

## BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Marty's career at the Community Center in Shirley, Vermont takes an unexpected turn when she is given the opportunity to teach creative drama to adults. The class quickly becomes more than just an extracurricular activity for her students, and more than just an afternoon teaching commitment for her. A series of exercises intended to break the ice instead results in the students revealing deeply held secrets about their personal lives. Learning to act may be one objective of the class, but truly knowing oneself must come first.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Circle Mirror Transformation* including:
  - the circle: group bonding
  - the mirror: self-reflection
  - the transformation: a new beginning
2. Relate themes and issues in the play to their own lives.
3. Analyze the themes and issues within the historical and social context of the play.
4. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the production.
5. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Circle Mirror Transformation*.

## PREPARATION FOR *CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION*

### ANNIE BAKER

Nothing is quite as thrilling for a young playwright as seeing his or her work staged. Imagine Annie Baker's excitement when, at only 29 years old, she learned that three of her plays about the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont would be produced in Boston at three different venues at the same time! The Huntington is producing *Circle Mirror Transformation* (along with a staged reading of her final installment of the series, *Nocturama*), SpeakEasy Stage is producing *Body Awareness*, and Company One is producing *The Aliens*. Why is it important for theatre companies to support the work of new playwrights? Why do you think these Boston theatre companies chose Baker's plays in particular? Research the production history of *Circle Mirror Transformation*, and the critic's response to the series of plays.

### SHIRLEY, VERMONT

Shirley, Vermont is a fictional place, the product of what Baker calls her "overactive imagination." Yet it is a place that many Americans who live in small towns will instantly recognize. Small-town America is known for having less traffic, less crime, and more fresh air than urban areas. You might even be able to find a yoga studio or farmers' market at the center of town. But small-town life also has its challenges. The neighbors know you, but might know too much. And you might not have as many opportunities or options as you would have in a city (personally or professionally). How might life be different for aspiring actors in New York City than those portrayed in Shirley, Vermont? How does the geography shape the outcome of the play?

## KEY ISSUES

### *The Circle: Group Bonding*

Marty wants to create a space in which her students can feel safe, get to know one another, and find the courage to share their thoughts and feelings. As they make their way into the circle each day to warm up and participate in group activities, the students learn to function as a whole. And for those six weeks, they come to depend on each other, both in and out of class. While their bond may not be long lasting, it proves to be life changing, shaping their futures in unexpected ways. Do you have any “circles” in your own life? Who is in them? How have those circles shaped your own journey? Have you been in anyone else’s “circle”? How have you influenced them? What is it that makes group bonding so special?

### *The Mirror: Self-Reflection*

Shakespeare famously described the purpose of theatre as \**“to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature.”* This idea is at the heart of Marty’s teaching philosophy. She wants her students’ performances to reveal the truth about their innermost selves, not simply their manicured images reflected on the mirrors in the back of the studio. To that end, she asks the students to portray their classmates, even if it is difficult or uncomfortable, so that they can begin to see themselves as others do. What does it mean for actors to “mirror” nature? How does acting help with the process of self-reflection? Have you ever learned something about yourself from the way another person portrayed you?

### *The Transformation: A New Beginning*

As the play begins, James and Marty appear to have an amazing relationship. After James’ opening monologue, few would predict that by curtain call their marriage would be in crisis. When James asks at the end of the class if Marty “want[ed] this to happen,” there is no easy answer. Marty wanted to elicit raw emotions from her students, but she could not have known, nor could she control, where those emotions would lead. Her marriage is, in that sense, a casualty of the class, the price that she and James paid for self-reflection. Similar transformations take place in the other characters’ lives. Lauren comments at the end of the play, “how many times [is] your life ... gonna totally change and then, like start all over again”? Follow the path of each character from beginning to end. Who did this class help? Did it hurt anyone? Whose transformation surprised you most?

*\*This famous quote from Act III, Scene 2 of William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, graces the front of the Boston University Theatre’s proscenium arch.*

## ***OPEN RESPONSE AND WRITING***

### *Open Response Assessment*

Instructions to the students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in a well-planned and carefully written paragraph. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

1. Is *Circle Mirror Transformation* a fitting title for this play? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the symbolism of placement of the mirrors in the back of the acting studio. Why are they important to the play?
3. Schultz and Theresa both describe themselves as “vulnerable.” What do they mean?
4. Is Marty a good acting teacher? Do you think her classroom is a “safe” place?
5. Do you think Lauren is too young for the acting class?
6. Theresa says she is “afraid to be alone.” What is happening in her life that may be contributing to this fear?
7. Is Schultz a good boyfriend?
8. Did James make the right decision when he walked out of the bar exam to pursue another career? What would you have done, and why?

