



BY **MIKE KENNY**

DIRECTED BY **DEBBIE DEVINE**

A PRODUCTION OF **24TH STREET THEATRE**

FROM AN ORIGINAL IDEA FROM **GAVIN STRIDE**

MAY 2 – 3, 2015 **KIRK DOUGLAS THEATRE**
213.628.2772 CenterTheatreGroup.org

Welcome to Center Theatre Group and *Walking the Tightrope* by Mike Kenny.

Walking the Tightrope is about how a man named Stan, and his young granddaughter, Esme, deepen their relationship while going through one of life's most difficult changes together. Before we tell you more, take a moment and think about what kinds of changes you have experienced in your life. Did you go through these changes with family members, friends or alone? Which changes brought you closer to others?

Have you ever had to travel a long distance to visit family, or have they traveled to visit you? What are some of your favorite things to do with those who you love? Do you like going to arcades or carnivals? Have you ever been to, or wanted to go to, the circus or the beach?

Walking the Tightrope is both a play and a poem that takes us on a rich theatrical journey. You will experience the excitement of train travel, the confusion of the unknown, and the joy of being with those we love. Actors will use their voices, bodies and imaginations to pantomime feeding chickens and playing in the surf. You will see a wooden box used as a seat on a train and as a bed in a house. You will hear the crash of waves at the seashore and the sounds of the crowd at a circus.

Turn the page to immerse yourself in the world of *Walking the Tightrope*. Discover how this play was brought to life through theatrical elements such as creative movement, live music, and video. Read interviews with the playwright, Mike Kenny, and the play's director, Debbie Devine.

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers and perhaps, additional questions. See what questions this information raises for you and what discoveries the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for *Walking the Tightrope*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

“Every year,
Some things stay the same
And some
things change.”

– Stan and Esme from *Walking the Tightrope*

“EVERY YEAR...”

ESME COMES TO STAY, WITH HER NANNA & GRANDAD... EVERY YEAR.”

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE takes place in a quaint town on the English coastline in 1959. Every summer, young Esme travels by train to visit her grandparents at their seaside cottage for a few weeks. During these trips to Grandad Stan and Nanna Queenie’s home, the three of them engage in the same enjoyable activities every summer: feeding the chicks in the yard; eating bread and butter pudding; going to the beach to build sandcastles and run in the surf. Grandad Stan gives piggyback rides and Nanna Queenie tells bedtime stories.

With each visit to her grandparents’ home, a noticeable change can be seen in Esme. During her first visit, she was in her “mum’s tummy.” On another, she was able to walk on her own, and during the next journey, she talked a lot. Last summer, she traveled by herself for the very first time.

The story of *Walking the Tightrope* takes place during Esme’s most recent visit. Once again, she has traveled by herself, and is very excited to be at her grandparent’s cottage. However, she senses that something is different this time around, even though many of the family’s activities remain the same. Grandad Stan and Esme end up spending a lot of quality time together, which brings them closer than they have ever been before.

CHARACTERS

GRANDAD STAN
Grandfather of young Esme, husband of Nanna Queenie, his home is a seaside cottage in the English countryside. During the play, he is dealing with extreme change in his life.

ESME
A young girl, but old enough to travel alone in those days by train to visit her grandparents; fun loving and full of energy; she is happy to be at her grandparents’ home.

PERFORMERS

CLOWN
Dressed in circus clown attire, but not your typical clown; he has a symbolic role in the telling of this story.

MUSICIAN
Plays a piano onstage during the performance; his live music adds another layer to the storytelling.

“Most days are like other days
But some days are strange
Most things they just stay the same
But some things have to change.”

– Stan from
Walking the Tightrope

A QUIAINT, ENGLISH
SEASIDE VILLAGE IN 1959. LATE SUMMER.

THE STORY takes place in a variety of locations. Through theatrical conventions such as sound and set design, projected images, narration and pantomime, we are magically transported to...

