

***A Fable For Now*, by Wei Yu-Chia**
Translated by Jeremy Tiang
Education Pack

THEMES:

CLIMATE CRISIS
GENETIC MODIFICATION
GLOBAL VERSUS LOCAL

GENRE: Neo-absurdism

AGE RESTRICTION: 12+ (depicting violence and cannibalism)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: Seven scenes; different casts per scene.

CHARACTER LIST:

Scene One – Did you know polar bears can die of cold? (2 characters)

MAN – a human

POLAR – a polar bear, holding a black bear pelt which he claims to be his lover

Scene Two – Duck and Panda (12+ characters)

DUCK – a bright yellow shiny duck

PANDA – a baby panda bear

NURSES – 2 female nurses

A Family formed by a **FATHER, MOTHER, SON** and **DAUGHTER**

A pair of lovers formed by **BOYFRIEND** and **GIRLFRIEND**

VOICE OVER – acts as a narrator

CANNIBALS – number not specified

Scene Three – The summit of infants (6 characters)

EMCEE – a speaker at the infant summit

Five formally-dressed **DELEGATES** – all infants¹

Scene Four – Brothers in Arms (2 characters)

A – soldier from the South Country

B – soldier from the North Country

Scene Five – Sodium cyclamate (5 characters)

MAN and **POLAR** – same as scene one

WOMAN – in her twenties

A genetically modified **CHICKEN** – with six wings and eight legs, Polar’s new lover

SUPERVISOR – tells POLAR what to do

Scene Six – Zoo Story (5 characters)

PANDA and **DUCK** – as on scene two

CHICKEN – as on scene five, still madly in love with Polar

IMMORTAL TORTOISE – an immortal being with a very fragile shell

WOMAN – as on scene five

Scene Seven – Same, same (1 character but can be performed by a single actor or by an ensemble, speaking together or separately, at once or in sequence. The other performers can mime the events that the speaker is describing. However you do this, there should only be one person on stage by the end.)

MAN – same as scene one and five

Voice only characters: **MALE VOICE** – perhaps the Man’s thumb; **RADIO** – built by the Man, repeats the same sentence over and over “Do you repent?”

SYNOPSIS:

Taiwan Literature Prize-winning play, *A Fable For Now*, shows us the world ending again and again. These global catastrophes come with environmental collapse, war, government incompetence, and unrestrained capitalism. Navigating this chaos are a panda, a polar bear and a duck, a genetically-modified chicken and a couple of humans. How can we coax meaning and happiness out of our brief time on this

¹ Note from the author: In an ideal world, there’d be actual infants in this scene. But that’s probably too ideal, so feel free to use adult actors.

dying planet? When the dust settles, only one human being is left alive in the world -- but is he blessed or cursed to have survived?

Staged reading at the PEN World Voices International Festival, Segal Center, Apr 2018, directed by Mei Ann Teo, with Eric Aviles, Wei-Yi Lin, David Shih, Elise Santora, Ching Valdes, and Jeena Yi.

This play was originally written in Mandarin (Chinese) in 2014.

KEY MOMENTS:

pp. 13-17, Scene Four (2M)

A and B are at war, until they realise they are more alike than they ever thought they were.

pp. 29-36, Scene Seven (1M)

The MAN has realised he is alone and begs not to be the last one standing.

pp. 17-22, Scene Five (1M, 1F + 2 animals)

Polar confesses his new found love for the genetically modified Chicken to the Man and a Woman.

STEP ONE: ASK

What questions come to the students' minds when they read these key moments? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the play which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised above and try to combine more than one concept in each question. Here are some examples:

- What can be done to prevent the "climate emergency" as pointed out in the article? Is it a global initiative or can there be action taken by individuals?

- What do you know about GMO animals? Are there ways that genetically modifying animals is justified and/or should be encouraged?
- What are you doing to know more about the food you put on your plate? What actions can we do individually that could reduce the global impact of our carbon footprint? (e.g. reducing animal consumption, avoiding the use of disposable plastic, recycling; etc...)

Consider these questions across global warming and melting ice-caps; genetically modified animals for human consumption; global versus local and its relationships with the individual, and explore if students can relate to the issues portrayed in this text.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1:

As the climate crisis is at the core of this text, this could be a good exercise to open the discussions:

FLOOR IS LAVA – Performers are asked to lay out chairs and/or theatre cubes throughout the rehearsal space and once they are happy with the lay out, shout out “The floor is LAVA!” As they start to find places to not touch the floor, start giving them obstacles to overcome (i.e. if you sit on an object it automatically transforms it into lava, or anything of a certain colour is now also lava, etc...)

