

# Learning STAGE

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## THE MILK DRAGON

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# Lost, Broken & Banished

by Dramaturg Wendy Gourley

What if you lived in a world where everything was perfect? No crime. No sickness. Nothing to fear. Wouldn't that be great?

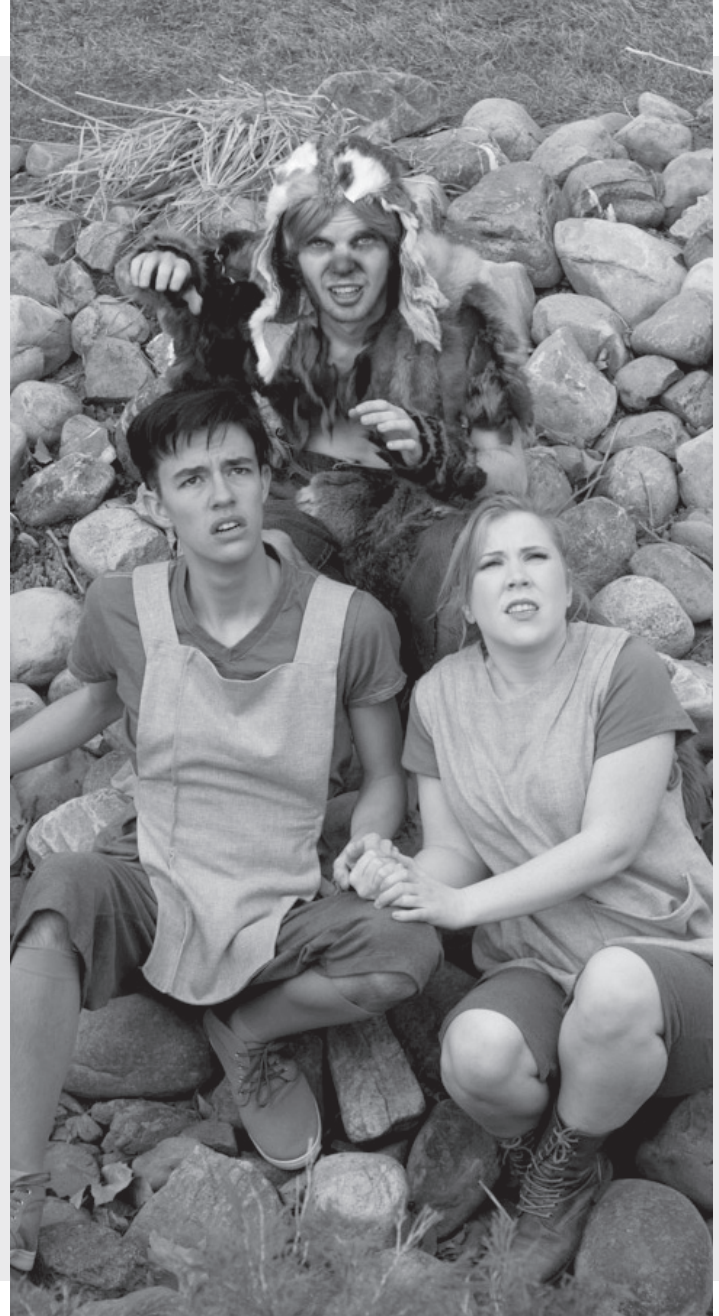
Many people throughout history have dreamed of such a world. In 1516, Sir Thomas More wrote a book called *Utopia* about an ideal society. No one is quite sure whether he was serious or joking about the ideas he put forth, but the word "utopia" has come to mean "a perfect society."

Can a perfect world exist? The idea of utopia depends on there being one people, one land, one truth. It seeks to erase differences because they can be messy or confusing. So what happens if you're different? What happens if you're broken some way in body or mind? What happens if you have your own thoughts, feelings or ideas? What price does the society pay to have everything perfect? What is lost in the process?

During the development and production of *The Milk Dragon*, we've been exploring the opposite of Perfect: Lost, Broken and Banished. What has been lost, broken or banished in your life? A homework assignment? A pet? A bone? A promise? A family? Can being lost, broken or banished ever be a good thing?

***"If you actually succeed in creating a utopia, you've created a world without conflict, in which everything is perfect. And if there's no conflict, there are no stories worth telling!"***

**- Veronica Roth**



What about a lost tooth? Sometimes we have to let go of the old to make room for the new?

What about a broken car? Sometimes when things break, it forces us to slow down and see things in a new way or take a new direction. It can also help us appreciate what we have.

What if we are banished from a group? Sometimes being forced out makes us redefine who we are. It can usually lead to finding or creating a new group that fits us better.

In the rush to find, fix and restore, notice what was learned. What were the gains in our losses? We hope as you watch *The Milk Dragon* you'll look for these questions and find the beginnings of answers that make sense to you.

# The Journey of The Milk Dragon

Suzan Zeder first started writing *The Milk Dragon* in the late 1960s when she was working on her first college degree at Bennett College in upstate New York. The story really started taking shape in the early 1980s when she worked for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA.) This was a controversial time for the NEA, with questions being asked about public funding of the arts and what kinds of art were appropriate. It was during the NEA years that Suzan got the idea for the perfect village.

