

PLAY GUIDE



Sponsored by:

la ofrenda is supported in part by an award from the
National Endowment of the Arts.

BANK OF THE BLUEGRASS
& TRUST CO.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT **for the ARTS**
arts.gov



la ofrenda

by josé casas

418 W. Short Street
Lexington, KY 40507
859.254.4546
www.lctonstage.org

Major Contributors:

LEXARTS

THE SHUBERT
FOUNDATION INC.

KENTUCKY Arts Council
The Kentucky Arts Council,
the state arts agency,
supports Lexington
Children's Theatre with state
tax dollars and federal
funding from the National
Endowment for the Arts.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT **for the ARTS**
arts.gov

Dear Educator –

Lexington Children's Theatre is proud to be producing our 81st season of plays for young people and their families. As an organization that values the arts and education, we have created this Play Guide for teachers to utilize in conjunction with seeing a play at LCT.

Our Play Guides are designed to be a valuable tool in two ways: helping you prepare your students for the enriching performance given by LCT's performers, as well as serving as an educational tool for extending the production experience back into your classroom.

We designed each activity to assist in achieving the Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS), including the National Core Arts Standards for Theatre. Teachers have important voices at LCT, and we rely heavily on your input. If you have comments or suggestions about our Play Guides, show selections, or any of our programming, your thoughts are greatly appreciated. Please email Jeremy Kisling, our Associate Artistic Director in Charge of Education, at jkisling@lctonstage.org.

Please use the Teacher Response form following a performance. We are thrilled that you rely on LCT to provide your students a quality theatrical experience, and we hope this resource helps you in your classroom.

-LCT's Education Department

The mission of our education programming



The mission of Lexington Children's Theatre's Education Department is to **provide students of all ages with the means to actively explore the beauty, diversity, complexity, and challenges of the world around them through the dramatic process.** We strive for young people to develop their own creative voice, their imagination, and their understanding of drama and its role in society.

Your role in the play

You may wish to have a discussion with your class about your upcoming LCT experience and their role as audience members. Remind your students that theatre can only exist with an audience. Your students' energy and response directly affects the actors onstage. The quality of the performance depends as much on the audience as it does on each of the theatre professionals behind the scenes and on stage.

Young audiences should know that watching live theatre is not like watching more familiar forms of entertainment; they cannot pause or rewind us like a DVD, there are no commercials for bathroom breaks, nor can they turn up the volume to hear us if someone else is talking. Your students are encouraged to listen and watch the play intently, so that they may laugh and cheer for their favorite characters when it is appropriate.

At the end of the play, applause is an opportunity for your students to thank the actors, while the actors are thanking you for the role you played as an audience.



Meet the Cast – *la ofrenda*



THOMAS COSTELLO (*Alex*) Thomas is thrilled to be returning for his second tour with Lexington Children's Theatre. You may have seen him last fall in *Jack and the Wonder Beans* (Jack) or *Amelia Earhart* (Reporter). He recently finished a run of *Jelly's Last Jam* (Melrose Brother) with the North Carolina Black Repertory Company and the National Black Theatre Festival. Thomas holds a BFA degree in Musical Theatre from The South Carolina School of the Arts at Anderson University. Much love and thanks to family, friends, and directors for the support and guidance received along the journey. Commit-trust-act, Psalm 37:5. Thomas-costello.com.



HANNAH LEE HERNANDEZ (*Marta*) Hannah is a recent graduate from SUNY Fredonia with a BFA in Musical Theatre and is very excited to join Lexington Children's Theatre for their fall season! She was most recently seen in Western New York Chamber Orchestra's production of *My Fair Lady: In Concert*. Other favorite roles include: John Quincy Adams (*Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*), Lucio (*Measure for Measure*), Cha-Cha DiGregorio (*Grease*), Pozzo (*Waiting For Godot*), Mrs. Bumbrake/Teacher (*Peter and the Starcatcher*), and Belinda Blaire (*Noises Off!*). Thank you to Mom, Dad, and Jake for your constant love and support.



