

ACCORDING TO COYOTE

An Educational Guide for Students, Teachers, and Families

By John Kauffman
Directed by Josephine Keefe
Performed by Julia Keefe
Honolulu Theatre for Youth
A collaboration with Spokane Ensemble Theatre

Recommended for ages 5+ | School audiences: Grades 3-Middle School

Welcome, Get ready to meet Coyote, a clever, curious, and mischievous character whose stories invite us to laugh, listen, question, and learn.

Welcome

According to Coyote is a vibrant anthology of Native American trickster tales created by the late playwright and former Honolulu Theatre for Youth Artistic Director John Kauffman. Through music, movement, humor, and storytelling, the production introduces audiences to memorable characters and explores how choices can create consequences, change, and understanding.

This guide will help students:

- Prepare for the performance.
- Understand the role of trickster stories.
- Engage respectfully with Indigenous stories and cultures.
- Notice how an actor uses voice, movement, music, and imagination.
- Reflect on the lessons and questions raised by the play.
- Create and share original stories of their own.

1. About the Play

According to Coyote brings a collection of trickster tales to life through live performance. One performer uses physical movement, voice, expression, music, and imagination to create multiple characters and carry the audience from one story to the next.

The production uses:

- **Storytelling:** to carry knowledge from one generation to the next.
- **Acting:** to create several characters through one performer.
- **Music and sound:** to establish mood, movement, and place.
- **Dance and physical movement:** to make characters and events visible.
- **Humor:** to entertain audiences while inviting them to think.

A note for teachers: Indigenous peoples are not one single group or culture. Native Nations have distinct languages, histories, governments, homelands, artistic traditions, and ways of telling stories. Invite students to consider whose story is being shared, who is sharing it, and what responsibilities audiences have when encountering a cultural story.

2. Meet the Artists

The Playwright: John Kauffman

John Kauffman created and originally performed *According to Coyote*. He served as Artistic Director of Honolulu Theatre for Youth from 1983 to 1990 and gifted the rights to the play to the company, allowing the work to continue as part of his artistic legacy.

The Director: Josephine Keefe

Josephine Keefe is a Nez Perce theatre artist and John Kauffman's niece. She views this production as an opportunity to share her uncle's words, support intergenerational storytelling, bring Indigenous stories to the forefront of theatre, and honor her ancestors.

The Performer: Julia Keefe

Julia Keefe (Nez Perce) is a nationally acclaimed Native American jazz vocalist, bandleader, actor, and educator. Her professional career has spanned more than 17 years, with appearances at the Smithsonian and the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, and performances alongside artists including Tony Bennett and Esperanza Spalding. Her work includes honoring the legacy of Coeur d'Alene jazz musician Mildred Bailey and leading the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band, which highlights the history and future of Indigenous people in jazz.

Watch Julia's performance choices: Notice how she uses voice, rhythm, posture, gesture, facial expression, and focus to distinguish characters and guide the audience through the stories.

3. What Is a Trickster?

A trickster is a character who disrupts the ordinary world. Tricksters may be clever, playful, impulsive, selfish, generous, foolish, or wise, sometimes all in the same story.

- Break a rule or ignore a warning.
- Solve a problem in an unexpected way.
- Create confusion or change.
- Learn from a mistake.
- Help others, intentionally or accidentally.
- Reveal something about human behavior.
- Invite audiences to laugh while considering an important lesson.

Think about it: Can someone make a poor choice and still teach us something? What is the difference between being clever and being wise? Why might humor make a lesson easier to remember?

4. Before the Performance

Activity 1: What Makes a Story Last?

Think of a story that someone in your family or community has told more than once. It might be funny, serious, surprising, or connected to a particular place. Students may also choose a favorite published story.

1. Who usually tells the story?
2. Who is the story about?
3. Why do people continue telling it?
4. Does the story teach something?
5. Does it change depending on who tells it?

