



The Shape of a Girl

by Joan McLeod

STUDY GUIDE

Remai Arts Centre, 100 Spadina Crescent East, Saskatoon SK | persephonetheatre.org



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The Shape of a Girl

by Joan McLeod

Cast

Braidie.....Jenna Berenbaum

Creative Team

Director Jennica Grienke
Set Designer Jensine Emmeline
Costume Designer Nicole Zalesak
Sound Designer..... Grahame Kent
Stage Manager Ricardo Alvarado

Staff

Artistic Associate Jennica Grienke
Youth Tour Coordinator..... Grahame Kent

Study Guide written by Green Thumb Theatre.
Jas Uppal with additional materials contributed by
Ellen Peterson, Amy Thomasson, and Nadine Carew.

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NOTE: Many of the exercises in this guide are not the creation of the author. The author of the guide is not attempting to claim the exercises as her own inventions. They have been learned from other teachers of theatre and altered through experimentation. Where no credit is given, the original source is not known.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE SHAPE OF A GIRL was inspired by the Reena Virk Story: the real life tragedy of a teenaged girl killed by a group of teens.

Braidie is fascinated by a TV news story about a girl accused of a shocking act of violence, “a monster in the shape of a girl”. A different kind of girl from her and her friends...or is she? Propelled by memories she can't forget and scenes from her past she can no longer ignore, Braidie must confront the truth of her giddy, terrifying teenage world. Can she find the courage to break her friends' conspiracy of silence when their bullying of a classmate goes too far?

Written by one of Canada's most respected authors, Governor General's Award winner Joan MacLeod, *The Shape of a Girl* is a dynamic one-woman show that looks at the realities of teenage relationships, aggression and codes of behaviour.

About the Playwright

Joan MacLeod is the author of 10 plays. Her scripts include *Homechild*, 2000, *Little Sister* (a co-commission between Green Thumb Theatre and Theatre Direct Canada and winner of the Chalmers Award), *The Hope Slide* (Chalmers Award), *Amigo's Blue Guitar* (Governor General's Award), *Toronto, Mississippi and Jewel*. Her plays have been produced extensively, including several productions at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, Arts Club Theatre, Belfry Theatre and Vancouver Playhouse. She wrote the libretto for *The Secret Garden* (Dora Award) and wrote several episodes for the popular CBC series *Edgemont*. *The Shape of a Girl*, commissioned by Green Thumb and co-produced at ATP's Playrites Festival in 2001, toured continually for five years and is still being produced in both Canada and abroad. It has been translated into six languages. She is currently teaching in the Department of Writing at the University of Victoria.

Playwright's Notes

I've only written one play that didn't include a teenage character. That play did, however, feature a hundred-year-old woman and I like to think she had the spunk, wisdom and brashness of an adolescent. It seems that in the teenage world the stakes are perpetually enormous —great terrain for any writer.

Braidie's voice started developing just over three years ago, not too long after the murder of a fourteen year-old girl by a group of teenagers, an incident that captured news headlines around the world. Writing about those sad events in Victoria was the last thing I wanted to do, so it took me another year to see a relationship between the two. I only knew Braidie had backed herself into a corner and I didn't know why. I also knew I had a play because I wanted to find out so badly.

As I write this we are in our second week of rehearsal. We have a great team and it's going well. There have been front-page articles all week about bullying and violence and young people: this week isn't extraordinary.

This play is for teenagers, hundred-year-old women and everybody caught in between.

-Joan MacLeod, Calgary, February, 2001

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After the Play

The following exercises and activities are provided as suggestions and starting points for further exploration of the themes brought up in "Shape of a Girl". They have been designed keeping the BC Ministry of Education Curriculum Guidelines in mind and may be used in connection with other units that you are doing during the school year. Near the end of the guide there are several pull-out worksheets, for your convenience, that investigate specific themes/aspects of the performance.

