

# **The Spiriting of Burd Ellen**

**A play for youth groups  
in one act**

**Written by Ron Nicol**

**Spotlight Publications**

# **The Spiriting of Burd Ellen**

CAST(in order of appearance):

**Stage Manager**

**Stage Crew**

**Merlin the Magnificent**

**Childe Rowland**

**Burd Ellen**, his sister

**Queen Guinevere**, his mother

**Horses**

**Herdsman**

**Herd of Cows**

**Cowherd**

**Hens**

**Cockerel**

**Henwife**

**Elf Attendant**

**Elfin King**

**Burd Ellen's Shadow** (non-speaking mime)

**Knights, Courtiers, Elves**

Despite the apparent cast of thousands, "The Spiriting of Burd Ellen" is not intended to be a real epic, and can be performed by groups of all sizes. Several characters make only one appearance, so doubling and trebling is possible - with consequent opportunities for a variety of virtuoso performances by individual actors! Courtiers can double as Elves. The animals provide parts for many extras, but there can be as many or as few as desired - they're also a challenge for costume designers, although simple masks could be used.

Time & Place - mythical

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"The Spiriting of Burd Ellen" was runner-up in the Youth Plays Section of the Scottish Community Drama Association's *Play on Words 2004* playwriting competition.

*As the lights come up, the Stage Manager and Crew have just finished building the set - a simple representation of a church and its surroundings. One notices the audience and nudges another, who reacts, terrified at being in view. Gradually they all become aware and each reacts in his/her own way, scampering off or inching offstage trying to look nonchalant. Music plays as Childe Rowland and Burd Ellen enter, and start to throw a ball from one to the other. The lighting fades, a spot comes up C, and Rowland and Ellen freeze as Merlin enters and steps into the spot*

**Merlin** Greetings, mere mortals. I am Merlin the Magnificent. That same Merlin who served King Arthur well. I can tell and foretell, see and foresee all things under the sun and beyond. You may have heard of me, and of the main character in our story - Childe Rowland. Now Rowland was one of the sons of King Arthur, and Burd Ellen was his dear sister. He loved her well, and cared for her as brothers should always care for their sisters.

*He makes passes with his staff and light returns - there should be a bright spot which throws a beam representing the sun across the stage. Rowland and Ellen carry out the actions described*

One day they were playing close to the churchyard. Rowland kicked the ball, and made it fly o'er the church. Ellen ran round to seek it.

*Magical 'spiriting' music plays as Ellen circles the church anticlockwise and exits. Rowland also exits, circling the church clockwise. Merlin waves his staff and the light changes, casting long shadows. He steps aside and music plays as Guinevere enters with her Knights and Courtiers, all moving in slow motion. Rowland re-enters and normal lighting is restored*

**Rowland** Mother! Mother!

**Guinevere** Rowland, where have you been?

**Rowland** Burd Ellen and I were playing by the church yonder. By an unfortunate chance I sent the ball into the church-yard and Ellen went to fetch it. Long I waited, mother, and longer still, but she came not back again. I sought her east, I sought her west, I sought her up and down, but she's nowhere to be found.

**Guinevere** You mean she's disappeared?

**Rowland** Like dew on a May morning.

**Guinevere** Then we must send for Great Merlin the Magician. He can tell and foretell, see and foresee all things under the sun and beyond.

**Merlin** I'm here, your Grace.

*He steps forward behind Guinevere, who jumps with surprise*

**Guinevere** Whoops! Don't do that, Merlin, how often must I tell you? It makes one's poor heart go pitter-patter pitter-patter. It's most distracting. Why can't you knock and wait like ordinary people?

**Merlin** Because I'm not an ordinary person, Your Grace. I'm a Great Magician. Merlin the Magnificent, to be exact. It's not my way to knock and wait. It's my way to suddenly appear and cause great consternation and the pitter-pattering of people's hearts.

**Guinevere** But not so suddenly, Merlin, and *not* directly behind one. Give a discreet cough to let one know you're there. *(Merlin breaks into a fit of over the top coughing)* That's not quite what one had in mind, Merlin.

**Merlin** I apologise, great Lady. It won't happen again. *(Bowing deeply)* I'm here, your Grace. What can I do for you?

**Guinevere** It's my dear son, Merlin. My dear Childe Rowland.

**Rowland** Yes Merlin, can you tell me where my sister's gone?

**Merlin** First you must tell me what happened. Carefully now. Leave out no detail.

**Rowland** I was playing with Burd Ellen by the church, and I kicked the ball over the wall. Burd Ellen ran to get it - and then - well, she just disappeared! I looked for her everywhere, but I couldn't find her.

**Merlin** Which way did she run? To the right or to the left of the church?

**Rowland** To the right. It was the nearest way.

**Merlin** Which way was the sun shining?

**Rowland** It was shining full on her face.

**Merlin** So she ran contrary to the sun's course. And her shadow, where was that?

**Rowland** Behind her.

**Merlin** Ah, Rowland, then this is the way of it. This will happen when people forget and run widdershins.

**Guinevere** Widdershins, Merlin?

**Merlin** Anticlockwise. When folk run against the light, their shadows are out of sight and can't be taken care of properly. That's when they're in the greatest danger.

**Guinevere** From what, Merlin? Tell one quickly, what happened to one's dear daughter?

**Merlin** When she was running round the church widdershins, fair Burd Ellen must have been carried off with her shadow by Elves. Elves have power when folk go against the light.

