

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

2400 THIRD AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55404
612-872-5108
FAX 612-874-8119

The Reluctant Dragon

Story by
Kenneth Grahame

Adapted for the Stage by
Tom Poole and Jon Cranney

Music by
Michael Koerner

The Reluctant Dragon was first presented by The Children's Theatre Company for the 1995-1996 season. All Rights Reserved.

The license issued in connection with PYA perusal scripts is a limited license, and is issued for the sole purpose of reviewing the script for a potential future performance. All other rights regarding perusal scripts are expressly reserved by Plays for Young Audiences, including, but not limited to, the rights to distribute, perform, copy or alter scripts. This limited license does not convey any performance rights of any kind with this material. By accepting any perusal script(s), Licensee agrees to and is bound by these terms.

Cast of Characters:

- Mother
- Father
- Boy
- Museum Guide
- Dragon
- St. George

Ensemble: villagers

SCENE 1: GETTING THE BOOKS

1

(The house lights go out in silence. The wall before us is strangely lighted. There is perhaps some ominous tone. From the distance we hear the sound of footsteps echoing, at first one person then three walking down a hard-surfaced floor. Sections of the wall begin to glow and the light appears on others. The footsteps come nearer. We hear the voices of the approaching group— MOTHER, FATHER, and BOY about ten, led by MUSEUM GUIDE..They come on stage looking at the wall and the artifacts before them.)

GUIDE

(This particular part of the building is incredibly ancient. There's a rumor, more of a legend, really, that these rooms were part of a kind of branch library of the world-renown library of Alexandria, which itself was burned by the Turks in 400 A.D.

BOY

Wow.

FATHER

Excuse me. Now is it just me, or is this place really creepy?

GUIDE

Creepy?

MOTHER

It sure feels "old."

GUIDE

Old, ah, yes. This space is connected to an underground labyrinth of caves that goes who knows where. The ancients seem to have been rather mole-like in their habits. Oh, oh, yes, this room is also said to be haunted.

FATHER

I can believe it.

GUIDE

By a basilisk.

FATHER

Basilisk?

GUIDE

A mythological beast--

BOY

Who could paralyze you with his eyes. A basilisk is a kind of dragon.

GUIDE

That's exactly right. You seem to know your monsters, young man.

MOTHER

He does indeed.

That's why we're here. The wife and I wanted to go to EuroDisney.

GUIDE

Yes, well, it was in 1550 that Giorgio Vasari, the painter, in what is generally considered to be the first important book on art history, made the distinction between the ancient and the merely "old." (*Fading, as all but BOY exit.*) He suggested that, and I quote, "the 'ancient' were works made before Constantine in Corinth, in Athens, in Rome, until the time of Nero; whereas those others are called 'old' that were executed from St. Sylvester's time by a certain remnant of the Greeks.

(The GUIDE and MOTHER and FATHER move on, not noticing that BOY has stayed behind. BOY takes a glowing book from the shelf. Sounds of a raging sea storm emanate from the book as he opens it. Light flickers on his face. He closes that book, replaces it and reaches for another. Upon opening the book, sounds of an intense battle emanate with flickering light again on his face. He is in wonder. He closes that book, and takes another. Again when he opens it, sounds of marshal music and pageantry are heard, but they are soon overtaken by the roaring sound of some ferocious and gigantic creature. He closes the book and puts it down in a somewhat excited and apprehensive state. He realizes that the others have gone, but before he can follow them, some books fall off a shelf. A strange light appears from a hole in the wall where the books were. We hear the sound of sheep, bleating from fear. At the same moment other books fall off the shelf in another place creating a similar hole. Then emerging from both holes in the wall are puppets, one, a flock of sheep, the other a shepherd. The sound continues to build as shadows appear on the rosette wall. We hear ominous sounds of a large creature supported by equally ominous music. The sheep and shepherd puppets are very agitated. Suddenly, crashing through the paper in the rosette is a puppet of the DRAGON--just wings and a head. It is only seen momentarily supported by a dragon scream.)

