

*TELLING
WILLIAM TELL*

a play for young audiences by

Evan Guilford-Blake

synopsis and dialogue sample

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Telling William Tell synopsis

Geared to family audiences with an emphasis on children aged eight to 13, *Telling William Tell* is the retelling of the story of the mythical Swiss hero -- famed for shooting an apple off his son's head -- framed by a fictionalized story of Rossini writing his famed opera. The play utilizes a cast of 5m, 3w and 3 children. (More may be added.) One man must play the keyboards and one other instrument (ideally, the recorder) proficiently, and it is recommended that two of the women have some operatic ability. The play is in two acts and runs approximately 80 minutes.

The script interweaves the two stories, with an emphasis on the role of children in each, drawing attention to the parallels between Rossini's dilemma (the quest for artistic freedom) and Tell's (the effort for national liberty) -- and their respective resolutions; and those between the societies and political situations of 14th century Switzerland, 19th century France and contemporary America. Music-only excerpts from various Rossini works are used, and his very funny "Cats" vocal duet; and there is a short folk dance sequence.

In the play, ROSSINI -- plagued by his Paris Opera producer, GEORGES, to finish a commercial opera -- has elected instead to write his version of William Tell, the heroism of which reminds him of his own father's challenges to the Italian hierarchy (which is based, nominally, in historical fact). In order to convince Georges of the worth of the tale, Rossini (who doubles as TELL) "tells" him the story, acting it out (while frequent recorded musical backgrounds are used).

TELL's son, JEAN (12), is an independent boy who is as fiercely nationalistic as -- and more hot-headed than -- his father. During the course of the play Tell and his Swiss compatriots are assisted (and sometimes guided) by Jean, and his close friend ROXANE (12), a very outgoing and independent girl, as they seek to overthrow the Austrian tyranny that has controlled Switzerland for hundreds of years. The Austrians are led by GOVERNOR GESSLER (Georges, doubling), an almost-hissable despot, whose decree -- that all must bow before his hat on a pole in the town square -- sets the revolution in motion.

The work is both dramatic and comedic. It incorporates adventure, action, romance and farce in its shifts between Rossini's 19th century Paris and Tell's 14th century Altdorf. The play resolves with the two worlds coming together through the respective relationships of Tell and his son, and Rossini (who was childless) and a musically-inclined child (the son of Rossini's keyboardist), who has helped him to find the key to creating the music of the opera's famous overture.

While all the characters except Rossini are wholly fictional, the facts about his background, his time and Tell's, and the geography, are generally accurate. Of course there are sociological liberties: The play places a woman in a position of power, which is unlikely during the era, and it's equally unlikely that children of the farming classes would have been able to read as the play suggests. But, as a play for children, the social implications and "modern" identifications they need to make are important storytelling devices to help them understand the real point of the play: that there has always been the need for change, and that things have (and haven't) changed over the centuries, juxtaposed with how children can -- and should -- be allowed and encouraged to help effect whatever change is taking place.

TELLING WILLIAM TELL

CHARACTERS:

Telling William Tell requires 11 actors: 5 men, 3 women and 3 children (2m, 1f). It may be done with more. Those roles shown in **bold face** require doubling; the balance may be divided however the production chooses. The suggested cast breakdown with doubling is:

Gioacchino Rossini/William Tell

Georges Meister, producer of the Paris Opera/Governor Johann Gessler

Jean Tell, a boy, age 12/Giovanni, Luigi's son

First Keyboardist/Peter-the-Rover/Luigi Boccino

Roxane Gervais, a girl, age 12

Hans Schmidt, a boy, age 10

Karl, an Austrian soldier/Marcel Lafleur

Suzanne Tell, Jean's mother/Marie Berné, an opera singer/Corinne Villiers

Ariadne Gervais, a townswoman of Altdorf. Roxane's Mother/Simone Berné, an opera singer/A Woman of Altdorf

Britta Baumann/Mathilde, Rossini's housekeeper/Marguerite Villiers

Robért Weisz/Gerhard Schmidt (Hans's father)

THE SETTINGS:

Paris, 1829. Rossini's music room.

