

THE MYTHS
AT THE EDGE
OF THE WORLD

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Matt Webster



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

A unique cross-curricular storytelling adventure on creation myths.

Playwright Bio

Matt Webster is a Theatre Educator and former tenured professor who has taught at universities, public schools, and professional theatre companies around the country. Matt is also a playwright, author, director, and actor. As a director, Matt has staged dozens of plays and musicals including *Annie*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *One Bad Apple*, *Einstein is a Dummy*, *Tartuffe*, *Sleuth*, *The Tempest*, and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*.

Matt is the Curriculum Consultant for the Drama Teacher Academy, the host of the monthly DTA Professional Learning Community (PLC), and the author of the book *Methods of Teaching Theatre: A Teacher Toolkit*. He also serves as an adjunct professor at Winthrop University.

Synopsis

Four campers are not only lost in the woods, they are lost at the edge of the world with no land, water, stars, or sun. The only way to bring life back is to ask the right questions that will release stories from the Wind: *The Myth of the Water Dragons* is from China, *Obatala and the Creation of the Ground* is a Yoruba myth from West Africa, *The Girl Who Scattered the Stars* is a Southwestern myth from the Cochiti tribe, and *The Sacrifice of the Sun* is an ancient Aztec myth.

Characters

The actors in the play take on roles in all of the myths.

Actor 1: Josh [M], Blue Dragon, Cedar, God 4

Actor 2: Ted [M], Black Dragon, Pine, God 1

Actor 3: Vicky [W], Yellow Dragon, Hen, Sequoia, God 3

Actor 4: Gina [W], White Dragon, Chameleon, Sycamore, God 2

Actor 5: Narrator 1 [AG], Sky, Oak, Nanautzin

Actor 6: Narrator 2 [AG], Obatala, Birch, Rich Beautiful God

Actor 7: Wind [W], Sentoukun, Orunla, Girl

Themes

Origins, creation, memory, quests

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is a myth?
- ★ What are some examples of myths?
- ★ What is the purpose of myths?
- ★ Why do we study myths?
- ★ What is a creation story?
- ★ Why do we use stories to explain the origins of something?
- ★ What can myths tell us about the present world?
- ★ What can we learn from myths?

Pre-Read Activities

Myth Creation Story

- ★ Discuss with students the definition of a myth. Highlight the following:

- » Myths are traditional stories, often oral stories passed down from generation to generation.
- » Myths often include elements of symbolism.
- » Myths often explain something, for example, the origin of a natural phenomenon (*the creation of the stars*).
- » Myths often include the extraordinary: supernatural beings, extraordinary events, gods.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group is to create an origin or creation myth.
 - » You can give groups the same topic (for example, the creation of the sun and moon) and have all the groups come up with their own version. Afterward you can discuss the similarities and differences between the interpretations.
 - » You can also have groups choose their own topic.
- ★ Each group will theatricalize the myth in their own interpretation. This can include:
 - » A traditional scene
 - » A narrated text with mimed action
 - » A nonverbal movement piece

Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research one of the myths from the play. What can students find out?
- ★ For example: *The Girl Who Scattered the Stars*
 - » What is the story of the myth?
 - » Where does the myth come from?
 - » What origin story does the myth tell?

- » What is the purpose of the myth?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Myth Title Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group one of the four myth titles from the play:
 - » The Myth of the Water Dragons
 - » Obatala and the Creation of the Ground
 - » The Girl Who Scattered the Stars
 - » The Sacrifice of the Sun
- ★ Groups will create a scene based only on what they can infer from the title. Emphasize that they are creating a myth. If necessary, have a discussion about myths:
 - » Myths are traditional stories, often oral stories passed down from generation to generation.
 - » Myths often include elements of symbolism.
 - » Myths often explain something, for example, the origin of a natural phenomenon (*the creation of the stars*).
 - » Myths often include the extraordinary: supernatural beings, extraordinary events, gods.
- ★ Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.

- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences of the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Myth Tableaux Series

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group one of the four myth titles from the play:
 - » The Myth of the Water Dragon
 - » Obatala and the Creation of the Ground
 - » The Girl Who Scattered the Stars
 - » The Sacrifice of the Sun
- ★ Groups will create a tableaux series of three tableaux based only on what they can infer from the title. What is the story in three pictures? How will they show the story?
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the moments each group chooses to visualize.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.

- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *The Myths at the Edge of the World*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What has happened to the four friends?
3. What did Ted lie about with regard to Eagle Scouts?
4. What does the voice of the Wind tell them to do?
5. What is the first myth?
6. What story does the first myth tell?
7. Who is Sentoukun?
8. Where does Sentoukun send Goujin and why?
9. What is the second myth?
10. What story does the second myth tell?
11. Who is Obatala?
12. Finish this sentence: "Mankind belongs in the world below, Orunla, but there is nothing for them to _____."
13. Who do the campers have to ask about the stars' creation story?
14. What does the mother tell the girl she must not do?
15. What happens when the girl does that exact thing?

16. Who is the Wind?
17. What is the fourth myth?
18. What does the volunteer have to do, according to the gods?
19. What does the Rich Beautiful God refuse to do?
20. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In the scenic elements suggestion, the author states: "As the scenes shift from location to location, the look of the set will change. From forest to waterworld, from water to land, land to sky, sky to sun and moon. These do NOT need to be realistic." How would you visualize this? Write your description of the set for the play.
2. The author gives actors the option to play multiple roles or a single role. In your opinion, which is more interesting as an actor and why?
3. The author has chosen to present the four campers in a humorous tone which contrasts with the tone of the myths. In your opinion, why does the author combine these tones in the play?
4. The narrators have a distinct way of speaking. Based on this, how would you costume them?
5. The author uses specific formatting to indicate when the narrators speak in unison. In your opinion, is it useful? Why or why not?
6. In the first myth, what is the significance of the line, "What makes you the same is what makes you different"?
7. In the second myth, what is the significance of the line, "Mankind belongs in the world below, Orunla, but there is nothing for them to stand on"?
8. What is the significance of the dialogue structure and rhyme in the third myth? Why do you think the author chose to use this structure?

9. What is the significance of the line, “We are building the world from the ground up”?
10. In the fourth myth, what is the significance of the line, “It does not matter! It is obvious that he does not measure up to the greatness required to bring light to this new world!”?
11. What is the main conflict in the play?
12. What is the purpose of the myths in the story of the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *The Myths at the Edge of the World*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about creation stories? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is going to happen next to the campers?
4. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which moment resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the stories impacted the characters by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Modern Creation Story 1

- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will make a modern creation story for some new item, object, or event.

- ★ How would they adapt the form of the myth for the 21st century? What is the modern version of a creation story? What would be created? How would the characters talk?

Modern Creation Story 2

- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will make a modern creation story.
- ★ Make a new creation story for an object or element that already exists. For example: How did trees come to be? Who put the fish in the sea? Why do people sing?

Modern Version

- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will make a modern version of one of the myths in the play.
- ★ How would they adapt the situation, the characters, and the outcome for the 21st century? For example, what is the modern version of *The Girl Who Scattered Stars*? What would a modern version of the character's action look like? What would the outcome be?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.

- » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
- » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
- » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Character Physical Discussion

- ★ As a class, discuss the personality traits of the characters in one of the myths. Create a list of traits for each.
- ★ Then compare and contrast the characters in the myth to the four campers. What are the similarities and differences?
- ★ Ask students: How do we physicalize personality? Why is physicality important in a production? Why would it be important to physicalize the myth characters differently from the campers?

Playwright Process

Playwright Matt Webster talks about his process of writing The Myths at the Edge of the World. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose to adapt these myths?

I knew I wanted to use creation myths as the foundation of the show. As I started researching different myths from around the world, I looked for stories that had interesting theatrical elements and strong characters that could be successfully transferred to the stage. Each of these stories provided those elements: In the case of the Chinese myth, the four bickering and destructive dragons are balanced by a single, calm, giant dragon who solves their problems with clarity and wisdom. Obatala's story has a simple structure, building action piece by piece, until a satisfying conclusion is reached. *The Girl Who Scattered The Stars* is a beautiful and heartbreaking story that has a relatable character and fantastic imagery. And the character of the Rich Beautiful God was just too good to pass up!

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

One of the biggest challenges was finding the individual styles and voices of each myth. For example, in the case of *The Girl Who Scattered the Stars*, I knew that I wanted to write it in rhyme. I wanted to do this partly as a challenge for myself and partly because that kind of choral vocal work sounds fantastic on stage. So for this story, the biggest challenge was adapting it to a specific, structured rhyming form. There were challenges like that in each of the four stories.

However, an additional challenge occurred because I was also the first director of the script. That created a problem because as the playwright, all of the lines and action made perfect sense in my head. But when I approached the script for the first time as a director I said, "Who is the idiot who put this on paper? That's never going to work!" Interestingly, being both playwright AND director has its advantages. Being the director gives me the opportunity to say things like, "You know, this character isn't working," "This scene is too wordy," or "There's no action going on here." And being the playwright allows me to say, "Let's change it." So the opportunity to make necessary changes while bringing the script to life was invaluable.

Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

Writing is rewriting. Your first draft is not going to be perfect. You will most likely need to go back and rework entire sections. If you are lucky enough to have a public reading of your script you will get a much better sense of where the work stands. Oftentimes when you hear it for the first time you say, "Oh, boy, that's pretty clunky, that's going to need some work." So you rewrite. But rewriting is hard, especially for beginning writers. It's hard because writers often fall in love with their own words and say, "No, you can't change it. You can't cut it. It's all important. None of it can go away." But those cuts and changes are necessary for the success of the script. Ultimately, rewriting is the process of making the story into the best version of the play possible, so it can be brought to life on the stage.

What is your writing process like?

I am a hot and cold writer. When I'm working on an original script and the writing is hot, the writing muse inspires me and I'll sit down and I'll write five, ten, even twenty pages! But then the muse leaves, the writing goes cold, and I can put a script down and not come back to it for weeks, months, or even years.

However, the process is different when I adapt an existing story. When I work on a piece like *Myths*, where I have source material in front of me, I work a little faster. In those cases it's a matter of adapting the stories into script form — doing things like giving voice to established characters and finding a way to shape the existing story into a workable script — so the process of adaptation is different than the process of creating something from scratch.