

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Terry Pratchett's
WYRD SISTERS
The Play

adapted for the stage by
Stephen Briggs

'Alle Thee Dysk's a Stage'

About the Book

Terry Pratchett's WYRD SISTERS

The Play

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Terry Pratchett takes Shakespeare's Macbeth and then turns it up 'till the knob comes off. It's all there - a wicked duke and duchess, the ghost of the murdered king, dim soldiers, strolling players, a land in peril. And who stands between the Kingdom and destruction? Three witches. Granny Weatherwax (intolerant, self-opinionated, powerful), Nanny Ogg (down-to-earth, vulgar) and Magrat Garlick (naïve, fond of occult jewellery and bunnies).

Stephen Briggs has been involved in amateur dramatics for over 25 years and he assures us that the play can be staged without needing the budget of Industrial Light and Magic. Not only that but the cast should still be able to be in the pub by 10 o'clock!

Oh, and a word of advice omitted from the play text:

Learn The Words

Havelock, Lord Vetinari

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About the Authors

Introducing Discworld

Also by Terry Pratchett

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WYRD SISTERS
the play

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STEPHEN BRIGGS



CORGI BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

Since the publication of *The Streets of Ankh-Morpork*, I have been drawn ever further into the Discworld universe. As well as working with Terry on *The Discworld Companion*, I was suddenly in demand - well, OK, I was in demand when I was dressed as *Death* - to pose for publicity photos. The first session was for a Discworld computer game; then *Death* was again summoned to be photographed with Dave Greenslade and Terry for his CD *From the Discworld*. I was delighted to find myself invited to 'play' Didactylos in the *Small Gods* track; yes, that was me - 'Nevertheless, the Turtle *does* move'. Er ... not my *real* voice, of course.

Death even got an invitation to London's flashiest Indian restaurant to have a curry with a group of journalists as part of the publicity for a Discworld computer game. A whole room full of journalists but, unfortunately for *Death*, no take-away.

My drama club has now staged *Wyrd Sisters*, *Mort*, *Guards! Guards!*, *Men at Arms* and *Maskerade*. We were even invited to act out a tiny extract from 'our' *Guards! Guards!* for Sky TV's Book Programme.

In fact, Oxford's Studio Theatre Club were the first people ever to dramatise the Disc world.

We had a theatre that seats ninety people. We had a stage that was about the size of a pocket handkerchief with the wings of Tinkerbell. Put on a Discworld play? Simple ...

A flat, circular world borne through space on the backs of four enormous elephants who themselves stand on the carapace of a cosmically large turtle? Nothing to it. A seven-foot skeleton with glowing blue eyes? *No* problem. A sixty-foot fire-breathing dragon? A cinch.

My drama club had already staged its own adaptations of other works: Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and *Holy Grail* - and Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* and *Blott on the Landscape*. We were looking for something new when someone said, 'Try Terry Pratchett - you'll like him.'

So I ventured into the previously uncharted territory of the 'Fantasy' section of the local bookstore. I read a Terry Pratchett book; I liked it. I read all of them. I wrote to Terry and asked if we could stage *Wyrd Sisters*. He said yes.

Wyrd Sisters sold out.

So did *Mort* the year after.

So did *Guards! Guards!*, *Men at Arms* and *Maskerade* in the three years after that. In fact, 'sold out' is too modest a word. 'Oversold very quickly so that by the time the local newspaper mentioned it was on we'd had to close the booking office' is nearer the mark.

My casts were all happy enough to read whichever book we were staging, and to read others in the canon too. The books stand on their own, but some knowledge of the wider Discworld ethos helps when adapting the stories, and can help the actors with their characterisations.

The Discworld stories are remarkably flexible in their character requirements. *Mort* has been performed successfully with a cast of three (adding in an extra thrill for the audience, who knew that sooner or later a character would have to have a dialogue with *themselves*. But it turned out very well). On the other hand, there is plenty of scope for peasants, wizards, beggars, thieves and general rhubarb merchants if the director is lucky enough to have actors available.

