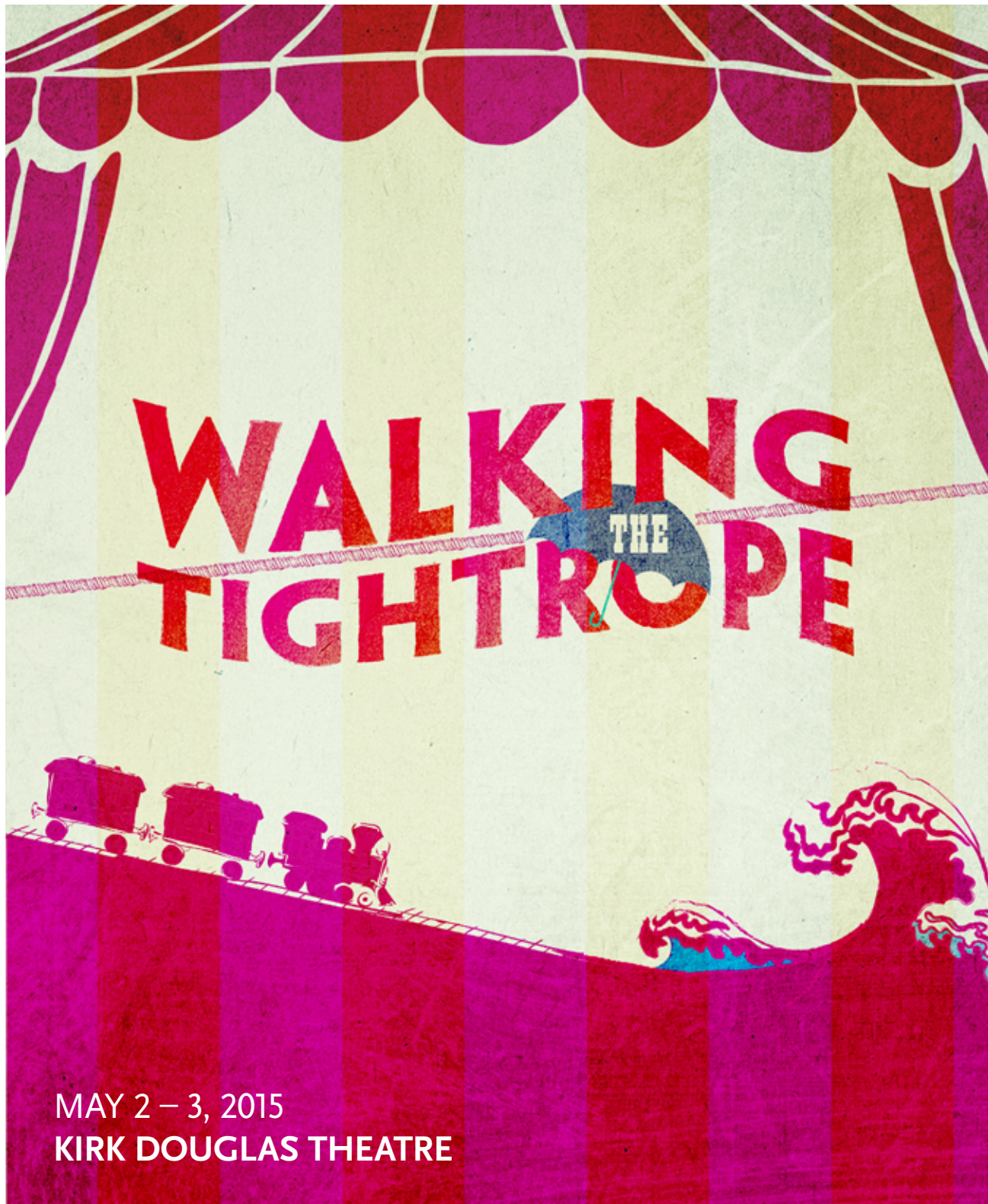




Educator Resources

YOUNG AUDIENCES PROGRAM



MAY 2 - 3, 2015
KIRK DOUGLAS THEATRE

Welcome

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Center Theatre Group is excited to have you and your students join us at *Walking the Tightrope* by Mike Kenny. A great play raises questions about the human condition and a great educational experience allows students an opportunity to reflect upon those questions and begin to discover their own answers. To that end the material in Center Theatre Group's Discovery Guide and Educator Resources raises questions: questions about loss and change, questions about relationships and connections, questions about the power of love seeing us through challenging times. Our goal is to provide you with a variety of entry points into *Walking the Tightrope* so that you can choose what best suits you and your students.

The Educator Resources and Discovery Guide are companion pieces, designed to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow-up the performance with options for discussion, reflection and creativity.

Discovery Guide

The Discovery Guide provides students with background information about the play and the subject matter, as well as questions for individual reflection. Written to be student-driven, the Discovery Guide helps prepare your students for the performance.

We have organized the Educator Resources into the following sections:

About This Play

This section includes a scene-by-scene synopsis of the play to provide you with detailed information about the content and form of the play.

Comprehension

This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play. We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play.

This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the Discovery Guide. This section can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

Connections and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

We know the hard work and dedication that it takes to bring students to see theatre. These materials are designed to support you in making the most of that experience. We applaud your passion for sharing theatre with your students and thank you for sharing your students with all of us at Center Theatre Group. We look forward to seeing you at *Walking the Tightrope!*



601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

About the play

Walking the Tightrope

Table Of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Welcome..... | 2 |
| About the Play | 3 |
| Comprehension | 11 |
| Connections and Creativity | 24 |
| References | 49 |
| Credits | 50 |

This section includes a synopsis of the play to provide you with detailed information about the content and form of the play.

A NOTE TO EDUCATORS

Walking the Tightrope addresses the topic of death. In the story, a very important person to the main characters has passed away. Esme's grandmother, Nanna Queenie, has died. Esme's grandfather, Stan, is having a hard time coming to terms with her death. He is finding it extremely difficult to say these words aloud to Esme because he cannot face the situation himself.

You may have students who have experienced the death of someone close to them, or some other type of devastating loss. We encourage you to support these students in any way you think would be appropriate. We are encouraging teachers not to give away to students the plot point regarding the grandmother's death. However, if you feel students in difficult life situations need to have this information before they study and see the play, please feel free to share it with them.

CHARACTERS AND PERFORMERS

Walking the Tightrope has two characters and two performers. The characters are Grandad Stan and Esme, his young granddaughter. The performers are a clown and a live musician playing a piano onstage.

The Clown serves as a symbol of certain aspects in the story. Most significantly, it represents the grandmother who has passed away. (This topic could make a great conversation with your students after they have seen the show. What and/or whom does the Clown symbolize?) The clown operates on the perimeter of the action of the story, stepping in from time to time to support and guide Stan and Esme. However, the characters cannot see the clown, and are not aware of its presence at all.

TIME AND PLACE

In Mike Kenny's *Walking the Tightrope* script, time and place are not indicated. He only offers narration, poetry and the dialogue between the characters of Grandad Stan and Esme. This gives theatre artists poetic license to invent details of the story's setting.

In this production, Debbie Devine and her creative team at 24th Street Theatre (where the play was first produced in the United States) has set the story in an English seaside village in 1959. Before they came to this decision, they experimented with the play being set in New Orleans; they thought the play's language suggested this direction.

After further exploration, the team decided it would be best to use England as the setting. Britain had suffered tremendously during World War II. It would make a fitting backdrop for Grandad Stan's character and his unique challenges within the play.

As for the era, the team considered what was going on in the world between 1959 and 1965. There was an entire revolution that young people went through. 1959 was the line of demarcation where older ideals and conservative thinking were being challenged. They wanted to place the story right on the cusp of that moment.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

SYNOPSIS

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.

At the opening of the play, when the lights come up, the Clown is swinging on a swing. He is holding a doll. He lightly jumps off the swing and slowly walks over to a suitcase. He picks up the suitcase and takes it to the wooden bench that is center stage. The clown sits on the bench, facing away from the audience. The lights go down.

A spotlight comes up on Grandad Stan. He addresses the audience directly, explaining that he is waiting for his granddaughter Esme to visit, like she does every year.

As he walks toward the train platform, he tells the audience about Esme's previous visits to him and her grandmother, and what stage of life she was in at the time.

