

THE WHITE ELEPHANT

A play for acting, based on a folk tale of India

Edel Wignell ©

first published in **Orbit: School Magazine**

The following play script is based on a folk tale of India. A woman, sworn to secrecy about her husband's visits to heaven – holding the tail of a magical white elephant – tells her neighbour and, when the story spreads, everyone tries to join in. All the children in a class can be involved.

If this play is printed in multiple copies for classroom use, ensure that the copyright notice, Edel Wignell ©, appears on each copy and that a remuneration notice is sent to Copyright Agency Ltd.

Cast

STORYTELLER 1

STORYTELLER 2 individuals or groups

STORYTELLER 3

SHANKAR - the Rajah's chief gardener

LAKSHMI - Shankar's wife

AIRAVATA - a white elephant

LAKSHMI'S FRIEND

LAKSHMI'S FRIEND'S FRIENDS (any number)

HUSBANDS OF THE WOMEN (any number)

CURIOUS WOMAN

Props (suggestions)

sun and moon - perhaps cardboard discs to show day and night

Rajah's garden - drawings on the blackboard

garden of heaven - mural

giant areca nut, betel leaf, mango and flower - cardboard or papier mâché

Settings

The Rajah's garden

Shankar and Lakshmi's cottage

The garden of heaven

The village street

SCENE ONE

The Rajah's garden with SHANKAR and LAKSHMI'S cottage in one corner. SHANKAR is working in the Rajah's garden. LAKSHMI is inside.

- STORYTELLER 1: Shankar is the Rajah's chief gardener. He lives in a cottage in the corner of the garden with his wife Lakshmi.
- STORYTELLER 2: He works from dawn to dusk, looking after flower beds, lawns and trees.
- STORYTELLER 3: He waters the flowers, weeds the beds, digs, rakes, sweeps the leaves and trims the hedges.
- SHANKAR: *(walking to the cottage and speaking to LAKSHMI)* What a day! I'm so tired.
(He gets into bed. Daylight changes to moonlight.) Why can't I sleep?
(He tosses and turns. AIRAVATA arrives in the garden, and begins plucking and nibbling the grass.)

Oh! It's midnight, and I haven't had a wink of sleep. (*Sitting up and looking out the window.*) A huge, white elephant! I've never seen a white elephant before!

STORYTELLER 1: Shankar remembered stories his mother had told him when he was a boy.
STORYTELLER 2: She told about the gods who dwelt in heaven.
STORYTELLER 3: Indra, their king, rode Airavata, a beautiful white elephant.
SHANKAR: This must be Airavata. If I hold on to his tail, he will take me back with him, and I will see the wonders of heaven. (*He tip-toes out and hides behind a tree near AIRAVATA.*)
STORYTELLER 1: Airavata eats the tender leaves of saplings.
STORYTELLER 2: He eats the half-ripened fruit of the mango trees.
STORYTELLER 3: Shankar waits, and doesn't protest, for he wants to go to heaven. (*Dawn is breaking.*)
AIRAVATA: (*trumpeting*) Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!
SHANKAR: It's time for Airavata to leave. (*He runs and grasps AIRAVATA'S tail.*)

SCENE TWO

The garden of heaven

STORYTELLER 1: Airavata rose like a bird.
STORYTELLER 2: He flew high above the clouds.
STORYTELLER 3: Shankar looked down.
SHANKAR: The Rajah's garden is just a speck, far away. And now we've landed. (*He lets go of AIRAVATA'S tail.*)
This must be paradise. (*He walks around.*)
Oh, what a beautiful garden!
STORYTELLER 1: Shankar spent the day touching the leaves...
STORYTELLER 2: ... looking at the flowers and ...
STORYTELLER 3: ... tasting the delicious fruit.
SHANKAR: What enormous trees - ten times larger than those on earth. The flowers are ten times as pretty. The fruit is ten times as tasty. (*The sun sets.*)
Oh, Lakshmi! You will be worrying about me. (*stopping and thinking*) I'll take her something - a present from heaven. This areca nut is as large as a coconut. This betel leaf is as big as a banana leaf.
STORYTELLERS: Shankar and Lakshmi loved chewing areca nuts and betel leaves.
AIRAVATA: (*trumpeting*) Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!
STORYTELLER 1: Shankar ran and grasped Airavata's tail.

SCENE THREE

The cottage and the village street

STORYTELLER 2: In a few minutes Shankar was back in the Rajah's garden.
STORYTELLER 3: He rushed home to his wife.
LAKSHMI: (*angrily*) Where have you been all this time?
SHANKAR: Don't be angry. See what I've brought you. (*He gives her the areca nut and the betel leaf.*)
LAKSHMI: Where did you get such giant-sized things?
SHANKAR: From heaven, of course. Listen! I'll tell you what happened.
STORYTELLER 1: Shankar told her the whole story.
STORYTELLER 2: At first she didn't believe him.
STORYTELLER 3: But, eventually, the nut and the leaf convinced her.

SHANKAR: You must keep this a secret. Be careful not to tell anyone.
LAKSHMI: I promise I won't tell.
STORYTELLER 1: But Lakshmi liked to talk, and found it difficult to keep her word.
STORYTELLER 2: And, when Shankar made another trip to heaven and returned with an enormous mango...
LAKSHMI: This is the most delicious mango I have ever tasted in my life.
STORYTELLER 3: ... it was harder still for Lakshmi to keep the secret.
STORYTELLER 1: From his third visit to heaven, Shankar brought back a giant flower...
STORYTELLER 2: ... whose fragrance filled the cottage.
(SHANKAR *goes out and works in the garden.*)
STORYTELLER 3: Soon after, Lakshmi's friend came visiting.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: (*sniffing*) What wonderful perfume you are using! Where did you get it?
LAKSHMI: That's not perfume. It's the fragrance of my giant flower.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Where did you get it?
LAKSHMI: Shankar gave it to me.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Where did he get it?
LAKSHMI: (*after a pause*) Can you keep a secret?
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Of course I can.
STORYTELLER 1: So Lakshmi told her friend the whole story.
LAKSHMI: Now promise you won't tell anyone.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: I promise.
STORYTELLER 2: But Lakshmi's friend was a gossip.
STORYTELLER 3: She hurried away and told her closest friend.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: Promise not to tell anyone.
LAKSHMI'S FRIEND'S FRIEND: I promise.
STORYTELLER 1: And so it continued until all the women in the town knew.
STORYTELLER 2: Then they told their husbands.
STORYTELLER 3: Before long, the whole town knew Shankar's secret.
STORYTELLER 1: One morning, everyone flocked to the cottage.
EVRYONE: Shankar! Take us on your next trip to heaven.
SHANKAR: (*angrily to LAKSHMI*) What a fool you are!
(*to the villagers*) All right. Come to the royal gardens tonight.

SCENE FOUR

The Rajah's garden at night, and the garden of heaven
STORYTELLER 1: That night, there was a strange scene.
STORYTELLER 2: Everyone gathered in the royal gardens and hid behind a tree.
STORYTELLER 3: The trees swayed in the wind, but the people were as still as statues.
(AIRAVATA *arrives and starts eating.*)
STORYTELLER 1: Even when Airavata appeared, no one made a sound.
STORYTELLER 2: They all stood as still as statues until dawn.
(*The dawn breaks.*)
AIRAVATA: (*trumpeting*) Whoo-hoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo-hoo!
STORYTELLER 3: Shankar beckoned. He rushed and grasped the elephant's tail.
STORYTELLER 1: Lakshmi held on to her husband's feet.
STORYTELLER 2: Her friend held Lakshmi's feet.
STORYTELLER 3: The friend's husband held his wife's feet.
STORYTELLERS: Another man held his feet. That man's wife held her husband's feet, and so on, and on.
STORYTELLER 1: Airavata rose into the air with a long chain of men and women trailing after him, the Curious Woman being the last.
STORYTELLER 2: Each one clung to the one above.
STORYTELLER 3: During the journey, the last woman was dying of curiosity.

CURIOUS WOMAN: (to her husband) Lakshmi told us that the heavenly fruit and flowers are very, very big. Ask your friend above to find out how big.

STORYTELLER 1: So the husband asked the man above him.

STORYTELLER 2: The man asked his wife, who asked the woman above her.

STORYTELLER 3: The woman asked her husband, who asked the man above him, and so on.

EVERYONE: (passing the message to the next person) How big are the fruits and flowers in heaven?
(The message reaches SHANKAR.)

SHANKAR: (to LAKSHMI) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.

LAKSHMI: (to her friend) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.

LAKSHMI'S FRIEND: (to her husband) You'll see for yourself when we reach heaven.

STORYTELLER 1: And so Shankar's reply moved along the chain to the curious woman at the end.

STORYTELLER 2: But she wasn't satisfied. She repeated the question.

CURIOUS WOMAN: (to her husband) How big are the fruits and flowers in heaven? I must know now.

STORYTELLER 3: So the question was repeated once more all along the chain until it came to Lakshmi.

LAKSHMI: (imploring) Please Shankar. You must tell her immediately how large are the fruits and flowers in heaven.

SHANKAR: (angrily) Each fruit is ten times as big as a fruit on earth. The areca nut was this big...

STORYTELLER 1: He let go of the elephant's tail to demonstrate with his hands, and...

STORYTELLER 2: ... the whole chain of people...

STORYTELLER 3: ... from Lakshmi down to the Curious Woman,

STORYTELLERS: ... came tumbling down to earth.

Source

Folk Tales from Asia for Children Everywhere, Book 4 (1975, Weatherhill, New York, and Heibonsha, Tokyo, sponsored by the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO)
ISBN: 978-1454-28-8