

Yale Program in Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies presents:

THE ARKANSAW BEAR

BY AURAND HARRIS



STUDY GUIDE

SYNOPSIS

The World's Greatest Dancing Bear is coming to town!

Tish is a young girl confronted with a reality that she does not understand — her grandfather is dying, and she cannot do anything to stop it. Like so many young children, Tish is confused by the inevitability of such a permanent end. Her internal conflict is soothed, however, by the help of new fantastical friends!

Lost and frightened, Tish runs to her favorite tree, seeking comfort and time to think. Here, she wishes on a star, Star Bright, to ask why it is that her grandfather must die. Star Bright comically answers her wish — enter The World's Greatest Dancing Bear! But there's a catch! The Dancing Bear is nearing the end of his career as the Ringmaster is chasing him down and trying to bring him into the Great Center Ring.

With the help of his close friend the Mime, the Dancing Bear fights for more time. He has so many dances and accomplishments to share with the world; the bear is by no means ready to meet his end. The Dancing Bear grows inspired by Tish's remarks about all the things she's learned from her grandfather. He wishes that he too could actively plant a legacy and pass down valuable lessons. This is when we meet Little Bear!

Little Bear, young and cute, recently lost his Papa and wants to do something to honor those still alive. It is this hope that convinces him to take dance lessons from the Dancing Bear, honoring the living by keeping the dance tradition alive. This moment of teaching satisfies the dancing bear, further preparing him for his own end.

With his legacy and dances instilled in Little Bear, the dancing bear accepts the Ringmaster's hand and enters the Great Center Ring. Tish seems to understand now — the impermanence of life but the longevity of admiration and legacy.

Tish returns home from her magical adventure and offers words of comfort to her mother and aunt. She carries with her a new acceptance of death, recognizing the parts of her grandfather that will live on through her, and thus his legacy will continue.

The Arkansaw Bear



by Aurand Harris



THEMES

ACCEPTANCE AND REASSURANCE

MAGICAL REALISM

LEGACY AND REMEMBRANCE



LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

GRIEF AND LOSS

CIRCUS AND ENTERTAINMENT

OUR JOURNEY MAKING THIS TOURING PLAY

Our production of *The Arkansas Bear* began as a Yale College course, *Production Seminar: Theater in Education*. We entered the first day of class with a blank canvas ready to be filled with creative ideas and clever tricks to make this show possible. We spent the first few weeks exploring the themes of the play, learning from professional children's theater makers, and bonding with each other. The highlight of this experimental period were Mime and Tap Dance workshops that helped us learn cool new techniques! Then, we dived into group rehearsals, where the whole group worked together to create the show. Our professor wonderfully described the process as 'theater of desire', which refers to how each company member could choose how they wanted to contribute to the show process. Some people chose acting, others chose music, some chose choreographing dances, amongst various other roles. In the lead up to the show, we will be making props, designing costumes, rehearsing scenes, choreographing dances, and planning for our tour! Since the show is performed in different locations, we had to think outside the box to create a magical experience that was portable and required minimal set-up time. Overall, our journey shows how we can work together to achieve amazing things and learn from each other!



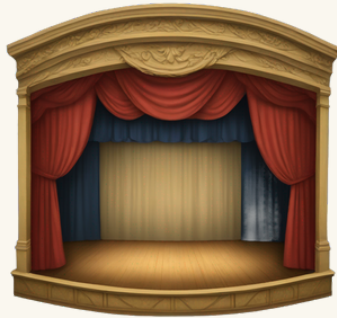
THEATER-IN-THE-ROUND

Performances can play out in many different orientations. The three most popular configurations for the stage are called proscenium, thrust, and in-the-round.

PROSCENIUM

A proscenium stage is the most common type of performance venue. This orientation has the audience all sitting on one side.

It usually includes a raised acting platform that is framed along the sides and the top, creating a “picture frame” for the stage pictures.



THRUST

A thrust stage has audience members surrounding three sides of the playspace. This arrangement makes for a more intimate feel by bringing more audience members close to the action, while providing multiple angles of viewing.



IN-THE-ROUND

Theater-in-the-round is the most naturalistic of the three configurations. This type of stage was popular in ancient Greece and Rome.

