

AWAY FROM THE MANGER

by Elizabeth M. Topp



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CAST*(In order of appearance)***NARRATOR***Teen or adult.***SHEPHERDS***Four to eight men (and women) of few words.***WISE MEN***Three intellectual types.***STARS***As many as available; giggly and shy. Good parts for children.***INNKEEPER'S WIFE***A very busy housewife.***BARN ANIMALS***Four to eight. Can include cows, pigs, chickens, etc.**Also good for children.*

SYNOPSIS

We're all familiar with the groups of people and animals that visited the manger in Bethlehem. This play is a humorous introduction to some folks who *didn't* go. We're introduced to a group of shepherds who didn't go because it wasn't in their job description, to a group of Wise Men who were busy attending a conference on "Celestial Signs That Will Indicate the Birth of the Messiah," to some stars that were too shy to shine, to the Innkeeper's wife who was busy with holiday preparations, and to her barn animals, who didn't think they were good enough. The audience is challenged to examine its reasons for staying "away from the manger" at Christmas.

PRODUCTION NOTES

"Away from the Manger" was performed for the first time in December of 1989 by the Sunday school classes of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Lawrence, Kansas. The play is designed to be flexible and easy to produce. The production notes listed below are suggestions based on our experience; other congregations should feel free to adapt the play to suit their own needs.

Casting and Rehearsals

The most difficult parts are the Innkeeper's Wife and the Wise Men. Youth group members (junior high or high school age) are ideal for these parts or they may be played by adults. The easiest parts are the stars, which are well suited for children in the early elementary grades. The parts of the barn animals and shepherds are of intermediate difficulty, and are suited for students in the late elementary grades.

A child with good reading skills and a loud voice should be cast as the Narrator. Due to the vocabulary used, this child will probably be junior high school age or older. The Narrator's part may be shared by two or more children if desired, or you may want to ask an adult to read the Narrator's part.

The play is designed so that most of the rehearsals can be done in small groups. We found it convenient to cast the play so that each group of characters (e.g., the stars) was made up of members of the same Sunday school class. The individual parts may then be rehearsed as part of the regular Sunday school time. The whole cast should rehearse together in costume on one or two occasions just before the performance.

Costumes, Props and Character Notes

Costuming is very flexible; elaborate costumes are not required. Some suggestions for costuming and notes about the individual characters are listed below.

SHEPHERDS — Old sheets or fabric samples tied with sashes or ropes make effective shepherds' costumes. The shepherds' job descriptions may be written on plain paper and rolled to look like scrolls.

WISE MEN — Costumes may be any convenient long robes; floor-length choir robes were used with success. The Wise

Men will find it easier to memorize their parts if they notice that they always speak in the same order.

STARS — The costumes may be large five-pointed stars cut out of very stiff poster board and fastened securely to flat wooden slats made for stirring paint. These may be decorated with shiny metallic papers and tinsel streamers. If time permits, the children may want to help decorate their stars.

INNKEEPER'S WIFE — This part may be interpreted in a variety of ways, from a "traditional" housewife wearing her house cleaning clothes to a working woman wearing a power suit. The Innkeeper's Wife should feel free to improvise. She needs four shopping bags containing: 1. presents, 2. a turkey, 3. the trimmings (stuffing, cranberry sauce, etc.) and 4. Christmas decorations (tinsel, a wreath, etc.).

BARN ANIMALS — May wear ears or headpieces representing cows, pigs, chickens and other barnyard residents. Many toy and novelty shops sell plastic noses for different types of animals.

NARRATOR(S) — One or more children may share the job of reading the Narrator's part. The part need not be memorized; the Narrator(s) may stand behind a podium and read directly from the script. A special costume is not necessary.

1 **AT RISE:** As the play begins, the NARRATOR is on-stage alone,
 2 standing behind a podium. The NARRATOR stays in this
 3 position throughout the play, and may read his/her part.

4
 5 **NARRATOR:** Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, a baby
 6 named Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem. I'm
 7 sure you've all heard quite a bit about Jesus' birth before.
 8 You know that there were shepherds, and Wise Men, and
 9 stars, and barn animals around when he was born. That's
 10 quite a list, but there really weren't many there when
 11 you think about it. You'd think that the whole world
 12 would have shown up for the birth of its Savior.

