

Rushcart Players

“VELVETTEN RABBIT”

By Paul Whelihan Music and Lyrics by Paul Farinella

Based on the children’s book by Margery Williams

Synopsis and Musical Numbers

Our story begins as Boy is getting ready for bed, surrounded in his bedroom by toys. After Nana sings a lullaby (*“I Love You Very Much”*) and he is fast asleep, Boy’s playthings begin to discuss among themselves the true nature of the world.



Velveteen Rabbit wants Riding Horse to continue his story about how a toy can become Real. All the other toys - Motle (the toy Boat), Amelia (the toy Airplane), and Diesel (the toy steam engine), try to convince Velveteen that making yourself unique, and standing out from the rest of the crowd is the way to be sure you’ll be loved. (*“All You Gotta Do”*)

The old and very wise Riding Horse assures Velveteen that becoming real isn’t achieved through gimmickry, but through the long-standing love that one receives and gives (*“Real”*).

Velveteen Rabbit’s greatest desire is to become real.

The next day, Boy finally shows interest in Velveteen Rabbit, and they embark upon many adventures through out the following years. Their imaginary journeys together include a thrilling sled ride, a “Moby Dick’ expedition at sea, an eerie bat cave exploration, and a battle with the Abominable Snowman (*“Let’s Go Play”*)

Their shared experiences together (all, indeed, through Boy’s imagination) forms a bond that makes them favorite companions. The boy declares that velveteen rabbit is “Real,” and Velveteen believes he has reached his goal.

Boy shows signs of developing an illness one day, and he is abruptly brought back into the house by Nana, leaving Velveteen Rabbit outside. Two wild rabbits from the nearby forest (Bob Fuzzy and Gwen Verdown) approach Velveteen, urging him to dance about with them (*“Dancin”*). As Velveteen can not, they declare him “just a toy.”

Boy develops scarlet fever, and, as medical wisdom of the day dictated, all his clothing, bedsheets, and toys must be destroyed – including Velveteen Rabbit (*“Trio”*). As Velveteen is sadly awaiting his fate and reflecting on his life with Boy, a “real” tear falls from his eye. The tear summons the nursery magic fairy (Divine).

Divine takes care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When the toys are old and worn out, and the children don't need them any more, she turns them into "Real." She does so with Velveteen, and sends him off to live with the other rabbits in the wood ("*Reborn*").

Boy is eventually cured. Time passes, and he takes his father, who has returned home after some time away, to the area of the woods where he used to play as a younger child. They come upon rabbits frolicking in the bush. Looking closer at one of them, Boy declares, "He looks just like my old bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever. He looks just like him!"

Seeing Boy, but uncertain at first, Velveteen ultimately states to his rabbit friends, "Yes, that's *him*. He's the child who first helped me to be Real."

Both Boy and Velveteen are filled with gratitude for the time they had together, and the memories of – and lessons learned by – their special friendship (*Real Finale*").

THEMES

The Velveteen Rabbit explores many different themes with its heart-warming story. They include:

Friendship * Kindness * Honesty * Imagination * Perseverance
Respect * Hope * Self-image * Relationships

FANTASY

Fantasy is a genre of literature that is characterized by its use of magic or other supernatural forms as a primary element of plot, theme, setting, or character. Fantasy comprises works by many writers, filmmakers, and artists, and spans from ancient myths and legends to modern-day films, plays, and novels for all ages.

"Velveteen Rabbit" falls into the fantasy genre in both its book form and in Pushcart Players' musical adaptation. In bringing the story from the page to the stage, several considerations came in to play, adapting events from the original text to make them more theatrically accessible to today's young audiences:

- The character of the Skin Horse in Williams' 1922 text is re-named "Riding Horse," and the toy airplane and steam engine are introduced as characters by the playwright and composer.
- A "tea party in the woods" is replaced by four seasons of adventure, each an exciting imaginary journey on a sunny Spring morning, a rainy Summer day, a crisp Autumn day, and a snow-filled Winter afternoon.



