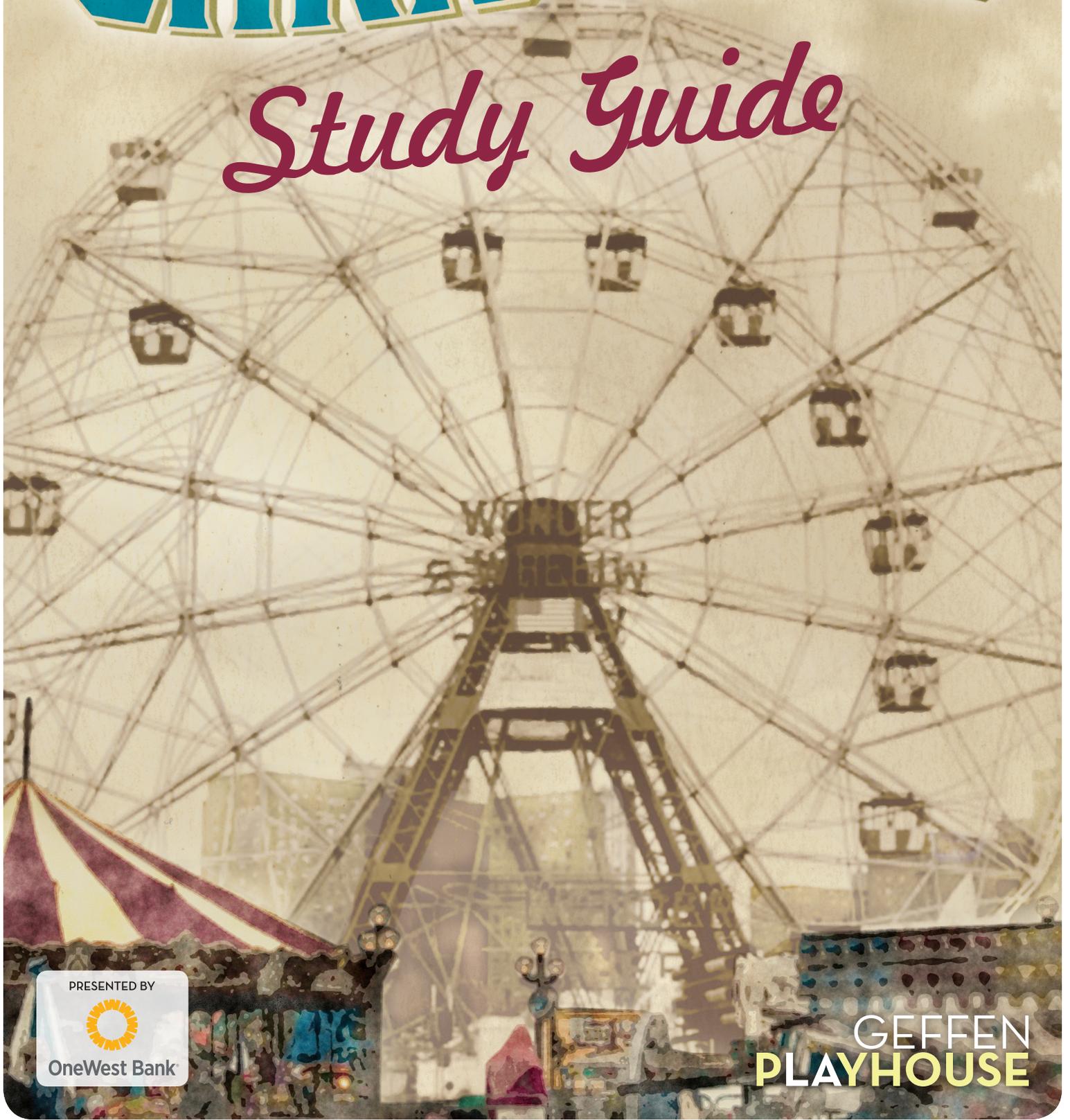


Coney Island
CHRISMAS

Study Guide



PRESENTED BY

OneWest Bank

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

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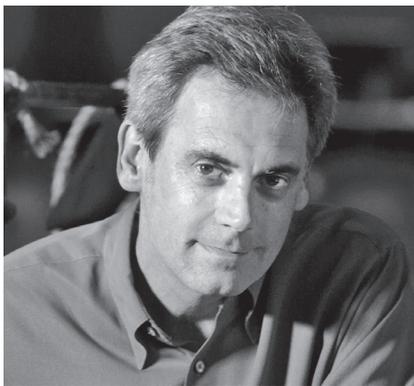
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



