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Limelight teacher literary &
curriculum guide

Rabbit Hole



by David Lindsay-Abaire

Directed by John Tillinger

November 3 - December 3, 2006
at the Boston University Theatre



HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY
IN RESIDENCE AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Rabbit Hole

by David Lindsay-Abaire
Directed by John Tillinger

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SYNOPSIS

Rabbit Hole

Becca's life is unraveling at its seams. Maintaining control over home and relationships isn't easy when one doesn't know how to grieve. Becca and Howie live in a well-appointed home, nestled in a suburban tree-lined enclave of Larchmont, New York. They have a beautiful life, or rather, they did — before the accidental death of their four-year-old son, Danny, eight months earlier. Now, they struggle to talk to one another and to reach an understanding of the unfamiliar emotional geography into which their union has wandered.

Becca's family isn't helping matters. Coarse and immature, her sister Izzy reminds her of where she comes from, where she might have ended up if not for a constant yearning for sophistication and the better things in life. Izzy's hilariously messy life collides with Becca's desire for order. When Izzy reveals that she not only was recently the victor in a bar fight, but that she's also pregnant, Becca's loss and isolation are magnified. Not even Nat, Becca and Izzy's even-keeled mother, can manage to say the right thing or provide comfort.

Howie is fighting his own battles, twisting in the wind as his methods for grieving clash with those of his wife. As Becca empties the house of reminders of their son, Howie yearns for those same touchstones to get him through the day. The only solution, it seems, is to put the house up for sale and flee the scene. If only it were that easy to escape the past, especially when it comes knocking on your door, looking for absolution.

Jason, the high-schooler who was driving the car that hit Danny, bears no legal responsibility for the accident, but can't seem to get past the grief he has caused. In an effort to offer some solace, he writes a story in memory of Danny, and is looking to get it published. Jason's tale suggests the possibility of parallel universes — rabbit holes — where alternate versions of each of these smart, funny, and unhinged people can find the peace so desperately needed. Becca, Howie, Izzy, and Nat seek to find their way through their own emotional rabbit holes in this wrenchingly comic play by David Lindsay-Abaire. — *IMB*



Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.
So he said to his mother, "I am running away."
"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you.
For you are my little bunny."

From *The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown; picture: Clement Hurd

DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE: Bostonian on Broadway

David Lindsay-Abaire, born and bred in South Boston, has moved far from the Red Line's Broadway station to the bright lights of Broadway and beyond. In 1999, Lindsay-Abaire told William Tynan of *Time* that his five-year goal was "to be considered a 'semi-successful' playwright." With his work having since been produced at the prestigious Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays, developed as part of the the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference, and praised by audiences across the country, he has more than surpassed his goal. Lindsay-Abaire now has under his belt a successful Broadway production of his latest play, *Rabbit Hole*, and is basking in the glow of critical acclaim and a 2006 Tony nomination for Best Play. He is currently working on two more high profile Broadway productions — musical stage adaptations of the book-turned-film *High Fidelity*, and the animated hit *Shrek* — as well as a number of new stage plays and screenplays.

David Abaire was born to a fruit seller father and factory worker mother, and grew up along Boston's West Fifth Street. Through his involvement with the Boys Club, he won a scholarship to prestigious Milton Academy when he was 11 years old. At Milton, he was encouraged, as "the funny kid," to write class plays, join the speech team, and take drama courses. He often references his time spent at the Massachusetts school as a major influence on his life in the theatre.

His love of drama led him to study the artform at Sarah Lawrence College, where his met his wife Christine Lindsay. After college, he committed to playwrighting, and Lindsay-Abaire soon found himself part of the lauded Juilliard



David Lindsay-Abaire

This "funny kid" from South Boston continues to wow theatre audiences with...his self proclaimed "skewed view of the world."

Playwrights Program, helmed by Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang. *Fuddy Meers*, a play from his time at Juilliard about a woman who wakes up each morning not remembering who she is, took him to the O'Neill and began an artistic relationship with the Manhattan

Theatre Club (MTC), which produced the piece in 1999. Since then, MTC has also produced his *Wonder of the World* in 2001 and *Kimberly Akimbo* in 2003.

This "funny kid" from South Boston continues to wow theatre audiences with a body of work that reveals his self-proclaimed "skewed view of the world." Lindsay-Abaire's plays follow characters "seeking clarity in a strange, overwhelming universe." It was a dare from acclaimed playwright and Juilliard mentor Marsha Norman that prompted him to pen his most recent hit. She said, "write what scares you most," but it would be years before Lindsay-Abaire took up her challenge. It was only after the birth of his son, Nicholas, that Lindsay-Abaire finally understood the fear that Norman had told her students would lead them to write a great play — in his case, the possibility of a sudden loss of his only child.

The playwright might be creating works that challenge himself and his viewers, receiving critical acclaim and Tony buzz, but even as he has become a more than "semi-successful playwright," he still knows how to have a good time enjoying the little things. During a luncheon for Juilliard students and alumni, Lindsay-Abaire shared how his life affects his work: "I used to write every morning for a set number of hours. Now I sit down to write, and my son comes in and asks me to play trains with him. Playing trains is always more important than writing." A solid base in family, for which strength and sense of humor are required, provides the underlayer of humanity in the plays of David Lindsay-Abaire that will keep audiences talking about his work for years to come. — LI

GOING FORTH WITH Boldness & Absurdity

Boston native David Lindsay-Abaire spoke recently with Huntington Literary Manager Ilana M. Brownstein about how he left sports for the stage, the ways in which he mixes awkward sadness with anarchic humor, and what exactly he's got against Phoenix.

IB: Let's start at the beginning of your theatrical career. I read that you left the wrestling team as a freshman in high school to take on a role in a Christopher Durang play — true?

DLA: It's true! Where did you read that? I can't believe I actually confessed someplace to being on the wrestling team.

I'm charmed by the fact that you eventually ended up with Durang as your mentor in Juilliard's Playwrights Program.

I know. Fascinating, right? I could have ended up with Jesse Ventura as my mentor instead if I had gone a different way. Chris and Marsha Norman run that program together, and I'm not sure how or why that chemistry works, but it does. Chris' response to my work was always very valuable. He would say, "you lost me here, and maybe it's because I'm on too many decongestants. But, for what it's worth, I got lost there." I can appreciate that.

Now that we've established your credentials, how do you usually begin the process of writing a play?

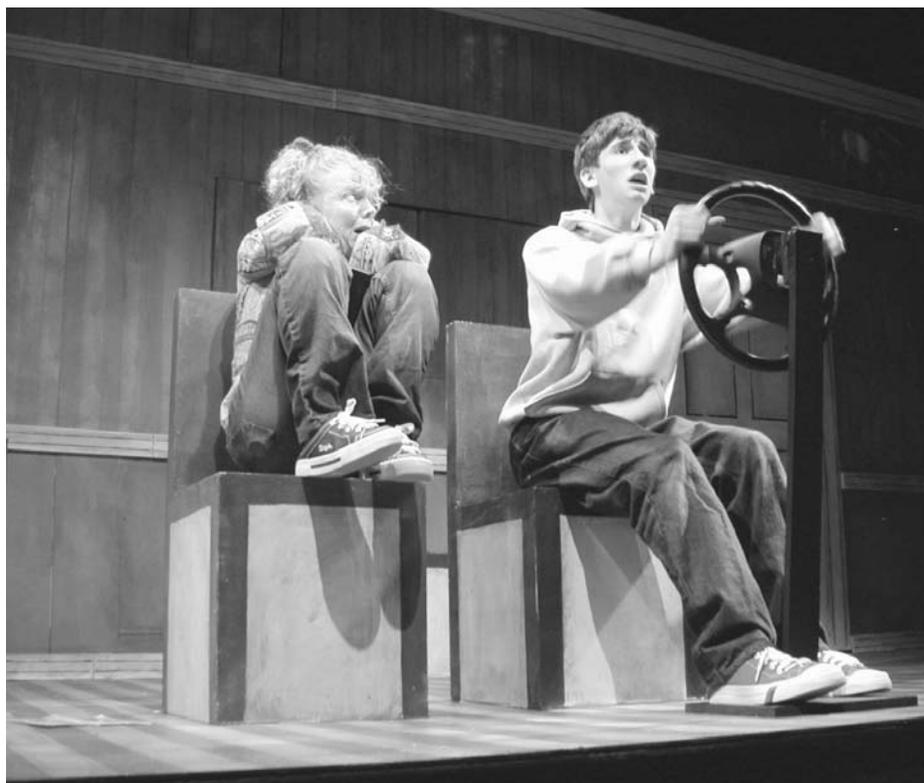
It depends entirely on what the play is. Every play I've written has been started in a different way. For *Rabbit Hole*, specifically, a couple things happened. When I was a student at Juilliard, Marsha Norman (who was our teacher) said one day, "if you want to write a good play, write about the thing that frightens you most in the world." And I thought, what is that? I didn't know at the time. Then a few years later, I became a dad and I had heard a couple awful stories about children who had died suddenly, and it was in that

moment that I thought: oh! That is the thing that scares me the most in the world. That became the seed of *Rabbit Hole* — fear. For *Fuddy Meers* it was a little piece of plot that came to me — there was a book about neurological disorders and one of them was this very specific form of amnesia. I stole that little idea, filed it away, and many months later I thought: what is it like for a woman to wake up every day needing her family to explain who she is, who they are, and what her situation is? What is it like at the end of every one of those days to lose that woman, to have her slip away every

night? So sometimes it's a plot idea, sometimes it's a character idea, sometimes it's like *Rabbit Hole*.

The role of disability and difference juxtaposed with humor is central to the majority of your work. What draws you to those kinds of stories?

I read once that most writers go back to this time when they were about eleven or twelve when something very traumatic happens in their lives. And so I thought, where was I at eleven or twelve? And aside from going through puberty — which is everybody's trauma — I got a scholarship to Milton Academy, a private school out in the suburbs. I grew up in a very blue-collar, rough and tumble neighborhood: Southie. And so for me to get up everyday and get on a train and go to this very tony, prestigious, hallowed campus where everybody was different than I was — it was defining to me as a person. I had a foot in each world, sort of shuttling between the two, but not really belonging to either one. It's not dissimilar to any-



Judith McIntyre and Jacob Liberman in the Boston Theatre Works Production of *Kimberly Akimbo*; photo: Nosaj T. Herland

thing that I've written about people finding themselves in an upside-down world where they have to maneuver through it and figure out who they are and how they fit.

Your plays are deeply theatrical, by which I mean they clearly don't belong in any other medium. Is that something that you've always had at your fingertips?

It is natural, it's certainly how I look at the world. I sit down and write things that I would find entertaining, or humorous,

crazy way. I read *House of Blue Leaves* in high school and I thought, good Lord! This thing is so wacky and yet so psychologically grounded and dark and sad. I immediately connected with it — it's what I wanted to write. With Feydeau, there's a great sense of anarchy. You know, I always feel like Feydeau is about twenty minutes too long, but I love it, and I just think it's pure insanity — the boldness of it and the absurdity of it. Ionesco isn't so dissimilar. There's a sense of nonsense with a purpose, and

“When I was a student at Juilliard, Marsha Norman said one day, ‘if you want to write a good play, write about the thing that frightens you most in the world.’”

or moving. It's just my point of view, but I think *Rabbit Hole* is a major departure from that. When I first started writing, I thought, this is just how I write — I write in a very theatrical, often absurdist way. Mostly I found naturalistic plays less engaging for me as an audience member. And then I started to look a little more closely at plays that were naturalistic, which for whatever reason, I started to enjoy. At some point, I had this little seed planted, “maybe you should write a naturalistic play.” I didn't know if I would ever find a play that would take care of that, but then those stories about the kids dying landed in my lap and I thought, maybe this is my way into writing it.

You mark Eugene Ionesco, Georges Feydeau, and John Guare as influences — how do you see those writers flexing their muscles in your work?

John Guare was the first playwright that I encountered who mixed tone in such a

again, sadness, too. As odd and absurd as Ionesco is, there's always sort of this ache underneath it, a longing. *Chairs*, for example, is one of the saddest plays, but so ridiculously funny.

***Rabbit Hole* was your first Broadway show. How was that, now that you're through to the other side?**

It was spectacular. It was everything I could have hoped it to be, and it was the easiest production I've ever worked on. I've never had to say less in a rehearsal room. But most satisfying was, actually, once the show was up and running, talking to people afterwards. I was often approached by, sadly, parents who had lost children. Some of them had stumbled upon the play by accident, some of them sought it out, but the play resonated with them in a way that I found gratifying as a writer. It's nice when people say “*Fuddy Meers* was so funny” and “*Kimberly* was so painful, it was so sad.” But this affected people in a way that I wasn't used to,

and, frankly, didn't really expect. I've never felt so proud of my work: it had reached people in a way that I had not reached them before.

Though *Rabbit Hole* is, as you say, more naturalistic than your other plays, I love that there's still that sense of trademark anarchy — do you think the play's humor helps temper the strain of grief that runs throughout?

I hope so. Honestly, I didn't even know if it was funny at all when I wrote it. Then we did a reading at Pacific Playwrights Festival at South Coast Repertory, and from the first few lines of the play people were laughing really hard. I thought: oh thank God. This play will work now because there are laughs there. It was a huge relief to know that as sad as the play is, it's really funny.

You grew up in Southie and you come from a blue-collar family. What happened when you announced that you were heading into the theatre?

They were entirely supportive. They wanted to make sure that I was happy and that's all that really mattered. My dad will still say to me, “are you ok for money? Are you doing ok?” because he doesn't quite understand how anyone can make a living in the theatre. But they're very proud, and it gives them a lot of bragging rights.

How do you feel about bringing *Rabbit Hole* to your hometown?

I grew up loving the Huntington, and when I became a playwright, that's where I wanted to have my plays produced, because, really, it's home. So this is incredibly gratifying, but it also comes with the pressure of failure. God! I hope it's good in Boston because it actually matters. In Phoenix I can sort of shrug and say, I don't care, I don't know anybody in Phoenix! If it stinks in Phoenix, who cares? I won't be there. But Boston, well, everybody I know is in Boston.

Death-Defining Action

Is it possible for a character the audience never meets to affect how the story unfolds? Yes — if the absence is palpable or leaves a void, an unseen character can fully shape the drama. The most powerful way to establish tension is with such a character's death. By its very nature of change and transition, death is an inherently dramatic event, and it can happen moments, or even years, before the action of the play begins. When we meet Becca and Howie in *Rabbit Hole*, their son, Danny, has already been fatally hit by a car, throwing their marriage into jeopardy and putting a strain on Becca's relationship with her mother and sister. It is Danny's absence that generates the central conflict of the play.

Rabbit Hole is by no means the first dramatic work to utilize death as an inciting incident or motivating factor; this motif can be seen as far back as Greek drama, as in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where the deaths of two brothers set a crisis in motion that has repercussions within the family and the state. Several of Shakespeare's plays employ this same device; *Antony and Cleopatra* begins after the death of Marc Antony's wife, initiating the events that catalyze the play's main conflict between the title characters. *As You Like It* starts with the death of Sir Rowland de Boys and the consequent expulsion of his son Orlando from the court. Orlando's exile hurls him to the forest where he befriends Rosalind, dressed as a boy, and a befuddled, bemused love blossoms.

Drama of the modern age also traffics in the deaths of offstage characters. In *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen, the exploits of a deceased father take their toll on his living relatives. Mr. Alving's life was full of debauchery, but he upheld his



Wilmington/Delaware, 1965; photo: Lee Friedlander

reputation with the help of his wife. As the play unfolds, his secrets are revealed and the lives of the family are forever changed. Even though the patriarch of the Alving family is long dead, his conduct in life still inflicts harm on those he left behind. Edward Albee cunningly incorporates a possibly dead unseen protagonist into his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by posing the question of whether George and Martha's baby was ever real. The cruel games that are part of the central conflict of the play can be attributed to the loss, or more accurately, the non-existence of their child. Albee suggests to us and the other characters that the child is a creation of the couple's imagination, and the absence of a real child both bonds the

duo and propels them into a bitter battle from which they can't escape.

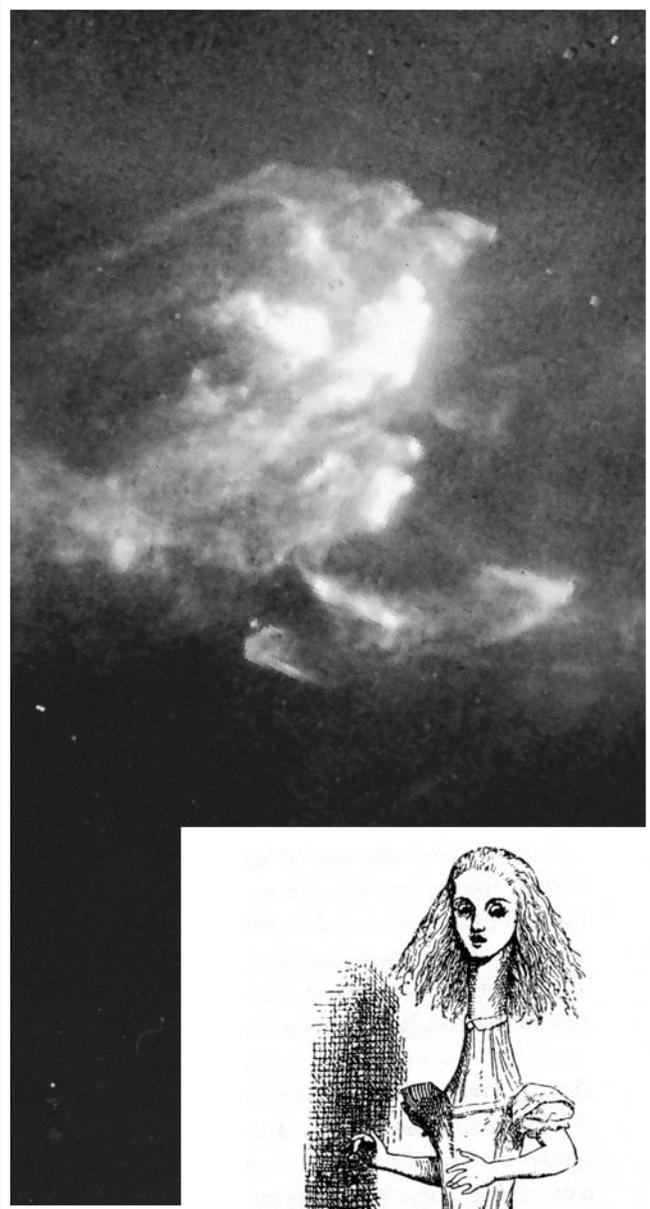
Throughout literary history, playwrights have relied on the existence and absence of offstage characters to raise the dramatic stakes, to move their creations to crisis, and sometimes transcendence, of the daily grind. Structurally, the emotional upheaval this dramatic device inspires makes for some of the most visceral theatrical experiences. In the hands of a skilled playwright, small personal dramas are raised to the level of universal human experience, allowing us to catch a glimpse of our own mortality and the promise of tomorrow. David Lindsay-Abaire doesn't disappoint in *Rabbit Hole*, a funny, gut-wrenching ache of a play with a deeply human soul. — *IMB with MBO*

