A Teacher’s Resource Guide
Dear Teacher:

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To speak to us personally, or to arrange a visit, please contact our office at ed.theatre@nyu.edu or 212 998 5868.

David Montgomery, PhD
Acting Director
Program in Educational Theatre
Director’s Notes

Despite its upbeat, larger-than-life characters and cartoon-like depictions of reality, *Yikes!* hinges on a subject that can be difficult to share with our children: the loss of our nearest and dearest. This might seem like an odd choice for a family show, not to mention a show that speaks to six year olds as well as older children. You might even think that the form and the content are at odds with each other. Surely a show about the trauma of loss should be way more serious than one in which a baby has a duet with a singing trout, or in which a dog and bull suddenly start talking to each other like two guys on the sidewalk. But as Oscar Wilde once famously said, “Art is the most serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.”

If the thought of this strikes fear into your heart, fear not. The spirit of this show is one of unmistakable joy. It wears a big heart on its equally large sleeve. Although death and fear of the unknown are ever-present in this show, the real subject of *Yikes!* is resilience. It’s about the amazing propensity of human beings to keep going in the face of adversity.

A family has lost its parents in an unspecified tragedy. This terrible accident is never mentioned by name, but it’s there all right, lurking in the background (maybe for the same reason that we find it difficult to talk about death). The play begins in the family home where, clinging together for comfort, all share the same bed. We meet a Grandmother who is ‘losing it’. She is tired and forgetful and almost at the end of her tether. Her Grandson, Solomon, is a bright eleven year old obsessed with numbers and calculations. Their faithful old dog, Zipper, longs for the park and a fair portion of sausages. Mary is a teenager who seems to hate everything. She is going through a difficult patch. Baby is, well, a baby. She is just beginning life’s journey and finds everything fascinating. She will try anything, once. This family is made up of characters who are familiar to us. They remind us of people we know.

Shortly after waking, Gran proposes that they all go on a family outing. Maybe she reckons that a picnic will take their minds off recent events and help the family to bond again. They agree to go to a favourite spot - the old ruined, spooky graveyard. Once in the countryside, they encounter one obstacle after another: getting through a gate proves to be tricky, wasps fancy their sticky bun, baby keeps wandering off, some irritating park rangers inform them that they can only eat in a ‘designated picnic area’. Eventually, at the end of a long and trying day, the family arrive at their destination. And so too does Gran. She goes into the graveyard but decides that, after a rich, long life, enough is enough. She decides to stay there. Without Gran, the family run home and dive into bed. Now, according to Shakespeare, some have greatness thrust upon them. And it is the least likely member of the family, Mary, who, in her own sweet way, takes charge until the cavalry arrives.

But who are the other four characters? They look like geishas and have surely arrived in the wrong place, the wrong time and the wrong play. We meet them at the beginning, although they do not speak. They have a faintly mysterious quality. While the family is asleep they sing a song about ‘the elastic creeping sleeping perpetual darkness of night’ where we sometimes can feel wobbled and frightened. They reassure us that things often seem worse than they really are, especially at night. But who are they? The family doesn’t see them, although we can see them clearly enough. Sometimes they get in the way (like the irksome gate). Sometimes they are more than helpful (like when packing a picnic hamper). I will not even attempt to explain who they are. It would be presumptuous of me and, frankly, your guess is as good as mine. I would love to know who your classes think they are and what they represent. To cite Wilde again, “I have never learnt anything except from people younger than myself.”

One last note about the show. Theatre is all about the imagination. In bringing young classes to the theatre, it might be worth encouraging them to think about how one thing can stand for another. For example, when a child plays she will happily employ a stick to represent a steering wheel, a sword or a spaceship. Here, our actors use household objects. For example, an umbrella stands for a bird and a set of bicycle handles represents a bull’s horns. Why not? All we are doing is what children like to do, play. That is, fundamentally, what theatre is: one big game of pretence that allows us to look at ourselves from a distance.

Tony Graham, Director
Dear Teacher:

We have been working for many weeks to prepare this resource guide for you and we hope that you find it useful when helping your students learn from our production of *Yikes!* either before or after seeing the show.

The main concept behind this guide is a series of activities which have been prepared in order to allow students to connect to the plot and themes of the play. A number of theatrical terms and conventions have been synthesized from a variety of sources and are intended to provide basic and interesting information for the students—some of which they will already be aware of from their drama classes and/or life experiences. These documents are intended to serve as cursory overviews and if you feel it appropriate, we encourage students to do follow-up activities on related topics in order to further their growth and understanding about theatrical conventions.

