



A CHRISTMAS PROGRAM

L.A. BAIRD



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Supplemental resources

PowerPoint slides (with scripture verses and song lyrics) for *The Christmas Stand-ins* are available (pg. 50).

Promotional material are included: 11x17 poster and bulletin inserts at the end of the text (pg. 86).

THE CHRISTMAS STAND-INS

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Introduction

A typical American family, the Allworths are in the throes of a minor crisis. ERNEST ALLWORTH—who, at his worst, can be a bit of a pessimist and a hypochondriac—fears he will be laid off. SHIRLEY ALLWORTH, an optimist and meticulous organizer, has agreed to direct the children's Christmas pageant this year. They are at odds over ERNEST's part in the play. The Allworths' three children, MEGAN (11), ELIZABETH (5), ANNA (13 months) are in the pageant. The family's effort to recreate the birth of the Savior in the church pageant will be the turning point in their family crisis.

Advertising posters, bulletin inserts, and PowerPoint slides (with scripture verses and song lyrics) for *The Christmas Stand-ins* are available as part of the download at the end of the text.

Cast List

Leading Characters

ERNEST ALLWORTH, 39, is recovering from a cold. In a moment of self-reflection, he rediscovers his love for his family and his God.

SHIRLEY ALLWORTH, 39, is overwhelmed with all the responsibility she feels she must carry. She renews her faith in the Lord and her love for her husband.

MEGAN ALLWORTH, 11, realizes she has been seeking her own glory rather than the glory of the Lord. She can yield her talents to the Lord.

ELIZABETH ALLWORTH, 5, reminds everyone of the glorious miracle of Christmas.

ANNA ALLWORTH, 13 months old, plays baby Jesus.

Supporting Characters

PASTOR, opens the onstage worship service and leads in prayer

2S AND 3S CLASS—shepherds (Act Three, Scene 2)

PRE-PRIMARY CLASS—angels (Act Three, Scene 2)

PRIMARY CLASS—primary-aged children (Act Two, Scene 3)

MIDDLER CLASS—middler choir (Act Two, Scene 1; Act Two, Scene 3)

JUNIOR CLASS—junior choir (Act One, Scene 3; Act Three, Scene 2)

YOUTH CLASS—junior/senior high students with nonspeaking parts (Act Two, Scene 1; Act Three, Scene 2)

YOUTH 1—junior or senior high student

YOUTH 2—senior high student

WISE MAN 1—child of middler age who is facile with words

WISE MAN 2—child of middler age

WISE MAN 3—played by a precocious pre-primary child

JOE WATKINS—a dark-haired young man who plays Joseph

CANDICE—a young woman who plays the role of Mary

GABRIEL—played by a teen or young man (not a speaking part)

CARL—an older man who plays Simeon

AMANDA—an older woman who plays Cousin Elisabeth

CONGREGATION—people of differing ages to sit in Church Sanctuary with SHIRLEY and girls

Production Notes

The Set

Rather than change the stage set with the change of each scene, the stage director allocates space on the church platform to each of the sets listed below.

The ALLWORTHS' Living Room and Kitchen

(Set for Act One, Scene 1; Act One, Scene 2; Act Two, Scene 3) These spaces are conjoined, with the audience able to see each area at the same time. The Living Room looks like a typical American home. The Kitchen opens to the Living Room. It is SHIRLEY's domain and reflects her penchant for organization.

Imaginary Car

(Set for ACT One, Scene 2) Off the Kitchen is the "imaginary car" SHIRLEY and the girls drive to church. The setup for the car allows SHIRLEY to pantomime the action of driving.

The Sanctuary of the Village Church

(Set for Act One, Scene 3; Act Three, Scene 1) The Sanctuary of the Village Church takes up Center Stage. The setup allows the audience to see the onstage congregation as well as the front of the onstage sanctuary. Thus, there are some pews, a podium, and a platform. Another option is to utilize the existing church's platform as the onstage sanctuary.

