

The Trumpet of the Swan

a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide

prepared by Cori Couture, M.Ed.

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200 The Riverway | Boston, MA 02215-4176

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The Trumpet of the Swan

by **E.B. White**

Adapted for the stage by Joseph Robinette

Presented by Wheelock Family Theatre, Boston, MA

October 23 - November 22, 2015

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This Study Guide was prepared by Cori Couture, M.Ed. It includes new content and material adapted from the 2002 study guide, which was prepared by Sarah LeMoine.

Story Overview

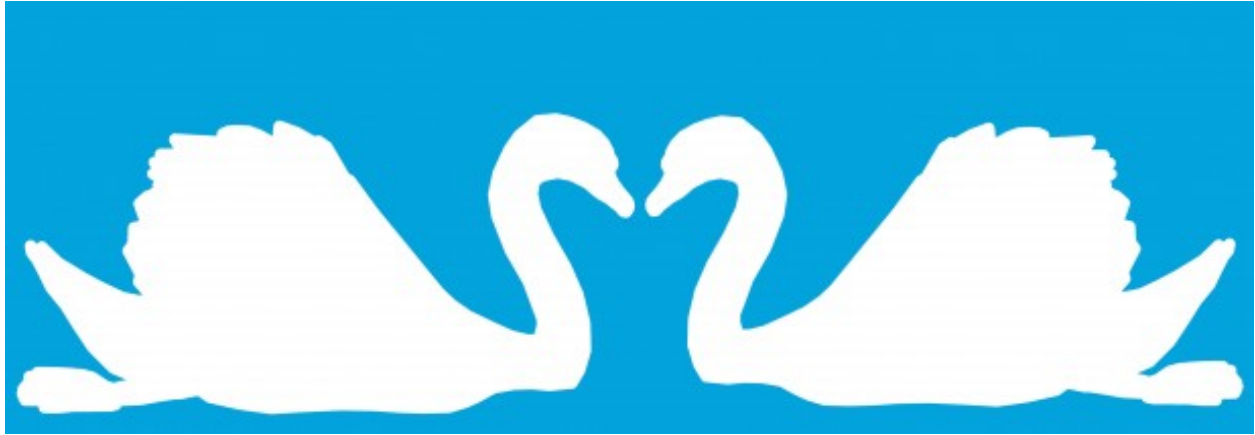
(based on Wheelock Family Theatre's Production 2015)

E.B. White's classic children's book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, tells the story of Louis (LOO-ee), a trumpeter swan, who is different from his brothers and sisters. All the other cygnets (baby swans), make beeping and burbling sounds right away. But Louis is born without a voice. In his quest to communicate, he shows us how **great challenges can lead to unexpected opportunities**.

Unable to “ko-hoh” with his family or trumpet his love to the beautiful young swan Serena, Louis must find other ways to be understood. His father decides to get him an actual trumpet, to use as his voice. Of course being a swan, the Cob (an adult male swan) doesn't have any money. So one day, on an impulse, he crashes through the window of a music store and *steals* a trumpet for his son, vowing to pay back what he owes somehow, someday.

With the help of his own family and a boy named Sam Beaver, Louis learns to read and write, to use American Sign Language (ASL), and to play the trumpet. Hoping just to earn enough money to pay back the music store, he travels from city to city, seeking his fortune. In the end he becomes a professional musician, he woos and wins Serena, and earns enough money to pay back the music store — and then some.

Louis's journey takes him from a remote Canadian pond and the lakes of Montana to the hearts of Boston and Philadelphia, then back again. This award-winning story is inspired by the natural world and **the need we all share to connect and communicate**.



Play Details, Scene by Scene

The play begins with Adult Sam speaking directly to the audience as he searches for his childhood diary. He is the narrator of our story.

Young Sam and his father arrive at their cabin in the woods of Canada, and Sam immediately goes to a pond to observe the wildlife there. He discovers a pair of trumpeter swans who have a new brood of cygnets.

Cob, the father swan, is very proud of his new offspring, and wants to show them off to someone. He spots Young Sam sitting on a nearby log, and leads the cygnets over to him. Each baby stops in front of Sam and greets him with a beep or a burble. Instead of making a sound, Louis pulls on Sam's shoelace and unties it.



