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The Early Bloomer

by Jana O'Connor

Commissioned by Concrete Theatre
with support from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts



A Study Guide for Teachers

written by Jennifer Tupper



A Note to Teachers

One of the purposes of this study guide is to make the experience of viewing theatre a meaningful and memorable one for your students. It is important for students to have fun while they are watching the play, but equally important for them to explore the many ideas advanced through the play before and after they see it. There are suggestions and activities included in this guide to help you do just that. The guide is also intended to provide learning opportunities for students related to the play. Feel free to adapt the activities and questions to suit the various needs and levels of the students in your class.

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Preparing the Students

Theatre Etiquette

Before the Performance

Some students have never attended a theatrical performance before, and may need some guidance as to what standards of behaviour apply. Others may need a refresher.

The important point to emphasize is that when they are watching the play they are in a partnership. They contribute as much as to the enjoyment and interest of the performance as the performers do. The performers appreciate audience response. Laughter, sighs, thoughtful silence, applause all let us know we're reaching you. The unspoken back-and-forth communication of thought and feeling is what theatre is all about.

Before the play, brainstorm with your class what they would appreciate themselves if they were performing in front of a large audience. Make a list of do's and don'ts in class and agree to try to be the highest quality audience possible during the performance.

In-class preparation is very important! Ask any actor – if the students are thinking about the issues when they walk into the auditorium, they are the most intelligent, responsive, engaged audiences a performer can wish for. You can help prepare your students to really benefit from what the play has to offer.

In the Performance Space

Sound carries: speaking aloud, gum chewing, moving about is not only disturbing for the other audience members, it distracts the performers. They can see and hear you from the stage. They rely on your focus, attention and respect to what they do best.

- **There is no photographing or recording permitted**
- **Please turn off and put away your cell phones, pagers, music players and headphones (iPods, MP3 players). Please remember to turn off watch alarms as well.**
- **Do not leave your seat until the play is over.**
- **In the case of an emergency, please leave as quietly as possible. If you plan to return, please wait for a teacher to re-seat you.**

Should any students be continuously disruptive, the Stage Manager may ask that they be removed from the audience. They may be refused the privilege of attending other Concrete Theatre performances.

Post Performance Wrap-up

Like a good meal, theatre should be digested. Create a time and a comfortable environment to review the production with your class. Follow up on the issues raised in the pre-show prep. Take advantage of the activities and discussion points suggested in the study guide. Create your own follow-up.

Teachers- We'd Love to Hear From You!

Invite your students to describe, written or graphically, what the play made them think about, and how it made them feel. Interview each other and send us letters, e-mails and drawings of your in-class activities.

At the back of this Study Guide there is a Feedback Form for teachers to fill out. Please take a few minutes to comment on the performance and let us know how the experience was for your students. We trust you will find *Smokescreen* a moving and thought-provoking theatrical experience.

Caroline Howarth
Mieko Ouchi
Artistic Co-Directors

Irene Kunda
Booking Coordinator

Debbie Giesbrecht
General Manager

Concrete Theatre

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The Players

Director: Caroline Howarth

Production Designer: Lisa Hancharek

Sound Designer: Dave Clarke

The Cast: Ntara Curry

Ming Hudson

George Szilagyi

Farren Timoteo

Stage Manager: Nancy Yuen

Sound Technician: Josiah Hiemstra

About the Playwright

Playwright Jana O'Connor is a well known improviser, actor and educator in Edmonton who has recently begun to write for the theatre, winning the 24 hour Playwriting Competition with ***The Lonely Hearts*** at the 10 Days of Madness Festival at the University of Alberta in 2007. ***The Early Bloomer*** marks her Theatre for Young Audiences debut. Jana's acting credits include roles with several different companies at the Edmonton Fringe Festival, Teatro la Quindicina, Northern Light Theatre, Rapid Fire Theatre and Panties Productions, as well as work as a core member of ***The Irrelevant Show*** on CBC Radio produced by Peter Brown. She has taught at the Foote Theatre School at the Citadel, Camp Shakespeare with the Freewill Players and for Rapid Fire.

About the Director

Caroline Howarth is a founding co-director of Concrete Theatre where she has directed many projects including the Sterling Award winning *The Shape Of A Girl*, *The Sprouts New Play Festival for Kids*, *A Promise to the Sun and Carnival Magic*, *Are We There Yet?* and *Smokescreen*. Caroline directed *Lord of the Flies* and a reading of *The Geography Club* for the Citadel Theatre's Teens @ the Turn. She is also a theatre instructor at Concordia University College of Alberta where she teaches acting, directing and children's theatre and directs student productions including *Our Town*, *Seussical* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Caroline works in opera as a singer and director. She directed *Suor Angelica* for Opera Nuova and *The Y2K Blackdeath Oratorio* for Edmonton Opera. Caroline has an MA in Popular Theatre from the University of Alberta.

