



© Huntington Theatre Company
Boston, MA 02115
March 2007

No portion of this Teacher Curriculum Guide may be reproduced without written permission from the Huntington Theatre Company's Department of Education.

Inquiries should be directed to:

Donna Glick, Director of Education
Huntington Theatre Company
264 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115

Limelight

teacher literary &
curriculum guide

Well

by
Lisa Kron

Directed by
Leigh Silverman

March 9- April 8, 2007
at the Boston University Theatre

Photo of Lisa Kron: Joan Karous

 the
Huntington

HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY
IN RESIDENCE AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Well

by **Lisa Kron**

Directed by **Leigh Silverman**

Table of Contents

STAFF

This Teacher Literary and Curriculum Guide was prepared for the Huntington Theatre Company by

Marisa Jones, *Education Consultant*

With contributions by

Donna Glick, *Director of Education*

Ilana Brownstein, *Literary Manager*

Lauren Ignaut, *Former Artistic Intern*

Cristina Killingsworth, *Artistic Intern*

Nicole Martorana, *Artistic Intern*

M. Bevin O'Gara, *Artistic Associate,
New Repertory Theatre*

Elisha Sawyer, *Education Intern*

Amanda Rota, *Education Department Manager*

Melissa Wagner-O'Malley, *Layout*

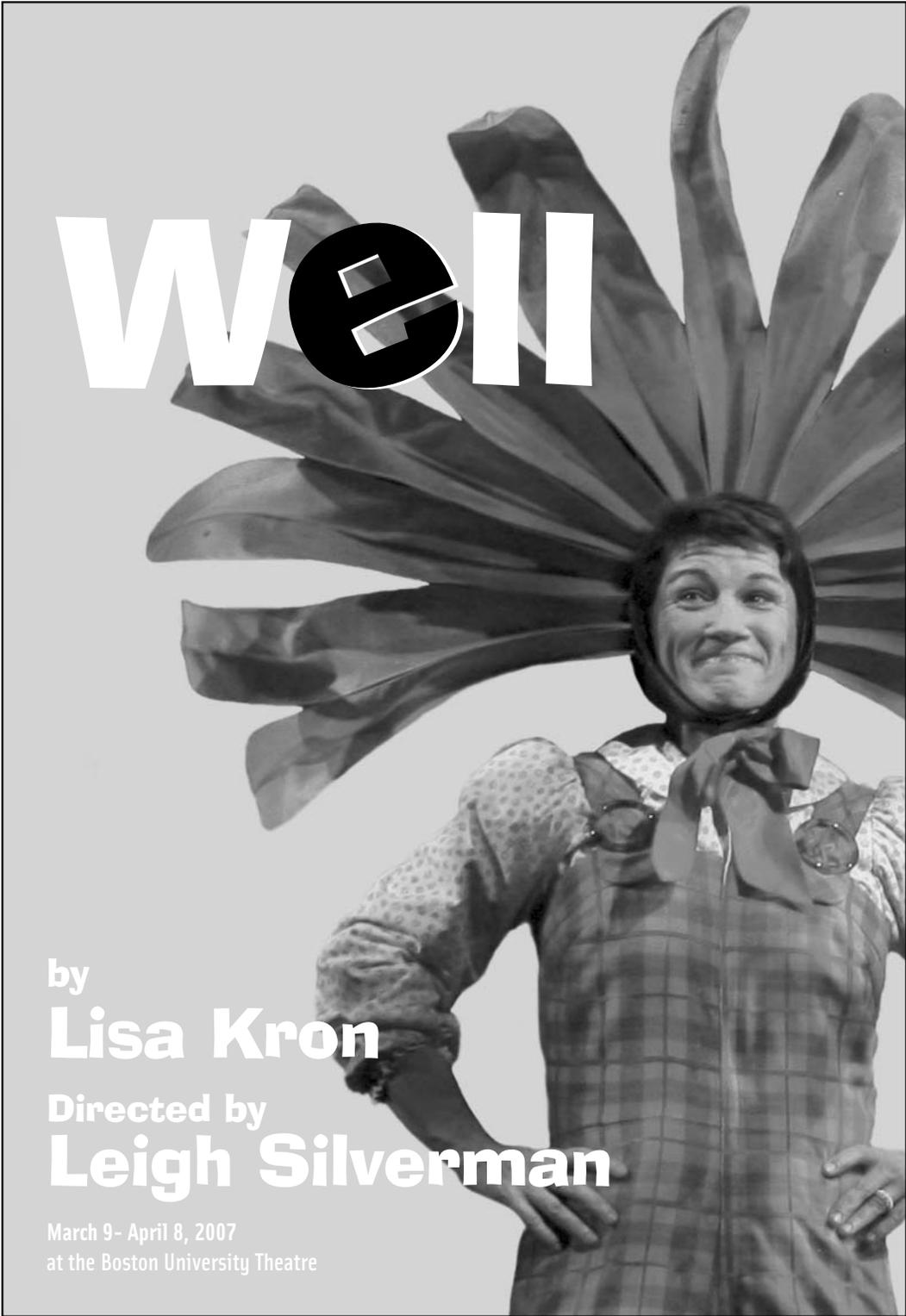
Special thanks to American Conservatory Theater for allowing us to incorporate portions of their Words on Plays educational guide to *Well*. "Characters," "Further Reading" and other questions and activities throughout the guide are used with permission from A.C.T.

