

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



**WORLD PREMIERE  
MUSICAL**

THE TALE OF THE  
**GIFTED  
PRINCE**

BOOK AND LYRICS BY

MUSIC BY

**LEZLIE WADE DANIEL GREEN**

BASED ON THE NOVEL

*THE REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF PRINCE JEN*

BY

**LLOYD ALEXANDER**

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DIRECTED & CHOREOGRAPHED BY DARREN LEE  
MUSICAL DIRECTION BY DANIEL GREEN

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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2025-2026 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

# ABOUT THE PLAY

## SUMMARY.

### ACT I

The Woman, our narrator, sets the scene for a fictional tale during China's Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). Aging King Tai must soon be replaced, but his son, Prince Ren (pronounced ZHEN), is considered ill-equipped to rule. We meet a Falconer and her daughter who send a warning to the king about approaching danger, but the message is intercepted by The Woman.

On an ordinary day in the kingdom of Tang, Prince Ren studies his Royal Book of Obligations as The Woman approaches the palace to warn the king. Dismissed by the guards, she disguises herself as a wise old man and is immediately admitted. King Tai insists he is well enough to receive the visitor, while General Kuang tries to preserve order and dignity. It soon becomes clear that the king is losing his memory and struggles to recognize his son or remember his late wife.

The Falconer's warning reveals that a secret society, the Yellow Scarves, led by the vengeful Na Ta, plans to destroy the king. King Tai prepares to confront the threat himself but is reminded by General Kuang that he is too frail. Prince Ren tries to prove he can take his father's place.

The Woman proposes that Ren journey to the Kingdom of Tian Guo to seek guidance from a Shaman who can prepare him to rule and face the Yellow Scarves. General Kuang is chosen to accompany him. Prince Ren departs with a royal edict and five gifts from The Woman: a saddle, sword, flute, ink brush, and kite.

As the journey begins, The Woman reveals her power to manipulate events by disguising herself again, this time as a poor wandering peasant seeking help. The encounter exposes Ren's lack of real-world readiness, showing that while he is well-read, he is unprepared for life beyond the palace. Thus begins the first Tale of the Gifted Prince.

### STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!," and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

### The Tale of the Warrior's Saddle

Prince Ren orders General Kuang to remain behind and repair the saddle, the first of The Woman's gifts, while Ren rides ahead with her. After years of loyal service, Kuang feels resentful and unvalued. Believing he deserves the beautiful saddle, he disobeys Ren and follows, until the saddle turns dangerous and carries him away. The Woman appears and explains Kuang is punished not for curiosity, but for choosing pride over honour and breaking his oath. He is turned to stone to reflect.

Prince Ren continues alone and meets the Village Official and his servant, Zhi Hao, an inadequate flute player. When Na Ta arrives with the Yellow Scarves, Ren is startled to find the people admire him. Confronting Na Ta, Ren realizes leadership is more difficult than he imagined.

### The Tale of the Thirsty Sword

Prince Ren loses his second gift, a magical sword, to Na Ta. The blade whispers, "Give me more to drink," fueling Na Ta's craving for power and violence. When he uses it to kill the village official he blames for his father's death and Lan's mother, the Falconer, it becomes clear the sword is corrupting him.

Ren escapes with Zhi Hao's help, proving her bravery and loyalty. As Ren reflects on his remaining gifts, Zhi Hao plays the magical flute with surprising skill. They soon encounter Mo Sha, a strange, but kind, robber guided by his own code, and decide to travel together to Tian Guo for help.

Along the way, they encounter The Woman, disguised as a playwright imprisoned by the Magistrate. She reveals the truth about Ren's mother's death at the hands of Na Ta's father. As Ren and Zhi Hao grow closer, Na Ta and his assistant Feng pursue them, driven by the sword's dark power and their own greed.

Act 1 ends with Prince Ren, Zhi Hao, Mo Sha, and The Woman (as Madam Xi) traveling across the River Miao on a raft, hoping to reach Tian Guo. They feel hopeful as a sudden storm hits, and the waves grow too strong. They are scared but promise to stick together until the raft flips over in the river. Prince Ren struggles to help Zhi Hao, when a piece of broken wood sweeps him away, leaving Zhi Hao calling after him.

## ACT 1 SONGS

Prologue | *Woman*

In the Kingdom of Tang | *Ensemble*

Save the Day | *Prince Ren, King Tai, Kuang*

There is a Shaman / The Gifts | *Woman*

Once | *Kuang, Woman*

Give Me More to Drink | *Na Ta*

Stay With You | *Zhi Hao*

Code of Ethics for a Thief | *Mo Sha*

Take One Step | *Mo Sha, Zhi Hao, Woman, Prince Ren, Kuang*

Standing by Your Side | *Zhi Hao, Prince Ren*

Act I Finale | *Ensemble*

## ACT II

The second act begins in the palace throne room as King Tai frets over the lost prince and demands a search party venture beyond the palace walls to find him. Na Ta and the Yellow Scarves, however, have taken over the kingdom in the last year.

Prince Ren has survived the storm and is safely at the Falconer's Cottage where the Falconer's now orphaned daughter, Lan, discovers him. He gifts her the kite, and she runs away, as he goes in search of Zhi Hao and Mo Sha.

### The Tale of the Singing Flute

Na Ta holds Zhi Hao prisoner guarded by Feng. Zhi Hao and her flute have both survived the storm, and as she plays for Feng, its magic bewitches him to release his prisoners.

Zhi Hao uses her flute to find Prince Ren. Its music fills listeners with hope, love, and kindness, breaking Kuang's stone curse and reminding him to honour his vows. When Na Ta learns of the flute's power, he sends Feng to capture Zhi Hao and claim it for himself. Ren hears the flute in his dreams and realizes Zhi Hao is alive. Choosing love over duty, he abandons his royal obligations to find her.

### The Tale of the Tiger's Ink Brush

On his journey, Ren meets the painter, Ling, in her village, fighting for her land that has been taken over by the Yellow Scarves. She confirms she has seen both Mo Sha and Zhi Hao. The Woman appears to warn them of Na Ta's approaching danger. They attempt to delay him by having Ling paint his portrait while Ren steals his sword, but the plan fails, and Na Ta departs unharmed. Before leaving to continue his search, Ren gives Ling his final gift, an ink brush.

She tries the special ink brush, and, at first, she worries she has nothing to paint, but she lets her imagination lead the way. As Ling paints, her artwork comes to life. The bridge, river, and clouds become real, and Ling is transported inside her own painting.

## ACT 2 SONGS

Now That We're Here | *Woman*

I Know That Tune | *Feng*

I Will Never Give In | *Zhi Hao, Kuang, Feng, Prince Ren*

No More | *Woman, Ling, Ren*

Life Into Art | *Ling, Lao Hu*

Hello Pretty Bird | *Lan, Niang*

If It Wasn't for Me | *Mo Sha, Feng*

The King of Tang | *Zhi Hao*

The Battle | *Ensemble*

Act II Finale | *Ensemble*

She adds a tiger—an important Chinese symbol—that comes alive and introduces himself as Lao Hu. Brave and proud, he explains that Ling created him by painting from her heart. Lao Hu tells her that the brush, made from his own tail, now belongs to her.

### The Tale of the Soaring Kite

In a bamboo forest, Lan flies her kite, dreaming of escape. As it rises, it pulls her into the sky and carries her to a mountaintop high above the kingdom. Frightened at first, Lan longs for home until her deceased mother appears as a great eagle.

As Ren crosses the forest seeking Zhi Hao, Mo Sha and Feng commiserate over their roles as confidants and their failed search for Zhi Hao. When Zhi Hao slips in unnoticed, she is captured by the Yellow Scarves and taken to Na Ta.

Elsewhere, the Magistrate captures Ren and imprisons him in a collar of punishment. Mo Sha steals a key, frees Ren, and delivers the news of his father's death. Ren ascends as the new King of Tang.

All converge on the palace: Na Ta has captured Zhi Hao, Feng stands up for himself by refusing to kill her, and Na Ta challenges Prince Ren to a battle for control of the kingdom. Though Ren is not as strong as Na Ta, he shows true courage. With the help of Zhi Hao's magical flute, Mo Sha's quick thinking, General Kuang's brute force, Lan's bravery, and Ling's tiger strength, the sword loses its power, and Na Ta is defeated.

Prince Ren is crowned King of Tang. Instead of ruling with fear, he chooses kindness and fairness. He rewards his friends for their loyalty, ending cruel punishment across the kingdom. Ren asks Zhi Hao to become his queen and rule side by side. She agrees, and the story concludes in joyful celebration.

### WHAT IS A COLLAR OF PUNISHMENT?

A cangue (*kaeng*) or *tcha* (枷 — *jiā*) was a real device used for public humiliation, punishment, and sometimes torture in East Asia until the early 20th century. Because cangues significantly restricted movement, people wearing them often starved to death.



# CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



## \* VIRTUES OF JEN & LI IN CONFUCIANISM

"To master and control the self and return to li, that is jen."

In Confucianism, **jen** and **li** are key virtues guiding life and leadership. Confucius taught that good leaders need moral character, not just intelligence.

**Jen** (ren) means kindness, empathy, and caring for others—people are born good and can grow more humane through learning. Without this, society can fall into chaos.

**Li** means proper behavior, manners, and rituals shown in daily actions (like respecting elders & polite greetings)

Together, **jen** shapes inner care, and **li** shapes outward behavior, creating trustworthy leaders and a peaceful society through example, discipline, and harmony.

# HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



## CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

Chinese **mythology** encompasses a diverse group of cultural tales, folklore, histories, and religious traditions compiled over the course of thousands of years. These are the tales that explain the world's origins, the rise of civilizations, and the meaning of life. From these tales emerge the **folklore**—more grounded stories and characters, reflecting common beliefs, fears, and hopes—including songs, poetry, dances, and puppetry.

**Folklore** often tells stories of human nature, historical or legendary events, love, and the supernatural. They can explain natural phenomena and distinctive landmarks.

**Mythology** (中國神話; *Zhōngguó shénhuà*) has been passed down in oral form or recorded in literature and includes myths from the traditions of various classes of people, geographic regions, historical periods (including the present), and ethnic groups. Although Chinese mythological traditions include those of Han Chinese and their Huaxia predecessors, as well as Tibetan mythology, Turkic mythology, Korean mythology, and many others, study tends to focus upon material in Chinese language.

The episodic structure of *The Tale of the Gifted Prince*, featuring moral lessons and figures who merge the religious and historical, is typical of Chinese storytelling.

## 5 IMPORTANT CHARACTERS IN CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

- 1 Dragon (lóng 龙):** Benevolent creatures associated with water, power, and good fortune; a symbol of imperial power. Check out [this cool resource](#) from Haw Par Villa in Singapore →
- 2 Phoenix (fènghuáng 凤凰):** A majestic bird, symbolizing grace, rebirth, and the Empress. This is the Yin to the Dragon's Yang—often paired together
- 3 Monkey King (Sūn Wùkōng 孙悟空):** A mischievous, immortal monkey and trickster
- 4 Tiger (hǔ 虎):** Symbol of power, courage, & protection; associated with the military.
- 5 Yellow Emperor (Huángdì 黄帝):** a cultural hero and a revered deity who reigned over people as well as gods and demons; said to have had four faces, so he could look to all sides without moving his head

## DID YOU KNOW?



Photos: Aliza Sarian

There is a **theme park dedicated to Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese history and mythology** in Singapore. Haw Par Villa was created in 1937—with elaborate, colourful dioramas depicting scenes that “educate visitors about the values and beliefs that were highly regarded in Chinese culture” like family loyalty, resisting temptation and evil-doing, honesty, community service, charity, and the afterlife. Among the stories are representations of the *Courts of Hell*, *Journey to the West*, and the *Eight Immortals' Crossing the Sea*—traditional Chinese and Buddhist tales. Despite often gory depictions of consequences of poor moral decision-making, generations of kids would visit on field trips and family picnics to learn these moral lessons

Source: [National Library and Archives Board](#)

## THE GIFTS OF THE GIFTED PRINCE

Each gift from the Woman in *The Tale of the Gifted Prince* carries a lesson about what it means to be a strong and kind leader.

### SADDLE

A symbol of humility and **worth**; losing and regaining it teaches Ren to lead with heart.



### KITE

A symbol of freedom & resilience, it teaches Ren to lead with **hope**.



### FLUTE

Represents the heart's desire of the listener; it teaches Ren the value of **truth**.



### INK BRUSH

A symbol of creativity and transformation; it helps Ren discover the importance of **perspective**.



### SWORD

A symbol of **power**, teaching Ren that leadership isn't about strength or weapons, but using power wisely and fairly



## PRODUCING A NEW SCRIPT ISN'T MAGIC, IT'S DRAMATURGY!

When a brand new musical is being developed, a creative team comes together to tell the story for the audience— including writers and composers. Steering the ship is a **dramaturg**. They're a researcher, editor, and guide for the play. They don't tell people what to do, but they help everyone understand why things happen and how the story can be told clearly.

So what does a dramaturg do?

- Analyzes the story structure (beginning, middle, end)
- Looks closely at characters, their goals, and how they change
- Researches the historical, cultural, or social background of the play
- Helps the director and actors understand the themes of the play
- Makes sure the play's choices make sense for the audience

Can you track Ren's journey using this map of Tang designed by cartographer, Matthew Wadley?



# WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



## **An open mind.**

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

## **Assigned seats.**

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

## **Live actors.**

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

## **A break from reality.**

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

## **Questions.**

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

## **Disconnection.**

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

## **PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A**

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 11) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't \_\_\_\_\_ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



# THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

*Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:*

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**The Playwright** writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

**The Director** creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

**The Actors** use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

**The Designers** imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

**The Stage Manager** assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly,

**The Dramaturg** is a literary and historical consultant who works with playwrights, directors, designers, and actors to make an artistic vision a reality. They collaborate with the playwright to help shape a new script and story as well as advocate for playwrights' intentions during the rehearsal process.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

### Found Object Puppetry

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*Inspired by New York City's New Victory Theatre Arts Breaks and the spectacular puppetry of Calgary's very own Green Fools featured on stage in The Tale of the Gifted Prince, this activity captures students' imaginations through found object puppetry. This type of object animation draws on every day items, breathing life, movement, and emotion into them.*

**Focus Question.** How can we use emotion and imagination to bring inanimate objects to life?

**Objective.** Students will be able to demonstrate emotional literacy through object puppetry.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Offer or brainstorm a list of emotion words with students.
- 2 Have them choose a word, then move through the space (or their backpacks) to identify an item that reflects that emotion (e.g., naughty notebook, cranky chalk, melancholy paperback book, etc.). Here is a [video from New Victory Theatre](#) with some examples.
- 3 Give students time to make choices about how their object might show how it's feeling. Your sidecoaching here will be particularly useful:
  - How do you stand or move when you are happy, sad, angry, excited, etc.?
  - What part of your object propels it forward?
  - Consider the tempo and rhythm of its movement
  - How might your object look around them?

This activity should be done silently focusing on movement rather than voice..

- 4 Prompt students to change to a different emotion and repeat the process. What changes about how the object moves when it feels differently?
- 5 Pair students together and have their puppets greet one another—silently at first. (Are they shy? Nervous? Eager? Suspicious?) If you have time, have students switch partners, and try a different greeting.

# IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

## Chinese Palace Lanterns

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*The Chinese lantern has a rich history and symbolism in storytelling. During the Tang dynasty, palace lanterns—hexagonal with wooden frames—were embellished to represent a peaceful life and strong country. This activity invites students to design a lantern using traditional symbolic elements to tell their own stories.*

**Focus Question.** How do we use symbolic elements to communicate personal meaning?

**Objective.** Students will be able to apply color and symbols to design a lantern that represents significant components of their own lives.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Distribute [this handout](#) to each student, as well as crayons, markers, and/or coloured pencils.
- 2 Show examples of palace lanterns in [these slides](#).
- 3 Have students choose their patterns and colours based on the traditional Chinese symbolism provided, and illustrate their lantern template.



# IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

## Be the Hero of Your Own Story...

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This storytelling activity empowers students to imagine themselves at the centre of the hero's journey. Students are prompted to follow the traditional story arc of an archetypical hero—like Prince Ren—facing magical guides, passing tests, and learning valuable lessons along the way.

**Focus Question.** What are the literary components of the hero's journey?

**Objective.** Students will be able to apply the elements of the hero's journey to their own lives.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Introduce students to the concept of the Hero's Journey story using [these slides](#) (and accompanying example, with help from grade 2 student, Abe M.).
- 2 Hand out the [Be the Hero of Your Own Story worksheet](#).
- 3 Give students time to plan out their story with themselves as the hero.
- 4 Choose the Step 4 that best suits your students: Have them...
  - Practice telling their story out loud to a partner.
  - Write out their story.
  - Create a Google Slide presentation telling their story.
  - Draw a comic of their story.
- 5 If there is time, invite them to share their story with their classmates.

**EXTENSION:** Create time for students to share, revise, and edit their work or explore varying media. If you had them write it out, challenge them to turn it into a slide presentation. If they drew a comic, have them tell it aloud.

# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *The Tale of the Gifted Prince* at Theatre Calgary.

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- 1 This is a “world premier musical,” which means that you are one of the first audiences to see it! What would you like the writers to know about the show? What questions do you have after watching it?
- 2 How do you think Prince Ren felt when he learned he’d have to take his father’s place as leader of the kingdom? How would you feel in that situation?
- 3 The set and costume designer drew from stories from their family history and childhoods. What are the stories and images from when you were little that have stayed in your mind?
- 4 If you could offer someone a magical gift, what would it be? Why would you pick that, and what would you hope someone would learn from it?
- 5 How does *The Tale of the Gifted Prince* inspire you to write your own story? Is there a character or idea you would steal to start with?

**THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY**

Aliza Sarian

[www.alizasarian.com](http://www.alizasarian.com)