STAN: The first year she came
She was in her mum's tummy
The next year she was a baby
And she cried
A lot
The next year she walked
And the year after that she talked
A lot
Last year she came on her own
For the first time
And this year
This year...

As he is about to tell the audience what is different about this year, the train's arrival interrupts his explanation.

Lights go down on Grandad Stan as he goes to greet Esme.

Lights come up on Esme and the Clown. They are sitting together on the bench (which is now a seat on a train). Esme does not see the Clown, or acknowledge its existence. She tells the audience about how excited she is to be on this visit, and mentions that some things stay the same, and that some things change every year.

When the train comes to a stop, Esme picks up the suitcase and the doll that the Clown had earlier and runs to meet her grandfather.

Esme meets Grandad Stan on the train platform. They take a good look at each other and comment on how each has changed. Esme asks where Nanna Queenie (her grandmother) is. Grandad Stan says he will tell her later. The pair rides a trolley home for tea.

When they get home, the Clown is sitting at the kitchen table, watching Grandad Stan and Esme, but they cannot see it. Grandad Stan begins to cook eggs and Esme takes a look around the

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

house to see what has changed and what has stayed the same. The Clown slowly exits the stage.

First she looks in the kitchen and sees the table with the checked cloth, the sink with a crack, and the egg timer. She notices the smell of boiled cabbage. These are all familiar to her.

Next, she looks in the garden and sees the three fat chickens, the tree you can climb, and the tree you can't climb. She notices the smell of wallflowers and the sound of seagulls. These are all familiar to her as well.

Finally, Esme looks in the living room and sees the telly (television), ornaments (decorations) on the mantle, and the newspaper open to the racing page. She notices the smell of damp and the sound of the clock ticking. Once again, these are familiar to her.

Everything is mostly the same, but Esme senses that something is missing.

She goes back to Grandad Stan in the kitchen and asks him where Nanna is. Grandad Stan hesitates to tell Esme that Nanna has died. Esme makes Grandad Stan follow her around the house and yard while she shows him that Nanna is not conducting her usual activities such as feeding chickens, boiling cabbage and checking lottery numbers.

Again, Esme asks where Nanna is. Grandad Stan tells her she's gone. As he says these words, the Clown slowly enters the scene carrying an umbrella. It hands the umbrella to her, but she doesn't acknowledge its presence. It's as if she has found the umbrella herself. Esme doesn't understand what's going on and comments that Nanna Queenie never goes anywhere without her umbrella.

Grandad Stan tells her to sit down and he will tell her where Nanna is. When Esme again asks where she has gone, Grandad Stan tells her, "To a nicer place."

Esme responds, "Nicer than this?" When Grandad Stan affirms this, Esme gets very excited and wants to go visit her right away. Instead of telling her that Nanna has died, Grandad Stan makes excuses and says it's too late and too far to go visit her.

Esme asks why, and Grandad Stan's answer is, "Well. We just can't." Esme gets very quiet after this.

Grandad does the dishes and suggests they take a walk by the sea when he is done. Esme sullenly sits at the kitchen table. Lights dim on Esme and stay up on Grandad Stan. As he continues doing dishes, he breaks the fourth wall and speaks the following poetry, to the audience, but mostly to himself.

Tide comes in
Tide goes out

Tide comes in
Tide goes out.

At the end of the day
It all washes away.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

And back comes
Something else,

At the end of the day
It all washes away
And just leaves
Wood and stones and shells

And you and me
And a shell to hear the sea.

The Clown has been watching all of the action from the periphery of the scene. Right before Grandad Stan says, “And a shell to hear the sea,” the Clown hands a shell to Grandad Stan, who gives it to Esme. Unsatisfied with the answers she has been getting from Grandad Stan, she does not accept the shell and stomps up the stairs to bed.

The bench now becomes Esme’s bed. She is still very quiet and can’t sleep. She mentions to Grandad Stan that grandma always tells her a story. She asks Grandad Stan for a story about herself.

Grandad Stan repeats the story that he told the audience at the very beginning of the play about Esme’s different trips to their home. However, this time, Esme hears it, too, and comments about the different stages she has gone through in life.

When Grandad Stan gets to the part about what has happened this year, he stops. He thinks Esme has fallen asleep. He tiptoes away, but as he leaves, she asks, “Why can’t we see Nanna?” At that moment, the Clown steps into a light, but is a good distance away from Grandad Stan and Esme. Grandad Stan answers Esme’s question about Nanna: “She has gone to join the circus.” Esme asks if they can go, and Grandad Stan tells her maybe. Esme goes to sleep.

The “Tide comes in” poetry is revisited; this time Esme, instead of Grandad Stan, speaks it. She drifts off to sleep as she recites the words.

Grandad Stan wanders to the kitchen and falls asleep at the kitchen table, holding the shell he offered to Esme. The Clown walks over to Grandad Stan while he is sleeping, gently takes the shell out of his hands, and takes it upstairs and places it by Esme’s bed while she is sleeping. Without touching her, the clown pantomimes caressing Esme’s hair.

The next morning, Esme wakes up to the sound of church bells. The Clown turns away from her and sits on the floor behind her bed. She wants to do what she and her grandparents always do on hot sunny days: go to the beach. As Grandad Stan and Esme gather items for their trip to the seashore, the Clown hands Grandad Stan a couple of beach towels. (Once again, Grandad Stan does not acknowledge the Clown’s presence.) The Clown walks to the edge of the scene and watches the action of the story.

Grandad Stan and Esme go to the beach and run in the waves, dig a hole in the sand and fill it back up, and the actors pantomime eating sandy sandwiches. The Clown brings Esme and Grandad Stan real ice cream cones to eat. Before they walk back home, Esme tells Grandad Stan

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

that she is waiting for him to carry her on his shoulders, like he always does. Grandad Stan does this, but comments that he won't be able to do it much longer because she is so big. Esme wants to lift him, too. She tries, but he is still too big for her to carry.

When they get home, Grandad prepares tea for them, and Esme looks around the house once again. She goes to all of the familiar places with their familiar aspects. While Esme is describing her search of the house, the Clown retrieves a book and begins to look at it.

After her search, Esme finds Grandad Stan and says to him, "Nanna Queenie's still not back." Grandad Stan replies, "No." Esme becomes upset and asks, "Well, who's going to make me bread and butter pudding?" Grandad Stan doesn't understand what she is talking about. Esme explains that Nanna always makes bread and butter pudding on the first day of her visit.

Esme and Grandad Stan begin to retrieve the items needed to make the bread and butter pudding. Esme mentions that they need Nanna's cookbook for the recipe. The Clown brings the cookbook to the kitchen, within Grandad Stan's reach. Grandad discovers the cookbook and he and Esme happily go about making, and eating, the bread and butter pudding. This is the first time either one of them has done this without the help of Nanna Queenie.

Grandad and Esme have a lovely evening together eating bread and butter pudding, watching the telly, and playing dominoes. When it comes time for bed, Esme can't sleep and asks for a story. She says, "Tell me about Nanna again." At that moment, a spotlight appears on the Clown, who is watching the scene from afar. Grandad Stan replies, "What about her?" Esme says "Tell me about her in the circus." The light on the Clown goes down and it exits the stage. Once again, Grandad Stan avoids the topic of Nanna's death. He tells Esme that it was something that Nanna always wanted to do. He goes on to explain exactly what she does in the circus, from working with the clowns to being a tightrope walker with her pink umbrella.

Esme falls asleep during this story.

Grandad Stan breaks the fourth wall and revisits the "Tide comes in" speech.

Grandad Stan falls asleep at the kitchen table once again. The Clown crosses over to him, watches him sleep, and sips on a beverage from a flask (Thermos).

When Esme wakes up the next morning, the weather is cloudy and windy. She and Grandad prepare to do what they always do on cloudy, windy days: go to the beach. As they gather what they need, the Clown makes sure that Grandad Stan sees the flask (Thermos). Grandad takes it from the Clown, and they head to the beach to spend time walking by the waves. Then Esme and Grandad head over to the Pleasure Beach. They go on dodgems (bumper cars), play bingo, eat fish and chips and drink hot chocolate from the flask. The Clown watches all that they do.

Esme and Grandad Stan are just about to walk home, when the Clown climbs upon the sea wall and starts to walk along the top of it. (Esme and Grandad Stan do not see this.) Esme tells Grandad that she is waiting. Grandad Stan says, "Not for a carry, I hope." Esme replies, "No. I'm too big for that." She is waiting for his help to get up on the sea wall so she can balance. He tells her to be careful. She says, "I am careful. I'm a big girl now."

