The Oldest Boy by Sarah Ruhl

by Sarah Ruhl

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THE OLDEST BOY was commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater. This play is a recipient of an "Edgerton Foundation New American Plays" award.
Support for the Mitzi E. Newhouse season is provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.
Special thanks to The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust for supporting new American plays at LCT.
Leadership support is provided by the Bernard Gersten LCT Productions Fund.
American Airlines is the Official Airline of Lincoln Center Theater.
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Introduction

"I come into the theater wanting to feel and think at the same time, to have thought affect the emotion and emotion affect the thought. That is the pinnacle of a great night at the theater."  

SARAH RUHL, THE OLDEST BOY PLAYWRIGHT

Welcome to the teacher resource guide for The Oldest Boy, a new play by the prolific playwright Sarah Ruhl, directed by her longtime collaborator Rebecca Taichman. The Oldest Boy is the story of a young American mother and her Tibetan husband whose lives are forever altered when two Tibetan monks arrive at their door. The monks proclaim that the couple’s two-year-old son is the reincarnation of an important Buddhist teacher, and wish to take him to a monastery in Dharamsala, India to begin his spiritual training. The parents are faced with a heart-wrenching decision as to whether or not they will let their son be taken away from them.

Set design model by Mimi Lien for Lincoln Center Theater’s production of The Oldest Boy.
Sarah Ruhl, a master of imaginative and evocative storytelling, poetic language, wit, and wonder, has written a play that will thrust students into a rich theatrical and cultural experience, engaging their hearts and minds. *The Oldest Boy* will also provide students with an opportunity to learn about Tibet, a country with a complex and multi-faceted history, culture, and religion, and to personally reflect on what cultural identity means to them.

*The Oldest Boy* offers many learning opportunities for students in areas related to:

- the work of Sarah Ruhl;
- the history of Tibet;
- Tibetan Buddhism, traditions, and culture;
- the refugee experience;
- and a thematic exploration of identity, heritage, and family.

## How to Use this Guide

This resource guide has been created to help prepare your students to see *The Oldest Boy*. We hope to direct you to resources that can further your classroom exploration of the play. We encourage you to photocopy and share pages of this guide with your students. In each section, look for resources, including links to materials and videos available online, as well as discussion questions and suggested classroom activities that you can use before or after seeing the production.

The overall goals of this guide are to:

- connect to your curriculum with standards-based information and activities;
- reinforce and encourage your students to exercise critical and analytical thinking skills;
- and, to provide you with the tools to have an engaging and educational experience at the theater.
The Play

Glossary

For a more in-depth look at many of these terms, review the Tibetan Buddhism section of this guide.

**Atheism**: disbelief in the existence of God.

**Buddhism**: a religion with roots in eastern and central Asia that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs, and practices largely based on teachings attributed to the Buddha. One defining element that distinguishes Buddhism from other religions is that there is no belief in a solitary God. Conversely, Buddhists believe that God resides within all of us.

**Bunraku**: a form of traditional Japanese puppetry in which multiple puppeteers operate one puppet.

**Butter tea**: a traditional Tibetan tea made from tea leaves, yak butter, water, and salt.

**Catholicism**: a Christian religion with its roots in Rome, Italy.

**Communism**: a political theory and form of government derived from Karl Marx’s teachings in which all property is publicly owned, and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.

**Dalai Lama**: the political and religious leader of Tibet.

**Deconstructionism**: a theory used in the study of literature or philosophy which says that a piece of writing does not have just one meaning and that the meaning depends on the reader.

**Dissertation**: a long essay or paper on a specific subject matter that is written in order to attain a doctoral degree. In addition to writing the dissertation, the student also must “defend” the content of the paper in front of a committee of professors.

**Dharamsala**: the home of the Dalai Lama in India, and the Central Tibetan Administration in exile.

**Enthronement**: a formal ceremony for recognizing a lama.

**Kathmandu**: the capital of Nepal.

**Khatag**: the offering of a white scarf (usually made of silk) when visiting a temple, shrine, guru, or teacher, is an ancient Tibetan tradition that shows respect or religious devotion. The color symbolizes the purity of intention and the sincerity of the offering.

**King Solomon**: a biblical king who was known for his wealth, wisdom, and writings.

**Lama**: a spiritual teacher or high-ranking Buddhist monk.
**Meditation:** sitting in focused silence and observing the mind’s thoughts in order to bring the mind and body into balance.

**Nepal:** a country located in the Himalayas, bordered to the north by China (a region that includes Tibet), and to the south, east, and west by India. Nepal has eight of the world’s ten tallest mountains, including the highest point on earth, Mount Everest.

**Prostrate:** to lower and stretch oneself to the ground as a gesture of submission, humility, and reverence.

**Reincarnation:** also called rebirth; the process by which human consciousness is reborn in a new form. Buddhists believe that again and again, after each death, a person’s consciousness (similar to what many of us think of as a “soul,”) is reborn as another being.

**Refuge:** to formally commit oneself in the presence of a spiritual teacher to the teachings of Buddha and the Buddhist religion.

**Rinpoche:** a title meaning “precious one”; often, but not always used to designate tulkus or reincarnated lamas.

**Seven bowls:** a traditional Tibetan Buddhist shrine offering of seven bowls of water.

**Tenzin:** a Tibetan name that means “holder of Buddhist doctrine.”

**Tibet:** a region in central Asia northeast of the Himalayan mountain range bordered by China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan; it was attacked and occupied by the People’s Republic of China in 1950, and has been under Chinese rule since.

**Tulku:** a high-ranking lama who can choose the circumstances of his own rebirth.

## The Story

### Act One

The play opens in the comfortable home of a couple with a two-year-old son in a North American city. The mother is sitting trying to meditate while the baby sleeps. The doorbell rings and two Tibetan monks are at the door. One is a lama, a master teacher, and the other is a simple monk. She invites them in and they ask if they can stay and wait until her husband returns from work at his restaurant. They are interested in talking to him. She serves them butter tea and they discuss philosophical and religious ideas as they wait for her husband to arrive. The baby is heard crying on the monitor, so the mother gets him. The boy, Tenzin, is portrayed by a bunraku puppet that is operated by three puppeteers. There seems to be an immediate connection between the boy and the lama. The lama asks lots of questions about Tenzin and the two monks observe him closely. It is clear that they believe this boy is very special. The lama prostrates to the boy and puts a white scarf around his neck. The boy takes it off and puts it around the lama’s neck, in the way traditional Tibetan
monks would. When the father arrives, the lama tells the parents that he believes Tenzin is his 79-year-old reincarnated teacher who died three years earlier. The mother faints.