(Lights out.)

SCENE 2: FATHER FINDS A DRAGON

(BOY is searching for something which he soon finds. He becomes engrossed in his reading.)

MOTHER

(Coming down the aisle with a basket and a pot.) Oh, dear... Oh, dear, what a day. It seems nothing will come out right. The hours just seem to slip right by. If it's not one thing, it's another. And now this. *(She sees BOY.)* Oh, there you are son.

Hello, Mother.

MOTHER

You're still here. Good. I thought perhaps that you had gone off to see the curate to return the books you borrowed last week. Now get your head out of that book and come help me with this. I'm in a hurry.

BOY

Yes, Mother. What's the matter, Mother?

MOTHER

Well, it's Father. He's coming home.

BOY

Today?

MOTHER

Yes. He wasn't supposed to be back until day after tomorrow. I do hope that there is nothing wrong, or that nothing terrible has happened. It's not like him to come home early like this. It is certainly fortunate that I cooked up a nice meal for you this evening. Father will be sure to want something tasty when he comes home. I wonder what could have torn him away from the sheep. The weather has been fine, so it can't be that. Still and all, there has been something strange in the air for the past several days. I've noticed it, and some of the village folk have mentioned it too. And if they've noticed something, then something is indeed strange. (*FATHER enters.*) Here's Father.

MOTHER

Good evening, Dear.

FATHER

Yes.

BOY

Evening Father.

FATHER

Evening.

MOTHER

How was your day, Dear?

FATHER

Most disturbing. Most disturbing indeed.

MOTHER

Not trouble with the sheep, I hope?

Oh, no, no, the sheep are troopers, never a problem with the sheep, other than the occasional wandering off, or the usual misunderstandings with wolves.

MOTHER

Well, what's the problem then?

FATHER

Well, I hope you don't think I'm crazy, but I came upon something-- on the downs-- something quite frightening.

MOTHER

Well why don't you tell us about it, and put your mind at ease.

FATHER

It began some nights ago. You know that cave up there-- I never liked it, somehow, and the sheep never liked it neither, and when sheep don't like a thing, there's generally some reason for it. Well, for some time past there's been faint noises coming from that cave-- noises like heavy sighings, far away down-- real snoring, yet somehow not honest snoring, like you and me, you know!

BOY

I know what it is.

MOTHER

Don't interrupt, dear.

FATHER

Of course I was terrible frightened, yet somehow I couldn't keep away. So this very evening, before I came down, I took a look by the cave, quietly. And there-- I saw him at last, as plain as I see you!

MOTHER

Saw who?

FATHER

Why him, I'm telling you! He was sticking half-way out of the cave, and seemed to be enjoying the cool of the evening in a poetic sort of way. He was as big as four horses, and covered with shiny scales. As he breathed, there was a flicker at the tip of his nose like you see over the highway in summer. He had his chin on his paws, and I think he was meditating. He seemed a peaceable beast, not ramping or carrying on or doing anything improper. I admit that. And yet, what am I to do? Scales, you know, and claws, and a tail I'm sure, though I didn't see that end of him--I ain't used to em', and I don't hold with 'em, and that's a fact!

It's all right, Father. It's only a dragon.

FATHER

Only a dragon? What do you mean, you and your dragons? Only a dragon indeed! And what do you know about it?

BOY

Because it is a dragon, and because I do know about dragons. Look, father, each of us have a speciality. You know about sheep; I know about dragons. I always said that cave up there was a dragon-cave. Well, now you tell me it has got a dragon. I'm not half as surprised as when you told me it hadn't got a dragon. That follows the rules. Now, please, leave this to me. I'll go and have a talk to him, and it'll be all right. Only, don't go up there without me. You don't understand dragons. They're very sensitive, you know!

MOTHER

He's right, Father. Dragons are his specialty, not ours. And to tell you the truth, I'm not very happy, thinking of that poor animal lying alone up there, without a bit of hot supper or anyone to talk to.