- In the book, all the child's belongings are destroyed by burning in a fire; Pushcart's adaptation has the unanimated toys theatrically removed from the boy's nursery in a touching, musically sophisticated song.
- In Pushcart's play, Boy's Father is introduced as a character. Boy is too excited to get to sleep on different evenings in the play, as he is anxiously anticipating his Father's return home on the next day. Father's profession took him away from home for extended periods at a time, but both Boy and Nana have learned to say, "The show must go on!" By the end of the play, Father announces to Boy that they'll have lots of time together now.
- Other differences exist. Audiences are encouraged to read the book by Margery Williams (either before or after the performance), exploring and discussing the differences between both, and the possible intentions or meanings behind them.

Theater for Young Audiences

Some basic terminology and theatrical conventions are useful:

The Theater Team:

- **Actors** learn the play and perform it live on stage in front of you. ("Actor" is currently the acceptable reference to both male and female performers. This has been promoted by the professional actor's union, Actors' Equity Association.)
- The **Director** guides the actors in building their characters, and decides when & where they will move on the stage. The director creates the vision for the play, and oversees the work of everyone involved in it.
- The **Stage Manager** is responsible for calling lighting and sound cues and for supervising the technical crew both in **rehearsals** and performance
- The **Playwright** writes the play, creating **dialogue** (the words the actors speak), and the events and actions of the story
- The **Composer** writes the music for the songs and the **underscore** (music that plays during scenes or under dialogue).
- The **Lyricist** writes the words to the songs that are sung (lyrics).
- The **Costume Designer** plans the clothing the actors wear, called costumes. Costumes give clues about when and where a story takes place, and about the characters who wear them.
- The **Set Designer** plans the scenery for the play.



YOU have an important part to play as a member of the **Audience**.

The theater team works together creatively to build a piece of theater. **But, it wouldn't be a play without you!** Theater does not exist without an audience, and so you are the final and most important part of a live theater experience.

Your part is to pretend the play is real. (This is called **willing suspension of disbelief**.) Give yourself over to the characters and their story.

A play is different from television or a movie. An active audience member doesn't just watch a play, they **participate**. The actors are right in front of you and can see your reactions, feel your attention, and hear your laughter and applause. There is an interaction between actor and audience that does not occur between a person and a screen. This is what makes every performance of a live play a unique experience that only happens exactly the same way **ONCE**. **Watch** and **listen** carefully to understand the story. The story is told by the actors, but it only comes to life through your imagination.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities are suggested as a way to enhance the theatrical experience, and offer some cross curriculum connections for arts integration in your classroom. These can be conducted before or after the performance, but we offer that Activities One through Three work well before seeing the show.

Activity #1: Discovering the Story Curriculum Connections

Drama	Context
Language Arts	Oral Language, Viewing, Speaking and Listening

Locate a copy of the original book by Margery Williams.

Read the story aloud with your students or show them this 6 minute video of the story read by actor, Meryl Streep: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_m054tLKvs

Speak with your students about the elements of the story. Have a classroom discussion about the story. Here are some questions to get you started.

1. If you were a doll, do you think you would want to become a real boy or girl?
2. Think about your own toys. Which ones have you had the longest? Do you forget about old toys when you get new ones? Do you have a favorite toy?
3. What do you think the "main idea" of the story is?
4. How is the Velveteen Rabbit different from the other toys in the nursery? From the boy? From the rabbits outside? Describe a time when you felt different than everyone around you.
5. Describe the relationship between Boy and his Father. Between Boy and Nana. Between the Boy and Velveteen Rabbit. Between Riding Horse and Velveteen. What impact do each of these relationships have on the individuals within them?
6. The Rabbit comforted and cared for the Boy when he was sick. You can probably think of a time when a parent or family member has cared for you when you needed help. Can you think of a time when you cared for an older person who was in a similar situation?

Activity #2: Creating Your Own Velveteen Rabbit

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts	Reading and Viewing, Writing and Representing
Visual Arts	Creative Process, Exhibition and Response

Once you have read the story, or your students have had the opportunity to read the story, have them complete drawings of the various characters. Following the viewing of the play, be sure to revisit these drawings to see what some similarities and differences were from the book, to the play, to their drawings of the characters.

Activity #3: What is Real?

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts	Oral Language, Speaking and Listening
Visual Arts	Exhibition and Response
Drama	Exploring and Creating, Presenting and Performing

"Real isn't how you are made", said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."