About the author of this study guide

Jennifer Tupper is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina where she works with pre-service and in-service teachers in the areas of social studies and curriculum. Before teaching at the university level, Jennifer taught students in the k-12 system in Edmonton. She has been involved in curriculum development projects in both Alberta and Saskatchewan.

About Concrete Theatre

Concrete Theatre is an award-winning professional theatre company committed to creating, developing and producing artistically excellent and culturally diverse Theatre for Young Audiences that explores issues relevant to the lives of young people and their families. Concrete Theatre is a member of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) and engages, under the terms of the Canadian Theatre Agreement, professional artists who are members of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association. Concrete Theatre is a non-profit organization and a registered charity.

A note from the playwright

When I was given the opportunity to pitch some ideas for a short play for Sprouts 2006, I found myself reflecting on the theme of diversity and how it has impacted my life. I thought about my childhood experience, how hitting puberty at an early age made me different, and how it impacted the person I have become.

I was much taller than most of my classmates all through elementary and junior high school. I developed curves way ahead of the curve and had to wear clothes from the ladies department. In fact, I was often mistaken for a teacher. In a time of life when all you want to do is be like everyone else, I most definitely was not. Fitting in, in all senses of the phrase, eluded me.

I also distinctly remember a need to try and keep it all a secret, as if not acknowledging the changes would make them go away. I remember cringing when my mom tried to have "the talk" with me, and how she ended up just handing me a book. Talking about it was too embarrassing; I just couldn't find the words.

Puberty is a topic that doesn't often come up in conversation, but it is something we all go through, at varying speeds, often awkwardly and painfully. I have a dear friend who self-identifies as a late bloomer, as does my husband. We've had many wonderful chats about our teen years on either side of the norm, sharing our perspectives, connecting through our differences. They felt just as conspicuous as I did, and they too wanted desperately to be other than they were. As I got older, I found talking about growing up, and, most of all, laughing about it with friends, was extremely liberating.

And so when it came time to write for Sprouts, this topic seemed the logical choice. I wanted to find a way to approach the topic lightly, without the clinical style of those films they made us watch in grade five, or the squirmy feeling of the embarrassing puberty talk we've all endured. I hope that telling the story through Maisie and her best buds removes the too close for comfort aspect, while opening up new perspectives.

One of the most gratifying experiences of having the short version of the play read at Sprouts was when a friend told me that afterwards she and her daughter went home and had a great talk, using the language of the play.

Ultimately, this is my hope for *The Early Bloomer*, that it will help open up a conversation that can be difficult to start and remind us all that we're not alone as we bloom.

I want to sincerely thank Concrete Theatre for their extraordinary support of me as a first time playwright, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts for their assistance in nurturing the play to its full-length form, the actors who have brought the play to life in its various incarnations and, finally, my friends for their generosity in sharing their stories.



Play Overview

Maisie Daisy and her friends Lacey and Casey attend the Nursery School run by Principal Gardner. Each week, the young buds are measured to ensure that they are growing just the right amount for their age. Poor Casey always seems just a little bit on the small side, so he resigns himself to eating extra fertilizer (good for growing buds) at lunchtime. Maisie and Lacey (but not Casey) plan to try out for the Oopsy Daisy tumbling team, but before they do, Maisie has a growth spurt. When Principal Gardener measures her, she has grown nearly a foot in one week, which it seems, is a school record! Maisie is horrified, not wanting to be different from the other buds. Lacey becomes rather jealous of all the attention Maisie is receiving so begins to treat her friend differently, referring to Maisie as a freak of nature.

Embarrassed by her size, and not wanting to face the other buds, Maisie goes home to her mother, who cannot understand what has Maisie so upset. When Maisie explains that she has grown nearly a foot, her mother (Momsie) expresses pride and love, reminiscing about Maisie when she was just a wee little seed. Momsie decides that it is time for Maisie to get a training pot because she is growing so quickly. Maisie is alarmed by this because no other bud in her class has a training pot. They go together to the garden shop and while Maisie is being measured for her pot, Lacey comes along and once again, reminds Maisie of how different she will be from the other buds if she comes to school in a training pot. She wonders aloud how Maisie will possibly be able to try out for the Oopsy Daisy Tumbling team if she is wearing a pot and makes a point to warn Maisie about the Bad Seeds from the twelfth row who like to tip over buds in training pots. Maisie feels worse than ever.