Table of Contents

3	Synopsis
4	No Spectator Sports: Lisa Kron
5	The Lesbian Brothers: Five Women, One Voice
6	Sniffles and Sneezes and Coughs, Oh My!
7	Witnessing Theatricality
10	Audience Etiquette
10	Background & Objectives
10	Preparation for <i>Well</i>
11	Kron's Characters
12	Open Response & Writing Assignments
13	Mastery Assessment
13	Related Works and Resources
14	For Further Exploration
15	Media Assessment
16	Questions for After the Performance
17	Lesson Plans
18	Further Reading
19	Handout 1: Vocabulary
20	Handout 2: A Matter of Perspective

Proud Sponsor





Well

by
Lisa Kron

Directed by
Leigh Silverman

March 9- April 8, 2007
at the Boston University Theatre

SYNOPSIS

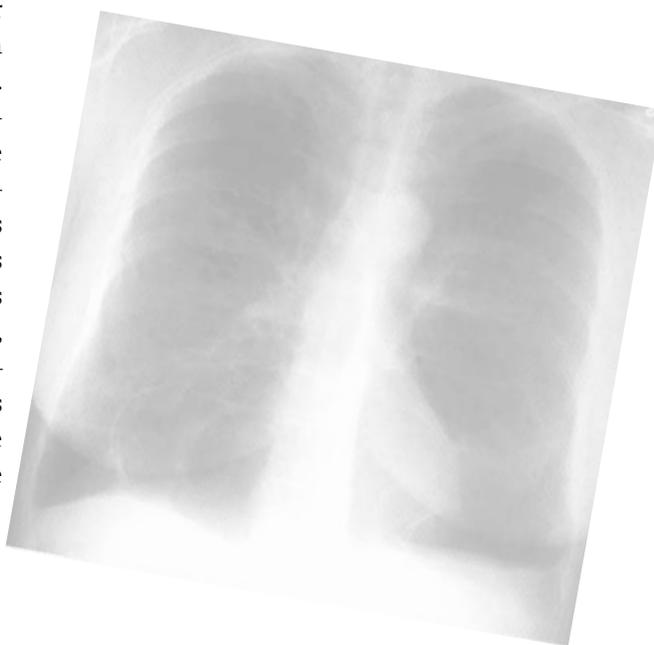
Well

"This is not a play about my mother and me." Lisa Kron the character — not to be confused with Lisa Kron the playwright — begins *Well* with this important clarification about the focus of her play. Meanwhile, her mother Ann lets out a groan as she sleeps in her La-Z-Boy recliner. Though Lisa describes the piece as a "multi-character theatrical exploration of issues of health and illness both in the individual and in a community," she is blissfully unaware that her mother, in alternating moments of tenderness and hilarity, is about to impose her own account of their shared past.

Almost immediately, Ann undermines Lisa's carefully planned dramatic experience. She charmingly offers refreshments to the audience and makes corrections to Lisa's recollections. Lisa explains that her mother suffers from illness brought on by chronic allergies. Still, during Lisa's childhood, Ann served as a catalyst for social change and helped to achieve racial integration in their Lansing, Michigan neighborhood. Lisa now wonders how her mother was able to cure the rift in their society, but never able to cure herself.

In her exploration of universal wellness, Lisa revisits the time she spent at the Allergy Unit at Henrotin Hospital in Chicago after her own conditions forced her to leave college. Simultaneously, she describes her mother's involvement in the West Side Neighborhood Association and the Lansing community, including portraits of her own friendships with other neighborhood children. All the while, the other characters in the play are slowly rebelling against the confines of Lisa's script.

Part autobiography, part hilariously subversive metatheatrical experience, Lisa Kron's world is reduced to mayhem as the impulsive manipulations of her mother and the other characters cause the play to spin off its axis. Her frustration grows each time Ann interjects, and the rest of the cast becomes increasingly engrossed in this alternate version of the story. As if that weren't enough, Lisa's pesky childhood bully resurfaces, much to Lisa the character's — and Lisa the playwright's — dismay. As the structure of the theatrical endeavor collapses and the actors lose focus, Lisa is left alone to uncover the relationship between art and reality, between her mother's life and her own. — NM



NO SPECTATOR SPORTS: Lisa Kron



Lisa Kron

In the introduction to her plays *2.5 Minute Ride* and *101 Humiliating Stories*, Lisa Kron writes, “It is my goal to strive for total fluidity so that my performances expand and contract to incorporate any unexpected intrusions — like the ringing of a cell phone, or a particularly noticeable reaction. I don’t want the audience to feel that they are watching something that is going to play out the same way with or without them.” Kron’s career as a solo performer and playwright has remained true to this goal, and it’s this sense of cooperation between artist and patron that makes an evening of theatre with Lisa Kron an experience rather than a spectator sport, an exploration rather than an instruction.

Since her youth, Kron has worked to channel her role as outsider into a means of making connections with an audience. A white Jewish girl growing up in the largely black Lansing, Michigan, she has said, “When I was in junior high school, I set myself a conscious mission to figure out how to make myself really funny. I wanted people to say, ‘Lisa Kron is the funniest person I ever met.’” Although she never pursued theatre during her childhood, Kron always considered herself a performer. During college, she suffered illness and chronic exhaustion, which forced her to leave school and check herself into the hospital for allergy treatment. When her health improved,

Kron decided to embrace her ambitions and pursue an acting career.

Upon her arrival to the New York theatre scene in the mid-1980s, Kron sought success within the boundaries of a “conventional idea of theatre.” Soon, however, she found herself drawn to the world of performance art, which was then thriving in the East Village. Performers like Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Holly Hughes had established themselves as a new generation of female artists. In addition, there were several venues committed to producing experimental work by women, and celebrating the complexities of lesbian sexuality and culture. Inspired by the freedom from traditional gender constructions, Kron found a home at the WOW (Women’s One World) Café — the legendary OBIE Award-winning New York performance space collectively owned and operated by women, for women. Here, Kron was able to experiment with the metatheatrical style (that is, theatre about theatre) that would characterize her solo work, while embracing subject matter she found personally and universally meaningful. Kron developed a unique combination of comedy, vaudeville, costume, media, and memory that made her performances entertaining and revelatory.

In addition to developing her work as a solo artist, Kron joined forces with other WOW performers to write a play that could tour. Kron, together with Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, and Peg Healey, founded the Five Lesbian Brothers and wrote *Voyage to Lesbos*. The group went on to create a series of comedies that drew from pop culture ideas of womanhood and highlighted the ways in which society simultaneously constructs “lesbian environments” and denies their existence (*Brides of the Moon*, *The Secretaries*, *Brave Smiles*, and most recently, *Oedipus at Palm Springs*). By way of her work with the Five Lesbian Brothers, Kron brought a greater sense of structure to her solo work.



Lisa Kron and the cast of *Well* on Broadway; photo: Joan Marcus

“When I was in junior high school, I set myself a conscious mission to figure out how to make myself really funny. I wanted people to say, ‘Lisa Kron is the funniest person I ever met.’”