### *Writing Assignments*

1. Choose one of the stories shared by an actor in the class. What do we learn about that person as a result of the story?
2. Choose one of the theatre exercises performed in the class. What is the purpose of that exercise, and did the students achieve that purpose?
3. Why did Marty and James ultimately break up?
4. Why is Lauren disappointed by the acting class? Is her disappointment justified?
5. Describe Marty’s relationship with her stepdaughter. Do you think the loyalty Erin feels toward Marty is unusual? Do you think Marty had the right to tell Erin about James’s past infidelity?
6. James is a complicated person. In your opinion, what is his biggest problem?

7. What happens in the final scene of the play? Do you think this is just an exercise in class, or is it really an epilogue about the characters' future?

8. Select one of the following quotes and discuss it in essay form.

“If you really love someone, you don't make them feel bad about themselves!”

-Lauren as Theresa

“I think the problem is not my father so much as my fear of being my father. Like if I run away too hard from him I will become something else that is also problematic.”

-Theresa as James

“I realized at that moment that I didn't want to participate in that. In the system.”

-Theresa as James

9. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Circle Mirror Transformation* and submit it for publication to your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!

## **MASTERY ASSESSMENT**

### *PROLOGUE & WEEK ONE*

1. Describe the play's setting.
2. In the opening scene, all of the characters are lying on the floor. What are they trying to accomplish?
3. James is the only one speaking during the first scene of the play, but he claims to be someone else. What's happening?
4. Describe the one-word exercise. What is Marty's suggestion for next time?
5. What compliment does Schultz give to Theresa?
6. Where does Schultz live?
7. What personal problem does Schultz share with Theresa?
8. What special skill does Theresa have?
9. Who tries "hooping" for the first time? How does he/she do?
10. How did James and Marty meet?
11. Theresa tells a story about a time when she lived in New York City. Why is her story unsettling to the class?
12. Who is behind on paying for class?

### *WEEK TWO*

1. Who does Lauren portray during the next exercise? How does this person's current career differ from the one he/she dreamed of during childhood?
2. What is explosion tag?
3. While Theresa and Marty have a private conversation, what does Schultz do?
4. How does Schultz feel about the class?
5. What invitation does Theresa make to Schultz?
6. Does the group get any better at the counting game by the end of week two?

### *WEEK THREE*

1. Where did Theresa live before she moved to Vermont? Where did she grow up, and what is wrong with her dad?
2. What childhood scene did Schultz try to create with the other actors in his class? Was he successful?
3. Who walks in on Schultz and Theresa kissing?
4. Is Lauren looking forward to starting a new school year?
5. What pointed questions does Lauren direct at Marty?
6. James is trying to call someone, but she won't pick up the phone. Who do you think this person is?
7. What are Theresa and James really trying to say during the gibberish game? Do they understand each other?
8. What does Theresa think about James and Marty's relationship that is inaccurate?
9. Why does Theresa get upset and leave class? Who follows her out?
10. What does Marty mean when she says "mirror it back" to the class?

### *WEEK FOUR*

1. Why is Schultz upset with Theresa? What does Theresa want to do to fix the problem?
2. Why is Marty having a "tense" conversation with Lauren?
3. What new facts do we learn about James during Marty's monologue?
4. Describe the relationship between Lauren's parents. What does Lauren want from her dad? Why do you think this exercise is hard on James?
5. Who does Theresa confide in about her problems with Schultz?
6. Why is Erin angry with her father?
7. What complaint does Lauren have about the counting exercise? Is Marty's explanation good enough?

### *WEEK FIVE*

1. Describe Lauren's cultural heritage. What has happened to her father?
2. Besides her mother and father, who else does Lauren live with?
3. During the phrase game, Theresa changes what she is saying. Why is this exchange difficult for Schultz?
4. What was Theresa's ex-boyfriend like?
5. Schultz has a theory as to why Marty fell out of bed. What is it, and how does Marty react to his suggestion?
6. What does Schultz forget he is bringing to India?
7. Marty asks everyone to write down a secret on a piece of paper. Match the confessions with the character.
8. What success does the class have with the counting game by the end of week five?

### *WEEK SIX*

1. Why is Marty not living at home?
2. What special gift does Schultz give to Marty?
3. What story did the actors finally tell with the "one word" exercise?
4. What does Schultz remember from the first day of class?
5. What happens during the final exercise?

