



STRAWGIRL

Resources and activities

STRAWGIRL is a play which we think is suitable for everyone aged 8 – 108. Based on the Jackie Kay novel of the same name, it tells a story full of warmth, humour and humanity with many themes which can be explored on different levels, including the capacity of the imagination, growing up, bereavement, the power of friendship, cultural identity and heritage, bullying, and modern rural life...! STRAWGIRL is also a visually and aurally exciting piece of theatre, its staging reflecting the story's explorations of the imagination, belief and magic.

STRAWGIRL is entirely appropriate for children of 8+, written and produced in an accessible, engaging style. It doesn't include strong language (there is 1 "bloody"). However, it doesn't shy away from some difficult themes. If you are bringing younger children to the production, you may wish to use the partial synopsis below to introduce them to the play they are about to see.

SYNOPSIS

At the start of the play, Molly 'Maybe' MacPherson is 11 years old. She lives with her parents on Wishing Well Farm, an organic farm in Scotland. They grow herbs and some vegetables, keep chickens and geese and they have their own small herd of dairy cows – all of which have names. Jamie and Irene MacPherson are tenant farmers. This means they rent the farm from a landowner – they don't actually own it.

Molly's mum, Irene, was born and grew up in Scotland; her Dad, Jamie, is Nigerian. He came to Scotland when he was 11 and was adopted by a white Scottish couple, the MacPhersons's, who ran Wishing Well Farm.

In the first few scenes of the play, we see that, though the MacPherson's all in their different ways love each other and the farm, there are some problems and tensions in their lives. Molly's father is keen for her to remember that she is half Ibo, one of the peoples of Nigeria. Molly seems to be embarrassed by her Dad and wishes she could be different. We soon find out that she is being bullied at school, and that some of this bullying is racist. She is also being bullied for living on a working farm.

Irene and Jamie meet Arnold Barnes-Gutteridge, son of their landlord, and find out that the farm, which is in need of repair, may be going to be sold. He is offering them somewhere "better" to live.

That night Jamie and Irene go out for a meal. On the way home, in a storm, they have a terrible car crash and Jamie is killed.

Struggling with grief and loneliness, Molly tries to keep the farm going, but it seems impossible. Then, just when things seem too bad to manage, help appears – in the most amazing and unexpected way, and Molly's fight to save the farm begins...



The Studio, 1 – 24 November 2007

Written by Jackie Kay, Adapted by Amanda Dalton

THE LAND

“People didn’t make the land so they can’t really own it” (Molly Maybe, Scene 12)

All the characters in STRAWGIRL have things to say about the places we live, owning the land, and why the place we live and the place we come from are sometimes important. Strawgirl herself comes from the land – you might even think that, in a way, she IS the land.

Think about a place that is important to you, it might be your home, your school, your favourite park, a friend or relative’s house. Why does that place matter to you? Who else might it matter to and why?

Wishing Well Farm means different things to different characters, and also means different things at different times in the play. Jamie, for example, has spent the first 11 years of his life in Africa, and comes from a family who owned very little. His ideas about the land have probably been partly shaped by his childhood as well as his strong personal beliefs. He believes it is not possible to really own land. He questions what this means: “Does he own the earth? The worms in it? The wee beetles?” (Jamie, Scene 6). Think about this argument. Do you agree with him?

Imagine you are an Estate Agent was trying to sell a place that matters to you. Write a description from their perspective. What features might they describe to help sell the property? Now write your own personal description saying what you like best about this place. How do the two descriptions compare?

“The Highlands belonged to the clans not the Chiefs” (Molly Maybe, Scene 12)

In Scotland, the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw what has become known as *The Highland Clearances*, where tens of thousands of men, women and children were evicted from their homes. Many crofters – people making a small living out of working a piece of land – were evicted

by the wealthy landowners to make way for large scale sheep farming, and for using the land for organized shooting and fishing, all of which would make them more money. Families who refused to move were often forcibly and violently removed from their homes. Many families were burned out of their homes, with reports of fires lasting for six days.

How long have you lived in your home? How long ago was it built? Find out, if you can, how many people have lived where you now live. Imagine how the place has changed over the years. Write an account from the point of view of someone who once lived where you do, describing what the place means to them and why.

Some highlanders settled on land near the sea, which was very hard to farm because the land was not suitable. Many more were forced to migrate south to cities like Glasgow, or emigrate to far away places such as Canada, crammed into boats in terrible conditions. This has had a profound and lasting effect on the population and culture of Scotland. It is estimated that in 1755 51% of the Scottish population lived in the Highlands, but by 1981 only 21% lived there.

It is the Highland Clearances that Molly Maybe sees and describes when she is flying from Cull Castle, and which Arnold Barnes-Gutteridge dreams.

“I was counting people and pushing them onto a ship, clearing the land”
(Arnold Barnes-Gutteridge, Scene 21)

“There’s a man and woman carrying bundles of earth on their backs. They’re on a pebble beach among the rocks. Pouring the earth, spreading it out with their bare hands. Trying to make a field of it”
(Molly Maybe, Scene 16)

Set up a debate between a group of people who are in favour of a farm being sold off to become a caravan park for holidaymakers, and a group of people who want to save the farm. Think of the arguments on each side, and good reasons for them. Elect a chairperson to keep order!

SUPERSTITIONS AND BELIEFS

In STRAWGIRL, Molly is very superstitious. She believes it's bad luck if you see a magpie on its own, and, if you do, you have to spit to turn the bad luck into good. This is a very common superstitious – shared by several of the actors in the play!

The farm Molly lives on is called Wishing Well Farm and she often makes wishes down the well. Maybe some of her wishes even come true...

Do you believe in wishes?

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: Think about the traditions and beliefs that you
: believe in and follow. You may think you have
: none, but you probably celebrate birthdays,
: and at least one or two religious festivals each
: year, whatever your religion, and even if you
: are not religious at all.
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Here are some other superstitions and beliefs. Can you think how they are used in the play?

1. CORN DOLLIES

Corn Dollies are made of straw, woven into shapes and sometimes decorated. It used to be believed, by many country people all across Europe, that the corn spirit lived in the crops and that when the crops were cut down the corn spirit became homeless. People would make a Corn Dolly and keep it in their house over winter. They would then plough it back into the land in the new season. This would bring good luck to the farm and make the crops grow well. In Scotland it was traditional for the youngest child in the family to cut the last sheaf of straw and weave a dolly from it.

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: Do you walk under ladders? Many people who
: think they are not superstitious will never do
: this. Ask some friends and family to give you
: examples of superstitions they know about,
: and make a list. Try writing a poem or story
: based on one of them.
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2. SPIRITS OF THE DEAD

The Ibo people of Africa traditionally believe in an Afterlife. They think we are always being watched or guarded by the spirits of our ancestors. The soul leaves the body at the last breath and takes the

form of a ghost, shadow or reflection that is always there. This is not scary – it's a kind of guardian spirit.

3. AURIGA in the night sky

There are many myths and ancient beliefs around the patterns made by the stars in the sky at night. The constellation of stars called Auriga is believed in mythology to be a shepherd in a chariot – carrying a goat over his shoulder and cradling two goat kids as he rides through the heavens in his chariot. In STRAWGIRL, Arnold Barnes-Gutteridge knows this myth and muddles it up with his vision of a flying tractor and cows.

4. HARVEST

In several religions the gathering of the harvest is marked as a festival. Traditionally, farmers also celebrate the completion of the yearly gathering of the harvest as a non-religious ceremony. In STRAWGIRL the MacPherson's have an annual Ceilidh, or Barn Dance.

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: Use the library and the internet to try and find
: out about some other traditions, beliefs and
: myths that are different from yours. Choose
: one that interests you and try telling it as a
: story.
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5. COWS

To many ancient Scottish peoples, cows were seen as a sign of wealth and importance to the people who owned them, and were believed to be closely linked to their human owners. In some areas people thought that cows should be informed of deaths in their owners' household, or else the cows would sense that something was wrong, and they could sicken and die. In some parts of Europe there is a superstition that cows are magically able to speak on the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. However, it was considered dangerous for humans to hear them talk!

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: After watching STRAWGIRL, try and decide
: what you think she is. Is she a girl? Is she an
: imaginary friend? Is she an African spirit? Is she
: a wish come true? Is she a part of Molly? Is
: she all of these, or none of these.....?
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WHY NOT... write a play?!

- Re-read the opening few chapters of a novel you know and like. Then see if you can write an opening scene of a theatre adaptation of this novel.
- Find out more about one of the topics Amanda researched for the play. You could base a play of your own on an African Folk Tale or make up a story set during the time of the Scottish Clearances.
- STRAWGIRL is set on a farm. Imagine you are writing a theatre play set in one of the following places:
 - a planet in outer space
 - a zoo
 - a busy swimming pool
- How could you suggest these places on stage? Remember you don't have thousands of pounds to spend on scenery or actors. But you can think about what the audience will hear as well as what they see.
- Make up a character you might write into a story. Write some notes on what they look like, what they wear, what they like doing, where they live etc... Try to make them seem like a real person. Now think of something they WANT. It might be something particular like a big car, or it might be something like "to be less shy." Think also of what is stopping them from getting this. Now see if you can write a scene that could be part of a play, where your character meets another character. You don't need to show us everything in this scene, but see if you can start to bring your character to life.

WHY NOT? Read some stories and poems that relate to the themes of STRAWGIRL?

Here's some ideas for starters:

1. **Brendon Gallacher**

This is a poem about an imaginary friend, which Jackie has said is based on her own experience. It starts like this:

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.

He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.

His father was in prison; he was a cat burglar.

My father was a communit party full-time worker.

He has six brothers and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

2. **In My Country and Mull**

Two short poems by Jackie Kay on themes that link to STRAWGIRL.

3. **Consider the Lilies**

A story about the Scottish Clearances by Iain Crichton Smith.

4. **Ajapa The Tortoise: A book of Nigerian Folk Tales** ed by Margaret Baumann.

For further information on the Royal Exchange Theatre's production of STRAWGIRL and supporting education workshops and activities, please contact Education on 0161 615 6721