

Miss Fancy

ELEPHANT QUEEN OF THE ZOO

By G. Riley Mills

STUDY GUIDE



PROVIDED BY BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S THEATRE

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PERFORMANCE DATES & HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

“Miss Fancy: Elephant Queen of the Zoo”
A World Premiere play by G. Riley Mills
Directed by Carlton V. Bell II

Performance Dates Available
March 15 - April 15, 2022
Tuesdays - Fridays @ 10:00am at the BJCC
in the MainStage Theatre
Great for ages: 6 and older

Visit www.bct123.org for more information or to book a field trip today!

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This classroom guide for “Miss Fancy: Elephant Queen of the Zoo” is designed for Alabama students.

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 10)

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 thrilled to have you in our MainStage Theatre for *Miss Fancy: Elephant Queen of the Zoo*, a world premiere play from playwright G. Riley Mills. As a member of our audience, we have a few expectations to ensure a smooth performance.

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

Filled with music, magic, comedy, dancing, and vaudeville to entertain audiences of all ages, "Miss Fancy" will have audiences' toes tapping and imaginations shining!

We hope you enjoy the show!

See you soon,

Birmingham Children's Theatre

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



G. RILEY MILLS | PLAYWRIGHT

G. Riley Mills is an award-winning, Chicago-based playwright and children's book author, as well as a graduate of The Theatre School, DePaul University. Mills has twice been awarded the Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Work for his plays *Sawdust and Spangles* (Prop Theatre) and *Streeterville* (TimeLine Theatre). He has had plays commissioned by the Children's Theatre Company, Minneapolis, Lookingglass Theatre, Prop Theatre, Chicago Children's Theatre Company and Emerald City Theatre. His first children's book, *Sawdust and Spangles* (written with Grammy-nominated musician Ralph Covert), won a 2007 NAPPA

Honor Award and their follow-up project, *A Nutty Nutcracker Christmas*, was nominated for a 2012 Distinguished Play Award by the American Alliance for Theatre & Education. It was also profiled in USA Today and on ABC's "Nightline." In 2012, their acclaimed musical *The Hundred Dresses*-adapted from the classic children's book-premiered Off-Broadway at the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York City and was nominated for a 2013 Distinguished Play Award. Mills' work has been produced on stages around the world and published by Samuel French, Dramatic Publishing Company, Chronicle Books, Harry N. Abrams, and John Wiley & Sons.



CARLTON V. BELL II | DIRECTOR

Carlton V. Bell II, "C.J" (they/them) - a Black queer southern artistic facilitator & cultural worker. Seen most recently in CNN's Docuseries "Blind Angels". With a primary focus in directing, producing, and writing theatre/film CJ is thrilled to back at Birmingham Children's Theatre as a Resident Artist for their 75th season! In addition to their work as an artist Carlton is avid member of community centered liberation justice practices as a DEI/EDI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) Consultant, Cultural Intimacy Professional, & Gender-Justice Movement Worker. Carlton is also an ordained minister, and Aborisa of the Lucumi Practice.

Organizations: Stage Directors & Choreographer Society Member, South Eastern Theatre Conference (SETC) LGBTQIA in Theatre Committee Co-Chair, City of Birmingham's LGBTQIA+ Advisory Board to the Mayor of Birmingham, Theatrefolk Advisory Board, Alabama Council of Theatre's DEI Committee, & Third Wave Fund Advisory Board.

Recognitions: Sipp Culture "Next Up Artist" 2021/2022, Center for Cultural Power's 2021 "Artist Disruptor", 2021 Southern Healer w/ the Campaign for Southern Equality. 2020 Broadway World Director of the Decade, 2018 Broadway World Best Director of a Play. Named AL.com's #2 Entertainer of the Year of 2019.

Rep'd By: Genia Nooks at Gill Talent
www.carltonvbell.com

ABOUT THE PLAY

SYNOPSIS

Miss Fancy: Elephant Queen of the Zoo is a simple story of love and friendship. It is a tale about sticking together when times are tough and how true friendship is the most important treasure a person can possess. Set in Birmingham during Jim Crow and the Great Depression, audiences will be transported back in time to learn how this period shaped our history and how we were able to move forward and find hope and redemption, together.

THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF MISS FANCY

Articles to Read:

[For 20 years, Miss Fancy was the ‘Queen of Avondale’ \(cbs42.com\)](#)

[Miss Fancy | Encyclopedia of Alabama](#)

Short Video Documentary:

[Mr. Todd’s Fancy, a short documentary - YouTube](#)

A Detailed History:



It happened many times. Between 1913 and 1934, the Birmingham police were called out repeatedly to investigate reports of a drunken man walking down Fifth Avenue South with a ten-thousand pound elephant strolling along behind. Other times the elephant, daintily named Miss Fancy, wandered alone through the neighborhoods of Avondale, Forest Park, and Woodlawn. From inside their houses residents would see Miss Fancy’s giant head framed in a window as she looked in at them. One little girl remembered waking in

the morning to Miss Fancy’s face “pressed against the panes of her bedroom window” as the elephant watched the child sleep. Housewives would find Miss Fancy eating their flowerbeds. She sometimes visited the playground at Avondale Elementary School, where the children would run outside to feed her their lunches. In the evenings, people heard her trumpet loudly as she walked past their houses. It was not unusual to find huge piles of elephant dung in the streets.

The sale of alcohol was illegal in Alabama for almost all of Miss Fancy’s time in Birmingham, so her long-time keeper John Todd convinced city officials to give him bottles of confiscated illegal liquor to medicate Miss Fancy. But Todd consumed most of the alcohol himself and was arrested several times for public intoxication. This is probably the reason Miss Fancy was able to wander away from the zoo with such ease.

cont.

ABOUT THE PLAY

By 1932, three years into the Great Depression, Birmingham's zoo had become a financial burden, and the Park Board suggested closing the facility and selling the animals. Trying to save Miss Fancy, in 1933 the city commission asked the Board of Education to assume responsibility for her. C. B. Glenn, superintendent of the city schools, declined, saying, "The board of education lacks facilities to handle the elephant. Miss Fancy would be a 'white elephant' to the board." Former Birmingham mayor George Ward also declined to take her, in protection of his house, "Vestavia"—a local tourist attraction modeled on a Roman temple, from which the town of Vestavia took its name. "Lions, tigers and elephants contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire," Ward said. "No elephant will have the opportunity to bring about the disintegration of my Roman empire." In October 1934, over the protests of civic groups, the Park Board announced that the zoo would close. Miss Fancy was sold to Cole Brothers Circus for \$500, one-fourth the price paid for her when the zoo opened.

A crew from the circus arrived at Avondale Zoo on the morning of November 11, 1934. They came to take away Miss Fancy and some of the other remaining animals: a cow, a llama, six monkeys, and the bear. The park had been Miss Fancy's home for twenty-one years, and children from Avondale School came to tell her goodbye. Miss Fancy, no doubt prompted by her trainer, bent her front knees and bowed to the children one final time. Then Miss Fancy and Todd took their last stroll through Birmingham, walking several blocks to the waiting train. At 1:30 in the afternoon she arrived at the train tracks and walked up the platform to the box car, but the door was too small. The circus men tried for two and a half hours but could not shove her into the car. Miss Fancy walked back down the platform and began nibbling grass along the tracks while the men searched for a bigger box car. An hour later one was found, Miss Fancy lumbered aboard, and at 7:00 in the evening the train left Birmingham. Todd rode with Miss Fancy to Peru, Indiana, winter quarters for the circus, where Miss Fancy was retrained as a circus performer. Todd returned to Birmingham and worked in the city greenhouse. Miss Fancy toured with Cole Brothers Circus in 1935, and her name was changed to Bama. She remained behind at the circus's winter quarters in 1936, suggesting that she was either ill or exhibiting behavior problems. She toured again in 1937 and spent 1938 back at the winter quarters. In April 1939, she was sold to the Buffalo, New York, zoo and stayed there until her death in 1954.

Birmingham has not forgotten Miss Fancy. She appears as a character in Fannie Flagg's 1987 novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, though not in the film. Avondale Brewing Company, one of Birmingham's microbreweries, adopted her as its mascot, and the company's logo features a drawing of Miss Fancy with a beer bottle hoisted in her trunk. A recent renovation of Avondale Park and revitalization of the Avondale business district has increased interest in the old elephant, and there are still people living in Birmingham who remember riding her as a child or seeing her wander the neighborhoods.

Miss Fancy's story is both sweet and sad, a mix of fact and legend. She was an intelligent, complex creature, gentle and patient with Birmingham's children, but dealt with the stresses of captivity and almost constant contact with humans. If the old girl occasionally felt the need to kick over a fire hydrant or demolish a small building, who would hold that against her?

[This article was published in Alabama Heritage Issue #106, Fall 2012.](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

READ THE BOOK: *MEET MISS FANCY* BY IRENE LATHAM



A charming and significant story set prior to the Civil Rights Movement about a boy who finds a way to challenge segregation laws.

Frank has always been obsessed with elephants. He loves their hosepipe trunks, tree stump feet, and swish-swish tails. So when Miss Fancy, the elephant, retires from the circus and moves two blocks from his house to Avondale Park, he's over the moon! Frank really wants to pet her. But Avondale Park is just for white people, so Frank is not allowed to see Miss Fancy. Frank is heartbroken but he doesn't give up: instead he makes a plan!

Frank writes to the City Council so his church can host a picnic in the park, and he can finally meet Miss Fancy. All of his neighbors sign the letter, but when some protest, the picnic is canceled and Frank is heartbroken all over again. Then Miss Fancy escapes the zoo, and it's up to Frank to find her before she gets hurt.

PLACES TO DISCOVER IN BIRMINGHAM



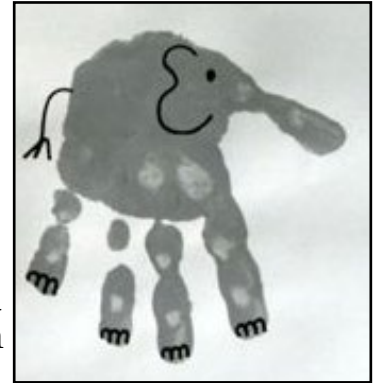
ACTIVITIES

HELPING HAND CRAFT & LESSON

Materials: Gray paint, black marker, hand, paper

Instructions: With gray paint, create an imprint of one hand on paper or paper plate, allow it to dry, then create an ear, eye, trunk, and feet with a black marker.

Lesson: Explain how Miss Fancy was always willing to “lend a helping hand,” and that if we as a society did that, how much better off we all could be.



ALL ABOUT VAUDEVILLE

Vaudeville, or the variety show, was the most popular form of stage entertainment at the end of the 19th century. Vaudeville was a lot like English music hall shows, which featured song and dance numbers and an emcee that lead the audience through the entire show. Variety shows featured music and dance, but also feature acts like plate-spinning, ventriloquism, magic, and even dog tricks. There were usually 12 or more acts in one show, and one show could last for hours! Though variety shows featured all kinds of acts, the big draw was comedy. People would go to vaudeville shows to see the latest comedians, and many vaudeville comedians became big celebrities. However, in the early 1900s, movies became popular, and people began buying radios for their homes. Once movies with sound were invented, vaudeville slowly disappeared. After all, listening to the radio was free, and movies were much cheaper than a night at the theatre. Vaudeville-style comedy is seen most in the movies today. The most famous vaudeville performers were able to find work in movies, bringing their silly faces and sight gags to the big screen. Variety shows acted as a proving ground for tons of types of performers, and you can see similar vaudeville styles on late-night talk shows and in sketch comedy shows. While it only lasted for a few decades, the variety show left a lasting impact on the performing arts.

(See “Printables Packet” pages 2 & 3 for worksheets)



STATE STANDARDS

National Core Arts Standards:

- Anchor Standard #1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

English:

- R1. Utilize active listening skills during discussion and conversation in pairs, small groups, or whole-class settings, following agreed-upon rules for participation.
- 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.
- 1. Contribute meaningful ideas to discussions with groups and peers utilizing agreed upon rules.
- 5. Express ideas, opinions, and feelings orally in a logical sequence clearly, accurately, and precisely, using appropriate volume, clear pronunciation, and standard English grammar.
- 13. Utilize new academic, content-specific, grade-level vocabulary to make connections to previously learned words and relate new words to background knowledge.
- 16. Use knowledge of grade-level academic and domain-specific vocabulary to gain meaning from text.
- 28. Identify the narration of a literary text as first person or third person
- 34. Write informative or explanatory texts about a topic using sources, including an introduction, facts, relevant details with elaboration, and a conclusion.
- 39. Gather and evaluate information about a topic from a variety of sources, including digital sources, and utilize it to create a project, report, or presentation.

Social Studies:

11) Interpret various primary sources for reconstructing the past, including documents, letters, diaries, maps, and photographs.



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THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

Questions? Contact Education & Engagement Coordinator,
Tramelle Shambray at tramelle@bct123.org