As the family prepares to leave for their summer home in the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Montana, Cob and Cygna are concerned that Louis can't make any sounds with his voice. Cob takes Louis aside, and asks him to make some noise. Louis tries, but can't. His parents — especially his dad — worry that life will become hard for Louis as he gets older. Louis worries about this too.

So, Louis flies away from his family, and finds his way to the Beaver family's "Bar Nothing Ranch," also in Montana. When Louis explains his situation, Sam takes him to

school and asks a teacher to help Louis learn. Mrs. Hammerbotham is skeptical, but the clever swan proves to be a quick study. He learns to read and write and to use American Sign Language (ASL) — because this school understands that there are many ways to communicate, and the English language is only one.

After a while, Louis prepares to rejoin his family at Red Rock Lakes. Sam gives him the gift of a small chalkboard (or slate), some chalk, and an eraser, to wear around his neck. Louis is thrilled that he will now be able to communicate with everyone he meets. Of course, the family is overjoyed to see Louis, but they can't read, so the chalkboard turns out to be no help at all.

When Louis spots a beautiful cygna (female swan) named Serena, he falls in love, but has no way to tell her. This is when Cob impulsively decides to take action. He flies to a music store in the nearby city of Billings, crashes through the front window, and makes off with a trumpet. When Cob hangs the trumpet around his son's neck, Louis is grateful, but he doesn't know how to play. So, he goes to see Sam again.

Sam is on his way to a boys' summer camp in the woods of Ontario. Louis joins him, practices bugle calls from a book, and is hired as the official bugler of Camp Kookooskoos. He is quite good at it, and Mr. Brickle, who runs the camp, is pleased.

When Louis saves one of the campers from drowning, he is awarded a life-saving medal, which he hangs around his neck. At the end of the summer, Mr. Brickle pays Louis \$100, which he puts into a waterproof bag, so Louis can wear that around his neck as well. At this point, things are getting heavy.

Around his neck Louis now wears:

- a portable slate
- a trumpet
- a life-saving medal
- a bag to hold all the money he earns

Louis is not afraid of working hard, so he gets a running start, and flies all the way across the continent to the Boston Public Garden.

The man in charge hires Louis to swim in front of the swan boats while playing his trumpet. Louis becomes a sensation, is featured in the newspaper, and attracts big crowds. It's the end of the season, so he only works for two weeks. However, he earns \$200, and adds it to his money bag.





Meanwhile, a New Jersey music promoter named Lucky hears about Louis, and hires him to play at a nightclub. He offers \$500 a week for ten weeks, which is pretty good for a young swan. So Louis makes his way south.

When Lucky and Louis meet (at Bird Lake, inside the Philadelphia Zoo), two zoo employees try to capture Louis. The zoo has a policy of claiming all swans that find their way to their lake and pinioning them. Pinioning is when they snip off the tip of a wing, so the bird can't fly away.

Louis is scared. Lucky worries that he will lose money if Louis can't leave the zoo and get to New Jersey. So, they make a deal. The zoo agrees not to pinion Louis's wings, as long as he gives a concert at the zoo every Sunday.

Louis agrees and settles in to his new routine. He plays Sunday afternoon concerts at the zoo, which he enjoys, and six nights a week at a rowdy nightclub in New Jersey, which he does not. Other swans at the zoo admire the talented young musician, especially the females. But Louis only has eyes for his distant love Serena. He longs to return to the Red Rock Lakes, see her again, and repay his father's debt to the music store.

One day, near the end of his ten weeks, a huge storm passes through the zoo. Its strong winds carry a ruffled and befuddled Serena right down to Bird Lake, and Louis can't believe his luck. By writing messages on his slate, he stops the zoo keepers from pinioning Serena's wings.

Once she recognizes him and hears the beautiful music of his trumpet, she falls in love with Louis. The two want to get married and raise their cygnets in the wild. However, the zoo wants to keep Serena, and won't let her leave. Louis reaches out to Sam for help again. When Sam arrives in Philadelphia, he comes up with a plan that seems to suit everyone.

