

Plays for Young Audiences

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

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The Velveteen Rabbit

Story by
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Cast of Characters

James, the Boy

Nana, the Grandmother

Velveteen Rabbit

Wild Rabbits

Doctor

Fairy

Voices

Velveteen Rabbit

Skin Horse

Ensemble: Toy/Puppet Operators

SCENE ONE

A young boy's nursery, circa 1920. It is furnished with a bed, dresser, rocker, and a large toy cupboard. A door leads to a hallway and staircase within the home; another door to a bathroom; French doors with curtains lead out to a second floor balcony which overlook a backyard garden. The glow of a nightlight on the dresser; moonlight from the balcony. A Christmas stocking and its tumbled contents—including Velveteen Rabbit—lie on the floor Center.

Christmas Evening. The sound of two voices laughing as they approach from downstairs. The door is kicked open by Nana, a woman in her late fifties, who carries on her back a little eight-year-old boy, James. Nana stumbles toward the bed and dumps her burden. James immediately hops up and commences a game of tag with his grandmother. Hopping back on the bed, he loses his balance and Nana catches him, dropping him down on the bed once again. The game is ended.

JAMES: Nana! Please, Nana--why can't I stay up?

NANA: "Stay up?!" My dear young man, you can't even stand up!

JAMES: But I'm too old to go to bed so early!

NANA: And I'm too old for this nonsense!

JAMES: But I'm not tired!

NANA: Oh, but I am!

Catching her breath, she notices the Christmas stocking.

NANA: Now what's this?

JAMES: What?

NANA: *(Stepping towards it.)* Your Christmas stocking. What's it doing here in the middle of the floor? Nuts, candy, toys strewn about...

JAMES: I don't know. I guess I left it there.

NANA: "I guess" you did--I hardly think it scattered itself about on its own.

Picking up the Velveteen Rabbit.

NANA: And see here your velveteen rabbit! Brand new just today--and already becoming quite covered in dust!

JAMES: A dust bunny!

NANA: *(As James skips about the room, laughing.)* "Dust bunny!" So you think it's all a joke, do you? Seriously, James, I do wish you'd show a little higher regard for your toys.

JAMES: *(He grunts; a pause as Nana tidies up.)* Nana? *(Nana grunts in response.)* Was it really Santa Claus?

NANA: "Was it really Santa Claus," what?

JAMES: Was it really Santa who filled my stocking last night?

NANA: *(Pulling off his shoes.)* And who else would have done such a thing? Of course it was Santa!

JAMES: But at school, some of the older boys say Santa Claus isn't real.

NANA: Do they? And what do they know about it? My dear James – boys will say all sorts of things; you mustn't mind them. Now, as for Santa, I expect he's every bit as real as anything else in this world. So you just go ahead and believe whatever you believe, alright?

JAMES: Alright. *(As Nana offers him his pajamas.)* I believe... I should not like to go to bed!

NANA: Well, isn't that a pity; because, you see, you're already in bed, silly!

JAMES: Santa Claus is silly too, I think.

NANA: Oh? Why is that?

JAMES: *(Enters bathroom to change into pajamas.)* Because he gave me a bunny.

NANA: And a perfectly splendid little bunny it is, too!

James picks it up and carrying it to the bed. In a plain sort of way.

JAMES: But bunnies are for Easter.

NANA: Oh, I see. I hadn't thought of that. Then I suppose Santa is a rather silly old codger, after all. Nevertheless, whatever the holiday, this velveteen rabbit is yours.

(A call.) Do you need any help? (James: "No.") Don't forget to clean your teeth! (James: A moan.)

(Nana recites to toy in her lap.) "There once was a boy named James, who was very fond of games. Instead of going to bed, he stood on his head. And that's how he lost his brains!" (James: "Nana!") Would you like to sleep with bunny tonight?

JAMES: No. It can go in the cupboard with the other toys. (Re-entering, searching for china dog.) I want my dog -- my china dog!

NANA: Are you sure? This new bunny is ever so much softer ...

JAMES: (Rummaging through toy cupboard.) I don't care! China dog was Mama's! Mama loved china dog, and I do too! I don't want anything else!

NANA: Fine -- so be it -- you don't need to fuss...

She goes into the chest of drawers and hands him the china dog which has been sitting by the night light.

NANA: Here you are.

James takes china dog and is immediately soothed. He takes it into bed with him and lies down.

NANA: Whatever makes you happy; whatever helps you fall asleep... (James tosses Rabbit out of bed; Nana picks it up.) And there you go, little Velveteen Rabbit -- to be neglected with the rest, I'm afraid. Now don't blame me. I did try after all ... (She goes to the balcony

doors and stares out at the snow.) I think perhaps Santa's learned at least one lesson today: there's but only one toy of any importance in the world to that boy, and that's his blessed china dog! Turning back to pull blankets over him. Now, James, time to sleep, eh? (No response.) James? (She dims the night light.) Merry Christmas, child. And sweet dreams. You too, precious toy dog.

JAMES: *(Half asleep)* He isn't a toy. He's real.

Nana sighs and shakes her head in resignation as she goes to the door.

NANA: Oh, yes, yes. It's real. It's real...

Nana turns off the general lights, and places Velveteen Rabbit in the toy cupboard. Nana exits. Glow of night light slowly fades to blackout.

SCENE TWO

The toy cupboard. In the darkness, sounds and whispering voices of Toys. It is not a nice place.

CLOWN: Is Nana gone?

PIG *(sing-song)* Nana's gone! Nana's gone! I know Nana's gone!

LION What about the boy?

PIG Dreaming! Dreaming! I know he's dreaming!

SOLDIER Be safe! Be sure! Check with the look-out! Ten-hut! Bear!

BEAR What?

SOLDIER All clear?

BEAR Sure.

SOLDIER "Sure," what?

BEAR Sure, sir.

SOLDIER Good! At ease! Toys activate with a great noise. We can more clearly see them now.

SKIN HORSE Merry Christmas, one and all!

TOYS *(scornfully.)* Merry Christmas! Big deal! What's so merry about it? I hate Christmas! I hate Christmas too!

VELVETEEN *(after a pause, very softly.)* Christmas? What's "Christmas?"

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Did s-s-somebody s-s-say s-ssomething? S-s-something st-stst...

BEAR stupid.

JACK-IN-THE-BOX ...stupid?!

CLOWN Somebody stupid.

LION Someone new.

FUNNY GUY Figures. Christmas – always someone new.

SOLDIER Go Away!

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Too crow... crow... crow...

BEAR Too crowded!

JACK-IN-THE-BOX ...Crowded!

TOP No room to spin!

BEAR *(Banging his drum for attention.)* Hey! Who's New? Who's down there?

VELVETEEN Me?

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Yes! You!

SOLDIER *(a stern command.)* Stranger!

VELVETEEN Me?

SOLDIER Name, rank, serial number!

VELVETEEN Name?

SOLDIER What do people call you?

VELVETEEN I don't think I have a name.

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Rank -- are you imp-p-p-p-portant?

VELVETEEN I don't know yet.

SAILBOAT Serial number -- label. Says what factory made you.

VELVETEEN I don't think I have a label. I don't remember being made. The Boy touched me. That's the first thing I remember.

TOP Did he play with you?

VELVETEEN We played a little while.

CLOWN He played with you, then he left you, didn't he?

PIG Betcha he left ya; betcha he left ya...

VELVETEEN Yes, the boy left me. How did you know?

TOP Same old story.

BEAR Boy don't play with nobody very long.

BALL *(Bouncing from lower to upper shelf.)* Who cares?! I'm rubber. I'm tough. I can play with myself.

BEAR *(As toys activate riotously.)* We can play by ourselves!

VELVETEEN But I can't play alone. I don't have anything. I can't do anything.

TOYS You're nothing. You're nobody.

SKIN HORSE That's no way to talk! Especially not on Christmas! (*A pause. Gently, to Velveteen Rabbit.*) New one -- young one -- I am the Skin Horse, and on behalf of us all, I bid you welcome to the nursery.

TOYS "On behalf of us all? Phooey! Speak for yourself! Take a hike! Scram! Get lost! Move it! Go!

VELVETEEN I can't go! I can't move!

SKIN HORSE Don't worry. It's not important.

CLOWN Listen to him! Skin Horse can't do nothing either.

BEAR Skin Horse ain't important. He's just old.

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Old and worthless. Old and worthless.

BEAR Old... old... old!

SKIN HORSE Little Rabbit -- do not be concerned about what you may or may not possess... Do not be concerned about what you can or cannot do... What's important is what you are. And what you can be.

VELVETEEN But I'm only a toy. What more can I be?

SKIN HORSE To begin with, you can be my friend.

TOYS (*Echoing mockingly through the blackout.*) Be my friend. Be my friend. Be my friend ...

SCENE THREE

It is late winter: Valentine's Night. Lights rise on James, seated in the middle of the floor,

making a valentine with paper and finger-paints.

JAMES *(Writing with his finger.)* Be... my... valentine.

