

TARRAGON THEATRE

The Shape of a Girl

study guide



Produced by Green Thumb Theatre

Playwright: **Joan MacLeod**

Director: **Patrick McDonald**

Stage Manager: **Angela Beaulieu**

Set Design: **Scott Reid**

Lighting Design: **Brian Pincott**

Sound Design: **Ian Tampblyn**

Carpenter: **J.C. d'Almedia**

Scenic Painter: **Angie Rees**

Featuring: **Jenny Young** as Braidie

March 21 – April 28, 2002

About *The Shape of a Girl* study guide:

The Shape of a Girl produced by Green Thumb Theatre is touring Canada with performances at the Tarragon Theatre from March 21 to April 28, 2002. The study guide is written by **Ellen Peterson** at the Manitoba Theatre for Young People.

Many of the exercises in this guide are not the creation of the author. The author of the guide is not attempting to claim the exercises as her own inventions. They have been learned from other teachers of theatre and altered through experimentation. Where no credit is given, the original source is not known.

Financial assistance for this study guide provided by Green Thumb Theatre, Vancouver and the Broadway Youth Series, Saskatoon.

As always, we hope it will help make your theatre experience at Tarragon a more fulfilling and engaging one by creating discussions, generating ideas and prompting many questions.

With regards to this play, we feel especially strongly that students will benefit most if they are aware of the events that are described within the script.

In order to continue to help meet the needs of teachers, Tarragon has referenced the Dramatic Arts curriculum expectations to the **classroom activities** within the study guide

Feel free to contact the Tarragon Theatre should you have any questions or comments about the study guide at 416-536-5018 x243.

The Shape of a Girl was workshopped at the 2000 Banff playRites Colony - a partnership between The Canada Council, the Banff Centre for the Arts and Alberta Theatre Projects. The world premiere was produced by Green Thumb in association with Alberta Theatre Projects at PanCanadian playRites 2001 Festival.

I. ABOUT THE PLAY

THE SHAPE OF A GIRL is loosely based on the Reena Virk Story: the real life tragedy of a 14-year-old girl killed by a boy and a group of girls, also teenagers.

Braidie is fascinated by a TV news story about a girl accused of a shocking act of violence, “a monster in the shape of a girl”. A different kind of girl from her and her friends...or is she? Propelled by memories she can't forget and scenes from her past she can no longer ignore, Braidie must confront the truth of her giddy, terrifying teenage world. Can she find the courage to break her friends' conspiracy of silence when their bullying of a classmate goes too far?

Written by one of Canada's most respected authors, Governor General's Award winner Joan MacLeod, *The Shape of a Girl* is a dynamic one-woman show that looks at the realities of teenage relationships, aggression and codes of behaviour.

About the Playwright

Joan MacLeod is one of Canada's most respected playwrights. Her scripts include *2000*, *Little Sister* (a co-commission between Green Thumb Theatre and Theatre Direct Canada and winner of the Chalmers Award), *The Hope Slide* (Chalmers Award), *Amigo's Blue Guitar* (Governor General's Award), *Toronto*, *Mississippi* and *Jewel*. She also wrote the libretto for *The Secret Garden* (Dora Award). Her plays have been produced extensively, including several productions at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, Arts Club Theatre, Belfry Theatre and Vancouver Playhouse. She has also written several episodes for the new CBC series *Edgemont Road*.

Playwright's Notes

I've only written one play that didn't include a teenage character. That play did, however, feature a hundred-year-old woman and I like to think she had the spunk, wisdom and brashness of an adolescent. It seems that in the teenage world the stakes are perpetually enormous —great terrain for any writer.

Braidie's voice started developing just over three years ago, not too long after the murder of a fourteen year-old girl by a group of teenagers, an incident that captured news headlines around the world. Writing about those sad events in Victoria was the last thing I wanted to do, so it took me another year to see a relationship between the two. I only knew Braidie had backed herself into a corner and I didn't know why. I also knew I had a play because I wanted to find out so badly.

As I write this we are in our second week of rehearsal. We have a great team and it's going well. There have been front-page articles all week about bullying and violence and young people: this week isn't extraordinary.

This play is for teenagers, hundred-year-old women and everybody caught in between.

