What's Lurking in the Swamp?

Wiley must go out into the swamp to build a hound house for that dog of his. But he's sure the Hairy Man is lurking nearby, and would rather stay in bed instead. Mammy won't put up with that, though, and as the “best conjure woman in the whole southwest county” she hopes to arm Wiley with charms and chants to keep him safe. Of course, the Hairy Man can't stand no dogs either, but that won't help Wiley. To get rid of the Hairy Man forever, Wiley must out-smart him three times, and to do that Wiley must trick him on his own.

Adapted from the traditional southern folktale, Wiley is able to overcome the terrible Hairy Man and realize that he has the power in himself to face whatever fears may haunt him.

Written by Suzan Zeder, this rhyming play is sure to be a big hit with children age five and up.

The Themes of the Play

Feeling powerless to fear can make even the bravest soul think twice about themselves. Many young people have to overcome the feeling of fear, especially irrational fears, if they are going to become independent, healthy individuals. Whether it’s the fear of the dark, or the “monster under the bed”, or even of failure, fear can keep us from growing into our potential.

Wiley and the Hairy Man has its hero face his fears showing the viewer that we all have the power to out-smart and overcome our fears, and even laugh at them in the end. The ability to play at one's strengths is also a major theme of the play. Wiley overcomes the Hairy Man, not because of what his Mammy does, or that his dog can protect him, but that he uses his unique abilities to finally trick the Hairy Man and banish him forever. Young people need to know that they have the power within themselves to overcome all sorts of difficulties. With the help of wise adults and loyal friends, they will find their way and grow to know and love themselves more.


**About the Origins of the Story**

*Wiley and the Hairy Man* traces its origins to the American South. Long held as an oral tradition, during the Federal Writers Project of the New Deal Era, it was finally captured in text form by Donnell Van de Voort. The story was originally set in the Alabama Swamps, but according to playwright Suzan Zeder it can happen, “anywhere there are swamps, and magic, and small frightened boys.” In Zeder’s version she has changed the ending and has “written a play about a small boy with a big fear who learns to overcome his own problems himself.” Zeder goes on to state, “I wanted to write a play about kinds of fears that children face, alone in the dark. I wanted to write a play about magic—good magic and bad—and, most importantly, the magic that all of us have somewhere deep inside us.”

Published in 1972, *Wiley and the Hairy Man* has been performed extensively throughout the world. Zeder, long considered a major playwright for young audiences is also the author of *Step on A Crack, Doors, Mother Hicks*, and *In a Room Somewhere*. All her plays are characterized by their sensitivity to the particular perspective a child has within our world, and treats them with the artistic respect they deserve.

**The Cast**

The cast of our show is made up entirely of students at CSUB. Coming from various majors and backgrounds, our actors all have in common the desire to work with young audiences. They rehearsed the show for the Winter Quarter on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. On tour, they will perform at over ten schools, the Beale Library and for the students at CSUB. They are definitely a fine, dedicated cast of actors.

**Director’s Notes: What To Look for in Our Production**

In 1993, one of my first professional shows was in a regional tour of *Wiley and the Hairy Man*, for Childsplay, Arizona’s professional theatre for young audiences. Since that tour, I have always wanted to mount the show again.

What I think is unique to this production is the use of the chorus as environmental elements in the show. They become everything . . . sticker bushes, alligators, stumps, and even the spooky sounds that the swamp makes. It is this use of the actor that I find so engaging for the young viewer. To see an actor transform physically and vocally into whatever they are pretending to be is very much the art that the child practices on a daily basis.

Capturing this environment required a set designed to appear playful and yet part of the swamp. Student designer Tiffany Pounds has done just that, creating a set that is both a playground—complete with slide, teeter-totter and rope climb— with the realistic backdrop of the murky swamp and the added foliage onstage to create texture.

Costumes, designed by Roger Upton, capture the rural feel with overalls, pinafores and lots of calico. We hope that our vision of *Wiley* takes you into the playful nature of the play, as well as its more suspenseful moments. After all, who doesn’t like to watch a scary movie now and again, if only to shriek and then laugh knowing that you and your heroes are all right.

Director—Kamala Kruszka
Discussions for Before the Show

- In our play, Wiley has to go into the swamp to build a hound house for his dog. Because it is a muddy place, Wiley has to be aware of pricker bushes and quicksand, not to mention alligators. When we go walking in our countryside, what animals and plants do we need to be aware of?

- Wiley and Mammy use rhyming chants to help them keep safe from the Hairy Man. In the theatre actors tell each other to “break a leg” as a way of wishing good luck before doing a show. Can you think of any sayings people say to each other that are meant to extend good luck.

- In our play there is a chorus. The chorus is there to act as a sort of narrator, setting up the scene and giving the audience more details. What other plays or stories do you know that have a narrator?

- The Hairy Man is a type of “boogey man” or monster. Can you think of other stories about monsters? How do the heroes overcome the monsters and win in the end?

- The Hairy Man has hairy feet, hairy eyeballs and spits sparks! What do you think he will look like in the play?

