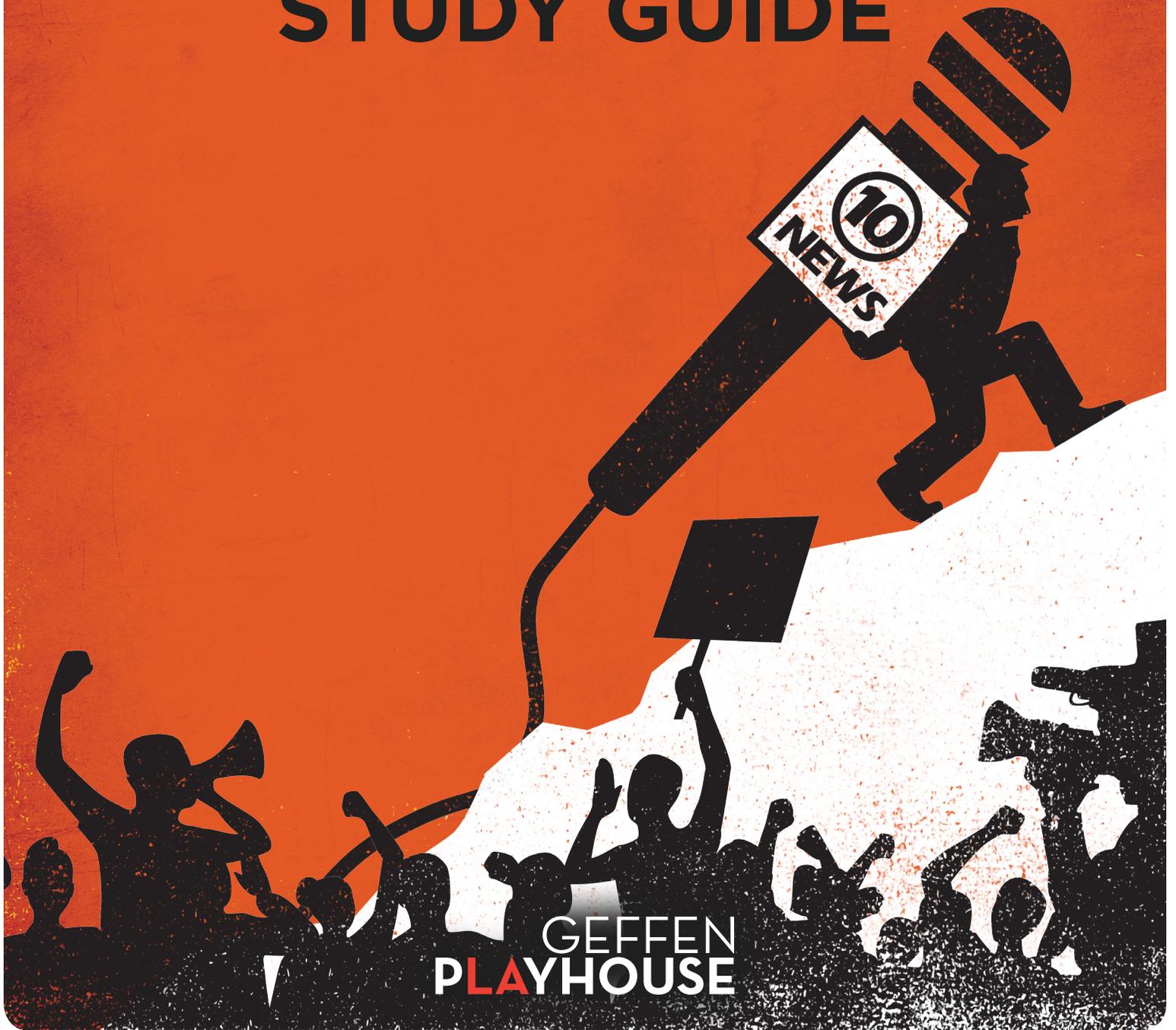


THE POWER OF **DUFF**

STUDY GUIDE



GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

THE POWER OF
DUFF

WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
APRIL 7 – MAY 17, 2015

SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Kristen Smith Eshaya, Scott Kriloff, Jessica Brusilow Rollins and Connor White**

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This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.

