



# The Night Alive

STUDY GUIDE

GEFFEN  
PLAYHOUSE

# The Night Alive

WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE  
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE  
**FEBRUARY 3 – MARCH 15, 2015**

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Randall Arney, Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Karen Gutierrez, Ellen Catania,  
Kristen Smith, Scott Kriloff, Jessica Brusilow Rollins and Connor White

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

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*This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## SECTION 1

### ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT ..... | 4 |
| PLAY SYNOPSIS.....                | 5 |
| ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES .....        | 5 |

## SECTION 2

### THEMES & TOPICS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| A LAND AT THE LIMIT OF THE WORLD ..... | 6  |
| HUMAN COMPLEXITY .....                 | 8  |
| DISORDER .....                         | 9  |
| BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE .....          | 10 |

## SECTION 3

### PERSONNEL PROFILE

|   |    |
|---|----|
| AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN GUTIERREZ,<br>DIRECTOR OF ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIPS..... | 12 |
|---|----|

## SECTION 4

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE.....             | 13 |
| POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS..... | 14 |

## SECTION 5

|                |    |
|----------------|----|
| RESOURCES..... | 15 |
|----------------|----|

## SECTION 1

# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

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## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



I AM A HUGE FAN OF CONOR MCPHERSON. IN MY FIRST season as Artistic Director at the Geffen, I helmed his hauntingly beautiful play, *The Weir*. A few years later came *The Seafarer* – depicting a Christmas Eve poker game with the devil and revealing the importance of hope and redemption. I am continually drawn to Conor's depictions of characters who, in spite of their quiet desperation amid the monotony of everyday life, are surprisingly funny and sweet. His plays are populated by people rich with quirks and idiosyncrasies that make them wholly individual and yet totally relatable to us all.

The intimacies of these stories are infused with huge heart, allowing the tales to transcend cultures. *The Night Alive* poses questions about our responsibility to one another and how someone like Tommy, the most reluctant of good Samaritans, cannot close the door on someone in need. These people, steeped deeply in their own flaws, find ways to rise above them, at least some of the time.

Once again I am joined by an incredible team of designers, including Takeshi Kata (scenery), David Kay Mickelsen (costumes), Dan Ionazzi (lights), Richard Woodbury (music and sound) and Ned Mochel (violence). Together they have created a setting ripe for the disturbance of a newcomer – someone to shake the foundation of this home and change the lives of its inhabitants forever.

I hope you enjoy our first play of 2015. If you are new to the theater, it's a pleasure to welcome you. If you are a subscriber, it's a pleasure to have you along for this ride that has thus far taken us into the locker room of a high school boys' choir, the luxurious living room of Irving Berlin and now to a run-down Edwardian home in the heart of Phoenix Park, Dublin. Our hope is that these very different journeys leave you with something unexpected.



# SYNOPSIS

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Middle-aged, down-on-his-luck Tommy lives in his uncle Maurice's house in Dublin, Ireland – as a boarder. When we first meet him, he is ushering a young woman, Aimee, into his room to help her recover from being hit in the face by a man she claims not to know well. When his younger friend Doc comes by asking for the money Tommy owes him, we learn they are “business associates” whose various sales schemes barely help them get by. After Aimee accepts Tommy's invitation to stay with him, her menacing boyfriend Kenneth appears and violence follows. In the aftermath, Tommy's life changes in unexpected ways.

### SETTING

An Edwardian house near the Phoenix Park in Dublin. Autumn. The present.

### RUNNING TIME

Approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes. *There will be no intermission.*

### PERFORMANCE NOTE

Coarse language is used; sexual activities are referenced; and violent acts are depicted.

# ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

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### CONOR McPHERSON (Playwright)

Conor McPherson was born in Dublin in 1971. He attended University College Dublin where he began to write and direct. His stage plays include *Rum & Vodka*, *The Good Thief*, *This Lime Tree Bower*, *St Nicholas*, *The Weir* (Laurence Olivier, Evening Standard & Critics Circle Awards), *Dublin Carol*, *Port Authority*, *Shining City* (Tony Award nomination), *The Seafarer* (Laurence Olivier and Tony Award nominations), *The Veil*, a translation of August Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* and *The Night Alive* (New York Drama Critics Circle Best Play Award, Laurence Olivier Award nomination for Best Play).