He points out that swans usually have a brood of cygnets each year, and there is always one who needs "special care and attention." So, if Louis and Serena are allowed to leave, they promise to bring that one cygnet each year to live at the zoo. Everyone agrees.

Louis returns to Red Rock Lakes in Montana, proud and excited. He has a beautiful wife, plays all kinds of music on his trumpet, and has earned more than enough money



to pay back the music store.

When his dad learns of Louis's success, he can't wait to bring the money to the store and settle his heavy debt. Louis hangs the money bag and slate (with a message written on it) around his father's neck, and Cob takes off.

Though he finds it hard to fly with the slate and money bag, Cob is determined, and heads straight toward the music store in Billings. However, as he approaches overhead, the owner, Mr. Watson, spots him. Worried that his store will be robbed again, he pulls out a shotgun and shoots. Cob is hit, and faints when he sees his own blood.

Nonetheless, he has accomplished his mission.

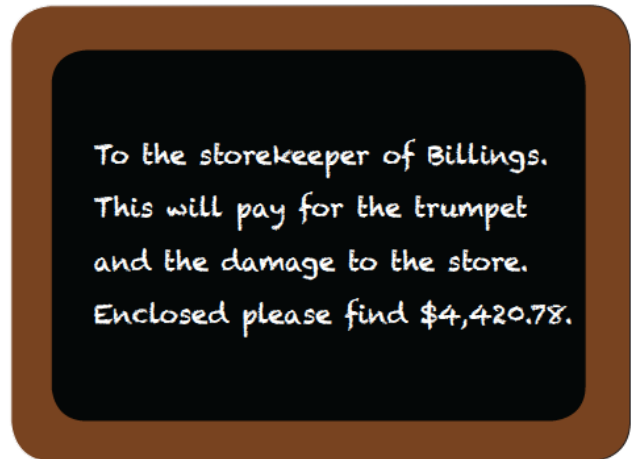
A crowd gathers around the fallen bird, including shoppers, a police officer, and a game warden. An ambulance arrives, and takes Cob away to the hospital. Luckily, he is not badly hurt, recovers quickly, and flies home before any of the townspeople can even visit him.

Meanwhile, outside the music store, Mr. Watson finds the moneybag, and reads the message on Louis's slate. It says:



The game warden argues that this money should go to him, because he is in charge of all things to do with wildlife. Mr. Watson does not agree.

Eventually, a judge in the crowd rules in favor of Watson, but Watson vows to keep only enough money for repairs to the store and for the cost of the trumpet. He agrees to donate the rest to the Audubon Society, an organization that helps birds.



When Cob returns to the lakes, Louis and Serena have already left for their honeymoon. They have kept their destination secret, but Sam thinks he knows where they went. In a final flashback to childhood, Young Sam and his dad visit the Canadian pond where Sam first met Louis. Sure enough, they hear a trumpet in the distance, and Sam knows that it's Louis playing for Serena.

Questions

- Did you read the book *The Trumpet of the Swan* before coming to see the play?
- What similarities and/or differences did you notice between the two?

Diaries and Journals

At the beginning of the play, Adult Sam is searching the woods for a daily diary he kept about his childhood life and adventures.

In the book *The Trumpet of the Swan*, author E.B. White tells us that:

Sam kept a diary— a daybook about his life. It was just a cheap notebook that was always by his bed. Every night, before he turned in, he would write in the book. He wrote about things he had done, things he had seen, and thoughts he had had. Sometimes he drew a picture. He always ended by asking himself a question so he would have something to think about while falling asleep.

Questions

- Have you ever kept a diary or journal yourself?
- Why do you think Sam kept one?
- *How* did Sam keep his diary?

Activities

Activity 1: If you don't already have one, create your own diary (or journal).

If you *do* have one, consider creating a separate journal, just for this project.

Choose a notebook or binder and decorate the outside. Use glue and glitter, markers, crayons, colored pencils, or perhaps pictures cut out from magazines. Be creative and make the book your own. You could also create your journal on a computer or tablet or other communication device.

To get started, use some of the topics suggested below. Feel free to make up your own topics based on events in your daily life — or do both!

