

Performance Preview Guide

Walking the Tightrope

Patrons have different ideas of what material or themes are appropriate for them and their families. For this reason, we provide the following information. Please note that the following contains plot spoilers.

Age Recommendation

Wheelock Family Theatre's production of *Walking the Tightrope* may not be suitable for children under the age of 6.

Production Length

The show is estimated to run approximately 50 minutes.

References to Moments of Death

This play deals with the death of Nanna Queenie. Esme asks Grammy Sofie if Nanna is dead and she responds that she is.

Full Synopsis

Every year, during the last week of the summer, Esme goes to visit her Nanna Queenie and Grammy Sofie at their home by the seaside. Every year, "Some things stay the same, and some things change." Grammy Sofie waits at the train station platform to pick her up. They are reunited and Grammy sees how much Esme has grown. Esme notices that Grammy has shrunk, but they decide that Esme feels that way because she has gotten taller. Esme notices that Nanna Queenie isn't there with Grandma Sofie to meet her at the train station. She asks where she is and Grammy tells her that she will tell her when she gets home. When they get home, Grammy cooks Esme an egg and Esme goes to look around the house to see what things have changed and what things have stayed the same. Grammy was there, the table had its checkered tablecloth, the sink still had a crack in it, the egg timer was the same, and the house still smelled of boiled cabbage. She goes to look in the garden and the chickens, trees, wallflowers, and seagulls are all still there. She looks in the living room and sees the television, decorations, the newspaper. The house smells the same and the clock is still ticking; but something was missing. She asks Grammy once again where Nanna is. Grammy tells her that Nanna Queenie has gone away to a nice place. Esme asks if they can go, but Grammy tells her that they can't because it's, "Too late and too far away." They do the dishes and go for a walk by the sea. That night, Esme can't sleep. She asks Grammy for a story, since Nanna usually tells her a story before bed. Grammy tells her that she, "Doesn't usually do stories," but tells her one anyway. Grammy tells her the story of how she comes to visit every year. As Esme falls asleep, Grammy gets up to go to bed herself; but Esme wakes up and once again asks why they can't go visit Nanna. Grammy tells her that Nanna has, "Gone to join the circus."

The next day, the weather is sunny and bright, so Grammy and Esme decide to do what they usually do on hot, sunny days: go to the beach. They play in the sea, dig big holes in the sand, run into the waves, and eat crunchy sandwiches and drippy ice creams. On their way home, Esme asks Grammy to carry her. Grammy warns her that she's getting too big for a carry and that next year, she will have to

carry Grammy instead. They make their way home and have a cup of tea. Esme goes to look around the house and notices that everything is the same, but that Nanna is still not back. She asks Grammy who will make her bread and butter pudding if Nanna Queenie is still not there, since Nanna always makes bread and butter pudding on the first day of the holidays. Grammy says that she will make it. After they find the right bowl, they get Nanna's cookbook and make the pudding together. Esme notices that Grammy isn't that good at making it, and tells her she will have to learn since Nanna isn't there. They eat it together, watch TV, play dominoes and then get ready for bed. Esme can't sleep, so Grammy tells her another story. Esme asks why Nanna didn't take her cookbook with her so that she can cook for the clowns. Grammy tells her that Nanna, "Has all the recipes memorized." Esme asks her to tell her about what Nanna does at the circus. Grammy tells her that she makes custard pies for the clowns to throw. Nanna catches the acrobats, and walks on the tightrope with her "Pink umbrella and shiny dress." Esme falls asleep.

