



EDUCATION GUIDE • AGES 13 & UP

Education Guide Information by Derek T. Pickens

Charleston Stage, soon celebrating its 44th season, is South Carolina's largest professional theatre company in residence at the Historic Dock Street Theatre. Named Charleston's "Best Local Theater Company" and "Best Live Theatre Group" by *City Paper* and *Post and Courier* readers, Charleston Stage has presented over 150 productions and played to a collective audience of over one million strong. More than a half million students have also attended Charleston Stage's fully professional productions at the Historic Dock Street Theatre over the past 43 years. Productions feature dazzling scenery, stunning costumes, and casts of professional actors.

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“I DIDN’T CRY BECAUSE MY BALLOON FLOATED AWAY... I CRIED BECAUSE I COULDN’T GO ALONG.”



By Julian Wiles

SYNOPSIS:

Helium, is an original play written by Charleston Stage Founder and Producing Director, Julian Wiles. *Helium* tells the moving and uplifting story of Mrs. Kingsley, a brilliant, humorous and beloved former chemistry teacher who braves the trials of frailty and aging, all the while keeping her imagination, charm and dignity intact. No longer bound by space and time, Mrs. Kingsley’s mind has begun to wander. With the help of colorful bunches of helium-filled balloons, she takes flight and visits the seashore of her youth, her old high-school classroom and even drops in on an old episode of Star Trek. Back in the present, Mrs. Kingsley’s daughter Alice struggles to keep her headstrong mother’s feet firmly on the ground and her aging mind solidly anchored in reality. It is a losing battle. As sparks fly between mother and daughter, Mrs. Kingsley’s grandsons watch in wonder and amazement as their mischievous grandmother’s wit and imagination continue to charm even as her mind slips into amazing and often humorous flights of fancy.

RECOMMENDED SUBJECT AREAS:

Chemistry and Science Students (Upper Middle-High School): The lead character is a former High School Chemistry teacher who is losing her faculties to dementia. In her flights-of-fancy she begins to make up her own elements giving the fanciful names like “hysteriam” and “pandemonium”. Also a favorite chemistry student from reappears in her dreams and together they seek to make sense of life’s mysterious equations.

English and Creative Writing Students: Exploring and analyzing this imaginative original script.

Psychology Students: Exploring the different strategies each character uses to understand and cope with a person with dementia, as well as, exploring the dynamics and interpersonal relationships of the family members.

THEMES EXPLORED:

- Family Bond
- Memories of the Past
- Dealing with Change
- Adapting
- Chemistry

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CHARACTERS:

Gramms (Mrs. Molly Kingsley) - An elderly grandmother, once a gifted and eccentric high school chemistry teacher

Alice - Gramms' daughter

Ruth - Gramms' sitter and nurse, an older woman in her fifties

Ethan - Gramms' oldest grandson, age 16

Josh - Gramms' youngest grandson, age 11

Johnny - Mrs. Kingsley's favorite student from years ago

GLOSSARY:

Aspidistra - a bulbous plant with broad tapering leaves, native to eastern Asia and often grown as a houseplant.

Dilithium - In the *Star Trek* fictional universe, dilithium is an invented material which serves as a controlling agent in the faster-than-light warp drive.

Encephalitis - inflammation of the brain, caused by infection or an allergic reaction.

Inert - lacking the ability or strength to move.

Penitentiary - a prison for people convicted of serious crimes.

Photosensitive - having a chemical, electrical, or other response to light.

Skinflint - a person who spends as little money as possible; a miser.



PLAYWRIGHT

Julian Wiles

Director, designer and playwright Julian Wiles founded Charleston Stage in 1978. As Charleston's resident professional theatre company, it has grown into one of South Carolina's largest arts institutions. Wiles grew up on a cotton farm in Ft. Motte, S.C. He attended Clemson University, received a bachelor's degree in history from the College of Charleston in 1974 and an MFA in dramatic art from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1976. Wiles has written or adapted 27 original plays and musicals including *Blitzen!; a boy and his piano; the boy who stole the stars; Denmark Vesey: Insurrection; FrUiTCaKeS; Gershwin at Folly; Helium; Inga Binga; Nevermore! Edgar Allen Poe, the*

Final Mystery; NigHt of tHe pterodActyls and *The Seat of Justice*. Wiles is a recipient of the 2010 Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Governor's Awards for the Arts, the highest honor in the arts awarded by the state of South Carolina.