- Describe yourself to your journal as if it were a person meeting you for the first time.
- Write about how you feel about keeping a journal.



Activity 2: Write in your journal every day for one week. The entries don't have to be long, but try to always end with a question for yourself. If you enjoy journaling, keep going after you finish the week. See where it takes you.

Resources

Books

- *A Book of Your Own: Keeping a Diary or Journal* by Carla Stevens
- *Doing the Days: A Year's Worth of Creative Journaling, Drawing, Listening, Reading, Thinking, Arts & Crafts Activities for Children Ages 8-12* by Lorraine M. Dahlstrom

Online

- *Journal Buddies* — <http://journalbuddies.com>
...information, articles and resources about journaling, writing ideas, journal prompts, kids writing, building and strengthening self-esteem in children and other topics such as creative writing
- *What We Do All Day; Creative Journal Ideas for Kids*
<http://www.whatdowedoallday.com/2015/05/creative-journal-ideas-for-kids.html>
- *Picklebums; Kids and Journaling* — <http://picklebums.com/kids-and-journaling>

WFT's Production 2015

Shelley Bolman is the director of WFT's production of *The Trumpet of the Swan*. When asked to pick some key words to summarize the themes of the play, he chose **Ability** and **Communication**. This production focuses on both themes in many ways.

About Ability

Bolman says, "*The Trumpet of the Swan* was published in 1970, when E.B. White was 70 years old. Some of the language, and the ideas about people with disabilities, needed updating." Of course, the character of Louis has the obvious difference of **not being able** to make sounds like other swans. In the beginning of the story, his father is extremely concerned that Louis *can't* do something. He sees his son's silence as a huge problem.

In the book, Cob uses the word 'defective' to describe his son's inability to make swan sounds. Louis even talks about himself that way. The original version of the *play* used the word 'handicap,' and more modern language might say that Louis *has* a disability.

Bolman tweaks the language even further, calling Louis's lack of voice a "great challenge." Now, in the play, Cob tells Louis, "Don't be sad about this - condition. The world is full of people who have overcome **great challenges**, many of them becoming superior individuals." Once he gets past his initial concerns, Cob starts to think creatively, and to look for things that Louis **is able** to do. He is the one who comes up with the idea of getting a trumpet for Louis to use in place of his voice.

About Communication

From the perspective of **communication**, an interesting element of this production is that Elbert Joseph, the actor who plays Louis, is Deaf. He uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate, and ASL is seamlessly integrated into the show.

Bolman says, "Louis learns to sign when he goes to Sam Beaver's school. The teacher, Mrs. Hammerbotham, uses some signs with her class, and the students use a few simple signs as well. So, it becomes clear that this school teaches ASL as part of the regular curriculum. Because of this, Sam Beaver also signs, and he will understand Louis when *he* is signing.

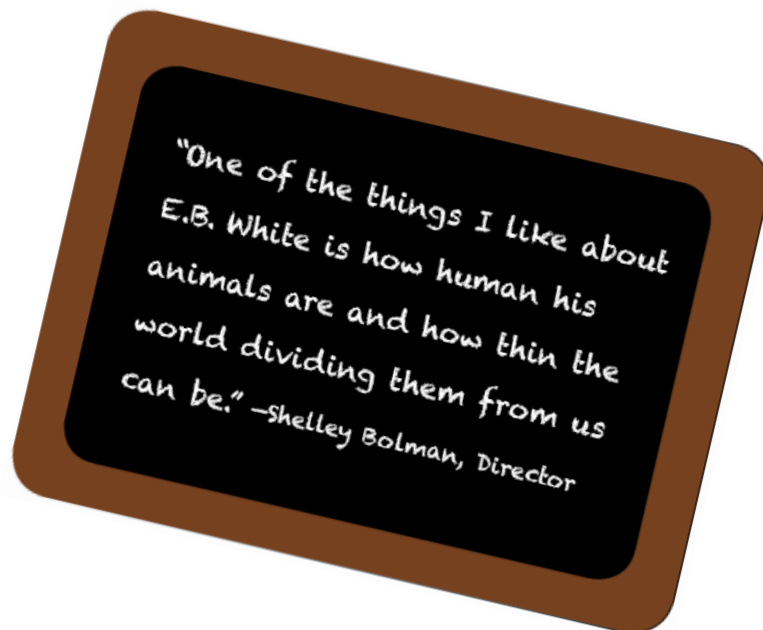
The idea is that it doesn't always need to be up to the person who is 'different' to figure out how best to communicate. This production portrays hearing characters who have simply decided that ASL is a useful language that will enrich individual lives and aid in communication."

