

## **BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES**

Faced with the responsibility of managing her mother's estate, Jackie soon discovers it is a liability rather than an asset. Her only hope to pay off the debts is the sale of a rare stamp collection, which her half-sister Mary claims as her rightful inheritance. When Jackie attempts to get an outside appraisal, she quickly attracts the interest of three opportunistic collectors—a professional philatelist, a local enthusiast, and a wealthy buyer. Everyone involved assumes that Jackie will be easily exploited. How far will she go to prove them wrong?

### **OBJECTIVES**

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Mauritius* including:
  - Paradise lost
  - Building and breaking trust
  - Rightful inheritance
  - Value systems
2. Relate themes and issues in the play to their own lives.
3. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the production.
4. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Mauritius*.

## PREPARATION FOR *MAURITIUS*

### PHILATELY: A COMMON HOBBY

Before the creation of stamps, letter carrying was a risky business. Because the recipient, not the sender, paid for delivery, mail carriers were often denied payment. Stamps eliminated this problem by requiring that postage be prepaid. Almost immediately after stamps were created, people began saving the ones they received in the mail. Philately, or stamp collecting, became a widespread hobby, with collectors spanning the globe. Why do you think Theresa Rebeck chose philately as the central activity of her play? Why not the collection of rare paintings or religious icons? Would an audience of stamp collectors enjoy this play more than a general audience?

### THERESA REBECK

Theresa Rebeck has written not only for the stage, but also for major movies (such as *Harriet the Spy* and *Catwoman*) and for prime-time television (including *Law & Order*). No matter what the medium, her witty dialogue and dynamic character development have succeeded in capturing an audience. After gathering information about Rebeck from the literary guide and your own research, discuss her work as a class. Consider the wide range of subject matter that her works address. Do you think it is difficult to continue coming up with new topics? What challenges arise when a writer moves from one entertainment format to the next?

### KEY ISSUES

#### *Paradise Lost*

For stamp collectors, the very thought of holding—much less owning—the One and Two Penny Mauritius Post Office stamps is exhilarating. They consider it the “crown jewel” and “holy grail” of philately. Even non-collectors, who may doubt the intrinsic holiness of the stamps, nevertheless covet them because of their million-dollar market value. When Jackie sets fire to the stamps at the end of the play, there is an overwhelming sense of loss. The stamps could have brought happiness to so many people, but instead they will bring happiness to no one. As in that most famous of stories, paradise is lost. Why would Jackie intentionally destroy items of such great worth? She tells Dennis that “maybe it’s better this way.” What, if anything, is gained through the loss?

#### *Building and Breaking Trust*

Trust is essential to any negotiation, but especially to the back-channel dealings in *Mauritius*. In order for the stamps to be sold, both Jackie and her buyer, Sterling, must be confident that they are getting the benefit of the bargain. Because neither person is capable of appraising the stamps independently, they must rely upon others for confirmation of authenticity and value. Yet those outsiders seem to break trust more than they build it. Consider the various techniques that the characters use to verify

information, and which are most successful. Why is trust so hard to build, and yet so easy to break?

### *Rightful Inheritance*

To whom the stamp collection belongs is, of course, a legal question. But to Jackie and Mary, it is also a deeply moral question. Mary feels that because she shared her grandfather's love of stamps and helped him with the hobby, she is automatically entitled to inherit the most valuable part of the estate. Jackie, however, accuses her sister of abandoning their mother and thereby forfeiting any claim to an inheritance. As the daughter who stood by her mother through hard times, Jackie feels that she "earned" the right to sell the stamps. Philip, who has an outside perspective on this sibling rivalry, disagrees with both women. He exclaims: "Those stamps belong to the world!" Who has the strongest moral claim to the stamps? Is it even possible to have a moral right to possession when you do not have a legal right?

### *Value Systems*

The characters in *Mauritius* seem to value the stamp collection more than they value each other. The stamps, being rare and historically significant, are perceived as intrinsically valuable. Their worth derives from what they are. Yet personal relationships seem to have only instrumental value as the play unfolds. Their worth derives from how they can be used and manipulated. If it will further their pursuit of the stamps, the characters are willing to deceive, demoralize, and ultimately destabilize anyone in their way. Ask students to discuss whether this behavior demonstrates a lack of personal integrity. Challenge them to define integrity and to give examples of it. To what extent is the very concept of integrity tied to the belief that all people have intrinsic worth and equal dignity? Ask students to reflect upon their own value systems and to consider whether they have ever prized objects over personal relationships. Is it ever acceptable to do so?

## 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 essay. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

1. Why is the play entitled *Mauritius*? Does the title have any symbolic value?
2. Dennis says, “It’s the errors that make [stamps] valuable. That’s kind of my theory on people, too.” What does he mean by this statement? Do you agree?
3. What prevented Mary from visiting her mother’s deathbed? Should Mary have come nonetheless?
4. Why do you think Mary’s grandfather decided not to sell the Two Penny Post Office stamps to President Roosevelt?
5. Why does Jackie prefer to sell the stamps in a shadowy transaction rather hold a formal public auction? Do you think her reasons are valid?
6. The value of the stamp collection is of central importance to the characters in *Mauritius*. Which objects in your possession have the most “value” to you? Is a pair of jeans with a particular label more valuable than a pair without it? Of course, what you value in the future may be different from what you value now. Which objects might your grandparents have considered valuable when they were growing up? How has the value placed on these objects changed over the last 50 + years?

### Writing Assignments

1. Throughout the play, Jackie alludes to a horrible personal tragedy—the “apocalypse.” What happened to her? Dennis calls her a “damaged” woman. Discuss whether this is true.
2. Imagine if Jackie and Mary found the last will and testament of their mother. What would it say? How would she have wanted her estate to be divided? Is there anything she might have wanted to express to her daughters?
3. Mary claims that the stamp collection has “intrinsic spiritual value” and is “worth so much more than mere money.” Jackie scoffs at this idea, telling Mary that “[m]oney is what we crave here.” Do you consider the collection to be priceless? Why or why not?

4. Choose one of the main characters in *Mauritius* and write a journal entry from his or her perspective, expanding on what we already know. Place the character at a key moment in the play, a time critical to propelling the action of the play forward.
5. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Mauritius* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!

## MASTERY ASSESSMENT

### ACT ONE

1. As the play opens, Jackie enters a shop. What is sold at this store? What does Jackie want from the man behind the counter?
2. Who finally looks at the stamps? What is his advice to Jackie?
3. What incredible thing is noticed in Jackie's collection? With whom is this information shared?
4. What do Sterling and Dennis want from Jackie? Do they think it will be easy to obtain?
5. Mary describes the history of the rare stamps in the collection. What do we learn about their origin? How has the collection come into Jackie and Mary's possession?
6. Who enters the house while Jackie is sorting through her mother's belongings? What is he seeking?
7. Sterling visits Philip at his shop. What information is he trying to extract from Philip? Are they friends?
8. Why does Dennis want Philip to be part of their deal with Jackie?
9. Explain why Jackie is desperate to sell the stamp collection.
10. What happens between Jackie and Mary at the end of the first act?

### ACT TWO

11. Where does Jackie go with the stamp collection? Who does she meet?
12. Who wants to buy the stamps from Jackie? What role does Dennis play in the process?
13. Describe Jackie's attitude while negotiating with the buyer. What does she demand before the buyer may view the stamps?
14. Phillip interrupts the negotiation. Who is his surprise guest and what information does she share with Sterling?
15. What is Sterling's reaction to this news?

16. What happens when Mary is offered everything in the collection except the One and Two Penny stamps?
17. What does Jackie do to those two stamps?
18. At the end of the play, Dennis offers hope for Jackie. What will be their next venture?

## **MEDIA ASSESSMENT**

The following exercises are interactive, hands-on challenges in Movement, Visual Arts, Drama, Music, and Design. They aim to give students a better understanding of the many kinds of tasks that contribute to a theatrical production.

### *Movement: Stage Combat*

All fight scenes must be carefully choreographed so that the actors can simulate a physical confrontation without suffering any bodily harm. Mastering this choreography can take hours of physically demanding practice, which continues until the very day of the performance. Just before the curtain rises, a fight captain (a member of stage management) runs one last rehearsal, called a “fight call,” to remind the actors of the necessary muscle movements. Until one has undergone all of this training, an actor is not ready to perform stage combat at full speed.

Instead, choose a physical confrontation from *Mauritius* and “walk-through” the scene in slow motion, avoiding physical contact. After careful rehearsal, share your scenes with the class. Consider the following questions: (a) How do you create the illusion of physicality? (b) How do you remain in character while also communicating safety issues with your partner?

### *Visual Arts*

Choose one of the following projects to complete and share with the class.

1. Commemorative stamps celebrate historical events, promote causes, or honor notable figures. Design a special-edition stamp representing an important group, idea, memory or person in your life.
2. Along with philately, comic-book collection has become a popular hobby. Create a comic strip depicting the major action of the play. Try to limit your work to twelve frames.

### *Drama: Characterization*

Have each student choose a character from *Mauritius* to portray. As if preparing for the role in rehearsal, they should be asked to answer the following questions about their characters: (a) What is my objective 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?

### *Music*

Transitions between scenes often call for musical interludes. Select a piece of music for each scene change. What mood are you trying to evoke? How do your selections relate

to the rising action of the play? How does music, in general, enhance the movement of a theatrical work?

### *The Design Process*

The major action of the play takes place in two key locations: Jackie and Mary's mother's home and Philip's shop. Choose one of these places and create a set design. How do you communicate with an audience that your characters are entering a store? What does it look like when a person's estate is being disassembled? Which key props or set pieces could be used to communicate location to an audience?

## FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. President Franklin D. Roosevelt is called the “premier American Philatelist of all time.” Research his extensive stamp collection and share what you learn with the class. Do you think his family’s involvement with overseas shipping aided his passion for stamp collecting? Do you think he is the reason that stamp collecting became such a widespread hobby?
2. Watch an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* on PBS. (You can check your local listings at pbs.org.) Jot down your thoughts as you watch the program. What is the most valuable item the experts appraise? Do the owners seem generally happy with the appraisal? After watching the show, can you sympathize with Philip’s lamenting, “I’m sick of looking. Every day there’s one more pathetic ... buy my stamp, save my pathetic life ... they don’t even see them”?
3. Although 1500 of them were originally issued, very few of the One Penny and Two Penny Post Office stamps remain in existence. Yet in 1902, a young French boy was lucky enough to discover *both* stamps on a single dusty envelope! Research the history of the prized “Bordeaux Letter” and where it went after being discovered by the boy.
4. Ernest Rutherford, a pioneer in the field of nuclear physics, famously remarked: “In science, there is only physics. All the rest is stamp-collecting.” Apparently, Rutherford intended this analogy to stamp collecting as an insult to the other fields of scientific study. Why would it be insulting? Do you agree with the analogy?

## **VOCABULARY**

Forgery

Vouch

Pristine

Preposterous

Philately

Civility

Provenance

Perforations

Untenable

Allude

Substantial

Crass

Nuance

Careen

Bout

Unperturbed

Onerous

Commodified

Validate

## HANDOUT 2

### SCAVENGER HUNT

Form groups of two or three. Using the resources at your disposal (library, Internet, dictionary, literary guide, etc.), collect the answers to the following questions. The first team to gather all of the correct information wins!

1. Whose profile appeared on the first British-issued stamp?
2. What was the first British-issued stamp nicknamed?
3. What does the Greek word *phileo* mean?
4. What did the first commemorative stamp in the United States “honor and remember”?
5. List the three types of stamps.
6. What are the five key considerations when inspecting the condition of a stamp?
7. List three plays written by Theresa Rebeck.
8. At which theatre will you be viewing a production of *Mauritius*?
9. List two female comic book heroes and any two comic book villains.
10. What is the population of Mauritius?
11. What is the most widely used language in Mauritius?
12. What is the name of the Mauritian President?
13. What illness caused President Franklin D. Roosevelt to lose the use of his legs?

*Answer Key: 1. Queen Victoria 2. Penny Black 3. “I love” 4. Christopher Columbus and the discovery of the “new world” 5. Definitive, Commemorative, Special 6. Color, Centering, Perforations, In General, Back of Stamp 7. Various, consult literary guide 8. Virginia Wimberly Theatre 9. various 10. 1,240,827 11. Creole 12. President Sir Anerood Jugnauth 13. Poliomyelitis.*

## 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.X) for *Mauritius* for students to read before the performance and to review again after attending it.  
Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout and ask students to define each word. A vocabulary test could be administered after viewing the play.
2. Read the **Synopsis** (P.X) 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 one question from **Writing Assignments** (P.X) for students to answer in one class period.

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

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *Mauritius* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students on both a group and individual level. 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 Act One and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY TWO – Act One

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

Homework: Read Act Two and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE – Act Two

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

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR – Group Work

Complete **Handout #2 Scavenger Hunt** during class time. Remember to schedule library time and use of the computer lab, if such resources are not available in class.

Optional: Vocabulary Handout due!

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**

You might explore other works by Theresa Rebeck, such as:

*Spike Heels* (1992)

*The Family of Mann* (1995)

*Loose Knit* (1994)

*View of the Dome* (1998)

*Omnium Gathering* (2003)

You might also explore the following books and plays as supplements to this literary and curriculum guide.

Iizuka, Naomi. *36 Views*. Overlook TP, 2003.

Datz, Stephen. *Stamp Collecting*. General Philatelic Corporation, 1999.

Goulart, Rob. *Comic Book Encyclopedia*. Harper Entertainment, 2004.

Malcolm, Fiona. *The Antiques Roadshow*. Mitchell Beazley, 2005.

For more information on stamp collecting visit the American Philatelic Society at [www.stamps.org](http://www.stamps.org).