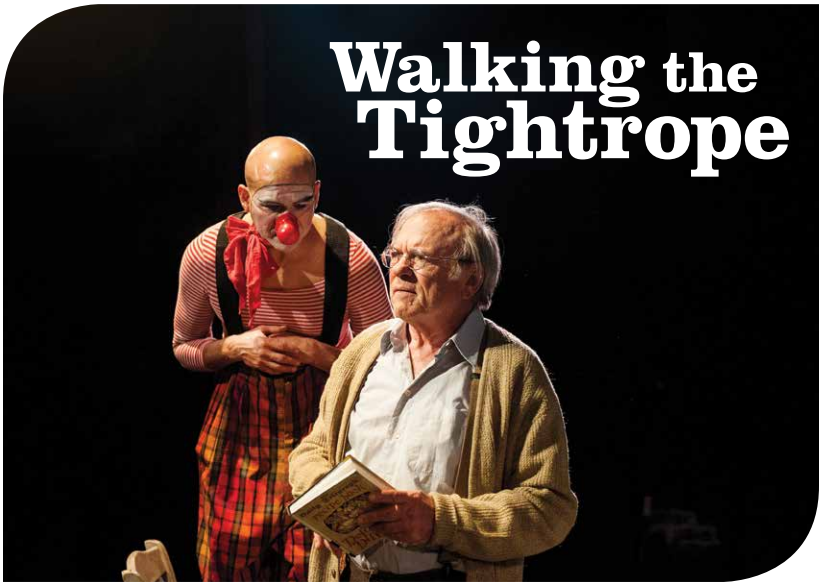
Window on the Work

McCallum Theatre Institute



McCallum Theatre Institute's Aesthetic Education Program
2016 | 2017

Performed by 24th Street Theatre

What is a **Window on the Work** — and why have one? Well, like windows in general, it provides a look in (or out!) at something. That something, in this case, is a work of art. The work of art in question will be studied in the classroom and then viewed — live. Classroom teachers, students, and teaching artists will be engaged, together, in determining what that study will ultimately look like. A document like the **Window on the Work** you hold in your hand at this moment will help you play your part in that process. It gives you not just one view but many views into the work of art. It supplies you with answers to the questions you raise. It inspires new questions, suggests new avenues of inquiry. It rounds out the picture. It sparks new ideas. See if the ideas below make sense to you.

WOW

In the planning phase, Windows on the Work can
help establish the most effective line of inquiry and richest unit of study
- answer questions about the work of art as they come up
- help you approach the work of art from various vantage points
- spark curricular connections

During the unit of study, Windows on the Work can
- help you expand the study in particular contextual areas
- become a reference for student use

After the unit of study, Windows on the Work can
- help keep the work of art alive in the classroom
- suggest pathways for further study
- help tie together strands of learning later in the year

Walking the Tightrope

TEXTS BY
KAREN RAE KRAUT,
EXCEPT WHERE
OTHERWISE CREDITED

Performed by 24th Street Theatre

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The Work

Synopsis

Walking the Tightrope by Mike Kenny is set in a British seaside town in 1959. A young child comes to spend her annual summer holiday with her grandparents only to discover that her Grandmother is not there. Grandad cannot bring himself to tell the child that "Nanna" has died. The play follows the journey of Grandfather and child as they struggle to come to terms with what has changed, what has stayed the same, and how they will re-shape their future together without this beloved figure. A third character, a silent clown visible only to the audience, supports their efforts. Director Debbie Devine calls *Walking the Tightrope*, "...a 57 minute tone poem that rocks your world."

Awards for *Walking the Tightrope*:

- LA Drama Critics Circle Awards: Best Production, Best Lead Performance, and Best Sound Design
- LA Weekly Awards: Debbie Devine, Best Director; John Zalewski, Best Sound Design; Matthew Hill, Best Video Design
- Ovation Award: Michael Redfield, Best Original Music
- Named one of KCRW's The Year's Best in Los Angeles Theatre
- Named one of Best in Los Angeles Theatre 2013 by *Stage and Cinema*

Playwright Mike Kenny had this to say about his approach to theatre for young audiences, "I want to create the shows I would have liked to take my own children to when they were younger, to do them with imagination, warmth and integrity...I want an audience to laugh, to feel happy, but this is not all I want. I want them to feel disturbed, moved, stretched. The theatre is a safe place, but it's not a place to hide from the world's harsh realities. It's a place to confront them. It's a place to experience danger. I want people to leave my plays feeling satisfied, not slightly sick from having overdone the sugar."

Production Choices

The audience is pulled further into the world of this funny and poignant story through the ingenious combination of a minimalist set, video projections, lighting, and music. The original music created by Mike Redfield is employed cinematically, underscoring powerful moments and adding nuanced layers to the mood of the overall piece. Anthony Byrnes, KCRW Radio host of *Opening the Curtain on LA Theatre*, calls Redfield's piano score, "a fanciful...mix of Nina Rota and Phillip Glass filtered through a traveling carnival."

Both actors and audience are forced to fill in missing scenic elements imaginatively, as when the actors deftly pantomime the opening of doors accompanied by sound effects. Audience members must then do their work, filling in the likeness of each imaginary object touched by the actors. Video images of sea, land, objects and people who figure in the narrative pull the viewer into the larger physical and symbolic landscape of the play. Lighting effects pull our eyes to the rooms and outdoor areas in play, but also add meaning and atmosphere as colors change from white to blue and pink, affecting our perceptions in subtle, subliminal ways.

