

STUDY GUIDE

GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

REVENGE SONG

A VAMPIRE COWBOYS CREATION



WORLD PREMIERE
& GEFEN PLAYHOUSE COMMISSION
REVENGE SONG
A VAMPIRE COWBOYS CREATION
02.04–03.08.2020
GIL CATES THEATER

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Amy Levinson, Rachel Weigardt-Egel, Brian Dunning, Wendell Pascual, Miriam Avital Levenson,
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STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

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COVER PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

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ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

REVENGE SONG

A VAMPIRE COWBOYS CREATION

WRITTEN BY
QUI NGUYEN

DIRECTED BY
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VAMPIRE COWBOYS PRODUCER
ABBY MARCUS

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER
ROSS JACKSON

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
LIZZIE THOMPSON

CASTING DIRECTOR
PHYLLIS SCHURINGA, CSA

THIS PLAY WAS COMMISSIONED AS PART OF THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE'S NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
THANKS TO THE GENEROSITY OF THE HAROLD & MIMI STEINBERG CHARITABLE TRUST

MAJOR SUPPORT FOR THIS WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCTION PROVIDED BY THE EDGERTON FOUNDATION NEW PLAY PRODUCTION FUND

DEVELOPED IN PART WITH CALARTS CENTER FOR NEW PERFORMANCE AND
WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE ORCHARD PROJECT, ARI EDELSON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

CAST



**NOSHIR
DALAL**
SERANNES,
GASTON
AND OTHERS



**BETH
HAWKES**
EMILY
AND OTHERS



**TOM
MYERS**
LOUIS, GAULARD
AND OTHERS



**MARGARET
ODETTE**
JULIE



**AMY KIM
WASCHKE**
MADAME DE
SENNETERRE
AND OTHERS



**EUGENE
YOUNG**
ALBERT
AND OTHERS

SYNOPSIS

This dynamic, dark comedy is based on the real-life adventures of Julie D'Aubigny, who lived in the late 1600s, in France. Independent in spirit and trained by her father Gaston in swordplay, she is on two interweaving journeys: to exact revenge for the exploitation she experienced as a teenager at the hands of her father's boss, nobleman Louis, and to explore her sexuality through relationships with men and women. Albert, a wealthy young man wants to take care of her; Emily inspires one of Julie's outrageous feats; Serannes is a master swordsman who helps Julie hone her skills; theater owner Marie supports Julie's work as a singer—and more. The show is the creation of New York-based Vampire Cowboys and includes the theater company's signature mash-up of artistic styles and cultural references, including original pop songs and a fusion of European and Asian martial arts.

TIME/SETTING France 1600s

RUNNING TIME 2 hours, including one 15 minute intermission.

PRODUCTION NOTES Contains strong sexual content, explicit language, stage violence, strobe lighting effects, theatrical haze, and is not recommended to those under the age of 14.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

QUI NGUYEN *Playwright*

Qui Nguyen is a playwright, television and film writer, and co-founder of the Obie Award-winning Vampire Cowboys of NYC. Scripts include *Vietgone* (2016 Steinberg Award, 2016 LADCC Ted Schmidt New Play Award, 2016 Kennedy Prize Finalist); *Poor Yella Rednecks*; *She Kills Monsters* (2013 AATE Distinguished Play Award); *Soul Samurai* (2009 GLAAD Media Award nom); *Begets*; *Krunk Fu Battle Battle*; and the critically acclaimed Vampire Cowboys productions of *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, *Alice in Slasherland*, *Fight Girl Battle World*, *Men of Steel*, and *Living Dead in Denmark*. For television/film, Qui's written for AMC, SYFY, PBS, Netflix, and Marvel Studios. He currently writes for Walt Disney Animation Studios. Notable honors include a 2016 Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in a Preschool Animated Program (*Peg+Cat*), a 2015 NY Community Trust Helen Merrill Playwriting Award, and a 2014 Sundance Institute/Time Warner Fellowship. He's currently under commission by South Coast Repertory/Manhattan Theatre Club (*The Vietgone Saga*), Geffen Playhouse, Center Theatre Group/Goodman Theatre, Atlantic Theater Company, and Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He is a proud member of the WGA, The Dramatists Guild, The Playwrights Center, Ensemble Studio Theatre, The Ma-Yi Writers Lab, and an alumnus of New Dramatists and Youngblood.

