

Asheville Community Theatre STUDY GUIDE

THE BOXCAR CHILDREN

About the show:



The Boxcar Children follows the adventures of the four Alden siblings and their determination to survive on their own during America's Great Depression. Orphaned and in danger of being sent to different foster homes, the two brothers and two sisters run away. Henry Alden is the oldest and is the leader of the family. Jessie is 12 and sometimes acts like a mother to the two youngest siblings. Violet is 10 and is very sensitive, and Benny is 6 and loves to talk and eat! Pursued by the authorities and a mysterious stranger, the children have to be brave and creative if they want to stay together. They learn how to be careful with their money and not to spend it on things they don't need. They are always caring to each other and to people they meet in their travels. And they learn to watch out for each other. When they find an abandoned railroad boxcar, they feel like they've finally come home! The four siblings discover the rewards and risks of life on the run, as well as the joy of keeping their family together.

The Boxcar Children was first a book and is now a play. The play was written by Barbara Field from the book by Gertrude Chandler Warner. These are two different ways to tell the same story. The playwright has to change or adapt the story into a form that will be seen by a live audience (you!). Sometimes this means adding scenes to better explain the story or removing scenes so the play doesn't get too long. Sometimes the location of scenes needs to be changed. Sometimes minor characters are combined or deleted all together. It's a lot of hard work to adapt a book into a play!

About Gertrude Chandler Warner:

From the age of 5, Gertrude Chandler Warner dreamed of being a famous author. She wrote stories for her grandfather, and each Christmas she gave him one of these stories as a gift. Her family lived near the railroad tracks, and she would spend hours watching the trains go by. Sometimes she could look through the window of a caboose and see a small stove, a little table, cracked cups with no saucers, and a tin coffee pot boiling away! She liked to imagine how much fun it would be to live in a boxcar or caboose.

Gertrude became a first grade teacher. Once when she was sick and had to stay home from teaching, she thought up the story about the Boxcar Children, inspired by her childhood memories of watching the trains. What a way to spend a sick day! She read the story to her classes and rewrote it many times so the words were easy to understand. Some of her pupils spoke other languages at home and were just learning English. *The Boxcar Children* gave them a fun story that was easy to read. She went on to write 19 books in all about Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny! Ask your teacher or librarian to help you find one to read on your own!

About Barbara Field:

Barbara Field is a playwright who has written original plays and adaptations that have been seen all across the country and all over the world! In 1971, she and four other playwrights formed a group called The Playwrights' Center, which helped playwrights to work on their plays and to get connected with people and theatres who wanted to perform their plays. The Playwright' Center is now the biggest playwriting center in the country!

Other works for children include adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol*, based on the books by Charles Dickens and *I Was a Rat!* based on the book by Philip Pullman. Great books to read, too!

Words to Know:

Audition: A hopeful actor will either read, sing or dance (or sometimes all three!) in order for the director to decide which actor she wants to cast in a particular role.

Cue: When something is supposed to happen - like a light goes on or an actor says a line - it's called a "cue." Stage managers are in charge of things like sound and lighting cues, while actors are in charge of line and movement cues.

Rehearsal: Once the cast of the play is set, everyone on the show needs to practice to get ready for the show. This can take weeks, and that gives time for sets to be built, for the actors to learn their lines, and for the designers to work on their plans.

Set: All of the scenery on the stage is part of what is called the "set." It helps to paint a picture of where the story takes place, so it is easier for the audience to follow the play.

Performance: Once everything is built, the actors have finished rehearsing, and the director is happy with the show, it's time for the performance. Everyone's hard work finally pays off, and the audience (you) can sit back and enjoy the show!

Who's Onstage:

Henry - Bryce Lotz
Jessie - Jean Louise Webb
Violet - Sarah Plaut
Benny - Sam Bible-Sullivan
Mrs. Alberts - Sheila O'Conner
Officer Banning - Craig Lotz
Sarah Calder - Kristin Whitlock
Baker's Wife - Jen Pyne
Cookie - Scott Cameron
Big Mike - Forest Beaudet
The Kid - Mary Claire Fagan
Sam - Tim Plaut
Mrs. Truman - Joyce Wood
Mr. Alden - Michael Lilly

People to Know:

Director: The director reads the script, and tells the actors where they should go and what they should do. Each director has a different way of telling a story from every other director, and this means that each play will be unique from every other play! The Director for *The Boxcar Children* is Lori Hilliard.

Scenic Designer: The Scenic Designer reads the play, and then thinks about what the sets should look like. All of the scenery on the stage comes from his imagination! The Scenic Designer for *The Boxcar Children* is Jack Lindsay.

Costume Designer: The Costume Designer creates a costume that fits the personality and style of each character. Renee Handley is the Costume Designer for this show.

Lighting Designer: Without lights, everything would be in the dark! The Lighting Designer's job is to light up the stage so the audience can see everything important that goes on during the show. The Lighting Designer for this show is Jason Williams.

Props Designer: The Props Designer builds, buys or borrows all of the props on the stage. She has to be creative and have a good imagination! The Props Designer for *The Boxcar Children* is McRae Hilliard.

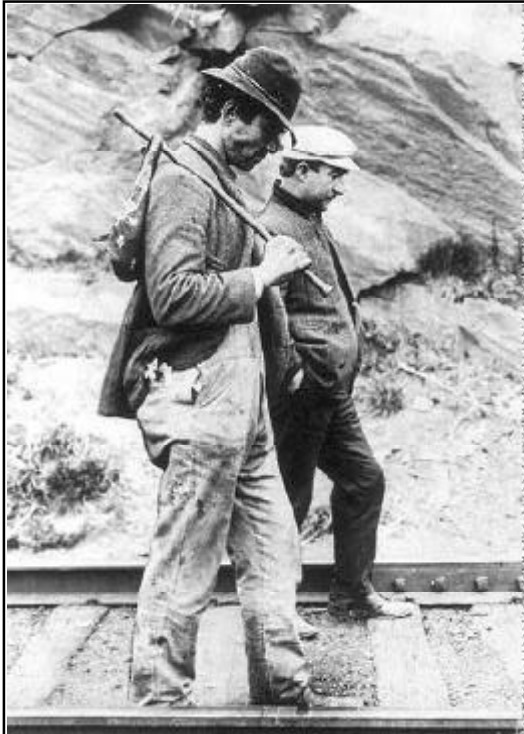
Technical Director: The Technical Director is in charge of building the sets and makes sure everything that the Scenic and Lighting Designers have planned out will work on stage. Jill Summers is the Assistant Technical Director at Asheville Community Theatre.

Stage Manager: The Stage Manager takes over for the director once the show starts. Stage Managers organize everything that goes on backstage, from set changes to sound and lighting cues. Even the actors need to follow the Stage Manager's directions. The Stage Manager for *The Boxcar Children* is LaNita Cloninger.

and of course -

Actors: These are the people that you see on stage. They each have a character to play, and they spend a long time rehearsing before they perform. They have to learn where they should walk, when they should talk, and how their characters should act. It's a lot of work!

Historical Background:



Two hobos walking along railroad tracks. A hobo was another name for a worker who was wandering, looking for a job.

Photo from the Library of Congress

The Boxcar Children takes place in the summer of 1930, right at the beginning of America's Great Depression. The Great Depression began in October 1929 and lasted for about ten years. During this time, people all across the country and all around the world lost their jobs, their homes, and their savings. Sometimes people had to travel very far to find work, and the jobs were few and far between. At the height of the Great Depression, it is estimated that about 250,000 teenagers were living on the road in America. Can you imagine that? That's more than 8 times the number of all students in Buncombe County & Asheville City Schools!