In a flashback, the mother and father tell the audience how they first met. The parents alternate between recreating significant moments from their relationship, and reflecting back on their courtship with the audience. As they arrive at the moment when they wed, a traditional Tibetan wedding is depicted by the actors and Tibetan dancers. We learn that this was just a fantasy, and that in reality, they were wed at City Hall.

We return to the previous scene just as the mother is recovering from fainting. The monks depart, asking if they can return to examine Tenzin, and the parents agree. As they leave, the boy is distraught. He reaches for, and recognizes a bell that was owned by the lama’s teacher. The monks believe this to be another sign that Tenzin is the reincarnated master.

The monks return for the official examination. They place a number of objects before the boy and ask him to choose the ones that belong to him. He chooses all of the objects that formerly belonged to the lama’s teacher. He has officially passed the exam. They ask the mother if she will consider allowing Tenzin to be raised in their monastery in India.
The mother deliberates over whether or not she can send her son away. She has a dream in which she and the lama are having a tug-of-war with the boy in the middle. In the dream the boy tells his mother that he has decided to walk to India.

**Act Two**

It is a year later and the mother is meditating again, but this time she is in a monastery in India and is pregnant. Tenzin is now three years old. He enters in monk’s robes and shares a moment with his mother. A monk arrives and begins to shave Tenzin’s head in preparation for his enthronement ceremony. The boy tells the monk about a memory he has of his flip-flops getting stolen by monkeys in Kathmandu. This actually happened to the lama’s teacher, thus reaffirming that Tenzin is his reincarnated master. The parents still have not decided if they can bear to leave Tenzin at the monastery or take him back to America after he is enthroned.

The mother and the lama have an intimate conversation about the significance of teachers in their lives. The mother tells the lama about her graduate school professor with whom she was very close and who passed away during her dissertation defense. The lama expresses how much sorrow he felt when he lost his teacher. It becomes clear to the mother that the lama is meant to be her new teacher. She makes a decision at that moment to take refuge (commit herself to Buddhism) and accept the lama as her master teacher.

It is time for Tenzin’s enthronement ceremony. After a procession with Tibetan dancers, he is placed on the throne. He gives a white scarf and a blessing to those who pass him, including his mother and father. As the lama goes to be blessed, the puppet is replaced by the main puppeteer, an old man in monk’s robes who is the physical embodiment of the lama’s teacher.

As the ceremony ends, the mother goes into labor. She delivers a baby girl, assisted by her husband. Tenzin, still in the form of the lama’s teacher, is by her side. The father cuts the umbilical cord and the mother holds the baby. Tenzin also holds the baby.

**Epilogue**

The mother addresses the audience and explains that she, the father, and their baby girl returned to America at the urging of Tenzin. Tenzin remained at the monastery to be educated as a high lama. The mother has a final moment of connection with her young son.
The Characters

A MOTHER: a young American woman raised in the suburbs who was pursuing her doctoral degree before she got pregnant with her son

A FATHER: the husband of the mother; a Tibetan refugee who immigrated to America and opened a Tibetan restaurant

THE OLDEST BOY (TENZIN)*: the toddler son of the mother and father; he is the reincarnation of a 79-year-old Tibetan spiritual master

*This character is portrayed by a bunraku puppet

A LAMA: a rinpoche, a high-ranking Buddhist monk who is searching for his reincarnated master who died three years earlier

A MONK: a simple Tibetan monk who accompanies the lama as he searches for his reincarnated master

THE OLD MAN: the operator of The Oldest Boy puppet who transforms into the 79-year-old Tibetan spiritual master

TIBETAN CHORUS/DANCERS

Top: Costume design by Anita Yavich for Lincoln Center Theater’s production of The Oldest Boy.

Bottom: Older Buddhist monks. Trey Ratcliff 2006 CC BY-NC-SA 2.0


**Classroom Activities**

**Introducing the story: a close reading activity**

Provide students with a copy of the play synopsis. Ask them to:

• Circle any words they are unfamiliar with.
• Underline characters, ideas, or events they would like more information about or have questions about.
• Notate in the margins any personal responses or reactions they have to the synopsis.

Next, provide students with a copy of the glossary included in this guide and have them read the synopsis again, this time, using the glossary. If time permits, do the View and Discuss components of the activity that follows.

**Imagine**

• Have students choose one dramatic moment from the synopsis that they find particularly compelling, and ask them to envision it on stage. What would the actors be doing? Saying? What would the set look like? The lights? Would there be movement? Music? How would they use the puppet?
• If time permits, have students work in small groups to create and perform their dramatic moments for the class.

**Through the lens: a viewing and research activity**

**View**

Watch the trailer for the film *Unmistaken Child*, one of Ruhl's inspirations for *The Oldest Boy*.


As students are watching, have them take notes about the following aspects of the trailer:

• The setting: What is the setting or environment like? Where might it take place?
• The people: Who do we meet? What are they doing?
• The conflict: Who is the protagonist? What challenges does he face?
• The theme: How would you define reincarnation? Why is it significant to the protagonist?
Discuss
Have students share their notes with the class, and have a discussion about how this trailer might relate to the play. Make a list of what the students know about Tibet and Buddhism and what they would like to know more about.

Research
Divide the class into research groups based on the four topics above (setting, people, conflict, and theme) and have students use the internet or library to gather additional information about their topic to present to the class.

Explore:
Watch a segment from a Playwrights Horizons’ video (start viewing at 1 minute, 25 seconds) with *The Oldest Boy* director Rebecca Taichman about collaborating with Sarah Ruhl on her new plays. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCJpHhhiMjM

Common Core Connections:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2
Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

A scene from Lincoln Center Theater’s production of *The Oldest Boy*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Sarah Ruhl is an award-winning playwright whose plays include *The Clean House* (Pulitzer Prize Finalist, 2005; The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, 2004); *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* (Pulitzer Prize finalist, Tony Award nominee for best new play); *Passion Play, a cycle* (PEN American award, The Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award from The Kennedy Center); *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (Helen Hayes award); *Melancholy Play; Eurydice; Orlando, Demeter in the City* (NAACP nomination), *Late, A Cowboy song; Three Sisters*, and most recently, *Stage Kiss* and *Dear Elizabeth.*

Though Ruhl’s original plan was to be a poet, she fell in love with theater while studying with Paula Vogel at Brown University. Under Vogel, she wrote her first play, *The Dog Play.* After graduating, she studied at Pembroke College in Oxford, England, and then returned to Brown to get a master’s degree in playwriting. After graduating, Ruhl workshoped *Eurydice,* one of her first plays (a contemporary spin on the traditional Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice), at Brown. This play would go on to be produced at numerous theaters across the country and abroad. In 2003, she won two prestigious awards: the Helen Merrill Emerging Playwrights Award and the Whiting Writers’ Award. Soon after, she gained widespread praise for her play *The Clean House,* which won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2004 and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2005. In 2006, she received a MacArthur Fellowship for "creating vivid and adventurous theatrical works."

