

*theatre:*  
**CALGARY**

Stafford Arima, Artistic Director

# PLAY GUIDE



**JANUARY 23 -  
FEBRUARY 11, 2024**

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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2023-2024 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

# ABOUT THE PLAY

## A HELPFUL GUIDE TO THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Emerging in Europe in the early 1950s, theatre of the absurd arrived soon after World War II, which has been considered a major influence on the style due to the senseless atrocities on human life. The term itself was not coined until 1960. The philosophical idea of existentialism is the foundation of theatre of the absurd—the notion that man's existence is futile in a world where, as each new day passes, man comes closer to his ultimate surety of death. Consider the Albert Camus essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where this figure of Greek mythology relentlessly pushes a boulder up a hill, only to see it roll down again.

Absurdist conventions might include:

- Language devoid of any real meaning (clipped, repetitive, cliché, etc.)
- Circular, rather than linear plots (appear to go nowhere)
- Slapstick and vaudeville-type actions
- Characters with little or no sense of time or place (they forget where they are, do not recall previous events the audience remembers, do not know what day it is, etc.)
- Long moments of silence
- Slow-paced sections juxtaposed with fast-paced dialogue

[SOURCE](#)

### ABSURDISM IN POP CULTURE



**Monty Python**  
*A critique of Western societies' cultural practices and ideologies*



**Alice in Wonderland**  
*A precursor to theatre of the absurd through the themes of time, memory, and language*



**Seinfeld**  
*A show about nothing*



**Bojack Horseman**  
*A commentary on the 'unbearable pain' of life in Hollywood*

# SUMMARY.

Steve Martin's absurdist play, *Meteor Shower*, Scene 1 opens with a couple, Corky and Norm, preparing to receive guests in their Ojai, California home. They briefly discuss how the guests they are waiting for are people they barely know, coming to watch a meteor shower at Corky and Norm's home. We get a clear sense that they have been together a long time and know one another quite well. We even see them participate in what we can assume is a practice of connection determined in a therapy session of some sort, where they touch palms, make eye contact, and repeat phrases of need and affirmation back and forth.

In Scene 2, we have skipped past the second couple's arrival. Laura and Gerald Newman are already in the middle of a conversation with Norm and Corky about the upcoming meteor shower. The energy begins to shift as things appear to be not quite as they seem. Laura claims to know all about Corky, despite Norm barely knowing her before inviting them over. Something about Gerald and Laura seems off.

Scene 3 jumps back in time to the living room where we left Corky and Norm preparing to welcome the Newmans, who finally arrive in Scene 4. After an uncomfortable, handshake-free introduction, they begin discussing a mutually known couple, the Coopers. Things start to devolve over a mysterious gift of eggplant and the unraveling of Gerald and Laura's relationship.

In Scene 5, we travel back to the moment before the Newmans enter Corky and Norm's home, where Gerald and Laura appear to be concocting a false identity for their evening. This is clearly something they have done before. Scene 6 returns us to Gerald and Laura's arrival and nearly line-by-line replay of Scene 4, only this time we start to see the results of their false identity story start to come through. We hear about Laura's supposed struggle with obesity and Corky's possible history as a cannibal. When Norm and Gerald head outside to watch the meteor shower, Laura and Corky stay behind discussing their marriages.

Scene 7 follows Gerald and Norm outside where they, too, are discussing their wives. There is a sense of competition mixed with pride as they share details of their marriages and make a plan to get the other's partner alone for "get-to-know-you" time.

In Scene 8, Gerald finds himself alone inside with Corky. He asks her to make him a complicated cocktail, while he proceeds to do drugs in plain sight and then make a pass at her. We see Norm and Laura together outside in Scene 9. Laura, too, is clearly putting the moves on Norm. He is nothing, if not faithful. Laura kisses him, and he does not respond.

The intensity of the meteor shower increases, the temperature starts rising, and then a meteor strikes Norm while he is outside. They confirm that he is dead. The reaction from the group is unexpected, with Corky contemplating redecorating and Gerald mourning the loss of his best friend.

In Scene 10, Corky and Gerald sit outside next to the smoldering lounge chair reminiscing about Norm's normalness until they begin making out. When Laura enters the backyard in Scene 11, Gerald is gone, Corky is racked with guilt, then she and Laura begin to make out, as well.

We are back inside for Scene 12, and Norm enters with the gaping hole left by the meteor. When Corky sees Norm, she accuses him of being indecisive and ruining her plans for the future by surviving.

In the next scene, 13, we return to the moment before the Newmans first arrive at Norm and Corky's house.

We see a split scene between Norm and Corky and Gerald and Laura. The dialogue replays, but we learn that the Newmans did, in fact, send the mystery eggplant to "throw [Corky and Norm] off balance." Inside, Norm and Corky get a call from their friends, the Coopers, to warn them about the Newmans. They make a pact to "protect and defend." This time, when the Newmans enter, it is Corky and Norm who are a bit off—seemingly anticipating all of Laura and Gerald's oddness. The dynamic between the couples has shifted. Norm has the power and is using it to dominate and come on to Gerald.

The chaos continues into Scene 14, where Corky is feeding Laura celery with her toes when Norm enters. He is left alone with Laura who he kisses and announces that he's cheated on Gerald. In Scene 15, we are with Corky and Gerald outside by the lounge chairs. She is trying to seduce him, but is clearly onto something else. By the end of the scene, it is clear: she is setting him up to be hit by the meteor.

In the final scene of the play, Gerald appears with his stomach blown out from the meteor as he and Laura bid goodnight to their hosts. The play ends with Corky and Norm in a true moment of connection.

## STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!" and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

# CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



Original Cast  
Old Globe Theatre  
San Diego, CA

Broadway Cast  
Booth Theatre  
New York, NY

Theatre Calgary Cast  
Max Bell Theatre  
Calgary, AB

**CORKY**



Jenna Fischer



Amy Schumer



Helen Knight

**NORM**



Greg Germann

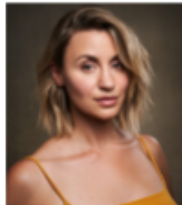


Jeremy Shamos



Nathan Schmidt

**LAURA**



Alexandra Henrikson



Laura Benanti



Bahareh Yaraghi

**GERALD**



Josh Stamberg



Keegan Michael Key



Braden Griffiths

# HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



## NOT JUST A COMEDIAN

### WHO IS STEVE MARTIN?

#### Musician

**1** He taught himself how to play the banjo and has won 5 Grammy Awards for country and bluegrass music.

#### Writer

**2** In addition to *Meteor Shower*, he has authored 2 full-length plays, one musical (*Bright Star*), 4 short plays, nearly 50 TV shows and films (including *Only Murders in the Building* and *The Jerk*), and a dozen books across genres.

#### Actor

**3** He has nearly 70 acting credits from *Saturday Night Live* to *Father of the Bride* since his first TV appearance in 1967.

#### Art Collector

**4** The comedian is a well-known collector of artworks by American artists such as Lichtenstein and Hopper, plus European work from the likes of Picasso and Seurat. He is an avid collector of Indigenous Australian art, as well, and curates galleries and exhibitions across the United States.

#### Game Show Contestant

**5** He appeared on *The Dating Game* in 1968, identified as Bachelor #2, a “wild and crazy guy.” He was chosen by the girl (Dean Martin’s daughter!), and they won a trip to Italy.

## STEVE MARTIN ON *METEOR SHOWER*

*Excerpted from an Old Globe interview conducted by Danielle Mages Amato*

### How would you describe *Meteor Shower*?

I’m calling it a kind of wild comedy. In terms of my own plays, I think this is the first full-blown comedy that I’ve written. Certainly it’s my first contemporary comedy for the stage.

### What’s the life story of this play?

I actually started it about 20 years ago. When you’re looking at a play that’s been worked on over 20 years, the question is, do you update it? And I actually decided not to do that and instead make it a period piece set in 1993. There was a real emphasis on the psychology of relationships...about how to communicate with your spouse. And leaving it in that period actually helped focus the play and the dialogue, more than just trying to set it in some vague “any date.”

### What made you choose Ojai in particular as the setting for this play?

There is something very California about this play. Ojai is kind of the country version of Santa Barbara. I’ve spent a lot of time in Santa Barbara—it’s very beautiful. I didn’t want to set this piece in L.A., because it’s too busy, and I needed a place that was out in the country where you could watch a meteor shower, so I immediately thought of Santa Barbara, and of Ojai.

### You mentioned the surreal elements in *Meteor Shower*. What draws you to playing with realism in that way?

Well, the surreal element can lead you to surprises—to things that surprise the audience. It turned out that the nature of this play was very symbolic. There are a lot of symbolic things happening. But symbolic things always need to begin as real—real characters, real people, saying real things—and then you can say, oh, that’s also a symbolic representation of something else.



# WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



## **An open mind.**

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

## **Assigned seats.**

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

## **Live actors.**

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

## **A break from reality.**

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

## **Questions.**

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

## **Disconnection.**

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

## **PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A**

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 9) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't \_\_\_\_\_ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



# THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

*Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:*

---

**The Playwright** writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

**The Director** creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

**The Actors** use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

**The Designers** imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

**The Stage Manager** assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

### Nonsensical Objects

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Part of the joy of absurdist theatre is the full commitment to the absurdity of it all. In *Meteor Shower* that means that there is nothing at all unusual about a character getting shot through with a meteor and surviving. In this activity, it is the unconventional use of an object in a totally believable way.

**Focus Question.** How do we find truth and story in the unexpected use of an object?

**Objective.** Students will be able to make sense of an unconventional situation.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Place a number of random objects around the room. Students line up at the entrance to the playing space.
- 2 Each student takes a turn at entering the space, picking up an object and using it in a way that it would not normally be used.
- 3 Discuss: *What did you notice in using an object in a different way? How did you communicate this through movement or gesture?*

**Objects to try:**



# IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

## Age Replay

---

Theatre of the Absurd tests the audience's and actors' perception of reality. This activity will allow students an opportunity to interact with the text of *Meteor Shower*, while exploring the impact character age has on one's interpretation of the text.