The Artists

Mike Kenny, Playwright

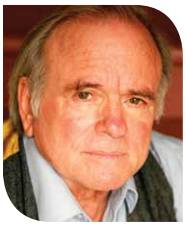
Mike Kenny is one of England's leading writers, specializing in young people's theatre. He is the recipient of numerous awards, was included in the *Independent* on Sunday's list of Top Ten Living UK Playwrights, and his plays are performed regularly throughout the UK and all over the world. In 2013 he was given an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by Nottingham University, England.

Debbie Devine, Director

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 Department of The Colburn School of Performing Arts for over 20 years. She is also a theatrical director with the Los Angeles 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.

Michael Redfield, Musician/Composer

Michael Redfield is an actor, composer, and director living in Los Angeles. He performs with 24th Street Theatre in both the Enter Stage Right program and the Lab24 ensemble developing original works for young audiences. For *Walking the Tightrope* he won the Ovation Award for Best Composition. Recently he starred in and scored the feature film *Chasing Home* which premiered at festivals in Tucson and New York City. In 2011, he created the role of Packie in *Small Engine Repair*, which became the first production to sweep every major LA theatre award and went on to enjoy an off-Broadway run at MCC Theatre. TV credits include *Hanna Montana, Bewitched* and *Days of Our Lives*. In addition to *Walking the Tightrope* his theatre scores include productions of *Death of a Salesman, Fata Morgana* and *Time of Your Life*. Film scores include the award-winning short, *Spirits, Captivated* and *Hero by Proxy* which he also directed.

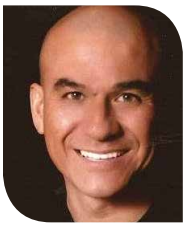


Shelly Kurtz,* Grandad Stan

A graduate of Yeshiva University, Shelly has been acting for over forty-five years. After a year at Syracuse University as a graduate student in theater where he had the good fortune to be cast in plays starring such luminaries as Hans Conreid, Dody Goodman and Shirley Booth, Shelly returned to New York City and for the next ten years became a regular on the Off Off-Broadway scene, as well as in commercials, soap operas and films. He left for California to pursue film and television work and has remained there. Over the last forty-five years Shelly has been in almost 200 plays. Most recently he toured around the United States in *Walking the Tightrope* for 24th Street Theatre. He has worked with numerous companies in Los Angeles, such as the Rogue Machine, Group Repertory Theater, West Coast Jewish Theater and Sacred Fools. Favorite productions include *Immortal Story* with the Orpheum Theater, *New Jerusalem* with West Coast Jewish Theater, *The Diary of Anne Frank* with Wasatch Theatrical Ventures, *Molly Sweeney* at the Celtic Arts Center and *Amy's View* opposite Carol Lawrence and Susan Egan at The International City Theater. Favorite film roles include Feliksas in the feature *Miriam*, a con artist opposite F. Murray Abraham in *The Darkling*, Coach Sanderson in the award-winning feature *Jumping for Joy*, Monty in *The Lepidoctor* which won first prize in the emerging artist category at Cannes, the dying businessman in *The Last Day* (Winner Buffalo Film Festival) and the troubled grandfather in *Dating Daisy*. His most recent films are *The Impossible Joy, California Dreaming* and *My Claire*. Television credits include a recurring role as Det. Pete Reynolds on *Knot's Landing* as well as starring and co-starring roles on *Dallas, The New Lassie, Hill Street Blues, Hunter, New Unsolved Mysteries, Resurrection Boulevard* and *American Family*. He is also a writer of short plays, screenplays and three sitcoms including *Mummy and the Ghost, The Brownstoners* and *Americanos*.

Jane Noseworthy,* Esme

Jane Noseworthy has performed at theaters across the country including Reprise, The Geffen Playhouse, A Noise Within, Theatre at Boston Court, Milwaukee Repertory, Pacific Resident Theatre, Theatreworks and the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Previous credits include the world premiere of *Lend Me a Tenor, the Musical* (Maggie), *Carousel* (Carrie), for which she received an Ovation nomination, *Merchant of Venice* (Portia), *As You Like It* (Rosalind) and *A Christmas Carol* with Christopher Lloyd and John Goodman (Ghost of Christmas Past). Originally from Omaha, Jane now makes her home in Los Angeles. She earned her degree in theatre and music from Cornell College and is a proud member of SAG-AFTRA and Actors Equity.



Tony Duran, Clown

Tony Duran is a Mexican artist living in Los Angeles. He appeared in 24th Street Theatre's 11-month run of *La Razon Blindada* (2011 LA Weekly Production of the Year) as well as in the revival at the Rubicon Theatre in Ventura. Theater credits include *Tsunami* and *The Traveling Towers* at Meet Me at Metro, *The Angels of McArthur Park* and *Guaria del Desamor* directed by Jorge Folgueira. Tony performed and co-created Olin and the solo work *El Hombre de las Suelas de Viento*, which was presented at the 2005 FITLA International Latino Theatre Festival of Los Angeles, and in *Fabula de un Pais de Cera* with Mexican theater troupe Mexicali a Secas at FITLA 2006. In 2007 he led an international workshop with actors and dancers from various Latin American countries through the project Teatro Amigo at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. He attended the XXXI workshop at the International School of Theatre of Latin America and the Caribbean (EITALC). Tony teaches courses on corporal expression, dance, theater and scenic movement.

**Member of Actors' Equity Association, The Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States*

An interview with director Debbie Devine

MTI Teaching artist Karen Rae Kraut and Director Debbie Devine shared this exchange on her work with *Walking the Tightrope*:

Karen: What first attracted you to this project?