FATHER

Whatever you think is best, dear. A lifetime tending to sheep is certainly no qualification for dealing with dragons. But I'll tell you this, I'm not embarrassed about being afraid of a dragon. It seems to me that if a person is going to be afraid of anything in this world, a fire-breathing reptile as big as four horses is a good thing to fear.

MOTHER

Yes, dear.

FATHER

(Referring to food) This is good. What is it, soup of some kind?

MOTHER

Mutton stew.

FATHER

Quite good. Quite good indeed.

(Lights down.)

SCENE 3: MEETING THE DRAGON

(The next evening, BOY enters from the auditorium and makes his way to the wall. He looks about, examines some items and so forth. He calls out to the creature, but there is no response.)

BOY

Hello. Hello! Anybody here?

(He is looking up at the broken paper in the rosette. He finds a book and heaves it at the rosette further breaking the paper window. Soon an ominous sound begins, similar to what we heard before. The BOY is startled. The globe activates. As it begins to move, more happens on the wall and with light. There is a great cracking sound. With light flashes and smoke, the great wall begins to open like a gate, ripping the paper apart as it does so. There is great rumbling and clanging as the doors open. As they do the sound subsides and the intensity of the light subsides as well to that emanating from a small speaker on a radio. Somewhere there is a tape recorder playing in the space. We see the reels going around. BOY walks in and approaches the machine. At the sound we heard has come from this machine. BOY pushes the stop button. All sound stops. As he considers his situation, a very peculiar noise begins. It is purring, the purring of a dragon, a very large sound that starts very faintly, then grows, with the boy looking around for the source. BOY wanders around the room for just a moment. He looks up and without warning a great sheaf of papers falls from the fly on BOY. It startles him and he discovers DRAGON flying in from somewhere above on his trapeze. DRAGON's head is buried in a book. The purring stops; DRAGON looks around.)

DRAGON

Who on earth are you?

BOY

Who are you?

DRAGON

I'm a dragon.

BOY

Well, you certainly don't look like any dragon I've ever heard of.

DRAGON

That's not my problem, now, is it? I am a dragon, the very last one, in fact, and I don't care half a bean how I look to you.

BOY

Are you really a dragon?

DRAGON

I just said I was, didn't I?

BOY

Prove it.

Very well.

(The DRAGON clears his throat and then let's out a tremendous roar followed by a blow of his breath and a toss of confetti. A large sheaf of paper rains down on the DRAGON as he descends to the floor. During this the BOY runs and hides. The DRAGON sneaks up behind the BOY and after a moment. Quietly.)

Well?

BOY

OK, you're a dragon.

DRAGON

Good.

BOY

What was that noise before?

DRAGON

Noise?

BOY

Something like a cat, only the size of a freight train.

DRAGON

Oh, that would have been me, purring.

BOY

Well, live and learn. None of my books ever told me that dragons purred!

DRAGON

I have a tendency to purr, if there's a bit of sun, say, or if it's a dragon holiday, we have about as many as the post office, you know, or if I stumble onto a particularly pleasing turn of phrase. I write poetry, you see. Now look here, I hope you don't plan to throw anymore stones, or squirt water, or hit me, or any of those "boy" things. I won't have it, I tell you!

BOY

I'm not going to hit you, I came to ask how you were, but if I'm in the way, then I will just go. I have lots of friends, so I don't have to hang around where I'm not wanted!

DRAGON

No, no, don't go away mad. You came here to ask how I am? How am I? Well, fact is,-- I'm happy as a clam up here. Except, I can't help thinking that I must be happier than a clam, they're such disgusting little things. Look up clam. I am never without an occupation, dear fellow, never without an occupation! To follow knowledge like a sinking star beyond the upmost bound of human thought. And yet, between ourselves, it gets dull sometimes. Can't say I object to seeing your kind now and then, if it's a small one and not too mean.

Going to stay here long?

DRAGON

Can't say at present, it seems a nice place--but I've only been here a short time the way my kind looks at things, and I practically just this minute had a chance to stick my head out to look around. One must be careful about settling down. It's a serious thing, settling down. Besides--the fact is, I'm lazy!

