

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



"Ashes, Ashes" is about the effects of pollution on children infused with mystical elements of witches from Russian and Indian mythology.

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## Play teaches value of life

### Cautionary tale uses magic to reach children

**By: Simrat Sharma**

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Imagine a world with no sun, no azure sky and no sign of the galaxies beyond ours. Trees and flowers have been annihilated, and nature's bounty has been exploited into extinction.

Some say future generations face such a world. Others believe that industrial pollution and its ramifications are resolvable problems. "Ashes, Ashes," a play featured in the University Co-op Cohen New Works Festival, addresses these problems plaguing people today. Moreover, it attempts to translate them for the demographic that will be most affected by them, but also may find them hardest to comprehend: children.

The play is most striking in the way it weaves the humanistic themes of love and compassion with mythological overtones of magic and witchcraft to produce a dark tale that raises a child's consciousness to larger questions of environmental issues.

The play is centered around a little girl, Nini (played by theatre and dance freshman Yvette Diaz), who lives near a power plant. Her world has gone dark because thick ash has clouded the sun, and there are no plants, seeds or flowers. All light in her world is electrical, says Eve Tulbert, a theatre and dance graduate student and playwright of "Ashes, Ashes."

In the play, as each life withers away due to industrial ash, the characters' "names" are forever lost to the ones they love. The death of Nini's mother and the ritualistic throwing of her name down the power plant's coal shaft leads Nini into a dark, alter-world, where the lines between myth and reality blur. Here lies a witch who echoes our lost perspective as a race exploiting the planet. She holds the power to bring the world above her back to normal by passing ancient seeds back through Nini.

Tulbert said she was compelled to write this play after witnessing firsthand how industrial pollution was affecting children in a small Chicago community.

"I met with teachers who spoke of kids with asthma due to their constant inhalation of air leeching with mercury ash from nearby plants," Tulbert said. "These power plants refused, in the face of overwhelming sickness, to change their practices, because they were apparently well within federal limits."

The play is very physical, with dynamic characters and movements that accentuate the dialogues. Director Dustin Wills said he thought the expression of the human body in all its electricity was an aspect he had to focus in on.

"The hardest part about making this play was preserving its magical elements while bringing it to reality," Wills said. "With people falling down a hole and depicting souls of the departed, technicality was a challenge we faced."

Unlike the frivolous themes usually associated with children's plays, "Ashes, Ashes" speaks to children and their parents, alike, about a contemporary problem in fairy-tale language.

"Ashes, Ashes" shows at 9 p.m. tonight at UT's Oscar G. Brockett Theatre.

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