**Guinevere** But where will she be now?

**Merlin** I fear she may be in the Dark Tower of the King of Elfland.

*A great indrawn breath of horror from everybody*

**Rowland** Then I must rescue her!

**Knights** Hurrah!

**Guinevere** One moment, Rowland dear. Merlin, surely this isn't a task for one's own dear son. I mean - the King of Elfland! The Dark Tower! Shouldn't one send one of one's boldest knights to carry out this dreadful undertaking?

*The Knights react with horror. Quite sensibly they've no intention of volunteering for anything so hazardous, and they react appropriately throughout the following - but not too obviously in case Guinevere notices*

**Merlin** Your mother's right, Rowland. None but the boldest knight in Christendom will be able to bring her back. Woe be to the man or mother's son who attempts the task if he be not well taught beforehand what he is to do.

*The Knights pretend modesty, each indicating that one of the others would be a much better volunteer*

**Rowland** I'll do it, or perish in the attempt!

**Knights** Hurrah! Good lad, Rowland! *Etc.*

*The Knights are enthusiastic*

**Guinevere** Perish? Oh, one's goodness! Must you, Rowland?

**Rowland** Mother! It's your daughter who's missing. Our fair Burd Ellen. I love her dearly, and cannot leave it to some bold old knight to rescue her. I'm her brother, and must save her by myself.

**Knights** Hurrah!

**Rowland** Merlin, you can tell and foretell, see and foresee all things under the sun and beyond, tell me how man or mother's son may find fair Burd Ellen in the Dark Tower of the King of Elfland.

**Merlin** My son, if you undertake this task, there are two things you must remember. Simple they are to say, but hard they are to perform. One thing is to do, and one thing is not to do.

**Guinevere** This sounds awfully complicated, Merlin.

**Merlin** (*ignoring her*) Rowland, the first thing you must do is this. Once you have entered the Land of Faery, whoever speaks to you, you must out with your sword and cut off his head. In this you must not fail.

**Guinevere** One moment, Merlin. My Rowland can't go round cutting people's heads off. I won't allow it. He's been brought up to be kind to... (*Prompting*) Come on Rowland, to be kind to...

**Rowland** To be kind to - to - small birds and furry animals...?

**Guinevere** No, no. To fair ladies and little children.

**Rowland** Fair ladies and little children. And never to strike in anger, and - and never to take advantage of one's opponent, such as to strike him in the - in the back - as befits a true knight.

**Guinevere** No, Rowland - never to strike one's opponent in the back, which befits *not* a true knight. You must understand, Merlin, Rowland's been trained in chivalry. He went to Knight School, you know, and took evening classes. He must only strike at knights in tournaments and such-like - and absolutely never

never ever to kill.

**Merlin** But suppose your opponent should wish you harm, Childe Rowland. Worse still, what if he might make an attempt upon your life? Worst of all, what if he would kill you, Rowland? What then?

**Rowland** Oh, that's different - I'd cut his head right off before he got a chance to do the same to me!

**Knights** Hurrah!

**Rowland** The only thing is - if I didn't manage to cut his head off he might cut *my* head off before I could stop him! I don't think I'd like that!

**Merlin** Aha!

**Guinevere** Quite right. And there's another factor to be taken into consideration, Merlin. (*Whispering*) There are children in the audience...

**Merlin** Ah. Well – perhaps you could merely strike them with the flat of the blade.

**Rowland** What if I hurt them? They might hurt me back.

**Merlin** (*sighing*) I'll give you a magic wand. Whoever speaks to you, you must strike them with the wand, and they will be turned to stone.

**Guinevere** Oh! Doesn't that hurt?

**Merlin** (*beginning to wish he hadn't got involved*) How should I know?

**Guinevere** But Merlin, you're a Great Magician. Merlin the Magnificent. You can tell and foretell, see and foresee all things under the sun and beyond. You must be able to tell if being turned to stone hurts.

**Merlin** (*vaguely*) Well - I shouldn't think so. (*Doubtfully*) Probably. (*Firmly*) No, it doesn't. (*He produces a wand - by magic if possible*) Now Rowland, remember, whoever speaks to you, you must strike them with this wand and they will be turned to stone. In this you must not fail. The second thing - after you enter the Land of Faery, you must bite no bit, nor sup no drop...

**Guinevere** But Merlin, if he can't eat or drink, how will he keep his strength up?

**Merlin** ...for if in Elfland he should bite one bit or sup one drop...

**Guinevere** He'll be ever so hungry.

**Merlin** ...never again will he see Middle Earth! So there!

**Guinevere** But, Merlin...

## **The Spiriting of Burd Ellen**

A lively, inventive, and often hilarious play for youth groups with a mediaeval setting. Runner-up in the 2004 Play On Words competition.

### **Plot Summary**

"The Spiriting of Burd Ellen" tells of the mysterious disappearance or spiriting of Burd Ellen, the daughter of King Arthur. Her brother Rowland consults the wizard Merlin, who suspects that Ellen has been spirited away by the Elves. Rowland sets out on a journey to the Dark Tower in the Land of Faery, where after a number of strange encounters he comes face to face with the eccentric King of Elfland, whom he has to outwit in order to save the day and his sister.

"...a lovely play - a wonderful asset to children's theatre ..." (*Scene*)

Playing time: 40 minutes