

A Wonderfully Flat Thing

Based on Mark Twain's "A Fable"

The Characters:

Mark Twain- a 3 ½ foot tall American bunraku style puppet with a talking mouth and moving eyebrows. This is Mark Twain circa 1906- when "A Fable" was written; he is well traveled, established, and working on his memoirs (in part because he has squandered his wealth on bad investments and must keep writing for his livelihood.)

The House Cat- a hand held marionette approximately 2 feet tall. She is the pampered pet, the sophisticate of the group.

Donkey- a costumed and masked performer, the adult/manager of the group. He is constantly reading the paper and meets each new thing skeptically.

Snake- A brilliant rainbow viper 12 feet long. A prankster and a glutton.

Ostrich- An oversized body puppet which uses the performers legs as her own and has a separate hand puppet head and neck. The showgirl of the group, she is sweet, silly, and vain.

The Elephant King- a full body walk around costume and mask- oversized. King of the Beasts. Authoritative and temperamental, occasionally pompous.

The mirror characters will be played by other cast members.

The Setting:

Mark Twain's House- stage left Mark Twain's bed/work station. It is messy, overflowing with crumpled papers, stacks of papers and bedding. There are many, many books around him. A mirror on the wall behind him.

"The Woods" - encompasses off stage to the right. Composed of hyper stylized natural elements- a trees and flowers

mixed with old furniture and chests. It has the feeling of a secret clubhouse where the animals hang out.

"The Path" - connects the House and the Clubhouse. Lengthy and mysterious. Ideally contains objects that must be climbed over/under and/or gotten around, including audience members.

Scene 1

MARK TWAIN is writing at his desk with a large yellow feather pen, trying to compose a short story. It is not going well. He keeps muttering to himself, crumpling pieces of paper and tossing them onto the floor. The CAT is absorbed in grooming herself nearby.

MARK TWAIN

Grrrr. The Elephant. King of the Beasts. HmMMM. Ehhh...no. Blarg. Humph.

TWAIN crumples the page and tosses it.

TWAIN

Well. The mirror. Yes. And...uuuuuhhhhh...no. I don't like that either. Blech.

TWAIN crumples the page and tosses it.

TWAIN

How about...the ostrich. With her long, elegant neck.

TWAIN cranes and stretches his neck in various directions, experimentally.

TWAIN

No. Bother. It's just not right.

TWAIN crumples the page and tosses it. He is not paying attention, and this page hits the CAT on the head.

CAT

(disrupted, irritated)

Mrrrrrrroowww!

CAT stalks around the room, annoyed that TWAIN is not paying attention to her. He crumples and tosses some more

pages, and another one almost hits the CAT. The CAT stalks under his chair for safety, turns around several times with dignity, and returns to grooming herself.

TWAIN

(writing again)

Dancing...apples. Newspapers. Yes. And, a clubhouse? Hmmm.

TWAIN rubs the tip of his nose with the feather, absently. He sneezes explosively, knocking over his chair. The cat protests and jumps onto the desk for safety.

TWAIN

Crumpets! I shall never get this fable written!

CAT paces on his desk, walking across all of his papers and deliberately making a mess. TWAIN sighs and pets the CAT.

TWAIN

Drat those lousy railroad investments. To think, at my age, still writing for hire!

TWAIN picks up the mirror, holding and looking into it pensively. TWAIN sticks out his tongue at his reflection, then turns to his CAT, stroking her fur affectionately.

TWAIN

(to CAT)

I'm so tired, I'm taking a break. You sleep all the time and it seems to make you the wisest and most beautiful thing in the house.

TWAIN holds the mirror so that the CAT can look at her reflection. She tilts her head, fascinated and puzzled. TWAIN gets into bed and falls asleep, perhaps snoring. The CAT watches until TWAIN falls asleep, as if awaiting her opportunity. TWAIN begins to dream - there is some sort of transition, and it is clear that we are now looking at his dream-CAT and dream-house, and that the following events are a part of his dream.

CAT

Finally! At last, some peace and quiet!

(CAT moves downstage)

CAT

(to audience)

Once upon a time there was a writer who lived in a house. With the writer there lived a housecat who was exceedingly wise and purrrrrrfectly refined, not to mention modest.

CAT returns to scene and paces, her tail in the air.

CAT

But what is this thing? He has been talking to this thing all the time! What can he see here that is more wonderful than me?

(A larger version of the mirror appears onstage. CAT goes to the big mirror and dances in front of it, where her magical and huge face is reflected back. Giant Cat Mask Dance. CAT is amazed. She turns to the audience to share her news.)

CAT

Why, it is a flat thing, wonderfully flat, marvelously flat, enchantingly flat and elegant. And, oh, so beautiful! A cat lives inside it, infinitely lovely, and, why, her head is even larger than mine!

(CAT glances at TWAIN. Yes, he is still sound asleep.)

CAT

I must go into the woods and tell the rest of the animals. What a fantastic story! A real story this time, not a make believe story! They will be so impressed!

CAT leaves the house and starts along the PATH to the CLUBHOUSE. The CLUBHOUSE is lit up.

SCENE 2

CLUBHOUSE is illuminated, empty. CAT is on the PATH from the house to the clubhouse. The OSTRICH picks her way along the PATH, clumsily, towards the clubhouse, much closer to it than the CAT. SNAKE and DONKEY are also on the path, separated from OSTRICH and each other, closer to the clubhouse than CAT but not as close as OSTRICH. SNAKE stops repeatedly to eat. DONKEY is trying to walk while reading his newspaper. DONKEY, then SNAKE enter the clubhouse. OSTRICH enters, stumbles on her way inside. Finally, CAT arrives, excited.

CAT

Friends! Friends! Have I got a tale to tell you!

OSTRICH

Ooooooh, what is it?

SNAKE

A ssssstory?

DONKEY

(sceptically)

What is it this time?

CAT

It's a real one! In the house. Mark Twain showed it to me himself!

SNAKE

A real what?

CAT

A real thing! It is a flat thing, wonderfully flat!

OSTRICH

Ooh it sounds amazing!

SNAKE

(to audience, like an evening news reporter)

The animalsssss were very exssssited about thissss new piecsssse of gosssssip, and they asskeds quesssstions, so assst to get a full underssstanding of it.

OSTRICH

What does it look like?

CAT

It's big! It has a wooden stand as tall as a human! The flat thing is round shaped, like an oval. When I looked into it, I saw the most wonderful picture!

SNAKE

What did you ssssee?

DONKEY folds his arms. He is not impressed. SNAKE and OSTRICH draw towards CAT, eager to hear more.

CAT (spoken)

I saw a picture of a beautiful cat! It is so marvelous your head turns round and round and you almost swoon with ecstasy.

OSTRICH

Oh, my!

SNAKE

Ssssssounds sssspectacular.

OSTRICH

But what do you call it? The flat thing - does it have a name?

CAT

Well - it's really flat - so wonderfully flat! And so large - so magical - it doesn't need to have a name!

DONKEY

(to audience)

The Donkey began to throw doubts.

DONKEY

Hah. Hah! You don't even know the name! That's because it doesn't have one - it doesn't exist! There has never been anything as beautiful as this before - *(makes a loud Donkey laugh)* ... and there isn't now. In my opinion, when it takes a whole basketful of sesquipedalian adjectives to whoop up a thing of beauty, it is time for suspicion.

SNAKE and OSTRICH react. Now they do not know what to think.

OSTRICH

(to audience)

Great was the surprise and puzzlement of the animals.

CAT

But it is that beautiful! You have to believe me!

DONKEY

I've heard enough of your addlebrained stories. You'll never convince me!

SNAKE and OSTRICH are still uncertain.

CAT runs right up to the Donkey, getting in his face. Donkey puts up his newspaper as a shield. She runs to OSTRICH and SNAKE who are friendly but still somewhat doubtful.

CAT

(to audience)

It was easy to see that these doubts were having an effect on the animals.

The CAT turns away from the other animals and leaves the clubhouse in a huff.

SNAKE

(to audience)

Sssso the cat went off offended.

DONKEY

Enough of this silliness. It's naptime!

SNAKE and OSTRICH reluctantly lie down to take a nap. DONKEY takes out his newspaper. SNAKE and OSTRICH wiggle around, too excited to sleep.

SNAKE

What issss this thing?

DONKEY

Hush.

OSTRICH

It is a flat thing.

DONKEY

Go to sleep will you?

SNAKE

Wonderfully flat.

DONKEY sighs.

OSTRICH

Marvelously flat!

SNAKE and OSTRICH wiggle more vigorously and flirt a bit, escalating the noise and silliness.

SNAKE

(to audience)

In the meantime curiosssssity was taking a fresh sssstart -

OSTRICH

(to audience)

- and there was a revival of interest perceptible.

DONKEY

That's it. I've had enough of this fatuous cajolery. If it will make you settle down, I'll go to the house and investigate.

SNAKE and OSTRICH react excitedly.

DONKEY

In the meantime, calm down and get some sleep!

DONKEY storms off, out of the clubhouse and along the path towards the house.

Scene 3

DONKEY arrives at the house and regards it suspiciously. He has never actually been to the house before. He walks all the way around it. He cautiously tries the doorknob, but it is locked. He realizes that he is going to have to break in like a common thief. He walks around the house again, stopping at the window and peering in. He tries to open the window. Suddenly, it squeaks loudly. TWAIN mumbles and turns over in his sleep. DONKEY freezes. TWAIN settles back to sleep. DONKEY finally slides the window open and climbs in. He brushes himself off, then peeks and pokes around the house. He is awed by the house. Finally, he looks for the mirror and finds it.

DONKEY

Ah, there it is, the flat thing. Now, I just have to look into it.

(The big mirror appears behind him onstage, this time with full sized Donkey puppet- a flat paper cutout of himself. The mirror dancer does a static and flat dance mimicking the static and flat moves of the Donkey. <Mirror #2>

DONKEY

Why, it's not a cat but - I see a giant donkey!

The Donkey looks himself in the eye, impressed, straightens his tie, and folds his newspaper.

DONKEY

What a sensible figure! Intelligent. Organized. Dressed to impress. I knew the cat was a liar. I'm off to tell the others - the truth!

DONKEY climbs back out the window the way he came in, closing it carefully. He steps back on the path to return to the clubhouse.)

Scene 4

Meanwhile, back at the clubhouse, SNAKE, OSTRICH, and the CAT - who returned after DONKEY left - are having a pillow fight, tickling each other with feathers, or some other such silliness. SNAKE takes a snack break while CAT and OSTRICH whisper to each other excitedly, catching up on the latest gossip. Then they all resume their previous activity, more boisterously than before. DONKEY returns and glares at them until they stop.

DONKEY

Ahem! Attention! Attention please! (he points) The cat lied. There was no cat in the picture - I saw it, and it was a great big donkey!

CAT

But how could this be?

OSTRICH

Did you see it good and clear?

SNAKE

Were you closssssse to it?

DONKEY

I saw it, good and clear. I was so close that I practically touched noses with it. It was a donkey, a tidy, proper fellow.

CAT

But I saw it, the picture, and it was a cat! This is very strange!

SNAKE and OSTRICH whisper to each other - now they really don't know what to think.

DONKEY

You made up this story, just like all the other ones! Cats have no sense.

CAT

Cats! How about donkeys! I bet your head was too stuck in your newspaper to see anything else!

DONKEY

Was not!

CAT

Was too!

DONKEY

Was not!

From afar, the blast of a tuba - the ELEPHANT KING approaches.

OSTRICH

What's that sound?

SNAKE

It'ssss the Elephant!

OSTRICH

Oh good! He'll know just what to do!

Everyone bustles around getting ready for the ELEPHANT's arrival ELEPHANT bursts into the clubhouse regally, wearing a humorous crown and regal cape that are many sizes too small for him, and pauses. SNAKE strikes a heraldic pose while OSTRICH kneels.

SNAKE

His royal majesty, the Sultan of Stomping, the Titan of Trumpeting, the Regent of of Roaring, the Grand Prince of Pounding, The Elephant King!

ELEPHANT

Greetings, subjects! Greetings!

ELEPHANT sits on his throne with exaggerated pomposity.

ELEPHANT

Now, what's all this noise and commotion?

DONKEY

Your Majesty, the cat has said that at the house there is a flat thing, "wonderfully flat," (sarcastic finger quotes) and when you look into it, you see a picture of "a large and beautiful cat."

ELEPHANT

Hmmm. A flat thing? I've never heard tell of such a device. It sounds like another one of her stories.

CAT

It is not! This one is real! I saw it myself!

DONKEY

So she says. But when I went, I saw nothing in the flat thing but a smart and sensible donkey! The cat lied!

CAT

Did not! It's the Donkey lying! He can't be telling the truth!

ELEPHANT

The cat saw a cat. But the donkey saw a donkey. This is most peculiar. Puzzling, even. And I do not like puzzles. They make my head hurt.

(pause, scratches his ears, thinks.)

I know! I have it! The perfect solution! I knew I could solve it, if I just applied myself.

(to SNAKE)

Snake. You go to the house. Look in the flat thing yourself, and report back to me. We will determine the truth of this matter, the straight truth, indeed.

SCENE 5

SNAKE bobs his head, exits the clubhouse and continues along the path towards the house. Eventually the snake arrives and circles the house. How will he get in? After much deliberation and several failed attempts, he slithers under the crack in the door. He explores the house, finding

and devouring a half-eaten cookie TWAIN had forgotten. Then SNAKE discovers the mirror.