DARREN VANCE (*Califas*) Darren is thrilled to join Lexington Children's Theatre for the first time. Darren is a graduate from Catawba College where he earned his BFA in Musical Theatre and Minor in Dance. He recently finished a run as Race in *Newsies* at Lees-McRae Summer Theatre in North Carolina. He would like to thank his family, friends, Justin Bulla, and LCT for giving him an amazing opportunity to pursue his dreams while also making an impact on the next generation of theatre practitioners.

What to know – before the show!

Play Synopsis

The story of *la ofrenda* (Spanish for “the offering”) is all about the love of family and the courage it takes to be vulnerable and connect, all centered around the Mexican holiday Día de los Muertos. After losing his parents in the 9/11 tragedy, eleven-year-old Alex moves to Los Angeles to live with his abuelita, Marta, a Chicana woman whom he doesn’t have much in common with – or so he thinks. Alex struggles with understanding his grief, but when the papier-mâché skeleton in his room comes to life, he begins to re-connect with his heritage and ultimately learns to heal through honoring and dedicating his life to his family, both alive and departed.

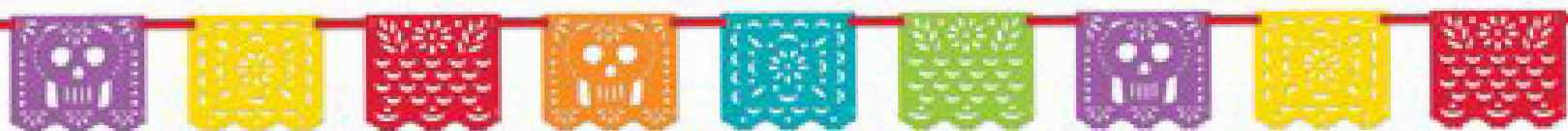
Alex must deal with starting a new life in a strange place as well as being immersed in a culture he knows virtually nothing about. Marta must not only try to get her grandson to talk about his feelings but also come to terms with her resentment for her deceased daughter for not raising her grandson with a knowledge of the Chicana/o culture, as well as her resentment for her deceased son-in-law; in her mind, by taking her daughter across the country to New York, he is to blame for her death. At a certain point, a homeboy calavera named Califas shows up to offer Alex a shoulder to lean on as well as some tough love. Califas is a mythical figure meant to serve as Alex’s conscience, but he is also the person who must help Alex come to terms with the fact that his parents are, indeed, dead. As the story progresses and the rift between grandson and grandmother widens, the tension boils to a point where Alex’s emotional release has a devastating effect on his grandmother and on the altar she has created for the Mexican holiday, Día de los Muertos. Ultimately, Alex and Marta acknowledge, for the first time, their mutual love for each other and come to the understanding that their journey as a family is just beginning. It is a journey with no easy answers, but they are both willing to try to find their way...together.

For Educators: Things to Know about *la ofrenda*

Día de los Muertos is inspired by ancient Mexican and Aztec cultures, as well as practices of the Roman Catholic faith. People who participate prepare intricate altars to welcome the departed back to the world of the living for this three-day celebration. These altars usually include food, traditional candy sugar skulls, and pictures of their late loved ones as well as more religious items like incense, a rosary, candles, and a statue of “Our Lady of Guadalupe.” The altar Marta and Alex build includes these and other items that have significant meaning to them, representing their family members who have died. During the creation of the altar, one stick of incense is burned on stage, so audience members with scent sensitivities might wish to sit further back from the stage.

This play is a great way to spark conversations about reflection and remembrance of the past, expressing emotions such as loss and grief, and familial values and beliefs. For young people and adults alike, navigating complex emotions can be difficult, but it is an important part of life that everyone goes through. Tying a compelling story to a holiday that celebrates reflection and remembrance is a great way to begin talking to your students about loss. Our audiences will have a range of religions and beliefs that may or may not be reflected in the play, but we feel this story is a great stepping stone for teaching students how different people interpret death, afterlife, and loss.

