two end plugs
- one flame

Note, for added effect, mix the flash powder with mesh spherical titanium.

(stops reading)

Oh my God, who would put instructions for making fireworks into a kid's book? Someone planted these.

(Bradley takes off his teacher glasses.)

BRADLEY

(very accusatory) You planted it!

VANESSA

No I didn't.

BRADLEY

You were the last person to take it out of the library.

VANESSA

You really think that someone who tries to get kids to blow themselves up with fireworks is going to write their name on a library card? Bradley, stop acting ridiculous. It's growing old.

BRADLEY

Well, what should we do with the instructions?

VANESSA

Throw them away of course.

BRADLEY

But wait, what about our promised surprise ending?

VANESSA

You mean the big show stopper?

BRADLEY

No, no, that's the Dance of the Shoes. The promised surprise ending is what we mentioned on the commercial.

VANESSA

What commercial?

BRADLEY

You were sick that day.

VANESSA

Oh. How come I never saw it?

BRADLEY

Well, we decided to never release it to the general public due to possible outrage and disgust, but it nonetheless got leaked onto the Internet and promised...

VANESSA

The aforementioned surprise ending. Hmm. So you're thinking a lot of people are expecting a surprise ending.

BRADLEY

Enough to make sure we have a surprise ending.

VANESSA

Let's do a show of hands. Who is expecting a surprise ending?

(Vanessa looks to the audience to see the response.)

VANESSA

Well, I guess we need a surprise ending then.

BRADLEY

So let's give the child laborers the fireworks instructions and the materials and see what happens.

VANESSA

That would be wrong, criminal, and evil.

BRADLEY

And funny, and adventurous, and most importantly, surprising.

VANESSA

Oh, all right, let's do it before I change my mind.

(They take the sack of ingredients and the instructions and place them before Theresa. Theresa takes a look at the paper and reads it to herself.)

BRADLEY

Now, I don't want to alarm anyone, but there is a remote, yet plausible possibility, that this will work and the child laborers will construct a gigantic firework that will explode and kill us all. But more than likely, any explosion would be small, killing no one, and only slightly injuring or maiming one of the laborers.

THOMAS

What does it say?

THERESA

(reading aloud)

Things you'll need to make fireworks.

One fuse.

Half a teaspoon of flash powder.

THOMAS

Flash powder, devil powder!

ROSE

I've never seen fireworks. Can we make a great display like they have at the fairs?

THOMAS

When I was a boy, before my parents passed on, there was a display of fireworks when we lived at the Grassmarket. It was the Queen's Birthday, the 24th of May, and the day was warm and the weather fine. It was the one time I saw fireworks and it was a great tragedy. A boy, not bigger than you, was apprenticed to the crew. He was given the task of lighting the last, largest display of fireworks. The surprise finale they called it. He was scared of the fire, scared of the whole thing, but it was his task and he would do it. When he went to light the fuse, he tripped on a rope, lit himself on fire, and right there met his end. So let's not make use of these things, the devil has his hand in this, I guarantee it.

(Thomas tears the sheet into many pieces and pushes the supplies off to the side, where they are still visible.)

THOMAS

Now I must spread the sulfur.

ROSE

And I must climb into the ovens to clean the furnace soot.

(Thomas picks Rose up and drops her down a hole. He then takes up a broom and begins to spread sulfur on the stage.)

BRADLEY

Oh no! Come on kiddies, try the instructions. Stupid child laborers.

VANESSA

Oh, it was a bad idea.

BRADLEY

But what about our surprise ending?

VANESSA

There's plenty of time for that. The show's only halfway over.

ROSE

I can't breath.

(Thomas pulls Rose out of the hole and frantically cleans the soot off of her, spreading it all over himself. He starts to cough, then shake and waver. He drops Rose.)

THOMAS

Oh, I'm going to be sick, my belly is very bad.

(Theresa comes and picks Rose up and lays her down to rest on her shoulder. Theresa puts a washcloth over Thomas's head. Vanessa and Bradley read from index cards.)

VANESSA

Healthcare was not unheard of for the child laborers. Many factories employed a doctor, paid for by deductions in the wages of the adult laborers. He would attend to all the sick and provide them medicine.