With theater-in-the-round, the audience sits on all sides of the actors, usually in a circle or square shape. This draws the audience further into the story by putting them right next to the actors, as well as where they can be seen by each other. This configuration is also thought to be more democratic due to the many viewing angles available and the lack of a “best seat in the house.” *We chose to perform our production in-the-round because we wanted to make the audience feel as close to Tish and her friends as possible, as well as maximize audience interaction with the actors.*



MEET THE CHARACTERS



TISH

Tish is an eight year old girl who lives in Arkansas, a state which borders Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas! Tish cares deeply for her grandfather and will do anything to help her friends. She is clever, caring, and courageous! Her favorite place is her white oak tree up the hill from her house. Try to count how many facts Tish knows about Arkansas!



STARBRIGHT

Starlight, Starbright, first star I see tonight... Starbright is always the first star in the sky, and this gives him the power to grant wishes! He isn't a tricky wish-maker as he loves to use his power to help others in need. What would you ask Starbright for?

THE WORLD'S GREATEST DANCING BEAR

The World's Greatest Dancing Bear is a European Brown Bear who has traveled the globe for 60 years, spreading joy by performing his world famous technical dances! He has danced for many important people, like the President, several royal families, Oprah Winfrey, Stephen Hawking, and Taylor Swift. He specializes in Barynya – a Russian folk dance that he learned from his father – and special Spanish folk dances he learned from his mother. His favorite food is honey and his best friend is his traveling companion: Mime!



THE ARKANSAW BEAR

Who is The Arkansaw Bear, the character the play is named after? You will have to see the play to find out. But here's a hint: they are somewhere on this character sheet! And no, that's not a typo---it really is The Arkansaw Bear!

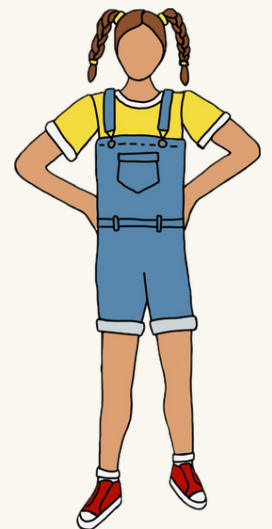


MIME

Mime is The Dancing Bear's best friend and traveling companion who never speaks a word. Mime and The Dancing Bear have performed together for many years, and Mime wants to do everything he can to help his old friend. Mime is fearless and loves to make people laugh! Mime talks by pantomiming gestures, so you have to watch carefully in order to hear!

LITTLE BEAR

Little Bear is an American Black Bear who grew up in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. Young little bear is kind and bubbly, and his favorite things to do are to fish and to dance! Little Bear is hard-working and loyal to his friends and family. He recently lost their papa, and now he is on a quest to do something big to honor his memory.



THE RINGMASTER

The Great Ringmaster is the orchestrator of the circus. He directs performers on and offstage, and guides them when it is their time to journey to the Great Center Ring. He has a very strict schedule, but he might loosen his grip on the timetable just this once...

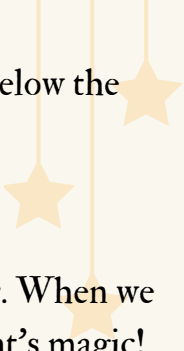
PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Crafts for the Show

Our production of *The Arkansaw Bear* would like to include your students' art work! Please see below the many options for students to contribute to our show and prepare for its content.

When you wish upon a star...

We ask that your students cut out these stars and write a wish they hope to come true on each star. When we arrive at your school, we will then collect your students' stars and incorporate them into Starbright's magic! Before the beginning of the show, hand the stars over to Starbright's actor. Feel free to make a copy of this page in order to be able to cut out as many stars as you need.



Flowers bloom...

This craft will help you create the bouquet of flowers Tish picks for her grandfather.

Materials:

- Pink tissue paper
- Green pipe cleaners
- Scissors
- Stapler



Instructions:

1. Have each student pick out four different sheets of pink tissue paper. These will make the petals of the flowers!
2. Stack the different sheets of tissue paper on top of each other. Then, starting from the short end of the papers, accordion fold the paper until the full length of the tissue papers has been folded.
3. Staple the center of the accordion-folded paper.
4. Use scissors to cut a round edge on each end of the folded paper. You can cut various shapes and angles to make each flower unique, but be careful not to cut too close to the staple!
5. Carefully pull the each layer of tissue paper apart. This will fluff out your flower and make it look full.
6. Wrap a green pipe cleaner around the center of the fluffed out paper, and twist the two ends to create the stem of your flower.



