

Rotten Pumpkin
A Play in 15 voices by David M. Schwartz

Have fun with imaginative costumes! For example, several students can be the Slime Mold, attached with a webbing of string, and they can chant their lines together. Other students can hold red balloons to represent the spore sacs. Bread Mold can be puffy with cotton balls, and several students holding hands can be Earthworm. Who says science isn't fun?

JACK: Here I stand, bright with light, proud and round. Tonight is my glory night. Call me Jack.

JACK: My flame is spent. No more do I glow. Back to the garden I go.

MOUSE: Some think I'M cute eating pumpkin, but it's not cute being everybody else's lunch. Weasel, gopher, owl, snake, badger, bobcat, house cat, rat -- they all want mouse pie! I'm always on the lookout for danger cuz danger's on the lookout for me.

SQUIRREL: Squirrels are nutty about nuts and flaky about fruit, but I've just had my fill, so no pumpkin right now, thank you. Oh, I see a seed, so I'll grab it and head for my favorite tree.

SLUG: Call me slug, the eating machine. I scrape food into my mouth with my sharp little tongue. Look closely and you'll see marks on the pumpkin. Like footprints, they show you where I've been and they make great spots for mold spores to touch down and grow. I hope those molds appreciate what I do for them!

FLY: My keen fly nose smells what I am looking for—dead fish, rotten meat, dog doo—the stinkier, the better! A rotting pumpkin is perfect. I taste it with my feet. You're gonna love hearing how I eat. I vomit on the pumpkin flesh. My vomit dissolves pumpkin nutrients so I can lap them up. A delicious, nutritious morning smoothie!

JACK: My big night is just a memory. My smile has faded, my crown is down. Where once I smiled and winked, now fungi ring my mouth and eyes. A cheerful Jack I am no more.

BLACK ROT: I'm a mold with a nasty name. People call me "black rot." I'm black and I rot! Someone cut holes into this pumpkin and that really helped

me out. Now I've got soft, fresh pumpkin flesh for lunch. Rotten fellow that I am, I'll turn Jack to mush.

FUSARIUM ROT: Black rot, I appreciate you. I'm Fusarium rot, and you prepared the pumpkin's skin for me like a gardener's hoe prepares the earth. I landed as a spore and from tiny gray spores great reddish fungi can grow. Now you're gone, but I'm living off the "land" you readied for me—pumpkin land.

BREAD MOLD: Have you ever noticed a slice of bread dotted with gray blotches? A strawberry growing white fuzz? A pumpkin wearing earmuffs? Then you've seen me! I'm sometimes called "bread mold" but I've got an appetite for a lot more than bread. Once my spores land on something yummy, I grow fast-fast-fast. Then I send up tiny pinheads filled with more spores, like teeny, tiny seeds. Into the air they go. If they land on another pumpkin, they'll give it earmuffs and a new nose.

SOW BUG: Hear this, all you molds and rots: I, the sow bug, owe you! Without you, I'd be under a log chewing rotten wood. My mouthparts can't break through a pumpkin's skin but you softened it up so now I can munch its deliciously rotten flesh. I'll repay you by getting you to your next pumpkin. I'm sure to swallow bits of mold and when I poop, I'll leave it behind. In other words, I'll spread you around. So I can thank you and you can thank me, too. We're even.

JACK: I may be one scary-looking dude, but I'm the one who's scared. I've got a bad case of mold – three, four, maybe five or more of them, and look what they're doing to me! But see the clean spot below my lower lip on the right side? I'll tell you why I look so good in that spot. First look a little further up and to the right. See that fuzzy grayish greenish area? That's not just any old mold.

PENICILLIUM MOLD: I am the famous Penicillium. The drug Penicillin is made from me and has saved millions of human lives.

Let me explain. Naturally, I'd rather not share my food with other molds or bacteria. When they start growing too close, I make chemicals that kill them off. See how the lower lip of this pumpkin is shaved clean? My chemicals dripped down and did that!

These chemicals are called antibiotics. When you're sick, they can kill the bad bacteria inside your body so you get better. I'm just a fuzzy gray mold

but you may owe your good health to me.

JACK: Am I still a pumpkin? My top is collapsing and my skin is a mess of molds. They grow all over each other and right through me, eating my flesh from the outside-in and from the inside-out! Not even winter snows and low temperatures have slowed them down because most of the fungi that love pumpkins thrive in cold weather. How did I get so unlucky?

EARTHWORM: Don't call me a lowly earthworm. The only thing low about me is my place on the ground. The work I do is high and mighty. Dead leaves, flowers, fruit, and animal carcasses are healthy food to me! When I eat a hunk of rotten pumpkin, its nutrients go into my mouth and many go out the other end. Now they are part of the soil. They will nourish growing plants, including new pumpkins! See, I'm not lowly at all.

YEAST: I am everywhere – in the air, in the soil, in your body and on this pumpkin. I am a single cell, which means I'm too small for you to see without a microscope. When millions like me cover a piece of fruit, you'll notice a whitish film. That's me, yeast.

Some kinds of yeast help bread dough rise. Other kinds turn grape juice into wine and cocoa beans into chocolate. We all digest sugar and release carbon dioxide along with alcohol. It's called fermentation. When you bake bread, the alcohol burns off but the gas bubbles get trapped. They expand from the heat and stretch the dough to make it soft and puffy.

SLIME MOLD: Of all the strange things are growing on this pumpkin, I am the strangest. I am a slime mold.

I started as a single cell, tumbling through the soil. Every once in a while I divided in half so there were two of "me." Soon there were lots and lots of us. Then we did the oddest thing: we joined to become one living creature that spread out in squiggly yellow arms connected like a net. The net, called a "plasmodium", began to move.

As a plasmodium, I oozed around for a while, then I landed on this pumpkin stem and changed shape again. I sent up stalks with spore cases that look like tiny red balloons. Gazillions of spores will grow in them, then they'll fly away in the wind, and the slime mold cycle will begin anew. Sounds like an alien life-form, doesn't it?

JACK: My pumpkin days are done. My pumpkin pride is gone. My pumpkin future? None. I'm a smelly rotten mess spilling my seeds on the garden soil. Am I good for anything now?

EARTH: I think of myself as a mother, the mother of all that grows on the land. I give seeds the molecules of nourishment they need. And what happens to these molecules when the plants die? They return to me, mother earth.

But I cannot pluck these molecules from dead plants as a hand picks fruit. They must be released by decomposers – the molds and rots, the earthworms and sowbugs, the many fungi, yeast and bacteria. Even flies, birds, squirrels, mice, and slugs do their part. With decomposers working, working, working non-stop, the earth is a fruitful place.

PUMPKIN SEED: There were hundreds of seeds like me, slippery and moist, connected by a stringy web. One day a hand reached inside and scooped out most of us. That hand missed me. Through bright sunny days and long stormy nights, I sat inside the pumpkin.

The animals came, the molds grew, the pumpkin collapsed into a heap of goo. . . and I waited. The goo seeped into the soil, enriching it with nutrients . . . and I waited. I nestled in pumpkin-soil, warming from the sun's energy, swelling with spring rains, pushing roots downward and stem upward. If all goes well, my flowers will form fruit. My fruits will ripen.

Maybe one of them will be your next Jack O'Lantern. Maybe it will have a glory day of its own.