POWERFUL PERSONAL DRAMA

MALA

CURRICULUM GUIDE

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HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY
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COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

STANDARDS: Student Matinee performances and pre-show workshops provide unique opportunities for experiential learning and support various combinations of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. They may also support standards in other subject areas such as Social Studies and History, depending on the individual play’s subject matter.

Activities are also included in this Curriculum Guide and in our pre-show workshops that support several of the Massachusetts state standards in Theatre. Other arts areas may also be addressed depending on the individual play’s subject matter.

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 1
• Grade 8: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
• Grades 9-10: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
• Grades 11-12: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 2
• Grade 8: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
• Grades 9-10: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shape and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
• Grades 11-12: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 3
• Grade 8: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
• Grades 9-10: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the themes.
• Grades 11-12: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop related elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 5
• Grades 9-10: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks), create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
• Grades 11-12: 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.

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 6
• Grade 8: Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.
• Grades 9-10: Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.
• Grades 11-12: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view required distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7
• Grade 8: Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
• Grades 9-12: 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).
MALA CURRICULUM GUIDE

MASSACHUSETTS STANDARDS IN THEATRE

ACTING

• 1.7: Create and sustain a believable character throughout a scripted or improvised scene (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.12: Describe and analyze, in written and oral form, characters’ wants, needs, objectives, and personality characteristics (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.13: In rehearsal and performance situations, perform as a productive and responsible member of an acting ensemble (i.e., demonstrate personal responsibility and commitment to a collaborative process) (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.14: Create complex and believable characters through the integration of physical, vocal, and emotional choices (Grades 9-12).

• 1.15: Demonstrate an understanding of a dramatic work by developing a character analysis (Grades 9-12).

• 1.17: Demonstrate increased ability to work effectively alone and collaboratively with a partner or in an ensemble (Grades 9-12).

READING AND WRITING SCRIPTS

• 2.7: Read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme, and conflict (By the end of Grade 8).

• 2.8: Improvise characters, dialogue, and actions that focus on the development and resolution of dramatic conflicts (By the end of Grade 8).

• 2.11: Read plays from a variety of genres and styles; compare and contrast the structure of plays to the structures of other forms of literature (Grades 9-12).

TECHNICAL THEATRE

• 4.6: Draw renderings, floor plans, and/or build models of sets for a dramatic work and explain choices in using visual elements (line, shape/form, texture, color, space) and visual principals (unity, variety, harmony, balance, rhythm) (By the end of Grade 8).

• 4.13: Conduct research to inform the design of sets, costumes, sound, and lighting for a dramatic production (Grades 9-12).

CONNECTIONS

• Strand 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts—Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings (Grades PreK-12).

• Strand 10: Interdisciplinary Connections—Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, foreign languages, health, history and social science, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering (Grades PreK-12).

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to the Huntington Theatre Company.

• How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?

• Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience’s behavior and reactions will affect the actors’ performances. No two audiences are exactly the same, and therefore no two performances are exactly the same — this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students’ behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.

• Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. It is absolutely all right to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be? Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!

• Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off (or better yet, left at home or at school!). Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food, gum, and drinks should not be brought into the theatre.

• Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.
PLAylWRIGHT: MELINDA LOPEZ

Melinda Lopez is a longtime member of the Huntington Theatre Company family. She is an acclaimed Boston stage and film actor, appearing in productions at the Huntington and SpeakEasy Stage Company, among others, and is currently the Huntington’s Playwright-in-Residence. As a playwright, she was a member of the inaugural class of Huntington Playwriting Fellows and the Huntington’s production of her award-winning play Sonia Flew was the first piece of theatre produced in the Calderwood Pavilion at the BCA in 2004. Since then, Sonia Flew has been produced all over the country including at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami and Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company, among others, and was broadcast on NPR’s radio theatre series, “The Play’s the Thing!” Her other plays include Caroline in Jersey (Williamstown Theatre Festival), Orchids to Octopi (IRNE Award, Central Square Theatre, commissioned by the National Institute of Health), and Becoming Cuba (Huntington Theatre Company and North Coast Repertory Theatre). Lopez is a recipient of a three-year playwright-in-residency grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and has also received the Charlotte Woolard Award, given by the Kennedy Center to a “promising new voice in American theatre.” Lopez’s Huntington acting credits include Our Town, Persephone, A Month in the Country, and The Rose Tattoo. She has served as a panel member for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Cambridge Arts Panel and is a founding member of Munroe Saturday Nights, which produces free high-quality arts performances in the Boston area. She has also shared her artistic wisdom and experience through teaching appointments at Boston University and Wellesley College. Deeply proud of her rich cultural heritage, Lopez is active in the Cuban American community and supports efforts which bring humanitarian aid to Cuba.

