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The Magic Paintbrush

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THE MAGIC PAINTBRUSH

written by

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Synopsis

Based on an ancient Chinese folk tale, this play depicts the adventures of a young girl, her magic paintbrush, and the struggle of good versus evil. The story takes place in a poor Chinese village that has been cruelly mistreated by the Emperor and his royal guard. When a mysterious artist gives Xiao Yue a magic that could change her fate, Xiao Yue discovers the weight and responsibility that accompanies power. It is now up to her to decide how to use this new gift and more importantly how to protect this magic from being used for evil.

Cast of Characters

XIAO YUE	A young Chinese artist whose discovery of a magic paintbrush changes her destiny, and that of her village, forever.
WEI WEI	The Emperor’s royal guard
DESHI	A local fisherman and friend of Xiao Yue
EMPEROR	A greedy, cruel Emperor of China
BAO	A local merchant and friend of Xiao Yue
CHEN	A Feng Huang bird that Xiao Yue magically creates with her paintbrush
ARTIST	A mysterious stranger who gifts the magic paintbrush to Xiao Yue

Director Notes

STAGING NOTES

This script was originally written for a traveling children's theater and lends itself to creative design work. The costumes and sets can be as simple or as elaborate as your budget permits.

CHEN can be a puppet.

The well can be a prop that is 'hidden' in the set and simply pulled out as it is drawn.

This script calls for *creative* set pieces. There are many different ways to accomplish the magic of the paintbrush.

*Create hidden compartments in the canvases.

*Have the lighting design 'draw' the paintings

*For the final drawing, as XIAO YUE draws, have the set change. As the characters 'enter' the drawing, build the set around them.

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

To explore another culture while learning fundamental moral truths about caring for those around us and choosing between right and wrong.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Actor 1: XIAO YUE

Actor 2: WEI WEI, DESHI

Actor 3: EMPEROR, BAO

Actor 4: CHEN, ARTIST

Props

Canvases
Easel
Paintbrushes
Bag for ARTIST
Charcoal chalk
Stool
Coins
Pouch for coins
Chair
Broom
Bamboo Stalk
Torn Net
New Fishing Net
Bamboo Flute
Roof Tiles
Flowers
Lantern
Scroll
Reading Glasses
Well with a pulley and a bucket
Chains
Glass
Drink Umbrella
Large Canvas

ACT I

Scene 1

At Rise: The ARTIST enters and moves to the stage. He is a mysterious figure, carrying a bag of tricks. He sets the stage, pulling a canvas and easel from thin air. He pulls the Magic Paintbrush from his bag.

ARTIST

Do you see it? The magic? It looks innocent enough. But this paintbrush holds a secret. The power to change the winds or raise a mountain. And like most innocent-looking things, it carries a story-of evil emperors and mythical birds and a child with the purest of hearts. It all happened many centuries ago, in a small village in that vast land we call China. It began with a girl named Xiao Yue...

(XIAO YUE enters and sits at the canvas.)

(ARTIST exits, as BAO takes his place near the easel.)

Scene 2

Setting: The Town Square of a village on hard times, but hospitable.

At Rise: XIAO YUE is making a charcoal sketch of BAO, a local merchant, who is sitting in a dignified pose.

XIAO YUE

Hold still. Almost done.

(BAO sits up straighter.)

XIAO YUE

Perfect. Very dignified.

(BAO holds his head high.)

BAO

Make sure you're getting my good side.

XIAO YUE

They all look good to me, Bao.

BAO

Ha! You're a flatterer Xiao Yue.

XIAO YUE

There. Finished.

(She presents the portrait. He takes it.)

BAO

Wonderful!

(admiring)

BAO (CONT)

It's a shame paint is so costly. This portrait would be even better if it had some color!

XIAO YUE

I could make paint easily enough with berries and dyes. It's paintbrushes that are expensive, and I only make enough to pay for my food. I'm afraid I'll have to use the charcoal from the fireplace for now.

BAO

I wish I could pay you what your sketches are worth, but the...

XIAO YUE

New taxes. I know. They've been such a strain on our village.

BAO

The Emperor's greed has caused a great hardship. But we must not speak of it. Don't want to get on the Emperor's bad side with the Imperial Guard roaming around town.

XIAO YUE

What do you mean? If the Emperor could help us, I'm sure he would.

BAO

Ah, to be young and innocent once again. Xiao Yue, never lose your pure heart. Here...

(BAO gives XIAO YUE some coins.)

XIAO YUE

Oh, Bao, I couldn't...you've been so kind to my family. This is a gift.

(BAO refuses to take the coins back.)

BAO

Save it for your brush. I expect big things from you one day. Tell your father to come see me sometime. I just got a shipment of rope from the city. I can get him a good price.

XIAO YUE

I will, sir. Zai jian.

BAO

Zai jian.

(BAO leaves.)

(XIAO YUE counts her earnings.)

XIAO YUE

(to audience)

It'll take me ages to save enough to buy a paintbrush.

(XIAO YUE begins to pack up her supplies.)

(WEI WEI enters, shouting at the citizens.)

WEI WEI

Hear ye! Hear ye! Imperial Guard on duty! Enforcing the Emperor's rule with an iron fist and collecting taxes on behalf of his majesty, The Emperor of All Emperors.

(He notices the audience.)

Filthy peasants! Don't you take baths in this village? I can smell you from here.

(He sees XIAO YUE and her small pouch of coins.)

You! What are you doing?

XIAO YUE

Nothing. I'm-

WEI WEI

Stop! Tax time. Let's see what you made.

XIAO YUE

Please, Mr...

WEI WEI

The name's Wei Wei. But you can call me...Danger. Actually-call me the Enforcer. No-The Enforcer-Formerly-Known-As-Wei-Wei!

(re-thinking)

No. I don't like that. Wei Wei is good. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, right? Now about that money...

(WEI WEI sees XIAO YUE's money pouch and seizes it.)

XIAO YUE

Give that back! I earned it!

WEI WEI

It's a cruel world, I know. But you're young. You'll bounce back.

EMPEROR *(offstage)*

Wei Wei! Where on earth have you gone?

WEI WEI

Oh man. Oh man. It's the Emperor! Be cool, okay?

(WEI WEI stands at attention.)

Make way for the Emperor! Emperor coming through. Show your respect for the all-potent, smartliest, most grandiose Emperor in the history of Emperors. Bow in admiration! Prostrate yourselves. I'm talking to you, short stack!

EMPEROR

That's enough, Wei Wei.

WEI WEI

Right you are, cousin.

EMPEROR

Wei Wei! Don't call me cousin! How many times do I have to tell you? I don't want people to know we're related!

WEI WEI

Won't happen again, Emps. Is it okay if I call you Emps?

EMPEROR

No.

WEI WEI

Right. Loud and clear, Cuz.

EMPEROR

I just spent the last hour wandering the streets of this village without my Imperial Guard.

WEI WEI

Oh, that's not safe. Lots of whackos around here. You shouldn't have done that.

EMPEROR

I know that!

WEI WEI

It's a good thing I found you.

(The EMPEROR's gaze hardens.)

EMPEROR

A local merchant just received a shipment of rope. An excellent source of revenue for the Empire. Time to collect, Wei Wei.

WEI WEI

Ah, but the people here are so poor. It's a waste of time. And no one seems happy to see me.

(mimicking the people)

"Please don't tax me. I'm poor and starving"

EMPEROR

If I plan on having the most powerful empire in China, I must be the richest Emperor in China. I need more gold to build my army and destroy my enemies.

WEI WEI

It smells like fish and manure here. Can't we extort a more pleasant smelling village?

EMPEROR

We'll stay here another week. Collect what we can, and move on to the next village. Am I understood? Now go tax that merchant!

WEI WEI

Yes sir!

(EMPEROR takes XIAO YUE's money pouch from WEI WEI and looks inside of it. He takes out one coin and hands it to XIAO YUE, keeping the rest of the coins for himself.)

EMPEROR

(to XIAO YUE)

Zai jian child. Your Emperor wishes you good fortune.

(The EMPEROR and WEI WEI exit.)

XIAO YUE

If only I had a paintbrush. I would make the greenest hills and the bluest seas. I could paint a rosy pink sunrise or

XIAO YUE (CONT)

a golden field of grain. People from the city would pay any price for my creations. And my family would never know another cold, hungry night.

(XIAO YUE continues to pack her belongings. The ARTIST walks by. He pauses briefly to admire XIAO YUE's sketches as she packs them away.)

ARTIST

Ni hao, child.

XIAO YUE

Ni hao.

(to audience)

I've never seen him around town.

(As the ARTIST goes to leave, a paintbrush falls from his pocket.)

(XIAO YUE bends to retrieve it as the ARTIST exits.)

XIAO YUE

Shifu, you dropped...

(She sees what she has found.)

A paintbrush. He must be a fancy artist from the city. Look at this. Horse hair. Birch wood. It's just what I need. I could make the most beautiful works of art with this.

(She starts to pack it with her supplies, then stops.)

But it's not mine. A paintbrush like this must have cost a small fortune. I have to give it back.

(XIAO YUE runs off after the ARTIST.)

These pages have been removed
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Scene 10

Setting: The Hall of Emperors

At Rise: The EMPEROR's Imperial Ball.

EMPEROR

Ah yes. Here she comes! Xiao Yue, the world famous artist.

(WEI WEI enters with XIAO YUE.)

EMPEROR

My dear! My dear, how lovely to see you. I was afraid you weren't coming.

XIAO YUE

(sarcastically, referring to her chains)

How could I resist?

EMPEROR

Wei Wei, how rude of you! Remove those chains from our guest immediately.

WEI WEI

Uh, but you said...

EMPEROR

I said remove them. Then refill my glass.

(WEI WEI removes XIAO YUE's chains. He then takes the EMPEROR's cup.)

WEI WEI

Do you want another little umbrella in this one?

(EMPEROR motions for him to leave, embarrassed. As WEI WEI exits, the EMPEROR shouts to him.)

EMPEROR

A blue umbrella! If you can find one.

(He smiles sardonically back to XIAO YUE.)

Hard to believe he shares my blood, isn't it? Now, my dear, my guests are waiting for the show of a lifetime. I promised them a living painting.

(He gets closer to her.)

And you will paint it for me! I think you'll find all the supplies you need. Wei Wei!

(WEI WEI wheels in a large canvas.)

XIAO YUE

Never. I promised to use the magic only for good.

EMPEROR

Only for good? What could be better than gold? A mountain of gold. Yes. That's what I want you to paint.

XIAO YUE

I won't do it.

EMPEROR

You are brave to defy a powerful man like me.

(closing in on XIAO YUE)

It seems you have a choice to make, Xiao Yue. You can do as I say. Stay here. Scribble a few masterpieces for me now and then, and live a life of luxury in my palace. Or you can refuse. You can walk away right now and I'll never bother you again. But when you leave here, there will be no home for you to return to.

XIAO YUE

You would hurt my village?

EMPEROR

When I'm done with it, there will be no village. The putrid docks. Your pretty flowers. Those quaint little huts you call homes. All gone.

(XIAO YUE is stunned.)

EMPEROR

But if you paint for me, your neighbors will be safe. So tell me Xiao Yue, what is the right thing to do?

(EMPEROR holds the brush out for XIAO YUE.)

(She hesitates. She takes the brush.)

EMPEROR

Smart girl.

(He turns to his 'guests'.)

Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll follow me to the dining chamber. Let us leave the artist to her work.

(to XIAO YUE)

Try anything funny and it will be your people that answer for your deeds.

(EMPEROR exits.)

(XIAO YUE dips her brush in gold paint.)

XIAO YUE

A mountain of gold. Enough to fund a thousand armies.

(She stops.)

Am I doing the right thing? If I don't paint for the Emperor, my village will be destroyed. But if the Emperor gets his army, who knows how many villages he will destroy? There will be nothing to stop him from obliterating half of China. But my family...Deshi and Bao...

(She begins to paint.)

I have to paint it. I'll figure out how to stop the Emperor later.

(CHEN enters.)

CHEN

Xiao Yue, there you are. The ravens are on the lookout for an escape, but it isn't looking too good...

(CHEN notices XIAO YUE at the canvas.)

CHEN

Wait. What are you doing?

XIAO YUE

Painting a mountain of gold for the Emperor.

(A mountain of gold rises into the picture.

CHEN

You promised to only use the magic for good.

XIAO YUE

He's going to destroy the village, Chen. I have to.

(She continues to paint. A sea of blue and green rises into place.)

CHEN

But why are you painting the mountain in the middle of the sea like that?

XIAO YUE

The mountain is too big. It won't fit in the palace. So I have to paint it in the distance.

CHEN

Hmm...Looks like it will take a while to get all the way out there...

XIAO YUE

I’m sure it will but I-

(XIAO YUE has an epiphany.)

Chen! You’re a genius! I’ll just paint a path of stones...

(She paints. A winding path of stones and it rises onto the canvas.)

CHEN

Why thank you Xiao Yue. You know, I believe that in my heart, but it’s nice to hear someone else say it sometimes.

(He notices her frantic painting.)

Wait. What did I say? Why am I a genius?

XIAO YUE

I’ve got a plan. Just hide! But stay close.

CHEN

Alright.

(CHEN exits.)

XIAO YUE

Now the sky.

(She dips the brush in blue. Considers.)

A little darker.

(XIAO YUE fills in the sky with a stormy purple haze. It appears.)

(WEI WEI enters.)

WEI WEI

How much longer is this going to take? The Emperor is stuffing his face with cakes. I’m afraid he’s gonna get a tummy-ache if he has to wait much longer-Hey that’s really good!

XIAO YUE

Just putting on the finishing touches.

(One last flourish with the brush and the painting is complete.)

(At once, the mountain shrinks into the distance, and the sea begins to churn. A path of stones rolls onto the stage.)

WEI WEI

Oh man. Emps is gonna love this.

(He shouts offstage.)

Hey! Your Eminence! Your mountain is done. Come check it out!

(The EMPEROR enters.)

EMPEROR

Well, is it finished?

(He sees the mountain.)

A mountain of gold. What will I buy first? Great warships, with iron plating and the tallest masts. But the mountain is so far away. Why is it so far away?

XIAO YUE

I was afraid the mountain wouldn't fit in your palace, so I painted it in the distance. But I have made you a very safe road leading to the mountain of gold.

EMPEROR

Well done, Xiao Yue. You have saved your village. I think this is the beginning of a long and rich friendship. Although, I would have enjoyed a good village razing. Oh well. Wei Wei! Let's go! We must bring back as much as we can carry.

WEI WEI

Should we get a wagon? No? You're just going...okay.

(WEI WEI and EMPEROR enter the painting, following the road to the mountain.)

XIAO YUE

(to audience)

I knew the Emperor wouldn't be able to resist running for the mountain as soon as he set eyes on it.

(XIAO YUE begins to paint a frame around the scene. WEI WEI and the EMPEROR appear in the painting.)

EMPEROR

The mountain! It's beautiful! Look at it, Wei Wei!

WEI WEI

Ooh! Shiny!

XIAO YUE

I made sure to paint the path long and winding. By the time he realizes my plan...

EMPEROR *(offstage)*

What is she doing? Wei Wei! Turn back. She's painting a frame. She's trapping us! Stop her!

(WEI WEI and the EMPEROR try to escape the painting just as...XIAO YUE finishes the frame.)

WEI WEI & EMPEROR

NO!!!

(WEI WEI and the EMPEROR are frozen in the picture.)

(XIAO YUE turns the canvas and removes the newly framed picture-with the EMPEROR and WEI WEI trapped inside.)

XIAO YUE

Looks like these two won't be raising any evil armies or,destroying any villages anytime soon.

(She pulls out her flute and plays.)

CHEN

Alright I'm ready. What's the plan? Do I need to peck out themEmperor's eyes? Because I'm prepared to do that.

XIAO YUE

Chen, it's done.

(XIAO YUE shows CHEN the picture.)

CHEN

Xiao Yue, you did it. They're trapped. For good! Let's bring the painting home and show Deshi and Bao!

(XIAO YUE looks at the painting in her hands.)

XIAO YUE

No, I think it should hang right here. In the Hall of the Emperors. Anyone who sits on this throne should be reminded of the Emperor's story. Let's get back to the village.

(Exit)

Scene 11

Setting: The Town Square.

At Rise: DESHI and BAO enter.

DESHI

When she returned to the village, Xiao Yue received the Hero's welcome she had been promised. The crops were growing tall. Business was booming for the merchants and fisherman. The town was teeming with hope and happiness.

(XIAO YUE enters. She sets to work at her easel.)

XIAO YUE

Chen built a nest in one of the cherry trees I painted. He got real good at being King of all Birds, with only a little bit of help from me.

(BAO and DESHI gather round the easel.)

DESHI

What are you working on now?

XIAO YUE

One last magical painting.

(She pulls a simple paintbrush from the canvas.)

BAO

A paintbrush!

XIAO YUE

Strictly non-magical this time.

(The ARTIST enters.)

ARTIST

And she locked the Magic Paintbrush away. Never to be used again. Most people think it was lost to time. Locked in a box in the ruins of an ancient Chinese village. Others say Xiao Yue passed the Magic Paintbrush along in her old age, and that many artists throughout the generations have kept the magic of the brush alive. Who knows? Maybe the Magic Paintbrush is still out there, waiting for a worthy artist to pick it up...

DESHI & BAO

Well...is it?

XIAO YUE

I'll never tell...

(The ARTIST disappears the Magic Paintbrush.)

ALL

Jiéshù!



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