

‘Stories on Stage’ Drama Competition 2020/21
Overview of Short Story Options

Option 1

Title: ‘The Golden Phoenix’ from *Shorts 2010 – 2014*

Characters

1. Claire (main character)
2. Claire’s mother
3. Mrs Harris
4. The golden phoenix
5. The silver bird
6. Other birds

Setting

Claire’s house; Mrs Harris’ house; a strange landscape behind the door at the end of a corridor; inside a tent

Summary

Claire’s mother asks her to take a box of cookies over to old Mrs Harris, who has just moved in next door. Mrs Harris invites Claire inside for some lemonade. Claire is amazed by Mrs Harris’ collection of framed pictures. The frames are antique and most of the pictures are of birds of various species. While Mrs Harris goes up to the attic to retrieve more pictures, Claire wanders around the house. Suddenly, she is startled by a loud screech! Has the picture of the golden phoenix mysteriously come to life or is Claire dreaming? The answer lies behind the door at the end of the corridor, where Claire hears the screeching of more birds. Find out what Claire learns about Mrs Harris when she opens the door.

Points to consider

- At the beginning of the story, Claire is tidying up her messy room because her friends came over the night before. Consider adding a scene to show Claire interacting with her friends in her bedroom. What do they talk about? Do they know about the old lady next door?
- Claire’s mother has a very small part at the beginning. Consider developing the scene to give her more lines. How does she feel about Claire’s messy room? Does she know anything about the old lady next door?
- As large props are not permitted in the competition, think about how to depict the framed pictures of birds hanging on the walls using language and mime. Sound effects can be used for the shrieking birds and when Claire smashes up the pictures, etc.
- Think carefully about “blocking” and how to use the space on the stage as Claire moves through Mrs’ Harris’ house, as she opens the door, and as she enters the bird tent, etc.
- Consider how to play the part of the birds using simple costumes and props, e.g. the golden phoenix, the silver bird, other birds (?).

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Option 2

Title/Author: ‘The Pop-up’ by Adrian Tilley		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mei Ling (main character) 2. Mr Wong (Computer teacher) 3. Genie.com (the pop-up genie) 4. Kevin Chan (Mei Ling’s boyfriend) 5. The Principal 6. Miss Ling (Class teacher) 7. Other teachers and students <p>Setting At Mei Ling’s school</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>Mei Ling despises Mr Wong, her computer teacher, because of the way he snuffles as he talks through his nose. During computer class, Mei Ling sees a pop-up on her computer and decides to click on it. Genie.com opens up and invites her to make three wishes. Although she is skeptical, she types in a wish to test it out: “A date with Kevin Chan.” A moment later, a note from Kevin lands in her lap asking her if she wants to go to the cinema. Mr Wong then embarrasses Mei Ling by telling her to stop staring at Kevin. She types in her second wish, “Get rid of Mr Wong”. That night, her date with Kevin is a lot of fun, but the next day at school she is met with a shocking surprise. What has happened to Mr Wong? How will Mei Ling use her last wish?</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This story takes place at a school, so think about how to set the stage to represent the classroom scenes using only four chairs and a small table. Consider using the four chairs to represent one section of the classroom. Set the chairs up on a diagonal so the audience can see the faces of the students and the teacher. The desks and computers will have to be mimed/imagined. Alternatively, set up the small table like a computer station. Arrange Mei Ling, Kevin and a third student at the table with real laptops. • Think about how to represent Genie.com as a character on stage. • Consider developing the scene where Mei Ling and Kevin are on a date at the cinema and the “miserable gweilo” sitting behind them is annoyed with them for spilling popcorn and using their smartphone, etc. • It may be difficult to represent the school assembly with a limited number of students. Consider setting the scene in the classroom. Students could be listening to the principal’s announcement through the PA system. • Think carefully about the ending. Consider how much to show and how much to leave to the imagination.

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Option 3

Title/Author: ‘The Copy’ by Paul Jennings		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tim (main character) 2. Dr Woolley 3. Fiona 4. Mat Hodson 5. The Cloner 6. The Copy 7. Tim’s Mum 8. Tim’s Dad <p>Setting: Hamilton High; Crankshaft Alley (Dr Woolley’s shop); Fiona’s house; the football ground; Tim’s house</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>At the beginning of the story, Tim is very happy for two reasons: 1) Fiona said yes when he asked her to be his girlfriend; 2) His friend Dr Woolley invented a new machine, the Cloner, and it is going to make them both rich. The Cloner can clone any object, including bars of gold. In reverse mode, it can make things disappear. Tim’s troubles begin when Mat Hodson finds out about him and Fiona. Mat vows to flatten Tim for “taking his girl”. Fortunately for Tim, Mat catches the mumps and must stay at home for three weeks. In the meantime, Tim visits Dr Woolley and finds no sign of him. His place is a total mess. As Tim is cleaning up, he finds a note from Dr Woolley instructing him to destroy the Cloner at once. He then finds a second copy of the letter that is identical. He works out that Dr Woolley most likely cloned himself before making himself and his clone disappear! When Mat Hodson recovers from the mumps, he finds Tim, beats him up, and threatens to beat him up every day until he breaks it off with Fiona. Tim thinks of an idea to protect himself. Why not use the Cloner to clone himself? Find out what happens when Tim meets The Copy and they both face Mat Hodson. What other problems arise when Tim and The Copy return home to Mum and Dad? And how does it all end?</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This story is told in first person narrative, which may present challenges when adapting it for the stage. Consider the use of monologue to get inside Tim’s head if/when necessary. • The story is rather long and has a number of plot twists. Think about how to perform the story within 5 – 8 minutes. Some parts of the story may need to be simplified or cut. • Casting is very important in this story as Tim and The Copy are mirror images of each other. The actors who play these roles must look very similar, if not identical. These roles would be perfect for twins if there are twins at the school with an interest in drama. • Consider how to represent the Cloner on stage. The Cloner could be an imaginary space; it could be constructed with the crates and chairs; or it could be “devised” by one or more actors. Think about whether to display the two buttons CLONE and REVERSE or whether to have the audience imagine them. • Think about how to dramatise the final struggle between Tim and The Copy. Consider using dramatic techniques like slow motion and freeze frame to build tension. Use of sound effects may also help.

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Option 4

Title/Author: ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’ by Geoffrey Chaucer (retold for young readers or L2 learners)		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Host 2. The Pardoner (narrator) 3. A boy in the tavern 4. Young man 1 5. Young man 2 6. Young man 3 7. Old man 8. Apothecary 9. Oak tree 10. Death <p>Setting A tavern in Flanders; under an oak tree in a grove</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>In <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>, the Pardoner works for the church selling indulgences, which are pardons of sins. Although he admits that he is greedy, he preaches that greed is the root of all evil and urges his fellow pilgrims to buy his relics so they may be forgiven.</p> <p>His tale is about three young drunken men at a tavern who see a coffin go by. They learn that it was their friend and that he was killed by a thief named Death. The three young men make a pact to find and kill Death. Along the way, they meet an old man who tells them they can find Death under an oak tree in a grove. There they find a pile of gold coins and decide to wait until night to steal the treasure. They draw straws to see who of the three will go back to town to buy some food and drink. The youngest draws the shortest straw. While he is away, the other two plot to kill him. In town, the youngest decides to buy some poison for the wine so he can kill his friends and keep the treasure for himself. When he returns, his two companions kill him first. They then drink the poisoned wine and die. All three manage to find Death.</p> <p>The Pardoner concludes by preaching against gluttony, gambling and blasphemy and trying to collect money for pardons from his listeners.</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Pardoner’s Tale is told by the Pardoner, a character in Chaucer’s <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>. Find a version of the story that is accessible to your students, e.g. Pearson English Readers, Puffin Classics, Usbourne Illustrated) • When dramatising the story, consider whether to include scenes that are mentioned briefly in order to create context, e.g. Danny’s mother working at Burger King, Danny’s father driving a truck, Danny at school being bullied. • In this story, there are a few objects that are very important, e.g. the 2 boxes, the gun, the bullets, the bathrobe. When dramatising the story, consider whether to mime these objects or whether to use props. If you choose to use props, try to find props that are believable, e.g. a prop that resembles a real handgun is more effective than a pink-coloured plastic water pistol; two small wooden boxes with hinged tops are better than two Nike shoe boxes. These details can make a difference.

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Option 5

Title/Author: ‘The Selfish Giant’ by Oscar Wilde		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The Giant2. The children3. The birds4. The peach trees5. Winter (Snow, Frost, the North Wind and Hail)6. A linnet (small bird)7. A little boy (the Christ child) <p>Setting</p> <p>The Giant’s garden; the street</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>Every day after school the children like to play in the Giant’s garden, but one day the Giant returns after being away for seven years. When he finds the children playing in his garden, he is outraged, and he drives them all away. He builds a wall around the garden and puts up a sign to keep them out. The children try playing on the road after school, but it is not the same. They miss playing in the Giant’s garden. When Spring arrives, it does not visit the Giant’s garden. The garden is stuck in Winter with Snow, Frost, the North Wind and Hail. One morning, the Giant wakes up and hears a linnet singing outside his window. The children have entered the garden through a little hole in the wall and they are playing happily. Spring has returned to the garden. In one corner, however, it is still Winter and a little boy crying because he cannot reach the branches of a nearby tree. The Giant realises how selfish he has been, and he goes outside to help the little boy climb the tree. When the other children see the Giant, they run away, but the Giant invites them back to play in his garden. He knocks down the wall and plays with the children every day, but the little boy does not come back. Read this story to find out what happens when, years later, the little boy finally returns to the Giant’s garden.</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This story takes place primarily in one location, the Giant’s garden, so it can be performed with few or no scene changes. However, use of space on the stage and miming skills will be very important in dramatising this story: the children climb trees and swing from the branches; the giant builds a wall to keep them out; the children climb through a little hole in the wall to get back in (and out); the Giant knocks down the wall with his axe. It will be challenging to perform these actions convincingly.• This story uses a device called personification, e.g. the birds, the flowers, the peach trees, the seasons and the elements of winter (Snow, Frost, the North Wind, Hail) are depicted as characters in the story. With only eight actors, it will be difficult to play all of these “characters” on stage. The flowers and trees can easily be mimed, and sound effects can be used for the birds in the garden. Consider whether and how to dramatisise Winter, e.g. with Snow, Frost, the North Wind and Hail as characters?• The story does not specify how many children are in the garden. (The more the merrier!) Some actors may need to play more than one role.

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Option 6

Title/Author: ‘When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine’ by Jhumpa Lahiri		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lilia (a 10-year old bi-cultural girl raised in the US by parents from India) 2. Mr Pirzada (a professor of Botany from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan) 3. Lilia’s mother 4. Lilia’s father 5. Mrs Kenyon (Lilia’s teacher) 6. Dora (Lilia’s classmate/friend) 7. Mr Pirzada’s wife and seven daughters (living in Dacca) <p>Setting</p> <p>The story takes place in 1971 primarily in the home of Lilia’s family, who live north of Boston, MA in the US. The story is set against the backdrop of the civil war between East and West Pakistan (the Bangladesh Liberation War). There is also a growing threat of war between India and Pakistan as the East Pakistani refugee crisis intensifies (the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971).</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>Lilia remembers Mr Pirzada, a professor from Dacca who used to visit her family’s home in 1971 when she was 10 years old. When Mr Pirzada visits, he always brings her a small gift of candy. Lilia’s father explains to her that Mr Pirzada is not Indian like them, but Bengali (from East Pakistan). He is frustrated that Lilia does not learn about South Asian history at school. One day at school, Lilia gets into trouble for reading a book about Pakistan when she should be reading about the American Revolutionary War. On one of Mr Pirzada’s visits in October, he helps the family carve a jack-o-lantern. While they are carving the pumpkin, they overhear a news report about rising tensions between India and Pakistan. Mr Pirzada makes a gash in the jack-o-lantern’s mouth, ruining its expression. On Halloween night, Mr Pirzada is concerned about Lilia’s safety and offers to accompany her when she goes trick-or-treating with her friend. Lilia’s mother assures him that the girls will be safe. Mr Pirzada returns to Dacca in January, and Lilia, for the sake of his family, begins a ritual of eating one piece of Halloween candy each night before bed. When Lilia’s family finally receives news from Mr Pirzada that he and his family are safe, they celebrate with a special dinner, and that night, Lilia throws away the rest of her Halloween candy.</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This short story is longer than the other options and contains several scenes. Writing a 5 – 8-minute drama will require being selective, i.e. cutting some parts of the story and focusing more on other parts. • The pumpkin carving scene will be a challenge to dramatise on stage. Carving a real 10 lb. pumpkin with a sharp knife in front of a live audience is NOT advisable. A real pumpkin can be used as a prop, but you should carve the jack-o-lantern before the day and keep the face hidden from the audience until Mr Pirzada and Lilia’s father finish carving the mouth. At that point, the surprised face of the jack-o-lantern can be revealed. Alternatively, consider using a papier-mache jack-o-lantern as a prop, or re-writing the scene to make it easier to dramatise on stage, e.g. think of another way to represent Mr Pirzada’s shock at hearing the news about the Indo-Pakistani War. • This story is an example of historical fiction. The historical events unfolding in the background create tension and affect the thoughts, feelings and actions of the characters in the story. This can be powerfully explored through drama.

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Option 7

Title/Author: ‘Systems’ by Charles Yu		
<p>Characters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Humans (they)2. The narrator (intelligent life forms, AI?) <p>Setting</p> <p>Earth (specifically the US) during the coronavirus pandemic.</p>	<p>Summary</p> <p>The story is about how humans behave during the coronavirus pandemic. It is told from an outsider’s point of view, perhaps an intelligent life form (an extra-terrestrial? a microorganism? AI?) observing and explaining human behavior. “Humans need each other. Like to be around each other. Like to touch each other... They search for things.” The narrator observes human behaviors, interactions and systems. He/she/it speculates that some may try to change the systems as a result of the disruptions brought about by the pandemic. But some things will not change. “They will need each other. Like each other. Miss each other.”</p>	<p>Points to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This story reads like a poem. There are no main characters other than the narrator, who is observing and explaining humans, how we behave, and the systems we have created. To adapt this story for the stage will require some creativity. The observations of the narrator will need to be scripted with characters and lines of dialogue.• The scenes of the drama can be derived from the narrator’s observations, e.g. people searching for things online, working and living “in boxes”, communicating with each other, learning how to use Zoom, playing online games, etc. The challenge will be to perform each scene as if it is being observed from an alien point of view.• There are many references to current events in the US and around the world, perhaps too many to work into a 5 – 8-minute performance. Be selective in what to keep, what to cut and what to change.

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