SNAKE

Where is it? There it is (etc).

A man dressed as a large golden apple tree slowly shimmers on stage. The dancer is enticing with the fruit and the Snake is hungry for it. SNAKE sees a small and delicate version of himself eating apples from a golden and magical apple tree.

SNAKE

I like Apples!

The small snake devours the fruit, teasing the big Snake. The real snake sees the basket of apples in Mark Twain's room eats the fruit eagerly.

SNAKE

That isssss delicious!

He eats until his tummy is overly full and hurting. He makes noises of gluttony, and then near vomiting. He steps back out of the frame.

The SNAKE can barely move. TWAIN rolls over and sighs. The SNAKE decides it's time to go. He is so fat now that it is much harder for him to slither out, but finally he manages, and returns along the path to the clubhouse.

SCENE 6

While SNAKE has been away the ELEPHANT has travelled away down the path a bit to inspect his kingdom, and the DONKEY has stepped out to check the latest stock prices. CAT and OSTRICH gossip together.

CAT

Did I tell you on my way home from our brunch last week I saw the Donkey actually walk into a tree while reading his newspaper?

OSTRICH

You don't say!

CAT

That's why he started wearing that hat the other day, it's because he got a big blue bump right on his forehead!

OSTRICH

That's so funny! It's just like him!

DONKEY walks into the clubhouse while reading his newspaper. CAT and OSTRICH try to hide their giggles. ELEPHANT reenters shortly ahead of SNAKE.

ELEPHANT

The snake is back! The snake is back!

Everyone turns expectantly and watches SNAKE reenter the clubhouse.

ELEPHANT

Well, subject? What did you see?

Dramatic pause.

SNAKE

I sssssaw a ssssssssnake, sssssssslithering and sssssssswallowing ssssssssome fruit.
A disappointed and puzzled pause.

ELEPHANT

Why, this is not possible! Not possible, I say!

CAT

The cat saw a cat...

DONKEY

The donkey saw a donkey...

SNAKE

The snake sssssaw a snake...

ELEPHANT

What is this flat thing, and how does it work? You, Ostrich. Investigate yourself, and bring us your report.

OSTRICH

(abashed)

Me, Your Majesty? Yes, Your Majesty.

SCENE 7

OSTRICH sets off along the path. She pretends to be brave while the others are watching but she is actually very nervous. She manages to break into the house, ideally in a different way from DONKEY and SNAKE. She falls down awkwardly in the process, and, embarrassed, brushes herself off. She regards the sleeping TWAIN. She speaks in a whisper, so as not to awaken him.

OSTRICH
(nervously)
Here - this must be it.

The ostrich looks into the mirror and sees an even clumsier version of herself. (Previously was the seagull dance, showing the ostrich what she can't do - duet is beautiful and heartbreaking.) She is unable to move with any grace, and ultimately unable to jump off the ground. Nostalgic music plays and realizes she can't fly. The spell is broken and she has a jealousy dance by the mirror.

OSTRICH
Oh! It is not a cat, nor a donkey, nor a snake - I can't see any of them! I only see a great big clumsy ostrich!

OSTRICH exits the house and goes back along the path, ashamed and angry. Her walk is noticeably different than it was on the way to the house. The CAT is outside the clubhouse waiting for her to return.

CAT
Ostrich! You're back!

They air kiss.

CAT
What did you see? What did you see in the flat thing?

OSTRICH
It was terrible!

CAT
Come on. It can't have been that bad.

OSTRICH

But it was! I saw an ostrich. But she was so clumsy, she couldn't dance at all! And then she tried to fly, but she couldn't! Oh, it was awful! I can never show my face in the clubhouse again!

OSTRICH buries her head in the ground. CAT touches or hugs her, trying to comfort her friend.

CAT

Poor Ostrich. It does sound terrible. (pause) Do you want me to tell the others?

OSTRICH

No! They'll just laugh and be mean about it!

CAT

What if I go with you and just say you saw an ostrich? I won't tell them anything else!

OSTRICH

I'm still so embarrassed!

CAT

Come on. We'll go into the clubhouse together.

There is a pause while OSTRICH considers the offer. Slowly she pulls her head out the ground.

OSTRICH

Okay.

CAT goes into the clubhouse. OSTRICH is still embarrassed and trips as she enters, staring at the ground.

ELEPHANT

(to CAT)

Well, Ostrich? What did you see?

CAT

She saw an ostrich!

DONKEY and CAT debate fiercely and loudly.

ELEPHANT

(to audience)

There was general confusion and more puzzlement.

