Beth: The Herdmans were the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars, and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain. *(During her speech, the Herdmans come on from the wings and position themselves with Gladys at the top level)* There were 6 of them - Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys. They went around town stealing things and tearing things up and whamming kids, so it was hard to get away from them. There was only one safe place.

Charlie: *(singing)* Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, because there are no Herdmans there. And Jesus loves us, as they say, because he keeps them miles away.

Beth: That's my little brother, Charlie. When the Sunday School teacher asked what was his favorite thing about church, Charlie said, "No Herdmans." That made the teacher mad because the other kids said nice things about God and Jesus, but Charlie told the real truth - No Herdmans!

(Coming home from church)
Charlie: I don't care what everybody else said. That's what they really thought. The main good thing about church is that the Herdmans aren't there, ever.

Father: That's not a very Christian sentiment.

Mother: Well, Charlie was black and blue all last year because he had to sit next to Leroy Herdman in school.

Father: Is he the worst one?

Charlie: They're all the worst one.

Beth: Ralph's the biggest.

Charlie: That doesn't make any difference. Gladys isn't big, but she's mean and she bites.

Father: I'm sorry I asked. Just stay away from all of them.

Charlie: That's what I said. Stay away from all of them. Go to church.

Mother: I'm glad to hear you feel that way.

Charlie: *(suspicious)* Why?

Mother: No arguments this year about the Christmas pageant.

Charlie: I don't want to be in it!

Mother: Everybody's in it. Think how I'd feel sitting there on Christmas Eve if my own children weren't in the pageant. Think how your father would feel. *(Everyone looks at father and he gives a look as if he doesn't intend to go)*

Beth: Why don't you be Joseph? Elmer's sick of being Joseph all the time just because his father's the minister. Nobody wants to be Joseph.

Charlie: Nobody wants to be in it!

Mother: You know, Mrs. Armstrong works very hard to give everyone a lovely experience.

Beth: Oh mom, Mrs. Armstrong just likes to run things *(kids exit).*

Mother: They're right. She directs the play, she runs the potluck supper, she's chairman of the garage sale. I think Helen Armstrong would preach the sermon if anyone would let her.

Father: Well, maybe she'll try to manage the hospital, because that's where she is. George told me this morning she broke her leg. She'll be laid up till the first of the year.

Mother: The first of the year?! They'll have to cancel Christmas.

Father: She's in charge of Christmas?

Mother: Well, she's in charge of the pageant. I feel sorry for Helen, but who's going to do all those things?

Beth: And then my mom got the phone call from Mrs. Armstrong, asking her to direct the show. Our Christmas pageant isn't what you'd call 4-star entertainment. Mrs. Armstrong breaking her leg was the only unexpected thing that ever happened to it. It's always the same old Christmas story, and the same old carols, and the same old Mary and Joseph. And that's what my mother was stuck with … that and Mrs. Armstrong.

(Mrs. Armstrong on phone in hospital bed)
Mrs. Armstrong: I always start with Mary and I tell them we must choose our Mary carefully because Mary was the mother of Jesus.

Mother: I know that Helen.

Mrs. Armstrong: Yes, and then I tell them about Joseph, that he was God's choice to be Jesus' father. That's how I explain that. Frankly, I don't ever spend much time on Joseph because it's always Elmer Hopkins, and he knows all about Mary and Joseph…

(During this call, the kids try to get mom off the phone, and she tries a few times, but Helen keeps talking)
Mrs. Armstrong: I explain about the Wise Men and the shepherds and how important they are. And I tell them there are no small parts, only small actors. You'll have to get someone to push the baby angels on, otherwise they'll get in each other's way and bend their wings. Bob could do that, and he could keep an eye on the shepherds too.

Mother: Helen, I have to go.

Mrs. Armstrong: and don't just use any baby for Jesus, get a quiet one…

Mother: Sorry Helen, I'll talk to you later. *(Hangs up on her)*

Charlie: I'll bet she told you about no small parts, only small actors.

Beth: And getting someone to shove the baby angels on, and make the shepherds shut up.

Mother: Yes. She suggested your father.

Father: Does that mean I have to go?