- » A train station.
- » The exterior of the cottage, which has a grassy yard with chickens.
- » The interior of a moving train.
- » The seaside, with a sandy beach and waves.
- » The interior of Grandad Stan and Nanna Queenie’s seaside cottage which has a bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room.
- » A seaside carnival of sorts called the Pleasure Beach.
- » A circus performance.

- ★ Have you ever had to pretend that you were in an imaginary place? If so, what did you do to create that environment? How did you act?
- ★ Choose one of the above-mentioned places in the story and act as if you are in that environment. Have your classmates guess where you are.



BRITISH SLANG

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE IS SET IN ENGLAND. This means the characters use British slang that might be unfamiliar to us. Slang is special language used by a particular group. This informal vocabulary can be made of invented words, changed words and exaggerated or humorous figures of speech.

The following is a list of British terms used in the play and their meanings in our culture:

WASHING UP
the act of cleaning plates, pans, glasses, knives, forks, etc. after a meal; doing the dishes

TEA TIME
coffee break

TELLY
television

MUM
Mom

ORNAMENTS (ON THE MANTLE)
decorations

SWIMMING COSTUMES
swimsuits or bathing suits

OOLIES
waves

BREAD & BUTTER PUDDING
bread pudding (a type of dessert)

DODGEMS
bumper cars

FISH & CHIPS
fried fish and French fries

FLASK
a container for liquids; Thermos (US trademark)

HOLIDAY
vacation

LOVE
a friendly way to address someone; for example: dear, honey or sweetheart.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

WHY is the play named *Walking the Tightrope*?

- ★ When you hear the phrase “walking the tightrope,” what comes to mind for you? What kinds of images do you think about? What kinds of feelings do you have?
- ★ Based on the title, what do you predict the play might be about?

If someone says they are “walking a tightrope,” it can mean he or she is dealing with a difficult situation. This phrase is an idiom: a word combination that has a different meaning than its literal meaning.

- ★ Do you know any other idioms?

More than one character is “walking a tightrope” in this story. As you watch the play, think about whom they are, what kind of difficulty they are experiencing, and what kind of support they receive during their challenging times.

“We’re not afraid of the ooly ooly oolies
The ooly ooly ooly ooly oooooOOOOOO...”

– Esme and Stan
from *Walking the Tightrope*

CHANGE

CHANGE is a constant, and mysterious, part of life. We are always changing, growing, and learning, even when we don’t feel it happening. Everything around us can stay exactly the same (our home, our town, our family or friends), but change will happen inside of us as we mature and grow. Or, the exact opposite is true. Everything outside of us can become completely different (a new home, a new town, or a new school), but we may feel exactly the same on the inside. Sometimes we choose to change; at other times, change finds us.

Change can happen in the tiniest of ways. Sometimes it feels like a huge tidal wave. Experiencing change can make us very happy or make us feel extremely challenged.

In *Walking the Tightrope*, Esme and her Grandad Stan are going through an enormous change, even though

everything around them looks the same as it has for years. Luckily, they have each other. The strong connection that we watch them develop, and their great love for one another, will ultimately get them to the other side of this very difficult transition that life has brought to them.

- ★ How have you changed recently in your life? Are these changes you can see, or does it feel like they are happening invisibly?
- ★ Have you ever chosen to change in any way? If so, how?
- ★ Has anyone helped you through a difficult change, or have you ever helped anyone?
- ★ How can those around us help us get through change?

“Most days are like other days
You remember the things that are strange.”

– Esme from
Walking the Tightrope

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Los Angeles, CA 90012

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PANTOMIME

“We have a piece that celebrates pantomime & live music & 21st century video &

WE ALL WORK TOGETHER, COLLABORATED TOGETHER

to make a 57-minute tone poem to rock your world.”

— DEBBIE DEVINE
Director of *Walking the Tightrope* and Artistic Director of the 24th Street Theatre

THEATRE HAPPENS through the art of collaboration. When we watch a play, we see the actors onstage performing the story, but there is also a huge part of the creative team that we do not see on the stage. A theatrical production could not exist without the writer, the director, designers and the stage crew. Each makes a creative contribution that brings a show to life.