NANA *(Entering)* James? It's gone well past nine. There's school in the morning; You know very well you ought to've been asleep half an hour ago... *(She sees James' art supplies.)* Now what's all this? Only see what a mess you've made! Where did you get hold of these paints?

JAMES In the trash, behind the garden shed...

NANA *(Grabbing a towel from the bathroom.)* Oh, never mind from where. You'd best pray this cleans up, young man ...

JAMES *(standing sorrowfully.)* I only wanted to...

NANA *(throwing towel over spills.)* It doesn't matter what you wanted to do; It's what you've done. She begins to scrub the floor where James spilled. Well? Don't just stand there! Get directly into that bathroom, clean yourself up and then go to bed! *(James hesitates, wanting to say something.)* You heard me -- march! *(James obeys. Nana sweeps through the room, picking up the paper and paints.)* A cupboard full of toys, but are you content to play with them? Oh no, indeed! If there's a mess to be made, trouble to be got into, there's James. I vow, one day you'll be the death of your old grandmother and what then, child, what then will you do? *(She freezes at picking up the artwork: a valentine. A long pause. She reads.)* "James loves Nana. Be my Valentine."

JAMES *(at the door, in his pajamas.)* Did I spell it right?

NANA *(looking up, a tear in her eye.)* Pardon?

JAMES "Valentine." It's a very long word.

NANA You spelled it perfectly. And it wouldn't matter one little bit if you hadn't.

JAMES Really?

NANA Really. Do you still want me to have this? (*James nods. She holds out her arms.*) Thank you. (*A hug, then she guides James to his bed.*)

JAMES I didn't mean to make you sad, Nana.

NANA But I'm not. No, yes I am. Oh, bother! (*She finds a handkerchief and blows her nose.*) It's just that ...well, James, it's been such a long, long time, since last I was given a valentine. I never expected nor hoped, for that matter, to receive another.

JAMES What can't be helped, Nana?

NANA (*tucking him in.*) Perhaps I'll tell you all about it someday ...
JAMES When?

NANA When you can understand.

JAMES I can understand a lot.

NANA I know. But there are a great many things you oughtn't be concerned about understanding... not quite yet. She starts to exit.

JAMES I love you, Nana.

NANA I love you, James.

She turns off the light and closes the door.

JAMES I love you, too, china dog. (*He takes china dog from dresser and into bed.*) I love you best of all.

Blackout.

SCENE FOUR

The toy cupboard. Continuous with the preceding.

TOYS Love! Yecch! I don't love nobody! Love is no good! No good for nothing! Who needs it? I hate love!

VELVETEEN Mister Skin Horse?

SKIN HORSE Yes, Young one?

VELVETEEN What is love?

SKIN HORSE Oh, my little friend, I'm afraid love cannot be described in something so limited as words. It is a feeling.

VELVETEEN Nana was crying. Does that mean love hurts?

SKIN HORSE Sometimes. But sometimes – when people are so full of Love, and as happy as they can possibly be –sometimes then too, people cry.

VELVETEEN I don't understand.

SKIN HORSE That's alright. Feelings don't need to be understood.

VELVETEEN There's one other word I don't understand.

SKIN HORSE Only one?

VELVETEEN Long ago, on Christmas, the Boy said something about china dog he said china dog was real.

SKIN HORSE Ah, yes.

VELVETEEN But what is REAL?

TOP It means having a handle so you can spin!

SAILBOAT A sail!

JACK-IN-THE-BOX A crank!

BEAR A drum!

SOLDIER A gun!

VELVETEEN Is that true, Mr. Skin Horse? Does real mean having all those things?

SKIN HORSE Of course not -- for china dog has none of those things. Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a very long, long time -- not just to play with --but really loves you, then you become REAL.

VELVETEEN First Love, Then Real. Does it hurt?

SKIN HORSE Sometimes. But when you are Real you don't mind being hurt.

VELVETEEN Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?

Toys crank, whirl, and sputter.

SKIN HORSE No. It may take a long time. That's why it seldom happens to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.

VELVETEEN I'm so glad I have nothing to get broken!

SKIN HORSE But you musn't expect that you can become Real without ~ changes.

VELVETEEN Changes?

SKIN HORSE Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, or your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and quite shabby.

VELVETEEN Oh, my!

SKIN HORSE But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly.

VELVETEEN *(A realization – in awe.)* Mister Skin Horse? I suppose you are real?

SKIN HORSE *(a laugh.)* Because I am so old and shabby?

VELVETEEN I'm sorry...

SKIN HORSE No, it's true. I am old and shabby-- and I am Real. The Boy's uncle – a child of Nana's -- he made me Real a great many years ago. And that's the best part of it all, my young friend: once a person makes you Real you can't ever become unreal again. It lasts for always.

