

THEATRE RESOURCE GUIDE

Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates

Based on the novel by Mary Mapes Dodge
Adapted for the stage by James L. Walker
Directed by Ed Moersfelder



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FOR TEACHERS

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Using this Theatre Resource Guide

This theatre resource guide for *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates* is designed to be used with students before and after attending the Festival Theatre production. The guide includes information and activities that will increase student understanding of this and other theatrical performances. You may reproduce any and all of the following pages to distribute to students or parents.



About the Author

Page 3

Introduces Mary Mapes Dodge, the creator of the Hans Brinker tale, and provides background on the novel's debut.

Setting & Historical Background

Page 4

Familiarizes students with the day-to-day realities of Dutch life in the late 19th Century.

Story Themes

Page 5

Highlights some of the story's central themes, and asks students to respond to the story.

Interview with the Playwright

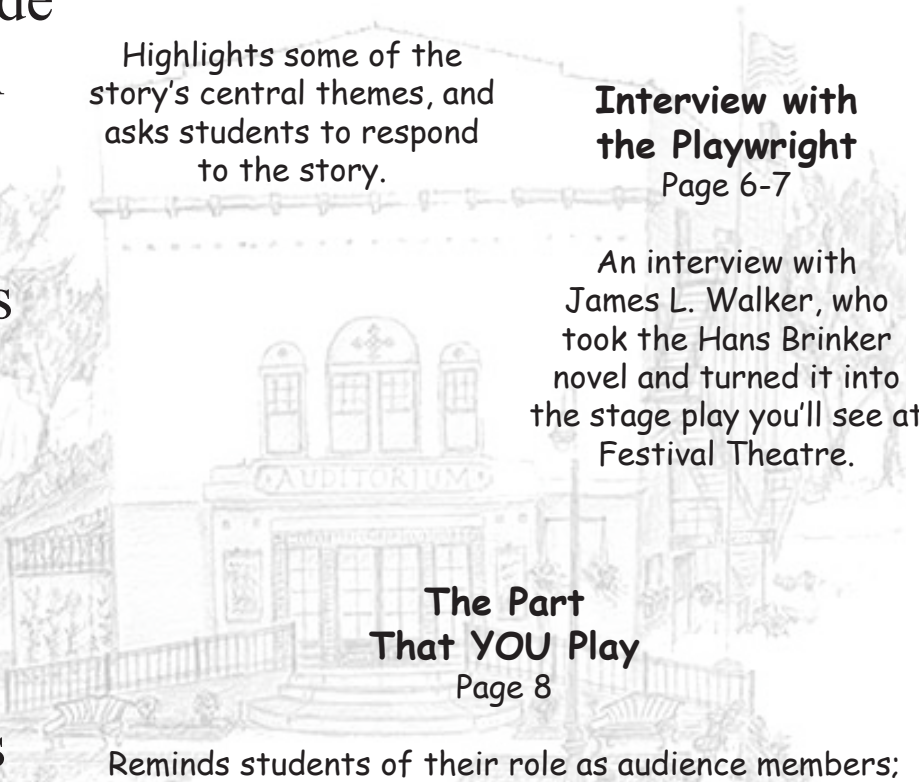
Page 6-7

An interview with James L. Walker, who took the Hans Brinker novel and turned it into the stage play you'll see at Festival Theatre.

The Part That YOU Play

Page 8

Reminds students of their role as audience members; also features post-performance discussion questions and additional resources.



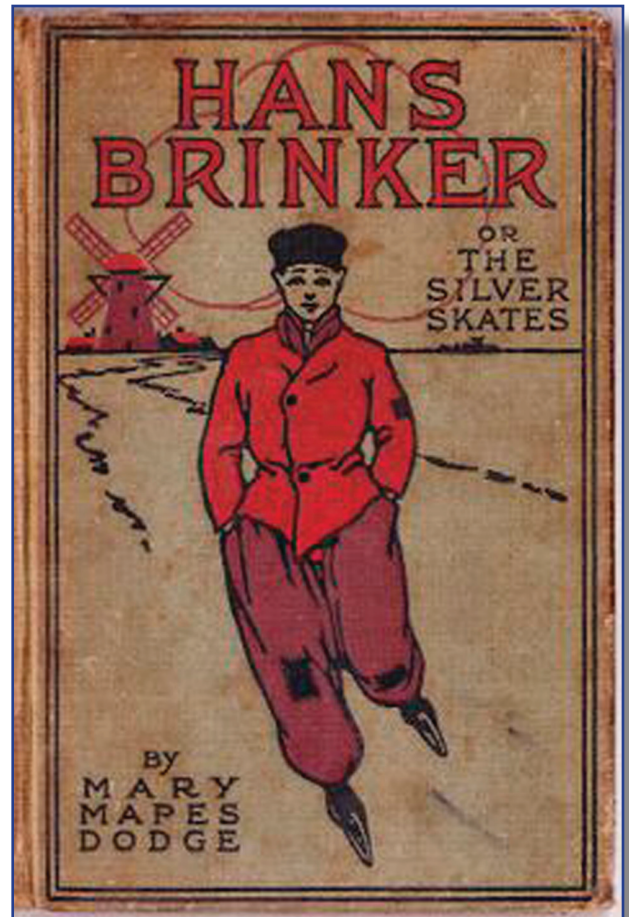
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Mary Mapes Dodge (pictured, below) was born in 1831 as Mary Elizabeth Mapes. She received a good education and was taught by tutors. At age 20, she married William Dodge. She gave birth to two sons by the time she was 25. When her youngest child was two, her husband drowned and she became a widow.

As a widow, Mrs. Dodge needed to make a living. She began her career as a writer when she worked with her father to write, edit and publish magazines. At that time she also began writing short stories which she published as "The Irvington Stories." They were well received and she was asked to write a novel. Mary then wrote "Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates."

Mary, who had never visited the Netherlands before she wrote the book, did extensive research while writing and gained much firsthand information about Dutch life from her Dutch immigrant neighbors. The book became an instant best seller and has since been continuously in print in multiple editions and formats and remains a children's classic.



History of the Story

"Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates" was first published in 1865. The novel takes place in the Netherlands and is a colorful fictional portrait of early 19th century Dutch life, as well as a tale of youthful honor.

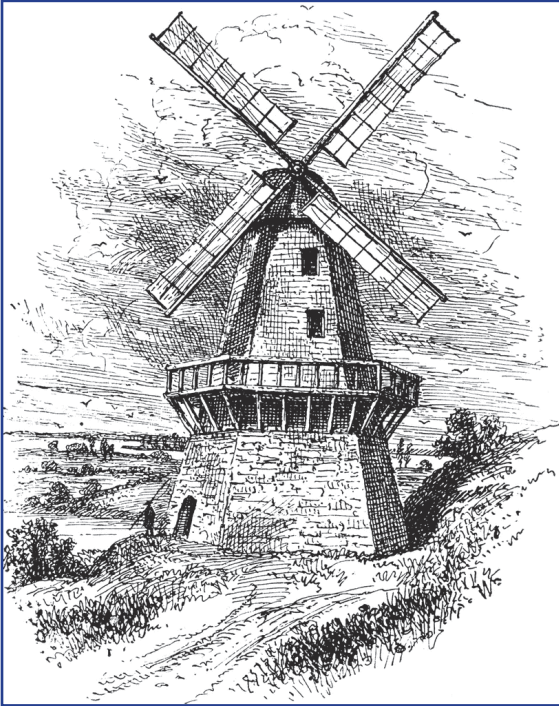
The book's title refers to the beautiful silver skates to be awarded to the winner of the ice-skating race Hans Brinker hopes to enter. The novel introduced the sport of Dutch speed skating to Americans, and in United States media Hans Brinker is still considered the classic speed skater. The novel quickly became a best seller and won a prize of 1500 francs from the French academy.

