



# Zoe's Play

Classroom guide



# On fairytales...

All good fairytales have meaning on many levels: only the child can know which meanings are significant to him at that moment. As he grows up, the child discovers new aspects of these well-known tales, and this gives him the conviction that he has indeed matured in understanding, since the same story now reveals so much more to him. This can happen only if the child has not been told didactically what the story is supposed to be about. Only when discovery of the previously hidden meanings of a fairytale is the child's spontaneous and intuitive achievement does it attain full significance for him. This discovery changes a story from something the child is being given into something he partially creates for himself.

**Bruno Bettelheim - *The Uses of Enchantment***

# INTRODUCTION

Thank you for bringing your class to see *Zoe's Play* at The Ark. We hope they – and you – enjoyed it.

We believe that attending a live performance is singularly the most important thing one can do to ignite a child's interest in theatre. But, of course, the exploration of the play's key themes back in the classroom can deepen their understanding of the experience.

In this pack you will find information on the play's key themes, as well as some ideas for how you might use these themes to help encourage the children in your class to develop thoughts and opinions concerning the issues raised in the play.

## Key themes

- Voice of the child versus the voice of the Adult
- Man's impact on the environment
- Idealism versus realism
- Complex family dynamics

# CHILDHOOD/ADULTHOOD

- *Childhood and the refusal to comprise*
- *Adulthood and the need to comprise*

Adults will understand well the choices made by Dada and Mama. But most adults will also remember that becoming an adult involves all sorts of compromises and that Zoe's passion, her 'extremeness', her refusal to comprise, will probably evoke memories of lost selves. Children will probably feel closer to her as she takes on the adult world. It is also possible that some children will dismiss Zoe as 'off the wall'. As you will no doubt know, children aged 8-13 years are not all idealists, and they have ingested quite an amount of the dominant values of our time. We certainly feel that some children may prefer to see Zoe as a head case. We believe that such a dismissal of her is worth challenging: like any character in fiction she represents certain values and attitudes. The fact that she is so connected to her dreams and

imagination might be used as a charge against her, but it is worth offering the counter argument that Zoe is in touch with certain truths and that she can see some of the disadvantages of the adult world of rationality and commerce.

The voice of the child is one that is constantly struggling to be heard throughout the play. Dada is the dominate force that Zoe has to battle with in order to be heard. Dada sees an adult world of dangerous forests inhabited by wolves, which little girls have no understanding of. He underestimates Zoe, trying to protect her from the situation while also turning away from the truth that he is aware of deep-down: that her grasp on reality is just as valid as his.

This struggle for Zoe to be heard by her parents, to voice her opinion and concerns is one children will be very familiar with.

# Exercise 1

Ask the children who they identify with most in the play: Zoe or Dada?

Spilt the class into two groups and start a debate. One group must take the side of Zoe and the other the side of Dada. This encourages the children to see the situation from the characters' point of view, even if they don't agree with it. Each group must state the reasons they agree with either Zoe or Dada.

## Exercise 2

Ask a child from your class to play the part of Dada and ask another to play the part of Zoe.

Zoe is trying to talk to Dada about her feelings concerning the wolves and Nana. Ask the children to act out how they might resolve the situation.



# THE ENVIRONMENT

Though the play is set long before 'the environment' became an issue in the formal sense which applies today, it certainly does explore some of the central principles which form contemporary environmental debate. Nana supports the principles of regeneration, of humans understanding their place within the rhythm of nature and their position on the planet as custodians, but not owner, of nature.

"Nana says no one owns the forest" Zoe tells her Dada. To this he replies that, while this is true, "whoever can make fields out of the forest owns the fields". We see Dada transformed from a boy in love with nature to a young man who follows the philosophy of his Uncle Jack, who believes that "there's no true future in mushrooms. You could grow corn or grass where them mushrooms grew". And though Nana used to warn Uncle Jack against

teaching Dada this way of thinking, Uncle Jack would dismiss her by replying "If you ever want him to make real money he'll have to learn to make fields out of the forest".

Our time is deeply challenged by the principals implicit here: the principle of 'progress' versus the destruction which the dominant human definition of progress is causing the planet. Doubtless this debate is something that surfaces regularly in your classroom.



## Exercise 3

Below you will find an inspirational text from the American Indian culture: a culture which suffered more than most from the ravaging by White Man of the natural environment. The text is from Black Elk, Oglala Sioux (1863-1950). Its linking of natural cycles with cycles of human generation and regeneration and its highly particular use of the word power make it a text worthy of reflection.

*“Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind in its great power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles. For theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again on a circle.*

*The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood. And so it is in everything where power moves”*

Do the children think that Nana is right and Dada is wrong?

Do they think it is possible to remain idealistic or will they, like Dada, believe something aged 10 that they will have abandoned at 17?



## Exercise 3 continued...

The linking of Zoe with Nana raises a useful cross-generational point. Is there a partnership between the idealism of youth and the wisdom of old age which is set against the pragmatism of (middle) adulthood?

A specific link between these twin themes of generation and environment is captured well: that we do not inherit the earth from our parents rather we borrow it from our children.

Here is another quote to discuss with your class, by Chief Seattle (1854):

*"...the Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the Earth. All things, are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself..."*



# THE ENVIRONMENT: WOLVES

Wolves have always held an extraordinary fascination for human beings.

They are complex creatures, very sophisticated, with patterns of behaviour that deserve great respect. And yet they are embedded in the human psyche as the epitome of slyness, greed and viciousness. The very phrase 'Big Bad wolf' has entered our languages an epithet of all we mistrust and fear.

If you were to consult one book on wolves, we would recommend *The Wolf Almanac* by Robert H. Busch published in the US by The Lyons Press, which is well-illustrated and explores the topic in a wide variety of ways.





## Exercises 4, 5 & 6

Ask the children how they feel about the wolves in the play. Do they think there is any way Zoe's family could have prevented the situation with the wolves getting this far while still making a living from the land?

Ask the children to make a list of animals whose habitats have been impacted by humans, eg: foxes in urban spaces feeding from bins.

What things can we do to halt or change the impact we are having on the habitats of other animals?



# THE ENVIRONMENT: FORESTS

A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a dark blue hooded cloak over a light-colored dress, stands in a forest. She is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The forest floor is covered in dry, brown leaves and some green ferns. A large tree trunk is visible behind her, and the background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

There are two interpretations of the forest:

1. Benign – Nana and Zoe share this view.
2. An enemy – Dada/ Uncle Jack share this view.

The forest is also a source of conflict between two sets of values:

1. Order, work, domestication, reason, ownership, the pre-eminence of humankind.
2. The subconscious, mutuality, the untamed, play, freedom

This conflict is seen in the divided thinking between Zoe and Dada, and Mama too.



# Exercise 7

Discuss with your class the many things the forest means.

Physical/environmental meanings, which are perhaps best expressed by Nana when she teaches Dada as a young boy and Zoe about the natural rhythms and balance of the forest.

The forest's symbolic meaning. What does the forest mean or stand for in the play?

# FAMILY DYNAMICS

Our image of family is largely determined by our own family life. The play allows the children to observe the dynamics of another family. Drama as an imagined reality is a powerful means for children to see other versions of the world. The play is not set in our time. The position of the father and the dynamics of adult/child relations are not of our time either. However like many aspects of the play they explore archetypal positions and are therefore psychologically true if no longer sociologically accurate.

There are competing definitions of happiness in the family. The most obvious moment in the play where this is explored is in this short exchange below, but it is an ever-present theme of the play. Clearly contemporary children have a multiplicity of definitions of happiness presented to them. It might be a fruitful area for exploration, particularly with the 5th and 6th class children.

**Dada: I can't get through to her. She thinks too much: spends so much time up there-**

**Mama: Maybe it's because she's lonely: if we could spend more time with her.**

**Dada: We ask her to come out with us to work, don't we?**

**Mama: She doesn't like the work.**

**Dada: She should.**

**Mama: But she doesn't.**

**Dada: It's for her. I'm making this farm for her.**

**Mama: But if it doesn't make her happy.**

**Dada: It will when she grows up.**



# Exercise 8

Explore the dynamics of the complex relationships between Mama/Dada/Nana/Zoe.

Discuss the relationship between:

- Nana/Zoe
- Zoe/Mama
- Dada/Zoe
- Nana/Dada

Encourage the children to question why certain characters relationships might be that way.

# Exercise 9

## Why is the play called Zoe's Play?

It might be worth asking the children if they think it is a good title for the play. What would they have called it had they written it. We think it is a good title as it signals:

- That the central character is Zoe
- That she is in charge/ controlling the play
- That the play is about her play and that she plays throughout the play, either regular play as in playing with her wolf puppets in her bedroom or in the play of her imagination/daydreaming/sleep-dreaming.



# Exercise 10

Discuss with the children whether dreaming is real: what do dreams tell us, are dreams important?

Mama and Dada are dismissive of dreaming.

Mama says:

“Oh Zoe, don’t be worrying about your dreams. Dreams just come. They don’t mean anything special.”

Is she right?

# Exercise 11

## Visual response

*Zoe's Play* is, we hope, a rich experience for children's eyes and ears: the organs that are hard-wired to their imaginations. It might be worthwhile to set aside time for the children to make a drawing or picture in response to the play. This could be a direct illustration, perhaps of the set or part of the set, or indeed of one or more of the characters. Otherwise it could be a freer picture of a scene from the play or of any imagined scene, such as one of Zoe's dreams or an image of her in the forest as Zoe/Rasa with her Dada/Ragg. Or perhaps even a drawing of Zoe at 17: has life changed her?; has she managed to change her father's mind?

We would be very happy to receive any pictures made by the children in your class.

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