Debbie: I loved being able to have the freedom of augmenting this spare story. Obviously plays have the will of the playwright in the stage directions. That Mike Kenny gave us such beautiful language but no such instructions was one of the pleasures for me of directing and in some small way 'co-creating' this production.

Karen: We were so impressed with the non-stereotypical characterization of Esme. How did you and the actor work together to arrive at that refreshing take on the little girl?

Debbie: Paige White, the original actress and I worked hard to create the essence of youth and to avoid the 'playing of a child'. The story is a deceptively simple two-hander which on its surface seems to be about a little girl who has to face the loss of her grandmother. It was clear to me that the power in the story was looking at it, not from the point of view of Esme, but rather the grandfather; his loss. Grandpa Stan's heartache guided us by giving Esme the resilience to reach out and help him find the strength to face it. She 'grew up' because of his need. That took Esme's character out of the stereotype.

Karen: Tell us about your process getting from that elegant, spare text to your filled out production with music, video, and a silent clown.

Debbie: It really is the magic and wonder of creativity. And the benefits of a wonderful team who can speak 'short hand' to one another. And of course reading the story closely and asking questions as all artists must do with any quality text. What drives these characters? Where do they live? What has happened in their lives before our story reveals them? What do they want? Who are the other characters (people) in their lives who are not in the script but in the story? It was important to have it grounded in reality. Because the entire team understood we were telling a poignant story of truth about loss and love and not doing 'traditional children's theatre' we were able to create a world in which everything complimented each other.

Karen: How do you keep children in mind when developing a new production?

Debbie: I don't. It's why so much of what we do at 24th Street Theatre, whether Arts Ed or TYA,* is described by parents and teachers as 'sophisticated'. The art is focused on the joys and struggles of what make us all human; child or adult.

Karen: What questions do you ask yourself when you start work on a new project? What questions do you ask the actors?

Debbie: I ask can I tell this story with integrity? Is this something I can create that will appeal on multiple levels for children and adults? Is the story compelling, resonant and relevant? I ask the actors if they will trust me on this journey. I ask if they are willing to stretch and fail. And then I ask is there a difference between adult theatre and theatre for young audiences? I negotiate this last question until the answer is no. Because sadly 95% of actors believe 'children's theatre' needs to be performed with a different set of muscles than if they are performing for adults. Quality appropriate content that can reach both children and adults is a given, but the approach to the work and the honesty of that approach should be the same for all audiences.

*TYA: theatre for young audiences

Karen: We talked about the meaning of the clown. A lot. It was such a rich metaphor that it meant something different to each one of us. What led to the addition of this wordless character?

Debbie: That opportunity to make metaphor. And with the emphasis on the heart break of the grandfather I felt the production needed to be offset with the knowledge and hope that the clown represented. All good art creates room for interpretation. But we saw him as the spirit and love of the grandmother. It was important that the clown have an objective and that was to help the grandfather and Esme connect. The clown introduced all the props of the story as if they were 'talismans' that helped bring Esme and Grandpa Stan together.

Karen: How did you work with the composer?

Debbie: I told Michael Redfield, the composer, I wanted a theme that could work for all the arc of the play. That we would then use it as variations on a theme. It is beautiful music that reflects heartache and joy. I especially love how we used music to score the circus sequence and not sound effects... That little riff is fun, isn't it? It occurred to me that students might want to create what they 'see' in pantomime accompanied by the music.

Karen: What brings you joy in working with this piece?

Debbie: Problem solving. It's what attracts me to directing. (It's what also makes me excited about the philosophy behind the Common Core Educational initiative...problem solving.) The emphasis on restraint. And the challenge of that. How little can we create physically in the room that allows for theatre to take place? How suggestive can we be? There were only 9 props in the play so they take on a powerful significance. Pantomime was an important component accompanied by sound effects to give it emphasis. But not everything that was mimed was underscored by sound, which is an example of restraint. Theatre is an agreement between the actors and the audience that we will all use our imaginations to experience this story. We were making theatre. The characters both narrate and dramatize the story. One of my favorite problems to solve was how to blend the narration and the dramatization so that they were narrating as if it was dialogue spoken to one another. I worked very hard to make sure that the language wasn't spoken as if it was a prose poem. We deconstructed that, in order to make it sound as much like dialogue as possible.

Karen: Can you share more about how and why you selected the projected images?

Debbie: Again restraint and theatre as the discipline of imagination is what guided us. Matt Hill, the video designer, suggested we just have wall paper represent the living room, a window for the bedroom and a tree for the back yard. The beautiful images of the quiet and then the roiling beach helped set the scene and our imaginations filled in the rest.

Karen: What are your creative influences? What people, books, shows have moved and changed you?

Debbie: 35 years making theatre for young people. 35 years teaching drama to young people. 35 years performing for young people. So I think I would have to say...young people.

Karen: Anything you'd like to share about how you work with actors?

Debbie: It's different with every cast, but the director is the leader, the guide, at the helm. Its important that the director have a clear vision so when actors and designers introduce ideas and challenges, the vision will help determine the course.

But truly the most powerful part of creativity is the intuition and intangible spark that happens from the spirit, not from the brain, and suddenly an idea is born. And that feeling of originality is profoundly life-affirming. It's my message to all my students. 'You are unique and artistic self expression proves it!'

Karen: How did you deconstruct the language to ensure that the actors didn't speak it as a poem but as dialogue?

Debbie: I was explicit about it being a conversation. Listening to and avoiding rhythms for example. And breaking it up physically on the page. Also all the movement if the actors is choreographed so the concentration on that distracted them from the text.

Thank you. These were good thoughtful questions, and it was interesting to be able to ponder them.

Karen: Thank you very much, Debbie!

Mike Kenny in conversation with Kate Hainsworth

From an interview with playwright Mike Kenny 9/27/13 from the website www.playstosee.com

KH: Do you think of your work as 'young people's theatre?'

MK: Not really. Young people don't ever make the decision to come and they never come alone so it's never just down to them. I've been a teacher and I've got three kids so I've always been pretty closely attuned to kids' reactions, but 'for young people' is more of a marketing shorthand to speak to parents.

In terms of the conversation between stage and audience, there's never a better time to talk about life's big things than with those who really need to know about it because they're close to its beginning. Our culture now is very protective, Disneyfying life for children (and grownups!) which makes it really hard to engage on serious stuff. Of course, the traditional fairy tales are pretty serious: *Cinderella* explores abuse, abandonment, neglect, loss of identity and survival. These are big things, which come to the fore in folklore because it's the business of living. We need to sort it out at any age.

If there is a distinction in work for kids or for adults, it's where you place your focus. Catastrophes happen. Adults want to know why stuff happens. Kids want to know how it works out. *Othello* takes you into the nightmare of jealousy and why it happens, an adult's perspective. *Winter's Tale* takes you out of the jealous destruction and shows how things end up, more of a younger person's perspective.

I suppose it's true that a lot of my work is centered on the journey out not the journey into the black hole. For me that works whatever your age. We are all survivors watching drama, we want to see how things end up.

More thoughts on writing from Mike Kenny

From: www.theatreleeds.com/d/?q=drama/14-nov-2013-1010am/q-playwright-mike-kenny-about-boy-who-cried-wolf

How does [your work] stand out in a crowded children's show market?

I maybe don't get out enough. It's hard to see everything, and I work so much I just keep my head down, doing my thing. It is a long time since I saw anything that blew me away. My impression, from what I do get to see, is that generally production values are quite high, but most of the work is almost instantly forgettable. For my taste, not enough is at stake. There is not enough jeopardy. We are all, rightly trying to keep our children safe, but art is for dealing with our deepest fears. When I was a child I have memories of seeing *Snow White, Pinocchio*, and *The Wizard of Oz* in the cinema. I laughed, I gasped, I cried and I never ever forgot them. Much of what I have seen lately seems like nicely done fluff.

I think my work stands out because it takes you on a journey, makes you think, makes you laugh, and excites you. It will give parents something to engage with as well as the children who come. I hope they remember it.

How did you start your career?

After training as an English and drama teacher I came to Leeds to become an actor/teacher in the Theatre in Education Company at the old Leeds Playhouse. We were employed full time to create plays and drama programmes that would play to Leeds school children. I stayed for nearly 10 years acting, teaching, writing and when I left I freelanced as an actor for a couple of years. Work for children was always most interesting to me and slowly and surely I began to devise and write plays for children and young people. Since then I have written around 100 plays.

Who were and are your inspirations when it comes to writing?

My inspirations. When I began working in Leeds Theatre in Education in the late 70s, the field was full of the most creative people. I suppose it felt as though we were inventing and creating a form as we worked. In those early days, I found teachers like Dorothy Heathcote, and thinkers like Bruno Bettelheim as inspiring as the big theatre names like Brook, Becket and Brecht. To be honest, until that time, very few people took theatre for children seriously. One wonders even now how rooted it is. It seems that theatre often falls into the category of treat, or optional extra, but if I said the same of books there would be an outcry. Yet, theatre came thousands of years before literature. These days, the people I work with inspire me.

But I think the people who have had the most profound effect on my work have been the audiences. The first play I wrote for very young audiences (*The Lost Child* — which incidentally Wendy worked on too) had a huge impact on how I wrote. It led to me doing *Stepping Stones*, which was my first play for a learning disabled audience. That changed my writing irrevocably.

What is the most important piece of advice you could give someone who is thinking of starting to write plays?

I think you have to be fascinated by people, what they say and do to each other, and telling stories. You also have to be able to do very opposing things. When I'm writing I spend a lot of time on my own. I'm quite happy in my own company. However, the process of getting a play on is about talking and listening, to director, actors, designer, audience, publicity people, etc. You have to be equally happy

engaging quite actively with people. At the heart of theatre is dialogue. I was an only child in an enormous, talkative, extended family, lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. My early memories are all about being under the table, listening. I think that's probably the ideal combination of factors.

So what I'm saying is, if you like describing landscapes and people, don't bother. If you like always getting your own way and can't stand change, don't even begin. Engage in dialogue.

Why do you mainly write for children and not adults?

I truly don't know the answer to why children. To be honest I get this question asked quite often and I don't really understand what motivates it. And I'm not sure what answer is expected. When I worked in an office in the city, which was frankly the most soul rotting thing I ever did, nobody ever asked me why. I wonder if anyone asks the question of JK Rowling or Walt Disney. Why work for children? The money? If the implication is that there's something lesser about work for children then I would refute it. I actually think it is a vocation. It is my passion and I would discourage anyone to whom it doesn't come naturally. J. M. Barrie wrote some fantastic plays but only *Peter Pan* is a masterpiece. I think he had a vocation. The same is true of C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl.

What do you think are the biggest challenges of writing for children?

My experience of children is that they are completely unimpressed by who you are and what you have done. If they are bored, they are bored, and they don't think it's their fault if they can't understand (as many adults often seem to); they think it's your fault for wasting their precious time. Keeping their attention is not easy. I just love the challenge. I often think that engaging in explaining the big issues of life, death and living to a young audience is incredibly useful. Most of my plays are as much a journey of discovery for me as they are for the audience.

How important is theatre for young children?

Arts for Children across the board, not just theatre, is a human right. The thing which makes us human is our imagination, our ability to conceive alternatives, to come together to sing, dance and hear stories. It doesn't make us better humans; it make us more human. Our imagination got us into the chaotic state we're in, but it stands the best chance of digging us out. Empathy is what theatre develops, and it does it in a social context.

Who do you feel are the more difficult audiences to please — children or adults?

Easy to please is an odd concept. I often think adult audiences are far too easily pleased. And I think they often go to theatre to have their preconceptions stroked. The difficulty of getting new plays staged speaks to that. We are not in risk-taking times. Honestly, isn't there a load of rubbish out there? Why on earth do people want to see productions of things they've seen loads of times before? A living art is being turned into a museum. My experience is that children are much more prepared to take on different material. And are more adventurous in their tastes. I don't really want to speak for the whole sector. I'll stand up for what I do. I try to do things. I try to please audiences, but I like to surprise them a bit too. My belief is that the theatre is a safe space for us to think about dangerous things.

Craft

Prose 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, as in this prose poem, which is repeated several times in the play:

> 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 it just leaves
> Wood and stones and shells.
>
> And you and me.
> And a shell to hear the sea

Note that repetition is used to create an enhanced poetic effect, and that the language is centered on the page, which also gives it the feel of poetry. This format is different from more standard examples of prose poetry which are laid out like prose on the page but read like poetry. Kenny's lines are laid out like poetry on the page but spoken as prose by the actors.

A more standard definition and examples of prose poetry can be found on the Academy of American Poets website www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-prose-poem.

Though the name of the form may appear to be a contradiction, the prose poem essentially appears as prose, but reads like poetry. In the first issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, editor Peter Johnson explained, "Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels."

While it lacks the line breaks associated with poetry, the prose poem maintains a poetic quality, often utilizing techniques common to poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, and rhyme. The prose poem can range in length from a few lines to several pages long, and it may explore a limitless array of styles and subjects.

Though examples of prose passages in poetic texts can be found in early Bible translations and the Lyrical Ballads of William Wordsworth, the form is most often traced to Nineteenth-Century French Symbolist writers. The advent of the form in the work of Aloysius Bertrand and Charles Baudelaire marked a significant departure from the strict separation between the genres of prose and poetry at the time.

Narration

Most plays are written and performed as if the audience is spying in on people's lives through an invisible fourth wall. Sometimes, as in *Walking the Tightrope*, the characters know we exist and talk to us directly through it. Both Grandad Stan and Esme use narration in the play. They speak directly to the audience and 'break the fourth wall'. An example of this is when Grandad Stan says "Train's comin'. I'll tell you later."

Pantomime

Director Debbie Devine defines pantomime as, "using the body and face to convey a story and create an imaginary world."

One of the main theatrical techniques used in the production is pantomime — there are no teacups, spoons, or blankets onstage, these are all pantomimed by the actors.

When pantomiming objects in the play the actors must keep in mind the points outlined below.

First, keep each and every motion precise — (meaning your item is invisible and you will have to use your body to shape it as if it was there).

Understand the five qualities of objects and how to incorporate them into your performance:

1. Weight — To show the weight of an object, use your muscles and movement to show straining or flexing.
2. Size — Be reasonable with the size of the object you are pantomiming.
3. Shape — The shape of objects is also a very important factor.
4. Consistency — Make sure nothing changes throughout the performance. Keep objects the same size and shape and put things back in the same place.
5. Resistance — Make movements sharp and crisp.

Roots

Great Britain in the1950's

Click on this link to read some fascinating particulars of that era in the UK:
www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/war/1950s.html

Young children and death

"...in my plays for very young children I'm always returning to death and old age."

- from an interview with Mike Kenny by Joanne Hartley | 1 Dec 2010 www.whatsonstage.com

In *Walking the Tightrope* Grandad Stan has a difficult time telling Esme that her grandmother has died. His discomfort is not unique.

Thoughts on speaking to children about death from Hospice Website
www.hospicenet.org/html/talking.html

Overcoming the taboos

Death is a taboo subject, and even those who hold strong beliefs may avoid talking about it. Once death was an integral part of family life. People died at home, surrounded by loved ones. Adults and children experienced death together, mourned together, and comforted each other.

Today death is lonelier. Most people die in hospitals and nursing homes where they receive the extensive nursing and medical care they need. Their loved ones have less opportunity to be with them and often miss sharing their last moments of life. The living have become isolated from the dying; consequently, death has taken on added mystery and, for some, added fear.

Many people are beginning to recognize that treating death as a taboo does a disservice to both the dying and the living, adding to loneliness, anxiety, and stress for all. Efforts are underway to increase knowledge and communication about death as a means of overcoming the taboo. Scientists are studying the dying to help the living better understand how dying individuals experience their approaching deaths.

The challenge of talking to a young child

Communicating with preschoolers or young school-age children about any subject can be challenging. They need brief and simple explanations. Long lectures or complicated responses to their questions will probably bore or confuse them and should be avoided. Using concrete and familiar examples may help. For instance, Dr. Earl A. Grollman suggests in his book, *Explaining Death to Children*, that death may be made more comprehensible by explaining it in terms of the absence of familiar life functions — when people die they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel any more; when dogs die they do not bark or run any more; dead flowers do not grow or bloom any more.