Joan MacLeod, Calgary, February, 2001

II. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Does Braidie's story accurately reflect your experience with the issue of bullying? Why or why not?
- Did Braidie's decision at the end of the play seem plausible? What finally convinced her to speak up? Was this a good solution to the problem? What is likely to happen next? What might happen to Sofie if no one intervenes?
- How has media coverage of the tragedy influenced Braidie's perception of events?
- Discuss other stories of this kind from the news. Is this problem getting worse?
- What can a person do if they are being bullied?
- What are the long-term effects of bullying on the victim? What are the effects on the bully?
- What makes some people bully others? Is this made clear in the play?
- Does Braidie's silence make her as guilty as Adrienne?
- Discuss the symbolic significance of the setting, especially its proximity to the Blind Children's Camp.
- What systems, if any, does your school have in place to deal with this kind of problem? What other steps could be taken?
- Some experts believe that the solution to the problem of bullying lies with the "bystanders"; students who are not being bullied themselves but see it happening. Initiate a discussion with your group about how bystanders can help. Is their role included in your school's anti-bullying efforts?
- Discuss the significance of the title.
- Is Braidie's relationship with her mother a "normal" one? Why or why not?
- Discuss any other high-profile crimes committed by youth against youth. Are these crimes increasing in frequency or severity? Are these incidents sensationalised in the media and if so, why?

III. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The Great Debate: Media Sensationalism

- demonstrate an understanding of language that is free from bias and stereotyping;
- identify and pursue appropriate questions in beginning to research a topic;
- use the vocabulary of dramatic arts to discuss, critique, and review drama presentations in the school and the community
- encourage participation, develop listening skills;
- discuss problems and proposed solutions

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

The effects of media sensationalism are a timely topic for discussion and debate. Headlines about the murder of Reena Virk in Victoria included:

“Accused teen killer acted like death was a joke: friend”

“Witness says teen smoked cigarette while drowning Reena Virk.”

“Students knew of planned attack but didn’t try to stop it.”

Study the media coverage of a sensational crime. Articles about the murder of Reena Virk and the subsequent trial, or about other crimes, are easily found through the periodicals database of your local library. Some include graphic details and should be used with caution. Hold an open discussion with the group about the effects of media sensationalism on public opinion. Discuss whether the public has a right or a need to know everything about a given event. Is it helpful for people to know everything? Are there other reasons why the media wants to use this information (i.e., to attract viewers)? Do these reports do anything besides spread fear? Is it healthy for children and youth to hear frightening details of violent crimes?

Ongoing in our society is a debate over the public’s right to information versus the individual’s right to privacy. Hold an in-class debate on topics such as:

- Why is it the responsibility of the media to distribute any and all information about a given event?
- Should families of victims have their right to privacy respected, and be able to prevent the release of sensitive information?
- Should children be protected from frightening stories in the news?
- Does media coverage of violent crimes leads to similar or “copy-cat” crimes?
- Would stricter gun-control laws greatly reduce crimes committed by youth and/or against youth?

Alternately, you might ask students to write a short paper or journal entry about their position on one or more of these issues.

Other In-class activities

- In small groups, ask students to design an anti-bullying program that involves their entire community.
- Working in small groups, ask students to find articles about the same news story from several different sources. Compare how different papers, radio and TV
Study guide for ***The Shape of a Girl*** written by Manitoba Theatre for Young People curriculum additions made in OutReach at the Tarragon Theatre, 2001-2002 season

programs and magazines cover the same event. Look for differences in where the story is placed. Is it the front-page story in one paper and a minor article in another? Notice differences in word use, sources, facts and other details. Do different media tend to show different biases?

- Create a poster to curb bullying. Include local and national help line number.
- Hold a contest or ask students from your school's Visual Arts Program to design an anti-bullying mural for your school. Include a slogan or message that supports the ideals of your school's anti-bullying initiatives.
- Have senior students design and conduct a survey to discover the extent of bullying in their community and the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs. Do students feel safe? Is more action needed?

IV. CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES

A) Fiction:

- demonstrate an understanding of language that is free from bias and stereotyping;
- identify and use effective styles of collaboration in drama
- identify research methods appropriate to developing ideas and text for a drama.
- stimulate the imagination

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Choose one of the following topics for a short fictional story, scene or monologue:

- Write a brief story describing what you think will happen after Braidie tells at the end of *The Shape of a Girl*.
- Write a brief scene describing a confrontation between Braidie and Adrienne.
- Write a monologue from Sofie's point of view describing her feelings.
- Write in your journal about a time when you were in a situation like the one described in the play.

