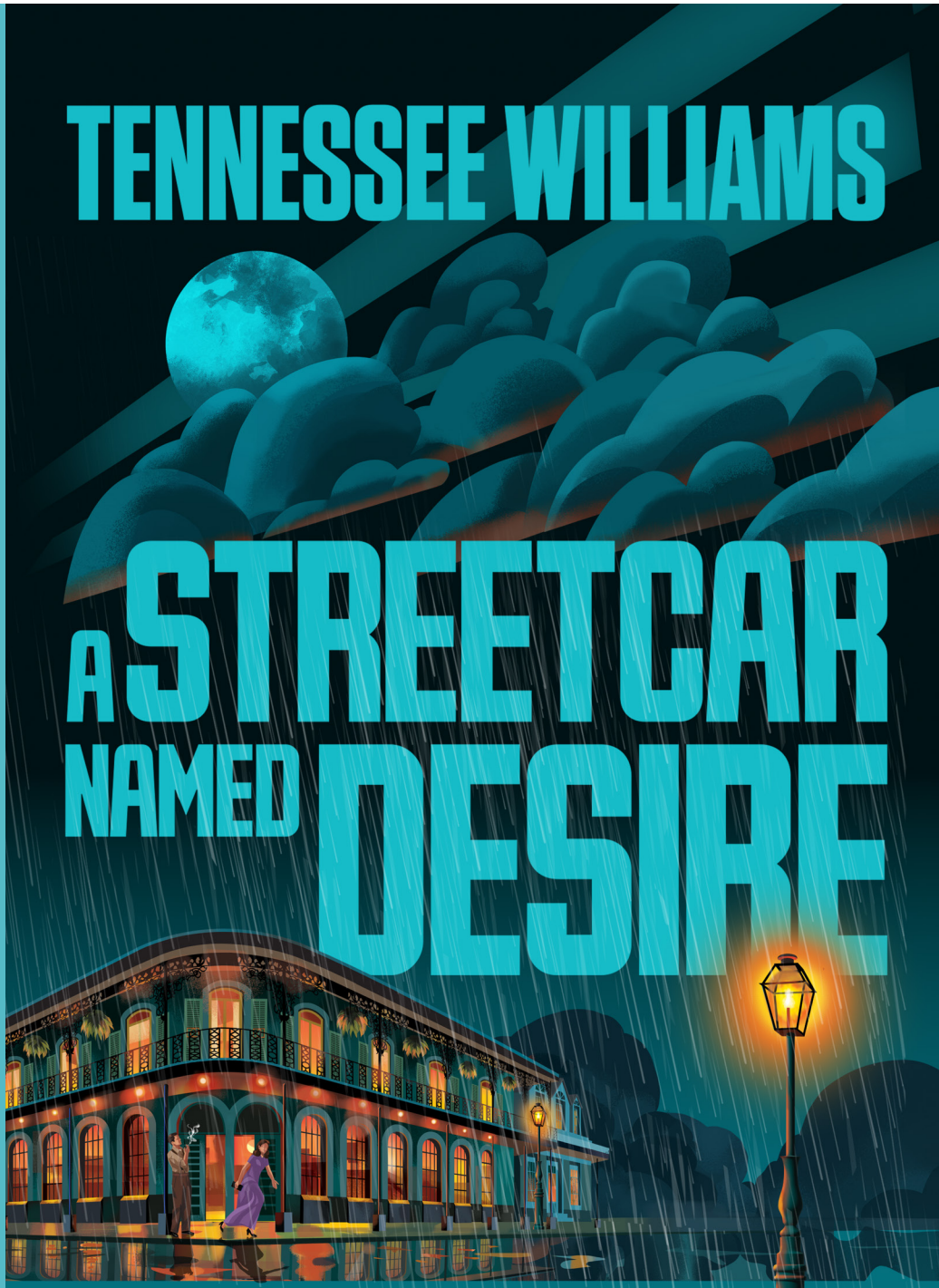


theatre:
CALGARY

Stafford Arima, Artistic Director

PLAY GUIDE



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

JANUARY 28 - FEBRUARY 23, 2025

This production is made possible
by the generous support of

MAWER 50th
Be Boring. Make Money.™

Generously supported by:

canada *life*

Stronger
Communities
Together™

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2** **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

- 3** **ABOUT THE PLAY**
Summary
Character Breakdown
Historical + Social Context

- 7** **WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE**

- 9** **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
If you have 15 minutes...
If you have 30 minutes...
If you have an hour...