In this section, we will explore some of *Walking the Tightrope*'s theatrical ingredients, added by artists both onstage and behind the scenes.

A POEM & A PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT, Mike Kenny, wrote *Walking the Tightrope* in a style called “prose poetry.” This is a hybrid genre of writing, which means two different types of writing are combined: prose and poetry.

PROSE
Written in paragraphs, like ordinary language, with no rhythm or rhyming.
Tells a story.
Generally has characters and a plot.



POETRY
Written in verse, at times with rhyming.
Focuses on images and metaphors.
Generally contains language play, like repetition and rhyme.



PROSE POETRY
Looks like prose. (Written in ordinary language, and tells a story.)
Looks like poetry. (Focuses on images and contains language play, such as repetition, rhythm and rhyme.)

“Tide comes in. Tide goes in. Tide comes out. Tide goes out. Tide comes in. Tide goes out...”

— Stan from *Walking the Tightrope*

PANTOMIME is the art of acting without words through facial expression, gesture and movement. Through pantomime, storytelling can be enhanced without having to build an elaborate set or use actual props.

The word pantomime comes from the Greek word “pantomimos,” which means “imitator of all.” It began as a form of solo dance accompanied by music, which told tales of comedy and tragedy. It evolved over the centuries into the art form we know today.

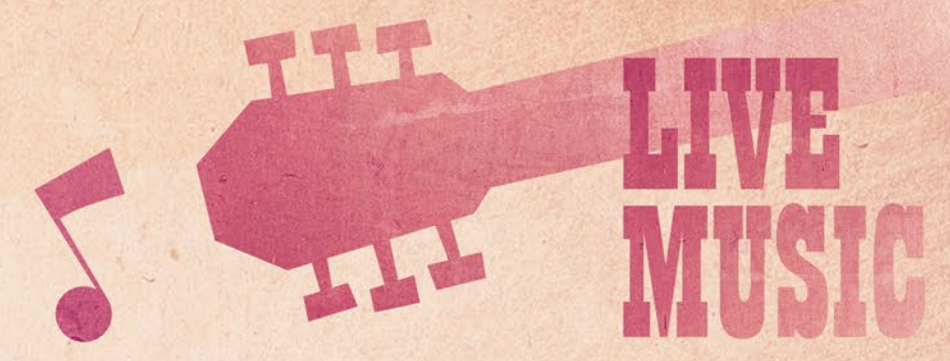
In *Walking the Tightrope*, the actors pantomime “feeding chickens,” “running from waves at the beach” and “watching a performance at

the circus.” Pantomime not only requires actors to use their creativity, but it also activates our imaginations as audience members. Pantomime creates a certain kind of theatrical magic as we watch the performers act “as if” they are really doing a task or are really living in a particular environment.

- ★ As you watch *Walking the Tightrope*, notice how many actions and environments are created through pantomime.
- ★ Have you ever played the game “Charades?” Choose a favorite activity from your life to pantomime for your classmates and have them guess what you are doing.

“Esme: Then they ate the pudding. Stan: Good? Esme: (Nods. Mouth full.)”

— Esme and Stan from *Walking the Tightrope*



LIVE MUSIC

WE EXPECT live music to be played or sung during a musical, but dramas do not necessarily require this. *Walking the Tightrope*'s creative team decided to add live music to this production.

Music played onstage during a show can add depth to the feelings we have as audience members. It also helps the director communicate the mood or tone of certain moments in the story. When watching the play, observe how the music makes you feel at different times.

Composer/musician Michael Redfield created brand new original music specifically for this play.

- ★ What are the differences between listening to live music and recorded music? What are the similarities?
- ★ How might *Walking the Tightrope* be different if there were no music during the performance?
- ★ How does music affect other stories you experience through movies, internet videos, television shows, and video games?
- ★ What kind of music is scary? Funny? Sad? Exciting?

BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

IN THEATRE, the “fourth wall” is the imaginary “wall” at the front of the stage between the audience and the performers. It serves to create an imaginary boundary between the audience and the play. It keeps the performers from directly talking to the audience.

When an actor “breaks the fourth wall,” this means that he or she breaks through the imaginary boundary and speaks directly to the audience.

In *Walking the Tightrope*, Grandad Stan and Esme are constantly “breaking the fourth wall” by speaking directly to the audience about where they are going, what they are doing and what they are thinking. They go back and forth between dramatizing (acting out the action of the story) and narrating (leaving the world of the play and speaking straight to the audience).

Dramatization: acting out the story. Narration: talking about the story

- ★ Can you think of a time when a character has “broken the fourth wall” in a play or movie that you have seen? What was the effect? (Was it funny? Did you learn something new about the character? Were you given new information about the story?)

DESIGN

EVERY single aspect of *Walking the Tightrope* was planned and created by a different person. These people are called “designers.”

SET DESIGNER: KEITH MITCHELL
Keith's streamlined set-design depicts a number of various settings. The circus tent that is draped around Grandad Stan and Nanna Queenie's house makes an excellent projection screen for the show's video pieces.

SOUND DESIGNER: JOHN ZALEWSKI
The rush of ocean waves. The rumble of a traveling train. These are just a couple of the many sounds that John added to the show to bring us deeper into the world of the play.

LIGHTING DESIGNER: DAN WEINGARTEN
Lighting designers get to “paint” with light. The color and brightness of stage lights helps to communicate the mood and setting of a particular scene.

Dan's lighting shows whether it is sunny or rainy at the beach, whether it is day or night, or whether the characters are inside or

outside. Lighting also helps to focus the audience's attention by communicating what we should be looking at onstage.

COSTUME DESIGNER: ELA JO ERWIN & MICHAEL MULLEN
Walking the Tightrope takes place in the year 1959 on the English seashore. That setting is reflected in Ela Jo and Michael's costume designs. They also had to think about what the characters were like and how old they were.

Ela designed costumes for the original production, and Michael designed them for the tour. Each artist had their own unique vision. We see an example of this in Esme's costume: Ela had her wear Keds-style sneakers; Michael gave her saddle shoes.

- ★ If you were to be a designer for a play, which area would you want to work on (set, sound, lighting, costume, make-up, video)? Why?
- ★ After you see *Walking the Tightrope*, discuss the design elements. What would you have kept the same? What would you have done differently?



OFTEN, the worlds of theatre and film are seen as separate places to tell stories. However, there are times when the two worlds are combined. Theatrical productions often make use of video footage to add to the storytelling. When video is used in a play, it acts as a special type of visual language. It helps to make certain scenes clearer.

Video designer, Matthew Hill, has created many moving and still images that add to the storytelling in *Walking the Tightrope*. For example, video is projected onto screens to help show that Grandad Stan and Esme are in a kitchen, at a train station, or at a seaside amusement park.

- ★ Have you ever seen video being used in a live performance (a concert, a play, etc.)? How did the video projections affect your experience of the event?

RELATIONSHIPS

GRANDAD Stan and Esme have a good relationship, but Esme did many things with her grandmother, too. Now Grandad Stan has to step in and take on Nanna Queenie's role when it comes to things like cooking and bedtime stories. These experiences bring Stan and Esme closer together. They discover new things about each other that strengthen their relationship and increase the love between them. This means being able to support each other during difficult moments in their lives.

- ★ What kinds of things do you do with people that you are close to?
- ★ What came first...the feeling of closeness with that person, or the activities that brought you together?
- ★ Have you ever helped someone close to you when they were having a problem?
- ★ Have you ever been helped by someone close to you when you were having a problem? Or have you learned to do something on your own?

“She looked
in the living room.
There was the telly
The ornaments on the mantelpiece
The paper open at the racing page
The smell of damp
And the sound of the clock ticking
All the same but something was
missing.”

