

# HOW HIGH IS UP?

BY BRENDAN MURRAY

[REVISED JANUARY 2000]

THIS PLAY WAS COMMISSIONED BY THEATRE CENTRE,  
LONDON

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1989 my oldest school friend died. He was thirty-two. It was the first time I had experienced the death of anyone very close to me. Naturally, I was deeply upset but more than this - and perhaps because Martyn was my contemporary - I was frightened. Of course I'd always known I would die one day [some day... never] but suddenly I felt truly mortal.

All sorts of questions filled my head: Why? Where's the sense in it? What now? The questions found their way into my work and over the next few years - during which time a further three friends died all too young - I found myself writing about death repeatedly. My plays *THE COLLYWOBBLES* and *LITTLE MAGGIE DANCING* [aimed at teenage and adult audiences respectively] dealt with people's struggle to come to terms with their own/their child's death. Rosamunde Hutt [Director of Theatre Centre] read one of these plays and invited me to lunch.

We talked of theatre in general [what we thought it should be doing]; of educative theatre [our specialist area]; of death and magic and pain and transformation. But most of all, perhaps, we talked of healing.

Rosamunde asked me to write a play for young children that would explore these ideas. I was excited. I was terrified. A play about death for six year-olds. I wondered why I'd ever agreed to the proposal. But over

the next few weeks we talked and read and met again and [inspired by Caroline Gowdy's strange, quirky drawings in the Penguin Book of Scandinavian Folk Tales] something like a story began to emerge. I went away to Kent to write the play.

On the day I sat down to begin the script, news reached me of the death of yet another friend: my one-time history teacher, Kevin. He wasn't a gardener - he wouldn't have known one end of a hoe from another - but he taught me a great deal, not least that the Arts are to be cherished and enjoyed. Life goes on of course, but I miss him. The play is dedicated to his memory.

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### **DEDICATION**

This play is dedicated to the memory of my friend and one-time history teacher,  
Kevin Charles Conroy, who died in September 1994.

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### **THANKS**

For their patience, help, encouragement and support, my thanks go to David, Laura, Lawrence, Eileen and Rene; the workshop company; the try-out company [especially Bernadette]; the performing company and Isy, Jackie, Jo, Avonnell and - above all - Ros at Theatre Centre.

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### **NOTES**

This is a play that happens in a world that is a bit like ours and a bit not and works well with a mixed-race company employing a variety of accents - local, national and international.

Little Star, Ba Gia and The Sun & The Moon were written originally for female performers; The Bird Who Has No Wings for a male. Over the

years just about every combination has been tried, including dividing The Sun & The Moon between two actors. These are decisions for individual directors but should The Bird Who Has No Wings be played by a woman her name should be Jeremy [and Little Star should struggle to say it thus: Jer... Jera... Jerem...]

Equally, Ba Gia should change to Ong Gia if played by a man. Both names are Vietnamese and carry the sense of both age and wisdom. Ba Gia sounds something like Ba-yar; Ong Gia like Ung-yar - with the accent on the second syllable in both cases - but I suggest you check with a Vietnamese speaker.

The magic should be simple and beautiful rather than impressive or mysterious. It should make you smile with wonder and delight.

The dance at the end might be a gentle, symbolic affair but I rather like the idea of its building to a joyous, raucous climax, rather in the manner of some Irish dances, with the Sun and Moon and The Bird joining in the whooping and stomping. In any event though, Little Star is alone when it ends. Alone, but no longer afraid.

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## PRODUCTION CREDITS

HOW HIGH IS UP? was first performed on Wednesday May 17, 1995, at Hanover School, Islington, with the following cast:

THE SUN AND MOON	Annie Sutton
LITTLE STAR	Mai Vu
BA GIA/MAGICIANS	Sam Adams
THE BIRD WHO HAS NO WINGS	Peter Rylands
Director	Rosamunde Hutt
Designer	Louise Ann Wilson
Composer	Paula Gardiner
Choreographer	Lawrence Evans
Company Stage Manager	Lucy Bovington

ASM Placement  
Production Manager

Violet Edmund  
Jack Tilbury

Assistant Director  
Costume Maker  
Design Assistant  
Voice Coach

Simon Nicholson  
Rachel Turner  
Alison Taylor  
Jessica Higgs

Administrator  
Financial Administrator  
Assistant Administrator  
Education Officer  
Secretary  
Touring Assistant

Isobel Hawson  
Jackie Alexis  
Jo Hemmant  
Shabnam Shabazi  
Avonnell Riley  
Ags Irwin

Teachers' Resources

Francis Gobey

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## CHARACTERS

THE SUN

THE MOON

LITTLE STAR

BA GIA, a gardener

THE BIRD WHO HAS NO WINGS [BIRD WHNW]

THE MAGICIAN OF THE ROARING WINDS

THE MAGICIAN OF THE POURING RAINS

THE MAGICIAN OF THE SILENT SNOWS

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**THE PLAY BEGINS**

IN THE HEAVENS, THE SUN AND MOON  
APPEAR.  
THEY MOVE ON TIPTOE; THEY SPEAK IN  
WHISPERS.

SUN                   Is anybody looking?

MOON                 I don't think so.

SUN                   Is anybody listening?

MOON                 I don't think so.

SUN                   We'd best be having a dance, then.

MOON                 We had that, or the kettle will never boil.

SUN                   And the holidays will never come.

MOON                 And it will always be Monday morning.  
[OR WHATEVER TIME OF WHATEVER DAY IT  
HAPPENS TO BE]

THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON                 What dance shall we dance today?

SUN                   Today we'll dance The Dance That Has No End.

MOON                 Isn't that the dance we always dance?

SUN                   That, or something very like it.

THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON Can we hear the music?

SUN Oh, the music never stops.

MOON But can we hear it?

SUN If we listen we'll hear it.

THEY LISTEN. SOMEWHERE A CHILD IS SINGING.

MOON Yes. Yes! There it is.

SUN Are we dancing, then?

MOON We are. We are!

THEY DANCE. THEN THE MOON NOTICES THE WORLD.

MOON Will you look at this.

SUN What's that?

MOON A world.

SUN Sure, the place is full of them things.

MOON Will we be having a look through the telescope?

SUN We will not! You know very well it's only to be used in emergencies. I mean what if someone should see us, you know, down there?

MOON Oh, they'll not see us. Just this once.

SUN No.



SUN                    Well?

MOON                  It's a world all right.

SUN                    We knew that much already.

MOON                  Well, there's a garden.

SUN                    Any people?

MOON                  Two.

SUN                    Careful now.

MOON                  Oh!

SUN                    What?

MOON                  She's looking up.

SUN                    Who is?

MOON                  In the garden.

SUN                    You don't think...

MOON                  What?

SUN                    She's looking at us, do you? Listening to us?

MOON                  I don't know.

SUN                    Best be still to be on the safe side.

MOON                  Right.

SUN                    We'll watch and see what happens.

PAUSE.

MOON I think this might be one of the sad bits.

SUN Ssh.

MOON And I haven't got a handkerchief.

SUN Will you shush yourself and watch.

MOON I'm watching, I'm watching. There's no need to -

SUN Ssh!

IN THE GARDEN BA GIA IS WORKING. LITTLE  
STAR IS GATHERING SEEDS IN A BOWL;  
SINGING AS SHE DOES SO.

LITTLE STAR One for the birds,  
And one for the squirrels;  
One for the gatherer,  
And one for the Spring.

AFTER A TIME SHE STOPS AND SPEAKS TO  
THE TREE:

LITTLE STAR Look, Tree: I am gathering the seeds the wind has  
blown from your branches. Some I leave for the birds;  
some I leave for the squirrels; some I take for myself,  
and some I keep to plant in the Spring.

SHE RESUMES HER WORK AND HER SONG.  
THE TREE BEGINS TO SHED ITS LEAVES.

LITTLE STAR Tree! Your leaves! Your leaves are falling!

BA GIA Little Star.

LITTLE STAR Ba Gia, the tree...

BA GIA            Come here, Little Star.

LITTLE STAR    But the tree, Ba Gia...

BA GIA            All in good time, Little Star. Now, come here.

LITTLE STAR GOES TO BA GIA.

BA GIA            Have you gathered the seeds for the Spring?

LITTLE STAR    Yes, Ba Gia.

BA GIA            Show me.

LITTLE STAR DOES SO.

BA GIA            Good. Did you leave some for the birds?

LITTLE STAR    Yes.

BA GIA            Did you leave some for the squirrels?

LITTLE STAR    Yes.

BA GIA            Did you take some for yourself?

LITTLE STAR IS SILENT.

BA GIA            It is right, Little Star; you will need food for the Winter.

LITTLE STAR    Then, yes: I took some.

BA GIA            You are learning. When the Spring comes you must learn to dance.

LITTLE STAR    Dance?