Music!

In our play we use music, especially for some special characters!

If a star had a theme song, what do you think it would sound like?

What instruments would you use?

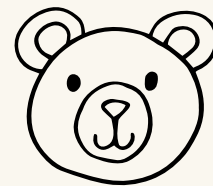
What about for the leader of a circus?



Keep your ears open for music during the show, and see if you can guess which character is about to enter!

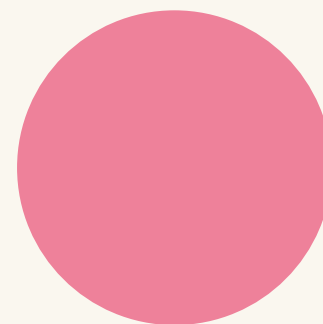
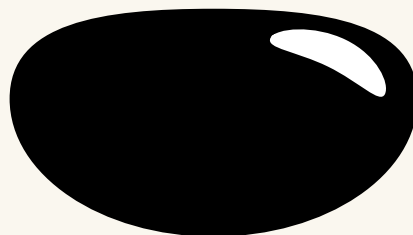
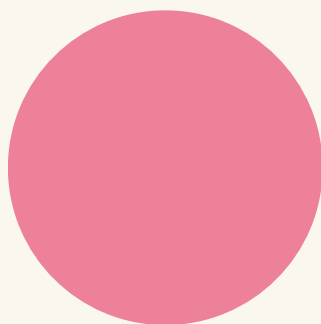
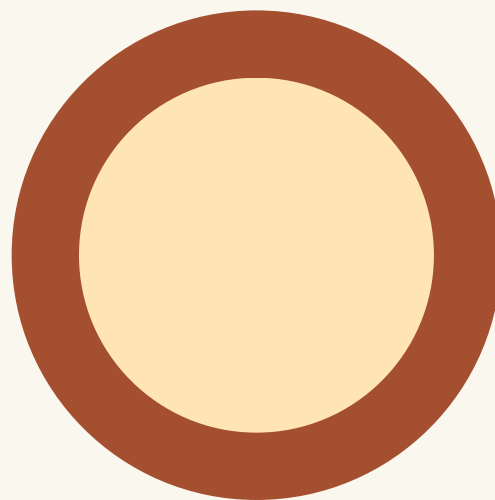
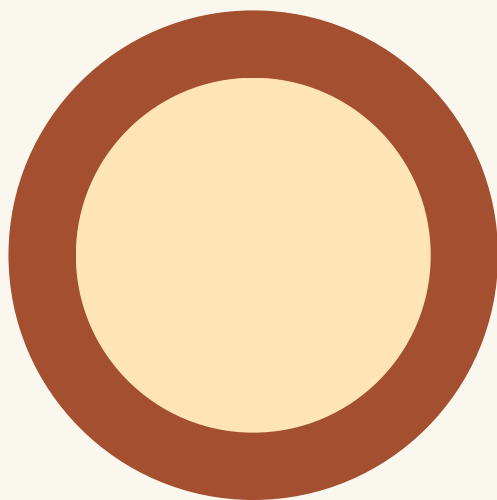
The Arkansaw Bear Mask Craft

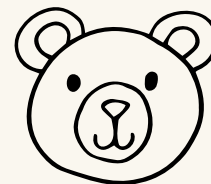
Remember: Every bear mask will be unique and special - just like you!



Materials Needed:

- One paper plate
- Brown paint or brown markers
- Black marker
- Elastic string or ribbon
- Scissors (adult supervision required)
- Glue
- Hole puncher
- Optional: sequins, glitter, stickers, or any small decorations you like!





