

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

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The Nightingale

Story by
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Adapted for the Stage by
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Cast of Characters

Wu Ling

Emperor

Prime Minister

Military Courtier

Literary Scholar

Toymaker

Music Master

Stone Carrier

Japanese Ambassador

Court Ladies (2)

Servants (2)

Assistant

Death

Fisherman Spirit

Lady Spirit

Gardener Spirit

Servant Spirit

Child Spirit

Emperor Spirit

Spirit of the Royal Child

Ensemble includes: children, ladies, court ladies, courtiers, spirits

Scene 1 & 2

(A painted scrim of a bridge and balustrade with a floating circle with a drawing of a rabbit within the circle. Wu Ling, a child wearing the robes of a kitchen maid, enters.)

Wu Ling

Good Morning. The moon is still in the sky. Full moon and the rabbit in the moon. Do you see a man in the moon? No. This is China. You see a rabbit.

(She bows to the audience.)

You see myself, Wu Ling, humble servant to the palace of the Emperor of China. The porcelain palace – made all of porcelain – very fragile, very costly...

(She gestures upstage and the scrim flies out to reveal the palace and the gardens surrounding it.)

... and the garden.

(Wu Ling touches a flower hung with bells. The bells ring, and are answered by other bells in the distance)

This garden goes on forever. It goes to the sea. Maybe it goes further. Maybe flowers are blooming underwater. Someone is coming.

(Emperor enters the garden from the palace, the members of the court who have been wandering through the scene all turn their eyes away in respect. Emperor yawns)

Emperor

Good morning.

Wu Ling

Oh, heavens! It is the Lord High Emperor, himself. I didn't look. Is it he? I'm not allowed to look upon him. Does he look wise? They say he does. Does he look kind? I love to hear his voice. I wish someone would speak to him. Then we could hear him answer.

(Emperor has seated himself at a table in a bamboo grove DSR and looks up from the scroll he has begun to read.)

Emperor

What is this? Some creature in my kingdom which I have never heard of before. A bird...

(He rings a bell.)

Prime minister? Prime minister!

(Empress enters carrying the infant child. Emperor rings bell again.)

Wu Ling

The Empress and the royal child. And here will come the Prime Minister. He is very...

(Tilting her nose up into the air.)

... lofty. I mean that with respect, of course.

Emperor

(To Wu Ling) Psst. You there. Fetch the Prime Minister.

Wu Ling

(Startled) I?

(Wu Ling crosses away quickly, introducing as she goes.)

The ladies of the court. The courtiers. The Music Master.

(Prime Minister enters, surveying the others with disdain.)

Prime Minister

Peh!

Wu Ling

But where is the Prime Minister? Oh, here he is!

(Wu Ling crosses over to Prime Minister and bows.)

Your Excellency, the Emperor...

Prime Minister

(Interrupting her) Peh! Who are you to speak to me?

Wu Ling

... the Emperor...

Prime Minister

(Interrupting again) You are not the Emperor. You must be out of your mind. This is not safe!

(A call) Royal Guard, please!

Wu Ling

(Quickly shouting out her message.) The Emperor wishes to see you!

Prime Minister

Oh?

Wu Ling

The Emperor sent me.

Prime Minister

Well, why didn't you say so?

(Prime Minister crosses to Emperor, bows, then kneels before him.)

Your Royal Majesty, you sent for me?

Emperor

Where have you been?

Prime Minister

I have been about the business of the court. Do you wish me to go into detail? What is it you wish?

Emperor

(Exhibiting the scroll he has read.) Look at this.

Prime Minister

It is a piece of writing.

Emperor

Yes?

Prime Minister

It is about the kingdom, of course. What else would anyone write about?

Emperor

What is this word ... here?

Prime Minister

“Nightingale.”

Emperor

And what is a nightingale?

Prime Minister

I believe it is some type of lizard.

Emperor

No! Can't you read? It is a bird. It is supposed to be the most beautiful thing in the kingdom. My kingdom. Why have I never seen it, I want to know.

Prime Minister

I don't know what to say.

Emperor

Don't say anything more. Go and find the Nightingale and bring her to me.

Prime Minister

As you wish.