- 13** **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION**

SPONSOR

Thanks to our Student Learning sponsor: **canada**  TM

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2024-2025 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

SUMMARY.

Blanche DuBois arrives at the New Orleans tenement home of her sister and brother-in-law, Stella and Stanley Kowalski, after her family's Laurel, Mississippi estate is lost to creditors. She is shocked to see how poorly-kept their home is and criticizes both Stanley and Stella, who is expecting. Blanche's directness violently clashes with Stanley's aggressive tendencies, setting up a contest of wills between them, with Blanche and Stanley vying for Stella's allegiance. Through the course of the play, Blanche discovers she is no match for the sexual hold Stanley has over her sister.

When Blanche and Stella go out to dinner and a movie, we meet Stanley's friends who come over to play poker. Upon the women's return, the men are still playing, and Blanche takes a particular interest in Mitch who seems to be more sensitive than the others. She begins to charm him with the idea of marrying him, but this momentary peace is broken when Stanley explodes in anger over a series of minor incidents, throwing the radio out the window, hitting Stella when she tries to intervene, and having to be held back by the other men to avoid doing more damage. Stella takes Blanche upstairs to Eunice's apartment to "protect her," but when Stanley calls for Stella, she returns to spend the night with him.

The next morning, Blanche is angry that Stella would return to a "madman," but Stella assures her that everything is fine and that "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant."

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.

As Blanche and Mitch's romance blossoms over time, she confides some of her past to Mitch, including the fact that she had once been married to a young man who, when she learned he was gay, committed suicide. Mitch confesses that once his ailing mother dies he, too, will be lonely, and he proposes marriage.

Stanley, however, has other plans. He has learned all about Blanche's past—a wild life of drunkenness and promiscuity in Mississippi that drove her out of town—which he shares with Stella and Mitch. Later that evening Blanche doesn't understand why Mitch won't come to her birthday party, but when Stanley gives her a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel as a birthday present, it becomes clear. Everyone's anger comes to a head just as Stella announces that she is going into labor.

With Stella and Stanley at the hospital, Blanche begins to drink heavily; Mitch arrives to confront her with what he knows about her past. She initially tries to deny it but ultimately confesses that after the death of her young husband, nothing but “intimacies with strangers” had any meaning for her. Mitch tries to get her to sleep with him; they argue, and he leaves, telling her she is not good enough for him.

The hospital sends Stanley home, telling him the baby won't be born until morning. He finds Blanche dressed in absurd clothing and fantasizing about an invitation to join a cruise. He confronts her with the lies she's been telling, and his animosity and anger explode into sexual violence.

Three weeks later, Stella is home and packing Blanche's clothes to prepare for a doctor and a nurse to take her to the state mental institution. Blanche, accused of a complete mental break, is under the impression that an old boyfriend is coming to take her on a cruise. When the nurse arrives, Blanche recoils, but Stanley helps trap her. The doctor is able to alleviate her fears, and Blanche eventually goes with him willingly, saying “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”

The play ends with Stella sobbing and Stanley trying to soothe her through words and sexual influence. The poker players start another game—the last line of the play being spoken by one of them: “This game is seven-card stud.”

CONTENT WARNINGS FOR *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

Coarse or Derogatory Language

- References to Stanley's Polish heritage by calling him 'Polack'
- Blanche's reference to a 'coloured girl' that we can assume was a former slave at their family's plantation
- Stanley's calling Pablo (see pg. 5) a 'greaseball' because of his Spanish heritage

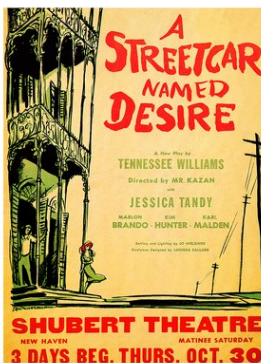
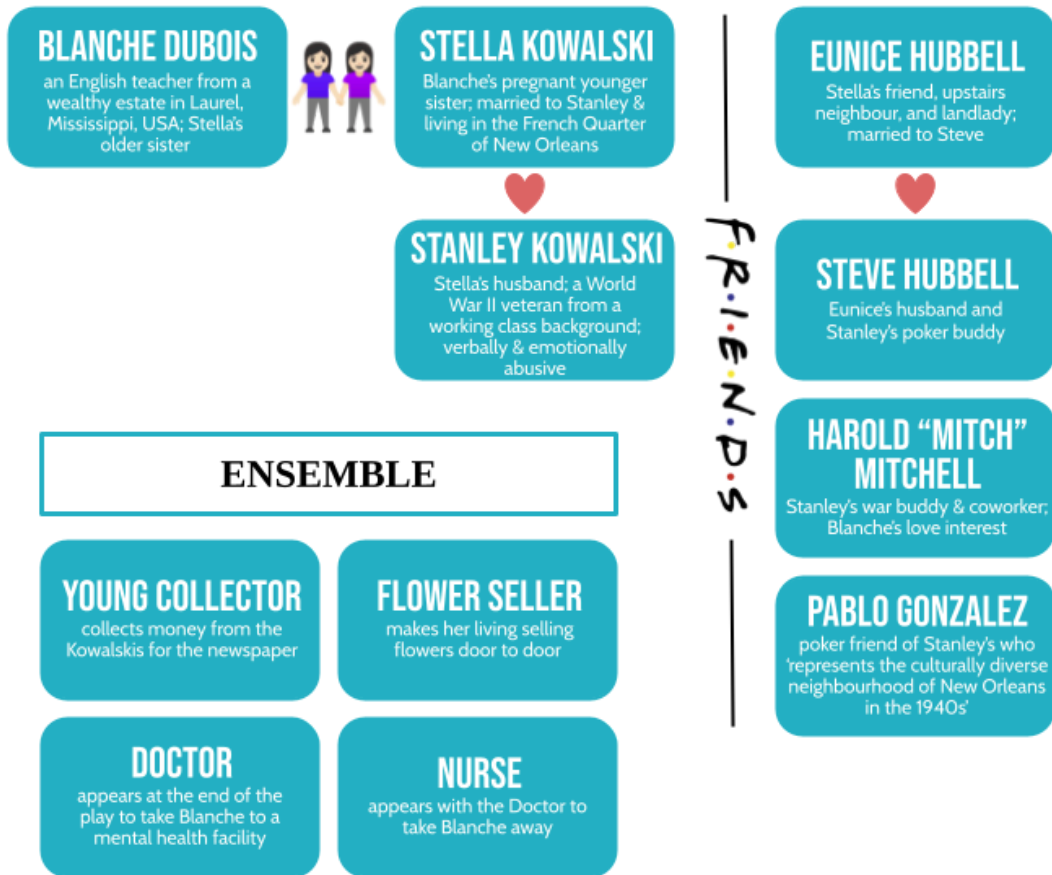
Domestic Violence

- Stanley's frequent violence and abusive behavior toward Blanche and Stella
- A moment of domestic violence between Eunice and Steve
- A moment of self-defense where Blanche threatens Stanley with a broken bottle

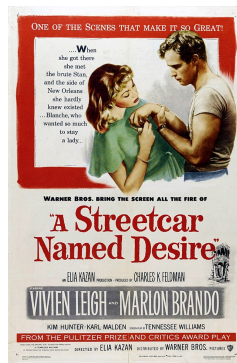
Sexual Assault

- Mitch's roughness with Blanche but leaving before an act of assault occurs
- Stanley's aggressive indication that he wants to have sex with Blanche without her consent; she uses a broken bottle to try to keep Stanley away from her

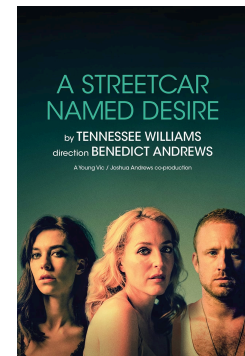
CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



Original pre-Broadway production in New Haven, Connecticut before its opening on December 3, 1947



1951 film version adapted from Tennessee Williams's Pulitzer Prize-winning play



2014 production at London's National Theatre featuring Gillian Anderson

HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT TENNESEE WILLIAMS

- 1 Throughout his life, Williams's homosexuality was an open secret and publicly confirmed in the post-Stonewall era (1970s).
- 2 Williams wrote his own life stories in the form of essays and play introductions and frequently gave candid media interviews.
- 3 Williams's best friend was his sister, Rose, who was institutionalized after an emotional breakdown. In a misguided treatment, she was given a lobotomy.
- 4 Over 14 films have been adapted from his plays and short stories.
- 5 Williams describes his plays as reflecting "the particular psychological turmoil I was going through when I wrote them."

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA



New Orleans, known as *The Big Easy*, is renowned for its distinctive music, Creole cuisine, unique dialects, and annual celebrations and festivals (maybe you've heard of Mardi Gras...). The heart of the historic city is the French Quarter—and the famous Bourbon Street—known for its French and Spanish Creole architecture.



New Orleans has long been a center for music. Its musical heritage emerged from colonial and early American days from a unique blending of European musical instruments with African rhythms. New Orleans was the only North American city to allow enslaved people to gather in public and play their native music, giving birth in the early 20th century to jazz music.

Similar to military funerals, New Orleans' traditional funerals feature sad music (like dirges and hymns) in processions on the way to the cemetery and happier music (hot jazz) on the way back—known as a second line. [Learn more about the culture of "Dancing in the Streets" in New Orleans](#)

WHAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE



There is an actual streetcar in New Orleans named "Desire" (see image left) that the character, Blanche, takes on her way to her sister's home. It was also Blanche's *desire* that ruined her reputation and drove her out of her hometown.

Before it was called, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the play was titled *The Poker Night* and, then, *Blanche's Chair in the Moon*.

The play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948.

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. 8) 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...

Status Walk

In A Streetcar Named Desire, the characters are frequently vying to be the most powerful person in the room. They demonstrate this power in different ways; for some, through violence and physical intimidation, and for others through what they say and how they say it. This activity allows students to explore the various ways power and status can be represented physically.

Focus Question. How does our physicality communicate our status in the world?

Objective. Students will be able to hold their bodies differently to represent various social statuses.

Procedure.

- 1 Ensure your space is set up with enough room for students to move freely around.
- 2 Establish a group understanding of the word *status* and what that looks like in the world.
- 3 Have students walk through the space as themselves noticing how they hold their bodies, establishing safety rules, as needed.
- 4 Introduce a scale of one to 10—where 10 is the highest status a being can have, and one is the lowest. Discuss what might be different physically across that range.
- 5 Invite students to explore various physicalities as you call out different numbers on the scale. Pause to discuss the choices they are making as they distinguish between one status and another.

EXTENSION. For a next step, distribute playing cards from a deck, and invite students to move about the space creating a character with the status indicated on their card—where the ace is the lowest and the king is the highest. Depending on your students' experience, you can instruct them to pair up and improvise a dialogue between their two characters.

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Poetry Interpretation Menu

A Streetcar Named Desire begins with a poem by Williams's favorite poet, Hart Crane. This activity will encourage students to make their own personal connections to the words in Crane's poem using a menu of interpretation options.

Focus Question. How do we find points of connection in poetry?

Objective. Students will be able to make personal and literary connections to a poem.

Procedure.

- 1 Read Hart Crane's poem found at the beginning of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This can be done individually, in pairs, out loud as a whole class, or a combination of all of these options.

The Broken Tower

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice

- 2 In reflecting on the poem—either independently, in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class—consider the following questions:

- How might Crane have landed on this title?
- What words specifically stand out to you? Why? What draws you to them?
- What might Crane be saying about his own life or yours?
- Are there images Crane doesn't mention that this poem brings to your mind? Colors?
- How else does this poem engage your senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell)?
- What mood or feelings are evoked in these lines?

3 Ask students to choose one of the following interpretation options to demonstrate their understanding of and connection to the poem:

Written Analysis (independent)

Write a short response about *The Broken Tower*, including the following information:

- Theme: the message conveyed through figurative language
- Language: word choice and imagery used to create mood and tone
- Sound and rhythm: the syllabic patterns & stresses that form the pattern
- Structure: the way the poet tells a story through stanzas, line breaks, rhyme patterns, punctuation, & pauses
- Context: the who, what, where, when, and why of a poem

Dramatic Scene (in pairs)

Improvise a scene inspired by the lines of this poem. Be sure to identify the following before you begin:

- Relationship: How do the two characters know each other?
- Setting: Where does this conversation take place? Be as specific as possible.
- Conflict: What does each character want that they are unable to get in this situation?

Devised Movement (small group)

Create a short physical movement piece that reflects the mood and imagery of the poem. Incorporate the following elements:

- Levels: use of high, low, & medium space
- Shape: using bodies & space to create shapes
- Stillness: moments of non-movement
- Unison: moments of simultaneous movement
- Proximity: using distance between performers to examine relationship and story

A student-facing version of these guidelines can be found [here](#).

4 Share outcomes with the whole class, if time. Consider as reflection:

- Where did you see similarities in interpretations of this poem? Where did you see differences?
- What might you be thinking about now that you didn't the first time you read the poem?
- Has another interpretation raised something new for you that you hadn't considered?
- If your class has seen or read *A Streetcar Named Desire*, be sure to discuss how this poem connects to the play. Why would Williams choose to start his script with these words?

IF YOU HAVE ONE HOUR...

Concept Collages

Tennessee Williams is known for his incredibly detailed, poetic, and narrative stage directions. In fact, when one secures the rights to produce a Williams play they are committed to honoring the stage directions exactly as they are written. This activity asks students to review the opening stage directions and use them to inspire a design concept for A Streetcar Named Desire.

Focus Question. How can we use a playwright's stage directions to shape a unique vision of the play?

Objective. Students will be able to identify design elements such as color, texture, shape, and mood based on Tennessee Williams's stage directions.

Procedure.

- 1 Divide students into small groups and have each group read and discuss the [opening stage directions](#) for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- 2 Utilize [page 2 of the handout](#) to guide student discussion around a design concept for the play. Each group should respond to the prompts on the handout before creating a collage or mood board.
- 3 Once a group has decided on their imagery, colors, textures, and words, they can begin finding visual representations of their concept on the internet or in magazines or newspapers.

Concept collage models can be found in [these slides](#).



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 of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 How does this play reflect the understanding of mental health at the time it was published (1947)? If written today, how might this conversation be treated differently?
- 2 What does *A Streetcar Named Desire* say about masculinity? What is the “right” way to be a man? How does this align or diverge from your own values?
- 3 Which character do you most connect with? What draws you to them?
- 4 Consider the quote, “Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour—but a little bit of eternity dropped in your hands—and who knows what to do with it?” How does it speak to your own life?
- 5 Why would this play have been controversial when it came out in 1947? How is it controversial now? Is it still relevant? What, if anything, has changed?

THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY

Aliza Sarian

www.alizasarian.com