—Esme from *Walking the Tightrope*

LOSS

WALKING *the Tightrope* deals with issues of loss. Esme has arrived for her annual visit with her grandparents. She is extremely excited to be at their seaside cottage. However, she senses right away that something is amiss, but cannot quite put her finger on what it is.

- ★ Have you ever experienced the loss of someone close to you, whether they moved or passed away? If so, what did others do to support and/or comfort you during this time? What did you do to comfort yourself?
- ★ Have you ever had to support someone through the loss of a loved one? If so, what did you do to comfort them, or support them, during this time?
- ★ Why is it sometimes so difficult to talk about loss?
- ★ Do you think it is easier for children or adults to talk about loss? Why?



AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE KENNY, PLAYWRIGHT & CENTER THEATRE GROUP'S STUDENT AMBASSADORS

Ambassadors: What is your role as a playwright?

Mike Kenny: Part of the clue about the role is in the name, in the difference between wright and write. A playwright is not really a writer. We create blueprints that other people build and inhabit. It's like being an architect of a building which is actually living. It's a social art which is more like a craft. It is about bringing people together in a space and telling the tales of what it is to be human.

Ambassadors: The script for *Walking the Tightrope* is very open to imagination. It is written in poetic prose without stage directions. Can you tell us about your reason for leaving so much room for interpretation?

MK: Before I was a playwright I was an actor and a teacher. For about ten years I worked in a theatre company which created work to take into schools. In my view the real play happens in the hearts and minds of the members of the audience, not on the stage. The theatre should only put in front of people things to provoke the pictures, which should find a pathway straight to their own memories and feelings. So, starting with nothing, you choose very carefully. This applies across the board, the set, the costumes etc, but especially to the words spoken. It leaves room for everyone else, actor, director, designer, musician, and most importantly, the audience, to do their jobs. I have seen many very different

kinds of productions of my plays. There was a production of *Walking the Tightrope* in France that was done as a one woman show. It worked, because the director understood that the job is to put pictures in people's minds, thoughts in their heads, and feelings in their hearts.

To my taste, I feel too much that is offered to children treats them as part fool, part customer. It's trying to sell them something, a view of the world, maybe. However, children are extremely clever and can see that stuff coming a mile off. They are usually not buying it.

Ambassadors: Do you have any rituals (activities you repeat) around writing?

MK: I'm not a big one for rituals. You just have to get on and do it. I write best in the mornings. I carry a note book with me always, and these days I love my iPad. I came from a very ordinary, working class background, and I suppose I thought people like me didn't become writers. I didn't think people like us lived the kinds of lives that would be of interest to others. I stumbled into writing almost by accident, and now I think the lives of ordinary people are absolutely the subject of art. And I don't develop rituals because I don't want to make it appear to be magic. It's just about paying attention, then starting to write.

Ambassadors: Who do you relate to more, Esme or Grandad Stan?

MK: Both, I think. I was the one and now I'm the other. I always say I write characters for myself to play (though I haven't actually acted professionally for 30 years) and these days I would look pretty strange as Esme (the beard might be an issue).

Ambassadors: What do you eat for tea?

MK: I have a bread and butter pudding story. If you've never had it, it really is made of what it says it is. It's comfort food made of left overs and stuff people have in their fridges, eggs, milk and so on. It is great. Well, once I was working on a play in France. I speak French but not great to be honest and I was staying in a big house with the director and the actors, and some clever person suggested that we share the cooking. So I thought I would make B and B pudding. Which would have been fine had not the director's



Grandmother come to stay and decided she wanted to see what I was doing. She spoke no English and asked me how to make it. So, I stood there, cooking and explaining this dish (in French) as I made it, while a French grandma watched my every move. In the end, she tasted it, pronounced it a success (though it would be better with cherries) and said it was just like a French recipe called Pain Perdu. It means Lost Bread. Isn't that cool? I thought, one day I will write a play called that. Lost Bread.

Ambassadors: Where do you imagine these characters are five years after the events of the story?

MK: My grandmother and I were close right through to her death. In the last few years of her life she lived in a nursing home, and was around long enough to meet my eldest son Billy as a baby. I think there is a very special relationship between grandchildren and grandparents. And Esme? I don't know. I like to think she may have followed in her grandmothers footsteps. She liked balancing on the sea wall, after all.

CLOWNS

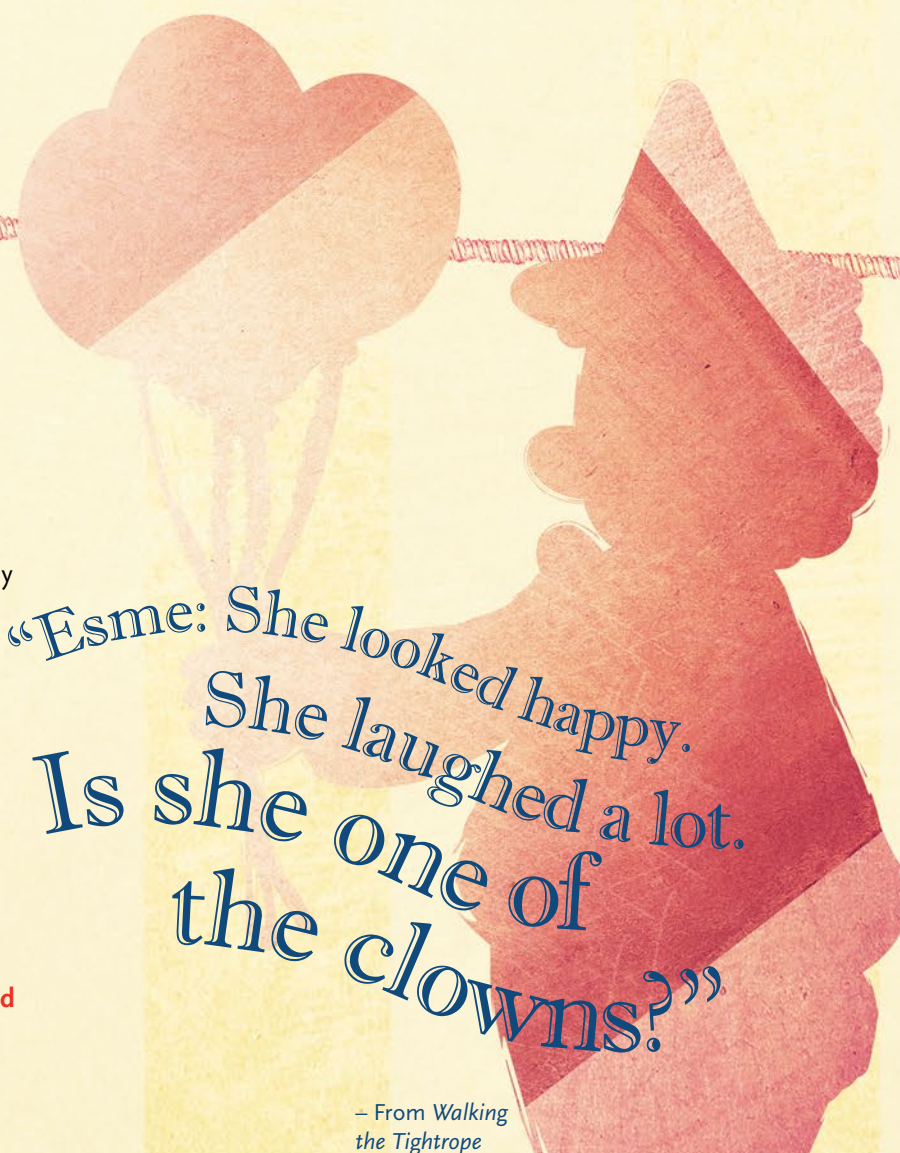
CLOWNS have been a part of human storytelling for thousands of years. Clowning has existed in many cultures and has served a variety of purposes. The oldest clowns date back to 2500 B.C. in ancient Egypt. Clowns from Italy's Commedia Del Arte theatre tradition appeared around 1550 A.D. Chou, the clown from China's Peking Opera, has been around for about two hundred years.

