

STUDY GUIDE

Big Sky



20 GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

Big Sky

WORLD PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
JUNE 7 – JULY 17, 2016

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Randall Arney, Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Kevin O'Brien, Peter Banachowski,
Carolyn Marie Wright, Ellen Catania, Kristen Smith Eshaya and Clay Dzygun.

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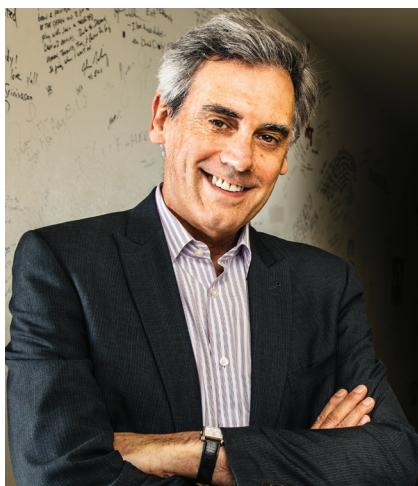
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



PLAYS ARE A CONDUIT THROUGH WHICH WE LEARN larger truths about ourselves and each other. Often, they are truths we already know, but there is something about having them illuminated before our eyes that reconnects us to them and, when done elegantly, ushers us out of the theater with a feeling of catharsis. Some plays take it one step further and are constructed on the basis that what is true at the end of a play is identical to what is true at the start. What drives the action is unearthing these revelations and watching the chips fall where they may.

As we enter a luxurious Aspen chalet in *Big Sky*, we immediately recognize a typical, affluent American family. But Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros' play explores the all-too-current idea of the precariousness of life in America after a nationwide financial crisis. This undercurrent propels this very funny and wry play into a rather profound place.

Our pleasure is to welcome Alexandra to the Geffen and to welcome back John Rando, who has directed here on many occasions. Together with a stellar cast and world-class designers, they have brought to life a story to which we can all surely relate. What does a family do when faced with challenges? Do they bond together to fight the elements, or is the wreckage insurmountable – one from which no recovery is possible?

SYNOPSIS

In this comedy with serious undertones, a family staying in a luxurious condo in Aspen, Colorado, is being pulled apart by conflicting desires, and secrets. Primary breadwinner Jack, devastated when he lost a well-paying job a few years before, is about to close a deal with a powerful financial leader, who has called him to the exclusive resort for a final interview. In addition to being stressed out, he is frustrated by his wife Jen's lack of interest in being close to him. Jen confides to family friend Jonathan, who hopes to secure Jack's investment in his own business venture, that she is seeking more meaning out of life. Jen and Jack's 17-year-old daughter Tessa is suffering from her parents' preoccupations and acts out in a thoughtless and unintentionally destructive way. The resulting repercussions inspire a round of truth-telling that has the potential to both break and heal the family.

SETTING/TIME Ritz-Carlton Condo. The Present.

RUNNING TIME Approximately 95 minutes. There will be no intermission.

PERFORMANCE NOTE Coarse language is used; there is a moment of smoking marijuana and a brief violent encounter.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

ALEXANDRA GERSTEN-VASSILAROS (Playwright)

Her play *Omnium Gatherum* (2004 Pulitzer Prize Finalist, co-written with Theresa Rebeck) premiered at the Humana Festival and moved Off-Broadway with subsequent regional and international productions. Her controversial play *The Argument* (Vineyard Theatre) had a recent “revised” production at Theatre J in Washington, D.C. *The Ordinary Yearning of Miriam Buddwing* (directed by Anna Shapiro), *My Thing of Love* (directed by Terry Kinney; Broadway, directed by Howard Davies) and *Supple in Combat* (directed by Max Mayer) were commissioned by and premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. *Mother of Invention* (directed by Nicholas Martin) premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival starring Estelle Parsons. *Mean Time*, about the fracturing effects of war on soldiers and their families, was workshopped at Juilliard, NYU Grad Theatre Program and New York Stage and Film Co. (directed by Daniel Aukin). Her plays are published by Smith & Kraus and Samuel French. Radio: Playing On Air is currently featuring two of her short plays for public radio: *Two Jewish Men in Their Seventies* with Jerry Stiller and *Open Arms* with Julie White and Bill Irwin. She has developed several television projects with co-writer Carl Capotorto for HBO (Executive Producers Will Scheffer and Mark Olsen), and for KILLER/MOXIE films. Alexandra is a graduate of the NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts and a member of PEN. She leads writing workshops for veterans and women at The Bowery Mission in N.Y.C. Special thanks to my theater family at New York Stage & Film and to Michael Hoffmann. Alex dedicates *Big Sky* to her three boys Tonio, Luka and Stefano and to her husband Johnny.