The next morning, before school, Maisie's parents decide it is time to talk with her about the 'birds and the bees', the 'flowers and the trees'. With more confusion than clarity, they attempt to teach her the facts of life. It's a good thing they also have a pamphlet for her to read! Before arriving at school, Maisie decides to hide her pot behind a tree – she is just too embarrassed to wear it and lies to Lacey and Casey about not needing it. Alas, Principal Gardner finds and returns the pot to Maisie. Lacey informs Maisie that she is just one growth spurt and some petals away from the grownup garden, again causing Maisie to feel badly. The morning of the tumbling tryouts, Maisie awakens to find that all of her petals have popped open overnight. She is horrified! Maisie ties the petals up with a bow and heads to school for the tryouts where Lacey and Casey have already performed their routines. Maisie takes her turn and executes some stunning moves, culminating in the removal of the bow from her hair and the release of her beautiful petals. Casey is in awe even though Maisie is mortified. He shares that he too is different, being part weed, and Lacey also confesses that she is not actually a daisy at all, but a begonia planted in the wrong garden. The three friends learn they have all made the tumbling team and Maisie learns, much to her relief, that she won't be transplanted to the grown up garden just because she has her petals.

In the Garden



Maisie Daisy

The central bud in the garden, Maisie is an early bloomer. She has to have a training pot before all the buds in her class and she is the first to get her petals. Maisie feels a great deal of anxiety about the changes she is experiencing, manifest in the form of fantasy flashes where she imagines all sorts of embarrassing things happening to her.

Lacey Daisy

Lacey is one of Maisie's best buds, although she is not always kind and understanding. Because of her own low self-esteem, she draws attention to how Maisie and Casey are different from the other buds. In the end, however, Lacey is able to accept herself and her buds for who they are.

Casey Daisy

Another close friend of Maisie, Casey is a little on the small side. He is self-conscious but kind and it is clear that his friendships are very important to him. He is willing to take a risk in trying out for the tumbling team in order to spend time with his two best buds.

Principal Gardener

Rather silly and absent minded, Principal Gardener runs the nursery school that Maisie and her friends attend. He is easily excited and seems unaware of how best to handle the changes that young buds experience as they grow into flowers.

Momsie & Dadsie Daisy

Maisie's parents, they are proud of the flower that their daughter is becoming.

The Bad Seeds

Older buds in the twelfth row who take pleasure in tormenting young buds like Maisie who are starting to change and grow.



The Play's Messages

There is much for students to learn from the play. It illustrates the struggles of being different, and the desire to fit in. It is about friendship and how we treat those we care about. It is also about acceptance and what it might mean to a person when they are not accepted for their differences and their unique identity. Finally, it is about the importance for young people of understanding the changes, both physical and emotional, that they will experience as they grow.



Pre-Play Activity

Before students see the play, encourage them to consider those qualities that make them special, unique and different. Rather than seeing difference as a bad thing, it is something that should be celebrated. Have students brainstorm words that they believe capture who they are and then write an identity poem or create an identity collage using the words. After watching the play, revisit this activity, discussing with students the words or phrases they would use to describe Maisie, Lacey and Casey. Write identity poems or create identity collages for each of the characters. Display these around the classroom.



Questions to Guide Viewing

1. Why does Principal Gardener measure the buds at the nursery school each week?
2. What kind of friend is Lacey?
3. How does Maisie react when she learns she has grown a full foot in one week? How do her friends react? Her mother?
4. Why doesn't Maisie want to wear her training pot to school? Should she feel so self-conscious?
5. Are Maisie's parents able to explain the 'birds and the bees' to her?
6. How does Maisie help Casey?
7. What purpose do Maisie's fantasy flashes serve in the play?
8. Why is Maisie worried that she will be transplanted to the grown up garden? Should she be worried?
9. Describe the Bad Seeds. Have you ever experienced 'bad seeds'?
10. What do you think the three buds learn by the end of the play?

Activities



Exploring Symbolism

Purpose: Many symbols are used throughout the play, including Maisie’s training pot, her petals, and of course the buds themselves. This activity is designed to help students understand the use and purpose of symbols in drama and literature.

Procedures:

1. Write the word symbol on the board.
2. Ask students to take a moment to write down what this word means to them.
3. Have students share their responses and keep track of them by writing them on the board.
4. It is likely that students will be able to explain what a symbol is, but you might also want to provide them with an explanation: “A symbol is something that stands for, or represents, something else”.
5. Next, generate some examples of symbols that students may already be aware of in everyday life. For example, the maple leaf is a symbol of Canada.
6. Now ask students to work in small groups to identify and discuss the symbols that were used in the play and why they might have been used.
7. Follow the small group work with a large class discussion, again, recording students’ responses on the board.

Closure: Have students create illustrations of the symbols from the play and display these around the class.

Being Friends

Purpose: This activity is designed to help students think about what makes someone a good friend and how good friends should treat each other. In *The Early Bloomer*, Lacey did not always treat Maisie or Casey well, so this activity is an opportunity to address this with your class.

Procedures:

1. Have students create two columns on a piece of paper. On one side have them write "A good friend is..." and all of the words or phrases they associate with being a good friend. On the other side of the paper have them write "things I do for my friends..." and the corresponding words or phrases.
2. Hand out recipe cards to your students, and working from the two columns they have just created, have your students make a recipe for good friendship. What are the ingredients for friendship and the steps in being a friend?
3. Next, divide the class into small groups (4 or 5 students). Have each group choose one group member to play the role of someone new to the class. The new student's challenge is to try to make friends and gain acceptance.
4. Have each group perform their role play.
5. After the role-plays, discuss how it felt to be the new student and how it felt to already be a part of a friendship group. Explore the importance of friendship in the context of the role play and in the context of the *Early Bloomer*.

Closure: Have students write a journal entry about the importance of friendship in their lives, and any struggles that they have encountered both being a friend and having a friend.

Changing as we Grow



Purpose: The intent of this lesson is to track growth over time. With links to both the science and health curriculum, students will have an opportunity to watch and record a seed grow into a plant, while also recording their own physical growth.

Procedures:

1. Provide every student with a Styrofoam cup, soil and a seed. Sweet pea seeds are terrific because they are hardy and initially grow very well indoors.
2. Have students decorate the Styrofoam cups and plant their seeds. Place them all on the window ledge so that students can watch their seeds grow.
3. Have students create a growth chart for their seeds. Once a week, have them observe and measure the progress of their seed. Initially, it may be a few weeks before they see any evidence of a plant in their cups. At some point, seeds may need to be transplanted to bigger pots, or to the outdoors, depending upon the time of year.
4. Next, take photos of all the students in the class and create a bulletin board display. Beside each photo, have students hang their own 'growth' charts. These might include changes in height, appearance, etc. they experience over the year. Have them regularly update their charts to track their own growth over the year.

Closure: Near the end of the year, discuss with students the changes they observed to their seeds, and to themselves. Did all of the seeds grow at the same rate? Does everyone in the class grow at the same rate? Have students write a reflection on the lesson. What was the value of the activity for them personally? What did they learn?

Check out these Websites

<http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca/pages/lessonplans/puberty.html>

This Canadian website has some helpful lessons for teaching about puberty to elementary school students.

www.safehealthyschools.org

This website includes a variety of lesson plans for teaching sexuality education, including self-knowledge and preparation for puberty.

<http://kidshealth.org>

This website includes a section for parents entitled "Talking to your child about puberty". There is some useful information for kids and teachers as well.

<http://www.cahperd.ca/e/free/alwayschanging.htm>

This is the website of the Canadian Health and Physical Education Association and includes a wealth of useful information about young people, their health and well being. It includes a number of teaching materials to help students in grades 5 & 6 understand that the physical and emotional changes involved with puberty are a normal part of growing up.



THE EARLY BLOOMER TEACHER FEEDBACK FORM/PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

We would like to hear from you, your colleagues and your students!

Concrete Theatre depends on teacher feedback for assessing our shows and planning future programming.

Please copy this form for each of your teachers and mail or fax to Concrete Theatre (address below)

School: _____ Performance Date: _____ Attending Grades: _____

Teacher's name, grades & subjects taught: _____

Please add me to Concrete's Electronic mailing list:

My Email address is _____

1. If you were responsible for booking, how did you find out about this performance? (check all that apply)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Company brochure/handbill | <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete's booth at the Teacher's Convention |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ATA News ad | <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete's website |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Through a teaching colleague | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____ |

2. Who paid for this performance?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> School | <input type="checkbox"/> Parents / School Council |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School Board | <input type="checkbox"/> Students |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Both School and Board | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____ |

3. Did you and your students find the performance and its content...

Enjoyable? Yes No Engaging? Yes No Age-appropriate? Yes No

Informative as a support for curriculum / student learning? Yes No

Comments on the show and how it was received by your students:

4. Did you find the Teacher's Study Guide useful for:

personal/student prep follow-up discussion/activities building links to school programming

Comments/Suggestions:

5. Did you find the Post-show Question and Answer session with the actors valuable? informative?

Yes No **Comments/Suggestions:**

6. What themes, topics, issues, plays or stories would you like to see explored in future works created for students in the grade level(s) you teach?

7. When is the best time to contact you with information about booking next season's productions?

8. Please include any general comments / issues related to the performance and Concrete's work.

Feel free to continue your comments on the back of this form if you need more room.

Please mail, fax or email this Evaluation Form to: Concrete Theatre
6-17 Stanley A. Milner Library Building, 7 Sir Winston Churchill Square, Edmonton, AB T5J 2V5
Phone: 780.439.3905 Fax: 780.433.4782 bookings@concretetheatre.ca