

A Letter for Elena



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Le Petit Théâtre
de Sherbrooke

la) parenthèse)
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STUDY GUIDE TO THE SHOW

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MAKING WORDS DANCE, MAKING BODIES TALK: THE PREMISE

For Érika Tremblay-Roy and Christophe Garcia, who together directed *A Letter for Elena*, it all started with a single image: that of writing a show for three young girls in red dresses. From there, Érika first initiated her writing process to the rhythm of the tragic symphony of Schubert, guided by the desire to create a show that would be both fiery and luminous. At the end of this first phase, and from the text snippets that emerged from it, the first creation lab started, with the immediate will to articulate words with movement. On top of it, and all through those first moments of creative exploration, the two artists met with various groups of children, knowing that those encounters would largely feed the early days of their artistic research.

When the first “complete” version of the text appeared, the confrontation of movements to words and narration quickly became an issue. Although the text gave the choreographer tools and support for dancing (through the words, rhythm or poetry emanating from the text), the challenge for both the author and the choreographer was to familiarize with and develop their respective dramaturgies and then combine them together. Both of them were also keen to constantly seek a point of balance between text and movement.

Just like a kite, the challenge was to keep the words from pulling too far on one side, or the movements too far on the other. Until the very last minute, the two creators stayed focused on identifying the moments where a heavy chatter or an inadequate lyrical surge would tilt the balance. When no interest was apparent in blending theater and dance together, a correction was made, in order to make sure that the dosage was as relevant as possible. In this context, the work of the performers was inevitably anchored in their bodies, relying on them and their impulses to inspire the intentions of each of their characters.

In other words, this play is just as meticulously designed as embroidery. When looking closely, we notice the myriad of very delicate threads between words and movements, sewn together through a shared creative process. This embroidery work has also been built up with a team of designers (music, lighting, scenography), whom the two artists maliciously refer to as “finishing psychopaths”, and is carried by performers with a solid technical mastery of dance and great sensitivity.



PHILOSOPHY: WHAT FOR? AND HOW?

This study guide was built in order to help you leap into *A Letter for Elena* through the path of philosophy.

Philosophy has this particular way to ignite a thinking process that goes beyond the simple opinion, often limited to “*I like / I don’t like*”, “*I didn’t understand a thing*” or “*Beauty is a subjective concept anyway*”, or even “*There’s no arguing about matters of taste!*”.

Rather, philosophy is an opportunity for each and every person to realize that it is in fact very possible to reflect – together! – on theatre, dance, art and emotions. And that, when we do, we collectively enrich our aesthetic, critical and relational abilities.



A little note to anyone who’s interested in exploiting the different keys provided by this study guide for workshops:

Facilitating a dialogue is – a priori – within everyone’s reach, as long as we pay attention to certain little things.

The following – non exhaustive – list aims to help you initiate that form of exchange in ways that are enriching for everyone and so that you’re collectively able to experience the virtues of philosophical dialogue:

- 1.** Doing philosophy is **not** just talking, discussing, or saying out loud what we’re thinking deep down. Neither is it about piling up ideas and opinions while adopting a straight face. **It’s something else:** it’s a dialogue in which we try *to think what we’re saying*.
- 2.** To try to think better and do it in a more critical way, we can rely on abilities such as: **defining** the words we’re talking about, giving **examples / counter-examples** and also staying mindful of the **consequences / implications** of what we’re saying. Other abilities are also important to develop: **rephrasing** our ideas or the ideas of others to make sure we understand each other correctly, **giving reasons** to support the idea we’re bringing forward, or even identifying **criteria** that would allow us to classify and distinguish our ideas.
- 3.** In philosophy, it is **essential** to stay suspicious of obviousness and perfect answers. As much as we can, we try to disrupt any form of biases, stereotypes and ideas presented as “what’s right”, the “common sense”, what “everybody knows”.

4. We discover, little by little, that it's impossible (luckily!) to end up with "good" and definitive answers, or identical conclusions for everyone. Answers tend to become more like a **horizon** toward which we lean, instead of a **result** that we try to obtain.

5. In philosophy, the goal is not to convince, but rather **to understand**, as well as to understand in what ways the subjects we're talking about and the questions that they inspire concern us all.

Instead of suggesting a didactical perspective, this study guide wishes to prioritize a reflexive approach, where the core idea is to encourage questioning and dialogue with children.