The Activities Center of Village Church

(Set for Act Two, Scene 1) This space is near the set of the Sanctuary of Village Church, a wing off the onstage sanctuary.

Offices

(Set for Act Two, Scene 2) ERNEST'S and SHIRLEY'S Offices are on opposite sides of the stage, though visible to the audience at the same time. The Offices reflect the characters' personalities. SHIRLEY'S Office is organized; ERNEST'S is cluttered. Behind SHIRLEY hangs a poster that reads "Receptionist" and then in two columns: DOES Schedule Appointments; DOES NOT Babysit, Give directions to the nearest cash machine, Dispense change for bus fare, Make copies of patient records.

Props

Each prop is listed by set location and scene. Directors may wish to simplify this list for some productions.

ALLWORTH'S Kitchen

- Table and chairs
- Highchair

Act One, Scene 1

- Box of tissue
- Winter coat for ELIZABETH
- Sheet of paper for SHIRLEY to give to ERNEST
- Boxes of props (or empty boxes marked "Props")
- Cap, diaper bag, and car seat for BABY ANNA
- Sunglasses for SHIRLEY
- Pieces of clothing; clothes basket
- Door from Kitchen to imaginary garage
- 4 folding chairs or 2 benches to be the car (optional)

Act Two, Scene 3

- Recipe box (optional); handwritten recipe card
- Packages or full shopping bags from local department stores
- Winter coat for ERNEST
- Plates of cookies; 3–4 edible cookies
- Plastic wrap
- Popcorn; needles and thread

ALLWORTH'S Living Room

- Fireplace with mantel
- Couch
- Coffee table
- Decorated Christmas tree with presents
- Entertainment center

Act One, Scene 1

- Vacuum cleaner
- Outlet for vacuum cleaner (could be imaginary behind the couch)

Act One, Scene 2

- Wristwatch for ERNEST
- Framed wedding photo
- 2 plaster of paris Christmas ornaments with children's handprints
- 3 Christmas cards (minimum); 1 musical Christmas card

- Toys; dirty clothes
- Bible

Act Two, Scene 3

- Wrapping paper; tape; scissors; bows
- Piece of paper with John 3:30 written on it
- Boxes to be wrapped (from ERNEST'S packages/shopping bags)

Church Sanctuary

- Pews or rows of chairs
- Podium
- Platform

Act One, Scene 3

- Enormous purse for SHIRLEY
- Enormous planner for SHIRLEY
- Photo for SHIRLEY to find
- Handkerchief for SHIRLEY

Act Three, Scene 2

- Containers for the WISE MEN'S gifts
- Manger/cradle
- Complete costumes for shepherds/2S AND 3S CLASS

Church Activities Center

- 1 Children's table and 6–8 small chairs
- 1 Table and chairs
- Prop boxes
- Props: boxes or pouches of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; beards; wigs; headdresses; halos

Act Two, Scene 1

- Coloring pages and crayons
- 5 Large (phone-book size) scripts
- Shining gowns for angels

Act Three, Scene 1

- Script for ERNEST
- Cell phone for SHIRLEY
- Complete costumes for angels/PRE-PRIMARY CLASS, wise men, Mary, and Joseph

Act Three, Scene 2

- Doll (optional for BABY ANNA) as the holy Babe

Office**Shirley's Office**

- Desk
- Phone
- Color-coded flip chart with extension numbers; color-coded dates on large hanging calendar; neat stack of color-coded files
- "Receptionist" desk plaque
- Pen
- Purse and planner from Act One, Scene 3

ERNEST'S Office

- Desk
- Phone
- Eye drops and other medications; box of tissue
- Computer keyboard
- Files
- Working humidifier
- Message caddy with lots of messy pink phone message slips and sticky notes on it

