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OLD YELLER

adapted for the stage by Brian Guehring
from the Newberry Honor novel by Fred Gipson
a play with puppets for a minimum of 3m/2f

Draft # 3.05 post production draft

When his Papa leaves on a long cattle drive, fourteen year old Travis has to become the man of the family. Then Old Yeller, a mangy one-eared thieving mutt, shows up, and Travis wants nothing to do with him. Old Yeller however proves to be a huge help to Travis and his family on the wild Texas frontier. Strong and courageous, Old Yeller earns Travis's love when the dog helps save the family from a bear, wild pigs and a rabid wolf. However, when Old Yeller gets hydrophobia and must be shot, Travis is faced with the most difficult duty of his young life.

Old Yeller was originally produced by the Omaha Theater Company for school groups and public audiences in the fall of 2006 and ran approximately 60 minutes. The original cast and production team were:

CAST

TRAVIS Michael Harrelson OLD YELLER/LISABETH Suzanne Withem
MAMA Jessica Runck ARLISS Brian Guehring
PAPA/SEARCY/SANDERSON Earl Bates

PRODUCTION TEAM

Director: Kevin Ehrhart Pupperty Designer: Trish Place
Set Designer: Mark Lewis Costume Designer: Sherri Geerdes
Light Designer : Andrew Vance Stage Manager: Kristi Morgan
Development Dramaturg: Michael Miller

Old Yeller was subsequently produced by Omaha Theater Company for a national tour during the 2007-08 school year.

***Old Yeller* was honored by the American Alliance for Theater and Education
with an Unpublished Play Award at the 2008 National Conference**

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OLD YELLER

a play for 5 performers (3 men/2 women) to 12 + performers

Human Characters

TRAVIS	a 14 year old boy trying to become a man
MAMA	his down to Earth mother
ARLISS	his 5 year old brother
*PAPA	a Texas rancher
LISABETH	a hard-working, shy 11 year old girl
*SEARCY	Lisabeth's talkative Grandpa
*SANDERSON	a young cowboy; Old Yeller's first owner

** Papa, Searcy, and Burn can be played by the same actor in a five person cast*

Puppet Characters

OLD YELLER	a clever, courageous, thieving mutt
MAMA BEAR	an angry she-bear
CUB	a young bear cub
HOGS	a hog with long, sharp teeth and two piglets
BULL	a bull with hydrophobia
WOLF	a big, loafer wolf gone mad
PUP	a speckled, rascally puppy of Old Yeller.

This show is envisioned to use a large range of puppetry. Old Yeller is envisioned to be a detailed rod puppet with the puppeteer in full view. The Bear, cub and wolf puppets are envisioned to be shadow puppets. The Bull puppet is envisioned to be a puppet as an extension of the actor. The Hogs puppets could be rod puppets or hand puppets.

**for a five person cast, the Lisabeth actress works the Old Yeller puppet while the Papa actor works the Bear and Wolf puppets the Mama works bear cub, Arliss, Mama & Papa work the hog puppets Arliss or Papa can work the Bull puppet*

**for a six person cast, the Papa actor works the Old Yeller puppet while Lisabeth actress works the Bear and hog puppets the Searcy/Sanderson actor works the bull and wolf puppets*

Settings

the Coates log cabin in the hill country of Central Texas
the surrounding woods, desert, and hills

Time

the late 1860's

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(TRAVIS walks on stage and addresses audience as an older teen or young man.)

TRAVIS

We called him Old Yeller. I remember like yesterday how he strayed in out of nowhere to our log cabin on Birdsong Creek. Old Yeller made me so mad at first that I wanted to kill him. Then, later, I came to love him like one of my own folks. That's how much I'd come to think of the big yeller dog. Which is why it was so hard to do what I had to do.

Old Yeller came in the summer of 1868. That was the year that Papa and a bunch of other Salt Lick settlers went to Kansas to herd their cattle up. I had just turned 14.

(MAMA comes out of the house with laundry)

MAMA

Travis, step out into the dog run and cut down a side of middling meat hanging to the pole rafters.

TRAVIS

Yes, ma'am.

(MAMA hangs out laundry to dry and beats the dirt out of the clothes with a battling stick. TRAVIS goes to the dog run and notices the meat is gone.)

TRAVIS

Where's the meat? Did some critter get it?

(He looks around and soon OLD YELLER pops up from his hiding place. OLD YELLER is big, slick-haired yeller dog. One short ear has been chewed off and his tail is a short stub that's wagging)

TRAVIS

Why, you thievin' rascal! You don't even have the manners to feel ashamed of what you've done.

(TRAVIS kicks, but misses OLD YELLER. OLD YELLER, though, starts squawling and bawling. MAMA comes running in)

MAMA

What on earth, Travis?

TRAVIS

Why, this old stray dog has come and eaten our middling meat clear up!

(ARLISS enters.)

ARLISS

A dog! A dog! A Yeller dog!