Along with being a favorite of the Huntington audiences, Lopez has captured the attention of many notable figures, including Boston’s Mayor Martin Walsh, who instituted Melinda Lopez Day in the city in October 2016, and even more prominently, former President Barack Obama, who mentioned Lopez’s work and personal experiences during his historic 2016 trip to Havana, Cuba. As the Huntington’s playwright-in-residence, she continues to break new ground with her solo performance piece Mala, which will be produced at the Huntington in January 2018, a little more than a year after its debut across town at ArtsEmerson. Although Lopez aspires to see Mala produced nationwide, the play has strong Boston ties: it is set during the brutal winter of 2015 when the city of Boston was buried under mountains of snow. Based on her reflections of saying goodbye to both of her own parents as well as her husband’s, the metaphor of the longest winter and the struggle to dig herself out seemed appropriate. However, Lopez does not seek sympathy through her storytelling; instead she encourages those facing the same challenges and suggests the story is not as rare or as lonely as one might believe when one is buried deep in the trenches of living through it. Lopez has said of her eclectic body of work: “Every work of art is about ‘Why are we here?’ and ‘What do we do?’” These questions are at the heart of Mala.

For more information about Melinda Lopez, visit her webpage at melindalopez.com

QUESTIONS:

1. Speculate as to why Melinda Lopez’s work resonates with current audiences. How does the personal nature of her playwriting affect the connection between artist and audience? Would it be difficult to share a personal family issue or conflict with the public?

2. Continue your research of Melinda Lopez’s life and career. Where was she born? How did she come to work in Boston? What are the factors leading to her current success?
DEATH: INEVITABLE BUT NOT STANDARD

“I am merely a guest born in this world, to know the secrets that lie beyond it.”

-Rumi

Death is the only certainty in human existence and yet it is often ignored and flatly denied by the living. Mala’s scientist sister maintains a clinical distance from death. A “procedure” and experimental “mouse blood” provide hope for staying young and avoiding death for as long as possible. Mala, however, is intimately familiar with the process of death, and while it can be extremely difficult to say goodbye, she’s had practice. She knows her mother is letting go; Mala has watched her suffer, lose her husband, and lose the ability to care for herself. Mala senses her mother is nearing the end.

When Maureen, the hospice nurse, announces that Mala’s mother is “doing great,” Mala finds it jarring. From Mala’s perspective, her mother is the opposite of “great.” But you should see my other patients,“ Maureen argues, comparing Mala’s mother’s process of dying with that of the others in her care. Maureen tells Mala that her mother will have a “good death” because “she is a classic. Declining slowly. Soon it will be faster. She’ll stop being able to support her weight. She’ll eat less. Drink less. Her kidneys will go. Organs will fail. Maybe while she sleeps.” Mala is initially resistant to this account because although death is unavoidable it is also an experience that varies from person to person. She feels that the details of how the death will occur and how long it will take are difficult for even a hospice nurse to answer. But does the “how” matter more than the “if” or the “when”?