JOHN RANDO (Director)

Big Sky is John's fifth production for the Geffen. Other Geffen shows are: *All in the Timing* (Ovation Award), *Merton of the Movies*, *The Underpants* and *Matthew Modine Saves the Alpacas*. Broadway credits include *Penn & Teller on Broadway*, *On The Town* (Tony Nomination for Best Direction of a Musical), *A Christmas Story*, *The Wedding Singer*, *Urinetown* (Tony and Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Director), *A Thousand Clowns* and Neil Simon's *The Dinner Party*. His recent Off-Broadway credits include *Lives of the Saints* (Primary Stages), *The Heir Apparent* (2014 SDCF Calloway Award for Direction – Classic Stage Company), *All in the Timing* (Primary Stages – 2013 Obie Award for Direction), and *The Toxic Avenger*, among many others. He directed the *Encores!* Productions of *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Little Me, It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *On the Town*, *Damn Yankees*, *Face the Music*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Do Re Mi*, *The Pajama Game* and *Of Thee I Sing*. He also directed Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* with the New York Philharmonic. M.F.A. from University of California, Los Angeles.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

WEALTH & HAPPINESS

PHOTO CREDITS

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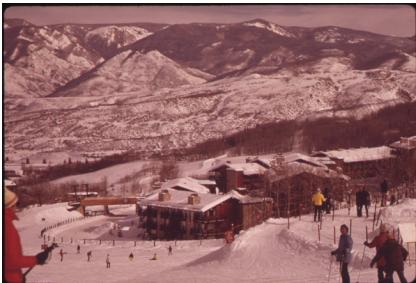
SOURCES

tinyurl.com/AfluDiscont
tinyurl.com/AfluKids
tinyurl.com/LowIncWrld
tinyurl.com/UNPovStats
tinyurl.com/PovOverview
tinyurl.com/AtlExpHapp



In a family that appears to want for nothing, tensions are high: Jack, as well as his wife Jen and daughter Tessa, need to impress a corporate titan in order for Jack to secure work that will sustain the family's affluent lifestyle.

Jack's earlier traumatic job loss echoes the ones that resulted from the economic downturn in the U.S. after 2008, when the banking industry had granted numerous mortgages to those they knew were unable to afford them and the loans came due. Major businesses failed, many lives were "downsized" and college and retirement savings vanished. As the economy shrank, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. For some, the fall from riches was too great. As Jack exults, when it appears the deal is certain, he is, "Not the guy [who] parked his Lexus on the tracks waiting for Metro North to bang 'em right outta this frickin' world, like my former boss..." Jack is determined to keep his family's extravagant lifestyle afloat until he can make it "back to shore."



ASPEN

Located in the Rocky Mountains in the central part of the state, Aspen is known primarily as a ski resort for the rich and famous. It is also the home of the Aspen Institute, a think tank that explores contemporary global issues, and a renowned summer music festival.

The problems Jack and his family face are endured under much more dire circumstances by 71% of the citizens of the world, who live on \$10 or less a day. According to the UN, "Nearly half the world's population, 2.8 billion people, survive on less than \$2/day." In the United States, where the standard of living is relatively higher, approximately 46.7 million people live in poverty. Some manage from paycheck to paycheck, but are one major medical emergency away from financial disaster. Unlike middle- and upper-class families, few working-class and poor families have safety nets provided by solvent family and friends.

While being able to afford everything from basic necessities to a comfortable, stress-free lifestyle is unquestionably a source of profound wellbeing, some research has shown that after a certain point financial wealth no longer provides happiness the way close relationships and positive experiences can. Indeed, as *Big Sky* unfolds, what the family members lack emotionally becomes more pressing than their financial straits. Jack misses having an intimate connection with his wife – a problem he blames on "the Menopause" Jen is experiencing ten years earlier than usual. Jen has quit her business as an interior decorator and volunteers at a hospice, in search of a higher purpose and, as it turns out, someone who can recognize, not just depend on her. Tessa has enjoyed a privileged life yet operates without boundaries, which lands her in trouble. A study by the National Institutes of Health has explored how, "...upper-class children can manifest elevated disturbance in several areas—such as substance use, anxiety, and depression—and that two sets of factors seem to be implicated, that is, excessive pressures to achieve and isolation from parents (both literal and emotional)." (NCBI, 2005) Tessa's mother appears to coddle her, but really over-identifies with her, and her father is obsessed with work. Though her parents may believe they are paying attention to her, they seem mainly concerned with how Tessa's behavior will affect or reflect on them, rather than what is at the core of her difficulties.

