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THE PLAY

Alaska Territory, the 1920s.

Jack and **Mabel**, a couple in their early 40s, have left Pennsylvania after the loss of their newborn child. They are trying to rebuild their lives in Alaska as homesteaders (see article). Their neighbors **George**, **Esther** and **Garret** are experts on the Alaskan wilderness, but Jack and Mabel are struggling. Food is running out; their marriage is drifting apart and winter is coming. How will they survive?

Everything changes when Mabel encounters a mysterious young girl, **Faina** (fah-ee-nah), who travels through the forest with a fox. Mabel wants to believe it is a snow girl she made, come to life. Jack refuses to believe it—until the girl appears to him, too. Is Faina real, or is she a spirit of the dark winter woods?

In Mabel's book of ancient folktales, when spring comes, the snow child disappears. But Mabel is not ready to lose another child. In this beautiful and violent land, things are rarely as they appear and what the snow child teaches them will transform them all.

SNOW CHILD



BASED ON THE NOVEL BY **EOWYN IVEY** | BOOK BY **JOHN STRAND**

MUSIC BY **BOB BANGHART** AND **GEORGIA STITT**

LYRICS BY **GEORGIA STITT** | DIRECTED BY **MOLLY SMITH**

MUSIC SUPERVISOR AND ORCHESTRATIONS BY **LYNNE SHANKEL**

CO-PRODUCTION WITH **PERSEVERANCE THEATRE**

KREEGER THEATER | APRIL 13 – MAY 20, 2018

“How can you love a thing too wild to love you back?”

—Faina, *Snow Child*

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MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



JOHN STRAND

“What most drew me to the story is the character who embodies the wildness and mystery of Alaska itself, the snow child. Like the land, she shapes and transforms everyone around her.”

John Strand is an award-winning playwright based in the greater D.C.-area. He spent ten years as a journalist and drama critic in Paris, where he directed NYU’s Experimental Theatre Wing. His plays are often political or historical like *The Originalist*, a play about the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, which premiered in Arena Stage in 2015. Strand has also written the **book** for new musicals including *Hat! A Vaudeville* and *The Highest Yellow*.

In the first rehearsal of *Snow Child*, Strand said the challenge of adapting Eowyn Ivey’s novel *Snow Child* into a musical was to capture the spirit of Alaska, the wilderness, the human dependence, the risk and the danger.

“Taking a folktale and setting it in contemporary reality allows us to investigate some of the universal themes: the cycle of seasons with their echoes of death and rebirth; the struggle to survive in a wilderness that is often violent and unforgiving; the power of hope; the resilience of the human spirit; and the courage it takes to believe in something that cannot be explained logically but is passed down to us in story and song.”

Strand won the Charles MacArthur Award for his play *Lovers and Executioners*, and was Arena Stage’s resident playwright from 2014–2015.

book—a musical’s script

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

“I grew up in Alaska. I’ve always wanted the opportunity to produce a project that came from the energy of Alaska, and I think *Snow Child*, with its combination of the heartiness of the people, the vastness and the danger of the land, and the magic realism of being in a place that seems almost unworldly, is a great concoction for a new musical. The story of moving West, of man against the environment, of the fight between the territorial government and individual people is an Alaskan story. If we can evoke tiny flashes of the glory of Alaska — I’d count this musical as a success.”



Molly Smith

POWER PLAY

Snow Child is the fifth **commission**, and first musical, to debut as part of Arena Stage’s Power Plays. The Power Play cycle will commission and develop 25 new plays and musicals from 25 writers over the course of 10 years. There will be one play for each decade of American history. *Snow Child* represents the 1920s.

commission—when a theater company requests a playwright to write a play specifically for them

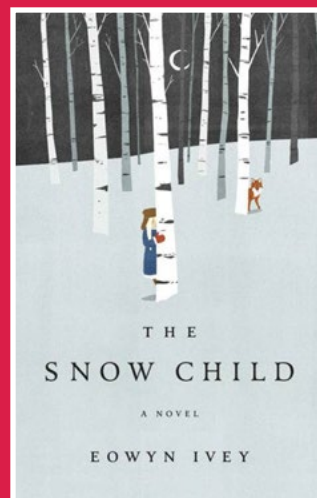
FROM PAGE TO STAGE

The show is based on the novel *The Snow Child* written by Eowyn Ivey and published in 2012. The book was a finalist for the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Arena’s musical ends 2/3’s of the way through the book.



ACTIVITY

What other musicals have been based on books? Why do musical writers find inspiration in books? Choose a novel you have read recently that you think would make a good musical. Why?