BOY

Really, you surprise me.

DRAGON

It's the sad old truth, That's how I got here. All the other dragon fellows were so serious--always rampaging and skirmishing, scorching the desert sands, pacing the shore, chasing knights, devouring damsels--whereas I like to eat a lot, read a few poems, and then have a good nap, in the hollow lotus land to live and lie reclined. So when it happened, I missed it.

BOY

When what happened, please?

DRAGON

I don't know. I suppose the earth sneezed, or shook itself, or the bottom dropped out of something. Anyhow, there was a shake, and a roar, and a general discombobulation. I was napping in the library at the time, in the criticism section I think. A noise woke me and the whole place was quivering. Well, I went back to my book and eventually the fuss died down. But when I looked around, I found myself in a totally different section of the stacks, with no idea how to get back to familiar ground. Well, thank goodness my wants are few, and at any rate I had peace and quiet and wasn't always being asked to come along and do something with the other chaps. So I just wandered, following my interests in a sandwichy sort of way. I've got an active mind--always occupied, I assure you! But there got to be a certain sameness about life. And so I was relieved when I found this cave here that opened out on the world. And I like the country, and the view, and the people--what I've seen of 'em--and on the whole I feel inclined to settle down here. At the quiet limit of the world. It's quite a special place once you've got to know it.

BOY

What's your mind always occupied about?

DRAGON

Did you ever --just for fun-- try to make up poetry--verses, you know?

BOY

Of course, heaps of it.

No.

BOY

Yes. Some of it's quite good, but there's nobody here who cares for poetry. Mother's very kind and so's father, but you can see they hate it.

DRAGON

My own case exactly. They don't get it. When you hand an ordinary person a poem, you might as well be handing them a rotting fish.

BOY

Yeah.

DRAGON

Now you've got culture, I can tell, and I should just like your candid opinions about some little poems I wrote down there. I'm awfully pleased to have met you, and I'm hoping the other neighbors will be equally agreeable. Someone was up here only last night, but he seemed shy.

BOY

Ah, that was my father. He herds sheep. I'll introduce you someday, if you like.

DRAGON

Can you two come over for dinner tomorrow? If you are not busy.

BOY

Thanks, but you frightened him. He said you were gigantic and covered with shiny scales and had claws and a tail he thought.

DRAGON

Yes, well, I have to put on all my dragon gear every once and a while, to be sure it still fits. It's too much trouble for everyday wear, you know, but I have to be prepared. I'm the last of my kind.

BOY

But you are a dragon, aren't you, even if you don't always look like one?

DRAGON

Oh, yes.

BOY

You know, when you talk about staying here, and how nice people are, I can't help thinking that you don't quite realize your position.

DRAGON

Position?

You're an enemy of the human race!

DRAGON

No. I haven't got an enemy in the world, too lazy to make 'em, to begin with. And if I do read other fellows my poetry, I'm always ready to listen to theirs!

BOY

Oh, please! Try to understand. When people know you're here, they'll come after you with spears and swords and torches. You'll have to be exterminated, according to their way of looking at it! You're a monster!

DRAGON

Oh no, I'm a very nice fellow. (*Digging in his pocket, scraps of paper fall out.*) Look, here's a poem I was working on when you arrived--

BOY

Be sensible.

DRAGON

It's not quite ready.

BOY

I'm going home.

DRAGON

I can fix it.

BOY

I can't read poems now; my mother's sitting up. I'll come by tomorrow. Until then, try to understand that you are a horrible monster. Good night!

(*BOY goes off. DRAGON watches him go.*)

DRAGON

(*Simply, to himself.*) My goodness, the world is full of remarkable creatures. Who ever would have expected to meet a boy who writes poems?