Mala is also intimately acquainted with denial. During one particularly difficult episode with her mother, Mala looks to her own daughter and proclaims, “I promise you, I will never be that old.” This is a complicated promise to make as she may not ever “be that old” — or she may. When Mala imagines herself dying, she is surrounded by love: grandchildren she has not yet met, a mother who is “at least” 115 years old. In this fantasy, Mala is too tired to care for others, but she is not lacking in love for them. She wishes to be forgiven by all those who suffered for her mistakes. Meanwhile, in reality, Mala is a woman caring for her mother who is alive but not truly living and Mala is strictly limited in what aid she can offer. She cannot, for example, take a page from old Inuit traditions and send her mother off on an ice floe following the perfect family goodbye. All she can do is bring offerings of clementines and remind her mother of their connection before she is gone. None of this is unique or extraordinary because according to Mala, “the most ordinary thing you can do is to die. And the second most ordinary thing you can do is to bear witness.” Perhaps it is not the “when” of dying that is most important but the “how” of letting go and finally saying goodbye.
QUESTIONS:

1. Mala makes the point on several different occasions that her parents lacked a plan for their end-of-life care. But while the particular details of a future death are unknown, the event itself is inevitable. Why might Mala’s parents have put off planning for the inevitable? For what other reasons do people take so little time to plan for their final days?

2. Do you ever discuss death with family or friends? Do you worry about losing people you love? What does a “good death” mean to you?

DUTY & SACRIFICE

Mala acknowledges she sometimes plays the “bad cop” with her parents. It is her duty to care for them when they can no longer care for themselves, which sometimes means getting them to do things they do not want to do. But Mala is often alone on the front lines and is undermined, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the other well-meaning people orbiting around her parents. When her father becomes a hazard on the road due to his advanced age, Mala plans to simply allow his driver’s license to expire — that is, until her sister intervenes and takes him to the registry of motor vehicles to renew it. It is an inversion of the child-parent relationship when Mala must take away her parents’ keys, force them to eat, or hire a nurse to bathe them, and when the time comes for her mother to receive hospice care, Mala shoulders the burden, keeping her mother home for as long as possible. “No one teaches you how to do ... The big stuff ... how to help your parents through that difficult ... Transition,” Mala observes.

But Mala’s parents do not view her as a hero and are not shy about letting her know it. Of her mother, Mala writes, “she won’t rest until I’m dead.” Mala’s mother takes her anger, fear, and confusion out on her daughter, who she routinely chastises and punishes rather than expressing gratitude for her daughter’s personal and professional sacrifices. Mala’s mother cannot muster a kind word or “thank you” for her daughter because she is too busy, as Mala describes it, “inflicting fresh wounds” on others for each of her own physical ailments. Mala vents her frustrations:

“I have 5 minutes, between caring for my daughter, walking the dog, working from home, working from the office, getting dinner on the table — and I’m not complaining — I’m just saying — I’m just painting a picture, sometimes I have 5 minutes and I think, Maybe I will pop in on a 92 year-old lady and see how I can ruin the rest of my day . . . how did it come to be that my 92 year-old mother lives with me instead of being in a nursing home, where obviously, she belongs....”

Mala has the best intentions for her parents and desires to do what is best for them. She feels tremendous loyalty because her parents sacrificed to provide her with the best childhood possible. Her father worked tirelessly as the family’s primary earner and her mother worked a minimum wage job to get Mala the extras, such as lip gloss and brand-name jeans because her father would never allow it to be otherwise. Mala knows the tremendous effort they made to pull her into adulthood and is grateful for all that they provided her. However, in order to fulfill her present-day responsibilities, Mala must not only challenge their authority and personal autonomy, she must also give up her own freedom. Parenting is often a thankless job, but as Mala discovers, so is caring for parents when they are no longer able-bodied. Mala reflects, “you are standing between your mother and her death. That’s all. And if you imagine that she’s going to forgive you for that, you might be disappointed.”

QUESTIONS:

1. Is Mala’s mother “nice”? Why might her behavior make it difficult to provide care for her? How is caring for a baby different than caring for an elderly parent? What are the challenges unique to each situation?

2. Do you or your parents care for aging relatives inside or outside of your home? Do you worry about your parents getting older and needing your help?

3. Is caring for the elderly a new topic of discussion in our cultural conversation? Why might Mala resonate deeply with today’s theatre audiences?