Another form of communication used by people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (but which turns out to be helpful for *all kinds* of people) is captions. At Wheelock Family Theatre, nearly every performance includes open captions. This means that the whole audience can see a text version of everything being said on stage.

These captions usually appear on screens at either side of the stage. For this play, however, the captions are integrated right into the set. The backdrop is a giant chalkboard, which serves as a close-up of the slate Louis wears around his neck and uses to write messages. It will also be used to display open captions.

About Costumes

Bolman says, “One of the things I like about E.B. White is how human his animals are and how thin the world dividing them from us can be. Louis certainly ‘acts human’ in certain ways, and it might be argued that some of the humans ‘act’ like animals. In this vein animal costumes will have a distinctly human influence, albeit with a 1940’s sensibility, while



the costumes the humans wear will be contemporary. I hope this gives the animal world a closeness to the human world while still preserving a sense of majesty.”

About Music

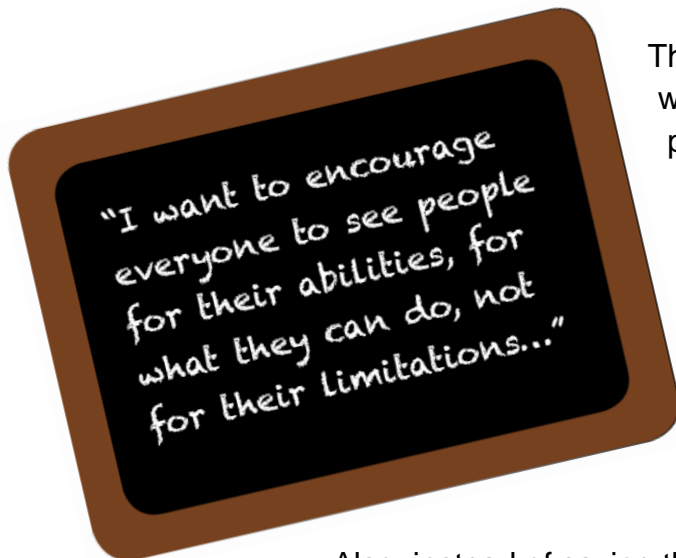
“Finally, I am also trying to jazz the show up a little. Louis’s name is clearly a reference to Louis Armstrong, and yet the play has no jazz music in it. The script suggests some music, but allows for the director to add or change other pieces. So I am adding jazz into all the transitions as well as adding a couple of jazz numbers to the show.”

Ability

Director Shelley Bolman reminds us that “We’re all, when it comes down to it, on the spectrum of **ability versus disability**. I want to encourage everyone to **see people for their abilities**, for what they **can do**, not for their limitations... just as Cob *eventually* does for Louis.”

For example. When Louis goes to school, he learns to read and write. When he gets his trumpet, he teaches himself to play. It never occurs to him that he might not be able to do these things. Not being able to make sounds with his voice is a *challenge* for Louis, but it doesn’t slow him down. He just finds other ways to say what he wants or needs.

WFT teaching artist Donna Folan puts it this way. “The idea that each of us has our own particular ways of tackling challenges, of communicating our ideas, of learning or doing something new, goes beyond the notion of ability or *disability*. It is a universal truth of the human condition; it is part of what makes each of us — delightfully and distinctively — exactly who we are.”



The words we use today to describe people with disabilities are very different from those people might have used in the 1970s. As Shelly Bolman mentions, negative words and phrases like ‘defective’ or ‘handicapped’ were common. Today, we try to use language that puts the person first, and the disability or condition second. So, instead of saying, “She’s a spina bifida kid,” you would say “She is a child with spina bifida.”