CREATING THE WORLD OF *SNOW CHILD*

MUSIC

The strumming of the guitar and the plucking of the mandolin underscore the music of *Snow Child*. The original score opens with a song about frozen rivers, endless sheets of ice and acres of trees, which captures the haunting stillness of the Alaskan winter. The bluegrass “roots” music is authentic to gatherings in Alaska when people would bring their instruments and play together. The on-stage band includes an upright bass, guitar, keyboard, mandolin, banjo, fiddle and some percussion instruments.

SET DESIGN

The set is inspired by a log cabin built by naturalist Richard Louis Proenneke in the 1960s Alaskan wilderness. Proenneke used mostly local materials and simple hand-held tools to construct the cabin. Proenneke lived in this cabin for 30 years without electricity, running water, a telephone or other modern conveniences. According to Todd Rosenthal, the set designer, the cabin on stage has to look like it was made by hand to demonstrate how people at that time struggled but also co-existed with the wilderness around them.

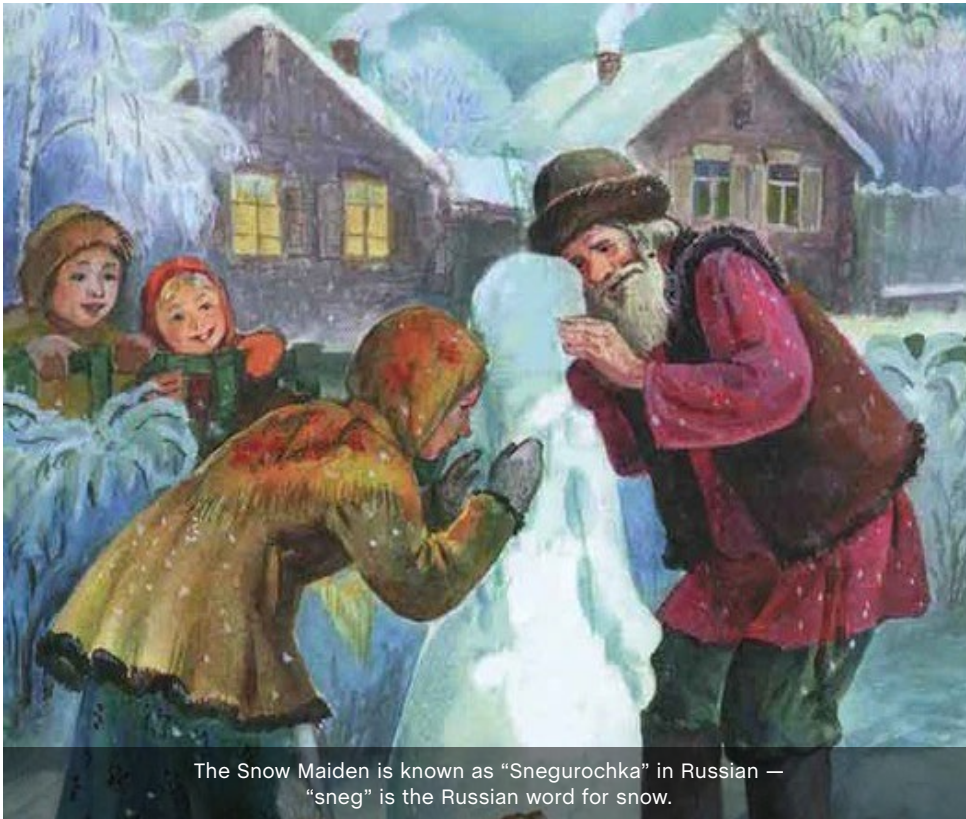
The Alaskan landscape contains trees, lakes, mountains and wildlife including foxes, moose and swans. How do you think this could be portrayed on stage?



Source: National Park Service.



Snow Child set design model by Todd Rosenthal.



The Snow Maiden is known as “Snegurochka” in Russian — “sneg” is the Russian word for snow.

a!
ACTIVITY

What are stories and folktales that you were told growing up? Research those stories and find out where they originated and if any other adaptations exist in other countries. How do the adaptations differ from the version you were told?

WATCH

Watch a silent animation of the Slavic fairytale “Snow Child”:
<https://goo.gl/rKhkh5>

ONCE UPON A TIME...

JACK: *Your book — you know how the story ends. When spring comes, the snow child dies.*

MABEL: *She’s real and she’s ours! We are not going to lose this one!*



Snegurochka

Snow Child is based on a centuries-old Slavic fairy tale. Although a peasant and his wife love each other very much, they are unhappy because they have no children. One winter day, they decide to craft a pretty maiden out of snow. Before their very eyes, the snow maiden—Snegurochka—becomes a real girl.