BRADLEY

The workers established benefit sick societies, so that if they became ill and could not work, they would get a weekly allowance from the society fund. Of course, the doctor would have to examine the patient and sign off on the illness. In contrast, modern children just have to say they're "not feeling good," and they get to stay home and play games,, though it is unpaid. Vanessa, do you feel up for a game of Go Fish?

(Bradley and Vanessa sit on the floor and play Go Fish with a deck of cards. Bradley places his stack of index cards on the side so he can hold a cold compress to his head. Vanessa has a thermometer in her mouth. Theresa interviews Thomas like a doctor.)

THERESA

And what is your work?

THOMAS

I spread sulfur and chalk on coals for the ball furnaces here at Cookson's Chemical Works. We make sulfuric acid and bleaching powder and sundry chemicals.

THERESA

And what instruments do you use for this? Your hands?

THOMAS

Of course not doctor. I use a shovel and broom.

THERESA

And does it get in your eyes or mouth?

THOMAS

I imagine it must, as I am covered in it at the end of each day.

THERESA

And do you wash?

THOMAS

I always wash when I go home from work, every day. But in the works, the water for washing is not often clean and so I avoid using it.

THERESA

And how do you feel after work?

THOMAS

I often turn sick at home, at about 8 o'clock.

THERESA

And why at that time?

THOMAS

I do not know, but that is when I try and have my supper of coffee and bread.

THERESA

Try? Aren't you always hungry?

THOMAS

Well, when I work in the acid chamber, where they make the vitriol, sometimes the gas is very bad and I cannot eat when I go home.

THERESA

And before you worked here, were you stronger or weaker?

THOMAS

Oh, I was vastly stronger. I never felt any headache or sickness before. It injures my health a great deal to work here.

THERESA

And were you in school before this?

THOMAS

Two years, I learned to read, but never to write, and now I can do little of either.

THERESA

And your teeth? Are they decomposing?

THOMAS

No, not yet. But we kids have a joke about that. You see the men, those who have been here a long time, their teeth are worn down and some nearly gone and some are tickled of their breath. But ours are mostly nice and still there, see.

(Thomas smiles and Theresa inspects his teeth.)

THERESA

Very nice teeth. I think you are feeling all right and can go back to work. Run along.

THOMAS

But wouldn't you like to hear the joke?

THERESA

I'm sorry. I am very busy.

ROSE

Whisper it to me.

(Thomas takes Rose from Theresa and tells Rose the joke. Rose, here voiced by Thomas, laughs uncontrollably. Thomas is very pleased that Rose likes his joke and acts very giddy, perhaps performing a moment or two of the dance of the shoes. Theresa stares at them to get back to work. Thomas continues to hold Rose and begins transporting a container clearly marked "acid". Theresa begins cutting up an old sack. Thomas struggles to move the container.)

BRADLEY

I hate going to the doctor. Do you have any sixes?

VANESSA

Go fish. Isn't it the worst when they're like, you can go back to school, you're not contagious. Do you have any twos?

BRADLEY

Shouldn't it be up to us if we're contagious?

VANESSA

Bradley, I asked if you have any twos. Do you?

BRADLEY

Uhh.

VANESSA

Bradley, stop being a baby.

BRADLEY

Oh man.

(Bradley reluctantly gives Vanessa his twos.)

VANESSA

Yes, I got the twos. But getting back to your previous point, you're totally right. Contagious is a state of mind. Your turn.

(Vanessa and Bradley continue with their game. After a little bit Thomas trips, spilling the acid on his hands. He screams out in pain.)

THOMAS

I've spilt acid on my hands!

THERESA

Wash it off, wash it quickly.

(Thomas moves to use Rose as a rag to wash off his hands.)

ROSE

(screaming) Ahh!

THERESA

(pulling Rose away from Thomas) No! Come, use this rag. Quickly.

(Theresa tends to Thomas's hands. She rinses the acid off and dries his hands with the rag she was cutting up.)

THERESA

There, there, that should feel better.

THOMAS

You're so kind to me, Theresa.

THERESA

No, no, nothing but anyone would do.