Kron’s first original play, *101 Humiliating Stories* (1993), was a collection of monologues chronicling an array of embarrassing incidents, from gym class to the temp desk. It premiered at Performance Space 122 and was then presented as part of Serious Fun! at Lincoln Center. Later, it was produced by New York Theatre Workshop and nominated for a 1995 Drama Desk Award for Best Solo Show.

Kron went on to create the widely-performed *2.5 Minute Ride*, in which she describes a trip to Auschwitz with her father, whose parents were killed there. She sets this story alongside a comedic recollection of a family trip to an amusement park. After premiering at the La Jolla Playhouse in 1996, it received its New York premiere at The Public Theater/NYSF where the run sold-out and was extended.

Ride received an OBIE Award, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle nominations, an L.A. Dramalogue Award, the GLAAD Award for Best Off Broadway Play, and was named Best Autobiographical Show by New York Press.

Well, Kron’s most recent piece, expands beyond the realm of her previous work in its use of a multi-character structure. It was developed with the help of director Leigh Silverman and dramaturg John Dias, and received workshops at Long Wharf Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, Baltimore’s Centerstage, Dixon Place, and the Sundance Theatre Lab. It premiered in New York at The Public Theater in March 2004, toured to American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) in San Francisco in February 2006, and opened

on Broadway at the Longacre Theatre in March 2006, where it received two Tony Award nominations, including one for Kron’s performance. *Well* was selected for the anthology *Best Plays of 2003-2004* and garnered Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel, and Outer Critics Circle nominations. In an interview with A.C.T. Kron said “*Well* is really about how we create narrative to make sense of our lives, and how each of our individual narratives is not necessarily true for someone else. We each make sense of the world in a different way.” The idea of creating our own stories is a message that Kron delivers in all of her work and it is her ability to include us in her own individual narrative that has allowed her to become a unique and powerful theatrical force. – NM



From left, Lisa Kron, Peg Healey, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, and Maureen Angelos

THE LESBIAN BROTHERS: Five Women, One Voice

Five lesbians walk into a Café and decide to call themselves brothers... it could be the beginning of a joke, but in fact it's the start of one of the most successful, dynamic, and hilarious collaborations in theatre today. In 1989 Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron (the Five Lesbian Brothers) started performing at the celebrated women's theatre collective, WOW Café, making gender politics something to guffaw about rather than scoff at, and forming an ensemble dedicated to creating provocative lesbian theatre for everyone.

Prior to the arrival of the Brothers, "lesbian theatre" had two outlets: one in performance art venues, and one for lesbian writers who weren't necessarily expressing an exclusively lesbian experience. The Brothers saw a void and wanted to fill it. In the 1980s they participated in the multi-faceted world of avant-garde theatre and performance art, which permeat-

ed New York's downtown scene. Leading the way was the Split Britches Theatre Company, run by Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin, who brought innovative performance pieces with a lesbian slant to WOW beginning in 1981. Individual performers, such as Holly Hughes (*Dress Suit to Hire* and *Clit Notes*) and Karen Finley (later of the infamous NEA Four), played a large role in this movement as well. But the work of performance artists wasn't considered "theatre" in the traditional sense of the word: their pieces didn't have a beginning, middle, and end; they made art rather than telling stories. Meanwhile, lesbian writers such as Paula Vogel and Maria Irene Fornes used a conventional structure for their plays, but didn't necessarily use their plays to portray lesbian characters. The Brothers realized their unique sense of humor could fill the need for structured theatrical work that dealt openly with a lesbian worldview.

It's possible that a majority of people wouldn't think of feminist lesbians as high comedienne, but the Brothers tear this stereotype to shreds, leaving their audiences in stitches. Pulling from such varied cultural icons as Monty Python and *Twin Peaks*, they have established themselves as a comedy troupe-cum-performance collective aimed at making political and intellectual statements. And yet they simultaneously show us new ways of thinking, examining how heterosexual and homosexual cultures collide and shape one another. Because their perspective is of "outsiders" to the masses, their work is inherently political, a reflection on a minority point-of-view.

In true collaborative style, each of the Brothers is both writer and performer, making each play a patchwork quilt of experiences. Their style is broad, embracing both the ways in which society views them and the ways they see themselves, yet it never lacks for heart or genuine emotion. They are adept at walking the fine line between realism and lunacy. In their satire, they are universally offensive, ridiculing feminists, homosexuals, and "mainstream" culture alike.

Their first production, *Voyage to Lesbos*, which premiered at WOW in 1990, took a leap away from the directive of the time. There was pressure in the '70s and '80s for homosexual artists to portray positive images of themselves in order to gain acceptance and presence in the arts community. Dominique Dibbell says, "We incorrigibly did the opposite of what we were told; we instinctively returned to the image of lesbians as perverts." Lisa Kron notes that this play began an "exploration of [the] warping effect of internalized homophobia and phallo-centrism on the lesbian psyche," and was just plain "trippy."

Their second collaboration, *BRAVE SMILES...another lesbian tragedy* (1992), pushed the Brothers' manipulation of popular culture to the extreme, pulling from literature, film, and theatre to create a hodge-podge of homophobic social com-

In true collaborative style, each of the Brothers is both writer and performer, making each play a patchwork quilt of experiences. ... They are adept at walking the fine line between realism and lunacy. In their satire, they are universally offensive, ridiculing feminists, homosexuals, and "mainstream" culture alike.

mentary. Their aim in this piece was to demonstrate how the traditional portrayal of lesbians dooms them to meet a tragic end. The Brothers chose not to celebrate that kind of societal "redemption," and the show received much praise. Peter Marks of *The New York Times* noted, "they carry it all off with a good-natured suaveness that showcases their polish and generosity of spirit." It was "impossible not to laugh."

Inspiration for their next show, *The Secretaries* (1993), originally came from the classic chestnut *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, which Babs slyly refers to as "the glorification of rape in song and dance." Skewering all kinds of pop culture — everything from Slim Fast ads to the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* movies — the Brothers developed *The Secretaries* into a "play that examines the ways in which women are the enforcers of sexism," says Kron. *Brides of the Moon* (1996) exemplified the tremendous heart of the Brothers' work. The journey of the play sends five space explorers into uncharted territory; what they find is each other. "The Brothers' strength as playwrights is in imagining new worlds and making those worlds seem real to people," says Peg Healey. *Brides* was a highly fantastical play that resonated because of the real human experiences within, and illustrates how their work is filled with a love for the magic of theatre.