Also, instead of saying that someone is ‘confined to a wheelchair,’ you might say that the person ‘uses a wheelchair’ or ‘is a wheelchair user’. Suddenly, we are talking about the wheelchair as an instrument of freedom instead of one of confinement or imprisonment. The wheelchair becomes a vehicle, like a car or a bike or roller skates, that allows its user to move about freely and independently.

Questions

- Do you or does someone you know have a disability?
- What does that mean to you? What does it mean to them?
 - In what way does disability change the way this person lives in the world?

- Does it affect movement? sight? hearing? the ability to understand things? the ability to speak or otherwise communicate? Something else?
- Have you ever faced a great challenge that turned into an unexpected opportunity? Write about it in your journal.

Activities

- Do some research on disability terminology. Try to find out:
 - what kinds of words people used in the past and the words we use now to describe different types of disabilities.
 - Compare notes with others in your group.
 - Research *People First Language* or *PFL*.
 - What is it?
 - Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?
 - Have a discussion about how and why language describing disability has changed over time.
- As a group brainstorm a list of things that are hard to do and a list of things that are easy.
 - What makes the hard things hard?
 - What makes the easy things easy?
 - Did everyone agree about which are hard and which are easy?
 - Why or why not?
- Pick one thing you are particularly good at, and think of that ability as a superpower. Now, use your journal to:
 - write a story about yourself using your superpower.
 - draw a picture or comic strip of yourself using your power to make the world a better place.
 - improvise a scene in which you use your power to solve a problem no one else can.

Resources

- *Disability Is Natural*
<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com>
 Information on People First Language, as well as changing perspectives and expectations about people with disabilities.
- *Kids' Quest on Disability and Health*
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/kids/index.html>
 Information, quizzes, and activities to help kids explore and challenge their

assumptions and perceptions about disability and health. From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

➤ *Friends Who Care*

<http://www.easterseals.com/explore-resources/making-life-accessible/friends-who-care.html>

An educational program designed to help children better understand what it means and how it feels to be a young person with a disability. From Easter Seals.

➤ *Count Me In*

<http://www.pacer.org/puppets/count.asp>

A puppet program designed to help children and adults learn about disabilities and chronic illnesses... From The PACER Center (the Minnesota Parent Training and Information Center)

➤ *Disability Awareness, Center for Parent Information and Resources*

<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/awareness>

An expansive list of resources about specific disabilities, as well as links to information on disability etiquette.

Communication

Some people are great speakers, and are very good at expressing their thoughts and feelings with spoken words. Other people find it easier to collect and organize their thoughts by writing them down. Still others prefer art or music or dance or theatre as an outlet for their ideas and feelings. What kind of communicator are you?

Define

- What is the definition of communication?
 - What does the word mean to you?
- How does Louis communicate with Sam?
- How does Louis communicate with his family?
- How do you think Louis feels when he is unable to communicate with Serena?
 - How does he finally communicate with Serena?
 - How do you think he feels after that?
- Have you ever communicated with an animal? Your family dog or cat? A chipmunk or squirrel? A horse or a goat?
 - If so, what were you trying to communicate to each other? How did you get your message(s) across?

Brainstorm

How many different types of communication can you think of?

- What is your favorite way to communicate? *Why?*
 - What senses and abilities do you use to communicate in this way?
 - What would you do if you could not communicate in this way?
- What form of communication do you use most successfully? *Why?*
 - What senses and abilities do you use to communicate in this way?
 - What would you do if you could not communicate in this way?
- Is the form of communication you use most successfully the same as your *favorite* form? *Why* or *why not?*
- Do you think that communication is something you can improve? *Why?* *How?*
- Do you ever consciously *practice* communicating?

Activity

Choose one type of communication you would like to use more successfully.

- List the skills you need for this type of communication, and make a plan to practice those skills.
- Practice for one week. Record daily occurrences in your journal.
- At the end of the week, sum up the experience in your journal.

The Natural World

The narrator of this play is Sam Beaver, a man sharing with us stories of his youth. He talks about camping in the wilderness of Canada. Sam loves nature, and tries to learn all he can about it. He is a keen observer of the sights and sounds of animals, birds, plants, trees, and the changing seasons.