Teacher connection: Introduce intergenerational storytelling: the sharing of stories, knowledge, memories, and teachings among generations. Remind students that some stories may be personal, private, seasonal, ceremonial, or not theirs to retell.

Activity 2: Build a Trickster Character

Invent an original trickster without borrowing a culturally specific sacred or traditional figure. Complete the prompts, then draw or introduce the character through a short pose, movement, or voice.

- My trickster's name is...
- My trickster wants...
- My trickster is very good at...
- My trickster sometimes forgets...
- The rule my trickster might break is...
- The trouble this could cause is...
- Something my trickster might learn is...

Activity 3: One Actor, Many Characters

In pairs, say the sentence “I know where we should go” as a confident leader, a nervous animal, a mischievous trickster, someone hiding a secret, and someone who has just made a discovery.

Discuss how performers change characters through pitch, volume, pace, rhythm, facial expression, posture, gesture, focus, and eye contact.

5. Words to Know

Word	Meaning
Anthology	A collection of different stories or works presented together.
Coyote	An animal native to North America. Coyote also appears as a significant character in the storytelling traditions of a number of Native Nations, although the character and stories are not identical across cultures.
Indigenous	A term describing the original peoples of a place and their descendants.
Intergenerational	Shared among different generations, such as children, parents, grandparents, and Elders.
Oral tradition	Knowledge, history, or stories communicated through speaking, listening, performance, song, or other forms of cultural transmission.
Trickster	A complex character who uses cleverness, humor, rule-breaking, or unexpected behavior to create change or reveal a lesson.
Transformation	A major change in a character, relationship, situation, or understanding.
Ensemble	Artists who work together to create a performance.

6. Being a Respectful Audience Member

Live theatre is different from watching a recording. The performers and audience share the same space, and audience reactions become part of the experience.

- Listen closely and watch how the performer uses the stage.
- Laugh and respond when invited.
- Keep phones and electronic devices put away.
- Remain seated unless instructed otherwise.
- Wait until after the performance to discuss questions with classmates.
- Applaud to thank the artists.

While you watch, notice:

- How does the performer move from one character to another?
- How do music and sound change the mood?
- When does the performer use silence?
- How does humor help tell the story?
- What choices lead to unexpected consequences?
- When does Coyote appear clever? When does Coyote appear foolish?

7. After the Performance

First Reactions

- One moment I remember clearly is...
- One moment that made me laugh was...
- I was surprised when...
- A choice I would like to discuss is...
- One question I have is...
- The performer helped me imagine ____ by...
- The story made me think differently about...

Discussion Questions

Understanding the stories

- What did Coyote want in one of the stories?
- What choices did Coyote make, and what happened because of them?
- Did Coyote or another character learn anything?
- Which lesson or question stayed with you?

Understanding the character

- What three words would you use to describe Coyote?
- When was Coyote most confident?
- When did Coyote misunderstand a situation?
- Why do audiences enjoy complicated characters?

Understanding the performance

- How did one performer create multiple characters?
- Which vocal or physical choices made a character recognizable?
- How did music, rhythm, or movement support the storytelling?
- Which theatrical choice was most effective for you, and why?

Culture and responsibility

- Why is it important for Indigenous artists to tell Indigenous stories?
- What is the difference between appreciating a story and claiming it as your own?
- Why should we avoid describing all Native peoples as if they share a single culture?
- What responsibilities do theatres and schools have when presenting Indigenous work?

8. Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Choice and Consequence Map

Choose one moment from the play and complete the sequence:

Story map Coyote wanted... → Coyote decided to... → Because of that... → Another character responded by... → The result was... → The audience might learn or question...

Activity 2: Tableau Storytelling

In small groups, create three silent, frozen stage pictures: the beginning of a memorable moment; the moment when a choice changes the situation; and the result of that choice. Audience members identify character relationships, emotions, conflict, status, power, and possible consequences.

