

BY RACHEL TEAGLE

THE IMPRACTICALITY OF MODERN DAY MASTODONS

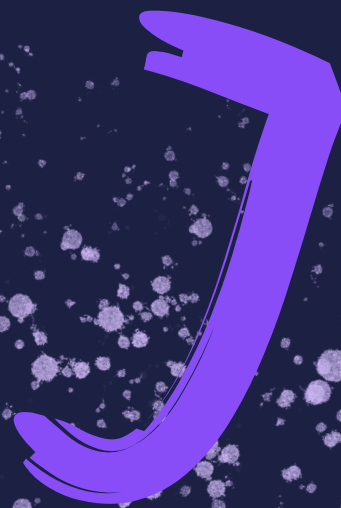
DRAMATURGY PACKET

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Directed by Joshua M. Feder
January 24-27, 2024
Jackie Liebergott Black Box
Theatre (Paramount Center)

Emerson
STAGE

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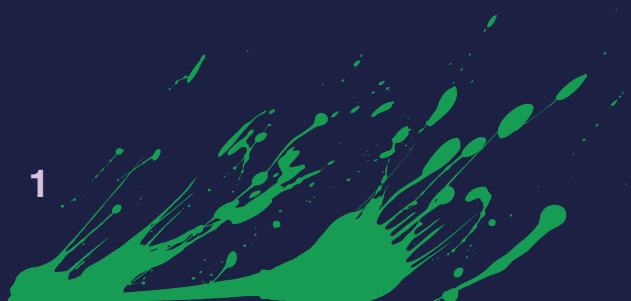
"Or maybe somewhere, out there, watching, waiting, are the other impractical children."

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FOR THE PRACTICAL CHILDREN

Plot Summary

A young person makes an impossible wish and suddenly all childhood dreams have come true; the world is full of astronauts, ballerinas, cowboys, and princesses. It's a brave and glorious new world for everyone but Jess, who wanted to be a mastodon when she grew up. With the help of her friendly vocational adviser and her super-spy boyfriend, Jess embarks on a journey to find her place in the world, and discover why it seems to be unraveling. Punctuating her journey are a quirky team of newscasters, a presentation of her 2nd grade report on mastodons by a pair of paleontologists, and a pageant of historical figures who made the mastodon what it is today. Unfortunately, Jess' community and the world turns its back on the things it can't understand. But Jess is able to find Buster, the child whose wish changed the world. Encouraged by Buster's kindness, Jess leaves to find the other impractical children.

Themes

- Making your own mark on the world
- Finding your identity through your actions
- Childhood dreams vs. adult realities
- Searching for a community of like-minded individuals

Core Questions

- Who are we? How do we shape our identity? What makes us unique?
- What's the difference between practical and impractical dreams?
- What do we take for granted in our lives?
- What does it mean to be important (to someone, to history, to the world)?
- What is our purpose or vocation?

Playwright: Rachel Teagle

Rachel Teagle is a contemporary playwright and comedian who currently resides in St. Paul, MN. Her plays highlight the experiences of young women trying to navigate a world that wasn't designed for them. Many of Teagle's plays incorporate fantasy, sci-fi, political commentary, horror, and lots of humor, often with impossibly theatrical stage directions and settings. Several of her shows, like *Mastodons*, explore themes related to childhood and adolescence. She has also adapted several children's books for young audiences.



Production History

The Impracticality of Modern Day Mastodons premiered at Theatre Lab, the professional resident company at Florida Atlantic University in 2021. The play has also been produced at Weber State University in Utah, Kent State University (Trumbull Campus) in Ohio, and Michigan State. The first reading of the play took place in 2011 at Truffle Theatre Company in Brooklyn with several additional workshops and readings between 2012 and 2015.



Cracks in the Ice: Critical reflections on the play

Like any play, *Mastodons* presents unique challenges particularly in some of the language. As we work on this play, everyone is encouraged to keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the “style” of the play and how will that inform how things look, move, and sound?
- When does the audience see the “cracks in the facade” for each character, and what does that reveal about our world?
- This play leaps through time, space, and into places that seem outside of time and space all together - what does that mean for you as an artist, and how will you communicate that to the audience?
- How does language punctuate character, theme, and story and how can we share that with the audience?

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

All About Mastodons

Height: 8-10 ft tall

Weight: 8,000-10,000 pounds

Location: While Mastodon fossils have been found all over North America, most have been found East of the Mississippi River. Mastodons lived in cool woodlands.