Swamp Settings
In this guide is a coloring sheet all about animals that make their homes in wetlands and swamps. Have students pretend they are the set designer for our play. Have them draw a backdrop that includes some of these animals. What colors might seem more “swampy”? What kinds of trees and plants can be included to create the shadowy wet world of the swamp? (TA 2, 5)

Chorus Convention
In our production the chorus transforms into scenery. Break the class into groups of three or four and see if they can make the following things using their bodies:

- pit of quicksand
- pricker bush
- tree stumps
- fireplace
- tables and chairs

This will give students a good idea of what the chorus will be doing. (TA 2)

Poetic Chorus
On page 2 of the guide is a quote from the play that introduces the Hairy Man (stampin’ stompin’ etc.)

Copy this on the board and have the class break into groups of four. Allow each group to decide upon the way to dramatize this piece of dialogue to create the very scary Hairy Man entrance. Encourage students to use their bodies and voices to bring the text to life. (TA 1, 2)

Discussion for After the Show

- Why was Wiley so scared of the Hairy Man? How did tricking the Hairy Man help Wiley to overcome his fears? Are there things we are afraid of that we can try to overcome? What might we do the next time we are scared? (TA 4)

- Before you saw the show you may have had a picture in your mind of how the Hairy Man would look. How did our Hairy Man look? Was he different from what you expected? What would you have changed in his costume to make him look more like your image? (TA 4)

- The play is written in rhyme so at times the chants and spells can sound almost like songs. Which spells do you remember most? (TA 1, 4)

- Mammy gives Wiley a lot of help in the play, but mostly encourages him to learn to take care of himself. What things do our parents do to help us become more independent? What things do they teach us that help us when they are not around? (TA 4)
Activities for After the Show

What Ever Happened To?
What happened to Wiley’s pappy? See if the class can come up with an original scenario and dialogue about the day that Pappy disappeared by Tombigbee River. Preparing the text as a script will give students the opportunity to become playwrights and extend the themes of the play. (TA 2)

Map to the Center of the Swamp
Wiley has to go into the swamp, but there are places to avoid. See if the group can draw a map for Wiley that shows the way from his house to the tree he must cut down to build dog’s hound house. Remember to include the sticker bushes, quicksand, snakes, bats and alligators. Include a compass so we can tell which elements are North, South, East and West. Finally, see if you can include a distance measurement that shows how many feet per inch are shown on the map. (TA 5)

Monster Party
Now that you have encountered our monster, see if you can create one specific to Kern County. Where might it live? What might it eat? What animals would it be able to change into? Allow students to become their monsters through voice and movement. Maybe you could have a monster party where they all meet and get to know each other. The dramatic possibilities are endless. (TA 2)

Monsters from other Lands
In many folktales there are monsters that are overcome. Ireland and England have stories about giants, Germany trolls, and China has stories about dragons. Mexico has stories about La Llorona. All monster stories have the common thread that they are eventually overcome by someone else. Have students write an original monster tale based upon a cultural monster from a different land. How is this monster similar to the Hairy Man and how is it different? (TA 3)

Chant-o-rama
Pretend you can make up a chant to make the clothes on the floor go into the closet, or to make your bed. How might that chant go? Have the group think of a rhyming chant or spell they could use for any household task from washing the dishes to mowing the lawn. Maybe, “Grass, grass do not grow. Machine over there, start to mow!” (TA 2, 5)

Hound Dog Helpers
Playing the hound dog is perhaps the most fun part in our play. Break the class into pairs and create scenes of Wiley playing with Hound Dog. When is he ready to play, when would he rather sleep? How does this hound bark and chase the Hairy Man? (TA 2)

Sources used in this Study Guide


Wetland Animals

Wetlands serve as nurseries for fishes. Many birds, especially waterfowl, build nests and raise their young in wetlands. Migratory birds depend on food from the wetlands, that lie on the way of their route, and in the south, many birds winter in the wetlands. Amphibians and reptiles make wetlands their homes. Salamanders, frogs and toads, turtles, alligators and snakes live in wetlands. Insects and spiders, butterflies and moths, along with mammals from the tiny mouse to the ferocious bobcat or gigantic moose—all these creatures are supported by the different wetlands. Here is a list of the animals shown above: alligator, bobcat, spotted turtle, moose, frog, dragonfly, beaver, muskrat, duck, eagle, sandpiper, bass. Can you find them?
Wiley and the Hairy Man Puzzle
Kamala Kruszka
Can you find the characters and elements found in the play “Wiley and the Hairy Man?”

b d p a m t w r s d
c a t r a s i l w n
r o t a g i l l a h
s t s o s e e m m f
a e c t p r y c p l
r e i s u r o h c s
l r o j i m r a e f
g t n a r c e r a a
l o h r m a m m y o
c p d d e e e s p a

Alligator   Bat   Charms
Chorus       Conjure   Costume
Dog          Fear     Grits
Hairy Man    Mammy    Spells
Swamp        Tree Toad Wiley