As they continue to find ways to escape the lava, allow them time to observe if there is anyone that is being left behind, or is in a more precarious situation. How can they help? Is it worth putting your safety at risk to not leave anyone behind?

Once the safe space to stand is reduced to the absolute minimum, ask them to freeze and observe. How did they get to that position? How did they respond to arbitrary difficulties imposed upon them? Would they have thrived if not together?

Exercise 2:

At scene three (pp. 11-13) we see EMCEE try to control a summit of DELEGATES that are all infants, who cannot speak the language of grown-ups. A good exercise for that could be:

Speaking Gibberish –

Ask two students to take the stage. One will speak gibberish, and the other will translate the gibberish into English. Give the gibberish student a specific situation to talk about, or take suggestions from the class. (i.e. You have just come back from a trip to Mars, and you are telling us, a crowd of reporters, all about it.) The gibberish speaker should speak only one line at a time, using as much physicality as they can. Then the interpreter will mimic the motions and translate the phrase into English. Encourage the gibberish speaker to be very specific in their intention and actions. Encourage the interpreter to think very carefully about trying to make the gibberish make sense.

Other scenarios you can propose: A scientist explaining her recent discovery of a 2nd moon; a pop singer giving a press conference after falling asleep during his concert performance; a child describing what it was like getting her first cavity; a chef explaining how to cook his favourite meal, candy spaghetti (or anything else!)

Exercise 3:

At scene four (pp. 13-17), we see A and B go from fighting each other to learning they are possibly real brothers. As the climax of the play touches upon the concepts of global versus individual identities and experiences, an exercise that can be played to explore that better is -

Boal's Machine – inspired by the Working Machine exercise by Augusto Boal, one of the participants should go into the middle and imagine that they are a moving part in a complex machine. As they start doing a movement with their body, a mechanical, rhythmic movement, and vocalising a sound to go with it. Everyone else watches and listens, in a circle around the machine. Another person goes up and adds another part (their own body) to this mechanical apparatus, with another movement and another sound. A third, watching the first two, goes in and does the same, so that eventually all the participants are integrated into this one, synchronised machine. When everyone is part of the machine, the facilitator asks the first person to accelerate his rhythm – everyone else must follow their modification, since the machine is one entity. When the machine is near to explosion, the facilitator asks the first person to ease up, gradually to slow down, till

in their own time the whole group ends together. It is not easy to end together, but it is possible. For everything to work well, each participant really does have to try and listen to everything he hears. This play's machine could work both as a) The machine of whatever themes we are currently working on: global warming, genetically modified animals and scientific research, global vs. local, etc. This helps enormously to create images for the actual scenes; b) The machine of the play, of a character or a situation. In this case, the actors' task is not necessarily to unify but to structure their relationships.

As Boal says "[it] is extraordinary how the ideology of a group, its political standpoint, can be revealed in a rhythm of sound and movement. The way people think and the things they find fault with soon become apparent." This exercise can also be repeated including text, once characters are assigned.

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. Can they relate with the characters' plight? What was the most interesting thing they learned? Bring students to return to the text and analyse what they are taking away from the exercises for their character study- if they have been assigned their characters already. Once the text is read in its entirety, perhaps pose the further questions:

- How can we make theatre that reflects the climate crisis and its consequences on us as performers? How does that reflect in today's society?
- Why was the MAN so desperate at the end of Scene Seven? Did he have to reach that extreme to learn that 'no man is an island'? What is this piece proposing as ways to reach solutions to the crisis it proposes to reflect on?

APPENDIX

STRUCTURE:

Scene 1. A very cold place. A MAN and a POLAR BEAR have a casual conversation over a cigarette break. They talk about the kindness of strangers, loss and mourning.

Scene 2. In a park. A BEAR and a DUCK talk about food safety.

Scene 3. A conference room. Numerous national leaders are like babies and arguing about world peace.

Scene 4. A battlefield. A and B are fighting with each other.

Scene 5. In a fish cannery. A MAN and a POLAR BEAR talk about the food processing and pollution.

Scene 6. A BEAR (not a panda) and a DUCK are missing their animal instinct. An IMMORTAL and a WOMEN join the conversation talking about the garbage pollution.

Scene 7. A barren island. A MAN services as a tour guide and introduces human history in an ironic tone. A radio voice repeatedly asks him “Do you repent?”