4. Who should be responsible for the care of the elderly if they no longer have capable family members? Should adult children be mandated to provide care for aging parents? Why or why not?
THE STING OF REGRET

Mala means “bad” in Spanish and the play’s titular character acknowledges her name is sometimes fitting: she readily admits to her mistakes and confesses that she carries regrets over her past actions. Mala’s mother once took a serious fall, but she hates doctors and hospitals and claims to want to be left alone. Out of respect for her wishes, the family decides not to seek medical care, but three days later she is stumbling and slurring her words. It is clear she needs immediate medical attention and soon, physicians diagnose a brain bleed that requires emergency surgery. Why didn’t anyone bring her to the hospital after the fall? Mala has no answer — only regrets. Mala wishes she could find the inner strength to manage her mother’s tantrums during their daily routine. Mala gets angry, overwhelmed, and hurt. She delegates the responsibility of assisting her mother on bathroom visits to a nurse because she feels it is just too difficult to be involved, a conclusion that Mala does not like in herself. “When did my heart get so small?” Mala observes.

Beyond the day-to-day struggles of Mala’s situation, she must also face down remorse on a grander scale. As her father’s health declines, Mala remains in denial, and it is not until he passes away that Mala finally finds the words, “I love you.” “The words leapt out,” she reflects, “and they were loud and they were everything.” Mala wants her daughter to learn from her mistakes and to avoid repeating the same painful process. In her idealized imagining of her own future death, Mala says she will kiss her mother (who will magically still be living) “and beg her to forgive me, and my family waves goodbye.” But this perfect moment is a fantasy. Can Mala overcome her regrets in order to fully love and embrace her family while they are all still living?

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think Mala is a bad person? Why is her mother often angry with her? Does Mala properly fulfill her responsibilities as a daughter?
2. Could Mala have done anything differently to relieve some of her burden? Could she have handled her parents’ situation in a different way?
3. Do you have any regrets? How do you make amends for wrongs you have committed? What does it mean to live life without regrets?
1. According to Mala, why might someone in the audience refuse to turn off their phone? Does Mala mind if a phone goes off in the audience? How do you know?

THE BEGINNING
2. Who is Annie? What situation does she encounter when she arrives to meet Mala’s mother?
3. Why does Mala experience a “white knuckle ride” on the way to work?
4. How did Mala’s father die?

ABUSADORA
5. List some of the ways in which Mala helps her mother.
6. How does Mala’s mother react when Mala tries to help her with the radio?
7. What has Mala’s mother forgotten about her husband?

MOUSE BLOOD
8. What does Mala’s sister do for a living?
9. What exciting scientific discovery has her sister made?

GINA
10. What activity do Mala and Gina do together?
11. Why is Gina frustrated with her brother while caring for their father?

SPONGES
12. According to Mala, what genetic issue causes fainting in her family?
13. What does Mala regret doing following her mother’s first fall?
14. Why were the nurses grateful to Mala when she visited the hospital?
15. What is Mala’s mother’s name?

DENIAL
16. From a medical standpoint, what is wrong with Frances?
17. What is Mala’s father’s name?
18. What happened to Mala’s father one night as he ran an errand to CVS? Why was it hard for Mala to take away his car keys?
19. How does Mala’s sister show she is in denial over her parents’ situation?
20. Describe the Inuit end-of-life tradition to which Mala refers.

MIRIAM
21. Why was Miriam’s family upset about her mother’s condition at the hospital?
22. How does the family handle the situation?

MASTERY ASSESSMENT

WINTER 1
23. Despite the weather, what important event is happening in Mala’s life?

COMING HOME
24. Why was Frances afraid to get a pedicure? At what age did she finally agree to one?
25. What medical decision does Mala make on Frances’ behalf?

MY FRIEND CRISTINA’S STORY
26. Why does Cristina’s mother hire a grief counselor?
27. Who was the primary caregiver for Cristina’s father?
28. Why is Cristina’s oldest sister angry?

TOUGH
29. Describe Mala’s grandfather, both physically and in terms of his personality.
30. How did Frances stand up to her father?
31. According to Mala, why did her mother work a minimum wage job despite the fact that her father made a decent living?
32. How does Mala describe her own parenting? Does she have any regrets about how she disciplined her daughter?

THE BLIZZARD
33. Describe Mala’s dream for herself at the end of her life.

HOSPICE
34. Describe Maureen’s personality. Does it make her a good fit for a career in hospice care?
35. How long does Maureen think Frances will live?

MYSELF
36. What happened between Mala’s parents that caused her to be concerned about their future living together?
37. How long were Mala’s parents married?

SUDDENLY
38. Does Frances prefer to be alone or with other people?
39. What regrets does Mala have about the care she provides Frances? What prevents her from having a stronger relationship with her mother?

FOLKSY WISDOM
40. When did Mala get married?
41. How is Bobbie related to Mala?
42. How did Bobbie die? How did Mala say goodbye?
43. How is Bernie related to Mala? Under what conditions did he pass away?
CLEMENTINES
44. In what ways is Mala satisfied with what she can do for her mother? At the same time, why is she disappointed in herself?
45. Why does Annie want Mala’s mother to rest in a hospital bed?

ASHES
46. Does Mala believe in God?
47. What end-of-life plans does Mala make for her parents? How does she arrive at her decision?

PAPI
48. Why does Mala cancel her trip to Vermont?
49. What does Mala read while she sits with her father?

50. What natural phenomenon catches Mala’s attention? Why might her father have also been interested in this event?
51. How does Mala finally say goodbye?

THE BIG STUFF
52. What are “the big stuff” moments for which Mala says she is woefully unprepared?
53. How did Mala’s parents prepare her for life, if not death?

GINA
54. What does Gina help her mother to find?

ORDINARY
55. What plan does Mala have for “tonight”?
56. With what poem does the play end? What might its significance be to Mala’s story?
T.S. ELIOT’S “FOUR QUARTETS”

In a college poetry class, Mala struggles with the study of T.S. Eliot’s masterwork “Four Quartets.” Mala describes the poetry as “so sad and so dense, and reading it makes you want to kill yourself even when times are good.” Mala’s experience with Eliot’s work is particularly fraught because she did not read it at a “good” time: Mala’s work on the poems came as her father lay dying. “Burnt Norton,” published in 1935, is the first of the four, though Eliot did not intend for it to be the “Four Quartets’” introduction. But while writing “East Coker,” the poem which would eventually become the second work in the project, Eliot was inspired to combine the poems together. Reflecting on this work, he wrote:

... these poems are all in a particular set form which I have elaborated, and the word “quartet” does seem to me to start people on the right track for understanding them (“sonata” in any case is too musical). It suggests to me the notion of making a poem by weaving in together three or four superficially unrelated themes: the ‘poem’ being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them.

Despite his interest in other written forms, including playwriting, and ongoing health issues, Eliot completed the “Four Quartets” collection, which consists of “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding.” The poems reflect on themes of religion and the divine, patriotism, and humanity’s relationship to time. “Little Gidding,” the poem to which Mala refers to explicitly, was written during World War II and includes references to the English Civil War. “Four Quartets” had acquired many admirers, who found hope in the poems during wartime and spiritual peace during religious revivals in Europe.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

QUESTIONS:
1. Why would playwright Melinda Lopez include T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets” in her play? Why might this series of poetry have resonated with Mala as she was caring for her dying father?

2. “Burnt Norton” opens with two epigraphs from the work of ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, which translate to:

   Though wisdom is common, the many live as if they have wisdom of their own.

   The way upward and the way downward is one and the same.

Choose one of the statements and analyze its meaning. How might these epigraphs relate to the major themes of this play?

3. How do religious beliefs affect one’s experience with death and dying?

4. Do you think the word “quartet” is less musical sounding than “sonata”? In what ways is poetry a musical art form?

WHO DECIDES? THE CASE OF TERRI SCHIAVO

When an individual suffers a catastrophic illness or injury that renders them unconscious, who has the right to make decisions regarding their medical care? First responders and doctors immediately address issues of life and death, as keeping a person alive is always the first priority on an ambulance or in the emergency room. But what happens after the patient is technically medically stable but is unconscious or otherwise unable to competently make decisions for themselves?

When a person has declined to the point that they are no longer physically or mentally capable of caring for their self, an enormous responsibility falls to the next of kin, often a spouse, but sometimes children or parents of the individual. In Mala, the titular character describes how her friend, Gina, and Gina’s brother struggled when faced with this responsibility. Gina desperately wanted to feed her father the foods he once loved such as meatballs, but as he is dying in hospice, it is simply no longer possible for him to digest this kind of food. Meanwhile her brother, fearing addiction, refuses to give their father the morphine he so desperately needs.