THOMAS

Not true. You are different. Though you stand on your feet all day, and get only Christmas-day off and no other holidays. Though your stomach hurts from the dust of

the rags, and it gets into your food and makes it so it is hard to eat, and you sometimes throw up your victuals when you get home. Though you cut yourself at the rag-knife, and even a bit of the thumb-nail or thumb end gets cut. And, though you cut rags for weeks and days at a time, so it gives you pain in your chest, a sort of shortness of breath, you are kind and you risk your earnings to help me.

THERESA

'Tis only what the Lord has taught us.

THOMAS

But has the Lord taught us to say nothing when Elizabeth Mitcheson has two of her fingers taken off by the rollers?

THERESA

And what would you have my family do without the money I make? Starve, beg, die, disappear from this earth?

THOMAS

I do not know, I am an orphan. Perhaps it is easier to be without a family in this world.

THERESA

It is. One mouth to feed and no sick parents or children to tend to. You should feel blessed. Now go on with your work and watch yourself so you do not end up losing fingers or hands. And no more of your frivolity!

(The three of them continue on with their work.)

VANESSA

Intense city! I feel like we need a break, a little recess, something to pick us all up from the doldrums of child labor. Something that makes you say, I'm glad to be alive!

BRADLEY

How about a cool refreshing glass of Caffeine Free Coke!

VANESSA

Bradley, we decided to skip the paid commercial endorsements. Don't you remember that meeting?

BRADLEY

Oh, um, yeah. Coke is associated with osteoporosis in older women, and lowers intake of calcium, magnesium, ascorbic acid, riboflavin, and vitamin A. Furthermore, in India, high amounts of pesticides were found in samples of Coke.

VANESSA

Bradley, we didn't say we would never have commercial endorsements. Scratch Coke off our list. Anyway, I was thinking something more like a game we could play with the audience - like I say the name of a place, like Topeka, and someone from the audience has to yell out another place that starts with the letter Topeka ended with, in this case A, so someone would yell out "Arlington" and then it would be our turn again, to say a place that begins with N, like Nantucket, and then the audience would have to say a place that starts with T. What do you think?

BRADLEY

Yeah, let's try it. Hey guys (talking to Theresa and Thomas) come and play this game with us.

THERESA

There's work to be done.

BRADLEY

No, no, no, this is outside the child labor world, this is be yourself for a minute.

THERESA

Are we allowed to? Won't we get in trouble?

BRADLEY

Come on, just play the game with us.

ROSE

Oh, I'm very good at games.

THOMAS

If we play and get in trouble and are wages are garnished, will you replace the lost amounts?

BRADLEY

Fine, fine, fine, I have a purse full of shillings, farthings, and pennies.

THOMAS

Yay! Game time. Let me get my hoop.

BRADLEY

We're playing a different game.

THOMAS

I can't get my hoop?

BRADLEY

Uhh, you can get your hoop, just be quick about it, the clock is o'ticking. Hey, you know what we should do while Thomas gets his hoop, we should check how rule #1 went. Audience row one, please say your names out loud.

(The audience members will either comply and say their names out loud or they won't. If they do in fact say their names in alphabetical order, then Bradley will give them candy and announce "good job! You get candy!" If they are not in alphabetical order Bradley will say "bad audience, no candy for you!" and shake the candy in a menacing way. In either case, Bradley and the other cast members can eat candy as they play the "alphabet place" game. Thomas returns with his hoop and demonstrates how he uses it.)

VANESSA

Great Thomas, thanks for showing us that. Now did everyone follow how we play the alphabet game. I am going to start by saying Arizona, and so someone from the audience please say a place that begins with the last letter of Arizona, that is, an A.

(The game continues for a while. If for some reason the audience won't participate or stops, the cast can play amongst themselves for a while.)

VANESSA

Wow, that was super fun. A little more fun than playing with your stupid hoop, eh Thomas?

(Thomas is enraged by Vanessa's comment and leaps at her with his hoop. He presses the hoop to her throat.)

THOMAS

Stupid hoop, who are you, J. Griffiths?

VANESSA

No, I'm Vanessa. Not J. Griffiths. Get off me.

(She pushes Thomas off her.)

