

STUDY GUIDE

POWER OF SAIL

GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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WEST COAST PREMIERE
POWER OF SAIL
02.08–03.13.2022
GIL CATES THEATER

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Brian Allman, Cindy Lin, Isaac Katzanek,
Paloma Nozicka, Paul Grellong, Rachel Myers, and Weyni Mengesha

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

Dawn Robinson-Patrick

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COVER PHOTO BY JUSTIN BETTMAN

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ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

POWER OF SAIL

WRITTEN BY
PAUL GRELLONG

DIRECTED BY
WEYNI MENGESHA

PRODUCED WITH
DARYL ROTH

SCENIC DESIGNER
RACHEL MYERS

COSTUME DESIGNER
SAMANTHA C. JONES

LIGHTING DESIGNER
LAP CHI CHU

ORIGINAL MUSIC & SOUND DESIGN BY
JONATHAN SNIPES

DRAMATURG
MIKE SABLONE

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER
J. JASON DAUNTER

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
LIZZIE THOMPSON

CASTING DIRECTOR
PHYLLIS SCHURINGA, CSA

THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *POWER OF SAIL* OPENED ON MARCH 15, 2019 AT THE WAREHOUSE THEATRE, GREENVILLE, SC,
MIKE SABLONE, PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, JASON D. JOHNSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR

CAST



**HUGO
ARMSTRONG**
FRANK SULLIVAN



**AMY
BRENNEMAN**
AMY KATZ



**BRYAN
CRANSTON**
CHARLES NICHOLS



**DONNA SIMONE
JOHNSON**
QUINN HARRIS



**TEDRA
MILLAN**
MAGGIE ROSEN



**SETH
NUMRICH**
LUCAS POOLE



**BRANDON
SCOTT**
BAXTER FORREST

SYNOPSIS

In *Power of Sail*, distinguished and well respected Harvard professor Charles Nichols is under public and private scrutiny after inviting a white nationalist sympathizer to speak at his annual symposium. Nichols hoped that the public conversation would in turn be an opportunity to dismantle and discredit racist views. After receiving counsel from concerned colleagues to cancel, his intention to move forward invites continued debate and student uprising resulting in an unexpected turn. The play examines free speech in moral conflict with hate speech.

TIME/STRUCTURE Fall, 2019. The scenes of the play progress in a non-linear manner, so that the story takes the form of a round-trip journey.

RUNNING TIME 1 hour and 45 minutes, no intermission.

PRODUCTION NOTES Contains adult subject matter and profanity.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



PAUL GRELLONG *Playwright*

Paul Grellong's plays include *Manuscript*, produced by Daryl Roth at the Daryl Roth Theatre, which has since been performed internationally; *Radio Free Emerson* (Winner: Elliot Norton Award from the Boston Theater Critics Association for Outstanding New Script), which was commissioned and produced by Rhode Island's Gamm Theatre; and *Power of Sail*, which had its world premiere at The Warehouse Theatre in Greenville, South Carolina. He is currently at work on a commission for Bay Street Theater. His plays have been read and workshopped at Center Theatre Group, MCC, Trinity Repertory Company, Symphony Space,

Echo Theater Company, and the Cape Cod Theatre Project. Television credits include: *The Boys*, *Scorpion*, *Revolution*, and *Law & Order: SVU*. Paul studied playwriting at Brown University. He lives in Los Angeles, where he is an alumnus of the Playwrights Union.



WEYNI MENGESHA *Director*

Weyni Mengesha is the Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company in Toronto. She has directed shows across Canada that have gone on to tour nationally and internationally, and have been developed into television shows playing on CBC, Global, and Netflix. She has also directed in London, New York, and Los Angeles, garnering an NAACP nomination for Best Direction as well as Dora (Toronto), Drama League (New York), and Drama Critics Circle (Los Angeles) nominations and awards for Direction. Some recent credits for Soulpepper include *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and

Kim's Convenience. She has been an instructor at the National Theatre School of Canada and the Canadian Film Centre, and was Co-Artistic Director of the A.M.Y (artists mentoring youth) Project for seven years. She has also directed award winning short films, episodic TV and is developing her first feature. She wants to thank everyone at the Geffen, and the wonderful cast and crew. She also thanks her husband and two boys for all their support, and all of you, for being here to share this story tonight.

