BIGGER THAN LIFE!
AMERICAN FOLK TALES AND LEGENDS

By CYNTHIA MERCATI

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BIGGER THAN LIFE!
AMERICAN FOLK TALES AND LEGENDS

By CYNTHIA MERCATI

CHARACTERS

1ST PLAYER        SAL FINK
2ND PLAYER        BESS CALL
3RD PLAYER        ANNIE OAKLEY
4TH PLAYER        SALLY CATO
5TH PLAYER        P.T. BARNUM, PECOS BILL

Additional parts may be assigned at director's discretion. See PRODUCTION NOTES.

This show is fast paced, energetic and noisy, with the same feeling as an old time traveling medicine show. The actors often speak directly to the audience, involving the children in various songs, stories and actions.

The PLAYERS function as a chorus, echoing words and adding emphasis. They also provide the SOUND EFFECTS, using a host of instruments: Whistles, penny whistles, washboards, spoons, drum, triangle, tom-tom, kazooos, cow bells, cow moos, mustard bottle, whoopee cushion—or anything else that makes an interesting noise. One of the PLAYERS should play a guitar to accompany the songs. All songs are in the public domain.

Costumes are generic frontier with character shifts denoted by a change of hat or vest or some simple costume part. These costumes should be hung on coat trees on either side of the playing area so they’re easy to reach. There should also be an easel standing to one side of the stage for the placement of signs. The instruments should be pre-set on a table, or, if desired, behind a plywood cutout of an old time circus wagon. When the actors are not assuming a character, they man the instruments in plain sight of the audience. In this way, the SOUND EFFECTS, and ways they’re used, become part of the show.
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AMERICAN FOLK TALES AND LEGENDS

Before the show, a principal, teacher, chaperon, leader, or, if desired, a student, is given the lines of the MAYOR.

(We hear SAL before we see her, a long, piercing bellow from the back of the theater.)

SAL: Hi-i-i-i-ow-ow-ow-who-whooh! (Roars into view. She wears a man's shirt and jacket, boots, and a man's hat with a red turkey feather in it. She's boisterous, loud and good natured. To the audience.) I'm a salt river roarer and a ring tailed squealer! I'm the Mississippi Screamer! (Bellows again to prove her point.) Hi-i-i-i-ow-ow-ow-who-whooh! (Again to the audience, with gusto.) I'm half wild horses and half chompin' alligator—and the rest of me is red hot snappin' turtle! I can out run, out jump, and out brag any human bein' on this earth! (Taking CENTER.) Maybe you heard tell of my father, Mike Fink, king of the flatboatmen? Well, we got us a forty foot keelboat, name O'Lightfoot! (Miming these actions.) My dad and me dip our poles in the water to set the pace, and the rest of our crew tries to keep up! We pole that boat over whirlpools and sandbars and mudbanks! We carry pioneers West and haul cargo North! (Miming.) Once, when I was just a youngun', I was out one mornin' a-gatherin' acorns when I heard a curios sound from a hollow oak tree. (SOUND EFFECT from the back of the theater.) Never bein' the shy type, didn't I stick my snout up that tree and take a look? And didn't a big she bear and her three cubs come a-shootin' outta that hollow tree? I tell you folks, they went right for me, especially that momma bear who didn't take kindly to anyone a-spyin' on her family! (With mimed fervor.) She clawed at my britches! She grabbed at my hair! She tugged and pulled and gnashed her big bear teeth! And if any of you have ever seen a she bear in full rile— (Stopping to ask the audience directly.) Have any of you ever seen a she bear in full rile? Well, let me tell you, I was almost a goner! Now you may be a-wonderin', just what did Sal do to get out of this predicament. So go ahead, ask me— (To the children, directing their response.) Just say: Sal, what did you do?! (And the kids ask: Sal, what did you do?) I'm glad you asked that! Well, what I did was, I spoke up to myself! (Speaking up to herself with enthusiasm.) "Sal," I said, "what is it you do better than any human bein' on
the face of the earth?" And what I answered myself was, "Beller!" So that's what I did. I turned around, took a deep breath and gave a shout. (And she does.) And those four bears stopped cold in their tracks, tucked their tails behind their legs, and took off for the forest! And do you know what? 'Bout three months later when those cubs found themselves without a mama, they took on a vote on who they most wanted to raise 'em and guess who won?! Just guess! (Encouraging audience response.) That's right! Me! It was me they wanted to bring 'em up! And did I take those three cubs in and care for 'em--and most important, did I teach 'em how to beller the heebie jeebies outta anybody who tried to twist their tails?! (2ND, 3RD and 4TH PLAYERS ENTER from the back of the theater.)