### RANDALL ARNEY (Director/Artistic Director)

Randall Arney has been a theater professional for over 30 years and has served as Artistic Director of the Geffen Playhouse since 1999. In addition to his artistic programming and oversight at the Geffen, Arney has helmed more than 10 productions for the theater, most recently *Reasons to Be Pretty*, *Slowgirl*, *American Buffalo*, *Superior Donuts*, *The Female of the Species*, *The Seafarer*, *Speed-the-Plow* and *All My Sons*. Arney is an ensemble member and former Artistic Director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre where his directing credits include: *Slowgirl*, *The Seafarer*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Death and the Maiden*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Killers* and *The Geography of Luck*, among others. Arney also directed Steppenwolf's world premiere of Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, as well as the subsequent national and international acclaimed productions. Mr. Arney's acting credits with Steppenwolf include *Born Yesterday*, *Ghost in the Machine*, *The Homecoming*, *Frank's Wild Years*, *You Can't Take it with You*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, *Balm in Gilead* and *Coyote Ugly*. As the Artistic Director for Steppenwolf from 1987 to 1995, he oversaw the creation of a new state-of-the-art theater which is Steppenwolf's current home. Broadway transfers under his leadership include *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, *The Song of Jacob Zulu* (six Tony Award nominations) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1990 Tony Award, Best Play). Mr. Arney has an MFA degree in Acting from Illinois State University and has taught master classes and workshops at UCLA, Steppenwolf, around the U.S. and in Tokyo.

## SECTION 2

# THEMES & TOPICS

## A LAND AT THE LIMIT OF THE WORLD

### PHOTO CREDIT

earthweek.com

### SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/BrfHistIre](https://tinyurl.com/BrfHistIre)

[tinyurl.com/MythClI](https://tinyurl.com/MythClI)

[tinyurl.com/WikilreTrbls](https://tinyurl.com/WikilreTrbls)



Ireland, which once was considered the edge of the known world, is a place of enormous beauty and spirit. Called the Emerald Isle because of its striking green landscapes, this island just off the western coast of Great Britain is also known for its rich Celtic heritage, lyrical folk music, and contributions to literature. The birthplace of some of Western culture's literary giants, such as poet William Butler Yeats, novelist James Joyce and playwright Samuel Beckett, it continues to produce artists with powerful gifts – like playwright Conor McPherson.

Ireland has also weathered political and economic struggles for much of its history. After centuries of fighting British domination of its lands, culture and Catholic religion, most of Ireland became a free state in 1922 and was officially declared an independent republic in 1948. Northern Ireland had been settled primarily by Protestants and remained part of the United Kingdom. Starting in the 1960s, it was the scene of violent clashes between Irish Catholic partisans, who believed Northern Ireland should join the Irish Republic and Protestant loyalists, who wanted it to stay under British rule. Peace between the warring factions was finally established in 1998.

## PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain: Wikimedia Commons, photograph by Mrs. Charles O'Connor

## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/WikiCelTig](http://tinyurl.com/WikiCelTig)  
[tinyurl.com/LewisIrelandBizVF](http://tinyurl.com/LewisIrelandBizVF)



From 1845-1852, Ireland was devastated by the Great Potato Famine. A million citizens died and a million and a half emigrated from Ireland, the majority of them to the United States. A period of prosperity, called the Celtic Tiger, took off in the mid-1990s and made Ireland the second strongest economy in Europe. Emigration, which had continued since the famine, halted as young Irish citizens chose to stay and those from other European countries flocked to Ireland in search of a better life. A recession in 2008, similar to the one experienced in the United States, was caused by the collapse of a real estate “bubble,” in which the prices of properties had increased rapidly and banks had given out huge loans borrowers could never repay. It sent Ireland reeling into a 14% unemployment rate, tough austerity measures that affected social services, big tax hikes and more people living in poverty.

McPherson has placed *The Night Alive* in the present – a post-Celtic Tiger period of hardship, especially for those who live at the fringes. Tommy, who lost his business after investing unwisely in it during the boom, has been reduced to clearing up gardens and selling goods from his van. With no place of his own to live, Doc is dependent on the hospitality of a sister with a hostile boyfriend, and Tommy, who with Aimee’s arrival, has little space to offer him.

## DISCUSSION POINT

How does poverty affect human beings physically, emotionally and mentally? What does it mean to be “rich in spirit?”

## HUMAN COMPLEXITY

### EMPATHY

(noun) Empathy is the experience of understanding another person's condition from their perspective. You place yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feeling. (psychologytoday.com)

### COMPASSION

(noun) Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. (merriam-webster.com)

### CARVERY

(noun) A restaurant where cooked meat is freshly sliced to order. (Wikipedia)

### SOURCES

Chambers, Liliane and Jordan, Eamonn. Introduction. *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: Right Beside the Beyond*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012

Characters in a play – as in a short story, novel or film – take us on a journey. Through them we experience feelings and conflicts and consider ideas and issues as they interact with others and confront obstacles. The most engaging characters are often crafted as complex human beings, whose compelling flaws, strengths and quirks both charm and concern us.

With Tommy we travel from a life in disarray to a sense of connection to danger to loss to a final, mysterious moment of grace. Along the way, we encounter his failings: he fibs to avoid looking bad, especially in front of Aimee and his uncle Maurice. A police surveillance camera has caught him not paying for gas and driving off. Angry phone conversations with the wife from whom he's separated reveal that he has lost contact with his two teen-age children.

Yet, in the middle of his unsettled circumstances and questionable behavior pulses a big heart, evident in the compassion he feels for Aimee and his often humorous exchanges with Doc.

Tommy: Yeah, but wait, hold on – I bought you your lunch the day we went out to Co Meath.

Doc: No you didn't!

Tommy: I did!

Doc: You didn't! You gave me a half of your banana sandwich when we were sitting in that traffic jam in Mullingar!

Tommy: Yeah? And?

Doc: Ah come on Tommy...

Tommy: That was your lunch! What do you want?

Doc: You said we were gonna go to a carvery!

Tommy: Yeah, well I carved the banana sandwich!

We often empathize with characters who struggle, because we may know what it is like to be homeless, like Doc, or to fall short of our dreams, like Tommy. Those who look for pinpoints of light in the darkness can inspire us. Doc, who initially seems slow-witted and alarmingly naive, turns out to be an imaginative thinker and resilient soul who, in the end, holds out hope for his friend Tommy.

### DISCUSSION POINT

How does having empathy for others help us build better relationships in our personal lives and communities?

What is the difference between empathy and sympathy?



# DISORDER

## PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain

## SOURCES

Chambers, Liliane and Jordan, Eamonn. Introduction. *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: Right Beside the Beyond*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012

Williams, Teeomm K., "Understanding Internalized Oppression: A Theoretical Conceptualization of Internalized Subordination" (2012). Dissertations. Paper 627. [tinyurl.com/PsychPathWiki](http://tinyurl.com/PsychPathWiki)



While vitality and humor abound in *The Night Alive*, trouble feels ever-present.

Tommy's act of saving Aimee brings Kenneth into their midst, with terrible consequences. Appearing to have no conscience and prone to violent outbursts, Kenneth displays the traits of a psychopath, who reflexively oppresses others.

Aimee is self-destructive. She is "on the game" (a prostitute), is likely taking drugs and wonders aloud to Tommy about suicide. She may be in the grip of what is known in psychological circles as an "internalized oppressor." Children, women and members of oppressed groups are especially vulnerable to absorbing the abuse of those who have power over them. A person's self, in effect, turns on itself and sustains the mistreatment. Engaging in destructive behavior deepens a person's self-hatred. Tragically, taking one's life is sometimes perceived as the only way to escape this intensely painful state. Seeking help can break the hold of this disorder and support the development of a more life-affirming, empowered self.

Also evident is the characters' apparent inability to move beyond chaos and improve their financial prospects. As the editors of a collection of essays on McPherson's plays note, his male characters struggle to "face down the dilemmas, confusions, inequalities, opportunities and pleasures of living." (*The Theatre of Conor McPherson*, 2012). Might this be the result of being trapped in a political and economic system that is stacked, quietly and invisibly, against them? Are citizens impoverished because the opportunities of the "have-nots" have been few, while those of the "haves" have multiplied – for so long? Or do they lack the determination to make a difference in their own lives? If so, why?

McPherson does not judge his characters, or invite us to, or provide answers, but prompts us to ask searching questions as we experience life through their eyes.

# BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

The dialogue in *The Night Alive* is laced with terms and slang used by the Irish. They include:

### BED-SIT

(noun) A one-room apartment typically consisting of a combined bedroom and sitting room with cooking facilities. (oxforddictionaries.com)

### EURO

(noun) The common currency (money) used in eleven countries of the European Union. (American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy)

### KIP

(verb) Go to sleep. (thefreedictionary.com)

### GIG RIGS

(noun) Vehicles that turn into outdoor sound stages. (soundaffinity.com)

To capture the story they envision, playwrights write a sequence of scenes composed mainly of dialogue between characters, and monologues, which are speeches by individual characters that reveal something about their inner lives. Scripts also contain descriptions of the settings, the age and look of characters and the actions that move the story along, which are known as *stage directions*.

When we read or observe anything closely we *interpret* – or make meaning – out of what we experience, by drawing on what we know and using our imaginations. In theatre, the director; the designers of the scenery, props, lighting, sound, and costumes; and the actors work together to create representations of how they interpret the playwright's vision. Through their artistic choices they bring the play to life.

**Scenery & Props:** Plays unfold within stage sets that show us the “worlds” of the play – the time period, place and culture – and also tell us about the people who inhabit them. Some are single sets, in which all the action takes place, usually over a period of time, and some have multiple sets that change. *The Night Alive* has a single set – Tommy's rented room. As McPherson writes in the stage directions for the play:

*The first floor drawing room of an Edwardian house near the Phoenix Park in Dublin. High double doors lead to a small metal balcony with steps down to the rear garden. The room is now a bed-sit. It is cluttered and messy. Boxes of knick-knacks and old newspapers and magazines are piled into corners, spilling out on to a single bed on one side of the room and a camp bed on the other. There is a battered old armchair, a 1970s stereo, a fold away chair or two. A door leads to a little toilet that has been built in one corner. Another door leads to the landing and the rest of the house.*

In the space below, sketch how you envision the room looking. Where might you place the walls, doors, windows, furniture and other props?



**Lighting:** The stage directions for *The Night Alive* include:

*As the play begins, moonlight pours in through the double doors from the balcony. The door to the hallway is open and electric light spills in from the landing.*

Imagine you are the lighting designer: What would the “moonlight” and “electric light” look like? What would they illuminate in the room? What shapes would they create on the floor, walls, and furniture? Go back to your sketch and indicate how the light would “pour” and “spill” into the room.

**Physical Appearance:** Playwrights reveal the characters they have created through physical descriptions, as well as their dialogue and behavior.

This is how we meet Tommy and Aimee, at the beginning of the play:

Tommy: (Off) Now, that’s it. Yeah. This is it. Up the stairs. Are you alright? That’s it. Head back. Nice and easy. Around here now. This is us.

*We see Tommy leading Aimee in. He is in his fifties, well built but well worn. She is in her twenties, skinny and also well worn. She holds her head back, pressing Tommy’s Dublin Gaelic Football tracksuit top up to her face. It is covered in blood. She stands there while Tommy goes and switches on the main light. An overhead light comes on.*

Tommy: Come in and we’ll sit you down and we can have a look.

What, specifically, have you learned about Tommy and Amy’s appearances? If they are “well-worn,” how might their faces and hair look? Their clothes? Their body language?

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**Directing & Acting:** Think about what the characters are doing in this moment. How are they moving? What props or parts of the scenery are they using? How are they feeling and relating to each other, given the circumstances?

Get into groups of three: two will assume the roles of Tommy and Aimee; one will be the director. As you collaborate to bring Tommy and Aimee’s moment to life, the actors will interpret their roles and the director will offer suggestions to help make the moment as vivid as possible.

- Work out the characters’ movements then include the dialogue.
- Show how the two characters might be feeling, given the circumstances.
- Run through the whole sequence without stopping and freeze the last part of the moment into a tableau.

# PERSONNEL PROFILE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN GUTIERREZ

***What is your title and how long have you been working at the Geffen Playhouse?***

I am the Director of Advertising and Sponsorships. This past October, I celebrated my 10th anniversary at the Geffen.

***What are your primary responsibilities?***

My job is to sell tickets to the shows we present here. First, I read the play and envision the kind of people who would resonate with it – both return and new patrons. Then I put a media plan together that is designed to reach them through print, radio, digital and outdoor outlets, around six weeks before the first preview. After the opening, we add quotes from reviews to advertisements and use social media to strengthen the word-of-mouth about the show. The Geffen's Signature Series special events, which I created and manage, also provide incentives to attend performances by offering unique pre- or post-show experiences that include complimentary wine sampling, a sparkling happy hour and much more. They also give patrons the chance to mingle with one another as well as with cast members, after the show.

***How did your education and prior professional experiences lead to working at the Geffen?***

My two majors at USC, anthropology and communications, have helped me understand and connect with all kinds of people. While a full-time student, I was an event producer for 25-30 professional productions offered on campus to students and the public. I took care of all the artists' travel, housing, and backstage needs and worked closely with the marketing team. After graduation, I was a special events coordinator for a company that managed business conventions in L.A. Organizing activities for 2000 people taught me about vendor relations, contracts, negotiation, problem solving and the different communities of L.A. Selling extra services to companies gave me the confidence to become an advertising sales representative for radio. I worked with NPR, a classical music station and the public station KPCC, where I sold radio spots to the Geffen. At that time my former boss at the classical station was a marketing director here. After we connected again, she created a position for me as a promotions assistant.



***What do you find most challenging about your work?***

No two advertising campaigns are ever alike – how they are put together, their voice and pace are different, depending on the play. Staying ahead of the curve with each campaign keeps me on my toes. And it hurts when a show you care about doesn't perform as well as you'd hoped.

***What do you find most satisfying?***

I am passionate about bringing people to the Geffen, because I want them to experience the quality work we do. The creativity involved in developing effective advertising is exciting, as is collaborating with the entire marketing and communications team, and artistic, production and development teams, to support the life and success of each play. ■



## SECTION 4

# AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

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

The audience plays an essential role at 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 the performance to life.

Since the actors can hear and see the audience, 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
- Touching or leaning on the stage.

**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 a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

# POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to 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? Put off? Entertained? Tense? Bored? Sad? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What was the most surprising moment in the production? Humorous? Frightening? Heartwarming? Describe each in detail.
- What did the appearance of Tommy's rented room tell us about him and his life?
- Based on what you learned from the play, how might life in Ireland be similar to and different from life in the United States?
- Who was your favorite character in the play? Why?
- In what ways did you empathize with the characters? Did you gain new understandings about people different from you? If so, how?
- Why do you think Tommy was so determined to help Aimee? How can we benefit from helping others?
- How did you interpret the end moment of the play – was it real, imagined, or supernatural? What was the playwright trying to convey?
- Who were the strongest performers in the play? Why?
- How did the design of the set, props, lighting and costumes compare to what you envisioned when you read the stage directions in the study guide? (See pages 10 & 11.)
- Is *The Night Alive* a play of high quality? Was the overall production effective? Why, or why not?

## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

**WATCH** playwright Conor McPherson discuss playwriting and *The Night Alive*, as it was being presented in 2014 by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, at [tinyurl.com/CMcPherYT](http://tinyurl.com/CMcPherYT).

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**READ** in depth about Conor McPherson's plays in *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: Right Beside the Beyond*, Carysfort Press, 2012. (Available at Amazon.com)

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**WATCH** Geffen Playhouse Artistic Director Randall Arney discuss his interest in directing *The Night Alive* at [tinyurl.com/RandArnYT](http://tinyurl.com/RandArnYT), and introduce the cast at [tinyurl.com/NACast](http://tinyurl.com/NACast).

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**LEARN** key facts of Ireland's history at [tinyurl.com/BrfHistIre](http://tinyurl.com/BrfHistIre).

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**WATCH** a comprehensive documentary on the history of Ireland at [tinyurl.com/IreHistYT](http://tinyurl.com/IreHistYT).

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**LEARN** about the economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger and its crash and aftermath at [tinyurl.com/LewisIrelandBizVF](http://tinyurl.com/LewisIrelandBizVF).

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**WATCH and LISTEN** to the renowned Irish music group The Chieftains at [tinyurl.com/YTChief](http://tinyurl.com/YTChief).

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**PARTICIPATE** in Irish cultural events and Irish language, music and dance workshops in Los Angeles at [tinyurl.com/IrishLA](http://tinyurl.com/IrishLA).

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**LEARN** about suicide prevention at [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org).

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| Los Angeles City Department of Cultural Affairs |   |
| Los Angeles County Arts Commission              |   |

And many more!



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