Walking the Tightrope's clown wears a classic clown costume, white make-up and a bulbous red nose, just like circus clowns found in our Western culture. However, this clown has other jobs, besides making us smile. It serves as a symbol, or metaphor, in the play. The clown also acts as a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. Its role is closer to that of sacred clowns found in other cultures, such as the Native American Pueblo clown.

Walking the Tightrope's clown was not a part of the original script. Director Debbie Devine added the clown character to the play in order

to enhance the storytelling. Debbie had an "aha!" moment one night when she awoke from her sleep with the realization that the show should have a clown. She contacted the playwright, Mike Kenny, to get his permission for this addition. The clown would be a silent character, so none of the dialogue would change. This being the case, Mr. Kenny happily agreed. This situation is a perfect example of collaboration during the creative process.

- ★ What types of experiences have you had with clowns?
 - ★ A clown's red nose is considered by some to be the world's smallest mask. Do you agree with this notion? Why or why not?
- After seeing the show...
- ★ Who or what do you think the clown in *Walking the Tightrope* represents? What did you see or feel that makes you think this?
 - ★ Did *Walking the Tightrope* change the way you think about clowns? Why or why not?



“Esme: She looked happy.
She laughed a lot.
Is she one of
the clowns?”

— From *Walking the Tightrope*

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBBIE DEVINE, DIRECTOR & CENTER THEATRE GROUP'S STUDENT AMBASSADORS



Ambassadors: Please describe your role as a director.

Debbie Devine: Directing is overseeing the whole production and making certain all elements; set, costumes, lights, props even the actors' sense of place and their dialects [the way they spoke] are all of the same 'world.' But the most important skill to me of directing is deciding what the play is about. And even more importantly, who it's about. After reading *Walking the Tightrope* it would make sense to think the play is about a little girl who has to face change. But I made the choice that the play is about the grandfather. He is the one who can't face change and lies to himself and his granddaughter when declaring that Nanna has 'joined the circus'. Making the directing choice that the grandfather was the protagonist [the main character] helped me find the road map for the production. Esme helps Stan face the truth. Her innocence and

love bring him back from the brink of grief and despair. They both learn 'that some things stay the same and some things change.'

Ambassadors: Can you talk about the simple set?

DD: I said to the set designer, I don't want a tea set; I don't want a table cloth. I don't want anything. This is what theatre is. It's the agreement between the live audience and the live actors to use your imagination.

Ambassadors: Do you think this is a sad play?

DD: I don't see this as a sad story... It's really a story of discovery and love and what did they get at the end, these two people? Each other. They were people that couldn't even relate to each other. He couldn't relate to kids, and she didn't really know who he was. They found each other. That's just rockin'. To me, that's just the joy of the story.

“SHE LOOKED LIKE
AN ORDINARY WOMAN
BUT INSIDE BEAT
THE HEART OF A
TIGHTROPE WALKER.”

– Stan from *Walking the Tightrope*

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Center Theatre Group’s mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

Education and Community Partnerships

Theatre is an enduring and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community; and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group’s education and community partnership programs advance the organization’s mission in three key ways:

Audiences: Inspiring current and future audiences to discover theatre and its connection to their lives;

Artists: Investing in the training, support and development of emerging young artists and young arts professionals who are the future of our field; and

Arts Education Leadership: Contributing to the community-wide efforts to improve the quality and scope of arts education in Los Angeles.

CENTER THEATRE GROUP STUDENT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

The Center Theatre Group Student Ambassador Program is a free program for Los Angeles County high school students who are curious about the arts and want to build leadership and teamwork skills. Student Ambassadors work with other students and with theatre professionals on exciting projects that get more young people involved in the Los Angeles arts community.

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