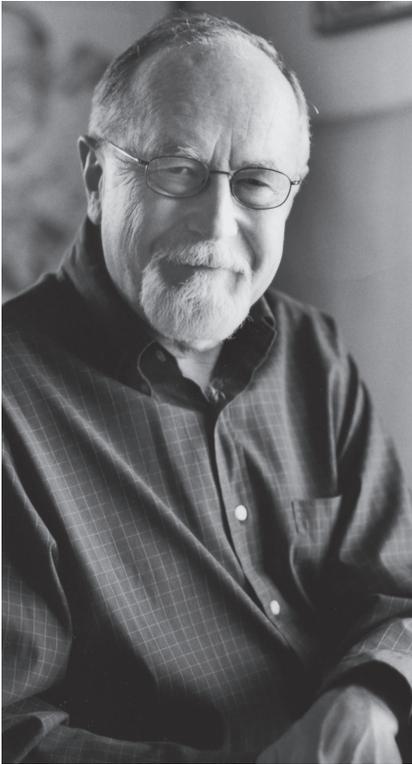
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



Coney Island Christmas is a play that came to us through a commission. Commissioning a play means that we pay writers a fee to create something specifically for the Geffen Playhouse. In this instance, Gil Cates, the Geffen's founding producing director who passed away last year, approached Donald Margulies about writing a holiday play. We have commissioned Margulies before, so we know that his plays take time to write and develop, but he was determined to have it ready for the fall of 2012. With the passing of Mr. Cates, Margulies' purpose was thrown into high gear – he wanted to have a play that not only represented the work that the Geffen has supported and nurtured through the years, but moreover, a play that in some way encapsulated the spirit of the man who had thought to commission it. When we saw the first draft of *Coney Island Christmas*, we knew that Donald Margulies had accomplished all of these things. Further, he has created a play that epitomizes what is wonderful about the holiday season – that it is a time where we focus on good will towards one another and set aside our petty differences.

PLAY SYNOPSIS & SETTING



DEDICATION

Playwright Donald Margulies wrote *Coney Island Christmas* on commission from the Geffen Playhouse and dedicated the play to the founder and late Producing Director Gil Cates.

Gil and Donald Margulies first collaborated in 1999 on *Collected Stories*. This sparked a subsequent film, as well as 13 years of friendship and collaboration. *Coney Island Christmas* is Donald's fifth play and second commission produced at the Geffen Playhouse.

SYNOPSIS

Pulitzer Prize winner Donald Margulies weaves together nostalgia, music and merriment in the world premiere of this new seasonal classic. A holiday show for people of all ages and all faiths, *Coney Island Christmas* introduces us to Shirley Abramowitz, a young Jewish girl who (much to her immigrant parents' exasperation) is cast as Jesus in the school's Christmas pageant. As Shirley, now much older, recounts the memorable story to her great-granddaughter, the play captures a timeless and universal tale of what it means to be an American during the holidays.

SETTING

The play takes place in Los Angeles, California, in the present and Brooklyn, New York, during the Great Depression.

INSPIRATION

Coney Island Christmas was inspired by the Grace Paley short story, *The Loudest Voice*, which appeared in a 1959 collection entitled *The Little Disturbances of Man*. Paley was, herself, a first-generation American daughter born of Jewish European immigrants who grew up in the Bronx in New York in the 1930s. She was an academic, a writer and an activist, and in 1989, she was named by New York Governor Mario Cuomo as New York's first official State Writer.

DISCUSSION POINT

All around the country, theaters celebrate the holidays by programming seasonal favorites. *A Christmas Carol*, *A Christmas Story* and *The Nutcracker* are presented year after year to sellout houses. Geffen Playhouse's world premiere answer to that call is *Coney Island Christmas*.

What stories do you think of around the holidays? Year after year, what event or happening signifies the beginning of your holiday season?

