

SKINTIGHT SKINTIGHT

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GIL CATES THEATER

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Amy Levinson, Rachel Weigardt-Egel, Brian Dunning, Wendell Pascual, Christine Drew Benjamin, Brian Allman, Joannarae Ibañez, Ellen Catania and Jessica Brusilow Rollins.

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

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SKINTIGHT

JOSHUA HARMON

DANIEL AUKIN

SCENIC DESIGNER
LAUREN HELPERN

COSTUME DESIGNER
CHINA LEE

PAT COLLINS

SOUND DESIGNER
VINCENT OLIVIERI

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER ROSS JACKSON

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
LIZZIE THOMPSON

CASTING DIRECTOR
PHYLLIS SCHURINGA, CSA

CAST



WILL BRITTAIN TREY



ELI GELB BENJAMIN CULLEN



HARRY GROENER ELLIOT ISAAC



KIMBERLY JÜRGEN ORSOLYA



IDINA MENZEL JODI



JEFF SKOWRON IEFF

SYNOPSIS

After her husband has left her for a woman half his age, mid-40ish Jodi travels from her home in Los Angeles to New York, supposedly to surprise her father Elliot on his 70th birthday, but really to be comforted by him. At his deluxe brownstone in the West Village, she encounters 20-year-old Trey, whom she assumes works for her ultra-successful fashion designer father. When Trey introduces himself as Elliot's live-in partner, she is upset that her father is mirroring her ex-husband's behavior and worried he is being taken advantage of financially. The arrival of Jodi's 20-year-old son Benjamin complicates the already tense interactions when he befriends Trey. After father and daughter argue passionately about what love is, the group is left to sort itself out as a family.

TIME/SETTING The home of Elliot Isaac, 2014.

PERFORMANCE NOTES There is profanity and explicit sexual references.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

JOSHUA HARMON Playwright

Joshua Harmon's plays include *Bad Jews* (Roundabout Underground; Roundabout Theatre Company/Laura Pels; West End; Geffen Playhouse), *Significant Other* (Roundabout Theatre Company; Broadway/Booth Theatre; Geffen Playhouse), *Admissions* (Lincoln Center Theater; West End) and *Skintight* (Roundabout Theatre Company). His plays have been produced across the United States at Studio Theatre, Geffen Playhouse, Speakeasy, Actor's Express, The Magic and Theater Wit, among others, and internationally in Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, and throughout the U.K. He is a two-time MacDowell fellow, under commission at Manhattan Theatre Club, and an Associate Artist at Roundabout Theatre Company. Graduate of Juilliard.

DANIEL AUKIN Director

Daniel is a New York-based director. Winner of three OBIE Awards, recent work includes the acclaimed Broadway revival of Sam Shepard's Fool for Love with Sam Rockwell and Nina Arianda and Joshua Harmon's Admissions (Lincoln Center Theater, London's West End). World premieres include Joshua Harmon's Bad Jews and Skintight; Abe Koogler's Fulfillment Center; Dan LeFranc's Rancho Viejo; Melissa James Gibson's Placebo, What Rhymes with America, Suitcase and [Sic]; The Fortress of Solitude by Michael Friedman and Itamar Moses from the novel by Jonathan Lethem; Sam Shepard's Heartless; Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles; Marius von Mayenburg's The Ugly One (U.S. premiere); Itamar Moses' Back Back Back; Mark Schultz's Everything Will Be Different; Mac Wellman's Cat's-Paw, Quincy Long's The Year of the Baby and Maria Irene Fornes' Molly's Dream. Also, Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge (Arena Stage) and Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine (La Jolla Playhouse). Formerly the Artistic Director of Soho Rep in New York (1998-2006), where he developed and produced world premieres by Richard Maxwell, Young Jean Lee, Thomas Bradshaw, Anne Washburn and Jordan Harrison, among many others. He has directed productions at Lincoln Center Theater, Soho Rep, Roundabout Theatre Company, Atlantic Theater, Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizons, Dallas Theater Center, Arena Stage and Woolly Mammoth, and has participated in development programs at Sundance Theater Lab, the O'Neill Playwrights' Conference and New York Stage and Film.

PARENTS AS PEOPLE



PHOTO

Human beings need many years of care to mature physically and mentally enough to take care of themselves. In the United States, parents, or the adults in charge of children's welfare, are expected to make sure they are fed, clothed, bathed, schooled, and safe up to the age of 18, when they are considered legal adults. Since the 1950s, attention has also been placed on nurturing offspring by providing loving support and encouragement, to empower them to live successful lives.

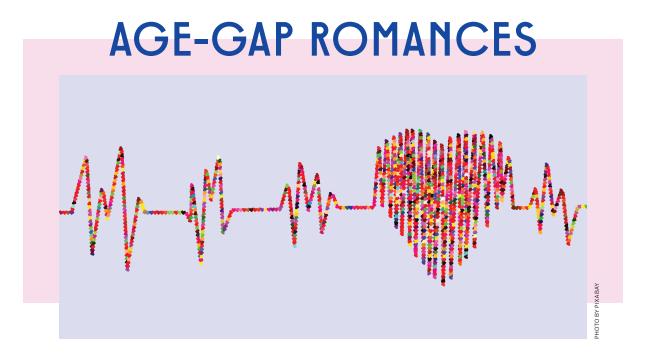
As a result of this lengthy upbringing, children often expect parents to provide selfless sustenance well into adulthood, if not throughout their lives. In *Skintight*, Jodi has never stopped yearning for Elliot to be overtly caring towards her, and feels excluded by his obsession with Trey's "hotness." Benjamin finds Jodi's attempts at being "a cool Mom" intrusive and an expression of her neediness. Even Elliot seems to have issues in how he avoids visiting his aged, barely conscious mother, who lives in a facility.

In these connections, adult children seem to resist relating to their parents as complex human beings with needs, aspirations, and conditions that either have nothing to do with them or may threaten their sense of themselves. Hearing about a parent's sexual life can be unsettling for someone who wants to be showered with fatherly love, as Jodi does. Benjamin likely wants his mother to be strong in response to his father's shattering behavior and not in need of Benjamin's attention. Confronting a parent's older age, as Elliot must if he tends to his mother, puts adults well past middle age in touch with their own mortality.

While witnessing parents' desires and vulnerabilities can make adult children feel less sheltered, it can also jolt them into a more mature view in which they see their parents more accurately and feel compassion for them as whole human beings.

DISCUSSION POINT

Consider your parents (or other guardians) outside their role as caregivers, as complex human beings. Which aspects were you/might you be surprised to discover? Which aspects inspired/might inspire compassion for them?



SOURCES

tinyurl.com/AgeGapCouples tinyurl.com/HappyAgeGap Central to Jodi's sharply humorous angst in *Skintight* is the 50-year age gap between Elliot and his lover Trey. For Jodi, her father's relationship is a constant reminder of how she was tossed aside, after 25 years of marriage, by her husband for a much younger woman. She is also suspicious about what has drawn her father and Trey together. She is not alone in being critical of her father's new romance. According to psychologist Wendy L. Patrick in *Psychology Today*, there can be considerable societal

disapproval when older and younger mates couple: the older partner is viewed as preying on the youthfulness of the younger partner, who is seen as a "gold digger," offering attention and sex in exchange for economic security and social status. Trey's humble origins in Oklahoma and his questionable former profession are of concern to Jodi, especially when she discovers Trey is living with Elliot and has received an outrageously expensive watch from him. Elliot later reveals to Jodi he believes all relationships are based on "exchanging goods."

While playwright Harmon references the stereotypes often projected onto age-gap couples, he endows his characters with facets that prevent them from becoming caricatures. Trey has an open and direct attitude towards life that clearly delights Elliot. Though some may question if Trey is mature enough to sustain the kind of enduring love Jodi fights for at the end of the play, for Elliot Trey's beauty is its own, life-enhancing reward.

Despite the skepticism about couples with considerable age differences, many partners testify to a timeless connection unrelated to their biological ages. Such a bond can weaken if the partners are overly sensitive to the disapproval of those around them or can flourish because of the commitment required to withstand resistance from others. Key to long-term happiness is sharing values and interests. The biggest threat is ending up in different phases of life, with conflicting needs that can pull a couple apart. Harmon hints at this when Trey expresses a desire to go clubbing and Elliot wants to stay in for the evening. The playwright has also placed a character in the townhouse to serve, perhaps, as a harbinger of how transitory Elliot's romances can be.

DISCUSSION POINT

No matter what the age gap, what are the ingredients for a successful, long-term relationship?

THE APPEALS & PRESSURES OF BEAUTY & YOUTH



Since Elliot is an icon in the world of fashion, it is not surprising that being youthful is a pressing concern for the characters in *Skintight*. While the idealized female form in Western fashion has changed over time, during the current era in which the play takes place, thin, long-limbed teenage girls with smooth, dewy skin appear on fashion show runways and in advertisements, promoting apparel and beauty products on which American consumers spend billions of dollars. Celebrity culture, with its focus on the young stars of show business, music, and social media, also disseminates physical ideals across media platforms that are not only physically and financially hard for most people to fulfill, but if not met, can cause distress.