I'd better add a note of caution here. There are a lot of small parts in the plays which nevertheless require good acting ability (as we say in the Studio Theatre Club: 'There are no small parts, only small actors'). The character may have only four lines to say but one of them might well be the (potentially) funniest line in the play. Terry Pratchett is remarkably democratic in this respect. Spear-carriers, demons and even a humble doorknocker all get their moment of glory. Don't let them throw it away!

Terry writes very good dialogue. Not all authors do. But Terry, like Dickens, writes stuff which you can lift straight into your play. Although it was often necessary to combine several scenes from the book into one scene in the play, I tried to avoid changing the original Pratchett dialogue. After all, you perform an author's work because you like their style; as much of that style as possible should be evident in the play.

We aimed to keep our adaptations down to about two hours running time - with a 7.30 start and allowing twenty minutes for an interval, that would get the audience into the pub for an after-play drink by about 9.50, with the cast about ten minutes after them (although slower-moving members of the audience might well find the cast already propping up the bar - we are true Coarse Actors!). Also, two hours is about right for the average play. This of course meant that some difficult decisions had to be taken in order to boil down the prose.

The important thing was to decide what was the basic plot: anything which didn't contribute to that was liable to be dropped in order to keep the play flowing. Favourite scenes, even favourite characters, had to be dumped.

I had to remember that not all the audience would be dyed-in-the-wool Pratchett fans. Some of them might just be normal theatre-goers who'd never read a fantasy novel in their whole lives, although I have to say that these now are a dwindling minority.

The books are episodic, and this can be a difficult concept to incorporate into a play. Set changes slow down the action. Any scene change that takes more than thirty seconds means you've lost the audience. Even *ten*-second changes, if repeated often enough, will lead to loss of interest.

The golden rule is - if you can do it without scenery, do it without scenery. It's a concept that has served radio drama very well (everyone *knows* that radio has the best scenery). And Shakespeare managed very well without it, too.

The plays do, however, call for some unusual props. Many of these were made by the cast and crew: a door with a hole for a talking, golden doorknocker, coronation mugs, large hourglasses for Death's house, sponge chips and pizzas, shadow puppets, archaic rifles, dragon-scorched books and Discworld newspapers ('Patrician Launches Victim's Charter'). Other, more specialised props were put 'out to contract': Death's sword and scythe, an orangutan, the City Watch badge, a Death of Rats, a Greebo and two swamp dragons (one an elaborate hand puppet and one with a fire-proof compartment in its bottom for a flight scene).

Since the Studio Theatre Club started the trend in 1991, Terry and I have had many enquiries about staging the books - from as far afield as California, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia (as well as Sheffield, Glastonbury and the Isle of Man).

So how did our productions actually go? We enjoyed them. Our audiences seemed to enjoy them (after all, some of them were prepared, year after year, to travel down to Abingdon in Oxfordshire from as far afield as Taunton, Newcastle upon Tyne, Ipswich, Basingstoke and ... well, Oxford). Terry seemed to enjoy them, too. He said that many of our members looked as though they had been recruited straight off the streets of Ankh-Morpork. He said

that several of them were born to play the 'rude mechanicals' in Vitoller's troupe in *Wyrd Sisters*. He said that in his mind's eye the famous Ankh-Morpork City Watch *are* the players of the Studio Theatre Club.

I'm sure these were meant to be compliments.

WYRD SISTERS

We staged *Wyrd Sisters* in 1991. At the time, most of us had never heard of Terry Pratchett; his work, his readership and - above all - his audience pulling-power, were unknown factors to us. Coupled to that, we had just moved venues - from Oxford itself out to Abingdon, a small town about ten miles away.

Abingdon's mock-Elizabethan Unicorn Theatre was built, in the 1950s, in the old Abbey Buildings as a tribute to the dawn of the new Elizabethan age. The auditorium's deep-set windows, ancient walls and oak-beam ceiling were a perfect backdrop to a Shakespearian spoof set in Discworld's Lancre.