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



BART DeLORENZO (Director)

Founding Artistic Director of the Evidence Room theater in Los Angeles. At the Geffen, he previously directed Donald Margulies' *Shipwrecked: An Entertainment* and the world premiere of *Joan Rivers: A Work in Progress by a Life in Progress*. Recent credits for the Evidence Room include Chekhov's *Ivanov* and Len Jenkins's *Margo Veil* produced with the Odyssey Theater. Other recent directing includes Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* at A Noise Within, the world premiere of Justin Tanner's *Day Drinkers* at the Odyssey, Karen Zacarias' *Legacy of Light* and *Around the World in 80 Days* at the Cleveland Playhouse, *King Lear* for the Antaeus Company, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's *Doctor Cerberus* and Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at South Coast Repertory, and Michael Sargent's *The Projectionist* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. He is on the faculty at Calarts. For his work, he has received six LA Weekly awards, three Backstage Garlands, three LA Drama Critics Circle Awards, and is the 2012 recipient of TCG's Alan Schneider Director Award.



DONALD MARGULIES (Playwright)

Donald Margulies' plays include *Time Stands Still* (Geffen Playhouse), *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment* (Geffen Playhouse), *Brooklyn Boy*, *Dinner with Friends* (Geffen Playhouse), *Sight Unseen*, *Collected Stories* (Geffen Playhouse), *The Loman Family Picnic*, *God of Vengeance*, *The Model Apartment*, *What's Wrong with this Picture?*, and *Found a Peanut*. He has won a Lucille Lortel Award, an American Theatre Critics Award, two Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards, two OBIE Awards, two Dramatists Guild Hull-Warriner Awards, one Tony Award nomination, five Drama Desk Award nominations, two Pulitzer Prize nominations and one Pulitzer Prize. His works have been performed on and off Broadway; at major theatres across the United States including South Coast Repertory, Manhattan Theatre Club, Primary Stages, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Long Wharf Theatre, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Old Globe Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse and Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival; and in Paris, London, Rome, Madrid, Tel Aviv, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Sydney, Berlin, Vienna and many other cities around the world. Mr. Margulies has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The New York Foundation for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 2005 he was honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters with an Award in Literature, by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture with its Cultural Achievement Award, and was the recipient of the 2000 Sidney Kingsley Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Theatre by a playwright. Mr. Margulies is an alumnus of New Dramatists and serves on the council of The Dramatists Guild of America. He is an adjunct professor of English and Theatre Studies at Yale University.

SECTION 2

THEMES AND IDEAS TO EXPLORE

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES ON SETTING

In his playwright's notes, Donald Margulies writes: "The Los Angeles prologue and coda may use projections or brightly-painted scrims inspired by the L.A. paintings of David Hockney, while the Brooklyn backdrops evoke Reginald Marsh's sepia-toned New York paintings of the 1930s."

Following is some information on these artists and their work pertaining to the period.

DISCUSSION POINT

Picasso said, "Good artists borrow, great artists steal." What are some instances where one piece of art has been the foundation or inspiration for another?

DAVID HOCKNEY BIOGRAPHY

SOURCED FROM:

www.biography.com/people/david-hockney-9340738

IMAGES SOURCED FROM:

www.friendsofart.net/en/art/david-hockney/large-interior-los-angeles

www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/hockney/



DAVID HOCKNEY

Born in Bradford, England in 1937, David Hockney attended art school in London before moving to Los Angeles in the 1960s. Here, he made his famous swimming pool paintings. In the 1970s, Hockney began working in photography as well, creating photo collages he called "joiners." He continues to create and exhibit art, and in 2011 he was voted the most influential British artist of the 20th century.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES ON SETTING

There is at least half a century's expanse between David Hockney's representations of "modern" southern California and Reginald Marsh's representations of a then modern New York City. Similarly, there is a generational gap between two of the featured characters in the play – Clara and her grandmother Shirley Abramowitz. Throughout the play – in its framing device as well as its core themes – a conversation concerning "the new way" and "the old way" figures prominently.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were to create a scenic backdrop in front of which you would perform a major event in your life's story, what would it look like?

What are the specific images that immediately come to mind?