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

They get into a conversation about her growing up, getting married and bringing her own children here. Esme says she is only going to get married “for the big cake.”

They arrive at home, and Grandad gets the tea ready. The Clown is there and follows him closely. Then it follows Esme as she looks around the house once again. They go to the kitchen, the garden, and the living room. The Clown hands her a pair of reading glasses. Esme comments to Grandad Stan that Nanna Queenie is still not back and that she is worried. She found Nanna’s glasses down the side of the sofa, and she knows that Nanna can’t do anything without them. Grandad goes quiet, and then tells Esme that Nanna doesn’t need them anymore. Esme asks, “Why?” Grandad Stan says that he will tell her later.

Grandad Stan remains quiet and Esme notices. When he suggests that it’s time for bed, Esme tells him that it’s a bit early. She goes on to ask if this is the night that he and Nanna Queenie usually go dancing. He replies that he has given dancing up since Nanna joined the circus. In the meantime, the Clown pantomimes moving a piece of furniture out of the way. Grandad Stan and Esme have a fun time dancing together until it’s time for bed.

Grandad Stan remembers to offer Esme a bedtime story and she replies, “No thank you.” Then she says she never knew Nanna wanted to be a tightrope walker. As she states this, the Clown appears behind Esme with a pink umbrella and pantomimes walking a tightrope. It eventually exits the stage.

Grandad Stan launches into a detailed and poetic explanation about his life with Nanna. He chronicles how they met and the path their life together took. The story ends with Grandad returning to the circus fantasy that he has created, because he still cannot say aloud that his wife has died.

Esme grows quiet after the story and says that she thinks Nanna has forgotten her. Grandad Stan says this is not true at all, so Esme wants to know where she is. Grandad explains she had to go. He says the circus came to town and she had to go.

Once again, Grandad Stan and Esme both return to the “Tide comes in” poetry. They speak it in unison, but not to each other. They speak to themselves. Grandad Stan speaks his final line alone, to the audience. The Clown crosses over to Grandad, stands behind him, and opens an umbrella.

The next morning, the weather is cold and wet. The Clown is sheltering Grandad Stan with the umbrella. Grandad asks Esme what she wants to do. She replies that she doesn’t know and she doesn’t care. Eventually, they decide to do what they always do on grey, wet days; take a walk at the seashore. The Clown hands the umbrella to Grandad Stan as they begin their walk. Esme takes her doll with her.

After spending a quiet day at the beach, Esme spies a circus poster on their way home. She becomes extremely excited and wants to go. Grandad Stan resists the idea at first, but then eventually relents. The two attend the Big Top show. Through all of the acts (clowns, acrobats, horses, the human cannon ball), Esme is searching for Nanna. Then, all of sudden, a drum roll introduces a tightrope walker. Esme and Grandad Stan wave to her, and she waves back. Then the tightrope walker is gone.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Esme and Grandad Stan walk home and Grandad cooks the tea. The Clown is sitting at the kitchen table with its back to the audience. Esme does not go to check the house. She sits at the kitchen table, too, and looks directly at the Clown. While looking at it, she begins the following conversation with Stan:

ESME Nanna Queenie's gone hasn't she?

STAN Yes love.

ESME And she's not coming back.

STAN No love.

ESME Never.

STAN No love.
She's never coming back.

ESME Is she dead?

STAN Yes love.
Queenie's dead.

ESME Some things stay the same
And some things change.

STAN That's right.

The Clown goes to leave the kitchen. Esme's gaze does not follow it. Grandad Stan moves toward Esme and comforts her. The Clown also moves toward Esme and pantomimes stroking her hair. The Clown then places the seashell on the table, on top of Nanna's cookbook, and exits the stage.

Grandad Stan and Esme have their tea. Esme tells the audience that she enjoyed the rest of her holiday, but she doesn't remember what she did.

For the final scene, we return to the train station where Esme and Grandad are waiting for her train to arrive. Grandad has brought the suitcase. She is going home and has plans to return the following summer. They hug each other goodbye. Grandad gives Esme Nanna's reading glasses. Before she boards, she asks Grandad if he is going to join the circus, too. He smiles, says, "No. Not me. But one day I'm going off to be a cowboy. But not just yet." They wave goodbye to each other.

Esme takes her place on the train seat and tells the audience the story that Grandad Stan relayed at the beginning of the play, and as a bedtime story one night. Esme adds the new event that happened during this most recent trip.

ESME: The first year I came
I was in my mum's tummy

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

The next year I was a baby
And I cried
A lot
The next year I walked
And the year after that I talked
A lot
Last year I came on my own
For the first time
And this year
This year...
I went to the circus

Comprehension

This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play as well as information about the artists involved. We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play.

This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the Discovery Guide. This section can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

PLAYWRIGHT

British playwright, Mike Kenny, wrote *Walking the Tightrope*. It is based on an original idea by another British theatre artist, Gavin Stride.

Mike Kenny is one of England's most successful playwrights for young audiences. He has won numerous awards for his writing work, and *The Independent* gave him the distinction of being one of the top ten living playwrights in the United Kingdom.

On storytelling, Mike has said, "I think all the really good stories are about something that is of profound importance to people but is never resolved." And about his work on *Walking the Tightrope*: "When I wrote that, my dad had just died and my youngest child was three. I don't know where people go when they die; I didn't know when I was three, and I'm never going to. I know that they don't come back."

Mike believes that children see through stories that are sanitized or trying to sell them something. Instead, he aims to bring young audiences topics and themes with true relevance for them. "We are in a very puritan time in which there's a strong urge to protect children," he says. "That urge is absolutely right, but I think that the urge to therefore keep them in ignorance of things that are going on in the world is a big mistake in all sorts of ways."

ORIGINAL IDEA

Walking the Tightrope is based on an original idea by theatre artist Gavin Stride. Among many other creative endeavors, Gavin is theatre director for England's Farnham Maltings Theatre. This theatre is part of a creative organization called Farnham Maltings "that works with artists and communities to encourage the most people to make, see and enjoy the best art possible."

The following self-description is an excerpt from his website:

"I have spent the past 25 years as a theatre maker, producer, commentator and occasional nuisance. Most of the things I do are simply an attempt to understand the world and my place in it. I am interested in the special and ordinary place of the arts in all our lives and in exploring all of the ways in which people express who they are. As story tellers, potters, knitters, poets and jam makers."

DIRECTOR

Debbie Devine is the director of *Walking the Tightrope*. She is also a co-founder and the Artistic Director of 24th Street Theatre in Los Angeles. Her company brought *Walking the Tightrope* over from Europe and gave it its first run in the United States.

Debbie is a powerful presence in the theatre world and the realm of arts education. In addition to 24th Street Theatre, and her involvement with *Walking the Tightrope*, she has been the Chair of the Drama Department of The Colburn School of Performing Arts in

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

downtown Los Angeles for over twenty years. She is also a theatrical director for the LA Philharmonic. She has won numerous awards for her work as an actor, director and arts educator. Recently, she received the 2011 Inspiring Women Award, presented by the LA Sparks and Farmers Insurance. This year, Debbie and Jack Black (one of her former drama students) participated in the Rose Parade by riding on the Farmer's Insurance float entry "Dream Big: World of Possibility" which honored teachers across the country for the endless dreams and possibilities they inspire within students on a daily basis.

LOSS/DEATH/GRIEF

It is recommended that students address the topic of loss *after* they have seen the play. Otherwise, one of the major plot points will be revealed; this may lessen the impact of the revelation during the show.

Walking the Tightrope addresses the powerful subject matter of death. Many plays for young audiences do not deal with this topic. If they do, it is often presented within the context of a fantasy world that removes the audience from the true emotional impact.

Walking the Tightrope addresses loss in a very personal and poetic manner. The character of Granddad Stan finds it too painful to speak the truth about his wife's passing to their granddaughter, Esme. In the play, there are moments where we sense that he is about to say the words aloud, but then he back peddles from, or circles around, the topic.

In fact, it is Esme who is the first one to speak the truth aloud. She is the one to break the ice, to say it plainly, without avoidance or euphemism.

What is the playwright, Mike Kenny, saying about the differences between what adults are able to talk about honestly and what children are able to talk about honestly? When do children start to become afraid of speaking honestly about important life issues?