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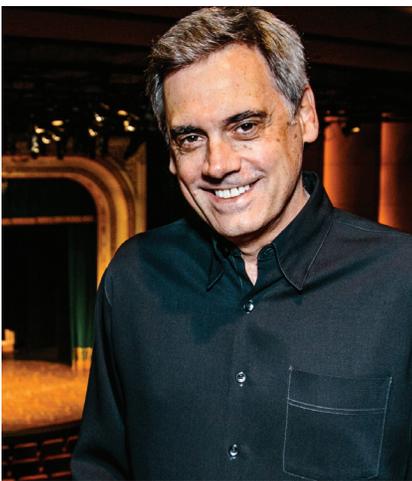
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



UPON READING *THE POWER OF DUFF* FOR THE FIRST time, I was struck in two ways. First, timeless struggles among nations and among individuals traverse generations. Depressing thought? Maybe. The second idea that struck me – the one that prompted the production you are about to experience – is that these very struggles lead people to seek out something better. This might be in the form of a person or an organized religion, a sense of spirituality, or simply in the way a person chooses to raise his/her children – all to make the world better in some small way. As members of a global community that faces adversity in a myriad of ways, we are united in our search for something better.

Enter Charles Duff. Stephen Belber has created a character who, lost in his own struggle, finds solace in prayer. But, as a public figure, his prayers are sent out over the airwaves, and his belief begins to permeate the beliefs of others. Belber has created a piece that examines our collective need to find peace, no matter the cost.

Peter DuBois, who previously directed *Rapture*, *Blister*, *Burn*, returns to helm *The Power of Duff* and, along with a first-rate cast and design team, has brought to life this wonderfully complicated and timely play.

The Power of Duff tackles large ideas. We hope you find the journey invigorating, revelatory, and redemptive.

SYNOPSIS

Charlie Duff is an established news anchor at a TV station in upstate New York. One night, after the death of his father triggers regret that he did not stay in better touch, he says a prayer for his dad as he signs off the newscast. This break with journalistic tradition causes concerns among station staff: young, controlling boss Scott insists that Charlie remain objective and not inject his personal beliefs into reading the news; co-anchor Sue, who takes her professional responsibilities seriously, warns that viewers with strong religious beliefs might find such acts offensive. When his young buddy John, a boisterous sportscaster, tells him that responses have surged on social media, Charlie continues to send out prayerful appeals, which stir up a firestorm of interest, especially since it appears he has the power to alter events. As Charlie becomes more renowned, he struggles to re-establish contact with his sixteen-year-old son Ricky, and seeks to connect with nineteen-year-old African American prison inmate Casey. These relationships, as well as encounters with grateful strangers and ambitious media executives, help him decide what truly constitutes success – in life and work.

SETTING

Rochester, New York. Present day.

RUNNING TIME

Approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes. *There will be one 15 minute intermission.*

PERFORMANCE NOTE

Coarse language is used, including the “n-word,” and there are references to sexual activities.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

STEPHEN BELBER (Playwright)

Stephen Belber’s plays have been produced on Broadway and in over 25 countries. They include *Match; Tape; Don’t Go Gentle; Dusk Rings a Bell; McReele; Finally; Geometry of Fire; Fault Lines; Carol Mulrone; A Small, Melodramatic Story; One Million Butterflies; The Power of Duff* and *The Muscles In Our Toes*. He was an associate writer on *The Laramie Project* and co-writer on *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. Movies include *Tape* (directed by Richard Linklater), *The Laramie Project* (associate writer), *Drifting Elegant, Management* (starring Jennifer Aniston) and *Match* (starring Patrick Stewart), the last two of which he also directed. Television credits include *Rescue Me, Law & Order SVU*, and pilots for *F/X, FTVS* and *HBO*.

PETER DuBOIS (Director)

Peter DuBois is the Artistic Director at the Huntington Theatre Company. His West End/London credits include *Rapture, Blister, Burn* (Hampstead Theatre); *All New People* with Zach Braff (Duke of York’s Theatre) and *Becky Shaw* (Almeida Theatre). New York credits include *The Power of Duff* with Greg Kinnear (New York Stage and Film/Powerhouse Theater); the premiere of *Rapture, Blister, Burn* (Playwrights Horizons) and *Sons of the Prophet* (Roundabout Theatre Company); *Modern Terrorism, Becky Shaw, Trust* with Sutton Foster and *All New People* (Second Stage Theatre); *Measure for Pleasure, Richard III* with Peter Dinklage, *Mom, How Did You Meet the Beatles?*, and *Biro* (The Public Theater/NYSF); *Jack Goes Boating* with Philip Seymour Hoffman and *The View From 151st Street* (LAByrnth Theater Company/The Public Theater). Regional US and UK credits include productions at American Conservatory Theater, Trinity Repertory Company, Humana Festival of New Plays, Manchester Opera House, and King’s Theater Glasgow. Before arriving at the Huntington, he served for five years as associate producer and resident director at The Public Theater, preceded by five years as artistic director of the Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska. Prior to his work at Perseverance, Mr. DuBois lived and worked in the Czech Republic where he co-founded Asylum, a multi-national squat theater in Prague. His productions have been on the annual top ten lists of *The New York Times, Time Out, Boston Globe, New York Magazine, The New Yorker, Newsday, Variety, Entertainment Weekly* and *The Evening Standard*.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

BROADCAST JOURNALISM

TECHNOLOGY & THE NEWS

Advances in technology have revolutionized how we experience the news. With the advent of film, news stories were now not only available in newspapers, but also in movie theaters. Radio reports reached people in their homes, and we now continue to tune in while in our cars. TV at first only broadcast regional news, until cross-country cables connected the U.S., and satellites connected the world. In recent years, numerous news sites, many with particular political slants, like those in cable news, have sprung up on the Internet, and the use of social media has enabled citizens to share images and commentary as they witness events in real time.

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/MuseumTV
tinyurl.com/PewPrinciJourn
tinyurl.com/PewTVNews



Most local television news is so focused on daily events, crimes and human interest stories, it is easy to lose sight of how journalism has long been considered essential to the health of a democratic society. Ideally, news organizations equip citizens to make decisions about civic life, by providing information in impartial and objective ways, and help prevent corruption and abuses of power, by investigating the actions of political and business leaders.

While TV network news, which broadcasts nationally, aims to inform the public about larger issues, some news professionals believe its scope has been diminished. For decades, commercial TV networks maintained the integrity of the news by keeping their news operations walled off from business concerns. Once these news outlets became a part of large corporations, their leaders looked for ways to increase revenue, especially as audiences flocked to cable stations. Cuts in staff resulted in having fewer people on the ground to witness and report events; as a result, networks are apt to share rather than produce original news. Attracting advertisers through high ratings is a top priority and many news outlets now focus on sensational and sentimental stories that will draw the most viewers.

In *The Power of Duff*, playwright Stephen Belber pokes fun at the limited fare of local TV news by having the newscasters cover “a politically disoriented turkey hunter,” the birth of a giraffe, mysterious cow deaths and a rise in subscribers to the local philharmonic orchestra.

Charlie’s prayers on the air are disruptive, not only because they break with journalistic principles regarding objectivity, but also, perhaps, because he ignites deep longings for meaning in the people the news business is supposed to empower.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/PewNonAffil
tinyurl.com/NYTNonAffil



When asked if he believes in God, Charlie says he is “suspicious” of “Some sort of ... force. To be reckoned with.” In a conversation with young prisoner Casey, he claims that while he’s been engaged in “religious speaking,” he’s “not particularly religious” himself. Like others who make this distinction, Charlie is not affiliated with any organized religion, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, but has embarked on his own spiritual quest.

