

Don't tell  
me I can't  
**FLY**  
by Y. York  
**STUDY GUIDE**



PROVIDED BY BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S THEATRE

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# Performance Dates and How to Use This Guide

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**“Don’t Tell Me I Can’t Fly”**

**By Y. York**

**Directed by Ajia Penix**

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Performance Dates Available

February 1 - 24, 2023

Tuesdays - Fridays @ 10:00am at the BJCC

in the MainStage Theatre

*Great for ages: 6 & older*

Visit [www.bct123.org](http://www.bct123.org) for more information or to book a field trip today!

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## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

This classroom guide for “Don’t Tell Me I Can’t Fly” is designed for Alabama students in Elementary School.

Use this guide to prepare for your trip to the theatre.

After the show, further the experience with activities that can be integrated into your current classroom curriculum.

*(A list of State Standards covered can be found on page 7)*

Lastly, we would love to hear from you! Please have your students fill out the “Post Show Response” form.

*(All worksheets can be found in the “Study Guide Printables” packet provided)*

# Your Role as the Audience

Dear Audience Members,

We are honored to have you in our MainStage Theatre as we celebrate Black History Month with a production of *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* by Y. York.

Rules we want to make sure everyone is aware of:

- **Masks on!** (for anyone 2 years or older) When the CDC COVID Data Tracker classifies Jefferson County as a HIGH status county on their Community Transmission Scale, BCT's mask policy will be Masks Required in our Wee Folks Theatre. Our organization will continue to monitor community transmission rates for Jefferson County and update schools with any changes to this status. BCT's full Care Commitment can be found at <https://www.bct123.org/care-commitment>
- **Cell phones off!** And put away - this is an immersive show that asks its audiences to be engaged in the storytelling

In theatre, the audience is an extremely important part of our storytelling, and we need your help to make this the best show possible for you and your fellow audience members!

## **While the show is happening, DO**

- Give your full attention to the actors and the story
- Feel free to laugh, gasp, and applaud!

## **And to make sure everyone can enjoy the show, we ask that you DON'T**

- Talk to your friends and neighbors
- Wave, shout, or disrupt the performance

Step into the 1960s and the life of nine-year-old Tonia Bridge as she finds her way to self-acceptance amidst pressure from her pragmatic, working-class parents. Despite all odds, her artistic soul takes flight in this empowering tale, inspired by the life of artist Della Wells.

We hope you enjoy the show!

See you soon,

Birmingham Children's Theatre

# About the Playwright

## Y. York



Y. York's award-winning plays for young people are noted for their relevance, humor and high critical response. They have been produced to popular acclaim for audiences of children and adults throughout the United States, Canada and Australia.

This anthology contains original plays, adaptations from literature and "listening plays," work based on research and interviews with living people.

The original plays include *The Portrait the Wind the Chair*, which deals with two sisters using their dream life to deal with the death of a grandparent; *The Last Paving Stone*, a futuristic fantasy comedy; *Mask of the Unicorn Warrior*, a swashbuckling drama for adolescents on the power of truth and lies; and *River Rat and Cat*, a slapstick farce on friendship for young children. *The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi* is loosely

based on Rudyard Kipling, *Getting Near to Baby* is adapted from Audrey Coulombis' Newbery Honor Book, and *Eggs* is from Jerry Spinelli's popular novel. The listening plays are *The Forgiving Harvest*, developed from conversations with Midwest farmers and their families; *Nothing Is the Same*, derived from the experience of elders in Wahiawa, Oahu, during and after the Japanese air attacks on Dec. 7, 1941; and *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly*, inspired by the life and art of African-American Milwaukee artist Della Wells.

Seattle playwright and screenwriter Y. York has written over 40 plays during the last three decades. Half have been for young people and their families. They have been produced in virtually every state in in the country, Canada & Australia. Most have been published. Seattle audiences have seen *Afternoon of the Elves*, *The Snowflake Avalanche*, *The Portrait The Wind The Chair*, *Rain. Some Fish. No Elephants*, *Frog and Toad (Forever)*, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, *Mask of the Unicorn Warrior*, *It Comes Around*, *Nothing is the Same*, *The Last Paving Stone*, *Getting Near to Baby*, *Crash*, and *The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi*.

Y received the 2008 Smith Prize for ...and LA is Burning; Houston's 2012 Buzzy Award, Best New Play for *Woof*; the Berrilla Kerr Award for *The Secret Wife*; and the Hawai`i Award for Literature for *Nothing is the Same*. AATE has awarded her five Distinguished Play Awards and the Charlotte Chorpenning Award for her body of work for children and their families. Y has also written video scripts for the award-winning *Science Sleuth* series and for *Little Bear*. Her work has been supported by the NEA, the Rockefeller Foundation, AT&T OnStage, USA Artists, and many local arts organizations through the years. Her plays *Sycorax* and *Framed* premiered in Seattle in 2018. She is currently writing two new musicals with composer Amanda Jacobs. Y lives with Mark Lutwak to whom most things are still dedicated.

Learn more at [www.yyork.com](http://www.yyork.com)

# About the Play

## SYNOPSIS

Nine-year-old Tonia Bridge is growing up in a working-class, African-American home in Milwaukee in 1964. Young Tonia's artistic soul is at odds with her parents' fears and pragmatism. Her efforts to please and appease them are in conflict with her own needs and desires. Complicating Tonia's world is her mother's mental illness and her father's anger at the insidious racism of the times, which hampers his own ambitions to pursue a career in science. Tonia tries to please her mother by wearing safe, but drab, clothing. She also follows the rules in a famous etiquette book on hair, deportment and manners. She tries to please her father by making a beautiful science project she thinks will make him proud. A different Tonia takes the stage when she is guiding her friend Theo into the world of her imagination, or finding a thrill in her secret games with her dolls. Tonia finds her way, the only way possible, by allowing her parents to see her true self with all its flaws, beauty and possibilities.

## BIOGRAPHY OF INSPIRATION



Della Wells was born in 1951 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and is a self-taught artist. As a child, she invented stories and characters based on her mother's recollections of growing up in North Carolina during the 1920s through the 1940s. Wells used these stories to escape the uncertain realities created by her mother's mental illness and her father's rage and eventually used them to inspire the collage art she creates today. Wells feels strongly that "being a master of your spiritual self does not come until you understand from where you came from." She incorporates her own folklore in her work which often has subtle symbols from the civil rights struggle.

Wells works in various media, from collage to painting and folk art dolls. She was one of the two recipients of the City of Milwaukee's Artist of the Year Award for 2016. Wells' work has appeared in various publications including *Self Taught*, *Outsider and Folk Art Guide to American Artists, Locations and Resources* by Betty-Carol Sellen and Cynthia J. Johnanson and the book, *Permission To Paint Please: A 150 Year History of African American Artists in Wisconsin* written by Evelyn Patricia Terry. Her work is exhibited in Europe and throughout the U.S. in folk art and outsider art galleries. Portrait Society Gallery presents her work annually at the Outsider Art Fair in New York. *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly*, the story of her life, was written for a performance at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C. and it was also presented in Wisconsin. She has illustrated two children's books.

Recent exhibitions include: *Her Story, My Dreams: The Images of Della Wells*, 2018, Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago; *Another Happy Mambo Day: The Invented worlds of Della Wells*, Wright Museum, Beloit College, 2017.

*Catalog essay by M. Shadee Malaklou, "Welcome to 'Mambo Land,' where black lives matter because they don't: An Afro-pessimist reading of Della Wells' black feminist world-making."*

<https://www.portraitsocietygallery.com/welcome-to-mambo-land>

# State Standards

Students will:

- R1. Utilize active listening skills during discussion and conversation in pairs, small groups, or whole-class settings, following agreed-upon rules for participation.
- R2. Use knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences and word analysis skills to decode and encode words accurately.
- R3. Expand background knowledge and build vocabulary through discussion, reading, and writing.
- R4. Use digital and electronic tools appropriately, safely, and ethically for research and writing, both individually and collaboratively.
- R5. Utilize the writing process to plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish writings in various genres.
17. With guidance and support, orally utilize new academic, content-specific, grade-level vocabulary and relate new words to prior knowledge.
18. Identify new meanings for familiar words and apply them accurately.
19. Ask and answer questions about unfamiliar words in discussions and/or text.
  - a. Describe the relationship between words, including relating them to synonyms and antonyms.
20. Name and sort pictures of objects into categories based on common attributes while relating vocabulary to prior knowledge and building background knowledge.
21. Use new and previously-taught vocabulary to produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.
  - a. Use previously-taught vocabulary words, including nouns, verbs, and adjectives, in speaking and writing.
  - b. Use new words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to text.
22. Use content knowledge built during read-alouds of informational texts by participating in content-specific discussions with peers and/or through drawing or writing.
23. With prompting and support, manipulate words and/or phrases to create simple sentences, including declarative and interrogative, to help build syntactic awareness and comprehension at the sentence level.
24. With prompting and support, identify common types of texts and their features, including literary, informational, fairy tale, and poetry.
25. With prompting and support, identify the topic of texts, using titles, headings, illustrations, and text clues.
26. With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear.
27. Identify and describe the main story elements in a literary text.
  - a. With prompting and support, retell a text orally, including main character(s), setting, and important events in logical order.
28. With prompting and support, use text clues to determine main ideas and make predictions about an ending in a literary text.

