

The
Country
House

Study
Guide

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

the Country House

WORLD PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

JUNE 3 – JULY 13, 2014

SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Randall Arney, Donald Margulies, Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning,
Ellen Catania, Kristen Smith Eshaya, Scott Kriloff, Jessica Brusilow Rollins,
Robert Bailey and Williamstown Theatre Festival**

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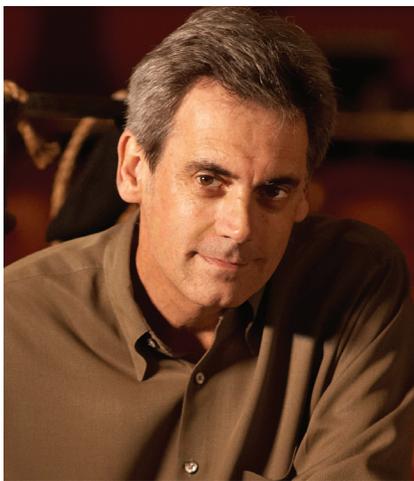
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



LONGTIME MEMBERS OF THE GEFFEN FAMILY, DONALD MARGULIES and Daniel Sullivan are a theatrical dream team, having collaborated here on such plays as the world premiere of *Time Stands Still* and *Dinner with Friends* among many others. So when they approached us about a new project, our curiosity was piqued, and we were in.

The Country House is a beautiful new play, rich with complicated family dynamics. This theatrical troupe of dramatis personae is always struggling for top billing. *The Country House* was commissioned by The Manhattan Theatre Club, which will produce the play in the fall of 2014. We have happily worked to great success with them on productions traveling in both directions, and are pleased to be part of the development of this new work.

Dan Sullivan has once again brought together a renowned group of designers, including John Lee Beatty (Scenic Designer), Rita Ryack (Costume Designer), Peter Kaczorowski (Lighting Designer), Jon Gottlieb (Sound Designer) and Peter Golub (Composer). They have created the quintessential summer house in Williamstown, MA, complete with decades of memories.

It has been 16 years since Dan and Donald first worked at the Geffen. Dan directed Annette Bening in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and in that same season, my friend, the late Gil Cates helmed Donald's *Collected Stories*. Since then Dan has directed five Geffen productions, and *The Country House* marks the sixth play by Donald we have produced, two of which we commissioned. In every case of working with these two incredible artists, we have always known that we and you, our patrons, are in the hands of phenomenal storytellers. We look forward to collaborating with them for many years to come, and it is our pleasure to welcome them home to the Geffen.

SYNOPSIS

In this poignant comedy, a family of actors gathers at its summer place, one year after the death of a cherished family member. Joining matriarch Anna are her granddaughter Susie, the child of her deceased daughter, Kathy; her son Elliot; Kathy's husband Walter, who has brought his new girlfriend Nell; and close family friend Michael. As Anna prepares for a role at the nearby Williamstown Theatre Festival and Elliot engages family members in a reading of his first play, secrets, conflicts and yearnings surface in unexpected ways.

SETTING/TIME

A century-old house in the Berkshires, near Williamstown, Massachusetts. Summer. Present.

ACT ONE Scene One: Friday afternoon. Scene Two: Later that night.

ACT TWO Scene Three: An afternoon a few days later. Scene Four: Later that night.

Intermission

ACT THREE Scene One: The following day. Scene Two: Later. Dusk.

PERFORMANCE NOTE This production includes the smoking of herbal cigarettes and strong language.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

DONALD MARGULIES (Playwright)

The Country House is Mr. Margulies' sixth production at the Geffen Playhouse, preceded by *Coney Island Christmas*, *Time Stands Still*, *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment*, *Dinner with Friends* and *Collected Stories*. His many other plays include *Brooklyn Boy*, *Sight Unseen*, *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, six 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 and Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival; and in Paris, London, Rome, Madrid, Tel Aviv, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Sydney, Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul, Mumbai 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. 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 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.

