

# The Ransom of Red Chief



**A Tell-A-Troupe Production  
Arkansas Arts Center**

**January 19 – March 6, 2009**

## **The Ransom of Red Chief**

Adapted for the stage by Alan Keith Smith

Based the short story by O. Henry

Here you will find resources helpful in preparing children for an enjoyable and educational theatrical experience. Included you will find genre information, author's biographies, vocabulary and further resources. Lesson plans are also included, complete with curriculum connections to the Arkansas Department of Education's Curriculum Frameworks. Children's Theatre strives to assist families and educators in creating the most comprehensive learning experience possible.

### **About the Playwright**

Keith Smith came from Harding University to the Arkansas Arts Center Children's Theatre in the fall of 1980 to join the theatre's acting company. A few years later he turned his attentions to play writing and directing, becoming the theatre's associate director in the late '80s. Over the past 20 years Keith has written more than 60 plays for the Children's Theatre and has directed many dozens more. Some of his favorite past works include *The Mind of Leonardo da Vinci*, *The Mad Science Fair* and *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*.

### **About the Author**

**O. Henry** is the pen name of American writer William Sydney Porter (September 11, 1862 – June 5, 1910). O. Henry short stories are known for wit, wordplay, warm characterization and clever twist endings.

Porter was born on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, N.C. His middle name at birth was Sidney; he changed the spelling in 1898. As a child, Porter was always reading. He read everything from classics to dime novels. His favorite reading was *One Thousand and One Nights*. Porter graduated from his Aunt Evelina Maria Porter's elementary school in 1876. He then enrolled at the Lindsey Street High School. His aunt continued to tutor him until he was 15. In 1879, he started working as a bookkeeper in his uncle's drugstore, and in 1881, at the age of 19; he was licensed as a pharmacist. At the drugstore, he also showed off his natural artistic talents by sketching the townsfolk.

Porter traveled with Dr. James K. Hall to Texas in March 1882, hoping that a change of air would help alleviate a persistent cough he had developed. He worked as a shepherd, ranch hand, cook and baby-sitter. While on the ranch, he learned bits of Spanish and German from the mix of immigrant ranch hands. He also spent time reading classic literature. Later, in Austin, he was first as pharmacist then a draftsman, bank teller and journalist. He also began writing as a sideline to employment.

He led an active social life in Austin, including membership in singing and drama groups. Porter met and began courting Athol Estes, then 17 years old and from a wealthy family. Her mother objected to the match because Athol was ill, suffering from tuberculosis. On

July 1, 1887, Porter eloped with Athol to the home of Reverend R. K. Smoot, where they were married.

Following jobs included drawing maps from surveys and field notes and as a bank teller and bookkeeper. Eventually he worked full time on his humorous weekly called *The Rolling Stone*, which he started while working at the bank. *The Rolling Stone* featured satire on life, people and politics and included Porter's short stories and sketches. Porter and his family moved to Houston in 1895, where he started writing for the *Post*. His salary was only \$25 a month, but it rose steadily as his popularity increased. Porter gathered ideas for his column by hanging out in hotel lobbies and observing and talking to people there. This was a technique he used throughout his writing career.

Athol Estes Porter died on July 25, 1897 from tuberculosis (then known as consumption).

Porter's most prolific writing period started in 1902, when he moved to New York City to be near his publishers. He wrote 381 short stories while living there. He wrote a story a week for over a year for the *New York World Sunday Magazine*. His wit, characterization and plot twists were adored by his readers, but often panned by the critics. Yet, he went on to gain international recognition and is credited with defining the short story as a literary art form.

Porter married again in 1907, to childhood sweetheart Sarah (Sallie) Lindsey Coleman, whom he met again after revisiting his native state of North Carolina. His health began to deteriorate in 1908, which affected his writing. Sarah left him in 1909, and Porter died on June 5, 1910.

### **About the Author's Pen Name**

Porter gave various explanations for the origin of his pen name. In 1909 he gave an interview to *The New York Times*, in which he gave an account of it:

“It was during these New Orleans days that I adopted my pen name of O. Henry. I said to a friend: ‘I’m going to send out some stuff. I don’t know if it amounts to much, so I want to get a literary alias. Help me pick out a good one.’ He suggested that we get a newspaper and pick a name from the first list of notables that we found in it. In the society columns we found the account of a fashionable ball. ‘Here we have our notables,’ he said. We looked down the list and my eye lighted on the name Henry, ‘That’ll do for a last name,’ I said. ‘Now for a first name. I want something short. None of your three-syllable names for me.’ ‘Why don’t you use a plain initial letter, then?’ asked my friend. ‘Good,’ I said. ‘O is about the easiest letter written, and O it is.’

“A newspaper once wrote and asked me what the O stands for. I replied, ‘O stands for Olivier the French for Oliver.’ And several of my stories accordingly appeared in that paper under the name Olivier Henry.”

## **About the Story**

When Bill and Sam first think it up, it seemed like a simple enough scheme-ride up in a horse and buggy, snatch the kid and sell him back to his old man for \$2,000. Brilliant, right? Wrong. That's before they met little Johnny Dorset, alias Red Chief, the scourge of Summit, Ala. It's side-splitting, knee-slapping, tear-dabbing fun as these two Yankee drifters get a heapin' helpin' of southern hospitality at the hands of the wildest 10-year-old to ever wear feathers.

## **Before the Adventure**

Read the short story to the class and discuss the humorous events that happen. You can even compare and contrast this short story to the movie "Home Alone." You can use a venn diagram to facilitate this discussion.

This is a funny story about a kidnapping, but kidnapping is really a serious topic. Have a class discussion with the students and discuss the dangers of talking to strangers. Have the students create flyers to educate other children about this topic. Distribute these flyers at the next P.T.A. meeting or to a class of younger students.

## **Words Used During the Performance**

Philoprogenitiveness-the love of children or loving your own children

Diatribes-pastime

Welter weight-a professional boxer weighing between 135 and 147 pounds

Yeomanry-volunteer home guard, soldiers

Contiguous-sharing an edge or boundary, touching

Somnolent-drowsy, sleepy

Calliope-an instrument fitted with steam whistles and played by a keyboard

## **Classroom Activities**

1. Sequence the major events of the story. Create a time line ordering the events.
2. Create a diorama of the cave. Use a shoe box, construction paper, glue, magic markers, etc. Instruct your students to include as many details as possible.
3. Using construction paper, craypas, colored pencils, glue, etc., create scene pictures. Instruct your students to include as many details as possible.  
Brainstorm the different scenes with your students and then let them choose the one they want to do.
  - a. Bill and Sam kidnapping the little boy in the wagon, the little boy is putting up a terrific fight.
  - b. The little boy is pretending to be Red Chief. He is pointing and war whooping at a wounded Bill.

- c. The bed scene where Bill is on one side, the little boy is in the middle, and Sam is on the other side.
  - d. Bill being scalped by the little boy who is playing Red Chief.
  - e. Bill trying to never close his eyes and sleep around the little boy.
  - f. The little boy is putting a red hot boiled potato down Bill's back and mashing it with his foot.
  - g. The little boy is using a sling shot to throw a rock at Bill's head. Bill passes out and falls into the fire across the frying pan filled with boiling water.
  - h. Bill and Sam writing the ransom note.
  - i. The little boy riding on Bill's back while Bill pretends to be a horse.
  - j. Sam in the tree waiting for the ransom.
  - k. Bill and Sam returning the little boy to his father. They are paying the father to take the little boy. Then they run away.
4. Collage portraits of the little boy, "Red Chief," Sam and Bill. Use different sorts of collage materials and paper.
  5. Create a poster using magic markers. Make sure you include the title of the story and the author. Then include a one sentence moral from the story. For example: Be careful what you ask for...

## **Curriculum Connections**

1.1.2. Produce art works to demonstrate an understanding of the various purposes for creating: aesthetic, functional, historical/cultural and social.

1.1.4. Demonstrate appropriate and responsible use of tools and materials to include but not be limited to the following areas: painting, drawing, print-making, sculpture, pottery, architecture, environmental art, graphic design, fiber art, jewelry and technology.

2.1.2. Analyze the relationship among the arts and other disciplines.

2.1.4. Create art work in response to past, present, and future situations.