




WATER
FOR
ELEPHANTS

A NEW MUSICAL

STUDY GUIDE





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A SYNOPSIS

by Rick Elice

PROLOGUE

After sneaking out of a nursing home to watch a traveling circus show, an elderly rule-breaker named Jacob Jankowski lingers under the Big Top after the performance, remembering another circus from way back in the middle of the Great Depression.

His reverie is interrupted when workers start to break the tent down and prepare to hit the road—next stop, Philadelphia. The circus owner, Charlie, and his star equestrienne, June, humor the old guy to be polite. He claims to know about animals. Tells June that one of her horses, a mare with a choppy stride, could use a stress test. When he mentions that he worked a circus like theirs back in the day, they're intrigued. Charlie and June offer to show Mr. Jankowski around; maybe he could even take a look at that mare. As the old guy follows them off, glad to delay his return to "the home" and enjoying his first real conversation in ages, memories come flooding back. Memories of a traveling circus years before. Of a train, criss-crossing the country...

The distant sound of a train whistle cracks time wide open. The present morphs into the past, and the old man reappears fifty years earlier as Jacob Jankowski, first-generation Polish American, still reeling from the car crash that killed his parents and destroyed his life. It's May 1931.

ACT ONE

"Anywhere" With nowhere to go, and desperate for a fresh start, Jacob jumps a boxcar train in the middle of the night. The workers on board are wary of the kid, especially the toughest of them, Wade, who threatens to throw Jacob off while the train's moving. But the

oldest of them, Camel, offers Jacob a job when they get to Utica in the morning. One day's work in exchange for food. "What kind of work exactly?" Jacob asks. Camel laughs. "You didn't just jump any old train, son. This here's the Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth! Welcome to the circus!"

The next morning, Wade puts Camel on ticket booth. His legs are numb from drinking bootleg moonshine non-stop through Prohibition; nothing else left that he's good for. It's the end of the line for Camel, but he takes the demotion in stride, shuttling Jacob through a whole list of jobs while Wade shouts orders to his workers. Fairway's gotta be set up, cookhouse's gotta make breakfast, and the big tent's gotta be raised. In the center of this whirlwind of activity, Jacob meets the rousts, the barkers, the acrobats, Barbara and the Cooch Girls, and Walter the Clown—until a dazzling Ringmaster takes his place in the center of the ring, and the show begins. "Ladies and Gentlemen, children of all ages, sinners, saints, kiddies and corpses! I give you Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth! "The Road Don't Make You Young"

"Benzini? You were with Benzini?" Charlie and June can't believe their ears. "Not just Benzini," Mr. Jankowski says. "Benzini in '31." They know what that means—the Benzini Stampede. The greatest disaster in circus history. Mr. Jankowski continues his story...

After the performance, Jacob watches mesmerized as Marlena, the beautiful star of "the greatest Liberty Horse Act this side of the Atlantic," ministers to her gorgeous white stallion, Silver Star, whose injured leg is causing great pain. As she calms and comforts the animal, she reveals a profound ability to commune with the horse—two souls, horse and rider, merging



Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2024

and soaring, wild and free. And for a few glorious moments, the pain is gone. "Easy"

Jacob emerges from the shadows and speaks to Marlena. They bond over concern for Silver Star's injury, but the moment is interrupted when August, the Ringmaster and owner of Benzini Brothers, appears with big news: Fox Brothers Circus is going out of business. Their train is in Wilkes-Barre.

They were a big outfit; maybe they have a horse to replace Silver Star. But August will have to cancel the second show in Utica and travel overnight, if they want to get to Wilkes-Barre before rival circuses show up to scavenge.

Marlena pleads with August to find a vet for Silver Star and leads the horse back to his stall. Jacob can't take his eyes off her. That's when August mentions that Marlena, star equestrienne, is also his wife. He tells Jacob to take a hike, but when Jacob reveals that his father was a vet and that, in fact, he himself had three years of vet school, August changes his tune. He offers Jacob three bucks a week as circus vet if he can keep Silver Star performing through the summer. Jacob protests, "But I'm not a vet, I only took classes." For August, that's close enough for jazz. "Come meet your other patients."

He takes Jacob to the menagerie—a ragtag herd of underfed and overworked animals, including Rex, an ancient, cranky lion. August tells Jacob to feed Rex, but

when Jacob opens Rex's cage, the lion chomps down on his arm. Jacob yelps in pain. August laughs. "I could've lost my arm!" Jacob hollers. "No, you couldn't," August says. "He's got no teeth." August proceeds to show Jacob that Benzini is built on make-believe. "Just like we're gonna make believe you're a real Doctor of Veterinary Science." "The Lion Has Got No Teeth"

August is selling, but Jacob isn't buying. He'll travel with the train to Wilkes-Barre and mope off on his own in the morning. August can't believe Jacob would turn down three bucks a week. He suggests that Jacob sleeps on it, and tells Camel to find him a place to bed down for the night.

Camel thinks Jacob can share a bunk with Walter. Walter's not interested and orders Queenie to attack Jacob. Without thinking, Jacob pulls his hand away, shouting "Zostan!"—"Stop!" in Polish. "It still comes out sometimes" under stress, he explains. Wade shows up for the nightly poker game. Barbara enters with a deck of cards, but the last player, Grady, isn't there. Wade says the boss ordered Grady to be red-lighted. "So red-lighting means you're fired?" Jacob asks. "Not just fired," Camel says. "Thrown off the train." Jacob wants in on the card game, but Wade's not interested. He hates that August offered Jacob three bucks a week while no one else gets paid. Ever. Jacob's made an enemy. But he's touched by the strong bonds of



Grant Gustin, Stan Brown in the Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2024

friendship between Barbara, Camel, and Walter. As the train rattles across fields on its way to Wilkes-Barre, Camel urges Jacob to stick to his plan to leave in the morning. "If you've got somewhere to go back to, you should go." But Jacob has nowhere and no one—and decides to stay. "I Choose The Ride"

Suddenly, the train stops. August comes looking for Jacob. Silver Star's taken a bad turn and August wants Jacob to look him over. They find the horse being cradled by Marlena. The news is bad; the animal's leg is fractured. There's only one thing to be done. August produces a pistol. Jacob holds out his hand for the gun. "I'm the vet." Marlena listens for the sound of the gunshot from atop the train as the star-filled sky stretches far away.