We love this story because it highlights the beauty of life, celebrates our cultural differences, and addresses the importance of family. Alex and Marta come from very different worlds, but they learn to love and accept each other as they remember their loved ones and keep their legacies alive. We love this story because it is funny and thoughtful and heartbreaking and beautiful, sometimes all at the same time. Just as Día de los Muertos celebrates death as a natural part of life’s cycle, *la ofrenda* is a beautiful way to remember, to celebrate, and to talk about loved ones in your lives who have passed away.



What to know – before the show!

Ancestor Holidays from Around the World

Día de los Muertos is a very important holiday in the play *la ofrenda*. However, it is not the only holiday that people use to remember and honor their ancestors. Use the information below to teach students about the other ways people around the world pay respect to the dead. This can be a paper you share with the class or students can be split into small groups to research one of the holidays listed below and then have them present about it to the class.

Bon Festival – Japan

This holiday is a Buddhist custom that has been celebrated in Japan for over 500 years to honor and commemorate dead ancestors. This festival usually takes place in August and involves fireworks, games, feasts, and dances to welcome the spirits. According to legend, a man asked Buddha for help when, while meditating, he saw his deceased mother was trapped in the land of Hungry Ghosts. The man, upon Buddha's recommendation, payed homage to the monks who had just finished their summer meditation. When he saw his mother released from her suffering, he broke into dance out of joy.



Gai Jatra- Nepal

This holiday is also known as the Festival of Cows and is celebrated in Nepal. During the celebration cows are marched through the streets and children dress up as cows while food is also distributed. In Hinduism a cow is considered the most venerated among all the domestic animals. It is believed this holy animal will help the deceased relative's journey to heaven. Gai Jatra is a light-hearted celebration of death meant to help people accept death as a reality and help ease the passing of those who have died.



Qingming Festival – China

This festival is also known as Ancestors Day or Tomb-Sweeping Day and it is celebrated in mid-April when families go to the tombs of their loved ones to clean their resting places. They also offer items like food, tea, and joss paper because they are believed to hold great significance in the afterlife. This celebration is thought to date back to AD 732 and is also used to pay respects to people who have died during significant events in China's history like Tiananmen Square.



All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day

These two holidays are observed primarily in the Catholic Church. All Saints' Day has roots in early Catholicism as a festival to honor unknown saints and martyrs. The next day is All Souls' Day, a more solemn holiday when people commemorate souls that are now in Purgatory. The prayers of the living are said to help speed the burning of minor sins in the purgatorial flames to help sanctify souls for the entrance into Heaven.



Día de los Muertos

Day of the Dead is most widely celebrated in Mexico but is also observed all over the world in places like the Philippines, Latin America, and the United States. It began with Aztec harvest celebrations dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl. Now it is a multi day holiday that involves family and friends gathering to pray for and remember people who have died and helping support their spiritual journey. This is seen as a day of celebration where their deceased loved ones awake to celebrate with them. Traditions include building private altars called ofrendas and using calaveras, Aztec marigolds, and favorite foods or drinks of the departed. Graves are also decorated and cleaned.



What to know – before the show!

What is 9/11?

“9/11” is shorthand for a date - September 11, 2001. That day, 19 men hijacked four commercial airplanes. They intentionally flew three of the planes into buildings: The Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, the headquarters for the armed forces of the United States, located just outside Washington, D.C. The Twin Towers ultimately collapsed because of damage from the impact of the hijacked planes. Hijackers turned the fourth plane off course and headed to Washington, D.C., likely to be crashed into the U.S. Capitol building. The passengers and crew aboard that plane fought back, and the plane instead crashed into an empty field in western Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed as a result of the 9/11 attacks, including people from more than 90 nations. The 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City has some great resources and lesson plans to assist your classroom discussion about the events of September 11th, 2001. You can visit their site at <https://www.911memorial.org/>

Marigolds to Remember

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a traditional Mexican holiday for honoring ancestors and loved ones who have died and is celebrated each year on November 1st & 2nd. This festive, family-centered holiday celebrates the cycle of life and highlights acceptance, rather than fear, of death. Colorful marigolds are a regular feature adorning the altars or “ofrendas” set up for honoring loved ones. Build your own marigolds by following these instructions:

Materials:

- one sheet of orange tissue paper per flower
- one green pipe cleaner per flower
- Small piece of paper
- scissors

Directions:

- Fold the long edge of your tissue paper in half so that the short ends meet.
- Fold it in half again in the same direction. You should have a long, skinny rectangle.
- Now, with one of the short ends facing you, accordion fold this rectangle into folds that are about ½” to 1” wide.
- Next, twist a pipe cleaner around the middle of your folded accordion, twisting the ends into a stem.
- Cut about ¼” off each end, then cut a “V” shape into each of the ends.
- Pull out your accordion so that it forms a circle.
- Carefully pull up the first layer of tissue paper as far up as it will go, all around the circle.
- Have the students write, on the marigold, the name of someone important whom they want to honor.
- Post the marigolds in a display to remember the contributions of the special people in our lives.



VA:Re 7.2.4; VA:Cn10.1.4; VA:cr2.3.5

What are these skulls all about? The meaning of calaveras

The word calavera (or calaverita in the diminutive) means “skull” in Spanish, but the term is also used to refer to a kind of poem that is written and published especially around the season of Day of the Dead. The word calavera is generally used playfully: in the different contexts that it is used, it does not have a gloomy or macabre connotation. Calaveras remind us of the transitory nature of life, that our time here on Earth is limited, and that it’s acceptable (and maybe even desirable) to play and poke fun at ideas about death.

Calaveras are deeply entrenched in Mexican culture, and it is important to honor their roots and their sacred and deep-rooted history. They tie into the way the culture sees life and death and how that impacts their daily lives.

Calaveras are a potent reminder of our own mortality. It sounds morbid or macabre, but in actuality, it serves as a statement that death is just as powerful and sacred as life, and that it is bound to happen, so have a little light-hearted look at it. This sugar coated way of approaching death takes the fear out of what is inevitably going to happen, and tells us to live life to the fullest. It also serves as an important reminder to honor those who have passed with love, light, a smile, and courage, and that we will be honored too. Calaveras serve as solid proof of faith in the afterlife.

When you see a calavera, smile and dance with joy. It is a reminder that you are alive, breathing, and although life is fleeting, there is no fear. Live each moment like it is your last, freely and deeply, and never forget the support of your ancestors around you and honor them. This makes you, and everyone you love, eternal.

5.G.MM1

What to know – before the show!

Anatomy of a Day of the Dead altar (in English and Spanish)

By KORI RUMORE , RICK TUMA and RODOLFO JIMENEZ AND OCTAVIO LOPEZ

This contextual article is from the Chicago Tribune: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-day-of-the-dead-altar-diagram-spanish-english-20151029-htm1story.html>

Skulls and skeletons are popping up in stores around Chicago, but they're not your typical Halloween fare. Look closely and you'll see them paired with colorful flowers, dressed as bride and groom, or made from sugar with intricate designs. These are representations of a popular celebration in Mexico and other parts of Latin America called Day of the Dead.

Unlike Halloween, Day of the Dead is not meant to be a sad or frightening holiday, but an uplifting time to remember loved ones who have died.

"Day of the Dead is a very sacred day. It's a day in which we welcome back the memory and the souls of those people who are still — are still — an important part of our family, even though they many not be physically present," Cesareo Moreno, chief curator at Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, told the Tribune in 2015 (read the story here). "And it's a sacred day in which a lot of people pray. They gather together. We welcome them back. Halloween, you don't want those ghosts around. You're kind of afraid of them. It's a scary time. It is certainly not a sacred day, and I think those are the big differences between the two."