- BA GIA Yes. Everyone must know how to dance, even the Sun and Moon in the heavens.
- LITTLE STAR I have never seen them dance.
- BA GIA That is because they only dance when no-one is looking.
- LITTLE STAR But if no-one is looking, how do we know they dance at all?
- BA GIA Doesn't the Sun rise in the East and set in the West?
- LITTLE STAR Yes.
- BA GIA And doesn't the Moon appear over the garden wall and disappear behind the tree?
- LITTLE STAR Yes.
- BA GIA How else, then, do they cross the sky if not by dancing?
- LITTLE STAR Er...
- BA GIA Now, what about the tree?
- LITTLE STAR Look, Ba Gia, the tree is dying. The leaves are falling.
- BA GIA It is Autumn, Little Star: leaves fall.
- LITTLE STAR Autumn.
- BA GIA Nothing to be frightened of; just a part of something bigger. A circle with four sides: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. The world turns and the garden changes: growing and flowering; falling and dying; sleeping beneath a blanket of snow but coming alive again with every Spring. It's how things are and

how they should be. Now tell me, will you remember this?

LITTLE STAR I'll try.

BA GIA Good; because the time is coming when you will need to know it.

LITTLE STAR What time is that?

BA GIA The world turns for people, too, and no-one lives for ever. I'm old now - yes - and tired: some mornings I creak like a gate.

LITTLE STAR What are you saying?

BA GIA People die, Little Star, as gardens die; as everything that grows must die.

LITTLE STAR People, yes; but not you.

BA GIA Everybody.

LITTLE STAR Everybody, yes; but not soon.

BA GIA Before the winter ends. You will know the time because I will hang my hat in the tree.

LITTLE STAR Will you come alive again in the Spring, like the garden?

BA GIA No. That doesn't happen with people.

LITTLE STAR Then I don't want you to die.

BA GIA It's how things are and how they should be, and your wanting it won't stop it happening. Nothing can stop

it happening. You would have to make time stand still.

LITTLE STAR [AFTER A TIME] No.

BA GIA Little Star...

LITTLE STAR It mustn't happen.

BA GIA Please...

LITTLE STAR You mustn't die.

BA GIA It's how things are -

LITTLE STAR Stop saying that!

BA GIA Please, Little Star...

LITTLE STAR No... No... No... No!

LITTLE STAR RUNS AWAY.

BA GIA I'm sorry, Little Star, there is no easy way: no day without night; no Spring without Winter. But the Dancing Time will come again and you will be hear to see it. [SHE TAKES A SCARF, AN UMBRELLA AND A COAT] Oh, Little Star, you never said good-bye.

BA GIA PLACES THE BOWL OF SEEDS UNDER THE TREE. SHE IS LOST FROM VIEW IN THE FALLING LEAVES.

IN THE HEAVENS, THE SUN AND MOON APPEAR.

MOON I knew something sad was going to happen.

Final pages

LITTLE STAR

How High Is Up? How Deep Is Down? Which Way Are You Facing When You Turn Around? [SHE TRIES IT] Forward... You're facing forward!

LITTLE STAR TAKES THE HAT FROM THE TREE.

LITTLE STAR

Good-bye, Ba Gia. Good-bye.

SHE PUTS ON THE HAT AND BEGINS TO GARDEN. IN THE HEAVENS, THE SUN AND MOON APPEAR.

SUN

Is anybody looking?

MOON

I don't think so.

SUN

Is anybody listening?

MOON

I don't think so.

SUN

We'd best be having a dance, then.

MOON

We had that, or the kettle will never boil.

SUN

And the holidays will never come.

MOON

And it will always be Monday Morning. [OR WHATEVER TIME OF WHATEVER DAY IT HAPPENS TO BE]

THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON

What dance shall we dance today?

SUN Today we'll dance The Dance That Has No End.

MOON Is that not sometimes a sad dance?

SUN Sometimes, yes. And sometimes full of joy!  
THEY PREPARE TO DANCE.

MOON Can we hear the music?

SUN Sure, the music never stops.

MOON But can we hear it?

SUN If we listen we'll hear it.

THEY LISTEN. SOMEWHERE SOMEONE IS SINGING.

MOON Yes. Yes! There it is!

SUN Are we dancing, then?

MOON We are. We are!

THE SUN AND THE MOON DANCE THEIR DANCE.

LITTLE STAR PAUSES IN HER WORK;  
REMOVES HER HAT FOR A MOMENT  
THEN WAVES TO THE PASSING BIRD.  
THE SINGING FINISHES. THE DANCE IS DONE.

**THE PLAY ENDS.**

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