The next morning, Nesci Brothers, a rival circus, beats Benzini to Wilkes-Barre, and buys up all the animals. There's only one left by the time Jacob finds the Fox menagerie man. "Show me the horse," Jacob says. "Who said anything about a horse?" And inside the broken-down train, in the shadows, is the most majestic animal Jacob's ever scene. "Where's she from?" August asks. "Europe," the menagerie man explains. "Her trainer was some Polack who brought her here and left her in Libertyville. Fox snapped her up. Her name's Rosie. She's fifty-three. You want her to move her ass, just poke her with this bull-hook." He jabs the animal. She bellows in pain. August buys Rosie on the

spot and tells Marlena and Jacob to get to work on a new star act. They'll go on in three weeks, soon as they hit Chicago. "Ode To An Elephant"

"Good luck," the menagerie man snorts. "You just bought the dumbest creature on God's green earth."

The next three weeks fly by with little progress. Rosie doesn't seem to understand commands, she's only interested in eating and sleeping. Marlena and Jacob try everything they can think of, but Rosie just looks at them, batting her amber eyes. Maybe the menagerie man was right.

Old Mr. Jankowski recounts the frustration of those three weeks, day after day of training, a momentary respite at sunset when August and Marlena surprise Jacob with a birthday cake. "Take the knife, Jacob," Marlena says. "First cut for good luck." And most of all, Mr. Jankowski remembers—the forging of friendship between Marlena and him. "Just Our Luck"

But the pressure is on. The day before Chicago, August is out of patience and sick of a circus with no star act. He explodes, brutally beating the elephant with the bull-hook. Jacob breaks up the beating. "She goes on first show tomorrow!" August decrees. "Get to work!"

Marlena apologizes for her husband's violent behavior and gives Rosie a bucket full of bootleg whiskey to dull the pain. "Shouldn't Be Surprised"

Marlena convinces August to apologize to Jacob at a swanky Chicago speakeasy. Jacob accepts the apology but warns August not to hurt Rosie again. August, drunk from too much illegal champagne, recounts how he and Marlena met, how he fell in love with her, what it means to feel so much for another person. Marlena remembers how different August was from the bankers her parents had in mind for her. When she ran away with him and joined the circus, her father disowned her. The more August drinks, the more the mood darkens. Finally, he pulls Marlena up for a dance, swings her roughly around the room and grabs her face so hard he almost breaks her jaw. When he wanders off to buy another bottle, Marlena, deeply embarrassed, reveals that, early in their marriage, August beat a menagerie man so hard he lost an eye. She wanted to go home then and there, but her parents wouldn't speak to her. Jacob is drawn to her, wanting to help. But a police raid breaks up the place. Marlena grabs Jacob and they run out back into an alley.

Jacob can't stop himself from kissing her. Marlena backs away and runs off. Alone, under another star-filled sky, Jacob heads back to the Benzini train, trying to understand a sensation he's never felt before. "Silver Stars"

The next day, August insists that Marlena and Rosie will at least appear in the Grand Spec—a parade of acrobats, clowns and animals that opens every performance under the Big Top. He announces the new star act, but backstage, Marlena and Jacob can't get Rosie to move. Furious, August storms backstage to beat the animal, but Rosie knocks him to the ground and trumpets loudly. She's about to crush him underfoot when Jacob spontaneously shouts, "Zostan!" The elephant stops for a moment, then raises her giant foot again. Again Jacob shouts, "Zostan!" Again Rosie freezes. Jacob turns to Marlena. "She understands Polish!" Jacob gives her another order in Polish. She responds. They've cracked the code. The show can go on. The entire company welcomes their new star into the center of the ring. "The Grand Spec"

Marlena, ecstatic, runs to Jacob for a hug. August's face darkens. Blackout.

ACT TWO

Old Mr. Jankowski remembers a song Marlena made up for Rosie in the summer of 1931. "Funny Angel"

His reverie is interrupted by Nurse Rosemary, making her morning rounds at "the home" where Mr. Jankowski is a patient. An orderly informs the old man that his son is busy and can't take him to the circus performance that afternoon as planned. "Then I'll go to the circus myself," he yells. "I'm not a turnip yet, you know!"

Time cracks open again, and Charlie and June replace the nurse and the orderly. "Were you back in '31?" they ask. "No," Mr. Jankowski answers. "I was back in this morning. In my prison cell." He knows it won't be long before he has to go back there again. He just wants one more look at the Big Top before he returns to a life of bingo and sing-alongs and ghosts rattling around. "They sure are banging around in there now. Damn ghosts."

The ghosts of the past bring us back to 1931. Benzini's business is booming. Rosie's become a national celebrity, everyone's happy. Except August. The smiles that pass between Jacob and Marlena are impossible for him to ignore. His mood grows progressively darker

as everyone celebrates this summer of success—and the Polish word that made it all possible. "Zostan"

Turns out Barbara, Camel and Walter are not oblivious to the smiles between Jacob and Marlena either. Now that things are finally copacetic, they would hate for Jacob to do anything with Mrs. Ringmaster that would jeopardize Benzini's current good fortune. So they call Jacob over to Barbara's tent for a heart-to-heart.

Though nothing's technically happened between them since that kiss in the Chicago alley, Jacob's feelings for Marlena are real and powerful—and (his friends remind him) downright dangerous. Marlena is another man's wife. And that man is their employer—and on the brink of war. Jacob doesn't realize it, but he's asking for a fight. "Squeaky Wheel"

Reluctantly, Jacob tries to do the right thing by his friends. He interrupts a training session with Marlena and Rosie to say he's going to take Camel to a real doctor; his legs are too bad to put it off anymore. Then he lowers the boom. He won't be coming back. "But what about the animals? What about Rosie?" she asks. Jacob can't bear to meet her gaze. "You'll finally get a real vet. You can afford one now." Marlena is pole-axed by the news. "What about me?"

