

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

By Craig and Heather Bitterling

Setting: *A small kingdom somewhere in Asia*

Characters:

FISHERMAN (*the narrator*)

THE EMPEROR

THE EMPRESS

LI TANG (*a young child*)

ROYAL TUTOR

CHIANG (*the Royal Advisor*)

ITZHAK (*a traveling con artist*)

ALFONSO (*a traveling con artist, presumably a Spaniard*)

JIMMY (*Alfonso's partner*)

VILLAGERS (*may double as other characters*)

The Royal servants:

HU

HIM

MI

YU

TI

THE ROYAL COOK

HERALD

CHORUS

A Word About Style:

This play was designed to be presented with some of the flavor of the various forms of Asian theatre. All actors not involved in a particular scene should remain onstage, as chorus, to provide live sound effects (e.g. drums, bells, whistles and other percussion instruments) as well as group reactions to the story as it plays out. Characters should be colorful and exaggerated. All movement should also be exaggerated, sharp and deliberate, and whenever possible, precisely accompanied by live sound effects – more like

choreography than natural movement. Scene changes should be frantic, with wild, sharp, exaggerated movements and acrobatics. The actual changing of set pieces becomes a part of the performance in the midst of an orchestrated "chaos." In many parts of the show, actors address the audience directly. In these moments, ad libs may be used to acknowledge the input of the crowd and allow them to become a part of the story. In short, the style of the show should convey that it is taking place in a world that is very unlike the one we know but is one that is truly heartwarming and charming.

SCENE 1 - The marketplace

(Scene opens to bustle of activity and sound. Townspeople move about hurriedly to the sound of gongs, bells, rattles, drums, etc., establishing a busy marketplace atmosphere. A final loud gong is sounded, and all noise and motion stops suddenly. A fisherman steps forward and addresses the audience)

Fisherman: *(ad libbing and interacting with audience throughout his speech)* Hello! Welcome to our village. So good of you to visit us! We are a very friendly, happy village. I think you will like it here very much. Have you come a long way? Stay awhile and rest your legs. This is our marketplace – very busy – always many things happening here. Would you like to buy a fish? Very fresh today! Our village is a very special village, because this is where the Emperor lives - right over there in the Imperial Palace! He is a very good Emperor – very brave, very strong, and very wise. He has told us so - many times!

(All the villagers turn their heads to the audience, and nod to the rhythm of a woodblock. Then they all turn back and freeze again as they were)

Our land has known peace for many years because of our Emperor. We owe everything to him – he has told us so - many, many times!

(All the villagers turn their heads to the audience, and nod to the rhythm of a woodblock. Then they all turn back and freeze again as they were)

Whatever the Emperor likes, we like. Whatever the Emperor does, we do! When the Emperor is happy, we are all happy!

Villagers: *(All together while raising their hands with widespread fingers, shaking them, and smiling profusely.)* Happy!

Fisherman: *(looking around quickly, then speaking aside in hushed voice)* So we try very hard to keep the Emperor happy all the time.

(All the villagers turn their heads to the audience, and nod to the rhythm of a woodblock. Then they all turn back and freeze again as they were)

Fisherman: *(returning to normal voice)* Maybe you should go to the Imperial Palace and see the Emperor for yourself. Then you will understand. Go ahead, now - it's just around the corner.

(He bows. A gong sounds. In another bustle of chaotic movement and rhythmic sound, the scene changes.)

SCENE 2 - The palace throne room

(The Emperor and Empress are seated on thrones. Li Tang and Tutor are standing before them. A final loud gong is sounded, and all movement and instruments stop simultaneously)

Empress: Good nephew, his majesty and I are so glad to have you staying here with us. We hope you will be very happy here.

Emperor: Nonsense! Why wouldn't he be happy? What more could a boy ask for than to live in the royal palace?

Empress: Yes, dear. And the Royal Tutor here will be your constant companion and mentor. He is very wise. You will do well to listen to him.

Li Tang: Yes, your majesty. Thank you both for your kindness.

Emperor: Of course, think nothing of it. In our empire, anyone who is unkind must be flogged with a noodle in the marketplace! Now, Li Tang, how would you like to play with my toy soldier collection? Or take a tour of the Royal Zoo? It is the finest in the land.

(A gong sounds. Minister Chiang enters with Itzhak)

Chiang: *(bowing low)* Your majesty.

Emperor: Yes, Minister Chiang, what is it?

Chiang: A visitor, your majesty. He has requested audience to offer his services to the Emperor and empress.

Emperor: Services? What kind of services?

Itzhak: *(speaking with a thick Russian accent)* Please, your majesty. My name is Itzhak, from the frozen lands of the north. I have many talents to offer your majesty. I am good singer, I dance, I play the fiddle, and best of all, I am juggler.

Emperor: A juggler?

Itzhak: Yes, your majesty. It has been said that I am best juggler in whole world, and maybe, I think, this is true.

(Chorus members all gasp)

Empress: *(laughing nervously)* Surely you have misspoken, good sir. You mean to say you are the second best juggler in the world, yes?

Itzhak: Second best? Ha! Let me show you...

Empress: Everyone in this land knows of the Emperor's great passion and talent for juggling. It has been quite the talk of the village for some time. Your majesty, would you honor us with a demonstration of your juggling?

Emperor: Oh, yes, I would love to! *(pulling balls from his pocket)* I am very good at juggling two balls, and sometimes even three! *(He begins juggling very poorly. All chorus members applaud with "ooh's" and "aah's")*

Empress: Oh, that is wonderful, my dear! *(to Itzhak)* You see? Wouldn't you agree that his majesty is the finest juggler of all?

Itzhak: *(laughs)* It is very amusing, yes, but, I think maybe you have never seen a true master of the art. If I could present to you...

Emperor: What?! How dare you!

Empress: Good sir, do you presume to say that you are better than the Emperor?

Itzhak: I only say that if you allow me but a moment, you may judge the truth for yourself.

Emperor: I have heard enough! Sir, your vanity is appalling! And pride of this sort is something we simply cannot abide in this empire. Chiang!

Chiang: *(stepping forward with one finger in the air)*
"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."
(He steps backwards to return to his place)

Emperor: Exactly! And?

Chiang: *(stepping forward with one finger in the air)*
“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” *(He steps backwards to return to his place)*

Emperor: Well said! Very well said! Remove this man from my presence!
Have him pelted with dumplings and send him on his way!

(All Chorus members gasp, accompanied by a brief rattling of percussion instruments. A lone voice somewhere in the back shouts, “Not the dumplings!” Servants appear and usher Itzhak offstage, as Li Tang turns to speak privately with the tutor)

Li Tang: Tutor, I do not understand.

Tutor: How so?

Li Tang: Why is it prideful for that man to say that he is better than the Emperor, but it is not prideful for the Emperor to say that he is not?

Tutor: Quiet boy!! Do you wish to lose your tongue? There is much you have to learn about this land.

Empress: *(to the Emperor)* Well done, my dear!

Tutor: *(turning back to the Emperor and bowing low)* Yes, your majesty, another swift and reasonable administration of justice.

(Chorus and all present, except Li Tang, applaud the Emperor and express their approval with murmurs, ad libs and percussion)

Emperor: Thank you, thank you. I quite enjoyed that myself.

Empress: Well, dear, I’m off to the market. Li Tang, would you like to come with me and see the village?

Li Tang: Yes, ma’am. I would like that very much.

Empress: Well, then. Let’s be off!

(A gong sounds and the scene changes in the same chaotic style as before. All exit hurriedly and noisily.)

SCENE 3 - Somewhere outside the village

(A final loud gong is sounded, and Itzhak enters a bare stage wiping something from his face with a cloth. He no longer speaks with his phony Russian accent. While speaking with the audience, he may ad lib as necessary to acknowledge their reactions)

Itzhak: Unbelievable! What a waste of very good dumplings! *(to audience)* Oh, hello. Boy, I really blew that one, huh? *(with accent)* “Best juggler in whole world.” *(without accent)* How was I supposed to know the Emperor fancied himself a juggler? Oh well, I guess that how it goes in the con game – sometimes you fool them and sometimes you don’t. I had a great plan this time, though. I thought I was going to fool the Emperor out of a big pile of his riches. Now I guess I’ll have to move on and try again in the next village. Hey, don’t look at me like that. I see what you’re thinking. “Lying and stealing are wrong” – right? Well, that may be true for you, but that doesn’t mean it has to be true for me too. I have to make a living somehow.

(A noise is heard from offstage)

Wait – someone’s coming. Hide me!

(He dives behind some audience members, and some playful interaction with the audience ensues as he looks for a hiding place. Alfonso and Jimmy enter talking and laughing. Itzhak stops suddenly when he sees them)

Hey, I think I know these guys! *(stepping out from hiding)*
Alfonso? Is that you?

Alfonso: Itzhak? Itzhak! It has been a long time, my friend. I have not seen you since that job we pulled on the czar! How have you been?

Itzhak: Oh, fine, I suppose. I sure didn’t expect to see you here.

Alfonso: Nor we you. Are you working an angle on the Emperor?

Itzhak: Well, I thought I was, but it didn’t go so well. That man is so conceited - I didn’t even stand a chance.

Jimmy: Conceited, huh? *(He exchanges a knowing look with Alfonso)*
How does he feel about fancy clothes?

Itzhak: Huh?

Alfonso: Jimmy and I have a little scam we’ve been running that is perfect for the proudest of the proud. They never see it coming.

Itzhak: A scam you've "been running"? You mean you keep using the same bit, and word doesn't get around?

Jimmy: Exactly.

Itzhak: But stories travel so fast around here, I have to come up with new lies in every town I go to just to keep from getting caught.

Alfonso: Yes, but that is because you are using lies. We do not deal with deception in this game.

Itzhak: You don't?

Alfonso: No. We deal with truth.

Itzhak: Truth?

Jimmy: That is to say we create truth. A "new" truth, you might call it.

Alfonso: You know if enough people believe something, then it must be true, right?

Itzhak: I don't understand.

Alfonso: Say that you will help us, and we will explain everything.

Itzhak: If it means getting back at this pompous fool of an Emperor, I'm in.

(They share a chuckle and an elaborate handshake. A gong sounds and the scene changes in the same style as before)

SCENE 4 - The marketplace

(Villagers rush into the marketplace, buying, selling, and chattering away. A final loud gong is sounded, and the noise is reduced to pantomime as the Fisherman enters, pitching his wares. He notices the audience again as he speaks)

Fisherman: Fresh fish! Caught today! *(to audience)* Well, hello! You're back. Did you meet the Emperor? Oh, good, good! Then, by now you must understand how important it is that we keep his majesty happy. The marketplace is open now – please take a look around. Maybe now you would like to buy a fish!

(A group of ladies enter, talking, and stop in front of the fisherman, blocking him from the audience)

Villager1 (Tiang): This is my finest cloth. It is woven on a double loom with spun silk.

Ladies: (*ad libs*) Oh it is so beautiful! That is lovely, Tiang! *etc.*

Itzhak: (*entering in a new disguise and injecting himself into the group*) My, my, that is lovely! But, you know, it is not nearly as lovely as the cloth woven by the great Alfonso! Now that is a cloth that is beyond compare. It is beyond words. It is beyond...all of us. It is simply magnificent- truly the most glorious cloth you have ever seen. But, I'm sure none of *you* have ever seen it.

(His words clearly bite at the pride of the villagers, who begin to lie to hide their ignorance.)

Villager2: I believe I have seen it - once when I was in Beijing.

Villager3: Oh yes, I saw it too. It was magnificent. Beyond compare.

Itzhak: It is a pity that not everyone can see it. If only the Great Alfonso were coming here.

(The ladies scatter and quickly join other groups in the marketplace to share their new gossip. Itzhak moves to one of these groups, approaching them in the middle of their discussion)

Villager3: And it is so amazing, it's almost as if the cloth were magical!

Itzhak: Like the gown he made for the Princess of Yakutsk – it made her so beautiful, that the King of Arabia fell in love with her immediately.

Villager4: Yes, I remember – it was as if he were enchanted by the dress!

(All agree that this was how it happened and then scatter to join other groups, all of which begin chattering with enthusiasm. Itzhak watches for a second before moving slowly to join another group in the middle of their conversation...)

Villager5: Is it true that the Great Alfonso is coming here?

Villager6: What a great honor that would be to our village!

Itzhak: I don't know. I have heard he only deals with the most noble of nobles. Why, the Queen of America had to beg him for three years to make her a gown, and even then, he only agreed to make the sleeves!

Villager6: Yes, but what fantastic sleeves they were! I heard she had them attached to a burlap sack, and still she looked more beautiful than a dozen angels.

Villager5: Surely, our Emperor is much nobler than the Queen of America.

(All agree and scatter again, this time to reveal that the Empress, Li Tang, and Tutor have entered and are speaking with the Fisherman)

Empress: That is wonderful! Have them sent to the Royal Kitchen right away. What a feast we shall have tonight!

Villager7: *(eavesdropping from a nearby group)* The Imperial Palace is preparing for a feast!

Fisherman: As you wish, your majesty. *(looking at Li Tang)* I hope your guest will enjoy them well.

Villager8: *(eavesdropping from another nearby group)* The Emperor is expecting guests!

Villager9: Then it is true – the Great Alfonso is coming here, to our village!

Itzhak: Don't look now, but it appears they have arrived!

(All turn and gasp to see Alfonso and Jimmy enter, except the Empress and her group. Her attention is caught, however, by the sudden hush and stillness that has come over the crowd. Alfonso and Jimmy bow deeply and dramatically to the crowd)

Empress: What? Did I miss something?

(A gong sounds and the scene changes as before)

SCENE 5 - The palace throne room

(The Emperor is seated on his throne. Chiang is standing near him as he calls for the servants. A final loud gong is sounded, and all noise and movement ceases.)

Chiang: Yu! Hu! Him! Mi! *(claps his hands and 4 servants enter nervously)*

Emperor: Did you say, "yoo-hoo?" Is that a proper way to call the servants?

Chiang: These are our four finest servants, your majesty. Him, Yu, Hu, and Mi.

(Chiang indicates each servant as he speaks their name. Each servant takes one step forward and bows low as his name is spoken. Throughout the entirety of the show, they repeat this action each time their "name" is spoken. As the Emperor grows angrier in this scene, the servants become more terrified and their actions more frantic.)

Emperor: *(not listening)* Yes, yes. Whatever. Send one of them to the cobbler's shop and see how he is coming on my new shoes. They must look spectacular for my birthday celebration next month.

Chiang: Of course, your majesty. I will send Him right away.

Emperor: You will send who right away?

Chiang: If you wish, your majesty, but Him is by far the fastest.

Emperor: Who is the fastest?

Chiang: No, your majesty. Hu is very old and cannot run very fast at all.

Emperor: "Who is very old?" Is this a riddle?

Chiang: Him is the fastest. This is Him.

Emperor: This is who?

Chiang: No, your majesty. This is Him. Hu is over there.

Emperor: I don't know who is over there. You tell me what his name is.

Chiang: Hu, your majesty.

Emperor: Him! *(pointing to Hu)*

Him: *(bowing low)* Yes, master?

Emperor: Who is this?

Chiang: This is Him, your majesty.

Emperor: This is who?

Chiang: No, your majesty. Hu is over there.

Emperor: I don't know his name.

Chiang: Hu, your majesty.

Emperor: Him!!!!

Him: (*bowing low*) Yes, master?

Emperor: (*exasperated*) Silence! Do not speak to your Emperor unless you have been spoken to! I could have *you* pickled and peppered for such insolence.

PREVIEW ONLY