Both mother and daughter seem to reach for spiritual meaning as a way to balance living in a world saturated with material things – exemplified by the fancy condo and \$200 bottles of wine. Perhaps Jen and Tessa seek less tangible, albeit more satisfying, experiences because they can afford to. Were they to know the overwhelming stress of being homeless and food insecure, they might strive for wealth as Jack does.

While financial security may be defined differently by individuals and come with unique sets of challenges, recent studies have proposed that positive experiences can provide more enduring fulfillment than *things*. Many believe that objects offer more satisfaction because they exist longer over time than more fleeting experiences. Engrossing work, fun recreational activities, inspiring cultural pursuits and care-free vacations that we enjoy alone or in the company of others, can open us up to life in unexpected ways, solidify our relationships and create a sense of community. Significant experiences that live on in us as memories can warm our spirits for the rest of our lives.

DISCUSSION POINT

What matters most to you in life – close relationships, exciting experiences or beautiful possessions? Why?

NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / Unsplash

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/WikiNASpirit

INDIGENOUS (adjective)

Originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native (thefreedictionary.com)

NAMING PREFERENCES

Some believe the term “Native American” more accurately reflects the stature of our country’s first settlers and removes any association with Christopher Columbus’ designation, having believed he’d arrived in India when he discovered the “New World.” Others believe “native” could apply to anyone born in the United States and prefer “American Indian.”
(New World Encyclopedia)

HISTORY OF SHINNECOCK

Tessa’s boyfriend Catoni is half Shinnecock, “...a federally recognized tribe of historically Algonquian-speaking Native Americans based at the eastern end of Long Island, New York... They are descended from the historic Pequot and Narragansett peoples of southern New England, whose bands also occupied eastern Long Island.”
(Wikipedia)



In her description of Tessa, playwright Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros suggests the teenager “...organically feels the crisis of the world and is, perhaps, the play’s canary in the mine.” Both Tessa’s sensitivity and her yearning for comfort come into view as she shares with family friend Jonathan spiritual principles she has learned from her secret (off-stage) boyfriend Catoni, a 25-year-old porter in her family’s Manhattan apartment building, who is half Native American. According to Tessa, Catoni, whose name means “big sky,” believes, “...the real purpose of being born is to align ourselves to the divine forces informing the world around us and within us.” Reverence for the interrelationships among all living things as well as with the “spirit world” are beliefs commonly associated with Native American cultures. In resonating with them, Tessa may be seeking relief from the harm her family is subject to within an economic system aimed solely at achieving wealth. In order for Jack to get the new job, each family member has to perform and conform – Jack as an asset to the company he wants to join, his wife as a friend to the mogul’s wife, and Tessa as a companion to the mogul’s daughter. Jack has been so focused on succeeding he has not only fallen out of touch with his wife and child, but is also willing, at one point, to sacrifice Tessa’s wellbeing for his own gain.

Catoni, in response to his tribe’s attempts to build a gambling casino on its reservation, rejects “...a skewed social order that operates under a turbo-powered capitalistic paradigm, seriously dedicated to the enrichment and fortification of the white man...” As is well-known, the “white man” has had a long, sordid history with American Indians: the first European settlers caused the decimation of the indigenous peoples of America primarily by ushering in disease; they and their descendants also stole Indian lands across the continent – for their own gain. While Tessa’s espousal of Catoni’s beliefs may illuminate “a crisis of the world” in how communities are harmed by the blind pursuit of wealth, as with many things in life, the reality is more complex. As Native American tribes have continued to endure seemingly intractable poverty, profits from casinos on their reservations have, in fact, provided decent housing and other necessities. Tessa’s affinity for spiritual principles may really show her desperate desire for stronger connections within her own family. The lack of them is certainly a crisis in her world.

IMPULSIVE ACTS

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/PsychTdlmpls
tinyurl.com/PsychTdMangImpls
tinyurl.com/TeenImpls

A theater work is most engaging when characters take actions that send the plot in unexpected directions. As audience members, we want to find out what is going to happen next, especially if we care about the people in the story. To create these pivotal moments, playwrights often have their characters act impulsively then follow where the consequences lead — usually to disaster, hilarity, or happiness. In *Big Sky*, several characters make thoughtless choices, which change the course of their relationships and lives.