Since then, Ruhl has continued to be one of the most actively produced and published contemporary playwrights, garnering numerous awards and having her work produced at prominent theaters in American and abroad. She most recently published the book *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write,* in which she discusses the intersection of theater, art, and motherhood. She is currently on the faculty at the Yale School of Drama and lives in Brooklyn with her family.

Read a profile of the playwright in the South Coast Repertory Theater study guide for *Eurydice:*
http://www.scr.org/docs/default-source/media/12-13guides/eurydiceguide.pdf
Magical Realism

The style frequently attributed to Sarah Ruhl’s plays is magic realism. Use the information that follows to discuss the unique quality of Ruhl’s writing and how that translates to the stage.

**Magic realism:**

A genre of art and literature in which the lines between magical and everyday events are blurred.

**Components of magic realism**

- Mundane objects are transformed into mystical ones.
- Fantastical events become commonplace, and commonplace events become fantastical.
- The writer offers no explanation for the fantastical events but rather treats them as completely ordinary or logical.
- Transformations abound—for people, events, objects, ideas, environments, etc.
- Multiple planes of reality blend together (i.e. the present and the past, the living and afterlife), as a way to reveal a deeper truth.
- Metaphors are brought to life theatrically.
- The usual constraints of time and place are obsolete.

When writing about Ruhl’s style, either in reviews of her plays or profiles, elements of magical realism emerge again and again. John Lahr, in his *New Yorker* profile *The Surreal Life* [http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/17/surreal-life](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/17/surreal-life), describes her writing in this way: “Ruhl writes with space, sound, and image as well as words… Ruhl’s goal is to make the audience live in the moment, to make the known world unfamiliar in order to reanimate it.” In his review of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/theater/reviews/05cell.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/theater/reviews/05cell.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0), New York Times critic Charles Isherwood writes, “Characters in her plays… negotiate the no man’s land between the everyday and the mystical, talking like goofs one minute and philosophers the next. She writes surrealist fantasies that happen to be populated by eccentrically real people, comedies in which the surface illogic of dreams is made meaningful—made truthful—by the deeper logic of human feeling.” *The Oldest Boy* director Rebecca Taichman, has said of Ruhl’s writing: “She has this glorious capacity to merge the mundane and quotidian with the spiritual and surreal, and ask epic questions.”

Ruhl values the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary, saying, “I like to see people speaking ordinary words in strange places, or people speaking extraordinary words in ordinary places.”
Classroom Activities

To discuss and investigate before seeing the play:

• What books, films, and plays have you read or seen that would be considered examples of magic realism?
• Why might the theater be an optimal place for a writer to explore a blend of magic and realism?
• Have students choose one of the components of magic realism, look for examples of it while watching the performance, and report back what they discovered in class.

To discuss and investigate after the play:

• How did Ruhl combine both tragic and comic elements in the play? What are some examples of the funny moments? The sad or dramatic moments? What effect did they have on you?
• Were you surprised by anything in the production? How was the magic realist element of transformation used in the production?

Telling Stories: a writing and performance activity

Have each student write a short story (no more than one page) about something ordinary that happened to them that week (i.e. they did laundry, they waited for the subway, they took the subway to school) and read it to the class. Choose one or two clear stories to experiment with. As a class, brainstorm different extraordinary circumstances under which they could be telling someone this ordinary story (i.e. as they are walking the plank of a pirate ship, as they are battling a giant, as they are running from an exploding volcano, etc.) Have different students in the class perform the stories using items off the list of extraordinary circumstances.

Explore:

• Read Sarah Ruhl’s play Eurydice and have students look for thematic and stylistic similarities and differences.
• Examine the paintings of Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist whose works integrated elements of magic realism. http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org/
Common Core Connections:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

A scene from Lincoln Center Theater’s production of *The Oldest Boy*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Tibetan Buddhism

The History of Tibet

Strife and Suppression

From 1913 to 1950, Tibet was a peaceful independent country under the political and religious leadership of the 13th Dalai Lama with a separate language, culture, and ethnic identity from China. In 1949, Mao Zedong’s Communist Red Army defeated the army of the Chinese general Chiang Kai-shek bringing Mao into power. Mao asserted his power by invading Tibet in 1950 and annexing it as part of China. It was at this time that the 14th Dalai Lama, who was 16 years old, was asked to assume full responsibility as the political leader of Tibet. Initially, Tibet and Beijing signed The Seventeen Point Agreement granting Tibet regional autonomy and guaranteeing there would be no alteration of Tibetan political, cultural, and religious institutions. However, by 1954 the Chinese began destroying monasteries, suppressing civil rights, imposing the Chinese language, and seizing and redistributing Tibetan land. In March 1959, the people of Lhasa (the capital city of Tibet) gathered together and called for the Chinese to withdraw from their country. The Chinese response was harsh. An estimated 87,000 Tibetans were killed, arrested, or deported to labor camps. The Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of his followers fled to Dharamsala, India where he established a democratically-based Tibetan government-in-exile. The Tibetan diaspora continued with thousands of Tibetans settling in surrounding areas in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

The Aftermath

It is estimated that there are close to 150,000 Tibetan refugees in exile today around the world. In 1989, under pressure from China, Nepal ceased to permit any newly arriving Tibetans to remain or seek refuge in their country. Prior to that, about 3,000 Tibetans fled to Nepal each year. The 20,000 Tibetans who currently reside in settlements throughout Nepal are not recognized as refugees or given any definable legal status.

Those who have fled and continue to flee to India, must adapt to a starkly different climate, food, culture, and language. These refugees do not have the same rights as Indian citizens, such as formal participation in Indian politics or the ability to obtain an Indian passport. However, they are free to work and own property.
The situation for Tibetans who have remained under Chinese occupation in their homeland is grim. In many places, Tibetans have become a minority in their own country, due to the encouragement of Han Chinese migration to Tibet. The Chinese government has suppressed Tibetan religion, culture, and freedom of expression and worship, and it subjects Tibetans to intense surveillance of daily activities and communications. In addition, China has repeatedly violated human rights and UN conventions. A 2003 U.S. State Department report states:

“Authorities continue to commit serious human rights abuses, including execution without due process, torture, arbitrary arrest, detention without a public trial, and lengthy detention of Tibetans for peacefully expressing their political or religious views…”

Since the Chinese invasion in 1950, it is estimated that one million Tibetans have been killed, 6,000 religious sites destroyed, and 99% of Tibet’s monasteries have closed.