VANESSA

Who's J. Griffiths?

THOMAS

J. Griffiths ran the rope works on Tilley Street. He was a severe man, very strict. Hated our hoops. Would beat us with a rope when he saw you with a hoop. "You're neglecting your work," he'd say and lash at you.

VANESSA

I'm sorry, that sounds very mean. It's a good thing he's dead.

THOMAS

What happened to him? You get him?

VANESSA

I don't know. Oh- no I didn't kill him. It's just he lived like 150 years ago, so he's dead. Just like you're dead.

THOMAS

Oh. Who killed me then? Was it Frederick Hopkins? I told you, it was William Bailey who took out his eye, not me.

(Bradley makes an alarm sound.)

BRADLEY

No, no, no. She's kidding, jesting, joking. You're innocent, you're alive. You can get back to work.

THOMAS

But if I am dead, why must I work? Is this heaven? Are you an angel of the Lord? Please, let me see my parents. I must speak to them. I have many things to tell them.

BRADLEY

No, no, a complete mistake by Vanessa. You're feeling great, you're in great health, you can work many, many more years before dying. Please, return to work.

THOMAS

If you are the devil and you lie to me, I will take out your eyes.

(Thomas returns to sweeping, Theresa continues cutting up old rags and Rose assists Theresa. Bradley takes Vanessa aside.)

BRADLEY

You can't tell them they're dead. What motivation will they have to work if they know they aren't alive? The show will be ruined.

VANESSA

We're not the factory owners. It doesn't matter to us if they're productive.

BRADLEY

Yes, but if they're not circa 1840 child laborers, what are they?

VANESSA

Just children.

BRADLEY

But this is a show about child laborers. Sure, we have our cute vignettes about modern children, but people are here to see children labor.

VANESSA

They've already seen that, I mean the dude spilt acid on himself. Isn't that enough? Can't we just have like a big recess period for the rest of the play? Let the kids off a little early? We can put on some music and everyone can dance?

BRADLEY

Vanessa, I don't want to have to make a rule here. I want to save it.

VANESSA

So let's check the suggestion box for some guidance. What do you say?

BRADLEY

Okay.

(Bradley and Vanessa walk to the suggestion box and try to open it. It's locked.)

BRADLEY

Did you lock this? Where's the key, come on! This is totally going to mess up the timing of the show - some of these people have dinner reservations.

VANESSA

I'll get it, I'll get it - hold on.

(Vanessa goes back stage to get the key, Bradley fiddles with the lock.)

ROSE

Did you hear what the woman said to you, we're dead.

THOMAS

Yes, but the man said that we were alive.

ROSE

He's lying. Look at him. He's a fool.

THOMAS

And if we are?

ROSE

Then we can do whatever we want.

THOMAS

What does that mean? I'm only good at labor, I'm not even very good with the hoop. Where will we go?

THERESA

We should steal those cards. They have all the answers.

THOMAS

At a girl, that's it, that's it.

ROSE

You meant borrow, stealing is terrible sin.

THERESA

Yes, yes, you're right, let us move quickly before it is too late.

(The three child laborers stealthily grab the index cards. Vanessa comes back with the key and unlocks the suggestion box. Bradley pulls out whatever pieces of paper are in there - this will include some planted suggestions and perhaps some suggestions from the audience. Bradley reads any audience suggestions first, making impromptu comments on them. Then he reads the following suggestions, as if they are really audience suggestions.)

BRADLEY

Here's a suggestion, and it's signed P. That's funny. Anyway, it says:
"It strikes me that you two are extremely immature and yet wildly controlling. Why don't you let the Child Laborers direct the show for a while?"

Hah! Pretty funny, but entirely worthless Mr. or Mrs. P. Better luck next time. Let's see the next suggestion Vanessa.

(Vanessa gives him the next suggestion.)

“How about a giant game of ring around the rosie?”

Great suggestion. Thank you. You know, I definitely had an index card about ring around the rosie. It had some pretty cool facts, like a posie is bunch of flowers that you might have used as a cure for the rosy rash of the illness, but where are my index cards? Where did I put them?

(He scans the stage for them.)

Damn it. Help me look Vanessa.