Beth: My mother didn't pay much attention to Mrs. Armstrong. She said Mrs. Armstrong was stuck in the hospital with nothing to do but think up problems, and there weren't going to be any problems. Of course, Mother didn't count on the Herdmans. That was Charlie's fault.

Charlie: Hey, Leroy, you give me back my lunch!

Leroy: Sure, kid, here *(hands him his lunch bag)*

Charlie: *(looks inside)* You stole my dessert again! You think it's so great to steal my dessert every day, and you know what? I don't care if you steal my dessert. I'll even give you my dessert. I get all the dessert I want in Sunday School.

Leroy: Oh yeah? What kind of dessert?

Charlie: All kinds. Chocolate cake and candy bars and cookies and Twinkies. We get refreshments all the time, all we want.

Leroy: Sunday School huh?

Beth: That was the wrong thing to tell Herdmans … sure enough, the very next Sunday there they were in Sunday School, just in time to hear about the Christmas pageant.

(All the kids are on stage to find out their roles)
Imogene: What's a pageant?

Alice: It's a play.

Imogene: Like on tv? What's it about?

Alice: It's about Jesus.

Imogene: (*disenchanted - looking around)* Everything here is.

Alice: And it's about Mary. Mostly, it's about Mary.

Imogene: Who's Mary?

Alice: I am. .. Well, probably I am. I know the part.

(Alice exits. Imogene smiles suspiciously)

Beth: And then came the day where my Mother selected roles for the pageant.
(*Kids start straggling in, with Mother herding them in)*

Mother: Okay, today we're going to decide who will play the main roles in our Christmas pageant, but of course everyone will have an important part to play. You know what Mrs. Armstrong always tells you - there are no small parts, only small actors. That means that the littlest baby angel is just as important as Mary.

Alice: *(full of herself)* I don't think anyone is as important as Mary.

Beth: Well, naturally that's what you think, Alice. I think Jesus is more important.

Mexine: I think it means short kids have to be in the front row…

Mother: Girls, girls! Everyone is important. Now you little children will be our angels. *(As she talks, the Herdmans enter. Other children are murmuring, wiggling around and pointing to the Herdmans. Aware of the rising clamor, she stops.)* Now, what's the matter? *(Mother sees the Herdmans. Ralph and Leroy shove their way onto a bench, causing a ripple of movement there. Gladys does the same on another bench. Imogene, Claude, and Ollie do the same)* Well, let's make some room for the Herdmans. *(A lot of room is made, like the parting of the Red Sea and the Herdmans occupy their space).* Now, I want you to think about Mary. We all know what kind of person Mary was. She was quiet and gentle and kind, and the girl who plays Mary should try to be that kind of person. So, who would like to volunteer for that part? *(everyone looks at Alice, but Imogene raises her hand).* Do you have a question, Imogene?

Imogene: No, I want to be Mary. And Ralph, over there, he wants to be Joseph.

Ralph: Yeah, right.

Mother: Oh. Well… well, I'll just make a list of volunteers for these parts and then we'll all decide who it should be. *(writes on clipboard)* Ralph Herdman. Now, who else would like to be Joseph? … Did you raise your hand, Elmer?

Elmer: No.

Mother: Just raise your hands, please, any volunteers…Any of you shepherds? *(her eyes fall on Charlie, who tries to be invisible)* Very well…Ralph Herdman will be our Joseph. Now, Imogene has volunteered to be … *(tiny break as if she can hardly bear to connect Imogene with Mary)*...Mary, I'll just write that down… What other names can I put on my list? Janet? Robetta? Alice, don't you want to be a volunteer?

Alice: *(choking it out)* No, I don't want to.

Gladys: I'll be Mary!

Imogene: Shut up, Gladys. I'm already Mary. You be a wise man.

Mother: Well, the Wise Men are usually boys. Of course, we could…

Leroy: I'll be a Wise Man!

Ollie: Me too! Claude, you wanna be a Wise Man? Raise your hand.

Claude: What's a Wise Man?

Ralph: Just raise your hand! *(Claude raises his hand)*

Gladys: What's left to be?

Imogene: Some angel.

Gladys: I'll be that. What is it?

