



*Special thanks to the Kulas Foundation
for their support of Freak The Mighty*



Cleveland Play House & Seattle Rep present

FREAK THE MIGHTY

FAMILY GUIDE

Welcome to Cleveland Play House

Cleveland Play House believes theatre can be a powerful space for learning, empathy, connection, and healing. Our education and engagement programming is deeply trauma-informed, meaning we recognize that young people and families may arrive at the theatre carrying a wide range of life experiences—both visible and invisible.

Freak The Mighty is a story filled with humor, imagination, friendship, and hope. It also includes themes of trauma, domestic violence, grief, and emotional harm. These moments are included not to shock audiences, but to encourage thoughtful conversation, understanding, and compassion.

This guide is designed to support young people, parents, and caregivers as they reflect on the play together in ways that feel safe, respectful, and supportive.

WHY WE TELL STORIES LIKE THIS

At CPH, we believe young people benefit when adults approach difficult topics with honesty, care, and openness rather than silence or avoidance.

Freak the Mighty reminds us that:

- **Young people often carry complex thoughts and emotions, even when they are not outwardly expressed.**
- **Experiences of trauma or loss can affect how people see themselves and others.**
- **Keeping feelings inside can sometimes feel protective, while connection and support can help people feel less alone.**
- **Friendship, imagination, trust, and compassion can play an important role in resilience and healing.**

Our trauma-informed approach recognizes that every audience member may respond differently to the story. There is no “right” way to feel after seeing the play, and all reactions are valid.

IF THE PLAY BRINGS UP SOMETHING PERSONAL

CPH wants young people and their families to know:

- **You are not alone.**
- **Support and care are available.**
- **Reaching out to someone you trust can be an important step.**

Young people and families may choose to connect with:

- **A trusted adult or caregiver**
- **A teacher, school counselor, or social worker**
- **Community-based or school-supported mental health resources**

We are grateful to share this experience with you and hope the story encourages meaningful conversation, empathy, and connection.



Meet Rodman Philbrick

by Inés Joris

Rodman Philbrick grew up on the coast of New Hampshire and began writing at the age of 16. For many years, he wrote mystery novels. When someone suggested he try writing fiction for children, he initially doubted he could do it because he did not have children of his own.

However, after giving it more thought, he realized that a remarkable story had been unfolding right in his own backyard: a friendship between two boys that he often observed from his window. That friendship ultimately inspired the characters of Max and Kevin in his 1993 novel *Freak The Mighty*.

The young man who inspired the character of Kevin lived around the corner from Philbrick, and over time, the author became friends with the boy's mother and stepfather. Philbrick recalled:

"I went to his house one time, the very first time, and he opened the door — he would have been in sixth grade. He'd been told I was an author, and this is before I'd ever written a book for kids. And he began quizzing me on my vocabulary, because he had an immense vocabulary, and he wanted to see if he knew words that I didn't, which was true."

When asked how the novel's themes of courage, imagination, and overcoming obstacles would translate to the stage version — especially for today's audiences — Philbrick explained that, although *Freak The Mighty* is now more than 30 years old, its themes remain universal.

He noted that everyone experiences moments in childhood of feeling isolated or out of place. "I can remember days when I think I needed a friend in school, and everybody's had that experience," he said. "So, an adult audience watching this is going to recognize a lot of those stages, which are classic kinds of stages that we have to go through as we become adults."

TO DO:

Write about a time you felt you didn't belong.

Write about a time when you formed an unexpected friendship.

Where Friendship Takes the Stage: An Interview with Actors

by Jenna Messina & Kelsey Witt

In *Freak The Mighty*, friendship is more than a theme — it's something that lives both onstage and off. The powerful bond between Kevin “Freak” Avery and Maxwell Kane is strengthened by the real-life friendship between the actors who portray them, Cornelius Kittrell (Kevin) and Netza Jimenez (Max).

At its core, the musical tells the story of “two kids who look vastly different than the world is used to” who “spark a friendship and go on adventures together,” as Kittrell explains. Bringing that bond to life requires honesty, trust, and a real connection — something both actors have built over time. Reflecting on their relationship, Jimenez shares, “You know, on stage, it’s like, I don’t even have to act. Because it was so natural from the first time that we met each other... we were like, we’re gonna be friends.”

That sense of ease and authenticity is matched by intention. Kittrell notes, “The more that you’re able to talk about characters like these who have such an intimate relationship, I feel like naturally, it’s just gonna align with the kind of relationship that you share with the person off stage.” Their work on the show has deepened their empathy for one another, allowing their performances to feel genuine and lived-in.

This trust is especially important in moments of physical and emotional vulnerability. When Max lifts Kevin onto his shoulders — one of the musical’s most iconic images — it requires communication and care. Jimenez recalls that this moment in rehearsal “really just helped unlock that joy that they both feel,” while Kittrell explains that it opened “lines for communication about comfortability,” strengthening both their performance and their friendship.

Music also deepens their bond. Kittrell says singing helps him “tap into a very emotional part” of the story, while Jimenez believes the songs “add that magic” that brings the characters’ journey to life.

Ultimately, *Freak The Mighty* shows how friendship can inspire growth, courage, and change. The connection between Kittrell and Jimenez creates a powerful cycle: Their real-life friendship enriches their performances, and their onstage storytelling strengthens their bond — reminding audiences that true friendship helps us become stronger, together.

TO DO:

Discuss how Kevin and Max’s friendship develops in *Freak The Mighty*. Use the actors’ insights to guide your thinking.

Write a short scene or dialogue showing a moment of friendship that builds trust.





Collaboration Is On Key

by Kelsey Witt

In *Freak The Mighty*, audiences witness the growth of an unexpected and meaningful friendship between Max and Kevin. Ryan Fielding Garrett, the composer of *Freak The Mighty*, explains that this relationship stands apart from the romantic storylines often found in musicals. Instead, the show centers on connection, trust, and the power of friendship.

Garrett shared that audiences will see “an unlikely friendship between people that you don’t get to see on stage very often. There is something beautiful about that connection and also the beauty and power of friendship, which I think in and of itself, is a story that is not told very often... finding a true buddy to go through life with, and that’s a really powerful thing.”



Ryan Fielding Garrett



Anthony Drewe

The theme of friendship extends beyond the story itself and into the creative process behind the musical. The collaboration between book writer Anthony Drewe and composer Ryan Fielding Garrett reflects the same sense of trust, communication, and partnership explored in the play. Although *Freak The Mighty* is their first musical together, they have collaborated on other creative projects over the years.

Drewe described how their work on the musical began during time spent together in France:

“We literally wrote the first three songs while we were together on that first sort of holiday together. But because Ryan lives in New York and I live either in France or in the UK, it was a very unusual process for me... it grew organically, but across the Atlantic.”

Garrett explained that collaboration requires careful listening and shared understanding:

“With working with Ants (Drewe), as a lyricist, every song is bespoke. So... getting aligned on what that temperature of what we’re about to dive into is really important and has been really fruitful for us.”

Drewe also noted that, no matter who he is working with, the creative process always begins the same way: “a blank sheet of paper.” Through collaboration, communication, and trust, that blank page becomes a story filled with friendship, imagination, and heart.

TO DO: COLLABORATIVE DRAWING ACTIVITY

Working with a partner, take turns drawing on the same piece of paper for one minute at a time. During the first round, partners should not speak or look at each other’s work while drawing. After three turns, look at the final picture together.

Next, try the activity again, but this time allow partners to communicate and collaborate throughout the process.

Afterward, reflect together:

- How did the two drawings differ?
- What changed when communication was allowed?
- How can collaboration help people feel more connected, supported, or successful?

This activity encourages teamwork, communication, and creative problem-solving while showing how collaboration can strengthen relationships and shared goals.



Understanding Kevin “Freak” Avery in *Freak The Mighty*

by Pamela DiPasquale with Sofiya Cheyenne & Talleri McRae

Kevin Avery, who calls himself “Freak,” is a central character in *Freak The Mighty*. He is a little person with a disability, and he is also imaginative, confident, and deeply intelligent. Kevin loves stories of knights and quests, and he uses his creativity to transform the world around him.

When thinking about Kevin, it’s important to remember that disability is not just about a person’s body. It is also about how the world is designed. The social model of disability reminds us that many challenges come from environments or attitudes that are not built with all people in mind, rather than something that needs to be “fixed” in a person. Kevin’s experiences reflect this: he navigates a world that isn’t always accessible, while bringing his own strengths and perspective to it.

Kevin’s disability affects his physical body, not his intelligence or imagination. Like many little people and disabled individuals, he uses adaptations and support when needed, but he also leads with his ideas, humor, and sense of adventure. People with dwarfism and other disabilities live full, independent lives across many fields and interests.

As audience members, practicing respect and awareness matters. Some key ideas:

- Use respectful language (for example: “person with a disability,” “person with dwarfism,” “disabled,” “little person,” or simply the person’s name).
- Do not touch someone or their mobility devices without permission.
- Avoid staring. Treat disabled people with dignity as you would anyone else.
- Be curious, but also thoughtful and respectful.

Kevin does not exist to be pitied or “inspiring” for others. He is a complex, fully realized person. His friendship with Max shows how different strengths can come together in powerful ways.

TO DO:

After watching the play, describe how others responded to Kevin. How could they do better?

Kevin reminds us that access, respect, and understanding help everyone thrive. What can we learn from his imagination, leadership, and perspective?



Understanding Max “Mighty” Kane in *Freak The Mighty*

by Peter Ogbuji

In *Freak The Mighty*, Max Kane lives with the emotional impact of violence, loss, and fear connected to his family history. Because his father has caused harm through abuse and violence, Max worries that he may someday become the same kind of person. These fears affect the way Max sees himself and how he relates to others around him.

Max is often misunderstood because of his large physical size and quiet personality. People sometimes make assumptions about him before getting to know him, which can leave him feeling isolated and unsure of his own worth. Rather than expressing his emotions openly, Max tends to keep his thoughts and fears inside, a response that can develop in young people who have experienced fear, instability, or emotional pain.