Music

- "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (Words: Phillips Brooks, Music: Lewis H. Redner). Sung by the MIDDLE CLASS in Act Two, Scene 1.
- "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" (Words: Charles Wesley, Music: Felix Mendelssohn). Sung by MIDDLE CLASS in Act Two, Scene 3.
- "Away in a Manger." Words and music by James R. Murray. Sung by PRIMARY CLASS in Act Two, Scene 3.
- "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (Words: Latin Hymn, Music: John Francis Wade). Stanza 1 sung by the congregation at the beginning of Act Three, Scene 2.
- "Going to Bethlehem" (Words: Bobbi Biddle, Music: "The Farmer in the Dell," arr. Sonya Shafer). Sung by PRE-PRIMARY CLASS in Act Three, Scene 2.
- "What Child Is This" (Words: William C. Dix, Music: English melody). Stanzas 1 and 3 sung by the JUNIOR CLASS during Act Three, Scene 2.
- "O Come, Let Us Adore Him" (Words: Anonymous, Music: John Francis Wade). Sung by the congregation during Act Three, Scene 2.
- "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" (Words: Fanny Crosby, Music: John R. Sweney). Stanzas 1 and 3 sung by the congregation at the close of Act Three, Scene 2.

Act One

Scene 1: Allworths' Kitchen

ERNEST is sitting at the Kitchen table on a Sunday morning before church. Family sounds are heard in the background. ERNEST, looking miserable from a cold, sitting alone at the table, wearing a baggy robe and pj's, hugs a box of tissue.

ELIZABETH: *(Entering, dragging a winter coat. Taps ERNEST on the knee to get his attention.)* Daddy. It's snowing.

ERNEST: *(Groans.)* Is it, honey? *(To himself, hugging the tissue box tighter.)* I know we'll get four feet of snow this afternoon. I'll be shoveling snow all day.

ELIZABETH: *(Hopeful.)* Will it snow all day long? Will it, Daddy?

ERNEST looks at her happy face, miserable just thinking about all that snow. Then he helps her put on her coat.

ELIZABETH: *(Looking hopefully into his face.)* When we get home from church, Daddy, I'll help you shovel all the snow.

ERNEST: I'm not going to church with you this morning. Daddy's sick.

ELIZABETH: Mommy says you're just being a hypomaniac.

ERNEST: I'm pretty sure she means I'm a hypochondriac.

ELIZABETH: She says if you were meeting Tom East today you wouldn't stay home. Who is Tom East?

ERNEST: Well, he's a man at work. He's my boss.

ELIZABETH: Mommy says she's the boss.

ERNEST: Well, you and I know better, don't we, sweetie? We let Mommy think she's the boss, right?

ELIZABETH: I can help you shovel all the snow, Daddy. Then we can make a snow angel. After church, okay?

ERNEST: Hey. The closest this invalid is getting to snow today is that box of fudgesicles in the freezer. After church, honey, you can have two fudgesicles. They're made from chocolate snowflakes.

ELIZABETH: Chocolate snow? Really?

Babe in arms, SHIRLEY enters like a weather front.

SHIRLEY: Don't tell her that. She believes you.

ERNEST: And good morning to you too.

SHIRLEY slaps a white paper on the table in front of ERNEST, who picks up the paper and follows his wife around the Kitchen as she prepares to leave.

ERNEST: What's this? (*Reads*). Vacuum den? Start wash?

SHIRLEY: Okay, girls, let's go. Elizabeth, grab that box of props (*Calling to MEGAN offstage.*) Megan, we're gonna be late!

ERNEST: I thought we had agreed you were going to do the laundry and I was going to vacuum. Remember when you made that list? (*BEAT*) "Which list?" you may well ask—there were so many. Let me remind you: It was the list called Household Duties. Remember? We divided up the list. We agreed to the domestic roles we were going to play.

SHIRLEY: (*Bundling baby in a cap and grabbing diaper bag*) And I thought we had agreed that you would play the role of Joseph in my Christmas pageant.

ERNEST: Oh, so that's what this is about? (*Shaking the list*) You're mad because I'm not going to be at the rehearsal today.

That's it, isn't it? Well, I agreed to be a stand-in for Joe Watkins. A stand-in. Remember?

SHIRLEY pauses in her bustling to look at him.

ERNEST: I know you think I'm just playing hooky. I know that's what you're thinking, Miss Vertical File. You can't imagine what it's like to be sick. Healthy people can never imagine what it's like to be really sick.

SHIRLEY: *(With just a touch of sarcasm)* Do you think you can manage a trip to the garage with some boxes of props? Honey?

MEGAN: *(Entering, grabbing a box of props as she crosses the Kitchen toward the garage)* Hey everybody. It's snowing! Will you help us build a snow castle after church, Daddy?

ERNEST: *(Looking at SHIRLEY a bit defiantly as he answers his daughter)* You can all have two fudgesicles after church.

ELIZABETH: Did you know they're made from chocolate snowflakes, Meg?

MEGAN: And you know what? Every winter they fall from Willie Wonka's Chocolate Factory in the sky.

ERNEST tries not to laugh.

SHIRLEY: Satisfied?

SHIRLEY settles BABY ANNA into her car seat, while MEGAN and ELIZABETH climb into the "car." Then SHIRLEY gets in. ERNEST waves to BABY ANNA in her car seat.

ELIZABETH: What's . . . what's a stand-in anyway?

SHIRLEY: Well, honey, it's a kind of like when someone takes the

place of someone else. (*Looking directly at ERNEST while she puts on her sunglasses.*) Sort of like a crash dummy.

There is a bit of repartee between ERNEST and SHIRLEY. Although as characters they are unaware of what the other is saying, the audience sees them and hears the dialogue coming from two different parts of the stage.

ERNEST: (*Returning to Kitchen where he begins to toss stray pieces of clothing into a clothes basket; muttering to himself*) Right. That's right. Oh yes. Oh yes, indeed. I am this family's crash dummy, all right. A big, fat crash dummy, that's what I am. Just paint a big black X on my forehead. Yeah. Uh huh. I'm the one who gets paid for taking all the hits.

SHIRLEY: (*Muttering to herself as she drives*) Stand-in. Right. Actually, girls, we're glad Daddy isn't going to be in the pageant. Right?

MEGAN: We are?

SHIRLEY: Yes we are. Look at it this way. Joe Watkins is a much better actor than Daddy is, right? I mean, Joe can remember his lines, and he has that dark hair. He looks like a Joseph. And his name is Joe—Joseph. He's perfect.

ELIZABETH: But Daddy is funny.

MEGAN: Yeah, when he forgets his lines, he makes something up. Something funny.

SHIRLEY: Well, some people would call that being an overcooked ham.

ERNEST walks into the Living Room and grabs the vacuum cleaner.

ERNEST: (*Wrestling with the cord*) Crash dummy here to vacuum,

sir (*Saluting*). Won't take long. Pay me no mind. Nobody else in this family does, why should you? Crash dummies of the world, UNITE! (*Falls exhausted onto the couch. Checks his pulse.*)

MEGAN, ELIZABETH, BABY ANNA, and SHIRLEY are still in the car.

MEGAN: I don't want to be the narrator of the Christmas pageant this year, Mommy.

SHIRLEY: But, Meg. You've been the narrator every year for the past three years. Of course you want to be the narrator. You're the best narrator we've ever had.

ELIZABETH: I want to be a shepherd. I want to carry a lamb.

MEGAN: We're going to have real lambs in the pageant this year?

SHIRLEY: No, of course not. Think how messy real lambs would be. No, Mrs. Baum made some fuzzy lambs out of cotton wool. They look like the real thing.

ELIZABETH: (*Imitating a sheep.*) Mrs. Ba – ah – ah um.

ERNEST gets off the couch in search of his box of tissues. Returning to the couch, he nearly trips over the cord of the vacuum. He flops down and feels his pulse.

MEGAN: I'm serious. I don't want to be the narrator this year.

SHIRLEY: Don't be silly. Nobody else can remember all those Scripture verses. You've had the Christmas story memorized since you were five years old.

ELIZABETH: Five years old.

ERNEST starts to snore.

