

FOR WE THE YOUNG

Five plays by Finegan Kruckemeyer



CURRENCY PRESS

The performing arts publisher

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF FINEGAN KRUCKEMEYER

Imagine seeing theatre where the world presented seems very familiar, but at the same time strangely unfamiliar. Where children are the protagonists and adults often absent. In which language is playful, poetic and often pretending to be actual real words. Where stories are eventful, extraordinary, and often epic in nature. Welcome to the plays of Finegan Kruckemeyer. Finegan writes 'strong and respectful work for children, works that acknowledge them as astute audience members outside the plays, and worthy subjects within'. They are full of inventiveness, daring, sorrow, humour and immense joy. They warrant being read aloud to expand children's understanding of literacy and language acquisition, and they command a staged performance so young people can deeply explore making theatre and experience the performing arts.

In Finegan's work, the improbable becomes probable. Events and narratives are driven by inventive writing, powerfully conjured landscapes, the presence of a rich imaginative playfulness that accompanies childhood—and sometimes adulthood—and by firmly placing big, bold, I-can-be-bothered decisions in the hands, hearts and minds of the young protagonists.

Finegan's plays create rich learning opportunities for students and teachers. Each play in this collection offers very teachable concepts and ideas for the classroom or co-curricular context. Language and its possibilities are central to Finegan's writing, brought alive by the characters who

FOR WE THE YOUNG

inhabit the worlds of the plays. There's nothing quite like reading a play aloud or performing in character to discover new words, to hear how words can be used to describe, narrate, exclaim, express, expose, generate rhythm and rhyme, be ridiculous, painful, powerful, profound and, importantly, to tell stories. All teachers are literacy teachers and the plays in this collection explore anagrams, palindromes, nonsense, metaphor, alliteration and, at times, almost onomatopoeic constructions. The plays also incorporate an array of characters who embody the joy, fear, despair, courage, love, humour, confusion and possibilities of what it means to be human—or in some cases not—and to be in the eternal process of growing up.

In the play *My Robot*, Ophelia says, 'We're all just made from pieces'. To bring the 'pieces' that comprise these characters to life in performance, to create the world and tell the story through action, design and the spoken word enables powerful learning, especially in the Arts-Drama field. Children are asked to consider: what do the characters and their stories tell me about myself and my place in the world?

In helping children address this big question, the plays purposefully present young characters who each experience great joy, and also deep sadness. They each face big challenges: the absence or loss of a parent, the loss of a treasured object, loss of identity, loss of community, loss of words, being marginalised, being abandoned. In this contemporary age of anxiety and uncertainty, what is the role of education in developing an understanding of such sadnesses, and in building resilience? Can plays meaningfully contribute? Acclaimed Canadian theatre-maker for young people,

INTRODUCTION

Suzanne Lebeau, has for many years contended that theatre is a powerful and substantive place for children to encounter darkness in a safe and mediated space, and a way to offer young people the opportunity to question, feel, connect to characters and stories, to consider choices and potentially find solutions. Speaking at the 2012 Symposium for Young People and the Arts Australia, she posed the questions: ‘Who knows and can decide what is best for a child? Do we have the right to show children situations that they haven’t experienced? Do we have the right to upset them? Do we have the right to leave an ending in suspense, to not give a conclusion, especially when the story stirs up complex societal debates?’ (YPAA, 2012) In her 2014 essay, Australian playwright Angela Betzien powerfully advocated for plays for young people that address ‘the difficult’ and ‘the upsetting’, in order to avoid ‘raising a generation of young people lacking resilience and all the protective factors that will help them to endure pain and crisis in their lives’. (Betzien, 2014)

Finegan’s approach to playwriting for young people boldly addresses both Lebeau’s questions and Betzien’s advocacy. His writing is concerned with honouring sadness and challenging constructions of childhood and adolescence. His plays aim to counter three assumptions that adults make about children’s readiness and capacity to experience sad events and large human issues on stage—if protected from sadness in the theatre, they won’t encounter it elsewhere such as real life, if shown sad events on stage they won’t be able to deal with such themes, and that for adults, the role of children’s theatre has a different set of rules. (Kruckemeyer, 2012) Fin argues that his young characters are ‘mapping uncharted landscapes,

FOR WE THE YOUNG

purely because they are uncharted to *them*'. That, he argues, is what childhood is. In Fin's plays the young characters come to know that to love and be loved is often accompanied by great sadness, but that the sadness is okay as it is a moment that will pass. In *Love*, Danica relates the story of the river goddess, which ends with one character giving their life for another.

'But ... that's sad' says Oslo, and Danica acknowledges this but responds that it is 'Sad in a beautiful way'.

It is often the sad event in a play or story that Finegan says, 'cries for its victim to step up, to respond, to fight. Or more passively to consider, to reflect, to self-assess.' (Kruckemeyer, 2012) As readers, audiences and performers, plays offer young people a process of distance and then nearness, through watching and reading others' stories, and then playing others' stories. Facilitating and mediating such a process can build capacity to critically reflect on issues and self-assess our own perspectives on the world. Each of the plays presented in this collection does this by offering young people a way to encounter the world—emotionally and imaginatively.

And now to the plays themselves. Each play in this collection offers a distinct world; seaside towns, snow-covered villages, lighthouses, mansions, fortified cities, junk shops, shadowy figures, mean-bird infested forests. The worlds are populated with characters who, true to Finegan's approach, are mainly young and face critical choices through often unexpected encounters, usually surrounded or accompanied by other characters—some of them adult—who are essential to their choices, or are even the subject of the critical encounter itself. Each play offers different sized casts, some small, but each play is also open to large casts—whole

INTRODUCTION

classes—and ensembles who can help bring the world of the play alive. Presented within the collection is a wonderful challenge for teachers and students—how imaginatively and creatively can each play be staged for performance? There are many clues in the scripts themselves, with suggestions by the playwright including ways to narrate and stage magical and imaginative moments using physical theatre, movement and music, the use of digital technology and projection, lighting and costume. Importantly, teachers and students can make their own interpretative decisions.

The first play in this collection reminds us that inventing games, things and friends is a powerful part of imaginative play. We marvel at invention. Oh! We might say. *My Robot* introduces several characters whose names all begin with ‘O’. We meet Ophelia, an inventor, who has moved away from everything she knows to a small beachy town. The memories and pieces of her previous life remain firmly in her head—the small red house, thick carpet, tall pointed mountains, the right-sized best friend. She is clear about the things she doesn’t like about her ‘now’ place—stinky zinc, wrong thongs, smouldering footpaths, and diving gulls. When a mysterious box full of gadgets, and a strange note that reads ‘You. Make. Me.’ arrives in her bedroom one night, Ophelia embarks on an invention, one that ensures unexpected encounters with her neighbour Orson, who is allergic to everything, Otis, a self-proclaimed but unsuccessful bully, and the grumpy Ms Ogilvie, who lives below. A dangerous storm demands bold things from the characters, and the big choices they make help them work out ‘how being alive works’. Oh, and there’s a robot.

FOR WE THE YOUNG

A central theme of many of Finegan's plays is love: understanding love, finding love, love of self, of others, of things, of memories. The play *Love* focuses on a twelve-year-old called Oslo Rogers who has a very funny mum called Ruthy. They live in a very fun town called Mellingong near the sea. The world is about to change for everyone. A huge storm is approaching and the whole town needs to evacuate to the old Clondike town hall up on the hill. People can only take a few important things each—'love luggage', Ruthy calls it. Oslo sets out to help the people of Mellingong decide on their love luggage, to discover what they love the most in the world and what they would save from a storm. Trapped in the enormity of the storm with Ruthy, Oslo comes to learn about love and 'stuff'.

The world in *The Snow* is expansive, populated by heroes, exaggerated bearded folk, a gentle giant, forests, mean birds, apprentice story narrators, and the threat of being consumed by 'a darkness made of emptiness'. When an endless snowfall imprisons the residents of the tiny village of Kishka, young Theodore Sutton proposes the villagers build a giant catapult to fling him and six of the village's bravest and strongest out in search of a solution. It's a brilliant idea—what could possibly go wrong? The catapult hastily assembled, Theodore, a 'very small boy', and his companions are launched over the snow and into the grandest of adventures. It's a quest of epic proportions! Within the narrative, the endless snow becomes a metaphor for the bitter rivalry between two villages, neither of which remember why they are at odds. The feud has conjured 'the darkness and the emptiness', and it threatens to consume them all. Whimsical and humorous, dark and

INTRODUCTION

mysterious, heartfelt and sincere, think Grimms' fairytales with darkly comic twists and Pythonesque moments—wonderful for introducing genres.

In *Where Words Once Were*, performers and audience are introduced to a dystopian world where language is rationed. It is perhaps the darkest of the five plays in the collection. The leaders of The City decide for its citizens that only 1,000 words can ever be in existence at any one time. Such a world is driven by fear. 'To see adults looking as scared as children' is a daily occurrence. New words replace old with alarming rapidity, pleasurable words such as 'beautiful' and 'love' are no longer valid. Pens are forbidden, pencils are collected at the end of the school day, writing in public is punishable. Those who break the language rules are condemned to silence. The Silent fade, then disappear from others' lives and memories. *Where Words Once Were* explores love, fear, war, power, anger, identity—words and concepts with rich and powerful meanings—all forbidden to be spoken in The City. The hero Orhan, however, learns unexpectedly from one of 'The Silent' that there are ways things can be changed, if only he dares.

The final play in this collection is *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*. This is a story of three girls—three sisters, triplets, identical—in the way that blocks of flats are, but then not really. It is a fairytale-like, woodcuttery beginning set in the middle of a forest. The tragic, accidental death of the girls' mother changes everything. 'When someone like a mother is suddenly gone, she is not the only thing that's lost.' A new stepmother suggests the 'unbelievably unbelievable' and the father, now twice broken-hearted, takes the three

FOR WE THE YOUNG

deep into the forest—Albienne, the oldest who knows cakes like no other; Beatrix, a child of the sun who warms those around her; and Carmen, concerned with all except herself. ‘Thrice upon a time’ three girls find themselves alone in a wood. They make a resolution. One sister will walk one way, one the other, and the third will stay right where she is. Twenty years later, having circumnavigated the globe, fought Vikings, crossed oceans, tamed wilds, and achieved greatness, the three walk back to where they began, meeting again as young women. They have ‘a world’s worth of stories’ to tell. *This Girl Laughs*, *This Girl Cries*, *This Girl Does Nothing* is a coming-of-age story of grand proportions.

I encourage you to consider all or some of these plays for the classroom, to use them as a means of learning in literacy, the arts, personal and social learning, critical and creative thinking, engaging with the world of each play, the story, the language and the central themes and concerns. You may like some plays better than others. Fin reminds us of the power of theatre to offer multiple stories and perspectives. He believes that to place a piece of theatre before children and their adults is to guarantee those perspectives ‘of lives lived, of circumstances known, of psychological rigours not politely left at the theatre door by each child as she enters, but carried into the room, and sat upon her lap, and picked up and used as a pair of binoculars through which she might then view the play that plays out’. For Fin, theatre cannot speak for each and every personality, rather, for him theatre must ‘respectfully speak for none, and in the same breath, all’ as this collection of plays so powerfully endeavours to do.

INTRODUCTION

Here are five possible classroom activities linked to the plays.

1. *My Robot*—The main character in this play is an inventor. Her main invention is a robot, one that can speak and move and kind of becomes her friend. The robot is made from a range of different leftover bits of things.
 - Draw/design a robot that is made of things found in a kitchen. For example, a toaster, a kettle, a chopping board, knives, forks, spoons, scissors, cookie cutter, potato masher, pizza cutter, cheese grater, microwave, blender; OR
 - Gather together some recycled materials such as cardboard, paper, tape, containers, string, straws, boxes and in pairs make/create a ‘robot’ that has a particular function—be creative here.
 - For either/both of these tasks—what is the robot’s name, its purpose—how does it work, what does it do?
 - Explain your robot to a classmate (Literacy, critical and creative thinking).
2. *Love*—In this play the townspeople need to collect some of their things together to wait out a big storm. What is precious to you? What would your ‘love luggage’ be if you had to choose five things?
 - Draw, write down, audio record or take photos of your five things. How might you present them? A folder? A box? A digital presentation?
 - If you feel comfortable, share what you chose with a partner/the class. What do you notice? What is similar, what is different? Why do you think this may be so? (Literacy/multi-modal literacies, critical and creative thinking, personal and social learning).

FOR WE THE YOUNG

3. *The Snow*—After the catapult landing, Theodore and Oliver journey through the forest. They climb to the top of a tree to see where they are and how they can reach the other side to continue their quest. The three narrators describe the action in Scene Four.

- This is a drama activity and involves creating still images or scenes called *tableaux*. Like a photo of a scene or event, but in the scene you can use your bodies to create and become people or creatures or objects.
- Work in groups of 5-7 and create a still image/photo/tableau using all the people in the group for each of the following—the forest, Oliver and Theodore climbing the tree, the tree tipping over, a house on the edge of the forest, The Darkness (The Arts—Drama, personal and social learning).

4. *Where Words Once Were*—In this play The City rulers decide what words the citizens can and can't use. Words are very powerful. One of the ways the characters use them in the play is to leave messages and to 'fight' back against The City rulers. These are written on The City walls in secret. Below are some examples and activities.

- ANAGRAMS—rearranging letters in a phrase or sentence to make a new one—using all the letters. In the play, ALL FEEL SAFE becomes SEE LEAF FALL. What other anagrams can you discover, write, research?
- PALINDROMES—words or phrases or sentences that read the same forward as backwards. An example from the play—WILL WE STOP? NO! IT IS OPPOSITION!
- Here are two further examples: NEVER ODD OR

INTRODUCTION

EVEN, WAS IT A CAR OR A CAT I SAW. What other palindromes can you discover?

- Discuss what each of the anagrams and palindromes from the play mean in the story.
 - Removing letters to make new phrases or sentences. In the play I THINK I SEE A CITY THAT RUES WORDS is gradually changed by one of the silent people to INK IS A TRUE SWORD. Work with a partner to cross out letters in the first sentence so that it becomes the second. What do each of these sentences mean? Can you create other examples of this? (Literacy, critical and creative thinking)
4. *This Girls Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*—Albienne, Beatrix and Carmen are three sisters left alone to make their way in the world. They separate and 20 years later, having circumnavigated the globe, fought Vikings, crossed oceans, tamed wilds, and achieved greatness, they come back together ready to tell stories. What story would each tell?
- Choose one of the sisters' journeys. Which journey did you enjoy the most? Remember: Your sisters have no idea what you have been doing.
 - Write a short story about one thing that happened to you in the 20 years.
 - Find another person in the class who has written a different sister's story OR the same (so you can possibly compare) and share your stories and discuss (Literacy, critical and creative thinking).

REFERENCES:

Betzien, A 2014. Writing in the Dark. State of Play,

FOR WE THE YOUNG

AustralianPlays.org; <https://australianplays.org/writing-in-the-dark>

Kruckemeyer, F. 2012. The Taboo of Sadness: Why are We Scared to Let Children be Scared? TYA, Culture, Society: International Essays on Theatre for Young Audiences, pp 85-92, Peter Lang: Frankfurt.

Lebeau, S. 2012. Censorship ... and Self-censorship. Speaking in Tongues: how do we translate the collective language of the arts? YPAA, July 2012, Symposium publication.

Kruckemeyer, F. 2019. Hope is a Trail of Breadcrumbs, presented as the Inspiring Talk for the 2019 Edinburgh International Children's Festival.

*Meg Upton
December 2019*

Meg Upton is a teaching artist, researcher and consultant in drama and theatre education. She has worked as Education Manager at Malthouse Theatre and Melbourne Theatre Company, and consulted as a teaching artist and resource writer with Arena Theatre, Polyglot, St Martins Youth Arts, Platform Youth Arts, KAGE, Victorian Opera, Arts Centre Melbourne, Australian Plays and Performing Lines. Meg lectures in Drama education, curriculum and pedagogy at Deakin University in Melbourne. She has an M.Ed and PhD from the University of Melbourne in drama education and pedagogy, and has written over one hundred education resources for theatre productions and arts education programs. Meg is also on the boards of Rawcus Theatre, Drama Victoria and Green Room Association Awards.