(*Lights down.*)

SCENE 4: WHISPERS IN THE VILLAGE

(*THE VILLAGE has entered in the blackout. One by one they turn on their unit lights until they are all lit. The scene lights comes up gradually. It is dawn. As the transitional music ends there is the sound of a loud cock crow. THE VILLAGE stirs slowly. Though we can see their faces, the actors have kept their eyes closed. They keep their eyes closed as the scene begins. MOTHER enters from stage right aisle with a shopping bag. FATHER follows carrying a shopping basket. He stretches and yawns loudly. He cleans his teeth with his fingernail.*)

That was the most delicious meal we had last evening. Most delicious. What was it called?

MOTHER

Ragout, dear. Ragout of spring lamb. You certainly ate a healthy portion. There was hardly enough left to make a snack for our boy's friend the dragon.

FATHER

Ssssssssh! You don't want the whole town to know?

MOTHER

Well, no. But it isn't regular for that boy to be spending all his time up there on that hillside with...(slight pause) with some creature who we don't know anything about now, do we?

FATHER

Well, now, dear.

MOTHER

Well, now, yourself. We have no idea where he comes from or, for that matter, who his people are. The mind reels to think of it. Still and all, he has made some wonderful comments on my cooking; though I think sending his complements in poems is a bit eccentric. We haven't even been introduced. They're nice poems, however, sensible and not so full of difficult words.

FATHER

Well, dear, if you would like to be introduced, you can join us for supper this evening. I am sure he would enjoy your company as well as your meals.

MOTHER

Dine? With a dragon?

FATHER

Ssssssssssh! Please, dear, the walls have ears. We don't want the whole village to know about our "friend" up on the downs.

(THE VILLAGE stirs. Some of their eyes open.)

MOTHER

(Aware that they are not alone.) I'm afraid some people are already suspicious. That dragon fellow eats quite a lot and yesterday when I asked the green grocer for the second fifty pound bag of potatoes this week, well, I'll tell you, he gave me quite a look.

FATHER

I'm afraid you're right. The gang at the tavern all had their heads together whispering when I stopped by last night. As soon as they saw me, they just shut up.

Well, we had better get on with our shopping if you're to have a nice supper. I'm fixing something new.

FATHER

Oh, what is it, dear?

MOTHER

(Going off.) Shepherd's pie.

(MOTHER and FATHER exit. By this time, THE VILLAGE has become alert and have heard the last part of their conversation.)

VILLAGER #4

It ate my cow.

VILLAGER #1

I think it's as big as a house.

VILLAGER #3

Did it eat a boy?

VILLAGER #2

I saw a big lizard once.

VILLAGER #5

How will it ever fadge?

(They begin to exit whispering additional rumors. [#1: Did you hear that rosr?; #2: Let's feed it the woodchuck, Scales and really long claws; #3: Big red eyes, Do dragons eat potatoes?; #4: A tail with really ugly spikes, I wonder if it has a treasure; #5: I knew that cave was weird, Somebody's gonna get hurt.] They turn off their lights as the stage lights fade.)

(Lights out.)

SCENE 5: GETTING TO KNOW YOU

(Lights up. Montage sequence. The BOY and the DRAGON have tea. The DRAGON's tea boils over The DRAGON gives the BOY many books. The DRAGON stacks books onto the boys arms until the BOY finally topples over from the weight of too many books.)

That's enough heavy reading for today. Pick that up. Don't leave a mess. I want you to see something. (*Dragon searches the floor for a poem.*) No, no, that's not it. Aha! (*Holding out a sheet to Boy.*) Have a look at this, would you? (*Snatching the sheet back*) No, no, no. That won't do, you can't read my dragon scratchings. I'll read it for you, how's that?

BOY

Very well.

DRAGON

I call it "The Empty Page." (*Reciting*)

The empty page sits on my desk;
 The waward son of a cedar glade.
 Pine-scented sighs have long since faded
 Off this snow-white, mocking pest.

Not a word. What a world.

But oh, what wonders waken when
 The marriage blooms twixt page and pen!
 What brooding child of pulp and ink
 Enjoins the world to dream and think?

A friendly note,
 A pithy quote,
 A springtime song,
 An essay long,
 A shopping list,
 A lover missed?

