

THE SHOW WENT ON

by Bernard Beckett

The children of Room 7 stood in line and tried to stay quiet. Their teacher, Mr Appleton, waited at the front with his finger to his lips. Next door, in the school hall, they could hear the audience laughing. Seth knew why. They were laughing because Rex and Anthea, dressed as a taniwha, were rolling on their backs with their legs in the air while Chen tickled their taniwha tummy with a broom. During dress rehearsal, the taniwha had accidentally rolled back into the lake. (The lake was actually a paddling pool filled with water.) It had taken three days – and ten hairdryers – to get the costume dry.

Very soon, Seth and his classmates would rush into the scene. They were dressed as farm animals. The taniwha would chase them, and then they would all do the farmyard dance. They had been practising this for the last six weeks. Mr Appleton had reminded them that, tonight, they must be perfect.



In front of Seth, Helen the rooster stepped from one foot to the other. Last year, she had been so nervous she had vomited before the show. Behind Seth, Talia and George were dressed as a horse. Talia was the front end. George was bent down behind her, a long tail sticking out at the rear.

Josh was at the very back of the line. Josh found it difficult to be still and quiet. He was dressed as a frog because he was very good at jumping. Seth could hear Josh humming to himself, the way he did when he wanted to say something but wasn't allowed.

Mr Appleton looked to the back of the line. "Quiet, Josh," he whispered.

"But –"

"No, Josh, quiet!" Mr Appleton's voice rose dangerously. Josh didn't notice.

"But it's George and Talia, Mr A."

"Not now, Josh!"

Josh hummed louder. Seth could feel the children around him begin to worry. Seth wasn't worried. He was dressed as a cat. Cats never worry.

"They're standing way too close to the heater, Mr A!" Josh blurted.

"You just worry about yourself, Josh," Mr Appleton replied.

Seth turned round. Now he could see what Josh was trying to say. So could the rest of the children.

"Excuse me, Mr A," Seth said. "I think George's tail might be on fire!"

The end of George's tail was beginning to smoulder.

"What!" Mr Appleton gasped. He ran to the fire extinguisher, but it wasn't in its usual place. During show week, a lot of things got moved. "I'll be back in a moment," he called as he ran off in search of another one.



Smoke was now billowing from the end of the horse's tail. It looked like a firework that was about to explode. Helen the rooster screamed. Max the sheepdog began to laugh. The horse broke in two. The head ran into a wall and fell over. The back end ran round in circles, patting its bottom.

Melanie the duck, who went to ballet lessons every Tuesday and Thursday and had a solo during the farmyard dance, said, "It doesn't matter. Everybody get back in line." But nobody listened.

Constance the pig began to cry.

Stefanie, the tallest child in the class, whose father had once rowed at the Olympics, took control. She ran to George and lifted him over her shoulder, burning tail and all.

Seth could see exactly what she had in mind.

"Quick," Seth called to the others. "We have to clear the way!"

So, even though there was still another thirty seconds before their entry, the farmyard animals followed the cat onto the stage. The cat meowed, the dog barked, the duck quacked, and the surprised taniwha jumped out of the way. The crowd cheered.



The cheering turned to laughter when an oversized chicken came bursting through the gap, carrying half a horse over her back. Stefanie dumped George, and the horse's bottom, into the pool. There was a mighty splash. Water sprayed over the school band. The trumpeter gave a surprised honk. The audience roared. Josh, who always had trouble containing his excitement, rushed forward and leapfrogged right over the pool, horse's smouldering bottom and all.

George stood slowly. Water dripped from the stump where his tail had been. Now there was silence. The audience waited to see what would happen next. George waited, too. So did the band. So did the farm animals. So did the taniwha. Everybody waited. Seth felt butterflies in his stomach. If something didn't happen soon, the show would be ruined.





Then Josh gave a long croak. Max looked up at him and barked. Josh hopped, and Max ran after him, exactly the way they had practised. Seth guided Talia across the stage to the dripping George and helped them put the horse back together. Rex and Anthea the taniwha chased Max the dog and Chen the farmer, just like they had in the rehearsals. The bandleader began the farmyard song.

Seth found his place on the end of the row. He kicked and turned and clapped in time. The audience clapped and sang along. The show went on.

illustrations by Rachel Smythe

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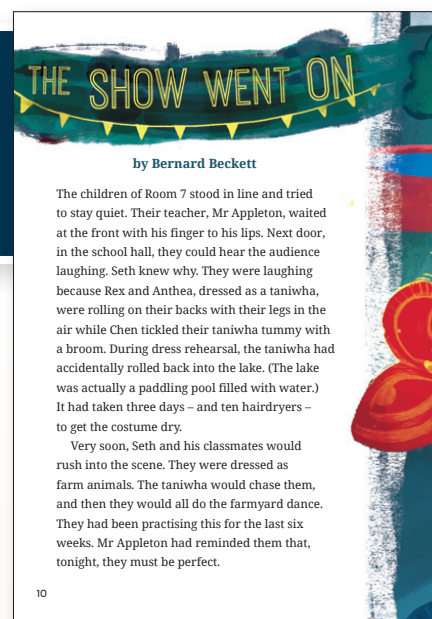
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