13 We hear a lot about the people and animals that
 14 went to the manger. Let's find out about the ones that
 15 stayed away. (*SHEPHERDS enter as a group down one of the*
 16 *aisles of the church. One of them is carrying a scroll — their*
 17 *"union contract." They are chewing on pieces of straw or grass.*
 18 *NARRATOR calling to the SHEPHERDS:*)

19 **Hello over there!** (*No response from the SHEPHERDS,*
 20 *who continue chewing on their straw*) **Er, um, pardon me,**
 21 **folks . . .** (*Still no response.*) **Nice day, isn't it?** (*No response.*
 22 *NARRATOR thinks for a minute, then yells:*) **Yo! You guys!**
 23 (*SHEPHERDS turn immediately toward the NARRATOR, but*
 24 *say nothing.*) **Say, aren't you people shepherds?**

25 **SHEPHERDS:** Yep.

26 **NARRATOR:** So, did you go to Bethlehem to see the baby?

27 **SHEPHERDS:** Nope.

28 **NARRATOR:** But I thought there were supposed to be
 29 shepherds there. That must have been some other
 30 shepherds.

31 **SHEPHERDS:** Yep.

32 **NARRATOR:** Well, why didn't all of you go? (*The SHEPHERD*
 33 *with the union contract stands up and starts to walk over to the*
 34 *NARRATOR.*) **What's that?** (*The SHEPHERD hands him the*
 35 *union contract. It's rolled up to look like a scroll. The*

- 1 NARRATOR *unrolls it.*) **A union contract?**
 2 **SHEPHERDS:** **Yep.**
 3 **NARRATOR:** **Let me see what it says . . .** (*Clearing his throat*
 4 *loudly before reading*) **A-hem! Shepherds' Union Local**
 5 **Number 404 — Minimum acceptable working conditions.**
 6 **Article Five: No shepherd of union Local 404 shall be**
 7 **required under any circumstances to venture more than**
 8 **one hour's distance from his (or her) usual "field abiding."**
 9 **The aforementioned shepherd may venture further if he**
 10 **(or she) so chooses, but only if the weather isn't cold, the**
 11 **sheep aren't sick, and he (or she) really feels like it.**
 12 (*Putting the scroll aside*) **Let me see if I've got this**
 13 **straight . . . You didn't go to see the baby because it's not**
 14 **in your job description, is that right?**
 15 **SHEPHERDS:** **Yep.**
 16 **NARRATOR:** **You guys don't take many risks, do you?**
 17 **SHEPHERDS:** (*Pleased with themselves*) **Nope.**
 18 **NARRATOR:** **Guess you never get hurt that way. But you**
 19 **missed out on a really big event . . .** (*SHEPHERDS stand*
 20 *up and start to wander back down the aisle, chewing on their*
 21 *straw.*) **Where are you going? I wanted to ask you a few**
 22 **more questions.** (*A SHEPHERD walks back and hands the*
 23 *NARRATOR another scroll. NARRATOR opens the scroll and*
 24 *reads.*) **Article Six: No shepherd of union Local 404 shall**
 25 **be required under any circumstances to answer a lot of**
 26 **nosey questions from a complete stranger. A couple of**
 27 **questions, maybe. But not too many.** (*Rolling up the scroll*)
 28 **Guess they missed seeing the baby because they didn't**
 29 **want to change their routine. I guess we're all afraid to**
 30 **change sometimes.** (*The WISE MEN come up the aisle,*
 31 *chattering among themselves about theories and things like that.*)
 32 **Are you the three Wise Men?**
 33 **WISE MAN 1:** **Yes, indeed we are.**
 34 **WISE MAN 2:** **Absolutely.**
 35 **WISE MAN 3:** **No question about it.**

- 1 **NARRATOR:** You must be the ones that went to see the baby
 2 in Bethlehem. And you brought him gold, frankincense
 3 and myrrh, right?
- 4 **WISE MAN 1:** Well, actually we were a bit tied up that day . . .
- 5 **NARRATOR:** Tied up?
- 6 **WISE MAN 2:** Yes. You see, there was a very important
 7 scholarly conference that we absolutely had to attend.
- 8 **WISE MAN 3:** Yes, yes, terribly important, terribly
 9 important . . .
- 10 **WISE MAN 1:** Wouldn't have missed it, really. It was
 11 certainly an intellectual milestone.
- 12 **NARRATOR:** What was the conference about?
- 13 **WISE MAN 2:** I can't say that I remember exactly . . . but it
 14 was a *very* important conference.
- 15 **WISE MAN 3:** *(To WISE MAN 1)* Say, what was that conference
 16 about, anyway?
- 17 **WISE MAN 1:** Hmm . . . let me see . . . Oh! I remember now!
 18 The exact title of the conference was "Celestial Signs
 19 That Will Indicate the Birth of the Messiah: Theoretical
 20 and Technical Aspects."
- 21 **WISE MAN 2 and WISE MAN 3:** *(Excitedly, not necessarily in*
 22 *unison)* Yes, that was it! Exactly! Good of you to remember!
- 23 **NARRATOR:** "Celestial Signs . . ." Does that mean stars and
 24 things like that?
- 25 **WISE MAN 1:** Yes, exactly. You're a well educated child.
- 26 **NARRATOR:** So you must have spent a lot of time looking
 27 through telescopes . . .
- 28 **WISE MAN 2:** Well, no, actually. The conference was inside.
 29 There weren't even windows in the meeting rooms. That
 30 made it easier to see the slides.
- 31 **WISE MAN 3:** We were quite busy the whole week. I didn't get
 32 a chance to go outside at all.
- 33 **WISE MAN 1:** Nor did I.
- 34 **WISE MAN 2:** Nor I.
- 35 **NARRATOR:** Then you didn't see the star?