When he first spots Cob and Cygna at the pond in the Canadian woods, Sam sits quietly on a log and watches Cygna sitting on her nest full of eggs. However, he doesn't make a sound or disturb the swans, until Cob brings the cygnets over to greet him.

For WFT's production of *The Trumpet of the Swan*, set designer Mac Young was inspired by the idea of "nature's playground." It includes playground elements, like a see-saw, a slide, and areas for climbing. All of these elements together look like rocks and trees and a pond.

The place where Sam and his dad camp is in the deep woods of Canada. Other than Shorty, who takes them to and from their cabin, there don't seem to be any other humans around.



Questions

- Have you ever been to a place like that?
- Do you live near areas with a lot of trees and animals?

- How do you feel about nature, in general?
- Do you spend a lot of time outdoors?
 - Do you enjoy it?
 - Why or why not?
- Do you have a *favorite* outdoor place?
 - Why do you like it?
 - How do you feel when you go there?

Activities

Activity: Nature Walk/Observation

Take a walk outside and really pay attention. Turn off your electronic devices, or, better yet, don't bring any with you. Find someplace to sit quietly. Concentrate on using all your senses to observe.

- What do you see/hear/smell/taste/feel? Write or draw your responses in your journal. You might also:
 - Take pictures.
 - Make up a song or dance inspired by your observations.
 - Collect small items like rocks or twigs or leaves, and arrange them in a way that you think is beautiful. Play with color and shape and texture.
- Make a list of the animals, birds, insects, or other creatures around you.
 - What are they doing?
 - Are they communicating with each other? How can you tell?

Resources

- *Peace, but Not Quiet; Nature Journals*
<http://peacebutnotquiet.com/nature-journals-2>
A blog entry about creating nature journals with kids.
- *Nature Journaling: A new way to enjoy nature*
<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3905>

Your Experience of the Play

Questions

How did you feel about the play?

- Did you have a favorite part?
 - If so, what was it and why was it your favorite?
- Who is your favorite character in the play?
 - Why? What made this character stand out for you?
- What does it take for you to believe in a character?
- How did the elements of theatre influence your choice?
 - Was there something about how the character was written by the playwright that struck you?
 - Did the actor for that part do something that made the character particularly interesting?
 - Was there something about the way the character moved around the stage or interacted with other characters that you noticed?
- If you were in this production, what character would you want to play and why?
- Would you rather be onstage, backstage, or in the audience?

This story takes place in many different locations, but this production uses just one basic set. How did the set, props, lighting, costumes, and acting help you feel like you were moving from one place to another in the world of the play?

Activities

Try one or more of the activities and exercises below.

Activity 1: Sketch your own set design.

If you were designing the set for this play, what would you do differently?

- Use a shoebox, tissue box, or other small box as a stage, and build a miniature version of your set.
- Use recycled materials (such as paper tubes, tinfoil, fabric scraps, packing peanuts, etc.), as well as paint, glue, and whatever else you wish, to create the set and props.

Activity 2: Write and produce an extended ending to *The Trumpet of the Swan*.

- Choose specific characters and topics to focus on. Here are a few suggestions:
 - Louis and Serena's first year of married life
 - Young Sam's life
 - the transition from Young Sam to Old Sam
 - what happens after the play ends
 - the animals at the Philadelphia Zoo and what they do for the next year(s) after

Louis and Serena leave

- the lives of Louis's siblings
- Louis's parents' activities while he is away
- choose another character and your own idea to explore!
- Cast the scene.
 - Decide how you want to direct it.
 - Work with your actors to make your vision real.
 - Make props and gather costume pieces, if you wish.
- Practice. Have a rehearsal with your actors.
- Present your scene to your class or group.

Activity 3: Improvise: Write a beginning to a scene that extends the play, then work with members of your group to improvise the rest of the scene. That means that you work together to make up what happens next in the story, on the spot.