Time Period: Mastodons lived about 10,000-125,000 years ago in the mid-Pliocene to end-Pleistocene eras

Timeline of other events and living organisms for context:

- Dinosaurs: Approx. 245-66 million years ago, Mesozoic Era
- Mammoths: 300,000 years ago up until about 10,000 years ago. Some survived until 1650 B.C.
- “Ice Age” (Last Glacial Maximum): 29,000 to 19,000 years ago (we are technically still in the same ice age)
- Homo Sapiens: Primitive Homo Sapiens lived about 300,000 years ago. Scientists estimate Homo Sapiens evolved to have brains and skeletons similar to ours around 100,000 years ago.

This means Mastodons likely existed simultaneously with Homo Sapiens, current science believes humans did not cross the Bering Isthmu to what is now called “North America” until about 75,000 years ago.

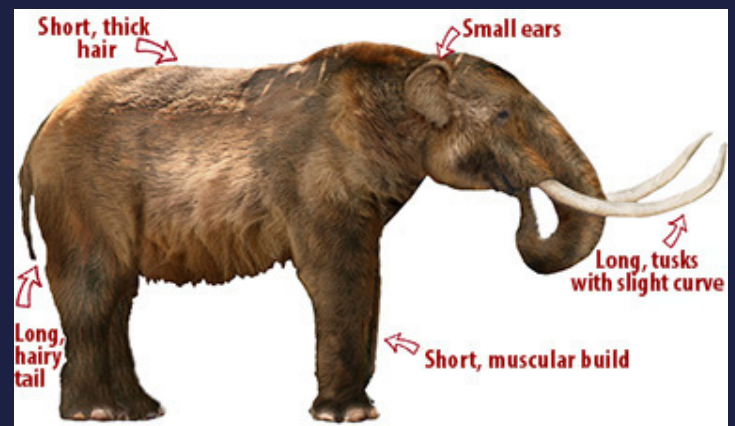


Teeth and Diet: Specialized teeth with high, pointed crowns for chewing on leaves and twigs.

Each tooth was about the size of 1 brick. Mastodons ate approx 400 lbs per day.

Tusks: Tusks had a gentle upward curve (Mammoth tusks were more curved)

Comparison to Mammoths: Mastodons are different from Mammoths based on their anatomy and where they lived. Mammoths have flat teeth with grooves (like the bottom of a tennis shoe), were larger, and their tusks had more curve. They lived all over the world, but mostly near Siberia.



Mastodon Discovery: Who



Georges Cuvier:
French Anatomist



Georges-Louis Leclerc,
Comte de Buffon:
French Naturalist



Thomas Jefferson: 3rd
U.S. President and
advocate for the U.S. in
France before and after
the Revolutionary War



Charles Willson
Peale: American
painter and naturalist



Moses Williams: An
artist and Peale's
indentured servant



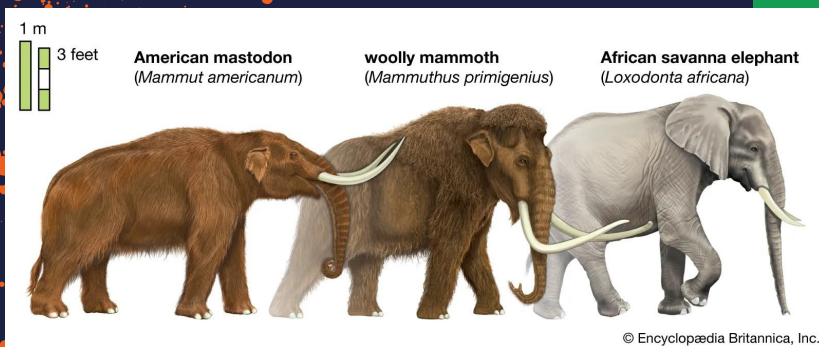
Lewis and Clark:
American Explorers

Mastodon Discovery: What, Where, and When

- **1705**: A giant tooth was discovered in the Hudson River Valley and given to the Governor of New York as a gift, who sent it to London. Around the same time, Mammoth fossils were discovered in Siberia.
- Over time, more skeletons and teeth were discovered and sent to Europe for study. The species is called *incognitum*. Many fossils were found by enslaved Africans who identified the similarity between the fossilized tusks and elephant tusks.
- **1755**: Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon wrote a book arguing that nothing in the Americas can be as great (in size or might) as anything on the European, African, or Asian continents. Thomas Jefferson writes back to challenge Leclerc, citing the *incognitum* as proof.
- **1776**: The United States declares independence from England.
- **1784**: Thomas Jefferson goes to Paris on behalf of newly formed US government. While there, he convinces Leclerc to write a new book rescinding his theory that the Americas are not as mighty as the rest of Europe, Asia, and Africa, but Leclerc dies before he can finish the book.