According to the *New York Times*, “spiritual but not religious” is how 7% of the U.S. population identifies itself these days. Such individuals aim to have a personal relationship with a divine force of their understanding, which may or may not be God. While they may participate in learning experiences or services to enhance their spiritual practice, they are usually on a solo journey. Those who are “religious” tend to identify with a specific system of beliefs, uphold proscribed behavior, attend houses of worship and engage with a community of fellow believers.

Some religious scholars and members of religious communities consider those who are spiritually oriented too self-centered, wishy-washy in their beliefs and less likely to work with others to improve society. Those who have turned away from organized religion cite oppressive dogma, the corruption of spiritual principles by the power-hungry, and, in the cases of certain religions, centuries of violent conflict undertaken in the name of God, as reasons to cultivate a direct, personal connection to a power greater than themselves.

Whether calling their path spiritual or religious, by reaching outside of themselves through prayer and actions, believers in a higher power are usually in search of meaning, direction, strength and comfort as they navigate life, overcome obstacles and confront mortality.

DISCUSSION POINT

Whether spiritual or religious, or a non-believer, what principles provide direction, strength and comfort in your life?

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

PRISON REFORM

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Many prisoners live in overcrowded, unhealthy, degrading conditions with little to do; solitary confinement, which has been shown to destabilize human beings mentally, is used to control and punish behavior. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a disproportionate number of prisoners are people of color and poor; many have been imprisoned for drug-related crimes or are mentally ill, and cannot afford effective legal representation. The ACLU is one of many organizations that believe there is a great need for a “fair and effective criminal justice system,” which complies with “the Constitution, domestic law, and international human rights,” and focuses on rehabilitation so that prisoners can live “a productive, law-abiding life” upon their release. (ACLU National Prison Project)

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com



By speaking from his television news pulpit, Charlie seeks to do good and help people connect in a world he considers broken. After his appeals help save others from danger, he shines a light on the important social issue of prison reform. Prompted by his co-anchor Sue, who has created an investigative series about those “forgotten” at a nearby prison, and his son Ricky, who notes, “...the place needs more than just luck,” Charlie asks the public for help, and donations pour in to support improvements for prisoners.

As people’s lives are positively affected after Charlie’s newscasts, we may wonder if his prayers are actually working or if the outcomes are just coincidences. While playwright Stephen Belber leaves us to make our own determinations, as the play unfolds he invites us to focus less on what forces may be at work, and more on how Charlie’s fellow citizens have been moved to rally together, communicate with him and each other, and take action.

Charlie’s success emboldens him to continue sharing his hopes on the air, at the risk of jeopardizing his career. When high ratings make him a valuable professional commodity, he is asked to work on an even grander scale. At the same time, he is pained by his inability to have an impact on those closest to him. Rather than give up, or expand his reach in the world, he realizes there is enormous power in simply showing up for another human being – no matter what results.

DISCUSSION POINT

Playwright Stephen Belber about *The Power of Duff*: “Basically, the play is a note-to-self to try to live better, to listen, to engage, and to remember that a good life is made up of small but profound acts.” (*The Power of Duff* program, Geffen Playhouse)

How have you engaged in or been on the receiving end of “small but profound acts?” How did it make a difference in your life?

PUBLIC SUCCESS / PRIVATE STRUGGLES

MANIC DEPRESSION

Known also as bipolar disorder, this mental illness is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. High-voltage, euphoric episodes usually alternate with periods of extreme lethargy and hopelessness. Medications and therapy can even out mood swings and enable normal functioning. If untreated, those afflicted can cause themselves harm by engaging in irrational behavior during manic phases and committing suicide to escape the deep psychic pain of depressive episodes.
(National Institutes of Health)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/NIHManicD

The adage to not judge people's insides by their outsides applies to the newscasters at Channel 10, who, for all of their outward professional achievements, experience challenges in their private lives. John, who seems full of life yet can also offend with raunchy comments, reveals to Charlie that he suffers from manic depression – an affliction that accounts for his bouts of off-putting energy and hidden despair.

Because of his good deeds, Charlie is held in high esteem by most of the public. His teenage son Ricky, who has agreed to see him for the first time in two years, is angry with him. Unlike Charlie's fans, he knows how his father's behavior led to his parents' divorce.