(The two of them look for them, Bradley quite frantically. Thomas comes to the center, flanked by Theresa and Rose. He shuffles the index cards and smiles.)

THOMAS

These you’d be looking for?

BRADLEY

Where’d you get those? They’re mine.

THOMAS

I suppose, now they belong to me. Theresa, care to read one?

(He hands Theresa an index card.)

THERESA

Dear Bradley,
I hope you have badoodles of fun at school today.
Love and Kisses,
Mommy

BRADLEY

Hey, that one’s personal. And they all belong to me and Vanessa, give them back.

THOMAS

(laughing) No, you heard the voice of the people. You are not wanted. We are to be in charge now.

VANESSA

Hold on Thomas. This has gone far enough. Give us back the cards.

THERESA

His mommy’s note he can have. The rest we will not return.

VANESSA

You have to.

THOMAS

I'd rather burn them. Theresa, Rose.

(Theresa brings over the fireworks materials.)

THOMAS

The flash powder and these cards might make quite the display, shall we give it a try?

ROSE

I'll start the fuse.

(Theresa lowers Rose into the bag of fireworks materials.)

BRADLEY

No, no, no, no. No, you can't. No, Rule #3.

VANESSA

Bradley, it's your last rule.

BRADLEY

(sings tragically) Rule #3. The index cards cannot be damaged.

THOMAS

Stop Rose. It is time to return to work. Hand me the fuse.

(Rose gives Thomas the fuse. Thomas goes over to Bradley and Vanessa and begins striking them with the fuse.)

THOMAS

Back to work you two!

BRADLEY

(shrieking in pain) We don't work, we're kids, we go to school.

THOMAS

Now pick up the broom and get to work before I beat you to death. And you (to Vanessa), grab some rags, get moving.

THERESA

Come on now, no point to make Master Thomas angry. He's quick and easy with the rope.

(Thomas hits Bradley and Vanessa a bit as they reluctantly begin working.)

BRADLEY

I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing.

VANESSA

Me neither. This sucks. I don't want to get hit anymore.

BRADLEY

Totally.

(Bradley tries to sweep, but does a terrible job, more pushing the broom than sweeping. Vanessa tries to tear the rags, but can't get them to rip.)

BRADLEY

I don't even know how to sweep, let alone what to sweep.

VANESSA

Didn't he say he sweeps sulfur? Sweep the sulfur.

BRADLEY

Is that safe? I can't lose any limbs or senses. I want to be a surgeon.

VANESSA

I don't think we have a choice, so just do it.

(Bradley continues to sweep awkwardly.)

BRADLEY

Am I doing it right?

VANESSA

No, that's not even close to sweeping. It's no use Bradley, you can't sweep and I can't even rip one rag.

BRADLEY

They're definitely going to beat us. Let's hide.

VANESSA

They'll find us Bradley and then they'll probably kill us. That dude is mean and he's got

a screw lose. You saw what happened when I insulted his hoop. He already thinks you lied to him. Now we're messing up his factory. This is a bad situation.

BRADLEY

Why don't you sweep and I can try the rags?

VANESSA

Yeah, awesome idea. I love you!

(They switch objects and Vanessa sweeps properly, while Bradley is able to rip up rags.)

BRADLEY

Pretty sweet.

VANESSA

We are pro child laborers.

BRADLEY

(surprised) What?

VANESSA

Like professional quality I mean, not that we like child labor, 'cause we don't, right?

BRADLEY

Yeah, yeah, we are pro anti-child laborers.

THOMAS

What are they carrying on about? They aren't even doing the assigned jobs - he's tearing up rags like he's a girl. We should round them up and hang 'em up by their toes. Put a scare in 'em.

THERESA

They are a pathetic little lot, aren't they?

THOMAS

Can we give them a taste of the rope? See if that changes their attitude.

THERESA

Thomas, perhaps they aren't suited to their work. Remember when you worked on Tilley Street with J. Griffiths at the rope works? You hated it. But the nail works, with Mr. Fairbairn, that suits you much better.

THOMAS

No, I hate that too.

THERESA

But you hate it less.

THOMAS

I hate it less, you're right.

THERESA

Well, perhaps they'd like to make candles, that's easy work.

ROSE

Yes, my cousin told me in the candle factory she works in, the children work with no supervision.

THOMAS

It's worth a try, otherwise we'll butcher them and feed them to the cows. You two, stop what you're doing.

BRADLEY

Oh man, we're going to get hit. I told you it was a bad idea to switch jobs.

VANESSA

No, you didn't.

BRADLEY

I did.

THOMAS

Hush up. Now stay where you are while I get the supplies.

THERESA

(excited) You're going to make candles! How joyful.

(she sings)

Candles are beautiful things

They light the world so we can sing

Of times to come at the fair

With the master gone and only children there

ROSE

(repeating)

with the master forever gone and only children there

(Thomas returns with the candle making supplies.)

THOMAS

Are you ready for candle making?

BRADLEY

Umm...

(Thomas brandishes the fuse.)

THERESA

Thomas is asking a simple question dear.

VANESSA

Yes sir, we are ready.

THOMAS

Then make candles. You'll be paid 1p for each twenty.

(Thomas, Rose and Theresa go and play with Thomas's hoop.)

BRADLEY

Did he just say we'd be paid? That is so cool. Why aren't kids paid to go to school? Can you imagine how awesome that would be. I think I'd rather be a child laborer.

VANESSA

Hello you idiot. It's not like the kids got to keep their wages and buy candy. They gave it to their parents so that they could buy potatoes and stuff like that to barely subsist on. But I know what we should do with our wages.

BRADLEY

What? Buy gum?

VANESSA

Donate it to the _____ (insert sum collected earlier in the show) we got from the audience to help child laborers.

BRADLEY

What a noble idea.

VANESSA

Thank you. Now let's try making a candle. Put a wick in.

(Bradley drops a wick into the pot.)

VANESSA

Not like that, get it back.

(Bradley dips his hand into the pot of wax and screams.)

BRADLEY

It's hot!

VANESSA

Not with your hand, forget about it. If they dock us any pay for that wick, it's from your pay.

BRADLEY

Fine, you deprive the child laborers of the donation.

VANESSA

Watch how I do it.

(Vanessa takes a wick and moves it in and out of the pot to form a candle.)

VANESSA

Pretty awesome, I saw this on the Discovery Channel.

THOMAS

They are inept at candle making as well.

THERESA

They've not been trained. Were you gifted with your hammer and nails the first day at the nail works?

THOMAS

I was full of tears, unsure of what was to follow. I, I was quite bad with the hammer. It was too heavy, my hands shook, the clanking made my ears hurt. I thought I would die that day.

ROSE

And so show them some mercy!

THERESA

You know how they feel.

THOMAS

No. I knew that I would die for certain without work and a trade, so I picked up the hammer and hit it with all my might, and smashed my thumb and cried all night. But a nail smith I would learn to be. Let them learn as we did life's tricks and sorrows.

THERESA

They are not the same as us.

THOMAS

Well, what would you have them do, go to the circus and study elephants all day?

THERESA

No. But there must be a world where you do not have to work.

THOMAS

There is. When you are the factory owner. If I owned the nail works, like Mr. Fairbairn, life would be very different. My only tasks would be to find sad little boys and girls like you and me and set them to work, and to beat them if they did not listen. Then I would collect all the money and eat apples and cakes until I got very fat.

THERESA

That is what you would do? That's awful. Would you not want to help those like yourself, share the monies and the food.

THOMAS

There would not be enough for everyone. How could I decide who would feast and who would starve? Better I should be well fed.

THERESA

Could you think of no future that included us all?

THOMAS

I, I could. It is just not my nature, not after so much sadness.

THERESA

What would that be?

THOMAS

First I would need to bring my poor parents back to life with potions and store them in my heart so they could never leave me again.

THERESA

Mmm, how beautiful.

THOMAS

Then I'd sail a ship around the world collecting orphans to bring them to the promised land of Jerusalem, where we would build a church tower and a school overlooking the Mount of Olives to rest in for all eternity.

(Theresa has begun to tear.)

THOMAS

What, are you crying? I knew it was a silly thought, it could never be.

THERESA

No, no Thomas. I would board your ship, if there was one. I would like to sail with you to Jerusalem.

THOMAS

But we have no boat, no sails.

ROSE

We can make them.

THOMAS

What? How can we? We cannot. Stop your foolishness.

ROSE

Theresa can sew the sails out of our fustian, and you can nail the boat together.

THOMAS

Fustian, we have fustian? Oh, how I've wanted a fustian suit to wear like the great Fergus O'Connor.

ROSE

Yes, yes. You could lead us like Fergus.

THOMAS

Then let us go forth and begin. Children, in my fustian suit I will lead you to the land of God. Come children, gather up the fustian fabrics and the thread, for a garment of the people I will wear today.

(Thomas, Theresa and Rose go off to find fustian.)

BRADLEY

What are these 19th century loonies talking about? They have no idea what they're doing. I don't think they even noticed we stopped making candles.

VANESSA

Fustian sounds familiar though.

BRADLEY

Like another way of saying fooling around, like, I ate a dog, just fustian.

VANESSA

That is so off. I think we have an index card about fustian.

BRADLEY

But Thomas has them all. You think we should ask Thomas to find it? He's not going to go for that.

VANESSA

No, no, remember we left some backstage.

BRADLEY

Yeah, on the props. The fustian prop!

VANESSA

Yeah!

(Theresa, Rose and Thomas return with a collection of fabric. Attached to one of the pieces of fabric is an index card.)

VANESSA

Look, there it is. Let me see if I can get it.

(The child laborers excitedly prepare the fustian so it can be worn. Vanessa does a set of ninja-style moves to retrieve the index card attached to the fabric. She reads the index card to the audience with elation.)

VANESSA

Fustian is a thick, twilled cotton fabric. Usually dyed dark and worn exclusively by nineteenth century workmen. A suit of fustian was famously worn by Fergus O'Conner, leader of the mid 19th century Chartist labor and voting rights movement, when he was released from York Castle prison.

BRADLEY

Ding, ding, ding. Fustian's the must have of the lower class.

VANESSA

The can't miss of the have nots.

BRADLEY

The Dior of the destitute.

VANESSA

The Prada of the poor.

BRADLEY

Fustian.

VANESSA

Fustian.

(Bradley and Vanessa help the child laborers parade around in the fustian and show them how to perform a fashion show. The child laborers walk the cat walk, as Bradley and Vanessa pretend to take their pictures and the stage lights imitate flashes.)

BRADLEY

I know we asked you to turn off your cellphones before we started, and about half of you complied, and a third put yours on vibrate and the rest said screw it, but in any case, please take out your cell phones and take some pictures of our fabulous models!

(The fashion show continues. When it is over, all the actors get into a kick line. Thomas and Theresa and Rose just sort of go along with the actions, kick a little, try and sing a little, but Vanessa and Bradley are extremely, perhaps drunkenly, into the song and kick line. The song or parts of it can be repeated.)

If you're feeling frugal,
And you're feeling great,
Get yourself some fustian,
Child labor made!
Child labor made.
Boogie, boogie, fustian!
Fustian!
Boogie, boogie, fustian!

(They all fall to the ground from excitement and fatigue. Thomas rises and speaks.)

THOMAS

I have labored, I have sunk low, I have slept in this rotting jail two years, while you have slept low some two thousand. Begone ills, trauma, the plights of our people. Cast off the corruption, the terror, the cruelty.

(Theresa and Rose rise.)

THERESA

Sing songs of praise, hymnals of charity, kindness and memorial. Let our fathers and mothers know, it was not in despair they left us to labor, but into the ladder of advancement and for a vote on tomorrow.

Sing with me – (singing) tomorrow will be different.

ROSE

Stand with me – God will change our way.

THOMAS

Take with me – a future based in freedom.
Come with me and we will sail across the world!

Come, come.

(The Child Laborers link hands and march offstage, doing the Dance of the Shoes. As they dance Thomas throws the index cards onto the stage, covering the stage.)

BRADLEY

They left.

VANESSA

Sounds like they're not going to come back.

BRADLEY

Is that the end of the child laborers?

VANESSA

I think I'll miss them.

BRADLEY

Not the crazy one though.

VANESSA

Oh, you just didn't like him because he reminded you of yourself.

BRADLEY

So untrue, he tried to kill you.

VANESSA

So did you.

BRADLEY

No, I didn't. Oh, the torture? That was pretend.

VANESSA

Well it scared me.

BRADLEY

Sorry. I can't believe this is over. I don't think we did a good job. We hardly got through a quarter of the index cards and now they're totally messed up.

VANESSA

Was that our assignment, to read index cards?

BRADLEY

No, but I still think we might get really bad reviews. Man, those child laborers really let us down, just leaving like that. If they only would have stayed five more minutes, I could have pulled off my wild and daring plan to take back control of the play. It was going to be a triumphant, surprise ending. Everyone was going to love it.

VANESSA

And now we have nothing except for a tired, disappointed audience.

BRADLEY

It's not our fault if half the cast was suddenly inspired to go off and sail around the planet.

VANESSA

No, we didn't tell them to do it.

BRADLEY

Do you think they'll yell at us or sue us?

VANESSA

The child laborers? We didn't do anything illegal to them and even if we did, the legal system doesn't apply to them.

BRADLEY

No, no, the audience. For false advertising – no surprise ending.

VANESSA

We don't have any rules left, do we? We could forbid them from getting mad or suing us, make them sign some waiver.

BRADLEY

I made my three and I can't see any way to change them to help us. I think we're at their mercy. They totally are going to give us bad reviews.

VANESSA

Well, maybe we can make it up to them. Give them something to take home.

BRADLEY

Like homework?

VANESSA

Yeah, but it should be extra credit work. How about if they write responses about the play, we'll read them and comment on them, and post the most awesome ones in the lobby?

BRADLEY

So it's not really like over then, the play. They can't dismiss us until they formulate their thoughts formally in writing.

VANESSA

I love it, I love it. It's perfect.

BRADLEY

We could even publish them on a blog and publish the best of the blog in a book. And then every year come out with a new edition of the book and the money would just be amazing, amazing.

VANESSA

But we're not trying to make money, remember? We collected money to give away, we don't have commercial endorsements, we gave out (tried to give out) candy.

BRADLEY

You're right. I was distracted momentarily by greed and the mentality of the factory owner, but I'm right back with you.

VANESSA

I don't know if I would have picked to be in this with you, but I'm happy that I was.

BRADLEY

Thanks, that means a lot. I know that if I was mysteriously transported out of my cushy lifestyle and onto the factory floor, having you watching my back would probably save me from being beaten and worked to death.

VANESSA

That's exactly what just happened. But if some day in the future, I find myself on display as some antiquated early 21st century school kid, then I hope you'll be there to help me talk the future out of condemning us as juvenile and spoiled rotten.

BRADLEY

Love your sentiment. And as for you, our precious and beloved audience, you are so important to us too. So please, don't let the magic die. When you get home, or when you're at work wasting time on the Internet, take a few minutes to write down your thoughts and send them to the theater. Talk about the play in any way you want, what you liked, the significance of child labor, how the script really works, how cute I am, whatever strikes you.

VANESSA

Well said – I think we're well on our way to rave reviews on this one.

(A piece of paper comes flying at Vanessa from backstage.)

BRADLEY

Well, well, it looks like our first review. Hope it's a good one.

(Vanessa picks up the paper and reads it.)

VANESSA

Uh-huh, uh-huh, oh, oh, okay. All right.

(Vanessa and Bradley whisper and confer.)

VANESSA

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special and unexpected treat for you. Joining us one last time before the start of their world tour, it's everybody's favorite child laborers, Theresa Gorman, Rose Maginn and Thomas Byrne! They have offered to teach us all how to do the Dance of the Shoes. Everyone who's ready, willing and able, get on your feet and get ready to move, because here they come ready to rock!

(The child laborers enter as Bradley and Vanessa clap.)

BRADLEY

What a surprise!

(Music begins. Thomas, Theresa and Rose teach the Dance of the Shoes.)

You got it folks.

VANESSA

Now take care...

BRADLEY

and keep on dancing!

BRADLEY AND VANESSA

END OF PLAY