One of the most complicated custodial issues to date involved a young woman from Florida named Theresa Marie (Terri) Schiavo, who suffered a heart attack thought to be a result of the eating disorder bulimia (the final autopsy was inconclusive). Schiavo’s brain was deprived of oxygen and she became comatose. She persisted in a vegetative state from 1990 to 2005 while a hotly contested legal battle waged between her husband, Michael Schiavo, and her parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, regarding Terri’s guardianship and medical care. Terri Schiavo did not have a “living will,” a document which dictates an individual’s wishes for many important matters, including delegating authority to make medical decisions on the person’s behalf in the event they are not able to do so for themselves. Following Terri’s collapse in 1990, Michael Schiavo pursued a number of alternate therapies for his wife, including nerve
stimulation and physical and speech therapies. Michael sued Terri’s obstetrician for failing to recognize that her infertility was caused by bulimia, which he believed resulted in low potassium levels and an imbalance in her electrolytes causing her heart failure. After attorney fees, Michael Shiavo received just over $1 million, which was put into a trust for Terri’s ongoing medical care. However, Terri remained comatose. Michael, after years of attempting various medical interventions, believed Terri had no prospects of recovery and claimed that Terri would not have wanted to continue living in a vegetative state. In 1993, Michael requested a do not resuscitate order for Terri and filed a court petition to remove her feeding tube in 1998.

Terri’s parents, however, argued that Terri was a devout Roman Catholic who would not disobey the Church’s order against euthanasia. They contended that assisted suicide, by denying her nutrition, would violate Terri’s religious practice. In a highly publicized legal battle, the Schindlers represented the pro-life movement and various disability groups while Michael represented the right to die movement, leading to a political firestorm that lasted another seven years. When the Schindlers’ legal appeals had been exhausted, the Florida legislature quickly passed “Terri’s Law” which allowed then-governor Jeb Bush to intervene on the Schindlers’ behalf. Michael and his legal team fought back and the court ultimately struck down “Terri’s Law” on the basis that it was unconstitutional. Terri Schiavo passed away on March 31, 2005 after her feeding tube was removed.

QUESTIONS:
1. Sometimes families do know what their loved one would want, as was the case with Miriam in Mala. While the family was in agreement about the best plan of action, fulfilling her mother’s wishes required getting a new doctor, much to the frustration of everyone involved. Do you think what a person wants for themselves can change over time? As a guardian or custodian, should what YOU desire for the person in your care factor into your decision making?

2. Terri Schiavo was overweight as a child and lost a considerable amount of weight in adulthood. At the time of her cardiac arrest, Terri was believed to have been exclusively drinking iced tea in order to keep her weight down. After her death, Michael’s lawsuits against her medical providers resulted in a $6.8 million settlement for failing to recognize Terri’s eating disorder. The dollar amount was reduced to $2 million (of which Michael received about half) because the court determined Terri was at least “partially responsible” for her medical situation. Do you agree or disagree with the court’s ruling? Is it fair to hold a person suffering from a disorder, such as bulimia, which includes mental health factors, responsible for complications from this health issue?

3. Michael, despite years of watching his wife linger in a comatose state, refused to divorce Terri or relinquish control to his in-laws, but at the time of his wife’s death, Michael was in a long-term committed relationship with another woman with whom he had a son. Meanwhile, Terri’s parents were visiting her regularly at
the medical care facility, despite all scientific evidence that she no longer had the capacity to swallow or engage in conscious activity of any kind. Do you agree with the court’s ultimate decision to allow Michael’s request to remove his Terri’s feeding tube? Did Michael make the right decision in carrying out Terri’s wishes? Were the Schindlers justified in fighting a long legal battle for their daughter? What might Terri have wanted for herself?