And at that moment, August enters the tent. He knows he's walked in on something. But he has a treat for Rosie. And gifts for Marlena and Jacob. It's Labor Day weekend, the grand finale to Benzini's banner summer, and August is feeling generous.

An important thing to understand about elephants—if they take a dislike to you, they'll hate you forever. Rosie doesn't like August, never has. And no matter how August tries to get on her good side with bribes of sweets and buckets of whiskey, Rosie remembers the beating with the bull-hook before Chicago. She snorts and stomps at the sight of August. Jacob walks her back to her stall.

August presents Marlena with her gift—a necklace. And Jacob, with his—a watch. But neither Marlena nor Jacob wants a gift from August right now. They want to say their goodbyes to each other in private. August sees a look pass between them. He knows love when he sees it. His heart sinks. He can control himself no longer. "You've Got Nothing"

Things escalate quickly. Words tumble from August—angry, hurtful words. Bitter recriminations. Lewd accusations. Marlena tries to calm him, but that only



Paul Alexander Nolan, Isabelle McCalla, and Grant Gustin in the Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2024

makes him angrier. The circus workers hear the yelling and try to make peace, sending August over the edge. He strikes Marlena. She falls to the ground. Jacob, furious, is walked away by Walter. Marlena stands, stares August down and leaves. Barbara runs after her. August orders Wade and Camel to break everything down. They're cancelling a show and heading to Scranton for a sold-out Labor Day weekend of shows.

As the train pulls out, August orders Wade to red-light Jacob. Camel and Walter object. August listens to them defend Jacob. When they're done, he takes Wade aside and orders him to red-light them, too. "Jacob, Camel, and Walter. All three of 'em—off my train. Do it now!" But the train is barreling over a bridge. "We're up too high, boss. That's not red-lighting, it's just plain murder."

A Roustabout tells August that Jacob jumped off the train before it left. August rushes to check on his wife's whereabouts. Wade, who depends on August for everything, has no choice but to follow orders. He finds Camel and Walter, grabs them both by the collar and red-lights them. The howl of the train whistle pierces the crimson sky as they fall.

Late that night. A hotel room on the other side of town. Marlena sits on the bed, looking out the window, looking at her life. Finally able to ask aloud the questions she's been holding down inside of her for so long. "What Do You Do?"

A knock on the door. It's Jacob. Barbara told him where to find her. "Just tell me you're alright, and then I'll go." Maybe this is goodbye. But Marlena stops him. Asks him to really listen, from the inside. Asks him what he really feels. And finally, alone together, Jacob tells her. "Wild"

The next morning. Hard choices. Marlena and Jacob know they have to go back to Benzini. Rosie must be protected from August. Camel really does need help; Jacob and Walter can get him to a doctor. The plan: Marlena will tell August she forgives him, perform with Rosie in the afternoon show, then while August finishes the performance, she and Rosie will meet Jacob, Camel, and Walter on the fairway and head off to the rest of their lives.

Mr. Jankowski remembers how free he felt in that moment—he and Marlena together at last, finally going somewhere.

In a field outside of Scranton, rousts are raising the tent. Barbara gives Wade some of Camel's bootleg booze to quiet Rosie down after a night of beatings from August. She asks Wade if he knows where Camel is. "No," he lies, and goes back to work.

Marlena shows up. August, wracked with guilt, begs her forgiveness. She forces a smile, assuring him all is well. "You take your nap," she says, "and I'll warm up with Rosie before the show."

Walter's bunk at the back of the train. Queenie barks happily when Jacob enters. "How come you're here all by yourself?" he says, scratching behind the dog's ears. "Where's Walter?" Queenie's barking turns angry when Wade appears and starts stuffing Walter's few belongings into a duffle bag. He tells Jacob that the boss ordered him to red-light Walter and Camel last night. Off a bridge at seventy miles an hour.

Jacob's head is spinning. "You killed Camel and Walter??" He lunges at Wade, but Wade grabs him and bangs his head against the wall. Jacob staggers and falls to the floor, unconscious.

"The Dream" Jacob's mind is awash with echoes of voices and swirls of color, circus, childhood, parents, car crash, heartbreak, danger, toothless lions, crimson August, juggling knives, daredevil acrobats, tight-wire walkers, Rosie's trunk aglow with love, Camel and Walter shrouded in shadow, Marlena way up high on a trapeze, and then in his arms, and then handing him a shiny object. "Take the knife, Jacob," Marlena says. "First cut for good luck."

When Jacob comes back to his senses, he's standing over a sleeping August with a knife in his hand. But August looks so peaceful. Like a little boy even. Jacob can't do it. He can't kill a man.

And that Labor Day afternoon, the Benzini tent is packed to the rafters. The bandleader gives the downbeat. August takes his place in the center of the ring for the show to begin.

Suddenly, a loud roar from Rex. Everyone freezes. A Roustabout runs through the tent, arms flailing. The band screeches to a halt, a collision of brass and percussion that finishes with a cymbal's hollow clang. Galloping hooves. Rolling like thunder. It's a stampede.

The Benzini Stampede of '31. The greatest disaster in circus history.

Mr. Jankowski remembers the chaos, the terror. Animals screeching and charging into the tent, customers screaming, diving out of the way. August, red-faced and shouting orders. And then Rosie, coming up behind him, her trunk wrapped around the bull-hook. Raising the bull-hook over August's head. No, Rosie, don't do it! Stop!!

But she doesn't stop. A moment later, August's eyes are frozen wide open. His head is split like a hard-boiled egg. In a matter of seconds, there are only three living creatures left inside the tent. Marlena, Rosie, and

Jacob. Rosie drops the bull-hook on the ground and flaps her ears.

Next day, the lot's crawling with police. Somebody says they saw Wade open the cages. Maybe he was taking revenge on August. Or maybe when a man hates who he sees in the mirror, it doesn't take long till he hates the whole damn world. No one ever sees Wade again.