At its heart, *Yikes!* is a play about a family who, through a variety of adventures and misadventures, connect while overcoming obstacles, a theme which many of your students can probably identify with, either from their own experiences or those which they have encountered in school, with friends, or in literature, film, and television. Ideally, their experience at *Yikes!* will expand their understanding of how theatre can convey this theme and may encourage them to experiment with a physical approach to storytelling. The activities presented here will help you to facilitate this experimentation should you feel it appropriate for your students.

Each individual activity concludes with a series of reflective discussion questions which will help the students to process their experiences as well as allow them to demonstrate achievement towards the New York State Learning Standards for the Arts.

Please pay particular attention to the Theatre Etiquette piece on page 7 and review this information with your students before attending the performance.

We are curious to have feedback on the utility of this document and we will contact you after the performance to evaluate your use of the guide.

Thank you for bringing your students to our production and we hope that you will consider coming again in the future.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Jones
Program Administrator
NYU Steinhardt
Program in Educational Theatre
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New York State Learning Standards for the Arts

Excerpted from:
Learning Standards for the Arts
New York State Education Department, April 1996

Available online: www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/arts.html

STANDARD 1: Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts
Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts.

STANDARD 2: Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.

STANDARD 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art
Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.

STANDARD 4: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts
Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

Theatre
Key Ideas

1: Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts
Students will create and perform theatre pieces as well as improvisational drama. They will understand and use the basic elements of theatre in their characterizations, improvisations, and play writing. Students will engage in individual and group theatrical and theatre-related tasks, and will describe the various roles and means of creating, performing, and producing theatre.

2: Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
Students will know the basic tools, media, and techniques involved in theatrical production. Students will locate and use school, community, and professional resources for theatre experiences. Students will understand the job opportunities available in all aspects of theatre.

3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art
Students will reflect on, interpret, and evaluate plays and theatrical performances, both live and recorded, using the language of dramatic criticism. Students will analyze the meaning and role of theatre in society. Students will identify ways in which drama/theatre connects to film.

4: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts
Students will gain knowledge about past and present cultures as expressed through theatre. They will interpret how theatre reflects the beliefs, issues, and events of societies past and present.
Summary

“Yikes!” is a dynamic play with music featuring Solomon, a mathematical prodigy, Mary, a spunky teenager, their forgetful Grandma, Zipper, their dog, and a baby called Baby who are preparing to go on a picnic. Grandma suggests they have a nice day out during which they encounter a series of unfortunate events requiring tenacity and a good sense of humor to help them succeed in their journey.

Like a wild theatrical version of the nursery school favorite We’re Going on a Bear Hunt (by Helen Oxenbury and Michael Rosen), the family face oversized hornets, angry bulls and interfering bureaucrats on a journey in which the baby keeps disappearing and the family always imagine that the worst has befallen the child (though he’s always safe and sound).

Directed by Tony Graham, former artistic director and chief executive of the Unicorn Theatre in London, UK, this show is a clever mix of the silly and the serious. Intended for ages 6 – 10, “Yikes!” is about the simple pleasures of scaring yourself silly (but not really) and confronting your fears. This is that rare children’s show that doesn’t shirk the scary things in life, but approaches them with verve, humor and invention.

Adapted from Lyn Gardner’s review of the original London production at the Unicorn Theatre from The Guardian, April 17, 2006

Theatre Etiquette

It is essential that students understand that the experience of going to the theatre requires a certain kind of interaction between audience members and the cast of a show. In order to present a successful show, we ask that all audience members:

1) Be respectful to the performers by not talking to others during the show.
2) Stay seated during the performance.
3) Turn off all cell phones.
4) Refrain from eating and drinking in the theatre.
5) Remember that photography and video are not allowed in the theatre.
6) Feel free to laugh, cry, and applaud when appropriate.
7) Enjoy the show!
The following pages are meant to provide some background information regarding some of the theatrical conventions that informed the creation of Yikes! While it is not essential for students to be aware of this information for them to understand or enjoy the performance, your knowledge of these conventions may be useful in helping them to learn more about theatrical conventions while viewing or discussing the play.

Kabuki

Kabuki was created in 1603, by Okuni, a “miko”, young woman at the service of the Izumo Taisha Shrine, the oldest and second most important temple of Japan.

At that very beginning, only women were on stage, playing both the male and female roles.

This way of doing theatre was quite innovative, or at least considered to be “out of the ordinary way,” which is what the word “Kabuki” means.

“Yikes!” is not meant to a Kabuki performance, though the spirit of theatre being presented “out of the ordinary way” is maintained through the inclusion of the Waki kata as well as inventive use of physical theatre.

Waki kata

In Japanese Noh Theatre, there are three types of actors and four types of instrumentalists. A production does not require any producers, directors, or designers, as the main outlines of the performance and production are set by tradition and training.

Actors who play the “side” role (waki) and his companions (wakizure) are known as waki kata. They often represent priests or ministers, dress in black and never wear masks, unlike the other actors.

“Yikes!” features four actors appearing as waki kata. They will act as guardians, guides, magical and practical helpers, and shape-shifters who will lead the family on their journey though the family cannot see them.
Theatre Conventions

Expressionism: Movement that began about 1910 and that has applications in painting, music and literature as well as drama. The term was first used in 1901 by Auguste Herve about works he’d painted in reaction against impressionism. The heyday of expressionist theatre in America was in the 1920’s and 30’s and was often a theatre of political and social protest.

Fourth Wall: The imaginary fourth wall that is removed from box set to enable the audience to see the action on stage. The term now applies to the “wall” separating audience and performers on any type of stage or even film and television. Thus, the term “breaking the fourth wall” refers to an actor speaking directly to the audience.

Heightened Reality: Situations in which characters behave in an exaggerated way due to exaggerated circumstances.

Mime: Originally, mimes were actors in ancient Rome who performed in a popular, spoken form or farcical drama. The emphasis was on character-development rather than plot. In its modern sense, the term has nothing to do with the Roman definition, and is more akin to the Roman pantominus, where performances are silent and thus entirely dependent on gesture and movement.

Musical Theatre: Play in which the story is told through a combination of spoken dialogue and musical numbers. Originally, the plot was slight and the musical numbers had little connection to, and did little to advance the plot. Development of the musical was particularly advanced by innovative plays such as Porgy and Bess and Oklahoma!

Physical Theatre: A theatre form wherein storytelling is largely based on physical movement as a means to convey character, plot, and/or objects. At times, the fluid movements and shape-shifting nature of the performance style can mirror mime or modern dance.

Adapted from http://www.tctwebstage.com/glossary.htm

Expressionism

Mime

Musical Theatre
Pre-Show Activity: A Family Meal

A fundamental connection between the main characters in *Yikes!* is that they are a family. As such, it is helpful for the students to think about their own families and the ways in which they relate to each other.

In this activity, the students will first take time to think about their own families, and (more specifically) a meal where the whole family is together. Questions should include:

- Who is there?
- Who speaks?
- What foods are served?
- How are the foods prepared?
- Who prepares the food?

After the students have had a few minutes to brainstorm, ask for volunteers to share some of their responses. When a variety of ideas have been shared, explain that the class will be broken up into teams (there should be 5-8 members in a team), and each team will be responsible for creating a short play of a family meal.

Guidelines

1. Everyone has to have a role.
2. Everyone has to say something at some point.
3. The food must be specific and it must be prepared or some indication of where it came from/who made it must be discussed.
4. We need to see how the family gets to the table and where everyone sits.
5. The “play” should last no more than three minutes.

Some of the presentations will likely relate to some religious or secular holiday (like birthdays or Thanksgiving) but any time where a family congregates is okay.

Discussion Questions:

- Why did you choose the roles you played?
- Why did you choose the food you ate?
- Did the play remind you of meals you’ve had in your own life? Why or why not?
Pre-Show Activity: We’re Going Camping!

One of the key facets of the dialogic style in *Yikes!* is that of repetition. This structured improvisational activity should help the students understand how such a text might be created and how it would feel to perform it.

1. Ask the students to imagine that the class is going to go on a camping trip. What items would they need to bring with them? Students should be given a few minutes to brainstorm and then share their ideas. You should generate a list of items.

2. Divide the class into groups of four students. Each group will select one item from the class list. They will create both a picture and a physical movement for their chosen object. The picture should be a literal depiction of the object, whereas the physical movement can be literal or metaphorical. You may need to provide a model of the physical movement so the students understand what they are being asked to do.

3. Once all groups have completed their image and created their movement, ask all students to rehearse their movements at once. This allows you to see what each group has created and work with groups who may need additional guidance or support.

4. When everyone is ready, display the images at the front of the room in number order. Have the students stand in rows if room permits, but anywhere in the space will do. Explain that the students will march together on their way to the camping trip (again, this may require some rehearsal).

5. Once everyone understands how to march together, continue the march and ask the students to repeat after you:

   Teacher: We’re going camping!
   Students: We’re going camping!

   Teacher: We’re bringing (item one)
   Students: We’re bringing (item one)

   At this point, the group who created the item that was just mentioned will share their movement. Thereafter, the call and response pattern will continue until each item has been incorporated into the pattern. You can either do each 4 line pattern in isolation or you can create a sustained pattern wherein you add an item and then go back and reiterate those that came before:

   item 1
   item 1 + item 2
   item 1 + item 2 + item 3
   etc.

Discussion Questions
- What did you like about this activity?
- What did you think about repeating the same lines?
- Do you think we brought the right items for our camping trip? Why or why not?
Pre-Show Activity: Overcoming the Frights

In Yikes!, the family has an adventure while on their way to have a picnic, encountering a number of things that might frighten the baby. Let’s stay with our idea of going camping and explore how the students might help protect the baby from things that would frighten her.

1. Choose a Location: In today’s drama, we’re going to go on a camping trip. Where might we go? First allow students time to think then ask them to share. Write their suggestions on the board and then choose one to work with.

2. Character Walks: Ask the students to walk around the space. First, they should walk as they normally do. Ask them to remain quiet and to try to avoid colliding with classmates. When they are comfortable, ask them to think about how the characters in the story might walk (grandma, brother, sister, baby, and the dog). They should then have an opportunity to walk like these characters. In between each character, they should return to their own normal walk. This allows them to think about how these characters move and experience it juxtaposed with they way the students normally move.

3. Creating Images: Ask the students to brainstorm about some things in our destination or that we might encounter along the way that the baby might be afraid of. The students should work in groups of four and each group should generate one ‘fright.’ They will create a poster for the ‘fright’ which must include a name and an illustration. These must remain secret!

4. Frozen Pictures: Each member of these groups will become one of the four characters (grandma, sister, brother, or the dog). One at a time, the teacher will reveal the ‘frights.’ Each time a fright is revealed, each group will work together to create a frozen picture demonstrating how their characters will work together to defeat that fright. The students should be given a few minutes to rehearse and then they will show their images. If the students are familiar with creating this type of work, when they show their work, you might go in and tap individuals on the shoulder at which point they will say their characters’ thoughts aloud.

Discussion Questions:
- What did you like about playing the different characters?
- Why did your group choose the fright you created?
- What did it feel like to defeat the different frights?
Post-Show Activity: Letters to Grandma

When watching this or any play, there is certain to be some disagreement among audience members about the events of the play and the reasons certain characters behaved the way they did. The purpose of this activity is to try to illuminate the spectrum of understanding that exists within the class.

At the end of *Yikes!* Grandma has decided to stay in the graveyard. Some may assume this means she has died, but that is not necessarily the case. Regardless, the students should have an opportunity to explore what the characters might say to Grandma if they had the opportunity to talk to her again. As Grandma is not present, the students will each write a letter to Grandma. Which role will they take on? Will they be Solomon or Mary? Will they be a grown-up version of Baby? What would they like to say to Grandma?

Once the students have written their letters, you might ask them to get into small groups and read their letters to each other. What do they think happened to Grandma? What do they reveal about the character through the letters? What can the class as a whole learn from this experience?

Post-Show Activity: Alternate Ending

As with any good dramatic text, *Yikes!* does not have a predictable outcome. Given the multitude of unfortunate events that the characters encounter while en route to their picnic, the students should reflect on their understanding of the play and contemplate alternative outcomes that were possible in the play.

Option A: Narrative Writing

Each student is asked to think about a possible alternative ending to the play, and is given some time to write a narrative of their new ending.

Option B: Improvisational Acting

The class is broken into groups and each group is responsible for improvising (that is, making up a scene without a script) that resolves the play in a new and interesting way.

In either option, it’s best that the other students have an opportunity to comment on the new endings. Do they seem reasonable? Why or why not?


Post-Show Activity: Posters

Earlier in this resource guide, a variety of information was presented regarding the theatrical conventions that informed this production. For older students who have some experience in drama or who are interested in theatrical form, this activity might allow them to further explore this type of work.

Posters

Have the students research a particular subject that they are interested in (from the list of conventions on pages 8 and 9 or other ideas inspired by their viewing of the play). Using their research, the students should create a poster using poster board or chart paper, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, internet sources, markers, tape, glue, etc. The posters should include detailed information and images about their selected topic. When complete, they should be shared with the rest of the class. The students should be encouraged to explain how their work related to Yikes! and how their research experience deepened their understanding of the play.

Post-Show Activity: Discussion Questions

Various elements of the plot of Yikes! remain ambiguous for younger viewers, largely reflective of the ways in which our culture tends to handle this subject matter with young people. As such, the students may have a number of questions about the production (beyond those they addressed to the cast after seeing the show) and it may be worthwhile to allow them a space to talk about these lingering questions.

Some questions you might consider exploring are:

- What did you think happened to Grandma? Why did you think that?
- How was the family able to overcome the obstacles they faced while on their journey to the picnic?
- Why do you think they kept forgetting about the baby? What do you think that tells us about the characters?
- If you took the place of one of the characters in the play, would you behave the same way that he or she did or might you act differently? Why?
- What other plays, stories, movies, or television shows did this play remind you of? Why?
- What do you think we can learn from a play like Yikes??
References