HISTORY OF COLLEGE PROTESTS & STUDENT ACTIVISM



Harvard students rioting over dining hall food in the 18th century 1766

In the opening scene of *Power of Sail* Harvard University students participate in a protest in disapproval of a controversial invited lecturer.

SCENE ONE

IN DARKNESS. Hear the SHOUTING OF PROTESTORS. Youthful angry voices, impassioned, straining. Chants such as “No Nazis, No KKK, No fascist USA!” The sound grows until it is very loud.

The Harvard campus has a history of student protest dating back to 1638, two years after the founding of Harvard College when the first class of students protested against President Nathaniel Eaton. They objected to Eaton’s practice of beating students as a form of discipline.

In the Harvard Butter Rebellion of 1766, food became the defining issue in campus activism. Student Asa Dunbar incited a rebellion when he stood on his chair in the dining hall and shouted, “Behold, our butter stinketh! Give us, therefore, butter that stinketh not.” The students then boycotted Harvard’s dining hall until the university’s president suspended half of the student body.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT & COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Student activists have also successfully addressed more serious issues like racist discrimination and inequity. They also pushed for changes to many campus policies. For example, until the 20th century, many American colleges and universities enrolled only white male students. Student activists pushed colleges and universities to increase campus diversity and protect members from discrimination.



Statue of North Carolina A&T University students David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr. (Jibreel Khazan) and Joseph McNeil who staged a sit the F.W. Woolworth store.

SIT-IN (noun)

An act of occupying seats in a racially segregated establishment in organized protest against discrimination; an act of sitting in the seats or on the floor of an establishment as a means of organized protest. (merriam-webster.com)

SOURCES

A History of College Protests: Student Activism in College
tinyurl.com/CollegeActivismHist

UCLA Hunger Strike
tinyurl.com/uclahungerstrike



WHITE NATIONALIST (noun)

The belief, theory, or doctrine that white people are inherently superior to people from all other racial and ethnic groups, and that in order to preserve their white, European, and Christian cultural identities, they need or deserve a segregated geographical area, preferential treatment, and special legal protections. (dictionary.com)

SAFE SPACE (noun)

A place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations. (merriam-webster.com)

SOURCES

Harvard Students Occupy University Hall
tinyurl.com/harvardoccupy

Hey Bacow! Protest's Place at Harvard |
 Opinion | The Harvard Crimson
tinyurl.com/harvardprotest

In the 1960s, many college students across the nation protested segregation and marched for civil rights. In 1960, four black students from North Carolina A&T State University held a sit in at a “whites only” lunch counter, an act that inspired thousands of students to join the civil rights movement.

In addition to pushing for anti-discrimination policies, student have advocated to change what colleges teach. At San Francisco State University, anti-racism activists in 1968 successfully pressured the administration to establish the country’s first African American studies department. In 1993, UCLA students staged a hunger strike, using activism to push the establishment of the UCLA César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies.

In the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, activists fought for equity and nondiscrimination policies. In 2015 at the University of Missouri, black students stood up against the administration’s failure to stop racial hostility on campus and create an inclusive, open, and safe space for students of color.

The students and faculty members of *Power of Sail* who stand in opposition to bringing the controversial white nationalist sympathizer argue whether his presence could bring more harm than simply a good debate.

MAGGIE

It’s fine. It’ll be fine. I actually, ah, came with an offer for you. An invitation. As you know—and as you can literally hear at this moment—the students are upset.

(pause)

I know you, what’s in your heart—I knew why you were doing this—when you told us—

CHARLES

Free speech. Rigorous open debate.

LUCAS

Right.

MAGGIE

Right. But the kids... they don’t know that, or know you as well, so the shock of this has triggered them.

CHARLES

They have been ‘triggered.’

MAGGIE

Yes. And were he to come here—Carver—to this campus—they feel—not me—but they feel, because I’ve spoken to many of them, and they are good kids, they really are—they feel his words would cause lasting wounds.

LUCAS

Words would ‘wound them’?

STUDENTS FOR CHANGE

In 2021, *Harvard Crimson* reported in response to protests that student demonstrations are prevalent for good reason.

“Protests are essential, on and off campus. They can help challenge harmful preexisting norms and invite positive change. Students have been protesting on college campuses for centuries, using loud voices and brightly-colored signs to call for reform.”