RITUAL (MARKING TIME/CHANGE)

Definition: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual>

- done as part of a ceremony
- always done in a particular situation and in the same way each time

Rituals can occur during formal occasions or ceremonies. For example, at weddings people may release doves or throw rice; at funerals, butterflies might be released. When new buildings open, often there is a ribbon-cutting ceremony. At a birthday party, blowing out candles on a cake can be considered a ritual.

Rituals also occur during informal occasions. Our everyday lives are full of rituals...what we do when we wake up in the morning; how we spend our lunchtime; our routine before going to bed.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

The trips that Esme takes to her grandparents' home are full of informal rituals. They do things that they have always been done in a particular situation and in the same way each time. Their rituals include:

- Nanna Queenie making bread and butter pudding on the first day of Esme's visit.
- Nanna Queenie always telling bedtime stories to Esme.
- Going to the beach when it's bright and sunny and when it is cloudy and windy.
- Grandad Stan carrying Esme on his shoulders.
- Enjoying Pleasure Beach with its games, snacks and rides.

POETRY AND REPETITION

Walking the Tightrope is both a play and a poem. Mike Kenny, the playwright, uses repetition in much of the play's poetry. For example, both Esme and Grandad Stan revisit the excerpt below many times throughout the story. In fact, there is a moment where they speak it in unison.

Tide comes in
Tide goes out

Tide comes in
Tide goes out.

At the end of the day
It all washes away.
And back comes
Something else,

At the end of the day
It all washes away
And just leaves
Wood and stones and shells

Another example of repetition is the language that is used by Esme to describe her searches through the house, when she is making sure things are the same and looking for her grandmother. Each time Esme searches the kitchen, the yard and the living room, her descriptions become more and more distilled, getting to the essence of what she is looking for.

First Description:

While Esme looked round the house
To see what had stayed the same
And what things had changed.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

She looked in the kitchen.
There was Grandad.
There was the table with the checked cloth
The sink with a crack in it.
The egg timer
The smell of boiled cabbage.
That was all the same

She looked in the garden
There were the three fat chickens
The tree you could climb
The one you couldn't
The smell of wallflowers
And the sound of sea gulls
That was all the same

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

Second Description:

ESME And Esme went round the house
She looked in the kitchen.
Checked cloth
Sink
Crack
Egg timer
Cabbage.
All the same

She looked in the garden
Three fat chickens
Tree
Other tree
Wallflowers
Sea gulls
All the same

She looked in the living room.
Telly

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Ornaments
Paper
Damp
Clock ticking
Same

Third Description:

In the kitchen.
Hmm.
Same.
In the garden
Hmm.
In the living room

POETIC LICENSE, PROPS AND PANTOMIME

Poetic license: the freedom used by a writer or an artist to heighten the effect of their work

Props (properties): items carried onstage by an actor; small items on the set used by the actors

Pantomime: acting without words through facial expression, gesture, and movement

Mike Kenny's *Walking the Tightrope* has no stage directions, character descriptions or definition of the setting. The only tools that theatre artists have to work with are the words of his prose poetry. This gives each creative team that produces the play poetic license to invent the details they need to enhance their storytelling.

Mike's play has been done as a one-woman show and as a Spanish-language puppet show.

24th Street Theatre's production has set the play in an English seaside village in 1959. This setting informed whatever the actors were working on. It was a springboard for them to create more specific details about the characters they were playing and the back-story that drives the story we see onstage.

In addition, decisions had to be made about which props were to be used and which actions should be pantomimed. The following items were used as props in the play:

- Suitcase
- Doll
- Umbrella
- Seashell
- Towels
- Cookbook
- Ice Cream Cones
- Reading Glasses

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

The creative team chose these items for very specific reasons. After seeing the show, discuss with your students the use of these props.

- What props do they remember being used in the story?
- What was the meaning, or symbolism, behind each of these props?
- What action was pantomimed in the story?

INTERVIEW

Center Theatre Group Student Ambassadors and their teaching artist, Paula Solano, interviewed *Walking the Tightrope*'s playwright, Mike Kenny, and its director, Debbie Devine. Excerpts from the interviews appear in the *Walking the Tightrope* Discovery Guide. Below are the interviews in their entirety.

MIKE KENNY (PLAYWRIGHT):

The script for *Walking the Tightrope* is very open to imagination. It is written in poetic prose without conventional stage directions. We also noticed you don't set a specific year for the setting...Can you tell us about your motivations/intentions regarding so much room for interpretation?

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. We would keep plays in repertoire for a very long time, always working on them, and I learned various things. 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. I don't like to use references which are too rooted in any one time so that the work feels timeless. Things go out of fashion so quickly.

“Is this story based on true events in your life? Without giving too much away, are there parts of *Walking The Tightrope* that came from your own experiences as a child or otherwise?”

Loads of this riffs off my own life. It started on the day my father died and my mother and I came home from the hospital. My youngest son Theo, who was then about four, was playing in the garden. He said to my mother, 'Is Grandad dead?' My mum said, 'Yes. Yes, he's dead.'

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

In his innocence he was the first to use the word and she could then actually say the words herself. But later that day, he said, 'I know grandad is dead, but when's he coming back?' And that was the genesis of the play. The hard thing to understand about death is the 'never-coming-backness' of it. But also, my grandmother lived with us when I was a kid, and she pops up in many of my plays. I was an only child who spent a lot of time with old people.

Were the themes of “loss” or “changing relationships” or “coming of age” the starting points or was it a memory or pure imagination?

I like to tackle pretty serious subjects in my work. When I was a child I felt like there was stuff I needed to know and as a grown-up it feels like it's our business to help children get to grips with the nitty gritty stuff of life (and not bore the pants off them in the process.) About this play I would get into crazy circular conversations with people. They would say, 'Surely you can't talk to young children about death.' I would say, 'but this is a play about not talking about death.' And so it would go on. It's as much a play about not talking about the things as it is about the things! I'm not sure about 'pure imagination'. I tend to think that even the most fabulous flights begin in the real world.

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

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)

Where do you imagine these characters are now after the events of the story? (Five years later.)

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 grandmother's footsteps. She liked balancing on the sea wall, after all.

If you were a student invited to watch this play, what do you think would stand out to you most?

That's hard for me to say. I just hope it feels truthful. I think that's more a question for the students.

What do you hope students will take away from your play?

This a very good question and a very hard one for me to answer. All those years ago when my dad died and Theo and I were talking about him never coming back, which was hard for both of us because he was a great guy and we loved him a lot, Theo asked me where he was, and I said, I don't know, but we thought about where we would like to picture him and we thought he was probably leaning against a piano somewhere with Frank Sinatra, singing. It made us

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

feel good.

I have got into trouble for this from lots of people since I wrote it, people of faith and of no faith, want me to be certain, one way or another. I'm sure you know the places on offer, heaven, hell, the ground, whatever. Me, all I can truly say is, I don't know where you go when you die. But I do know it can be hard living with a loss. And I do know that talking helps. Talking always helps. And if the talk is honest, it's the best kind and helps a lot.

Can you talk about your approach to writing for young audiences? What is different about writing with youth in mind, rather than just for adults?

This question really needs a book to answer it. I'll try to be brief(ish). Young people are near the beginning of their lives and they have very little power over their lives. Other people make the big, and even the little choices on their behalf. This is just a fact. It's not necessarily a bad thing. It's the way it should be. My kids don't need to be deciding what we are having for dinner.

However, you must take this on board when writing for them. Take two plays by Shakespeare. *Othello*, and *The Winters Tale*. One day, you might see them. They are both amazing. They are both about a man who gets jealous. The first (*Othello*) is about how the man gets jealous, how slowly it eats away at him until, right at the end, he does a very bad thing. It shows what can go wrong between people. It shows you how to avoid it. It's a play for adults. The second (*The Winters Tale*) starts with the bad thing. The man becomes jealous all of a sudden, accuses his wife, forces his best friend away, and abandons his child to wild animals. The play shows how to deal with bad things happening. It can take a long time. It's not easy. But recovery will come. Though it wasn't written for them, I feel it is a classic children's play.