Adapting the play was more of a challenge. The first version would have run for about three hours and it was clear that a knife would have to be wielded even more mercilessly than it is in the play if we were to get down to our optimum, two-hour, running time. I had to note the main plot and to consider as optional extras any scenes that did not actually advance that main plot. I let the tax gatherer go; it was a good scene, but it mirrored the 'bun' scene. I had to let Death go! I had decided that all the other late kings of Lancre could be dispensed with without affecting the main plot and that the early scene with Verence and Death could join them; without that introduction, I could not then suddenly introduce Death into the play-within-a-play scene for his tap-dancing bit. It

was a tough decision (but we made it up to HIM by staging *Mort* the following year).

The script as it appears here is now tried and tested, but it isn't the *only* way to adapt the book. Other groups have made different choices. Some have many more people available than we did, and they've looked to add in 'crowd' scenes - perhaps the late King Verence is given a bigger role and joined by Champot and his fellow spooks; Death is left in but the 'three old ladies gathering wood' is cut; the Magrat/Verence reconciliation scene is left out, and so on. Two groups entirely independently decided to add in the Standing Stone as a character. The Ankh-Morpork scenes are ripe for the knife if length becomes a problem, with the Thieves' Guild scene the first to go, particularly if your audience are not Discworld aficionados (although Monty Python fans will recognise the relentless logic of the Theft Licence). Sad, but necessary sometimes. What is important, though, is to ensure that a scene left in at one point in the play doesn't rely for part of its humour or logic on a scene you've cut elsewhere!

Inevitably, the adaptation was written with the restrictions of the Unicorn Theatre, and the numbers of players I'd have available, in mind. This meant that complicated scenic effects were virtually impossible. Anyone thinking of staging a Discworld play can be as imaginative as they like - call upon the might of Industrial Light & Magic, if it's within their budget. But they *can* be staged with fairly achievable effects, and the notes that accompany the text are intended to be a guide for those with limited or no budget.

In short, though, our experience and that of other groups is that it pays to work hard on getting the costumes and lighting right, and to keep the scenery to little more than, perhaps, a few changes of level. One group with some resourceful technophiles achieved magnificent 'scenery' simply with sound effects and lighting ('dripping water' and

rippling green light for a dungeon scene, for example). There's room for all sorts of ideas here. The Discworld, as it says in the books, is your mollusc.

Characterisation

Within the constraints of what is known about and vital to each character, there is still room for flexibility of interpretation. The witches have been played successfully with Somerset, Dublin and Yorkshire accents (er, not in the same production!). Hwel works quite well as a Welshman, but if your right actor is the wrong height, his dwarfishness is not vital to his character. The Duke seems to work best as a twitchy version of Blackadder II, but the Duchess can be played as either an old battleaxe or, as in a couple of versions I've seen, as a more vampish wicked Queen.

The witches are each described in the Discworld canon with some detail and, if you don't wish to disappoint your audiences, it's probably an idea to try to get as close to those descriptions as you can. However, when it comes to shapes and sizes, most drama clubs don't have a vast range from which to choose and it's the acting that's more important than the look of the player when it comes to major roles!

Granny Weatherwax. In the opinion of many, not least herself, the greatest witch on the Discworld.

She is nominally the village witch of Bad Ass in the kingdom of Lancre in the Ramtops (a mountainous and unforgiving area of the Disc). For practical purposes, however, she regards the whole kingdom and, indeed, anywhere else she happens to be as her rightful domain.

She lives in the woods outside the village in a traditional, much-repaired witch's cottage, with beehives and a patch of what might be medicinal plants. She owns a broomstick, but despite the best efforts of dwarf engineers

everywhere, it cannot be started without a considerable amount of running up and down with it in gear.

Esmerelda ('Granny') Weatherwax is a formidable character with every necessary attribute for the classical 'bad witch' - a quick temper, a competitive, selfish and ambitious nature, a sharp tongue, an unshakeable conviction of her own moral probity, and some considerable mental and occult powers.

Granny likes to look the part. She is tall and thin, with blue eyes and with long, fine, grey hair tied back in a severe bun. She wears sensible black, her skirt incorporates some serviceable pockets and her lace-up boots have complicated iron fixtures and toecaps like battering rams. She likes to wear several layers of clothing, including respectable flannelette petticoats. She wears a reinforced pointy hat, held in place by numerous hatpins. She has perfect skin - a source of irritation: her complexion has resisted every one of her attempts to gain some warts.