Suzan became very interested in creating a piece of youth theatre that addressed censorship and fear. Those were topics not then found in the plays that were written for young and family audiences, but the lack of plays about important topics had never stopped Suzan before.

Suzan decided that fantasy was a great way to explore those tough issues. In fantasy, the writer can examine hard issues and even exaggerate them within the safety of the story, and that's how *The Milk Dragon* found its magical quality.

The play still had a long way to go. About ten years later, Suzan found herself spending a winter in a cabin in Colorado. She pulled out her old play and started to write. The world of winter came from that quiet contemplative time at the cabin.

The journey of *The Milk Dragon* has taken lots of twists and turns since the 1990s. Stories sometimes need years and even decades to fully develop. Once, Suzan turned *The Milk Dragon* into a novel, and then into a musical, and then back into a straight play. The writer says that each of these stages taught her something about the story and what it needed.

The development of the play had many starts and stops and long periods where, as Suzan tells it, "the dragon would go back into his cave and wait." It had a staged reading at the University of Texas at Austin in 1998. John Newman, the director of this production, was then a graduate student studying playwriting with Suzan and played the role of Footnote in that staged reading. John also saw a public reading of the play at the Provincetown

Playhouse in New York City as he completed his doctoral work at NYU. He was impressed at how the story had developed.

In 2012, it was time to call the dragon out of hibernation. John Newman, then a professor at Utah Valley University, offered to bring the play to UVU and give it its first full production. John had loved the play and followed it over the years and was eager to bring it to the stage.

*"There were many times that I gave up on [The Milk Dragon.] Either I didn't have time or it couldn't be done or it was too expensive. I [was] the one putting up the limitations. The material never had the limitations. The material was always there ready to talk to me. It's been incredibly blessed. It [always] found... what it needed to go the next step."*

- Suzan Zeder

The UVU Theatre Department, with the support of the Noorda Theatre Center for Children and Youth, has been working with Suzan for two years to develop the play into its current form. This has included staged readings and workshops, with the playwright on campus, in September 2013, January 2014, September 2014, and January 2015. It also included a spring semester special topics class that involved several actors and designers who are currently working with the production.

One of the major design challenges with the play is how to present a dragon that grows and evolves throughout the production. The dragon had to be manifested at different points in the journey in different ways and yet had to be recognizable in each appearance. In the production, you will be able to see how we addressed those theatrical challenges.

What creative ideas are you working on? What are the challenges that force you to devise creative solutions? Are you willing to go on the journey and to give the idea the time it requires to reach its full potential? If so, we hope that you will enjoy sharing the end of this phase of the Milk Dragon's journey.



## Meet Playwright Suzan Zeder

The faculty, staff, and students at UVU have been fortunate to have had the opportunity of working with Suzan Zeder on the development and production of *The Milk Dragon*. Suzan has been recognized nationally and internationally as one of the leading playwrights for young and family audiences in the United States. Her plays have been produced by professional, university, and community theatres in all 50 states as well as Canada, England, France, Switzerland, Greece, Israel, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Suzan is a four-time winner of the Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, a member of the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, and a recipient of the Children's Theatre Foundation of America's Orlin Corey Medallion. She recently retired from the University of Texas at Austin and currently lives with her husband, Jim Hancock, in Sante Fe, New Mexico.

As a professor of theatre at the University of Texas, Suzan Zeder has mentored a generation of aspiring playwrights for young and family audiences. Her doctoral dissertation challenged the field to create young protagonists in plays who take action for themselves and solve their own problems, rather than having them solved by adult characters. Suzan has advocated for the production of original plays by theatres for young audiences, rather than relying primarily on adaptations of novels and picture books. When plays are adapted from myths, legends, and tales, Suzan has encouraged writers to explore the deeper truths that are contained in the stories rather than presenting only the surface characteristics and shaping them into a formula or imposing an artificial moral.

Here are some quotations from Suzan Zeder about plays that are written for young and family audiences:

*"I've read statements about children not paying attention to what they don't understand. I don't agree. There's a great deal about the world that young children don't understand, but that doesn't mean they always get up and walk out on those things. I think children will pay attention in the theatre when there is emotional truth on stage."*

*"I saw my first play when I was 5. When I was a kid and I saw a play or a movie, I would come home and force my brothers and sisters and friends to re-enact it in our living room, complete with costumes, music, programs, and very elaborate curtain calls. I even staged a theatrical funeral for my pet turtle. I always dreamed about having a life that involved theatre and it came true. If you have a dream, don't wait until you are a grown-up to start making it come true. Start now. Start today and keep going!"*

### References:

Pearson-Davis, Susan. *Wish In One Hand, Spit in the Other: A Collection of Plays by Suzan Zeder*.

New Orleans: Anchorage Press, 1990. Interviews with Suzan Zeder by Wendy Gourley, September 2014.

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