*Ice skates made
of wood, metal
and leather straps.*



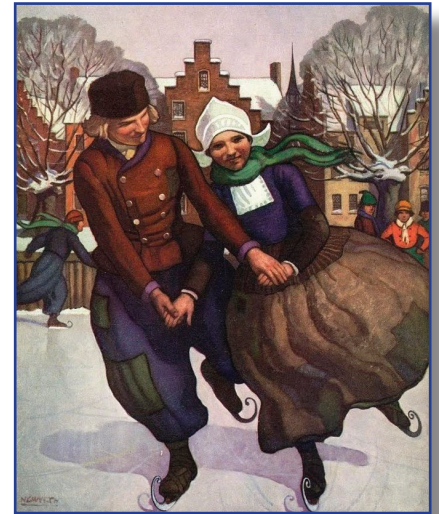
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SETTING AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



Famous for being located below sea level and held up through a system of dikes, the Netherlands is a land of many lakes and rivers. The countryside is covered with a very close network of water drainage canals. The water did not flow a lot and that was the reason that those canals froze over very fast.

In the wintertime, the Dutch skate long distances along those canals and frozen rivers to get around. Because there were more canals than roads, the people used their skates to travel from one location to the other. That was faster and more convenient than to walk all the way.



Fun Fact: Today there are 1,180 windmills in the Netherlands!



Most people were poor in those days. Treats were only available on special days. St. Nicholas Day, December 6, is the main Christmas season day in Holland, and kids would have gotten most of their gifts and treats on that day.

A small fictional story within the novel has become well known in its own right in American popular culture. The story is about a Dutch boy who saves his country by putting his finger in a leaking dike. The boy stays there all night, in spite of the cold, until the adults of the village find him and make the necessary repairs. For tourism purposes, statues of the fictional dike-plugging boy have been erected in Dutch locations such as Spaarndam, Madurodam, and Harlingen. The statues are sometimes mistakenly titled “Hans Brinker;” others are known as “Peter of Haarlem.” The story of the dike-plugging boy is, however, not widely known in the Netherlands — it is a piece of American, rather than Dutch, folklore.

STORY THEMES

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The play highlights a number of themes relating to values and honor. A number of them are identified below with questions to focus thinking as students are watching the play.

Generosity/Charity

When you watch the play and listen to the story, you will find a number of places where people in the town want to help each other. Different people in the story have different ideas about whether this is a good idea.

- What does Hans' mother say when she sends Hans to town to get porridge for Christmas breakfast?
- How does St. Nicholas define generosity when he and Hans are talking outside Dame Van Gleck's house?
- When Hilda generously wants to help Hans or Gretel get a pair of skates for the race, how does she get Hans to accept the money without thinking of it as charity?
- How does Hans display generosity when Peter's skate strap breaks?



Honoring Commitments

Just before Hans' father, Raff Brinker, was injured, he gave Dame Brinker a gold watch and asked her to keep it safe.

- What circumstances made it difficult for her to do this?
- Why did she believe it was so important not to sell the watch?
- In the end why was she glad she had honored this commitment?

Wealthy Characters vs. Poor Characters

Many of the characters in this play reside in wealthy families. The Brinker family had very little money. The play is set at Christmas time and the children are thinking of what gifts from St Nicholas would make them happy.

- For what kinds of things did the wealthy children wish for Christmas?

- What did Hans and Gretel wish for when they were playing their Christmas wish game?
- In the end, what made Hans most proud and happy?

Kindness/Bullying

There are times in this story when groups of children are mean to Hans or Gretel.

- Describe three situations where this happened in the play. What did the children say or do that felt mean?
- What did Hilda do when she felt bad about being part of the group that teased Hans and Gretel?
- How did the other children react to Hilda's actions?
- How does this apply to our society today?

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INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

The stage version of *Hans Brinker* was written specifically for Festival Theatre. James L. Walker read Mary Mapes Dodge's novel and decided it would be a perfect holiday story to bring to Festival Theatre's audience. But what is it like to write a play? Below, Mr. Walker shares his experience and provides helpful hints to anyone interested in what it takes to write a play!

What is the most challenging aspect of adapting a story to a play?

How to make it “dramatic” in the sense of how to make the story create interest and excitement in the audience. A book can very leisurely take the reader from place to place providing pages of explanation of the significance of a setting to the people who live there, or the author can easily provide us with the thoughts of several characters within a scene, and can create great tension in the reader simply by telling us what is transpiring inside a character's head. These things can't be done in the same way on stage; the stage author has to pick and choose what is important for the audience to know and find ways to make it clear to the audience how these characters think about each other, sacrificing some of the directness and explicitness of the book for the display of innuendo and intention by the performers.

Every journey has to start somewhere; how do you begin the process of writing a play?

I think a lot about the overall tone of the piece of theatre being created, as well as trying to have in the back of my mind where the story is going. The tone is in some sense the setting; *Hans Brinker* is very much an outdoor play and involves a whole village of characters, young and old. By where it's going, I mean that there are generally one or two characters I want the audience to identify with, and it is their emotional journey that the audience is following. In the case of *Hans Brinker*, it is of course, primarily Hans himself. What does he learn about himself and about the world around him in the course of the play? How have the events of the play changed him, for better or worse? Once I have an idea of the answers to these questions, I feel I have a better sense of how to start bringing the story to life on stage.



What advice would you give to a young writer who is just beginning to explore writing scripts?

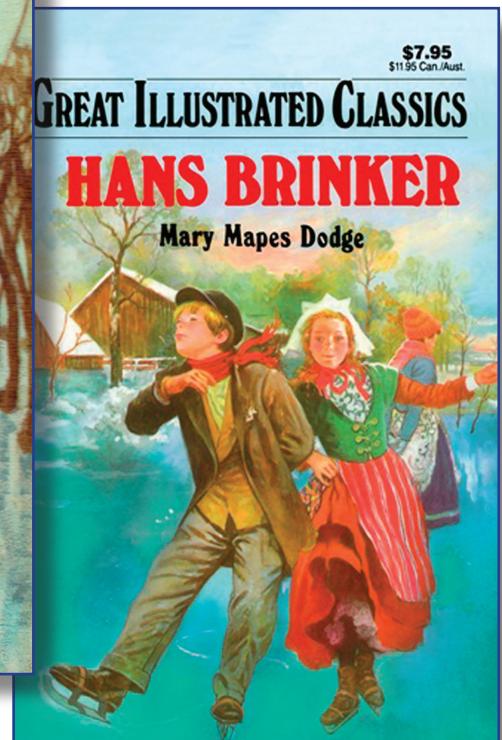
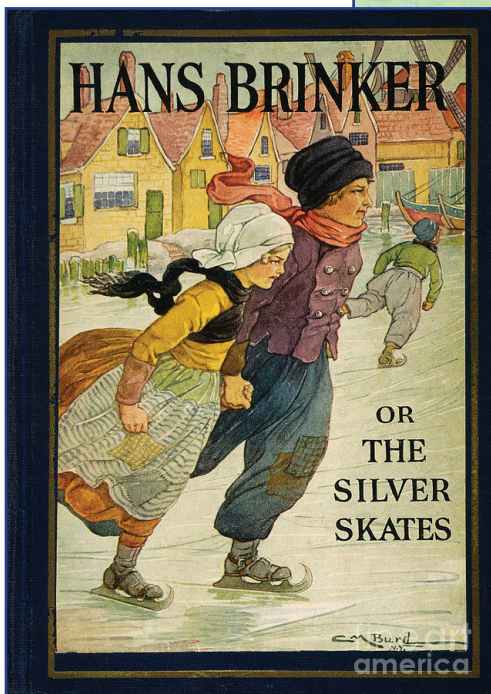
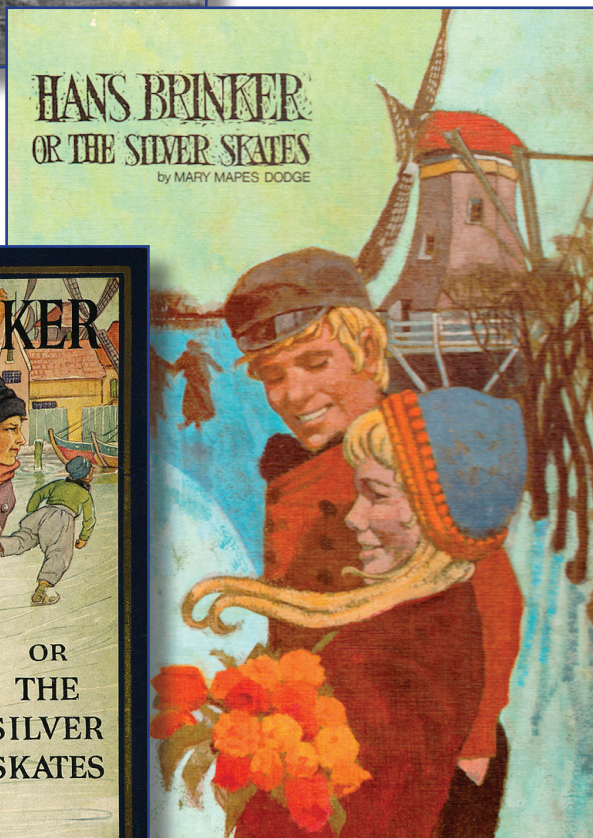
Write what interests you, and get to know the medium you are writing for. It's hard to write much about something you don't care about. It is also important that you know how the medium you are writing for can aid you in telling your story. A book is very different from a play, and both are very different from a film. Work to understand the tools the medium can offer you to help you present the story you must tell.



What do you like most about a story that can be told on a stage, versus a story being told on the page?

I like the fact that so much information can be conveyed so succinctly by having the actors perform it for you. For instance: two young people see each other for the first time and fall very much in love. In a book, it might take two pages of writing to convey to the reader the desperate passion both feel for each other, how thunderstruck they are at their first meeting, how they've never seen anyone so remarkable before in their lives. On stage, you can simply have them look at each other at a party and have each say "Hello". How the actors say that "hello" and what they each do before and after it, without dialogue, will tell us most of what the author of the book needed two pages to explain to us! As a playwright, you rarely have to have someone say: "And now Hans was really upset". The actor playing Hans can show us how upset Hans is through his use of the dialogue and his actions.

James L. Walker, Playwright



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THE PART THAT YOU PLAY

Theatre Etiquette

To prepare for presenting *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates*, the actors memorized their lines and practiced their movements. They worked with director Ed Moersfelder who helped them move about the stage and play their parts well. The costume and set designers planned with the director and created a look that was historically correct. The stage manager is ready to make sure everyone on stage and backstage does the right thing at the right time. All Festival Theatre needs now is

YOU.

YOU have a part to play in *Hans Brinker*. You are the audience. Your part requires you to listen carefully and watch closely. It's okay to laugh or applaud if you enjoy the play, but remember that you and the actors are in the same room. Talking or whispering to friends during the performance might distract the actors. Help them play their parts well by playing YOUR part well.

Reacting to the Performance

After the performance, share your experience of *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates* with your class, family, and friends:

Who was the most memorable character and why?

What did you learn about Dutch life in the 1800s?

How are Hans' life and times different than yours today? How are they the same?

What are some challenges about telling this story as a play? How might this story be different if it were a movie or a book?

How did Hans and his family handle the challenges they faced?

What was your favorite part of the play and why?

Resources

To learn more...

<http://www.biography.com/people/st-nicholas-204635>

<http://www.iamexpat.nl/expat-page/the-netherlands/the-dutch-and-water-in-the-netherlands>

http://www.librarypoint.org/mary_mapes_dodge

Visit www.festivaltheatre.org or call 715.483.3387 for information about Arts Education opportunities at St. Croix Festival Theatre.