Does that make sense? It's hard to sum this up quickly. I've been working on it most days since I was young, and now I'm definitely not (young that is). I have three sons (a bit like a fairy tale) the eldest was 14 when the youngest was born. So for many years at the dinner table (and I am old fashioned, I like to cook, I like food, I like to talk), every evening at 6, (Sports and clubs allowing), it was screens off sit down, eat, 'How was your day?' So when Billy was 17, Theo was three, and Joshua (the middle one) was seven. No subject is taboo, but no one must be excluded. We talked about big things and little things, but in a way that everyone could join in. That's the thing about plays. You don't see them on your own. They're social. Everyone has to be included. One of the biggest buzzes I get is when the adults at my plays get drawn in. If they think they're going to come, leave their kids and sit in the back row texting they have another thing coming. I know I'm billed as a writer for children, but I also write for the adults who bring them.

Did you write this play in a specific place, like at the seaside or in a particular room in your house? Do you have any rituals around writing?

Funnily enough, we do own a little cottage in a fishing village on the North Yorkshire Coast. It's called Staithes (which actually means 'a safe harbour') and most of the play was written there. But it looks nothing like the place I had in my head when I was writing it. I did have the

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

sound and smell of the sea in my ears.

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.

What did you eat for tea when you were young? What were some of your favorite things? Were there things you didn't much like but had regularly?

I did always have a soft spot for boiled eggs, still do, but I like them for breakfast now. And my grandmother did the best apple pie! I know that sounds like some crazy cliché but it is the truth. She only did two things. The other was an egg custard, which was also delicious. I was a bit weird about food when I was a kid. I went through a stage when I didn't like the different foods on my plate touching, like I didn't want the beans on the toast, I wanted them by the toast! Weird, I know.

The thing I particularly hated (because of the above) was beetroot! It was red and it seemed to be bleeding over everything. It was impossible to keep under control, and we had a whole garden of it, so it popped up a lot. In my defense, I would like to say, that these days it is one of my all time favourite foods.

Last thing. I have a bread and butter pudding story. If you've never had it, and 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 suggest that we share the cooking. No pressure. 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.

What is your role as a playwright?

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 have more in common with a cartwright or a wheelwright. 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.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Why did you add the clown to your production?

Debbie Devine (Director): So that [the clown] was just like an epiphany. I think this is a big part of what it is to be an artist or have artistic and creative sensibilities which we all have; everybody on the planet has that. So giving yourself permission to be creative, and you just never know where those ideas are going to come from, a song, or you know an idea of a clown, or how something should be staged. And it was just so powerful to me that that is what the story needed. It needed that entity that was present ...that the spirit of the grandmother was there with love and help and reminding them from, you know, another part of the universe, that everything is going to be okay.

What made you choose to make the clown a man instead of a woman?

For you to ask that. Because how conventional it would be to have a lady, put her in a grey wig, you know? But the metaphor isn't there. It's not strong enough. There's not enough questions. And there needs to be dialogue around material this powerful that you are delivering for youth and family. It felt important for me to do that. Plus Tony is fun... He was wonderful to work with.

And you had him in mind as soon as you thought of the clown.

Oh my god. He's Tony; he's gotta do it. And, we went through all kinds of stuff where he did a lot of clowning. We spent several weeks of real clowning work, and I just distilled it all down to him just at the top of the piece, you see him on the swing and that's it. No more.

And when he walked the tightrope...

Yes, yes and when he walked the tight rope. Which is on film. So you see that we took that piece and what happened is, in my space, the 24th Street Theatre, we shot it and it was projected onto the ceiling. So how we're doing it now is we tour, and it's projected on the scenes behind us so that's not live.

So when he walks the periphery of the stage, is that live?

Yeah, that's live.

But the end is filmed.

Yeah.

Yeah, it's that old grainy film.

Yeah, Matt Hill, who was the video designer, just made it really simplistic. Everything, the whole idea was restrained. What do we need to do to make this very beautiful, and powerful, and restrained?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

...When was it set? Where was it set?

It was 1959, we decided, 'cause he [the playwright] doesn't tell us. We could have done it in 1965 in Florida, you know? We actually played a little bit with it in New Orleans. We thought we'll set it in New Orleans. Cause it lends itself to that, if you hear it, the language. But we explored with that, it's a seaside village 1959 and if you do a little history, its right out of World War II so this, you know, England suffered a lot, so where that consciousness is for a man like Stan and what would be happening for him having been probably a soldier earlier, but we think we he might have lost his son. This is all the back story we created.

Uncle Kev.

Uncle Kev.

So just thinking about where they were and how what happened around the world between 1959 and 1964 or 1965. Where there was a whole revolution that young people went through; that is my era; it would be the hippie generation. 1959 was that demarcation where there was a tremendous amount of observation of old ideals and conservative thinking. So we wanted to put it right on the cusp of that. And it only informed whatever the actors were working with. As much detail as you can find when you're making art like that, it really helps to be creative. We don't have to be explicit, any more than we have to be explicit about Grandma being a [lady] even though it's a guy, why can't that be Grandma?

Esme and Stan...They both change into a deeper awareness. They were on the edge of change.

It's interesting you were talking about the characters, that Esme is more resilient than Stan, that she was able to, you know, handle this, you think, a little better than Stan. In our experience now performing it with kids as audience members, the kids are great, the kids get it; they totally get it. Oh the clown is grandma, and yeah it's too bad. They are so resilient around it. The teachers, the adults, that's who's really experiencing it pretty profoundly. The kids just get it. They understand. They feel it, but they're not crushed by it. It's really powerful to see live. These two actors are really amazing. They are really amazing artists.

This is the other big epiphany for me, that it wasn't Esme's story, and whenever you begin as a director, you always have to know whose story it is you're talking about. It can't be both. Who is your story about? I mean everyone can be impacted in a story. But to guide you as a director...who's story is it? If you and when you make that choice, then you really have a road map. And I chose not for it to be about Esme, which is the conventional thing for children's theatre to do. This is a little girl who lost her grandma and now she understands that she's found her grandpa. But then I have children's theatre. I have theatre if I make it about him. Just theatre. Quality theatre for everybody. And so his inability to be able to cope with the fact that he lost this woman – and we did some deep exploration with Mark [who played Stan] – we decided he was on the verge of suicide, that his plan was to just to walk into the water because he lived by the sea...he couldn't go on. He slept on the kitchen table at night.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

He wouldn't go in the bedroom. He couldn't sleep in the bed that his wife had been in. And then having this girl that he didn't even want to deal with, that he didn't have a relationship with – it was Nanna that had the relationship with her – she actually brought him out, and he was able to find his life again and live. His lie was not to protect her. That's what we decided. His lie was to protect him. And that made hugely the difference for us in how the whole piece unfolded.

Another big component that I wanted to make sure happened over and over again was restraint, restraint. I would have done it with just tape on the floor. We did six weeks of rehearsal with just blue tape where things should be. That's where I am about theatre. Just how much less can it be and can we still capture it. But you are fighting with designers over that...To be a director when you are collaborating, you have to balance that out because they want to do all of these things. 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. That's the central fact of what we are. Otherwise we are film. How much less can we scale it back and do it. So pantomime was a huge component of what we did. So those props then, because pantomime is woven into it, those props were in relief. They had real value because you didn't have a tea set. [When there was a prop there] it was important.

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 found each other. Two people that were strangers 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.

You talk about how you didn't want to put so much into the show to make it very simple. What's your opinion on the projections?

Oh I love them. It's only three images. The house is represented by a swatch of wallpaper. And then the clock in the middle and then the swing that's outdoors. So it's just those three images over and over again... And a window, which is cool because in the window we were able to make it rain and for the wind to blow... But it was battling that. No. Most of the time I was saying 'no' to the designers. If you have a vision, and you need to, you need to have an image of what you want; then you need to protect that and as everyone began to understand what we were doing, those technical ideas became more restrained.

Connections and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre, and other activities, to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

CULTURAL MAPPING

Objectives

- Students will gain knowledge of similarities and differences in their classmates.
- Students will be introduced to *Walking the Tightrope* and begin to reflect on the play.

Activity

1. Ask the students to move the desks to the side and stand in a circle.
2. Describe the room as a map of the world. Identify Los Angeles in the space.
3. Have students who were born in Los Angeles gather in that place. Have the other students group themselves according to their birthplace (north, east, south or west of Los Angeles). Each group must determine two additional things that they have in common. Report back to the whole class. (Example: The members of the “north” group all like pizza and are the oldest in their families.)
4. Repeat activity using other divisions:
Oldest, middle, youngest, only child.
Speak one language, two languages etc.
Clowns: love them, fear them, like them, indifferent
Travel to see family: Local, State, National, International
Quotes. Ask each student to stand by the quote that most intrigues them. Discuss in the group why they chose that quote. What intrigues them about it? They will share aspects of their conversation with the whole group.