Throughout the play, Max struggles with questions about identity, choice, and belonging. He wonders whether people are defined by their past experiences or whether they can create a different future for themselves. Over time, Max begins to recognize that he is not responsible for the harmful actions of others and that his future is shaped by his own values, choices, and relationships.

The story also highlights the importance of connection, empathy, and support. Through friendship and shared experiences, Max slowly begins to see his own strengths, including his compassion, loyalty, and emotional awareness. He learns that strength is not about intimidation or control, but about kindness, courage, and the ability to care for others.

By the end of the story, Max begins to understand that healing and personal growth take time. His journey reminds audiences that people can move beyond fear and develop a stronger sense of self through trust, resilience, and supportive relationships.

TO DO:

Throughout the play, some people make assumptions about Max before getting to know him. How did these assumptions affect him, and what could others have done to show more understanding, empathy, or support?

Max reminds audiences that not all emotional struggles or challenges are visible. What can we learn from his resilience, self-growth, and ability to build trust and connection with others?



Healing Through Friendship

Provided by Journey Center for Safety and Healing

At Journey Center for Safety and Healing, we know the power of connection can change a life. In *Freak The Mighty*, the friendship between Max and Kevin shows how kindness, acceptance, and encouragement can help someone feel seen and valued. Their story reminds us that no child should face fear, violence, or hardship alone. If the play brought up strong emotions for you, remember that it is okay to pause, reflect, and reach out to someone you trust for support.

Child abuse and exposure to violence can impact children far beyond childhood. Studies show abused children are at a greater risk for future violence, victimization, and criminal behavior as adults. But supportive relationships with caring adults, friends, teachers, and community members can help children heal and build resilience.

Every child deserves safety, support, and hope. By speaking up, listening without judgment, and creating healthy relationships, we can help break cycles of violence and build stronger futures for young people in our community.

We're here as a resource with a 24-hour help line for anyone experiencing abuse or violence. If you know someone who may need support, encouragement, or guidance, please reach out. No one should face these challenges alone.

24-HOUR HELPLINE: **216.391.4357 (HELP)**

WEBSITE: **journeyneo.org**





Freak The Mighty

Ohio Learning Standards Guide for Teachers

OHIO LEARNING STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

This production of *Freak The Mighty* supports multiple strands of the Ohio Learning Standards (OLS) for English Language Arts and Theatre, particularly for grades 6–8, with extension opportunities for grades 9–10.

OHIO LEARNING STANDARDS • ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

READING: LITERATURE

RL.6.2 / RL.7.2 / RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text.

- Students analyze themes such as friendship, courage, identity, and resilience, and trace how these ideas develop through Max's journey.
- Viewing the play supports understanding how theme can be communicated through performance, dialogue, music, and staging, not just written text.

RL.6.3 / RL.7.3 / RL.8.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., setting, characters, plot).

- Students examine how Max and Kevin's contrasting abilities shape their actions and decisions.
- The theatrical adaptation offers a clear opportunity to analyze character relationships through physical storytelling.

WRITING

W.6.1 / W.7.1 / W.8.1

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

- Students can argue how Max grows as a character or what defines heroism in the story, citing moments from the production.

SPEAKING & LISTENING

SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

- The play provides a shared artistic experience that supports discussion on sensitive topics such as disability, grief, and self-identity.

RL.7.7 / RL.8.7

Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story stays faithful to or departs from the text.

- Students can compare the novel *Freak the Mighty* with the stage adaptation, analyzing how theatrical elements deepen emotional impact.

W.7.3 / W.8.3

Write narratives using effective technique and relevant details.

- Students may write from Max's point of view, Kevin's imagined future, or a moment not shown onstage, drawing on character insight.

OHIO LEARNING STANDARDS • THEATRE

CREATING & PERFORMING

6CR/PE: Drama/Theatre

- 6.3CR: Examine the basic principles and elements of various theatrical genres
- 6.3PE: Examine and demonstrate how theatrical artists conceptualize and convey an idea or message.

Students can analyze how actors physically communicate Max's size, Kevin's imagination, and emotional shifts without relying on narration.

RESPONDING & CONNECTING

6RE/PO, 7RE/PO: Drama/Theatre

- 6.1RE, 7.1RE: Express and compare personal reactions to various theatrical elements using appropriate theatrical vocabulary and terminology.
- 6.2CO: Explain how the actions and motivations of characters in a drama or theatre work impact perspective of a community or culture.

The production encourages students to articulate emotional and thematic responses, supporting arts literacy.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CONNECTIONS *(aligned with Ohio's SEL competencies)*

- A3. 1.c: Seek appropriate support from a trusted adult when help is needed academically, socially or emotionally
- A3. 3.c: Identify and utilize appropriate processes for reporting unsafe behaviors or situations for self and others
- C1. 2.c: Demonstrate respect across school, community, face-to-face and virtual settings, when viewpoints or perceptions differ
- C1. 3.c: Demonstrate empathy through understanding of others' feelings and acknowledgement of their perspective
- C3. 1.c: Discuss how positive or negative stereotypes of an individual or group can be unconscious and may lead to discrimination and prejudice
- D1. 1.c: Demonstrate the ability to actively listen and understand multiple perspectives