Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical

The Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences on Tour

Tia Shearer as Trixie

Generous support for Schooltime provided, in part, by MERCK
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Kid Power!
Through energy efficiency and conservation, kids can help preserve our planet’s rich natural resources and promote a healthy environment.

Tip of the Day
In Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical, Trixie is in danger of losing something very precious to her. We too are in danger of losing something precious—the Earth’s natural resources. Natural resources, such as water, are limited and must be protected. There are ways you can help preserve the Earth’s water supply. Did you know that taking a shower uses much less water than filling up a bathtub? A shower only uses 10 to 25 gallons, while a bath takes up to 70 gallons! To save even more water, keep your shower under five minutes long. Try timing yourself with a clock next time you hop in!
Made possible through the generosity of the PSEG Foundation.

Arts Education and You

The New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) Arts Education Department presents the 14th season of the Verizon Passport to Culture SchoolTime Performance Series.

With Passport to Culture, Verizon and NJPAC open up a world of culture to you and your students, offering the best in live performance from a wide diversity of traditions and disciplines. At NJPAC’s state-of-the-art facility in Newark, with support from Verizon, the SchoolTime Performance Series enriches the lives of New Jersey’s students and teachers by inviting them to see, feel, and hear the joy of artistic expression. The exciting roster of productions features outstanding New Jersey companies as well as performers of national and international renown. Meet-the-artist sessions and NJPAC tours are available to expand the arts adventure.

The Verizon Passport to Culture SchoolTime Performance Series is one of many current arts education offerings at NJPAC. Others include:

- Professional Development Workshops that support the use of the arts to enhance classroom curriculum
- Arts Academy school residency programs in dance, theater and literature, and Early Learning Through The Arts—the NJ Wolf Trap Program
- After-school residencies with United Way agencies

In association with statewide arts organizations, educational institutions, and generous funders, the Arts Education Department sponsors the following arts training programs:

- Wachovia Jazz for Teens
- The All-State Concerts
- The Star-Ledger Scholarship for the Performing Arts
- The Jeffrey Carollo Music Scholarship
- Summer Youth Performance Workshop
- Young Artist Institute
- NJPAC/New Jersey Youth Theater Summer Musical Program

Students have the opportunity to audition for admission to NJPAC’s arts training programs during NJPAC’s annual Young Artist Talent Search.

Detailed information on these programs is available online at njpac.org. Click on Education. The Teacher’s Resource Guide and additional activities and resources for each production in the Verizon Passport to Culture SchoolTime Series are also online. Click on Education, then on Performances. Scroll down to “Download Teacher Guide in Adobe Acrobat PDF format” and select desired guide.

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To Teachers and Parents

The resource guide accompanying each performance is designed
- to maximize students’ enjoyment and appreciation of the performing arts;
- to extend the impact of the performance by providing discussion ideas, activities, and further reading that promote learning across the curriculum;
- to promote arts literacy by expanding students’ knowledge of music, dance, and theater;
- to illustrate that the arts are a legacy reflecting the traditional values, customs, beliefs, expressions, and reflections of a culture;
- to use the arts to teach about the cultures of other people and to celebrate students’ own heritage through self-expression;
- to reinforce the New Jersey Department of Education’s Core Curriculum Content Standards in the arts.
Since 2004, children and their parents have been entertained by Caldecott Honor-winning author Mo Willems’ stories about Trixie and her Knuffle Bunny. Now Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences on Tour presents a musical version of the first of these books, *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*, with script and lyrics by Willems and music by Grammy Award-winning Michael Silversher.

In the play, Trixie is excited to be going on an adventure with her father. The 16-month-old has never been to the Laundromat and, since the trip is so special, Trixie brings her beloved stuffed animal Knuffle Bunny along—not that she would ever be parted from it under any circumstances. Trixie is excited to be with her father and help him at the Laundromat. But then, something awful happens. When they leave the Laundromat, Knuffle Bunny is left behind. Trixie tries hard to find a way to tell her father the terrible news. Unfortunately, she cannot speak “Grownup,” and Dad has no idea what Trixie is so upset about. What can she do about her abandoned and lost Knuffle Bunny? If something is not done soon, Trixie fears she may lose Knuffle Bunny forever.