The day after that, the Nesci Brothers Scavengers show up and make a bid for the whole Benzini circus. Including Rosie. But Marlena won't allow it. "Rosie's coming with us," she says. And nobody argues.

Barbara's the last to leave. She's got a niece down in Texas who runs a dance studio. She hands Queenie to Jacob, hugs Marlena—and that's the end of Benzini.

Marlena calls Ringling, and a week later, she and Rosie are top of the bill. A little while after that, she and Jacob get married. Rosie and Queenie are the bridesmaids. When the kids come along, they quit the circus life and head back upstate. Jacob takes his exams, becomes a real vet, and starts his own practice.

Mr. Jankowski is talking to Charlie and June. "We were together, Marlena and me, just shy of fifty years," he says, wiping his eyes. "A real sweet life, she called it. I hate that she's gone, but I'm glad she went first. Being the survivor stinks."

A taxi arrives to take Mr. Jankowski back to "the home." "Don't forget," he tells June, "Stall rest is the key for that mare."

Charlie and June share a look. They can't let the old man go back to that prison cell of his. Charlie suggests he come with them to Philly instead. And then maybe Scranton after that. June smiles.

"Why not? Give you one more story to tell your grandkids."

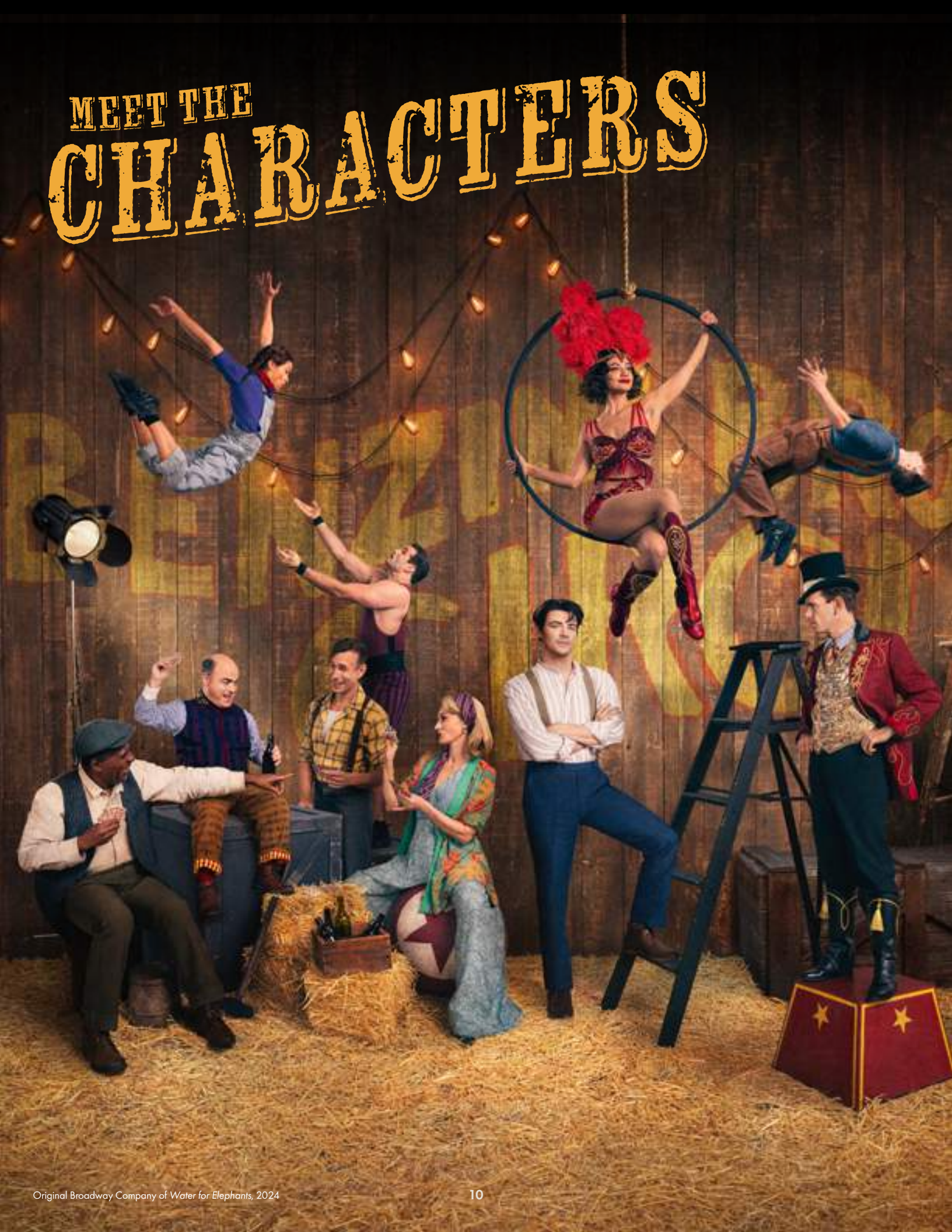
"It'll be an honor and a privilege," Charlie says. The old man can't believe his luck.

June hugs him. "Welcome home, Jacob Jankowski."

And for the second time in his life, the old man runs away with the circus. The ghosts from his past appear—Barbara, Camel, Walter. Marlena, of course, taking her place next to young Jacob. All of them on that train. All of them choosing the ride. "Finale"

The lights fade. Curtain.

MEET THE CHARACTERS



**JACOB JANKOWSKI:**

A young man of strong values with a deep love and understanding for animals, Jacob's pre-determined life is suddenly shattered by loss.

He hops a random train out of sheer desperation, hoping to find a new reason for being somewhere, anywhere. When the train turns out to be home to a traveling circus, he becomes part of a new family, the bonds quickly become like iron, and the trajectory of his life changes forever.



MARLENA: Supremely gutsy and wildly talented, young Marlena runs away with the circus and marries the mercurial Ringmaster. In no time at all, she becomes the

star attraction—a fabled equestrienne and horse whisperer. What's more, she has the gift of "getting" people the same way she "gets" animals. Her life isn't what she dreamed, but when Jacob Jankowski suddenly shows up at Benzini, her whole world changes again.