- Write up a description, including what characters are in the scene and what is happening when it begins.
- Have people volunteer to be the required characters at the beginning of the scene.
- Tag people out.
 - Ask people watching the scene to pay close attention. Then, if they have a new idea for moving the action forward, have them say “freeze.” The actors in the scene freeze in place.
 - The new person taps a character on the shoulder. That actor steps out, and the new one takes over.
 - You can add a “two minute” rule to keep students from being tagged out too quickly.

Activity 4: Choreograph and perform a movement piece or dance.

- Pick a piece of jazzy trumpet music that appeals to you or use a recording of nature sounds from a marsh or pond.
- Close your eyes, and see how the music/sounds make you feel. Move your body based on those feelings.
- Use large sheets of blue fabric to represent water.
- Create props and/or costumes that go with the type of movement you're doing.

Activity 5: Paint.

Make a painting of a scene from the production or showing your own impressions of how that location might look.

Activity 6: Draw a cartoon.

Make a cartoon based on the play as a whole or on a specific character from the show.

Resources

Books

Performance and classroom drama

- *Creative Drama in the Classroom* by Nellie McCaslin
- *Creating Theatre* by Ruth Byers
- *Break a Leg!: The Kid's Guide to Acting and Stagecraft* by Lise Friedman, photography by Mary Dowdle
- *Let's Improvise!* by Milton Polsky
- *Natural Dance* by Peter Slade
- *Writing Your Own Play* by Carol Korty

Music suggesting nature and animals

- "Little Bird" by Edvard Grieg
- Suite from *The Firebird* by Igor Stravinsky
- *The Birds* by Ottorino Respighi
- "Spring" from *The Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi

Online resources

- Children's Music Web — <http://www.childrensmusic.org>
- Create a Pandora channel, beginning with Nature Sounds.
- Create a Pandora jazz channel, beginning with Louis Armstrong.

About the Author: E.B. White

Born in 1899, Elwyn Brooks (E.B.) White lived an accomplished 86 years, writing twenty books for a variety of audiences. Originally, he wrote for adults, and turned to younger audiences later in his life. His children's books are *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Some reports say that the inspiration to write these children's stories evolved from bedtime tales he told to his niece and nephew.

Here is an excerpt from a 1975 E.B. White response to letters from his readers:

I don't know how or when the idea for *The Trumpet of the Swan* occurred to me. I guess I must have wondered what it would be like to be a Trumpeter Swan and not be able to make a noise.

Sometimes I'm asked how old I was when I started to write, and what made me want to write. I started early – as soon as I could spell. In fact, I can't remember any time in my life when I wasn't busy writing. I don't know what caused me to do it, or why I enjoyed it, but I think children often find pleasure and satisfaction in trying to set their thoughts down on paper, either in words or in pictures. I was no good at drawing, so I used words instead. As I grew older, I found that writing can be a way of earning a living.

Are my stories true, you ask? No, they are imaginary tales, containing fantastic characters and events. In real life, a family doesn't have a child who looks like a mouse; in real life, a spider doesn't spin words in her web. In real life, a swan doesn't blow a trumpet. But real life is only one kind of life – there is also the life of the imagination. And although my stories are imaginary, I like to think that there is some truth in them, too – truth about the way people and animals feel and think and act.

Activities

Do some research on E.B. White and write what you learn in your journal.

- Collect basic information on his life and writings. Use the internet, and/or your school or local library as resources.
- Share your research with your peers.
 - What information did you find that was similar or exactly the same?
 - Was there one particular fact you learned that intrigued you? Explain.

Questions

- Have you ever thought about becoming a writer?
- If you could write a story about anything what would it be?

- If you told your story through animal characters, which animals would you use?

Resources

Books about E.B. White

- *E.B. White* - by Julie Berg
- *E.B. White: The Elements of a Writer* - by Janice Tingum
- *E.B. White, Some Writer!: A Biography* - by Beverly Gherman
- *Meet E.B. White* - by Stasia Ward
- *To the Point: A Story about E.B. White* - by David R. Collins, illustrated by Amy Johnson

Books by E.B. White

- *Charlotte's Web*, illustrated by Garth Williams
- *Stuart Little*, illustrated by Garth Williams
- *The Trumpet of the Swan*, illustrated by Fred Marcellino