Touchingly sentimental, yet hilariously funny, *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* will keep both children and adults entertained with its charming, upbeat songs and dances, huge puppets, and even a gigantic dancing laundry! And, before the performance, remind the children to watch for The Pigeon in this delightful production.
Mo Willems (Playwright/Lyricist) is a literary rock star to youngsters. He has won three Caldecott Honors for his picture books: Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, Knuffle Bunny A Cautionary Tale and Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity. He has won six Emmy Awards for his writing on Sesame Street and was the head writer for the animated television series Codeman: Kids Next Door. He also created the animated television series Sheep in the Big City. Additionally, Willems’ Elephant and Piggie book series for early readers has won two Theodore Geisel awards. The Knuffle Bunny series of books stems from Willems’ own experiences. Though his biography states that he, not surprisingly, avoids laundromats, his daughter’s name is Trixie. When she was born, a friend on Sesame Street, actress Stephanie D’Abruzzo, gave her the stuffed toy animal that became the inspiration for Knuffle Bunny. At Willems’ request, D’Abruzzo played Trixie when Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical opened at The Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Willems’ success has everything to do with his empathy for children, who, he says, “happen to be people...They’re shorter and don’t have the cultural modifiers. They don’t know what the Arc de Triomphe is. They’re working on things like walking.” He believes his books provide an intimate time for both reader and child. When asked what the power of art is, he responded, “I have no idea. I just know that it’s powerless without an audience.” With Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical, his first play, Willems reaches his audience in a new and enlightening way.

Michael Silversher (Composer) creates songs for the Henson/PBS Sprout series Pajanimals. Among his numerous accomplishments, he is a Grammy Award-winning songwriter (Elmo in Grouchland) and the founding musical director for Robert Redford’s Sundance Institute Children’s Theatre. He has composed operas for Los Angeles Opera and the Kennedy Center as well as a musical, The Lively Lad, for the Humana Festival of New American Plays. Silversher is responsible for more than 100 songs in the Disney catalog for such shows as Chip ‘n Dale, Rescue Rangers, Duck Tales, and The Little Mermaid TV series as well as the theme songs for Tale Spin, Gummi Bears, and Donald Duck’s 50th Birthday. He also earned three prime time Emmy nominations for Winnie the Pooh and The Muppets.

Rosemary Newcott (Director) is the Sally G. Tomlinson Director of Theatre for Youth at Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, where she has enjoyed working on such productions as Seussical the Musical, The Stinky Cheese Man, Ferdinand the Bull, Androcles and the Lion, The Hobbit, and the theater’s annual production of A Christmas Carol. Newcott won the 2009 Princess Grace Special Projects Award for her work with André Benjamin’s Class of 3000 Live. A certified secondary education teacher, Newcott taught at the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program, the Alliance Performance Program and the Horizon Teen Ensemble. As an actress, she has performed in most of Atlanta’s theaters as well as on film and television.

Information about the cast and additional creative personnel for Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical can be found online at njpac.org. Click on Education, then on Performances, then on Curriculum Materials. Scroll down to “Download Teacher Guide in Adobe Acrobat PDF format” and select desired guide.
adaptation - taking a story in one form, such as a book, and changing it to another form. The stage production of *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* is an adaptation of Mo Williams’ book *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*.

*Bunraku* - a traditional Japanese puppet art form in which all the puppets are life-sized and operated from behind by a hooded puppeteer dressed in black.

*composer* - a person who creates original music. Sometimes the composer writes both the music and words (or *lyrics*) of a song, and sometimes he or she will work with a *lyricist* who writes the words.

*dialogue* - conversation in a play, usually between two or more characters; *monologue* is a speech of one character.

*director* - the person who conceives of an overall concept for a production, supervises all its elements and guides the actors in their performances.

*knuffle* - the Dutch word for hug or snuggle. (Pronounced with a hard “k” (KA-nuff-ul).

*Laundromat* - a facility where people who do not have washing machines and dryers in their homes can do their laundry.

*playwright* - a person who writes plays.

*puppet* - an inanimate object controlled by wire, hand, body, or other means to represent a person, idea or figure.

*puppeteers* - people who make and/or manipulate puppets.
When fans of *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* suggested that the popular children’s picture book would make a great stage show, author Mo Willems always replied, “Yeah, right. You’d watch a musical starring a character who can’t talk?”

Willems later admitted that all his protesting actually planted the idea in his mind that adapting his story into a musical would be a great idea. An invitation from The Kennedy Center allowed him to do just that, and *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* was created.

In order to adapt the book into an hour-long production, it was necessary to expand the story. One way this was accomplished was through the production’s songs.

The songs in musicals help connect the characters and the audience to strong emotions that may be difficult to communicate in spoken words alone. In *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical*, Trixie certainly has communication problems. She is extremely distraught over her inability to convey to her father that they have left her beloved bunny at the Laundromat. However, when the preverbal toddler sings “Aggle flaggle klabbage,” a tender ballad about her loss and her maddening inability to articulate, her father (though he still doesn’t understand the exact problem since the song is sung entirely in babble) has no doubts about his daughter’s distress and frustration. And, neither does the audience.

Other songs in the production reveal the characters’ internal emotions as well as their relationships with each other. It is through the song “Really, Really Love You” that we hear of the father’s hopes and dreams for his daughter.

Another means by which the original story was lengthened was the addition of a dream ballet. In a musical, dream ballet sequences exist for clarification, foreshadowing and symbolism.

Trixie’s father is pretty deflated that Trixie’s mother understands the trouble immediately. When the whole family races back to the Laundromat, Trixie’s father attempts to rescue Knuffle Bunny. His heroics, seen through both his family’s and the audience’s eyes, redeem him. To symbolize how much of a hero Daddy is, the rescue is depicted as a dream—if not hallucinatory—dance sequence that shows Trixie’s father entering the world of the Washing Machine and doing battle (such as boxing with boxer shorts) to bring Knuffle Bunny back.

Mo Willems’ decision to adapt his famous story into a musical has proved to be a marvelous choice. Full of adventure, laughter and love, *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* with its delightfully buoyant songs, innovative scenery, props and puppets, and heartwarming characters is indeed a truly enchanting way to tell Trixie’s and Knuffle Bunny’s tale.
In the Classroom

Before the Performance

1. Read the story of Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale and review its illustrations with the class. Ask the students what Trixie’s major problem in the story was. How did she try to solve it? Was she successful? Trixie knew what she wanted to say to her father. Discuss why it was so difficult for her to communicate. What did she need to know? What did her father think she was trying to tell him? Ask the students if we can think without words? (1.1)

2. Explain that the performance the students will see at NJPAC is a musical adaptation of the story they just heard. Ask students where they think songs might be inserted into the story and who might sing the songs. What might the songs be about? (1.1, 1.3)

3. “Knuffle Bunny: Page to Stage,” is an arts integrated resource of Verizon’s Thinkfinity.org. Follow the process of bringing Mo Willems’s beloved children’s book to the stage in this audio/visual presentation for grades K-5 at artsedge.kennedy-center.org/multimedia/AudioStories/page-to-stage/knuffle-bunny.aspx (1.1)

After the Performance

1. Ask the class if anything about the performance surprised them? Why were these things surprising? (1.4)

2. Ask the students to describe each of the characters. Did they learn anything about these characters that was not in the book? If so, how did the musical give them additional insight into the characters’ thoughts and emotions? (1.4)

3. How did Trixie’s song “Aggle Flaggle Klabble” make the students feel? What was Trixie saying during the song? Ask the students to put some nonsense words together to make a song and see, when they sing it (to any tune they like), others will understand what they are singing about. (1.3, 1.4)

*Number(s) indicate the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standard(s) supported by the activity.

Teaching Science Through Theater (K-8)

By Sharon J. Sherman, Ed.D.

Encouraging the growth of theatrical creativity in children is an excellent way to deepen their understanding of the subjects they study in school. Guiding them in the script writing process is a way to bring the curriculum to life and make it more meaningful and engaging. Learning about the environment through theater can deepen their understanding of their world.

Reuse, recycling and reducing waste help us preserve our precious natural resources. Each day, children come to school with lunches packed at home. At the end of the lunch period, waste containers in schools everywhere abound with items such as paper and plastic bags, Styrofoam, empty juice cartons, plastic utensils, and more. You can use theater to encourage your students to think about bringing environmentally friendly packed lunches to school.

Begin the creative writing process by asking your students to write short plays about a class that will lead a school-wide campaign to reduce waste in the lunchroom. You can divide the class into teams of four to six students who will work together. In order to convince their schoolmates of the importance of reuse, recycling and waste reduction, teams should begin their work by doing research on the topic. How many trees are cut down each year from the use of non-recycled paper? How many plastic bottles are discarded each day? What happens to a juice box after it is put in the trash? Students will enhance their information literacy skills as they do their research. They will also deepen their understanding of the topic.

Once the research phase is completed, the groups can begin to write their plays. Ask them to select the main characters and define their characteristics. After that, they should select the secondary characters and define their roles. Then, it is time to set the scene for the play. Beginning with the first act, have your students visualize what is going to happen. Which characters will speak and what will they say to each other to get the message across? Continue developing the story line until the first draft is written. Once the drafts are done, have the groups rehearse their plays. Then, it is time for presenting their productions. Ask the class to critique each performance in a constructive manner.

Sharon J. Sherman, Ed.D. is Dean of the School of Education and Professor of Teacher Education at Rider University in Lawrenceville, NJ.

The Teaching Science Through the Arts content of this guide is made possible through the generous support of Roche.

Additional Before and After activities can be found online at njpac.org. Click on Education, then on Performances, then on Curriculum Materials. Scroll down to “Download Teacher Guide in Adobe Acrobat PDF format” and select desired guide.
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For even more arts integration resources, please go to Thinkfinity.org, the Verizon Foundation’s signature digital learning platform, designed to improve educational and literacy achievement.

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Books by Mo Willems


Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! Hyperion, 2003.

Don’t Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late! Hyperion, 2006.


There Is a Bird on Your Head! Hyperion, 2007.

We are in a Book! Hyperion, 2010.

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