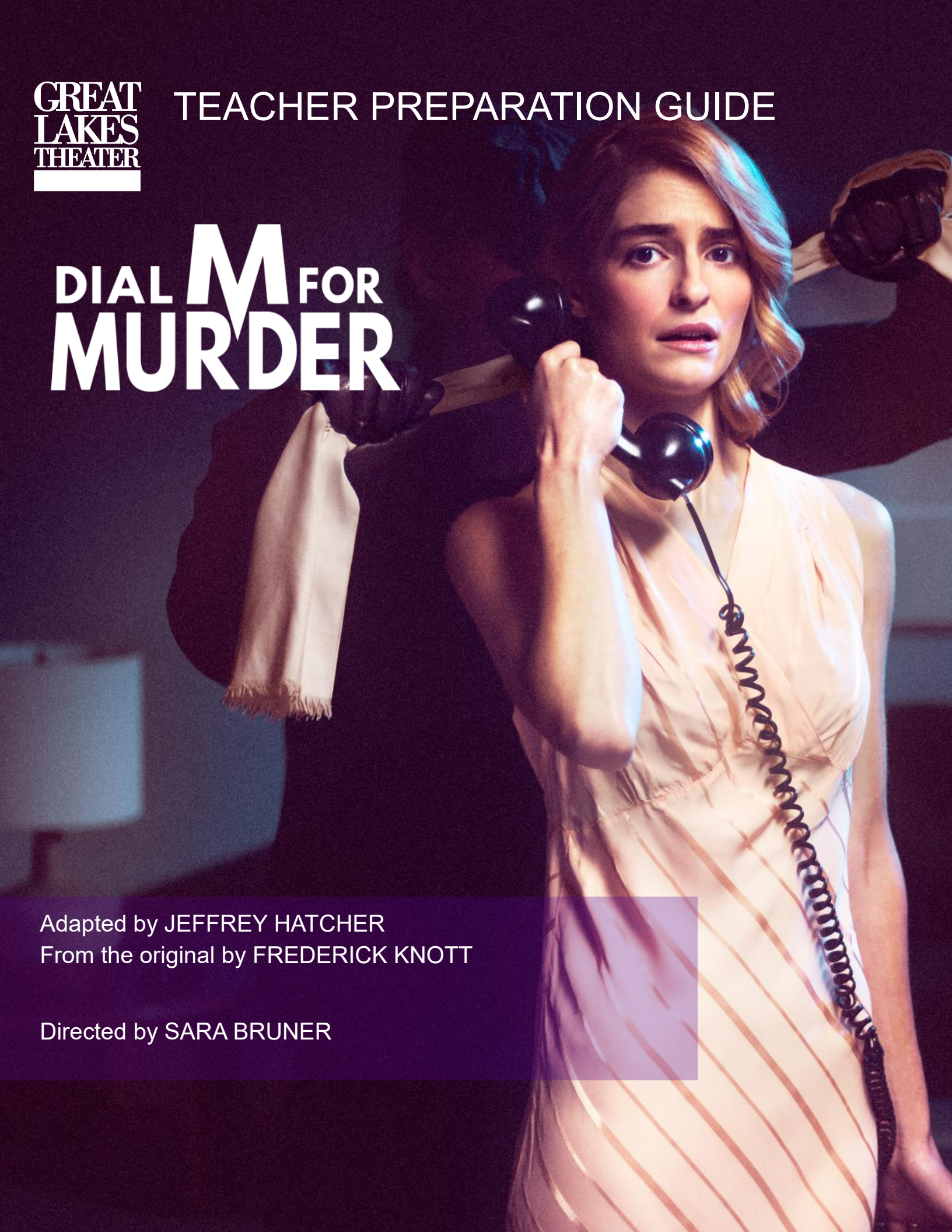
GREAT LAKES THEATER

TEACHER PREPARATION GUIDE



Adapted by JEFFREY HATCHER
From the original by FREDERICK KNOTT

Directed by SARA BRUNER

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Fall 2025

Dear Educator,

Thank you for reserving student matinee tickets for *Dial M for Murder* at Great Lakes Theater. This production will be presented in the Hanna Theatre at Playhouse Square from October 24–November 9, 2025.

Deception, blackmail and murder collide in this fresh take on the classic thriller that inspired Hitchcock's masterpiece. Tony's plot to kill his wife Margot takes an unexpected turn in this fast-paced adaptation that will keep you guessing until the final twist. Taut, suspenseful and full of surprises, this gripping story will leave you on the edge of your seat.

Just a note for educators. This performance is amazing. I know your students will love it. We feel it is appropriate for middle and high school students. To best prepare your students, we have a note (below) that explains a change in the adaptation.

At the heart of the drama lies a tangled web of relationships—two female characters, bound by a past love affair, find themselves at the center of a sinister plot that raises questions about loyalty, power, and survival. While the relationship is central to the emotional stakes of the story, it is important to note that there is no physical manifestation of this connection on stage. This allows the play to focus on the psychological and emotional dimensions of their bond, offering students an opportunity to explore complex characters and nuanced storytelling.

This guide includes essays, discussion questions, and classroom activities designed to introduce students to the world of the play and offer a meaningful entry point for personal exploration. At Great Lakes Theater, we're proud to share high-quality classic theater alongside resources that support your teaching. We're thrilled to welcome you and your students and always appreciate your feedback on how we can best support your classroom experience.

Sincerely,

Kelly Schaffer Florian
Director of Educational Services
Kflorian@greatlakestheater.org

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Education Programs Manager
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A Note to Students: What to Expect at the Theater

You may or may not have attended a live theater performance before. To increase your enjoyment, it might be helpful to look at the unique qualities of this art form — because it is so different from movies or video.

The live theatrical performance not only involves the actors on the stage; it is meant to involve you, the audience, in ways that film and television cannot. In truth, although you are sitting in an auditorium and the actors are on stage, there is very little separating the audience from the performers. How you react to the play *deeply affects* the actors. Something as seemingly trivial as whispering or unwrapping a candy bar can distract them and disrupt the mood and tone of their performance. Due to the important relationship between actors and audience members, there are certain, perhaps obvious, provisions of live theater we wish to call to your attention.

In the Hanna Theatre, it is important to know that the taking of pictures, either with or without a flash, is strictly prohibited. Also, it is essential that all electronic equipment, including cell phones, music players (even with headphones), alarm watches, etc., be completely powered off once you have entered the theatre. Even the glow from a watch or a silent cell phone (used for checking the time, text messaging, or posting social network updates, for example) can be very distracting to fellow audience members, even if you try to mask it under your hand or an article of clothing. Our goal is to provide every person in the audience with the best possible theatrical experience, so we appreciate your respectful cooperation during the performance.

Other differences live theater provides: in film or video, the camera and editing define what we will see. In the theater, however, each of us works as our own camera and editor, choosing our own personal points of focus. And in the Hanna Theatre, you should know that often we do not use microphones. As audience members you'll need to actively listen and "tune in" to the sound of the unamplified human voice.

As for our lighting and scenery, it might surprise you to know that these are not necessarily meant to be realistic. In this production, for example, there may be design elements that are abstract or metaphorical.

The theater's ability to focus on human experience — distilled through the dialogue and behavior of people on stage and enhanced by the scenery, costumes, lighting, music and dance — is a centuries-old tradition. Being part of the communal magic when performer and audience connect —whether at a baseball game, music concert or theater performance — cannot be duplicated.

The performance you will see at Great Lakes Theater will happen only once. It is unique and personal. Though this play will be performed more than a dozen times, the performance you see belongs only to you.

We hope you enjoy it, and we'd like you to share your response with us.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE
Sara Bruner

"At their core thrillers are about control— or rather, the illusion of it, the loss of it, and the desperate attempts to reclaim it. Crime stories allow us to step into a world of danger while remaining safe in our seats, experiencing fear, suspense, and even catharsis as we watch characters navigate treachery and deception.