Oedipus at Palm Springs (2005), the Brothers' most recent endeavor, was created after a six-year hiatus from working as

an ensemble. How did the ladies get reacquainted? "We were pretty much naked the whole time we were writing," Healy quips. And despite the fact they put some clothing back on for the performances, the show became a critical and commercial success. Warping the classic Greek story with their trademark wit, and making Jocasta the protagonist instead of Oedipus, the Brothers put their indelible stamp on the story, transforming tragedy into cult-comedy. The play was workshopped in Boston at the Theater Offensive in 2004. Now Lisa Kron, this time on her own without her brotherly companions, returns to Boston with her newest solo work: *Well*.

Since the birth of the Five Lesbian Brothers, they have grown out of the WOW Café and ventured into the world beyond; they have performed Off Broadway and Off Off Broadway, at the New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theater, Performance Space 122, Dixon Place, La MaMa E.T.C., the Kitchen, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and around the world from London to Croatia. Their body of work includes a book of lesbian humor, a book of their collected plays, and three short films for HBO. They have received an OBIE, a Bessie (New York Dance and Performance Award), and a New York Press Award for Best Performance Group. Each of the women has maintained a performance career apart from Five Lesbian Brothers, but the collective certainly isn't finished yet — there are still many more archetypes to roast and punch lines to deliver. — MBO



Top, *Voyage to Lesbos*, 1990 WOW Café production; photo: Dona McAdams. Middle, *The Secretaries*, 1994 New York Theatre Workshop production; photo: Joan Marcus. Bottom, *Brides on the Moon*, November 1997 New York Theatre Workshop production; photo: Joan Marcus

Sniffles and Sneezes and Coughs, Oh My!

Your eyes water, your nose itches, your throat swells shut, and you sense the beginnings of an excruciating headache. Though these symptoms may be uncomfortable, for many, allergies are more than an annoyance; they can be harmful and possibly life-threatening. According to an estimate by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, 40 to 50 million Americans suffer from allergies, and every year that number steadily increases. Though doctors and scientists understand the allergic reaction itself, they have yet to agree on what has caused the escalation in sufferers over the past several decades. Both Lisa Kron and her mother suffer acutely from a variety of such allergies, the effects of which are entertainingly examined in Kron's *Well*.

Theories have emerged from allergists around the world attempting to account for this augmentation. Dr. Roger Wodehouse, a Canadian hay fever specialist, asserted in 1939 that the increase in allergens was "nature's reply to man's destructive and wasteful exploitation of natural resources." In the years following World War II, allergist Theron Randolph blamed not nature, but the rise of man-made chemicals in the environment, substances that can be found in industrialization's by-products, along with household items such as fragrances, paint, make-up, and flooring. Randolph suggested that the reduction of synthetic chemicals would cause a decrease in allergic sensitivity.

It is almost impossible to avoid potentially dangerous allergens such as formaldehyde as they make their way into the air, escaping from common office and



Photo: Arnold Newman

household staples like carpet and upholstery — a process known as off-gassing. Allergy sufferers are frequently afflicted by this phenomenon. The contaminants can cause a variety of reactions, and may persist for years — these reactions are often referred to as "sick building syndrome," when relief occurs soon after leaving the enclosed space and no particular cause can be determined for the symptoms. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "building occupants experience acute health and comfort

effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a building." When a patient is diagnosed with the more serious "building related illness," the airborne contaminants are definitively identified as the source of the affliction and symptoms persist long after leaving the building.

In the 1990s, Dr. Erika Von Mutius, head of the Asthma and Allergy Department of Munich University Children's Hospital, developed her own hypothesis of the cause of increased allergy patients. She postulates that allergy reactions are increasing because an excessively cleanly lifestyle leaves the immune system off-balance, causing it to attack harmless substances such as pollen or pet dander. Though exposure to certain allergens can be dangerous or even deadly, better hygiene has reduced the risk for more potentially hazardous diseases.

Over the past several decades, allergy cures, as diverse as the symptoms they claim to treat, have developed. Prescription and over-the-counter drugs offer some sufferers relief, while alternative medicine facilities offer cures through chiropractics, homeopathy, and much more. Allergy centers specifically devoted to symptom diagnosis and treatment have been built — such as the one Lisa Kron visits in *Well* — and most major hospitals, such as the prestigious Mayo Clinic, have developed a division for allergies. Hospital websites often dedicate pages for allergy patients to learn about symptoms, relief, and prevention, and specialists are on staff to answer questions and offer advice. As doctors recognize the seriousness and extent of allergies, they are continually improving the accommodations and treatments for their patients. — CK



Lisa Kron and Jayne Houdyshell in the Broadway production of *Well*; photo: Joan Marcus

Witnessing Theatricality

As the house opens to ticket holders for Lisa Kron's *Well*, the set reveals Lisa's mother Ann Kron in her well-used La-Z-Boy. When the play starts, theatregoers are ushered into daughter Lisa's world and promptly offered a drink. Urged to sit and stay awhile, we become active participants in a much interrupted and contested account of Ann and Lisa's shared history. Unlike heavily realistic theatre that strives to convince us what we witness is real, *Well* self-consciously unfolds on a stage, within a set, showing us scenarios enacted by people playing roles assigned them. The artifice is never in dispute — the act of attending the theatre is immediately acknowledged by characters and playwright alike. Intimacy of this sort is familiar to modern audiences, and has been used adeptly by countless playwrights over the centuries, but the official label for this genre was coined only during the last fifty years.

The term “metatheatre” was first used by critic Lionel Abel in 1963. Abel created the word to describe “theatre pieces about

life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, and because these characters already knew they were dramatic. They are aware of their own theatricality.” Stuart David, a senior lecturer at Cornell University, expands upon Abel's definition, “Metatheatre begins by sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness — in short, the theatricality — of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide.” And so we come upon the characters of the self-proclaimed “avant-garde metatheatrical thing.” *Well* Such characters, caught as they are, speak directly to the audience and relate to them *as* their audience — not as imagined characters like in many monologues. Here lies the power

of the metatheatrical — as evidenced by the whole of performance history.