MEGAN: This year, I want to be the angel Gabriel.

ELIZABETH: You can't be Gabriel. Angels are boys.

MEGAN: Mom, are all angels boys?

SHIRLEY: Well, I think there must be some girl angels, too, since I'm sure Heaven is very organized.

MEGAN: (*Crossing her arms and pouting.*) I want to be Gabriel. I want to wear a gown that sparkles and stand under a blue spotlight. I want to be majestic.

SHIRLEY: That's nice, honey. Okay. Here we are. Everyone grab a box. Watch out for ice.

SHIRLEY carries BABY ANNA, while MEGAN and ELIZABETH carry boxes. They exit. Leaving the boxes and BABY ANNA backstage, they return to the Church Sanctuary and are seated.

Scene 2: Allworths' Living Room

While SHIRLEY and the girls are at church, ERNEST is snoring on the couch. He awakens suddenly.

ERNEST: (*Awakes with a start.*) What? (*Sits up, looks around.*)

Lit by a single light, he seems especially alone.

ERNEST: (*Checks his watch; shakes his wrist to get the thing to work.*) Oh boy. It must be later than I think. This feels like a . . . a dream. Am I dreaming?

He circles the room, ending up in the Kitchen, calling out for his family.

Honey? Meg? Anybody home? Ebenezer?

(*Laughs.*) Are you there, Ebenezer Scrooge? Oh boy, I must be really sick this time. Or . . . or dead?

Checks pulse again. Shakes his head.

ERNEST: No, no. That's crazy. I can't die. Not yet. Not at age thirty-nine. I've still got eighteen years to pay on the mortgage. *(BEAT.)* Okay. Okay. You've just had too much caffeine, Allworth. That's why your heart is beating like this.

(Putting his hand on his chest.) I'm having a . . . a heart palpitation. Yes. I think my heart is palpitating. Calm down. Deep breath. Everything is okay. Look, you're at home. Your home, your castle. Your dream house. The one you and Shirley saved up for all those years, remodeled with your own two hands. Look, here's the nick in the wall where you hit your thumb with a hammer and beat the wall. Youch! *(BEAT.)* And here's your wedding picture, Allworth. Proof positive that you were crazy enough to marry her.

Picks up photo and is about to put it down when something catches his eyes.

We were so young. Were we ever this happy? I used to joke about her name, Shirley. Shirley, "goodness and mercy shall follow." *(To the photo.)* I always said you were the best thing that ever happened to me. You made me believe anything was possible. Now? Now all I can think about is how much you bug me.

Places photo back. Wanders to the Christmas tree. Looks at some of the ornaments, including two with Megan's and Elizabeth's handprints.

ERNEST: Megan. Elizabeth. Such tiny things, tiny feet, tiny hands. I never dreamed being a father . . . who could have dreamed what a joy it would be?

He studies the plaster handprints, placing his hands over the two small prints.

Why does Shirley think they still believe what I say? To them, I'm just this . . . this funny little guy who pays the bills. Bills! The truth is I don't even know if I'll have a job next year. *(BEAT.)* Next year? What am I talking

about? Next month. This economic crisis will swallow up little guys like me.

ERNEST puts the ornaments in his pocket. Picks up a stray ornament that has fallen off the tree and puts it back onto the tree. Finds a musical Christmas card on the mantel. Opens it. Closes it. On. Off.

ERNEST: What happened to us?

Picks up another Christmas card on the mantel. Reads. Picks up another. Reads.

“Unto us a child is born . . .” “Christ, our atoning sacrifice”—hmm. . . . “Joy” (*Chokes on the word*). “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” (*BEAT*.) What happened to me?

ERNEST starts to search for something. Looks everywhere, under stuff that has accumulated, inside the entertainment center. Finally he finds it. Under the couch, mixed in with a pile of toys and dirty clothes, he finds it. A Bible. Pulls it out and sits down with it on the couch. Sitting in shadows now, he reads throughout Scene 3.

