

MUMMU

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Kirk Shimano



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Mummu is a one-act play inspired by an ancient Sumerian myth depicting one of the first Mesopotamian gods. But while the source material may be of another time, the perspective is distinctly modern, trying to find purpose in a world that can seem otherwise indifferent.

Playwright Bio

Kirk Shimano is a playwright originally born and raised in California but now living in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is a fourth generation Japanese-American and many of his works explore issues of identity, with a particular focus on queer representation. His plays often take elements of popular culture and refract them through an empathetic lens, creating zombies who love, robots with self-doubt, or superheroes who struggle to come out of the closet. By day, he works programming software for the visual effects industry: a topic which leads to its own nerd-ish implications on his writing.

Synopsis

Mummu, an ancient Mesopotamian deity introduces the characters: a Reed, the Large Intestines of a Cow, and a Feather. There's also a divine storm bird with the power to create and destroy universes at their whim, but they're going to stay offstage. The three characters meet for the first time and share how they came to be in this space — each were connected to something, and now they are orphaned and alone. The experience was extremely traumatic for the Reed and the Feather, kind of okay for the Intestine. But each was specifically chosen to be bound together to form a new object — an arrow. This arrow was not for shooting squirrels. It had a much higher purpose. And when the arrow was shot into the sky, the Reed, the Feather, and the Intestines realized what it meant to soar. That maybe you can aim to be more than satisfied with life. This might be the most important thing they ever do. The characters are ready to take on their quest — to defeat Anzu, the divine storm bird with the power to create and destroy universes at their whim. But the bird did more than respond; it took the arrow and returned the parts to their original state: the Feather to the bird, the Reed to the side of the river, and the Intestines to the cow. Their adventure was unmade

and the arrow was no more. This is not a fairy tale where the good guys always win — sometimes they don't. But now the characters have knowledge, and they remember what it was like to fly. And because sometimes, against all odds, what's coming next turns out to be better than what you had before.

Characters

MUMMU: Mesopotamian deity of engineering. Charismatic, if a bit domineering.

REED: Plucked from a swamp, a simple scrap of vegetation that yearns for more.

FEATHER: Removed from a noble ibis and its associated lineage. Never misses a chance to let others know their place.

COW PARTS: The large intestines of a cow, happily producing gas as they fester.

Themes

Purpose, Identity, Convention, Status Quo, Personal Journey

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ How does one find their purpose in life?
- ★ What do you think you are meant to do or be? What is your personal journey?
- ★ What would you do if someone decided your purpose for you?
- ★ Do you know anyone who has found their purpose?
- ★ What makes up a person's identity?
- ★ Can you change your identity? Do you believe people can change?
- ★ How do you identify yourself? Do you have more than one identity?
- ★ Does anyone see you as different than how you identify yourself? How do you deal with that?

Pre-Read Activities

Research Project: Who is Mummu?

- ★ In groups, students will research the Mesopotamian deity Mummu.
 - » What details can you find out?
 - » What does Mummu represent?
 - » What other myths include Mummu?
 - » What connections can you make between Mummu and your own experiences?
- ★ After completing their research students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Original Scene: The First Arrow

- ★ Divide students into groups. Their job is to create a one-minute scene which theatricalizes the creation of the first arrow.
 - » How is it made?
 - » What purpose was it made for?
 - » Who made it?
 - » Was the use of the arrow a success or a failure?

Original Scene: Anzu

- ★ In the play, there is mention of “a divine storm bird with the power to create and destroy universes at their whim.” We never see this character.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Their job is to create a one-minute scene in which Anzu is a character. What is this character like? How do they move, sound, and behave?
- ★ Encourage students to put this character into a modern context. How would others react to Anzu? Would they be afraid? Why or why not?

Describe Yourself

- ★ Have students write a description of their outsides and insides. How do they present themselves in public? How do they see themselves in private? Do they believe they are the same inside and out?
- ★ Alternatively, have students describe themselves (outside and inside) using the five senses. What is their look, their sound, their texture/feel, and their smell? Have them identify a specific food for taste.

Monologue: My Purpose

- ★ Have students reflect on what they think their purpose is in life. Does everyone have an individual purpose? Do we figure out that purpose early or late in life?
- ★ Then have students write a monologue for a character who realizes that their purpose is not what they thought it was. How does their life change when their purpose changes? Do they resist this change? Why or why not?

Monologue: Ten Years From Now

- ★ Have students reflect on who they think they are right now. What makes up their identity?
 - » Family identity
 - » Social identity
 - » Background

- » Physical appearance
- ★ Then, based on this information, have students write a monologue from their perspective, ten years in the future. Where will they be? What do they think will stay the same? What will change?

