HOT Season for Young People
2014-15
Teacher Guidebook

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE

24TH STREET THEATRE

Photo by Cindy Marie Jenkins
For over 130 years Regions has been proud to be a part of the Middle Tennessee community, growing and thriving as our area has. From the opening of our doors on September 1, 1883, we have committed to this community and our customers.

One area that we are strongly committed to is the education of our students. We are proud to support TPAC’s Humanities Outreach in Tennessee Program. What an important sponsorship this is – reaching over 25,000 students and teachers – some students would never see a performing arts production without this program. Regions continues to reinforce its commitment to the communities it serves and in addition to supporting programs such as HOT, we have close to 200 associates teaching financial literacy in classrooms this year.

Thank you, teachers, for giving your students this wonderful opportunity. They will certainly enjoy the experience. You are creating memories of a lifetime, and Regions is proud to be able to help make this opportunity possible.

Jim Schmitz
Executive Vice President, Area Executive
Middle Tennessee Area

From our Season Sponsor

Regions

For Young People
Dear Teachers,

We are privileged to bring 24th STreet Theatre’s production of Walking the Tightrope to Nashville to share with HOT students. We thank the company for making their education guide available to us and allowing us to include excerpts from their excellent work in our own.

The age range for this play spans many grades, and in fact, it is suitable for additional ages as well. Because the explorations included can be adapted for younger and older students, specific grade levels are not listed.

One extra note: the particular capitalization of the “T” in 24th STreet Theatre is deliberate, a nod to the company’s theater location in Los Angeles.

Enjoy the show!

TPAC Education

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Project-Based Learning Unit

Find a complete Project-Based Learning Unit utilizing Walking the Tightrope on the TPAC website at tpac.org/guidebooks. Developed by a PBL trained teacher and a teaching artist, this 10 day unit explores the essential question “How does the experience of change help us develop and grow?”

Discover how naturally the arts work within the PBL framework.

Photo taken at Brighton Beach, England in 2007 - with thanks to Jerome C on flickr
Written by one of England’s major writers for young audiences, Mike Kenny, *Walking the Tightrope* is a sweet and funny story of a grandfather who, while trying to tell his young granddaughter that her Nanna is gone, goes about building a beautiful new relationship with her. With the help of a silent clown, they discover the meaning of family.

**Main theme**

Some things change, and some things stay the same. The story explores the rhythm of life’s changes including loss. How we handle change can sometimes help us learn about our own family.

*Walking the Tightrope* uses sophisticated video design and creative movement to bring to life the beauty and excitement of both the sea and the circus. With the imaginative use of pantomime and award winning music, we are transported to a quaint English seaside village “just before the leaves turn brown and fall from the trees, just before school starts” in 1959.
Mike Kenny is one of England's leading writers, specializing in young people's theatre. He has written over thirty plays which are performed regularly throughout the UK and all over the world. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Top Ten Living UK Playwrights list in the Independent on Sunday. In 2013, he was given an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Nottingham University, England.

Awards

* 2000 Arts Council of England - first ever recipient of The Children's Award for playwriting for children, Cinderella
* 2002 Barclays TMA Award for Special Achievement in Regional Theatre, The Railway Children
* 2009 Dora Mavor Award for Theatre Direct’s Outstanding Production and Outstanding Performance for Theatre for Young Audiences, Walking the Tightrope
* 2011 Olivier Award for Best Entertainment, The Railway Children
* 2012 Dora Mavor Audience Award, Scarecrow
* 2013 Dora Mavor Award for Outstanding Musical Theatre Production, Diary of an Action Man
* Best Children's Play - Time Out, Stepping Stones
* Best Children's Play - Writers' Guild of Great Britain, Stuck
* short listed (nominated) for Writer's Guild Best Children’s Play, Walking the Tightrope
* Best Children’s Play - Time Out Critics Choice, Electric Darkness
* Best Children’s Play - British Theatre Institute, The Gardener

Quotes about Walking the Tightrope from Mike Kenny

(From an interview with The Yorkshire Times by Lauren Masterman in December 2014)

“What do you think is your biggest achievement?”

