

Box

A VIGNETTE PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Lindsay Price



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Box is a middle school vignette play that examines the “boxes” that we put ourselves in, or that are defined by others. Who is in control of our identity?

Background

Box was originally workshopped for, and premiered by Owensboro Middle School in Owensboro, KY.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator, and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

Box is a vignette play made up of short scenes on a theme. Each scene explores a different aspect of the metaphorical “boxes” that represent how we present our identity to the world and how the world decides who we are. Who is in control of our identity? Sometimes we choose the way the world sees us. Black box — indestructible. Jewelry box — plain on the outside, shiny on the inside. Sometimes our box is defined by others — our parents, our friends, or our enemies through gossip, drama, and rumours. A box built by others can feel small, confined, impossible. How do we handle the boxes imposed on us by parent pressure, peer pressure, our relationships, or our environment? If we are defined by others, does that identity remain? Can we change our identity? Is our box an expression of individuality, a safe space, or a trap?

Characters

As this is a vignette play, actors play multiple roles in a variety of scenes. The majority of characters are middle school students. Generally, each scene contains a set of characters that only appear in that one scene.

The play calls for 18 actors to play multiple roles such as:

- ★ Hoax, Secrets, Tattle, Peace, Hearsay, Rumour, Drama

Themes

Identity, Individuality, Relationships, Self-image, Peer-pressure, Obedience, Gossip, Safe Space

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes up a person's identity?
- ★ How do you describe yourself?
- ★ What sides of your personality do you show in public?
- ★ Is the way you see yourself the same as the way others see you?
- ★ Do you think you are in control of how others see you?
- ★ Do your parents want you to present yourself in a certain way?
- ★ Do your parents have a plan for you? Are you on board with that plan?
- ★ If you had to choose a box (cardboard, jewelry, pizza, tool, music) to define you, which would it be and why?
- ★ Have you ever had to defend yourself against a rumour?
- ★ Do you believe rumours and gossip about others?
- ★ Have you ever started a rumour about someone else?

- ★ Are you in control of your reputation?
- ★ Do you believe a good reputation means someone is a good person?
- ★ Do you think people should be defined by their reputation?
- ★ Can you change your reputation?
- ★ Where is your safe space?

Pre-Read Activities

Draw Yourself: Shapes, Lines, Symbols

- ★ Provide paper and coloured pencils for students.
- ★ Tell students that their first task for the class is to draw themselves. They don't have to be artists or draw themselves true to life. They will use shapes, lines, and symbols (for example, hashtag, stop sign, peace sign, hourglass, smiley face).
- ★ Take students through each of the items and have them think about their personality. If they could draw a shape that represents their personality what would it be? Give students suggestions of shapes (circle, square, star, crescent, prism) and encourage them to think of multiple shapes — we are all not just one thing. Model an answer:
 - » *I would draw a square for myself, because I love nerding out on science fiction. But then in the square I'd draw a star because I'm also an extrovert.*
- ★ Next, ask students to think of their personality in terms of lines. Again give examples (curvy, zigzag, straight, slanting, dashed) and model an answer.
- ★ Lastly, ask students to think of their personality in terms of symbols. Give examples and model an answer:
 - » *I would draw a treble clef, because music is a big part of my personality. Whatever emotion I'm feeling, I sing about it.*

- ★ It would be helpful to play music during this activity, so that students don't feel self-conscious.
- ★ When everyone is finished, make a gallery of the sheets (stick them to the wall or a large piece of paper) and have students examine them. Tell students to identify and share one shape, one line, and one symbol that stood out to them.
 - » Gauge your students. If they want to share the reasoning behind their choices publically, give them the opportunity. If not, have them write a journal entry or an Exit Slip in which they describe their reasoning for each element.

Describe Yourself

- ★ Have students write a description of their outsides and insides. How do they present themselves in public? How do they see themselves in private? Do they believe they are the same inside and out?
- ★ Alternatively, have students describe themselves (outside and inside) using the five senses. What is their look, their sound, their texture/feel, their smell? Have them identify a specific food for taste.

Identity Chart

- ★ Have students make an identity chart for themselves. An identity chart visualizes different aspects of the question, "Who am I?"
 - » Students will need paper and something to write with.
 - » You may want to complete an identity chart for yourself as a model.
- ★ An identity chart starts with students putting their name in a circle or square in the middle of the page.
- ★ Then students draw lines from the centre. At the end of each line, students write one word or phrase that describes them (tall, girl, Scottish background, drama club, piano). Possible categories include:
 - » Family identity

- » Social identity
- » Cultural background
- » Physical appearance
- ★ Ask students to reflect on the final product. What shapes their identity?
- ★ Ask students to reflect on their identity. Are they in control of their identity? Is there anything they would like to change? What would happen if they did?

Safe Space Collage

- ★ Create a collage that visualizes your definition of “Safe Space” How do you visualize safety?
 - » Brainstorm images, symbols, and words that visualize safety.
 - » Decide what materials you will use to visualize your safe space.
 - » After you create your collage, write a one-paragraph description of the choices you made and why.

Reputation Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups
- ★ Groups will create a one-minute scene on the theme of good/bad reputation. They can show characters reacting to someone with what they consider a “bad” reputation, someone trying to change their reputation, or the qualities of a good reputation.
- ★ Discuss afterward: Are you in control of your reputation? Why or why not? How important is it to students to have a “good” reputation? What does reputation represent?

Rumour & Gossip Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups
- ★ Groups will create a one-minute scene on the theme of rumours/gossip. They can show a group deciding to start a rumour, the aftermath of the rumour, or someone trying to stop a rumour.
- ★ Discuss afterward: Have you ever been the subject of a rumour? Have you ever seen a rumour start? Have you ever stood up for someone when you knew a rumour wasn't true?