RICKY

Can I ask you something?

CHARLIE

Yes.

RICKY

What are you thinking our relationship is gonna be right now?

Are you expecting that we're gonna be "best buds" again?

CHARLIE

No—

RICKY

Are you looking for someone to chat on the phone with about girls?—

CHARLIE

Look, Ricky—

RICKY

Rick.

CHARLIE

...Sorry. Rick. I, ah, I would like for us to--

RICKY

Can I interrupt?

(Charlie waits)

You may have certain people falling for your little saint routine but you shouldn't count on me for that. Because I know what you are.

TEENAGERS & ADULTS

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / pixabay.com

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/PsychTT-PCConflict

tinyurl.com/PsychTSurviveAdol



Adolescence, which starts in puberty and can last into a person's early twenties, is a unique and difficult phase of life, in which we human beings begin the long process of separating from our parents and becoming distinct individuals. Even though we are wired to be independent, we also yearn to remain connected to our caregivers, which can cause internal conflicts that give rise to moody behavior.

During adolescence, the part of our brain that can envision consequences and regulate our actions is not fully developed. As a result, we sometimes engage impulsively in risky behavior, such as abusing substances, driving too fast or committing crimes, which can harm our bodies, and our futures. While we may think they are not trusting enough, the adults in our lives are understandably concerned for our welfare – until we get out of the danger zone of not knowing how to take care of ourselves.

We need to be respected, hate being condescended to and cannot abide dishonesty and betrayal. If we sense that adults truly care about us, we may listen – even if we don't look like we are.

Some experts believe that engaging in conflicts with our parents – as long as they do not turn violent – can help us become who we are.

In *The Power of Duff*, Charlie is rebuffed by two teenagers – his son Ricky, who is furious with his failings, and Casey, who has been imprisoned for murder, and is wary of his charity. For both young men, Charlie's good intentions are not enough; he must earn their trust through his actions. In some ways, what each teenager needs from Charlie helps him become a more authentic and impactful human being.

DISCUSSION POINT

To establish better communication and more trusting relationships, what would be helpful for teens and adults to know about each other?

ROLE-PLAYING

Whether playing a theater game for the joy of it, exploring the interactions of characters in a play or bringing a real event to life, enacting different roles can fire up our imaginations, help us understand points of view different from our own and teach us about relationships.

With a partner, choose a scenario from the selection below, or make up your own. Once you have divided up the roles, take a few moments to think about 1) who your characters are, 2) their objectives in the scene and 3) what your relationship is. This will help you improvise – make up on the spot – dialogue as you come to a decision, solve a problem, or resolve a conflict.

Scenarios

1. Two friends are trying to decide what kind of restaurant to go to. One is a picky eater; one loves rich and exotic foods.
2. Two co-workers, responding to a directive from their boss, must decide who is going to work extra hours on Saturday.
3. There are only two astronauts left on Mars. One wants to go home.

Follow these guidelines for improvisation:

- Listen deeply to your partner and respond.
- Say “yes, and” – acknowledge what your partner has shared and build on it by adding information, ideas and directions to go in.
- Have fun!

Once you have explored one of the above scenarios, turn your attention to the characters and situations in *The Power of Duff*. Bring one of the interactions below to life with a partner. Be as specific as possible as you advance the characters' points of view.

1. A newscaster and colleague argue about the ethics of one of them making personal appeals during a television news broadcast.
2. A teenager is angry that his/her parent failed to show up for an important event – again; the parent is full of excuses and regret.
3. A person describes what it is like to have emotional problems; the person's friend does his/her best to support him.

DISCUSSION POINT

What did you find rewarding about role-playing? Challenging? Eye-opening?
How might role-playing help improve your communication skills?

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES GRABOWSKI

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

I am the House Sound Supervisor and have been at the theater for 15 years.

How would you characterize your primary responsibilities?

