STUDY GUIDE

I ON THE SKY

for teachers attending a performance with their students

Painting: Yoakim Bélanger
I ON THE SKY
A DynamO Théâtre production

"Wherever I find myself, the sky will always be the same"
- Yves Simard

Table of contents

A handy travel guide:
Why produce a guidebook? page 3
Tour guide: for whom is the guide designed? page 3
The travel agency:
The company behind I on the sky page 4
People in the control tower:
The company staff page 4
A summary of the production: imagine a country
The production's craftsmen and women: page 5
The people backstage page 5
Theatre of acrobatic movement:
A world to discover page 6
Theatre and its natural resources page 8
Running away from home page 10
Exile: leaving your home country page 14
Take off: sources and references page 19
Landing: acknowledgements page 19
Credits page 19
Questions et comments page 20
Financial support page 20
DynamO Théâtre is the company behind *I on the sky*. It has toured worldwide for many years with its productions and taken audiences on journeys filled with imagery. Discovering a play is similar to entering a strange land, which is why the company provides a document that serves as a tourist guide introducing you and your group to the play.

Needless to say that you do not have to read the entire guide from cover to cover before venturing into this new land. Some may only want to leaf through it and look at the pictures, while others will read only parts and still others will prefer reading every page and explore areas of interest to them. Some travelers may want to learn the lingo by heart and be able to use this new language. In short, everything revolves around the type of traveler you tend to be.

Whatever way you travel, the guide provides you with information that will help you better prepare for the trip into *I on the sky*.

Although the guide is mainly designed for those leaving on a trip, i.e. the audience, teachers are the ones who are handed the guide since they are the ones who will be acting as tour guides.

Whether your group is on its initial trip or made up of seasoned travelers, the texts can be read by teachers to their groups or handed out to students so they can read them on their own.

With respect to the activities around the production, we suggest that you guide the young travelers through them, so they don't wind up in a dead end! The arrows appearing before texts and activities will tell you if this component can be shared with your students prior to or after the performance.

If you decide to use only parts of the guide, we suggest that you include the production summary in your selection and share it with your students before taking off. It has essential information that all travelers need to know before venturing into the world of *I on the sky*. They will appreciate the trip that much more!
Montreal-based DynamO Théâtre takes domestic and foreign audiences on journeys during which imagery and reality as well as movement and gestures meet. Such journeys may include layovers in the world of words.

These adventures are the result of 30 years of research into the world of imagination giving rise to some 20 productions, acknowledged and appreciated throughout Canada, Europe and Asia.

As a recipient of many awards both from peers and audiences, DynamO Théâtre constantly tries to push the limits of a dynamic theatre style that its artists consider essential.

This style takes advantage of the many facets of movement, with choreographies that introduce characters and tell stories. Audiences may be drawn initially by the impressive acrobatic feats, but later on they relate to topics that touch them and challenge their beliefs about the world around, just like traveling the world shapes young people’s outlook.

People in the control tower:
The company staff

Pierre Leclerc, general manager
Jacqueline Gosselin, coartistic director
Yves Simard, coartistic director
François Sammarco, touring and market development
Maurice Roy, head of communications
Nicole Lemire, administrative assistant
Against the backdrop of a constantly changing sky, a young woman sits on a park bench. Her only piece of luggage is a small suitcase in which she keeps some sheet music and a few objects belonging to people with which she had to part company. Through flashbacks, she remembers events that led her to flee her homeland. The crowd of strangers moving by considers her with indifference and contempt, until her path crosses that of a young runaway, in exile herself. She discovers a fragile tie in a faraway land.