- 1 **WISE MEN:** *(All together)* What star?
- 2 **NARRATOR:** The huge star up in the sky. Some *other* Wise
- 3 Men followed it to a manger in Bethlehem. They say they
- 4 saw the Christ child.
- 5 **WISE MAN 1:** Nonsense! The “star-directed” theory has
- 6 never been proven!
- 7 **WISE MAN 2:** Very scanty evidence, very scanty evidence . . .
- 8 **WISE MAN 3:** Are you sure it wasn’t a rainbow? Many of the
- 9 more influential Wise Men are convinced that the sign
- 10 will be a rainbow.
- 11 **WISE MAN 1:** The star theory is definitely out. The rainbow
- 12 theory is much more credible.
- 13 **WISE MAN 2:** I personally favor the lightning bolt theory. So
- 14 dramatic!
- 15 **NARRATOR:** But you missed the baby!
- 16 **WISE MAN 3:** Couldn’t have been the right baby. The star
- 17 theory is out.
- 18 **WISE MAN 1:** Absolutely not.
- 19 **WISE MAN 2:** Couldn’t be. *(The WISE MEN begin to exit down*
- 20 *the aisle. As they go, they continue to discuss their favorite*
- 21 *theories.)*
- 22 **WISE MAN 3:** *(To the other WISE MEN, ignoring the NARRATOR)*
- 23 Yes, the lightning bolt theory *is* interesting. I was discussing
- 24 that with a friend just the other day . . .
- 25 **WISE MAN 1:** Let’s not forget the meteor shower theory.
- 26 **WISE MAN 2:** Ah, the meteor shower theory! A bit overrated,
- 27 if you ask me . . .
- 28 **WISE MAN 3:** Too vague.
- 29 **WISE MAN 1:** Indeed. *(The WISE MEN continue their discussions*
- 30 *until they’ve left the sanctuary.)*
- 31 **NARRATOR:** Well, it seems that these Wise Men were too
- 32 preoccupied with their theories to notice the coming of the
- 33 Christ child. Ideas can get in the way sometimes, especially
- 34 if you really like them. Speaking of stars, I’ll
- 35 bet you didn’t know that the star over the manger was

1 **actually supposed to be a whole bunch of stars of all**
 2 **different sizes. Kind of like a fireworks display. But some**
 3 **of the stars chickened out at the last minute. That looks**
 4 **like them over there.** *(The STARS enter down the aisle. They*
 5 *are very shy. They are giggling and whispering to each other.*
 6 *Some of them are hiding their faces behind their hands.)*

7 **NARRATOR: You are some of the best looking stars I've ever**
 8 **seen . . . but then I've never really seen a star up close**
 9 **before.** *(The STARS giggle and whisper to each other.)* **You**
 10 **must be young stars . . . that's why you're so bright.** *(The*
 11 *STARS giggle and whisper some more.)* **So, did you stars**
 12 **shine for the baby in Bethlehem?** *(The STARS shake their*
 13 *heads.)* **Were you sick that day?** *(The STARS shake their*
 14 *heads.)* **Did your mom and dad make you stay home?** *(The*
 15 *STARS shake their heads.)* **Did you fall from the sky?** *(The*
 16 *STARS shake their heads.)* **Was it too cold out for stars?**
 17 *(The STARS shake their heads.)* **Do you have to stay inside**
 18 **at night?** *(The STARS shake their heads.)* **Well, then, why**
 19 **didn't you shine for the baby in Bethlehem?**

20 **STARS:** *(In a soft voice, in unison)* **Because we're too shy.**

21 **NARRATOR: Could you say that a little louder?**

22 **STARS:** *(In a very loud and very unshy voice, in unison.)* **Because**
 23 **we're too shy!**

24 **NARRATOR: Oh, I see.** *(The STARS run back down the aisle,*
 25 *giggling and laughing and whispering.)* **Well, I guess we know**
 26 **why the stars didn't go . . . they were too shy.**
 27 *(The INNKEEPER'S WIFE comes running down the aisle. She's*
 28 *carrying shopping bags that are filled with Christmas presents*
 29 *and Christmas decorations. She is a housewife caught in the*
 30 *grip of the last-minute Christmas rush. She is a very busy and*
 31 *very overworked person.)*

32 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Dropping all her packages in the middle*
 33 *of the stage area and talking to herself)* **Whew! I never thought**
 34 **I'd get out of those shops alive! I have never in my whole**
 35 **life seen so many people!**

1 **NARRATOR:** Pardon me, but it seems like you've had a very
2 busy day.

3 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** Busy! *Busy?* Honey, when you're an
4 innkeeper's wife, you're *always* busy. But you're right,
5 today was especially bad.

6 **NARRATOR:** Why is that?

7 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** There's just a lot to do, that's why. I've
8 had to buy gifts for all the relatives — his family and
9 mine. *(Pulling gifts out of the shopping bags and throwing them*
10 *around)* I've had to buy this turkey *(Pulling a turkey out of*
11 *a bag)* and all the stuff that goes with it *(Pulling stuffing,*
12 *cranberry sauce, etc. out of a bag)* and all these decorations.
13 *(Pulling tinsel and wreaths and things like that out of another*
14 *bag)* And of course that's not the end of it! Oh, no! Now I
15 have to wrap all these presents *(Kicking the pile of presents)*
16 and clean and stuff this bird *(Kicking the turkey)* and put
17 up all these dumb decorations! On top of that, we've got
18 an inn that's crammed to overflowing with the holiday
19 travel crowd. Busy? *(Sitting down exhausted)* Honey, right
20 now I've got a busy-ness degree.

21 **NARRATOR:** So you and your husband run this inn, is that
22 right?

23 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Still exhausted)* Yeah, that's right.

24 **NARRATOR:** It was very nice of him to let that pregnant
25 woman stay in the barn.

26 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Very alert now — wondering what her*
27 *husband did this time)* There's a *pregnant* woman in the
28 barn?!

29 **NARRATOR:** Well, not any more. She's had the baby.

30 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Exasperated)* Oh, brother!

31 **NARRATOR:** Maybe you could go out and see it sometime . . .

32 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Losing her temper, and pointing her finger*
33 *at the NARRATOR)* Now you listen here, Buster. I have
34 got way too much to do to spend time koo-chee-koo-ing
35 some little baby!

- 1 **NARRATOR:** But this is a special baby!
- 2 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Still angry)* **Buster, they're all special.**
- 3 **Is that baby going to help me with all this work?**
- 4 **NARRATOR:** *(Unsure of the answer to that question)* Well . . .
- 5 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Interrupting)* **Of course not.** *(Ending the*
- 6 *discussion)* **It's the holiday season, and I have *no* time to**
- 7 **spend with that baby.** *(Starts putting all her purchases back*
- 8 *in their bags.)*
- 9 **NARRATOR:** Are you leaving?
- 10 **INNKEEPER'S WIFE:** *(Gathering up her bags and her composure)*
- 11 **Yes. I have work to do.** *(The INNKEEPER'S WIFE strides*
- 12 *purposefully back down the aisle, a woman with a mission.)*
- 13 **NARRATOR:** *(To the audience)* **Kind of interesting, isn't it?**
- 14 **She's got the Messiah in her back yard, and she hasn't**
- 15 **got time to go and see him. Some of her barn animals will**
- 16 **get closer to Jesus than she will.** *(The BARN ANIMALS*
- 17 *walk in down the aisle. They don't like themselves very much.*
- 18 *NARRATOR to the audience:)* **Some of her barn**
- 19 **animals . . . but not *all* of them.** *(To the BARN ANIMALS)*
- 20 **So you were right there in the barn when the baby Jesus**
- 21 **was born!**
- 22 **BARN ANIMALS:** *(Sounding a little bit like a "Moo")* No.
- 23 **NARRATOR:** You weren't inside the barn at all?
- 24 **BARN ANIMALS:** No.
- 25 **NARRATOR:** Do you always have to stay outside?
- 26 **BARN ANIMALS:** No.
- 27 **NARRATOR:** Why didn't you go inside to see the baby?
- 28 **BARN ANIMALS:** We're not good enough to see the baby.
- 29 **NARRATOR:** But some of the other animals went inside.
- 30 **BARN ANIMALS:** We're not good enough to see the baby.
- 31 **NARRATOR:** Nobody's good enough to see *that* baby. But
- 32 **some went to see him anyway.**
- 33 **BARN ANIMALS:** We're not good enough to see the baby.
- 34 **NARRATOR:** But you don't have to be good! The baby was
- 35 **born because *none* of us are good!**



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