



Super Cowgirl and Mighty Miracle

A New Play Commissioned by Metro Theater Company

BY JOSÉ CRUZ GONZÁLEZ

IN THIS GUIDE YOU'LL FIND

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- ★ Discussion ideas to stimulate interest and reflection
- ★ Classroom activities linked to Grade Level Expectations
- ★ Exploration of the play's themes
- ★ Ideas to help students practice writing skills
- ★ Resources for further inquiry

CREATIVE TEAM:

DIRECTOR	Carol North
SET DESIGN	Nicholas Kryah
COSTUME DESIGN	Lou Bird
SOUND DESIGN	Rusty Wandall
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Sarah Rugo

ABOUT THE PLAY

When six-year-old Cory is left in the care of her maternal grandmother, neither Cory nor Grandmother Autumn is pleased about the situation. But Cory's father is out of work and living in his truck. He can't afford to care for her. Cory's mother has passed away. And Grandmother has a toothache, a scowl and a pile of bills. Plus, the only thing she has to eat is canned chicken soup!

In a neighborhood full of empty homes and abandoned dogs, Cory feels lonely and scared—until she finds friendship in a stray dog. Although he is different from the other dogs that roam the neighborhood, this dog doesn't make a good first (or second or third) impression



on Grandmother Autumn. As the dog unexpectedly wins Grandmother's heart, we are reminded that love makes almost anything bearable.

José Cruz González has written a humorous, heartwarming new play that boldly illustrates the impact of tough economic times on three characters who discover a loving non-traditional family.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

José Cruz González grew up in the agricultural region of California. As a child, he made up stories "with small sticks and pieces of sod—whatever was around me." His plays include *Earth Songs* (also commissioned by Metro Theater Company), *Salt & Pepper*, *The Blue House*, *Tomás and the Library Lady*, and many others. A collection of his plays, *Nine Plays by José Cruz González: Magical Realism & Mature Themes in Theatre for Young Audiences*, was published in 2008. He teaches theater at California State University Los Angeles. He is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America and TYA/USA and was recently honored with induction into the prestigious College of Fellows of the American Theatre. An Associate Artist with Cornerstone Theater Company in California, and Playwright-in-Residence with Childsplay in Arizona, he dedicates this new play to his beloved dog, Penny.



▲ PENNY

▶ JOSÉ



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



BEFORE THE PLAY...

Help prepare young people to see the production with these questions:

- Do you have a family member or loved one who lives far away? How do you keep in touch?
- What is a family? What makes families different from each other?
- What are the responsibilities of owning a pet? Why might adults say no to having a pet?
- The dog in this play is played by a human actor. How do you predict he will move?
- Have you ever been in a situation that you were not happy with, only to find that eventually your feelings changed?



DURING THE PLAY...

Prompt children to use their senses to take in details during the performance:

- What do the elements and details of the set (inspired by the work of artist Louise Nevelson) tell us about Grandmother Autumn's home and neighborhood?
- This play takes place in many different locations. How do you know when the story has moved from one location to the next?
- What specific sounds do you hear during the play? How does sound create a shifting environment and a change in mood?
- What do the costumes tell you about each of the characters?
- While there are only three characters on stage, many other characters are in the story. What kinds of clues do the actors and playwright give us to indicate what those other characters are like? What do you think these characters (Cory's Papi, the church ladies, the veterinarian, etc.) might be saying aloud?

AFTER THE PLAY...

Reflect on the experience with these questions:

- What was a moment in the play that really surprised you?
- Why do you think Grandmother Autumn decided to save Miracle? What kinds of risks did she have to take to save him? If you were in her position, would you have made the same choice?
- How do you think Cory and Grandmother's relationship will change, now that they have brought Miracle into their family?
- If you could write the sequel to this play, what do you think might happen next with Cory, her dad, Grandmother, and Miracle?
- How would you describe this play to a person who has never seen it?

ACTIVITY IDEA!



SUPER COWGIRL COMICS

José Cruz González has written a fast-paced play with very short scenes that flow rapidly. After you view the performance, help students sequence the story by creating a comic strip storyboard of memorable moments.

- First, brainstorm with students to create a list of favorite moments from the play. For each moment on your list, ask students: "What caused this event to happen? What was the effect of this event?"
- Then, work with students to number the events in chronological order.