ROBERT ROSS PARKER *Director*

Robert is co-founder of the Obie-winning Vampire Cowboys. He has directed all of their productions including *Soul Samurai*, *Alice in Slasherland*, *Fight Girl/Battle World*, and *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*. Other credits include *Anna Moench's Mothers* (The Playwrights Realm); *Vietgone* (Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre); *Disgraced* (Mirvish, Citadel Theatre, Hope and Hell Theatre Company); *Fast Company* (Ensemble Studio Theatre Los Angeles, where Robert is a member); *Branched* (InViolet Theater); *How to be a New Yorker* (CRC productions); *She Kills Monsters* (The Flea Theater); *Goodbye Cruel World* (The Roundtable Ensemble), and *Hamlet (solo)* (Hope and Hell Theatre Company) which has toured for ten years playing in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Acting credits include *Constellations* (Hangar Theatre) and *Frankenstein* (Soho Rep./The Flying Machine). He is the former editor of *The Dramatist*, the Journal of the Dramatists Guild of America. M.F.A., Ohio University.

A SENSE OF AGENCY



PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN

Revenge Song is based on a story from the past and is brought to life with modern sensibilities. To understand Julie's remarkable sense of agency, both in real life and in this play, it is useful to consider what life was like for women in late 1600s Europe and to also look at her experiences through a current LGBTQ lens.

WOMEN'S LIVES: It takes courage and determination to refuse to follow social norms, and Julie D'Aubigny possessed both as she made her own way in an oppressive world. According to Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, author of *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (which encompasses a period from 1500 through the 1800), European women lived in a world defined by and designed for men: females were considered inferior to males; being wives and mothers and running households were seen as women's central roles; they could not inherit wealth or land, and were unable to divorce their husbands.

WOMEN'S WORK: Julie's ability to take action on her own behalf was likely influenced by her upbringing. As the daughter of Gaston D'Aubigny, secretary to Louis de Lorraine-Guise, who served as Master of the Horse for King Louis XIV, she learned to read, ride and take care of horses, and fence alongside the boys her father was training. At age fourteen, Louis compelled her to become his mistress. Eventually, Julie ran away and she lived primarily as a single woman. Historian Wiesner-Hanks notes that 10-15% percent of women in early modern Europe did not marry and their work options were limited. Many became nuns in convents. Those less well off served as nannies and servants in affluent households, and some found work

IDENTITIES/TERMS

Since our identities are ours alone to determine, the following terms are used to self-identify gender identity and sexual orientation, not to assign to others.

GENDER IDENTITY (n.)

A person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not fit into one of those two choices. (GLAAD)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION (n.)

The scientifically accurate term for an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual (straight) orientations. (GLAAD)

NON-BINARY (adj.)

Term used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. (GLAAD)

GENDER NONCONFORMING (adj.)

A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender; nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming. (GLAAD)

PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY (n.)

Patriarchal (adj.) describes a general structure in which men have power over women. Society (n.) is the entirety of relations of a community. A patriarchal society consists of a male-dominated power structure throughout organized society and in individual relationships. (thoughtco.com)

SOURCES

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Fourth Edition). Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

<https://www.glaad.org>

in clothing production. Julie bucked convention by supporting herself as a swordswoman and as an opera singer.

APPAREL: Wearing masculine clothing, as Julie did throughout her life, may have been related to her gender identity, may have been a choice not to conform to the dress expected of females, and/or may have provided protection as she worked in spheres only open to males. According to Wiesner-Hanks, women serving as soldiers and sailors dressed as men to take advantage of such opportunities, and to blend into their ranks. When younger, Julie wore clothing that boys typically wore to avoid drawing attention to being a girl while working in the stables. What is not addressed by the historical record, or in the play, is how Julie identified her gender. At the time, according to Wiesner-Hanks, females' gender identities were subject to legal control, to prevent the disruption of male hierarchies. If women wore masculine clothing to express their identities, they ran the risk of severe legal consequences, such as execution, if discovered.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: Because she engaged in relationships with women and men, Julie has been described as "bisexual" in her sexual orientation, which denotes being attracted to those of her gender and other genders as romantic and sexual partners, to varying degrees. Today, Julie might consider herself "queer" — a term that those who are not exclusively heterosexual use, which encompasses attractions that fall along a continuum, and are "fluid" since they can change. Some in the LGBTQ community object to the term "queer" (which often signifies the letter Q in the LGBTQ acronym) because of how it has been used in the past as a slur. Those who embrace the term believe it offers the freedom to love others in ways that are not defined according to limiting cultural "constructs."