Terms from the Play:

the Crash - the US Stock Market crash on October 29, 1929

Hooverville - makeshift communities built by wanderers. They were named after Herbert Hoover, the President at the time of the Crash

squatter - a person who is living on land he does not own or rent

scavenge - to hunt ("For treasure!" says Jessie)

From the Script:

In the play, Benny asks Jessie "What's a Depression?" Jessie answers, "A Depression is when lots of folks like Mrs. Pillbottom lose their money very fast, then they have to fire the people who were working for them, then no-one has any money."



*These children were pictured in 1937, a few years after *The Boxcar Children* is set. Notice their clothing, their hats, and the type of car behind them.*

Photo by Lewis Hine from the National Archives

Questions for Discussion:

1. Imagine you had to leave your home in a hurry, and you knew you wouldn't be coming back. What items would you take with you? Why?
2. What are some of the items the children find and reuse? How do they reuse them? What are some of the good things about making something rather than buying it? Can you think of anything that might not be good?
3. What is responsibility? In what ways did the Alden children have to be responsible? What are some of your responsibilities?
4. What would it be like to live on your own without any adults? What would you do? What would be fun about the experience? What do you think would be hard?

Write your own review!

Your assignment is to write a review of *The Boxcar Children*. If you were writing a review for a newspaper, here are some items that you would need to include:

- ★ Your reader may not have seen the performance. Start by placing your reader in the middle of the action by describing some of the high points.
- ★ Was there a scene or character that you especially liked? Write about what made that character or scene special to you.
- ★ Most reviews comment on the acting, the direction, the sets, the lights, and the costumes. Choose at least three from the list to include in your review

Create a headline for your review: _____

Byline (your name): _____

Teachers - please feel free to send reviews of the play to:
 Susan Harper, Asheville Community Theatre, 35 E. Walnut Street, Asheville, NC 28801.

Fun and Games!

The Boxcar Children Word Search

See if you can find:

BENNY
BOXCAR
BRAVE
CARING
CHILDREN
COOKIE

HENRY
HUNGRY
JESSIE
SENSITIVE
VIOLET
WATCH

S K I O Q G G C C T E U T Q B
 J E V M N S E B H W I T V D Q
 L X N I T E L O I V K R G G J
 S V R S E Q K P L K O K A E H
 H A I X I Y Q S D P O J S B Q
 C Q G R N T Y U R Q C S D B O
 I K N H A U I B E G I C S K Y
 C D J P E C S V N E V A R B W
 V W M Z I N X S E H S U S A S
 T F A D M Z R O X A Q N T N W
 H D B B C D K Y B H S C X N X
 K J E Y T X A M R P H R L D H
 T C N R G E I A Q G P X A B G
 U G N A U H M K U E N P R K J
 H Z Y H U N G R Y S F Y V Z G

Make Your Own Boxcar Children Beef Stew

**Please ask an adult for help!*

Ingredients:

- 1 pound beef stew meat cut in 1" chunks
- 32 ounce carton vegetable broth
- 3 cups cold water
- 1 pound fresh sweet potato
- 1 pound fresh yellow potato
- 2 medium carrots
- 1 large onion
- 2 teaspoons thyme
- 2 teaspoons rosemary
- 1 head of garlic, or equivalent powder, chopped garlic, etc
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt and pepper (put aside until the end)



Directions:

1. Wash and peel vegetables. Chop vegetables into approximately one inch pieces. They do not need to be exactly one inch or cut perfectly – just chop them into big bite size pieces and toss them into a heavy stock pot. Add all other remaining ingredients and stir. If using fresh whole garlic, you can either peel it and add each clove whole or peel and chop.
2. Cover pot with a lid. Place pot on stove on lowest simmer setting and follow remaining directions, checking after 5 hours.
3. Add salt and pepper to taste. Stir and serve. Yum!

Throughout the month of March, ACT is a "Friend of Earth Fare." Stop by the South Asheville Earth Fare, and bring your own bags! Earth Fare is also a sponsor of ACT's summer theatre camp!