2ND PLAYER: Sal Fink--queen of the keelboats!
3RD PLAYER: Flower of the flatboats!
4TH PLAYER: With a red turkey feather in her hat signifying she's a gen-u-ine river champeen!
2ND PLAYER: Sal's a legend!
3RD PLAYER: She's an original!
4TH PLAYER: She's one of a kind!
SAL: Straight from the river highways and byways of the great Midwest!
2ND PLAYER: There's tall tales and story tales told in this country, and proverbs and jokes and songs and dances!
ALL: Dances?! (The guitar player strikes up "Buffalo Gals." They all sing and do a few steps to the reel as, from the back of the theater, P.T. BARNUM ENTERS. He wears a flashy suit jacket and a derby and is as slick as a snake oil salesman. He waves and greets the audience. ALL sing.) Buffalo gals, woncha come out tonight, Woncha come out tonight, woncha come out tonight? Buffalo gals woncha come out tonight, And dance by the light of the moon?!
P.T. BARNUM: (To audience.) Yarns--tall talk! Whoppers--stretcher--windies--fish stories--lough stories! Drawing the long bow--taking the rag off the bush--calling the dog! That's what people call folk tales!
PLAYERS: Folk tales?! (SOUND EFFECT.)
BARNUM: All over this country--and a fine country it is--people have names for folk tales!
PLAYERS: Folk tales! (SOUND EFFECT.)
2ND PLAYER: Talking tales--Ghost stories--Noodle stories--
BARNUM: America's stories!
3RD PLAYER: Our stories!
BARNUM: And who am I, you might ask, to be telling you this? So
go ahead, ask me. (To the children, directing the response.)
Just say: Who are you?! (And the children say: Who are
you?!) I'm glad you asked that! (A flourish on the kazoos.)
SAL: And now--
2ND PLAYER: And now--
3RD PLAYER: We have the honor--
4TH PLAYER: We have the privilege--
ALL: We have the pleasure!
SAL: Of introducin'--
2ND PLAYER: That celebrated impresario--
3RD PLAYER: That renowned showman--
4TH PLAYER: That peddlar not of wares but of wits and wisdom--
SAL: The man who once was wrecked on a desert island and tried
to sell a map to the natives--
BARNUM: Phineas Taylor Barnum! (Going into the audience.) I've
been everywhere worth being--seen everything worth
seeing--and everything I've done and seen, I've brought back
to you, the good people of this great land—that's right, ladies
and gentlemen—for one day--
2ND PLAYER: (Interrupting BARNUM, who is not pleased with the
interruption.) And one day only!
BARNUM: P.T. Barnum's Museum of American Folk Tales--
ALL: Folk tales?! (SOUND EFFECT.)
BARNUM: --and legends will be appearing in your town! For one
day--
2ND PLAYER: (Again interrupting a displeased BARNUM.) And
one day only!!
BARNUM: --you will be bale to feast your eyes on the true
immortals of this pro-digious country! For one day--
2ND PLAYER: (Interrupting.) And one day only!!
BARNUM: (To the 2ND PLAYER, with much outraged dignity.) You
know, you're starting to bother me! (And as he turns back to
the audience, the 2ND PLAYER retaliates with an instrumental
raspberry.) As I was saying—For one day— (He quickly looks
back, but the 2ND PLAYER is silent. Then, as he faces front
again--) 

PLAYERS: And one day only!!!! (They strike a pose.) P.T.
Barnum's Museum of American folk tales—folk tales?!! (SOUND
EFFECT.) And legends will be appearing in your town!
(SOUND EFFECT.)
BARNUM: (As the PLAYERS hold their pose.) Prepare to be amused, a-mazed, dazed, de-lighted and astounded! Prepare to be enlightened!

SAL: Edified!

2ND PLAYER: Entertained!

3RD PLAYER: See the roping of Texas steers!

4TH PLAYER: Wild elk riding!

BARNUM: Trick shooting!

SAL: Bucking broncos!

BARNUM: (In all seriousness.) Before the show begins, I wish to impress upon you that what you are about to witness is not a performance in the common sense of that term, but an exhibition of skill, courage, individual excellence and--

MAYOR: (Rising out of audience.) Hogwash!

BARNUM: (Confronting MAYOR.) I beg your pardon?

MAYOR: How do we know that this show of yours isn't just a bunch of hot air?

BARNUM: I'm glad you asked that. Because my good woman (man) the management—that's me—vouches for the truth and accuracy of all the acts in this show!

MAYOR: And who's gonna vouch for the management?

BARNUM: Are you calling me a fraud?

MAYOR: No, sir.

BARNUM: I'm glad to hear it.

MAYOR: I'm calling you a liar!

BARNUM: Never have I been so insulted!

SAL: Yes, you have.

MAYOR: (Crossing to BARNUM.) I'm the Mayor of this fair city, and I say let the people decide! I say—as I've always said—let the will of the people prevail! (Encouraging applause for her comments.) Mr. Barnum, why not give us a sample of your show? And if we decide you're on the level, we'll let you put it on!

BARNUM: And if not?

MAYOR: We'll hog tie you, tar and feather you, and run you out of town on a rail!

BARNUM: An interesting dilemma. (To the PLAYERS.) All in favor of giving this audience a rousing sample of our show, say aye! (And the company votes yes, with a few of the slackards having to have their hands raised for them. BARNUM goes back to the audience with flourish.) All right then! Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages! It is my pleasure to present to you, P.T. Barnum's Museum of
American folk tales--

PLAYERS: Folk tales?! (SOUND EFFECT.)

BARNUM: --And legends! (The 3RD PLAYER places a sign on the easel.)

3RD PLAYER: Sal Fink and the River Pirates! (The 2ND, 3RD and 4TH PLAYERS don pirate garb, clustering to one side of the stage, while the 5TH PLAYER first sets up a plywood tree on one side of the playing area, then mans the instruments.)

SAL: One day I was out in the woods, just mindin' my own business as usual--

ALL: As usual!

SAL: When I found myself surrounded by a band of pirates! (And the pirates leap in and surround her, scowling, snorting, growling, scratching and just generally acting cantankerous.)

SAL: (To the audience.) Now I'm usually a regular tornado, but this time I was plumb outnumbered!

PIRATES: We win, you lose! Nah-nah! (And they tie her up.)

PIRATE 1: Now what are we gonna do with her?

PIRATE 2: Got me.

PIRATE 3: Good question.

PIRATE 1: Why don't we hold her for ransom?

PIRATE 2: For what?

PIRATE 1: (Angrily.) Gold! Ponds! Pence! Cash! Bucks!!

PIRATE 2: Oh.

PIRATE 1: We send a note to her kin and say iffen they don't give us some dough, we dispose of her!

PIRATE 2: We what?

PIRATE 1: Throw her overboard! Cut bait! Sell the farm! Git rid of her!!

PIRATE 2: Oh.

PIRATE 3: That's a good idea! We'll git a bunch of money!

PIRATE 1: We'll git so much money we can move into town!

PIRATE 2: And git a house!

PIRATE 3: And git a horse!

PIRATE 1: And git a bathtub!

PIRATE 2/3: What fer? (Vaudeville-like SOUND EFFECT that will accompany all comy jokes: BA-DUM.)

PIRATE 3: But how are we gonna send the note? We cain't write!

SAL: So what? My Pa cain't read! (BA-DUM.)

PIRATE 2: I say we let her go. I'm scared of her.

PIRATE 1: She's jest a girl!

PIRATE 2: She's a loud girl!

PIRATE 3: She's a strong girl!

For preview only
PIRATE 1: Now jest a minute! We're pirates ain't we? (General agreement.) Well, let's act that way! Let's see a little bad! Let me see some mean! (And the PIRATES make faces, growl and grunt.) That's better! Now I reckon we better catch forty winks.