**Focus Question.** How does our reading of a text impact our interpretation?

**Objective.** Students will be able to see the impact varied vocal inflection and physicality can have on one's interpretation of a text.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Use the following script excerpt from Steve Martin's *Meteor Shower*, ask students to read over the excerpt 3 times in pairs.
- 2 Give each pair a specific age to adopt as they practice the scene:
  - Toddlers
  - Kindergarteners
  - Tweens
  - Teenagers
  - Newlyweds
  - Middle-aged couple
  - Retired couple
  - Very elderly couple
- 3 Allow students time to run through their scene with these characteristics.
- 4 Have three groups across ages share their interpretations.
- 5 *Discuss:* What does this do to the interpretation? What do we notice?

## EXCERPT FROM *METEOR SHOWER* BY STEVE MARTIN

CORKY. Norm, they're here in fifteen minutes.

NORM. I'm going crazy. Help me.

CORKY. What?

*(NORM is exasperated. He's trying to remember something.)*

NORM. I'm trying to think. ... this book title. It's for Jeopardy ...

*(Indicates the TV back in the bedroom.)*

It's ... oh ... the tip of my tongue. Something like ... Death to the Cuckoo. But not that ... com'n ... book title. It's like Death to the Cuckoo ...

CORKY. To Kill a Mockingbird.

NORM. Thank you! Thank you! How'd you come up with that?

CORKY. I know your brain.

NORM. And yet another reason to be married.

CORKY. You'd repressed it, that's all.

NORM. Yeah. And when I repress something, I push it way down and kick dirt over it. It's not coming back.

*(He puts on his pants.)*

CORKY. If you don't deal with your subconscious, it will deal with you.

NORM. That's good. Who said that?

CORKY. In that book, remember?

NORM. Oh yeah.

# IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

## Exploring Absurdism

---

Embracing absurdism is about play on stage—exploring non-traditional relationships, actions, and delivery of text. This activity introduces another absurdist playwright, Christopher Durang, giving students a chance to play.

**Focus Question.** How can we “unlock” the potential of absurdism by playing with different styles of performance?

**Objective.** Students will be able to interpret texts in multiple styles of performance.

### Procedure.

- 1 Pair students to perform the following script excerpt from Christopher Durang’s *Phyllis and Xenobia*.
- 2 Have them practice the scene several times to understand the context.
- 3 Then, introduce the [Ways to Play](#) slide and talk through what each style might look like (i.e., Back-to-Back, No Words, Still or In Motion, etc.) Answer any questions before sending students off to play.
- 4 Have students make their way through the 6 styles offered as they read through the scene. They don’t need to go in order, but they should stick with each style and see it through.
- 5 *Discuss:* Which way worked at the turning point in the script? Was there one style that was better suited to the scene than the others? How did the story change with each different style played?
- 6 Pair each scene partner with another partnership and have them share with one another. *Discuss:* What are they noticing about their partner group’s interpretation of the scene? What was similar? What was different?

## EXCERPT FROM *PHYLLIS AND XENOBIA* BY CHRISTOPHER DURANG

XENOBIA: She was a bad housekeeper, mother was. She never should have done that. We got bugs everywhere.

PHYLLIS: You're right, we did. It started, of course, with the rugs, that's where the bugs started. But they didn't stop there. I didn't mind them though. Did you?

XENOBIA: Yes, I did mind the bugs. I couldn't stand them.

PHYLLIS: Well, you learn to stand everything after a while, don't you?

*(Suddenly reaches over and hits XENOBIA hard on the side of her head. XENOBIA is shocked and angry.)*

XENOBIA: What did you do that for?

PHYLLIS: You had a bug in your hair.

XENOBIA: I didn't!

PHYLLIS: You did.

XENOBIA: I did not have a bug there. I did not.

PHYLLIS: Either you had a bug in your hair, or you're wearing a bobby pin that crawls on little legs. And for your sake I hope it's bugs. *(Hits her in the head again.)* There's another one!

*(XENOBIA looks shocked and upset. Stares at PHYLLIS. They're silent for a moment.)*

# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *Meteor Shower* at Theatre Calgary.

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- 1 How did you feel watching this piece? How does it differ from other pieces of theatre you've seen?
- 2 What questions were you left with after viewing this play? Try to answer them as a group.
- 3 What do you think Steve Martin was trying to achieve with this story? How do you think the genre of *absurdism* contributes to or takes away from the playwright's message?
- 4 Were there moments that you laughed and other audience members did not? Were there moments where others were laughing, but you didn't know why? Why might that have been?
- 5 How does the play's location contribute to its themes? If it didn't take place in California, where would you set it? How would that impact the story?



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