MR. JANKOWSKI: Slipping out of the nursing home where he dreads the next bingo game and runny rice pudding, Mr. Jankowski attends a traveling circus

show, and his story comes tumbling out of him—the story of young Jacob Jankowski, whose whole world exploded when he jumped a circus train fifty years ago.



AUGUST: The owner and ringmaster of Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth, August is charming, bright and seductive, doling out favors

and dazzling the crowd. His word is law, both inside and outside the ring. When he likes you, the sun shines on you and life is glorious. But when he darkens, the sun is gone and the world grows cold.



WALTER: Master Knife-Thrower and World Famous Clown at Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth, Walter is wary of

strangers and fiercely protective of his friends. He may be slow to warm up to Jacob, but when his dog, Queenie, takes a liking to him, Walter soon follows suit.



CAMEL: A veteran roustabout at Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth, Camel is the first to show Jacob the ropes and his first friend at

Benzini. He's passionately well-read, keenly interested in language, and a life-long student of human behavior. Only one problem: where camels can survive long stretches with very little to drink, this Camel can barely go five minutes without a slug of his bootleg moonshine.



BARBARA: A cooch dancer by trade, Barbara is the brassy mother hen of the circus. She knows who she is and where she comes

from, and if anyone's got a problem with that, too bad. She may be loose in the hip, but she's tight in the lip—and she knows every single secret in every single car on the Benzini train.



WADE: A roustabout at Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth, Wade is August's right hand man and his muscle when it comes to

August's dirty work. Whenever the boss tells him to do something, his only response is "Sir, yes sir!" He's entirely at home with violence, but sadly devoid of any sense of humor, irony, or metaphor.






I CHOOSE THE CIRCUS

KNOW, WANT, LEARN

Explore what life was like in a traveling circus during the 1930s.

After losing what matters most, a young man jumps a moving train, unsure of where the road will take him, and finds a new home with the remarkable crew of a traveling circus, and a life—and love—beyond his wildest dreams. Seen through the eyes of his older self, his adventure becomes a poignant reminder that if you choose the ride, life can begin again at any age.



WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE ON THE ROAD WITH A TRAVELING CIRCUS IN THE 1930S DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION?

In this activity, students will research, learn, and be immersed in the unique, inviting, and magical world of the circus. To begin, ask students to create a K-W-L chart by dividing a sheet of paper into thirds. Each third of the paper should be labeled with K, W, or L. K represents what students currently know about the topic. W represents what students want to learn about the topic. L represents what students learned about the topic. Prior to researching the circus and its key elements, have students complete sections K and W using this question as a prompt: **What do you know about the circus and its rich history?**

Here are a few examples:

K: I know that tents were major elements in a circus. I know that many different acts were performed in the circus and some involved animals. I know the circus traveled by train.

W: I want to know the following: Where did the circus originate? Why did the circus travel by train? Did everyone in the circus travel by train? Where did some famously recognizable circuses, like The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, get their names?

Once students have completed K and W, give them time to read their list as a group. As they read, begin building a research list. This list should include key topics that can easily be divided among the students for individual research. In addition to the topics your students mention, here are a few suggestions to add to the research list:

- Origin of the circus
- Traditions of the circus
- Key elements: e.g., “the ring”
- Key acts and skills: e.g., clowns, tightrope-walking, fire-breathing, etc.
- Circus advertisements
- Naming a circus
- Animals in the circus
- Circus training
- Train travel



Paul Alexander Nolan and the Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2024

Once all students have shared their K and W and any additional suggestions are included, divide the list so that each student has a topic to research. Note for success: If you have more students than topics, give the same topic to multiple students. If you have less students, have students research more than one topic. Ask students to research and create a visual presentation to share the information they discover about their circus topic. Encourage students to cite details from their research that are distinct from their personal opinions. As they research and build their presentations, students add to the L column of their charts and cite the sources where they gathered the information.

Have students present their findings to the full group and then research any remaining W questions. Students can alter their L columns as their peers share additional information. When the chart is complete, return to the prompt question, and ask students to answer the following: What do you know about the circus and its rich history? Encourage students to update their K-W-L charts throughout their exploration of *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* as they learn about the show.

A LESSON IN DECEPTION

Research and explore circus acts using the song “The Lion Has Got No Teeth” as inspiration.

Circus acts come in all shapes and sizes! Building from students’ K-W-L knowledge, have students continue exploring circus acts by watching [The cast of *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* performs “The Lion Has Got No Teeth” on Good Morning America](#). Ask students to think about the central theme of this song. Jacob’s lyric “a lesson in deception” is essentially the theme being explored in the song.

The circus encompasses many kinds of performances, including magicians and illusionists! Illusionists are entertainers who perform tricks where objects seem to appear and disappear, sometimes close-up to their audience, using sleight of hand.

What Jacob calls “deception,” we’ll call “illusion”! The key to a successful act is not only the skill or trick but also how the trick is presented to the audience. Using misdirection or sleight of hand, and a good amount of showmanship, the presenter can share an illusion that leaves an audience astonished. For example, the character August sings, “The Lion Has Got No Teeth,” and about one minute and seven seconds into the video, during the first chorus, an ensemble member performs a costume quick change onstage. Ask students to describe what they notice about August during this moment in the song. What is his posture? What about his facial expressions? August is confident. He doesn’t flinch or question whether the mechanics of the trick will work. If he were to appear anxious, or even look back at his cast member before their quick change, it could destroy the delivery of the illusion. Next, you will find an illusion act to practice with your students!



VANISHING TOOTHPICK: CREATE YOUR OWN ILLUSIONIST ACT!

Materials: (for each student)

- Toothpick
- Clear tape
- Mirror or camera (for practice)

Here's how the illusion works:

Preparation—To begin, tear off a piece of tape the approximate size of the width of the presenter's thumb. Attach one end of the toothpick to the tape and then press the toothpick to the presenter's thumb on the backside of the hand right at the top of the fingernail. The taped part of the toothpick should be right below the thumbnail, and the rest of the toothpick should be lying flat down the knuckle and base of the presenter's thumb on the backside of the hand. If you're having trouble visualizing this trick, a quick online search will clear it up!

