



THE GIRL WHO SWALLOWED A CACTUS

A rolling world premiere by **ERIC COBLE**

This play was workshopped by Metro Theater Company and presented as a rehearsed reading in April 2018 at The John F. Kennedy Center for The Performing Arts as part of New Visions/New Voices 2018.

SYNOPSIS

When school is out, there's nothing to do and the desert sun beats down hot. Sheila and her friends find themselves in search of something – anything – interesting to explore. So when a walking, talking, and surprisingly well-dressed coyote shows up, the kids find themselves on the adventure of a lifetime! Filled with magical realism and surprises at every turn, this funny story of friendship and imagination will bring the desert landscape to life.

TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT'S INSIDE THE GUIDE:

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Eric Coble was born in Edinburgh, Scotland and raised on the Navajo and Ute reservations in New Mexico and Colorado. His scripts for adults have been produced on Broadway (Tony-nominated "The Velocity of Autumn"), Off-Broadway ("Bright Ideas"), in all fifty states of the U.S., and on several continents. His plays for Young Audiences include his award-winning adaptations of Lois Lowry's "The Giver" and "Gathering Blue", as well as "The Storm In The Barn," "The Baker Street Irregulars" and a dozen other published TYA scripts which have been produced at Dallas Children's Theatre, Childsplay, Metro Theater Company, Oregon Children's Theatre, First Stage, Denver Center Theatre Company, Cleveland Play House, Adventure Stage, Alliance Theatre, and many others.

Awards include two AATE Distinguished Play Awards for Best Adaptation, an Emmy nomination, the Chorpenning Playwriting Award for Body of Work, the AT&T Onstage Award, National Theatre Conference Playwriting Award, an NEA Playwright in Residence Grant, a TCG Extended Collaboration Grant, the Cleveland Arts Prize, two Cuyahoga Arts and Culture Fellowships, and four Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Grants.

For more information visit ericcoble.com



▲ ERIC COBLE



Picture your favorite movie or television show, and consider how many characters are in that show, telling the story. Now think about how many actors play those characters. Are there four actors? Ten? Even more?

In movies and television, typically one actor plays one role. In live theatre, like the shows at Metro Theater Company, it's often the same. Background actors might play several smaller roles throughout the play, but the main characters are played by individual actors. However, sometimes all of the characters are played by one person!

To help the storytelling in one-person shows, playwrights will often create a main or default character who is telling a story. This character is one that the actor can constantly defer back to, and this character typically addresses the audience to get their story across. The actor then switches between other characters in the story by changing their body language and their voice to make each character very distinct.

Some things actors could change in their voice are how high or low their pitch is, how fast or slow they talk, and the way they pronounce different vowels or consonants or put on an "accent." Some things they could change in their body language are how heavy or light they walk, how straight or hunched over their torso and head are, and what they do with their arms. Keeping these ways to create different characters in mind, read the descriptions of the characters and think about how the actor in *The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus* changed to play each character. Then hop up on your feet and try a few different choices yourself!

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

DUST CLOUD: a 20-40 year old who is excited to tell a story from their past to a new audience. A person experienced in building.

SHEILA: An 8 year old girl. If you could reach up and grab the sun and pull it down and wrap it in a body with a laugh that shakes windows and eyes that let that inside-sunshine blast out so you could get a suntan just by looking at her, that would be Sheila.

DENNIS: The oldest, the biggest, and the heaviest. He feels like he should be the leader of the pack, but he's actually stronger as a helper to Sheila.

LEON: Skinny, wise, and helpful. He loves to take things apart and put them back together, and can be convinced to do some wild things.

THE TWINS: Shy and Eager, or Eager and Shy. Always together. They giggle a lot. They always want to be part of anything, no matter how crazy.

COYOTE: A real life wild animal coyote, walking on its hind legs, wearing dusty cowboy boots, a faded jean jacket, and sunglasses. At night! The leader of a pack of animals who are determined to take back land that was once theirs.

ONE MAN SHOW ACTIVITY: BUILDING A CHARACTER

Ask students to spread out around the classroom (or alternatively gather students into a circle), with everyone facing away from each other, so they are not looking at each other. Read one of the character descriptions aloud, then allow students a few seconds to shape their bodies into a sculpture of that character. Count down from three so that by one, they are facing each other or the front of the classroom, still in their statue. Repeat for all of the characters. For the last round, let students re-create the statue of their favorite character. Now try walking around the room as the characters with voices off. Allow students to move silently until they have fully developed their character, then have them greet one another as these characters with different character voices. (For an added challenge, switch back and forth walking and talking between two or three characters!)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- **What was it like to change between different characters?**
- **Why do you think playwrights choose to have one person play many characters? How does that help or change the story?**

MISSOURI THEATER GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

- AP1B K-8** Express impressions and observations related to dramatic activities and performances
- PAP1B K-8** Participate in dramatic play that reflects the environment and portrays character



PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT



In *The Girl Who Swallowed the Cactus*, Coyote and the other animals try to rise up and stop humans from taking over more land. As the human population has grown, we have built more cities and towns, and in the process we have destroyed many animal habitats.