Mastodon Discovery: Impact

- The mastodon was the first animal to ever be declared “extinct.”
 - This realization also challenged current evidence about the age of the Earth and the existence of a Christian God.
- The discovery of Mastodons was used by the fledgling United States government to dispel a theory in Europe that animals and people in the America’s were literally diminutive and therefore incapable of being a mighty country.
- Part of the reason Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark west was that he believed Mastodons still existed and he wanted someone to find them.
- Mastodons were part of the last major mass extinction that wasn’t caused by humans.



Painting Elephants

- People have been training elephants to paint for several decades. Some animal activists believe the activity is cruel because the training process can include physical pain. Others argue that activities like painting provide valuable enrichment to creatures that are smart and creative (Norris, 2022).
- A study conducted at Melbourne Zoo found that while painting didn’t seem to have a positive or negative affect on the elephants, not being selected to paint on a given day resulted in less interactive behavior from elephants (English, et. al, 2014).
- It is also important to remember there is a long history of training elephants to do tricks because they are smart and it is easy to make them the butt of the joke due to their size and appearance (Nance, 2015).

Mastodon Discovery: What, Where, and When

- **1786:** Charles Willson Peale, a painter with a love of natural history, begins creating the first national museum in the U.S.
- **1806:** French Anatomist, Georges Cuvier, named the incognitum “mastodon,” from the Greek mastos (for “breast”) and odont (for “tooth”). He also argues that the animal must be extinct.
- **1801:** Peale leads the first scientific exploration in the U.S., a dig for a mastodon skeleton. He finds a mostly complete skeleton. He tasks his enslaved assistant, Moses Williams with figuring out how to put it together.
- **1804:** Thomas Jefferson is President and sends Lewis and Clark on their expedition. While history books say the expedition was to find water routes across the country to the Pacific Ocean, he also believed mastodons still existed and wanted Lewis and Clark to find them.

Sources: Conniff, 2010; Extinction Over Time; Hilfrank, 2014; Last Glacial Maximum; Longrich, 2020; New York State Museum; U.S. National Parks Service

"BUT WHAT DO WE REALLY DO?"

Imaginative Play

In the early 1900's, psychologists became interested in the make-believe worlds of young children, especially the ways pre-school and early elementary aged children discovered their world and learned through imaginative play. Through pretend play, young people practice:

- Negotiation skills
- Emotional Regulation
- Collaboration
- Sequencing
- Iterative thinking (experimentation)
- Critical thinking
- Flexible thinking

Play, in general, is essential for "deep learning" because young people are able to apply concepts they're learning to new situations. Agency is also essential to play. Sometimes, make-believe is one of the few times a young person is able to exert control over the events and outcomes of their lives.

According to the Lego Foundation, there are 5 characteristics of healthy play:

- Joyful
- Helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning
- Active, engaged, minds-on thinking
- Iterative thinking (experimentation)
- Involves social interaction

Source: Zosh, et. al, 2017

"Play is essentially wish fulfillment - not, however, isolated wishes, but generalized affects." Vygotsky, p. 8

Child Psychology and Human Development

People to Know

Sources: Malik, 2023; Mcleod, 2022, Piaget's; Mcleod, 2022, Erik Erikson's; Nortje, 2021; Vygotsky, 1967/2016; Wood, 2017

Yardsticks (Book): By Chip Wood

- Based on theories of many child development and education practitioners (Piaget, Erikson, Montessori, Vygotsky, etc.)
- The book is inspired by the "responsive classroom" approach, which gives equal weight to academic and social-emotional learning and considers how cultural contexts influence development.
- Yardsticks outlines behaviors and cognitive processes educators and parents can expect to see in typically developing children at every age between 4 and 14.
- The book offers recommendations for the cognitive and social-emotional development of young people in classrooms, homes, and informal learning spaces.

