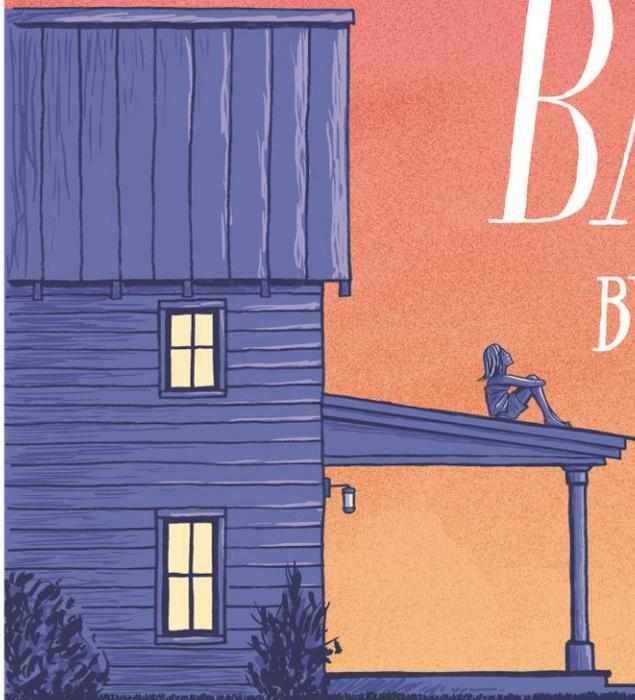


GETTING NEAR TO BABY

BY Y. YORK

FEB. 7-22

DIRECTED BY
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ROUGH



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PRODUCTION STUDY GUIDE

Getting Near to Baby.

Study Guide compiled by Alejandra Sullivan (age 13)

Willa Jo: Careful now, don't fall... Look at them stars. Look at that sky. Is that enough sky for you?

Little sister raises her arms towards the heavens in an embrace.

Based on the novel by Audrey Coulombis, *Getting Near to Baby* tells the story of Willa Jo, her younger sister, and their mother who are all coping with the death of their infant sister and the disappearance of their father. When the play begins, Willa Jo and her younger sister (who has stopped talking) have come to live with their pushy and rule-obsessed Aunt Patty and their Uncle Hob, because their mother is unable to care for them adequately. Their new home is filled with new rules and expectations, that the girls are unaccustomed to following. As they look for a place to escape the challenges of living with Aunt Patty, one morning Willa Jo and Little Sister go up to sit on the roof to watch the sun rise -- and stay there. This embarrasses and angers their aunt because she is desperate to get into a fancy women's social league, and the neighbors have already begun to talk. Once Uncle Hob joins the girls, Aunt Patty begins to realize that she has been neglecting the girl's emotional needs, and the real healing begins.



The stage play of *Getting Near to Baby* is based on the award-winning novel of the same title, written by Audrey Coulombis.

About the novelist – Audrey Couloumbis

Audrey Couloumbis is an award-winning novelist who calls upon her real life experiences to create rich characters like those in *Getting Near to Baby*. Born in Illinois, Couloumbis' father left home when she was two, and he worked as an electrician for travelling shows such as *Dancing Waters*, *Holiday on Ice*, and *Skating Vanities*. Visiting her father while he was on the road gave the young Couloumbis the opportunity to travel to places like Paris, Brazil, Hawaii, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Detroit, and Houston. Finally, when she was fourteen years old, her father settled down in New York, where Couloumbis still lives. In addition to *Getting Near to Baby*, Audrey Coloumbis has written other novels for young people, including *Say Yes*, *Summer's End*, and *The Misadventures of Maude March*.

About the Playwright -- Y. York

Y York has been writing plays since the early 1980s, and children's plays since 1993, with a current total of more than forty plays for both adults and children. She was a resident playwright at the Honolulu Theatre For Youth, has taught playwriting workshops at various colleges and theatres, and has been awarded many awards for her plays such as the Hawaii Award for Literature and several AATE Distinguished Play Awards. Notable other plays include *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly*, *Woof*, *The Secret Wife*, *Eggs, ...and L.A is Burning*, *Rain*, *Some Fish*, *No Elephants*, and *Krisit*. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild and an alumna member of New Dramatists.

Production History of *Getting Near to Baby*



The stage production of *Getting Near to Baby* was commissioned by the People's Light & Theatre Company in 2008, where the show premiered. Written by Y. York, the script was developed through workshops at New York University's Provincetown Playhouse and Arizona State University West.

Sylvie Davidson, left, Catherine McCool, Anne Allgood and Todd Jefferson Moore in The aSeattle Children's Theater's production of "Getting Near to Baby."

Since then, the play has been performed at locations including Seattle Children's Theatre (pictured above) , Lansing's Riverwalk Theatre, and ChildsPlay in Tempe, Arizona. In 2013, playwright Y York won an AATE Distinguished Adaptation Award for *Getting Near to Baby*.