# Activities

## VOCABULARY TO LEARN

- Characteristics - special aspects or qualities that describe a person, animal or object.
- Costume - a style of dress that relates to a particular country or group of people.
- Culture - ways of living that have been developed by a group of people that are passed on through generations.
- Environment - a surrounding area
- Features - parts of the face such as nose, ears, chin and mouth.
- Representation - making a likeness of, creating one thing that stands for something else.
- Society - a group of people living together as a community.

## USING FOLKTALES & FABLES TO BUILD LITERACY SKILLS

### Introduce Literary Devices

Folktales and fables are usually short, so they're great for younger students who are just learning about classic literary devices used in stories. Gather a selection of folktales and fables for your class to look through. Choose a folktale from another part of the world, or a bilingual folktale, for some added multicultural learning!

### Literary Devices Often Found in Folktales & Fables

- Symbolism: Folktales and fables are full of characters and objects that actually represent another concept or thing. Can students search stories to find something that represents ideas like truth, or death? Or will they notice that several different classic lion fables portray lions as symbols of power, strength and courage?
- Juxtaposition: Because characters in these tales are often simple and one-dimensional, students can more easily see that they are juxtaposed, or profoundly in contrast with each other. Does one character act honestly, while another is always deceptive? Or, is one greedy, while another is generous?
- Satire: Fables and folktales are often full of satire. Find an example of a story that makes use of humor and/or ridicule to expose the follies and vices of certain characters.
- Foreshadowing: Search the early parts of a story for clues, and find foreshadowing of the upcoming dilemma, or of a character's ultimate fate.

### Create Your Own Fable

Since folktales and fables often follow a basic formula, they are a great introduction to writing and storytelling skills. Students can begin by creating simple characters, perhaps by taking their favorite animals, and giving them human attributes.

Discuss how they can introduce these characters in the exposition of their story.

What moral will be learned? Teachers can offer a set of life lessons to choose from, or students can find inspiration from their own experiences, and pick morals they think are important to learn.

### Re-imagine a Classic Tale with a Twist

Another fun activity is to take a classic folktale or fable, and re-write it with a surprise twist. What if the gingerbread man gobbled up the fox? Or, what if Red Riding Hood was the antagonist, and we rooted instead for the wolf?

**CONT.**



# Activities

## DOLLS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Dolls have captivated the human imagination for centuries. Paddle shaped dolls dating back to 2000 B.C. have been found in Egyptian tombs. Dolls have been constructed out of virtually every material known to humankind including bone, ivory, wax, wood, terra cotta, plastic, rubber, old socks and inner tubes.

Play is key to the function of dolls and doll-making. As miniature humans, dolls automatically shift the power scale from the adult to the side of the child. Suddenly in control, children can manipulate their playthings and project their imaginations and longings onto their inanimate friends.

- Learn about how dolls represent the cultures they come from (historical and cultural understanding).
- Be able to discuss the physical qualities of different dolls (perceiving, analyzing and responding).
- Create a figure using fabric and mixed media (creating and performing).

Link: [Full Lesson Plan PDF](#)

## CRAFT AND DRESS-UP ACTIVITY

### Make a Cape!

- Step 1: Dye stack of white men's t-shirts your colors of choice.
- Step 2: Cut off the sleeves and cut open both side seams.
- Step 3: Open up the shirt, and cut out the shape of a cape from the back side of the shirt. Keep the original neckline of the shirt intact to create the neck ties. You can use the neckline as-is, or cut in half and apply snaps at both ends for closure (Velcro would also work well).
- Step 4: Use markers or paint to create unique superhero emblems!



More cape crafting ideas: <https://www.hellowonderful.co/post/how-make-cape/>

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Folk Art Coloring Sheet (*Printables Packet: page 2*)
- Post Show Response Letter (*Printables Packet: page 3*)



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## **THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!**

Questions? Contact Education & Engagement Coordinator,  
**Tramelle Shambray** at [tramelle@bct123.org](mailto:tramelle@bct123.org)

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