The next day, the weather was cloudy and windy. So, they go down to the sea and then to Pleasure Beach, the local amusement park. They ride roller coasters, play bingo, eat fish and chips, and drink hot chocolate. On their way home, Esme balances on the sea wall instead of asking for a carry. When they get back home, Esme once again looks around the house. Everything is still the same and Nanna Queenie is still not back. Esme begins to worry after finding Nanna's glasses because Esme knows Nanna cannot do anything without her glasses. Grammy goes quiet. She tells Esme that Nanna does not need her glasses anymore. When Esme asks why, Grammy tells her that she will tell her later. They have their tea and watch TV. Esme remembers that Grammy and Nanna used to go dancing together this night of the week. Grammy tells her that she hasn't been dancing since Nanna went to the circus, so they dance together in the living room. Esme decides that she does not want a story, but Grammy tells her about how she and Nanna met and why Nanna wanted to become a tightrope walker. Grammy tells Esme that she met Nanna Queenie while she was walking on the beach back when she was a sailor and Queenie was an office clerk. They had Esme's mom and her uncle Kev, but Queenie always practiced her act on their washing line. Grammy tells her that she misses her and knows Esme misses her too, but that everyone at the circus adores Nanna Queenie. Esme goes quiet because she thinks everything has

changed. She gets upset because she thinks Nanna has forgotten her. Grammy assures her that Nanna could never forget her and that, "She had to go" because the circus came to town. Grammy reminds Esme that, "Most things stay the same, but that some things have to change." They go to bed.

When Esme wakes up the next day, the weather is grey and wet. Grammy asks her what she wants to do, but Esme just rolls over and says she, "Doesn't know and doesn't care." They go to the sea. Grammy notices that Esme has gone quiet and doesn't want to do anything, so they decide to go home. On the way back, they see a poster for the circus. Esme asks if they can go, but Grammy says no. After she asks again, Grammy finally says yes; so they go. They sit down in the front



Shadow puppet storyboard by Emma George for the circus sequence at the end of *Walking the Tightrope*.

row and watch all the acts. Esme notices Nanna hasn't performed yet, but Grammy says she might just not be feeling well enough to perform today. Just as they are about to leave, the sound of the drums signals that the tightrope walker is about to perform. Sure enough, a lady with a pink umbrella and a shiny dress walks the tightrope. She waves at Esme, and then is gone. They walk home after the show. Grammy makes them some tea and notices that Esme hasn't looked around the house yet. Finally, Esme asks Grammy about Nanna one last time, "Is she dead?", she asks. Grammy tells her that she is. Esme remembers that some things stay the same, and that some things change. They talk about the memories that they have made, and Esme enjoys the rest of her vacation. When it is time for her to go back home, Grammy takes her to the train station. Esme asks Grammy if Grammy will also join the circus one day, but Grammy tells her she will be going to the rodeo instead. Esme gets on her train and says goodbye to Grammy until then. Esme reflects on her trip and how this year she went to the circus. She knows that when she comes back next year some things will have changed, but some will also be the same.

Some Additional Information Regarding the Show

Walking the Tightrope: A History of How We Got Here

Walking the Tightrope was written by award-winning playwright, Mike Kenny, and originally produced by New Perspectives in the United Kingdom in 2000. Mike Kenny is an UK based playwright who specializes in young people's theatre. In 2000, he became the first recipient to receive the Children's Award for Playwright for Children, which was given by the Arts Council of England.

Walking the Tightrope has been performed throughout the UK and around the world. Mike Kenny has allowed Wheelock Family Theatre to make changes to his original script. In the original text, the character of Grammy Sofie is actually Grandad Stan. In changing the gender of Grandad Stan, Wheelock's production has been able to represent and explore how love, grief, and joy take root in a LGBTQIA+ family dynamic. Much like Esme's drawings that are utilized in the show, Kenny's text provides a beautiful structure for productions to play with. His poetic script with very few stage directions has allowed this production to experiment with puppetry and videography, while incorporating the motif of the circus to further the spirit of childhood play in the script.