An Overview of Buddhism

Origins

Buddhism is a major global religion with a complex history and system of beliefs. Historians believe that it began in India between the 5th and 6th century B.C.E. According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama (later known as the Buddha) is the founder of Buddhism. He was born the son of an Indian warrior-king and lived in a palace at the foothills of the Himalayas. He was provided with all the privileges of his royal lineage, but was not allowed to leave the grounds of the palace. One day, he escaped and went into the local town where he was confronted with poverty, death, and suffering. He wanted to understand more about life, why human beings suffered, and how one could help to relieve suffering in the world. He renounced his princely title and became a monk, depriving himself of worldly possessions and committing himself to a search for that which is everlasting or eternal. His search culminated when he was 35 years old and meditating under a tree. Siddhartha experienced what the Buddhists call “enlightenment” or being awakened to the true nature of things without worldly illusions. From that point forward he became known as a Buddha, a title that means “awakened one.” He spent the next 45 years sharing his wisdom and creating a community of followers.

Buddhism in Tibet

In 755 C.E. during the reign of King Trisong Deutsen, Buddhism became the official religion of Tibet. At that time, the king invited famous Buddhist teachers to visit from India, including Pamsambhava, who the Tibetans regarded as the “Second Buddha” and called Guru Rinpoche, or “Precious Master.” He helped the king construct Tibet’s first monastery at Samye and indoctrinated Tibet’s first seven monks. In the years that followed, there were many wars, and many kings who would suppress Buddhism. However, it is believed that Buddhism was restored as the main Tibetan religion in 1042. Five hundred years later, the title of Dalai Lama would be created after the occupation of Tibet by Mongolia. When the Mongolian king Altan Khan was converted to Buddhism by the Tibetan lama Sonam Gyatso, he bestowed him with the title Dalai Lama, meaning “Ocean of Wisdom.” From that point forward, Dalai Lama became the title of the sovereign religious leader
of Tibet. In the early 17th century the Dalai Lama’s role expanded and he became the political and religious ruler of all Tibet. The succeeding Dalai Lamas remained the chief administrators of Tibet until the invasion of China in 1950 and the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959.

The 14th Dalai Lama

The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born in 1935 to a farming family and was recognized at two years old as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama. He was enthroned in Lhasa at age four and began his studies at age six. After the People's Republic of China invaded Tibet in 1950 he was asked to assume full responsibility as the political leader of Tibet. As a practitioner of non-violence, he tried to make peace with the Chinese, but after the Chinese violently suppressed a Tibetan uprising in 1959 he was forced to flee. Dressed as a soldier, he and his family escaped Tibet and established a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India.

The 14th Dalai Lama has been an international figure in world peace, spreading Tibetan Buddhist teachings around the world. In 1989, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for consistently using non-violent methods to achieve his goal of autonomy for Tibet.

Understanding reincarnation and rebirth

Reincarnation is the process by which human consciousness is reborn in a new form. Buddhists believe that again and again, after each death, a person's consciousness (similar to what many think of as a “soul,”) takes rebirth as another being. Buddhists also believe that good karma (a tendency toward positive thoughts and actions) may result in rebirth in a higher form. The consequences of bad karma (negative deeds) may lead to rebirth in a lower form.

Reincarnated masters

Buddhists believe that through good karma and by overcoming greed, hatred, and ignorance they can free themselves from the perpetual cycle of death and rebirth. However, some of those high spiritual leaders (called rinpoches or tulkus), sacrifice nirvana (a permanent state of peace and happiness) in order to return to earth and ease the sufferings of humans with their vast wisdom and knowledge. These tulkus can control the time and place of their future births, and choose their future parents.

Finding reincarnated tulkus

Buddhist monks have a system for finding reincarnated tulkus that has been in place for thousands of years. It is believed that at the time of their death and cremation, the tulkus will leave signs, such as footprints in the ashes that point in a certain direction, or letters and symbols that appear in the clouds indicating where search
parties or students should begin looking for their reincarnated form. Many high lamas will be consulted, as well as the Nechung oracle, a Tibetan seer. The student or search party then begins traveling throughout the region, using information from the oracle, as well as dreams and meditation to focus their search. They go door-to-door meeting children in different villages and testing them to see if they may be the reincarnation. The examinations consist of presenting the child with a variety of objects, including those owned by the former lama, and having them identify and choose those which belong to “them.” They will ask families about the child’s sleeping habits, spiritual maturity, and behavior. Once the child has been confirmed as the reincarnated teacher, the parents are encouraged to send the child to a monastery where he will be enthroned, raised, and formally educated.

Reincarnated tulkus can be found in any part of the world. Learn more about Western reincarnated tulkus at the following websites:

- Learn more about the Nechung oracle on his official website.  [http://nechung.org/oracle/about.php](http://nechung.org/oracle/about.php)

### Key Buddhist Concepts

“True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Because of this firm foundation, a truly compassionate attitude toward others does not change even if they behave negatively. Genuine compassion is based not on our own projections and expectations, but rather on the needs of the other: irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy, as long as that person wishes for peace and happiness and wishes to overcome suffering, then on that basis we develop genuine concern for their problem. This is genuine compassion.”

14th Dalai Lama, *Love and Compassion*
The foundation of Buddhist dharma (teachings) can be found in The Four Truths and The Eightfold Way of Right Living, concepts that were explained in the Buddha's first lectures after attaining enlightenment. http://www.pbs.org/edens/thailand/buddhism.htm

The Four Truths:

1. Suffering and dissatisfaction exists.
2. The cause of suffering and dissatisfaction is unawareness and craving/desire.
3. Suffering and dissatisfaction can have an end.
4. There is a path that leads to the end of suffering and dissatisfaction called the Middle Way (or the Eightfold Way of Right Living).

The Eightfold Way of Right Living:

1. Right Understanding: learning the laws of karma.
2. Right Thought: fostering thoughts of compassion.
3. Right Speech: speaking the truth rather than lies.
4. Right Conduct: behaving in ways that are helpful.
5. Right Livelihood: earning a living in ways that promote happiness.
7. Right Mindfulness: becoming more aware of thoughts and actions.
8. Right Meditation: deepening the practice of being present.