A child may ask questions immediately or may respond with thoughtful silence and come back at a later time to ask more questions. Each question deserves a simple and relevant answer. Checking to see if a child has understood what has been said is critical; youngsters sometimes confuse what they hear. Also, children learn through repetition, and they may need to hear the same question answered over and over again. As time passes and children have new experiences, they will need further clarification and sharing of ideas and feelings.

It may take time for a child to understand fully the ramifications of death and its emotional implications. A child who knows that Uncle Ed has died may still ask why Aunt Susan is crying. The child needs an answer. "Aunt Susan is crying because she is sad that Uncle Ed has died. She misses him very much. We all feel sad when someone we care about dies."

There are also times when we have difficulty "hearing" what children are asking us. A question that may seem shockingly insensitive to an adult may be a child's request for reassurance. For instance, a question such as, "When will you die?" needs to be heard with the realization that the young child perceives death as temporary. While the finality of death is not fully understood, a child may realize that death means separation, and separation from parents and the loss of care involved are frightening. Being cared for is a realistic and practical concern, and a child needs to be reassured. Possibly the best way to answer such a question is by asking a clarifying question in return: "Are you worried that I won't be here to take care of you?" If that is the case, the reassuring and appropriate answer would be something like, "I don't expect to die for a long time. I expect to be here to take care of you as long as you need me, but if Mummy and Daddy did die, there are lots of people to take care of you. There's Aunt Ellen and Uncle John or Grandma."

Other problems can arise from children's misconceptions about death. Dr. R. Fulton, in Grollman's *Explaining Death to Children*, points out that some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with one of the many euphemisms for sleep — "eternal rest", "rest in peace."

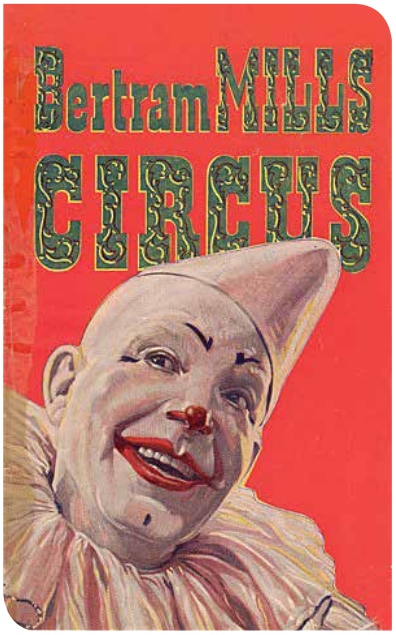
As a result of the confusion, a child may become afraid of going to bed or of taking naps. Grandma went "to sleep" and hasn't gotten up yet. Maybe I won't wake up either.

Similarly, if children are told that someone who died "went away", brief separations may begin to worry them. Grandpa "went away" and hasn't come back yet. Maybe Mummy won't come back from the shops or from work. Therefore, it is important to avoid such words as "sleep", "rest", or "went away" when talking to a child about death.

Telling children that sickness was the cause of a death can also create problems, if the truth is not tempered with reassurance. Preschoolers cannot differentiate between temporary and fatal illness, and minor ailments may begin to cause them unnecessary concern. When talking to a child about someone who has died as a result of an illness, it might be helpful to explain that only a very serious illness may cause death, and that although we all get sick sometimes, we usually get better again.

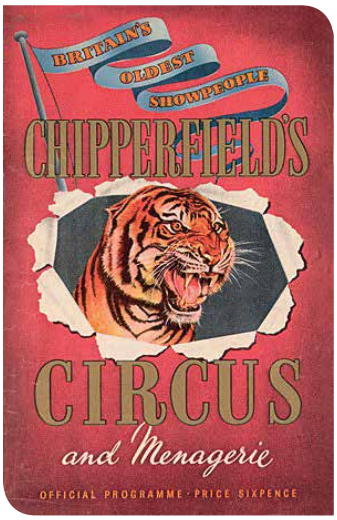
Another generalization we often make unthinkingly is relating death to old age. Statements such as, "Only old people die" or, "Aunt Hannah died because she was old" can lead to distrust when a child eventually learns that young people die, too. It might be better to say something like, "Aunt Hannah lived a long time before she died. Most people live a long time, but some don't. I expect you and I will."

Circus then and now



Traditional circus performances such as the one Grandad Stan and Esme witness in *Walking the Tightrope* are described this way by Wikipedia:

A circus is a company of performers that may include clowns, acrobats, trained animals, trapeze acts, musicians, hoopers, tightrope walkers, jugglers, unicyclists and other object manipulation and stunt-oriented artists. The term 'circus' also describes the performance which has followed various formats through its 250 year modern history. Philip Astley is credited with being the 'father' of the modern circus when he opened the first circus in 1768 in England. Early circuses were almost exclusively demonstrations of equestrian skills with a few other types of acts to link the horsemanship performances. Performances developed significantly through the next fifty years, with large scale theatrical battle reenactments becoming a significant feature. The 'traditional' format, whereby a ringmaster introduces a varied selection of acts that mostly perform choreographed acts to traditional music, developed in the latter part of 19th century and continued almost universally to be the main style of circus up until the 1970s.



