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*Dramatic Publishing*

# When She Had Wings



**Comedy/Drama by Suzan Zeder**

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# When She Had Wings

**"A visually stunning and profoundly multilayered story that can truly appeal to adults as easily as children."** —*DCTheatreScene.com*

**Comedy/Drama. By Suzan Zeder. Cast: 2m., 2w., 1 either gender.** A story told in sound, movement and words about 9-year-old B ... just plain B, like the letter, like the grade, who is about to turn 10 and is not happy about that! B knows, really knows, that before she could walk, she could fly. She is desperate to remember how before the dreaded birthday comes. In a summer thunderstorm, B's treehouse is hit by lightning, and a mysterious stranger appears. She cannot speak except in strange squawks, single words and occasionally the letters "KHAQQ"—the call letters of the plane Amelia Earhart was flying when she disappeared and was never found. Is this creature a bird, an older woman escaped from a senior care unit or could she possibly be Amelia herself? Together they must help each other remember how to fly—literally and metaphorically. "Part history lesson, part argument for female empowerment and part enticing family drama ... goes above and beyond your standard theatre for young audiences offering." (*BroadwayWorld.com*) "Embodies the openness and honesty that children want in a theatre production, but it never sacrifices the complexity that adults crave." (*DCTheatreScene.com*) **Unit set. Approximate running time: 60 minutes. Code: WJ1.**

Back cover photo: Deborah Samuel. Front cover: Imagination Stage, Bethesda, Md., featuring (l-r) Maggie Wilder and Pamela Christian. Photo: Noe Todorovich. Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel.

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# When She Had Wings

By

SUZAN ZEDER



**Dramatic Publishing Company**

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“Originally commissioned and produced by Imagination Stage, Bethesda, Md.”

*When She had Wings* was commissioned and developed by Imagination Stage in Bethesda, Md. Founder/Executive Director: Bonnie Fogel. Artistic Director: Janet Stanford.

Prior to its premiere, it received a developmental workshop at New Visions/New Voices at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in 2014.

The world premiere took place on Sept. 26, 2015, at Imagination Stage with the following cast and creative team:

Cast:

A..... Pamela Christian  
B..... Maggie Wilder  
Wingman..... Calvin McCullough  
Sound Op ..... James Konicek  
Dad / Attendant / Man..... Ian Le Valley

Creative Team:

Director ..... Kathryn Chase Bryer  
Movement Director..... Andrea Moon  
Sound Design..... Christopher Baine  
Scenic Design..... Luciana Steconci  
Costume Design..... Collin Ranney  
Lighting Design ..... Zachary Gilbert  
Assistant Sound Design ..... Justin Schmidt  
Stage Manager ..... Elizabeth Ribar

*When She Had Wings* was part of the  
Women's Voices Theatre Festival  
Washington, D.C.  
2015



Dedicated to

Dr. Victoria Brown  
and

The children of the Lucy School  
For giving this play wings.

And

Kathryn Chase Bryer  
and  
Imagination Stage  
For making it fly!



## AUTHOR'S NOTES

This play was born in the air. I was sitting on a bench in Oregon on a bluff 100 feet high with seagulls soaring and the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean before me, staring out to a horizon where the edge of the sky met the rim of the sea. It was a sight seen mostly by birds, or in dreams of flying, or perhaps by a pilot alone in a cockpit in the solitude of sky.

At this point in my writing life, I was seized by a desire to do things differently; to speak in other theatrical languages, to break the conventions that had served me well over the past 40 years. I yearned for a release from realism. I wanted an adventure in process and product, where the visual, kinesthetic and auditory vocabularies of light and shadow, sound and silence, movement and stillness would be *as* important as any words characters might speak. This longing to escape the gravity of my own stylistic “habits” was something akin to flying!

This play has had a charmed life in the almost four years of its developmental journey. Everything it has asked of me, it has gotten. Like a lucky magnet, it has attracted exactly the right people at the right time, blessed with the generosity of “yes.”