“I think I’m best known for the production of The Railway Children but I did a play some years ago called Walking the Tightrope, which is about grandparents and grandchildren and how to deal with and talk about death. I feel like they’re the ones that will really last, the small, intimate plays.”

(From The Leeds Guide, UK, December 2008)

“Most vitally, however, Walking the Tightrope ... meets Kenny’s definition of a good story. ‘I think all the really good stories are about something that is of profound importance to people but is never resolved,’ he says. ‘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.’”
24th STreet Theatre is an arts organization like no other. Built in 1928 as a Carriage House, these walls were once home to the working horses of the grand Victorian homes in this neighborhood, many of which still stand today. Thus, this historic old building has always served a useful purpose; in its past and now in its present.

Since 24th STreet Theatre’s beginning in 1997, the organization has taken on a life of its own. We started out just intending to do plays. But we quickly found that this was a neighborhood that deserved...demanded so much more than we had planned to give. It was a neighborhood like we thought had ceased to exist. A community where people still knew each other. A true neighborhood with as much character as our charming old carriage house. So we began doing Outreach projects with local kids, then Art Exhibits, then Music, and then Arts Education projects with the local schools. We began to expand our work beyond the neighborhood to citywide audiences, and other school districts. Our work then reached beyond our borders as we began to establish an International reputation, working with theatres in other countries and representing the United States as Cultural Envoys in other parts of the world. With the given that all of our programming must be of the highest caliber, we began to use our art as a tool with which to bring people back to this old building and to the neighborhood. A tool with which to make people remember...or sometimes forget.

Today we are proud to be a leader in Arts Education, Community Outreach, and quality Professional Theatre for young and old alike. Today, we do more than just plays! 24th STreet is truly a model 21st Century arts organization, using first-class art to make a difference in our own neighborhood, in our city, and around the world. A building from the past, with a mission for the future.
Debbie Devine has been an award-winning theatre director and a respected leader in the field of arts education for over three decades. She has been the Chair of the Drama Dept. of The Colburn School of Performing Arts for over 20 years. She is also a theatrical director with the LA Philharmonic and is thrilled to be directing in the gorgeous space that is Disney Hall. Debbie is the co-founder and Artistic Director of L.A.’s 24th STreet Theatre, which has created award-winning professional theatre and model arts education programs for thousands of students and teachers since 1997.

Debbie’s work as an actor has earned her three Drama-Logue Critics Awards, a Robby Award, an L.A. Weekly Award, LA Parent Magazine’s Best Westside Children’s Theatre Award, and the Women In Theatre Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Los Angeles Theatre. Debbie recently earned LA County Arts Commission’s Professional Designation in Arts Education, and is the recipient of the USC Rossier School of Education’s Innovation and Leadership Award, and won LA’s County Music Center’s 2001 Bravo Special Mention for her work in Arts Education. She is also the proud recipient of the 2011 Inspiring Women Award, presented by the LA Sparks and Farmers Insurance.

On Debbie Devine’s direction and her addition of a clown character:

(From alittlenightmusing, Los Angeles Theater Reviews by Mickala Jauregui, February 2013)

“Adding to the production’s powerful presentation is Devine’s brilliant idea of having Nanna’s memory always looming in the background as a silent, melancholy clown, played to heartbreaking perfection by Tony Duran. Duran’s character walks quietly around the stage never seen by the other characters. Watching over them as they go through the same motions they always did every year. Helping to point out where things were that only Nanna had known, he is the spirit of Nanna and it is tragic and yet beautiful at the same time.”

24th STreet Theatre says the following:

“The clown is not in the script but was a directorial choice. We intentionally cast it as a male, ... so as to have the character reflect the essence of Nanna’s spirit rather than Nanna herself.”
Both the United States and the United Kingdom are English speaking nations. However, given their different cultures, the language is spoken differently, especially regarding slang and informal vocabulary.