In Latin America, Day of the Dead customs are passed down from generation to generation, but the celebration is a relative newcomer in the U.S. Activists in California began to organize Day of the Dead processions and altar exhibits in the 1960s and '70s as a way to honor Mexican-American heritage. And more recently, Day of the Dead products are popping up at stores like Wal-Mart, Target, and Crate and Barrel.

Una mirada al altar del Día de los Muertos
Calaveras y esqueletos adornados con flores coloridas, vestidos de novios o hechas de azúcar con diseños extravagantes: Así son las representaciones del Día de los Muertos, una tradición en México y Latinoamérica.

Al contrario que Halloween, el Día de los Muertos no es para sentir miedo o tristeza, sino un momento para recordar a los seres queridos que ya partieron.

"El Día de los Muertos es algo muy sagrado. Es un día en el que damos la bienvenida a la memoria y las almas de aquella gente que de alguna manera siguen entre nosotros como parte de nuestra familia, a pesar de que físicamente ya no están con nosotros", señaló Cesáreo Moreno, curador jefe del Museo Nacional de Arte Mexicano (lee la historia completa aquí.). "Y es un día sagrado en el que mucha gente reza. Se reúnen y les dan la bienvenida. En Halloween no queremos que esos fantasmas te rondan. Como que les temes. Es un día para asustar. En definitiva no es un día sagrado y creo que esas son las grandes diferencias entre ambas celebraciones".

En Latinoamérica las tradiciones por el Día de los Muertos se pasan de generación en generación, pero en Estados Unidos esa celebración es relativamente nueva. En California, algunos activistas comenzaron a organizar procesiones y exposiciones de altares con motivo del Día de los Muertos en las décadas de los 60 y 70 como una manera de honrar la herencia mexicoamericana. Más recientemente, los productos relacionados con el Día de los Muertos comenzaron a aparecer en tiendas como Wal-Mart, Target y Crate and Barrel.

Structure of the altar

The altar is one of the most distinctive ways Day of the Dead is celebrated. An altar is made in honor of the deceased and can be displayed at a gravesite or in the home. Offerings of food, beverages and prized possessions are displayed. "The altar is a good example of the fusion of both religions and cultures," said Eric García, Arte Ambulante coordinator of the National Museum of Mexican Art. "These altars pay respect to both the indigenous and the Catholic beliefs of the afterlife and situates them logically."



An altar can be built using tables, shelves or crates. The order of the three levels references Catholic and indigenous beliefs.

Top level

Symbolizes Heaven (where God and the saints live).

Middle level

Represents Earth (where people live).

Lower level

Symbolizes Mictlan (the Aztec underworld of the dead).

How to grow – after the show!

Components of an Ofrenda/Offering Background:

El Día de los Muertos is one of the most important and anticipated events in the Mexican calendar. Starting as early as the summer, preparations for the ofrenda begin and money is set aside to provide for the expenses the celebration requires. In addition to the ofrenda prepared for the individual ancestors, the local cemetery is refreshed with fresh coats of paint and tidying up of the graves. Items are offered out of love and respect, not fear of their family's spirits.



- Water which satiates the thirst of the spirit and represents purity and a source of life.
- Salt carries purifying elements, also a symbol of wisdom and can act as an invitation to the altar.
- Calaveras de azucar, sugar skulls, as sweets; both sugar and salt are to express the bitter and sweet aspects of life shared with those who are deceased.
- Flowers represent love and the sun; cempasúchitl or marigolds are the traditional flowers.