The Arkansas Bear Mask Craft

Instructions:

1. 🎨 Start by coloring or painting one paper plate brown - this will be your bear's face! If you paint it, make sure to let it dry before you continue.
2. ✂️ Cut out the following shapes from the previous page!
 - Two round, brown ears
 - A small, black nose
 - Two pink circles for the cheeks
3. 🧠 Glue the ears to the top of your plate
4. 📌 Glue the nose in the center of your plate
5. 😊 Glue the pink cheeks on either side of the nose
6. 🖍️ Use your black marker to draw:
 - A big smile under the nose
 - Two happy eyes above the nose
 - Fun swirls or patterns for the fur
7. ✨ Optional: Add sequins, glitter, stickers, or anything else you like to make your bear extra fancy for dancing!
8. 🧑🏻 Finally, ask a grown-up to help you:
 - Punch one hole on each side of the plate
 - Tie the elastic string or ribbon through the holes

Time to Dance!

Put on your mask and twirl around like the happiest dancing bear in the forest!

Safety Note for Adults:

Please supervise children when using scissors and help with punching holes and securing elastic. In addition, because the mask has no holes to see through, be sure to supervise children while they are wearing the mask.

MEET THE MIME!



In *The Arkansaw Bear*, the character of the Mime guides the audience through the story without using words and creates moments of laughter! Mime is a unique form of acting that relies on gestures, facial expressions, and movements to tell a story. This style of performance dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, but became particularly popular in France in the 19th century. Famous mimes like Marcel Marceau brought this art form to life, showing how much can be communicated without speaking. The Mime in our play helps express the deeper feelings of the characters, using silence to create moments of wonder and interacting with the audience to build engagement.

ACT IT OUT!

Animal Charades

Write down different animals (including a bear) on slips of paper. Split up into two teams, and have one student from each team act out an animal without using words. The other team members must guess which animal is being acted out.

Courage Role-Play

The teacher gives students scenarios where they need to act brave, like “being afraid of the dark but needing to go out of their bedroom at night to get something.” After each role-play, discuss how students felt and what made their character brave.

Emotion Freeze Tag

Choose one student to be “it.” When they tag someone, the tagged student freezes and shows an emotion (like sadness, joy, or fear). The other students must guess the emotion to unfreeze them.

Object Transformation Pantomime

Students pretend to use everyday objects, showing how they work through exaggerated movements. Then, they switch the function of the object mid-performance. The class guesses the original and transformed objects.

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

STORY CIRCLE: BEAR'S JOURNEY

Start a story about a bear going on an important journey. Each student adds one sentence, exploring different themes like fear, loss, and friendship. The teacher may guide the story to connect with the themes of *The Arkansaw Bear*.

DRUMBEAT & MOVEMENT GAME

Play a steady beat on a drum or clap. Call out animals, and students move like those animals to the rhythm. Mix in emotional movements like a “sad bear” or “brave fox.”

INVISIBLE WALL

After seeing the Mime in action, explain the idea of an invisible wall and have students act as though they're pushing, pulling, or climbing against it. Challenge them to escape from an imaginary box or crawl through tight spaces, using only their body movements.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST DANCING FAMILY

As you heard, the World's Greatest Dancing Bear comes from a family of dancing bears – his father was Russia's most honored dancing bear and his mother ‘the prima ballerina bear of all Spain.’ As a creative writing exercise, ask your students to write a history of the World's Greatest Dancing Bear – from childhood to circushood.

TISH'S DIARY

After Tish returns home from her adventure, she writes in her diary about her magical experience. Ask your students to write a diary entry as if they were Tish. What did she see? How is she feeling?

TAP DANCE

In *The Arkansaw Bear*, the World's Greatest Dancing Bear shows off a style called tap dance. In tap dance, the dancers wear special shoes with metal plates, or taps, on the soles that allow them to express their movement with rhythm and sound. A very important part of tap dance is community! Dancers often watch and listen to each other tap, and then respond by offering a few of their own dance moves. You can try it on your own by making a circle and going around one at a time, giving each dancer a chance to show off their moves by making sound with their feet! Play around with different sounds, such as stomps, shuffles, and hops.

CHILDREN AND GRIEF



A Message to School Staff, Parents, and Caregivers from The Cove Center for Grieving Children:

Death, grief, and loss are topics that can be incredibly challenging to explore with children. Often, adults avoid discussing these important topics, only to be faced with compounded stress, confusion, and pain when their family is inevitably faced with a death. After decades of experience and research, grief experts have found that children of all ages benefit from having honest, accurate, and age-appropriate conversations about death/dying with trusted adults in safe & supportive environments.