A summary of the production: imagine a country

The production’s craftsmen and women: The people backstage

Package design and tour guide:
Yves Simard for concept and directing
Tour consultant:
David Paquet, dramaturg
Assistant tour guide and travel organizer:
Josée Fontaine-Rubi, assistant director and stage manager
Air-traffic controller:
Michel Castonguay for video design
Aerial corridor meteorologist:
Sylvain Letendre for lighting design
Aeronautical engineers:
Pierre Étienne Locas for costume and prop design
Suzanne Trépanier for make-up design
Acoustics:
Christian Légaré and J. S. Bach for original music
Flight manager:
Guillaume Simard for technical direction
Aerobatics:
Performers Laurianne Brabant, Andréeanne Joubert, Marie-Ève Lafontaine, Frédéric Nadeau and Hugues Sarra-Bournet
In *I on the sky*, music serves as a universal language that speaks to all, irrespective of background. The same does not necessarily apply to choreographic and acrobatic movement, which could be closer to the language of a specific nation that only its speakers can understand. When visiting a foreign country, you can usually count on the services of an interpreter, translating important information that travelers may have difficulty understanding. In *I on the sky*, the director is the one who takes on this job. By determining specific movements in a given context or setting, he allows audiences to understand a language that up to then could not be understood.

To get a better grasp of the bases of this new language, several questions were put to Yves Simard who directed *I on the sky*.

---

**Theatre of acrobatic movement: A world to discover**

Movement and acrobatics act as representations of the state of the world. They depict through action or movement the state and feelings of characters and the emotion arising from a situation. Take this sentence from the plot: “a woman blown in by a storm”. The woman's movement, i.e. to be carried and blown away by a storm, is the image of her flight. Rather than using words to say that this woman was forced to escape a conflict, I decided to depict the sequence from a poetic and evocative standpoint by using the strength of a storm as the impetus for movement. Movement does not say everything. Being evocative means giving room to audiences so they can imagine part of the story. Acrobatics supplements the movement. It acts as a thrust, i.e. the exclamation point of the choreographic phrase. Acrobatics can convey a character's emotional by building on it. Thanks to acrobatics, movement becomes larger than life.

---

**- How can an acrobatic movement describe a feeling or an emotion?**

In a production that has no words, everything must serve to enhance movements and gestures. The first impressions stemming from the script often come from the original set idea (the park bench) and the theme (exile). In *I on the sky*, the trampoline and the bench were there at the very first working session with the performers: bodies challenging the set design. The contribution of the performers is crucial to creating this type of production. After going through several improvisations, we develop a syntax that will help script the movement in space. It is like writing on a blank piece of paper. The performers offer up a series of movements taken from the script and the director chooses what helps move the story or the feeling forward. It is by switching back and forth that the director and the team of designers come to an understanding.

**- How does the director manage to choose the movements and when they will be used during the performance?**
Words can be powerful, full of imagery and direct, but so can movement. It is all a question of vocabulary, phrasing, balance, rhythm and interpretation. A powerful speech resonates in the spectator’s ears as much as a powerful movement. What sets them apart is that moving bodies draw spectators’ attention visually while words and text require more concentration and good hearing. Seeing or hearing. Feeling as opposed to understanding. My challenge in I on the sky was to use movement alone to tell a story. The power of images in the production comes from a pool of movements. Bear in mind that the movement also includes music, video projections, lighting and costumes. This blend of elements helps create clear, powerful and poetic imagery.

In the case of I on the sky, it’s almost an act of resistance. The idea that a play is often a storyline based on text, words and speech is often a given. I deliberately wanted to tell a story without using words, at a time when everything needs to be said, spelled out and demonstrated at a speed of 30 images/second. I wanted to immerse the audience in a sea of poetry, of evocative imagery and leave room for contemplation, like when you stop and gaze at the sky for some time.

You will notice many rotations in the sequences. Rotations are a way of representing the search for oneself, the “where am I going?” that characters experience. Let me take you back again to the beginning of the performance: “a woman blown in by a storm”. The wind makes her spin like a top. Swirling like a dead leaf is very poetic imagery. In spite of herself, she is blown away in the wind like a dead leaf falling from a tree. The rotating movement shows the loss of control. When you direct a scene, there are always recurring movements from one scene to the next. That is part of the vocabulary that makes up the phrasing.
If the value of a country is a function of its natural resources, the same could apply to the elements of a play. By playing its part, each element enriches the play in the same way a natural water reserve or a diamond mine does so for a country.

**Theatre and its natural resources**

- **The text or the script stemming from a basic idea is called**: ideation. A single individual, playwright or director, or a group of designers and performers can come up with the idea before developing it and putting to paper.

- **The acting, the movements and the performers**: carry the storyline. Through their interpretation of a character, their movements, their way of carrying out an action, they give audiences access to what characters have to say, what they are experiencing and feeling.

- **Music**: is there to express all that cannot be said through words or movements or even to highlight a feeling or a specific situation.

- **Directing**: is equivalent to orchestrating all the elements so they interact smoothly and always in the direction chosen by the director. All elements must work together coherently in telling the story, depending on what the director feels is right.

- **Lighting and the use of video**: create an atmosphere and the imagery that help audiences understand the sequence of events while providing information on the locales. These two elements also have a poetic component as they suggest feelings through the use of various colors or textures in the lighting as well as realistic or symbolic images in the video.

- **Set and props**: are evocative elements per se. Set and props help establish a context that can be more or less specific for a given scene. They all hinge on the director’s vision and his objective in specifying if the action is set in a real or imaginary world. The usual way in which objects are used can be twisted into meaning anything. It is then the audience’s job to figure out what is depicted, depending on how the characters use them.

- **Costumes and makeup**: provide clues on the realistic or imaginary aspect of the play while putting the characters in a given time period.

**ACTIVITY 1 : Researching**

Ask your students to answer the following question: according to you, what are the essential elements in “dramatizing” a play, i.e. making sure the basic idea of a story is conveyed adequately on stage?
**ACTIVITY 2 : Twisting the meaning**

In *I on the sky*, which object was used in a surprising way? What was it used as originally? What did it become in the character's mind?

**Answer:** the park bench, which becomes the young woman's piano bench as she plays J. S. Bach's aria.

The idea is to change what an object usually refers to. In their performance, the actors manage to have audiences accept the substitute meaning.

- Students can work alone or in teams of 2 or 3.
- Students choose an object in the classroom, e.g. a chair, a desk, a pencil box, a pair of scissors. They determine a substitute meaning for the object, a use that is different than the one it was designed for.

**Example:** a chair turned upside can become a basket in which you drop fruits as they are being picked, a desk can be turned into a cave for shelter during a storm, a pencil box can become a cell phone, a pair of scissors can turn into binoculars to observe a bird flying off.
According to Frédéric Gentilé, a human relations officer and youth worker in the Sorel-Tracy area around Montreal, it is difficult to single out the typical runaway. However, he identifies 5 general types of runaways:

1. those who run away to assert themselves;
2. those who run away because they are unable to live in a difficult family situation;
3. those who are homeless and destabilized by strict rules set by their parents and society (when they were younger, they had the right to do whatever they wanted);
4. those who run away and manipulate to get what they want when they come back;
5. those who keep running away over and over.

In *I on the sky*, scriptwriter and director Yves Simard chose to introduce audiences to a young girl who runs away from home because the family atmosphere created by her parents’ arguing has become unbearable.
To discuss the issue of runaways with your students, let us suggest various avenues to explore. Here are a few answers provided by Steve Geoffrion, a criminologist who works with young people experiencing difficulties and by the Missing Children's Network, which mentions that Québec reports 6,034 runaways on a total of 7,822 disappearances. Not surprisingly, this major social issue needs to be discussed with the main stakeholders, the kids themselves.

**ACTIVITY 1: Tackling the issue**

**Why do kids run away?**

There are three major causes for kids running away:

1. Inadequate communication between kids and parents: running away generally denotes a break in communications between kids and their parents. Running away is an expression of revolt, rejection, suffering and a way to challenge parental authority;
2. Kids’ inability to face personal issues: problems with school, drinking or drugs, lack of self-esteem leading kids to want to prove to their peers that they are not afraid of running away;
3. Being abused by their relatives: running away then becomes a way to escape an unhealthy family setting and shows strength of character and a determination to leave oppressive issues behind.

**Is running away thought out and planned or a spur-of-the-moment impulse?**

Running away often seems a well thought-out and organized action. Clothes, food, money are stashed away while runaways have already figured out where they will be crashing. Most young people call on their social network to find a place to stay. That is what is called hidden homelessness. If the plan is well thought out, kids will be taking off due to some event that suddenly overwhelms them. In fact, kids know that they will be living with a peer or they may know of a heated location where they can sleep. They do not preplan taking off. An argument, a rejection, heartbreak or humiliation may be the trigger.
- **What early signs tell you someone is planning to run away?**

Aside from the signs directly associated with getting ready to run away (setting aside money, food, and clothes), you need to be looking out for the following signs: the individual is talking about running away, alcohol/drug abuse, school or home issues, a sudden change in friends and lifestyle. Individuals who are getting ready to run away are isolated, sad, have fits and break family rules.

- **How can you help a friend who tells you that he/she wants to run away?**

If your friend has not yet run away, you can suggest looking for help from an adult who is not involved in the conflict, an adult your friend can trust. Your friend can also go online (www.covenanthouse.ca) where he/she will be able to find information and help resources.

- **Are there tools to prevent someone from running away?**

Parents can show their child that they love them and make them understand how important they are to them. A child-parent discussion on the issue could also deter someone from running away. Parents could also invite their son or daughter’s friends over to find out who their social network is. Parents could change their work schedule in order to be more present with a son or daughter who seems prone to running away.

- **Once runaways have left their neighborhood and reference points, what can they expect?**

Young runaways do not always realize the dangers they are exposing themselves to. They become easy prey to individuals who want to take advantage of them. In addition, young runaways can be tempted by criminal behavior, drug or alcohol abuse, prostitution, depression and even suicide.
ACTIVITY 2: Writing a letter

The teacher asks students to take pen and paper and begin their letter like so:

Dear you I don't know...

The student continues his/her letter to the young runaway. The student is free to sign it or not.

Dear you I don't know. I saw a glimpse of your life and I would like to tell you that...

Once the letter is finished, the letters are collected and sent to the DynamO Théâtre company that produced *I on the sky*. These letters will then be put on display in various venues where the play is performed.
While going on a trip usually means fun, discoveries and holidays, it is absolutely different for those who are forced into exile. As refugees, these individuals find refuge in a foreign land. To be given refugee status, they must first request it. The host country may grant or deny refugee status. If the asylum request is accepted, the country then accepts taking on and setting up newcomers.

There is a Convention on the Rights of the Child and a Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. According to the convention, a refugee is "any person who fears being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it".

**Activity 1: Answer the following**

To test the knowledge of your students on refugee status, we suggest you ask them the following questions, which you will be able to mark together later on:

1. Is there a difference between a refugee and an immigrant? If there is, what does it involve?
2. What are the reasons that can force individuals and their families to claim asylum in a foreign country?
3. True or false: unaccompanied children who leave their country of nationality without being accompanied by an adult cannot become refugees.
4. True or false: people who are forced to desert their houses due to natural disasters (floods, tsunamis, earthquakes) need to claim asylum in another country.
5. True or false: all countries must accept refugee claims.
6. True or false: developing countries do not accept refugees inside their borders.
7. True or false: all asylum claimants become refugees.
8. True or false: refugees enter the country of refuge with large suitcases and trunks filled with personal effects.
9. What are the reasons that could drive a population to massive exodus?

10. Match the following countries with the number of refugees they accepted. Which country accepted the greatest number of refugees? Which country accepted the fewest? Figures are shown at the bottom of the map.
Answers:

1. There is a huge difference between an immigrant and a refugee. Immigrants leave of their own free will and do so most often for financial reasons to have a better life for themselves and their families. For their part, refugees are forced to leave their country to protect their lives and freedom. As such, they are not protected by the country’s government, which is often responsible for persecuting them.

2. The following reasons can prompt individuals and their families to claim asylum: being persecuted for the color of their skin, their faith (during civil wars, for instance), their social group (such as gays or women) or political views.

3. False. Sometimes children and teenagers are forced to flee their country on their own because their parents were killed or imprisoned. Children may be separated from their parents in the chaos of an exodus or the threat of persecution may be directed squarely at children or teenagers, e.g. when rebel armies kidnap children to make them soldier children.

4. False. Because governments mostly view victims of natural disasters in a favorable light, their situation is very different. They have access to humanitarian assistance on site and can be relocated without having to leave their country.

5. This is true of the signatory countries of the Geneva Convention (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees signed in Geneva Switzerland in 1951) who must accept and protect refugees.

6. False. According to the High Commissioner for Human Rights, developing countries accept 80% of refugees in the world. Why? First, because individuals fleeing their country must often do so on foot or use rudimentary transportation. They look for refuge in a neighboring country, as did Sudanese refugees in Kenya, citizens of Myanmar in Bangladesh or even Afghan refugees in Iran. Another reason is that developed countries are increasingly hesitant in accepting refugees. They bring issues relating to migration into play to justify denying more and more asylum claims.