SS:CU:2.16; VA:cr2.3.5; VA:Re7.2.5 VA:cr1.2.4

Make an Ofrenda

To build an ofrenda, first you must decide whom you want to remember. Ask yourself these important questions: Has anyone you have known passed away? Or is there anybody who you admire that you would want to celebrate? Once you decide whom you want to honor, it is time to build your ofrenda. Remember that it is special to you and to the person or thing that you are honoring. You can be as creative as you like.

1. Find something to use as the base for your ofrenda, like a table (you can use smaller boxes to make more levels).
2. Place a photo or drawing of whom you are remembering.
3. Decorate your ofrenda with colorful paper and pictures or drawings. Skeletons are popular decorations, but your ofrenda is special to you. You can make whatever decorations you like.
4. Now decorate your ofrenda with flowers. Marigolds (cempasúchitl) are traditional, but you can use flowers that are special to you or the person you are honoring.
5. You may set out some favorite foods of the person you are honoring.
6. If you have a particular religion, you can include some special items on your ofrenda that help to honor and recall your loved one.
7. Finally, with adult help, you may want to place candles and incense on your ofrenda.



SS:CU:2.16; VA:cr2.3.5; VA:Re7.2.5 VA:cr1.2.4

How to grow - after the show!

What happens next?

This play ends with Alex and his grandmother coming together to express their grief for the loved ones they lost from 9/11. This moment is significant because it is the first time Alex has allowed his grandmother to hug him. The final moment signals that this may be the beginning of a rebuilding for Alex and his grandmother's relationship as they continue to learn about each other and create a new future that honors the ones they lost and looks forward to the life they are living.

Break students into groups and have them create brief scenes depicting what they think life for Alex and his grandmother looks like after the play has ended. Have groups act out what they think happens to the characters three weeks, six months, and one year after the events of the play. Each scene should show a progression of the relationship as we track the characters' journeys into the future.

TH:Cr.1.1.5; TH: Pr 4.1.5; TH:Pr6.1.5

Letter to Alex

la ofrenda follows Alex's story as he moves to a new place and works to process the loss of his parents. Imagine that you are one of Alex's friends back in New York and write a letter to him offering words of encouragement or advice during his time of loss and transition.

WR:Te.5.3; TH:Cr.1.1.5.c

[illegible]

How to grow – after the show!

What to Read Next

***Nine, Ten: September 11 Story* by Nora Raleigh Baskin**

A look at the days leading up to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and how that day impacted the lives of four middle schoolers.

***Towers Falling* by Jewell Parker Rhodes**

A powerful story about young people who weren't alive to witness this defining moment in history but begin to realize how much it colors their every day lives.

***The Dead Family Diaz* by P J Bracegirdle**

Every skeleton in the Land of the Dead is excited to celebrate el Día de los Muertos with the Living, but not Angelito. When Angelito is separated from his family in the Land of the Living, he's petrified—until he makes a new friend who is just as terrified of THEM as Angelito is.

***Just a Drop of Water* by Kerry O'Malley Cerra**

In this story about growing up in a difficult time in America's history, Jake Green is a cross country runner who wants to be a soldier and an American hero when he grows up. Before he can work towards these goals, September 11th happens, and it is discovered that one of the hijackers lives in Jake's town.

***The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales**

Sofia is singled out to receive a scholarship to an elite boarding school, she longs to explore life beyond the barrio, even though it means leaving her family to navigate a strange world of rich, privileged kids. It's a different mundo, but one where Sofia's traditions take on new meaning and illuminate her path.

LCT teaches in YOUR school!

Would you like to see some of these play guide activities modeled in your classroom?

Book a workshop for your class with one of LCT's teaching artists! In our pre-show workshops, our teaching artists will engage students in acting skills and themes from the play through drama activities. In our post-show workshops, students will extend their play-going experience by strengthening their personal connection to the play and deepening their understanding of the themes and characters.



Call us at 859-254-4546 x226 to book a pre or post-show workshop for your class!

To learn more about Lexington Children's Theatre and our programming for your school visit:
www.lctonstage.org/for-educators/in-school-experiences/