Thrillers also hold up a mirror to society. Beneath their tightly wound plots, they explore deeper anxieties—about power, class, morality, and justice. *Dial M for Murder* is, at its heart, a story about manipulation and privilege, about who gets away with what and why. It reminds us how easily trust can be weaponized and how justice, while inevitable, is rarely neat or fair.

This is what makes *Dial M for Murder* as gripping today as it was when it first debuted. In an era where deception and hidden motives seem ever-present in our daily lives, this story remains a thrilling—and eerily relevant—reminder of what happens when we underestimate those around us.

Sit back, lean in, and enjoy the ride. But remember: in a true thriller, nothing is ever as simple as it seems.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Margot Wendice	Jodi Dominick*
Maxine Hadley	Carrie Kawa*
Tony Wendice	Nick Steen*
Lesgate	Jeffrey C. Hawkins*
Inspector Hubbard	David Anthony Smith*

*Members of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States

Playwright Frederick Knott

Frederick Knott is best known for his two plays, *Dial M for Murder* and *Wait Until Dark*. Both scripts enjoyed successful runs on London's West End and Broadway here in the U.S. Both scripts were adapted for the screen, each starring well-known actors and receiving critical acclaim. However, Knott is not a household name and only has a small amount of plays and screenplays to his credit. Often called a "reluctant writer," his career in theater, television, and film was brief but enduring.

Top left: playwright Frederick Knott
Bottom: Frederick Knott and Grace Kelly

Frederick Knott was born in Hankou, China on August 2, 1916 to English missionary parents. He was introduced to the theater through performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas at the Hankow Operatic Society. In his obituary, his sister Jean related how the two of them poured over the scripts and music of Gilbert and Sullivan, performing them in the back yard, with Knott directing their home-spun productions.

Around the age of 10, Knott was sent to school back in England where he stayed through university at Downing College in Cambridge. There he studied law and became an accomplished tennis player — which is reflected in the original version of the *Dial M for Murder* character of Tony Wendice. Unfortunately, the start of World War II prevented Knott from competing at Wimbledon. After college, Knott served in the army as a signals instructor for the Artillery, rising to the rank of major by the end of the war.

Knott's parents eventually moved back to England and bought a small holding in 1948. Knott moved into a small building on the property and there wrote *Dial M for Murder*, his first script. Written between 1948 and 1952, Knott shared that the inspiration for the story was hearing the sound of a gun going off in an old, oak paneled house. Reportedly, the effort to write *Dial M for Murder* was difficult for Knott, so much so that he wouldn't get dressed or leave his room for days, causing his mother to leave meals outside his door. All told, it took him 18 months to complete his first play.

The effort to get the play produced was even more difficult. Seven theater companies turned the script down — one theater manager ironically stated that "the play as a whole would cause little interest." Before Knott gave up though, the BBC made him an offer to turn it into a televised performance. The script aired as episode twelve of the third season of the BBC program Sunday Night Theatre. The performance caught the attention of Alexander Korda, a talent agent, who bought the screen rights for only £1000, giving Knott the impression that a film was highly unlikely now that the play had been televised. Knott also agreed to a clause in the contract with Korda that any stage productions would be canceled in the event a film was available for release. Unfortunately, this decision scared away

Original movie poster for *Dial M for Murder*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1954

many — now interested — theater managers. However, due to a last minute change in programming at the Westminster Theatre, *Dial M for Murder* was first produced on London's West End in June 1952 and starred many of the actors that were in the BBC televised version.

The success of the West End production paved the way for the rights to be secured for a Broadway debut in October 1952 which earned rave reviews. Unlike the British theater managers who refused to first produce the play, New York critics declared that the production, "tingles with excitement" (New York Times) and "holds your attention like a vice" (New York Mirror.) To make the script easier for American audiences to understand, some changes were made, including the name of the lead female character from Sheila to Margot and the reason for

one of the instances of blackmail. The play ran for 16 months, followed by a tour. Over the following five years, the play was toured in 30 countries.

The play famously came to the attention of Alfred Hitchcock. According to Hitchcock's biographer, Donald Spoto, he wasn't sold completely on doing the film. However, according to Knott's obituary, Knott and Hitchcock became good friends. Knott stayed with the Hitchcocks while the movie was shot and he was given a chair on set along with the actors — a high honor. The movie was originally filmed with the then fairly new 3-D technology. However, audience response was low and the movie continued its run in 2-D with a much better reception. While it is not considered to be one of Hitchcock's finest, the movie, to this day, holds a high rating on websites such as Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic. In 2001, the movie was listed as #48 in the American Film Institute's "100 years…100 thrills" retrospective.

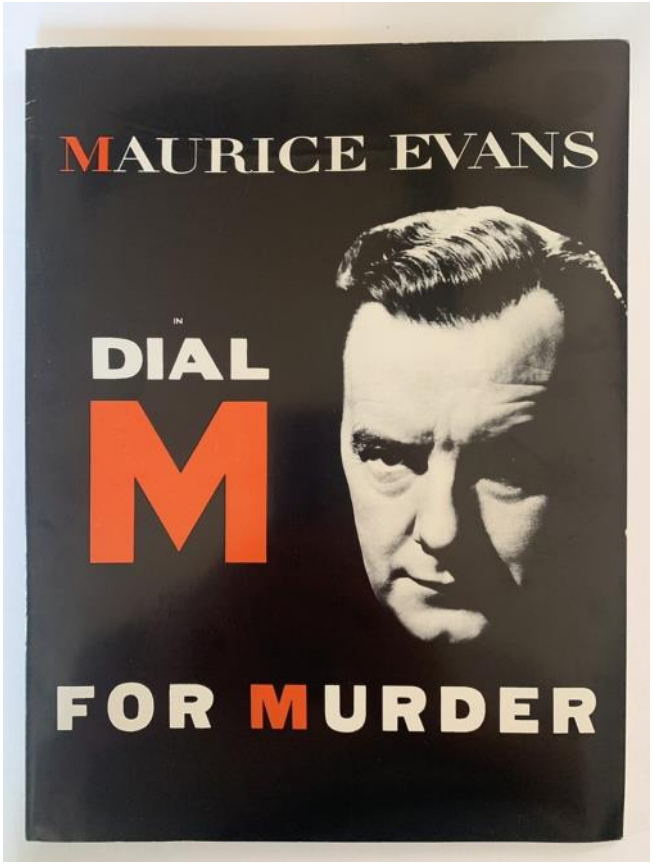
Frederick Knott stopped writing after the success of his play *Wait Until Dark* in 1966 and the failure of the movie *The Honey Pot* (1967), which was based on his play *Mr. Fox of Venice* (1959). His wife Hillary said, "I don't think the drive was there any more. He was perfectly happy the way things were." Knott died on December 17, 2002 in Manhattan, survived by his wife, son, and two grandsons, as well as the small handful of plays, movies, and television shows he wrote.

Knott's plays continue to endure. Playbill.com lists twelve professional regional productions of *Dial M for Murder* in 2024 alone and that is not counting the educational, smaller professional, and community theater performances around the world. The 2025 production of *Dial M for Murder* marks the third production of a Frederick Knott play in Great Lakes Theater's history. For a person that considered himself a "reluctant writer", Knott's legacy will continue to inform theater history for many generations.

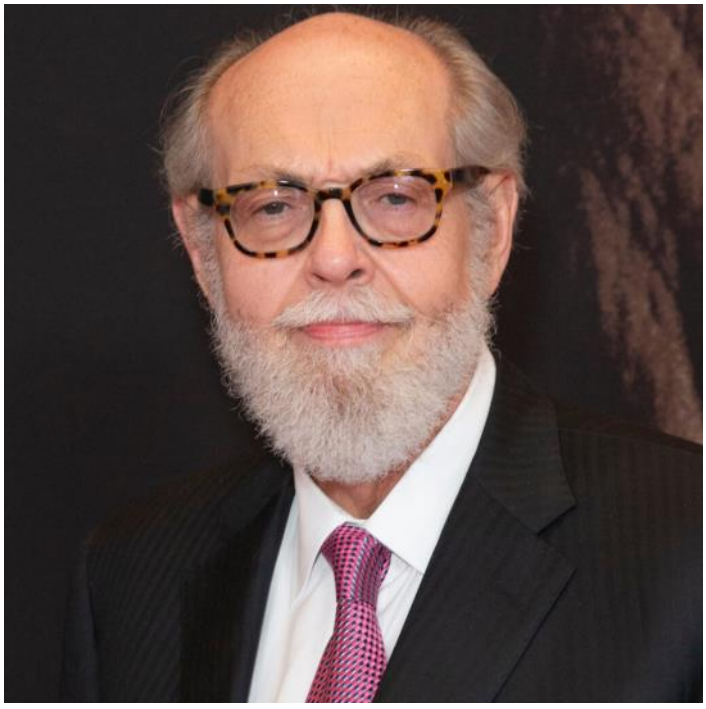
Jonathan Dyrud (as Tony) and Robyn Cohen (as Margot) in the 2015 Great Lakes Theater production of *Dial M for Murder*

Adapted for Different Audiences: *Dial M for Murder*

The adaptations of stories and novels into visual mediums such as film, television, and stage productions is nothing new. Shakespeare adapted poems and histories from all over England and Europe into plays. The ancient Romans took stories from the lands they conquered and built on the religion they "borrowed" from Greece and put them on the stage. Traditional folk tales, performed through oral storytelling in taverns and next to campfires, traveled in the world in various forms throughout millennia. In our lifetimes we have seen countless novels turned into movies, movies turned into musicals which are then filmed in their musical version, folk tales turned into cartoons turned into stage plays, etc.. As Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), "An adaptation is not a copy; it is a creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging." This creative process allows for people to share ideas, philosophies, and lessons to be learned across time and space, making a story more accessible. *Dial M for Murder* has been adapted many times since its creation by the author himself as well as by other people, creatively salvaging ideas and appropriating plot elements to



Program for the 1952-1954 run of *Dial M for Murder* at the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway, starring Maurice Evans.



Jeffrey Hatcher

connect the story to different people in different places. This act of adaptation has contributed to its 70+ year history and its continuing into the future.

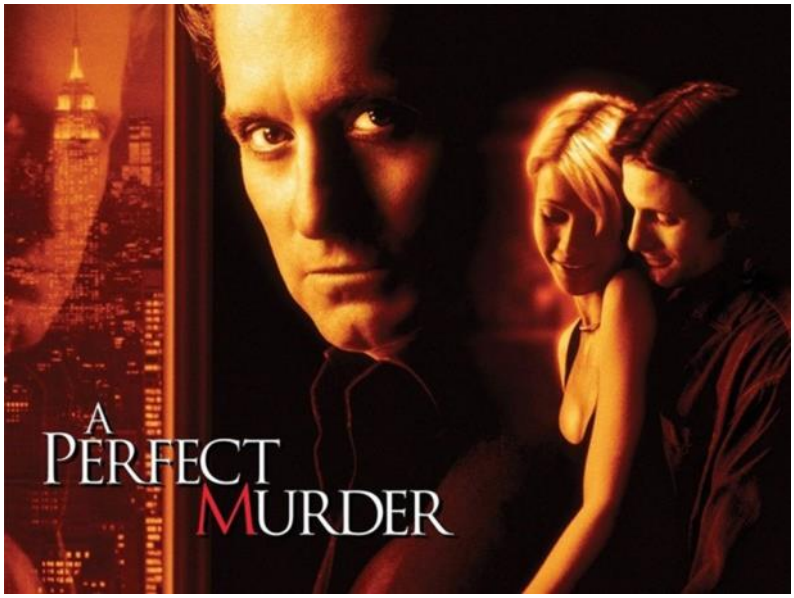
Frederick Knott took 18 months to write his first play, *Dial M for Murder*. It was a laborious process in which Knott sometimes didn't leave his room or change his clothes for days on end. When it was finished, Knott was unable to find a theater manager willing to produce his play. According to Tom Vallance in Knott's obituary in *The Independent* (Dec. 26, 2002), he was on the verge of tearing up the script when it was accepted by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1952. They offered to produce a televised performance on their series "Sunday Night Theatre." While the show televised scripts written for the stage, arguably Knott had to

make some changes in order to shift his story to a smaller, flatter visual performance.

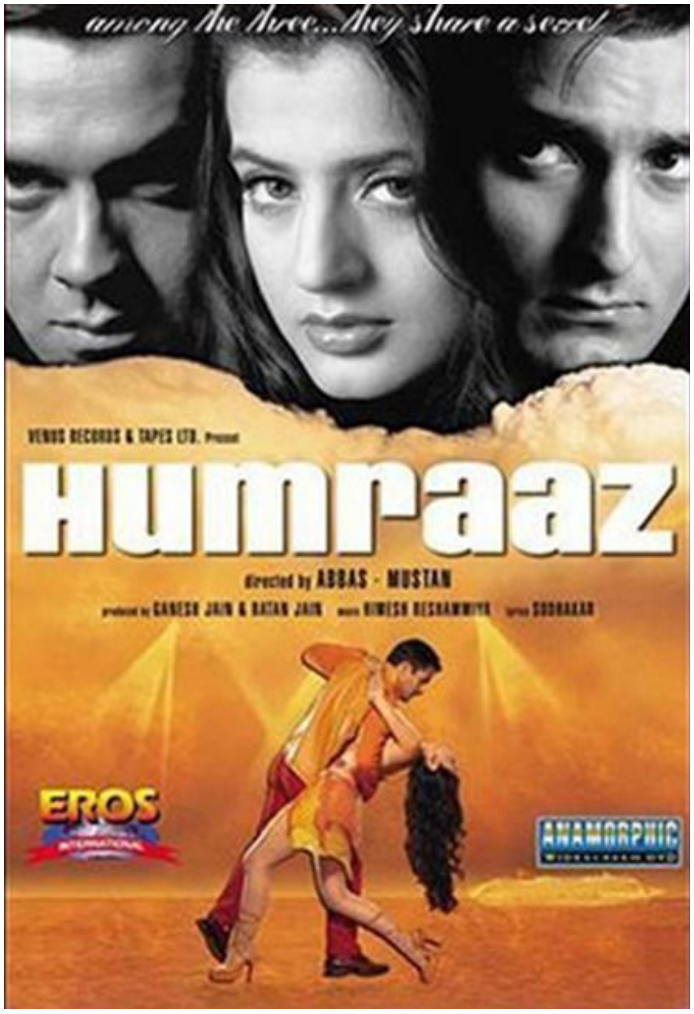
The televised performance attracted the attention of theater makers, allowing Knott to have his play debut on London's West End. This, in turn, caused excitement from American theater managers and *Dial M for Murder* was scheduled to play on Broadway within the year. However, Maurice Evans, the actor who received the rights to produce the play in the U.S., needed Knott to make some changes for the better understanding of American audiences. Mostly small changes to language and idioms/colloquialisms were made, however, one change was particularly large, and yet has become invisible over time. The way the British phone system worked in the 1950s required a person to dial a letter for the area they were calling to; in this case, the M in the title refers to Maida Vale, the neighborhood in London the Wendices live. Since the American phone system was different, Knott changed his lead female character's name from Sheila to Margot. This small adaptation to American understanding of the play forever changed the character and the meaning of the title, which is now taken for granted by audiences.

After the success of the play in both England and the U.S., the movie version was greenlit. Alfred Hitchcock was to direct and Grace Kelly was to star. Knott worked closely with Hitchcock to create the needed changes to change the script from a stage play to one more applicable for film. Additional scenes were created, the character of Max Halliday became Mark, and changes made for Broadway were put back to the way they were in the original script. The play became a movie. While it had a slow start at the box office when it opened in 1954, the film version of *Dial M for Murder* is often listed as a great suspense or thriller movie.

However, adaptations of the story were only getting started. Hitchcock created a prequel based on the character of Mark Halliday for his *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television show in 1956. Three separate scripts of the play were adapted for television: one for NBC in 1956 using many of the actors who premiered the play on Broadway; one for ABC in 1967, filmed in color for the first time; and an American produced version for broadcast in Russia



A Perfect Murder (1998), starring Michael Douglas, Gwenyth Paltrow, and Viggo Mortensen



Humraaz (2002, starring Bobby Deol, Akshaye Khanna, Ameesha Patel) is a Bollywood adaptation of *A Perfect Murder* (1998, Michael Douglas, Gwenyth Paltrow, Viggo Mortensen).

NBC broadcasted a version of *Dial M for Murder* in 1958 starring (from left to right) John Williams, Maurice Evans, and Rosemary Harris.

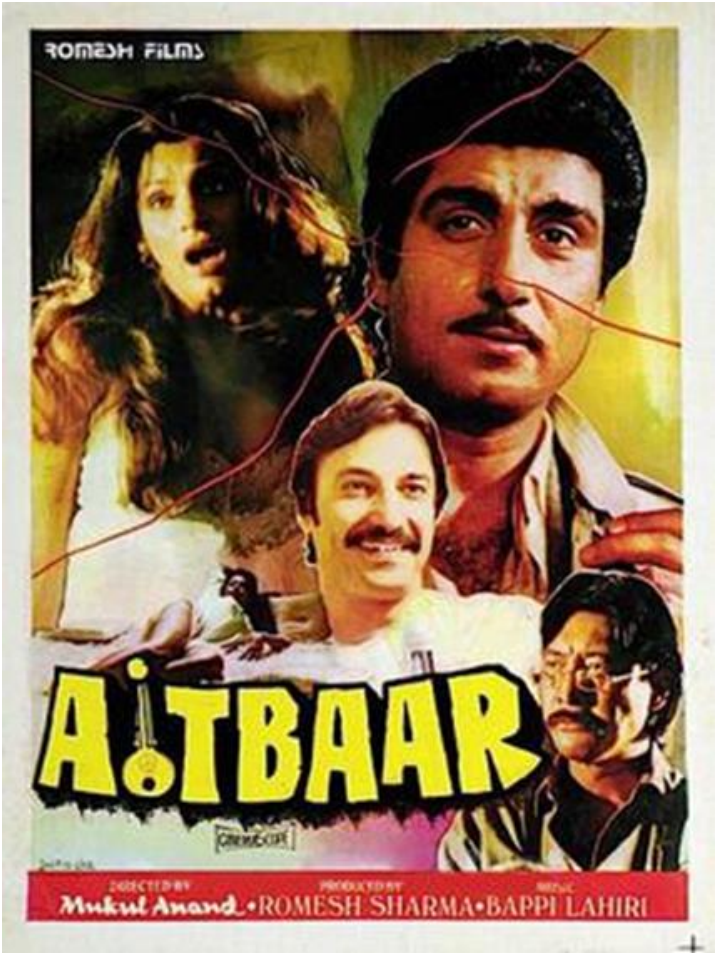
called *Tony Wendice's Mistake*. Several television series have parodied or used the plot of the play for one of their episodes including *Frasier* and *Archer*. The movie has been translated and filmed in Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam. The 1998 movie *A Perfect Murder* is an updated adaptation of the story, starring Michael Douglas, Gwenyth Paltrow, and Viggo Mortenson. Both *A Perfect Murder* and *Dial M for Murder* have been adapted in Bollywood and Pakistan, respectively. This has allowed the play to connect different generations and cultures with the story and the characters more thoroughly.

After Hitchcock's movie, Knott himself left the play alone. The changes made to the characters, location, and details of the events were left where they were until the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, CA commissioned Jeffrey Hatcher to adapt the play to premiere in July 2022. Hatcher was an obvious choice to adapt *Dial M for Murder*. He is an acclaimed playwright and screenwriter, known for the adaptation of novels onto the stage and screen. His award-winning writing career spans from 1993 to today and includes such films as *The Duchess* (2008) and *The Good Liar* (2019), as well as TV episodes of *Colombo* and *The Mentalist*. His plays range from original works to adaptations of Charles Dickens, Nikolai Gogol, Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Hatcher was engaged on the project, the Knott estate approved, and he began his adaptation.

Tony Wendice's Mistake (1981) is a Russian adaptation of the play, starring Igor Kostolevskiy, Milena Tontegode, and Pauls Butkevics

He was cautious at first, as he stated in a talkback at Dallas Theater Center in 2024, "It's close to a perfect play; what if I screw it up?" However, based on the artistic director Barry Edelstein's suggestion to change the gender of Max Halliday, Hatcher felt like he could raise the stakes of the play just a little more: "It made the secrets deeper and the problems bigger." He was interested in giving the character Margot more agency than was previously written for her as the only female character in the original version — the focus had been mostly on the villain, her husband Tony. Ultimately, he felt adapting the play would combat the tropes that would have been fairly fresh for audiences in the 1950s but are common today. An example of which is the detective/inspector arriving at the door. After many years of watching Agatha Christie mysteries, or watching police procedurals on TV, American audiences are aware of what that character represents: the mystery will be solved and the bad guy will be caught. However, with the changes made to *Dial M for Murder* for a contemporary audience, the knowledge that the murder will be solved is compounded with the fear that secrets will also be uncovered that add another layer of danger to one or more characters. This provokes questions for the audience of, "will they give that piece of information to the inspector to resolve the mystery? Or will they protect themselves?" Per Hatcher's wish, these deeper secrets make the problems bigger and heighten the suspense for today's audiences.

And audiences have responded overwhelmingly positively. Since the premiere of Hatcher's adaptation of Frederick Knott's *Dial M for Murder* in 2022, this version of the script is one of the most performed in the country. *American Theater Magazine* reported the play as being the 5th most produced in the U.S in 2023. Consequently, the magazine named Hatcher the 5th most produced playwright (tied with Kate Hamill and Selina Fillinger) the same year. Concord Theatricals, one of the licensing companies for the play, lists 20 productions scheduled for the 2025-2026 theatrical season. Hatcher's adaptation — working as both a copy and an appropriation — is proving itself as a refreshing take on Knott's original story, providing an exciting new way for today's audiences to engage with this story.



Aitbaar (1985) is the Hindi version of the movie *Dial M for Murder*, starring Dimple Kapadia, Raj Babbar, Suresh Oberoi

Photos from *Dial M for Murder* at Idaho Shakespeare Festival

Clockwise from top left: Jodi Dominick & Carrie Kawa; Carrie Kawa & Jodi Dominick; Nick Steen & Jeffrey C. Hawkins; Jeffrey C. Hawkins & Jodi Dominick; Carrie Kawa & David Anthony Smith; Jodi Dominick, Nick Steen & David Anthony Smith; Carrie Kawa, Jodi Dominick & Nick Steen.

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025
1
Margo
Act I Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025
2
Margo
Act I Sc. 2

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025
3
Margo
Act 1 Sc.3

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025
4
Margo
Act II Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

6

Maxine
Act I Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

7

Maxine
Act I Sc. 2

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

8

Maxine
Act II Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

9

Maxine
Act II Sc. 2

Dial M for Murder

Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater

2025

11

Tony

Act I Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder

Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater

2025

12

Tony

Act I Sc. 2

Dial M for Murder

Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater

2025

13

Tony

Act II Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder

Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater

2025

14

Tony

Act II Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder

Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater

2025

15

Tony

Act II Sc. 2

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

16

Lesgate
Act I Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

17

Lesgate
Act I Sc. 3

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

19

Inspector Hubbard
Act II Sc. 1

Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

18

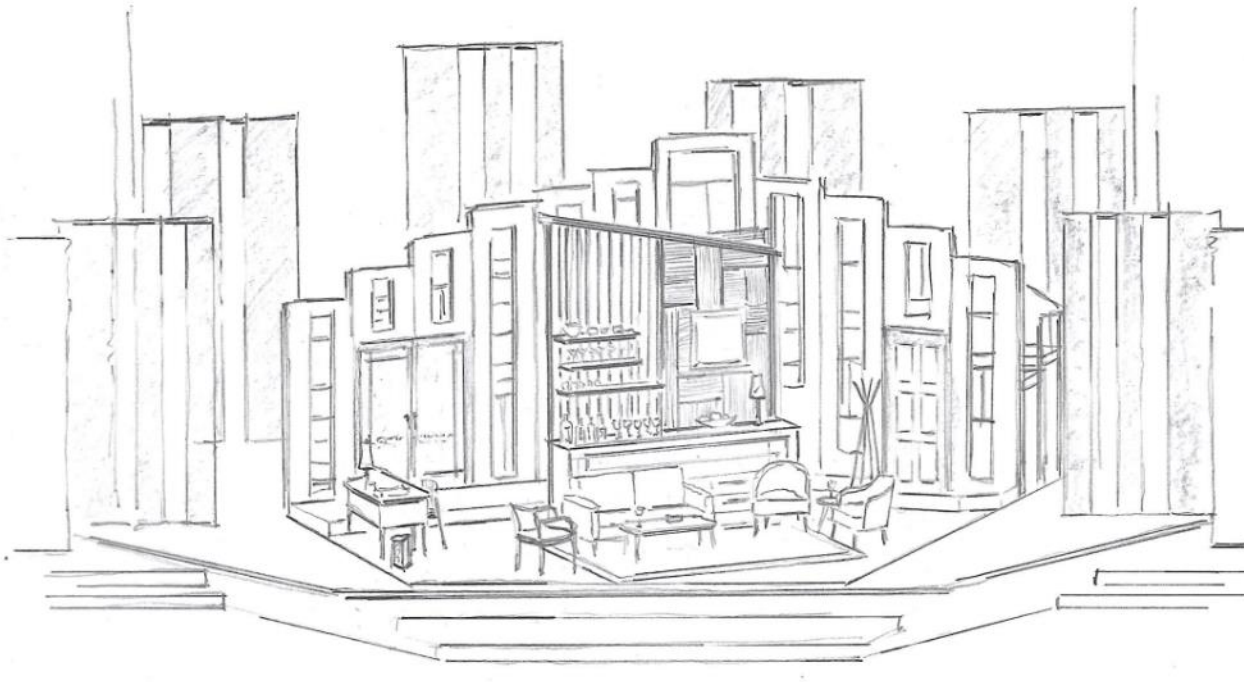
Inspector Hubbard
Act II Sc. 1

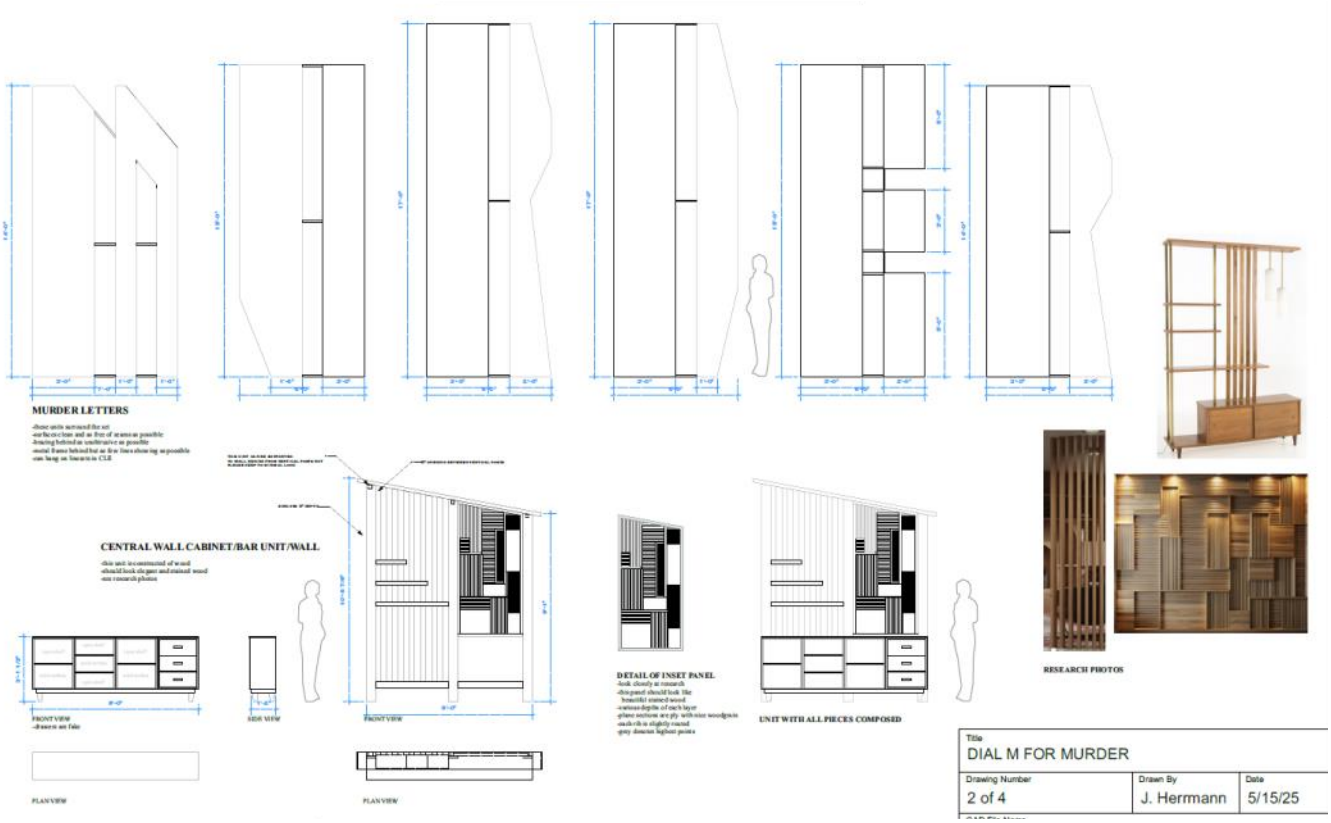
Dial M for Murder
Idaho Shakespeare/Great Lakes Theater
2025

20

Inspector Hubbard
Act II Sc. 2

Scenic Design by Jeff Herrmann





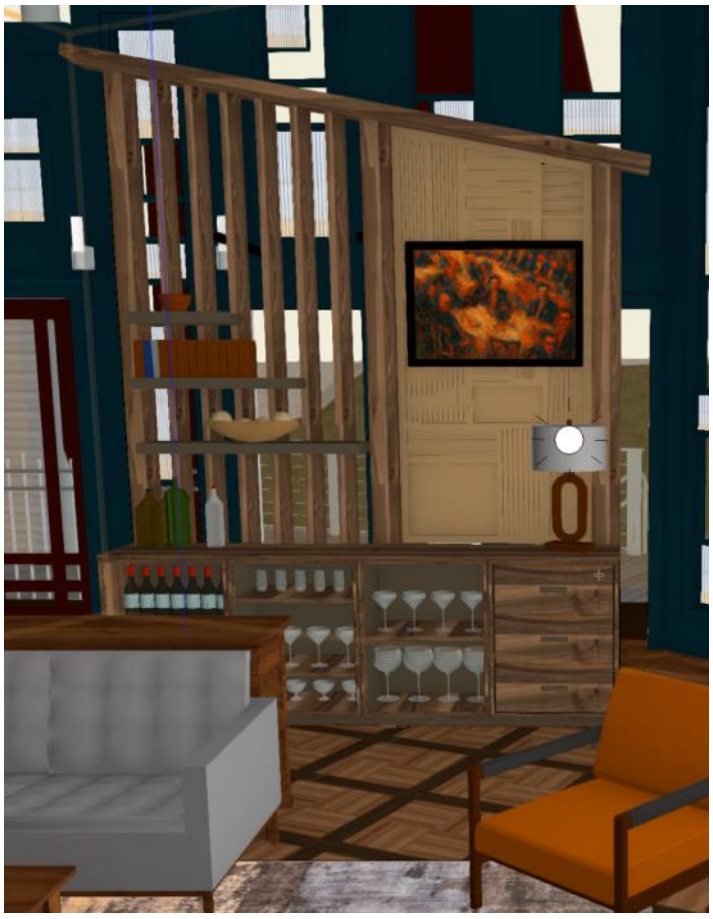


Photo from *Dial M for Murder* at Idaho Shakespeare Festival featuring Carrie Kawa and Jodi Dominick.

Discussion Questions

Prior to attending the performance

1. What is an adaptation? Think of all of the different versions of fairy tales there are — why do storytellers change and/or update older stories to tell them again? Have you come across a story that you don't think could be adapted? What is it about that story that makes it unable to be retold in a different way? Is a story's ability to be retold in different ways a sign of its enduring connection with culture or is it a sign of a weak story that needs to be "fixed" or updated in order to be understood?

2. If you could adapt any book into a play, what would you adapt? What is it about that story that would make it something that you would like to see live on a stage?

3. Jeffrey Hatcher, the adapter of *Dial M for Murder*, once said that this play is an inverted murder mystery — how would you define that? Why do you think this genre is not produced as much as murder mysteries? Which do you think you prefer? Why?

4. Have you ever gotten back at a person before? What did they do to you? Why did you feel like you needed some sort of revenge? After it was over, how did you feel? Did your punishment match the wrong done to you?

5. There is a saying that "Revenge is a dish best served cold." What does this mean? Why do you think that this saying exists in some form in many cultures all over the world? What is the difference between justice and revenge?

6. Why do you think art is drawn to the idea of suspense? What are the different forms that suspense can take artistically? What are the elements of creating a suspenseful tale?

7. How do you forgive a person? What steps do you need to take? Who is forgiveness for?

8. Why is it difficult to share our feelings with the people closest to us sometimes? Who is a person in your life that you can tell anything to? What is it about that person that makes it easy to share with? Is there a person/people that trust you in that way? How do you build that trust?

Activities & Writing Prompts

ACTIVITIES

1. **CLASSROOM DEBATE**
   Stage a classroom debate arguing the pros and cons of adapting stories to the stage or screen. Split the class into groups and divide the research topics. What is gained or lost by adapting a literary medium to a visual one? Can adaptation go too far? Why is one adaptation considered successful and another a failure? Compare and contrast the adaptation history of *Dial M for Murder* with the adaptation history of something like *The Hobbit, The Little Mermaid,* or *Romeo and Juliet.*

2. **IMPROVISATION GAME: ONE WORD STORY**
   Players sit in a circle. Set the genre for the story: suspense/mystery/fantasy/etc. One person says a single word to begin a story. The person to his left says another word, then the next person says another word, continuing around the circle. The object is to tell a coherent story, one word at a time. What was it like to have the story keep changing? How did you adapt your contribution as the story went? How did it feel to know you didn't have control over other people's contributions? How did sharing the story with others make you feel about your sense of ownership over the story?

3. **TONY'S TRIAL**
   Put Tony Wendice on trial. Create a courtroom scenario to try Tony for his actions in the play. Can the defense justify the choices he made? Can the prosecution make a case that revenge is never a solution? Who will be the judge? How will they stay impartial to the proceedings? Is there a real life trial that parallels this story — what was the outcome of that trial and how would each side change the arguments to get a different outcome?

WRITING PROMPTS

1. Adapt a story. Take a well known story like a fairy tale or a novel you are working on in class — how would you adapt it? Who would you adapt it for? What elements would you keep? What elements of the story would you change?

2. Write a review! See instructions on page 19.

3. Take a well known murder mystery and reverse it! Jeffrey Hatcher calls Dial M for Murder an inverted murder mystery — using the plot of a well known murder mystery story, flip the script by showing exactly how the murderer plans and executes the event to show the moment when the detective will discover how to solve the case. How can you build the suspense using time, a red herring (misdirection), or emotion?

4. From the perspective of Maxine, write a letter on behalf of a friend to convince a judge to appeal their sentence. Things to think about: Define your relationship with the friend. Why are they innocent? Why should the judge reexamine the case? How and when do you use pathos, logos, and ethos to try to sway the judge to grant your request?

Discussion Questions

After Attending the Performance

1. Research the pre-2022 script and the adaptation done by Jeffrey Hatcher. What were the similarities and differences? Why do you think this adaptation is one of the most popular plays currently being produced in the United States?

2. Could this story be updated to a modern time? What elements would you keep and which ones would you change while preserving as much of the original story as possible? How did this production stay faithful to 1950's London? In what ways did it veer away?

3. The entire play takes place in one room. How does the smallness of the location help to tell the story? How do you think it would change if the audience were taken to other locations talked about in the play such as the theater or the court room? How would it affect the idea of suspense? How did the design of this production's set work towards or against building suspense and atmosphere?

4. Do you think Margot's affair deserves the punishment Tony creates for her? Why do you think he is willing to take his revenge as far as he does? If you were Tony's friend and he confided in you, how far would you go to help him? At what point would you stop him?

5. Both Tony and Margot are, at various points, unhappy in their relationship; do you think they should have stayed together? What do you think of their stated reasons for staying married? What advice would you give each of them?

6. Why do you think Tony creates such an elaborate plan? What do you think it says about him that he spent months spying and planning?

7. Maxine does everything in her power to help Margot. If you were Margot's friend, what kind of help would you offer her during the play or after? When was a time that you went the extra mile to help someone you cared about? What did they need? How did you help? How did it feel to help someone in that way?

8. If you were Tony, would you be able to forgive Margot for her adultery? Why? Should Margot forgive Tony for the choices he made to endanger her life? What do you think Margot does after the play is over?

9. How does this play — written over 70 years ago — compare to modern mysteries and suspenseful tales? Why do you think this play is still told after all this time?

How to Write A Review

MORE HOW AND LESS WHAT

A theater review is not a book review, you do not need to summarize what happens. Provide the necessary background so the reader knows the name of the play and the basics of what kind of play it is, and then move into your commentary. You do not need to explain WHAT the play is, instead write about HOW successfully it was presented.

THE ACTOR NOT THE CHARACTER

You can disapprove of the decisions a character makes, but how well did the ACTOR perform the role? Was their behavior appropriate to the part as written? Feel free to share your opinions, comparing or contrasting their work with other actors with whom you are familiar.

WHAT IS DIRECTION?

Maybe you have heard of a “director” in theater or film, but do you know what they do? It is not a director’s job to tell the actors how to say every line, but they are the person responsible for creating the general mood and concept for the production. What was your impression of the production as a whole? Was it too funny for a serious play? Or not amusing enough for a comic play? Use words to reflect back to the director how successful the production is as a whole.

DON’T FORGET THE DESIGN

The set you see and the sounds you hear are also unique to this one production of this play. Describe what you see and hear, but also be sure to make clear how successful these designs are in telling the story of the play.

IN CONCLUSION …

While it is not necessary to give a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” your concluding sentence should summarize you impression of the production as a whole.

THEATER REVIEWS IN THE NEW MEDIA

Reviews in news websites may be 1000 words, they may be as brief as 300 words. Can you write a one-page review? Can you write a 100 word review, to post on Facebook? Do you think you could create a 140-character review that sums up the production for posting on Twitter?

A sample review written by a student follows this page.

A Sample Review Written by a Student

"Gambit": More Poetry Than History — Mark Wood

If Aristotle was correct when he said that poetry “is a higher thing than history,” then “Royal Gambit,” which opened Friday night at Pentacle Theater, is, I suppose, on the right track.

For those who were expecting a representational treatment of the life of England’s Henry VIII, “Royal Gambit” was a shock, if not a disappointment. Those who sought poetry got it, although of a very dogmatic and simplistic sort.

This unusual, highly presentational play by Hermann Gressieker, directed by Ed Classen, is an indictment of modern man as a ruthless opportunist. The Tudor king is a representative of a rationalizing, shifty society which has become “superior to the highest” while “wallowing in the depths.”

As Henry uses the banners of “reason” and “humanism” to obtain then dispose of his six wives, so modern man uses them for his own pleasure and glorification, uses them to wage war in the name of peace, to hate in the name of love.

Such is the grim theme pleasingly presented by a company of seven actors, who performed their roles energetically, if unevenly. The presentational acting style employed here is difficult to perfect. It should be theatrical, yet believable; aimed at the head, yet acceptable to the heart.

Louise Larsen was a standout as Catherine of Aragon, Largely because she utilized this presentational approach and was not afraid of open theatricality. Her flamboyant stage presence, which needed to be toned down in her recent role in “Last of the Red Hot Lovers,” found full vent here.

Henry's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, was portrayed by Gale Rieder, who quickly became an audience favorite. Her thick accent was letter-perfect and her direct humor was a welcome contrast to the bitter satire of the rest of the play.

The other four actresses—Kathy Stratton, Marcia Engblom, Polly Bond and Patricia Sloan—each had their exceptional moments. However, they generally seemed tied to more conventional, representational acting styles.

Ron Fox was superb in the role of Henry. Tuxedoed, leering with the look of a demonic marionette, the vacant stare of a deranged orator, Fox dominated the stage fully, commanding both in voice and stage presence.

The technical elements of the play were more than adequate. Musical accompaniment was appropriately sparse and simple.

At one point the play, King Henry roared, “In my realm I decide what constitutes tragedy!” Ironically, Gressieker strips modern man not only of his possibilities as a tragic figure worthy of any sympathies at all. In the final moments of the play, Catherine of Aragon announces the death of modern man and the birth of a new era. It is a scene of great hope, but it is not as profound as her earlier pronouncement to her husband that “the ways of the world are not so cut and dried!”

For my own part, I wish that “Royal Gambit’s” statement were not so cut and dried. By making man out to be such a simple monster the play defeats its own purposes and turns poetry into scathing dogma, which is probably even less interesting than, say, history.

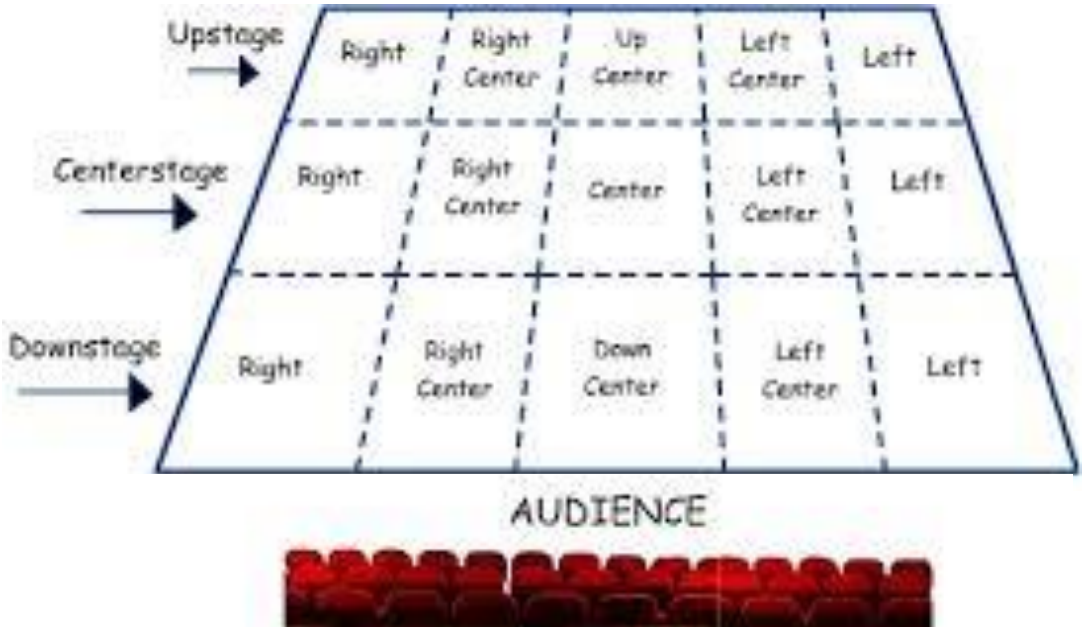
http://faculty.chemeketa.edu/jrupert3/eng105/Annrev.html

A Brief Glossary of Theater Terms

Apron	The part of the stage in front of the curtain
Auditorium or House	Where the audience sits
Beam Spread	The area a single light covers
Blackout	Turning off all the lights in the theatre at once
Board	The control center for lights, sound, or both
Book (The)	A copy of the script containing all notes and blocking
Box Office	Where the audience buys tickets
Box Set	A set in a proscenium with three walls
Call	The time certain members of the production need to be at the theatre
Cheat	When an actor takes a realistic action and modifies it for the audience to see
Cloth	Scenery painted on fabric
Cue	A line or action that immediately leads to another action by the actor (for them to speak) designer or stage manager (to change the lights or sound)
Curtain Call	The bows at the end of the show
Dimmer	Equipment that controls the brightness of a light
Director	The creative head of a production. They create a vision for the show and work with actors, designers, and crew to bring that vision to life
Flat	A frame covered with canvas, cardboard, or some other light material which is then painted as part of the set
Floodlight	A light that has a wide unfocused beam covering most of the stage
Fly	A system used to raise set backgrounds, set pieces, or potentially actors
Follow-spot	A spotlight that can follow an actor as they move across around the stage
Footlights	Floodlights on the floor at the front of the stage.
Gel	A piece of plastic placed over the light to change its color
Greenroom	A room where the company can relax, eat, or potentially watch the show if a TV and a camera has been rigged
Notes	The director’s notes on the performance or rehearsal
Pit	An area between the stage and the audience where an orchestra can sit (typically below audience level
Producer	The person responsible for all logistical and financial aspects of a production (as opposed to the creative head, the director).
Properties or Props	Items used by actors in a show (such as swords, plates, watches, etc.)

Proscenium	A type of stage defined by a proscenium arch. Proscenium theatres typically distinctly separate the audience and stage by a window (defined by the proscenium arch). The stage typically will not go far past the proscenium arch (the Ohio Theatre, for example).
Raked Stage	A stage that is angled (upstage is the top of the hill and downstage the bottom) so that the audience can see the action more clearly
Set	The scenery used in a scene or throughout the play
Set Dressing	Parts of the set that don't serve a practical function but make the set look realistic.
Spotlight	A type of light that is focused so that it can light a very specific area
Strike	Taking apart and removing a set from the theatre
Thrust	A stage that goes beyond the proscenium arch so that the audience is sitting on three sides of the set - in front, and on either side (the Hanna Theatre, for example).
Tracks	The rails on which curtains (tabs) run.
Trap	A hole in the stage covered by a door where actors or set pieces can exit or enter
Understudy	An actor who learns all of the lines and blocking of another actor (typically one of the actors in a lead role) who can perform in case the main actor cannot go on
Upstage	The rear of the stage
Wings	The sides of the stage typically blocked off by curtains where actors and crew can stand and wait for their cues

STAGE DIRECTIONS



CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A
Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7
Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5.A
Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions hen possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.1.A
Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and is sometimes contested.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5.A
Interpret figures of speech (e.g., hyperbole, paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.

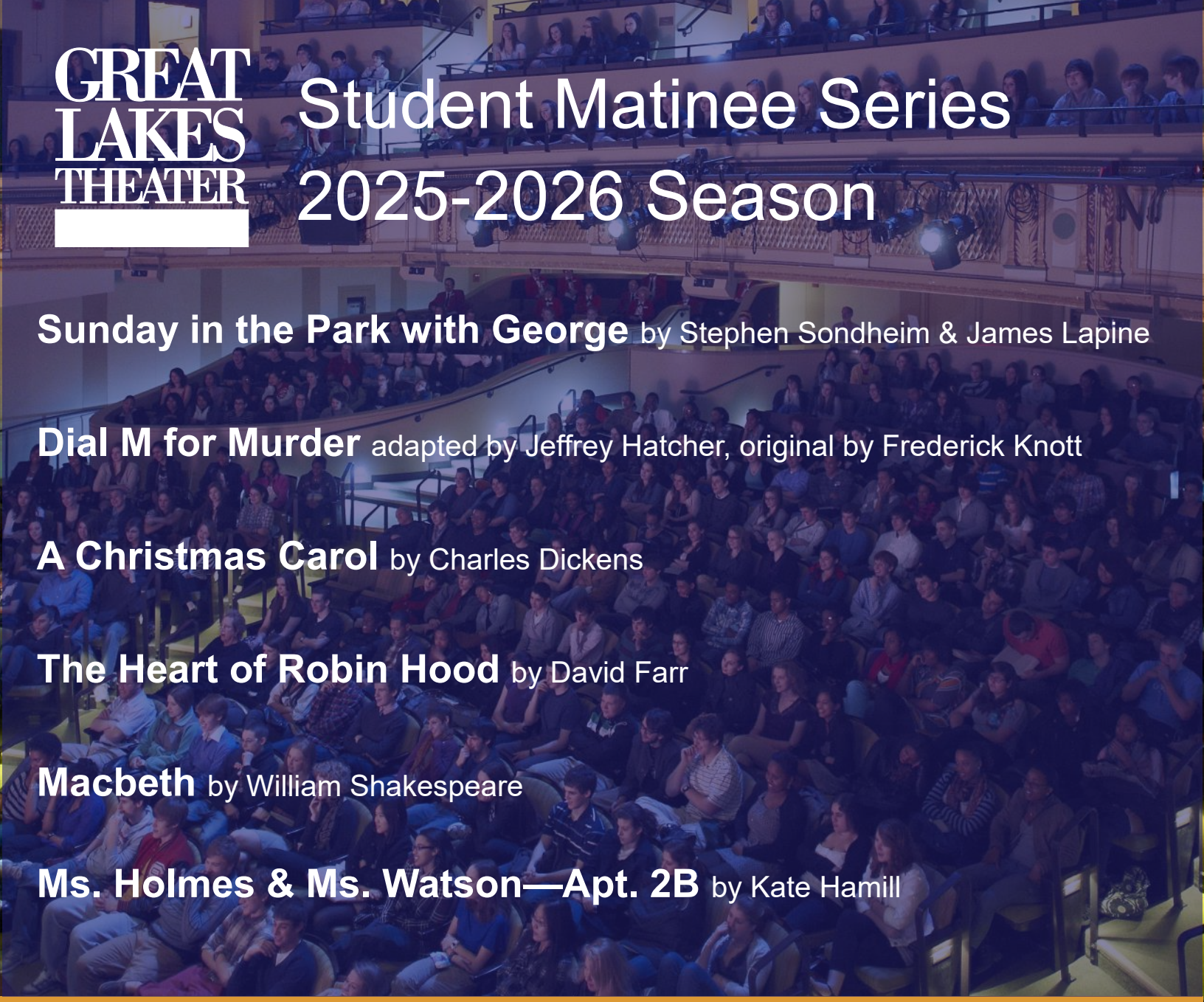
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5.B
Analyze nuances in the meaning of words

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2
Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5
Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).



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Dial M for Murder adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher, original by Frederick Knott

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

The Heart of Robin Hood by David Farr

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Ms. Holmes & Ms. Watson—Apt. 2B by Kate Hamill

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Introducing the Great Lakes Theater Teacher Workshop Series—a comprehensive professional development workshop series designed to equip teachers with the tools and confidence to bring Shakespeare's timeless works to life in the classroom.

This series explores Shakespeare's most celebrated plays, providing educators with innovative, performance-based strategies to make his language and themes accessible and engaging. Through interactive sessions, participants will gain hands-on teaching techniques, practical lesson plans, and methodologies from GLT's 45-year residency program, all designed to meet state curriculum standards and support professional development.

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Deep Dive: *Romeo & Juliet*

OCTOBER 10, 2025 | 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM

COST: $150

Join us for a dynamic workshop on Romeo and Juliet, designed to help you bring Shakespeare's tragedy to life in the classroom. Gain practical strategies to make the play's language, themes and characters accessible through interactive activities and performance-based techniques, fostering a lasting appreciation for Shakespeare.

1-DAY WORKSHOP

Deep Dive + Performance: *Macbeth*

MARCH 20, 2026 | 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM, *plus evening performance*

COST: $175

Includes performance & Director's Night discussion, Receive certificate with

This immersive workshop is partnered with a performance and live discussion with the production's director. The workshop is designed to provide you with innovative strategies to make *Macbeth* accessible to students, deepening their understanding of characters, themes and language. Attending the play allows you to experience the text in practice, seamlessly merging words with performance to deepen your understanding of the story and better equip you to convey that insight to your students.

FOR MORE INFO & TO REGISTER:

www.GreatLakesTheater.Org

GREAT LAKES THEATER

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Launched in 1981, Great Lakes Theater's in-school residency program is now one of the most successful artist-in-residence programs in the country. Each year over 16,000 students in over 100 schools experience the pleasure, power and relevance of classic literature brought to life in their own classrooms.

From *The Sneetches* to *Romeo and Juliet* (and so many more in between!) each week-long residency uses an interactive, hands-on approach, and is designed to meet the common core education standards. We visit your school with scripts, props, costumes—and for high schools, swords, daggers and stage blood—to explore classic literature in an unforgettable way!

For more information contact Lisa Ortenzi at 216.453.4446

Greatlakestheater.org/education

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About Us

Sara Bruner, Producing Artistic Director

The mission of Great Lakes Theater, through its main stage productions and its education programs, is to bring the pleasure, power and relevance of classic theater to the widest possible audience.

Since the company's inception in 1962, programming has been rooted in Shakespeare, but the company's commitment to great plays spans the breadth of all cultures, forms of theater and time periods including the 20th century, and provides for the occasional mounting of new works that complement the classical repertoire.

Classic theater holds the capacity to illuminate truth and enduring values, celebrate and challenge human nature and actions, revel in eloquent language, preserve the traditions of diverse cultures and generate communal spirit. On its mainstage and through its education program, the company seeks to create visceral, immediate experiences for participants, asserting theater's historic role as a vehicle for advancing the common good, and helping people make the most joyful and meaningful connections between classic plays and their own lives. This Cleveland theater company wishes to share such vibrant experiences with people across all age groups, creeds, racial and ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

The company's commitment to classic theater is magnified in the educational programs (for both adults and students) that surround its productions. Great Lakes Theater has a strong presence in area schools, bringing students to the theater for matinee performances and sending specially trained actor-teachers to the schools for weeklong residencies developed to explore classic drama from a theatrical point of view. GLT is equally dedicated to enhancing the theater experience for adult audiences. To this end, GLT regularly serves as the catalyst for community events and programs in the arts and humanities that illuminate the plays on its stage.

Great Lakes Theater is one of only a handful of American theaters that have stayed the course as a classic theater. As GLT celebrates over a decade in its permanent home at the Hanna Theatre, the company reaffirms its belief in the power of partnership, its determination to make this community a better place in which to live, and its commitment to ensure the legacy of classic theater in Cleveland.

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