The Velveteen Rabbit has an extended title: *The Velveteen Rabbit or, How Toys Become Real*. What is the concept of reality? This is the principal theme within the book. And it is a big question to tackle with your students!

Discuss this question with your class. Here are some places to begin:

- Have any of you have / had imaginary friends or toys that you thought were real?
- Why did you think they were real?
- What made them real?
- Why did you stop thinking they were real?
- If you think of something that does not exist, does that mean it is not real?
- If something exists, but you don't know about it, does that mean it is not real? Why?
- When in the story does Velveteen become real?
- Is Velveteen real from the very beginning? Why?
- What makes you real? And does Velveteen have those traits? (ie. Emotions?)

To further this discussion, ask your students to bring a favorite toy for show and tell. Ask them if it is real to them. Does it talk to them? Engage with them? Comfort them? Ask each student to do the following with their show and tell piece:

Does the toy have a name?

Tell the history of the toy: how long have you had it, where did it come from? Why is it your favorite toy?

If your toy came to life, what would happen?

Have your students think up a fun adventure that their specific toy might go on if they were real! Can they tell it to the other boys and girls? Could the toys all go on an adventure together?

Take a picture of all of the toys together and print it for your classroom wall. The students will love to look back on the photo whenever they can!

Activity #4: Use Your Imagination!

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts	Oral Language, Speaking and Listening
Arts Education	Exploring and Creating, Presenting and Performing
Drama	Context



The book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* encourages us to use our imaginations. Every book does! When reading the book, we imagine the Boy's nursery with his bed and toys, we imagine the forest he loves to play in, and we imagine the characters within the story.

After seeing the play, we can talk about the imagination used in the production. Talk to your class about how the characters within the play became the toys. The director made specific choices about the play to encourage the use of imagination, using minimal set pieces and suggestive costumes. Ask your students if they noticed certain aspects of the stage craft:

- How could you tell when the Boy and Velveteen were inside or outside?
- How did you know what season of the year it was?
- What did the actors do to become the different characters they were playing? To their voice? To the way they moved? To what they were wearing?

The actors create the characters (and toys) and ask the audience to make the leap, using their imaginations to see the story and its characters come to life.

Ask your students if they noticed the above mentioned ideas regarding set and characters. Did they notice any other uses of things in the boy's nursery or when they were playing outside? On a ship? In a cave? Did they like them? Why would the director decided to create the play in this manner? Was it fun to watch the actors become the different characters?

Using imagination and creativity (also known as pretend play or make believe play) helps children grow socially and emotionally. Through imaginary games and storytelling children are more likely to adapt learning habits, develop their communication skills, and improve their vocabulary. By using their senses and bodies, they can move around and develop their muscles as well as the neurological connections in their brains. It is an integral part of their cognitive and social development.

How can we foster this creative play?

Read books!

Make up stories!

Use props and toys to create new thoughts and ideas (boxes become forts or cars, blocks become castles and hats create characters we can play!) Go to theatre!

Use drama in your classroom! (a great warm up game can be found in the following Activity!)

Activity #5: Theatre in the Classroom!

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts	Oral Language, Speaking and Listening
Arts Education	Exploring and Creating, Presenting and Performing
Daily Physical	Contributes to required 30 minutes

Ask every child to imagine that the classroom has just changed into a huge toy store. It is the biggest one in the world and it is filled with tons of toys of all kinds! (Feel free to embellish as much as you can to boost their excitement.) Their job is to think up a toy that they can become within the toy store. Have them imagine it first. They could be anything from a robot, to a doll, to a puppy, to the hottest thing on the market today. It is an individual exercise to be kept to themselves. Pose some of the following questions to them. Do not have them yell it out, but rather think of the answers in their own heads.

What is the name of your toy?

How does it operate? What happens when it gets switched on?

How does it move? What sort of things does the toy do? Can you use your body to show that?

Tell them to become the toy in its frozen position. (This is called a **tableau**.) There should be no movement because toys don't move unless they are switched on.

Act as the toy shop owner. Walk around the class looking at your "toys". Comment on how amazing your shop is and how people from all over the world come to visit it. Be very proud and comment on some toys you can identify. You can ask some children what toy they are.