Quotes

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

“Tide comes in
Tide goes out
Tide comes in
Tide goes out.
At the end of the day
It all washes away.
And back comes
Something else...”

“We’re not afraid of the ooly ooly oolies
The ooly ooly ooly ooly ooooOOOOO
Yes we are”

“You forget the things that are everyday
You remember the things that are strange”

TABLEAU/FROZEN PICTURE

Objectives

- Students will practice using their bodies to communicate an idea or theme.
- Students will reflect on the varied interpretations of the theme.
- Students will reflect on *Walking the Tightrope* through a physical exploration of its themes.

Activity

1. Divide students into pairs. Student A is the artist. Student B is the sculpture.
2. Have student A create a statue out of B on the theme of the “future”. Examples: Flying cars, world peace, destroying the environment, graduating from college. Statues can be realistic or symbolic, personal or global.
3. Have each student title his or her statue and present to the class.
4. Repeat exercise with B as the artist and A as the sculpture.
5. Repeat with any of the following show-specific themes:
 - Family
 - Relationship
 - Loss
 - Travel
 - Clowns
 - Change
 - Confusion
6. Have each student sculpt an image that represents one of these themes. Discuss what these ideas mean to your students and what these ideas meant in *Walking the Tightrope*. Are they similar or very different?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

COVER THE SPACE

In an open rehearsal space or classroom, students walk around the room in a neutral manner, the way they would walk around school or at home. They should try to keep equal distances between each other. (If one were looking down at the room from a bird's-eye point of view, everyone would be equidistance apart.) Students do not have to walk in the same direction; they should be encouraged to walk in any direction they so choose.

Students walk in silence, not making any eye contact with each other. As they move, ask them to make transitions in how they walk. (Have them come back to their neutral walk between each transition.)

Students are instructed to walk as if they are...

- Traveling to meet someone.
- Curious
- Confused
- Going to the circus
- A tightrope walker
- A clown
- Grief stricken
- With someone that you love dearly

After the exercise, conduct a whole group discussion about students' experiences, feelings and insights.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

RITUAL PANTOMIME

Pantomime is using the body and face to convey a story and create an imaginary world. One of the main theatrical techniques used in *Walking the Tightrope* is pantomime. There are no teacups, spoons, blankets, etc. These were all pantomimed.

Age Group

Elementary, middle, high school, college

Length

More than 30 minutes

Summary

Students will name rituals from their own lives (every day or special) and pantomime them for the class.

Objectives

- Students will explore and express how ritual exists in their lives.
- Students will draw connections between their rituals and the rituals of Esme and Grandad Stan's family in *Walking the Tightrope*.

Materials needed (if applicable)

Paper and writing utensils for students
Performance area

Activity

1. Whole Group Discussion:

- Ask students what comes to mind when they hear the word ritual.
- Define the word "ritual" for them. (See below.)
- Describe/Discuss rituals that take place in *Walking the Tightrope*:
 - Pre-show: Discuss the family rituals mentioned in the synopsis of *Walking the Tightrope*. (Esme's visits, going the beach, making bread and butter pudding, bedtime stories, etc.)
 - Post-show: Ask students about the rituals they observed within the family as they watched the play.
- Use the questions in the "Ritual" section of the Educator Resources to conduct a conversation with the students about the rituals that takes place in their lives

2. Independent Writing

- Distribute paper and writing utensils.
- Ask students to write about a specific ritual from their lives. (It can be an everyday activity or a special one.)
 - Name the activity.
 - Does it happen with anyone else?
 - Where does it happen?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

- What time of year does it happen?
- What else would you like to say/write about it?

3. Ritual Pantomime

- Students are asked to pantomime their ritual, or aspects of it, for the whole class.
- Student audience members offer guesses as to what the ritual is.
- Student actor reveals what the ritual is and describes it in detail for her/his fellow classmates.

Variations

- Instead of using a performance/stage area, students form one large circle and pantomime their rituals from where they are standing.
- Students work in pairs or small cooperative groups and perform their rituals for each other. They also do their guesswork within these groups (perhaps they write down their guesses). They share their experiences during a whole group discussion.

Quotes

“Every year

Right at the end of summer

Just before the leaves turn brown and fall from the trees

Esme comes to stay

With her Nanna and Grandad

Every year”

-Grandad Stan in *Walking the Tightrope*

“Every year

Some things stay the same

And some things change.”

-Grandad Stan in *Walking the Tightrope*

Vocabulary

Ritual: done as part of a ceremony; always done in a particular situation.

CHANGE: GIVING UP, GAINING AND GROWTH (A POETRY EXERCISE)

Age Group

Elementary, Middle, High School, College

Length

Over 30 minutes

Summary

This activity offers students the opportunity to make personal connections to the story of *Walking the Tightrope*. They will create their own poems based on the play's themes of change, loss and growth.

Objectives

- Students will reflect upon their own personal experiences of change.
- Students will write poetry based on these experiences.

Materials needed (if applicable)

Writing Utensils

Copies of "Change: Giving Up, Gaining, Growth (A Poetry Exercise)" handout

Crayons, Markers, Colored Pencils

Blank paper or cardstock (if desired)

Activity

1. Students will write the first stanza of their poems by describing the following in complete sentences:
 - One huge change in your life.
 - What you gave up or lost because of this change.
 - What you gained or how you grew because of this change.
2. Students will create the second stanzas of their poems by choosing their three favorite words from the sentences that they wrote on Change, Loss and Growth.
 - Students will create the third stanzas of their poems by choosing their single favorite word from each set of the three words about Change, Loss and Growth.
3. Students will transfer their work to a plain piece of paper, a piece of cardstock, or the third page of the Center Theatre Group handout. Encourage students to add illustrations.
4. Poems are shared among the class members.
 - Have students share their poems aloud with a partner.
 - Students read their poems aloud to each other.
 - Students share the full story of their poems with their partners.
 - Conduct a whole group conversation about the students' experiences with the activity.
 - How did writing the poem make you feel? What did it make you think about?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

- What was it like to share your poems and stories with one another?
- Poems are read aloud to the whole group.
 - Students tell the class the entire story of their poems (if they feel comfortable doing so).
 - Audience members contribute their thoughts, feelings, and questions about the poems and the stories.

Variations

Students write about different types of change:

- Huge
- Small
- Changes that happen on the inside
- Changes that happen on the outside

Tips

Sometimes students have trouble coming up with ideas or descriptions and putting these on paper. It helps if they speak these things aloud first. If this happens with a student, conduct a conversation with him/her about changes in his/her life; when they verbally communicate information about change to you, encourage them to write down what they just said.

Vocabulary

Stanza: A group of lines in a poem, separated by space from other stanzas, much like a paragraph in prose.

Reflection questions/prompts

1. How have you changed recently in your life? Are these changes you can see, or does it feel like they are happening invisibly?
2. Have you ever chosen to change in any way? If so, how?
3. Has anyone helped you through a difficult change, or have you ever helped anyone?

The following pages include handouts that accompany this exercise. Your students may use these as graphic organizers for their poems.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

CHANGE: GIVING UP, GAINING AND GROWTH (A POETRY EXERCISE)

STEP #1: In a complete sentence, describe the following:

One huge change in your life: _____

What you gave up, or what you lost, because of this change: _____

What you gained, or how you grew, because of this change: _____

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

CHANGE: GIVING UP, GAINING AND GROWTH (A POETRY EXERCISE)

STEP #2: Take your complete sentences and choose three of the most important words to you from each one:

Change:

Gave Up or Lost:

Gain or Growth:

STEP #3: Choose one word that is the most important to you from each section:

Change: _____

Gave Up or Lost: _____

Gain or Growth: _____

**CHANGE: GIVING UP, GAINING AND GROWTH
(A POETRY EXERCISE)**

Take these sentences, phrases and single words that you have just written about change, and transfer them to a single page of paper (or cardstock). You will now have a poem with three stanzas (or sections)! Add illustrations to your poem. Read your poem aloud to others. Display in your classroom.

In the space below, write your three-stanza poem. Add illustrations, if you like.

POETIC LICENSE, PROPS AND PANTOMIME

Age Group

Elementary, middle, high school and/or college

Length

More than 30 minutes

Summary

Students will take poetic license with the props from *Walking the Tightrope* and create new stories from them. They will perform these stories using the props and pantomime.

Objectives

- Students will become introduced to the concept of poetic license.
- Students will explore the power of props and practice the art of pantomime
- Students will make connections to these conventions in *Walking the Tightrope*.

Materials needed (if applicable)

Paper and writing utensils

Props from the play (enough for one for each student)

- Suitcase
- Doll
- Umbrella
- Seashell
- Towels
- Cookbook
- Ice Cream Cones
- Reading Glasses

Activity

1. Students are divided into groups of three.
2. Each student is assigned one prop.
3. Now each group has three props to work with. They are given 15-20 minutes to create a story involving all three props.
 - They may write their story or improvise it.
 - They may use prose or poetry to tell it.
 - The props should play an important role in their story.
 - Each story should have a solid beginning, middle and end.
4. Each group performs its story for the class three times. Each time a single prop is used. The other props are pantomimed.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

5. Two additional steps may be added, time permitting:
 - Performing the story with all of the props at once.
 - Performing the story with no props and using all pantomime.
6. Conduct a whole group discussion regarding the performances and the experiences of the actors and the audience members:
 - How did using one prop change each story?
 - What was the effect of using all the props? None of the props?
 - How did it feel to perform with and without your prop?
 - Was it easy to invent a story with your props, or was it challenging?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

OUR CLASS CLOWNS

Age Group

Elementary, middle, high school college

Length

More than 30 minutes

Summary

Walking the Tightrope has a clown character that represents, among other things, the grandmother figure in the play. Instead of making us laugh, this clown serves a symbolic and spiritual role in the play. In this activity, students discover, imagine and craft their very own unique clown character.

Objectives

- Students will learn about the art of clowning.
- Students will connect their learning about clowning to *Walking the Tightrope*.

Materials needed (if applicable)

Red clown noses

String

Scissors

Activity

1. Warm-Up: Ask student to walk around the room and cover the space. They can start at a regular pace. The teacher then suggests different ways to exaggerate the movement a little bit as the students are walking. For example, the teacher can say, "Walk as if you have big clown shoes on; walk as if you are filled with helium; walk as if you are walking through a very tiny hallway." These simple suggestions help students understand what happens when a simple physical movement like walking gets exaggerated.
2. Guided Conversation
 - What is a clown?
 - Why have they been around throughout human history?
 - What do red clown noses make you think of?
 - What is one way you sometimes act like a clown?
 - Can we nominate our favorite class clown and give them a hand for making us laugh?
 - Besides making us laugh, how else can clowns make us feel when they perform?
3. Main Activity
 - Create clowns based on ourselves using our actor's toolkit (voice, body, and imagination). All great clowns start with their own bodies and movements. The clown figures out how he/she moves, stands and laughs. Then, the/she takes those physical gestures and makes them really big and exaggerated, just like we did with the movements in our warm-up activity. The clown we will discover today is the bigger-

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than-life version of you!

- In groups of three, the students take turns helping to fit one another with red clown noses:
 - One student sits in chair and holds a red nose in place on his or her nose with a finger.
 - Another helps measure the elastic string around the sitting student's head.
 - They help each other cut the string and tie it onto the nose.
 - The sitting student tries on the nose that is fastened with the string around his or her head.
 - He or she tightens or adjusts accordingly so the nose doesn't fall off, even while jumping up and down.
- Once everyone in the group has a clown nose on their face, ask the students to take a moment to look around the room and observe how everyone looks with noses and what that feels like. Perhaps ask "What is it like to have this big red nose on your face?"
- Then, it's time to help one another find the natural, physical characteristics of our inner clown.

4. Demonstration

- The teacher stands in front of the room in a natural way. Then he/she asks the students to observe how they are standing — how wide are my feet, are my fists clenched or relaxed, do I lean forward/backward?
- The teacher asks the students to try to stand exactly the same way. That means trying to copy how the teacher looks as a mirror image.
- The teacher picks one or two students to come stand alongside him/her so the whole class can see a few model examples.
- The teacher says:
"What can we do to our arms, legs, hands or head to exaggerate how I stand?"
The teacher and the volunteers make adjustments.
- Back in the small groups of three, the students take turns standing with their eyes closed. The other two partners examine how the student is standing, noting where he or she places his or her feet, arms, hands, head, etc. The students try to copy the way the student with closed eyes is standing, but they get to exaggerate the posture just a little bit. When they have their poses ready, they tell the student to open his or her eyes.
- The student gets to see examples of how his or her personal clown might stand and hold their posture. That original student now tries to copy the exaggerated postures of the other two students.
- Repeat these steps, so the two other students get help in finding how their clown might stand.
- The groups practice walking around a bit in their clown postures and physicality.
- The last step is to give your own clown a name!
- After 20 minutes, reconvene the class. Each group presents. All of the students introduce their clowns by striking a pose and saying "Hello, my name is _____," using a voice that they create for their clown.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

5. Closure: A quick group popcorn conversation to share out surprises, challenges and questions connected to creating and naming your own personal clown today.

Variations

After creating their unique clowns, have students move around the space to circus music from *Walking the Tightrope*. Excerpt Link: <http://bit.ly/WalkingTheTightropeCircus>

THE SETTING GAME

Age Group

Middle, high school and/or college

Length

15 - 30 minutes

Objectives

- Students will explore place/setting through physical pantomime activities and behavior.
- Students will reflect on the different settings in *Walking The Tightrope* and how the actors used pantomime to communicate the place and what happens in that place.

Materials needed

Cards with setting/places listed on them. Examples: beach, circus, baseball field, grocery store, gym, hospital, church, library

Activity

1. A student picks a card with a specific place on it and begins to silently act out an activity that would occur in that setting (Example: Lifting weights at a gym). Tell the students that when they know where the person is by what they see them doing; that they should join in with another non-verbal activity that happens in this place (Example: running on a treadmill, playing basketball).
2. Repeat with different students picking a setting card.
3. Discuss how the place or setting can impact or change our behavior.

Variations

- Divide the class into small groups of five to six. Assign each group either the circus or the beach as a setting. Have them decide on a story that could happen in that setting. Have them create three frozen pictures showing the beginning, middle and end of their setting story. Share the frozen pictures. Back in their groups, have them bring the story to life adding pantomime, dialogue, sound and movement. Share the scenes.
- Ask students to think about a place they love to visit or spend time. Ask them to draw a picture or an image that represents that place. Have each student journal about things that happen only in that place. Why do they love to go there?

Reflection questions/prompts

After seeing *Walking the Tightrope*, ask the class to compare what happened in the different settings with the group scenes they created and with their individual journal reflections. What similarities did they see? What was unique and different?

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

OUTSIDE/INSIDE

“She looked like an ordinary woman, but inside beat the heart of a tightrope walker.”
-*Walking The Tightrope*.

Age Group

Middle and/or high school

Length

15-45 minutes

Objectives

- Students will reflect on the first impressions people have of them and on what about them cannot be seen from the outside. Students will reflect on the decisions they make about other people based on an outside impression.
- Students will write and create visual art about their inside/outside awareness
- Students will reflect on the first impressions they have of the characters in *Walking the Tightrope* and how those impressions changes over the course of the play.

Materials:

Journal or paper and pens

Paper plates, magazine and other pictures to create collages

Activity

1. Read the following quote from *Walking the Tightrope*:
“She looked like an ordinary woman, but inside beat the heart of a tightrope walker.” -*Walking The Tightrope*.
2. Ask students to write or share an answer to the prompt “One thing you don’t know just by looking at me is....” Stress that these can be lighthearted or serious. Example “One thing you don’t know just by looking at me is I like to paint/ I miss my best friend who moved/ I have to take care of my younger siblings/ I am going to be a doctor/ I am really shy” Etc.
3. Journal: Have students reflect on the first impression they think people have when they see them. Do you think people notice your race, gender, age, clothing, glasses? Do you think people make assumptions based on what they see? What if that person knew the inside/real you? What “beats” on the inside that people cannot just see?
4. Ask each student to think of an older person in their life, a grandparent or other older relative or friend. What is something you think about them based on what you see on the outside? What do you think might “beat” on the inside?