Environmentalism is a movement that encourages people to think about the way our actions impact the world around us. Across the world young people have found ways to stand up for the environment and make their community eco-friendly.

What changes could you **start making** in your community to make it more environmentally friendly? Challenge your students to create a map of a sustainable town. Brainstorm different things a town might include to be environmentally friendly: a recycling plant, a bike, a community garden, etc.

MISSOURI SCIENCE GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

ESS 3, B: 1 K-5 Communicate solutions that will reduce the impact of humans on the land, water, air, and/or other living things in the local environment

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

ANCHOR STANDARD 1 Organize and develop artistic ideas and work

ANCHOR STANDARD 11 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding

OBJECT TRANSFORMATION



Sheila, Dennis, Leon and the twins take the “junk” they find and use it to build their very own city. Where grown-ups saw leftover metal that was ready for the trash, our adventurers saw an opportunity. They made the ordinary extraordinary as they reclaimed junk on the side of the road and turned it into something new. Practice making your own transformations!

- **Take an everyday object that you have in your classroom. This object could be a roll of tape, a book, a pen, or any object you would like to see transformed!**
- **Gather students in a standing up circle. Take turns transforming your chosen object into something new by pantomiming how you might use it. The object can be used for anything other than its intended purpose. - For example, a pencil may become a baseball bat or a magic wand.**
- **As one student pantomimes using the object, have the rest of the class make guesses about what the object has been transformed into.**
- **If time allows, go around the circle again with a different object!**

MISSOURI SCIENCE GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

ESS 3, B: 1 K-5 Communicate solutions that will reduce the impact of humans on the land, water, air, and/or other living things in the local environment

MISSOURI THEATER GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

PAP1A K-8 Develop and apply skills to communicate ideas through theatrical performances

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

ANCHOR STANDARD 10 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

JOURNAL ENTRY



Write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the humans or one of the animals in the story. Talk about how you felt when you confronted the other group, and why you felt strongly about what you wanted. If you would like, have students share their entry with a partner or small group, or even perform the entry as a monologue in front of the class.

MISSOURI ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

W2C K-8 Compose well-developed writing texts for audience and purpose

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

ANCHOR STANDARD 2 Organize and develop artistic ideas and work

SOUND AND BODY TRANSFORMATION



Throughout the play, Dust Cloud changes her voice and movement to portray the different characters. Now, it's your students' turn! With all students standing in a circle, create a sound and a movement and perform it to the person on your right. That person will repeat the same sound and movement, then let it change in their body and perform a new sound and motion inspired by the previous person on their right. Go all the way around the circle.

MISSOURI THEATER GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

PAP1A Develop and apply skills to communicate ideas through theatrical performances

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

ANCHOR STANDARD 1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

RESOURCES for Educators



FURTHER READING FOR EARLY READERS (K-3)

- ***Borreguita and the Coyote: A Tale from Ayulta, Mexico***
by Verna Aardema
- ***Watching Desert Wildlife*** by Jim Arnosky
- ***The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest***
by Lynne Cherry
- ***Secret Tree Fort*** by Brianne Farley
- ***Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest***
by Gerald McDermott
- ***What to Do with a Box*** by Jane Yolen

FURTHER READING FOR UPPER ELEMENTARY (3-6)

- ***Desert Voices*** by Byrd Baylor
- ***Mr. and Mrs. Bunny – Detectives Extraordinaire***
by Polly Horvath
- ***Dappled Annie and the Tigrish*** by Mary McCallum

RESOURCES FOR GREEN LIVING

- kidsplanet.org
- upcyclethat.com/make-that/kids/
- greenkidsnow.org
- epa.gov/recyclecity/mainmap.htm

DISCUSSION Questions



1. Which character in Sheila's group do you identify most with, and why?

2. Each one of Sheila's friends has a strength they bring to their friend group. What are some strengths you share with your friends?

3. Why do Sheila's friends follow her onto the truck, even though they feel scared?

4. Dennis made up the game of "hide-and-seek tag" with the car headlights. Have you ever made up a game with your friends?

5. Why did the coyote and other animals want to fight with the humans?

6. Sheila and friends try many different tactics to stop the coyote. Which tactics work, and why?

7. Where do you think Sheila went at the end of the story?

8. What do you like to do with your friends when you play outside?

9. How do you resolve disagreements with your friends?

10. What are some ways that humans can take better care of the land that animals live on?



3311 WASHINGTON AVE.
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI 63103
P: 314.932.7414 F: 314.932.7434

MISSION

Inspired by the intelligence and emotional wisdom of young people, we create professional theater, foster inclusive community and nurture meaningful learning through the arts.



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