CAT

The cat saw a cat.

DONKEY

The donkey saw a donkey.

SNAKE

The ssssnake sssaw a ssssnake.

OSTRICH

The ostrich saw an ostrich.

ELEPHANT

Why, this is most peculiar! I do know all of you to be honest subjects, at least the majority of the time. We must get to the bottom of this mystery. I declare, we shall have the truth of this matter, if I have to go fetch it myself!

DONKEY

But your majesty! Think of your royal dignity!

ELEPHANT

My dignity?

DONKEY

Your dignity! Aren't you The Elephant King?

ELEPHANT strikes a regal pose and trumpets.

ELEPHANT

Of course I am!

DONKEY

Then your role is not to investigate this foolish nonsense of the cat! You have more important matters to attend to!

ELEPHANT

But I WANT to see the flat thing! I want to see the flat thing NOW!

DONKEY

You are wasting your valuable time!

ELEPHANT

I'll be the judge of that! Am I not -

(He gestures towards SNAKE and OSTRICH until they take the hint.)

SNAKE AND OSTRICH

His royal majesty, the Sultan of Stomping, the Titan of Trumpeting, the Regent of of Roaring, the Grand Prince of Pounding, The Elephant King!

ELEPHANT

To the house!

ELEPHANT trumpets again and leaves the house with great stamping and fanfare.

DONKEY

I'm not going! I'm not going back! This is all - balderdash!

Irritated, DONKEY goes off on his own.

SCENE 8

ELEPHANT struts along the path, still ruffled by the exchange with the Donkey. He mutters to himself along the lines of: I am His royal majesty, the Sultan of Stomping, the Titan of Trumpeting, the Regent of of Roaring, the Grand Prince of Pounding, The Elephant King! He talks to the kids in the audience, asking them if they are his friends and subjects and whether they like him. Eventually the animals arrive at the house. The ELEPHANT attempts to open the door and the whole door comes off. He shrugs and enters. He notices and looks in the mirror. His head comes into the frame large and upside down, and he crosses from stage left to center stage.

ELEPHANT

Hey you, come here. No, you come here. Who's the King? Who's the boss?

ELEPHANT'S image on the mirror grows to extra large proportions. He looks at himself and he realizes that it is actually him.

ELEPHANT

Hey! That's me, His royal majesty, the Sultan of Stomping, the Titan of Trumpeting, the Regent of of Roaring, the Grand Prince of Pounding, The Elephant King!

With each phrase his image on the screen shrinks (7x total) until his image is a tiny spot on the screen. Elephant is very upset and insecure and turns to the audience for help.

ELEPHANT

Oh no! What happened? Now I'm so small - that's not the king I want to be! Friends - subjects - can you help me grow bigger? Let's all trumpet like an elephant - together!

ELEPHANT prompts kids to trumpet. He trumpets even louder. This happens a total of three times. Mark Twain is finally wakened by the all this noise. He is shocked speechless to see his dream come to life. The CAT creeps in to see what is going on.

TWAIN

I must still be dreaming! My cat. But who is your friend?

CAT

This is the Elephant! Elephant, meet Mark Twain.

There is a moment when neither of them knows what to do. Finally, they shake hands/paws.

CAT

(to Twain)

We have all come to see it, the flat thing! We don't understand how it works. When I looked into it, I saw a charming and beautiful cat! But then the Donkey came and he saw a donkey, and the Snake came and he saw a snake, and the Ostrich came and she saw an ostrich, and now the Elephant has come and seen an elephant! Why have we all seen different pictures?

TWAIN

(laughs)

This flat thing is called a mirror. And a mirror shows what you bring to it. You are seeing your own true beauty, my dainty one. You saw yourself. Then, each of your friends looked in the mirror and saw who they really are. Do you understand it now?

ANIMALS

Yes! Yes I do!

TWAIN

Come on everyone. Be brave, let's all share what the mirror shows us!

Everyone gathers together.

ANIMALS

Dance! Let's dance everybody! Yay! All together!

The big ending dance - this time it brings out the best of every animal.

Mark Twain

(To audience)

You may not see your ears, but they will be there. (pause)
Oh! My story! I didn't see it before, but now I do. My story has been right here this all this time!

TWAIN rushes to his desk and resumes writing with his pen. ELEPHANT and SNAKE have individual exit dances. Finally, CAT and OSTRICH are the only ones left. CAT beckons her friend towards the mirror.

CAT

Look!

OSTRICH looks in the mirror and sees a video of herself dancing elegantly. She has a short ecstatic dance moment ending in a gorgeous leap.

The End.