In *Skintight*, Jodi experiences the brunt of the skin-deep values that permeate her father's world. Not only has she been traded in for a younger wife by her husband back in Los Angeles, her father, a regular consumer of Botox, suggests she try it and expresses concern about her weight.

As evidenced by Elliot's treatment of Jodi, the glorification of certain body and facial types in mainstream culture can create a lens through which human beings are viewed by others in negative ways. Family members can shame each other with comments. Those in middle or older age can feel treated as "invisible" and subjected to ageism in the workplace.

While many engage in diets and exercise to remain healthy and use cosmetic procedures to look their best and feel good about themselves, others go to extreme lengths to appear youthful in order to gain the approval of their peers, attract romantic partners, and succeed, especially in high-visibility professions. Around weight issues, some develop eating disorders. Women who are extremely thin, especially those past middle age, add to the risk of their bones becoming brittle. Men trying to achieve a chiseled appearance sometimes ingest substances, such as human growth hormone, which may have a harmful impact on long-term health. Other individuals may hold themselves responsible for not trying — or not trying hard enough — to meet current standards of body perfection and struggle with their sense of self-worth.

THEMES & TOPICS

AGEISM

According to the World Health Organization, "Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age... Overlooked for employment, restricted from social services and stereotyped in the media, ageism marginalises and excludes older people in their communities."

CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The Body Project, sponsored by Bradley University in Illinois, offers: "Although thin bodies are the ideal in America today, this is not always the case in other parts of the world. In some countries [such as the Pacific island nations of Tahiti and Fiji] larger bodies are actually preferred because they are symbols of wealth, power, and fertility... In recent times, even many societies that once favored larger bodies seem to be moving toward thinner bodies as the ideal. Why? One factor is that with globalization and the spread of Western media, people around the world are receiving the same message that we do in America: that thin bodies are the most attractive."

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/YouthObsessCulture tinyurl.com/VisibleAgeing tinyurl.com/MenBodySelf-Esteem tinyurl.com/WedMdHGH Those who promote exacting ideals and those who are ashamed they cannot live up to them have not taken into account how much genetics and ageing impact the appearance of our bodies. Everyone has differently proportioned heads, facial features, necks, torsos, and limbs, which are inherited and can be improved upon but not transformed completely. Ageing affects weight and the vibrancy of our muscles and skin. According to a study excerpted by the American Psychological Association, "Oh to be lean and muscular: Body image ideals in gay and heterosexual men." (2007), both groups were affected by the discrepancies between the ideal body and their own, especially as they grew older: "For both sexual orientation groups, dissatisfaction with thinness increased with age and was negatively correlated with self-esteem."

In addition to physical features, spontaneity may also draw older partners to younger ones, who have abundant energy that allows them to enjoy life fully. Untethered by major responsibilities and routines, or the fatigue of advancing age, they can follow impulses to go out, party, pursue leisure activities, and travel, all of which can be stimulating to be around. As Elliot tells Jodi about Trey's effect on him, "I feel awake. I feel more awake to my life."

Focusing on youth can be about many things: believing fashion designs are best displayed if worn by the young and thin; advancing commerce, since beautiful young people attract so much attention and can sell so many wares; and wanting to bask in the vitality the young possess. In celebrating how "hot" Trey is, Elliot makes the case for what he has packaged and sold for so many years: "Hot is everything. Look around you. This house-- this life-- has been paid for by hot. *Hot* is everything. It's everything." He also rhapsodizes about sex with Trey: "...it's life, and I want life...I love waking up next to him because it feels like life, and I love that, and I love him for it."

Within Elliot's joy about the pleasure he experiences with Trey seems to pulse the belief that staying close to the beauty and energy of youth is a powerful way to outwit the challenges of ageing.

DISCUSSION POINT

What is lost and what is gained as we age?

FROM POVERTY TO EXTREME PRIVILEGE



Towards the end of *Skintight*, Jodi gifts her father with an album she has assembled about the history of their family. We learn about the origins of his passion for clothing — his father was a tailor and he sewed while other children were out playing. Trey becomes more confident as he notices Elliot's family "was as poor as I used to be." When Benjamin asks his grandfather's housekeeper Orsolya to read an inscription on a photograph in Hungarian, he highlights Elliot's cultural roots and the family members who left and settled in America, because many Hungarian citizens, according to Benjamin, "were like, pretty enthusiastic collaborators with Nazis."

Benjamin, who is proudly out and has been studying queer theory and Yiddish culture abroad in Hungary, remarks on Elliot's lack of awareness about being attracted to men. When Jodi shares about her mother, who died 15 years before, Elliot's choice to marry and have children and remain closeted, which many gay men did and still do in order to succeed in a predominantly hetereonormative world, resonates among them.

Elliot's "rags to riches" pathway, his success in becoming his own global brand, when most designers end up working for garment manufacturers, and his evolution from being closeted to publicly involved with a much younger man, echo the trajectory of Calvin Klein, who became popular in the 1980s and is a force in fashion to this day. The two men also share an affinity for minimalist design, which focuses on spare elegance and lack of ornamentation, and having maintained many years of sobriety.

Through Elliot's interactions with Jodi and Benjamin we see him adamantly committed to the present, uninterested in staying terribly long in the past — a characteristic he may share with other self-made entrepreneurs, driven to move far away from the impoverished circumstances they experienced as children. Elliot also operates with the sense of privilege of someone who can pay for anything he wants, including the loyalty of an employee who reminds him of his roots, without expecting him to return to them.

HUNGARY

According to the travel website tripsavvy.com, "The country of Hungary is landlocked in Europe and borders seven countries—Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia...Hungary was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the 20th century, it was under a Communist government until 1989, when a parliament was established...Hungarians speak Hungarian, although they call it Magyar. Hungarian has more in common with Finnish and Estonian than the Indo-European languages spoken by neighboring countries."

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/CalvinKleinStory

COMIC TIMING

Playwrights, directors, and actors work very hard to provoke audiences into laughter. Much of the impact of comedic dialogue depends on *timing*. The use of rhythm, tempo, and beats enhance the audience's overall understanding of the "set-up" of a joke and the resulting kinetic response of laughter to the punchline.

To explore the use of timing in humorous dialogue, bring the scene from *Skintight* below to life with a partner. First read the scene to yourselves, and then decide who will be each character. Read the scene aloud in a straightforward way and then again, delivering your lines more slowly, taking beats. The third time through, say the lines faster. Finally, select various speeds appropriate to your character's intentions and reactions.

ELLIOT

Listen honey. I am... glad you're here, really I am, but I want to make sure you're very clear on the fact that there are to be no other surprises this weekend.

JODI

What do you mean?

ELLIOT

No surprise party. No, no cowboys jumping out of cakes-

JODI

No, there are no cowboys jumping out of cakes.

ELLIOT

Because you understand, that would be my worst nightmare.

JODI

Yes, I know. You don't have to worry. I am way too consumed with myself right now to go to that kind of trouble for anyone.

ELLIOT

Excellent.

JODI

If you wanna have a birthday dinner, just the family, then fine, and if not, then we-- $\,$

ELLIOT

No dinner.

JODI

Fine.

Quick beat

ELLIOT

What do you mean, the "family?"

DISCUSSION POINT

What did you learn about the relationship between timing and comedy?

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE DREW BENJAMIN



What is your title and when did you join the Geffen?

I am Development Manager, and I have been with the Geffen since May 2019.

What personal, educational, and professional experiences led you to your job at the Geffen?

I have been involved in theater since I was around 5 years old, when I was cast as Baby Bear in the classic "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." From there. I began writing and performing my own plays in front of family and friends (much to their enjoyment, I can assure you). My fundraising career, however, began when I was based in New York. It was there that I became involved with several non-profits and developed an extensive knowledge in creating successful fundraising campaigns and found a deep appreciation for philanthropic work. It is an amazing feeling to raise necessary funds to support work that will contribute to the betterment of society. Which is what led me to the Geffen Plavhouse. It combines my love of theater, fundraising, and education.

What are your primary responsibilities as Development Manager?

I work within the Development De-

partment in areas of data entry, donation processing, analysis, research, and reporting.

Why is a Development Department central to the life of a non-profit theater?

Non-profits rely on their Development team to raise necessary funds to support their mission and vision. I think Jim Volz, author of *How to Run a Theater* says it best: "As an arts representative, you are offering donors a rare and remarkable chance to be a significant part of a rare and noble enterprise that has the potential to reap the myriad educational rewards, economic development benefits, and cultural awakenings that the arts bring to audiences and communities night after night, performance after performance!"

As a relatively new staff member, what has stood out most to you about the Geffen — both as a theater and as a place to work?

The sense of community within and around the Geffen is definitely something that doesn't go unnoticed. There's a strong feeling of belonging, camaraderie, and collaboration, which makes coming to work that much more enjoyable.

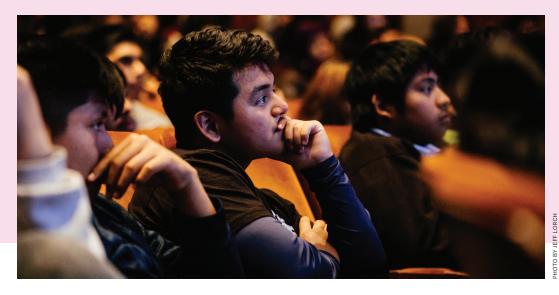
What do you find most challenging about your work?

Development work combines a lot of different skill sets: customer service, communications, writing, and design. It challenges me to learn new approaches for funders, ways to see the work we create, but mostly it challenges me to calculate numbers. Math has never been my strong suit.

What do you find most rewarding?

It is fully rewarding to support programs and projects that serve the community, and what's even more amazing is to work at a theater and be a part of all the incredible work they produce. Theater has always been my passion, whether my involvement with it be acting, writing, directing, or producing. It's there for people to run away to another world, gain a different perspective, learn something new, be entertained, join a community, find similarities among others, fall in love, and share stories. It has the power to create social change and provides a chance for all of us to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE



Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of "audience etiquette," or how to behave at the theater.

THE AUDIENCE'S ROLE The audience plays an essential role during the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members' concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring their performance to life.

BEHAVIORS TO AVOID Since the actors can hear the audience so clearly, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them—and fellow audience members. These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- · Unwrapping candy or cough drops.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA We appreciate you sharing your Geffen Playhouse experience via social media, but ask that you **do not do so inside the theater, where the use of electronic devices is prohibited.**

We recommend that you post your status in the lobby after the performance, and invite you to tag @GeffenPlayhouse and use #GeffenPlayhouse to share your experience and continue the conversation with us online.

AUDIENCE AWARENESS ACTIVITY Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with:

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing in a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to questions selected from those suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Ask for several volunteers to share their groups' answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching Skintight? Engrossed? Distanced? Entertained? Bored? Conflicted? Moved? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- Playwright Joshua Harmon has described Skintight as "a funny play about sad people."
 Did you find the play humorous? If so, which moments stood out to you? If not, why not?
- Regarding the characters as "sad people," what about their personalities and circumstances might confirm this perspective? Or not?
- At the end of the play, Jeff says, "Anything that's very beautiful only lasts a very short time." Do you agree with this view? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What do think happens to each character after the end of the play? Does the relationship between Elliot and Trey endure? Does Jodi recover from the dissolution of her marriage? Does Benjamin thrive? Do Jeff and Orsolya remain loyal to Elliot? If so, how or why? If not, why not?
- · What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, costumes, props, and lighting contribute to the impact of the show?
- Would you recommend this production of Skintight to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?
- If you have seen productions of Joshua Harmon's *Bad Jews* and *Significant Other* at the Geffen, how does *Skintight* compare?

RESOURCES

| WATCH an interview with Calvin Klein, upon whom <i>Skintight</i> is said to be based, to learn about his approach to design and the business empire he created at tinyurl.com/StoryCK . |
|--|
| LEARN about the impact of the Minimalism and Maximalism on fashion over time, in an online exhibit provided by the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City at tinyurl.com/MinimalMaximalExhibit . |
| VISIT the Fashion Institute of Design Museum in downtown Los Angeles to view exhibits about various fashion eras. (Information at http://fidmmuseum.org.) |
| LEARN about self-acceptance and healthy practices regarding different body types through Bradley University's The Body Project at tinyurl.com/BradleyBodyProject . |
| LEARN about when and why Hungarians emigrated to the United States, including those who fled Nazism, at tinyurl.com/Hungarian-Immigrants-U-S . |
| WATCH a favorite situation comedy or comic film to analyze the timing of the actors as they create humorous moments together. |

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Keyes Automotive Group

KIND Bars

Kissick Family Foundation

L&N Andreas Foundation

Lear Family Foundation

Lionsgate

Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

Los Angeles City Department of Cultural Affairs

Los Angeles County Arts Commission

Lowell Milken Family Foundation

Lowy Foundation

Mara W. Breech Foundation

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MOCA Foundation

Netflix

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Shay Family Foundation

The Sherwood Foundation

Sidley Austin LLP

Simms/Mann Family Foundation

Singer Family Foundation

Smith Family Foundation

Sondheimer Foundation

Sony Pictures Entertainment

Steve Tisch Family Foundation

Stone Family Foundation

UCLA

Union Bank

US Bank

The Walt Disney Company

Ziff Family Foundation

And many more!