PIRATE 2: What?

PIRATE 1: Slumber! Sleep! Siesta! Snooze!

PIRATE 2: (With dignity.) Oh, you mean-- repose. (BA-DUM. And the PLAYERS lay down on their backs, feet to a pretend fire, and one by one, begin snoring vociferously.)

SAL: There they lay, the scruffy ruffians, a-sleepin' by the fire! I couldn't decide which one was the ugliest!

PIRATES: (Without sitting up, but pointing.) He is!

SAL: So I said to myself, Sal, you're not gonna stand for anymore such treatment! (Grunting with the effort.) So I burst the ropes that held me! (She collects squirt guns, yo-yos, and badminton paddles from the PIRATES, throws them OFFSTAGE and then loops the rope around their feet, hanging on to the end.) I collected all their nefarious weapons and tossed 'em into the brush--and then I tied their feet together all around the fire! And then I give that rope a mighty tug. (And she does, as she bellers right into their ears.) Snakes! (The PIRATES come to, squealing and yelling, their feet in the fire.)

PIRATES: Oww!

SAL: Ouch!

PIRATES: Oh, my foot!

SAL: Your foot? My foot!

PIRATES: Enjoy your hot feet, felias! (She takes a few steps into the audience.) I was outa there like a panther out of a pen! (Stopping to bellow.) Hi-i-i-ow-ow-ow-whoohh! (Proudly.) I heard tell that last beller woke up all the folks from the headwaters of the Ohio to the mouth of the Mississippi! (As the 2ND PLAYER dons her BESS CALL duds--skirt, man's hat, bandanna, the others sing a version of "Old Dan Tucker," to the accompaniment of the guitar and do a dance step or two.)

PLAYERS: (Sing.) Old Sal Fink's a fine old gal.
Washed her face in a old milk pail.
Combed her hair with a wagon wheel.
And died with a toothache in her heel.

Get outta the way, old Sal Fink.
The time is latter than you think!
Supper's over and dinner's cookin'.
Old Sal Fink's jes' standin' there lookin'!

SAL: (At end of song. To audience.) I'm Sal Fink—and I can wade across the Mississippi without gettin' wet!

BESS: (Challenging SAL.) Yeah, well, I'm Bess Call and I can lick my weight in wildcats!

SAL: (They're nose to nose now.) I can jump over my own shadow!

BESS: I can slide down a locust tree with a mountain lion under each arm and never get a scratch!

SAL: I can ride the river on the back of an alligator while standin' upright and singin' Yankee Doodle Dandy!

BESS: I've fought a duel with a thunderbolt! My clothes are made of bear hide. My bonnet's a hornet's nest. (The clincher with pride.) And my brother's Joe Call.

PLAYERS: (In awe.) Joe Call?!

SAL: (With proper respect.) The strongest man in America?

BESS: That's right! And I'm no weaklin' myself!

3RD PLAYER: No, sirs!

4TH PLAYER: No way! (SOUND EFFECT. Placing the sign on the easel.) Bess Call and the City Slicker!

BESS: (Giving the appearance of anything but.) Now I give the appearance of being calm as a pan of skimmed milk.

PLAYERS: Not exactly. (SOUND EFFECT.)

BESS: But just let me see some mean galoot pickin' on a little kid or a big bully tyin' tin cans on a kitty cat's tail and I charge right in! I squeeze up my face like so. (And she does, SOUND EFFECT.) And I stamp my feet like such. (And she does, SOUND EFFECT.) And they back right down.

PLAYERS: Yes, ma'am! (SOUND EFFECT.)

BESS: If I'd been born in the olden times you wouldn't never catch me sittin' around a castle bein' ladylike--wearin' one of them pointy hats and waitin' fer some prince to come a-lookin' fer me!

3RD PLAYER: No, sirs!

4TH PLAYER: No way! (SOUND EFFECT.)

BESS: I farm in the Adirondacks with my brother. That's in upstate New York, I'm proud to say. Well, one day, I was sittin' on a fence. (Perching up on a box, she mimes bending a horseshoe.) Jest bendin' a horseshoe back and forth as usual--

PLAYERS: As usual. (SOUND EFFECT.)