The following British slang is found in the play:

- Wellies - galoshes
- Telly - TV set
- Oolies - Waves
- Flask - Thermos
- Dodgems - Bumper cars
- Out of Puff - Out of breath
- Jim jams - pajamas
- Kip - sleep, nap, "forty winks"
- Sprog - baby, young child
- Bangers - Sausages
- Cornet - Ice cream cone
- Ice lolly - popsicle
- The Loo - toilet
- Bucketing - raining very heavily, "raining cats and dogs"

The ocean tides are very important in both the text and the setting of Walking the Tightrope. Help students understand the literal meaning of the tides and their effect on the shorelines, so they will better understand the symbolic meaning of the following poem that repeats throughout the play.

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.

(From marinebio.org/oceans)

High tide is when the water is at its highest level and low tide is the water at its minimum level. Ebb or falling tide is when the water seems to flow back out and happens between a high tide and a low tide. When the water flows back in between low tide and high tide, this period of time is known as flow, flood or rising tide.
Theatrical devices are methods with which a playwright or a director creates a particular effect to aid in telling the story of the play. “Telling the story” in theatre requires bringing it to life on stage. The audience must use their imaginations, and every member of the team of actors, creators, and designers learns different ways to help them.

Walking the Tightrope uses several theatrical devices to tell and to dramatize the story of Esme and Grandad Stan.

- Live music during the performance that underscores the action of the play.
- Projected video segments that resemble old photographs to set the scene.
- Pantomime that the actors use to show many everyday things.
- Narration spoken by both characters within the action of the play instead of an outside narrator.
- Poetry used within the text of the play.
- Repetition.
- A clown.

It is this last theatrical device that may provide some of the most interesting discussions after the performance, because each audience member will experience the clown in a different way. This clown is not from the circus clowning world or from the European historical traditions. He is not even a fool of the royal court or of Shakespearean literature. The character is closest to the theatrical clowns of 20th century plays who, with a more serious demeanor, serve the purpose of representing something in the world of the play, or of perceiving something that other characters cannot.

Shelly Kurtz, Micaela Martinez, and Tony Duran in the current tour of Walking the Tightrope. Photo by Cooper Bates.
This production of Walking the Tightrope uses a combination of pantomimed pretend “props” and real physical props. The director’s choice between which one of the two to use in each instance is quite intentional. In both cases, the object can be infused with meaning to the characters beyond its basic purpose. The following is a brief, engaging activity from 24th STreet Theatre’s Teacher guide that will let students play with the importance a prop can have to a scene.

1. Have students choose a “prop” in the classroom (i.e. pencil, ruler, globe, notebook,) and as a class give it value by creating a fictional past for it. Where did it come from? Who used it for something important? What is so special about it and how did it end up in this classroom? Don’t let them anthropomorphize it. Keep it as a real object that has a special history.

2. In small teams, have students create a simple scene based on the value and importance of the prop. Ask them to determine the Where (setting), the Who (characters), and the What (the issue, problem, or conflict.)

Example 1: Prop- Pencil
The Where- restaurant
The Who- waiter and customers
The What - the waiter can’t take their order until she finds her ‘lucky pencil’

Example 2: Prop- Ruler
The Where- shoe store
The Who- shoe salesman and customer
The What - the ruler is ticklish to the customer and so the salesman can’t get the right sizing for a new pair of shoes

3. Ask them to find a way to end the scene, whether or not it resolves the problem.

4. Discuss the meanings that people attach to inanimate objects. When do we do it, and what does it say about us?

* For younger students, work only with the imaginary history of the prop and its significance. Ask them to demonstrate how they might handle it differently, when they know its “true” story.
Students will create a short pantomime that will both stay the same and change, with three repetitions.

1. Pair students and ask them to choose an everyday activity that can be acted out silently - brushing teeth, making breakfast, maybe taking the dog for a walk.

