PLAY SYNOPSIS

In *Tales as Tall as The Sky* by Cliff Todd, the audience is introduced to some famous American tall tales. Tall tales are stories that exaggerate larger-than-life characters which may or may not be based on a real person. John Henry, Pecos Bill, and Hurricane Hallie prove to be, indeed, larger than life in the imaginations of characters Alice, Dean, and Jerry. In the tale of John Henry, the strong, steel driving man goes up against a jackhammer in a competition and drives his way through a mountain, victorious. In the story of Pecos Bill, the wild Texas cowboy and his horse, Widowmaker, lasso a cyclone, then slide down a thunderbolt, landing in California and creating a “dent” that comes to be known as Death Valley. Finally, the kids make up their own tall tale, with a female character called Hurricane Hallie. In this exciting and fun-filled play, Alice, Dean, and Jerry learn that tall tales can trigger their imaginations and prove more fun, even, than video games!

The statue of John Henry standing alongside State Highway 12 south of the town of Talcott, WV. The statue is placed above the Big Bend tunnel on the C&O railroad where many believe the Man vs. Machine competition originally took place.
Often in tall tales, two different things are compared to describe something in a different or funny way. **Similes** are used to make these comparisons. A *simile* is a comparison between two different things using the words “like” or “as.”

**IT’S YOUR TURN:**

Fill in the blanks below to complete the sentences using a simile to compare two different things.

1. School is as fun as ________________.
2. Bobby is strong like a ________________.
3. Puppies are as cute as ________________.
4. Jumping into puddles is like ________________.
5. The castle smelled like ________________.
6. Today it was as cold as ________________.
7. The car looked like a ________________ after the wreck.

**FACT OR FICTION?**

Some folk tales are tall tales that feature larger-than-life characters that solve a problem in a funny way. Sometimes these characters are real people whose life experiences have been exaggerated, while other stories feature made up people.

See if you can tell which of the following sentences describe real folk heroes. Underline the name in each sentence that you think tells about a real folk hero. Look for clues in the sentence - some may surprise you!

1. Johnny Appleseed’s real name is John Chapman and he loved apple trees.
2. Paul Bunyan had a big blue ox named Babe.
3. John Henry was a very strong baby who reached for a heavy hammer instead of a bottle.
4. Calamity Jane’s real name was Mary Cannery and she rode for the Pony Express.
5. When Pecos Bill was two weeks old, he wrestled a bear down and tossed it around.
6. Davy Crocket was elected to the U.S. Congress when Andrew Jackson was President.

**THINK ABOUT IT**

The name of the play is *Tales as Tall as the Sky*. 

There is a **simile** in the title. Why do you think the playwright (the writer of the play) chose that title? Can you think of another title for this play? Write it below:

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

**Take it One Step Further**

Go to a kid-friendly website and see what you can find out about Johnny Appleseed. For example, you may find stories, a history, puzzles, and games.
Tall tales are a fun way to explain how and why things in nature are the way they are. People long ago didn’t know what caused things like lakes and mountain ranges to be formed. They didn’t understand what made thunder or waves on the water. They made up stories to explain those things they didn’t understand.

One example of a tall tale is the story of how Lake Michigan came to be. According to the tale, Paul Bunyan dug the grand lake as a watering hole for his big blue ox, Babe.

Today we know that tall tales are not true, but they sure make great stories.

Pick a subject and make up your own tall tale to explain some of Virginia’s natural features, like the Natural Bridge, the James River, or the Blue Ridge Mountains, using the story frame provided.

Title: ____________________________

Who... __________________________

Wanted to... ______________________

Tried... __________________________

Couldn’t because... __________________

Then... __________________________

In the end... ______________________

Try This! The story of Pecos Bill ‘explains’ the existence of Death Valley, California. According to the tale, how was Death Valley formed? Locate Death Valley on a map of the United States.
Exaggerations

Tales as Tall as the Sky is the best play ever written!

While this may be an exaggeration, the play Tales as Tall as the Sky is fun because it brings to life many popular folk tales called tall tales. The key to a tall tale is exaggeration. In folk tales, a person’s real skills are often exaggerated to make them seem even more incredible. So, while you may think that Tales as Tall as the Sky is the best play you have ever seen, it probably isn’t the best play ever written.