This guide relies on the idea that a study guide will always be more interesting and fruitful:

- through the unsettling paths it leads us to take, if guided by the questions children have (however surprising and strange they may seem)
- then through the safe and comfortable destinations we anticipate reaching

THE STORY



Somewhere in the countryside, on a summer morning, Frank, Lucy, and Aisha are playing, just like every other day since school has ended. They encounter a squirrel's nest, a pond, a tree trunk which they reimagine as a racer, a rock, strawberries, some hay, a ditch, a road...

On the side of that road, they discover a multitude of objects and letters left there, just for them. They rummage. There are messages from everyone, except Elena, their best friend, the fourth of the gang, remaining in silence for a reason they just can't explain. There has to be a letter from her, and they need to find it!

Throughout their research, Frank, Lucy, and Aisha reveal to us, step by step, the words of a whole town saying goodbye: those of a little brother not yet born, with so many questions in his mind, those of a grandfather who's already in heaven waiting for them, the secret words we love to read again and again, the words that protest, the glowing neon words that are filled with love... And slowly, they clear up some space...

There is also this peculiar bird, that keeps coming back, that seems eager to deliver a message... And always this letter that's too heavy, but which we finally manage to open.

And the moment comes when they have made enough room for it to arrive, this letter from Elena, who manages to say goodbye. Who promises not to forget. Then they're free to leave. But first, they too, write a letter for a little girl who will find her way. And they put it there. For Elena.

CAN WE AVOID PROJECTING OUR ADULT PERCEPTIONS ONTO THAT OF CHILDREN?

***A Letter for Elena* is not a show about death. Neither is it about friendship, mourning, loneliness, road rage or the life of small communities being impacted by a tragedy. It's not a show where the goal is to tell children: "What's happening to the characters could happen to you too". And it's not a show about the loss of childhood innocence or about fatality.**

Saying that *A Letter for Elena* wishes to convey these messages and these messages only would be terribly reductive. Above all, it would enshrine the omnipotence of the adult's perception over that of the child.

On the contrary, to put oneself at the level of a child, or a teenager, is to recognize that he or she is a full-fledged viewer. Not a minor viewer, almighty viewer nor even a peculiar, not fully trained viewer.

Children are real viewers, with their own sensitivity, their own references, their own perceptions. Even if with time, they can become better at it (just like anybody else, adults included), they already are viewers.

As adults, when we embrace that idea, it becomes possible, if not mandatory, to accept that what we see in the show will be different from what the kids see. That what we might recognize as violence, despair, absurdity or injustice (with every implication that it has from an adult point of view), might resonate differently for children.

And, even if they were to interpret the themes as we would, let's just accept humbly that they will not necessarily perceive them with the same emotional charge as their elders. Which can only make it easier on them. And on us. *A Letter for Elena* offers us a lovely opportunity to get a taste of that enjoyable experience as a viewer.

This study guide was created only as a counterpoint, that can allow us to interrogate, react to and navigate through a few of the themes that are intertwined with the show. Leading a workshop under the angle of philosophical thinking is therefore absolutely avoiding the question "Did you understand the show?" to instead favour questions such as:

- *What have you understood and felt during the show? What stuck with you?*
- *What questions does this raise for you?*
- *In what ways does it give us something to think about?*

This study guide offers the opportunity to measure up to children in order to give them the chance – certainly too rare these days – to think for and by themselves. There isn't only one key to read a play, but many. And everyone is free to find its own.



IS IT MANDATORY TO UNDERSTAND?

Whether we're talking about *A Letter for Elena*, a painting or a sculpture, we all have in mind an encounter with a work of art that, one day, left us confused and wondering: "*What am I supposed to understand from this?*"

Although we might be convinced we're ignorant, uneducated or simply unable to understand certain things, being curious is the key to downplay those situations and – most and foremost – rediscover a more intuitive connection to art, one that is less rational and maybe less conditioned by what general education (school, family, social environment) teaches us about what we're supposed to "understand" from a work of art.

To ask the question of understanding art is therefore to question its meaning beyond the obvious, preconceived ideas, binary and simplistic reasoning, to discover that perceiving the complexity of the question... does not mean that it is a complicated question!