DANIEL SULLIVAN (Director)

Daniel Sullivan most recently directed *The Snow Geese*, *Orphans* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* on Broadway. For The Public Theater, Sullivan directed *A Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Stuff Happens* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Among his Broadway credits are *The Columnist*, *Good People*, *Time Stands Still*, *Accent on Youth*, *The Homecoming*, *Prelude to a Kiss*, *Rabbit Hole*, *After the Night and the Music*, *Julius Caesar*, *Brooklyn Boy*, *Sight Unseen*, *I'm Not Rappaport*, *Morning's at Seven*, *Proof*, the 2000 production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *Conversations with my Father* and *The Heidi Chronicles*. Among his Off-Broadway credits are Charlayne Woodard's *The Night Watcher*, *The Way Things Are* and *Neat; Intimate Apparel; Far East; Spinning into Butter; Dinner with Friends*; and *The Substance of Fire*. From 1981 to 1997, he served as artistic director of Seattle Repertory Theatre. Sullivan is the Swanlund Professor of Theatre at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

A SENSE OF FAMILY

SOURCE

Geffen Playhouse Program:
*Donald Margulies Discusses
His New Play, His Process and
What It Means to be a Part
of a Theatre Family* by Amy
Levinson

PHOTO CREDIT

ClipArtBest.com - Clipart
Families - JOBSPAPA



In *The Country House*, theatre is a family affair. Anna is a highly regarded and accomplished actress. After failing at acting, her son Elliot is trying his hand at playwriting. Her son-in-law Walter, a stage director, has gone on to achieve success in film. Family friend Michael, now the famous star of a popular television series, has come to the Williamstown Theatre Festival to “return to his roots” as an actor. Only Susie has decided to buck the family business and is pursuing other interests while at college.

Just as this family is bound together by their passion for theatre so do theatre professionals who come together for months at a time to mount productions of plays often end up feeling like a family – in the best and worst sense. Sharing the common purpose of creating and sustaining a successful performance can inspire camaraderie, much the way family members support each other’s achievements. If afflicted by personality conflicts or individuals’ insecurities, a theatre ensemble can be like a dysfunctional family, riddled with hostility and discord. Often there is a mix of affection and tension. As *The Country House* playwright Donald Margulies has remarked about the intensity of theatre, “There are feelings of love and animosity and passion and hurt toward those people with whom they spent a relatively short chapter of their lives – much like the nature of family.”

DISCUSSION POINT

When have you experienced a sense of family in a work, recreational, or other setting? How did the attitudes and behavior of group members create a sense of family?

WILLIAMSTOWN THEATRE FESTIVAL

SOURCE

Williamstown Theatre Festival

PHOTO CREDIT

Courtesy of Williamstown
Theatre Festival



Williamstown Theatre Festival was founded in 1954 by members of the Williamstown, MA community and director Nikos Psacharopoulos, who sought to create a premier company and training program for future generations of American theatre artists and produce invigorated versions of classics and new plays. In the summer of 1955, a 26-member company was assembled from young New York professionals, Yale actors and alumni, and local students. This first season was successful enough for the theatre to plan a second. Under Nikos' leadership, WTF's repertory became increasingly ambitious with productions of Shaw, Miller, Williams and Chekhov. Over the years, a growing family of accomplished actors evolved, including Blythe Danner of *The Country House*, whose return year after year gave stability to the Equity Company.

According to director Robert Bailey, who participated in the Festival in 1985, an egalitarian spirit prevailed: "There was no division between well-known actors and apprentices. Everyone worked on projects everywhere – from the back porches of houses to the main stage – and came away renewed."

IN THE SPIRIT OF CHEKHOV

CLASSIC (Noun)

An outstanding example of a particular style, something of lasting worth or with a timeless quality.

Wikipedia.org

ARCHETYPE (Noun)

In literary criticism, a primordial image, character, or pattern of circumstances that recurs throughout literature and thought consistently enough to be considered a universal concept or situation.

Britannica.com

SOURCES

Geffen Playhouse Program:
Donald Margulies Discusses His New Play, His Process and What It Means to be a Part of a Theatre Family by Amy Levinson

Anton Chekhov's Selected Plays, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain: www.my-chekhov.ru



Playwright Donald Margulies considers *The Country House* “a mash-up, a collage, an homage to the spirit of Chekhov” in a “contemporary American setting.”

Revered Russian playwright and short story author Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) had a profound impact on Western literature. In his plays, he broke with the melodramatic theatre tradition of the times and explored what lay below the surface of his characters’ inner and everyday lives. He also evoked a “constellation of characters,” instead of tracing the arc of a single main character. So it goes in *The Country House*, which reveals, with much humor, how longing propelled by memory, and sadness from loss or diminished prospects collide inside and among family and friends.

In this work, Margulies has also been inspired by archetypes, situations and themes from Chekhov’s classics *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

The Matriarch: In *The Country House* and *The Seagull*, self-absorbed, judgmental mothers, who have enjoyed much success in acting, have sons who seek to redeem their failures and secure their mothers’ love through artistic accomplishment.

PHOTO CREDIT

Wikimedia Commons:
SiefkinDR: 2008: Cottage at
Melikhovo where Chekhov
wrote *The Seagull*



The Disruptive Power of Beauty: In *Uncle Vanya* and this play, an older man brings his much younger and stunning wife/fiancée home. In both works, two other men pursue the younger woman, and she is attracted to one of them, which unsettles the men's friendship, and her.

Loss: A lead character in *The Cherry Orchard* has come home after traveling abroad, following the death of a her son; she and the rest of her household, which includes family, friends and servants, must contend with the loss of their beloved home, because of financial mismanagement and changing times. In *The Country House*, the characters are still grieving their beloved daughter, sister, mother, wife and friend Kathy.

Art vs. Commerce: In *The Seagull*, the son disparages his mother's preference for popular theatrical fare after she criticizes his serious, original work. So, too, does Elliot in *The Country House* castigate Walter for abandoning his artistry in order to make money directing a commercial franchise.

Unrequited Love: In *The Country House*, as with Chekhov's works, characters pine for someone who cannot reciprocate because he or she longs for someone else. Susie is attracted to Michael, whom she has known since she was a little girl, and is frustrated when he continues to treat her as such. He, meanwhile, has set his sights on Nell, who considers his advances when she is not fending off Elliot, who fell for her when they were in a production together eleven years ago.

DISCUSSION
POINT

Do you prefer to experience the story of a main character who triumphs over obstacles and is transformed, or one that explores the inner lives of a group of characters within the context of everyday life? Share an example of a favorite literary work, play or film, as you discuss your preference.

THE ACTOR'S LIFE

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/LaborActors

To move audiences as they bring stories to life, actors need to remain open, playful, responsive and in touch with their feelings. To succeed in the *business* of acting, they must be tough and tenacious. Getting an agent who will submit them for roles is extremely difficult. Actors often take menial jobs with irregular hours that allow them the flexibility to audition and perform. Because many more actors try out for roles than are cast in them, all have to handle constant rejection at some point in their careers. No matter how talented, actors often cannot land roles if they are not the right “type” in appearance, age, or ethnicity.

Margulies’ “off-stage comedy” captures the stresses and indignities of being an actor. As Anna grows older, she equates losing her looks with losing her power. Even Nell, who is 35 years old, is alarmed.

NELL

The youth worship in L.A. really gets to me. I’m constantly looking over my shoulder to see who’s the new “me” coming up behind me. And hating myself for not being 29 anymore. I was up for a pilot, a police procedural thing I didn’t even want; I had like three callbacks. I was in my car, on my way to my umpteenth audition of the day, and my agent called to tell me I lost the part – to a girl who looked like me five years ago, and I started crying, so hard, right there, behind the wheel, on the 101, I almost rear-ended a Prius SUV...

How is it that hundreds of thousands struggle to become actors when all but a few can barely eke out a living? Most were likely utterly transported when they first saw a group of fellow human beings enacting life on a stage or screen. Offering that experience to others can become an all-consuming passion that helps them endure rejection and make unconventional life choices as they pursue their artistic dreams.

DISCUSSION POINT

Some believe it is essential to “do what you love” to succeed in life. Some argue you should be practical and concentrate on meeting your material needs. What are the “costs” of pursuing your dreams in an art form like theatre – and not?

SUBTEXT

**CHEKHOV &
STANISLAVSKY**

By rejecting the over-the-top acting style of the late 19th century and having actors depict human truths in believable ways, Russian dramatist Constantin Stanislavsky had an indelible impact on acting, and Chekhov's plays. His troupe had the skills, which included interpreting and conveying subtext, to bring the playwright's work to life. Likewise, performing Chekhov's plays helped Stanislavsky grow his methods, which, as they evolved into the practice of Method Acting, influenced generations of U.S. actors.

SOURCES

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subtext
tinyurl.com/StanMethod

How often have we asked someone close to us, "What's wrong?" and upon hearing "Nothing!" have known the opposite to be true? In artful playwriting, characters do not reveal what they are thinking and feeling directly. Underneath the dialogue might lie "conflict, anger, competition, pride, showing off, or other implicit ideas and emotions." Characters' true motivations and feelings, as written by playwrights and interpreted by actors, are called "subtext."

In the following excerpt from *The Country House*, Nell has come downstairs from the room she is sharing with Walter. Michael is lying on the couch, where he has been sleeping each night. Read the dialogue with a partner and discuss the motivations and feelings that might underlie what the characters are actually saying, given that they are drawn to each other. Choose roles then infuse the dialogue with your interpretation of the *subtext* as you read the scene aloud with your partner.

NELL

I didn't mean to disturb you.

MICHAEL

You're not disturbing me.

NELL

I wanted a glass of water.

MICHAEL

Isn't there water upstairs?

NELL

I needed a glass.

MICHAEL

Ah. Help yourself.

As SHE goes to the kitchen:

MICHAEL

Could I have one, too?

NELL

A glass?

MICHAEL

Of water.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY GARRETT

What is your official title and how long have you worked at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Artistic Manager, and I have worked at the Geffen for seventeen years.

What are your primary responsibilities?

I act as the company manager. Once the artistic team selects the plays and directors and the casting director chooses the actors, I make offers to the actors and directors via their agents. I spend a lot of time on the phone negotiating the contracts between the theater and the artists. These deals are based on agreements between LORT (League of Resident Theatres) and Actors Equity, the union for stage actors, and the directors' union, SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society), regarding salaries and working conditions. For those coming from out of town, I arrange their travel, housing, and car rentals and make sure they have everything they need while they are here.

How did you come to work at the Geffen Playhouse?

I first wanted to major in dance when I went to college, but at San Diego State dance was in the physical education department, so I got

involved in theatre. After getting my degree in theater at Cal State Los Angeles, I worked as an actress at the White Oaks Theater in Carmel Valley, CA. I ended up San Francisco, where I worked at the American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) for eighteen years. After assisting various executives, I became company manager. I left when a new leader brought in her own people, and spent two years as company manager for the Intiman Theatre in Seattle. I wasn't happy living in that city so I moved to Los Angeles – without a job. I knew Annette Bening from her days at A.C.T. and through her became personal assistant to her husband, Warren Beatty. After two years, I was ready to get back into theatre and a friend suggested me for a job at the Geffen Playhouse as Gil Cates' assistant and the company manager. Eventually, I focused exclusively on company management.

How has the Geffen Playhouse changed since you first started working here?

The seasons include so many more productions! Before 2005, when the theater was renovated and the Audrey Skirball Kenis (A.S.K.) Theater was added, we only had shows on the main stage. Now we



have five main stage productions and three in the A.S.K. That doesn't include the Spotlight Entertainment Series and other special events we have throughout the year.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

When we have several shows in various stages of negotiation, juggling all the business can get complicated. It's also challenging to coordinate actors' schedules. Many who work in film and television in Los Angeles would be happy to return to the stage at the Geffen, but finding those actors whose schedules permit doing so can be difficult.

What do you find most satisfying?

Getting to know actors and directors and establishing relationships with them is very gratifying. By and large, they are lovely people, and some have become friends. I try to take all that I've learned and use it to the best of my abilities in establishing rapport and supporting all the talented artists who work here. ■

SECTION 4

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and members' interests, guide your group to respond to the questions 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. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Provoked? Put off? Entertained? Bored? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What was the funniest moment in the production? The most surprising? Touching? Describe each in detail.
- With which character did you identify the most? The least? Why? Which did you find the most compelling? Why?
- How was the family depicted in the play similar to or different from yours?
- What did you learn about acting as a profession? Has your attitude toward acting been altered? If so, how, and why?
- What did you appreciate about the performances? Share the details.
- How did the performers use their voices and behavior to convey subtext?
- How did the set, props, costumes and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- What was particularly uplifting or enlarging about the play?
- What moments between characters, monologues or behavior affirmed what you believe to be true about human nature?

NOTES

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

WATCH playwright Donald Margulies discuss the influence of New York theatre on his life and career at tinyurl.com/DMYouTube.

READ plays by Donald Margulies, such as *Time Stands Still* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Dinner with Friends*, which were given world premieres at the Geffen Playhouse. These and other works are available at the Los Angeles Public Library.

LEARN about the Williamstown Theatre Festival by visiting their website at www.wtfestival.org.

LEARN about Anton Chekhov at tinyurl.com/ChekhovFacts. Read his works in *Anton Chekhov's Selected Plays*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2005.

WATCH Blythe Danner (Anna in *The Country House*) portray Nina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*, as performed at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 1975. The DVD can be purchased at tinyurl.com/SeagullDVD.

ENHANCE your understanding of theatre by visiting www.broadwayeducators.com. Lessons, which include several on *subtext*, illuminate various aspects of the theatre experience.

READ arguments for and against following your passion as you build a career at *Psychology Today* (tinyurl.com/DreamPros) and *Fast Company* (tinyurl.com/DreamCons).

GET TO KNOW the experimental and provocative American Russian Theatre Ensemble Laboratory (A.R.T.E.L.) in Los Angeles at www.arteltheatre.org

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