Mother: It's the Angel of the Lord who brought the good news to the shepherds. So, Elmer, would you like to be a shepherd?

Elmer: I don't want to be a shepherd. Gladys Herdman hits too hard!

Mother: Gladys isn't going to hit anybody! The Angel of the Lord just visits the shepherds in the fields and tells them Jesus is born.

Elmer: And hits them!

Mother: Elmer, that's ridiculous, and I don't want to hear another word about it, from anyone. Now that's all for today, boys and girls. You can go… *(There's a scramble for the door)* But I expect to see everyone here on Wednesday at 6:30! *(Mother takes Alice's arm)* Alice, what's wrong with you? Why in the world didn't you raise your hand?

Alice: *(Miserably)* I don't know.

Mother: You don't know? *(Sounds of a scuffle offstage - yells, Ouch! Cut it out! Let go!)*

Child: Mrs. Bradley! Get Gladys offa me!

Mother: Don't you want to be Mary?

Child: Mrs. Bradley! *(Mother exits with an exasperated look at Alice)*

Beth: Oh come on, Alice! *(mimicking her)* I don't know…

Alice: I didn't dare raise my hand. Imogene would have killed me! She said, "I'm going to be Mary in this play, and if you open your mouth or raise your hand you'll wish you didn't" And I said, "I'm always Mary in the Christmas pageant" And she said, "Go ahead then, and next spring when the pussywillows come out, I'll stick a pussywillow so far down your ear that nobody can reach it…and it'll sprout there and grow and grow, and you'll spend the rest of your life with a pussywillow bush growing out of your ear!"

Beth: You know she wouldn't do that!

Alice: She would too! Herdmans will do anything. You just watch, they'll do something terrible and ruin the whole pageant…and it's all your mother's fault!

(The following are phone conversations)

Mrs. McCarthy: Jane? Edna McCarthy. Did you hear about the…Well, it must be Grace's fault somehow! How else would the 6 of them end up in a Christmas pageant, when they ought to be in jail!

Irma: Vera …Irma Slocum. I just heard that Imogene Herdman is going to be Mary in the Christmas pageant, and I …Is that a fact? All 6 of them? Has Grace gone crazy?

Mrs. Armstrong: Where did they come from? Who let them in? Imogene Herdman? .What kind of a child is that, to be Mary, the mother of Jesus? Where was Reverend Hopkins, I'd like to know.

Mrs. McCarthy: I said, why don't you let them hand out programs at the door? Grace said we never have programs for the pageant, but I said…

Mrs. Slocum: …better nail down the church and lock up the silver service and hide the collection plates before they clean them out…

Mrs. Armstrong: What was the matter with Grace? Couldn't she have sent them away? Tell them to go home? I feel responsible. If I'd been up and around this never would have happened!

(Mother and father having a conversation)

Mother: *(mimicking Mrs. Armstrong)* If I had been up and around, this never would have happened! Helen Armstrong is not the only woman alive who can run a Christmas pageant! I made up my mind just to do the best I could under the circumstances, but now I'm going to make this the best Christmas pageant ever, and I'm going to do it with the Herdmans! After all, they raised their hands and nobody else did, and I don't care…

Father: Good for you Grace.

Mother: And you're going to help me!

Father: *(stopped by this)* Does that mean…

Mother: You have to go!

(All the kids are sitting on risers - mother is setting up the scene.)

Mother: The inn is back here, and the shepherds come in and gather around the manger.

Leroy: Where'd all the shepherds come from, anyway?

Claude: What's an inn?

Elmer: It's like a motel, where people go to spend the night.

Claude: What people, Jesus?

Alice: Oh, honestly! Jesus wasn't even born yet. Mary and Joseph went there.

Ralph: Why?

Elmer: To pay their taxes.

Ollie: At a motel?!

Imogene: Shut up, Ollie! Everybody shut up! I want to hear her. Begin at the beginning.

Mother: The beginning?

Imogene: The beginning of the play. What happens first?

Mother: Imogene, this is the Christmas story. Haven't you ever heard the Christmas story from the Bible? *(Pause as she realizes they have not)*...Well, that's what this Christmas pageant is, so I'd better read it to you. *(There's a chorus of groans and grumbles from all the kids as mother looks for a Bible and finds one)*

Alice: They don't even know what a Bible is, and they never went to church in their whole life, till your dumb brother told them we got food. Now we have to waste all this time for nothing.

Mother: All right now. *(Find the place and starts to read)* There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed *(All the kids are visibly bored except the Herdmans who listen with puzzled but determined concentration of people trying to make sense of a foreign language)* and Joseph went up from Galilee with Mary, his wife, being great with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, that the days were accomplished that she should be delivered, and she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Imogene: What?! They didn't have room for Jesus?

Mother: Well, nobody knew the baby was going to be Jesus.

Imogene: Didn't Mary know? *(Points to Ralph*) Didn't he know? What was the matter with Joseph, that he didn't tell them? Her pregnant and everything…

Leroy: What's a manger? Some kind of bed?

Mother: Well, they didn't have a bed in the barn, so Mary had to use whatever there was. What would you do if you had a new baby and no bed to put the baby in?

Imogene: We put Gladys in a bureau drawer.

Mother: Well there you are. You didn't have a bed for Gladys so you had to use something else.

Claude: What was the wadded up clothes? It said in there *(pointing to Bible)* she wrapped him in wadded up clothes.

Mother: Swaddling clothes. People used to wrap babies up very tightly in big pieces of material, to make them feel cozy.

Imogene: You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox? Where was the Child Welfare?

Gladys: The Child Welfare is at our house every 5 minutes!

Alice: There wasn't any child welfare in Bethlehem!

Mother: *(raising her voice)*... And there were shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them, and the Glory of…

Gladys: *(leaps up, flinging her arms out)* Shazam!

Mother: What?

Gladys: Out of the black night, with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo…

Mother: I don't know what you're talking about Gladys.

Gladys: The Mighty Marvo, in Amazing Comics - out of the black night, with horrible vengeance

Mother: This is the angel of the Lord, who comes to the shepherds…

Gladys: Out of nowhere, right? In the black night, right?

Mother: Well, in a way

Gladys: Shazam!

Mother: *(reading)* Now when Jesus was born, there came Wise Men from the East, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense…

Claude: *(To Ollie)* What's that?

Mother: …and myrrh…

Ollie: What's that?

Mother: They were…special things. Spices, and precious oils…

Imogene: Oil! What kind of a present is oil? We get better presents from the welfare!

Leroy: Were they the welfare? The Wise Men?

Mother: They were kings, and they were sent to…

Imogene: Well, it's about time somebody important showed up! If they're kings, they can get the baby out of the barn and tell the innkeeper where to get off!

Mother: *(ignoring this turn of plot)* …They were sent by Herod, who was…well, he was the main king, and he wanted to find Jesus and have him put to death.

Imogene: What?! He just got born! They're gonna kill a baby?

Ralph: Who's Herod in this play?

Mother: Herod isn't in this play.

Leroy: He's out to kill the baby, and he isn't even in the play?

Imogene: Let Charlie be Herod, and he says, "Go get me that baby."

Ollie: ***(****warming up to the idea)* But then they don't do it!

Charlie: I'm not going to be Herod!

Mother: No one is going to be Herod! *(frustrated)*

Claude: No…Joseph gets the shepherds together and they go wipe out Harrod! *(makes machine gun gesture)*

Mother: Forget about Herod! There's no Herod!

Imogene: And I run away with the baby till the fight's over!

Ralph: ***(****grabs a stray shepherd)* Gladys, you should wipe out the innkeeper!

Gladys: I can't! …I'm an angel!

(Kids leave, except the Herdmans).
Beth: And the rehearsals just went downhill from there. Here's how practice went the next Wednesday.

Imogene: Well I wouldn't just hang around out in the barn. I'd go get a room.

Claude: She said there wasn't any room.

Imogene: Then I'd throw somebody out. I'd tell them, "I've got this baby and it's the middle of winter, so either get out or move over!"

Leroy: I'd send the angel after him. She could just point her electric finger and turn him into a pile of ashes.

Gladys: *(happily)* Yes, zap!

Ollie: What's the name of this play?

Claude: Christmas pageant.

Gladys: I know a name! I'd call it…Revenge at Bethlehem!

Beth: Revenge at Bethlehem! The Herdmans thought the Christmas story came right out of the FBI files! At least they picked out the right villain. It was Herod they wanted to gang up and not the baby Jesus. But the baby Jesus quit the pageant anyway. It was supposed to be Eugene Slocum, but Mrs.Slocum said she wasn't going to let Imogene Herdman get her hands on him. So, we didn't have a baby Jesus, and that bothered my mother. She kept trying to scratch up a baby…even at the last rehearsal.

(All kids are assembling for rehearsal in partial costumes. Mother is counting people. Alice is writing in a small notebook)

Beth: What do you keep writing in that book?

Alice: It's … like a diary.

Beth: *(snatches the book and reads it)* It is not. It's all about the Herdmans. *(reads aloud)* Imogene curses and swears all the time. Gladys Herdman drinks communion wine. It isn't wine. It's grape juice!

Alice: I don't care what it is, she drinks it. They steal too - if you shake the doughnut bank, it doesn't make a sound, because they stole all the money out of it! And every time you go into the ladies' room the whole air is blue, and Imogene Herdman is sitting there in the Mary costume smoking cigars!

Beth: *(angry)* And you wrote all this down?! What for?

Alice: For my mother and Reverend Hopkins and the Ladies Aid Society and anybody else who wants to know what happened when the whole Christmas pageant turns out to be a big mess!

Mother: All right everyone, let's get quiet. Now, this is our last rehearsal, and we're going to…*(Mrs. McCarthy enters in apron, carrying a baking pan)*

Mrs. McCarthy: Grace, I just wanted to tell you that we're all back in the kitchen making applesauce cake. We'll try not to bother you. … I guess this is your dress rehearsal.

Mother: it's supposed to be. …Oh Edna, did I hear that your niece had a baby about a month ago?

Mrs. McCarthy: Yes, she's 5 weeks old, and…

Mother: Well, I wonder how it would be if I were to see if your niece would let us borrow…

Mrs. McCarthy: Grace…no! We are certainly not going to hand her over to Imogene Herdman. Sorry Grace. *(She leaves).*

Imogene: I'll get us a baby.

Mother: How can you do that?

Imogene: There's always 2 or 3 babies in carriages outside the supermarket. I'll get 1 of them.

Mother: Imogene! You can't just walk off with somebody's baby! …I guess we'll forget about a baby. We'll just use a doll.

Imogene: Yeah, that's better anyway. A doll can't bite you.

Mother: Okay, let's get started.

Child: Are we going through the whole thing?

Mother: Yes, of course. …but first we're going to practice just the entrances, so all of you go where you're supposed to be, and we'll start with the shepherds. *(All angels and shepherds scramble offstage. Ralph and Imogene go to the manger and sit down. Mother stands in the aisle.)* Just read the last few words Maxine.

Maxine: …shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Mother: Music…shepherds! *(shepherds straggle in, pushing and shoving each other and go around the manger)*

Maxine: And an Angel of the Lord appeared to them and…

Gladys: *(bursting out from behind the choir)* Shazam!

Mother: No Gladys!

Gladys: ***(****swooping at the shepherds)* Out of the black night…

Mother: No! *(takes Gladys by the arm and heads her back to the risers).* Go On Maxine. *(As Mother returns to her spot, Gladys makes another threatening swoop towards the shepherds.)*

Maxine: … A multitude of the heavenly host…

Mother: Music… angels *(Baby angels are corralled on and stand in position).*

Mother: Music… Wise Men! *(Leroy, Claude, and Ollie enter, slouching aimlessly down the aisle and up to the manger. As they approach, Imogene holds up the doll by the back of the neck , waving it in the air)*

Imogene: I've got the baby here. ..don't touch him! I named him Jesus.!

Mother: *(hurrying to the stage)* No, no, no. You don't say…*(Ralph grabs the doll. He and Imogene tussle over it as the shepherds scramble out of the way, creating a tangle of bodies and voices. She continues, nerves fraying)* …anything! Mary doesn't say anything. No one says anything! Mary and Joseph…

Imogene: *(To Ralph)* Let go! … Give it back!...*(Ralph and Imogene are pounding each other, till Mother gets in the middle and separates them).*

Mother *(in total exasperation)*: …make a lovely picture for us to look at while we think about Christmas and what it means!...Now, put the doll back!

Imogene: *(disgruntled)* I don't get to say anything…some angel tells me what to call the baby… I would have named him Bill.

Alice: Oh, what a terrible thing to say *(scribbles in her notebook)*

Ralph: What angel was that? There's angels all over the place. Was that Gladys?

Mother: No. Gladys brought the good news to the shepherds.

Gladys: Yeah! *(yells at shepherds)* Unto you a child is born!

Imogene: Unto me! Not them. Me! I'm the one that had the baby!

Mother: No, no, no. That just means that Jesus belongs to everybody. Unto all of us a child is born *(big sigh)*

Imogene: Why didn't they let Mary name her own baby? What did that angel do, just walk up and say "Name him Jesus"?

Mother: *(fed up with this)* Yes.

Alice: *(Piety personified)* I know what the angel said. She said, …"His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God., Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" *(there is a moment of amazed silence at this performance, so Imogene's response is loud and clear)*

Imogene: He'd never get out of the first grade if he had to write that!

(This throws the rehearsal into confusion. There's a babble of voices, shock, laughter, Alice marches off with her nose in the air, followed by Angel choir members saying, "Why'd you have to do that?", "Nobody asked you Alice". The shepherds see a chance to escape with excuse "I have to to the bathroom", "I need a drink", Ralph grabs the doll and throws it to Leroy, then runs offstage, followed by Imogene and the other Herdmans - all at the same time)

Maxine: (above the clamor) Mrs. Bradley, what should I do? Should I start over?

Mother: *(sinking wearily on angel choir riser)* Five minutes Maxine. *(calls to others)* Five minutes! *(Everyone leaves the stage)*

Beth: We never did start over. And we never did go through the whole thing. The 5 minutes turned into 15 minutes, and Imogene Herdman spent the whole time smoking cigars in the ladies' room. Then Mrs. McCarthy went to the ladies' room and saw all the smoke and called the fire department. And they came right away. They cleared everybody out of the building and dragged a fire hose through the church looking for a fire to put out…but the only one they found was in the kitchen…all the applesauce cake burned up. Of course all the ladies were mad about that, and Mrs. McCarthy was mad, my mother was mad, and Alice Wendelken's mother was mad too, and the whole Ladies' Aid Society was mad, and Reverend Hopkins said he didn't know what to think.

Reverend Hopkins: I've been on the telephone all day, and I can't make heads or tails of it. Some people say they set fire to the ladies' room. Some people say they set fire to the kitchen.

Mother: They didn't set fire to anything. The only fire was in the kitchen, where the applesauce cake burned up.

Reverend Hopkins: Well, the whole church is in an uproar. I don't know…Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," but I'm not sure he meant the Herdmans… Grace, don't you think we should just cancel the pageant? We could blame it on the fire…makes a good excuse. Everyone seems to think it's a … a …

Mother: Disaster? Well…they're wrong!...It's going to be the best Christmas pageant we ever had!

Reverend Hopkins: But, Grace…I don't think anyone will come to see it!

Beth: I didn't think so, either, and neither did Charlie…but we were wrong. On Christmas Eve the church was jammed full. Everybody came…to see what the Herdmans would do.

(Mother and Father walk in bringing props, etc.)
Mother: Oh, I don't have any idea what's going to happen tonight. We've never once gone through the whole thing, and the Herdmans still think it's some kind of spy story. It may be the first Christmas pageant in history where Joseph and the Wise Men get in a fight and Mary runs away with the baby.

Beth: It's going to be awful, you know. They look like trick or treaters - all dirty and fastened together with safety pins and wearing their moldy old sneakers…Mary and Joseph, I mean. They look like refugees or something.

Father: Well, …that's what they were…Mary and Joseph. They were refugees, in a way. They were a long way from home, didn't have any place to stay, didn't know anybody. They were probably cold, and hungry, and tired…and messy.

Mother: *(remembering to help with their costumes)* Oh, do you think I should…

Father: I think you worry too much. Now… *(briskly, to get her mind off the Herdmans)* I'm going to push baby angels onstage, and I'm going to hand out shepherd's crooks, and then push them onstage. When do I do all that?

Mother: *(hands him script)* Just follow this script.

Father: *(Flips through script)* Baby angels, shepherds, Wise Men… It doesn't seem to say here where the fire engines come in *(sneaky smile).*

Mother: Ohhh! *(in no mood for jokes)*

Father: Just kidding. *(pats her shoulder, collects crooks, exits. All kids start coming on stage.)*

Mother: Is everyone here? Will you all come on stage please? *(With a predictable amount of shoving and jostling, everyone assembles onstage.)* I just want to see how you look. *(Brief pause while she sees that they do indeed look like trick or treaters.)* Gladys, where's your halo?

Gladys: Our cat buried it. ..Listen, I think I ought to say something besides the baby came. Why would they all get up and tear off after some baby they don't even know? I ought to tell them it's Jesus, and I ought to tell them where he is.

Mother: No, Gladys. You tell them, "Unto you a baby is born" …and that's all you tell them. Now. Let's go backstage and try to be quiet while people are coming. Good luck. *(They all exit, Imogene last, dangling the doll upside down by 1 leg)* And Imogene, try to remember that that's a baby. *(starts to exit, and then adds)* And, for tonight anyway, it's the baby Jesus.

(She exits, leaving Imogene alone. In this scene Imogene, surrounded for the first time with the simple, traditional trappings of Christmas. The stillness, the dim light, the words "Baby Jesus" in her mind reflects the sense of wonderland mystery evoked in everyone on Christmas Eve. She cradles the doll awkwardly in her arms, takes a cloth from the manger and wraps the doll in it, straightens her veil, smoothes her costume…becomes Mary. She exits. Maxine enters and lights candles. As Maxine crosses to her place on the riser, the angel choir enters singing **"O Little Town of Bethlehem."** *They take their places on the risers. Alice and Beth are downstage so we can hear their conversation. Maxine goes to lectern. When carol is finished, she speaks.)*

Maxine: In the days of Caesar Augustus a decree went out that all the world should be taxed, and Joseph went into Bethlehem with Mary as his wife, who was great with child. And while they were there she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manager because there was no room for them in the inn.

(Angel choir sings **"Away in a Manger"** *as Ralph and Imogene enter. They are hesitant, awkward, visibly sobered by this Christmas Eve service and by all the people watching them. Imogene handles the doll with a kind of motherliness, puts it on her shoulder, as if to burp it. The choir could continue humming while Beth and Alice talk.)*

Alice: Look at them, aren't they awful! What's she doing with the baby? Oh!...I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus, as if he had colic.

Beth: Well, he could have had colic, just like any other baby.

Alice: I don't care. It looks awful. And they look awful.

Beth: So what? They just came a long way and now they don't have any place to sleep, and they've got a new baby to worry about.

Alice: Who, Ralph and Imogene?

Beth: No. Mary and Joseph. *(Ralph and Imognee take their places at the manger)*

Maxine: And in that region there were shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

*(Choir sings "***While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night"** *(During this carol, the shepherds enter down center aisle collecting their crooks from Father. They cluster in front of the stage, sitting and standing.)*

Maxine: And an angel of the Lord appeared to them…*(no Gladys)*...An Angel of the Lord appeared to them…*(still no Gladys)* The glory of the Lord shone round about and they were so afraid when the angel of the Lord appeared to them and said. Be not…*(Gladys, having chosen her moment, now roars up the aisle, around the shepherds, and up on stage with her message)*

Gladys: Hey!...Hey!...Unto you a child is born!...It's Jesus, and he's in the barn…Go see him! *(When the shepherds hesitate, she grabs to move him along, and then another one)* Go on, he's over there…Go on! *(Shepherds move on stage and gather around the manger.)*

Maxine: *(though flustered, recovers)* And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host, saying Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace among men. *(Choir sings* **"Angels We Have Heard on High"** *while Baby Angels enter, steered along by Father.)* When Jesus was born, there came Wise Men from the East to worship him, bringing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

(Chor sings **"We Three Kings of Orient Are"** *as Leroy, Ollie, and Claude enter down center aisle with Leroy carrying a ham, wrapped with a merry Christmas ribbon)*

Alice: They look awful, too. And what's that Leroy's got?