VELVETEEN "Always!" It sounds like magic!

SKIN HORSE To be loved, to be real ... it is the greatest magic in all the world!

Lights begin to fade to blackout.

VELVETEEN Oh, I hope it happens to me soon! Soon! Soon!

TOYS Aw, shut up!

VELVETEEN Soon!

SCENE FIVE

Easter. A sunny afternoon. The door flies open and James enters the room with Nana immediately behind. She closes the door behind them.

NANA Well?

JAMES "Well" what.

NANA I want an apology, that's what.

JAMES I'm not sorry.

NANA You should be! Never in all my life have I witnessed such an

outrageous display at the dinner table -- and on Easter, no less! Whipped potatoes are not meant to be fashioned into cannon balls, nor are medallions of lamb intended to be worn as pirates' eye patches. Now, I may be accustomed to humoring you -- indeed, some have accused me of spoiling you -- but there are times, James, when you simply must show a little consideration for others!

JAMES All those old people downstairs? They don't care what I do.

NANA Well, I do!

JAMES Anyway -- they laughed.

NANA Only because they didn't know what else to do.

JAMES I know what they can do. They can go home. I never wanted them to come here in the first place

NANA I did. This is my home.

JAMES *(shutting himself in the bathroom.)* And I never wanted to come here either!

NANA But you are here, and that's that! *(James comes out again.)* Please, James, tell me -- how long will I have to wait until there's a holiday when I don't have to scold you?

JAMES You don't have to scold me! You don't have to do anything! Just leave me alone!

NANA As you wish. You'll keep to this room until you learn to be civil.

JAMES Fine.

NANA You'll go without supper.

JAMES I'm not hungry anyway.

NANA You will be.

JAMES Then I'll eat my Easter candy.

NANA Oh no you shan't. You've had more than enough already. She takes the Easter basket.

JAMES Give it back!

NANA I'll do no such thing.

JAMES It's mine. The Easter bunny left it for me!

NANA No he didn't! I did! And now I'm taking it back until you've said you're sorry.

JAMES But I'm not sorry! I'm not!

NANA You will be.

JAMES Stop telling me what I'll be! You don't know how I feel! You don't even care! I hate you, Nana! I hate you!

NANA *(As James runs out onto the balcony.)* You'll be sorry for that, too one day! *(James slams the doors closed behind him.)* Get back in here, James! *(James stays turned away.)* Get back, I say, before you catch your death of cold!

JAMES I hope I do! I hope I die!

NANA You do that! See if it makes your life any easier!

She angrily turns to the bed to arrange it for James' nap. She punches a pillow.

NANA And when you're done catching cold, I want you to have a nap. And I don't want to hear a peep out of you until the last of our guests have gone, is that clear? *(James doesn't answer. She mutters to herself.)* Why must we always have these fights? Why?! ... *(In throwing open the bedspread, the china dog, buried amongst the covers, flies to the floor and shatters.)* Oh, no! Not china dog! Not today! *(She quickly looks to the balcony to see if Boy saw, then immediately scoops up the shattered fragments.)* What am I to do now?

Nana looks about for a place to put the pieces; finally strips a pillow of its pillowcase, dumps the pieces, and goes to dresser to get a fresh pillowcase. James steps back into the room as Nana steps back toward the bed.

JAMES Oh. I thought you were gone.

NANA Just leaving. I was only giving you a fresh pillowslip.

JAMES You changed it yesterday.

NANA (*Snapping.*) Yes, and already it was dirty.

JAMES No, it wasn't; it...

NANA James, please! Don't argue!

She exits. James goes to his bed and can't find china dog. He calls for Nana until she returns.

JAMES Nana? I can't find china dog.

Nana stands frozen at the door. She wants to confess, but cannot find the courage. She swiftly opens the toy cupboard and grabs the Velveteen Rabbit.

NANA Here, take your old Bunny! He'll go to sleep with you!

She almost shoves the toy in James' arms, then quickly exits. James is perplexed and a little frightened. He remains in the bed.

JAMES Maybe china dog is mad at me too. Maybe that's why he's gone away. But I love china dog. When you love somebody, they shouldn't leave you!

He lies down, with Velveteen Rabbit in his arms.

VELVETEEN (*A call to Skin Horse.*) Mister Skin Horse? Are you there?
SKIN HORSE Yes, young one -- I am here.

VELVETEEN Where is china dog, do you know?

SKIN HORSE China dog is gone.

VELVETEEN Gone where?

JACK-IN-THE-BOX Gone dead, dum-dum!