Attachment: Not wanting to be separated from something or someone; unchecked desire or grasping. Buddhists believe that one can be freed from suffering if they cultivate non-attachment.

Compassion: The sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate the suffering of others.

Impermanence: The idea that nothing in the physical realm is everlasting. This awareness leads to a life guided by the pursuit of value rather than impermanent pleasures.

Karma: The universal law of cause and effect by which goodness reaps happiness and evil reaps anguish. Buddhists believe our karmic patterns determine what kind of life experiences we will have in the future.

Meditation: Buddhists believe that by practicing meditation a person can learn the patterns and habits of their mind, and cultivate new, more positive ways of being.

* Watch a video on compassion from the PBS documentary The Buddha.
  http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/compassion/

* Watch a video explaining meditation from the PBS documentary The Buddha.
  http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/meditation/

* Watch a TED Talk by a monk that outlines the benefits of meditation in an entertaining way.
  http://blog.ted.com/2013/01/11/4-scientific-studies-on-how-meditation-can-affect-your-heart-brain-and-creativity/

* Explore the science of meditation with this article from Scientific American.
  http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/meditation-on-demand/
Classroom Activities

Words of Wisdom: a close reading / poetry activity

As a class, review the information in this guide about the 14th Dalai Lama and the history of Tibet. Provide students with a copy of the 14th Dalai Lama’s Nobel Peace Prize speech. 

Read

Read the speech aloud as a class, assigning different students to each paragraph and discuss the content of the speech.

Choose

Provide students with a blank piece of paper and have them choose and write three words from each paragraph of the speech that are meaningful to them.

Write

Using the words on their paper, have students create a poem or spoken word piece that explores the issues in the Dalai Lama’s speech. If students choose to write a poem, encourage them to experiment with form, structure, and the way they visually represent their poetry on the page. Have students who have created spoken word pieces perform them for the class.

What Would You Leave Behind?: a writing activity

Read

Have students read the article about the Dalai Lama’s escape from Tibet http://news.bbc.co.uk/ondiday/hi/dates/stories/march/31/newsid_2788000/2788343.stm, and discuss the Tibetan diaspora that occurred after this event.

Write

Ask students to examine the following two questions in a personal essay:

• If you needed to flee your country at a moments’ notice the way many Tibetans did, what five objects would you carry with you?

• What would you have to leave behind? These may not necessarily be physical or material possessions.
Explore:

• Learn about a typical day for the Dalai Lama. [http://www.dalailama.com/biography/a-routine-day](http://www.dalailama.com/biography/a-routine-day)

• Watch one of the following films that explore different aspects of Tibetan Buddhism:
  
  * **Kundun** (Martin Scorsese): a feature film that chronicles the story of The 14th Dalai Lama
  * **Unmistaken Child** (Nati Baratz): a documentary about a monk’s search for his reincarnated teacher
  * **10 Questions for the Dalai Lama** (Rick Ray): a documentary that explains the Chinese occupation of Tibet
  * **The Cup** (Khyentse Norbu): a feature film made by a Tibetan monk about young monks who have an obsession with soccer

• Download and explore excellent lesson plans and curricular materials about Tibet and Buddhism at the Journeys in Film website. (Free subscription required to download materials.) [http://journeysinfilm.org/films/the-cup/](http://journeysinfilm.org/films/the-cup/)


• View photos of displaced Tibetans taken by Brandon Stanton of Humans of New York at the following websites: [https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork](https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork) [http://www.humansofnewyork.com/](http://www.humansofnewyork.com/)

Common Core Connections:

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1**
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2**
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3**
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Influences and Inspiration

Insights from the Artists

Before rehearsals began, Sarah Ruhl was interviewed about the inspiration for *The Oldest Boy*.

What inspired *The Oldest Boy*?

The kernel of the play came from a story that my babysitter told me. She had friends from Tibet who lived in Boston. One day monks arrived at their home and told them that their child was likely a reincarnated lama, or high teacher. So the family shut down their restaurant in Boston, moved to India, and had the child educated at a monastery there. I wondered what would happen in that same situation in an intercultural marriage, where both parents were Buddhist, but one parent was a later convert, and not born into Buddhism. I wondered: how would a contemporary American parent, schooled in attachment parenting, be able to give over a child, in the name of non-attachment? I was also inspired by a movie called *Unmistaken Child* which I saw years ago. It’s a very beautiful documentary about a Tibetan monk whose teacher dies. Traditionally in Tibet, when a high teacher dies, the student goes and searches for the reincarnation of the teacher, and then the student teaches his former teacher.
Were you interested in Eastern philosophy prior to this?

I guess you could say I was interested in Eastern philosophy before writing the play, but I can’t say that I was any expert. The play became a good excuse to do a huge amount of research.

When did the idea for the puppet come?

The idea for the puppet came early, when I realized there was no way I could get a child actor to do and say the things I needed this three-year-old boy to do. I also liked the idea of a metaphor of duality—that in fact, the child’s previous reincarnation was still part of him, and speaking through him.

When you begin your writing process, do you start with certain themes or ideas you want to explore and then let that inform the story or do you start with the story?

I think of the initial impulse for a story as a thread that you follow. You follow it even as you make it. You follow it and follow it until it becomes something else.

In Tibetan Buddhism and the world of your play, the teacher/student relationship is deeply valued. Reflecting back on your own relationships with teachers in your life, have you ever experienced a special relationship like that? And if so, how did that teacher help you to grow and evolve?

I’ve had the good fortune to have had many teachers in my life of great consequence, from kindergarten onwards. But Paula Vogel has had the most sustained and dramatic influence on my life. It is because of her that I became a playwright, it’s because of her that I became a teacher. It doesn’t seem like a far reach to think that I may have known her in more than one lifetime; and it’s a comforting thought that I could find her again in the next. There is a kind of recognition that you feel when you meet a great teacher; great with a capital “g.” I remember that feeling of recognition when I met Paula. I don’t think it happens by accident. And timing is all; we meet crucial teachers at crucial times in our lives, when we are about to turn a corner.

With all the different mediums and art forms available today for storytelling, why have you chosen theater as your art form?

I love being in a room with people in real time, watching a story together. I love the immediacy of the theater, and I love working with actors and designers. I think theater is a radical art form in the digital age because it insists on presence and experience. Theater is also deeply accessible because anyone can do it, you don’t even need a camera. All you need is words, some people willing to speak them and other people willing to listen.
Integrating Tibetan Music and Dance

*The Oldest Boy* requires the incorporation of Tibetan art, dance, music, and rituals into the storytelling. *The Oldest Boy* sound designer Darron West, and choreographer Barney O’Hanlon discussed their process for integrating these elements into the production.