This play about flight needed a grounding in the reality of how children perceive and dream about flying and how they might express their thoughts and feelings in drawing, movement, singing, acting and writing. This “yes” came in a three-year partnership with the Lucy School in Middletown, Md., as they dedicated a full year to the exploration of flight at all grade levels in all subjects.

This play, made of as much movement as words, needed an early place to bring it before an audience of peers. This “yes”

came in an invitation to be part of New Visions/New Voices at the Kennedy Center.

This play needed to explore ways to make characters fly without resorting to the theatrical trickery of harnesses and wires. This “yes” came as a three-day residency at the University of Northern Colorado working with Andrea Moon and her amazing students.

This play needed a landscape of sound to chart a geography of feeling to express what cannot be captured in words. This “yes” came in the sound design and score created by Christopher Baine.

This play needed a theatre willing to take the risk to produce a script with a title no one had ever heard of before and a story not based on a best selling book, movie, or a familiar fairy tale. This “yes” came from Imagination Stage.

This play needed an artistic alchemist to bring together exactly the right cast and design team and to create a safe and challenging environment where all collaborators were empowered to do their best work. The “yes” came in the wise and patient persona of Director Kathryn Chase Bryer.

This play needed belief that unanswered questions are more powerful than facts, that mystery is more potent than certainty and that young people have the capacity to make their own meaning and find their own answers, if we will only trust them to do so. This “yes” comes at every performance from every audience.

This play has been a journey of joy.

—Suzan Zeder  
2015, Santa Fe

# When She Had Wings

## CHARACTERS

**B:** 9 years old. Built like a fireplug. Definitely not designed for flight. She longs to escape ... into the air.

**A:** Ageless. A VERY missing person. Not quite human, not quite avian. Not quite wild, not quite tame. Language left her when mind separated from memory, leaving only mystery. Desperately searching for a landing ... even if it's a crash.

**MAN:** The force of gravity in three manifestations:

**DAD:** B's father. Earthbound, stabilizing force for B. Loves his daughter and does the best he can since Mom flew the coop.

**ATTENDANT:** Works at a nearby retirement, nursing, assisted, senior care facility.

**MAN:** A seraph. Dressed in white. Looks something like Dad and the attendant but different. Appears when the laws of gravity must be overturned.

**WINGMAN:** Creates the visual manifestations of flying out of found objects, puppets and everyday illusions. Becomes Coast Guard Lookout. He is the enabler of visual imagination.

**SOUND OP:** Creates the feelings of flight through live and recorded sound. Becomes the Voice of Itasca, the ship waiting for Amelia Earhart when she disappeared. He is the enabler of auditory imagination.

## PLACE AND TIME

B's backyard.

Somewhere in Nebraska.

July.

Now.

## PRODUCTION THOUGHTS

There are thoughts on production execution from the director, sound designer and movement director of the premiere production in the back of the book on page 62.

# When She Had Wings

## Prologue

*(WINGMAN and SOUND OP appear from the house, approaching the stage. SOUND OP plays a kazoo. As soon as they reach the stage, WINGMAN turns the rotor of an imaginary propeller. SOUND OP transforms the sound of the kazoo into an airplane engine sparking to life. WINGMAN guides an invisible plane with two batons. The plane taxis and recorded sound takes over as it zooms over the heads of the audience.)*

*WINGMAN materializes a white feather from nowhere. He throws the feather into the darkness upstage as a single white feather falls from above.*

*Collage of children's voices, cascading, soaring, rising, falling, words and phrases about flying.*

*Lights up on B. As the feather falls, she watches it and holds out her hand. The instant it touches her hand, the voices vanish.)*

B. OK now ...

Remember!

How does it begin?

*(WINGMAN and SOUND OP take a deep breath.)*

B. BREATH!

*(On their exhale, B inhales deeply. B exhales with a whoosh and thrusts forward, arms raised in anticipation of the take off.)*

B. UP!

*(Nothing happens.)*

B. Nuts.

*(She concentrates harder.)*

B. Remember!

Where does it begin?