For a more thorough Study Guide, including information about specific curricular connections, planned learning outcomes, and a variety of supplementary activities, please download the **Shape of a Girl Study Guide: Extended Version** from our website at: <http://www.greenthumb.bc.ca/plays.asp>

General Discussion Questions/ Snowball Strategy

Here are some questions to help structure a discussion in your classroom after the performance. These can also be jumping off points for a journaling or reflection activities. In order to encourage purposeful talk try the Snowball Strategy: First have students discuss in pairs, then have the pairs make a group of four and then have the groups of four make a group of eight.

- Does Braidie's story accurately reflect your experience with the issue of bullying? Why or why not?
- Did Braidie's decision at the end of the play seem plausible? What finally convinced her to speak up? Was this a good solution to the problem? What is likely to happen next? What might happen to Sofie if no one intervenes?
- How has media coverage of the tragedy influenced Braidie's perception of events?
- Discuss other stories of this kind from the news. Is this problem getting worse?
- What can a person do if they are being bullied?
- What are the long-term effects of bullying on the victim? What are the effects on the bully?
- What makes some people bully others? Is this made clear in the play?
- Does Braidie's silence make her as guilty as Adrienne?
- Discuss the symbolic significance of the setting, especially its proximity to the Blind Children's Camp.
- What systems, if any, does your school have in place to deal with this kind of problem? What other steps could be taken?
- Some experts believe that the solution to the problem of bullying lies with the "bystanders"; students who are not being bullied themselves but see it happening. Initiate a discussion with your group about how bystanders can help. Is their role included in your school's anti-bullying efforts?
- Discuss the significance of the title.
- Is Braidie's relationship with her mother a "normal" one? Why or why not?
- Discuss any other high-profile crimes committed by youth against youth. Are these crimes increasing in frequency or severity? Are these incidents sensationalized in the media and if so, why?

Learning Activity One : Other Perspectives

The Shape of a Girl is a monologue written from the perspective of the central character, Braidie. Through her narrative, Braidie introduces us to many different characters, all of whom must have their own perspective on the incidents which occur.

Part 1- Who are the characters?

Create a list with your students of the different characters referred to or suggested in the above excerpt. These may comprise characters in the play but also some made up ones as well. Consider the following as some possibilities:

- Trevor
- Mum
- Adrienne
- Adrienne's mum
- Jackie
- Amber
- Sofie
- Sofie's Mum
- Someone from the blind camp
- An adult walking on the beach
- A teenager walking on the beach
- A TV reporter
- A class teacher
- A policeman
- Other class members male or female
- A psychologist working with any of the characters

Part 2 - Characters and their possible perspectives

Allocate a different character to each small group and have them discuss the possible perspectives that these characters may have. Ask the students to choose one of the characters listed and consider the following?

How might this character have reported this incident?

Would this character be shocked, mortified?

Would this character report the incident differently if they were speaking to a friend, a policeman, a TV reporter, etc

How would this incident make this character feel?

Would they feel that they should respond? Why/why not?

Following the small group discussions, have each group share their insights, thoughts about the character's possible perspectives.

Part 3 – Creative Writing

Have the students write a journal entry or monologue from the perspective of one of the other characters mentioned in the play from the list above. Have them describe one of the incidents in the play from their point of view.

Learning Activity Two: Defending Decisions

- Discuss the decision to sentence seventeen year old Melissa Todorovic (convicted of murder in the slaying of Stefanie Rengle) as an adult rather than under the Youth Criminal Justice Act
See article at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/2009/07/28/rengel-sentence.html>
- Defend a position on how the legal system treats young people differently than adults who commit the same crime. Do you agree or disagree?
- Discuss any other high-profile crimes committed by youth against youth. Are these crimes increasing in frequency or severity? Are these incidents sensationalized in the media and if so, why?

Learning Activity Three: Reading an Opinion Piece

Ask your students to read this article and answer the following questions:

- What point is the writer trying to make?
- Why does the writer highlight gender in this article?
- How does the writer see the role of the media in the Reena Virk case?
- What is your opinion about the claims made by the writer?

Reena Virk: The Erasure of Race

<http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/articles/virk.htm>

WORKSHEET-Bullying P.1

Name: _____

Define and give an example of each of the following types of bullying:

	Definition	Example
Physical bullying:		
Verbal bullying:		
Emotional Intimidation:		
Sexual bullying:		
Cyber bullying:		
Racist bullying:		

What kinds of bullying did you observe in Shape of a Girl?

Who was/were the victim(s)?

Who was/were the bully(ies)?

WORKSHEET-Bullying P.2

List 3 possible short term effects of bullying on a victim

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List 3 possible long term effects of bullying on a victim

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What kind of long term effects do you think bullying might have on the bully?

Research Anti-bullying websites on the internet and come up with a list of 5-10 ways to prevent bullying:

WORKSHEET—Media Coverage

Name: _____

What are some of the headlines from around Canada this week?

How many, if any, of these stories are about crime or violence?

List some words used to describe the crime, the offenders and the victim.

Pretend you are the anchor of a local news broadcast. How would you tell the story of Reena Virk (or another story about violent crime that you found in your research) to the public?

WORKSHEET-Teen Violence P.1

Name _____

Do some research about Teen Violence in Canada. Make a list of important facts and statistics.

Using the internet or newspapers, find at least two different stories about teen violence. Where did they happen? How old were the people involved? What happened? What were the consequences? Include other information that you think is important. If possible, staple a copy of the story or article to your worksheet. Make sure you write down where you found the story.

Story #1

Source:

Story #2

Source:

WORKSHEET-Teen Violence P.2

What year did the Youth Criminal Justice Act come into effect in Canada? _____

Between what ages can you be tried under the YCJA in Canada? _____

In your own words, what is the purpose of the Youth Criminal Justice Act?

Bonus: What was the name of the Act that preceded the YCJA (hint: it was passed in 1984) _____

List three organizations you found in your research that are trying to prevent teen violence. How can someone get ahold of them? What do they do? Include other information that you think is important.

Name of organization:

Website:

Phone number:

Description:

Name of organization:

Website:

Phone number:

Description:

Name of organization:

Website:

Phone number:

Description:

RESOURCES

<http://www.ravendays.org>

(Surviving Middle School, Junior High and Highschool as an Outsider)

A site directed at students with advice, outreach, articles, news and a comprehensive list of links to other sites related to being an outsider and to anti-bullying programs.

<http://www.nationalsave.org>

(Students Against Violence Everywhere)

A student-driven national association based in the U.S. aimed at violence prevention, conflict management and positive leadership. The site includes student forums and helpful resources about bullying, violence and conflict management.

<http://www.dosomething.org/whatsyourthing/Violence+and+Bullying>

Do Something.org is a website that encourages young people to take action on a variety of issues. The violence and bullying section provides facts, news and resources and tips about how to take action. The website also has a matrix function in which students can select an issue that interests them and an amount of time they are willing to commit and the site provides them with a list of opportunities for getting involved.

<http://www.pinkshirtday.ca>

Information about Anti-Bullying Day programs with news, videos, resources and a list of links to other anti-bullying websites.

<http://watch.muchmusic.com/all-shows/muchtalks/the-bully-factor/#clip89802>

(Much Music show MuchTalks)

An episode of MuchTalks called "The Bully Factor" where students and experts discuss the issue of bullying.

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/04/14/f-virk-timeline.html>

A timeline of the news coverage about Reena Virk's murder and Kelly Ellard's trial. With links to online articles.

<http://www.youthagainstviolenceline.com/>

1-800-680-4264

<http://kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/InfoBooth/Bullying.aspx>

1-800-668-6868

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to use and review the *The Shape of a Girl* study guide as a resource to further enrich your students' experience watching the play.

Visit our website at persephonetheatre.org for more information about future Youth Tours or School Matinees.

Good luck in the school year and we hope to see you next year!

We want to hear from you and your students!

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