

PLAYS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

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How High Is Up?

By
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How High Is Up? was first presented by Theatre Centre, UK, in 1994.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1989 my oldest school friend died. He was thirty-two. It was the first time I had experienced the death of anyone very close to me. Naturally, I was deeply upset but more than this - and perhaps because Martyn was my contemporary - I was frightened. Of course I'd always known I would die one day (some day... never) but suddenly I felt truly mortal.

All sorts of questions filled my head: Why? Where's the sense in it? What now? The questions found their way into my work and over the next few years - during which time a further three friends died all too young - I found myself writing about death repeatedly. My plays *THE COLLYWOBBLES* and *LITTLE MAGGIE DANCING* [aimed at teenage and adult audiences respectively] dealt with people's struggle to come to terms with their own/their child's death. Rosamunde Hutt (Director of Theatre Centre) read one of these plays and invited me to lunch.

We talked of theatre in general (what we thought it should be doing); of educative theatre (our specialist area); of death and magic and pain and transformation. But most of all, perhaps, we talked of healing. Rosamunde asked me to write a play for young children that would explore these ideas. I was excited. I was terrified. A play about death for six year olds. I wondered why I'd ever agreed to the proposal. But over the next few weeks we talked and read and met again and (inspired by Caroline Gowdy's strange, quirky drawings in the Penguin Book of Scandinavian Folk Tales) something like a story began to emerge. I went away to Kent to write the play.

On the day I sat down to begin the script, news reached me of the death of yet another friend: my one-time history teacher, Kevin. He wasn't a gardener - he wouldn't have known one end of a hoe from another - but he taught me a great deal, not least that the Arts are to be cherished and enjoyed. Life goes on of course, but I miss him. The play is dedicated to his memory.

DEDICATION

This play is dedicated to the memory of my friend and one-time history teacher, Kevin Charles Conroy, who died in September 1994.

NOTES

This is a play that happens in a world that is a bit like ours and a bit not and works well with a mixed-race company employing a variety of accents - local, national and international.

Little Star, Ba Gia and The Sun & The Moon were written originally for female performers; The Bird Who Has No Wings for a male. Over the years just about every combination has been tried, including dividing The Sun & The Moon between two actors. These are decisions for individual directors but should The Bird Who Has No Wings be played by a woman her name should be Jeremy (and Little Star should struggle to say it thus: Jer... Jera... Jerem...) Equally, Ba Gia should change to Ong Gia if played by a man. Both names are Vietnamese and carry the sense of both age and wisdom. Ba Gia sounds something like Ba-yar; Ong Gia like Ung-yar - with the accent on the second syllable in both cases - but I suggest you check with a Vietnamese speaker.

The magic should be simple and beautiful rather than impressive or mysterious. It should make you smile with wonder and delight. The dance at the end might be a gentle, symbolic affair but I rather like the idea of its building to a joyous, raucous climax, rather in the manner of some Irish dances, with the Sun and Moon and The Bird joining in the whooping and stomping. In any event though, Little Star is alone when it ends. Alone, but no longer afraid.

CHARACTERS

- THE SUN
- THE MOON
- LITTLE STAR
- BA GIA, a gardener
- THE BIRD WHO HAS NO WINGS (BIRD WHNW)
- THE MAGICIAN OF THE ROARING WINDS
- THE MAGICIAN OF THE POURING RAINS
- THE MAGICIAN OF THE SILENT SNOWS

THE PLAY BEGINS

IN THE HEAVENS, THE SUN AND MOON APPEAR. THEY MOVE ON TIPTOE;
THEY SPEAK IN WHISPERS.

SUN Is anybody looking?

MOON I don't think so.

SUN Is anybody listening?

MOON I don't think so.

SUN We'd best be having a dance, then.

MOON We had that, or the kettle will never boil.

SUN And the holidays will never come.

MOON And it will always be Monday morning. [OR WHATEVER TIME
OF WHATEVER DAY IT HAPPENS TO BE]

THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON What dance shall we dance today?

SUN Today we'll dance The Dance That Has No End.

MOON Isn't that the dance we always dance?

SUN T hat, or something very like it.

THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON Can we hear the music?

SUN Oh, the music never stops.

MOON But can we hear it?

SUN If we listen we'll hear it.

THEY LISTEN. SOMEWHERE A CHILD IS SINGING.

MOON Yes. Yes! There it is.

SUN Are we dancing, then?

MOON We are. We are!

THEY DANCE. THEN THE MOON NOTICES THE WORLD.

MOON Will you look at this.

SUN What's that?

MOON A world.

SUN Sure, the place is full of them things.

MOON Will we be having a look through the telescope?

SUN We will not! You know very well it's only to be used in emergencies. I mean what if someone should see us, you know, down there?

MOON Oh, they'll not see us. Just this once.

SUN No.

MOON Go on.

SUN No.

MOON How do we know it's not an emergency if we're not allowed to look?

SUN The answer's No.

PAUSE.

MOON Oh...

SUN What is it?

MOON I'm getting a feeling.

SUN What sort of feeling?

MOON You know, one of my feelings.

SUN And?

MOON Something's going to happen.

SUN Yes?

MOON A bit sad...and a bit not sad.

SUN Is that it?

MOON It's all I can say without having a look.

SUN Go on, then. But be quick about it.

THE MOON LOOKS THROUGH THE TELESCOPE.

SUN Well?

MOON It's a world all right.

SUN We knew that much already.

MOON Well, there's a garden.

SUN Any people?

MOON Two.

SUN Careful now.

MOON Oh!

SUN What?

MOON She's looking up.

SUN Who is?

MOON In the garden.

SUN You don't think...

MOON What?

SUN She's looking at us, do you? Listening to us?

MOON I don't know.

SUN Best be still to be on the safe side.

MOON Right.

SUN We'll watch and see what happens.

PAUSE.

MOON I think this might be one of the sad bits.

SUN Ssh.

MOON And I haven't got a handkerchief.

SUN Will you shush yourself and watch.

MOON I'm watching, I'm watching. There's no need to –

SUN Ssh!

IN THE GARDEN BA GIA IS WORKING. LITTLE STAR IS GATHERING SEEDS IN A BOWL; SINGING AS SHE DOES SO.

LITTLE STAR One for the birds,
 And one for the squirrels;
 One for the gatherer,
 And one for the Spring.

AFTER A TIME SHE STOPS AND SPEAKS TO THE TREE:

LITTLE STAR Look, Tree: I am gathering the seeds the wind has blown from your
 branches. Some I leave for the birds; some I leave for the squirrels;
 some I take for myself, and some I keep to plant in the spring.

SHE RESUMES HER WORK AND HER SONG. THE TREE BEGINS TO SHED ITS LEAVES.

LITTLE STAR Tree! Your leaves! Your leaves are falling!

BA GIA Little Star.

LITTLE STAR Ba Gia, the tree...

BA GIA Come here, Little Star.

LITTLE STAR But the tree, Ba Gia...

BA GIA All in good time, Little Star. Now, come here.

LITTLE STAR GOES TO BA GIA.

BA GIA Have you gathered the seeds for the Spring?

LITTLE STAR Yes, Ba Gia.

BA GIA Show me.

LITTLE STAR DOES SO.

BA GIA Good. Did you leave some for the birds?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BA GIA Did you leave some for the squirrels?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BA GIA Did you take some for yourself?

LITTLE STAR IS SILENT.

BA GIA It is right, Little Star; you will need food for the Winter.

LITTLE STAR Then, yes: I took some.

BA GIA You are learning. When the Spring comes you must learn to dance.

LITTLE STAR Dance?

BA GIA Yes. Everyone must know how to dance, even the Sun and Moon in the heavens.

LITTLE STAR I have never seen them dance.

BA GIA That is because they only dance when no-one is looking.

LITTLE STAR But if no-one is looking, how do we know they dance at all?

BA GIA Doesn't the Sun rise in the East and set in the West?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BA GIA And doesn't the Moon appear over the garden wall and disappear behind the tree?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BA GIA How else, then, do they cross the sky if not by dancing?

LITTLE STAR Er...

BA GIA Now, what about the tree?

LITTLE STAR Look, Ba Gia, the tree is dying. The leaves are falling.

BA GIA It is Autumn, Little Star: leaves fall.

LITTLE STAR Autumn.

BA GIA Nothing to be frightened of; just a part of something bigger. A circle with four sides: spring, summer, autumn, winter. The world turns and the garden changes: growing and flowering; falling and dying; sleeping beneath a blanket of snow but coming alive again with every spring. It's how things are and how they should be. Now tell me, will you remember this?

LITTLE STAR I'll try.

BA GIA Good; because the time is coming when you will need to know it.

LITTLE STAR What time is that?

BA GIA The world turns for people, too, and no-one lives forever. I'm old now - yes - and tired: some mornings I creak like a gate.

LITTLE STAR What are you saying?

BA GIA People die, Little Star, as gardens die; as everything that grows must die.

LITTLE STAR People, yes; but not you.

BA GIA Everybody.

LITTLE STAR Everybody, yes; but not soon.

BA GIA Before the winter ends. You will know the time because I will hang my hat in the tree.

LITTLE STAR Will you come alive again in the spring, like the garden?

BA GIA No. That doesn't happen with people.

LITTLE STAR Then I don't want you to die.

BA GIA It's how things are and how they should be, and your wanting it won't stop it happening. Nothing can stop it happening. You would have to make time stand still.

LITTLE STAR [AFTER A TIME] No.

BA GIA Little Star...

LITTLE STAR It mustn't happen.

BA GIA Please...

LITTLE STAR You mustn't die.

BA GIA It's how things are –

LITTLE STAR Stop saying that!

BA GIA Please, Little Star...

LITTLE STAR No... No... No... No!

LITTLE STAR RUNS AWAY.

BA GIA I'm sorry, Little Star, there is no easy way: no day without night; no spring without winter. But the Dancing Time will come again and you will be here to see it. [SHE TAKES A SCARF, AN UMBRELLA AND A COAT] Oh, Little Star, you never said good-bye.

BA GIA PLACES THE BOWL OF SEEDS UNDER THE TREE. SHE IS LOST FROM VIEW IN THE FALLING LEAVES. IN THE HEAVENS, THE SUN AND MOON APPEAR.

MOON I knew something sad was going to happen.

SUN It hasn't happened yet.

MOON But it's going to; I can feel it.

SUN You and your feelings.

MOON And now she's gone and run away.

SUN Can I not see that for myself?

MOON I'm just saying. And who knows where she is? Not me, that's for sure, because somebody won't let me look through the telescope.

SUN You've had one look already.

MOON I mean, anything could be happening...

SUN No.

MOON She might be lost; or worse, she might be –

SUN Just this once, you said; just once.

MOON Once, twice - what's the difference?

SUN Go on, then, but don't think –

MOON [ALREADY LOOKING] Oh! There she is, the poor, wee thing.

SUN What is it? Has she come to any harm?

MOON No harm; but, oh, she's tired and tearful and awful far from home.

SUN That's where running away gets you.

MOON I was just going to say that.

SUN Let's watch and see what happens.

LITTLE STAR; UNSURE OF WHERE SHE IS OR WHERE TO GO. SHE SITS DOWN ON A ROCK WHICH TURNS OUT NOT TO BE A ROCK BUT THE BIRD WHO HAS NO WINGS.

BIRD WHNW Excuse me!

LITTLE STAR [JUMPING UP] Agh!

BIRD WHNW Do I look like an armchair?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BIRD WHNW Yes, well I'm not.

LITTLE STAR No. [PAUSE] I didn't mean –

BIRD WHNW Should think you didn't! Really! Can't go anywhere these days but somebody doesn't ... And it's not as if they even say they're sorry.

LITTLE STAR Sorry.

BIRD WHNW I mean, it doesn't take much to apologize, but oh, no!

LITTLE STAR I'm sorry.

BIRD WHNW They seem to think it perfectly acceptable behavior to go round sitting on –

LITTLE STAR I said: I'm sorry!

BIRD WHNW Yes. Well. So long as you are. [PAUSE] So... do we have a name?

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BIRD WHNW And do we get to know it?

LITTLE STAR My name is Little Star.

BIRD WHNW Little Star... And what brings you so far from home?

LITTLE STAR Well...

BIRD WHNW Yes?

LITTLE STAR You see...

BIRD WHNW I do?

LITTLE STAR Ba Gia is old and going to die.

BIRD WHNW Oh... And so?

LITTLE STAR I ran away.

BIRD WHNW Ah! And why was that? Were you afraid?

LITTLE STAR No. Yes. I don't know.

BIRD WHNW So long as we're clear, eh?

LITTLE STAR Wait! To make time stand still. That is what Ba Gia said: "You would have to make time stand still." That is why I ran away. If I can make time stand still, it won't happen; Ba Gia won't die.

BIRD WHNW So... You want to make time stand still.

LITTLE STAR Yes.

BIRD WHNW And you don't know how.

LITTLE STAR No.

BIRD WHNW [AFTER A MOMENT] Perhaps I can help you.

LITTLE STAR Who are you?

BIRD WHNW I am The Bird Who Has No Wings.

LITTLE STAR Oh. And you know how to make time stand still.

BIRD WHNW Now, I never said that –

LITTLE STAR But –

BIRD WHNW I might just know what you need to know if you want to know.

LITTLE STAR And what's that?

BIRD WHNW Magic.

LITTLE STAR Magic?

BIRD WHNW That's the thing for making time stand still, you mark my words.

LITTLE STAR And you have magic!

BIRD WHNW No.

LITTLE STAR I thought you said –

BIRD WHNW I had some once, but I left it under the bed and it went all moldy.

LITTLE STAR Then where can I get some?

BIRD WHNW Well, you could try the butcher's. Or the chip shop. But I always think, when you need a bit of magic it's best to go to a magician.

THE BIRD PRODUCES A TELEPHONE DIRECTORY.

LITTLE STAR Where did that come from?

BIRD WHNW Don't ask personal questions. Now, let's see... [LOOKS] Magicians...
Magicians... Magic Carpets... Magic Markers... Magicians! "See
under Wizards." [LOOKS] Wizards... Blizzards... Gizzards...
Lizards... Wizards! "See under Sorcerers." [LOOKS] Ah, here we
are! There are three of them by the look of it: The Magician of the
Roaring Winds: "Twenty-four hour call-out service. Anything legal
considered."; The Magician of the Pouring Rains: "Open seven days
a week. Except Saturdays and Sundays."; The Magician of the Silent
Snows: "You've tried the rest; now try the best."

LITTLE STAR Where do they live?

BIRD WHNW Across The Sea That Has No Shore, I'm afraid; all three of them.

LITTLE STAR But I have no boat and I cannot swim. What am I to do?

BIRD WHNW Well, you could always... Or, then again, you could... [PAUSE]
Mind, I've not been getting out much recently. I suppose the
exercise might do me good.

LITTLE STAR You mean..?

BIRD WHNW Climb aboard and I'll give you a lift.

LITTLE STAR But you haven't got any wings.

BIRD WHNW Oh, full marks! Don't miss a trick, do you?

LITTLE STAR How do you fly?

BIRD WHNW I flap my imagination.

LITTLE STAR And that works?

BIRD WHNW Do you have a better idea?

LITTLE STAR Well... no.

BIRD WHNW No. Well... Jump on then, and let's be off.

LITTLE STAR How long will it take?

BIRD WHNW Until we get there.

LITTLE STAR I must be back before the spring.

BIRD WHNW Why's that?

LITTLE STAR I... have to learn to dance.

BIRD WHNW I see. Well, we'll be back. Hop on.

LITTLE STAR DOES SO. THE BIRD SINKS BENEATH THE WEIGHT.

BIRD WHNW Agh! What have you got in your pockets?

LITTLE STAR Nothing.

BIRD WHNW Well, something weighs a ton. We'll never get off the ground at this rate.

LITTLE STAR Perhaps if I hold my breath: that sometimes works.

SHE DOES. IT DOESN'T.

BIRD WHNW No. It's no use. Something's not right. [PAUSE] Are you worried about anything?

LITTLE STAR Yes. I'm worried about Ba Gia and being away and –

BIRD WHNW That's it then. That's the problem. Worries always weight you down. You mustn't worry, Little Star. I've got a feeling everything's going to turn out just as it should.

LITTLE STAR How do you know?

BIRD WHNW Have I ever let you down?

LITTLE STAR I've only just met you.

BIRD WHNW Exactly. Now, stop worrying and we'll give it another go. [THEY DO SO. THEY BEGIN TO LEAVE THE GROUND.] That's more like it. You see: the less you worry, the lighter you feel.

THEY TAKE TO THE AIR.

LITTLE STAR Yes...Yes! We're up. Above the world. We're flying!

BIRD WHNW Of course we are! [ASIDE] Heavens, it worked!

THEY FLY FOR A TIME. THE BIRD SINGS A SONG.

LITTLE STAR What song is that?

BIRD WHNW It's The Song That Has No Words.

LITTLE STAR What happened to them?

BIRD WHNW Blown away by the wind, I expect.

LITTLE STAR But what does it mean?

BIRD WHNW It doesn't mean anything.

LITTLE STAR Everything has to mean something.

BIRD WHNW Is that right?

LITTLE STAR Oh yes.

BIRD WHNW I wonder.

THEY BOTH SING.

LITTLE STAR Can I ask you something?

BIRD WHNW You just did.

LITTLE STAR What? Oh. Something else then. What's your name?

BIRD WHNW I am The Bird Who Has No Wings.

LITTLE STAR That's not a name. It's what you are.

BIRD WHNW Is that a problem?

LITTLE STAR It's just that "The Bird Who Has No Wings" is a bit difficult to say.

BIRD WHNW Oh, I see: you want something more convenient. Very well, then, you may call me Cynthia.

LITTLE STAR Cynthia!

BIRD WHNW Is there a problem?

LITTLE STAR No but... Cynthia?

BIRD WHNW Now hold on tight; we're on our way.

AND OFF THEY FLY. THE SUN AND MOON APPEAR.

MOON Isn't it marvelous! I'm glad she met that bird or she'd never've got across The Sea That Has No Shore.

SUN If you want my opinion, he's a bit of a strange bird. No wings! And Cynthia! What kind of a name is that?

MOON An awful nice name, don't you think? So light and airy. Like Marjorie... Although that sounds a bit like margarine.

SUN I wish you could hear yourself sometimes.

MOON Pardon?

SUN Never mind. Have a look; see what's going on.

MOON You mean a look through the telescope?

SUN Did I not just say?

MOON That'll be three times.

SUN Will you look!

THE MOON LOOKS THROUGH THE TELESCOPE.

MOON Oh, yes: they've reached The Islands of the Roaring Winds. And someone's doing magic.

SUN That'll be the magician.

MOON Wasn't I just going to say that?

SUN Let's watch and see what happens.