The following questions can therefore help you nuance and somewhat enrich everyone's preconceptions and opinions:

- *What do we mean by understanding a show?*
- *Is there always something that we need to understand, in a show?*
- *How do we know if we enjoyed a show?*
- *What is the connection between enjoying and understanding? Are they compatible?*
- *What is the connection between feeling and understanding? Are they compatible?*
- *Can we enjoy a show without understanding it?*
- *Is it possible to learn how to enjoy a show?*
- *Do we appreciate art with our "guts" or with our head? Or with both?*
- *Does understanding a show allow us to enjoy it more?*
- *Are artists always aware of what they want to say when they create a show?*
- *Do artists always want to say something when they create?*
- *Is there a "right" or "wrong" way to understand a show?*
- *Is it possible to understand something different from what the artist meant?*
- *Can our tastes evolve?*

DYING

Death is unquestionably at the heart of *A Letter for Elena*, although it appears mostly in watermarks and dotted lines. Through the grace of movement, poetry and narrative progression, its challenges are unexpectedly revealed under an atypical light. Far from being presented as oppressive or as a sword of Damocles, it diffuses more like a summer light.

Just like the climate in which the characters of the show are immersed, it oscillates between exhilaration and torpor. And quickly becomes the background of the story of a close, but scarred relationship between Frank, Lucy, Aisha. And Elena.

The way we perceive death as a child often has nothing to do with the way we perceive death as adults. Indeed, the meaning of words such as “definitive”, “disappear” or “never” is truly different depending on our age.

Consequently, if we were to talk about death with children, it could be wise to listen and dig into the questions they are asking (themselves). Instead of serving “proper” adult answers that would definitely be out of sync with the question – sometimes very trivial or factual – that they are actually trying to raise.

Asking the question of absence pushes forward the discussion around the presence of the people we care for and our attachment to them. And whose absence, or disappearance, can affect us on the surface or deep within ourselves.

Raising a few of these questions can therefore give us the occasion not only to address the meaning of death, to discover in what ways grieving allows us (sometimes reluctantly) to grow, but also to identify what it reveals about our relations to others:

- *Are there some people with whom you love to spend time?*
- *Are there some people with whom you'd love to spend more time?*
- *Are there some people you need to keep close to you in order to feel good?*
- *Are there some people you need to keep far from you in order to feel good?*
- *When you spend some time apart from a person you care about, how do you react?*
- *When you reunite with people from whom you've been separated for a period of time, how do you react?*
- *Are there people that you miss when they aren't around?*
- *Are there people that, even when they aren't around, feel like they're with you anyway (in your head / your heart)?*
- *Are there “little tricks” that help you feel good when someone important to you is far away?*

GROWING UP

**An accident. A tragedy. Three missing children.
One survivor. A community torn apart.**

On the basis of these few foundations, *A Letter for Elena* lets us foresee and guess, way more than it makes us understand, to what extent such an event can be an opportunity of measuring great existential issues. To interrogate the way in which every single one of us, while facing tragedy, is lead to search for new bearings and how they allow us – in the best of cases – to grow.

Because, beyond the difference between being a grown up and growing, it can be interesting to bounce back on these notions, through a few questions. Indeed, some children express an impatience (sometimes vividly) wanting to grow up and leave, as quickly as possible, the world of childhood. Others, voluntarily or not, want to access – sometimes very precociously – the adult life, their heads full of stars and aspirations, without really measuring that the advantages of such a status (in terms of freedom, for example) are not exempt of constraints (in terms of responsibility for example).

As we see it, once again, the varnish of evidence can easily be scratched off. And reveal nuances and variations that can lead to discover that, no matter how small or grown we are, the tones are as complex as they are rich.

And, in any case, why not keep in mind that, as English writer George Bernard Shaw said, “youth is wasted on the young”.

- *What's the difference between being young and being grown up?*
- *What's the difference between being grown up and acting like you're grown up?*
- *What does growing up mean?*
- *Are “being grown-up” and “being an adult” the same thing ?*
- *Are an adult's ideas more valuable than a child's?*
- *Is growing up a choice?*
- *Are there certain life events that force us to grow up “too fast”?*
- *Are we happier when we are young or grown up?*
- *Are we sadder when we are young or grown up?*
- *At what age do we become grown up?*
- *Is it possible to act “young” in some areas and “grown up” in others?*
- *Is it possible to be both young and grown up?*
- *Why do we sometimes wish we'd never grow up?*
- *Why are we sometimes impatient to grow up?*

BEING FRIENDS

Elena is, without a doubt, friends with Frank, Aisha and Lucy. Admittedly, the accident has separated them forever, at least physically. But all along *A Letter for Elena* appears an indefectible thread that ties them and that brings the three missing friends – just like their friend who's still alive – to wrestle with the disruption induced by the accident.

On one end, it seems like Elena is tormented by the words she's struggling to find to reach out to her deceased friends. On the other end, we're guessing, she has to cope with the loneliness generated by the numerous letters addressed to her missing friends, whilst she is receiving none.

As for Frank, Aisha and Lucy, they keep trying to elucidate why it is that Elena is the only one who's name is absent from the letters they keep receiving. How can we not see, right there, a unique opportunity to interrogate what creates a friendship, and in what ways some of existence's upheavals can put it severely to the test?

Questioning the way we relate to the idea of friendship allows us to explore multiple issues. These relate, among other things, to the place we think – or desire – to occupy in the world, to the value that others hold in our eyes, to the self-image that defines us. But they also speak to our relation to time, as our friendships structure and inform our life trajectories (as kids and adults), whether or not proximity and regularity are there.

A fortiori, when fate comes to mutilate this seemingly indissoluble relationship, especially in childhood, nothing prevents us from seeing it as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning and value that these friendships have for us.

In order to – who knows? – allow everyone, children and adults, to get a sense of how wise it could be to enjoy our friendships more fiercely while we can; without hesitating to let our friends know just how much they mean to us.

Rather than later succumbing to the “demons” of regret and missed opportunities.

- *What's a friend?*
- *Is a friend different from a buddy?*
- *Is it essential to have friends, in life?*
- *How do we know if a friendship is really reciprocal?*
- *Are there “good” and “bad” friendships?*
- *Can a friendship endure everything?*
- *Can a friend say everything? And / or hear everything?*
- *Can a friendship become worn out?*
- *Can a friendship evolve?*
- *Do we sometimes need to tell our friends how much they mean to us?*
- *Do we sometimes need our friends to tell us how much we mean to them?*

HOW TO MAKE THE WORDS DANCE

When we attend to *A Letter for Elena*, we attend to a work of art created from a text that is danced, that has been brought to life through performers – and also through staging – and movements.

Knowing that, it can be amusing (and instructive), aside from exploring the themes of the play, to also look closely at what it means, to make words “dance”.



As we invite children to think together, it can be interesting to explore the “meaning” of this setting in motion.

In other words, to question, in relation to the story told throughout the show, what this articulation of words and movement is saying. By relying on questions such as:

- *What images come to mind when you look at these different movements?*
- *What emotions or sensations do they awake in you?*
- *In what ways do they enlighten / extend / enrich... the story that's told?*
- *If you were to recall one moment / image from the play, which would it be and why?*



“I HAVE QUESTIONS FOR ALL YOUR ANSWERS”

Frank

Can we die on purpose?

What age is old?

Why do we get sick?

What does being lucky mean?

Are there different kinds of tears?

What is a mommy?

Are some stories more important than others?

Why does Daddy cry?

Why does the doggy cry?

Why do the tulips cry?

Why does the bathwater cry?

Sometimes, we have questions that nobody knows how to answer to.

They might have appeared at an early age, might suddenly irrupt in our heads and then disappear just as quickly, they might also linger.

Tiny or big? Futile or useful? Existential or just frivolous? It is sometimes a challenge to determine, as is it with the questions that Frank is asking.

Yet, it can be amusing, surprising and even a little bit instructive to pause and search for what those questions could look like today.

The task is simple:

- *Hand out a post-it to each child, inviting them to think of at least one question that they have in mind that seems funny, silly or absurd.*
- *Then, either we bring back the children into a group and discuss what this peculiar category of questions is awaking in them.*
- *Either we stick the post-its in a corner of the classroom, letting the children free to discover them at their own rhythm and sit with them, informally.*



THE CREATIVE TEAM

Playwright Érika Tremblay-Roy | **Choreographer** Christophe Garcia | **Directors** Christophe Garcia and Érika Tremblay-Roy | **Music** Ariane Bisson McLernon, after F. Schubert | **Lighting** Andréanne Deschênes | **Set design** Richard Morin | **Costumes** Pascale Guéné | **Performers** Marion Baudinaud, Merryn Kritzinger and Nina-Morgane Madelaine

Photos Jean Charles Verchère

GILLES ABEL

Scholar, author and philosopher

Trained in philosophy for children at the Université Laval in Québec, Gilles Abel has been actively working in this field since 2001, in Belgium. Focusing on theater for children, he works as a facilitator, mediator and educator for different cultural institutions, but also as a creative collaborator and philosophical mentor for several children and youth companies in Belgium, France and Québec. Scholar, author, he is actually invested in a doctoral thesis at the Namur University, reflecting on the connections between theatre for young audiences and philosophy for children.



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