Many have blurted out inappropriate comments or bought something on a whim they never used after bringing it home; under pressure, they may have had to make quick decisions. Those who are *impulsive* constantly act without thinking. According to psychologist Adrian Furnam, such individuals have other traits, including being "...thrill-seeking, complexity-avoiding, easily-distracted, unreflective..." and not inclined to plan for the future. Furnam adds that while such individuals can be persuaded to manage their behavior if promised "exciting rewards," they are "curiously insensitive" to threats of dire consequences.

These traits are also evident during the teenage years — when young people are apt to engage in dangerous behaviors like substance abuse and driving irresponsibly. According to brain science, many teenagers are unable to assess risks accurately, due to the lack of development of the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which can serve as a "brake" when human beings speed toward unwise choices. Teens also tend to respond emotionally rather than rationally to problems, and their reward centers are highly active, which motivates them to do what they feel like doing, rather than delay gratification to do what they should.

In addition to addiction, lack of impulse control has been tied to ADHD and anger issues for young people and adults alike. Behavior fueled by these disorders can be harmful to the afflicted as well as those around them. Staying away from environments that trigger actions such as shopping and drinking, and being mindful — developing the ability to observe impulses without acting on them — can help curb potentially damaging decisions.

While impulsivity often connotes negative behavior, plenty of spontaneous acts are the absolute opposite of harmful. Rushing to someone's aid, taking care of a lost child, suddenly deciding to pay another's way or to proclaim deep appreciation for someone can enhance, if not save, the lives of others.

DISCUSSION POINT

Think of a time you acted impulsively, or someone behaved in a sudden and unexpected way towards you — to good or bad effect. How did such an act change your life? If you could roll back the moment, what would you do differently? Why?

HONEST COMMUNICATION

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain / Unsplash

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/Love-Resp

tinyurl.com/PsychTdEmoHon



"Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy."

— Warren W. Wiersbe

Just as there are different ways to lie — stating falsehoods, omitting information, allowing untrue assumptions to go unchallenged — so are there a variety of ways to be truthful. Simple, bracing honesty turns out to be the antidote for what ails Jack and his family in *Big Sky*. On the way to this touching conclusion, however, each family member lobs observations that sting upon landing. As Tessa remarks to Jen then to both of her parents, "I see a whole lot more than you realize! You're a mess. You're a weird desperate mess. You both are."

At its best, honest communication in close relationships supports the authentic expression of each person's needs, vulnerabilities and desires, and builds trust. When honesty is used as a weapon, it is usually an expression of anger, a need for control or a way to discharge shame. Trust can never take root. If asked to offer an assessment of a decision, action or someone's appearance, some choose to remain silent or tell white lies for fear of being hurtful. Interestingly, if an observation is shared with respect and another's best interests at heart, it can be perceived as care. When couples seek help because they are locked into cycles of conflict, therapists often recommend they share their genuine responses to, not judgments of, each other's behavior.

There are conflicting views about the wisdom of disclosing unfaithful acts. In some instances, mates confess to unburden themselves of guilt without considering the devastating impact on their loved ones. If revealing infidelity is about taking responsibility for a breakdown in the relationship that must be healed, and is followed by dependable communication and trustworthy actions, relationships cannot only survive, but eventually thrive over time.

DISCUSSION POINT

How can honest communication build a sense of freedom and trust in close relationships?

COMIC RELIEF

The character of Jonathan, described by the playwright as “Jen’s loyal gay friend,” provides comic relief as tensions increase among his friends. We laugh because he is caught unwittingly in the middle of a messed-up family, and as each member confides in him, exploits his good nature and ignores his needs — much to his dismay. His enthusiasm and self-deprecation — on display after going skiing for the first time — are funny and winning.

Take a moment to read through the scene below and note where Jonathan tries to be positive and makes fun of himself. If you were bringing this role to life, how would you say the lines to convey these aspects of his personality?

JONATHAN

I'm here to tell you that Nanook of the Northeast, by way of Brooklyn, has accomplished the once daunting Bunny Hill. YAY!

JEN

Yay!

JONATHAN

And tomorrow, maybe I'll take on an easy green! I'm a late bloomer, but I only went on my tush twice. Once when a very pretty man bumped into me. Actually, I sort of slid into him. It was very embarrassing.

JEN

Who was he?

JONATHAN

His name is Jean Jacques, a slightly over the hill ski instructor, from New Zealand, no less. We traded numbers. No, we didn't, but I wish we did. Maybe tomorrow.

JEN

Excellent. I'm glad you're having fun!

JONATHAN

Are you kidding? I love it here. If you come to Aspen next year, count me in! Because, drumroll, by this time next year, I'll finally be able to pay my own way, how 'bout that? Unless of course I'm on my honeymoon with Jean Jacques in Turks and Caicos. Uh oh, my feet are tingling. Is that bad?