Collapsed Stars, Rabbit Holes, and the Science of Parallel Universes

Rabbit Hole takes its title from an idea explored by Jason, the teenager who accidentally kills Becca and Howie's young son Danny. Jason's efforts to make sense of his world — one in which he not only has caused great grief for another family, but wherein he himself grieves for a lost father — take the shape of a short story in which those suffering can travel through "rabbit holes" to parallel universes. There exists, Jason explains, another universe where they all might be happy, if only they could make it there. Multiple realities, and the ability to travel between them, are a pervasive trope in popular culture, from *Alice In Wonderland* to *The Terminator*. But could parallel universes actually exist, and how might it be possible to travel between them?

The possibility of parallel universes first appeared in scientific thought with the discovery of black holes, or collapsed stars. In 1783, the British astronomer John Mitchell was the first to speculate about the possibility of a star so massive that not even light could escape. Mathematically, it makes sense for a mirror universe to exist on the other side of a black hole, and while Albert Einstein felt that the existence of such a universe couldn't be proven, his work with Israeli physicist Nathan Rosen suggested the possibility of a passageway to the hypothetical mirror universe. Their calculations theorize a gap at the center of a black hole, linking this universe with another; mathematicians call these gaps "multiply connected spaces," but physicists call them wormholes. In addition to the idea of mirror universes, the field of quantum physics — particularly through the work of Stephen W. Hawking — theorizes the existence of an infinite number of universes, one for every possible outcome of every decision. The wormholes, however — which are, according to Hawking, constantly developing and linking parallel universes together — are so small that not even atoms would be able to pass through.

While the existence of parallel universes is considered likely by physicists and mathematicians, the prospect of traveling to these other worlds anytime soon remains doubtful. Still, the notion that other universes exist — and the idea that the way things are in this universe are not how they have to be — can be a source of comfort. David Lindsay-Abaire notes, "I was definitely trying to find something that Becca could find solace in, and I didn't want it to be about support groups and I didn't want it to be about God. This is a woman who deals in facts." — KH



Top, Jets from a Young Star, 1994; photo: Jeff Hester. Bottom, Alice in Wonderland; illustration: John Tenniel



Vincenzo Natali, one day old; photo: Enrico Natali

TOUCHSTONES

For the Truth of Childhood

Whether we like it or not, we are tied to our siblings by shared experiences — their roles in our lives are as touchstones for the truths of our childhood. Despite (or because of) shared origins and history, relationships between siblings can be rocky. A variety of factors can explain the surprising differences between people reared in the same environment and born of the same parents. In *Rabbit Hole*, sisters Izzy and Becca revolve in familial orbit around their mother Nat, measuring themselves against one another, as well as the memory of their late brother Arthur. They're not alone: David Lindsay-Abaire drew on his own family social system as inspiration for the sibling relationships on stage. "Becca is the quintessential middle child," he notes, "just like me."

Birth order as a determinant of personality is popularly debated. Although the study of birth order is a hotbed for scientific argument, it cannot be denied that many individuals feel that their role in their family is heavily influenced by their ordinal position. Some cite their own personality traits, or those of their siblings, as attributable to their birth rank — the baby of the family, the dethroned oldest child, or the forgotten middle kid. The place each sibling feels he or she has in the family can influence the ways in which they continue to navigate social interaction years later, even as adults. In her book, *The Accidental Bond: The Power of Sibling Relationships*, Susan Scarf Merrell offers case studies and personal accounts of siblings reflecting on their place in the world:

The oldest, Scott:

"I'm responsible for everything and everyone. No one moves in my family without consulting me. I

feel like I've never been allowed to be a child, carefree and happy, because I'm supposed to be sensible and alert."

Margie, the tag-a-long to a bossy sister:

"I can't be in the same room with my sister Eileen for five minutes before she's bossing me around. She always thinks she's in charge and the only one who can do anything right. And me, I promptly turn into the little sister who doesn't have a mind of her own."

The baby of the family, Bill:

"I used to torment my sister by provoking her to hit me and then tattling on her. ...I felt bad but it was more important for me to prove that I was in control."

Siblings come to assume precise roles within family units — ones that are specific to natural attributes and the needs of their family. In short, although

they might share parents and a childhood, each sibling has an inherently different experience of that family. In his book, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*, Frank J. Sulloway writes, "The concept of 'niches' is useful...and describes how individuals develop differing roles within the family system. Siblings compete with one another in an effort to secure physical, emotional, and intellectual resources from parents."

Despite individual opinions on the influence of birth order on sibling roles, there is no doubt that siblings are a person's first peers as well as figures of great influence. In short, siblings teach an individual how to interact with the world beyond the family. As one woman notes in *The Accidental Bond*, "I always saw [my sister], not my parents, as the place I returned to. I always saw her as my roots. ...She's where I come from in the world, what centers me." — LI



BU Theatre by T. Charles Erickson

Audience Etiquette

Because many students have not had the opportunity to view live theatre, we are including an audience etiquette section with each literary/curriculum guide. Teachers, please spend time on this subject since it will greatly enhance your students' experience at the theatre.

1. How does one respond to a live performance of a play, as opposed to when seeing a film at a local cinema? What is the best way to approach viewing a live performance of a play? What things should you look and listen for?
2. What is the audience's role during a live performance? How do you think audience behavior can affect an actor's performance?
3. What do you know about the theatrical rehearsal process? Have you ever participated in one as an actor, singer, director, or technical person?
4. How do costumes, set, lights, sound and props enhance a theatre production?

BACKGROUND & Objectives

Use the following synopsis and lesson objectives to inform your teaching of *Rabbit Hole* curriculum.

After the death of her young son, Becca feels like she is falling helplessly through her own life. Every relationship, including her marriage, comes close to unraveling. She doesn't want to return to her old job, have another baby, undergo a religious revival, or follow any other advice from her well-meaning family and friends. Oddly, the only person whose words offer some hope is the person she would be most justified in blaming: the teenage driver who killed her son. His science-fiction story about parallel universes and rabbit holes gives her a basis for believing that her tragedy need not be all-consuming. Although she will carry the pain of her son's death forever, she begins to embrace it as a bridge to the past.

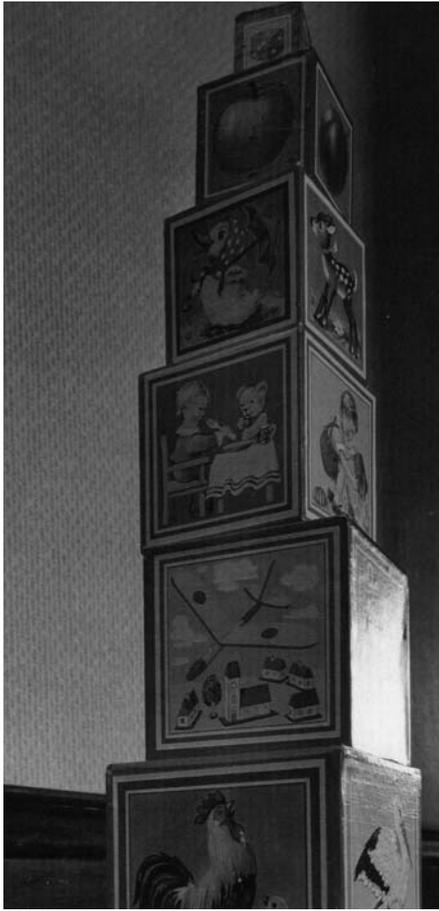
OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Rabbit Hole* including:
 - coping with loss
 - forms of faith
 - the weight of guilt
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 *Rabbit Hole*.



Brady Looking at His Shadow (detail), 1990; photo: Abelardo Morell



Toy Blocks (detail), 1987; photo: Abelardo Morell

PREPARATION FOR *Rabbit Hole*

Use the following ideas to engage your class in thinking about David Lindsay-Abaire, introducing them to Rabbit Hole and its major themes.

FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

The play depicts a married couple's struggle to come to terms with the premature death of their son. Both recognize that the grieving process will be long, but they remain hopeful that it will bring them to a better place. As Nat explains, "At some point [the death] becomes bearable. It turns into something you can crawl out from under. And carry around — like a brick

in your pocket." Have students consider the five stages of grief that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified in her famous book *On Death and Dying*. They are (1) denial and isolation, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, such as asking God to spare your life until a specific event, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance. Do Becca and Howie progress through any of these five stages during the play? Which ones? Might it be possible to skip some of the stages or to encounter them in a different order?

DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE

David Lindsay-Abaire, the Boston native who wrote *Rabbit Hole*, made the most of his early education. He attended Boston public schools until junior high, when he received a scholarship to Milton Academy, a private institution with a tradition of producing student plays. Although Lindsay-Abaire characterizes his early works as "terrible, terrible plays," he developed enough confidence to enroll as a theatre major at Sarah Lawrence College. From there, he gained admission to a very selective playwriting program at the Juilliard School. Have students discuss the relative importance of youthful experimentation and formal education to the development of their writing abilities. Can writing "terrible" works as a young person nevertheless help them to become talented writers later in life?

KEY ISSUES

Coping With Loss

Becca and Howie have very different methods of coping with the loss of their son. Howie loves to be reminded of Danny, such as when he finds small fingerprints around the house or watches old videotapes. Becca, however, wishes that those painful reminders would disappear. Howie turns to other people for support, perhaps even taking things too far with one of the women in his group. Becca, however, rejects the idea that grief can be shared with others. She says that the women in her support

group only "know what they're going through." She even finds it difficult to relate to Howie, telling him that "we can't be there for each other right now." Why do Becca and Howie have such different coping mechanisms? Becca comments to Howie, "You're not in a better place than I am, you're just in a *different* place." Do you agree?

Forms of Faith

Becca no longer believes that her life has a design, or even a designer. She refuses to accept the thought that a loving God would create a world with so much suffering. Yet she admits being jealous of so-called "God-freaks," because they have a source of comfort inaccessible to her. At the end of the play, Becca does manage to find some comfort in a secular source. Jason, citing the "basic laws of science," suggests that there may be other Beccas in parallel universes, charting less tragic courses for her life. "There's a never-ending stream of possibilities," he says. To Becca, this means that somewhere within infinite space, another version of her may get to enjoy the rest of a happy life with her son. Why is this secular belief more comforting to Becca than her discarded religious beliefs? How are the two faiths similar, and how are they different?

The Weight of Guilt

Each character in the play feels some measure of guilt about Danny's death. Izzy regrets calling Becca to complain about their mother, which distracted Becca from her son's whereabouts. Becca regrets leaving the gate open in the backyard as she raced for the phone. Howie regrets buying the dog that led Danny into the street. And Jason must live with the fact that he struck and killed a young boy with his vehicle. None of these characters intended to cause any harm. Danny's death was simply an unfortunate accident. Nevertheless, guilt weighs heavily upon them all. How do they attempt to release some of that weight? Will they ever be able to release it entirely?

OPEN RESPONSE & WRITING Assignments

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.

OPEN RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

1. Why is the play entitled *Rabbit Hole*? What does the rabbit hole symbolize?
2. Why does everyone hope that Izzy's baby will be a girl?
3. Becca briefly stands on the stairway and listens to the videotape of Danny that Howie is watching. Do you think Becca intentionally erased the tape? If so, why?
4. The videotape shows Danny pretending to be invisible and to have magical powers. Why might that segment of the tape be particularly meaningful or helpful to Howie?
5. Why is Becca vehemently opposed to any comparison between Danny's death and Arthur's? Are her feelings justified?
6. Although Howie was seen holding hands with another woman, he denies having an affair. Do you believe him? Why did he look to someone other than his wife for companionship?
7. Why is it ironic that Howie works as a risk management assessor? How might his job have affected the way he responded to his son's death?
8. Debbie and Becca were friends before Danny died, but they lost touch after the tragedy. Do you think Debbie really fears that accidents are "contagious," as Becca says? What other reasons might she have for allowing their relationship to wither?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. After revealing her pregnancy, Izzy claims that having a child "is exactly the kind of thing that gives a person clarity." Howie agrees that "[a] baby can be good for a person." However,

Becca predicts that parenthood will be too burdensome for her carefree sister. Does having a baby usually make a person more responsible? Why or why not?

2. Should Becca and Howie file a lawsuit against Jason so that they can recover money for their son's death? What are the benefits and drawbacks of litigation in this situation?
3. Izzy has always lived in the shadow of her responsible older sister. Becca worked at a famous auction house, married a businessman, had a child, and became an expert in the kitchen. She is a perfectionist in all aspects of her life. Izzy, on the other hand, takes a carefree approach to life. Do you think her choices have been affected by Becca's? Which sister has taken the better route?
4. Would Becca and Howie have been better prepared to deal with Danny's death if they had other children? Should they have more children in the future? Explain your answers.
5. After their sons died, both Becca and Nat had friendship problems. Compare Becca's awkward relationship with Debbie to Nat's awkward relationship with Maureen Bailey. How were the situations different, and how were they similar?
6. Choose one of the main characters in the play and write a journal entry from his or her point of view, expanding on what we already know. Place the character at a key moment in the play, a time critical to propelling the action forward.
7. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Rabbit Hole* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!



Camera Obscura Image of Brookline View in Brady's Room, 1992; photo: Abelardo Morell

MASTERY

Assessment

ACT 1

Scene 1

1. As the play opens, Izzy tells Becca about a recent event in a bar. What happened, and what caused it?
2. What important personal news does Izzy share with Becca?

Scene 2

3. Why is Becca upset with her friend Debbie?
4. Why does Becca want to sell the house? Does Howie want to sell it?
5. At the end of the scene, what is Howie watching?

Scene 3

6. Whose birthday is being celebrated?
7. Nat discusses the misfortunes of which famous family?
8. Who is Arthur? What happened to him?

Scene 4

9. What is Jason's message to Becca and Howie? What does he dedicate to their son?
10. What happened to the video Howie was watching?
11. How did Danny die?

ACT 2

Scene 1

12. What advice does Izzy give to Howie about selling the house?
13. What leads Izzy to confront Howie? What is his response to the accusation?
14. What happened to Becca at the grocery store?



Infant (detail); photo: Mary Motley Kalegis

15. Who wanders in at the end of the open house?

Scene 2

16. As the scene opens, what is Becca doing with Nat in Danny's room?
17. Briefly summarize the story that Nat tells about Maureen Bailey.
18. What is the basic plot of the story that Jason gave to Becca and Howie?

Scene 3

19. What does Jason admit to Becca about the accident?
20. What is Jason's theory about the existence of parallel universes?

Scene 4

20. What does Howie decide to do about his group therapy?
20. With whom does Becca make amends? How do Howie and Becca plan to deal with the barbecue?

Related Works and Resources

Other plays by David Lindsay-Abaire:

Kimberly Akimbo (2000)

Wonder of the World (2000)

Dotting and Dashing (1999)

A Devil Inside (1997)

Books mentioned in *Rabbit Hole*:

David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens (1849–50)

Bleak House, by Charles Dickens (1852–53)

Madame Bovary, by Gustave Flaubert (1856)

The Runaway Bunny, by Margaret Wise (1991)

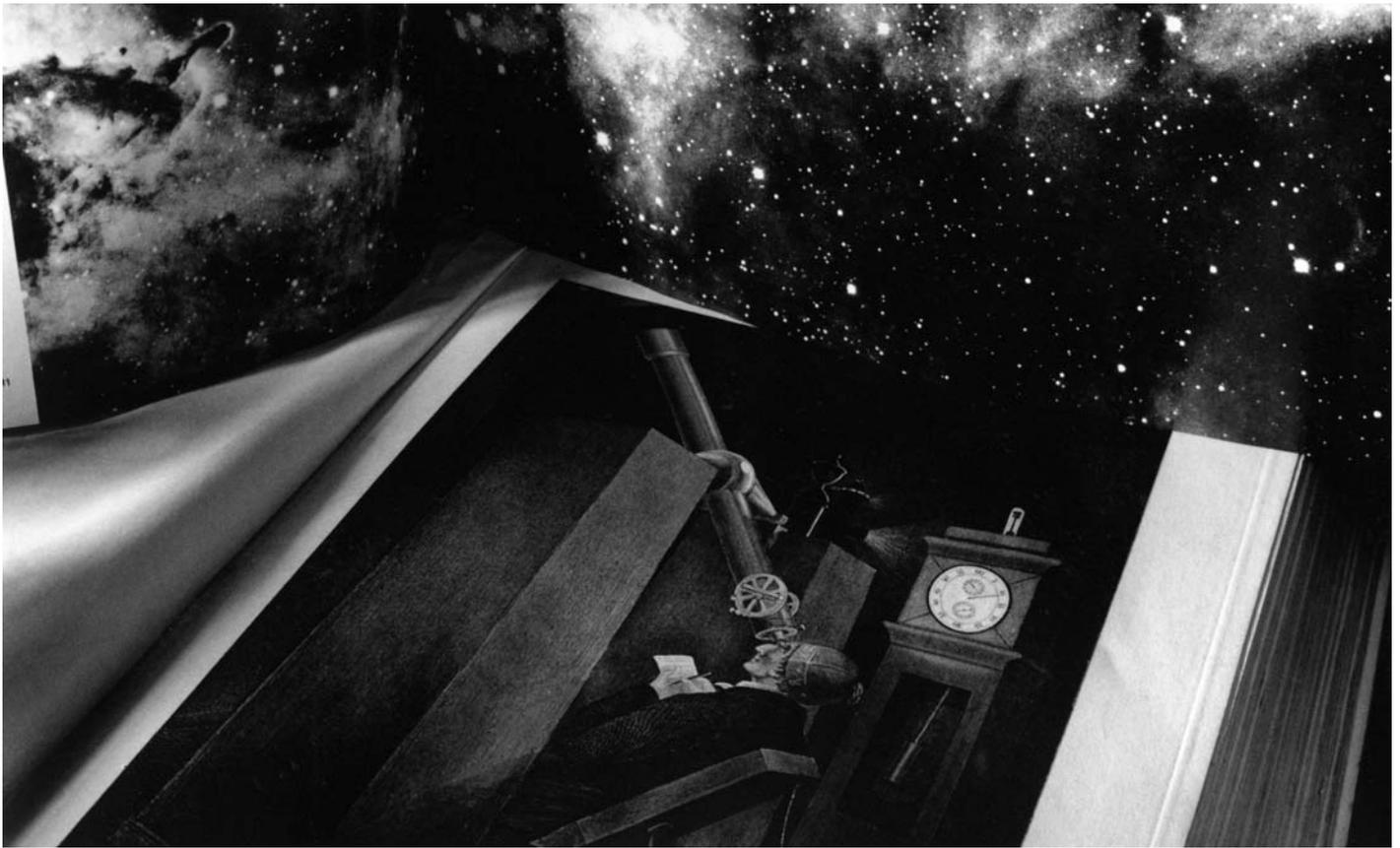
Supplemental resources:

A Brief History of Time, by Stephen Hawking (1991)

On Death and Dying, by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969)

Donnie Darko, directed by Richard Kelly (20th Century Fox 2003)

Alice in Wonderland, directed by Kathryn Beaumont and Ed Wynn (Walt Disney 1951)



Two Books of Astronomy (detail), 1996; photo: Abelardo Morell

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Note to Teachers: The following ideas and questions can be used to further explore the text. They can be used as prompts for class discussion or additional writing assignments.

1. Jason claims that space is infinite and that there must be parallel universes with worlds similar to ours. Is this scientifically correct? Research the prevailing theories about the creation of our universe and about the possibility of other universes. Write an essay explaining which of Jason's scientific claims were right and which were wrong.
2. Becca observes that Jason's story about parallel universes is similar to an ancient Greek myth about Orpheus and Eurydice. Examine that myth. Write an essay in which you summarize the myth and then try to deconstruct the analogy that Becca makes.
3. Becca laughs when she learns that her class is reading the novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Both she and Jason prefer another Dickens novel, *David Copperfield* (which happened to be Dickens's favorite as well). Research the two novels and then briefly describe them. Why might Becca and Jason prefer *David Copperfield*, given their recent circumstances? Becca also mentions that her class is reading *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. She comments that it "oughta get the ol' girls goin'." Research the novel and then briefly describe its plot. Why might Madame Bovary be exciting to older women?
4. Howie frequently talks about playing squash — the sport, not the vegetable! Research the sport and answer the following questions. What are the basic rules of squash? How does it differ from racquetball? What is a "squash ladder"? In which social groups has squash traditionally been most popular?
5. Nat speaks at length about the tragedies that have befallen the Kennedy family. Explore the family's history and create an outline of the tragedies to which she refers. Which were related to the family's political involvement and which were not?

MEDIA

Assessment

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

DRAMA

Have each student choose a character from *Rabbit Hole* to portray. As if preparing for the role in rehearsal, have students answer the following questions about their characters: (1) What is my character's objective in the play, and which obstacles must he or she overcome? (2) How does my character change during the course of the play? (3) Are there any

contradictions inherent in my character? (4) 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 sort of 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

Using the media with which you feel most comfortable, create a "For Sale by Owner" advertisement for Becca and

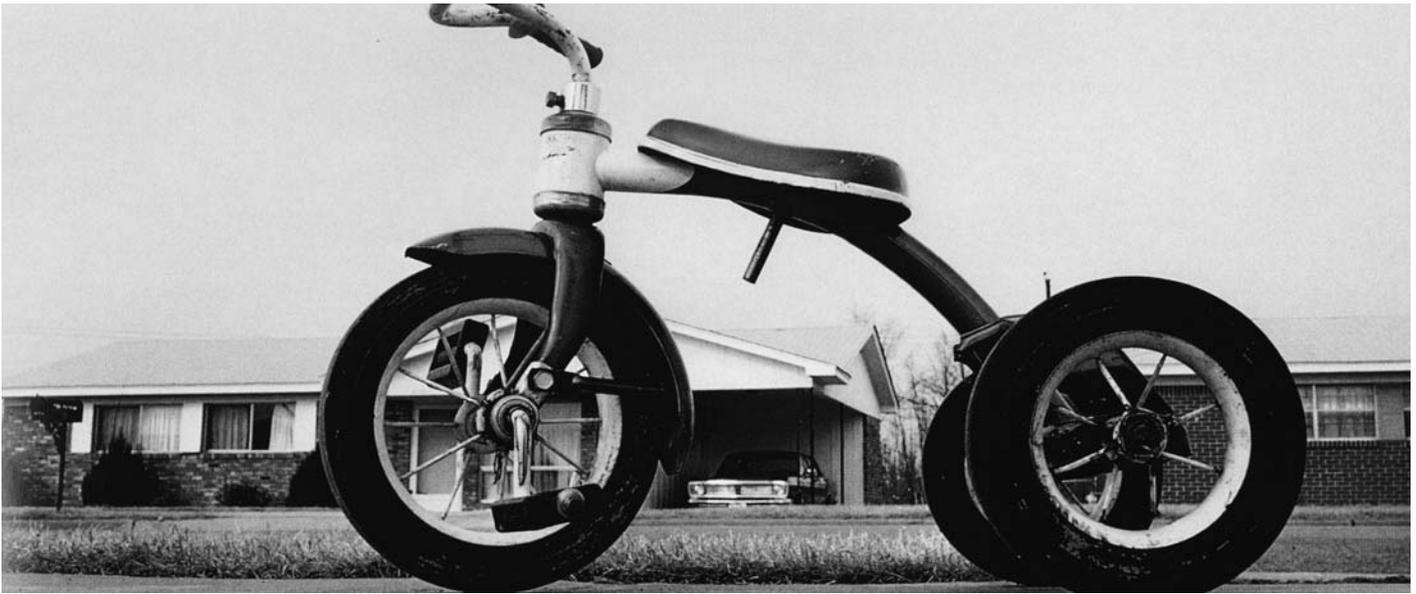
Howie's house. Be creative! What do Becca and Howie want people to know about their home? What are they trying to hide? Do they really want to sell it? Your sign should reflect their internal struggle with the decision to let go of their home.

VISUAL ARTS

The difficult task of redecorating Danny's room leads to some disagreement between Becca and Howie. They do agree, however, to put Ansel Adams photographs on the walls. Research Adams's work and select four photos that best reflect the theme Becca and Howie are trying to create in the room. Explain why you selected them.



Noemi, 1987; photo: Phillip-Lorca diCorcia



Memphis, 1969-71; photo: William Eggleston

QUESTIONS FOR AFTER Attending the Performance

Note to teachers: After viewing the play, ask the following questions:

1. About the Play and Production

- A. What was your overall reaction? Were you surprised? Intrigued? Amused? Explain your reactions. How was the play structured? Did it build to a single climax? Was it episodic? Did this structure help or hinder your understanding of the play? Was the dialogue interesting? Appropriate? Poetic? Were you aware of the imagery and symbolism during the course of the play? Would you have been aware of these devices without previous preparation?
- B. Was the pace and tempo of the production effective and appropriate?

2. About the Characters

- A. Did the characters touch you personally in any way? Did you care about them?
- B. Were the characters three-dimensional and believable?

- C. Were the motivations of the characters clear?
- D. What qualities were revealed by the action and speech of the characters?
- E. Did the characters develop or undergo a transformation during the course of the play?
- F. In what ways did the characters reveal the themes of the play?

3. About the Set

- A. Was the set usable and workable?
- B. Was the set compatible with the production as a whole? Were there any features of the set that distracted from the action of the play?
- C. Did the design reflect the themes, type and style of the play?
- D. Were the artistic qualities of unity, balance, line, texture, mass and color used effectively?
- E. Did the set provide appropriate environment and atmosphere?

- F. Was the set used to present any symbolic images or did it simply represent the space in which the action of the play occurred? Did it contain elements of both a “realistic” and a “symbolic” approach?

4. About Lighting and Sound

- A. What mood or atmosphere did the lighting establish? Was the illumination sufficient? Did the lighting harmonize with, and contribute toward, the unity of the production?
- B. How did the sound used in the play enhance your overall experience?

5. About Costumes/Makeup/Hairstyles

- A. Were all of these elements correct in terms of the period fashion? Were they suitable in terms of character and storytelling for the production?
- B. Did the color/design of the costumes and make-up serve to illuminate the themes, type, and style of the play?

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. 13) for *Rabbit Hole* 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. 3) 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 more critically and creatively 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.



'It was much pleasanter at home' (detail), 1998; photo: Abelardo Morell

DAY THREE - Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class.

DAY FOUR - Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the **Open Response** (P. 12) or one question from **Writing Assignments** (P. 12) for students to answer in one class period.

Optional: Students may choose one of the **For Further Exploration** (P. 14) or **Writing Assignments** (P. 12) tasks to complete for extra credit.

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *Rabbit Hole* 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.

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

Optional: Distribute **Vocabulary Handout** due on Day Four.

DAY TWO - Act One

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

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

DAY THREE - Act Two

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

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR - Group Work: The Museum

Ask students to bring their chairs into a circle. Divide students into groups of two or three, and tell them that a volcano has erupted and in fifteen minutes their lives will be lost. However, they have the opportunity to preserve the memory of their class by creating an installation for a museum. Allow students to return to their desks, lockers, etc., to gather belongings, write notes, and design their exhibit. Students' work must fit on their chairs, which is where it will be displayed. Once students complete their projects, ask them to turn the chairs so that they face outwards. Leading the students around, take the time to look carefully at each exhibit, giving each student an opportunity to talk about how they would want to be remembered. Do these exhibits do a good job of representing the details of their lives?

Optional: Vocabulary Handout due.

DAY FIVE - The Production

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.

Optional: Students may choose to complete one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** (P. 15) tasks for extra credit.

DAY SIX - Review/Preparation

Students should complete Handout #2 during class time. Discuss responses and answer any remaining questions they have about the play.

Homework: Study for test!

DAY SEVEN - Test

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

Handout #2 due!

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 1
VOCABULARY

absolve

affront

ambient

bystander

condolence

distraught

dynamic

hubris

hype

hypothetical

insolent

intervention

karma

leukemia

lobotomy

nemesis

perpetuate

plausible

plié

presumption

prologue

provoke

sabotage

sadistic

subconscious

warren

zest

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 2
DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Jason comforts Becca by speculating about the existence of parallel universes in which our lives follow different paths. While this may not be true as a scientific matter, it is certainly true for writers of fiction. They can choose to send their characters down an infinite number of paths. This exercise will give you a chance to play the writer's role by envisioning alternate paths for the characters in *Rabbit Hole*.

Imagine a parallel universe in which . . .

. . . Howie admits to Izzy that he was, in fact, having an affair with the woman from his therapy group. How does Izzy respond?

. . . Izzy discovers that she is not only pregnant, but is having a boy. Does she tell Becca? Why or why not? If she does tell, how does Becca respond?

. . . Jason never stops by to apologize, and never writes his story about parallel universes. How are Becca and Howie affected? What about Jason?

. . . Becca admits that she did intentionally erase the videotape of Danny. How is her relationship with Howie affected?

. . . in addition to speeding, Jason was drinking a small amount of alcohol. Does he admit that fact to Becca? Why or why not? If so, how does Becca respond?

. . . Becca never calls Debbie. What becomes of their relationship?