Legs!

*(B takes a deep breath. She runs in place, faster, faster. She leaps forward, arms raised to catch the loft.)*

B. UP!

*(Nothing happens.)*

B. Nuts!

*(She concentrates harder.)*

B. Remember!

Why does it begin?

*(B takes a deep breath. She runs in place. She spreads her arms wide as she thrusts forward.)*

B. WINGS!

*(WINGMAN materializes the figure of a tiny girl with wings. The tiny girl takes off and soars over B's head and high into the air.)*

B. YES!

*(There is the glorious sound of the delight of flight as B flies and flies in her imagination.*

*The tiny girl flies and flies in wide circles. She loops and dives. B's face is wreathed in wonder.*

*The tiny girl banks and, with the WINGMAN's help, lands in B's outstretched hand. B smiles at the tiny girl. WINGMAN whisks her back into the air.*

*B watches her go.)*



## Scene 1: The Perfect Storm

*(Lights come up on B's backyard: an immaculate patch of neatly trimmed grass and nice straight edges. Flower beds are color coordinated and possibly alphabetized. Standing guard over each bed is a garden gnome about three feet tall. There are a lot of them. They are not cute. There is something slightly sinister about them.*

*In the very center of the yard, in stark contrast to the order that surrounds it, is an ancient tree. Most of it is dead, but the branches reach and gnarl around a structure that might be a treehouse. It looks like a giant crow's nest or a cockpit. It is made of branches, twigs, vines, spare parts of airplanes. Around the edge, pinwheels stick out at odd angles.*

*There is the sound of distant thunder.*

*B grabs her pilot's goggles hanging from one of the branches and scrambles up the tree into the nest/cockpit.)*

B. Flight controls ... Free and correct.

Instruments and radios ... Check, check, check and set.

Altimeter ... Set

Fuel gages ... Checked.

Pop Tarts

Whoppers

Little Debbie snack cakes ...

*(B mimes turning on an engine.*

*SOUND OP makes the sound of the airplane engine on the kazoo.)*

B. Propeller ...

*(SOUND OP's sound mixes with the live or recorded sound of a lawn mower.)*

*DAD enters. He is pushing a lawn mower. He makes a wide circle around the tree to where B is sitting and holds up a postcard.)*

DAD. Special delivery, little missy!

B. Dang it! Dad. Now I gotta start all over again!

DAD. Postcard from your mom!

B. That's my private mail!

DAD. Nothin' private about a postcard. If it was, it'd be a letter.

*(He reads it.)* She says, "Congratulations on losing two more pounds!"

*(B's face falls in dismay.)*

DAD *(cont'd)*. And she sent you something for your birthday!

B. Probably another pair of yoga pants, two sizes too small.

DAD. She says she can't wait for your visit. She's got your summer camp all picked out.

B. Another fat camp!

DAD *(reading)*. "Li'l Losers Kamp for Kids."

B. I'm not going!

DAD *(with an edge)*. "Kamp," spelled with a K ... cute.

B. I'm not going! Not again! They make you hike till your feet fall off, swim till you pucker like a prune, and they only feed you twigs and yogurt. I'm staying here.

DAD. Can't spend all summer in a tree.

B. Who says?

DAD. The court!

*(DAD exits with the mower.*

*B straightens her aviator cap and goggles.)*

B. Flight controls ... Free and correct.

Instruments and radios ... Check, check, check and set.

Altimeter ... Set

Fuel gages ... Checked.

Pop Tarts

Whoppers

Little Debbie snack cakes ...

Propeller!

*(B starts the engine again. SOUND OP makes the sound of the engine.)*

B *(as Amelia)*. Got the maps, Fred?

*(As Fred.)* Yes, Miss Earhart!

*(As Amelia.)* Only 7,000 miles to go!

Toss me a Whopper, Fred!

*(As Fred.)* Yes, Miss Earhart!

*(Engine sound mixes with clippers heard offstage.*

*B tosses a Whopper malted milk ball in the air and expertly catches it in her mouth.*

*DAD enters with electric hedge clippers and starts trimming up the tangle of branches around the base of the tree.)*

B *(cont'd)*. DAD! Dad! How many times do I have to tell you? Don't clipper my tree!

DAD. But it's so ...

B. That was our deal! You do what you want to with anything in the front or backyard, BUT my tree is my tree.

DAD. It's dangerous.

B. Oh pish!

DAD. TV says a storm's coming. End of June means monsoons! We get a typhoon here and ...

B. Typhoon? Dad, this is Nebraska!

DAD. At least let me tidy ...

*(DAD picks up a leaf blower and starts toward the tree.)*

B. DAD!

DAD. All right! All right!

*(DAD puts the leaf blower down, starts up the clippers and exits, trimming his side of the yard.*

*B goes back to her flight.*

*Sound of the clippers changes to an engine made by SOUND OP.)*

B. Howland Island ... Howland Island ...

Tiny little spec on the wide, wide sea!

Like landing on the back of a gnat.

*(As Amelia.)* Fred, you think you can find it?

*(As Fred.)* No problem, Miss Earhart!

*(DAD enters, whistling, with a garden gnome in a wheelbarrow.*

*SOUND OP's engine sound nosedives out.)*

B. DAD! What are you doing?

DAD. Isn't he a beauty? Look at how lifelike he is.

B. Lifelike? It's a garden gnome!

DAD. I think he's the best one yet.

B. Evil little faces, beady little eyes, stubbly little fingers.

DAD. Yah, he's a beaut all right!

B. Did you know that at night they come to life and sneak into the house? They sit on your chest and steal your breath while you sleep.

DAD (*scoffing*). It's cats that do that!

B. We don't have a cat!

(*Points to the gnome.*) That's how come I got asthma. Gnome breath.

DAD. You got some imagination, little missy!

B. I don't want a garden gnome anywhere near my tree. They give me the creeps!

DAD. I was gonna get you one for your birthday dressed up like a pilot ...

B. All I want for my birthday is for you to leave me and my tree in peace. I've only got three days before I turn 10 and there is something I've got to do first. Something IMPORTANT.

DAD. More important than your birthday?

B. I don't care about my birthday.

DAD. What kind of kid doesn't care about her birthday?

B. This one!

DAD. Little missy, that's just not right!

B. The older you get, the more you forget!

DAD. What'da ya got to forget? You're 10!

B. Nine! I'm 9! Nine is FINE! I don't want to turn 10.

DAD. Double digits ...

B. Double digits weigh you down. Double digits are too HEAVY.

DAD. Too heavy for what?

B. For everything! I don't want to have a birthday. I don't want to go to Mom's. I don't want a garden gnome. I just want to be left alone!

(*B puts the helmet and goggles back on.*)

DAD. What are we playing today?

B. *I'm* not playing! *I'm* flying!

DAD. Why don't we play like you're a famous pilot and when you land your plane, I'll be a reporter who ...

B. I'm NOT playing that with you!

DAD. Why not? We use'ta play it all the time.

B. This is the last leg of a very important mission and it's a solo flight!

DAD (*hurt but covering*). That's my little missy! Always got your head in the clouds. Be careful or the wind's gonna blow you right outta that tree and you'll fall on your noggin ... again!

B. I'm not going to fall ...

DAD. Really! 'Member the time you taped fake feathers and American flags to your shirt and jumped off the roof o' the root cellar.

B. I remember.

DAD. Or the time you hitched up all those balloons to your bike and ...

B (*tersely*). I remember.

DAD. Or the time you tied two kites to your—

B. I REMEMBER!

DAD. Down at Urgent Care they got a gurney with your name on it. They give me discount on stitches.

B. It's not my fault! It's gravity.

DAD. Gravity, my heck!

B. I fall off my bike? ... Gravity!

Wipe out on my roller skates? ... Gravity!

Fall out of a chair? ... GRAVITY!

There ought to be a law against GRAVITY!

DAD. Ya gotta have gravity.

B. Why?

DAD. 'Else you'd go floating off the earth—

B. Gravity is my enemy—

DAD. And wind up on the moon or something!

B. Dad! Let me just finish this!

DAD. Well just don't—

B. Don't even say it!

DAD. Fall again!

*(DAD passes the gnome, pats him on his pointy little head and exits.)*

B *(frustrated)*. How can I remember flying when all I can think about is falling?

*(Sounds of a storm, wind and thunder are heard.)*

*B resumes her flight.)*

B *(cont'd, into an imaginary radio)*. This is KHAQQ on 3105 kilocycles ...

*(Sounds of the storm increase and are mixed with radio static.)*

DAD *(off)*. Time to come in now!

B. KHAQQ, we're about 100 miles out ...

DAD *(off)*. I'm not kidding ...

B. KHAQQ ...

DAD *(off)*. I'm counting to 10! One ... two ... three ... four ...

B. Itasca, this is KHAQQ, want bearings ...

DAD. Five ... six ... seven ...

*(Storm sounds build. The tree begins to shake.)*

B. I'm coming!



DAD. Eight ... nine ...

*(B holds onto a branch to steady herself.)*

DAD *(cont'd)*. BEATRIX, NOW!

*(There is a strong gust of wind. The branch cracks, and B falls out of the tree onto the ground below.)*

B. GRAVITY!

*(She is eye to eye with the garden gnome.)* What are you laughing at?

*(B stands and shakes her head.)*

B *(cont'd)*. Three days! I'll never make it!

*(B limps offstage as the storm builds in intensity.)*

*Thunder rumbles; lightning flashes.*

*WINGMAN and SOUND OP are tossed by the storm and wreak havoc on the yard, scattering leaves and branches, toppling gnomes, etc. The tree shakes and branches whip back and forth.*

*Suddenly there is a blinding flash.*

*The tree is obviously struck by something. Maybe it's just lightning, but maybe it is a rent in the fabric of time.*

*Something falls from the sky and lands smack in the middle of B's crow's nest.*

*A figure stirs and peers out of the nest. This is A. She looks around, dazed and disoriented. She opens her mouth, and no sound comes out. She tries again, nothing. Finally, in frustration, she beats her arms up and down against the side of the nest.)*

A. Awwwwk!

*(Lights change.)*

## PRODUCTION THOUGHTS

Because I believe that the languages of sound and movement are as important to this play as any of the words spoken by characters, I have asked the sound designer, movement director and director of the premiere production at Imagination Stage to contribute a few words as production “thoughts.” Part of the adventure for other production teams doing this play will be for you to find your *own* solutions to the many challenges and opportunities this script offers, but I thought it might be helpful to hear from artists who have stood where you stand.

### **Sound (Christopher Baine)**

Part of the reasons I love *When She had Wings*, and why I enjoyed creating the music and sounds for this play, is because audio is such an integral part of the dynamic language of the show. Between the words on the page and the movement of the characters, sound is part of the trifecta of storytelling. Without it, this story could not be told. By endowing sound with the power of narrative, Zeder has opened up a world of possibilities for collaboration and exploration and has given us an empty canvas on which we each can add our own color. Sound has the ability to move people, to affect our emotions, and to take us to different worlds along with the characters in the play.

In the script, we are given a visual/physical manifestation of the language of sound through SOUND OP, who not only produces many of the sounds of B’s fantasy but is the embodiment of aural language onstage. We thought of this character as the reality of B’s imagination in the aural world. To this end, in the

Imagination Stage production, we used both live and recorded sound to help delineate the worlds B creates in her imagination from those where she finds herself swept up in a story larger than herself. We used primarily live sounds, made by SOUND OP, using everyday objects and garden implements as B tries to help A remember her past life: her flights and crashes, and her famous solo crossing of the Atlantic. Recorded sound was used to create a larger world: in the two storms that begin and end the play, and to underscore the Interludes where A's story is told without words in music, light, shadow and movement.

There are many different choices that can be made in terms of sound. Live sound effects, recorded music, underscoring, use of the recorded voices of children and a host of other possibilities. The palette is limited only by your imagination. As a final note, I encourage everyone approaching a production of this play to not hold back, don't let practicality get in the way of your imagination. Allow yourself to fly!

## **Movement** **(Andrea Moon)**

In my work as the movement director for this play's inaugural flight, I realized that movement is integral to the landscape of B's imagination and the landscape of A's ... call it magic, call it mystery, and her journey through the play. We discovered that WINGMAN and SOUND OP function, mostly silently, as the manifestations of B's imagination *and* of A's mystery. The tenor of these two jobs is different so we worked on making the tenor of the two characters' movement different in the scenes than in the interludes.

The interludes tell A's story—from her arrival, through her own confusion about who, what and where she is, to her longing for and remembering flight, and finally her taking on of Amelia's story and identity. In the beginning of the play, A drops in on us without the benefit of verbal language. She calls on a more primal and visceral form of storytelling—the magic of image and the exploration of her body in space to communicate her thoughts and feelings. WINGMAN and SOUND OP are drawn into that primal magic as they facilitate the telling. In rehearsal, we worked on making their movement during the interludes simpler, cleaner and totally in unison. They function almost as one. Whereas, as manifestations of B's imagination, they become individual characters with individual jobs and unique gestures, sometimes in harmony and sometimes conflict, with each other and with B.

One of the loveliest and most lasting moments in A's journey is her pas-de-deux with the moon: Interlude #2: "Lift." Zeder always had an image of A on aerial silks and because I am an aerialist and our actor for the production at Imagination Stage had training on the silks, we were able to realize this image with actual aerial choreography. It is possible, however, to create a powerful image for this moment even if you don't have an actor trained in aerial work or the ability to hang human weight safely in the production space. There are some beautiful and simple things that can be done with white silks that don't require the strength or skill of an aerialist. There are also alternative ways to get across the idea of the Interlude without having to use silks at all. However, this interlude is realized it must be in concert with the movement vocabulary of the play as a whole. It must be played as a scene with a dramatic arc of discovery and release, not as a "specialty act" inserted into the larger fabric of the play.

The possibilities for movement in this play are endless and these notes should be taken not as a prescription, but as a description of what worked with this particular cast, design team and limitations of the space. I encourage each production team to make their own choices. The sky's the limit!

## **WINGMAN and SOUND OP** **(Kate Bryer)**

When Zeder and I first started working on this script, we believed that SOUND OP and WINGMAN were present only to facilitate the non-verbal aspects of this story. However, over the three-year period, as we worked with the children from the Lucy School and the college students from UNC, it became apparent that these two characters could serve as entities that are much more integral to B and A's story. We spent much of the rehearsal period trying to clarify the rules for these characters and to decide what world they live in.

We decided that even though B and A do not seem to see or directly interact with them (except for A in interlude #4), WINGMAN and SOUND OP are the embodiment of the imagination and their hearts' desire for both B and A. For most of the play, SOUND OP operates from an aural perspective, punctuating action with sound effects and transforming everyday sounds like a lawn mower into the imagined sound of an airplane engine. WINGMAN works from a visual basis: manipulating props, ordinary objects and miniatures to change scale and illustrate action. They do not create the story, nor do they know it's ending in advance, they take their clues from A and B and are, in a sense, created by the power of the telling. It is only when we arrive at the Final Flight that

everything comes together as they gain the power of speech and become actual characters in Amelia's last flight. Now that they are truly agents of action they can aid in A's ascension, and help B to "fly."

Every production team will find their own ways to deal with the enigmatic and provocative characters who say so much without words. We found it useful to allow these characters to be onstage at all times and to stage them so they express the inner emotions, thoughts and imaginations of A and B and provide a direct link to the audience as they discover the story together. We were incredibly fortunate to have actors gifted in imagination and improvisation as they helped us clarify and create these silent interactions in rehearsal, many of which remain in the script today. We wish you the same joy of discovery.