

January, 2008 NCC
Let's Pretend
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Word Count: 704

Along with the radio mystery programs *Mr. and Mrs. North* and *The Shadow*, one of my favorite childhood programs was *Let's Pretend*, which always began with a familiar tune from its long time sponsor *Cream of Wheat*.

Pretending was my favorite activity. My mother provided me with a box of old clothes and rummage sale treasures. With lacy curtains draped about my head, I became a Madonna or bride; an old yellow umbrella allowed me to imitate Gene Kelly while I danced on the sidewalk "singing in the rain." A fur stole made me into Dorothy Malone as I acted out *Written on the Wind*. I clomped around the house in high heel shoes, dragging old tablecloths behind me pretending to be Queen of England. My friend and I tied scarves on our toes and danced around the room to our favorite tunes.

I worked up my nerve to audition for the part of Miss Brill, an old maid schoolteacher in my high school production of *Cheaper by the Dozen*. It was a role I considered pretty close to what I expected in life, so I wasn't surprised to get the part, but I was surprised at how let down I felt when the play was over. The magical world of make-believe was gone and real life was back.

Since that time in the 1950's, I've acted in and directed many plays and musicals. Being on stage, doing what most of the world is afraid to do is one of the few opportunities in life to have the spotlight. It's like being nine years old again and yelling out from the playground swing, "Hey Ma, look at me."

On a Sunday evening in early January, I assisted with the Epiphany Play at St. Catherine's Episcopal Church, and a few folks had a chance to step out of their usual

roles--teacher, painter, priest, teenager, child, writer, lawyer--and become someone else—king, wise man, shepherd, ox, snake, Adam, Eve, Mary, Joseph. In they came in bathrobes, towels on their heads, fir branches tied to their waists with canes and crowns from Burger King or made of gold foil and bows. In they came with tassels strung around waists, sheep faces on paper plates, a snake mask, and laundry basket filled with a life size doll. They came to tell us a story.

Of course there were mishaps. “Follow Me,” I said to Adam and Eve at the beginning of the pageant. “The rest of you stay in the back room until called.” When I looked behind me, 15 people had followed me. We were short a king, so I had to rush into the audience and drag out a member who said he would help out in a pinch. This was a pinch. After all, you can’t sing, “We two kings of Orient are...” The innkeeper’s hat, a wicker cornucopia basket jammed on his head at the last minute covered the poor fellow’s entire face and made him look like a member of the Coneheads; the serpent dropped her apple right before her entrance at an especially quiet time; the donkey kept moving her ears, a clever device she had designed with dowel rods down her arms, but no one seemed to notice; King Herod was irritated that his part required nothing more than a whisper in a shepherd’s ear, so he milked his part, swinging his tassels as he sauntered in on his very slow entrance and then proceeded to add a dramatic falling-over-chairs death scene. Priest in real life and used to being center stage, he jokingly threatened, “I’m going to call my agent for a bigger part!” Mary and Joseph dragged the baby Jesus off in the laundry basket, one holding the handle on the front and the other the back. The kings did their best to look reverent because I told them they’d better not laugh. Cornucopia

head stumbled as he tried to find his way off stage. The archangels bickered among themselves as to who was the chief archangel and had the most clout.

It was their time center stage. My heart was touched by their willingness to step out there, to risk being vulnerable. It was life in the moment.