BESS: When this personage rode up.
5TH PLAYER/CITY SLICKER: (ENTERING with a derby and an English accent.) Excuse me, my good woman--

BESS: Now I might be a woman, but if I'm good or not is not fer you to be knowin'! (BA-DUM.)

CITY SLICKER: (Double take.) Quite so. I hail from England, where word has reached us of your brother's prowess.

BESS: (Instantly angry.) Joe doesn't neither have the prowess! We got shots fer that! (BA-DUM.)

CITY SLICKER: I meant your brother's skill as a wrestler.

BESS: A what?

CITY SLICKER: (Distinctly.) A wrestler.

BESS: Oh, you mean, a wrassler. (BA-DUM.)

CITY SLICKER: (With pomposity.) I'm a bit of a champion myself, Marquis of Queensbury rules.

PLAYERS: (With English accents.) Don't you know. (SOUND EFFECT.)

CITY SLICKER: And I've come here to challenge your sibling to a match!

BESS: Well, there ain't no siblin's here. Their place is further on up the road. (BA-DUM.)

CITY SLICKER: I mean--I'd like to wrestle your brother.

BESS: Why didn't you say so? Joe is gone right now, but you're welcome to wait.

CITY SLICKER: Righto! Pip, pip, cheerio!

PLAYERS: Huh?

CITY SLICKER: (To the PLAYERS, annoyed.) I mean, okay!

PLAYERS: Why didn't you say so? (SOUND EFFECT.)

BESS: Course it might be awhile. I usually do any wrasslin' that's called fer while Joe's away.

CITY SLICKER: (In amazement.) You? (And he starts to laugh.) You? A--a--woman! (And he laughs uncontrollably.) Wrestl me? Champion of the five boroughs!

BESS: (Angry.) Ever since I was knee high to a katydid the one thing that riles me the most is some feller thinkin' he's better 'n stronger than me just cuz he's of the male persuasion and I'm of the female! Makes me mad enough to break a horseshoe in two! (And she mimes this. SOUND EFFECT.) Makes me mad enough to jump down his throat and swing on his tonsils! (SOUND EFFECT.)

CITY SLICKER: You're welcome to try, dear lady!

BESS: I am not your dear lady!

3RD PLAYER: No, ma'am!

4TH PLAYER: No way! (SOUND EFFECT.)
BESS: And iffen you think you kin git the better of me, you've got enough brass in your head to make a five pound kettle—and enough sap to fill it!

CITY SLICKER: I will wrestle you! (With insult.) It will be good practice for a real opponent.

BESS: (Really ticked off, to the audience.) Now seein' how this city slicker had just added insult to injury, you might be a-askin' just what did Bess do? So, go ahead, ask me. (To the children, directing their response.) Just say: Bess, just what did you do? (And the kids ask: Bess, just what did you do?) I'm glad you asked that! (And she does, indeed, role up her sleeves.) I rolled up my sleeves and got to work! Cuz once my mind is made up and my head is down, there ain't a bully nor a varmint I can't lick! (They circle around each other a few times, then BESS takes hold of the CITY SLICKER'S britches and coat and sends him flying OFFSTAGE. SOUND EFFECT.) I sent that city slicker a-flyin' over the fence and head long into a ditch!

CITY SLICKER: (OFFSTAGE.) I say, I'm getting my monocle all muddy! (Wearing a horse's head and making horse noises, an actor gallops in to the accompaniment of instrumental clip clops. BESS goes after him.)

BESS: And then I chased down his horse. (She grabs the horse and sends it flying OFFSTAGE. SOUND EFFECT.) And sent it flying over the fence!

CITY SLICKER: (OFFSTAGE.) I say, will someone please get this horse off me! (The CITY SLICKER and his horse run back across the stage at full throttle and are OUT again.)

BESS: And then both those varmints took off a-runnin' and didn't stop till they got back to England! Wherever it is! (BA-DUM.)

BARNUM: Let's hear it for Bess Call! (As BESS does a jig step or two with some children from the audience, the PLAYERS sing "Skip To My Lou" to the accompaniment of the guitar.)