A long line of respected playwrights has used metatheatricality throughout history to critique the realities of our world and the limitations of our stage. Over two thousand years ago, Plautus' works for his fellow Romans featured comedic actors breaking character to get a laugh. In the 16th century, Shakespeare employed the highly metatheatrical play-within-a-play device as a means of likening the world to a stage. And of Luigi Pirandello, scholar Martin Puchner writes in his introduction to the 2003 book, *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, “[he] delights in our bewilderment as we watch one layer of theatricality and illusion give way to the next as if they were so many Russian dolls stacked into one another.” Pirandello's 1921 masterpiece, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, features a cast of characters who confront the actors supposedly portraying them. We are left to wonder what is imagination and what is reality. Contemporary playwrights, such as Christopher Durang (*Laughing Wild*), Jane Martin (*Anton in Show Business*), and Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*), have harnessed the power of metatheatricality to comment on life, on stage and off. Looking at these examples, we can say most simply that metatheatre is self-referential, performance that is self-aware. These works use the power of their own self-consciousness to increase their impact as statements about the ways in which we stage our own lives.

Through the metatheatrical dimension of Lisa Kron's *Well*, we are included in the playwright's experience of her past, encouraged to reflect upon our own layers of memory. We are welcomed into Kron's memories, even as their recollection forces her to process things painful and forgotten. As active participants, we are encouraged to remember our own formative years as we leave the theatre.

— 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 *Well* curriculum.

Once a sickly individual, playwright Lisa Kron believes she has discovered the keys to wellness, both for herself and for her community. Now she hopes to pass them down to audiences through a “theatrical exploration.” But as her play unfolds, Kron realizes that the traditional devices of theatre cannot convey everything she wishes to say, nor can they hide some embarrassing truths about her past. Thanks to her mother Ann, who defiantly transforms herself from a pathetic caricature into a sympathetic character, the audience comes to see the complexity of Kron's struggle with illness, as well as her childhood neighborhood's struggle with racial integration. Although the play defies its original design, even Kron comes to accept that it may be just as well.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Well* including:
 - differences in perspective
 - family frustrations
 - lifestyle choices
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 *Well*.

Preparation for *Well*

Use the following ideas to engage your class in thinking about *Lisa Kron*, introducing them to *Well* and its major themes.

LANSING, MICHIGAN: A MODEL FOR INTEGRATION

Racial integration has been a challenge for many communities across the United States. After World War II, there was a mass exodus of white families from inner cities to suburban neighborhoods, where relatively few black families lived. This demographic shift, known as “white flight,” exacerbated the country's racial divide, resulting in de facto segregation. But as Kron explains in the play, the

city of Lansing, Michigan chose to respond differently to the challenge. Through the West Side Neighborhood Association, Kron's mother helped to bring together residents of different races and to create a diverse, flourishing community. How has greater Boston responded to the challenge of racial integration? Do you believe that Americans still live in segregated neighborhoods? How would you describe your own neighborhood with regard to racial and cultural integration? How, if at all, should we seek to eliminate racial divisions?

SUFFERING FROM ALLERGIES

Allergies can be a minor nuisance, causing runny noses, hives, or sleeplessness. But they can also be very serious, interfering with breathing and even causing anaphylactic shock. As a class, discuss how this wide spectrum of allergic symptoms affects our perception of people who suffer from allergies. Do we minimize the problem because some of its effects can be minimal? Not only do allergies cause a wide range of symptoms, but they also derive from a wide range of sources. Anything from bee stings, to peanuts, to cat hair can trigger an allergic reaction. As a class, discuss who should bear responsibility for keeping allergens away from the people they threaten. Should restaurants warn diners if their food contains peanuts? What should pet owners do when guests are allergic to their pets? What should you do if another student is allergic to your perfume?

KEY ISSUES

Differences in Perspective

The play emphasizes the importance, but also the difficulty, of seeing the world from someone else's perspective. Lisa, for example, admits that as a child she wrongly assumed "that being Black was just like being white only you were also Black." She was also a victim of such bias: her neighbors viewed her Judaism "as a kind of accessory that you wear on top of your Christianity." Lisa learned from her mother that one way to avoid these distortions is to broaden your own experience. As her mother said, "[i]f you're a part of the main group all the time you never learn to see the world from anyone's point of view but your own." Unfortunately, differences in physical health cannot be bridged in that manner. As one of the characters, Kay, explains, healthy people tend to envision unhealthy people as having "sickness on top of their health," but obviously they cannot pursue illness as a means of shedding their bias. Ask students to discuss or write an essay on whether *Well* identifies another way to bridge the gap between the well and the ill.

Kron's Characters

LISA KRON, the character, is a New York performance artist who is writing a play that she says is "NOT about herself." The character of Lisa Kron is played by real-life actor/writer/performance artist Lisa Kron, who has in fact written and performed several plays about herself.

ANN KRON, a woman in her late 60s to early 70s, is Lisa's mother. She is a Midwestern housewife, often tired and in pain, yet surprisingly vibrant. She is warm and funny.

THE CHORUS is an ensemble of actors hired by Lisa (the character) to be in her play. They each play several different characters.

- A white woman in her 30s to 40s plays Joy (a patient in the allergy clinic where Lisa goes for treatment), Dottie (a neighbor of

Lisa's family in Lansing, Michigan), and "herself" (an actor in the play Lisa is trying to write).

- A black woman in her 30s to 40s plays Lori Jones (a girl who used to bully Lisa when she was growing up in Lansing), Kay (a patient in the allergy clinic), Mrs. Price (a neighbor in Lansing), Cynthia (one of Lisa's playmates in Lansing), and "herself."
- A black man in his 20s to 50s plays Little Oscar (one of Lisa's playmates in Lansing), Big Oscar (Little Oscar's father), Jim Richardson (a neighbor in Lansing), and "himself."
- A white man in his 20s to 50s plays a nurse in the allergy clinic, Howard Norris (a neighbor in Lansing), and "himself."

Family Frustrations

The main conflict in the play is between Lisa and her mother Ann. Like many mother-daughter relationships, theirs is complex. On one hand, they have great admiration for each other. Ann calls her daughter an "amazing star," and Lisa says that when her mother "has a burst of energy it's awe-inspiring." But on the other hand, they cause each other great frustration. Lisa accuses her mother of not only refusing to seek wellness, but also trying to get Lisa to share in her illness. Ann protests that her daughter is being dishonest about her physical problems. When the chorus members come to Ann's defense, Lisa retorts that "she's not your mother" and that, as a daughter, she has to "live with the other stuff." This is true: family members often carry a heavier burden. Yet they cannot always make things better. Ask students to discuss family frustrations and how they deal with family problems that they can neither solve nor ignore.