Death and Grief in Children's Literature

Throughout history, storytelling has been used as a tool to pass on traditions and teach lessons to children. People of all ages are often drawn to storytelling because it allows us to empathize with people around us, share information in a memorable way, and make sense of things that we may not be able to understand otherwise (National Geographic Society 2020). Despite this, using stories to teach children about death is a fairly new concept. Up until about the 17th century, death was not revered as one of the taboo topics we might treat it as today, as children most often learned about death in literature that was shared with adults (Butler 105). Early stories from the Brother's Grimm such as *The Juniper Tree* and *Godfather's Death* approach the subject of death from an angle that could be described as mature and dark. Some common themes of other fairy tales of the era include describing death as a form of sleep, death as a result of being evil, love conquering death, and the ability to come back to life (Butler 109).

Around the 1700s, children's stories involving death began to shift closer to what we understand them to be today. The modern depiction of death and loss in children's media can be seen in iconic

modern pieces, such as E.B White's Charlotte's Web. Modern depictions of death attempt to normalize death through encouraging the ideas of remembrance, in the case of Charlotte's Web through Charlotte's children and her beautiful web (Butler 116). Death in some children's literature is explained more scientifically, and represented both factually and interpretatively. This interpretative representation can be seen in *Walking the Tightrope*, where it is both acknowledged that Nanna has died, but also understood that she lives on through Esme and Sofie's memories of the circus. Despite the fact that the process of death is not described in *Walking the Tightrope*, it is acknowledged by both Esme and Grammy Sofie's. The imaginative qualities of Nanna being at the circus and one day, Grammy going to the rodeo, allow the concept of death as a form of continuance to be utilized through playfulness.

The Circus of Design: Creating an Environment of Childhood Imagination and Play

Children's media often presents themes of death in a way that children can contextualize and better understand that death is a natural thing that occurs to all people at some point. With many fairy tales framing death in the moral sense of good versus evil, children's media creators strive to emphasize that death is a universal experience (Violetta-Irene & Anastasia 154). In doing this, illustrators of children's books abandon the gloomy colors children commonly associate with death because of mainstream funeral practices and exchange them for bright, vibrant colors, earth tones, and watercolor pigments depending on the tone they are attempting to achieve in order to show that death has just as many colors as life does (Violetta-Irene & Anastasia 155). Much like illustrators are responsible for designing the visual world to elevate the text within children's books, designers are responsible for doing so within the theatre. Wheelock's production design mirrors this; centering childhood play and artistic sensibility in the design elements. With colorful texture and artwork that evokes the memory of children's art being at the center of design concepts, Scenic Designer, Sam Mastrati, realizes the world of childhood play, creativity, and the imagination of Esme's mind. Elements of design are often multidimensional, with Grammy's cottage turning into the circus tent, shadow puppets created by costume designer Emma George and scenic designer Sam Mastrati being used as a tool of physical storytelling, bright and lively lights designed by Qian Chengyuan and assisted by Klara Ballay, and original music and sound designed by Sean Doyle and assisted by Sam Bliss. These elements create a multisensory experience that utilizes the colors of life and shades of experiences to create an environment that not only evokes the feeling of childhood play, but elevates the joy of pretending, playing, and creating on which many children thrive.

Queer Family Structures on Stage

Historically, the representation of spousal bereavement is often focused on the relationship between heterosexual partners, thereby centering traditional family structures. Spousal loss in queer relationships differs, specifically since queer relationship dynamics do not typically align with those of traditional heterosexual ones. Loss of a spouse or partner for heterosexual couples can look many different ways; but under traditional and



Shadow puppet storyboarding by Emma George depicting Sophie and Queenie's meeting and love story.

historical gender roles, loss of a husband could mean the loss of financial stability or protection, while the loss of a wife could mean the loss of companionship or a caregiver relationship (Carr & Jeffreys 85). *Walking the Tightrope* explores the lesbian relationship between Queenie and Sofie, as Sofie experiences Queenie's loss later in her life. The effects of grief in lesbian relationships is objectively less researched, but queer loss in a world that exists after the AIDS crisis of the 1980s is overwhelmingly complex and nuanced, given the early traumas older adults in the LGBTQIA+ community experienced in their youth and early adulthood. Lesbian bereavement of a partner often can signify a loss of identity and sense of self that is rooted in the social, cultural, and personal aspects of one's world in relationship to their queerness (Broderick et al. 229).