**WEST:** I did an enormous amount of research about Tibetan music and customs: traditional horns and string instruments, bamboo flutes, the incredibly rich chanting tradition, as well as many location recordings. When I’m doing a show steeped in a real cultural tradition like *The Oldest Boy*, I want to portray the music as accurately as possible. I also had an amazing live resource in the room with me every day in our actor/musician and all around amazing guy Tsering Dorjee who was always available to talk about the soundscape as it was developing.

In the early stages, the musical life of the show was primarily about the clash of cultures. As we kept working on the show, it became more about how musically theatrical I can make it sound with as much simplicity as possible. So rather than whipping up something on the computer, a musical idea for a transition might come from striking a series of bowls and bells on the table next to me in rehearsals.

When we moved from the rehearsal hall into the theater it became about making the soundscape float around you in the room. Multiple music layers come from multiple speakers in the room like a museum installation because of the desire to make it enveloping without calling too much attention to itself.

**O’HANLON:** The process was a very interesting one from our very first auditions onward. For the auditions I created choreography loosely based on Tibetan folk dances, sort of my interpretation of their circle dances which are very communal and beautiful. As fate would have it, the amazing Tsering Dorjee, a brilliant performing artist from Tibet who trained at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts in India, was able to share songs, dances, language and rituals with us in both the workshop and the rehearsal process.

It was important to everyone involved in the production that we try to get as much Tibetan culture into the production as possible to be true to the culture and also honor and celebrate this beautiful culture. Tsering taught us traditional folk dances from Tibet and also a couple of dance sequences from Tibetan Opera. The trick was finding which dance would be appropriate in which part of the show and how much of each dance we should use.

Sarah has written many magical transitions from scene to scene and sequences that aren’t specifically Tibetan, which needed a choreographic eye and some formality. I also wanted to make sure that the dancers, Takemi
Kitamura and Nami Yamamoto, had a voice in the process so some of their own exquisite movement is in the enthronement scene.

During the workshop, Tsering asked me to create some movement for him. So one afternoon during the rehearsal process, Tsering and I went into the small rehearsal room to work on his “rain dance”. I made a little phrase that he learned and then he added his own phrase to my phrase. It was a wonderful exchange of artist to artist from different cultures and backgrounds.

**Puppetry**

While no one knows exactly when the art of puppetry began, we do know that puppets have been used for centuries in countries around the world to dramatize stories. In puppetry, an inanimate object is brought to life through puppeteers who use their own bodies to operate and animate different parts of the puppet. There are many different styles of puppetry, including string, rod, and shadow, but the style being used in *The Oldest Boy* is called bunraku. In the play, the character of The Oldest Boy (Tenzin) will be represented by four different puppets that will appear over the course of the play, operated by three puppeteers, as is traditionally done in the bunraku style.

Bunraku, also known as *Ningyō jōruri*, is a type of Japanese puppet theater dating back to the 16th century that combines puppets, narration, and music. Bunraku puppetry uses three puppeteers to operate a single puppet. Traditionally, the main puppeteer, called the *omozukai*, operates the head and right hand. In this performance, the main puppeteer will be The Old Man. Assisting him at times will be the two Tibetan chorus members taking on the roles of the second puppeteer, the *hidarizukai*, and the third puppeteer, called the *ashizukai*. In traditional bunraku, the second puppeteer operates the left hand of the puppet by using a rod that extends from the elbow of the puppet, and the third puppeteer operates the feet and legs of the puppet.

In Japan, Bunraku puppeteers begin their training by operating the feet and legs, and after many years of practice (sometimes 30 years) they progress to being the main puppeteer. Bunraku puppeteers perform in full view of the audience wearing black robes, and often black hoods. Bunraku is still performed today at the Bunraku National Theater in Osaka, Japan.

It makes sense that a playwright known for highly imaginative plays that explore the full range of theatrical devices available would embrace puppetry in many of her plays, including: *Eurydice; Late: A Cowboy Song; Passion Play*, and her very first playwriting assignment in college!

- Explore the website of *The Oldest Boy* puppet designer Matt Acheson. [http://hangingarchives.org/about.html](http://hangingarchives.org/about.html)
Tibetan Arts and Culture

Explore the following aspects of Tibetan culture outlined briefly here. Links to more extensive resources have been provided for each topic.

**Art**

Tibetan murals, sculptures, and paintings, were traditionally made as aids for Buddhist meditation. By focusing on the artwork, the worshipper was reminded of the presence of the divinity. Works of art were also commissioned to commemorate a death, and to encourage wealth, good health, and longevity. Buddhists believed that commissioning an artwork brought blessings to both the donor and to all those who viewed the art. Works of art in temples and household shrines reminded lay people that they were also capable of achieving enlightenment.


**Music and dance**

Tibet is known as the “Ocean of Songs and Dances;” music and dance are an integral part of Tibetan cultural identity. Traditionally, there are elaborate songs and dances for every rite of passage and significant aspect of agricultural and religious life: births, deaths, weddings, planting, harvesting, as well as religious ceremonies.

Watch these videos of traditional Tibetan dance and music from the New York Public Library:

- [http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6e9ffa70-e50d-0130-85a7-3c075448cc4b](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6e9ffa70-e50d-0130-85a7-3c075448cc4b)
- [http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/23015d80-e7f0-0130-f9a8-3c075448cc4b#10:44](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/23015d80-e7f0-0130-f9a8-3c075448cc4b#10:44)
- [http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7788d7b0-e50c-0130-061d-3c075448cc4b#6:33](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7788d7b0-e50c-0130-061d-3c075448cc4b#6:33)

**Multiphonic singing**

Multiphonic singing is a special skill that many Tibetan monks cultivate. In multiphonic singing, a singer simultaneously produces three notes at the same time, creating a complete chord all on his own!

Watch a video of a Tibetan monk doing multiphonic singing. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rilz0lNhcy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rilz0lNhcy)

**The Mandala**

A Tibetan mandala is a geometric composition with repeating patterns that serves as a tool for gaining wisdom and compassion. According to Buddhist teachings, it transmits positive energies to the environment and those who view it. It’s designed so that when the viewer looks at it, or meditates upon it, certain shapes, lines, angles, and colors, lead the eye on a journey to the center of the image, where it is believed deities reside, thus helping to transform ordinary minds into enlightened ones.
In Tibet, mandalas are often constructed with colored sand. Sand mandalas are believed to promote purification and healing. The process begins with a high lama choosing the specific mandala that the monks are to create. The monks then bless the site with sacred chants and music. Next, they make a detailed outline with chalk and a compass. Once the outline is complete, they begin what may be a two-week process of filling in the design with millions of grains of colored sand using funnel-like devices. When the mandala is finished, they bless it in a public ceremony. In order to reinforce the Buddhist belief that existence is impermanent, after the blessing they sweep the colored sand grains up, dispensing half of them in flowing water, and giving the other half to the closing ceremony audience.