Jean Piaget

- 1896-1980, Swiss
- Main Focus: Cognitive development & "Theory of Mind" development
- Cognitive Development: As children's thinking develops, their behaviors change.
- Theory of Mind: People's ability to imagine how others are thinking or feeling and adapting their behavior to match what's happening with the other person. Based on how children understand rules, justice, and morality.
- Piaget focused more on birth-childhood and less on adolescence. He studied the way young people play to develop theories about how their understanding of the world developed and how their behaviors were motivated by cognitive development.

Lev Vygotsky

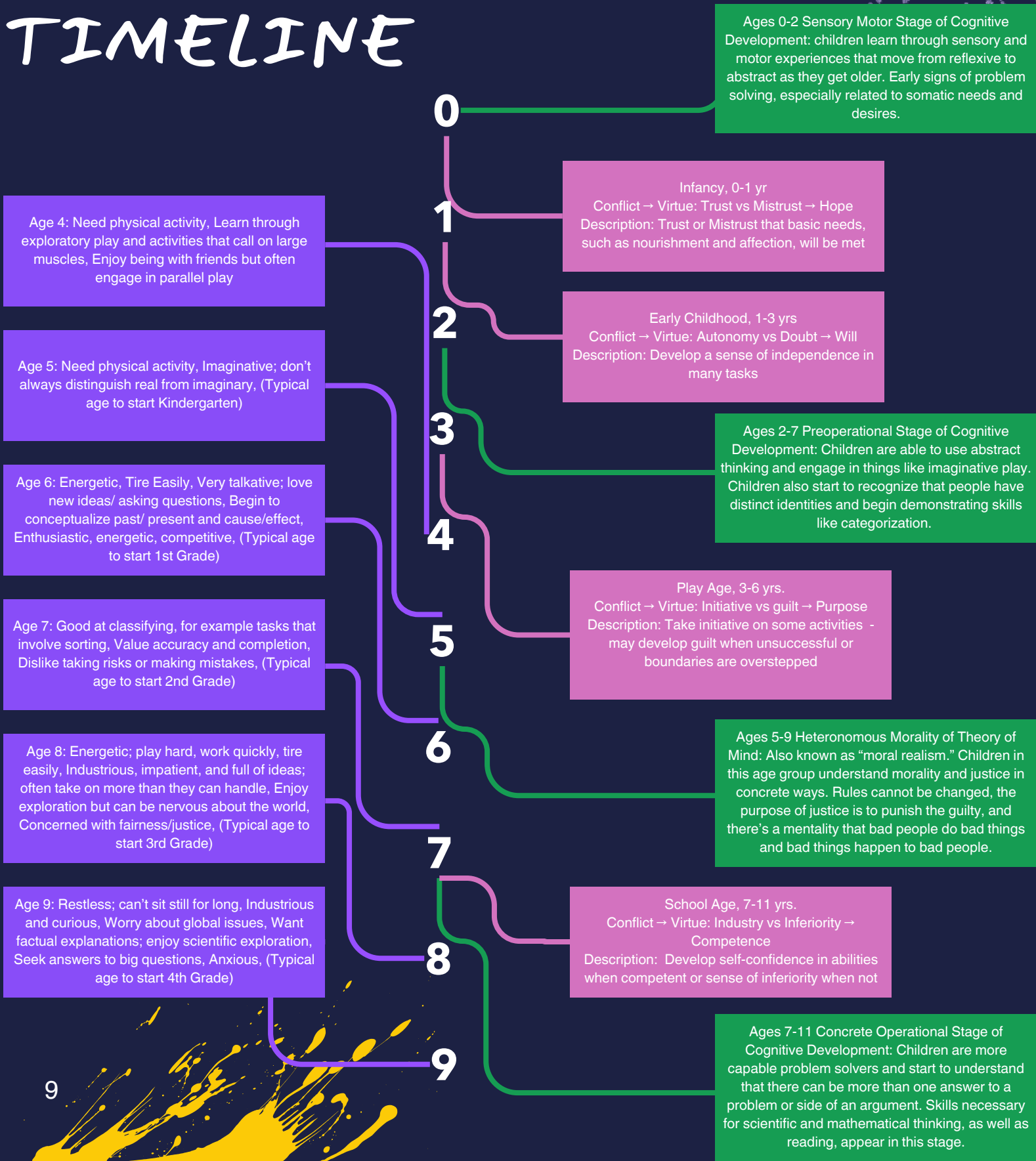
- 1896-1934, Russian
- Main Focus: Sociocultural Theory
- Believed that social interaction is essential for the cognitive development of children and that those interactions are informed by culture
- Also famous for educational theories of 'Scaffolding' and 'Zone of Proximal Development.'
- Early work looked at how imaginative play is essential for young people to learn agency, impulse control, and abstract thinking.

Erik Erikson

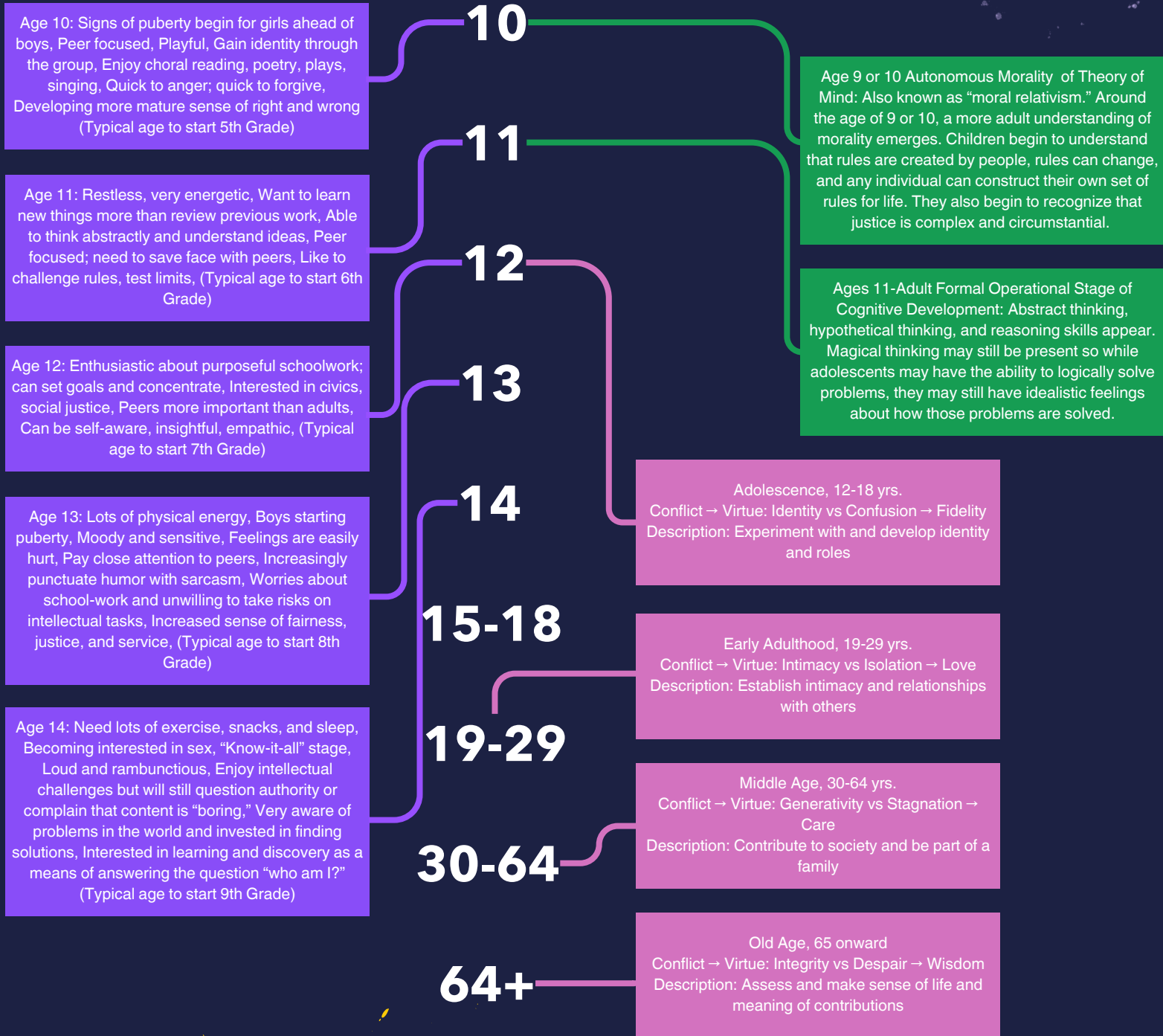
- 1902-1994, German
- Main Focus: Psychosocial development theory
- Psychosocial development theory: Used conflicting personality traits. A "healthy" person exhibits more of the "positive" traits and is therefore more likely to be "successful" in developing the virtue of that stage. The stages are scaffolded, meaning a lack of success in one stage may prevent success in future stages.
- Focused on people's lives from birth to death.

"In a child's world the logic of wishes and of satisfying urges dominates, not real logic." Vygotsky, p. 17

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE



HUMAN DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE



Childhood Career Aspirations and Occupational Identity

From a very early age, young people are asked “what do you want to be when you grow up?” Several studies have analyzed responses to this question to determine how age, gender, and practicality impact young people’s vocational aspirations and the realities of what jobs are actually available to young people.

- Vocational Dreams are more fantastical in early childhood (ages 2-6) and become more practical over time (Turner, 2016).
- Career aspirations are typically more gendered among younger adolescents, whereas older adolescents appear less influenced by gender stereotypes (Hoff, et. al, 2021).
- Elementary school children are more likely to describe occupations in terms of their “activities and behaviors,” while older children are more likely to focus on “interests, aptitudes and abilities.” (Watson, 2005).
- Studies across global circumstances show ALL young people hold big occupational dreams, many dreaming of careers that require advanced degrees and/or are connected to community service and “helping.” Turner’s study looked at children in countries all over the world and specifically sought out countries where war/safety, economic disparity, education access, and racial inequities were prevalent (Turner, 2016).
- 50% of adolescents in the U.S. aspire to either an investigative or artistic career, which together account for only 8% of the U.S. labor market (Hoff, et. al, 2021).

About 80% of adults are NOT doing their dream job from childhood. Many of the folks who did pursue their dream job, however, report high job satisfaction (Walden, 2016).

Since the start of the pandemic, people have been re-thinking their relationship to work. While people’s identities have been tied to their work for centuries, it can also become unhealthy when a person’s identity is only tied to their job (Morgan, 2021).

In this play, Jess is trying to discover her calling, or vocation. While everyone around her seems able to find meaning in their new occupations, Jess is looking for another way to feel ‘useful’ in the world (pg. 28) and to find something ‘big’ (pg. 58). But what if Jess’ calling is simply to make other people think (pg. 70)? Jess is an artist, maybe she’s telling us it is *our* job to ask others to think.



Engagement Preview

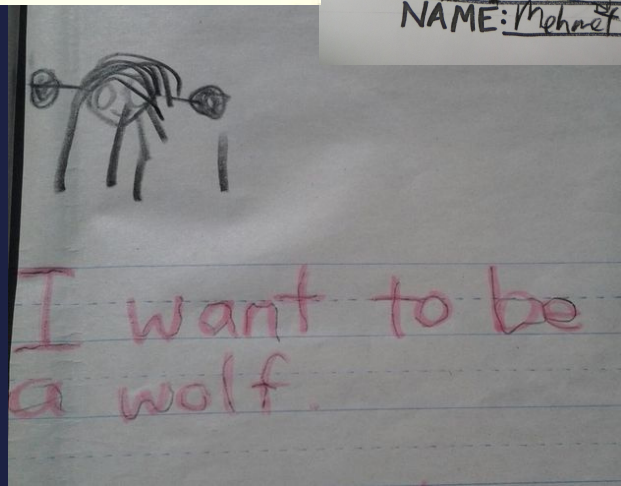
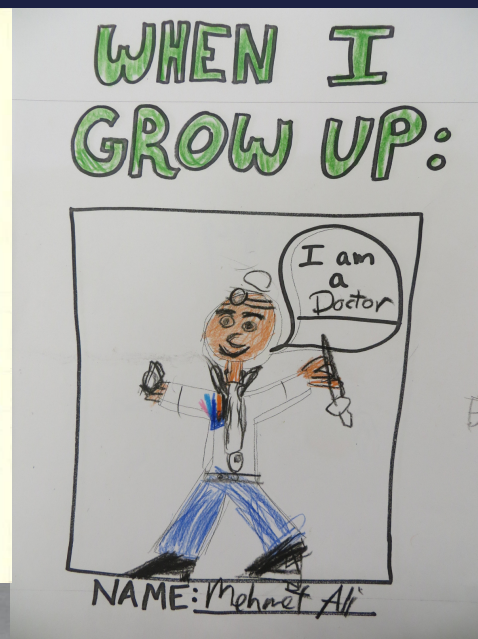
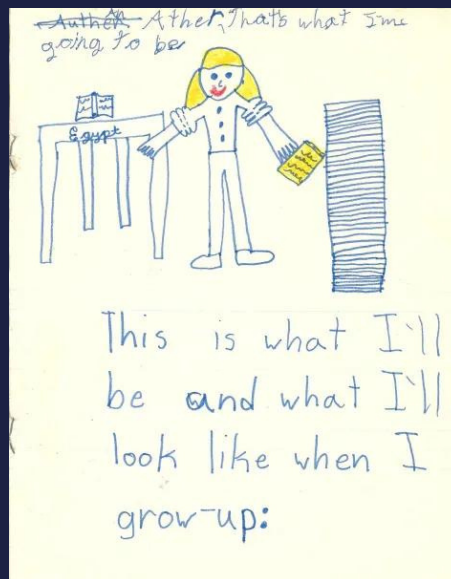
"OR MAYBE SOMEWHERE,
OUT THERE, WATCHING,
WAITING, ARE THE OTHER
IMPRACTICAL CHILDREN."