- Next, have each student select at least one moment from the list. Students will create a 3-5-frame comic strip in which they include cause and effect, and depict their selected events in order of occurrence. Remind students: comic strips include pictures AND words for dialogue, thoughts and/or narration.
- Finally, arrange all comic strips in chronological order, and you have your very own graphic re-telling of *Super Cowgirl and Mighty Miracle!*

WRITE A LETTER

At the end of the play, Cory receives a letter from her papi, including a special drawing and extra money for Grandmother Autumn. Imagine that you are Cory in this moment, and you have just received this letter.

Write a letter back to Papi. Tell him about your new life and adventures with Grandmother and Miracle. Include as many details as you can remember from the play. Remember to thank him for the money, and include a drawing with all the members of Cory's new family.

MISSOURI COMMUNICATION ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:
W1A K-8 Apply a writing process in composing text
W2 K-8 Compose well-developed text
W3 K-8 Write effectively in various forms and types of writing

MISSOURI VISUAL ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:
PP3C K-8 Communicate ideas about subject matter and themes in artworks created for various purposes

MISSOURI COMMUNICATION ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:

R2C K-8 Develop and apply skills and strategies to comprehend, analyze and evaluate fiction

W1A K-8
W2 K-8

Apply a writing process in composing text
Compose well-developed text



TACKLING CHALLENGING CONTENT



**“I remember my mommy singing to me,
combing my hair and giving me butterfly
kisses before she went to heaven.”**

– Cory to Grandmother Autumn

**“I’ve got ‘til the end of the
month to pay or I lose my home.”**

– Grandmother Autumn to Cory

TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DEATH AND LOSS

When Cory’s mother died, Grandmother Autumn also lost a daughter. During the play, both characters express their grief and recall memories of this woman they loved. Experts agree it is important to speak openly to children about death, and to *listen* to children’s thoughts and feelings about death.

- Promote a healthy understanding of death by using everyday encounters, such as a bird that has fallen from its nest or a headline about a local car accident, to discuss death in your classroom. Don’t wait until you have a child in crisis to bring up the subject.
- Find ways to incorporate a discussion of death within your curriculum. For example, use science class to explore items that are alive, not alive and dead. Use this exploration to discuss death as a natural part of the life cycle. Or, in social studies, compare different funeral rituals across history and cultures.
- Maintain a warm and supportive atmosphere, especially when discussing death. Children may become anxious if they sense anxiety coming from you.
- If you have a grieving student in your class, reach out to that student and his/her family before the student returns to school. Find out what they want the class to know about the death. Discuss with other students how the grieving student might want to be treated. Be sensitive to the range of emotions around this topic. Most students want to be treated as they were before the death of their loved one, yet they also do not want people to act as if nothing happened.
- Be open to discussing feelings around grief and loss in your classroom. Be sure students understand that teasing is entirely out-of-bounds with this subject.

For more information on dealing with death in the classroom, visit The Dougy Center, the National Center for Grieving Children & Families, online: <http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/death-impacts-your-school/>
Gerry Koocher, PhD, also offers some useful suggestions in this article, originally published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Child Development, Children’s Bureau: <http://kspope.com/therapistas/death.php#copy>

TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT FORECLOSURE

Foreclosure is the process of taking possession of a property when the homeowner, or mortgage payer, is unable to keep up with mortgage payments. For many children and adults, too, understanding the intricacies of foreclosure, loans, banks, and mortgages can be confusing and overwhelming. Grandmother Autumn’s plight reminds us of the millions of Americans currently at risk of losing their homes to foreclosure. Children are often at the center of these crises, and in these tough economic times, family homelessness is on the rise. Take time to answer children’s questions about foreclosure. Explain to them:

- If your family is going through this process, it is not your fault. Your parents still love you very much.
- The cost of a home is too expensive for most Americans to pay for all at once. To buy a home, we need a loan – or **mortgage** – from a bank. Most people will make payments once a month for *thirty years* to pay off their mortgages. But when a person cannot keep up with the payments, the bank will take back their property.
- There are many reasons why people struggle to make payments. Job loss and a bank’s changing payment rates are two common reasons.

For more information, visit www.kidsofforeclosure.com, a resourceful site designed by a seventh grade student!

DID YOU KNOW...?

Families like Cory’s are on the rise in America.

- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of children living with grandparents has **INCREASED 64% SINCE 1991**.
- Of the 7.8 million children living with at least one grandparent in 2009, 24% did not have a parent living in the household.