Proficiency—The presenter should tuck their thumb (with the toothpick taped to the outside of the thumb) toward the palm of the hand. The untaped portion of the toothpick will then be sticking up in the air. The presenter then wraps their remaining four fingers around the tucked thumb, positioning the toothpick to look as if they were holding it in their hand (their fist is closed, and the toothpick points vertically out of their closed fist). It may be extremely helpful to use a mirror or front-facing camera on a smart phone to practice making this position look as natural as possible. Once the position appears perfect, have the presenter practice swiping the opposite hand over the toothpick while quickly opening the hand holding the toothpick. The presenter's final hand position for this illusion is the palm of the hand facing the audience. While the audience is focused on the opposite hand, the toothpick will seem to vanish when the presenter opens their hand! In reality, the toothpick is still taped to the thumb and blocked from view behind the open palm.

Presentation—Remember, presentation is everything in illusion! Swiping the opposite hand over the closed fist draws the audience's attention to the moving hand rather than the hand holding the toothpick. The speed and confidence with which the illusion takes place also adds an element of mystery.

Once presenters feel proficient performing the illusion, work on building their own version of the presentation. Maybe they make the toothpick reappear or show the audience that the toothpick is not attached to the hand by rotating both hands, palm in, being careful not to show the back of their hands. Most importantly, students should make the illusion their own with confidence and flair.

NOTHIN' IS QUITE WHAT IT SEEMS

Continue exploring different kinds of circus acts.

Not all acts rely on illusions. As Jacob sings,

*But the acts I like the best
Don't depend on misdirection
Where is the lie
When they're flying overhead?
When they're dancing on a thread?
When she's riding?*

Circus performers, like the trapeze artists mentioned above, are such well-trained athletes that it may seem at times like they're really flying! Where is the lie when someone is flying the trapeze? There is no lie; there's just serious mental and physical training to build the skill. First, take a look at this [article from Playbill](#), and then watch the [behind-the-scenes video](#) on how *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* brought the circus to the Imperial Theatre on Broadway. After reading the article and watching the fight call, have students identify what they learned about the skill and education it takes to be a strong circus performer and director like Shana Carroll, co-choreographer and circus designer. Ask students: Is there anything you discovered or that surprised you from the article? One thing to keep in mind is all the circus performers in *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* had to begin somewhere! Let's explore a beginner circus act: building an individual Hula-Hooping routine!



Gain a circus skill—learn to Hula-Hoop!

Materials: (for each student)

- Lightweight Hula-Hoop

Here are a few Hula-Hooping skills:

Hip—Have the presenter stand with their feet shoulder-width apart. Next, they should pull the Hula-Hoop over their head and place it directly on their back before giving it a big spin. Then, the presenter should move their hips backwards and forwards in a small, fast motion. Once presenters get comfortable with Hula-Hooping, they can try walking while Hula-Hooping or even adding more hoops! Keep in mind, more hoops will require raised arms and larger spins.

Hand—Have the presenter use their dominant hand first. They should begin by holding their arm out to the side at an obtuse angle. They should hold their fingers together and thumb up, like reaching out for a handshake, with a strong arm holding tension from the shoulder to the fingertips. They should place the Hula-Hoop on the top of their hand in between the index finger and thumb. Next, have them push down on the hoop with their opposite hand. This will cause the hoop to begin to spin. Once students get confident with the hand hoop, they should try it on their non-dominant hand.

The Act—If students are proficient in hip and hand hooping, have them begin exploring other hooping options. Have students try safely hooping around their knees, forearms, and more. They can even try jumping through the hoop, using it like a jump rope, or tossing the hoop into the air to catch it. If students are only comfortable hooping on their hips, encourage them to keep improving that skill.

It is time to build an act! Just like performing illusion acts, presentation is key! Have students string together a series of hoop choreography and set the act to music of their choice. The choreography should be based on their comfort level. For example, maybe they walk to the rhythm of the music, pause, prepare, hoop on the hips, then throw the hoop into the air and catch it. For a little more advanced presentation, they could begin dancing to the music, then jump the hoop in rhythm, and then pass the hoop to hand hooping.

Taking it further, if students are interested in learning more about illusion acts or beginner circus acts, have them look online at tutorial videos and research local circus facilities and gyms. There are lots of resources for hooping online as well.



Nicolas Jelmoni, Samuel Renaud, Keaton Hentoff-Killian in the Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2024

ADVERTISEMENTS

When you enter the theater to see *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, Broadway Scenic Designer Takeshi Kata has wrapped the proscenium with a collage of vintage 1930s circus posters. This is the first thing the audience sees, instantly bringing the audience into the world of the musical. Did you know circuses spent more money on marketing than any other elements in the show? Maybe that is why August did not change the posters from Benzini Brothers! Circus advertisements are iconic and historic pieces. They were some of the first large-scale prints in America and served as a marketing tool to bring in the crowds!

Now that students have learned a few different circus acts, it is time to sell their acts! Have students think about the act they want to present. This can be one of the two acts they explored (Vanishing Toothpick and Hula-Hooping), or students can create an act using previous skills that they have, like tumbling, juggling, jumping rope, and more. Then, have students research historical circus posters and illustrations on the internet. A pro tip for students: research multiple galleries across America that have circus poster collections on display. Once students complete their research, have them create an 8 x 11 circus poster advertising their act!

Advertisement Guidelines:

- Posters should feature color! The original prints were bright and eye-catching compared to hand-painted, simple advertisements that small-town America was used to.

- The poster should highlight the name of the presenter's circus! Students can be creative in naming their circuses.
- The poster should feature the presenter's specific act.
- The poster should feature a fun, old-timey or antiquated font to share a detailed description of the circus act!

Taking it further, host a presentation where students showcase their advertisements and present their circus acts for peers and invited guests!