After the September 11th attacks, 20 Buddhist monks from the Drepung Loseling Monastery constructed a seven-foot sand mandala at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. It was offered for the healing and protection of America.

- View photos and learn more about the creation of this mandala at the Smithsonian website. [http://asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/default.htm](http://asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/default.htm)
- Watch a video of Tibetan monks from the Mystical Arts of Tibet creating a sand mandala. [https://vimeo.com/6692126](https://vimeo.com/6692126)

**The Dharma Wheel**

The dharma wheel, or dharmachakra, is one of the oldest symbols of Buddhism. The wheel’s motion is a metaphor for the rapid spiritual change and transformation that can come from the teachings of the Buddha. The wheel also represents samsara or “the wheel of life,” the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth which can only be escaped by following the Buddha’s teachings. This symbol is often found on Tibetan and Buddhist art.
• Project and discuss the image of the dharma wheel included in this guide.

• For help analyzing the image, read the article, “The Wheel of Life” by Barbara O’Brien.
  
  http://buddhism.about.com/od/tibetandeities/ig/Wheel-of-Life-Gallery/Bhavachakra.htm

**Tibetan water offering bowls**

*Yonchap* is a Tibetan Buddhist shrine offering of water in seven bowls. Water is used because Tibetans consider it to be plentiful and easily accessible and Buddhist offerings should be easy to make and not a sacrifice. The offering reinforces the idea of cultivating generosity with no attachment to what is given. The idea is that offerings should be given as freely as one would give water. The water also symbolizes purity, while the seven bowls can symbolize aspects of prayer.

• Learn more about the water offering ritual at the YoWangdu Tibetan Culture website.
  

**Singing bowls**

Singing bowls produce sounds that promote a deep state of relaxation in order to assist a person at the beginning of a meditation session. The sounds they make are also believed to have healing properties, so they are often used in Buddhist healing practices. They can be found on private Buddhist altars, and in temples, monasteries, and meditation halls throughout the world.

• Learn about the science of singing bowls in this video.
  

**Prayer flags**

Prayer flags are colored flags inscribed with ancient Buddhist prayers, symbols, and mantras that are strung between trees, shrubs, and buildings. It is believe that when the flags get blown by the wind, they harmonize the environment, increasing happiness and good fortune to all living beings.

• Learn more about the origins and history of prayer flags here.
  
Classroom Activities

What Inspires You?: a dramatic writing activity
In the preceding interview with Sarah Ruhl, she explains that the idea for *The Oldest Boy* came from an intriguing story she was told by her babysitter, and an evocative documentary film she saw.

Research
Assign students one week to find a news article, non-fiction book or documentary, or a true family story that describes an event that they believe is out-of-the-ordinary, surprising, or astonishing.

Report
Each student will have 3-5 minutes to share their story with the class. For their presentations, students must give their story a title and explain it in their own words. They are allowed to use notes, but they shouldn’t read the whole story directly from their papers. As students share their stories, the rest of the class should write down questions, ideas, and comments based on the story that is being shared. Assign one student (or the classroom teacher can do this) to make a large list with all the story titles on it.

Choose
Have students vote on the 5 or 6 stories (depending on class size) that they feel would make the most interesting plays. Explain that they are going to be asked to work in small groups to write a dramatic scene based on a moment in one of the stories. Questions to consider might be:

- Which stories would work best on the stage, performed by live actors in front of an audience?
- How would you stage a scene from the story?
- What other elements could be integrated, such as music and dance?
- What additional research will need to be done?

Write
In small groups, have students work together to write a dramatic scene that includes dialogue and stage directions. Allow enough time for additional research, if necessary. After they have completed a draft, have them read their scene to the class, and allow the audience to provide feedback. Have students return to their groups in order to integrate the feedback and create a final draft.

Cast and stage the scene
Have each group cast their scenes (choose actors to play the characters) with students from other groups, and work collaboratively to direct and stage the scenes. Students who are not actively directing or staging can be responsible for writing a brief introduction to the scene that explains the content of the original story it was inspired by.

**Perform**

If possible, use the school auditorium and invite other classes or parents and have students introduce and perform each of their “inspired” scenes.

**At the Performance: an observation activity**

Before the performance, discuss the following words with the class: color, space, transparency, movement, transformation, ritual, and emptiness. All of these words relate to production and thematic elements that are woven into *The Oldest Boy*. Using the template on page 32, ask students to choose one word to examine closely as they watch the performance. Students should look for different ways their word is expressed in each of the show’s production elements. They may write notes on their sheet during intermission or directly after the performance.

After students have completed their sheets, ask them to report back on their findings. This exercise can also be linked to a discussion about how artists can use a wide range of tools and devices to bring themes alive.

**My Mandala: art activity**

Use one of these mandala activities and lesson plans with students, or use them as inspiration to devise your own mandala activity.

National Peace Academy: Mandala Mindfulness

Rubin Museum of Art

Davis Art

As an extension, assign students the task of finding and taking pictures of naturally occurring and man-made mandalas that exist in their neighborhoods, communities, local parks, etc. Create a classroom exhibition of students’ photographed mandalas and their handmade mandalas.
**Explore:**

- Read the interview “Sarah Ruhl: The Select Equity Group Series on Playwriting,” between Paula Vogel (Ruhl’s mentor) and Sarah Ruhl from Bomb Magazine. [http://bombmagazine.org/article/2902/](http://bombmagazine.org/article/2902/)
- Have students create a newspaper puppet using the video that follows and experiment with bunraku puppetry techniques. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dgz1Gv49m4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dgz1Gv49m4)

**Common Core Connections:**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3**  
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1**  
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5**  
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

---

A scene from Lincoln Center Theater’s production of *The Oldest Boy*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
At the Performance: an observation activity

Circle one element to focus on:

- Color
- Space
- Transparency
- Movement
- Transformation
- Ritual
- Emptiness

How was that element expressed throughout the performance of *The Oldest Boy*?

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Exploring the Big Ideas

“
If you want to know the truth of life and death, you must reflect continually on this: There is only one law in the universe that never changes—that all things change, and that all things are impermanent.” BUDDHA

Thematic Elements

The Oldest Boy asks its audience to ponder some very big, existential questions, such as:

• How do you both love and let go?
• How do you accept change when it is human nature to want things to remain the same?
• Do we create our life circumstances or are they a result of karma/destiny?
• How long do we hold onto traditions, and at what cost?

Below you will find broader thematic elements and discussion questions directly linked to the production that can be used to launch a classroom exploration of these big ideas, and prompt classroom conversations about how this play resonates with students’ personal lives and experiences.

Choice versus Destiny

“
Americans like to choose things. You choose things all the time. I would like: a soy chai latte, wet, with extra foam. You have these preferences. And these preferences reflect your identity. When it’s convenient you are religious. When it’s not convenient you are not religious. When it’s convenient you help your family. When it’s not convenient you do not help your family. When your mother is able-bodied, you have her babysit your children. When your mother is old, you put her in a home. It’s not like that in my country.” Father, Act 1, The Oldest Boy
• How do the different cultural identities of the parents influence their beliefs about choice? What are their beliefs? Do you agree or disagree with them?
• In what ways does destiny intrude in the parents’ lives for better and/or worse? How do they each react to it? What would you do if you were put in a similar situation as the parents?
• How do the mother and father’s perspectives on choice and destiny shift throughout the course of the play?

Culture, Heritage, and Tradition

“I have to marry someone of my culture. My culture is dying. It’s like salt dissolving into water, my people dissolving. If you put a small amount of salt into a very large pool of water, and take a sip, the water is no longer salty.” Father, Act 1, The Oldest Boy

• Why it is important for the father and the monks to keep Tibetan culture and religious traditions alive?
• What obstacles have they confronted in trying to uphold their traditions?
• Reflect on the information the playwright gives us about the childhood and background of the mother and the father. How do they compare and contrast? Imagine you are a relationship expert and they have come to see you for advice about whether or not to get married. What advice would you give them? What challenges might they face? What growth might they experience as a couple?

Family and Duty

“I’m sorry. I cannot disappoint my family. My family is everything for me.” Father, Act 1, The Oldest Boy

• The bond between a mother and a child is considered to be the strongest of human bonds. How does the playwright explore the tenacity and fragility of that bond in the play?
• Both the mother and father’s decision-making process about whether or not to keep Tenzin with them at home or let him be educated at the monastery shifts and changes throughout the play. How would the
play be different if the playwright had chosen to present the decision in a more black-and-white way? Which do you think more truthfully reflects reality?

**Student and Teacher Relationship**

“I remember when my teacher died I cried for three days. When he was alive there was order in the universe. He always cared for me, he showed me what to do, and when he died, there was no meaning, a kind of dullness everywhere, no light.” *Lama, Act 2, The Oldest Boy*

- There are a variety of teacher/student relationships in *The Oldest Boy*. In addition to the lama and his reincarnated master (in the form of the boy), which other characters are in teacher/student relationships? How would you define a positive teacher/student relationship?
- Why do you think the monks place such a high value on the relationship between teachers and students? How does it tie into their cultural identity?
- The lama says that there is a difference between learning from books and learning from a teacher or life experience. Do you agree or disagree with that? What are the pros and cons of each of them?

**Buddhist Elements**

Interwoven in the play are many Buddhist concepts that were explained earlier in the guide. As a class, explore the ways in which these concepts arise in the play: karma, compassion, attachment, impermanence, and meditation.

Questions for discussion:

- The Buddha’s teachings say that attachment is the cause of our suffering, because nothing lasts; everything is impermanent, including us. Is it possible to enjoy something for the moment and not wish for more?
- Have you ever enjoyed something for the moment and when it was over you were satisfied to let it go?
- Conversely, have you ever gotten what you really wanted and then not actually enjoyed it as much as you thought you would?
- Is it possible to want something deeply, and yet not be attached to a particular outcome?
**Classroom Activities**

**Who Am I?: a thematic activity**

A large part of a Tibetan monk’s education consists of debate about religious and philosophical ideas. Use the following quote taken from the autobiography of the 14th Dalai Lama’s mother to launch a debate and discussion about cultural identity and holding onto traditions in a global world:

“My traditions, my roots as a Tibetan, have fortified me. Traditions cannot be denied or forgotten. They are the creators of your spirit and your pride, and are the backbone of your sensibilities. They make you what you are and define what you want to be.”

Diki Tserling, *Dalai Lama, My Son*

As homework, ask each student to create a self-portrait made up of objects, symbols and/or imagery that represent key elements of his or her identity. Students can create these self-portraits using whatever medium they choose, including graphic software on the computer, magazine cut-outs, drawing, 3-D sculpture, modeling clay and so forth.

**Stories of Identity: a literature activity**

Read one of the following books about contemporary teenagers who are struggling with their cultural identity in America:

- *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston (Chinese American)
- *Autobiography of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (Native American)
- *Born Confused* by Tanuja Desai (Indian American)
- *Cuba 15* by Nancy Osa (Cuban American)
- *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez (Dominican American)

**Explore:**

- Learn more about Tibetan Buddhist debate at the Asia Society’s website. [http://asiasociety.org/countries/traditions/tibetan-buddhist-debate](http://asiasociety.org/countries/traditions/tibetan-buddhist-debate)
Common Core Connections:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3
Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

A scene from Lincoln Center Theater’s production of The Oldest Boy. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Resources/Bibliography

Books


Films


Online Resources

Sarah Ruhl


*New Yorker* profile  [http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/17/surreal-life](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/17/surreal-life)


**Magic Realism**


**Tibetan History**

[http://freetibet.org/](http://freetibet.org/)
[http://www.history.com/topics/chiang-kai-shek](http://www.history.com/topics/chiang-kai-shek)
[http://asianhistory.about.com/od/china/a/TibetandChina.htm](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/china/a/TibetandChina.htm)
[http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/01/under-china-s-shadow](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/01/under-china-s-shadow)
[http://www.refworld.org/docid/3f51f90821.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/3f51f90821.html)
[http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/dalai-lama-begins-exile](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/dalai-lama-begins-exile)

**Tibetan Buddhism**

[http://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/apr/01/teaching.schools3](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/apr/01/teaching.schools3)
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/tibetan_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/tibetan_1.shtml)
**Tibetan Arts and Culture**


http://www.metmuseum.org/research/metpublications/Tibet_and_India_Buddhist_Traditions_and_Transformations

http://asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/default.htm

http://www.mysticalartsoftibet.org/

http://wwwtheworldofchinese.com/2013/08/traditional-tibetan-dance/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/galleries/bhavachakra/


**Puppetry**

http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/bunraku/en/
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