If you enjoyed this production of *Getting Near to Baby*, consider reading the book -- or these other books that are similar in theme:

- *The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights*
by Russell Freedman
- *Yolonda's Genius*
by Carol Fenner
- *After the Rain*
by Norma Fox Mazer
- *What Jamie Saw*
by Carolyn Coman
- *Whittington*
by Alan Armstrong
- *The Planet of Junior Brown*
by Virginia Hamilton
- *Show Way*
by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Crazy Lady!*
by Jane Leslie Conly
- *What Hearts*
by Bruce Brooks
- *A Fine White Dust*
by Cynthia Rylant

Conversations with *Getting Near to Baby* Designers

- by Alejandra Sullivan (age 13)

A conversation with Will Slusher (set designer):

- **How did you combine “the cave” and Aunt Patty’s house into one set?**

W.S.: Combining the house and the cave into one set was definitely a challenge. Early in the process, we decided that we wanted those two elements to occupy the same space and that we wanted the walls of the house to open or rotate to reveal the cave. That presented not only a mechanical challenge in figuring out how the walls would move but also a design challenge in figuring out how to make the elements common to both sets (the porch floor and posts) work equally well in both scenes.

- **What was your inspiration?**

W.S.: One of our design decisions was that we did not want the house and scenery to look overly realistic. Our concept was that we were looking at an older Willa Jo's memory of these events, and that memory had the form of a painting or a page from a storybook brought to life. Visually we took inspiration from a number of storybooks that Grace found. The illustrations in those books were primarily ink line drawings with great blocks of color that sometimes overflowed the lines. That led us to other pieces of art, mostly ink and watercolor paintings, of similar styles.

I also found myself always on the lookout for interesting and unique rooflines everywhere that I would drive around Charlottesville.

- **Did the smaller space in the Founder’s Theater make it easier or harder to create a set?**

W.S.: The smaller space was definitely a challenge for this set, specifically the limited vertical space available between the floor and the lighting grid. Since two of the actors spend the entire second act sitting on the roof, we had to find the right balance for the 1st and 2nd floors to give us just enough space on the roof for the actors to sit, but not so much that the porch below was awkward or unusable.

The small floor plan in the Founder's Theater also made it interesting to find the right location for the house and porch. We needed to leave room for the actors to exit around the house towards backstage, but still have a large enough porch/roof area and plenty of yard space for the actors and gnomes to play in.

- **Do you re-use parts of old sets (for big things like a house) or do you make new ones in the shop?**

W.S.: The only piece from a previous set that we reused is the ladder that serves as the entrance into the cave. Everything else was built from scratch.

- **Do you also run the building of the set? Or just the designing?**

W.S.: Construction of the set was run in coordination with the Technical Director (TD) and the Master Carpenter. We worked with the TD to set goals for each build and assign tasks to the volunteers to graciously came to help us out, and with the Master Carpenter to figure out how the different elements of the set would actually be constructed.

- **What is your favorite part of this set? What was the most challenging aspect of designing it?**

W.S.: I think my favorite part of the set is the cave. The most challenging part that design was determining exactly how the walls of the house would open to reveal the cave. We went through countless variations of doors, swinging walls, turn tables, etc., before arriving at the bi-fold door design that we have now. Even after the doors were figured out, it was still a puzzle to find just the right location for the ladder so that it could be well seen, didn't interfere with the doors, and still allowed room for the actors to exit when the walls were closed.

I think I like the cave best because it not only functions so well mechanically (the doors open smoothly and easily, allowing for a quick set change), but aesthetically that quick change immediately and totally transforms the look and feel of the space.

Conversation with Jonathon Hunter (lighting designer):

- **What do you do for a scene that would take place in a spot with lots of natural light? How do you recreate that effect?**

J.H.: For most of this play, the action does take place in the backyard. To achieve an "outdoor" look, I have used many instruments to create an even wash of light across the entire area. Technically, there are multiple areas of light that we can control individually, but for this production, I treat all these areas as a single large area. In any environment, there are variations in the texture of light. I can recreate this with the use of a gobo to make a pattern. In this show, I use a gobo for the tree and inside the cave.

- **Do the choices in what type of light will be used affect how the characters' costumes will be made or how the set will be painted?**

J.H.: Typically, I find that it is actually the opposite, I base my decisions of light upon what the other designers have chosen. In some cases, lighting may highlight a particular piece of costume or scenery.

- **How would you use the lights in a night scene, so that the characters can still be seen, but you don't get the impression that it is daytime?**

J.H.: One of the choices I get to make as a lighting designer is the color of each light. The material used to change the color of the light is called a "gel" and these gels come in a wide variety of color. For the daytime scenes of this show I am using bright colors similar to a yellow or orange. For a night scene, I would likely use cooler colors such as light blues.

- **Do you run the lights during the show?**

J.H.: I do not run the lights for the show, rather one of Live Art's many volunteers will run the board. For this production it is our stage management apprentice, Olivia. All the light cues are programmed in a computer and for the show the light board operator will press a single button at the right moment in order to make the lights fade and transition at the right time.

Conversation with Jacqui Slusher (costume designer):

- **Do you prefer to alter current costumes, or create new ones?**

J.S.: I prefer to alter things, as I am a huge fan of reusing- unless the piece is just too special. I have decent boundaries.

- **Are original costumes ever sewn?**

J.S.: They are! By very talented folks with amazing skills.

- **Do you chose a costume based on what other theaters have done or do you come up with your own interpretation of what the character would wear?**

J.S.: I think that with the current show we did a bit of both. Nothing is ever an exact replica, so you can always add your fun spin to it.

- **What is your favorite type of costume or clothing era, and does that reflect onto how you dress the characters?**

J.S.: I love the 50's. The A-lines. The simplicity. I tend to drop accessories... Luckily I have someone there to remind me that people need belts.

- **What was the biggest challenge you had in costuming this show?**

J.S.: The biggest challenge by far was trying to find seasonal appropriate clothing. Sandals and shorts are not easy to come by in January.

Conversation with Edwina Herring (properties designer)

- **Do you sometimes use props to decorate the set?**

E.H.: Yes, props are sometimes used to decorate a set. The difference between props and set decoration lies in how they're used. If the character touches/uses the object, it is considered a prop (ex: she paints and hangs a painting). If something is there to add visual effect, but is not handled or moved, it's considered set decoration. (ex: a painting that hangs in the character's house). But, there can be a lot of overlapping, and if different people are in charge of different aspects, they must still collaborate to create the desired effect. What matters is a consistent look that works in the reality of the play's world.

- **Do you often alter or adjust props?**

E.H.: Yes! Props are often altered and adjusted. I may alter an old prop from a previous show to make it work for a new one. Sometimes, in rehearsal, it becomes clear that the prop you have provided will not work for the intended blocking or lighting. In this case, the director may ask you change its color, size, shape, or texture.

- **Are props ever made in the scene shop?**

E.H.: Yes, the scene shop can be an ideal and safe environment for building (or altering) props. It depends on the nature of the prop. I like to work on big, technical props in the set shop where I have access to paint, adhesives, hammers, screw guns, and the safety equipment that goes with them. When I have to varnish or laminate a prop I try to go outside for ventilation.

- **Would having more props make scene or set changes more difficult?**

E.H.: I believe that the number of props does not determine the difficulty of scene changes. Whether you are working on a minimal show or a very complex one, with an organized system and good stage management you can achieve efficient transitions. Communication between props and stage management is key during tech week when the run crew is making pre-show checklists. Props that live onstage are pre-set. Actors should also check their own props, every night.

- **What was the most challenging prop to find/create for this production?**

E.H.: The most challenging prop for this production was the creation of four hedge plants. They needed to be tall, durable, and "read" (register with the audience) as real hedge plants. I created four 3ft. structures of cardboard, wrapped in artificial greenery, and mounted into plaster in a flower pot. I sewed the greenery to the foam and wrapped burlap around the pots. Physics had to be taken into account to keep them stable. The props are carried into the theater by a young actor who was instructed to take extra care with these heavy, and delicate props.

- **What is your favorite prop that you've ever made or found?**

E.H.: My favorite prop that I have ever made was a pair of silver Victorian inkwells, shaped like squirrels for "Six Degrees of Separation" in 2011. The script called for them, very specifically. But, this is not something one can find easily. So, I found two cement squirrels at a dollar store. I glued them to two inexpensive silver enamel platters. Finally, I slowly painted them all over with silver "leafing." This is a process of laying thin foil over an object, and gently dabbing on a special adhesive that makes the silver cling to the object. It makes things look solid, metallic, and expensive. Perfect for the show, as it was set in the apartment of a wealthy couple. I am most proud of this prop because it cost almost nothing to make, used a slow technique that tested the patience, and because it beautifully fulfilled one of the most random prop requirements I have ever been given. I was very proud!

Questions for the audience:

Like most people, Aunt Patty is a mixture of weaknesses and strengths. Think of an example when she seems to care too deeply about what other people think. Do you think she has other weaknesses? What do you think are her strengths? Do you identify with her worries about how people perceive her?

Willa Jo and Little Sister go on the roof to watch a sunrise. Why are sunrises so important to them? Why do you think they go to the roof? What do you do or where do you go when you need to "get away"?

Willa Jo thinks that Aunt Patty said all the wrong things about Baby's death when she talked to Willa Jo's mother. Why do you think that Willa Jo believes Aunt Patty should have told her mother, "It wouldn't have made a bit of difference"? What does that mean for Willa Jo?

What does Willa Jo learn about Aunt Patty when they talk on the roof? Do you think that they will get along in the future?

Uncle Hob says that when he lived with his grandfather, he "learned to cry unashamedly." Why does he think that's so important? Do you think it's necessary to grieve and share your loss with others when someone close to you dies?