Newer styles of circus performances as exemplified by Cirque du Soleil, the Pickle Family Circus and others began to emerge in the 1970's. Here's what Wikipedia has to say about them:

Contemporary circus (originally known as nouveau cirque) is a recent performing arts movement that originated in the 1970s in Australia, Canada, France, the West Coast of the United States, and the United Kingdom. Contemporary circus combines traditional circus skills and theatrical techniques to convey a story or theme. Compared with the traditional circus, the contemporary genre of circus tends to focus more attention on the overall aesthetic impact, on character and story development, and on the use of lighting design, original music, and costume design to convey thematic or narrative content. For aesthetic or economic reasons, contemporary circus productions may sometimes be staged in theatres rather than in large outdoor tents. Music used in the production is often composed exclusively for that production, and aesthetic influences are drawn as much from contemporary culture as from circus history. Animal acts appear less frequently in contemporary circus than in traditional circus.

Early examples of nouveau cirque companies include: Circus Oz, forged in Australia in 1978 from SoapBox Circus and New Circus, both founded in the early 1970s; the Pickle Family Circus, founded in San Francisco in 1975; Ra-Ra Zoo in the UK in 1983, Nofit State Circus in 1984 from Wales; Cirque du Soleil, founded in Quebec in 1984; and Archaos in 1986. More recent examples include: Teatro ZinZanni, founded in Seattle in 1998; Quebec's Cirque Éloize; Les 7 doigts de la main (also known as The 7 Fingers); and the West African Circus Baobab in the late 1990s.

British idioms

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. Check out the British slang terms listed below!

English Slang!

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"

Responses

What teachers are saying about *Walking the Tightrope*

"From the very first scene my eyes were filled with tears. I know it was a combination of the breath-taking acting, nostalgic setting, and beautifully written storyline. The storyline was simple enough for a child to comprehend, yet symbolic and metaphoric enough for adults to be completely stimulated and engaged throughout the entire performance. I attempted to keep my teacher goggles on throughout the performance, but it was challenging because I was enjoying it and appreciating it on such a personal level. This play would lend itself beautifully into my classroom across all subject matters. It lends itself especially well to reading comprehension, classroom discussion, and opinion and narrative writing. Throughout the performance I was creating and placing mental sticky notes in places of the play where I could envision incorporating into extended lessons. I am truly excited for my students to be able to experience this amazing play in the fall."

— NICOLE RAMERIZ, REAGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“My favorite part of this day was going to see the 24th Street Theatre production of *Walking the Tightrope*. It was amazing to watch the play come to life with little use of props and settings. The first thing I noticed was the clown. I knew he was there for a reason, but it took me awhile to figure it out. The actors did an amazing job, especially the lady playing a young girl. She definitely captured the carefree nature of a little girl. You could see how the grandpa was trying to protect his granddaughter, but in the end it was okay. Change was okay.”

— AMY TUFT, DELLA S. LINDLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“After watching the company perform the play in its entirety, I was greatly moved. Not only because of the stellar acting, but with the interpretation the director chose to share with the audience. The addition of the voiceless clown created such poignancy and was a completely unexpected choice. It was a fine example of out of the box thinking that worked beautifully in the play. The play allowed me to do some of my own self-reflection. I realized that in my own life, I seem to walk many tightropes: teacher, mother, wife, daughter, friend...balancing them all can be precarious too.”

— COURTNEY CARRERA, CIELO VISTA CHARTER SCHOOL

“The *Walking the Tightrope* performance moved and inspired me in more ways than one. I just thought that the creativity of the art of theater was displayed in its purest form. The illusions that were brought out through props, the use of a clown to soften and enhance human emotions throughout the play. The artistic techniques displayed by actors were simply brilliant. I think I was able to relate to it the deepest, because the relationships that were addressed in play I was able to make personal connections with. I am a daughter and granddaughter. I’m looking forward to bringing my class to *Walking the Tightrope* performance at McCallum Theater next school year.”

— GABRIELA MITCHELL, REAGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“I was completely moved! The thing that stood out to me the most from the play was the emotion and playfulness that was evoked. The playfulness and energy that the young girl brought out mixed with the sadness and struggle the grandpa was feeling made for a great experience as the viewer. Also, I can’t forget the clown that was on stage. His presence was a little confusing (in a good way) at the beginning and then as the play went on, I was able to make a connection that he might have represented the deceased grandmother. I felt it was a very strong component and brought an added emotion to the play.”

— STEPHANIE YANEZ, FRANKLIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“Not only was the writing superb, but so was the acting. It was such a delight to see an adult female actress play a child and do such a tremendous job that one forgot about her “size” onstage. The fact that the clown never spoke, yet his miming actions and expressions allowed for one to use the senses to figure out that he represented the grandmother was brilliant. It really added to the mystery while we were watching what one would think was a simple story! I was also in awe of the live music and how intently the musician Michael Redfield watched the performers and kept the music in sync with the performances. It also left me wanting to see it again.”

— BRENDA RAGLAND, DELLA S. LINDLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Sample Lessons

Classroom teachers ask us: what can we do with our students to help get them ready for experiencing the performance? Check out these ideas:

Teacher-led lessons connected with *Walking the Tightrope* might include:

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. Also repetition is used to create an enhanced poetic effect. Please note how the language is centered on the page. This is text from the script and is repeated several times during the play. The text is placed in the middle of the page which gives it the feel of poetry too.