PUPPETRY

HORSE, DOG, ELEPHANT

Learn more about the puppets used in *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*.

Puppetry is an ancient form of storytelling where a person, called a puppeteer, manipulates a figure resembling a human, animal, creature, or inanimate object. In *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, puppets and puppeteers are used to enhance the storytelling. Take, for example, Silver Star, the prized horse and equestrian act in the Benzini Brothers Circus. The 2006 novel by Sara Gruen uses imagery to describe the horse, the 2011 motion picture uses a real horse, and in the Broadway musical, Silver Star is represented both by a puppet and puppeteer and also by an aerialist suspended on a silk ribbon.



REVIEW THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PUPPETS BELOW.

Types of Puppets:

- **Body**—most familiar as sports mascots. These puppets are usually worn like costumes and manipulated by the person wearing the puppet.
- **Bunraku**—traditional Japanese puppet using half-life-sized wooden dolls for storytelling. The dolls are manipulated by puppeteers who are dressed in black and sometimes masked.
- **Finger**—manipulated by a single finger moving, allowing a puppeteer to have multiple puppets on one hand.
- **Hand**—worn over the puppeteer's hand like a glove, with fingers fitting into the head and arms of the puppet to create movement. A sock puppet is a familiar form of a hand puppet without using arms—only head and body movement.
- **Marotte**—a stick puppet featuring a head carved or placed on a stick; manipulated by holding the stick.
- **Marionette**—a puppet with a complete body manipulated from above by strings connected to the puppet's limbs.
- **Mask**—a cover for one's face that represents a character, figurehead, or feature, and completely hides the wearer's face. Masks have a long history in theatre, with the Greek comedy and tragedy masks representing arts and drama. Masks are used in many festivals, religious ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations.
- **Rod**—uses metal or wooden rods attached beneath the figure for manipulation. Typically, the rods are connected to the puppet figures' limbs. These puppets can be manipulated by a puppeteer using one arm to wear the hand puppet and one arm moving the puppet's arm, attached to a rod. If the puppet has two arms or additional figure extensions, more puppeteers can assist. Rod puppets and hand puppets are used for television, video, and musicals.
- **Shadow**—these puppets are created by placing a figure between a light source and a screen, making a shadow. Typically, these figures are flat cutouts, but puppeteers can also use hands to create shadow puppetry.



VIDEO LINK:
GO BEHIND THE SCENES
OF WATER FOR ELEPHANTS
AND LEARN MORE ABOUT
DEVELOPING THE AERIAL
CHOREOGRAPHY AND
PUPPETRY WORK FOR THE
PRODUCTION NUMBER
"EASY."

In this activity, students will be introduced to puppetry concepts and designs in *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*. Watch "[*WATER FOR ELEPHANTS—The Menagerie*](#)," which explores the concept of puppets designed by [*Ray Wetmore, JR Goodman,*](#) and [*Camille Labarre*](#). The design process focuses on what Mr. Jankowski, one of the main characters, might remember about the circus animals. After watching the video, ask students: In what ways did the designers and director use their imaginations while engaging in creative exploration to tell the story using puppets? Discuss the exploration of memory and the design concepts, like leaving unfinished edges on the puppets to give the illusion of the animal being a memory.

Along with the overarching design concept for the puppets, there are a variety of types of puppets featured in *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*. Revisit the "[*WATER FOR ELEPHANTS—The Menagerie*](#)" video. At the top of the video, you will see a glimpse of a puppeteer manipulating a dog. Ask students: How do you think the dog puppet functions? The dog is a great example of a hand puppet. A hand puppet slides over the puppeteer's hand like a glove, with fingers fitting into the head and arms of the puppet to create movement. A sock puppet is a familiar form of a hand puppet without arms—only head and body movement. A hand puppet is easy to slide on and off, making this a great choice for the dog since it is operated by multiple characters in the show and even passed between two characters in one scene.

As mentioned in the list above, there are many kinds of puppets. In *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, the title character, Rosie the elephant, is portrayed in many different forms. If your students have already seen the production, ask them to think back to the different ways Rosie appeared onstage. If you have not seen *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* yet, read the list below.

Rosie, the elephant, appears as the following types of puppets:

- **Mask or Symbolic**—two simple ears being held by an acrobat on an actor's shoulders
- **Shadow**—behind a curtain
- **Rod Puppet**—on a single trunk
- **Body Puppet**—seeing just Rosie's legs
- **Body and Rod Puppet**—full body operated by multiple cast members



STOCK CAR PUPPETS

Research, design, and build a circus animal puppet.

Return to the list of puppets above and review their individual characteristics with your students. Once you've discussed the list, encourage students to continue their own exploration of different types of puppets, reviewing example photos and videos found online.

Following their exploration of different types of puppets, ask students to design a puppet circus animal of their choice. Ask students to create a design board, including the puppet type, an illustration of the puppet, the number of puppeteers needed to manipulate the puppet, and an illustration demonstrating how to manipulate the puppet. Once your students' design



Original Broadway Company of *Water for Elephants*, 2014

boards are complete, have students build a list of and acquire materials needed to create the puppet. Once they have the materials, students can begin building the puppets. Conclude the activity by having students present their puppets to the full group.

Tips for Success:

- Remember, materials do not have to be expensive. Encourage students to think about sustainable designs. Cardboard is a great sustainable material.
- If students need multiple puppeteers for their design, make sure to give appropriate rehearsal time.

CLASSROOM CONNECTION:

This activity works best for secondary students grades 6–12 under **National Arts Standards: Theatre at Glance: Creating: Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. Enduring Understanding: Theatre artists rely on intuition, curiosity, and critical inquiry. Essential Question(s):** What happens when theatre artists use their imaginations and/or learned theatre skills while engaging in creative exploration and inquiry?



PIGPEN'S MUSICAL MAP

PigPen Theatre Co. takes us through the Depression-era music that inspired the score of *Water for Elephants*.



"Broadcasting from an L.A. radio station, the Boswell Sisters were a wildly popular vocal trio. Their harmonies inspired Barbara, Vera, and Sue's verse in 'The Road Don't Make You Young.'"

"'Funny Angel' is a riff on country blues, which Texas troubadours like Lyle Lovett keep alive for modern audiences."



"Peruvian singer Yma Sumac was famous for a vocal style that echoed the natural sounds in her country. Her approach informed the spare, elemental style of 'Easy.'"

"When writing absorbed the style of New

"Just Our Luck" takes cues from Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and other Chicago jazz greats of the '20s and '30s."

"Cab Calloway was a legendary showman at Harlem's Cotton Club. You can hear his jazzy, vaudeville spirit in the high-energy charm of 'The Lion Has Got Not Teeth.'"

"It's got a Polish name, but 'Zostan' has DNA from jazz greats like Philadelphia's Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang."

Cincinnati bandleader Henry Fillmore was a prolific composer of bombastic circus marches called 'screamers.' With 'The Grand Spec,' The Benzini Brothers Circus has a screamer of its own."

"Appalachian and bluegrass music influenced 'The Road Don't Make You Young,' especially the vocal harmonies that pioneers like Ralph Stanley brought to the genre."

"The slide guitar and call-and-response chorus in 'You've Got Nothing' have their roots in the Mississippi Delta blues of Big Joe Williams, Muddy Waters, and Son House."

"Chattanooga native Bessie Smith was one of the bluesy torch singers who impacted the opening of 'I Shouldn't Be Surprised.'"

"In 'I Choose the Ride,' we hear the unpolished, unhurried vocal of Orleans-born Louis Armstrong."







RESPOND AND CONNECT

RECALL, REFLECT, INQUIRE, CONNECT

Guide students through writing a post-show reflection after viewing *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*.

In an interview with **Playbill**, Paul Alexander Nolan, who plays August in the original Broadway cast of *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, describes the show as “the biggest, smallest musical... I say small in that we have very little set. It’s really the company of artists and the puppetry and the circus that fill in this set. And so, it does kind of feel like a downtown show brought to a big stage. So, we’re giving people the pleasure of a big musical with the gratification of a story that’s really about a very human thing.” Ask students to think about this quote and if they agree with Nolan’s ideas. Then, ask them a series of questions about the show: Now that they’ve experienced the “biggest, smallest musical,” is this similar to how they might describe the show? How would they describe *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*? Ask them to pause and think about how they, as audience members, are processing their experience. Did they leave the theater talking about the show? Did a song pop into their heads the next day? Is there a theme from the musical that they can’t stop thinking about? Was there a trick or choreography that sticks in their heads? Do they share these thoughts with others?

In this activity, guide students through an exercise to recall, reflect on, inquire about, and connect to their experience of *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*. This is also an opportunity to model this exercise for students to use in the future following productions, class performances, and more. This exercise can be a group discussion or individual journal entry for students. To begin, ask

students to fold a piece of paper in half and then reopen. On the front, label the two columns “Recall” and “Reflect.” Label the columns on the back “Inquire” and “Connect.” Then, guide students through the following questions, and have students record their responses using bullet formatting.

RECALL—WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER?P

- Ask students to describe what they observed when experiencing *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*.
- Encourage students to recall the full story from beginning to end. The more detail students can include and the more expressive students can be, the better.
 - Describe the story’s exposition.
 - What was the inciting incident?
 - What was the climax?
 - What rising action led to the climax?
 - How did the story end? What was the resolution?
 - What falling action led to this resolution?
- Describe all the elements that worked together to tell the story. Think about the following:
 - Technical elements: the set, lights, sound, projections, and costumes
 - Circus elements
 - Puppetry design and its execution by performers
 - Lyrics and dialogue
 - Style of the music
 - Choreography



REFLECT—THINK ABOUT THE THEME OF *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*

- What is the author trying to convey to the audience?
- Was there a universal takeaway?
- What was the mood of this musical? Why have you identified this mood?
- How did the creative team and cast communicate the theme to the audience?



INQUIRE—DO YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MUSICAL?

- Were you curious or confused at any point?
- Is there something from the musical that you wanted to follow up on in order to gain a deeper understanding?
- For example, what is “Jake” that Camel is drinking? “Jake” is short for Jamaican Ginger, a popular substitute for alcohol during prohibition that caused numbness in the legs.



CONNECT—HOW DOES *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* RELATE TO YOU?

- Does *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* remind you of anything?
 - Perhaps you have been to the circus or you have a family member aging, like Mr. Jankowski.
- How does *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* compare to other musicals you have seen or listened to?
 - How is it similar or different?
- Does *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* relate to your own life in any way?
 - Is there a song you identify with?
 - Is there a plot point that feels familiar to you?
 - For example, it’s assumed that Rosie cannot learn, when really, she was just speaking a different language and needed to be taught differently. Is that a situation you can identify with?

Once students have finished the exercise, ask them to review their bullet points. Using their responses to *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, have students write a

description of the piece like Paul Alexander Nolan’s using their own thoughts and reactions to the production. This process of reflection requires students to stop and truly think through their experience with *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*. This activity helps students articulate their thoughts and form opinions deeper than “I liked it.” Give students time to share their descriptions with each other and encourage them to share with others who may ask about their experience at the theatre.

REMEMBER, THIS EXERCISE CAN BE USED IN THE FUTURE WITH CLASSROOM AND PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTIONS!

CLASSROOM CONNECTION:

This activity works best for secondary students grades 6–12 under English Language Arts Standards » Speaking and Listening as well as Theatre at Glance: Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. Enduring Understanding: Theatre artists apply criteria to investigate, explore, and assess drama and theatre work. Essential Question(s): How are the theatre artists’ processes and the audience’s perspectives impacted by analysis and synthesis?

Common Core State Standards Initiative:

Grade 6—[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1](#)

Grade 7—[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1](#)

Grade 8—[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1](#)

Grades 9–10—[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1](#),
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A](#)

Grades 11–12—[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#),
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A](#)

National Arts Standards: [TH:Re9.1.5.-](#) [TH:Re9.1.II.](#)

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