Altdorf, a Swiss village, and environs. 1307

ACT I: Scene i: Rossini's music room. A morning in July, 1829/Altdorf and environs, October, 1307

 Scene ii: ROSSINI's music room, early the same afternoon/Rütli Meadow, late the same evening

ACT II: ROSSINI'S music room, about 4:00 the same day/Altdorf town square, a few days later

Production history

PRODUCTION: First Stage, Atlanta (Commission: 2002)

HONORS: Winner, Jackie White Memorial Playwriting Competition (2006)

 Winner, Aurand Harris/NETC Children's Play Competition (2006)

TELLING WILLIAM TELL

CHARACTERS:

Gioacchino Rossini (Historical): The composer of almost 40 operas and the leading figure in French music in the first half of the 19th century. He operates from a great sense of urgency and tends to be abrupt with people who don't share that, or his very serious attitude toward music in general and his in particular. At the time of the play he is 37.

William Tell (Legendary): A leader in his community and renowned as an archer. He is a nationalist who believes strongly in his country's independence but -- generally -- is level-headed in how to go about achieving it. Devoted to his family and a good father.

Georges Meister (Fictional): Producer of the Paris Opera, the world's foremost company. A businessman who loves art but is much more concerned with the bottom line. And with food. He has a longstanding and effective working relationship with Rossini.

Governor Johann Gessler (Historical): Governor of the area of Switzerland in which the Tell family lives. He is a despot whose primary concerns are his own welfare and safety.

First Keyboardist (Fictional): An incompetent keyboardist hired to assist the injured Rossini compose his opera.

Peter-the-Rover (Fictional): A Celt living in Switzerland. Friend of the Tell family and wooer of Ariadne Gervais. He plays an instrument (ideally, the recorder) and is an ardent proponent of freedom -- his own and Switzerland's.

Luigi Boccino (Fictional): Another keyboardist hired to assist Rossini compose his opera. He is a capable and gentle man who loves his family, especially his prodigy son.

Jean Tell (Fictional): Tell's son, age 12. He is bright and imaginative, as well as headstrong, impetuous and independent, approaching manhood and learning the lessons he needs to achieve that status.

Giovanni Boccino (Fictional): Luigi's son, age 12. He is timid but friendly and confident of his musical abilities. Very bright.

Roxane Gervais (Fictional): Ariadne's daughter, age 12. Jean's best friend. She is extremely smart, more reasonable than Jean but also headstrong and willing to face risk to help Switzerland achieve its independence.

Hans Schmidt (Fictional): Gerhard's son, age 10. Like his father, he is meek and easily frightened. Hans is the voice of caution in his trio of friends that includes Jean and Roxane.

Karl (Fictional): An Austrian soldier, 25-40. He works for Gessler (whom he doesn't like) but avoids being a toady. He has sympathy for the plight of the Swiss, recognizes the problems Gessler is creating and tries to soften the impact of the Governor's decrees.

Marcel Lafleur (Fictional): 25-40. A leader of one of the Forest Cantons and of the Swiss revolution. He has a positive outlook, a protective personality and a sense of humor.

Suzanne Tell (Fictional): Jean's mother, 28-38. A good mother, concerned with the best interests of her son and husband, but, like them, committed to Swiss independence.

Marie Berné (Fictional): An opera singer, 28-38. A diva who is both naive and talented. There is a certain vacancy about her intellectual processing and she overcompensates for the impetuous errors she often makes.

Corinne Villiers (Fictional): An apple farmer, 28-38, Marguerite's daughter. She has "street smarts" though no formal education. Talkative and outgoing.

Ariadne Gervais (Fictional): 28-35, Roxane's mother. Strong, intelligent, committed to Swiss independence. Her husband was killed in the early stages of the fight; she misses him but doesn't grieve because she believes in what they both stood for.

Simone Berné (Fictional): An opera singer, 28-35. Marie's cousin. Also a diva, but much haughtier and not at all naive. She loves attention.

A Woman of Altdorf (Fictional): A street seller, 28-35. She believes in commerce and has no interest in the politics of the Swiss/Austrian struggle.

Britta Baumann (Fictional): 40-65. The leader of one of the Forest Cantons and one of the architects of the Swiss freedom movement. She is wise, strong and capable.

Mathilde (Fictional): 40-65. Rossini's housekeeper. She is patient with Rossini and protective of him, and appreciates his skills, though she has no knowledge of music and not much curiosity about it.

Marguerite Villiers (Fictional): 63, an apple farmer. Corinne's mother. Like her daughter, she has "street smarts" though no formal education. Talkative, outgoing -- and she doesn't suffer fools at all.

Robért Weisz (Fictional): 30-40. A leader of one of the Forest Cantons and of the Swiss revolution. He is the most physical and least intellectual among the leaders. A good man, though he tends toward gruffness and impatience.

Gerhard Schmidt (Fictional): 30-40. Hans' father. A man who is reluctant to disturb the status quo. He is timid and anti-revolution because he is afraid of the consequences of speaking out and acting on its behalf. He also woos Ariadne.

Preshow music up: MUSIC CUE #1. **ACT I, scene i:** ROSSINI'S music room. A morning in mid-July, 1829.

IN BLACK: MUSIC -- played poorly -- is heard. **AT RISE:** ROSSINI is discovered at his desk, a music manuscript before him. The FIRST KEYBOARDIST plays the piano.

ROSSINI

No, no, no! The right hand is *legato*, the *left* hand is *staccato*. I've told you that twenty times, man!

FIRST KEYBOARDIST

I'm sorry, Master Rossini. Shall I play it again?

ROSSINI

Again? You haven't played it yet! All you've done is - tinkle the keys.

FIRST KEYBOARDIST

I'm sorry, Master Rossini. It's a very difficult piece.

ROSSINI

Sorry! Hmp! When I was a *child* I could have learned it in minutes.

FIRST KEYBOARDIST

I didn't know they even had pianos back then.

ROSSINI

What was that?

(Unseen, GEORGES enters.)

FIRST KEYBOARDIST

I'm *sorry*, Master Rossini. I'll practice more for next time.

ROSSINI

Next time! I have an opera to compose. And barely a week left to complete it. With this wrist. If you can't play for me, *how* shall I finish an opera in one week?

GEORGES

You've done it before. Several times. To my endless consternation.

ROSSINI

Monsieur Meister! Good morning!

(Ironically)

How nice of you to come all this way, *mio amico*. Did you have a pleasant walk?

GEORGES

I did! The fresh air was invigorating. You should try it.

ROSSINI

Unfortunately, I rarely have the leisure to, because *I* must have my "pianist" play the same passage several dozen times before he gets it right!

FIRST KEYBOARDIST

I beg your pardon, sir!

ROSSINI

And beg you should! Now go. And don't bother to come back!

FIRST KEYBOARDIST (TOGETHER) GEORGES
Good day!, "Master" Rossini. Gioacchino, what are you ---
(HE exits.)

ROSSINI
Utterly useless. No sense of timing, and even less of rhythm. How do you manage to find these people?

GEORGES
This is the third one you've dismissed, Gioacchino!

ROSSINI
I don't care if it's the thirty-third, Georges! Find someone who can play a keyboard with some - sense of what music's about!

GEORGES
I find who I can afford. Producing opera is expensive. -- Well, how is it coming?

ROSSINI
I ... don't know.

GEORGES
What?! ... Why, Gioacchino? You've done it a dozen times: Spectacle, comedy, sopranos and a dash of drama. And this time there's
("Dramatically")
Gustave's mystery. What more do you need?

ROSSINI
This one, this one is - different.

GEORGES
It had better not be *too* different. Paris is used to you. And that's what sells.

ROSSINI
Georges: I've written thirty-eight operas in less than twenty years. And most of them are forgettable trifles.

GEORGES
Not at all forgettable. And they're very successful trifles. *Barber of Seville, The Italian Girl in Algiers, Cinderella*. The public loves them.

ROSSINI
But *I* don't love them. They were - jobs. I *want* some satisfaction. Look at my life, Georges!: I compose, I eat, I sleep; I compose again. I have no children, I have no family, I have no *life* except the opera.

GEORGES
Have a child. Have ten! No, don't: Children are difficult. Very *noisy*.

ROSSINI
Children are wonderful!

GEORGES
I warn you: They will take up too much of your time. I have five and I know!

ROSSINI

Perhaps... I would love to have a *bambino* someday, someone I can pass on to this - love of music I feel; but ...

GEORGES

Mm.

ROSSINI

So -- if music must be my whole life, I want to write something that, will - light a fire in all those who hear it, throughout the world for years to come. Something that, for the rest of *my* life, I will remember. That I'll *want* to remember.

GEORGES

Write *that* opera next year.

ROSSINI

But this story. This - man...

GEORGES

Gustave?!

ROSSINI

William T--- Oh. -- No, a --- another man.

GEORGES

What "another" man?

ROSSINI

It's - an idea *I* had. About - a farmer.

GEORGES

A farmer. Farmers are peasants!; and an *opera* about a farmer at the Paris Opera?! Nonsense! The Paris Opera is the most renowned opera company in the world!

ROSSINI

Perhaps. But *I* am the most renowned composer in the world. Others may bow before it, but the flag of the Paris Opera is not one *I* need salute.

GEORGES

Bah! A farmer. We cannot have another failure, like *Le Comte Ory*, Gioacchino.

ROSSINI

A fluke.

GEORGES

An expensive fluke. Perhaps. Or perhaps you *have* lost your touch. There are those who suggest I ---

ROSSINI

I will compose great operas *if* I can write about great subjects. And this *is*: A man and his son -- their growing-together as they fight for freedom, the - integrity of their beliefs. These are the things the people of *Paris* fought for just forty years ago. It *will* excite them, because they'll recognize *their* struggle.

GEORGES

Mmm. This man -- what is his name?

ROSSINI

Tell. William Tell.

GEORGES

Oh, yes. Swiss or something wasn't he. But he lived --- -- it was the fourteenth century: five hundred years ago!

ROSSINI

Tell's story still lives. And it's an exciting one!

GEORGES

Mm.-- All right: Tell it to me.

ROSSINI

What?

GEORGES

(As to a child)

Tell me the story of this William Tell. If -- *if* -- I like it I'll consider it. But remember! It *must* have action, bravery, heroism.

ROSSINI

It *does*, Georges.

GEORGES

And comedy!

ROSSINI

In abundance.

GEORGES

All right. Then let me hear it.

ROSSINI

Well... It --- No! I shall do better than that! I shall --- here. Sit here.

(HE moves GEORGES to his desk.)

GEORGES

What? Why! I'm perfectly comfor---

ROSSINI

I shall *show* it to you. The story, through the music, as the audience will see and hear it. Here: a score. And *here* is the stage.

(Indicating an area)

There is a small Swiss village called Altdorf, in the canton of Uri, and the area surrounding it -- do you know it?

GEORGES

Of course. My grandfather was born near there. In the heart of the Alps. All those counties on Lake Lucerne -- Uri, Schwyz, Unterwold: the Forest Cantons, they're called -- they are beautiful places. Wonderful sausage and beer. And mountains, lakes, trees everywhere.

ROSSINI

(HE sits and taps out a few notes. MUSIC
CUE #2 begins as HE moves to the "stage.")

Yes. Well: As you know, Switzerland, in those days, was under Austria's rule. When the opera begins, Tell is on his ---

GEORGES

Begins? What about the overture!

ROSSINI

It's ---. -- First the story. As the curtain rises, Tell is on the way to see his son, after meeting with --- well: Start at letter "B."

(HE picks up a large bow.)

GEORGES

What's *that*?

ROSSINI

It's a bow.

GEORGES

Yes. And they're used with arrows. But *why*?

ROSSINI

It's part of my inspiration. It was very expensive. It's supposed to be the one Tell used to ---

GEORGES

A bow as inspiration? Hm! You composers *are* odd.

ROSSINI

Which, of course, producers are not. But never mind. Read the score. You will - see it.

(HE moves across the stage. Lights change:
Switzerland. ROXANE and HANS gather nuts
near a tree. JEAN shoots his slingshot.)

JEAN

Got him!

ROXANE

Who?

JEAN

That Austrian soldier!

ROXANE

That's a tree, Jean!

JEAN

I'm just *pretending*, Roxane!

ROXANE

Well, you *should* be helping us. There won't be enough walnuts for your *Torte*.

JEAN

All right.

HANS

The, the Austrians came to our farm this morning...

ROXANE

What, Hans?

HANS

My father said I shouldn't tell anyone, but... they shot both our goats! Because my father couldn't pay the extra tax the new Governor put on them.

ROXANE

Both?! Where will you get your milk?

HANS

I don't know. They threatened to burn our wheat, too. If they do that, we won't be able to make bread. And without bread ...

(TELL, holding the bow ROSSINI exited with and another, smaller one, enters unnoticed.)

JEAN

They better not try to do that at our farm. I'd take this
(The slingshot)
and -- pow! Right in the nose!

TELL

Oh you would, would you.

JEAN

Oh -- um, I, um ---

TELL

You're not to use your slingshot to shoot at people. You've been told that before.

JEAN

But the Austrian soldiers ...

TELL

A slingshot is something for hunting, or for sport. Just like a bow is. Like *this* one is.
(HE offers the smaller bow to JEAN.)

JEAN

For me?!

TELL

I promised you one for your birthday, if you fed the goats every day.

JEAN

Thank you!

(With a deep bow)

Thank you, kind sir!

TELL

(HE returns the bow)
You are most welcome, my good man.

(JEAN "aims" the bow.)

Here, like this. -- You set the arrow notch onto the string, then lean it against the frame; then ...
Watch that big walnut.

(HE fires. A nut comes tumbling town.)

JEAN

Wow! Bull's-eye! Can I try?

TELL

(Handing him an arrow)
Here.

JEAN

You watch *that* one.

(HE loads, aims, shoots and misses.)

Phooey!

TELL

We'll practice. But remember: You don't shoot at people. No matter who they are.

HANS

The soldiers use *their* arrows against people. And to kill our animals. The new Governor tells them to.

ROXANE

They shot both of Hans's goats today.

TELL

I'm sorry, Hans. Tell your father he can borrow one of ours until he can sell your crops.
(KARL enters with a sheaf of paper, a rock and nails. HE hammers a sheet to the tree.)

JEAN

If they have crops to sell. The Austrians threatened to burn them! We won't let them *do* that, will we father.

TELL

Keep your voice down!

KARL

Good afternoon.

TELL

Good afternoon. What's that you're putting up?

KARL

(With a tinge of disenchantment)
What? Another order from Governor Gessler, of course.

(TELL investigates.)

JEAN
(Mimicking quietly)
Another order from Governor Gessler of course.

HANS
Be quiet, Jean!

JEAN
(A loud whisper)
Hans!

HANS
What?

JEAN
Give me one of your walnuts. A big one.

HANS
What are you going to do?

JEAN
You'll see.

HANS
You'll get us into trouble!

ROXANE
Here. Use this.
(JEAN creeps into position and loads the nut. ROXANE moves with him.)

Don't miss.

JEAN
How can I miss *that*?
(HE points to KARL's rear end, then fires.)

KARL
Ohhh!
(Startled, KARL throws his papers into the air and grabs for his rear.)

TELL
Jean, what are ---
(To KARL)
Are you all...

JEAN
Oh, here, let me ...

(TOGETHER) KARL
Ach! I'm fine! ...
(The CHILDREN gather the papers.)

TELL
I'm - I'm sure it was an acci---

(Ironically)
I'm sure.

KARL

But he ---

TELL

Wait! ...
(To JEAN)
So... you like tricks.

KARL

Oh, *no*, Sir. Tricks? No -- there was, there was a huge squirrel in the tree ---...

JEAN

With the biggest teeth I've ever seen.

ROXANE

And, and, and ---

HANS

And it was running down the tree.

ROXANE

But *I* thought it was going to jump on you.

JEAN

And bite you.

ROXANE

So I tried to hit it with this.
(The slingshot)

JEAN

But you missed.
(JEAN nods)
I see. A likely tale.

KARL

And you can be sure he will get a likely "reward" for telling it.

TELL

(Confidentially to TELL)
Oh... Don't be too hard on him. After all, he is only a boy. We were boys once, too. And we also liked tricks. Yes?

KARL

Well...

TELL

See? They have cleared everything up. No harm is done.

KARL

We're, we're sorry, sir.

JEAN

KARL

Of course you are. But -- since you like tricks -- why don't you come here.

JEAN

Me?

KARL

Yes, you! You're the trickplayer, aren't you.

JEAN

Well, I ... no. It, it wasn't a trick!

KARL

No? *I* think it was. Come!

JEAN

Father...?

TELL

... Go ahead, Jean. I'm right here.

KARL

Now -- *I could* report you to Governor Gessler, and *he* could order that you are placed in prison, where you would eat nothing but stale bread and cold gruel and warm water. Would you like that?

JEAN

No, sir.

KARL

No. I didn't think so. *I* think you would rather eat what's in your ear.

JEAN

In my ear?! I don't have anything to eat in my ear!

KARL

No? Then what's this?

(HE reaches to JEAN's ear and produces a fig.)

Isn't this something to eat?

JEAN

A - fig? In my ear?

KARL

And quite a delicious one, too, I would imagine. Would you like to try it?

(JEAN tests it with his hand, then tastes it.)

It's good, isn't it.

JEAN

Very good. Almost as good as chocolate-walnut *Torte*. Thank you.

KARL

Good! Now -- the next time you play a trick, you may not be so lucky to play it on someone who finds figs in ears. *Next* time, you may play it on someone who finds the road to prison a more - appropriate discovery. So be careful. All of you.