FUNNY GUY Smashed into smithereens!

SOLDIER Blown to bits like a big boom buzz bomb! (*He makes was explosion noises.*)

SKIN HORSE For shame! For shame!

BEAR Aw, c'mon -- where's your sense of humor?

CLOWN Everybody dies.

VELVETEEN Is that true, Mister Skin Horse? Does everybody die?

SKIN HORSE Yes.

VELVETEEN Does it hurt?

SKIN HORSE No one knows. But it can hurt the people left behind.

James turns in his sleep, on top of Rabbit.

VELVETEEN Help! Help! He's going to crush me! He's going to break me! I'm going to die!

SKIN HORSE No, you won't.

VELVETEEN Help! I can't breathe!

SKIN HORSE Of course you can. Lie still.

VELVETEEN He's smothering me!

SKIN HORSE: No he isn't.

James turns onto his back, snuggling Rabbit to his neck.

SKIN HORSE: There, now. Feel that? Your friend is hugging you. There's a difference; you'll see.

VELVETEE Will I?

SKIN HORSE Velveteen Rabbit -- do you want to feel Love?

TOYS No! No!

VELVETEEN Yes!

SKIN HORSE Then remember: it's easy to feel bad, or feel nothing. To feel Love and Real is much harder -- that is why they are so wonderful.

The nursery door slowly opens and Nana enters.

NANA James? Are you awake?

JAMES Yes, Nana.

NANA I sent all our guests home. I'd like to... I need to make an apology.

JAMES You?

NANA Yes, me. I suppose you may think, just because I'm your grandmother and I'm very old, that I'm terribly wise and know everything about everything. Well, I don't. Nobody does. Everybody -- young, old -- we all make mistakes. And today, I behaved every bit as badly as you. Perhaps worse. So, James, I want you to try very hard to understand what I'm about to tell you. Something quite dreadful happened today, and I don't know how to make it right.

JAMES Somebody's dead.

NANA What?

JAMES Somebody's dead. You're talking to me just like you did when my

Mama died.

NANA Am I? Well, in a way... It's your dog. China dog. While I was turning down you bed, it fell to the floor and broke. It was an accident, James.

JAMES *(Slowly getting up from the bed.)* Oh.

NANA It can't be mended.

JAMES Oh.

NANA I was so very upset and afraid. I didn't know how to tell you.

JAMES *(Shutting the doors of the cupboard.)* Oh.

NANA "Oh"?! Please, James, do please say something besides "oh"! Yell, cry... something!

JAMES Crying won't bring china dog back. Crying never brought Mama back.

NANA No, of course not. Yet, even still, crying can help, James. It can help you sort out your feelings.

JAMES I know how I feel. *(A pause. He goes back to the bed; looks at Rabbit.)* Nana? Velveteen Rabbit can't break, can he?

NANA What?

JAMES Bunny couldn't have an accident, could he?

NANA *(a sign of relief.)* No. I believe whatever might happen to the bunny could be mended.

JAMES Good.

A great hug. James takes Velveteen Rabbit out onto the balcony.

NANA Would you like me to read a story?

JAMES No, thank you.

NANA Would you like to play a game?

JAMES No, thank you.

NANA Would you like... some Easter candy? *(A pause. James returns with a nod. Nana giggles.)* Good! So would I!

James fetches the basket and they sit on the stairs leading to the balcony, side by side. James offers Nana some candy, then Velveteen Rabbit.

NANA It's been rather a difficult day, hasn't it, James? *(James nods.)* But I want you to know, James, that even when I'm angry and say terrible things, I'm still very, very glad to have you with me.

JAMES *(Giving her a kiss.)* Me too!

NANA *(Head for the door.)* You're welcome to come downstairs now, if you like.

JAMES No, thank you.

NANA Shall I tuck you in?

JAMES I can do it by myself.

NANA Of course you can. Only please know you don't have to.

JAMES "Don't have to" what?

NANA Do it by yourself. *(She heads for the door.)* I'll call you for supper ... *(Snatching one last candy from the basket.)* ...if you're still hungry. *(Nana chuckles, winks, and exits.)*

JAMES *(To Velveteen Rabbit.)* There really is an Easter Bunny, you know. He brings baskets of candy to children all over the world. Maybe he didn't know my Mama died, and that I had to move here with Nana. Maybe that's why Nana gave me candy instead. Easter

Bunnies can make mistakes, too –everybody does. But you can be my Easter bunny -- if you want. And did you hear what Nana said? She said you're going to last forever. Forever and ever and ever... !

Lights fade to Blackout as James tosses Velveteen, Rabbit high up in the air.