JEN

Maybe you made the buckles too tight. Do you need help unhitching?

JONATHAN

Definitely. I had a hard enough time getting them on, I swear I have no idea how people do this on their own.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER BANACHOWSKI

What is your official position and how long have you been at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Accounting & Payroll Manager, and I've been at the theater since October 2014.

What are your primary responsibilities?

With payroll, I am responsible for everyone getting paid on a regular basis. In accounting, I make sure that every dollar that comes in — like through ticket sales, funding and donations — and every dollar that goes out to pay salaries, fees and expenses is recorded, accounted for and justified. To ensure our health as a non-profit, records of our expenses are made public, and we undergo a third-party audit every year. I also handle some HR (Human Resource) administrative functions, including helping to mediate employee concerns.

How did you get into accounting?

I backed into this field while pursuing my goal to be a stand-up comic. I've had jobs since I was 14 years old and have always been in the habit of teaching myself how to do things. My degree in mathematics has equipped me to use proof-based, indestructible logic that serves working in finance well. Six years ago, while handling odd jobs like answering phones at the Improv, a comedy club in West Hollywood, I was asked to help with bookkeeping. Several years later, when I lived in New York City for a year to work as a comic, I became the accountant at a synagogue.

How is accounting different from bookkeeping?

With bookkeeping, you maintain records of revenue and expenses. With accounting you analyze the budget and help make strategic decisions regarding the organization's finances.

How did you end up at the Geffen?

After coming back to Los Angeles from New York, I answered an ad for a part-time job in the accounting department. A few days after my second interview there were major changes: my boss left, and shortly after that so did the only other member of the department. After six months of helping to keep the business



end of the theater afloat, and more personnel changes, my boss and our Chief Financial Officer Behnaz Ataee, known as Nazy, returned, and it's been uphill ever since.

How do you balance your work in accounting with your work as a comic?

I work all day at the Geffen then gig most nights at comedy clubs. Recently, I opened for Jamie Lissow in Ontario. I also take classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade and the Groundlings to keep my skills sharp.

What do you find most challenging about your work at the Geffen?

I have to balance all aspects of payroll, accounting, and HR, and attend to the tasks of each area consecutively so that nothing important gets dropped. It's like keeping three plates spinning at the end of wooden poles and making sure none of the plates slow down so much they fall off.

What do you find most satisfying about your work?

I can only work for people I respect, and I value those I work with deeply, especially Nazy, who really knows what she's doing and from whom I have learned and continue to learn so much. I also appreciate the work culture at the Geffen. It is an incredibly kind and forgiving place, which I think helps us do our best because no one gets stuck from being terrified of making a mistake. ■

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 *Big Sky*? Engaged? Distanced? Entertained? Bored? Confused? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- What did you enjoy most about the play? What did you have trouble connecting to? Why? (Provide evidence from the production.)
- At the beginning of the play, how did you feel about the characters of Jack, Jen and Tessa? By the end, how did you feel about them as individuals, and as a family?
- Which impulsive acts changed the course of the characters' lives the most?
- What was the most surprising moment in the play?
- How do you think the lives of Jack, Jen, Tessa and Jonathan unfold after the end of the play?
- Why do you think playwright Alexandra Gertsen-Vassilaros titled her play *Big Sky*?
- What observations about affluence, spiritual values and/or family do you think she wanted to share with the audience?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, props, lighting and special effects contribute to your experience of the play?
- Would you recommend *Big Sky* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

WATCH a promotional video on Aspen to learn about the geographical locale, the experience of skiing and how the affluent engage in recreation at tinyurl.com/YTSkiAspRes.

VISIT the Kuruvunga Springs Culture Center & Museum in Los Angeles to learn about the Gabrielino/Tongva tribe indigenous to the region. Information at gabrielinosprings.com/wpsite.

VISIT the Chumash Indian Museum in Thousand Oaks, CA to learn about the history and culture of the Chumash – a regional coastal tribe. Information at chumashindianmuseum.com.

LEARN about the impact of unemployment on people all along the economic spectrum at tinyurl.com/UnEmpAll.

LEARN about the psychology of happiness regarding enjoying experiences vs. buying things at the tinyurl.com/AtlBuyExp.

LEARN about the upside and downside of impulsive habits in the workplace at tinyurl.com/PsychTDImpWrk.

LEARN how to communicate effectively in loving relationships at tinyurl.com/Love-Resp.

LEARN tips on writing comedy at tinyurl.com/WrtFunny.

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