Scene 3: Sanctuary of the Village Church

During church, SHIRLEY, MEGAN, and ELIZABETH are in the congregation at the front of the Church Sanctuary.

Lights come on. JUNIOR CLASS sings “Joy to the World.”

CHOIR: Joy to the World, the Savior reigns . . .

PASTOR: (*Takes his place in front of the congregation after the singing*) “Joy to the world” What a message of hope! I love Christmas. I love the lights and color and especially the music. We have so much to give thanks for, don’t we? Let’s turn to the Lord in prayer and lift up thankful hearts to him. Let’s pray. (*BEAT*.) Almighty God . . .

The lights dim, the sound of the prayer dies out. A single light focuses on SHIRLEY. Option: the following monologue could be a voice over as we hear SHIRLEY’s thoughts.

SHIRLEY: I love Christmas too. I love the decorations, and the pine smell of the tree, and the FOOD! Mother's pumpkin roll with the sweet cream filling to die for, the way she makes it—

Wait, wait. No. I think I love the cookies best, the frosted kind. I love baking with the girls, watching them use the old-fashioned cookie cutters I bought at Bascomb and Wicke that first Christmas after we were married. I can't believe I spent that much on cookie cutters. I can't believe Ernest let me spend that much on cookie cutters.

Were we ever that laid back? Were we ever that young? (BEAT.) Stop. Just stop it. Don't think about that. This is supposed to be a time of prayer.

SHIRLEY: (*Trying to refocus on praying*) We're supposed to be giving thanks for Christmas. Thanks!

I want to give thanks for Christmas. It's just so hard, though. I mean, I've got to direct this Christmas pageant, of all things. Nobody else can do it, after all. I'm the only one organized enough to pull it off. (BEAT.) Right? I mean, isn't that why they asked me. They didn't ask Robin Carlyle. Oh no, they sure didn't. They asked me, me, Shirley Allworth, to direct The Village Church's Fifth Annual Children's Christmas pageant because Shirley GETS THINGS DONE. Oh yeah. Ohhh yeah.

(*Surreptitiously pulling an enormous planner from her enormous handbag*) Just look at this list of things I have to get done. . . . I mean I can accomplish. Ernest can call me Miss Vertical File, but even he knows I can do anything.

Okay. Let's see. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. 5:00 a.m. Make coffee, eat breakfast. 5:15 Clean bathroom. 5:20 Feed cats. (*Scratching out*) No, no. Clean the garage—all this snow will really mess up the garage. 5:30 Get Anna ready

for day care. 6:00 a.m. Kiss Ernest when he leaves for work. Big HEART there. 7:00 a.m. Drop kids off at school. 7:15 Unlock Office. 7:30 Call dentist. Call Mom. Call Aunt Carol about making costumes for the pageant. What's her phone number anyway?

SHIRLEY flips through her planner and finds a photograph, not a phone number.

SHIRLEY: What's this? (*BEAT.*) Okay. Okay, who's being cute? How did this get here? Who was the wise guy who put this photograph in my planner? Not just any photograph, either. A photograph of us at that—what was the name of that place? The place with the beach and the ponies? That one vacation we took when Meg and Liz were little, before mortgage payments and car payments and flex spending and . . . and . . . that time when we were . . . when we were . . . happy?

Okay. All right So this is some kind of message, right? Some kind of subtle hint? So who would be sending this message? Who would send this subtle, photographic message? Well, I think we certainly can eliminate Ernest there. Nothing subtle about him.

Let's think here. Maybe it's me. Maybe I am sending myself a subconscious message . . . subconsciously. Okay. So if I'm sending myself a message, what message would that be? What message could I possibly be sending myself by not putting this photograph . . . this wonderful photographic treasure . . . in its proper place in our family photo album? (*BEAT.*) This beautiful, unforgettable . . . family keepsake.

Presses a woman's hankie to her forehead.

SHIRLEY: Look at us. We were so happy. What happened to us? (*BEAT.*) What happened to me?

All exit.



Date:

Time:

Location:

Date:

Time:

Location: