

Study Guide prepared by
Catherine Bush
Barter Playwright-in-Residence

I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas

Book & lyrics by Catherine Bush, Music by Dax Dupuy

*Especially for Grades K-6

By the Barter Players, Gilliam Stage, Christmas 2023

(NOTE: standards listed below are seeing a performance of the *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas* and completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English – K.1, K.5, K.6, K.8, K.9, 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.8, 1.9, 2.1, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.12, 2.14, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.9, 3.11, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.9, 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.9

Music – K.11, K.13, 1.12, 1.16, 2.8, 2.9, 2.11, 2.13, 3.9, 3.10, 3.12, 4.8, 4.9, 4.13, 5.8, 5.9, 5.12, 6.7, 6.9, 6.10

Theatre Arts – 6.5, 6.18, 6.23, 6.24, 6.25

Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English/Language Arts - Reading Literacy: K.1, K.3, K.5, K.7, 1.1, 1.3, 1.6, 1.7, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 3.1, 3.4, 3.5, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 6.4, 6.6, 6.7

English Language Arts – Writing: K.1, K.3, 1.1, 1.3, 1.8, 2.1, 2.3, 2.8, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.7, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.7, 5.9, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.7, 6.9.

Tennessee Fine Arts Curriculum Standards

Theatre – K.4.1, K.4.3, 1.4.1, 1.4.3, 2.4.1, 2.4.3, 3.6.2, 3.6.4, 3.7.1, 3.7.2, 3.8.1, 4.6.1, 4.6.4, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 4.8.1, 5.6.1, 5.6.4, 5.7.1, 5.7.2, 5.8.1, 6.1, 6.2

Music – K.7.1, K.7.2, 1.7.1, 1.7.2, 2.7.1, 2.7.2, 3.7.1, 3.7.2, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 5.7.1, 5.7.2

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – K.A.1, K.CU.1, 1.A.1, 1.CU.2, 2.A.1, 3.A.1, 3.CU.1, 3.CU.2, 4.A.1, 5.A.1, 5.CU.1, 6.C.1, 6.C.2, 6.A.1, 6.CU.2

Music – K.MR.1, 1.MR.1, 2.MR.1, 3.MR.1, 3.CR.1, 4.MR.1, 5.MR.1, 6.MR.1

Setting

Various locations at the Cincinnati Zoo. Christmas. The present.





A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the Producing Artistic Director in October 1992. During his tenure, attendance grew from 42,000 to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements were also made, including renovation of the main stage (now Gilliam Stage) in 1995 and the 2006 addition of The Barter Café at Stage II (now the Smith Theatre). Rose retired in December of 2019 and Katy Brown, who had been at Barter since 1998 as the Director of the Barter Players and as an Associate Artistic Director, was named the fourth Producing Artistic Director – and is the first woman to hold the position.

Barter represents two distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre’s Gilliam Stage, and Barter’s Smith Theatre. Gilliam Stage, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter’s Smith Theatre offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. Barter Theatre is also home to The Barter Players, a talented ensemble of actors who produce plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

Characters

George Braunagel – zookeeper at the Cincinnati Zoo

Dolly Frizzoti – George’s wife, a zoologist

Lois Jean Braunagel – their 7-year-old daughter

Big Suzy – a pregnant hippo at the Zoo

Mac – George’s right-hand man

Mayor – Mayor of Cincinnati

New Yorker – a tourist to the Zoo

Patrons – regular customers at the Zoo

Santa Claus – a jolly Christmas elf

Boys/Girls – various kids in line to see Santa

Dr. Andrea Brozen – the veterinarian who takes care of baby Bella

Chet Myerson – news reporter

Carol – Dolly’s assistant in Africa



Vocabulary

celebrate

citizen

flatter

festive

respect

territorial

invade

zoologist

specialty

abandon

barrier

introduce

responsibility

reporter

resident

auspicious

occasion

constituent

endeavor

premature

caution

commemorate

campaign

confer

transparency

update

priority

catastrophic

accountable

cynical

critical

situation

elude

dire

diagnose

revive

reprieve

undercover

disguise

serum

instructions

administer

Define each of the vocabulary words listed above then write sentences using them. Remember: anyone reading your sentence should be able to understand the word from the context in which it is used.

Synopsis

It's Christmas time at the Cincinnati Zoo, and everyone is excited to start celebrating the season – everyone except Lois Jean, the zookeeper's daughter. Lois Jean is missing her mother, a zoologist who has moved to Africa in order to study wild hippos. Lois Jean knows that her mother would come home for Christmas if the zoo's resident hippo Big Suzy had her baby – however, Lois Jean's father George explains that Big Suzy's baby isn't due until a month *after* Christmas. Lois Jean remains determined to reunite her family in time for the holidays, so when Santa comes to visit the children at the zoo, Lois Jean tells him she wants a hippopotamus for Christmas. Santa promises to do what he can, and the next day, Big Suzy's baby is born – a little girl hippo Lois Jean names Bella. Because Bella is born so early, she faces serious health issues – her survival depends on a new serum that Dolly, Lois Jean's mother, has developed in Africa. Despite the distance, George is finally able to communicate with Dolly and inform her of the situation. Dolly immediately hops a plane, and all of Cincinnati waits eagerly for her arrival, hoping Bella will be able to survive until Dolly gets there. Suddenly a blizzard grounds Dolly's plane in New York and all appears lost – until “what to my wondering eye should appear, but a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer!” Santa Claus has picked Dolly up in New York and flown her home just in time to save Bella – and Christmas. George and Dolly reunite, and we are once again reminded that there's nothing better than Christmas at the Cincinnati Zoo!

History of the Song *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas*

The original song *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas* (whose title was the inspiration for this play) was written by John Rox in 1953 and sung by a 10-year-old named Gayle Peevy. When released, the song became an instant holiday classic, and the citizens of Oklahoma City, Peevy's hometown, even raised \$3000 to buy her a hippo for Christmas! Peevy donated the hippo, named Mathilda, to the Oklahoma City Zoo, where she lived for 50 years!

I want a hippopotamus for Christmas
Words and Music by John Rox
Arranged for Ladies Barbershop Chorus with Intro and Tag by Aurelie Gaudou & Catherine Doherty

Chorus: *mf*
Christmas time is near - by here, there's one thing I must say. Would
you - by make me hap-py on a per-fect Christ-mas Day... I want a hip-po-
ta-mus for Christ-mas. Just like I saw last sum-mer in the zoo.
Men say a hip-po would eat me up but then...

Biography of the Playwright



Catherine Bush lives in beautiful Abingdon, VA where she makes her living as Barter Theatre's resident playwright. Her plays produced at Barter include: *The Other Side of the Mountain*, *The Quiltmaker*, *Comin' Up A Storm*, *Wooden Snowflakes*, *Tradin' Paint*, *Where Trouble Sleeps*, *The Road to Appomattox*, *Walking Across Egypt*, *I'll Never Be Hungry Again (book & lyrics)*, *The Controversial Rescue of Fatty the Pig*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Winter Wheat (book & lyrics)*, *Ghost, Ghost, Come Out*

Tonight, *Great Expectations*, *Dracula*, *A Christmas Carol*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, and *Frankenstein*. Other produced plays include *The Executioner's Sons*, *unHINGEd*, *The Frankenstein Summer*, *A Jarful of Fireflies*, and *Just a Kiss*, which was a finalist for the 2007 Steinberg Award. Catherine has also written over twenty-five plays for the Barter Players, whose work serves the younger members of Barter's audience. Catherine is a proud member of Dramatists Guild.

Biography of the Composer

Dax Dupuy is a songwriter, newly transplanted from Brooklyn to Asheville, NC. She's written several musicals, including *Clementine: The Musical*, *Frosty*, *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *The Fantastical Dangerous Journey of Q*, *Jingle All the Way*, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, and *Kentucky Spring*. She has also written numerous incidental scores: *Othello*, *Great Expectations*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and many more. She



audited BMI's Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop in 2017, and is currently a member of Maestra, Georgia Stitt's collective for female composers, music directors and musicians. She spends most of her time hanging out with her cats and avoiding hiking.

Hippo Fun Facts!!

Hippos are the third largest mammal on Earth!

The only mammals larger than hippos are elephants and white rhinos.



#1 ELEPHANT



#2 WHITE RHINO



#3 HIPPOPOTAMUS

Hippos are strong swimmers!

Hippos can hold their breath for an average of 5 minutes. That's long enough to take walks along the floor of a lake or river. No wonder their nickname is "river horse"!



Hippos are herbivores!

Hippos are herbivores, meaning they fuel their bodies with plants! Hippos eat, on average, 80 pounds of grass each night.

Hippos produce their own sunscreen!

Hippos live in sub-Saharan Africa, where the sun's UV rays are incredibly strong. Hippos have adapted an ability to produce a red, oily liquid which acts as a natural sunblock.



Hippos are most active at night!

While not considered nocturnal, most of the hippos' foraging and activity happen during the night. They leave their resting waters near dusk and return in the morning.

The gestation period of a hippo is 243 days (eight months)!

Baby hippos are called calves, and they weigh between 50 to 100 pounds when they're born. Fiona, the baby hippo who was the inspiration for this play, was born prematurely and only weighed 29 pounds. She is the smallest hippo ever to survive!



Questions/Activities

1. In this play, Lois Jean writes Santa Claus asking for a hippopotamus for Christmas. Have you ever wanted a present so badly that you wrote Santa a letter asking for it? If so, did you receive the present? How long was it special to you? If it was a toy, do you still play with it today? **Discuss.** Is a hippopotamus what Lois Jean *really* wanted for Christmas? Or was there something else? Did she receive her gift? **Discuss.**



2. Lois Jean's mother, Dolly, is a zoologist. What is a zoologist? What is the difference between a zoologist and a zookeeper? Given her occupation, why was it so important for Dolly to take the opportunity to go to Africa? **Discuss.** Dolly ends up catching a flight from Nairobi. Using the internet, **research** the city of Nairobi.

In which African country is Nairobi located?

Locate that country on the map of Africa. Does its location explain why it took Dolly so long to get home? How does the size of Africa compare to the size of the United States? How many countries are in Africa today? Pick one of the countries, research its history, and **make an oral presentation to your class.**



3. On January 24, 2017, a baby hippo named Fiona was born at the Cincinnati Zoo. She was born six weeks early and faced many challenges in surviving her premature birth. Fiona was the inspiration for the baby hippo Bella in *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas*. In the play, Bella faces challenges as well but, for the sake of storytelling, is able to be cured rather quickly. The real life story of Fiona involves more “touch and go” situations. To learn Fiona's story, check out the link below and watch the videos that the Cincinnati Zoo put together to explain how the zoo staff helped Fiona meet those challenges.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nT-q8FM7GI>

4. *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas* is a musical. How was music used to tell the story? Do you think it was effective? **Write your own song** about the life of a hippo or a zookeeper or a veterinarian and perform it for your class.

5. **Write a letter** to your favorite actors from this production. Tell them what you liked about the play, their performance, etc. Mail your letters to:

The Barter Players
c/o Barter Theatre
P.O. Box 867
Abingdon, VA 24212-0867
ATTN: I Want a Hippopotamus
for Christmas



6. How are the animals in the zoo represented in this show? Do you think it was effective? If you were going to design a hippo or a polar bear or a penguin, how would you do it? **Pick your favorite zoo animal and design a costume that could be worn/used by an actor on stage.**

Teacher: hang up the design pictures and see if the students can guess what they're supposed to be.



7. This play took a lyric from a song and built a story around it. Pick another favorite Christmas carol like *Here Comes Suzy Snowflake* or *Winter Wonderland* and **write the story** behind the song.

8. This story takes place over several days. Pick a character from this play and **keep a journal as that character during this time period.** For example, what might Dr. Brozen have written in her journal the night she realized Bella was sick? What might the Mayor have written the night Bella was born? Keep your journal entries as specific and imaginative as possible.

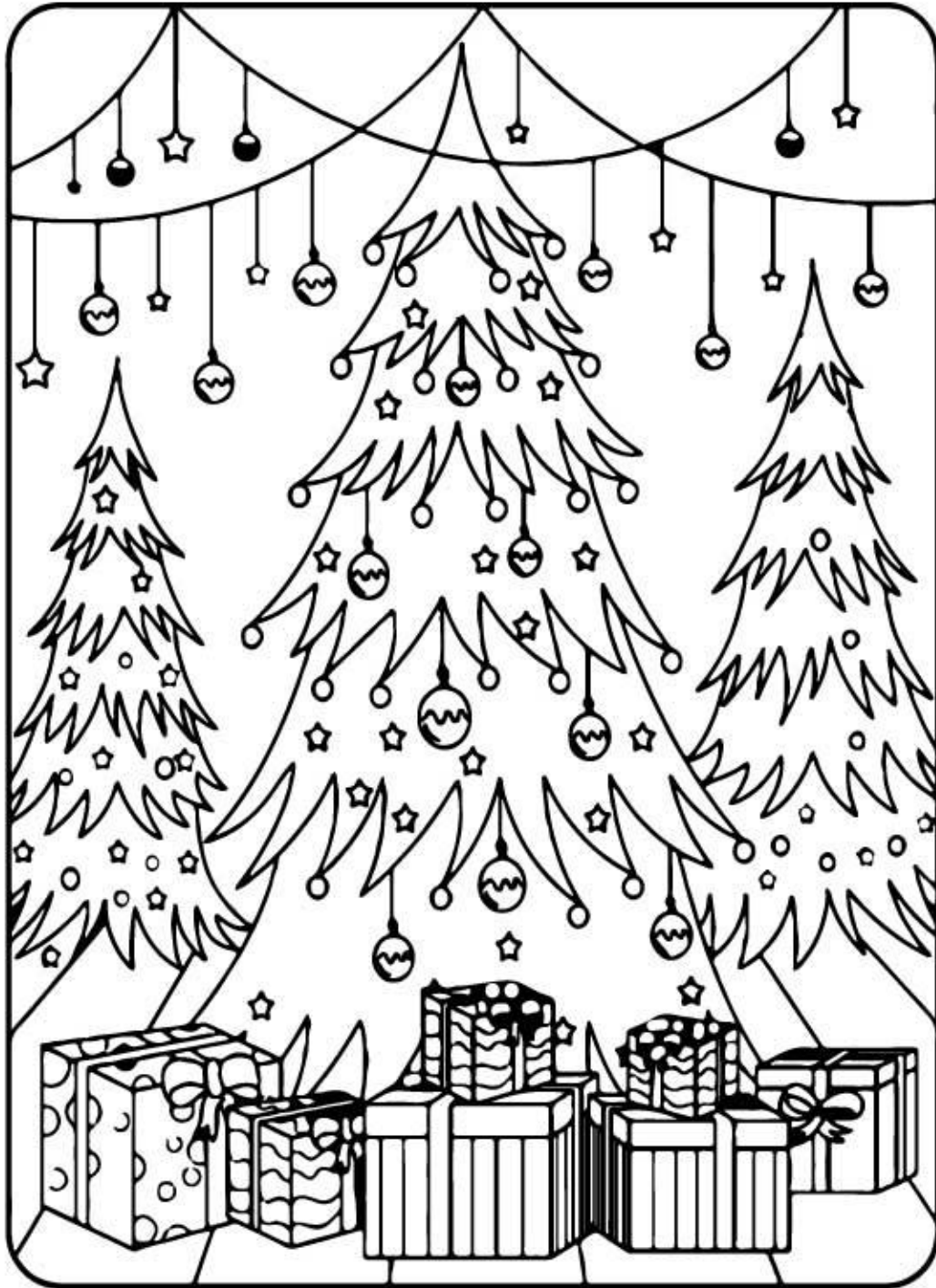
WORD SEARCH

Searching forward, backward, horizontally, vertically and diagonally find the following words below:

Cincinnati, Santa Claus, LoisJean, zoologist, George, Dolly, moon, Bella, news reporter, veterinarian, hippopotamus, Dr. Brozen, Christmas, wish, Mayor, Chet Myerson, Africa, BigSuzy, blizzard, survive

S U A L C A T N A S J N C T B
H O S G M M O R A E C I U S E
D O L L Y O P A G E N E N I L
S M W R B L O R G C J E G G L
U A Y I Y F O N I N W S Y O A
M Y A I S E O N E S Q Z I L P
A O P C G H N Z R P U U P O Q
T R G R I A O E M S H Q T O L
O G B B T R P Q G D Q N V Z V
P H Q I B O F I E V I V R U S
O I U R R J B A P W E M D A D
P J D T N O S R E Y M T E H C
P U E N A I R A N I R E T E V
I R C H R I S T M A S R A D E
H P B L I Z Z A R D U I F G F

Color the Christmas Tree and presents!



Suggested Further Reading

Little Hippo by Julie Arbery

Hippos Go Berserk! by Sandra Boynton

That's NOT a Hippopotamus by Juliette MacIver

The Ultimate Hippo Books for Kids by Jenny Kellett