## MEDIA ASSESSMENT

The following exercises are interactive, hands-on challenges in drama, music, art, and design. They aim to give students a better understanding of the many tasks that contribute to a theatrical production.

### *Characterization*

Have each student choose a character from *Circle Mirror Transformation* to portray. As if preparing for the role in rehearsal, ask students to answer the following questions about their characters: (a) What is my objective in the play, and which obstacles stand in my way? (b) How, if at all, does my character transform during the course of the play? (c) Are there any contradictions inherent in my character? (d) What do other characters think of my character, and what does my character think of them?

### *Acting*

Have students form small groups to act out a scene from the play. Select an important moment from *Circle Mirror Transformation*. Use props and costumes, if possible, to enhance the performance. Students should consider their placement on the stage, blocking (who moves where and when), gestures, vocal tone, and the intended emotional impact of the scene. Use the *Characterization* activity above to help students develop their assigned roles.

### *Music*

American country music singer Justin Moore co-wrote and recorded a number one hit on the country music charts entitled “Small Town USA.” Listen to this song and pay special attention to the lyrics. Does Moore have a positive or negative association with small towns? What demographic is this artist trying to reach? Does Moore have a message for his big-city neighbors? Try your hand at writing lyrics for a song about Shirley, Vermont. You can use the tune of *Sweet Home Alabama* by Lynyrd Skynyrd if you cannot think of another one. Share your song with the class!

### *Visual Art*

*Circle Mirror Transformation* is being produced as part of a Boston theatre festival centering on Annie Baker’s Shirley, Vermont plays. You will need to do a little research about the two other plays (*Body Awareness* and *The Aliens*) in order to complete this assignment. Create a poster for this theatre festival, since a very important function of producing a play is creating the advertising to bring in the audience. It’s no fun putting on a play without people to see it! Remember to include (fictional) dates of the performance, price of tickets, etc. Your designs, in whatever medium you choose, should reflect the mood and tone of the play. How do you sum up the life and times of people living in Shirley, Vermont?

## FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. Night terrors occur when a person is having difficulty coming out of sleep. The individual may be yelling or walking during this type of an event. It is very difficult to wake a person in this state, and he or she will often go back to sleep without memory of the incident. It is believed that night terrors are more common during childhood than adulthood, and that about 15% of children suffer from them. Compare the treatment and diagnosis from children to adults. Why might a person have night terrors? What medical factors may contribute to this problem?
2. Theresa says that it is a “misnaming” to refer to *hooping* as hula hooping. What does she mean by that? During what decade did the hula hoop become a popular toy for children in the United States? What does modern-day hooping look like and who does it? Do we know who invented the hula hoop and where in the world the idea originated from?
3. During an uncomfortable moment for the class, Theresa shares a story during which a man she does not know lectures a group of young black males about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Many conspiracy theories were floated after the events of that day, across the world and in the United States. Do some further research on this topic. Which theory in particular do you think this man was referring to? How has that theory been debunked?
4. James confesses to having an addiction to internet pornography. Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) is still under debate by many professionals in the medical and mental health fields. Conduct some research on that debate. What are the arguments for and against recognition of IAD as a mental health disorder? Do you think that a gambling, shopping, or pornography addiction online is different from one that is played out in public?

## **HANDOUT #1: VOCABULARY**

Aggressive  
Aloft  
Assessment  
Claustrophobia  
Convulse  
Davens  
Dominate  
Elude  
Epilepsy  
Ethical  
Exuberant  
Feign  
Gesture  
Hypnotized  
Hypocrite  
Inconsistent  
Insecure  
Manipulate  
Melodic  
Moralistic  
Neurotic  
Pelvis  
Pilates  
Possessive  
Rapt  
Realization  
Reevaluate  
Seizure  
Self-actualization  
Self-conscious  
Scurry  
Stereotype  
Toxic  
Unconventional  
Vague  
Vulnerable  
Yoga

## HANDOUT #2: MARTY'S CHEAT SHEET

Many of the exercises that Marty uses in her theatre class are popular in acting classes throughout the country (though their names vary from place to place). In small groups, choose at least two of the exercises below to perform. One of the exercises must be either Reenactments or Frozen Scene. If time allows, share your responses to these exercises with the rest of the class.

ACTIVITY	DIRECTIONS
Counting to Ten	Actors should be lying on the floor. The goal is to count to ten as a group. Individuals will call out one number at a time until the group reaches the number ten. If two people call out a number at the same time, they must start back at one.
Reenactments	Each actor will interview someone and prepare a monologue as if he/she were that person. No more than two-minutes long.
One-Word-Story	The Actors will sit in a circle. One person will begin the story by saying one word. The next person in the circle will say one word. And around the circle it will go until the story is complete. No punctuation required!
Explosion Tag	One person is chosen to be "it." The "it" person chases everyone else around the room. When tagged by this person, he/she must explode. After the explosion, this actor becomes the new "it."
Frozen Scene	One person will create a picture of either an important moment or place from his/her own personal history. This person will use other actors from the class to be objects, family members, or whatever else they need to complete the scene. This person will serve as the director and put the actors in the appropriate frozen position.
Acting with Gibberish	One actor will be given the words "ak mak" and the other will be given "goulash." Without using any real words, the two actors should engage in a conversation. Using proper tone, gesturing and blocking will be key to making the conversation work.
Family Scene	One person will choose other actors in the class to play their family members. This person will give some background on each individual family member, but will not direct the scene. Once all of the family members are in place, the actors will improvise a short scene.
Phrase Game	A phrase will be chosen (I want it) and given to one actor, and the second actor will say a phrase that is contradictory (You can't have it.) A "referee" can be chosen to switch the phrase or declare a winner.
When I Go To India	The actors, in a circle, are taking a fictional trip to India. One person begins with "When I go to India I will bring a ____." (Actors fill in the blank.) The next person will repeat what has been said before and add a new item. If an actor forgets an item, he/she is out. The last person standing is the winner.

**Extra Credit:** Can you create your own theatre game? Play it with your class. Be ready to defend why it would be useful to actors in preparation for work on the stage.

## LESSON PLANS

Teachers' Note: Choose activities that are appropriate for your classroom period. All assignments are suggestions. Only a teacher knows his or her class well enough to determine the level and depth to which any piece of literature may be examined.

ONE-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the context and major themes of the production.

### DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

1. Distribute **Mastery Assessment** (P.6) for *Circle Mirror Transformation* for students to read before the performance and to review again after attending it. Optional: Distribute Vocabulary **Handout 1** and ask students to define each word.
2. Read the **Synopsis** (P.1) of the play. Discuss other works students have studied with similar themes and issues.
3. If time allows, discuss further pages from the literary guide, narrating highlights for students.

FOUR-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think critically about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

### DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

Same as Day One above; completed before seeing the production.

### DAY TWO – The Production

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.

Homework: Students should answer the **Mastery Assessment** questions.

### DAY THREE – Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class.

### DAY FOUR – Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the **Open Response** or two questions from **Writing Assignments** (P.4) for students to answer in one class period.

Optional: Students may choose one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks to complete for extra credit.

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *Circle Mirror Transformation* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students. Students will ideally view the play after completing **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY ONE – Introducing the play

Same as Day One above.

Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout due on Day Four.

Homework: Read the Prologue, Week One & Week Two and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY TWO – Prologue, Week One & Week Two

Discuss the first part of the play and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Homework: Read Week Three & Week Four and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE – Week Three & Week Four

Discuss Act Two and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Homework: Read Week Five & Week Six

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR – Week Five & Week Six

Discuss Act Three and corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions. Form groups to complete **Handout 2: Marty's Cheat Sheet** (P.12) Leave time for class discussion.

Optional: Review Vocabulary Handout.

DAY FIVE – Attend Performance

Optional: Students may choose to complete one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks for extra credit.

DAY SIX – Review/Preparation

Students should answer the **Open Response** questions as preparation for their test the following day.

DAY SEVEN – Test

Individual Assessment: Choose two questions from the **Writing Assignments** for students to answer in one class period.

## **RELATED WORKS AND RESOURCES**

To broaden your familiarity with Annie Baker and the key topics in the play, consider consulting the following resources:

### **Plays**

*The Aliens* by Annie Baker

*Body Awareness* by Annie Baker

*Nocturnamas* by Annie Baker

### **Books**

*Banishing Night Terrors and Nightmares* by Christopher Raoul Carranza & Jane Rogers Dill (2004)

*Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (second edition) by Augusto Boal (2002)

*Hoop La: The Ultimate Book of Hoop Tricks* by Kari James & Jamie Bennett (2002)

*M is for Maple Syrup: A Vermont Alphabet* by Cynthia Furlong Reynolds (2002)

*The Psychology of the Internet* by Patricia M. Wallace (2001)

### **DVDs**

*Synecdoche, New York* starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman and directed by Charlie Kaufman (2008)

*Waiting for Guffman* starring Lewis Arquette and directed by Christopher Guest (1996)

*Esther Kahn* starring Summer Phoenix and directed by Arnaud Desplechin (2000)