Rumour & Gossip Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will create a three-picture tableau that focuses on the subject of rumour and gossip.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ The first picture will feature a group before the rumour/gossip occurs, the second picture will visualize the rumour/gossip in action, and the third picture will show the aftermath.
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss with students: Have you ever been the subject of a rumour? Have you ever seen a rumour start? Have you ever stood up for someone when you knew a rumour wasn't true?

Identity Control/Change Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will create a three-picture tableau that focuses on the subject of trying to control or change one's identity.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

- ★ The first picture will feature a group of students visualizing their current identity. The second picture will show students trying to change/control an aspect of their identity. The third picture will show the aftermath of that decision.
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss with students: Do you feel you are in control of your identity? Is there something you would change about your identity if you could? Why or why not?

This is my Box

- ★ This can be done as a drawing exercise or you can have students bring in an actual box to decorate.
- ★ The goal is for students to visualize their personality as a box. What type of box would students use? How is the outside of the box different than the inside? What colours, textures, shapes, and lines would you use?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Box*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Name three of the types of boxes described in the opening.
3. What is a Kobako?
4. Who is holding an orange?
5. What is the gossip about Hoax?
6. What instrument does Sakura Sato play?
7. What was Rayna's childhood nickname?
8. What does Patrick think about?
9. Complete this sentence: "I choose to be _____ until the wind dies down."
10. Brenna would rather be a what, instead of a shark?
11. Who says, "I can make my pretty years count?"
12. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose to share the subject matter episodically through scenes, rather than following one story from beginning to end?
2. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen to use a bare stage with cubes to stage the play? How would the lack of set impact the staging?
3. In your opinion, why does the playwright use a box to symbolize how a person controls their identity (or the lack of control over their identity)?
4. In your opinion, why has the playwright given some of the characters names, and some of them are identified as concepts?

5. Analyze Justice’s use of language. What kind of words does she use? What can you infer about her character based on her vocabulary and word choice?
6. Based on the way Diamond speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?
7. What is the significance of the line, “Why can’t I determine who I am and how people see me”?
8. What is the significance of the line, “We can’t be popular if we can’t be fake. Being popular is everything”?
9. What is the significance of the line, “I can make my pretty years count”?
10. In your opinion, is there a common conflict throughout the scenes? If so, what is it?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called Box? What does the box represent?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about control? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with controlling your identity with what happens in the play.
4. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with rumours and gossip with what happens in the play.
5. In your opinion, what is the significance of the last scene? What does it represent?
6. How does the author want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?

- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Did any scene make you think about how you present yourself?
- ★ Should anyone else be able to define your identity? Why or why not?
- ★ What symbol, other than a box, would you use to define yourself?

Post-Read Activities

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? Would you use a box? What box would it be? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play such as, "I can make my pretty years count."
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how they will visualize this line in a tableau.
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.

- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Box Original Monologue

- ★ Using the format of the Box monologues in the play, have students write an original monologue. The character must describe their identity in terms of a box, and describe why their box is the way it is. Are they in control of their identity? Has it been defined by someone else? Do they want to change their identity? Are they dealing with a certain rumour or reputation? Do they have a secret they are trying to hide?
- ★ Monologues should be half a page.

This is Not my Box Original Scene

- ★ In one of the scenes a character says, “This is the box my parents want for me. This is who my parents want me to be.”
- ★ In groups, students will create a scene in which they explore their own struggles with controlling their identity, specifically the idea of having someone else define their identity for them.

Sound Design Description

- ★ Vignette plays often use music to transition from scene to scene.
- ★ There is no specific sound design for this play. Have students write a description of their sound vision. What type of music fits the play? What sounds would you use to create an appropriate mood and atmosphere? How would you use music to transition from scene to scene?

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process writing Box. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

I had written a middle school play called *Hoodie* and was looking to write a companion piece. I was working with some middle school students on another play and had the opportunity to do a brainstorm idea session with them. I was amazed at some of the issues they were dealing with and *Box* was born.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

The biggest challenge was authenticity. It's been a long time since I was in middle school and wanted to make sure I was writing in a voice that middle school students could connect with and relate to. To that end, I can't ever write in a vacuum. I have to get the work in front of middle schoolers and have them act out the scenes. I need to hear them read the dialogue aloud as much as possible. I need to get their feedback. The workshop component is a big part of the writing process for me, and it means I'm rarely surprised at a play's reaction after it's published. I get out all the kinks and problems beforehand.

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

Justice's monologue is one of my favourites. It's heartbreaking and I don't think that the character is going to get past their environment. But when I read that monologue, I can clearly visualize the situation, and I can see what this character is dealing with so vividly. Words become pictures, and that's what we're always trying to achieve as playwrights.

What is harder: coming up with ideas or rewrites?

Rewrites always! Ideas are fun because it's the brainstorming phase where everything can change. I don't feel that ideas are precious; they are just a starting point. Rewrites are specific and need to relate directly to moving the play forward. Sometimes, I can rewrite all day and hardly have anything to show for it because I'm trying to work on a moment or a character. But, while the idea stage is more fun, rewrites are more

rewarding. Plays become the best they can be in the rewrites; they are never fully written or realized in a first draft.

What was it like to see the play performed?

It was amazing, mostly because of the audience response. When I saw the first production, the audience was filled with family and friends of the original cast and you could tell they were not only connecting to the stories in the vignettes, but they were connecting to the piece as an authentic portrayal of middle school life. I couldn't have been happier.