REVENGE: In the play, the pivotal experience Julie has with Louis propels her to seek revenge. While some may wonder if going after Louis through violent

means is the "right" action to take, Julie's response to being overpowered by a male member of the ruling class who invaded her boundaries for his own pleasure is ultimately an assertion of her right to have control over her body, rather than passively accept the kind of exploitation women were — and in many cases still are — expected to endure in a patriarchal society.

DISCUSSION POINT

How does discrimination regarding gender, race, and class, as well as the lack of access to and support in pursuing economic opportunities impact women's ability to make their own way in the United States? What attitudes and systems need to change for all women to be perceived and treated as equals to men?

JOURNEYS & JUXTAPOSITIONS IN GEEK THEATRE



PHOTO: JEFF LORCH

Vampire Cowboys company members rehearse *Revenge Song*.

JOURNEY: In his article “Geek Theatre Moves the Outsiders into the Spotlight” (*American Theatre*, February 2014), Robert L. Neblett refers to Vampire Cowboys—the New York company that has created *Revenge Song*—as “arguably the best-known geek theatre company in America.” Geek Theatre has used as its inspiration teenage gamers who see themselves as outsiders and often traffic in cyber-reality in search of empowerment. As Neblett observes, “The idea of the hero, particularly the superhero, plays a vital role in geek culture. This immersion into fantasy is a way of forgetting the mundane quality of the everyday world.”

According to an interview in *Playbill Magazine* with Robert Ross Parker, *Revenge Song* director and co-founder of Vampire Cowboys, he and playwright Qui Nguyen, also co-founder of the theater company, met twenty years ago as graduate students in theater at Ohio University. After realizing how out of sync they felt with the “serious” and naturalistic approach to theater of their teachers and fellow students, they decided to be true to their anarchic spirits by creating works based on horror and science fiction genres and comic book aesthetics.

Nguyen has attributed the popularity of Vampire Cowboys’ work in part to their presentation of “superheroes for people who don’t often get to see themselves drawn that way” (*American Theatre*, February 2014). In *Julie*, the creators have an “outsider” who is an expert swordswoman and artist in 1600s France, when such roles were not readily available to women. At the same time, she engages in a journey of self-discovery about whom to love, which aligns with what Neblett notes about Geek Theatre: “At its core—among the struggles between reality and fantasy, individuality versus conformity—geek theatre is about the search for community, and a search for self.”

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/GeekTheater

Getting the Band Back Together: An Interview with Robert Ross Parker by Rachel Wiegardt-Egel. *Revenge Song* Playbill, (2020, February). 17-18.

tinyurl.com/WikiCyberpunkDerivatives

THEMES & TOPICS

JUXTAPOSITIONS: Comic books that convey the exploits of superheroes are known for containing several key elements: the seamless combination of visuals and words; direct dialogue; lots of action; and heroes facing powerful enemies—all of which turn up in *Revenge Song*. Committed to producing “quality theatrical shows,” Nguyen and Parker have also added the fusion of two historical eras, intentionally diverse casting, strong doses of ironic humor, a vivid pop culture design sense, and high-energy martial arts sequences, into the mix.

How, we might ask, do all of these elements and combinations of elements enhance the experience of Julie’s story?

The 1600s European context shows the constraints Julie was up against and ignored, while the 1990s L.A. punk scene and its profane vernacular—evident in the dialogue and songs—echoes that rebelliousness in modern and accessible ways. Having performers of color enact key roles also breaks down the barriers of the world into which Julie was born and brings it into the present.

The rudeness with which characters treat each other unleashes irreverent humor, as does the provocative narration of Madame De Senneterre, who passes judgment on the characters and challenges the audience to abandon its conventional thinking.

The pop songs that characters break into are cheerfully outrageous or sweetly mundane and serve as a counterpoint to the fierce antagonism between some of the characters. The stage set combines motifs from earlier times—arches in castle walls—and 1990s L.A. grunge—graffiti on those walls, and the costumes are reminiscent of today’s “ro-coco punk” and “steampunk” fashion styles, which marry clothing from prior eras (late Baroque and Victorian, respectively) with exaggerated or deconstructed details that add a contemporary flair to the designs.

Vampire Cowboys is known for including thrilling sequences of expert martial arts fighting. In *Revenge Song*, characters engage in East Asian forms, such as Kung Fu and Karate and European swordplay, which allows the audience to appreciate their similarities and differences, if not experience a new form of fighting that results from their fusion. This kind of synthesis is what *Revenge Song*’s creators seem to be asking audiences to witness. Through the juxtapositions of different historical periods, dramatic genres, and design styles, separate, even opposing, elements come together—out of time—and tear down each other’s walls to create an exciting and revelatory form of theater.

DISCUSSION POINT

Think about a theater production you have seen that was a “mash-up” of different eras, realities, or styles. How did the elements play off of one another and affect your experience of the play?

THE ART OF FIGHTING

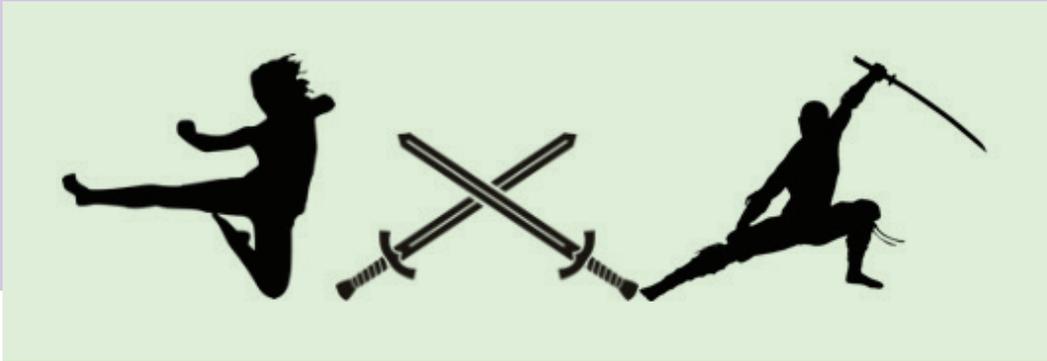


PHOTO: PIXABAY/PD

Martial arts are “fighting systems” that emerged from hunting and combat thousands of years ago in Asia and Europe. Today, most practitioners engage in these activities as physical and spiritual disciplines and competitive sports. Many “unarmed” East Asian styles involve stances from which to spring, offensive moves of the hands and feet, such as punches and kicks, and defensive moves such as blocking and swiveling to avoid contact. Both European and East Asian “armed” styles use swords and other weapons as extensions of the body. European swordplay, which once used wide, heavy blades, has evolved into the sport of fencing with thin rapiers. Large swords are still used in Asian forms, as well as daggers, axes, and smaller weapons that were once used to harm opponents and now display manual dexterity.

In keeping with the “mash-up” style of the show, the fight styles in *Revenge Song* draw on several disciplines including:

- **Western (European) sword fighting** from centuries ago, as well as fencing
- **Kung Fu**, a Chinese martial art based on powerful stances and striking moves, the focusing of “Qi,” an inner source of energy, and weaponry
- **Karate**, which involves “grappling, throws, joint locks, restraints and vital-point strikes” (Wikipedia).

Weapons used in fight scenes from the above and other martial arts include:

- **Dagger** — “a weapon like a knife with two sharp edges” (collinsdictionary.com)
- **Rapier** — “a straight, two-edged sword with a narrow pointed blade, designed especially for thrusting” (merriam-webster.com)
- **Katana** — “a long curved single-edged sword traditionally used by Japanese samurai” (collinsdictionary.com)
- **Battle axe** — “a broadaxe formerly used as a weapon of war” (merriam-webster.com)
- **Bo staff** — “a Japanese martial art weapon that is made of usually red or white oak that is between 5.9 ft to 9ft. long, which is used to strike and block opponents and their weapons” (collinsdictionary.com)
- **Shuriken** — “a martial-arts weapon usually in the shape of a star or cross... thrown with a spin to wards the target” (collinsdictionary.com)
- **Nunchaku** — “a throwing weapon consisting of two sticks linked loosely with a chain or fine rope” (collindictionary.com).

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/WikiChineseMA
 tinyurl.com/WikiKarate
 tinyurl.com/Collins-Dictionary
 www.merriam-webster.com

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIRIAM AVITAL LEVENSON



How long have you worked at the Geffen and what is your title?

I've worked at the Geffen for close to a year and a half — first as a properties artisan and now as Associate Properties Master.

What personal, educational, and/or professional experiences led you to assuming your role at the Geffen?

I went to college for scenic design and technical direction, wanting to have both a grounded technical instruction, and an artistry and design component to my education. It turned out to be the perfect preparation for working with props, which truly needs a well-rounded technical and artistic background. I find myself drawn to helping, and people always need props, be it a graphic for their show, or a shelf for their kitchen. I started doing props because I loved it, without formal training, not at all knowing that it would lead to this line of work.

What do “properties” encompass in a production?

What constitutes a prop can be a little vague, but properties are anything that goes on the walls or sits on the floor, and generally, if an actor can lift it, it's a prop. That includes things as big as beds and as small as matches. Curtains are props, whereas windows are scenery. Lamps are props, whereas light bulbs are lighting. There is a lot of overlap, so we need to interface with every department

to make sure that we're providing everything that's needed.

What are your primary responsibilities as Associate Properties Master?

I assist with many of the decisions regarding props, as well as with purchasing, making, building, and modifying the various props that best support the shows. I need to make sure that props are functioning the way they need to in the world of the play. Through something as simple as a bloody handkerchief, a whole story can be told onstage, and it's my job to make sure that story gets told correctly.

Given that plays usually happen in specific time periods, how are props acquired, constructed, or adapted for each play to align with those eras?

I do a lot of research!!! I usually start by diving into the time period, looking at what people's homes and lives were like. I try to find photos and paintings that show the objects of the era. Sometimes we buy reproductions, but we always try to buy items from the time period in antique shops — anywhere from Los Angeles to Riverside — and from people clearing out their attics. Much shopping nowadays is done online, so I scour Ebay, Etsy, and Craigslist, looking for vintage treasures.

The story upon which *Revenge Song* is based takes place in 1685 France, but according to the stage directions, the

setting “looks and feels far more like downtown Los Angeles circa 1990’s.” How has this “mash-up” influenced the choice of props?

This is my favorite kind of play, where we get to do the thing that tells the story best. That means I get to put a beautiful 17th century armchair onstage next to an exercise bike from the 70's. We're telling a story out of time, and the restrictions are gone, nothing is “right,” and so everything is.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

The most challenging part of my job is ensuring that I always keep up the fight to make theater a diverse space that is safe for queer people and people of color. On top of my job, I am always striving for more diversity, better wages, better hours, and more respect for the artists who devote so much mental energy to their craft. I'm not alone in this fight, but as an artist and young person in 2020 it's always at the forefront of my mind.

What do you find most rewarding?

Since every show is different, I love expanding my knowledge base, by researching the specific time periods, cultures, and art. When I can make something wonderful, like a 16th century banquet (out of foam!), or a magic puzzle board, I've helped tell that story, and telling stories is the most important thing we can do, as artists and as people.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

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



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

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 *Revenge Song*? Engaged? Conflicted? Amused? Inspired? Provoked? Put off? What made you feel this way?
- What did you find most surprising about this production?
- How would you characterize Julie's journey as a person? Did you empathize with any aspects of her experience? If so, which? If not, why not?
- How did the integration of historical events from the 1600s with contemporary cultural references impact your engagement with Julie's story?
- What aspects of this production were humorous? How did the creators use satire to make fun of serious subjects — and the audience's assumptions?
- What role does martial arts play in telling Julie's story?
- How did the set, props, costumes, and songs contribute to the impact of this show?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances?
- What is the playwright's message in *Revenge Song*?
- Would you recommend this production of *Revenge Song* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

RESOURCES

WATCH playwright Qui Nguyen discuss Vampire Cowboys, the theater company of which he is co-founder and artistic director, at tinyurl.com/QuiNguyenComicCon.

LEARN about the experiences of women in 1600s France in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

WATCH the animated real life story of Julie D'Aubigny, which discusses the “shifting norms” in 17th century France that allowed her to live as her “authentic self” at tinyurl.com/JulieD-AubignyStory.

LEARN about and support the efforts of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) at www.glaad.org to advocate for full acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

LEARN about Julie D'Aubigny's career as an opera singer at tinyurl.com/JulieD-AubignyOpera.

LEARN about Geek Theater — the genre embraced by the Vampire Cowboys theater company — as discussed in American Theatre magazine at tinyurl.com/GeekTheater.

VISIT the Martial Arts History Museum in Burbank, CA, to learn how martial arts have played a significant role in the cultures of Asian countries, such as China, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand, and in American film and television. Information at martialartsmuseum.com.

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And many more!