Beth: *(craning her neck to see)* It's …it's a ham!

Alice: A Ham! I'll bet they stole it!

Beth: No,...I think it's the ham from their welfare basket.

Alice: You mean it's their own ham?...Then they must hate ham.

Beth: Well, even if they hate ham, Alice, it's the only thing they ever gave away in their whole life. *(Choir hums* **"We Three Kings"** *as Wise Men kneel at the manger)*

Maxine: Being warned in a dream that they should not return to their own country, the Wise Men departed another way. The shepherds also departed, praising God for all that they had seen and heard. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

*(Choir sings **"Silent Night"** - possibly with the congregation. Father and Mother step out and too are singing. Imogene takes the doll from the manger and holds it. She is crying. Choir continues humming.)*

Alice: Beth…Look…Mary's crying. *(Goes to Mother)* Mrs. Bradley…Mary's crying.
(Kids bow and maybe exit. Mrs. McCarthy and Mrs. Slocum come up from audience and meet onstage.)

***Mrs.* McCarthy:** Could you believe that was Imogene Herdman? And all the rest of them? Irma, this was the best Christmas pageant we ever had, and I'm not sure what, but I think it was them. Could that be?

Mrs. Slocum: Oh, I always get weepy about the pageant, but you're right, this was the best one…and it should have been the worst.

Mrs. McCathy: There was just something…different.

Mrs. Slocum: Well, the angel of the Lord was different!

Mrs. McCarthy: Yes, but you know, I liked that! Had lots of spirit. I must find Grace, and tell her

Mrs. Slocum: (following) I just wish now that I'd let her have Eugene to be the baby Jesus.

Mrs. McCarthy: Who was the baby Jesus?

Mrs. Slocum: Why, it was a doll.

Mrs. McCarthy: Oh, I don't think so, Irma. That was no doll.

Mrs. Slocum: Well…it did seem real. *(They exit)*

Beth: It did seem real, as if it might have happened just that way. We all thought the pageant was about Jesus, but that was only part of it. It was about a new baby, and his mother and father who were in a whole lot of trouble - no money, no place to go, no doctor, nobody they knew. Because of the Herdmans, it was a whole new story - Imogene, burping the baby, and the Wise Men bringing such a sensible present. After all, they couldn't eat frankincense! And even Gladys - "He's in the barn. Go see him" so the shepherds didn't have to stumble around all over the countryside. But I guess it wasn't like that for Imogene. For her, the Christmas pageant turned out to be all wonder and mystery, as if she just caught on to what Christmas was all about. When it was over, we had a party in the basement, but the Herdmans didn't stay. They didn't have any cocoa and they didn't walk off with all the cookies, and they wouldn't even take their candy canes.

(Mother and Father and Charlie enter. About to close up and go home. Beth joins them.)

Charlie: Should I bring this ham?

Mother: It's the Herdmans' ham from their welfare basket…but they wouldn't take it back. Leroy said, "It's a present. You don't take back a present."

Father: *(bringing costumes from backstage)* **I** guess that's about it. ...It's almost Christmas.

Mother:...almost Christmas, kids.

Beth: …almost Christmas, Charlie.

(Lights dim - candles still on, as they reach out to others, to touch hands, we hear lines from the pageant offstage)

"And it came to pass in the days of…"
"And there were shepherds abiding…"
"A multitude, praising God…"
"I bring you good tidings of great joy…"

Gladys: *(offstage)* Hey!... *(She runs on the stage and points to audience)*...Hey! Unto you a child is born!

(All lights down for a count of 4-5 seconds. Lights up - all the kids join on stage to sing **"Joy to the World"** - with audience)

Kids	Youth
Charlie	Maxine (maybe confirmands)
Ralph	Beth
Imogene	Father
Leroy	Mother
Claude	Mrs. Armstrong
Ollie	Mrs. McCarthey
Gladys	Mrs. Slocum
Alice	Reverend Hopkins
Elmer	