Many believe that student protests help support a better and more just society inside and outside of campuses, *showing us how to peacefully fight for the world we want to live in.*

“Protests at Harvard have a track record of improving our community and the experiences of the people within it—and we doubt that change would’ve come about without some rebel rousing. A laundry list of crucial Harvard policy shifts can be traced back to rowdy, vocal students: the end of campus enlistment programs during the Vietnam War, the creation of an African and African American Studies department, divestment from fossil fuel companies and Apartheid South Africa, and contract improvements for Harvard University Dining Services workers.”

It continues to be debated among school authorities, even when clear evidence exists, that students, in advancing the causes they are passionate about through vocal public protest, have made Harvard better.

In the early months of 2020, campus activists continued to focus on major issues, such as the cost of college and equity on campus. But the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new urgency for student activists today and beyond.

Power of Sail is set in a time period before the pandemic. The playwright Paul Grellong intentionally kept the play in 2019, pre-George Floyd’s murder, in order to position the characters’ psychology and the way they approach the events of the play. After seeing the play, it is interesting to consider, what responses or actions may have changed if the scene was set in late 2020.

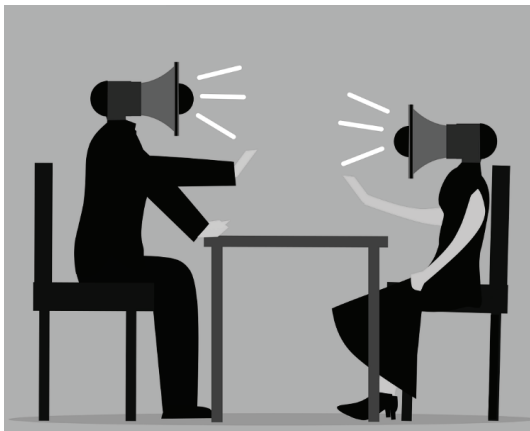


In 1970, students at North Carolina University staged a sit-in to protest the Vietnam War.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Have you ever been part of a public protest?
- In what ways could student protests help advance important causes in an effort make campuses and our society better?
- How can protests lead to inciting harm? What are some examples from our current history?

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM VS. HATE SPEECH



SOURCES

Ward, Kenneth Free Speech and the Development of Liberal Virtues: An Examination of the Controversies Involving Flag-Burning and Hate Speech; tinyurl.com/freevshate

American Library Association, Hate Speech and Hate Crime ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/hate

Photo: Pixabay/PD

Power of Sail examines the question of intellectual freedom and our public and institutional responses hate speech. What is the difference between the two?

The American Library Association (ALA) defines **Intellectual Freedom** as “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored.”

Hate Speech is speech, writing, or nonverbal communication that attacks, threatens, or insults a person or group on the basis of national origin, ethnicity, color, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. (dictionary.com)

In the United States, many believe that hate speech is protected by the First Amendment. ALA establishes that the First Amendment, “often requires the government to strictly protect robust debate on matters of public concern even when such debate devolves into distasteful, offensive, or hateful speech that causes others to feel grief, anger, or fear.”

However, under the current Amendment’s legal theory, hate speech can only be criminalized when it directly incites criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group. It is evident in our political histories that hate speech can often lead to hate crimes. Hate crimes include acts of violence against persons or property, denial of civil rights or even acts of intimidation, or conspiracy to commit these crimes.

Though hate crimes may begin as offensive speech or conduct, they can progress into criminal behavior that ranges from property crimes like vandalism, to assault and murder. Victims of hate crimes include individuals, college institutions, religious organizations and government entities.

The current debate on censorship challenges the use of power of the state to impose views of what is truthful and appropriate, verses what is offensive and objectionable. Censorship is defined as the suppression of ideas and information that some individuals or groups find objectionable or dangerous. Censors pressure public institutions, like colleges or universities, to suppress what they judge inappropriate. Many believe censorship is a form of cancel culture or “cancelling” the public presence of those in opposition to the minority. While cancelling is often seen as an effort to hold society accountable, it is often argued that absence of the conversation prevents the much needed change from occurring.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the play, Professor Charles Nichols believes that “the answer to hate speech is more speech,” which becomes one of the central themes of the play. Is it better to engage in discussion with harmful ideas in order to expose them? Or is it best to silence them completely?
- How can we ensure that free speech and exercising our intellectual freedom does not evolve into hate speech and ultimately hate crimes?

BEHIND THE SCENES



MODELS BY CINDY LIN

Did you know that Geffen Playhouse builds the set for each play from scratch? The Scenic Designer works in collaboration with the Director and Playwright to develop a vision that fully represents the play. *Power of Sail* Scenic Designer Rachel Myers shares:

“When I read a script I normally have a reaction in terms of textures and materials of what the world feels like. There’s a lot of other interesting research and factors that played into the specific design of this show. It was important to both Director, Playwright and me that what we had on stage felt minimal and essential. Just enough details to tell the story and just as the play presents different versions of how the action unfolds—we see the set change in different ways and expose more as our story goes on.”

After a design concept is created, it is built into a miniature dollhouse-sized model before full conception. A typical design process includes about 4-6 weeks of planning and preparation (drawings, models, and renderings) before building begins in the scenery shop. Thereafter, it can take about 3-4 weeks for construction and painting to create depending on the scale and scope of the design. A team of 10-12 production and technical staff was needed to fully execute the *Power of Sail* set.

Take a look at the above miniature version of the *Power of Sail* set. While watching play, take notice if anything in the design changed after the set was built. Do you see something while experiencing the play that you did not see in this smaller version?

DID YOU KNOW?

- The phrase “power of sail” refers to a maritime law that states that a ship under power of a motor must give way to a ship under power of sail.
- Playwright Paul Grellong started working on *Power of Sail* about twenty years ago in response to Holocaust denial from far-right groups, but never finished it until 2017, when the Warehouse Theatres’ producing Artistic Director Mike Sablone encouraged Grellong to re-visit the script. Grellong changed everything about the script except for the central character and the structure.
- Some of the conversations in the script are versions of real conversations the Playwright had with friends, colleagues, and family members about what free speech means.



PIXABAY/PD

DISTORTING THE NARRATIVE



AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT PAUL GRELLONG

AMY LEVINSON: Let's start with talking about your inspiration for the play and what inspired you to place it in 2019.

PAUL GRELLONG: I first wrote a draft of this play many years ago and then shelved it for a while. It was probably in 2002 when I started working on this, and at the time, the play was focused on Holocaust denial and that particular movement on the far right. But other elements about it were the same—the central character, the structure. But as I said, I put it away for a long time. Then, in 2017, I was speaking to Mike Sablone, who is the Artistic Director of the Warehouse in Greenville, and an old friend and collaborator of mine. I was talking to him about another play that I was starting to work on, and he asked a question that I wasn't expecting, which was, do you ever think about taking *Power of Sail* out of the drawer and revising it for today? And this was right after Charlottesville, so I thought it was an interesting question. If I'm being honest, I had been focused on this other play and hadn't really considered it. So that weekend, Mike and I

read it again. I took out this old script and just tore it to shreds. He and I got on the phone a couple of days later, and I came at him with all of these plans—I want to change this, and I want to change that, and these characters have to go. I was excited and so was he, so I spent that fall working on it. It was also a way for me to process some of the rage and frustration about what was happening in this country at the time. So I rewrote the play and changed essentially everything about it except the central character and the structure.

AL: So the setting of the play remained the same as well?

PG: Yes. At the start it wasn't Harvard, but it's been like that from a very early draft. And it was always a New England setting. We ended up doing the play at the Warehouse in the 2018/19 season, so it was set at that time, March of 2019. As to the second question of why I have kept it in 2019, I have two reasons. One is specifically COVID-related. Artists in various fields have differing feelings about depicting life in or after

AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT PAUL GRELLONG, CONT.

coronavirus. Some are all for it and others are adamantly opposed. Personally, and I'm only speaking for myself, I didn't want to have this play live in this time. I wasn't writing a script dealing with that. I've enjoyed plenty of work that is set in the present and deals with COVID. It just didn't seem like the right choice for this play. The second reason is a more important one, actually, which has to do with the characters' psychology. The way they approach the events of this play involves a mindset that is different from those who would have seen the murder of George Floyd, seen the public's response, seen the long overdue yet still decidedly unfinished racial reckoning it gave rise to—not only in this country, but around the world. I think that these characters would bring a different perspective, and a different set of behaviors in the wake of that, so it was important to me to set it at the doorstep of these two seismic events.

AL: Let's talk a little bit about the structure of the play. I love your description of it, talking about it as a roundtrip journey.

PG: That was one of the first things that I hit upon as I went from filling up notebooks with ideas to actually sitting down to write a cohesive play. I stumbled across this particular phrase in nautical law—that a vessel under power of motor has to grant right of way to a vessel under power of sail, so the powerful granting passage to the less powerful—and it rang true as a way to explore power dynamics while writing about people who distort history, historical narratives, and their own personal narratives. They dole out information in ways precisely designed to accomplish their goals. This was true specifically of the characters in the play, and also of the Holocaust denial movement more generally. So I thought, what better way to depict that dramatically than to show one timeline from two different perspectives? I knew that if we could withhold information in a judicious way in the front half of the play, that the second half would come alive with moments of revelation and dawning understanding. If we were doing our jobs, it would end up being true to the subject matter and the genre I was working in. This play

is a thriller and deploys certain tricks of that trade in telling the story, one of which is toying around with timeline. Not to fill viewers with a sense of having been manipulated, but rather providing them with an experience that delivers consistent surprise, especially in the second half. Because the play exists in an academic setting, some of the things that are talked about are intellectual in nature, but the goal has always been something with a pulse—to make the stakes high, and to make the temperature in the room heat up as we move along. I felt the structure could be our friend in that pursuit, that it could tell this story in a non-traditional way. So, here's hoping that our audiences agree.

AL: These characters are all very well-drawn, and I'm curious if any of them are people you've known in your life or if they're amalgamations of people you've known.

PG: The events of the play have nothing to do with any lived experience on my part. But some of the conversations in the play are versions of conversations I've had over the years with friends, colleagues, and family members about what free speech means. I was often unresolved after some of those discussions, especially when we'd hit a genuine impasse. So, part of writing this was an effort to finish the conversation and play out some of these disagreements in a dramatic way, almost as an experiment. What would happen if we follow this line of argument all the way to its conclusion? This was especially true of the conversations about free speech and white supremacy that were happening between 2015 and 2018. There were many false equivalencies that were drawn, explanations that were either insufficient or absurd, even as you could sense that the danger that had been creeping over the horizon was no longer approaching—it was here. It had arrived. So, writing the play was an attempt to make sense of one small facet of that. It was never designed to present an all-encompassing overview, but rather specific people in one set of given circumstances. What happens when they bring these theoretical arguments down to the ground level? And really, really live it.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE



PHOTO BY JEFF LORCH

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette.”

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 to experience the audience?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Depending on the time available and your participants' 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 *Power of Sail*? Engaged? Conflicted? Amused? Inspired? Provoked? Put off? What made you feel this way?
- How does the title *Power of Sail* act as a metaphor for Charles Nichols' desire to bring the speaker to campus?
- What did you find most surprising about this production?
- How would you characterize each character's journey?
- What aspects of this production were difficult?
- How did the structure in the varied timeline of the play contribute to the element of surprise?
- Have you ever welcomed an argument in an effort to incite or prove you were "right?"
- How did the set, props, costumes, and music contribute to the impact of this show?
- What is the playwright's message in *Power of Sail*?
- Would you recommend this production of *Power of Sail* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

RESOURCES

WATCH *Power of Sail* Behind the Scenes video featuring Bryan Cranston and Director Weyni Mengesha. tinyurl.com/BTSBryanWeyni

WATCH 2019 *Power of Sail* Interview with Playwright Paul Grellong at the Warehouse Theatre. tinyurl.com/POSWarehouse

LEARN more about the history of student protest on college campuses. A History of College Protests: Student Activism in College. tinyurl.com/CollegeActivismHist

LEARN more about Protest at Harvard. Hey Bacow! Protest's Place at Harvard. tinyurl.com/harvardprotest

READ books and materials that inspired playwright Paul Grellong to create *Power of Sail*.

- ***The Racial Contract*** by Charles Mills
 - ***The History of White People*** by Nell Irvin Painter
 - ***Culture Warlords*** by Talia Lavin
 - ***Everything You Love Will Burn*** by Vegas Tenold
 - ***The Sum of Us*** by Heather McGhee
-

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And many more!