(TRAVIS aims another kick at OLD YELLER, who easily avoids it, but starts acting hurt again.)

ARLISS

You kick my dog, and I'll wear you to a frazzle!

(ARLISS takes up a battling stick and whacks the surprised TRAVIS before Mama holds a kicking and screaming ARLISS)

He's my dog. You can't hurt him. He's my dog!

TRAVIS

I didn't even touch him! I missed him.

MAMA

BOYS!

(MAMA separates the boys. ARLISS runs over to OLD YELLER, who starts licking him)

It looks like we just got us a dog.

TRAVIS

But Mama, you don't mean we'd keep an old ugly dog like that. He'll come in and steal meat right out of the house.

MAMA

Well, maybe we can't keep him. Maybe he belongs to somebody around here.

TRAVIS

He doesn't belong to anybody in the settlement. I know every dog at Salt Licks.

MAMA

Well, then, if he's a stray, there's no reason why Little Arliss can't claim him. And you'll have to admit he's a smart dog. Mighty few dogs have sense enough to figure out a way to reach a side of meat hanging that high.

ARLISS

My dog's smart.

MAMA

What are you going to call it, Arliss?

ARLISS *(thinking)*

...Yeller!

TRAVIS

'Cus he yells like scaredy cat.

ARLISS

No! Cus that's his color! C'mon Old Yeller.

(ARLISS and OLD YELLER exit)

TRAVIS

Fine, he's smart. But I still don't like him. He yells as much as Arliss.

MAMA

Now, Travis, You're not being fair. You had a dog when you were little, but Arliss never had one. Your brother gets lonely.

(MAMA exits into the house.)

TRAVIS *(to AUDIENCE)*

When Mama got her mind set a certain way, there's no use arguing with her. However, I didn't aim to have a meat-thieving dog on the place. For the whole next week, I plotted ways to get rid of that dog. While Arliss was getting more and more attached to Old Yeller each day.

(ARLISS and OLD YELLER come running on yelping)

MAMA

What did you do to your brother this time, Travis?

TRAVIS

Nothing, Mama! Honest!

(MAMA runs to ARLISS and ARLISS shows her the catfish he caught. MAMA jumps back a bit)

MAMA

Travis, come take this catfish out of your brother's hands.

(TRAVIS takes catfish)

TRAVIS

No wonder he's bawling; the catfish finned him. Nothing hurts as bad as that.

MAMA

Travis bring me some mashed up prickly-pear root poultice.

(TRAVIS goes into house as OLD YELLER licks ARLISS's wounds)

Arliss, now calm down, you're going to be alright.

Are you sure?
ARLISS

Yes, Arliss.
MAMA

I caught a big fish, didn't I?
ARLISS

Yes you did, son.
MAMA

(TRAVIS returns and MAMA applies poultice)

ARLISS
You should have seen me, Mama. I saw it on the bottom of a deep hole and I dove way down to get it. The water was freezing. I almost turned into an icicle. Then I lifted these huge boulders out of the way. He was hiding.

(ARLISS acts out moving boulders)

What a windy!
TRAVIS

Hush, Travis. This is Arliss' story. You let him tell it the way he wants to. What happened next, squirrel?
MAMA

ARLISS
I found the fish and I grabbed him with one hand. He tried to swim away and he almost carried me with him to the ocean, but then I used my strength and I dragged that huge fish back. It must weigh as much as I do, don't you think, Mama?

Just about.
MAMA *(amused)*

ARLISS
I nearly ran out of breath before I swam to the bank with it.

MAMA
What a strong little boy you are, Arliss!

TRAVIS
You can't even swim, yet!

MAMA

Arliss, why don't you and your dog go back to your fierce hunting. I'll cook up that catfish you caught and serve you a hero's dinner tonight.

(ARLISS struts into the woods with OLD YELLER as TRAVIS rolls his eyes)

TRAVIS

Mama, you know that old yeller dog caught that fish in a shallow part of the stream and brought it to the grass so Arliss could get it. That old yeller dog is going to make Little Arliss the biggest liar in Texas.

MAMA

Let Little Arliss alone. If he ever tells a bigger whopper than the ones you used to tell, I have yet to hear it.

(MAMA enters the house)

TRAVIS *(to Audience)*

I figured that Mama had let him tell so many big yarns about his catching lizards, snakes, and fish, that Arliss begun to believe them himself. All of which led up to what happened next.

(TRAVIS moves to the axe and wood pile TRAVIS starts chopping and then ARLISS screams)

TRAVIS

Arliss, what are you screaming about now? That boy is always screaming about something.

(ARLISS screams again and the cub whimpers)

TRAVIS

What did you catch this time?

ARLISS

Travis! Help me!

(TRAVIS drops the axe to begin searching for ARLISS. ARLISS enters holding onto a bear cub puppet.)

TRAVIS

That isn't what I think it is....

ARLISS

Look I caught a little bear.