Activity 3: Tell It Three Ways

Select a simple event, such as losing an object, missing a bus, or finding something unexpected. Tell it as a short written paragraph, a physical performance without words, and a spoken story using voice and sound. Discuss what changed and which version was easiest to remember.

Activity 4: Advice for Coyote

Write a letter beginning, “Dear Coyote, I noticed that you...” Describe one choice, explain its consequences, offer advice, identify something you learned, and ask one thoughtful question. Younger students may create a drawing with one sentence of advice.

Activity 5: Soundscape

Create a class soundscape using voices, hands and feet, approved classroom objects, repeated words or rhythms, and changes in volume and speed. Build sounds for a journey, an approaching problem, a clever plan, a surprising change, or a lesson being understood.

9. Writing Prompts by Grade Band

Grades 3-5

- Coyote is a memorable character because...
- One choice Coyote made was...
- If I could ask Coyote one question, it would be...
- The funniest or most surprising moment was...
- A lesson I found in the play was...

Grades 6-8

- Is Coyote a hero, a troublemaker, a teacher, or a combination of all three?
- How does humor communicate serious ideas?
- What is the relationship between cleverness and responsibility?
- How does the performer distinguish among characters?
- Why are stories important to cultural continuity?
- How can a modern theatrical production honor an older storytelling tradition?

10. Connecting the Play to Hawai‘i

Students in Hawai‘i live in a place with rich storytelling, language, genealogy, music, movement, and relationships to land and water. Teachers may invite students to consider broad connections among storytelling traditions while avoiding the suggestion that distinct Indigenous cultures are interchangeable.

- How can stories carry relationships to place?
- What can stories teach that a list of facts cannot?
- How do music, movement, and spoken language work together?
- Why does it matter who tells a cultural story?
- How can young people help stories remain meaningful across generations?

Respectful practice: Students should not be asked to reenact ceremonies, imitate culturally specific practices, or disclose knowledge that their families or communities consider private.

11. Create an Original Trickster Scene

Students can apply what they observed by writing and performing an original scene.

- An original trickster character.
- A clear goal.
- A rule, warning, or obstacle.
- A surprising choice.
- A consequence.
- A moment of transformation or understanding.
- A final image, question, or line for the audience.

Responsible storytelling reminder: Create characters from your own imagination and experiences. Do not copy sacred beings, ceremonies, regalia, languages, or culturally specific stories from a community to which you do not belong.

12. Teacher Reflection and Assessment

After the performance and classroom activities, students should be able to:

- Identify features of a trickster character.
- Explain the relationship between choice and consequence.
- Describe how an actor uses voice and movement.
- Identify ways music and sound contribute to storytelling.
- Discuss why intergenerational storytelling matters.
- Recognize that Native Nations and cultures are distinct.
- Demonstrate respectful engagement with Indigenous cultural material.
- Create an original response through writing, discussion, visual art, or performance.

Exit Ticket

6. What did you notice?
7. What did you learn or reconsider?
8. What question are you still carrying?

13. A Final Thought for Students

Stories can make us laugh, surprise us, challenge us, and help us see our choices differently. As you leave According to Coyote, think about the stories you carry, the people who shared them with you, and how you can listen carefully when someone shares a story from their community.

Every audience member helps a story live by listening with attention, responding with respect, and remembering what the experience made them feel and question.

Production Snapshot

Play	According to Coyote
Playwright	John Kauffman
Director	Josephine Keefe
Performer	Julia Keefe
Presenting theatre	Honolulu Theatre for Youth
Collaborating theatre	Spokane Ensemble Theatre
Recommended audience	Ages 5+
School audience	Grades 3 through middle school

For Teachers

This guide is designed for flexible use before and after the performance. Select activities that best fit your students' ages, learning goals, and available class time. The guide intentionally avoids plot-specific spoilers so students can encounter the production with curiosity.

Core approach: Observe closely. Ask thoughtful questions. Honor cultural distinctions. Create responsibly. Carry the story forward through respectful listening and reflection.