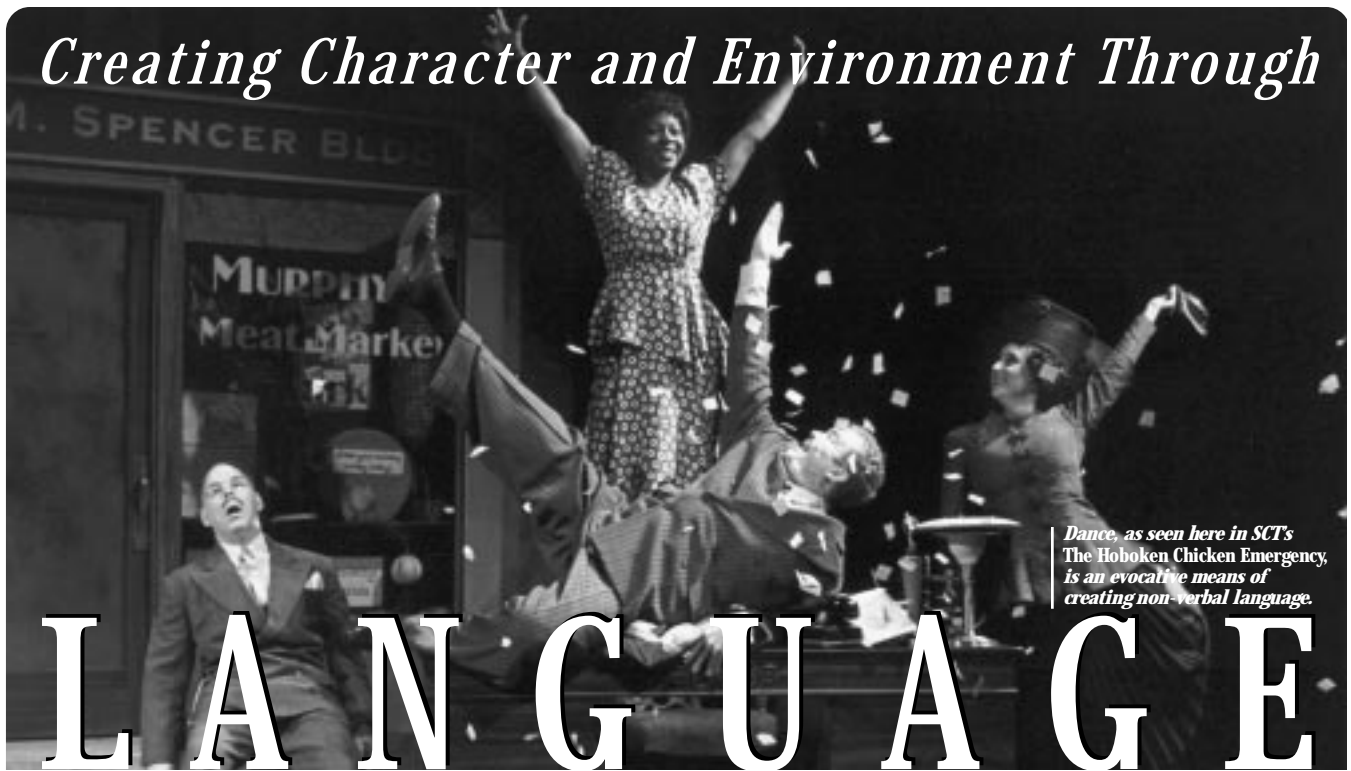


Creating Character and Environment Through



Dance, as seen here in SCT's The Hoboken Chicken Emergency, is an evocative means of creating non-verbal language.

LANGUAGE

In theatre, a writer finds words that will point an actor toward the character they are going to portray, and an actor embodies this character by bringing the words on the page to life. In a play, each character speaks with a distinct style. In addition, the language the characters use can help to create a unique environment.

In *The BFG*, the giants often speak using compound words made from combining one familiar word and one nonsense word: “wondercrump” means wonderful and a “snozzcumber” is a strange cucumber-shaped vegetable. Their language is evocative, but rather than using actual linguistic devices such as onomatopoeia, the giants use words that *sound* like common English words, but aren’t. Instead of “cross your fingers,” the BFG says, “cross your figglers.” The context allows us to recognize their meaning, and the giants are able to talk nonsense and still be understood. By giving these words to the giants, Dahl created characters whose language matches their physical size—both are larger than life.

S. E. Hinton’s teenagers speak in a different, more realistic way. As the story was written in 1967, when Hinton was a teenager herself, some of the word choices are vastly different from the words teenagers use today. There is innocence and naiveté revealed in words like *sure* and *real*, as in, “that’s sure pretty” or “I’m real tired,” as well as in exclamations like “Glory!” that are rarely heard from adolescents today. But Hinton’s dialogue captures a young-adult language pattern that spans generations: a simple directness combined with a tendency to abbreviate. The Greasers say “wanta” instead of “want to” and “lotsa” instead of “lots of.” They use contractions whenever possible (“Johnny’ll come”) and leave g’s off of “ing” words (workin’, comin’, etc.). This shows us the teenage struggle to create something of their own to hold on to through the way they talk.

Language isn’t always vocal however. The dogs of *Go, Dog. Go!* are verbally frugal, but visually effusive: gestures, actions, and facial expressions make up most of their communication. The characters are introduced to the audience by what the actors do and how their

bodies move. Without words, the actors and audience communicate in an exceptional way, and as Physical Comedian Dan Kamin said in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “complex ideas are communicated instantly and with tremendous clarity.”

Another tool playwrights can use to create character is regional dialect or foreign language. In *The Shakespeare Stealer*, Widge goes to London where his northern word choices and accent help to establish him as an outsider, and this difference highlights his struggle to fit in. Similarly, when the rabbit in *Nicky Somewhere Else* reaches “somewhere else,” not only can he talk, but also he speaks a mixture of English and Czech. As Nicky only speaks English, this tells us that the rabbit has a life of his own that does not include Nicky.

Language can help us learn about the people we meet on stage as well as deliver us to different places. It can take us to Elizabethan London, Oklahoma in the 1960s, and even to the Land of the Giants or a dog party on top of a tree.

ACTIVITY

- Pair up your students. Instruct one to be a “storyteller” and tell the other what he/she did over the summer—BUT they cannot use words or sounds. The “listener” then writes down his/her interpretation of the story, without discussing it with the “storyteller.” Next, have them switch roles, with the “listener” becoming the “storyteller.” Once they have both told and listened they should read what they wrote about the other’s story.
- Ask them how effective their non-verbal communication was. Was it hard for them to not use words?

◆ COMMUNICATION—listen and observe; communicate clearly;
E A L R S work in a group
ARTS—reason and problem solve; communicate



INGENUITY AND RESILIENCE

An Emerging Sense of Self

While thematically diverse, many of the plays in Seattle Children's Theatre's 2002-2003 season have a common thread connecting the protagonists—they are young people at turning points in their lives, struggling to find their own identities and independence without the nurturing presence of parents. Despite this, their tenacity, free spirits, and innate goodness allow them to accomplish great things.

How would this challenging family structure affect children in real life? According to Lisa Wolff, MSW, Mental Health Therapist at the Augustine Clinic in Seattle, attachment plays a large part in the development of personality and behavior in children who grow up without parents. "In a nutshell," said Wolff, "studies have shown that the quality of a child's relationship with their caregiver during the first four or five years of their lifetime can create the template for how they form all other relationships throughout their lifespan."

In *The Shakespeare Stealer*, Widge, an orphan, struggles to make friends and trust people. Only after some time working and living alongside the people at The Globe Theatre does he believe in himself and his new friends. They help him learn that he has many fine qualities within himself, and this awareness aids in the development of his identity.

According to Wolff, adverse behaviors, along with more serious attachment disorders, often develop in children who were removed from their parents or were unable to bond with their caregiver at an early age. These children often have a difficult time trusting adults. They frequently reject adult kindness or affection, pushing someone away who tries to hug them, or sticking their tongue out at someone who smiles at them. *Our Only May* *Amelia's* Kaarlo, May's cousin, feels abandoned by his own parents and therefore cannot bear the affection of his adoptive family. This distrust manifests itself in a different way in *The Outsiders*. Ponyboy's rejection of his brother Darry's attempts to safeguard the family stems from Pony's belief that Darry is overprotective: Pony believes Darry doesn't respect him because Darry is, after all, only a brother and not a father.

Many of the characters in *The Outsiders*, in both socioeconomic groups, act out toward each other. This often happens when children are in challenging family situations. These children may curse and shout, cause property damage, or exhibit cruelty to other children or animals.

Wolff explains that if children are able to develop a solid and secure attachment with someone during their early years, they may show great ingenuity and resilience in how they go about finding and forming relationships, thus making it possible to create a confident and positive personal identity. Sophie, another orphan, and the BFG in *The Big Friendly Giant* forge a friendship that helps Sophie find strength in herself.

SCT's protagonists all possess a staggering resilience and resourcefulness, making friends and securing allies, just as children in real life often do when faced with similar situations. They develop their identities through positive relationships with other peers, relatives, and even giants.

Above: When children are able to form strong friendships in their early years, it helps them become more confident and independent as they grow older.

ACTIVITY

• Have your students pick one of the characters mentioned in this article—Sophie, Widge, Ponyboy, or Kaarlo. Ask them to think about why they identify with this character. Then, ask the students to work in pairs to brainstorm similarities and differences between themselves and the character they've chosen. Next, have them write a letter to their character describing the personality traits that they admire in that person.

EALRS

READING—analyze

WRITING—write for a purpose

COMMUNICATION—listen and observe; communicate clearly; work in a group

ARTS—communicate; connect