B) Poetry:

- demonstrate an understanding of language that is free from bias and stereotyping
- identify research methods appropriate to developing ideas and text for a drama.
- stimulate the imagination

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Do this writing exercise in large printing on large pieces of construction paper, or print the words on a computer in a large font.

Write a list of words, short phrases and sentences describing how it feels to be loved, included and accepted. Then write words, phrases and sentences describing the opposite feelings. Cut the words and phrases out with scissors and rearrange them on another piece of paper, as you would with 'fridge magnet poems.' Add words as needed to turn the list into a more poetic form. Glue the words in place when you like the arrangement, and title the work.

V. DRAMA ACTIVITIES

Theatre Forum

- develop important moments in a narrative through a series of tableaux;
- demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dramatic expression (e.g., voice, movement, production values)
- demonstrate an understanding of techniques used to re-create roles (e.g., observation, research, improvisation)
- demonstrate an understanding of the element of risk in playing a role (e.g., adapting to challenges to personal and social beliefs)
- demonstrate an understanding of group responsibility in the creation of a drama
- identify various solutions to the problem of conflict in group situations and compare their effectiveness
- demonstrate an understanding of audience perspective in the communication of a drama

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Bullying is a complex and important issue for youth. It is difficult to deal with bullying alone: solutions to the problem must come from the community working together. By creating a Theatre Forum, students can discuss the problem and test strategies in a safe, non-threatening setting. When they face the problem in their real life, the Forum has provided them with acceptable, positive steps they can take.

The Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal outlines his social issue theatre techniques in his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. This style of theatre in Canada is often called Theatre Forum, or sometimes Power Plays. Any teacher wishing to do full-scale Theatre Forums should begin preparation by reading this text. (See *Resources*, p. 9)

A Theatre Forum is a process by which a group of peers can seek solutions to a shared challenge. In Theatre Forum-style plays, the central character or characters fail in their struggle to overcome oppression. Key scenes are then replayed, and the audience members are invited to stop the action, come onto the stage, replace the struggling character, and attempt a new solution to the problem.

The basic outline and techniques given below are intended for use in creating short scenes for purposes of in-class presentation and discussion. They may also be a useful outline for teachers who have some experience or training in Theatre of the Oppressed. As with any discussion of sensitive issues, a safe, confidential and nurturing class environment must be in place.

Members of a peer group always create theatre of the Oppressed for each other. In this way, the play cannot deliver a judgmental message, but rather begins the process of discovering new strategies. It is not even a requirement that the group define a concrete solution to their shared problem. The primary goal is to first enlighten the group about the nature of their struggle, and empower them to believe that there *are* strategies they can try, and that they have the right to live free of oppression in any form.

Warm-up:

Because successful Forums require a high level of trust and openness in a group, begin with the trust exercises listed above. Use other drama activities and improvisation to ready your group for performing. Stress to them, however, that although Theatre of the Oppressed is meant to be good, entertaining theatre, they can participate successfully

regardless of their experience or skill level.

Friends and Foes

Work in a large, open space such as a multi-purpose room or gymnasium. Ask the students to spread out evenly throughout the space. Without indicating whom they have chosen, each student chooses one other student to be their “Friend,” and another student to be their “Foe.” At “go” the students begin to move. Each student must move in such a way that they use their Friend as a shield from their Foe. That is, the Friend must be kept between the player and his or her Foe at all times. This creates an interesting pattern of movement: vary the exercise by instructing the group to change speed. Try playing the game without looking directly at the Friend and Foe, using only peripheral vision.

Preparatory exercise: Tableaux

Tableaux are still pictures or statues made by actors to communicate an idea. The skilful arrangement of actors in the playing space can convey an entire story in a second. This is a powerful teaching tool: it can be used to demonstrate the power of single images, it can be a safe, easy way to introduce a shy group to performance, and the tableaux can serve as “building blocks” for the creation of scenes.

Working in small groups of three to five students, ask each group to create three tableaux to show the group. All the students must be in all the tableaux. They cannot move or speak. Give the students three broad categories and allow them to choose specific topics. For instance, if the category is “place” they might choose to create tableaux of a restaurant or a doctor’s office. Begin with simple ideas and familiar concepts:

- Place
- Object
- Fictional character
- Great invention
- Event in the news
- Famous person

When it is time to perform the tableaux, the group is frozen in position by the time the teacher counts to five. Or, ask the audience to turn away from the group until they are ready.