The representation of LGBTQIA+ family structures on stage is not only extremely important for children to witness and learn to understand, but for adults to see themselves represented as well. The opening of awareness in regards to children's understanding of what a family can look like outside of their own contributes to their appreciation of diverse family structures and engages them in becoming aware of their own familial identities and structures ("How to Help Children Understand Diverse Families"). Grammy Sofie's and Nanna Queenie's relationship has opened up new pathways for our team to represent diverse families with lesbian grandparents and to approach death from a Queer Theory lens as well. Queer Death Theory critiques and analyzes death from a feminist, queer, and decolonial perspective to better understand death outside of how it is normally perceived by western societies (Dadomska, Mehrabi, & Lykke 2020). Queer Death Theory aims to humanize death and understand it as a part of life in addition to celebrating and understanding that those we have lost can live in our memory and through the impact they have made on our lives (Dadomska, Mehrabi, & Lykke 2020). Through this method, we come to understand death and mourning differently from the way it has been presented in a western society.

Some Questions to Discuss with Your Family Before the Show

We invite you to open up a dialogue with your family before the show. Some conversation starters could be:

- Do you have a favorite story from your childhood? If so, what do you remember about it? What were your favorite parts of the story?
- Have you ever been to the circus? If so, what do you remember liking the most about it? If not, would you like to one day go?
- Do you have a favorite meal that you make with your family? What is it and why is it your favorite?
- If you were a performer in the circus, what would your act be?
- What does it mean to grow up every year?
- Do you remember being in someone's tummy when you were a baby?
- Do you visit your older relatives or grandparents? If so, what kinds of smells, tastes, or sounds do you remember or enjoy?
- Do you have a favorite place you go in the summer? If so, where do you go?
- Have you ever been to the ocean? Do you like the big waves?
- Which do you like better? Hot, sunny days or cloudy, windy days?

Some Additional Resources & Related Materials

Good Grief Program at Boston Medical Center

<https://www.bmc.org/programs/good-grief-program>

Good Grief's Guide to Supporting Children Through Grief

https://www.bmc.org/sites/default/files/Programs_Services/Programs_for_Children/Good_Grief_Program/Pediatrics-Good-Grief-Program.pdf

The Children's Room: Grief Support Services

<https://childrensroom.org>

The following books for children also deal with themes of death as well as continuance and treasuring memories of loved ones who have passed.

Brown, Laurie Krasny & Brow, Mark: "When Dinosaurs Die"

DePaola, Tommy: "Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs"

Karst, Patrice: "The Invisible String"

Nicholas, Susan: "Death of Cupcake"

Paterson, Katherine: "Bridge to Terabithia"

Penn, Audrey: "Chester Raccoon and the Acorn full of Memories"

Soetoro-Ng, Maya: "Ladder to the Moon"

Thomas, Pat: "I Miss You: A First Look at Death"

Thompson, Holly: "One Wave At A Time"

White, E.B.: "Charlotte's Web"

Books for children that further explore the themes of the circus.

Falconer, Ian: "Olivia Saves the Circus"

Fleischman, Pauls: "Sidewalk Circus"

Gerstein, Mordicai: "The Man Who Walked Between the Towers"

Johnson, Crockett: "Harold's Circus"

Pernice, Clare: "Circus Girl"

Van Dusen, Chris: "The Circus Ship"

McCully, Emily Arnold: "Mirette on the Highwire"

Books that celebrate non-traditional family structures, LGBTQ+ families, and include LGBTQ+ themes.

Combs, Bobbie: "ABC A Family Alphabet Book"

Gonzalez, Maya: "Call Me Tree/Llamame Arbol"

Love, Jessica: "Julián is a Mermaid"

Newman, Lesléa: "Mommy, Mama, and Me"

O'Leary, Sara: "A Family is a Family is a Family"

Richardson, Justin and Parnell, Peter: "And Tango Makes Three"

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