For more resources about grandparent-headed households, visit the Grandfamilies page from Generations United: <http://www2.gu.org/OURWORK/Grandfamilies.aspx>

According to research from the Mortgage Bankers Association, one child in every classroom in America is at risk of losing his/her home because the child’s parents are unable to pay their mortgage.

ANOTHER KIND OF FAMILY TREE



INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Draw a self-portrait or paste a photo of yourself in the open space in the tree. Write your name below the picture.
2. Follow each branch of the tree and write the name of the person in your life that is best described by the words of the branches. Then draw a picture or paste a photo of them in the space above their name.
3. On each leaf for that branch, write an expressive, juicy word that best describes that person.

Who I go to for advice

name

The most interesting person I know

name

When I grow up, I want to be like

name

The person I share secrets with

name

The oldest person I know

name

The funniest person I know

name

your name

ANIMALS IN NEED



DID YOU KNOW...?

- ▶ After the deadly Joplin tornado in May 2011, the American Humane Association stepped in to rescue **1,308** animals who were victims of the storm. (Read more about the AHA's efforts at www.americanhumane.org.)
- ▶ According to the American Humane Association, between **15,000-26,000** animals are in danger of losing their homes every day due to America's foreclosure crisis.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- ▶ View the Humane Society of Missouri's tips for kids on how to help animals: <http://www.hsmo.org/education/howtohelpanimals.html>
- ▶ Save pets from abandonment! If you or someone you know needs financial assistance for pet care, the Humane Society offers many potential resources: http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/trouble_affording_pet.html
- ▶ The American Humane Association also offers some valuable tips to save pets from becoming foreclosure victims: <http://www.americanhumane.org/animals/professional-resources/for-shelter-professionals/shelter-resources/foreclosure-pets.html>

ACTIVITY IDEA!



DOGS AND DOLLARS: THE COST OF CARE

At the beginning of the play, Grandmother Autumn tells Cory: "I can't afford to raise you and a dog!" What are the costs of owning a pet? Download the ASPCA's chart of Pet Care Costs at <http://www.aspc.org/adoption/pet-care-costs.aspx>.

Then, explore these costs through these activities.

- ▶ **Make Predictions.** Ask students to guess the estimated cost of owning a medium-sized dog for the first year. Make a list of all responses, or plot out the responses on a chart or graph. Then, reveal the actual cost (\$1,580). What is the difference between students' predictions and the actual cost?
- ▶ **Reading Responsibilities.** What kinds of care and supplies do pets require? Discuss the possibilities with your students, and make a list of the items and services that pets might need. Then compare your list with the ASPCA's itemized cost list. Pass out the chart to your students, and use your discussion to practice chart-reading skills.
- ▶ **Animal Math.** Practice advanced arithmetic using the figures from the ASPCA's chart. Create questions based on the information, for example: What is the difference in first-year (or annual, or specific item) costs between owning a large dog and a small dog? How much would it cost if you owned a large dog and a cat? Encourage students to create their own questions, which they can then ask a partner or answer themselves.

For more information on dog care, visit: <http://www.aspc.org/aspcakids/pet-care/dog-care.aspx>.

MISSOURI MATHEMATICS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:

- D1 K-8 Formulate questions that can be addressed with data and collect, organize and display relevant data to answer them
- D3A K-8 Develop and evaluate inferences and predictions that are based on data

ACTIVITY IDEA!



PET OWNERSHIP GRAPH

How many pets are there in the homes of your students? Ask each student to make a list of how many and what type(s) of pets they have in their homes. Then, as a class, create a bar graph or pictograph based on the total number of each type of pet. You can also use the data to make other kinds of graphs or charts. For example, you might make a pie chart based on the number and types of pets people have in their homes. If your class does not have too many pet owners, consider making your graphs based on number and types of pets your students would like to have.

MISSOURI MATHEMATICS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:

- D1C K-8 Represent and interpret data

ACTIVITY IDEA!



FOUND OBJECT HATS

At the end of the play, Cory, Miracle and Grandmother Autumn work together to fix her broken church hat. With some old objects and a new style, Grandmother's hat is like new, and she finds herself with a new profession—redoing hats! Students can make their own hats with objects and recyclables found around the house. Or, start a collection drive in your classroom: cardboard tubes, empty milk cartons, coffee cans, plastic bottles, and other everyday recyclables make handy and inspiring art supplies, while teaching students about conservation.