Consider other literary and dramatic texts that illustrate similar familial conflict.

Lifestyle Choices

Lisa uses theatre to explore the idea that a person can choose whether to be well or ill. She sees herself as evidence of that choice, having solved her health problems by changing her lifestyle and finding romance. Yet as her mother emphasizes, Lisa was also diagnosed with a wheat allergy, which may have been the main cause of her illness. Her mother, too, has physical problems that she cannot control. Lisa, though, wishes that her mother would at least control the things she can, such as her sleep cycle. Ask students to discuss which is more important to physical health: the lifestyle that we choose, or the physical maladies that we do not? Can different people cope with the same illness in different ways? To what extent should we congratulate ourselves for being well or blame ourselves for being ill?

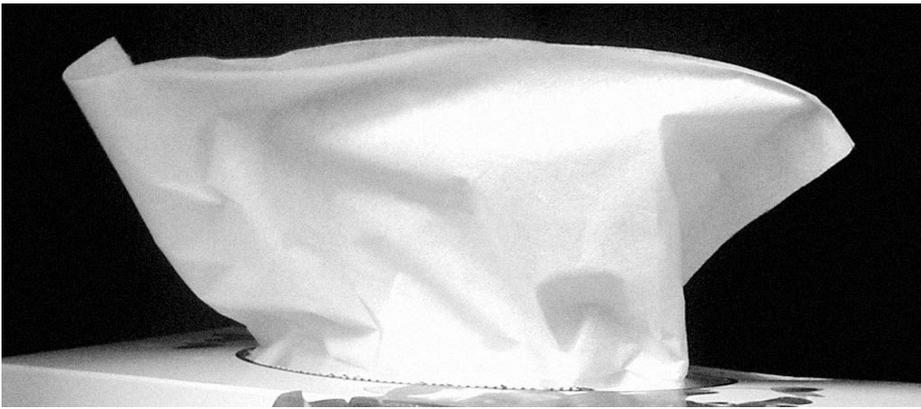


Photo: Roy Mattappallil, stock.XCHNG

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 *Well*? What does the actress playing the mother mean at the end of the play when she refers to “true wellness”?
2. Critique Lisa’s initial claim that “this play is not about my mother and me.”
3. Why does the chorus become so loyal to Ann? What is your ultimate opinion of her?
4. Describe the convention of interior monologue. Consider similar conventions in contemporary mediums, such as the popular television comedy “Scrubs.”
5. Why does Joy harass Lisa in the allergy unit? Briefly compare her to Lori Jones, who bullied Lisa during childhood.
6. Who is more responsible for the conflict in the play — Lisa or her mother? Give specific examples to support your answer.
7. Do you think that Lisa’s status as culturally Jewish affected her interactions with other minorities in her community? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. *Well* is not told as a linear story, the way many plays are. Instead, playwright Lisa Kron uses flashbacks, actors playing several characters, and characters who sometimes speak directly to the audience. How do you feel about the techniques used to tell the story? Did they make the play more interesting for you? Easier or more difficult to follow? What is a “memory play”?
9. The actors in *Well*, other than Lisa Kron and Mary Pat Gleason, each play several different characters, as well as “themselves.” How do the actors indicate the transition from one character to another? How might the play have been different if different actors played each role?
10. How many different settings are depicted in *Well*? How do you know when a scene changes from one setting to another? How many settings exist on the stage at the same time at any given moment throughout the performance? What do you think are the most effective ways a production can signal scene changes: actors, lighting, costumes, music? When is one more important than the other in this play?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Lisa believes that, if not for the constant interruptions, a “pattern would have emerged” from her play that would have helped the audience to “make sense of things.” What pattern was she developing, and would it have made sense of things?
2. Lisa says that “the two main things we believe in as a family are allergies and racial integration.” Which things (aside from religion) does your own family believe in? Funny answers are encouraged!
3. In the speech that serves as the play’s closing monologue, Ann suggests that society must find a way to include “parts that are uncomfortable or that don’t seem to fit.” Does our society do a good job of including everyone? Are there any exceptions to the ideal of inclusion—i.e., people it would be better to exclude? Use specific examples from current events and/or experiences in your own town or neighborhood.
4. Lisa refers to *Well* as a “theatrical exploration” and says it is “not meant to be a well made play.” How does her theatrical exploration differ from a well made play? Why did she choose to defy certain conventions of theatre?
5. Choose one of the main characters in *Well* and write a journal entry from his or her perspective, expanding on what we already know. Place the character at a key moment in the play, a time critical to propelling the action forward.
6. Write the beginning of a 10-minute play, where you as author control theme, characters, and plot. Stop writing mid-way to your anticipated dramatic conclusion. Set your “characters” free, and envision through writing or reporting to the class the characters’ conclusion of *your* play.

MASTERY Assessment

1. Describe the setting of the play. Which piece of furniture is vital to the production?
2. According to Lisa, what is *Well* about? What is it not about?
3. Something is wrong with Lisa's mother Ann. What does Lisa think it is? What does Ann think it is?
4. Who are the unexpected guests at Ann's house? What does she offer them?
5. Which two overarching stories does Lisa want to tell the audience?
6. Why did Lisa withdraw from college? Where did she go?
7. What happened to Kay at the allergy unit to make her happy?
8. What two things does the Kron family "believe in"?
9. What was wrong with the city of Lansing, Michigan? How did Ann intend to improve it?
10. Who is Lori Jones?
11. Which allergy test did Lisa undergo first?
12. How did Kay, Joy, and Ann find out about the allergy unit?
13. Why did Ann decide not to buy gift certificates for prizes at the community fair?
14. What costume did Lisa wear at the July 4 festivities? What was wrong with it?
15. What is the first food that Lisa tried during her allergy testing? How did she react to it?
16. How did Joy react to the pineapple?
17. According to Ann, what might be causing A's discomfort at the mall?
18. Who is Mr. Harris? What happened with him on the weekends?
19. To what does Ann attribute her reelection as president of the neighborhood association?
20. What does Ann like to watch on television? Why does she have to tape it?
21. What happened to Ann in the summer of 1953 that "changed [her] life"?
22. Why does the chorus decide to leave the play?
23. Why does Lisa think her health improved and her mother's did not?
24. Who is playing Ann Kron? Why does she stop the play?
25. From what speech does Lisa read at the play's conclusion?



Photo: Julio Guajardo, stock.XCHNG

Related Works and Resources

OTHER WORKS BY LISA KRON

2.5 Minute Ride (2000)
101 Most Humiliating Stories
(2000)
Five Lesbian Brothers/Four Plays
(2000)

RESOURCES ON HEALTH

Health and Wellness,
by Gordon Edlin & Eric Golanty (8th
ed. 2004)

*Allergy: The History
of a Modern Malady*,
by Marc Jackson (2006)

RESOURCES ON RACIAL INTEGRATION

*Forced Justice: School
Desegregation and the Law*,
by David J. Armor (1995)

*White Flight: Atlanta and the
Making of Modern Conservatism*,
by Kevin M. Kruse (2005)

*Popular Culture in the Age of
White Flight: Fear and Fantasy
in Suburban Los Angeles*,
by Eric Avila (2006)

RESOURCES ON HEALTH

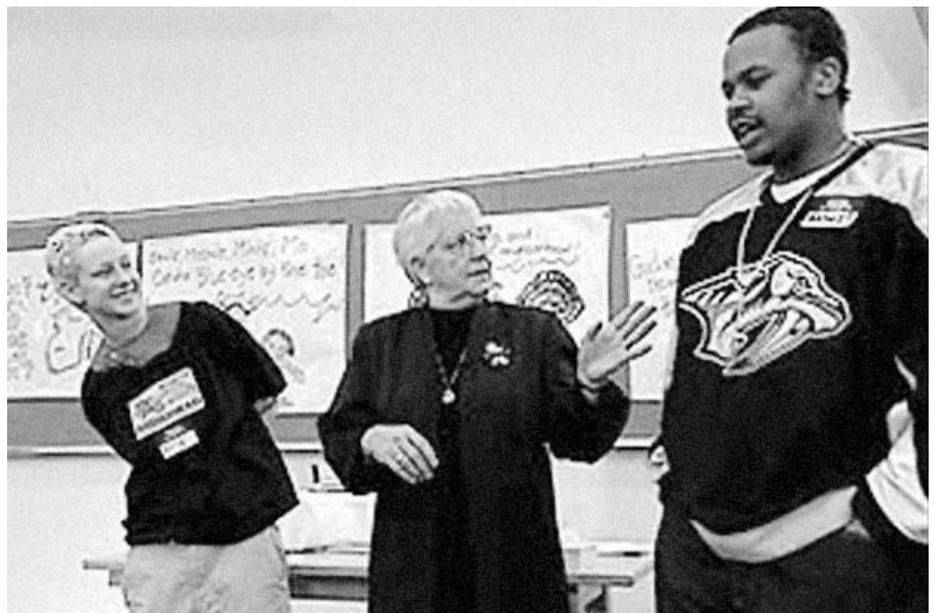
Night, Mother,
by Marsha Norman (1983)

*Extreme Exposure: An Anthology
of Solo Performance Texts from
the Twentieth Century*,
by Jo Bonney (1999)

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. Like many ancient plays, *Well* relies on the theatrical device of a “chorus.” Ask students to research the history of the chorus and then answer the following questions: What is a chorus? How is it generally used? Why have choruses become less common in modern plays? How is the chorus in *Well* different from those in ancient plays?
2. Lisa describes her “family mystery illness” as having the following symptoms: “the general inability to move, to physically cope, to stay awake.” Try to identify at least three illnesses that have similar symptoms.
3. Ann attributes to Susan Sontag the remark “that whenever the cause of an illness is mysterious it’s assumed to come from psychological problems or a moral weakness. And once science finally figures out the medical root of the illness that assumption disappears.” Sontag, who died in 2004, was a noted writer, humanitarian, and political activist. Research her achievements. What would Sontag have thought of Ann? Were they similar in any respects?
4. Jane Elliott, a schoolteacher, was so enraged by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that she created the famous Blue eyes/ Brown eyes exercise. This activity labels you inferior or superior based on the color of your eyes. Research Jane Elliott’s career and how her students were affected by the exercise. Compare their experiences with Ann’s experience of living in Baltimore during the early 1950s. Why does discrimination have such lasting and powerful effects?
5. Ann Kron appears to suffer from “environmental illness,” a complex of symptoms sometimes diagnosed as allergies, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple chemical sensitivity, or fibromyalgia. The status, cause, and treatment of these illnesses remain controversial within the medical community. Do you consider environmental illness a “real” disease, or do you believe it is a psychosomatic illness? What do you think Lisa, the character in *Well*, believes? What about Lisa the playwright?
6. Knowing that Lisa Kron wrote the play, including all of the interruptions and the actors leaving, what purpose does it serve for Lisa to “lose control” of the play to the other characters? While watching the performance, did you realize that all of the dialogue was scripted, or did you, if even for a moment, believe that the actors were genuinely rebelling against Lisa?
7. What do you think about the idea of “wellness” in our society? What other meanings can the idea of “wellness” have, in addition to the association with physical health?



Jane Elliott (center) conducting her presentation *Power, Perception, and Prejudice*; photo: www.janeelliott.com

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 *Well* to portray. As if preparing for the role in rehearsal, they should answer the following questions about their characters:

- What is my objective in the play, and which obstacles stand in my way?
- How, if at all, does my character transform during the course of the play?
- Are there any contradictions inherent in my character?
- What do other characters think of my character, and what does my character think of them?

Once students have answered these questions, have them act out scenes from the play in small groups.

MUSIC

As a child, Lisa enjoyed playing a game in which she and her friends would choose which musical group they wanted to portray. Research the various artists mentioned in the text (Chaka Khan, the Partridge Family, the Archies). Which of them would be the most fun to portray? Select a song of theirs that could be used to reflect a key part of Lisa's play or life. Share it with the class and then explain why you selected it. What musical groups do you or your friends enjoy emulating?

VISUAL ARTS

Well explores a wide range of topics, from allergies to racism. Have each student create a collage that reflects one of the topics



Clockwise from top, Chaka Khan, the Archies, and the cast of "The Partridge Family"

from the play. Put the finished collages together on the wall, and then discuss how Lisa Kron wove all of those topics together to create a single artistic work.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

Lisa and her mother would design unusual and creative costumes for various events throughout Lisa's childhood. For example, Lisa dressed up as Laura Ingalls Wilder, the Little Match Girl, the Princess of Five, and a geisha. Unfortunately, major flaws in these cos-

tumes often impeded Lisa's "performance." Ask students to sketch a design for one of the four costumes listed above. If there is enough time, they should also draft a short essay explaining how Lisa could have changed that costume to make it more appropriate for the event at which she was wearing it. Following attending the Huntington's production of *Well*, ask a student to compare the costume sketches with those created by the Huntington Costume Department.



Lisa Kron and Jayne Houdyshell in the Broadway production of *Well!*; photo: Joan Marcus

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 *Well* for students to read before, and to review again after attending the performance.

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 about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

DAY ONE - Introducing the Play

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

DAY TWO - The Production

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.

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

DAY THREE - Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class.

DAY FOUR - Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the **Open Response** (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 **Media Assessment** (P. 15) tasks to complete for extra credit.

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *Well* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students on both a group and individual level. Students will ideally view the play after completing **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY ONE - Introducing the play

Same as Day One above.

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

Homework: Read Act One and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions (#1-14).

DAY TWO - First Half

Discuss the first half of *Well* and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Homework: Read the remainder of *Well* (page 26 to the end) and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions (#15-26).

DAY THREE - Second Half

Discuss the second half of the play and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR - Group Work

Complete **Handout #2: A Matter of Perspective** during class time. Remember to bring newspapers to help with the handout.

Optional: Vocabulary Handout due!

DAY FIVE - Attend Performance

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

DAY SIX - Review/Preparation

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

DAY SEVEN - Test

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

Further Reading

ON AND BY LISA KRON

Angelos, Maureen, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron. *The Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000.

Kron, Lisa. *2.5 Minute Ride and 101 Humiliating Stories*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001.

Kron, Lisa. *Well*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, August 2005.

www.lisakron.com

ON ENVIRONMENTAL ILLNESS

Allergy Support Home Page. www.allergysupport.org

Hamilton, Linda. *MCSurvivors: A Resource Web Site for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and Environmental Illness*. www.mcsurvivors.com

Radetsky, Peter. *Allergic to the Twentieth Century: The Explosion of Environmental Allergies – from Sick Buildings to Multiple Chemical Sensitivity*. New York: Little, Brown, 1998.

Randolph, Theron G., and Ralph W. Moss. *An Alternative Approach to Allergies: The New Field of Clinical Ecology Unravels the*

Environmental Causes of Mental and Physical Ills. New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980.

Staudenmayer, Herman. *Environmental Illness: Myth and Reality*. Boca Raton, FL: Lewis Publishers, Inc., 1998.

Tarcher, Alyce Bezman, ed. *Principles and Practice of Environmental Medicine*. New York: Plenum Medical Book Co., 1992.

ON RACIAL INTEGRATION IN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Cashin, Sheryll. *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class are Undermining the American Dream*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

Ellen, Ingrid Gould. *Sharing America's Neighborhoods: The Prospects for Stable Racial Integration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Fasenfest, David, Jason Booza, and Kurt Metzger. "Living Together: A New Look at Racial and Ethnic Integration in Metropolitan Neighborhoods" (2004). The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/20040428_fasenfast.htm

Welch, Susan, Lee Sigelman, Michael Combs, and Timothy Bledsoe. *Race and Place: Race Relations in an American City*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Wiese, Andrew. *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 1
VOCABULARY

antebellum _____

authentic _____

avant-garde _____

coherence _____

compressed _____

convention _____

crochet _____

demographic _____

diuretic _____

endeavor _____

enema _____

entwined _____

extrapolate _____

fatigue _____

formaldehyde _____

haven _____

hypochondriac _____

impish _____

inhalants _____

integrate _____

kimono _____

malady _____

membrane _____

methodology _____

milestone _____

montage _____

parallel _____

precaution _____

presumption _____

psychosomatic _____

queasy _____

resonance _____

reverential _____

rickshaw _____

savant _____

seep _____

sinister _____

skeptical _____

suppress _____

synthesis _____

valiant _____

wringing _____

zoning _____

Handout 2

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Lisa Kron often disagrees with her mother about what happened in their past. Neither woman is lying. They simply remember events differently because they witnessed them from different perspectives. How a story is told depends on who is telling it! This exercise will give you an opportunity to experiment with point of view and to see how it shapes both the content and the style of a story.

INTRODUCTION: As a class, review the classic children's story of the *Three Little Pigs*. Contrast the original story with Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. How do the stories differ? Does it seem plausible that the Big Bad Wolf has not been treated fairly in the classic version? Use this activity as a model for the one that follows.

ANALYZE AN ARTICLE: Divide into groups of three students. Each group should select an article from a major newspaper that covers a controversial current event. Make sure it is a story that describes an event from two or more opposing viewpoints. After reading the article, your group should discuss whether it is written with an unbiased voice. Does it contain only factual information? Does it contain any opinions or analysis? If so, which side does it favor?

FORM PANELS: Consider that each member of your group has been asked to join a panel at a local law school discussing the issue from the newspaper article. You are all experts in the field, but are taking different sides. One of you has been assigned to summarize the issue without any opinion or analysis. The other two have been assigned to take opposing sides, dissecting the controversial parts of the issue. Determine which of you will take each assignment.

EXPERT DISCUSSION: Your teacher, serving as the moderator, will guide each group through a panel discussion in front of the class. First, the neutral panel member will summarize the facts of the controversy. Next, the opposing panel members will take turns advocating their positions. (Groups that have chosen the same article or current issue may sit on the same panel, so long as everyone is given an opportunity to speak.) If time allows, the panel members may field questions from the class.

REFLECTION: After each panel, the class should discuss the arguments on both sides of the issue. Were there valid points on both sides? Was one side "right" or "wrong"? Discuss how the newspaper article would have been different if it had been written from a different point of view. How is it that two people can interpret the same situation in vastly different ways?