Discussing the issue

The research phase consists of two areas of study: the personal and the universal. Study the phenomena of bullying in books, journals, and current events. Invite a speaker to address the group. After studying the data on the issue, begin an exploration of the personal and emotional issues involved. Use discussion, journal writing, visual arts exploration and storytelling to help the group define the issue for themselves.

Creating scenes

For effective Forum scenes, concentrate on situations of *oppression* rather than *aggression*. Audience members will have little desire to step into the place of a person who is being beaten up, and it could prove to be physically dangerous for all concerned. It is much harder to end oppression if the situation has progressed to the point of violence. Use scenarios where the protagonist is under *strong social pressure* (instead of immediate physical threat) either to conform to the group or to keep quiet about the

group's behaviour.

Suggested scenarios for Forum scenes:

- A young person, the victim of bullying, goes to an adult and is not helped.
- A member of a group protests when others in the group are cruel to another student.
- The group pressures the individual to participate in the cruelty.
- A victim of bullying appeals to a member of the peer group for help and is refused.
- The peer may be frightened of getting involved.
- A young person hears about an act of violence committed by peers and says nothing.
- A new student is teased by classmates about his or her physical appearance and says nothing.

Remember that all the scenes must end with the failure of the central character to overcome the oppression. Once each group has chosen the scene they plan to create, begin by creating tableaux of the pivotal moments in the scene. You might create a series of tableaux for each scene, to help the actors remember the sequence of events, and to make the images memorable and effective.

Facilitating a Forum: The role of the Joker

For a group doing their first Theatre Forum, it helps if the entire group is involved in the whole process. For example, if your large class is divided into five smaller groups, and each group prepares a scene to perform for the other groups, they will be more comfortable participating in each other's scenes.

In-class Forums are usually best facilitated by the teacher. Boal calls the leader of the Forum the "Joker." If your group becomes very experienced, you may elect to have a student or students take this role. The Joker's role is not to manipulate or influence the group's process, but to open the debate and lead the group, through careful questioning, to their own conclusions. The Joker helps the group explore their doubts and beliefs: Does this solution work? Is this approach right? *Always* let the group decide, and help them to question solutions that are inadequate, dangerous or improbable.

After playing all the scenes once without interruption, begin the Forum by explaining the process. The scenes will be replayed one by one, and during each scene, when the protagonist is failing to overcome the oppression, when the character bends to social pressure, when the "moment of truth" arrives, it becomes the responsibility of the members of the audience to stop the action. Encourage students to take this responsibility seriously. In this way, as Boal has said, an individual watching the scene stops being a spectator and becomes a "spect-actor:" an active participant in the movement for change. When someone raises their hand or says, "stop," the actors freeze in position. The spect-actor comes into the playing space, replaces the protagonist and improvises their idea. Note that they must replace an *oppressed* character. It would be easy to solve these problems if we could replace the Oppressor and magically change their behaviour. The actors in the scene must try their best to behave as their character would when faced with the new idea.

When the scene has been played out to its logical conclusion, the Joker leads the group in a discussion of the idea. Would this work in the real world? Would it make matters worse in the long run? What other steps could be taken to ensure success?

After the Forum, allow time for reflection on the process and its effects, through in-depth discussion and journal writing.

VI. RESOURCES

Websites: Anti-bullying

homeworktips.about.com

Has links to pages for young people about bullying with practical advice.

www.ravendays.org (*Surviving Middle School, Junior High and High School as an Outsider*)

Links to hundreds of articles, stories and sites. Also includes facts and statistics about the problem. Some difficulty in sorting through material for practical help, but useful for research, and proves conclusively that the victim of bullying is not alone.

<http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/directorates/studequi/antibully/links.html>

Australian Department of Education (New South Wales) with links to other sites, descriptions of anti-bullying programs being used in several schools.

Websites: Theatre of the Oppressed

<http://pages.nyu.edu/~as245/AITG>

Applied and Interactive Theatre guide from New York University. Listings of companies and groups involved in Theatre of the Oppressed work.

<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/boalintro.html>

Good introductory Article on Theatre of the Oppressed and an interview with Augusto Boal.

<http://www.gn.apc.org/resurgence/issues/unwin204.html>

Article/interview with Augusto Boal from Resurgence Magazine.