2. Ask them to be sure there is a definite beginning and end point to the action of the pantomime so that they can make an entrance and exit. (Entrances and exits should not be out of the room; they can be as simple as turning towards the audience and then turning back.)

3. Ask students to choose an adjective to describe a feeling. Encourage them to find strong, specific adjectives (i.e. exhausted instead of tired, overjoyed instead of happy.) Ask older students to go further and imagine an episode that caused this emotion.

4. Ask students to practice the following sequence:
   ✡ Student A “enters” and performs the pantomime and then “exits.”
   ✡ Student B “enters” and performs the same pantomime and then “exits.”
   ☑ Both students “enter” and repeat the same pantomime, but this final time the pantomime will be colored with their chosen emotion.
   ✡ They both “exit.”

5. Perform the vignettes for the class. Discuss what stayed the same and what changed in the pantomimes. Encourage students first to be objective observers about what they saw in the action, before they make subjective judgments about the emotion. What things change in students lives and what things stay the same? Is it ever both at once?
Poetry

Mike Kenny writes in a style which is called Prose poetry. It is written with very little verse but with heightened imagery (creating a picture,) and is to be spoken as dialogue. Repetition is used to create an enhanced poetic effect.

In the text from the script, the language is centered on the page and is repeated several times during the play.

Tide comes in;
Tide goes out.

1. Have students write three simple lines of dialogue, as if they are speaking to someone, instructing them to do something. Have students put the text in the middle of the page. Example:

    Wash the car.
    Put away the dishes.
    Make the bed.

2. Ask them to write it again, repeating the lines. Have several students speak the lines aloud to the class. What changes when the lines are repeated? What changes when they are read aloud?

    Wash the car.
    Wash the car.
    Put away the dishes.
    Put away the dishes.
    Make the bed.
    Make the bed.

3. Have students write a six-line prose poem with the theme of losing something they really liked and will miss very much. Ask them to include repetition by writing the last line of their story twice. Example:

    My dog ran away.
    His name was Baxley.
    I miss him so.
    I miss him so.

4. Read the poems aloud. Now that there is more context and meaning in the lines, discuss what effect the repetition has on the listeners.
**Narration**

Most plays are written and performed as if the audience is spying in on people's lives through an invisible fourth wall. Both Grandad Stan and Esme use narration in the play. They speak directly to the audience and ‘break the fourth wall’. In *Walking the Tightrope*, the characters both narrate their own actions and engage in regular dialogue in seamless combination.

1. Using the following excerpt from the play, ask students to identify which parts are narration and which are dialogue.

2. Pair them up with copies of the text. How would they act out this scene with both narration and dialogue?

**ESME**  In bed that night
    Esme was still quiet.
    Grandad Stan.
**STAN**  What is it, Esme?
**ESME**  Can’t sleep.
**STAN**  Can’t sleep?
**ESME**  No.
    Nanna always tells me a story.
**STAN**  Always?
**ESME**  Always.
**STAN**  Grandad Stan went very quiet.
    I don’t usually do stories.
**ESME**  Well, you’ll have to if Nanna Queenie’s not here.
**STAN**  What do you want a story about?
**ESME**  Me.
**STAN**  Right.
    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
    Every year
    Some things stay the same
    And some things change.
Discussion Questions

1. There were three characters in the play, however only two spoke. Discuss with the class why the clown character didn’t speak.

2. Grandad Stan’s character had a secret; what was it? How did the actor help us know he was struggling with the secret?

3. Throughout the play Esme was looking for Nanna, but she found something else instead. What was it? How did the actor help us know she had found it?

4. What does the title of the play, Walking the Tightrope, mean? Does it have more than one meaning?

5. What function does the clown character serve? Who or what does the clown represent?

One more exploration...

Below are five nouns that were included in the play. Ask students to imagine their own stories and write down how they might use these nouns as symbols for an idea or emotion.

Example: Backyard Swing - Freedom

Pillow -
Teapot -
Clock -
Window -
Rain-
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