It matters not the scribe's ability;
 What matters is the possibility!

Of words. Of worlds.

(*Pause*) Well, what do you think?

I think it's wonderful, and I'm glad it rhymes. There's something suspicious about poems that don't rhyme.

DRAGON

Glad to hear you say that. It must seem odd to you, how much this messy little place means to me. I don't think I've gotten all my things completely unpacked since Arthur was King.

BOY

I've never seen anything quite like it.

DRAGON

Not many people have and lived. Dragons are a private bunch. And this place is special. It has a *personality* all its own.

BOY

(Going to wings) What's this then?

DRAGON

Those are my wings.

BOY

Why aren't they on you?

DRAGON

That wouldn't be very practical, would it? If I wore them all the time, I'd be spending half my day picking up what I'd knocked over.

BOY

You only put them on when you need them, then? I had no idea a dragon's wardrobe was so flexible.

DRAGON

I suppose that's an eccentricity of mine. But if you ask me, the other dragons were grumpy from lugging around the whole paraphernalia of dragonhood every minute, wings and scales and horns and tails and such. Imagine trying to cook a bit of dinner with all that on. No wonder they were always breathing fire on everyone.

BOY

Do you breathe fire?

DRAGON

Some, I fear, first thing in the morning. You know, it's not nearly so wonderful as everyone thinks, flying with wings. I've often thought a person could fly without wings if he took himself lightly enough. Now *that* would be *remarkable*. *(Fetching a bound sheaf of paper.)* Have a look at this, would you? *(BOY takes sheaf.)* I've been working on this for several thousand years now.

Goodness.

DRAGON

Yes. So much depends on a writer's first book. I want you to take it with you, take your time reading it. It's the only copy.

BOY

No, what if something happens to it?

DRAGON

That's the point, isn't it? I trust you, Boy. I know you'll be careful-- with my book-- and with my friendship.

BOY

(Pause.) Dragon, I'm very touched. *(DRAGON makes a "move along, move along" gesture)* I don't mean to be rude, but I need to ask you something.

DRAGON

Yes? Out with it.

BOY

Well, it's my mother. Since you and I have become such close friends, she'd like to know who your people are.

DRAGON

My people, well, yes. I miss them sometimes.

BOY

What were they like?

DRAGON

You really want to know?

BOY

Oh, yes, please.

DRAGON

Isn't your mother waiting up?

BOY

I think she will understand.

DRAGON

Very well. Once upon a time, there was only one dragon.

BOY

What was his name?

DRAGON

That's a rude question. I should eat you for that.

Oh, please!

DRAGON

This dragon was very talented at ravishing the countryside and stealing loot. So talented it eventually got hold of everything worth having.

BOY

Wow.

DRAGON

Wow indeed. One day, a young woman arrived in his lair. She was searching the world for a precious gift her mother had given her, which she had somehow lost. She described the thing. The dragon knew he had nothing like it in his heap of goodies. It didn't even sound valuable. But he was lonely down in his hole and, well, the dragon was quite taken with this woman.

BOY

Ah.

DRAGON

Yes. So he let her stay and dig through his treasure. Time passed. The woman grew very old, searching, and one day the dragon realized that he loved her, in his dragony way. So to make her happy, he gave her a trinket -- one of his own -- and told her he'd found the precious thing she had been seeking. Well, she caught him lying. He could see she knew, they both knew, that he'd told a big fat lie. Yet she thanked him very much for finding the precious thing she had lost. She said that now her heart was at rest. And the dragon saw that this was true, somehow. And from that moment until she was gone, both of them were very happy.

BOY

(Pause.) Is that all of the story?

DRAGON

Oh, no. When the woman was gone, the dragon went a little crazy. He searched everywhere for something that could fill his restless heart. Every dragon who came after him searched too, madly, for something that was lost in the world. Even me. I search for poems, but it's the same really.

BOY

I have to go now. Good night.

DRAGON

Night, night.

(The BOY goes. The DRAGON watches a moment, then turns and goes upstage.)