'Tide comes in'
'Tide goes out'

Poetry activity

1. Have students write 3 simple lines of dialogue, as if they are speaking to someone, instructing them to do something and put the text in the middle of the page. Example:

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

2. Then write it again repeating the lines and see how it appears to feel and look like prose poetry:

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

3. Have several students speak it aloud to the class. What elements of prose poetry do we notice?

4. Have students write a six line prose poem. The theme is losing something they really liked and they miss very much. Have them repeat 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"

Students could then illustrate the subject of their poem and the class could compile an anthology of the created poems.

Pairs of students could present their poems to the class in the form of a dialogue with each other where they take turns reciting lines of each poem first to each other and then to the audience.

Audience members could share what they notice about word choices, prose poetry elements and the difference between the presenters talking to each other and to the audience.

Symbolism: something that represents something else

Symbolism activity

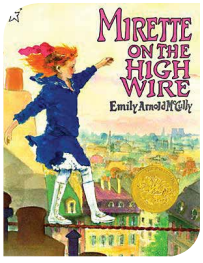
Below are five nouns that were included in the play. Each student writes down how they might use these nouns as symbols for an idea or emotion. Then they describe how the object might appear in a scene from a play or draw the object in such a way that its symbolic meaning becomes clear.

Pillow —
Teapot —
Clock —
Window —
Rain —

Resources

Read it here!

Mirette on the High Wire
By: Emily Arnold McCully
Age Range: 4 - 8 years
Publisher: Puffin, 1997
ISBN-10: 0698114434



Mirette lives in a boarding house surrounded by actors, dancers, jugglers and mimes. Her life is filled with exciting stories and fascinating people. None as magical as the stranger Mirette discovers crossing the courtyard on air — a tightrope walker. Mirette becomes the stranger's pupil and learns to walk the wire. Features brilliant watercolor and gouache paintings, reminiscent of the French Impressionists. 1993 Caldecott Medal winner.

1950s Childhood: Growing Up in Post-War Britain
By: Janet Shepherd
Shire Publications, Ltd., 2014
ISBN 0747812357

Children of the 1950s have much to look back on with fondness: Muffin the Mule, Andy Pandy, and Dennis the Menace became part of the family for many, while for others the freedom of the riverbank or railway platform was a haven away from the watchful eyes of parents. The postwar welfare state offered free orange juice, milk and healthcare, and there was lots to do, whether football in the street, a double bill at the cinema, a game of Ludo or a spot of roller-skating. But there were also hardships: wartime rationing persisted into the '50s, a trip to the dentist was a painful ordeal, and at school discipline was harsh and the Eleven-Plus exam was a formidable milestone. Janet Shepherd and John Shepherd examine what it was like to grow up part of the Baby Boomer generation, showing what life was like at home and at school and introducing a new phenomenon — the teenager.

Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs
By: Tomie dePaola.
Age Range: 4 - 8 years
Publisher: Puffin, 2000
ISBN-10: 0698118367

First published in 1973 and later expanded and updated, this autobiographical picture book describes dePaola's relationships with his grandmother and greatgrandmother and how he deals with their deaths.

Love Never Stops: A Memory Book for Children
By: Emilio Parga
Publisher: Centering Corporation, 2007
ISBN-10: 1561232017

Emilio Parga, founder of The Solace Tree, a child and adolescent center for grief and loss, created this memory book to give grieving children an opportunity to express themselves

In My Grandmother's House:
Award-Winning Authors Tell Stories About Their Grandmothers
By: Bonnie Christensen (editor & illustrator)
Age Range: 8 and up
Publisher: HarperCollins, 2003
ISBN-10: 0060291095

An anthology collection of short stories by authors about their grandmothers. Contributing authors: Joan Abelove; Alma Flor Ada, Bonnie Christensen; Beverly Cleary; Pat Cummings; Jean Craighead George; Minfong Ho; Ji-li Jang; Gail Carson Levine; Beverly Naidoo; Cynthia Leitich Smith, and Diane Stanley.

On the Web

Circus
www.pbs.org/show/circus/
Circus is a new six-hour television series from PBS that takes you on a journey through the world of the big top to explore the artistry of circus performance.

BBC History | Britain: 1945 to Present
www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/timeline/present_timeline_noflash.shtml
A brief history of Great Britain; post WWII.

***Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief* by Dr. Bruce Perry**
www.teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/death_and_loss.htm

Poetry materials for teachers
www.poets.org/poetsorg/materials-teachers
Resources for teachers to help them bring poetry to the classroom.

Poetry
www.teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/
Study the genre of poetry by taking step by step workshops with favorite authors.

Glossary

Act — to represent behavior, action or emotion.

Actor — a person portraying a character onstage.

Character — a participant in the events of the story.

Dialogue — a conversation between two or more characters onstage.

Dramatization — a theatrical adaptation of an event, moment, or story.

Fiction — stories that have not happened in real life.

Fourth wall — the imaginary wall between the actors and the audience.

Imagery — language that describes the setting and characters of a story.

Improvisation — to create a character, setting and action without any previously written material.

Narration — spoken description of the events onstage.

Pantomime — using the body and face to convey a story and create an imaginary world.

Play — a written theatrical work that can be produced by any theatre company or group of artists.

Poetry — a type of literature written in short rhyming or non-rhyming groups of sentences.

Production — a theatrical presentation by a theatre company or group of artists.

Prop — an object used onstage in a production.

Prose — a non-rhyming language used in writing, usually in literature.

Prose Poetry — a hybrid form of both prose and poetry written with very little verse but with heightened imagery (creating a picture), which is to be spoken as dialogue.

Score — a musical composition used to enhance story-telling.

Setting — the location where the play takes place.

Timing — the ability to select the precise moment of doing something for optimum effect.