(THE CUB is trying to escape but ARLISS won't let go)

TRAVIS

Arliss, you let that little cub bear go. You hear me? Let him go!

ARLISS

No! I'm keeping him.

TRAVIS

You don't understand. You gotta let him go before.....

(Offstage MAMA BEAR roars)

Before his mama comes.

(The Shadow of the MAMA BEAR appears on stage as TRAVIS freezes. the MAMA BEAR is much closer to ARLISS)

NOOOOO!

(OLD YELLER comes racing towards the MAMA BEAR. OLD YELLER barks and the MAMA BEAR rears up on her hind legs to fight. The shadow of OLD YELLER is seen attacking the MAMA BEAR. MAMA BEAR throws off OLD YELLER. ARLISS lets go of the BEAR CUB which runs away. TRAVIS grabs a hold of ARLISS)

Come on!

(MAMA then runs on stage to see the BEAR. OLD YELLER attacks one more time and is thrown off)

MAMA

Arliss! Travis!

TRAVIS

Grab him, Mama! Grab him!

(MAMA pulls ARLISS to the house. TRAVIS turns and lifts his axe to attack the bear, but OLD YELLER has kept the bear away.)

MAMA

Come away from there, Travis! Hurry, son! Run!

(TRAVIS then sees OLD YELLER leaving the fight and the BEAR roars. OLD YELLER soon comes running in front of the screen and they run into the house. The BEAR goes back to all fours and walks slowly off. Inside the cabin, MAMA is rocking an upset ARLISS.)

MAMA

Are you ok, baby? Arliss, are you hurt?

(ARLISS can't talk. OLD YELLER licks him)

TRAVIS

He doesn't have a scratch, Mama. Old Yeller got there before the Mama Bear could touch him.

MAMA

How's Old Yeller?

(TRAVIS examines OLD YELLER)

TRAVIS

He seems fine. He sure is lucky.

MAMA

As soon as Old Yeller saw we were safe from the bear, he came sprinting away. Old Yeller was running so fast it looked like that bear was backing up.

(OLD YELLER starts barking and bouncing around)

TRAVIS

Look at him! He's bouncing around like that bear fight was just a fun romp.

ARLISS

Mama?

MAMA

Yes, baby.

ARLISS

I'm done catchin' bears.

MAMA

I think that's a good idea, Little Arliss.

TRAVIS

A very good idea.

(MAMA hugs him again and TRAVIS hugs him too as OLD YELLER barks. MAMA takes ARLISS off-stage.)

TRAVIS *(to audience)*

Seeing my little brother, so helpless against the angry she bear, I realized that I loved him as much as I did Mama and Papa, maybe in some ways even a little bit more. So it was only natural for me to come to love the dog that saved him. Of course, being the rascal that he was, Old Yeller still found ways to cause us problems.

Brian Guehring is the award winning Playwright in Residence of the Omaha Theater Company, one of the nation's largest professional theaters for young people. Brian has adapted the world premiere scripts of the Newberry Award winning novel **Julie of the Wolves** (directed by Everett Quinton), **Miss Bindergarten**, **If You Give a Cat a Cupcake**, **The Misfits**, **Holidays Around the World** and **Sacagawea: Discovering History**. Brian's scripts have won several national and regional awards. His adaptations of **Where the Red Fern Grows** and **Old Yeller** and his original Theater in Education play **The Super Adventures of Pyramid Man and Dr. Nutrition** won AATE (American Alliance for Theater and Education) Unpublished Play Project Awards. His script **The Bully Show** was selected for the 2002 New Visions/NewVoices new play development workshop at the Kennedy Center. Brian received a playwriting fellowship from the Nebraska Arts Council in 2002. His new adaptation of the Newberry Award winning novel **The Giver** was honored as one of the best theater productions of 2008 in Omaha by the Omaha World Herald. His original script **King Chemo** won the Southwest Theater Association's 1997 Best New Play for Children, and his original play **Creating Haley's World** was selected in 2003 for development in the inaugural Playwrights in Our Schools program. His plays have been produced by Imagination Stage in Washington, D.C., Lexington Children's Theater, Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, Barter Theater of Virginia, South Carolina Children's Theater, A. D. Players in Houston, Apple Tree Theater for Young Audiences in Chicago, Town Hall Theater in Dayton, and other schools and theaters. **King Chemo** and **The Bully Show** are published by Dramatic Publishing Company. He also contributed to Dramatic Publishing's **The Bully Plays**, an anthology of 10 minute plays about bullying for teen performers.

Brian is also the Education Director of the Omaha Theater Company which does drama and dance education outreach for every single child in over 80 local schools each year. His teen theater troupe **Pride Players** (which uses improvisation to explore issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and straight allied teens) won a Human and Civil Rights Award from the National Education Association in 2006. In 2010, Brian was elected to the Board of Theater For Young Audiences/USA. Brian earned his MFA in Children's Theater and Creative Drama from the University of Texas at Austin.