Variation

Visual Art. Using paper plates to make simple masks (cut out eye holes and attach string to the sides) have students cut out words and images that reflect what the world sees on the outside. Paste these to the outside of the paper plate mask. Have students cut out words and images that reflect what “beats” on the inside.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Reflection

After seeing the play, have students reflect on first impressions they had of the characters in *Walking the Tightrope* and how those impressions changed over the course of the play. How does this relate to the journal or visual art exploration students created about themselves?

TRADITIONS: A CULTURAL SHARING

Age Group

Elementary and middle schools

Length

Two 45-minute sessions

Homework: Assign students to bring an object or picture of an item regarding their tradition they are going to share about.

Summary

Students take the time to think of a tradition that their grandparent or an elder shared with them. In this time they think about the impact of this tradition. This process takes them through sense memory and the writing down of this tradition-story. They share their story and a picture or object associated with their tradition to their fellow students.

Objectives

- To notice tradition and the effects it has on us.
- To practice communicating our thoughts and ideas clearly—public speaking.
- Sharing our own tradition-stories provides opportunities for teachable moments around diversity and inclusion.
- Writing down our tradition-story is practice in storytelling and writing skills.

Materials needed (if applicable)

Paper/journal

Pen

Bring an object or picture that addresses your tradition

Activity

Session #1

1. Warm up with Brain Gym exercises:

- Stretch the left leg back and lunge forward with the right leg. Feel a stretch in the left leg. Switch sides and lunge forward with the left leg. Feel a stretch in the right leg. Breathe while stretching.
- Begin to march in place swinging your arms too. Watch out for your neighbor. (The opposition of arms and legs wakes up the right and left sides of the brain to get synapse firing back and forth.) Keep breathing!
- Next, bring both thumbs up in front at chest level like you're giving a "thumbs up!" sign with both hands. Begin to draw in the air with your thumbs and make sure your thumbs are mirroring each other. Come to a close and take a couple of deep breathes.

2. Ask students to look at their objects. Ask them to write about it as if they were describing it to someone who is on the phone or not present in the room.

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

- Ask the students to describe what it looks like and even how it feels to the touch, what color it is, and is it smooth, does it have sharp edges?
3. Next, ask students to begin to describe the tradition associated with this object or picture?
 - How it is a part of their heritage or family culture?
 - Is there an activity that is associated with this object or picture? Is there something you always do when you practice this tradition?
 - These traditions might be cooking a special food or dish, or a routine that is practiced like going to a particular place most every visit or every season.

Session #2

1. Start with the Brain Gym Warm-Up's again.
2. Sit in a circle, if possible, and ask each student to present their object and share the story of their tradition.
3. Once everyone has presented, open up the session to talk about what the students learned and if their tradition is similar, or different to other students' traditions?

Variations

There may be traditions that can be demonstrated right there in your sharing circle. Allow time and preparation for this to happen.

Tips

You know your students best, so, choose the format that works best for you and your students. Sometimes it makes sense to have everyone share and then have a discussion or Q&A regarding everyone's different traditions. It could also make sense to be able to ask each student questions right after they share.

Mostly, I would give everyone the same amount of designated time, for example, two to three minutes each. Depending on your class size, you might be able to get through all of the sharing in one class session or you might break it up into more than one class session.

Another option is to break the students up into small groups to share one at a time within their groups. Then, have each group report out to the larger group and share what they learned.

Quotes

ESME: Bread and butter pudding.

Nanna always makes me bread and butter pudding on the first day of the holidays.

STAN: Does she?

ESME: Always....You're not very good at this, are you Grandad?

STAN: No.

ESME: You'll have to learn if Nanna's not here. Get down Nanna's cook book.

STAN: Cook book, yes.

- *Walking The Tightrope* by Mike Kenny

Vocabulary

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Tradition: 1. The handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc. from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice: a story that has come down to us by popular tradition. 2. A continuing pattern of culture beliefs or practices.

Reflection questions/prompts

1. How has tradition affected you and your family or community?
2. Did you know that your family or community's activity was a tradition at first?
3. How does having a tradition make you feel? Do you look forward to it?
4. Would you pass this tradition along to others?
5. When you look at your object, does it remind you of anything?
6. Ask the students these items one at a time.
 - Does it remind you of a place?
 - A smell?
 - A sound?
 - A taste?
 - A texture or particular feel when you touch it?

Actors call this sense memory work—when one or more of the senses can evoke a memory. In most cases, the strongest sense memory for emotional recall is smell.

Ask the students to guess which of the senses tends to be strongest. Ask them which of their senses tends to be most prominent.

BUILD-A-CLOWN

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Age Group

Elementary, Middle, High school and/or college

Length

Approximately 50 minutes

Summary

A clown help tell the story of *Walking the Tightrope*. The clown offers humor, emotion and represents a symbol of the grandmother in the play.

Objectives

- Students develop basic physical gestures of clowning
- Students develop an awareness of emotion and story told without words

Materials needed (if applicable)

Red clown noses
Music (optional)

Activity

1. Students form pairs.
2. One student is the interviewer and the other is the interviewee. The exercise will be repeated so the students can swap roles.
3. The student being interviewed stands in a neutral position and closes their eyes. The interviewer student stands far enough away that they can see their partner from head to toe.
4. The interviewer asks their partner the following three questions:
 - What was your happiest moment this week?
 - What were the circumstances of the last argument you had with someone?
 - What is something people would be surprised to know about you?
5. While interviewer asks questions, they notice how their closed-eyed partner is standing and what they are doing with their hands, feet and posture.
6. The interviewer attempts to mirror exactly how their partner is standing—noting how feet, hands and head are positioned.
7. The interviewer then greatly exaggerates the position and forms a frozen statue and asks his partner to open their eyes. The interviewee gets to see an example of their clown mirrored back to them. The interviewee assumes the exaggerated posture as well and takes a little walk. This gives their new clown life.
8. Students reverse roles and repeat.
9. In a moderated clown show, students can introduce their clowns by walking across a space with music playing. Red noses can be worn.

Variation

About the Play | Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

If this is a theatre-based class, the clowns can interact (non-verbally) with other clowns while circus music is playing using simple costume pieces, props and set pieces from the classroom.

Tips

If time permits, play audio/video internet clips of clowns from different shows (Cirque du Soleil, Barnum & Bailey, *Walking the Tightrope*). Engage students in a conversation about what makes the clowns come alive. What is the clown doing or not doing? Saying or not saying through physical gestures without words?

Quotes

“The role of a clown and a physician are the same—
it’s to elevate the possible and to relieve suffering.”
- Patch Adams

Examples

Useful clowning educational materials can be found at this site:
<http://www.ringling.com/SectionLandingPage.aspx?id=45688>

Vocabulary

clown (n.)

1560s, clowne, also cloyne, “rustic, boor, peasant,” origin uncertain. Perhaps from Scandinavian dialect (compare Icelandic klunni “clumsy, boorish fellow;” Swedish kluns “a hard knob; a clumsy fellow;” Danish klunt “log, block”), or akin to North Frisian klönne “clumsy person.” Or, less likely, from Latin colonus “colonist, farmer,” though awareness of this word might have influenced the sense development in English.

Reflection questions/prompts

- How did it feel to observe your partners posture? What was going through your mind during the process?
- How did it feel to see your exaggerated clown mirrored back to you? What was going through your mind when you saw an example of your clown in front of you?

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Credits

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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.

SPECIAL THANKS

Education and Community Partnerships receives generous support from Renee & Meyer Luskin, Deena & Edward Nahmias, Eva & Marc Stern, the Artists & Educators Forum.



Additional support for Education and Community Partnerships is provided by The Sheri and Les Biller Family Foundation, the Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, The Louis L. Borick Foundation, The Sascha Brastoff Foundation, The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Foundation, Brookside Fund, the Brotman Foundation of California, Diana Buckhantz & Vladimir & Araxia Buckhantz Foundation, the Carol and James Collins Foundation, the Culver City Education Foundation, the James A. Doolittle Foundation, the Joseph Drown Foundation, the Fineshriver Family Foundation, the Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation, The Friars Charitable Foundation, the Lawrence P. Frank Foundation, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, The Green Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Education Endowment, HUB International Insurance Services, the Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Rosenthal Family Foundation, Laura & James Rosenwald & Orinoco Foundation, Sony Pictures Entertainment and Dwight Stuart Youth Fund.