During these conversations it is important to use accurate terms such as “death, dead, and dying” when speaking to children. Euphemisms such as, “We lost grandpa,” “Mom went on a long trip,” or “Your brother is sleeping forever” can understandably confuse children and cause more harm. It’s also important to note that grieving children can look very different from grieving adults. Children express their grief through their behavior and play, as opposed to verbalizing thoughts and discussing feelings openly as you may see with adults.

We can support children throughout their grief process by opening the door for conversations about the deceased, letting the child know that they can come to you when they are ready to talk, encouraging the child to ask questions, and validating the child’s feelings and experiences. Connecting children to professional and peer-based supports can be vital to the healing process, as we believe that no child should grieve in isolation.

Why Grief Education in Schools Is Vital:

The death of a significant person or loved one is inevitable within every human’s lifetime. Schools have a vested interest in providing age-appropriate grief education to prevent the potentially negative outcomes associated with unresolved grief. Unresolved grief happens when children do not have opportunities to process their grief in healthy ways that reflect their age and developmental needs. Families are often in a state of shock following a death and do not know how to begin dealing with a profound loss. School programming can aim to incorporate topics of grief and loss.

The 2024 Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM) conducted by Judi's House/JAG Institute predicts "1 in 12 children in Connecticut will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18," equaling approximately 59,000 bereaved children in the state (Judi's House: (2024). Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model. Retrieved from www.judishouse.org/CBEM). With this staggering number in mind, we feel it is in everyone's best interest to prepare both students and school staff to support grieving children.

When schools support students in their grief, both children and parents benefit as the family moves together toward integrated healing. When children are provided with the proper support systems and opportunities to heal appropriately from the death of a loved one, they are more likely to re-adjust to their lives in a healthy, productive, and functional manner and less likely to engage in the unwanted behaviors that can lead to serious negative outcomes. In turn, caregivers and other family members are also encouraged to heal and re-stabilize their lives in a similar manner.

The impacts of unresolved grief affect both the individual and the greater community. Unresolved grief in children may include anger, acting out, depression, low academic performance, increased school drop-out rates, drug use and addiction, risk-taking behaviors, self-harm, and even suicide. We can come together to mitigate these negative outcomes and encourage both healing and resiliency in our students by advocating for grief education and support in the school setting.

About The Cove Center for Grieving Children:

The Cove Center for Grieving Children, a volunteer-driven program developed by the New England Center for Loss and Transition, was started in Guilford, Connecticut in 1994. After an exhaustive study of the best national models available, The Cove's peer support, family-based model was designed to help children deal with grief due to the death of a loved one. The Cove was separately incorporated as a 501 (c) (3) organization in 1998. Beginning with six families in the first year, the program developed a solid working model that has steadily grown to include 5 Family Program sites in New Haven, Meriden, Guilford, West Hartford, Stonington. Today we offer 3 Virtual Programs for grieving teens, young adults, and caregivers of grieving children. We also offer an annual bereavement camp, Camp Compassion, for children ages 6-17 who are grieving a significant death. Furthermore, we offer professional development trainings for adults serving grieving children, as well as community referrals and outreach. Cove programming provides education, support, and tools for children to navigate their grief in healthy ways, helping them to express their feelings, improve family communication, and find pathways to resiliency and healing. All programs at The Cove are free of charge. Visit covect.org for more information.

Thank you for reading!

Can't wait to see you at...

THE ARKANSAW BEAR

BY AURAND HARRIS

Crew

Director - Genesis Browne
Director - Bebhinn Knudsen
Choreographer - Sadie Pohl
Sound Designer - Lula Talenfeld
Sound Designer - Gloria Kim
Costume Designer - Emily Patrick
Costume Designer - Sadie Pohl
Props Designer - Emily Patrick
Study Guide Designer - Emily Patrick
Study Guide Designer - Angela Zhao
Faculty Advisor - Nathan Roberts
Faculty Advisor - Deb Margolin

Cast

Tish - Ella Brenes
Starbright - Kevin Chabla Piruch
Mime - Dhruv Balla
Mime - Pranava Dhar
Dancing Bear - Emily Patrick
Ringmaster - Serhii Malevych
Little Bear - Angela Zhao
Mother - Gloria Kim
Aunt Ellen - Sadie Pohl
Announcer - Nathan Roberts



presented by: