Nixie Out of the Water: A Humanities Program Guide

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Nixie Out of the Water

Ruth Andrews, playwright. Beverly Smith, composer.

FLYOVER ART

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Introduction

Nixie Out of the Water is an operetta produced as a collaboration between playwright Ruth Andrews and composer Beverly Smith developed over the course of several years. In this current form, *Nixie* is presented as a traveling performance for venues across the state of Michigan. This play is meant to get people to think about the importance of water in their lives and their communities through a story inspired by Finnish folklore and particularly, characters and stories adapted and reimagined from the Finnish national epic *Kalevala.* Finnish culture has played an important role in several key areas of Michigan since immigrants first arrived in the 1860s, particularly in areas such as the Western Upper Peninsula and metro Detroit. As with all of Michigan's myriad Indigenous and ethnic communities, Finns contribute to our state's broader cultural heritage in various ways and the folklore they brought with them is one area that creates space for ongoing inspiration. This play is truly inspired.

This guide has been developed to inspire organizations that host performances of *Nixie Out of the Water* in adapting and creating supplementary programming to deepen the impact of the play's message, to help audiences internalize their understandings of the importance of water and the environment in their own lives, and to provide audiences and organizations with resources for further exploration. Feel free to read, adapt, and share this guide! Like folktales themselves, the ideas and themes of this play are best internalized and enacted through reflection, active learning, and sharing. We hope this guide helps you to do just that!

How to Use this Guide

This guide has been created to provide a range of information and use options for you. Understanding that different users will have different needs, the materials are arranged so that people can either reference necessary information quickly, engage more deeply with the contents to ensure broad general knowledge of the subject matter, or to seek outside sources for further information. The sections of the guide and what they offer are as follow:

Finland, Finnish Folklore, and Kalevala: This is a broad introduction to the culture that this play engages, offering the reader a basic sense of Finland today as well as the historical and cultural features that contribute to the importance of Finnish folklore as a representation of the Finnish nation and as the source of inspiration for numerous artists and scholars from around the world–including *Nixie's* playwright, composer, and humanities guide writer right here in Michigan!

Nixie's Inspirations: This section describes the Finnish source materials (characters, names, storylines) that the play engages.

Programming Activities: This section offers a variety of program activities for use by performance venues as well as groups that may attend performances such as scouting troops, day camps, and more.

Readings and Sources List: Want to find out where we got our information from or get deeper into environmental humanities or Finnish folklore and epic poetry? Here you are!

Glossary and Pronunciation Key: Come here for key concepts, definitions and relevant English and Finnish terms (including pronunciations of the Finnish) introduced in this guide.

We hope that *Nixie Out of the Water* serves a variety of purposes: we want to entertain you with high quality performers presenting our unique script and score; we want to take the themes and characters from tales from the past, together reimagining them for the present; we want audiences to take these ideas and put them to use in their own lives. Why does water matter and how does traditional wisdom help us consider how to protect water and the flora and fauna (including humans!) that call it home and need it not just for survival but for a good life?

Finland, Finnish Folklore, and *Kalevala*

Map of Finland. European Commission Joint Research Council. Wikimedia Commons. CC by 4.0 license.

In the far northern reaches of Western Europe is the country of Finland, nestled between Sweden to the west and Russia to the east. Finland is about the size of the

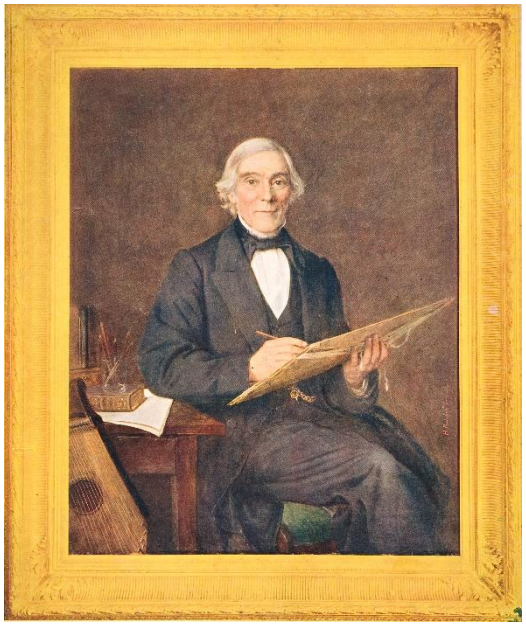
state of Montana and has a population of about 5.6 million people. Most Finns live in the southern third of the country, with around 20% of the total population living in the metropolitan area surrounding the capital city of Helsinki, located on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Modern Finland is regarded as an advanced, affluent, well-functioning society with regular placements at or near the tops of rankings by the World Happiness Report, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, and the World Press Freedom Index, among others. Finland's current status as one of the world's most enviable countries to come from has not always existed, and, as with every society, there are areas in the Finnish social structure that must improve in order to offer all citizens and residents the high standard of living for which Finland is famous.

Culturally and geographically, Finland was, for centuries, a remote, underdeveloped backwater region that supported a small population consisting of three key ethnic groups: the Indigenous Sámi whose current traditional lands are in the far north of the country (though originally found throughout much of Finland), the ethnic Finns, a cultural community with distant linguistic and cultural ties to the Sámi, and the ethnic Swedes who, after the end of the Viking era, came to settle the western coastal areas of Finland starting in the 1100s contributing to the development of Finland as part of the early Swedish kingdom. Sweden retained control of Finland as it developed into a political entity until 1809, when it became a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. During this period, Finland retained Swedish as the official language of the country, Lutheranism as the official religion, and other social norms and practices were also protected. Russia also implemented a system where Finns had a great deal of autonomy in governance, with many of the day-to-day affairs of state, including trade, a developing communications and transportation infrastructure, and banking (including after 1863 a separate Finnish currency, the *markka*), education, and internal defense managed by Finnish institutions. This autonomy gave Finns the chance to practice the functions of running a modern state outside of high-stakes areas such as international diplomacy and warfare, which, by 1917 when the Russian Empire collapsed during the Bolshevik Revolution, provided Finland with the ability to successfully declare independence and develop into the Republic of Finland, which has functioned with only a few constitutional amendments to the present.

Significant cultural differences with neighboring Sweden and Russia have always marked Finland as a unique place. Unlike the Indo-European family of languages languages spoken by 97% of Eurasians including Swedes (in the family's Germanic branch) and Russians (part of the Slavic branch), Finns and Sámi both speak a language belonging to the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family, a group of languages primarily found across the far north of Russia, with western outlying languages including Finnish, Estonian, the Sámi languages, and to the far south, Hungarian, among others. These far-flung languages are thought to have developed

along the Ural mountains thousands of years ago before branching east into the far reaches of Siberia, and as far west as Finland, the Baltic states, and, of course, Hungary. While time and distance have created differences between these cultures over time, sometimes glints of cultural similarities can still be seen as a result of the unique relationship that exists between a language and the culture that uses and continually develops it.

These cultural differences became important to the Finnish cultural elite during the 19th century when Finland was part of the Russian Empire. Although Swedish was the language of government, commerce, and education from the 1200s on (and the language of religion after the Reformation), Swedish speakers constituted less than 20% of the Finnish population at their peak. This unique situation meant that, though Finnish speakers were the ethnic majority in the country, they were the cultural minority when it came to actual power and influence. Oddly, it was the Swedish-speaking ruling and cultural class that put an end to this in the 19th century: recognizing that the connection with the Swedish kingdom had been irretrievably broken and putting voice to their resistance toward becoming culturally and linguistically Russian, the mantra for the developing Finnish cultural elite–originally stated in the Swedish language by Adolf Ivar Arwidsson–became “Swedes we are no longer, and Russians we do not want to become, so let us be Finns.”