Nanny Ogg. Gytha ('Nanny') Ogg is probably in her seventies. Her family arrangements are cosy but haphazard. She has been formally married three times. All three have passed happily, if somewhat energetically, to their well-earned rest. She has fifteen living children.

Contrary to the rules of traditional witchcraft Nanny Ogg now lives in quite a modern cottage in the centre of Lancre, with up-to-date conveniences like a modern wash copper and a tin bath a mere garden's walk away on a nail at the back of the privy. The cottage is between those of her sons Shawn and Jason. She likes to have all her family around her in case of an emergency, such as when she needs a cup of tea or the floor washed.

Nanny's hair is a mass of white curls. She is a small, plump, attractive and good-natured woman, with a crinkled face, thighs that could crack coconuts and a large and

experienced bosom. She smokes a pipe and, like Granny Weather wax, she wears heavy, lace-up boots.

Magrat Garlick. A witch in Lancre. The youngest member of the coven which Granny Weatherwax swears she has not got.

Magrat has a cottage in Mad Stoat. She was selected and trained by Goodie Whemper, a methodical and sympathetic witch with a rather greater regard for the written word than is common among the Lancre witches.

In a certain light, and from a carefully chosen angle, Magrat Garlick is not unattractive. Despite her tendency to squint when she's thinking. And her pointy nose, red from too much blowing.

She is short, thin, decently plain, well-scrubbed and as flat-chested as an ironing-board with a couple of peas on it. She has the watery-eyed expression of hopeless goodwill wedged between a body like a maypole and hair like a haystack after a gale. No matter what she does to that hair, it takes about three minutes to tangle itself up again, like a garden hosepipe left in a shed. She likes to wind flowers in it, because she thinks this is romantic. She looks like someone has dropped a pot plant on her head.

Magrat has an open mind. It is as open as a field, as open as the sky. No mind could be more open without special surgical implements. A lot of what she believes in has the word 'folk' in it somewhere (folk wisdom, folk dance, folk song, folk medicine) as if 'folk' were other than the mundane people she sees every day. She thinks it would be nice if people could just be a bit kinder.

She is, however, more practical than most people believe who see no further than her vague smile, startlingly green silk dress (which would be both revealing and clinging if Magrat had anything for it to reveal or cling to) and collection of cheap occult jewellery. She is incidentally a great believer in occult jewellery - she has three large

boxes of the stuff. Although she has a black cloak lined with red silk, she hardly ever wears a pointy hat. She's just not a pointy hat person.

Costumes

Not surprisingly, we opted for coarse Shakespearian as our period, with most of the peasant characters in all-purpose combinations of tunics, tights, hoods, dresses and medieval footwear. The Duke and Duchess we attired in complementing outfits of red brocade. The late King Verence drifted around in pale grey chainmail and tunic (a bit like the knight whom Indiana Jones encounters guarding the Grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*). Our Fool wore the traditional jester's costume, with one of those sticks with a small jester's head on the end (to which he could address the occasional remark) and a hanky with bells at each corner (which he offers to the Duke in the 'Is this a dagger I see before me?' bit).

Scenery

Well, virtually nothing. We relied on lighting changes and use of different areas and levels, together with appropriate window gobos for the castle and dungeon scenes and a green follow-spot for the late King Verence. Apart from that, just thrones for the Duke and Duchess. Stocks in the dungeon. A 'trick' entrance for the demon and so on. Stuff which is easy and quick to move on and off.

Special effects

As you'll see in the script, we had two hand-held flash devices made for us by a magic shop - one operated by clockwork, one a battery-operated flash-wool device. These were supplemented by a couple of mains-operated flash pods hired from a local firm, together with a dry ice machine; it's awful stuff to deal with, but the effect was worth it! For the flying witches we just used a follow-spot

with a witch gobo plus a disco-wheel. Of these, only the flash pods are really essential.

Stephen Briggs
May 1996