THE RIGHT TO DIE MOVEMENT

“This play isn’t about suicide. Or assisted suicide. I don’t kill anybody in this story.”
- Mala

In the text, playwright Melinda Lopez makes it very clear that her play Mala is not about suicide or physician-assisted suicide. However, she concedes that at the end of one’s life, there may be a question of whether or not life is worth living. “My point is: This is the point,” Mala says, referring to her mother’s state of being, “she doesn’t live, is my point. She doesn’t live.” As justification for her conclusions, Mala even references an Inuit tradition allowing any member of the group to end their life, for any reason, and if they ask for help it will be granted without judgment. “The seniors? When they don’t want to live anymore,” she explains, “or if they become a burden, they climb out on an ice floe, and the community pushes them out to sea.”

Pushing Mala’s mother out to sea on an ice floe is not an option for Mala’s family and the other medical possibilities are controversial. Euthanasia is a long-debated topic for terminally ill patients. In 1999, Jack Kevorkian, often referred to in the media as “Dr. Death,” was sentenced to jail for second-degree murder in an assisted suicide case. He claims to have helped 130 patients end their lives. Kevorkian would only assist patients for whom he was certain there was no cure for their ailments; for this reason, Kevorkian did not assist mentally ill patients whom he believed suffered from clinical depression no matter how great their desire for his services. While he certainly brought the issue to the national spotlight in the 1990s and laid the groundwork for the subsequent Right-to-Die movement, it received mostly negative press at the time. Kevorkian is famous for saying, “dying is not a crime.”

In 2014, the death of Brittany Maynard ignited a new end-of-life conversation. At 29 years old, Maynard received the devastating diagnosis that she had less than six months to live as the result of a rare and aggressive brain tumor. Maynard was also told that her death would be gruesome, and as many of her symptoms began to emerge (loss of speech for multiple hours at a time, violent seizures which caused falling, and unbearable pain), she set the date of November 1, 2014 as the time she would end her life. Maynard posited that she was not committing suicide. “There is not a cell in my body that is suicidal or that wants to die,” Maynard said in a 2014 People magazine interview. “I want to live.” But knowing in no uncertain terms that this rare form of brain cancer would certainly take her life, she moved from California to Oregon, a state that in 1997 enacted its Death with Dignity legislation. Maynard became an activist for the cause, claiming that she was in the fortunate position to make a costly move with her family out of state. “Right now it’s a choice that’s only available to some Americans,” she told People, “which is really unethical.” The freedom to choose to end her life before losing her ability to stand, speak, or recognize her mother lessened her anxiety. Despite being devastated by her diagnosis, she remained in control of the end to her story. “I’m dying but I’m choosing to suffer less,” she explained. On November 1, 2014, Maynard took medicine prescribed by her doctor and passed away peacefully with closest family and friends by her side. The state of Oregon listed “brain tumor” as the cause of her death.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why might some people fear the right-to-die movement? What political or religious philosophies challenge the notion that a person should be in control when they die? How does a physician’s ability (or inability) to provide and accurate prognosis factor into death with dignity decisions?

2. Despite some attempts to pass such legislation, Massachusetts patients do not currently have access to physician-assisted suicide. Research these attempts to change these laws. Compare and contrast them with those in the state of Oregon.
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

Choose one of the following quotes from *Mala*. Write an essay analyzing the quote’s meaning.

Consider the following:
1. Does Mala mean these words literally or is there unspoken subtext?
2. What does this statement reveal about Mala’s worldview?
3. How do Mala’s actions support or contradict the quote?
4. How does the quote contribute to the forward progression of the scene and of the plot as a whole?

- “She has started dying, but haven’t we all?”
- “I have a daughter. She will do better than me. She will learn from my mistakes. There have been so many.”
- “But I didn’t know. I didn’t know how hard it is to be everything to the person who loves you.”
- “You just get scared that if you give up any more of yourself, you might cease to exist.”
- “The dying aren’t wise. Or generous. They may never see you for what you are. And they will probably hurt you every day of the rest of their lives, because — They are angry, and in pain, and it’s not fair.”
- “...you are standing between your mother and her death. That’s all. And if you imagine that she’s going to forgive you for that, you might be disappointed.”
- “When a person’s been dying for a long time, sometimes it’s okay when they go. Because they’re not suffering anymore.”
- “I believe in Darwin, and Newton and Relativity and wormholes — yes, okay — and global warming.”
- “(I love you) The words leapt out and they were loud and they were everything.”
- “They were frugal with their money, generous with their love, and prepared for every eventuality in their lives. Except the last one.”
- “Plays are about people who do extraordinary things. But the most ordinary thing you can do is to die. And the second most ordinary thing you can do is to bear witness.”

*Melinda Lopez in Mala*
ADAPTATION CHALLENGE

In playwright Melinda Lopez’s opening stage directions, she notes that “Mala is a first-generation child. Mala could be Greek. Or Polish. Or Mexican.” Lopez references that she is Cuban American throughout the play, and suggests that some characteristics of her family situation and her choices are directly linked to her cultural heritage, while others are part of the experience of being a first-generation American child of an immigrant family.

Imagine you are the director for Mala. You cast an actor in the lead role who is not Cuban but is bilingual and must now make the necessary adjustments to the script, with the permission of the playwright. (And for purposes of this exercise only, assume it will be granted!). Write a letter to the playwright, Melinda Lopez about your casting of the show:

• Describe the cultural heritage of the actor cast in the show and how you intend to customize the script.
• What language, other than English, does this actor speak?
• Document the lines of dialogue in need of translation.
• Note any other lines of dialogue which reference, directly or indirectly, Mala’s Cuban heritage.
• Are you able to translate the lines of dialogue yourself or do you need assistance of a skilled translator?
• Do you believe that Mala’s race, religion, or politics is fundamental to the production of this show? Why or why not?
• What are the universal themes in this play that connect across cultures?

SOLO PERFORMANCE PROJECT

“We are all alone, born alone, die alone...”
- Hunter S. Thompson (The Proud Highway)

Solo performance presents unique challenges for a performer who must propel the action of the story forward without help from others, creating tension and acknowledging the conflict through the power of their own voice. Mala presents additional challenges in that the playwright is also the performer and the story is autobiographical.

Write an autobiographical monologue and present it in class. Focus your writing on a time when you were either caring for someone/something else OR when you were being cared for by someone/something else. Ideas for inspiration: did you ever have a babysitter that broke your parents’ rules? Did you stay up through the night with a baby bird who fell from a nest outside your front door? Watered a neighbor’s plants while they were on vacation?

While your monologue should relate the facts and details of your experience, keep in mind the elements of good storytelling which include: strong character development (specifically who you are in the story — how do you grow or change?), story arc (events spiraling up or down), and the most important element of all, a central conflict. Did you kill the tomato plant in your neighbor’s beloved garden? That event would likely hold the audience’s attention!

After you perform, leave time to discuss your monologue with your class. How does it feel to be responsible for someone or something else? Do you prefer to be cared for or do you like the freedom of taking care of yourself?
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

HERITAGE QUILT

If time allows, this project could be completed as a homework assignment or students, who are able, may choose to create a fabric quilt.

Throughout her play, Mala, playwright Melinda Lopez draws upon her Cuban American culture for inspiration. Some lines of dialogue are written in Spanish and she mentions that her family’s experiences may not be typical for people with other backgrounds. The United States is a country built by many immigrant hands, so many Americans also identify with cultures from around the world. Perhaps you are a first-generation Chinese American or maybe your great-great-grandfather moved to this country from Ireland. Whatever your story, share it with your peers and combine those images together.

Work as a class to create a paper quilt. Decide together if your quilt pieces will be square or rectangular (8” x 8” or 8.5” x 11”). Using materials in the classroom (paper, pens, pencils, markers, crayons, stickers, etc.), create a quilt piece that reflects your cultural values and personal heritage. You may use religious symbols, flags from around the world, writing in other languages or whatever images you believe best convey your personal story and at least part of your family history.

Once everyone has completed their individual project, the quilt pieces (or banner pieces if that makes more sense for the space) should be stapled together. If the group feels there are elements missing from the quilt, students may want to create additional images which reflect something about their school or classroom.
2017-2018 STUDENT MATINEES

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG Sept. 28
TARTUFFE Nov. 17
MALA JAN. 18 & 25
SKELETON CREW MAR. 15
TOP GIRLS MAY 3

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