(Prime Minister rises, bows, and leaves the Emperor. He crosses to the steps of the palace and announces in a genteel tone.)

The members of the royal court will please assemble.

(Military Courtier and Literary Scholar, sitting nearby, cannot help but hear the command. They rise and present themselves to Prime Minister.)

(To Military Courtier) Repeat the announcement.

Military Courtier

(Imitating Prime Minister's tone and volume) The members of the royal court...

Prime Minister

Loudly!

Military Courtier & Literary Scholar

(Shout in unison) The members of the royal court will please assemble!!

(The court assembles rapidly, including common people. Toymaker stands before a group of children and waves a puppet before them.)

Wu Ling

(To audience) The Toymaker. He is the most useful man.

Toymaker

(To children, oblivious to Prime Minister) Look! See what I have for you today. I made it just this morning...

Prime Minister

(To Music Master) Call for silence.

Music Master

(Booming) Silence!

(All attention is focused on Prime Minister)

Prime Minister

Someone has been hiding something from me. Some information. A “nightingale”.

Ladies & Children

A nightingale? What is a nightingale?

Wu Ling

It is a bird.

Prime Minister

Who said that?

Music Master

Birds are no concern of mine!

Literary Scholar

What does it matter?

Military Courtier

I must go.

(Prime Minister whispers to Music Master.)

Music Master

(Announcing to others) By royal decree, the Emperor requires the Nightingale.

Prime Minister

Someone must bring me the Nightingale. The Emperor wishes it so.

Court Lady

But we have never seen the Nightingale.

Wu Ling

(Gathering her courage) I have seen the Nightingale. Yes, I. I have seen what I think must be she. A little bird who sings such a song!

(Aside) I hope I know what I am saying. Why would the Emperor want her? Well, whatever the Emperor wants...

Prime Minister

Come here, little girl.

Wu Ling

Yes, I must step up and say I know her.

(To the court) Her song, it is like nothing you have ever heard – perhaps because it is everything; silver bells and wind in the mountains and children crying and laughing, or burping. And then lotus flowers floating on the water so quietly you think you have heard the one thing quieter than silence itself. She lives by the sea. I can lead you there.

(Aside) I hope I know what I am saying.

(To Prime Minister) I'm sure I can lead you to her.

(Aside) I hope I know what I am getting into.

Prime Minister

We will need to form a hunting party.

(No one volunteers)

It must be a small party, or else we will probably lose each other.

(He points to Military Courtier and Literary Scholar)

You, you...

Stone Carrier

And me?

Prime Minister

We do not send fools!

Children

And me?

Prime Minister

We do not send children.

(Children and other courtiers begin to exit. Prime Minister points to Wu Ling.)

Except for you. And heaven knows why we are sending you. And I suppose I will have to go along and supervise!

(Prime Minister, Military Courtier, and Literary Scholar turn upstage to exit.)

Wu Ling

(To audience) I don't know how we will catch her...

(Wu Ling follows the three men as lights fade to Blackout.)

Scene 3

(The scrim is in. Downstage appear Literary Scholar, Military Courtier, Prime Minister, and Wu Ling, walking in place as music plays. The music stops for a moment and there is the sound of frogs croaking.)

Military Courtier

(Hearing the sound) Why, there she is. She sounds...I don't know...it sounds familiar.

Wu Ling

(Politely) No, that is only the frogs.

Literary Scholar

(To Military Courtier, imitating Prime Minister in previous scene) "We do not send fools."

Prime Minister

Peh!

Wu Ling

This may be a long journey...

Prime Minister

If you know where she is, lead us to her, directly.

Wu Ling

(Leading the group offstage) She lives by the sea.

Military Courtier

The sea?

Literary Scholar

The sea.

Military Courtier

Where by the sea?

Wu Ling

She never stays in one place.

Prime Minister

That could be anywhere.

(They are off. Upstage of the scrim we see a large moon and a man on horseback riding down a hill, in silhouette before the moon. The group passes by the stranger and begins to ascend the hill.)

Literary Scholar

(Grumbling) The Nightingale...The Nightingale...

Military Courtier

Maybe there is no such thing as a nightingale...

Literary Scholar

Listen.

(The distant mooing of a cow.)

Military Courtier

Our journey is over! Why, we have heard that song before. We know the Nightingale.

Wu Ling

(Pointing into the distance) That is a cow.

(She laughs behind her hand.)

Literary Scholar

(Pointing to Military Courtier) And that is a fool.

Prime Minister

How far to the sea?

Wu Ling

Still very far.

(The music stops and the loud roar of a bear.)

Prime Minister

At last, at last, the Nightingale. And she has quite a BIG voice.

Wu Ling

That is a bear.

(Prime Minister runs offstage in fright as Literary Scholar and Military Courtier laugh. Wu Ling turns to them urgently.)

I said, that is a bear!

(The men suddenly rush offstage, followed by Wu Ling, as lights fade. Lights slowly rise on a pine forest by the sea. The men have made camp and are resting DSR while Wu Ling stands on a rock ledge beneath a tree, with a bird hopping and singing above her in the branches. It is the Nightingale, singing a lovely song.)

Nightingale?

(Nightingale sings a response to Wu Ling after each of the following lines.)

Yes, we have met before.

The Emperor wishes to see you.

Who is the Emperor? Why, he is the greatest man in all the world.

What is a man? A man is a being like myself.

Why, thank you.

Military Courtier & Literary Scholar

(Suddenly noticing Wu Ling and bird) The Nightingale!

(Wu Ling allows Nightingale to alight on her finger.)

Prime Minister

She is not even pretty. She looks drab and ordinary.

Wu Ling

Will you come, then? Will you come away with us to the porcelain palace?

Military Courtier

The girl understands the bird!

Wu Ling

(To the men) But she speaks quite clearly.

Literary Scholar

What is she saying now?

Wu Ling

Nothing at all. She's just singing.

Military Courtier

What will we do if she refuses to come?

Wu Ling

(A shrug) We will go back without her.

Prime Minister

We will NOT go back without her! I will command her to come with us.

Wu Ling

She is laughing at us. With respect, of course.

(Nightingale sings a question.)

Yes, we do want you very much to come.

(A response.)

She will! Consent to come!

(Lights begin to fade as Nightingale sings and flies off.)

Ah, thank you, Nightingale!

(Blackout. Lights rise downstage to reveal hunting party crossing; Wu Ling first, carrying Nightingale on her arm, then Military Courtier, Literary Scholar, and finally Prime Minister.)

Scene 4

(Music. Lights and scrim rise on porcelain palace. It is evening and candles are lighted. The Nightingale sits on a perch beside the throne; all the court members are present except for the Emperor. The Nightingale sings softly; the Emperor appears to meet the Nightingale.)

Prime Minister

You majesty – may I present the Nightingale, which we have captured...

Wu Ling

(To Prime Minister) Shhh!

Emperor

(Looking at Nightingale) Why, she is not much of anything, is she?

Prime Minister

(As an introduction) For your royal pleasure...

(The Nightingale sings. When she is finished the listeners release a sigh of great satisfaction in unison.)

Emperor

(After a moment) Enchanting.

(All exit except Emperor and Wu Ling. Emperor steps downstage and takes up one of his sleeves to dry a tear from his eye.)

Wu Ling

(To Nightingale) See, he is weeping.

(Nightingale asks a question.)
I will ask him.

(To Emperor) Why are you weeping, Your Majesty? Does the song make you sad?

Emperor

Happy. Such...happiness...I cannot express.

(Emperor turns and approaches the Nightingale.)

How can I repay you for this enchanting song? Will you accept my slipper?

(Nightingale sings in reply.)

Wu Ling

(For the Nightingale) Your tears of happiness are payment enough.

(Nightingale sings again.)

And now, she says she must fly away home.

Emperor

Oh, no! Couldn't she stay?

Wu Ling

Ask her.

Emperor

Honorable, enchanting Nightingale – I, your humble Emperor, request that you abide here with me at the palace for a while.

(Nightingale sings.)

Wu Ling

(Interrupting) For how long?

Emperor

Forever!

(Hastily correcting himself.)

No. For a long while.

(Correcting himself again.)

No. For as long as she likes.

(Nightingale sings.)

Wu Ling

She is thinking it over.

(Nightingale continues for a moment.)

Yes. She will stay!

(Wu Ling rushes out of the palace garden, happily shouting for all to hear.)

She will stay!

(Emperor and Nightingale are along together.)

Emperor

Oh, thank you, Nightingale. Oh, Nightingale, how could I have ever thought that you were ordinary? Why, you are the most beautiful thing in my kingdom. You will be my own little dear Nightingale, and I will feed you sweet meats and you will have a golden cage...

(Lights fade on the scene.)

Scene 5

(A series of vignettes depicting the Nightingale's life at the porcelain palace. Music and ad-libbed Chinese phrases throughout.)

(Lights rise on Wu Ling with children; Wu Ling displays the Nightingale who is perched on her sleeve. They exit. Court ladies are "airing" and folding silks; Nightingale "flies" into the silk and causes the ladies to giggle in confusion as lights fade.)

(Lights stay upstage of scrim to reveal Emperor on throne listening to Nightingale on her perch; Music Master enters and listens; he is annoyed that Nightingale does not follow a set rhythm which he marks out with a pair of sticks. Music Master passes them by and shakes his head and utters sounds of disapproval.)

(Common people and Literary Scholar cross the stage; Nightingale “flies” up the sleeve of Literary Scholar as lights fade.)

(Upstage of scrim in twilight lighting we see Nightingale fly with a silk ribbon attached to her which courtiers hold and parade behind her offstage. Wu Ling places a lotus flower in the pond DSR and waves at them.)

(Music Master stands beside perch and attempts to conduct the Nightingale, who pays no heed to him. Emperor enters.)

Scene 6

(The court is gathered as the Japanese Ambassador arrives at court; he rides on a litter carried by two Japanese Military Aides. At first, no one notices him.)

Japanese Ambassador

(Remaining seated) Honorable ladies and gentlemen of the high palace of China, if you would be so kind as to convey me to your Emperor. I bring a message from the Emperor of Japan.

(Court ladies bow and exclaim.)

Court Lady

Please come this way.

Japanese Ambassador

A message and greeting for your Emperor.

(Prime Minister steps forward; very arrogant.)

Prime Minister

You had better give your present to me.

Japanese Ambassador

And who might you be?

Prime Minister

I? It is only too obvious who I am. You are the stranger here. Who are you, might be the question. You look Japanese.

Japanese Ambassador

I am...

Prime Minister

Japanese, I would say. Small.

Japanese Ambassador

I am the very...

Prime Minister

Clever, irritable, small. Yes, Japanese.

Japanese Ambassador

(Standing to reveal considerable height.) I am the very honorable Japanese Ambassador to the entire kingdom of China.

Prime Minister

(Taken aback) Oh. Well, why didn't you say so? Right this way.

(Prime Minister leads Japanese Ambassador towards the throne.)

Your Royal Majesty, the Ambassador from Japan.

Emperor

(Rising) Oh. The Ambassador from Japan. Very well.

(To Nightingale who is on her perch) I will be right back, Nightingale; I must go greet the Ambassador from Japan.

Japanese Ambassador

(To Emperor, bowing) I bring you greeting from the Lord High Emperor of Japan. He wishes you good health, good weather, much treasure...

Emperor

And I wish to greet the Emperor of Japan, in the person of his Ambassador, and wish him...

Japanese Ambassador

...many children...

Emperor

...many children...

Japanese Ambassador

...long life...

Emperor

...long life, and may he always be surrounded by those who love him as much as I love him.

(A final bow to one another.)

Japanese Ambassador

He wanted me to give you this.

(The aides remove a ribboned wooden box from the litter.)

Emperor

(A command to anyone) Bring us tea.

Japanese Ambassador

Beg pardon, dear Emperor, but I cannot linger. I am needed in Kyoto.

Emperor

Open the box!

Prime Minister

(Extracting a letter from the ribbon) A letter!

Emperor

Read it!

Prime Minister

“Please accept this humble bird, poor though it is, compared with the fabled Chinese Nightingale.”

Japanese Ambassador

Oh, I should add – you might like to wind it.

(Japanese Ambassador steps back on the litter, sits, and is carried away by his two aides. Two servants of the court kneel at the box and unwrap and open it, revealing a second box, which they unwrap and open to reveal a third box which, when opened, reveals a golden, jeweled, mechanical nightingale.)

Emperor

Is there a key?

Court

Wind it! Wind it!

(Prime Minister is about to do the honors, but the Emperor halts him.)

Emperor

No! I feel the Music Master ought to wind it. Music Master?

(Music Master steps forward; Emperor hands him the key.)

Wind it.

(Music Master obeys. A mechanical song is played, accompanied by the jerking movements of the mechanical bird.)

Why, isn't that cunning? This is a most charming sound.

Music Master

Marvelous. Fabulous.

Emperor

What kind of bird is it?

Music Master

We will call it the Nightingale.

Emperor

The Nightingale. Yes. Fetch the Nightingale. She ought to hear this.

(To Nightingale) Isn't that a charming sound? Isn't it sweet?

Wu Ling

(Aside, to Nightingale) That is the Japanese idea of a nightingale. But it is not real.

Emperor

Shouldn't they sing a duet together?

(The two birds sing a duet; the court obviously prefers the mechanical bird.)

Music Master

This bird is a classical musician. The other bird will not obey the rules of classical music. She never has.

(Wu Ling silently crosses downstage and with her eyes follows her "flight".)

Wu Ling

She has flown away, Your Majesty. I'm sorry. There she goes.

Emperor

(Calling after her) Nightingale! Nightingale!

(Suddenly angry) Oh, bah! She will not obey. So be it. Let her stay away. She is banished. We have a new nightingale!

Prime Minister

Yes, and she is quite a pretty bird.

Music Master

She has eighteen rubies.

Emperor

Eighteen rubies! Let everybody see her. Yes, you may even show her... *(gesturing to the audience)* ...to common people.

(The members of the court slowly exit as scrim flies in. Music Master steps downstage, holding the mechanical bird in his arms, as common people gather around him.)

Scene 7

(Common people have gathered about Music Master.)

Music Master

Ladies and gentlemen – the marvelous, fabulous, made-in-Japan – the Nightingale. Observe the eye. The lid blinks. The precious emerald of the eyeball glows with an inner light as though the bird could see. Marvelous. Fabulous. Worthy of further study. The wings, ladies and gentlemen – observe how they open and close on hinges, as though the bird could fly. And let me show you – under the wings, under this mass of precious stones that so closely resembles the downy breast of a bird – underneath resides the music. We could not do this with the real Nightingale. If we tried to look inside – what a bloody mess.

(He shudders.)

And the real bird would sicken and die if we really tried to investigate. Real, real...who's to say which is the real bird? Look here, can you see this? This is real: these cogs jog this wheel which wags the pegs and gives the bells a jingle which urges the bigger sound from the bellows, which...wait a moment; I'll wind it. Fabulous. Marvelous. Here it is, ladies and gentlemen. Are you listening? Bird song.

Scene 8

(Music Master winds the bird and it performs. The scrim rises on a series of vignettes done to the sound of the mechanical bird song.)

1. Court ladies dance to the bird
2. A servant and the Courtiers cross with the mechanical bird on a ribbon.
3. The Emperor dances in his Throne room to the bird's song.
4. The full court dances to the bird song.

(The music continues as the lights fade.)

Scene 9

(The song of the mechanical bird suddenly stops as if it is broken.)

Wu Ling

(Aside, holding her ears) Thank heavens!

Emperor

(After a pause of silence) Something is wrong here. What is it? It's too quiet. It seems dead here. The bird! I miss the Nightingale.

Prime Minister

(Entering) Peh!

Emperor

(To Prime Minister) Wind the bird! Wind it!

(Prime Minister obeys, but no music plays)

Prime Minister

Your Majesty, I am afraid...

Emperor

What is it?

Prime Minister

(Thrusting the machine at Wu Ling) Wind this, if you please.

Wu Ling

(Backing away) I am not allowed to touch it!

Prime Minister

(Handing it to court lady, then exiting) Wind this.

(Court lady winds it; again no music.)

Court Lady

(With a shrug) Boo shi.

Emperor

(Melancholy) I miss the Nightingale.
(Courtiers step forward to comfort him.)

You are only people. You are not the Nightingale. I don't feel well.

(Emperor tries to hum the song to cheer himself up; he is unsuccessful.)

Hush. I don't feel well at all.

Music Master

Someone out to repair the Nightingale.

(To Emperor)

You look quite pale. You don't look well at all. Tch, tch.

(Music Master exits. Emperor calls out.)

Emperor

Prime Minister! Prime Minister?

(To court lady)

Fetch the Prime Minister.

Military Courtier

But who can repair the Nightingale?

Court Lady

The stonecutter?

Court Lady 2

No, he is too clumsy.

Wu Ling

The clockmakers?

Courtiers & Ladies

(In unison) The clockmakers!

(Wu Ling exits as Emperor turns to go to the palace.)

Emperor

I think I shall lie down.

(He collapses into Military Courtier and Literary Scholar's arms. They assist him up the steps and seat him on his throne. Wu Ling reappears with two clockmakers who approach the mechanical bird and elbow each other aside before finally settling into tinkering with the inner mechanism.)

Emperor

I feel so strange. So tired. How old am I?

Literary Scholar

Very old.

Military Courtier

And very wise.

Wu Ling

No, you are still young.

Emperor

Who said that?

(The mechanical bird suddenly begins to play again. Emperor rises, invigorated. Court applauds. Suddenly the music stops again and the Emperor sinks back onto his throne.)

Wu Ling

The toymaker!

Literary Scholar

Little girl, this is not a toy!

Wu Ling

It isn't?

Military Courtier

The toymaker! Let the toymaker try.

(Toymaker enters and kneels beside the mechanical bird, tinkering.)

Emperor

(Miserable) Where is my Prime Minister?

Military Courtier

Beg your pardon, Majesty. He is nowhere to be found.

(Toymaker winds the mechanical bird; it plays its song again.)

Emperor

(Sitting up) Ah!

Court

Ah!

(The mechanical bird breaks down again.)

Emperor

(Slumping back in his seat) Oh.

Court

Oh.

(Toymaker shakes the machine; nothing responds. Empress whispers to court lady.)

Court Lady

(Reporting Empress' request) Send for the doctor.

Court Ladies

The doctor!

(Doctor enters and approaches the Emperor.)

Emperor

Not me! Not me! Heal the Nightingale!

(Doctor whispers to Military Courtier.)

Military Courtier

(Reporting Doctor's request) Put him to bed.

Literary Scholar

Put him to bed.

(Stage begins to clear. Prime Minister enters and stands beneath the throne. Only the Emperor and Wu Ling remain onstage with Prime Minister.)

Prime Minister

So, it is true. He is dying.

Wu Ling

He is not dead.

Prime Minister

He is sick of himself.

Emperor

Prime Minister! Prime Minister?

Prime Minister

(Ignoring Emperor; to Wu Ling) Give him privacy. Let him be alone.

(Prime Minister exits. Wu Ling picks up mechanical bird and clutches it to her chest.)

Wu Ling

Wait for me, Your Majesty. Just wait a little.

(Wu Ling rushes DSR as scrim falls.)

Scene 10

(Lights rise on bamboo grove where Music Master sits with an Oriental stringed instrument in his arms. An assistant stands silently beside him. Wu Ling steps up to Music Master, holding the mechanical bird.)

Music Master

What is it, Wu Ling?

(Wu Ling silently holds the mechanical bird out to him in an appeal for help.)

Oh, that. I am very busy. I have just written a new piece of music. It is a funeral march for the Emperor. Listen...

(He starts to play.)

Wu Ling

But he is alive. He is not going to die.

Music Master

Yes, yes. I know. You are young. I understand how you feel. He is the only Emperor that you have ever known.

Wu Ling

Oh, please, Your Excellency. The clockmakers could not fix it. They are “all thumbs” compared to you, I’m sure. You understand it. Remember, you were the one who explained it to us. If you can’t fix it, no one can.

Music Master

Well, I’ll see.

(Music Master takes the mechanical bird and mutters as he tinkers inside it.)

This cog jogs this wheel...ah, yes...marvelous, fabulous...now, listen.

(The mechanical bird’s song comes out very brightly. With great joy Wu Ling quickly snatches the machine from Music Master and rushes offstage.)

Well! She runs off without a “thank you”. Without so much as a “fare-thee-well”!

(Lights fade on Music Master and assistant.)

Scene 11