ON WRITING THE PLAY *HELIUM*

by Playwright Julian Wiles

Of all the plays I have written, this is my favorite. I originally wrote *Helium* in 1990, after reading a memoir by *New York Times* humor columnist Russell Baker called *Growing Up*. Mr. Baker opened his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir by observing that his 80-year-old mother's mind "could wander free through space and time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place a half-century earlier . . . she moved across time . . . with a speed and ease beyond the gift of physical science." While Mr. Baker certainly saw the sadness of his mother's affliction, he also saw that there was a freedom there as well. From that thought, my play *Helium* was born.

Over the next few years I was able to see aging and dementia first hand. My delightful grandmother, having reached the age of 100, passed away still with the twinkle in her eye and her good humor mostly intact. I watched as my mother and her sister, her primary caregivers, found their way through my grandmother's last and somewhat difficult years.

BACKGROUND INFO

A few years later, my wonderful mother-in-law (yes, some are wonderful) became lost (on most days) in the fog of dementia. It was a challenging time for our family, especially my wife Jenny, who became her primary caregiver. Our kids were little and they marveled at Granny's wandering mind and her flights of fancy. Sometimes we wanted to cry, but often we just had to laugh at the things she would tell us. And, like Russell Baker's mother, she spent much of her time traveling, for like many patients with dementia, much of her long-term memory remained intact, so she could remember fondly things from long ago but nothing from the past few minutes.

After Granny passed away I decided to revisit *Helium* and the play underwent a major revision in 1997. It was produced the next year at the Historic Dock Street in Charleston. It struck a chord with many people who would say to me, "let me tell you about my aunt, my mother, my uncle, my cousin" and they would relate their trials, but also the joys they found as caregivers. They would share with me the flights of fancy that their own loved ones had taken.

Taking notes from that production in 1997 and one produced in Greenville, South Carolina, the following year, I revised the play once more and mounted a third production in 2010 on which this version is based.

The world has become much more aware of Alzheimer's and dementia since 1990, but much is still unknown. Patients and their caregivers still struggle to find their own way. And each way is different. In *Helium*, I simply wanted to share one family's journey, its joys and its sorrows, and with them to marvel even in such adversity, that the human spirit and the human mind can still take flight.



Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Grade
ELA Writing - Meaning, Context and Craft
| Standard 1 - Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. **Indicator** - 1.1

ELA Writing - Meaning, Context and Craft
| Standard 2 - Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. **Indicator** - 2.1

ELA Communication - Meaning and Context | Standard 1 - Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives. **Indicators** - 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5

High School - English I through IV
ELA Principles of Reading | Standard 4 - Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. **Indicator** - 4.1

ELA Principles of Reading | Standard 7 - Analyze the relationship among ideas, themes, or topics in multiple media, formats, and in visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities.
Indicators - 7.1, 7.2

7th Grade - Physical Science: Classification and Conservation of Matter
Physical Science: Classification and Conservation of Matter | Standard 7.P.2 - The student will demonstrate an understanding of the structure and properties of matter and that matter is conserved as it undergoes changes. **Indicators** - 7P.2A.1 - 7.P.2A.4

Chemistry I
Bonding and Chemical Formulas | Standard H.C.3 - The student will demonstrate an understanding of the structures and classification of chemical compounds.
Indicators - H.C.3A.1 - H.C.3A.3

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

NOTE TO TEACHER: Please feel free to adjust activities to meet the needs of your classroom or grade level.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Introduction to Alzheimer's and Dementia

Before seeing *Helium*, it may be a good idea to introduce your students to Alzheimer's and Dementia.

In order to do so, here are 4 great videos:

What is Alzheimer's? <https://youtu.be/qPVPJDW1XNM>

What Can I Expect and How Can I Deal with It? <https://youtu.be/Tgv4VhC4BI4>

If The Person with Alzheimer's Lives with Us, What Can I Expect? <https://youtu.be/M8dUdCqZPo4>

How Can I Help and What's Out There to Help Me? <https://youtu.be/wJuFYq25eKs>

Discussion Questions

1. Have you faced a difficult experience when your friends didn't know how to help or what to say?
2. Have you ever been unable to understand what a friend was going through because you had not shared a similar experience? How did you handle it?
3. Are we ready as a culture to hear a message of inclusivity and friendship for people with dementia or are we too afraid of the condition?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Discussion/Writing

Put yourself in the shoes of Gramms' oldest grandson Ethan. How would you feel to watch your grandmother slowly change over time? How would you react? How would you have done things differently?

Mrs. Kingsley's Science Project

In the play, Mrs. Kingsley (Gramms) assigned Johnny a project where he had to make up two brand new elements and to place them in the periodic table. She asked Johnny to give them an atomic number, decide how many valence electrons they have, where they'd sit in the periodic table, and what properties they might have. Here is what he created:

"Preposterous has the atomic number of 15 1/2. It sits at the periodic table next to its big brother phosphorus. It has 5 valence electrons -- actually 5 1/2 which is why the element was named preposterous. As you may expect, compounds formed with preposterous have unexpected qualities. For instance, rhinicum (Atomic number 23 1/2) joins with preposterous to form rhinoceros."

Have your students create (in groups if necessary) their own two elements just as Johnny did and present them to the class!

CONTENT WARNINGS

Helium is not intended for younger audiences, as it makes reference to the consumption of alcohol, as well as references to a character losing their virginity. *Helium* also has mature language, including: hell, damn, and SOB.

www.julianwiles.com

The director and playwright's website provides more background information.

Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org

Dementia Resource Suite for Schools

<http://www.exeter.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Dementia-resource-suite-for-schools.pdf>

Books

The Periodic Table by Primo Levi. Though not a chemistry book per se, instead it is a masterful series of essays, each based on an element from the periodic table. By acclaimed Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi.

The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements by Sam Kean. This is a fascinating and very readable book about the basic elements and their discoveries and their many unusual qualities.

Growing Up by Russell Baker. This humorous Pulitzer-prize-winning memoir written by former *New York Times* humorist, Russell Baker tells the story of how he became a writer and how later in life he came to confront his mother's dementia. This book provided the spark that led playwright Julian Wiles to write *Helium*.

DOCK STREET THEATRE



For almost 300 years audiences have delighted in performances at the Historic Dock Street Theatre which stands on the site of the very first theatre building in America which opened its doors in 1736. The current building, originally The Planter's Hotel was built in 1803 and in 1937 was converted into the Dock Street Theatre know today. Charleston Stage presents over 150 performances at the Historic Dock Street Theatre playing to theatre goers from every state in the union and many foreign countries. The Dock Street Theatre, newly renovated in 2010, is currently owned and managed by the City of Charleston. Other

performing arts groups including Spoleto Festival USA perform here annually.

On February 12, 1736 the Dock Street Theatre opened with a performance of *The Recruiting Officer*. Built on the corner of Church Street and Dock Street (now known as Queen Street), the Historic Dock Street Theatre was the first building in America built exclusively to be used for theatrical performances. Flora, the first opera performance in America, took place at the Historic Dock Street Theatre.

The original Dock Street Theatre was probably destroyed by the Great Fire of 1740 which destroyed many of the buildings in Charleston's French Quarter. In 1809, the Planter's Hotel was built on this site and in 1835 the wrought iron balcony and sandstone columns of the Church Street facade were added. A number of notable persons worked and patronized the Planter's Hotel including the noted 19th Century actor Junius Brutus Booth (father of Edwin and John Wilkes Booth). Robert Smalls, an African-American Civil War hero, who stole a steamboat in the harbor and sailed it out past the Confederate-held Ft. Sumter and turned it over to the blockading Union Fleet, served as a waiter in the hotel's dining room prior to the war. Charleston's famed Planter's Punch was first introduced here.

After the Civil War, the Planter's Hotel fell into disrepair and was slated for demolition. But in 1935, after Milton Pearlstine made the property available to the City of Charleston and at the urging of Mayor Burnet Maybank and other notable citizens, the original building became a Depression Era WPA (Works Progress Administration) project. At that time, the present theatre was constructed within the shell of the

DOCK STREET THEATRE



Planter's Hotel. The hotel's grand foyer became the grand foyer of the theatre and the hotel's dining room now serves as the box office lobby. The beautiful woodwork and mantels of the second floor drawing room were salvaged from the Radcliffe-King Mansion (circa 1799) which stood at the corner of George and Meeting Streets and was razed to build the College of Charleston gymnasium, another WPA project. Modeled on eighteenth century London playhouses by Charleston architect Albert Simons, the present Dock Street Theatre's new stage house and auditorium were built in the hotel's courtyard. The local carpenters who were put to work as a part of this Depression era relief effort utilized locally grown and milled native black cypress for the beautiful warm wooden interior. Following this \$350,000 renovation, The Historic Dock Street Theatre's second grand opening took place on November 26, 1937. Notables in the audience included author DuBose Heyward (*Porgy*) who was named writer-in-residence.

The Historic Dock Street Theatre reopened for the third time on March 18, 2010 after a three year, \$19 million dollar renovation by the City of Charleston. This extensive full-scale renovation brought the historic theatre into the 21st century with state-of-the-art lighting and sound, modern heating and air conditioning, and new restrooms and seating. In addition, the theatre was made seismically secure and fully handicapped accessible. Extensive sound-proofing was added to ensure that outside noises no longer intruded on performances inside.