7. False. For instance, half of claims are accepted in Canada. For a claim to be accepted, claimants must be facing danger in their country of origin, as described in the Geneva Convention. They must show that this is their first asylum claim in Canada, that claimants do not have a refugee status in another country, that they did not pass through a safe country able to provide asylum (the United States of America for instance) and that their presence in Canada does not endanger Canadian citizens (e.g. for reasons of health or criminality).

8. False. People fleeing their country because they fear for their lives or their freedom must often leave in a hurry and only have the clothes on their backs when they leave. If they can, they may try to bring along a small piece of luggage in which they mostly stuff keepsakes and picture albums.

9. Political, ethnic and economic conflicts, famine, insecurity, violence, poverty, environmental degradation and violation of human rights are the most significant causes of massive exodus of populations.

10. Iran: 1,306,000, Pakistan: 1,227,000, United States of America: 485,000, Sudan: 328,000, Kenya: 233,000, Canada: 129,000
**ACTIVITY 2: Unscrambling the letters**

By putting back the following letters in the right order, you will discover the name of the countries from which most asylum claimants come from:

- nihaagtsna
- qiar
- iosalam
- tamocdicer cebpliru fo ocong
- mmymaa

**ACTIVITY 3: Locate**

Using a world map, locate the countries and pay special attention to their neighbors. Are these countries part of the ones who accept most refugees?
ACTIVITY 4: Improvising

Make up teams of 4, 5 or 6 students. One individual plays the role of the immigration officer and the others will play the members of a family seeking asylum in the country. The storyline is as follows: a family is attempting to make its case and explain why the host country should grant them refugee status. The immigration officer asks questions in order to assess if these people can enter the country as refugees. At the end of the improvisation, the officer must decide if the asylum request will be granted or denied. The improvisation will be performed in front of the class.

Before performing the scene, the students must:
- Cast the various parts
- Choose the country of origin of the asylum claimants
- Determine why the family left the country
- Broadly sketch out the family’s history
- Decide if and why the officer will grant their request or not.

Following the performance, the class can discuss the decisions made by the officer in the immigration department depending on the cases presented.
ACTIVITY 5: Storytelling

1. The students put together a small suitcase similar to that of the exiled woman.
2. They find objects in the surroundings, objects that they would bring with them if they had to flee. All the objects must fit into a small suitcase.
3. They then write a short text describing the objects in the suitcase and why they chose them.
4. Lastly, they present the contents of their suitcase to the class.
The information and the quotes you find in the guidebook were taken from the following websites and published documents:

**Websites:**
- www.covenanthouse.ca
- www.enfant-retourquebec.ca/index_en.php
- http://cwy-jcm.com/
- www.unhcr.ca/

**Documents:**
- Refugee teenagers: www.unhcr.org/4534f1e713.html
- Refugees: A Canadian Perspective: www.unac.org/learn/wrld/Refugees/REFeng.htm
- Against All Odds: www.playagainstallodds.com/factualweb/us/index.html

Many individuals shared information and knowledge to produce this guidebook. Thank you to director Yves Simard, criminologist Steve Geoffrion, school liaison agent Alvarro Sierra as well as Maison de la Famille des Maskoutains in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. Thank you also to United Nations High Commissioner Refugee Agency for the educational guides and magazines needed to write the guidebook. Thank you to Louise Saint-Pierre and Geneviève Dubé for revising the document. And lastly a special thank you to the entire DynamO Théâtre team for its availability and the beauty of its productions.

- Josiane Arsenault Dubé, writer of the guidebook

**Credits**

Writing and design of the guide: Josiane Arsenault Dubé
Graphic design: Valérie Perron
If you have questions or comments about the guidebook or if it gives you ideas for other activities, we would be delighted to know about them and share them with others.

You can write to one of the following addresses:

911 Jean-Talon Street East, suite 131
Montreal QC
H2R 1V5
Canada

Phone: 514-274-7644
Fax: 514-274-1034
Website: www.dynamotheatre.qc.ca

DynamO Théâtre is financially supported by: