

# THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS

## STUDY GUIDE

### DEAR TEACHER,

We have created the following study guide to help make your students' theater experience with *The Plant That Ate Dirty Socks* as meaningful as possible. For many, it will be their first time viewing a live theatrical production. We've learned that when teachers discuss the play with their students before and after the production the experience is more significant and long-lasting. Our study guide provides pre-and post-production discussion topics, as well as individual and class activities. Enjoy the show!

### BACKGROUND

Our musical, written by Joe Iconis, is based on the book *THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS* – the first in the popular series by Nancy MacArthur.

### THE STORY

It's a familiar kind of family: Mom, Dad, and two brothers – Michael, who is super-messy, and his younger brother Norman, who is super-neat. Unfortunately, they share a room – half messy, half neat (with a line drawn down the middle!) – that causes a constant battle between the brothers, not to mention what Mom has to say about it.

Suddenly, Michael and Norman receive a mysterious package containing two mystery seeds. The boys plant them and soon realize that these are very strange plants. And then there's the problem about the socks!

The boys also have problems at school. Michael, in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, wants to be “cool” like his super-cool 8<sup>th</sup> grade friend Jason, and having a 4<sup>th</sup> grade brother doesn't help his image. And *everyone* has to deal with Patty Jenkins, the mean, snooty cheerleader!

Norman feels bad because his brother sometimes acts as if he doesn't exist. Mom seems too busy, and Dad just seems clueless. Plus, how can the family keep the secret of the very strange plants? And who will win the big prize at the school Science Fair?

Above all, how can two brothers learn to accept each other; how can Mom and Dad learn to be better parents; and how can those very strange plants become part of the family? *And what about those socks??* This funny, tuneful, sweet, and very cool musical will show you how.

A VARIETY OF SUGGESTIONS FOLLOWS FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION,  
DEPENDING ON THE GRADE LEVEL OF YOUR STUDENTS.

## **BEFORE SEEING THE MUSICAL**

### *Vocabulary Building*

Ask your students to -

1. Review some words from the original book.

OOZE	AVALANCHE
MASTER PLAN	FINICKY
TO CHIP IN	TO EAVESDROP
TO IMPERSONATE	STAMPEDE
TO BLACKMAIL	GLEEFULLY
VENTRILOQUIST	EERIE
TO POUT	HAZARDOUS
TREND	RESOURCEFUL

2. Study some new or challenging words that will be heard in the musical.

TO SWOON	TO DEVOUR
HORTICULTURIST	TO REVERE
EXOTIC	AQUATIC
TO DETECT	TO EMANATE
BRAWNY	POTENTIAL
ALERT	INCONSPICUOUS
APPRENTICE	LUCRATIVE
CONFIDENTIAL	BOTANICAL
DOMESTICATED	ANONYMOUS
VANDAL	MUTANT
PREPOSTEROUS	BANISH

### *Learning about Theatre*

Discuss with your students –

1. Some important terms to know about a play or a musical:
  - **Setting** (where does the story take place? when?)
  - **Characters** (who are the people?)
  - **Plot** (what happens?)
  - **Theme** (what is the Big Idea?)
  - **Structure**: Acts and Scenes (how is the play “built”?)
  - **Style** (how again: - realistic? fantastical? futuristic? – etc.)
2. Some important people who make a play or a musical happen:
  - Good **playwright**
  - Creative **director**
  - Believable **actors**
  - Imaginative **designers**
    - **set**
    - **costumes**
    - **lighting**
    - **sound**

A musical also needs special creators: a “**book**” **writer** (spoken words), a **composer** (music) and a **lyricist** (words that are sung); and a **choreographer** (dances).

3. Some ways to be a great audience member:  
Great audiences can make good shows even better. Here's how:
- Listen, really listen!
  - Laugh if it's funny; cry if it's sad – but please don't talk (actors hear you)!
  - Exercise your memory (Hey! That's the tiger they talked about in Act One!)
  - Turn off cell phones and pagers!
  - Eat your candy bar before or after. Scientific studies prove that *it's impossible to unwrap it quietly!!*

### *Being a Sibling*

Much of the musical's plot is about the relationship between two brothers – and how that relationship changes by the end. Ask your students, in small groups or as a class, to -

Explore your own experiences:

- Do you have a sibling? Brother? Sister? Or maybe it's a similar relationship, like being cousins – or even really close friends.
- What is the age difference? What's great about this relationship? What's hard?
- How are you different? Alike? Do you accept each other's differences? How easy is it to be your own person? When do you most feel like a team? Do you ever feel as if you're competing or that adults treat you differently? How?
- Write down your thoughts and share them with your group or the class.

## **AFTER SEEING THE MUSICAL**

### *Being Drama Critics*

While it's still fresh in your minds, discuss *The Plant That Ate Dirty Socks* musical.

1. If your class previously read Nancy MacArthur's book, discuss ways in which the book and the musical remain the same and ways in which they are different.
2. Discuss the main characters – Michael and Norman; Mom and Dad – and the actors who portrayed them. What specific lines or actions did actors use to help you understand these characters. If you were directing the musical, would you add or change anything about the characters?
3. How did the songs change or add to your understanding of the characters or the plot? Which songs did you particularly enjoy and why?
3. Smaller roles are important too. Discuss some of your favorite supporting characters and what the actors did to make these characters special.
4. Discuss the designs. For example, how did the *set* help you to imagine the world of the *Socks* musical? How did the *costumes* say something about the characters (don't forget the two plants!)?

# ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

## *Creative Dramatics*

Many of your students are probably familiar with the art of improvisation: actors create mini-scenes “on the spot” – usually being told by the audience only the basic situation and identifies. Even quite young students can have fun doing “improv.”

1. “Fantasy Plants Super-Heroes” Improv  
Follow the same basics as above. This time, ask the audience members to write on the slip of paper the name and brief description of a fantasy plant “super-hero” – for example, “*Telescope Plant*” or “*Bubble Plant*.” For this improv, each of the two volunteers will draw an identity from the hat. Ask an audience member to give the actors a problem to solve. Improv begins!
2. Original Scene  
Ask your students to write and act out a dialogue between the two very strange plants. Perhaps it’s a plant’s-eye view of Norman and Michael, or of Mom and Dad; or just what it’s like to be a human’s “pet”!

## *Language Study: Being “Cool”*

Discuss with your students that idea that words are important powerful – including slang. Throughout the **Socks** musical, we meet characters (Michael and Norman) who want to be accepted at school, to be “cool” – and characters who think that they *are* “cool” (Jason and Patty Jenkins). Part of being “cool” is knowing and using cool slang - special words that people your age use and that adults don’t understand (that’s part of the fun!). Some **Socks** slang:

RADICAL	BIG WOOP
FLY	CHILL
KILLING	DORK
WHACKED	DINGBAT
GROSS	RULE

Ask students to -

1. Break into small groups, discuss these words, and write your own definitions.
2. Are there other slang words in your own school or neighborhood? Discuss and define these words.
2. As a group, invent at least one new slang word or phrase and its meaning. Share your invention with the whole class.

## *Creative Writing*

Ask your students to think about (perhaps discuss) and write about -

1. Being a Parent  
Another important part of the **Socks** musical is the idea of raising kids – the different roles and responsibilities of a mom, dad, or other “parental” adult; the importance of sharing, negotiation, and compromise.
  - What, from your viewpoint and from what you’ve noticed in the musical, makes a good “parent”?
  - What are the rewards of parenting? The difficulties?
  - How do today’s fast pace, busy schedules, and technology affect families?

2. Being a Pet

What does the word “pet” mean in the dictionary? What does the word mean to you personally? What are some reasons that people have pets? *Your* reasons?

- Write a paragraph about your own experience. What pets have you had or do you have now? What kind? Name? Describe your pet’s appearance and personality, special abilities or characteristics. How were you responsible for your pet? What role has your pet played in your life?
- Michael and Norman’s plants become their “pets.” What is similar and different between raising a plant and raising the usual kinds of pets? How do Michael and Norman’s pet plants make the brothers’ lives better?

3. Being You

A play is like a mirror. What do you see of yourself (or someone you know) when you look into the “mirror” of *The Plant That Ate Dirty Socks*? How does seeing yourself through this musical make you feel connected to others? Write a paragraph about your thoughts.

**“Woo-Hoo!”**

An important slang word in the *Socks* musical is the exclamation “WOO-HOO!” Write about a few times in your life that make (or made) you feel “Woo-Hoo!” – happy, successful, triumphant, or just goofy-good. If you are a sibling, include a “Woo-Hoo” moment that you experienced together.

*Artistic Expression*

Ask students to –

1. Draw a fantasy plant (or sculpt or model): for ex., guitar plant, robot plant, super-hero plant, cat plant. Name it and introduce it to the class.
2. Create a “Plant Dance” in small groups and teach it to the class!
3. Picture your own room. Now imagine that half of it is really messy (we know it’s not!) and draw a picture of the room, both halves, using lots of details.

*Research Projects*

Students can learn about plants by doing some research, exploring the library or the Internet for information. Students can work individually or in groups and create presentations displaying their finds. Ask students to choose from the following:

1. Plant Families

There are hundreds of “breeds” of plants. Learn and report about some of the different plant groups, where they grow, their appearance, habits, and care. Here are the Pet Plants mentioned in Nancy MacArthur’s book:

- AFRICAN VIOLET                      IVY
- PHILODENDRON                      GERANIUM
- MARIGOLD                              SNAKE PLANT

Don’t forget the “Venus-flytrap” – you can guess what it eats! Which plants might make the best “pets” and why? Think, for example, about shape, color, texture, smell, and growth habits.

2. Plant Pluses

Plants have many uses for us and for our planet. Learn and report about some of them through your research. Here are some uses to get you going:

- flood protection
- air cleansing
- medicine
- household and industrial products
- clothing

3. Plant “Pets” – Hands-On, Teacher-Initiated

Bring in an assortment of seed packets and small seed pots and ask students to sign up for some seeds to plant and “raise”; ask them to keep a log about their plants: size, development, watering habits, fertilizing, and – of course – each plant needs a name!

When the plants are grown, set up a school “Pet Plant Day” sale, or have the class research and choose an outside facility where the gift of plants would be appreciated: for example, a children’s hospital wing or a nursing home.

**BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Nancy MacArthur lives in Berea, Ohio, and is a part-time journalism professor. at Baldwin-Wallace College ([Macarthur@apk.net](mailto:Macarthur@apk.net)). She has written fourteen books, including the nine that make up the **SOCKS** series:

THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1988)  
THE RETURN OF THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1990)  
THE ESCAPE OF THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1992)  
THE SECRET OF THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1993)  
MORE ADVENTURES OF THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1994)  
THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS GOES UP IN SPACE (1995)  
THE MYSTERY OF THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS (1996)  
THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS GETS A GIRLFRIEND (1997)  
THE PLANT THAT ATE DIRTY SOCKS GOES HOLLYWOOD (1999)

**HAVE FUN. LEARN TO NEGOTIATE.  
PICK UP YOUR SOCKS. TAKE A PLANT TO LUNCH.  
AND REMEMBER, YOU ARE COOL!**