My job is to make sure everyone attending a show in the Gil Cates Theater can hear everything – from what actors are saying, to phones ringing onstage and thunder rumbling offstage, to the music between scenes. To do this, I assist with the system design for each production, which includes the use and placement of microphones and speakers. As Sound Master for each show, I operate the playback, which is computer-programmed, and cue and mix sounds manually to be responsive to any changes in timing onstage. I also make sure the headsets used by the hearing-impaired are working properly in all parts of the theater.

How impactful are the auditory aspects of a play?

Sound helps create a sense of place and time, supports the action and reinforces the moods of a play. We accomplish this, in part, by placing speakers in different spots onstage and in the auditorium. For instance, in *The Power of Duff*, for the scenes taking place in a television news studio, we've put speakers on the balcony and in back of the mezzanine so the audience will hear the disembodied voice of the news director, just as the anchors would in a studio.

How did you get into the art and science of sound?

As an undergraduate at Purdue University I started out in electrical engineering then went into computer science and physics – but nothing held my interest for long. While growing up in Chicago, my parents had taken me to see great theater at Steppenwolf and the Goodman Theater. So I took a theater class and suddenly felt completely at



home. I left engineering school, and worked in a factory to save enough money to come back to theater school, where I was drawn to technical production. I got my graduate degree in Technical Design and Production, with a specialization in sound, at the University of Cincinnati.

How did you end up at the Geffen Playhouse?

I moved to L.A. to work in film production, but the amount of time waiting for set-ups was less than satisfying, so I ended up working in small theaters. I happened to be the roommate of the Geffen's House Sound Supervisor. When he left in 2000, I was hired to take his place.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

When everyone thinks they know how something should sound! But even when I lose certain battles, I often end up learning something new.

What do you find most rewarding about your work?

I love experiencing the impact of the play on an audience. I love how collaborative theater is. And I love the Geffen – everyone here is not only really good at their job but also cares deeply about the work. ■

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 in 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 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 the play? Engaged? Distant? Entertained? Intrigued? Bored? Moved? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What was the most memorable moment in the production? Provide details.
- How has your attitude towards television news been affected by the play?
- Should Charlie Duff have prayed on the newscasts? Why or why not?
- With which character or characters did you identify the most? Why?
- To which of Charlie's experiences did you connect most strongly – his career, his spiritual quest, the risks he took to do good, his struggles as a parent, his caring behavior as a friend? Why?
- Did the play affirm or alter your beliefs about the power of prayer? If so, how?
- Overall, what was the play about? What life lessons did you take away from it?
- What aspects of the story kept your interest? What aspects didn't? Why?
- Who were the strongest performers in the play? Why?
- How did the lighting, video, images and sound contribute to the impact of the play?
- Would you recommend *The Power of Duff* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN about the history of broadcast news at tinyurl.com/MuseumTV.

LEARN about principles underlying serious journalism at tinyurl.com/PewPrinciJourn, and the current state of news media at tinyurl.com/PewNewsMedia.

LEARN about how and why the number of Americans not affiliated with a religion is on the rise at tinyurl.com/PewNonAffil.

VISIT the Self-Realization Fellowship in the Pacific Palisades – a spiritual sanctuary, whose peaceful grounds include a lake surrounded by gardens. Find information at www.lakeshrine.org.

PARTICIPATE in volunteer activities suggested by the city of Los Angeles at tinyurl.com/LA-VolOpp.

LEARN about the reasons for conflicts between teens and parents at tinyurl.com/PsychTT-PCConflict and how to manage conflicts constructively at tinyurl.com/PsychTSurviveAdol.

LEARN about the efforts of the American Civil Liberties Union to improve the U.S. criminal justice system at tinyurl.com/ACLUPrisProj.

LEARN about Norway’s radical approach to prison design and its impact at tinyurl.com/NorwayPrisDesign.

LEARN about the symptoms and causes of manic-depressive illness (also known as bipolar disorder) tinyurl.com/NIHManicD.

READ about theater games that unlock creative expression in *Improvisation for the Theater* by the innovative “mother of improvisation” Viola Spolin (available at the Los Angeles Public Library).

PARTICIPATE in improvisation classes that welcome non-actors at www.improv-la.com.

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And many more!