REGINALD MARSH BIOGRAPHY**SOURCED FROM:**

New York Historical Society Museum and Library:
www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/swing-time

IMAGES SOURCED FROM:

www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/swing-time

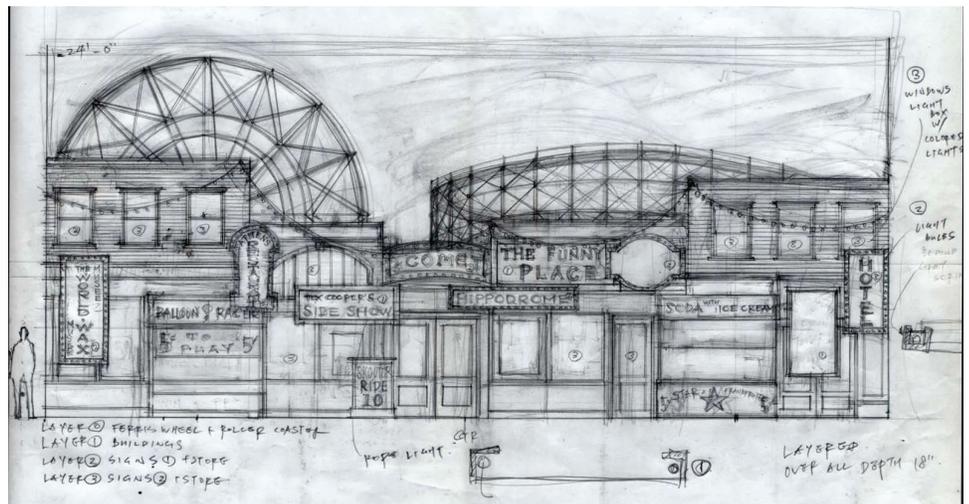
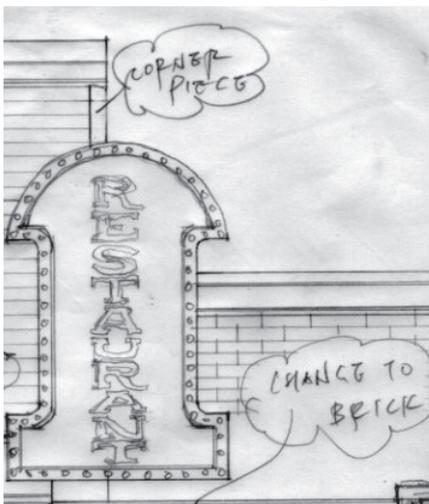
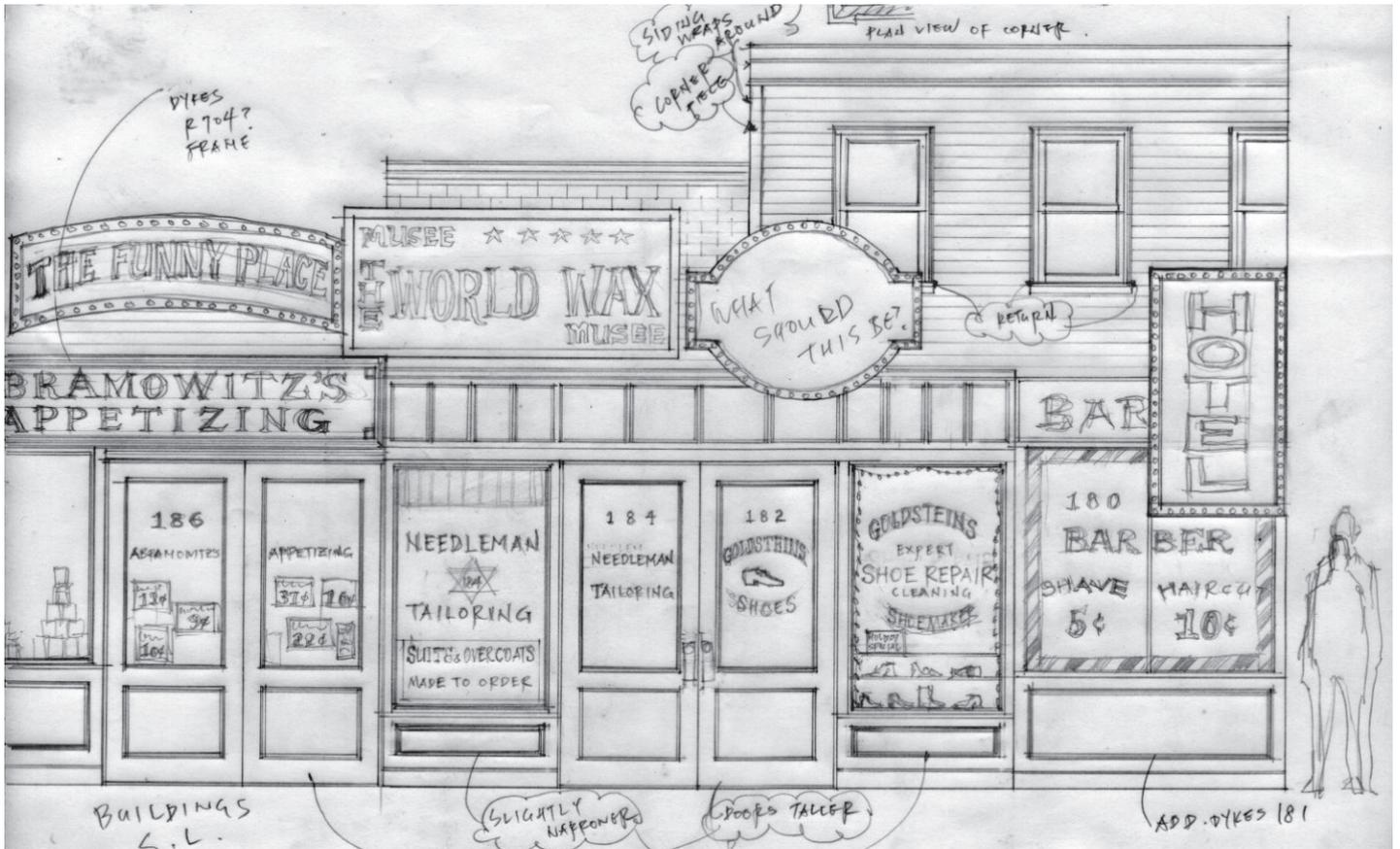
faculty.uca.edu/mikea/picaresque.html

**REGINALD MARSH**

With his calligraphic brushstrokes and densely-cluttered, multi-figured compositions, Reginald Marsh recorded the vibrancy and energetic pulse of New York City. In paintings, prints, watercolors and photographs, he captured the animation and visual turbulence that made urban New York life an exhilarating spectacle. His work depicted the visual energy of the city, its helter-skelter signs, newspaper and magazine headlines and the crowded conditions of its street life and recreational pastimes.

SCENIC DESIGN

Scenic Designer Takeshi Kata was generous enough to share the following renderings for *Coney Island Christmas*. Note the influence of Reginald Marsh's New York works:



NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia - (n.) a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life ... a sentimental longing for the past ...

FROM WIKIPEDIA:

... The scientific literature on nostalgia is quite thin, but there are a few studies that have attempted to pin down the essence of nostalgia and what causes it. Smell and touch are also strong evokers of nostalgia and memories in general due to the processing of these stimuli first passing through the amygdala, the emotional seat of the brain. These recollections of our past are usually important events, people we care about and places where we have spent time. Music can also be a strong trigger of nostalgia.

DISCUSSION POINT

Performing in her school's holiday plays figures prominently in Shirley Abramowitz's memory of her childhood. She credits those events with helping her "find her voice."

What, if any, activity from your youth can you point to as having influenced some facet of your adulthood and in what way?

SHIRLEY ABRAMOWITZ

There is a certain place ... far from sore throats and the scent of hibiscus and eucalyptus ... Far from freeways packed like parking lots and all the noise and dreck we call the Here and Now, there is a certain place where everything is the way it was, the color of faded old pictures. And the smells are ... potato latkes, gefilte fish, and sour pickles.

CLARA

What is this place?

SHIRLEY ABRAMOWITZ

It's a place called ... Brooklyn!

The framework of *Coney Island Christmas* involves a grandmother (Shirley) and her granddaughter (Clara) sharing stories of Shirley's childhood growing up Jewish in New York in the 1930s. There is a great sense of nostalgia in Shirley's memories.

In one of her remembrances, Grandma Shirley (as young Shirley) is walking home with her father as he sings something in Yiddish. She asks him what his song means. He translates:

MR ABRAMOWITZ

Beltz, my little town!

The little house where I grew up!

Every shabbos I would run to the riverbank to play with other children under a little green tree.

My little town where I dreamt such wonderful dreams!

He finishes: "Come, kiddo, let's go home." Through the song, sung in a native tongue and his reference as it ends to going home, we are made privy to this kind of quiet longing that is frequently part of a nostalgic experience. We inevitably think of our own parents, our own children, our own music – our own home.

IMMIGRATION & IDENTITY

ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION STATISTICS BY THE NUMBERS

- Total immigration to the United States during the 1880s: 5.2 million
- Total immigration to the United States during the 1890s: 3.7 million
- Total immigration to the United States during the 1900s: 8.8 million
- Total immigration to the United States during the 1910s: 5.7 million
- Total immigration to the United States during the 1920s: 4.1 million
- Total immigration to the United States during the 1930s: 0.5 million
- Number of European immigrants processed through the Immigration Station at Ellis Island, New York, between 1892 and 1954: more than 16 million
- Record number of immigrants processed through the Immigration Station at Ellis Island in a single day in 1907: 11,747

SOURCED FROM:

www.shmoop.com/ellis-island-immigration/statistics.html

DISCUSSION POINT

Immigrants frequently struggle with issues of identity – how to immerse oneself in a new culture while holding on to a previously experienced one. How important is it to be able to define where you come from, and does that necessarily effect, where you are?

While the play is generally fun and lighthearted, there are some underlying themes that carry great weight – and have for centuries for American immigrants.

Grandmother Shirley, as a young girl, wanted very much to participate in “American activities” like the holiday plays at her school; however, her mother, Mrs. Abramowitz, felt that involvement in non-Jewish events, especially those celebrating rituals of another faith or custom, would compromise the integrity of their own Jewish faith:

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ

Am I the only one in this house who sees this for what it is?

MR. ABRAMOWITZ

It's only a play! It's not the end of the world.

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ

Oh, no? The end of our world, maybe... If we came here to get away from tyrants and people who hate us, and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that eats away at us slowly, so slowly we don't even notice what it's doing to us, and makes our children forget who they are and where they came from, who's the joke on then, huh, Misha?...

MR. ABRAMOWITZ

Bend a little, Clara.

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ

Bend too much, and you break.

Throughout the play, this cultural tug-of-war plays a large role in the familial relationships, especially between young Shirley and her mother. There are tensions between where this family came from and where they now find themselves, between articulating an individual identity and doing what's necessary to “fit in.” Shirley is torn between what is expected of her and what she wants for herself in the moment. Even as we're listening and laughing, first at young Shirley's elementary school Thanksgiving play, then at the Christmas pageant, the themes of self-identification and personal reconciliation are pervasive and phenomenally relevant.

HEBREW AND YIDDISH WORDS USED IN THE PLAY

Classical Hebrew, also sometimes referenced as Biblical Hebrew, is the original language of the Jews. Some 2,000 years ago, Aramaic became the more common spoken language, but Hebrew was still used in formal writing and temple services. Modern Hebrew refers to the spoken language of today, and its revival is credited to Eliezer Ben Yehuda who, after immigrating to Israel in 1881, advocated diligently that the ancient language should once again be spoken in schools and in Jewish homes. Yiddish is a European language that is a fusion of Aramaic, Hebrew and Germanic roots and structures. It is a principal literary language in Jewish history and has also seen many of its words adopted into the contemporary American vernacular.

Mishugeh - (adj. Yiddish) Crazy, senseless.

Potato latkes - (n. Yiddish) A fried potato pancake eaten during Chanukah to symbolize the miracle that the oil in the Temple lasted eight days when it was supposed it would only last one.

Gefilte fish - (n. Yiddish) Minced and balled or caked, de-boned fish, usually whitefish or pike, often simmered in a fish stock, then eaten cold. Used during the Passover Seder.

Bubeleh - (n. Yiddish) Term of endearment, often from older generations to younger.

Shabbos - (n. Hebrew) Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, signifying the seventh day of Creation and celebrated as the Day of Rest.

Brucha - (n. Hebrew) A blessing.

Yiddish theater - (n. English) Originating in Eastern Europe, the Yiddish theater made its way over to America with European Jews, beginning in earnest in the 1880's. The large immigrant audience in New York City rallied around performances as community events featuring traditional plays, adapted to immigrant culture, and performed in a flamboyant style in the language of their home.

Wiseneimer - (n. Yiddish) A person who behaves in an irritatingly smug or arrogant fashion, typically by making clever remarks and displaying their knowledge.

Shtetl - (n. Yiddish) A settlement inhabited by a high concentration of Jews.

Shanda - (n. Yiddish) Shame or disgrace.

Goyim - (n. Yiddish) A group of Non-Jews.

Mamaleh - (n. Yiddish) Term of affection akin to "Mother, dear."

Schlepped - (v. Yiddish) Drag, carry or haul, particularly unnecessary things, parcels or baggage; to go somewhere unwillingly or where you may be unwanted.

Pogrom - (n. Russian) An organized attack and/or massacre targeted toward a particular ethnic group.

Guy shluffen - (v. Yiddish) Go to sleep.

Ferkokta - (adj. Yiddish) Gone bad/awry, messed up.

Chanukah - (n. Hebrew) An eight-day Jewish holiday, also sometimes called "The Festival of Lights," commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 165 BCE. On each evening of the celebration, a new candle on the menorah - an eight armed candelabra - is lit to recall the story of a one-day supply of oil that miraculously burned in the Temple for eight days until new oil was obtained.

Farshtinkeneh - (n. Yiddish) A rotten person; someone who behaves badly.

Dreck - (n. Yiddish) Crap, garbage or trash

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTISTIC ASSOCIATE / LITERARY DIRECTOR AMY LEVINSON

1. *What is your official title at the Geffen Playhouse?*

AL: I am the Artistic Associate / Literary Director at the theater. I am also the dramaturg on productions that require one.

2. *How would you describe what you do?*

AL: My jobs have numerous facets. As the artistic associate and literary director my main job is to read and see plays to consider for production. Along with Kristina Leach, the literary associate at the theater, I make recommendations to Randall Arney, the artistic director about which plays might be right for us to produce. Together, Randall and I choose the plays for the Gil Cates theater and the Audrey Skirball Kenis theater. As a dramaturg, I work directly on each production helping writers to develop new plays by giving them feedback, working with directors to hone their point of view on any given play and supplying historical information and background information to the actors in order for them to build more complex and complete versions of their characters.

3. *You said you serve as “dramaturg on productions that require one.” Please define dramaturgy?*

AL: I define dramaturgy as “the act of play building.” For a new play, it often begins with helping writers hone their work by asking them the right questions about what it is they are trying to achieve. Dramaturging a new play usually means I’m focused on congruity, script development and helping the writer achieve clarity and focus by constantly challenging their choices and making them explain those choices through the process of writing and rewriting. This is followed by careful research and examination of the work that happens to a play once it is in production to ensure there is

consistency and coherency. I watch and listen to make sure the most important ideas a writer is trying to put forth are reaching the audience. This is why the job always changes, because the goal is never achieved in the same exact way – because all plays are so different. With existing works, if the script is no longer changing, I will usually only supply background information on the time period in which the play is written, the subject that the play is about and any other background that the director and actors ask me for. I will also research context for and define words and phrases that are unclear to actors if they are doing something like Shakespeare or Moliere, a great 17th century French playwright. A dramaturg can also make suggestions about what translation of a play might be used if the source play is in another language. Also, not all of our productions utilize a dramaturg. Some directors prefer to do this work with the writer themselves, and in that circumstance, I don’t participate in the rehearsal process.

4. *As the Artistic Associate and Literary Director, you are intimately involved with the process of selecting plays and composing a season. Please share some of that process?*

AL: Choosing the season is the most challenging and the most fun part of the job. It usually begins with one play at the tent pole of the season and then branches out from there. There are numerous things we have to consider. We want to make sure that each season is balanced, that there is drama and comedy; that there are plays with large casts and small casts (because plays with large casts are far more expensive) and we always want to have a mix of tones. For instance, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* was the first play we selected this season. We knew that it was a period piece, meaning it takes place in a historical setting, and that it was a large

CONTINUED >

play in terms of number of characters, expensive period costumes and elaborate sets. So we knew that we also needed to have a play that takes place in the present, a smaller play in terms of cast size and sets and something with a grittier feel to offset the opulence of that of that play. *The Gift*, a four character play that takes place in modern day, turned out to be the balance to *Vera Stark*. Then another play is fit in and another. But the most important aspect of choosing plays is that we love what we read. If we are not passionate about the work, we cannot expect our audiences to be, so we only select plays we love. This is not to say that it guarantees that everyone else will love them, or that they will translate perfectly from the page to the stage, but it is a good place to start.