Identity Chart

- ★ Have students make an identity chart for themselves. An identity chart visualizes different aspects of the question, “Who am I?”
 - » Students will need paper and something to write with.
 - » You may want to complete an identity chart for yourself as a model.
- ★ An identity chart starts with students putting their name in a circle or square in the middle of the page.
- ★ Then students draw lines from the centre. At the end of each line, students write one word that describes them (tall, sister, Canadian, drama club, piano). Possible categories include:
 - » Family identity
 - » Social identity
 - » Background
 - » Physical appearance
- ★ Ask students to reflect on the final product. What shapes their identity?
- ★ Ask students to reflect on their identity. Are they in control of their identity? Is there anything they would like to change? What would happen if they did?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Mummu*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Which character is perhaps a member of the Cyperaceae family?
3. What bird does the feather come from?
4. What did the Reed dream of being?
5. Who is Marduk?
6. What is the Feather's job in being the arrow?
7. Who stole the Tablet of Destiny?
8. Mummu is the god of making and what?
9. What happens to the arrow in the end?
10. What's the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In the casting note, the playwright states that the characters are “appropriate for any gender, race, age or other human characteristics.” Based on this statement, how would you cast the play?
2. What is the symbolism of an ibis?
3. Based on the way Mummu speaks, how would you visualize them? What is their physicality?
4. How would you costume the Cow Parts character? How would you show their personality through costume? Use the text to support your answer.
5. What is the significance of the line, “You can never make something without unmaking something else”?
6. What is the significance of the line, “Sometimes, against all odds, what’s coming next turns out to be better than what you had before”?
7. What role does imagination play in the story?
8. The end of the play is not resolved. In your opinion, why does the playwright do this?
9. What impact would the ending of the play have on the audience?
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Mummu*, when the story is about the other three characters?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about purpose? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about identity? Cite the text to support your answer.

4. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with identity with what happens in the play.
5. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Would you end the play differently? Why or why not?
- ★ Which character resonates with you the most and why?
- ★ What would happen if your life's purpose changed without your control?
- ★ Is Mummu bad or good? Is the character a villain? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Research Project

- ★ There are many names, characters, and other deities that are mentioned in the play. Divide students into groups. Each group will research a separate name.
 - » What details can you find out?
 - » What personality traits do they have?
 - » What other myths include them?
- ★ After completing their research students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a moment in the play. You should be able to present the whole play.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Character Physical Action

- ★ As a class, discuss the personality traits of the four characters. Create a list of traits for each character.
- ★ Ask students: How do we physicalize personality?
- ★ For example, Mummu is described as charismatic if a bit domineering. How do charismatic people stand? How do they move? How do they gesture?
- ★ Divide students into groups and give each group a character, without letting the other groups know.

- ★ Each group, using the personality trait list for their character, must discuss and decide upon a stance, a walk, and a gesture for this character.
- ★ Each group will present (they are all presenting the same character). Each person in the group will enter the space with their walk, take a stance, gesture, and then walk off.
- ★ Those watching must guess the character simply by looking at the physical action.
- ★ Ask students: Why do we need to give characters a specific physical action?

Modern Rewrite

- ★ Take the basics of the story — three characters who thought they had one purpose in life, find they are destined for something else, and yet don't win in the end — and create a modern scene. In a modern version, how would you represent Mummu? Who would the characters "fight"?

Playwright Process

Playwright Kirk Shimano talks about his process writing Mummu. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose this topic to write about?

I love a story that wraps up in a neat package, with every plot point satisfyingly resolved in an ending that seems inevitable. And yet, so many times our actual lived experience is nothing like this. I was excited to take Reed on this journey, where they first believe they are on the road to their destiny but then ultimately must come to terms with something much less defined. I wanted to bring the audience to a place where they could feel the melancholy of a lost promise and yet remain hopeful about the future.

What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

For over ten years, I've been working with a group named the "San Francisco Olympians" (first as a resident of the Bay Area, and now remotely). Each year, Stuart Bousel, the founder of the festival, picks out a series of mythological figures and asks playwrights to submit proposals. While we originally began with Greek and Roman myths, we've since moved into other areas of the world.

I didn't know much about the Mesopotamian myths, so I just started to read about the various figures on Wikipedia. As an engineer myself, I'm always drawn to the opportunity to create art that relates to the sciences, so I was interested in Mummu's role as a craftsman, as well as the connection between making and unmaking. From there, I started to think about how events in our lives can feel like they might finish, but then become undone, which eventually led me to the characters I explored here.

What's harder and why: ideas or rewrites?

For me, the hardest is always the space in between: the first draft. I always enjoy the process of exploring ideas; I'm especially a fan of research, and often find related material to read before I start a play. The idea phase is often a good excuse to explore areas that I'm already interested in learning more about. In researching Mummu, one bright moment was discovering the Reed's dual usage for scribes and archers, which became a key part of that character.

The first draft is where I find if my ideas can sustain a whole play. I always find this to be the most stressful experience, and it often includes discoveries about material that I thought would work needed to be thrown out or remade. I'm always worried that the ideas won't work out on paper the way that I thought they would in my head. With Mummu I was never quite sure if there would be enough to relate to in these three inanimate object protagonists, and struggled to find exactly where their characters would land.

Rewrites are tough (and often take longer than the original draft), but at least I can make steady improvement. I often will choose a specific goal for a new rewrite. For example, a later pass focused solely on Feather's development, to make sure their emotional range was broader than just being haughty. These goals help me to feel like I'm making continuous progress.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

I knew this wasn't going to be a story that most audience members would be familiar with, so it was very important to set up the proper expectations. I wanted to remain true to the original story while focusing on the parts that were key to what I wanted to say. It's also tricky to determine what it is to "remain true" in this case, as the records of these stories aren't always consistent.

What was it like to see the play in production?

I'm always nervous to see whether the audience is able to connect with a story, especially in a case like this where so much of the source content is going to be unfamiliar. It was great to be able to sit with an audience and see the actors transcend that and make the material feel as immediate as I had hoped.

One moment that really stands out to me is when our three heroes bind together and launch as an arrow across the stage for the first time. I enjoyed writing this scene and thought it would make a fun visual, but just imagining it my head was very different to seeing it on stage. Seeing the three actors dash across the stage was both joyful and exciting, and I knew then that this was a journey that everyone could relate to.