Here’s another example of an exaggeration:

1. I have an old car.
2. That car was around with the dinosaurs.

Read each sentence below. Circle the sentence if it is an exaggerated sentence. Discuss why you think the sentence is an exaggeration.

1. Our swing set is the best on the block.
2. I live in the biggest house in the whole universe.
3. That bike is so small that it was made for an ant.
4. Daddy is as old as the world.
5. The bed was very comfortable.
6. The hammer made a huge hole in the wall.
7. The ocean goes on forever.
8. My dog Spot is as stinky as a skunk.
9. David’s shirt is red like a tomato.
10. Kate is very hungry.
Pecos Bill & John Henry were two incredible men...

The following events happened in the “life” of either Pecos Bill or John Henry. Write the number of the event in the correct circle for each man. Then, list three characteristics that both men had in common in the center of the Venn Diagram.

1. He hauled bales of hay as his first job on a farm.
2. He married Polly Ann.
3. He lassoed a cyclone with a rope.
4. He died with a hammer in his hand.
5. He married Slue Foot Sue.
6. As a baby, he drank panther’s milk and used a bowie knife for a teething ring.
7. He saved a train headed for unfinished tracks.
8. He worked on the Big Bend Tunnel as a steel drivin’ man.
9. He was born in the state of Texas and raised by Coyotes.
10. He rode a horse called Widowmaker, who ate dynamite.

TIMELINE OF ________________________________

Choose events in the life of either Pecos Bill or John Henry (from above) and put them in order below. Write the name of which man above.

__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________

__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
Incredible Characters

*Tales as Tall as the Sky* mentions some incredible occupations (or jobs) of tall tale characters, such as:

- Steel Driving Man
- Cowboy
- Trapper
- Explorer
- Steamboat engineer

Create an outrageous character for your own tall tale. What would be their occupation? What would be their name?

Use the graphic organizer to help create your character.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. What would a tall tale character of today be able to do? What incredible abilities would they have?
2. What mysteries of science would your tall tale explain? How?
More Classroom Ideas

MORE CLASSROOM IDEAS TO TIE IN TALL TALES

Geography:
Research the natural features that are ‘explained’ by tall tales such as Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan. Where are they located? How were they really formed?

History:
Many tall tales are folk tales set in the newly explored and settled American West. Research Western Expansion during the 1800’s. Why do you think tall tales came out of this historical event?

Science:
The exaggeration in tall tales include characters who can do things that defy the laws of science. For example, Pecos Bill lassoed a cyclone. Research the weather conditions that cause cyclones, and the physical forces involved in cyclone winds.

Art:
A good story ‘paints a picture’ in the mind of the reader. Choose your favorite tall tale and illustrate your favorite scene. What picture is in your imagination?

Music:
Go to http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/songlist.html and listen to music about John Henry. What do you notice about the characteristics of this folk music?

Mathematics:
Take a poll among your classmates as to whether they like Pecos Bill, John Henry, or Hurricane Hallie the best. Create a bar graph of the results. Be sure to label your graph.

Language Arts:
Read examples of the different types of folk tales, including tall tales, trickster tales, legends, and fairy tales. How are these stories similar and different? What unique characteristics differentiate each type?

MORE TALL TALES TO CHECK OUT:

PBS’s Between the Lions: Pecos Bill story and game  
https://vpm.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/btl07-ex/

John Henry  

Pecos Bill  

Paul Bunyan  

Johnny Appleseed  

Chicken Little  
Cues at the Theatre

When you are in an audience at Tales as Tall as the Sky or any play, pay attention to the following:

**Cue**
1) Command given by stage management to the technical departments.
2) Any signal (spoken line, action or count) that indicates another action should follow.

**House Lights**
The auditorium lighting, which is commonly faded out when the performance starts.

**Blackout**
The act of turning off (or fading out) stage lighting.

**Curtain Call**
At the end of a performance, the acknowledgment of applause by actors — the bows.

**Build / Check**
Build is a smooth increase in sound or light level; check is the opposite — a smooth diminishment of light or sound.

**Fade**
An increase, decrease, or change in lighting or sound.