Playwright Engagement

- 1) Pre-Rehearsal Conversation: The directing and dramaturgy teams met with Rachel via zoom before rehearsals started to discuss the play
- 2) Cast and Production Team Conversation: Rachel will be zooming in to a rehearsal to chat with the cast and anyone else working on the show who wants to come! The discussion will be facilitated by Sofia with time for questions from the group at the end.
- 3) Interview: Sofia will conduct an interview with Rachel which will be edited and shared via the Emerson Stage Blog.

Audience Engagement

- 1) "What do you want to be when you grow up?" art installation: Cast, crew, and production team members will be invited to fill out a "What do you want to be when you grow up?" worksheet (think 5th grade first day of school vibes). Glitter, stickers, and drawings are encouraged. The worksheets will be displayed anonymously near the theatre entrance. Audience members will be encouraged to add their own worksheets to the installation throughout the run.
- 2) Talk-Back: Sofia will host a post-show talkback during the run.



GLOSSARY & FURTHER READING

References

Paleontologist (p.20)- one who studies paleontology. (**Paleontology** - a science dealing with the life of past geologic periods as known from fossil remains.)

Quetzal (p.30) - a Central American **trogon** (tropical bird) that has brilliant green plumage above, a red breast, and in the male long upper tail coverts. Also the name of the basic monetary unit of Guatemala.

Garrotting (p.55) verb of: **Garrote** - a method of execution by strangulation or the apparatus used / an implement (such as a wire with a handle at each end) for strangulation.

Paleo-phrenologist (p.61)- (**Paleo** - involving or dealing with ancient forms or conditions.) (**Phrenology** - the study of the conformation and especially the contours of the skull based on the former belief that they are indicative of mental faculties and character.) Therefore, a paleo-phrenologist is one who studies ancient skulls to determine if the shape indicates the being's mental condition or abilities.

Osteopath (p.61) - A physician practicing osteopathic medicine. (**Osteopathic Medicine** - a system of medical practice that emphasizes a holistic and comprehensive approach to patient care and utilizes the manipulation of musculoskeletal tissues along with other therapeutic measures (such as the use of drugs or surgery) to prevent and treat disease).

Pharmacologist (p.75) - One who practices pharmacology. (**Pharmacology** - the science of drugs including their origin, composition, **pharmacokinetics**, therapeutic use, and toxicology. Or, the properties and reactions of drugs especially with relation to their therapeutic value).

Dirigible (p.78)- An airship (in the script, described as a blimp).

Definitions from **Merriam Webster**

Recommended reading for the cast and production team

To learn more about the playwright, Rachel Teagle:

- [Rachel's Website](#)
- [Interview with Rachel](#)

To learn more about the history of mastodon discoveries:

- [Smithsonian Magazine Article](#)

To learn more about Elephant Painting:

- [Treehugger Article](#)

To learn more about careers, childhood, and identity:

- Academic paper: [Career Dream Drawings: Children's Visions of Professions in Future Workscapes by Jennifer D. Turner](#)
- [Mashable article about number of adults pursuing childhood dream jobs](#)
- [Vox Article about teen career aspirations](#)
- [BBC article about vocation and identity](#)

To learn more about child development:

- [Child Development Cheat Sheet from Responsive Classroom](#)

More info on google drive



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