FOR MORE IDEAS ON TURNING TRASH INTO ART, VISIT

<http://www.makingfriends.com/recycle.htm> OR <http://familyfun.go.com/crafts/crafts-by-material/recyclable-projects/>.

MISSOURI SCIENCE GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:

- 83A K-5 People are always making discoveries about nature and inventing new ways to solve problems and get work done

MISSOURI VISUAL ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:

- PP2A K-8 Select and apply three-dimensional media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas and solve challenging visual art problems

ALL KINDS OF FAMILIES

Thrown together under less than ideal circumstances, Cory, Grandmother Autumn and Miracle soon become a family of their own. Honor the different kinds of families represented in your classroom with these activities.

- **UNIQUE FAMILY PORTRAIT:** What makes your family interesting and unique? Choose one thing that is special about your family. Draw a picture, make a collage or create a sculpture of your family in which you highlight this special characteristic. Share your artwork with the class.
- **FAMILY STORY CIRCLE:** Divide the class into two groups. Seat the groups in two concentric circles, with each student in the inner circle facing a student in the outer circle. Allow students time to share their answers to these prompts with their circle partners: What is one interesting fact

about your family? What activities does your family enjoy doing together? What is a meal that your family eats together? What is a special place your family likes to visit? Do you have any family members you wish lived closer to you? (Who and why?) Use details to fill all the time you have to speak. Between prompts, rotate the inner circle so students can share stories with new circle partners.

- **INTERVIEW A FAMILY MEMBER:** Outside of class, have students interview a selected family member, based on the question “What does family mean to you?” As a class, you may want to come up with a few follow up questions, or students may write their own questions. Have students summarize their interviews into a written paragraph and then present their findings to the class.

MISSOURI HEALTH EDUCATION GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:
FS2A Social, Emotional and Mental Health: Influence of Family and Peers

MISSOURI COMMUNICATION ARTS GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS:
L1B K-8 Develop and apply effective listening skills and strategies
L2A K-8 Develop and apply effective speaking skills and strategies for various audiences and purposes
W1A K-8 Apply a writing process in composing a text

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

http://www.nasponline.org/communications/spawareness/spweek2005_resilho.aspx
Valuable tips from the National Association of School Psychologists, titled: “Building Resiliency: Helping Children Learn to Weather Tough Times.”

<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/toughtimes>
The Sesame Workshop’s interactive project for children and adults facing economic hardship: “Families Stand Together: Feeling Secure in Tough Times.”

Picture books to further explore the play’s themes:

NONTRADITIONAL FAMILIES:
Hoberman, Mary Ann. *All Kinds of Families!*
Parr, Todd. *The Family Book*.
Simon, Norma. *All Families are Special*.

MULTICULTURALISM:
Katz, Karen. *The Colors of Us*.

GRIEF/LOSS:
Karst, Patrice. *The Invisible String*.
Schweibert, Pat. *Tear Soup*.

FORECLOSURE:
Rockwood, Ryan. *Mia’s Home: Children, Families and Foreclosures; or a Read Aloud Story for Parents and Children in Foreclosure or Financial Hardship*.

For more classroom activities to celebrate diverse families, visit Teaching Tolerance’s page on Talking About Our Families: <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/talking-about-our-families>

This site also provides useful lessons on family diversity: http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/byrnes-literature/CKHOOSTE/___FAMILY2.HTM

TO PARENTS AND EDUCATORS:

Please let us know how this Guide enriched your experience with *Super Cowgirl and Mighty Miracle*. Share letters, drawings and projects developed in your classroom. Let us know about the discussions that occur at school, in the hallway, lunchroom, staff lounge, or over dinner at home. Your feedback helps us enormously. If you have a message for playwright José Cruz González or any of the actors, we will be happy to forward it to them. Thank you for the opportunity to share this important new play with you.

Carol North, *Artistic Director*
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METRO THEATER COMPANY’S MISSION

Inspired by the intelligence and emotional wisdom of young people, we create professional theater, foster inclusive community, and nurture meaningful learning through the arts.

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Metro Theater Company is honored to continue helping to realize the legacy of the late Fred Saigh. Because of this important support for Metro Theater Company from The Saigh Foundation, children in our community have more opportunity to benefit from professional theater.

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