This myth has been retold in many ways across cultures. The common theme is the story of a mysterious child who comes into the life of a couple and transforms them.

The German folktale “Ice Child” is about a merchant returning home after two years to find his wife with a newborn son. His wife pretends that she slipped on ice and fell into a snow bank. Later she gave birth to the ice child.

The 19th century Russian folktale “Snow Maiden” is about a beautiful girl with snow white skin, deep sky-blue eyes and curly fair hair who appears to the Fairy Spring and Father Frost. Fairy Spring keeps her protected deep in the woods away from the Sun God who can destroy her. But the snow maiden is lonely. She ventures out on her own and falls in love with Lyel, a farm boy playing his flute.



Snow Maiden



Ice Child

SETTING THE SCENE: ALASKA IN THE 1900s



Source: *Travelquaz.com*

ESTHER: *First they came with the gold mines, now they're talking 'bout oil*

GEORGE: *Could there be a fortune bubbling underneath this soil...?*

The landscape of Alaska has transformed drastically since the Native Americans first settled there about 15,000 years ago. In the mid-18th century Russians began trading with the Alaskan Natives and took control of the land. In 1867, Alaska was purchased by U.S. Secretary of State William Seward for \$7.2 million, or about 2 cents an acre.

In 1896 gold was discovered in the Klondike region of Alaska. The idea of striking it rich led over 100,000 people from all walks of life to abandon their homes and embark on an extended, dangerous journey across treacherous, icy valleys and harrowing rocky terrain. Only 30,000 stampeders made it to the region alive.

The gold rush prompted the discovery of other minerals like oil and copper in the early 1900s. This marked the development of mining, fishing and trapping industries in Alaska territory. This led to the U.S. government's increased interest in establishing political control in Alaska. Over 300,000 new settlers moved into regions of the territory where few non-Natives had lived before.

While the gold rush invigorated the economy of the Pacific Northwest, it also devastated the local environment, causing massive soil erosion, water contamination, deforestation and loss of native wildlife. New settlers also had a negative impact on many Alaskan Natives, ruining their hunting and fishing grounds because of excessive mining.

HOMESTEADING

Jack and Mabel move to Alaska in the 1920s, just after the gold rush, and become homesteaders. Homesteaders were people, especially during the 1800s, who carved out new lives in new parts of America.

The original Homestead Act, passed in 1862, provided free land in exchange for the development of that land. The government passed the act to rapidly settle "unoccupied" territory in the West. The legislation offered homesteaders a 160-acre parcel of land. In exchange, the homesteaders lived on the land for five years, farmed it, and built a house on it. If they did this, after five years, the homesteader would receive full ownership of that land. In 1898, land in the territory of Alaska became available for homesteading.

Initially homesteading was instrumental in developing the U.S. presence in Alaska territory. However, many homesteaders were unprepared. They lost a desire to farm their land when faced with the Alaskan remoteness, cold weather, short growing seasons, high expenses for supplies and problems selling crops.

Though the State of Alaska currently has no homesteading program for its lands, homesteading remains important to many Alaskans today. Many homesteaders or their families still own original claims.



America's last homestead (1988) built near Lime Village in southwestern Alaska. Source: Bureau of Land Management.



HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

ALASKA FACTS

Source: *AlaskaPhotoGraphics.com*

- ★ It has the world's largest wildlife refuge, comprising 16 million acres.
- ★ In the summers the temperatures reach 90°F. In the winter the temperature can fall below -60°F
- ★ According to the 2010 United States Census, Alaska, has a population of 710,231 including 66.7% White, 14.8% American Indian, 5.4% Asian and 3.3% African American. Hispanics or Latinos of any race make up 5.5% of the population.
- ★ The oil and gas industry dominate more than 80% of the Alaskan economy.
- ★ The state animal is the moose. It can provide about 400 to 700 pounds of meat through subsistence hunting.

SIDEBAR

After its run at Arena Stage, this production of *Snow Child* will be performed at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

The Snow Child by Eowyn Ivey

The Call of the Wild by Jack London

ON THE WEB

"Alaska" *History.com*

<https://goo.gl/9Mhtmq>

"Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts" *University of Pittsburgh*

<https://goo.gl/8HX3Fh>

"History of Alaska Homesteading"

Bureau of Land Management

<https://goo.gl/Z596PA>

"Russian Fairytales" *RussFolkArt*

<https://goo.gl/HNTnpB>

"The Gold Rush and Minerals"

Alaska Public Lands Information Center

<https://goo.gl/NgJH25>



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

How do you believe in something that cannot be logically explained?

2

What defines the American spirit today?

3

What is the relationship between people and nature?