5. How did *Coney Island Christmas* come to the Geffen Playhouse - why this play and what was its process?

AL: *Coney Island Christmas* has a particularly special story behind it. Donald Margulies, who is a writer with whom we have worked many times, has only written one play directed toward younger audiences. But when we did that play, called *Shipwrecked!* a couple of years ago, Gil Cates, had a stroke of genius and decided he wanted to commission Donald to write us a holiday play. Commissioning a play means we pay the writer to write something specifically to be produced at our theater. Donald, who grew up Jewish and has written many plays on the Jewish experience, told Gil that if he was going to write a 'Christmas' play that it was going to be a Jewish Christmas play and Gil encouraged him to do so. Before Donald had the opportunity to finish the play, Gil passed away. Donald has dedicated this play and production to the memory of the man who encouraged him to write this piece about what it means to be an immigrant in America and how the American dream means something different to each one of us.

6. Please share a favorite experience working with a writer on development of his/her play.

AL: My favorite experiences as a dramaturg are always on world premieres (plays produced for the very first time) and commissions (plays the theater has developed from the very beginning of the writing process). The reason for this is that I become incredibly invested in the work. I know the plays like the back of my hand – all

the dialogue, the directors' choices, the actors' choices. I can see every nuance of the production. This allows me to see the small alterations that happen as the play grows and changes and to me, this is what is most exciting about live theater – it is never the same twice. It changes according to the audience feedback, due to a variation in an actor's performance, any number of things can change it. I am constantly surprised and inspired by how the work changes, grows and evolves over time like the living, breathing thing that plays are. A great example in *Coney Island Christmas* is in the original script, all of the school children were played by actual children. During the initial workshop the writer and director and myself realized that as an audience, we would be disinclined to laugh at kids doing a school play badly, but we would have no problem laughing at young adults pretending to be kids doing a school play badly. This one change altered the entire tone and direction of the play and it became uproariously funny. These types of discoveries are the best part of the job.

7. What is the most challenging aspect of your job? The most rewarding?

AL: The most challenging part of my job is the constant balance between trying to support a writer and their work but never overstepping my usefulness by imposing upon them my ideas for the play. A dramaturg's job is not to write the play for the writer, but to nudge them in the right direction so that what emerges is the play they have inside of them. And a good writer will always come up with a better solution than a dramaturg will – that's why they are the playwrights. The other really hard part of my job is that we get upwards up 400 to 500 plays submitted per year and we have 8 slots for production. That is a lot of writers to whom we have to say "no," and saying "no" never seems to get any easier. The most rewarding part of this job is seeing a play reach its potential. To go from being words on a page to being a full-blown production with scenic and lighting designs, costumes, sound etc. To see actors inhabit the people who were once just words on a page. And I love the joy that writers get from watching their work come to life. While it is never an easy process, it is usually a rewarding one for them, and nothing makes me happier or more proud than a writer who is satisfied with the outcome of his or her play. ■

SECTION 4

SUPPORTING MATERIALS AND SITES

- Vermont Public Radio, an affiliate of NPR, has a vocal recording from 2009 of Grace Paley reading *The Loudest Voice*, the story playwright Donald Margulies credits with inspiring *Coney Island Christmas*: www.vpr.net/news_detail/86644/vt-edition-grace-paley-reads-loudest-voice/
- For more Los Angeles images by David Hockney: www.friendsofart.net/en/artists/david-hockney
- For more information about Reginald Marsh, including an upcoming 2013 exhibit in New York: www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/swing-time
- The 28-minute documentary film *Island of Hope – Island of Tears*, was uploaded to youtube on June 4, 2008. It looks at some of the European immigrant populations in the late 19th and early 20th century: www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4wzVuXPznk
- For more on Jewish Immigration to New York: www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/jewishexp.htm
- To read about current immigration statistics and legislation: topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/immigration-and-emigration/index.html
- A recent *Seattle Times Travel* article focused on tracing spots-of-interest related to the Jewish Immigrant Experience of New York from the 18th-20th centuries: www.seattletimes.com/html/travel/2016970577_webnewyorkjewish08.html
- Mr Abramowitz talks about the significance of the Yiddish theatre. It did have a large presence in the lives of many immigrant Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries. www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=1411
- Many Yiddish words have made their way into the American-English lexicon. For 40 of the most popular: www.dailywritingtips.com/the-yiddish-handbook-40-words-you-should-know/
- To create your own family tree: www.ehow.com/how_8164065_do-yourself-family-history.html
- For more holiday plays in the Greater Los Angeles area: www.theatreinla.com/holidayplays.php

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