PLAYERS: (Sing.) Lost my partner, what'll I do?
Lost my partner, what'll I do?
Skip to my lou, my darlin'!
Lou, lou, skip to my lou,
Lou, lou, skip to my lou,
Lou, lou, skip to my lou
Skip to my lou my darlin'!

1ST PLAYER: (At end of song.) Bess Call's a legend!
3RD PLAYER: She's an original!

End of Script Sample
SET DESCRIPTION

Only a few set pieces are needed to set mood and tone. One tree, or several, stand at either side of the playing area and should be stylized. The plywood cutout of an old time circus wagon stands UPSTAGE, behind which the actors play their instruments. An easel is DOWN RIGHT or LEFT on which signs denoting the various acts are placed. If anything more elaborate is desired, painted set pieces can be used to suggest a prairie or forest, a log cabin or distant mountain tops.

COSTUMES

All the costumes, with the exception of the ones the actors first appear in, should be hung on the trees within easy reach of the actors.

SAL FINK: Pants, a man’s shirt and jacket, boots, a cowboy hat with a red feather stuck in it.

P.T. BARNUM: Flashy suit jacket, derby.

PIRATES: Pirate hats.

BESS CALL: Skirt, bonnet, bandanna.

THE CITY SLICKERS: Derby, frock coat, English accent.

COWBOYS: Cowboy hats.

PECOS BILL: Cowboy shirt, large stetson.

VILLAIN: Black top hat, black mustache.

MOTHER: Apron, shawl.

DAUGHTER: Frilly bonnet.

VILLAINOUS COWBOY: Black stetson.

SALLY CATO: Spectacles, a mob cap, apron, boots.
SALLY CATO'S NEIGHBORS: Mob caps (Even the men.)

ANNIE OAKLEY: Begins in sparkly blouse and skirt; then puts on countrified jacket and hat; then for her trick shooting, puts on a fancy jacket or vest and a cowboy hat.

SHOOTING GALLERY OWNER: Straw boater, cane.

FRANK BUTLER: Fancy cowboy hat, either dandified cowboy vest or jacket.

PROPS

The signs should be preset on the easel, so the actors need only take off one sign to reveal another.

SIGNS FOR EASEL:
1. SAL FINK AND THE RIVER PIRATES!
2. BESS CALL AND THE CITY SLICER!
3. PECOS BILL!
4. SALLY CATO AND THE GIANT!
5. ANNIE OAKLEY!

A suggestion for the construction of the giant: In the production at the Des Moines Playhouse, the giant was a large, colorful, plywood cutout with a panel of material at the bottom that divided in half for SALLY CATO to disappear into and out of. The giant's head and arms were worked by strings.

SOUND EFFECTS

These are created by as many different and varied instruments as desired, the wilder the noises, the more offbeat, the better. Let your imagination run and use whatever instrument is necessary to create the scene you want. Some suggestions: whistles, penny whistles, kazoos, washboard and spoon, washtub, triangle, tambourine, bells, sandpaper blocks, drums, tom-tom, bongos, whoopee cushion, cow moo, chicken cluck. laughing ball, clattering teeth, several large mustard bottles—all squeezed at once. At least one of the actors should play the guitar.
PRODUCTION NOTES

This is a free wheeling show, full of energy and noise, fast paced and fun, with the same kind of blarney and excitement as an old time medicine show.

Quite often the actors speak directly to the audience, inviting them to participate in the stories, songs and actions. The costume changes should be made in plain view of the audience, and the instruments should also be played in sight of the audience—all of these things serving to involve the audience in the very mood and feeling of the show.

The PLAYERS, when not a specific character, function as chorus, echoing words and adding emphasis.

CAST

The cast may be doubled as indicated at the beginning.

If you wish to do the show with a larger cast, there may be as many PLAYERS as desired, with the specific parts played by different actors. They will enact all the other roles—pirates, cowboys, melodrama characters, FRANK BUTLER, shooting gallery owner, cyclone, townspeople—and also play the instruments. They can remain onstage throughout the production (as additional chorus members) or enter and exit as needed. In this kind of cast, the PLAYERS should wear some sort of generic frontier garb that they can add various other costume pieces to as they assume their additional roles.
We hope you’ve enjoyed this script sample.

We encourage you to read the entire script before making your final decision.

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