Elias Lönnrot by Bernhard Reinhold, 1872. Heritage Agency of Finland. CCx4.0 license.

This mantra was rapidly put to use in the following decades, with two notable centers of action: the academic community surrounding the university in Turku (which

was moved to Helsinki after Turku's Great Fire of 1827) and subsequent activities in the arts community centered in Helsinki and the nearby lakeside community of Järvenpää which was firmly rooted in National Romanticism. The earlier academic activist movements began as early as the late 1700s but were coalesced in three key figures, all of whom began their studies at the University of Turku in 1822: the statesman Johan Vilhelm Snellman, the poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg, and the folklorist and linguist Elias Lönnrot. All but Lönnrot were born to Swedish-speaking homes and all contributed to Finnishness as a practical way of life through the channels of education, law, commerce, government, and language formalization and culture-building. Lönnrot, inspired by the works of his professors and their contemporaries, wrote his scholarly theses on the Finnish mythological figure of Väinämöinen, aspects of whom contribute to the central figures of our play. Lönnrot was concerned with taking the body of oral epic poetry incorporating mythological, historical, and emotional themes and organizing storylines into a single, linear plot. He wrote multiple versions of such a narrative with the 1849 version being the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* known around the world today. While not central to our uses here, it is worthwhile to highlight that this was the first major work published in Finnish that wasn't tied to religious or governmental functions, and it proved to the world that Finnish, still a primarily oral language, was capable of producing monumental literary works and of growing to accommodate a modernizing society.

Pentti Lyytinen Recites Poems in a Cottage in Savo by Robert Wilhelm Ekman, 1848. National Gallery of Finland. CC0 1.0 license.

This work inspired subsequent waves of cultural nationalism in Finland in the realms of music, literature, art, and more, as seen in the music of Jean Sibelius, the works of painters Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Eero Järnefelt, and Pekka Halonen, and the plays and literature of Aleksis Kivi, among many others. This embrace of Finnish culture also resulted in the Swedish-speaking elite accepting the charge given by Snellman to adapt Finnish language as the language of everyday speech, government, and public life. Today, the Swedish speaking minority represents approximately 5% of the population when at its height, it represented at least 15%.

The work of these people led to *Kalevala's* role as the most recognized feature of Finnish cultural life and its application in everyday life ranging from the name of a heavy equipment manufacturer to memes featuring Väinämöinen. While deep understanding of the original mythology may be lacking among everyday people, these themes, stories, and words are available for people around the world to read, reflect upon, and use in inspired ways. In our play, storylines, characters and their archetypes, and the innate concern for environmental balance seen in *Kalevala* stories serve as the basis for our exploration of water as a source of beauty, culture, and *life.*

Nixie's **Inspirations**

Ilmatar by Robert Wilhelm Ekman, 1860. Oil on paper. National Gallery of Finland. CC0 1.0 license.

Nixie Out of the Water is based first and foremost on the importance of water in the Finnish epic: the first story of the epic relates the sea birth of the culture hero Väinämöinen from his mother, known variously as Ilmatar (maiden of the air), Aallotar (maiden of the waves), and Luonnotar (maiden of creation) depending on the actions she engages and the settings in which her actions take place. Luonnotar shapes the landforms and Väinämöinen subsequently creates the conditions for humans to live on the land, namely by inventing agriculture, planting the forests with trees, and instituting the practice of reserving natural spaces for birds and other creatures. After this, the cultural conditions of the *Kalevala* are set, particularly with Väinämöinen's reputation for being the wisest person in the world attracting attention from the brash young Joukahainen, who challenges the sage to a singing contest and losing badly when he is sung into the swamp and must give up his sister, Aino, in exchange for his life. Joukahainen is but one of several young men whose impetuous, brazen behavior gets him in trouble in various ways, but in this play, Joukahainen is melded with Väinämöinen, using the creative license that exists when connecting epic poetry with popular culture to create new meanings for contemporary audiences. The dragonfly characters Sini and Kati also connect with Finnish mythology: both are listed in scholar Christfried Ganander's 1789 dictionary of Finnish and relevant Sámi and Swedish folkloric and mythological terms, *Mytologia Fennica.* Both are an *emuu,* or female spirit responsible for the guidance and control of living entities including animals and trees; Sini's name derives from Sinisirkku, who controls forests and has connections with bears while Kati controls trees. These *emuu* spirits were important intercessors between humans and the flora and fauna with which they interacted and upon which they depended for their own lives.

The word *nixie* is an English-language term for a water spirit related to those found in folklore in many cultures, including in Finland, where it is known as a *näkki.* While water spirits have different connotations attached to them, varying by culture, and sometimes within a given culture, varying by form, they are often beings with whom humans have unique interactions that highlight the relationship between nature and culture that humans constantly traverse and negotiate. Water is a realm that offers unique challenges for human interactions but is also essential to our lives. It is a substance that can be dangerous to humans, but also is a source of comfort, enjoyment, and calm. The *näkki* in Finnish folklore is actually a frightening creature that often tricks unwitting humans into the water to join it and then causes humans to drown (much like mermaids in many cultures). In a basic sense, this creature was used to explain accidental drownings, and also to warn children against being too careless in the water. Between *emuu* spirits governing otters, fish, and other natural beings, and *näkki* spirits trying to get us to join them, the water could be a busy place! In this play, much like in pre-Christian Finland when there was a much smaller distance between what we consider nature and what we consider culture, creatures can change form,

humans and animals and spirits can all communicate, and humans are understood to have a reciprocal relationship with the environment and the non-human beings that inhabit it: trees, fish, nixies, and water itself all live and breathe, and they—we—all depend on one another for our mutual protection and wellbeing.

Nixie is a musical production which engages a variety of inspirations from Beethoven to Finnish folk music with hints of Sibelius. It should be noted that *Kalevala* poetry was traditionally recited in a specific poetic meter known as trochaic tetrameter: each line features eight syllables. A true trochaic tetrameter features two such lines, and this is the case with *Kalevala:* an 8-syllable line of poetry is complemented by a second line that typically relates directly to the previous line, both in musical/poetic structure, and in wording. Both the playwright and composer do just as Lönnrot, the National Romantic artists, and, indeed, the original epic singers did: they find inspiration in familiar arts and in traditional stories and shape these ideas into something that not only pays tribute to the stories and musics that came before them, but are unique, distinctive, and created works of art in their own right. In doing so, these creative artists are joining artistic forebears in bringing the past into the present, and, it is hoped, as Lönnrot did with the literary epic *Kalevala,* leaving “a trail for singers”...and poets, and actors, and artists, and those who love water and the world it helps create for us.

Programming Activities

The following activities are designed for either as-is use or adaptation. When adapted from another source, the source is cited.

Water mural
Primary audience: K-4
Supplies needed: Spooled art paper, scissors, magazines (for collage cuttings), crayons, markers, pens, pencils, glue, other art supplies (glitter, fabrics, other materials that can be glued to paper surface).

Using a suitable length of spooled art paper, participants can use collage, drawing, mosaic, small written texts, etc., to create visual representations of the importance of water. Facilitators can pose questions to guide the expressions for a variety of ages:

- What is your favorite activity to do with water? Why?
- What is your favorite animal that lives in or near water?
- Where is your favorite watery place?
- What do you use water for?

The resulting work of art can be displayed on-site, reflecting the ideas generated by the play and this discussion activity.

Nature Journaling
Primary audience: Grade 5-adult
Supplies: Journals, variety of writing utensils (pens, pencils, coloring tools, etc.)
Collaborations: Local writing groups, summer activity clubs, scouting troops.

Nature journaling is an excellent way for people to engage with the environment around them, to learn more about their local natural resources, to develop better relations with our environment, and to develop an instinct for stewardship of it. The John Muir Laws website is dedicated to nature journaling and offers extensive resources for this activity here: https://johnmuirlaws.com/nature-journaling-starting-growing/

Photography
Primary Audience: Grade 7- adult
Note: This activity can be organized in several ways as detailed below
Supplies: Participants will need a camera of some variety. This could include either regular cameras or cell phones. Flora and fauna guidebooks/apps can also be fun and useful! (See Readings and Sources List)
Safety: In outdoor conditions, participants will want to consider water safety, proper clothing, insect bite prevention, and sunburn prevention measures.
Financial concerns: Organizers will want to consider instructor honoraria for such a program.
Collaboration potentials: Collaborative organizations can include local arts centers and university/high school arts departments.

A: Outdoor photography workshop. This activity could use the guidance of photographer(s) experienced in nature photography.
An experienced photographer can work with participants in how to photograph wetlands in a variety of scales and conditions. Suggested workshops could include a technical workshop in which participants learn how to use camera/cell camera features to best take macro/micro/landscape, etc. scenes in a variety of conditions, as well as how to use digital effects in their work. A second session could allow participants to explore and photograph a wetland together, with possibilities for subsequent in-person and digital presentation of selected images taken that day.

B. Outdoor photography experience. Instead of offering a how-to workshop, an outing to a public wetland where participants can experience and photograph together can be organized with the same financial, safety, and collaboration considerations listed above.

C. Wetland photography exhibit/online display/contest: Participants can independently submit their images for a physical or online display celebrating wetlands/shorelines and the life they support. Such an event can include a prize if possible, or can just be an opportunity to share and display.

Wetlands Outings
Primary audience: pre-K through adult
Supplies: Depending on the activity planned, participants may want to take cameras/cell phones, notebooks and writing utensils, identification guides (or apps), etc.
Safety: In outdoor conditions, participants will want to consider water safety, proper clothing, insect bite prevention, and sunburn prevention measures. Participants will want to wear proper shoes based on the type of wetland/shoreline, etc. being visited.
Collaborations: This activity can be adapted by any number of groups including scouting troops, summer youth clubs, and more. Additionally, this activity can take place at local nature centers and led by naturalists. Land conservancies, local parks, and nature and outdoors clubs are all good sources for existing programs and for developing collaborations.

Readings and Sources List

This list is offered not only for the benefit of people who want to learn more about issues and ideas raised through the play, but also for the development of programming. Ideas for use include library book displays, field guides for use in outdoor activities exploring local wetlands and watery places, and of course, individualized readings for interested people. We hope they inspire and educate!

Kalevala and Finnish Folklore

Kalevala, compiled by Elias Lönnrot, translated by Keith Bosley. Oxford University Press, 1989. This version, translated by the British scholar Keith Bosley, is a good translation that is accurate to the Finnish literary original from 1849 but does not maintain the poetic structure of Kalevala poetry (meter and alliteration especially). It is, however, widely and cheaply available.

Kalevala, compiled by Elias Lönnrot, translated by Eino Friberg. Penguin Classics, 2021; also Otava, 1989. This version was translated by Finnish American scholar Eino Friberg, whose lovely version maintained important aspects of traditional Kalevala poetic structure, including the trochaic tetrameter, alliteration, parallelism, and more. The 1989 version, which can be hard to find, includes charming illustrations by Bjorn Collinder.

Kalevala ja Opas Sen Lukemiseen, compiled by Elias Lönnrot. Finnish Literature Society, 2015. This is the Kalevala in its 1849 version in the original Finnish, just for those who might like to try it out!

The titles below are either about Kalevala or are collections of Finnish folk tales translated into English.

Arctic Twilight: Old Finnish Tales, by Samuli Paulaharju, translated by Allan M. Pitkänen. Finnish American Literary Heritage Foundation, 1982.

Canine Kalevala, by Mauri Kunnas. Otava, 1992. [Note: This is a children's book that tells the story of Kalevala with cat and dog characters. It is immensely popular in Finland and among Finnish Americans.]

Finnish Folk Culture, by Ilmar Talve. Finnish Literature Society, 1997.

Finnish Folklore, by Leea Virtanen and Thomas A. DuBois. Finnish Literature Society, 1999.

Finnish Folklore Atlas, by Martti Sarmela. SKS, 2009. This book is available for free online simply by searching for it on your favorite web browser and downloading it!

Kalevala Guide, edited by Irma-Riitta Järvinen. Finnish Literature Society, 2012.

Kalevala Mythology, by Juha Y. Pentikäinen, translated and edited by Ritva Poom. Indiana University Press, 1999.

The Maiden Who Rose from the Sea and Other Finnish Folktales, edited and translated by Helena Henderson. Hisarlik Press, 1992.

Mythic Images and Shamanism: Perspectives on Kalevala Poetry, by Anna-Leena Siikala. Folklore Fellows Communications, 2002.

Tales from a Finnish Tupa, James Cloyd Bowman and Margery Bianco, translated by Aili Kolehmainen. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

The EPA maintains a readings list for students of all ages here: https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/wetlands-reading-list-pre-kindergarten-through-grade-12

Flora and Fauna Guides and Apps

Here is a sampling of sources for identifying flora and fauna. Whenever possible, we offer Michigan-specific sources.

Books

Birds of Michigan by Stan Tekiela. Adventure Publications, 2019.

Kaufman Field Guide To Nature Of The Midwest by Kenn Kaufman, Kimberly Kaufman, and Jeffrey P. Sayre. Mariner Books, 2015.

Trees of Michigan by Stan Tekiela. Adventure Publications, 2020.

Wetland Plants of the Upper Midwest: A Field Guide to the Aquatic and Wetland Plants of Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin by Steve Chadde. Orchard Innovations, 2022.

Wildflowers of Michigan by Stan Tekiela. Adventure Publications, 2021.

Free Apps (downloadable from your favorite app store)

Audubon Bird Guide

Bird Buddy (This app can be used with a smart bird feeder to monitor and identify birds)

Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab

PlantNet Plant Identification

Seek by iNaturalist (This app identifies wildlife, plants, and fungi)

Websites

Environmental Protection Agency Wetlands Education for Students resource guide: https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/wetlands-education-students-and-teachers#cg

Land Trust Alliance (Michigan page) https://landtrustalliance.org/land-trusts/gaining-ground/michigan#land-trusts

Michigan Wetlands Association https://miwetlands.org/

National Wildlife Federation Wildlife Guide https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide

The Nature Conservancy https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/michigan/

Nine Wetland Monsters from World Folklore, Wisconsin Wetlands Association https://www.wisconsinwetlands.org/updates/9-wetland-monsters/#:~:text=Finnish%20children%20must%20beware%20of,while%20gazing%20at%20their%20reflection.

Glossary and Pronunciation Key

Basic Finnish pronunciation note: In Finnish the first syllable of a word gets the stress no matter how long the word is (AI-no as opposed to ai-NO) and every letter is pronounced (i.e. no silent letters, exceptions to spelling rules, etc.). The only letters that sound slightly different in different circumstances are the vowels “I” and “E”: Normally the letter “I” sounds like how we pronounce it in the word “sit” if it is located at the start or before the final syllable of a word but if it is the final vowel in a word, it is pronounced like “keep.” The letter “E,” if starting or before the final syllable of a word, is usually pronounced like the English “set” but if it is the final letter in a word, it sounds more like the vowel sound in the English “stay.” The pronunciations offered below come from

common American English words/sounds that either are as they sound in Finnish, or that come close to normal pronunciation.

Aino: EYE-no. A female character who was adapted in the Kalevala epic and given a name, Aino is a young woman who is married off to Väinämöinen after her brother Joukahainen offers her as a prize when he badly loses a wizard singing battle.

Joukahainen: YO-ka-high-nen. A young man who, in the epic, is jealous of the sage Väinämöinen and tries to defeat him in a wizard singing battle of wits. When he loses, he tries to offer Väinämöinen rewards for not killing him, and finally succeeds when he offers his sister, Aino. In this play, we do as any person would do with a long name and give him a more manageable nickname: Yo.

Kalevala: KA-lay-va-la. The national epic poem of Finland, this word refers to a mythical place settled by the giant Kaleva and his descendants, who are not actually introduced in the poem, but are understood to have existed in an even earlier, more mythical time (mythology can be bafflingly fun!). Originally a tradition of oral poetry incorporating broadly known story lines, but dependent on individuals who participated in singing traditions of storytelling to not only keep traditional poems alive, but also create new stories in this form, the epic was compiled and arranged into a linear story by the Finnish folklorist Elias Lönnrot and published in the form from which translations were based in 1849.

Kati: KAH-tee. The character of Kati in the play takes their name from ancient Finnish mythological characters not found in the published Kalevala epic. In the mythology, Kati is an *emuu,* (EH-moo), a spirit that oversees a set or group of living beings in nature and as such, is someone humans could negotiate with when the being(s) in question had important interactions with humans. In Finnish mythology, it was believed that humans, flora, fauna, and natural objects (bodies of water, stones, etc.) all had a spirit and so non-human entities, especially animals and trees, would have an *emuu* as a sort of spokesperson or ambassador. Kati was the *emuu* for trees.

Nixie: NIX-ee. A nixie is an English-language term for a member of the group of folklore characters that dwell in bodies of water (usually smaller ones like rivers and lakes) and can either have frightening interactions with humans (people often drown or almost drown in encounters) or can warn humans of upcoming calamities. In Finnish folklore, these types of characters were called *näkki* (which is similar to the Swedish *näcken*) or *vedenhaltija* (literally water guardian). In this play, we use the term nixie to facilitate familiarity and ease with this character, even as we send him on a deep dive as a part of Finnish folklore and mythology.

Sini: SIH-nee. Much like Kati above, Sini was also an *emuu,* and thus, had an important function in maintaining relations between humans and their natural surroundings. Her charge was the forest, and she also helped in relations with bears (though another spirit, Hongotar, was in charge of bears). The word itself pertains to the color blue, *sininen,* and was also connected, at least by Christfried Ganander in his book *Mythologia Fennica,* with the longer-named Sinisirkku. Incidentally, Sinisirkku is the Finnish name used for the bird, Slaty Bunting.

Väinämöinen: VYE-na*-moy-nen (*A like in English cat). Väinämöinen is the central character of the Finnish national epic, and one that not only lends a lot to this play, though through the melding of him with Joukahainen into the character Yo, but also is a key symbol of Finnish folklore and mythology. In the oral poetic tradition and the epic, Väinämöinen is the oldest and wisest man, having been the first man born in the world's current cycle. He and his mother are key to shaping the world from a realm only consisting of water and air into a place of land and water, and flora and fauna. Väinämöinen plants the forests and invents agriculture, and as the man who was present at the creation of the world, is recognized as the wisest person in the world. In the original poetry and epic, Joukahainen, a young man who resents Väinämöinen's social status, challenges him to a singing dual. This may seem odd to us, in our world of action movies and physical confrontations, but in the epic, one of the main themes is that being the most knowledgeable about a given thing gives a person the most power. Knowing about an entity's origins and history gives a person the power to control that entity, not only reversing negative things when they happen, but also allowing entities to be convinced and coordinated to assist with acts of good. In the oral poems and epic, Väinämöinen defeats Joukahainen and accepts Aino as his reward. Aino refuses this and allows *näkki* spirits to convince her to join them in their watery home, resulting in her death. Väinämöinen, however, eventually learns that it is best not to try to marry younger people, and Joukahainen also (kind of) learns that it is best not to promise humans as prizes.

In all, the Kalevala's most important lesson is that, by gaining knowledge and using it responsibly, we can do good things. What good things can we do when we understand more about water and our need to protect it?