Then comment that you are glad that your toys are well behaved. They never move, never talk, and they always, ALWAYS are in the same place when you return in the morning. Yawn, tell the toys that you love them and appreciate them, but you are tired and it is closing time. Leave the room (or turn your back to the class). If you have an aid or another adult in the class, they can encourage the kids to move as their toy. (Sometimes classes will figure this out on their own, other's will need a little prompting from you. You can tell them that you know they move a little in the night as sometimes the toys are in a different spot in the morning. You don't mind though because they are so well behaved. In fact, you love that the toys play together when you are not around! It makes them happier toys and those toys get bought by the customers!)

Open the door (or turn around) abruptly. All the toys should freeze. You can have some fun with this. You can point out that you are sure that some moved when you walked in, that some switched positions, that some look like they have crazy smiles on their faces. Remark on things that changed. If you hear giggles, swivel your head around in surprise! "What?! These toys aren't REAL!"

You can choose a couple of students to enter as customers. They can press the "ON" switch on some toys to see them come to life. Then they can turn them off. You can offer toys to the customers by turning them on and off yourself. The customers can buy some toys and leave the room (or stand in a corner) and become the next group of buyers. You can leave the shop several times allowing the toys to become real again. Noise can become a factor, so you can ask students to keep it to sound effects.

You can also play up the idea that toys only move when you are not looking at them. This becomes a different part of the game so that when you enter, all those that are toys behind you become moveable and real, while the toys in your eyesight must remain statues. As you swivel on your feet, it becomes a game of freeze. Remind them to stay in character. This version works well in a gymnasium setting allowing the toys to be fast, slow, big, goofy, etc.

Activity #7: Today's Velveteen Rabbit

Curriculum Connections

Language Arts	Oral Language, Speaking and Listening
Arts Education	Context
Communications	Comprehend and Respond

The book and the play of *The Velveteen Rabbit* both speak to the idea of toys coming to life. *The Velveteen Rabbit* (and various other stories by Margery Williams) was one of the first stories that dealt with toys becoming real. You will notice that in the book, some of the toys are older versions of what we see in the play. There is a boat, a lion and soldiers mentioned in the book, and in the play we see a boat, an airplane and a steam engine. They brag about the tricks they can do that make them unique. The play shows the advancement made in toys and hints that children have grown to love the toys that do more and show more. The real rabbits in the forest claim that Velveteen is not real at all. In the play, the Rabbit is considers the possibility that he may never be real.

Discuss the above idea with your students. What seemed to be the different between the toys in the book versus the toys in the play? Which toys do you prefer?



Ask your class what other movies also represent the idea of toys coming to life. Some possibilities may include: Winnie the Pooh, Pinocchio, The Indian in the Cupboard, Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer (the island of misfit toys), Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium, and more recently, The Lego Movie or Toy Story.

About Margery Williams

A native of London, Margery Winifred Williams was born to successful and accomplished parents. The second daughter of a noted lawyer and a renowned classical scholar, she and her sister were encouraged by her father, whom she remembered as a deeply loving and caring parent, to read and use their imaginations. Writing about her childhood many years later, Williams recalled how vividly her father described characters from various books and the infinite world of knowledge and adventure that lay on the printed page. She noted that the desire to read, which soon transformed into a need to write, was a legacy from her father that would be hers for a lifetime.

When Margery was seven years old, her father died suddenly, a life-changing event which, in one way or another, would affect all of her future creative activity. The undertone of sadness and the themes of death and loss that flow through her children's books have been criticized by some reviewers, but Williams always maintained that hearts acquire greater humanity through pain and adversity. She wrote that life is a process of constant change—there are departures for some and arrivals for others—and the process allows us to grow and persevere.

While visiting her publisher, Margery Williams met Francesco Bianco, an Italian living in London, who was employed as the manager of one of the book departments. They were married in 1904 and became the parents of a son, Cecco and a daughter, Pamela. Pamela became a renowned child artist who had a showing in Turin at the age of eleven. Her fame brought the Bianco family to New York and (with the exception of Cecco) they lived in the Greenwich Village area until the end of their lives. Pamela illustrated some of her mother's books, including "The Skin Horse" and "The Little Wooden Doll."

The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real was Margery Williams Bianco's first American work, and it remains her most famous. It has remained a classic piece of literature through numerous adaptations in children's theatre as well as on radio, television and in the movies.