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BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Margie's existence hangs by a thread. She is fired from her low-wage job at the Dollar Store because the inconsistent care for her mentally disabled adult daughter causes her to be chronically late. Her landlord, who is also a "friend," is threatening to kick her out now that she's unemployed. And the one person who might actually be able to help her, an old boyfriend from Southie who is now a successful doctor, doesn't even want her to attend his birthday party for fear of embarrassment. The only hope left seems to be a good round of BINGO. And maybe some good people, if Margie can find them.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Good People* including:
 - cycle of poverty
 - what could have been...
 - judging a book by its cover
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 *Good People*.

PREPARATION FOR GOOD PEOPLE

DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE

David Lindsay-Abair, the “Southie” native who wrote *Rabbit Hole*, received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2007 and multiple Tony award nominations for his play. He grew up in South Boston, where his mother was a factory worker and his father worked for the Chelsea fruit market. He attended Boston public schools until junior high, at which time he received a scholarship to Milton Academy, a private institution with a tradition of producing student plays. Although Lindsay-Abair characterizes his early works as “terrible, terrible,” 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 any future professional goals. In thinking about his newest play, *Good People*, consider Lindsay-Abair’s personal history. How did his own life experience inform and influence this work? In what ways might this play be autobiographical?

SOUTH BOSTON

South Boston, or “Southie” as the local residents call it, is a vibrant and historic area of Boston well-known for its heavy population of Irish-Americans. While being a largely working class neighborhood, Southie also maintains some of the oldest housing projects in the country. Southie can also claim some of the most beautiful spots in the city, including Castle Island and Thomas Park, which displays an American Revolutionary war monument. Its beauty, history, and unique culture have made it a popular setting for many outstanding pieces of literature and films. See how many “Southie” movies you can list. You might be surprised how often these works are critically acclaimed!

KEY ISSUES

- ***Cycle of Poverty***
Margie believes that she never had a chance to get out of South Boston. Joyce’s birth brought a series of challenges that, even with unlimited resources, would have been difficult for any mother to face. But why does Margie feel trapped? Mike suggests it was her choices that sealed her fate. She bristles at this idea, claiming that he in fact was just “lucky.” Could both perceptions be true? Was Joyce’s life simply predestined or does Mike’s success debunk this notion of the “cycle of poverty”? Consider the idea that there may also be a “Cycle of Wealth.” If your parents are rich, does that make it more likely that you will be too? Is it fair that your parents’ or grandparents’ wealth or poverty makes such a significant impact on your social mobility, or do you believe that all people make choices that ultimately determine their socio-economic status?

- ***What could have been...***
Did Mike ever look back? Did he ever wonder what happened to Margie or her child or to the black boy that he beat up? Margie certainly wonders about the 'path not taken.' It is how she clings to hope and the way she reconciles the past. Would Mike have become a doctor if Margie stayed in his life? Trace the evolution of at least one character from their early life to the play's conclusion. How might the tweaking of circumstances change the destiny of these characters? Is it a worthwhile exercise to think about the trajectory of your life and how it might have turned out differently?
- ***Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover***
Margie assumes that she is the reason that Mike cancels his birthday party because he fears humiliation in the event that Margie actually shows up. However, his child is ill. Why would Margie be quick to assume that she is the reason for the cancelled party? Is Margie an open-minded or accepting person herself? Consider her disapproval (although not voiced overtly) of homosexuality, interracial dating/marriage or Mike's Hispanic secretary? Why is racism less politically correct than judging someone based on his or her social class, if in fact it is? Create a list of moments in the play when characters are making judgments about other people based on their looks (appearance, ethnicity, activities). Do you think this type of thinking is unavoidable? Useful? Unacceptable?

OPEN RESPONSE AND WRITING

OPEN RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

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

1. Consider the title, *Good People*. What is the playwright suggesting by choosing this title for his work?
2. The characters from South Boston love to play BINGO. What does BINGO symbolize? Do you think spending money on this game is a good use of resources?
3. Mike married a black woman and is a fertility specialist. He volunteers, has a beautiful home, and a daughter whom he loves. How might the choices he has made in his adult life be a way to find redemption from past mistakes?
4. Do you believe that Mike was hurt by Margie's decision to dump him and fall into a relationship with Gobie? If she had stayed single, might the outcome of their relationship changed?
5. Stevie was born and raised in South Boston and hasn't gotten out. Do you think he is nevertheless successful? Why is it surprising the way he treats Margie? Does she deserve it?
6. Dottie seems to be at odds with her daughter-in-law, Franny. Why is she angry about the way Franny treats her son, Russell? Do you think her feelings are justified?
7. Does Margie maintain real friendships? Describe her support system.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Is Mike a "good" person? By societal standards? By moral standards? Why or why not? What might playwright Lindsay-Abaire be suggesting about what makes a good person and what makes a bad one?
2. Do you agree with Kate's charge that a "good mother" would have done everything she could for Joyce, even if it meant tracking down the father and having a difficult conversation? How have both Kate and Margie

made sacrifices for their daughters?

3. What happened to Cookie? Is there anyone to blame? How is ignoring Cookie different than Mike ignoring Margie, if at all? By including this story in his play, what might Lindsay-Abaire be suggesting about society and its “good people”?
4. Make a list of the characters and put them into categories (good/bad). Are some people more difficult to categorize? Who are the most complex characters in the play? Explain why it is difficult to label these people – what are the contradictions inherent in their character?
5. Do you agree with Margie’s decision to drop the paternity issue with Mike and Kate? Why or why not?
6. Select one of the following lines from the play and analyze it in paragraph form.

“And I wouldn’t be late if I didn’t have to beg someone to watch my daughter! And I wouldn’t have to beg someone if I could pay someone, but you’re making that very difficult!”

“That’s a mean thing to say, Mikey ... Because it means that nothing woulda been different. That there really was nothing I coulda done to get outta there. It’s a pretty fucking depressing thought. That’s why.”

“The point is, you knew what you were doing. And I’m sorry this isn’t your life, Margaret, but that’s not my fault. And it’s not Ally’s fault. We didn’t do anything to you.”

“Which is lucky, that’s all I’m saying. I never had anyone watching from a window for me. You got lucky. One hiccup, and it could’ve been you looking for work instead of me. Or you dying up on that sidewalk instead of Cookie. That could just as easily have been you, Mikey.”

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

MASTERY ASSESSMENT

ACT ONE

1. Based on the stage directions given at the play's opening, describe the **setting** of *Good People*.
2. Why does Margie recount "the turkey story" to Stevie?
3. Why is Stevie, the store manager, in trouble with his boss? What are Margie's excuses? What bad news does Stevie ultimately give her?
4. What is Stevie's version of "the turkey story"?
5. Who is Dottie's son and what is his relationship with his wife?
6. What happened to Remy Hayes that makes people feel bad for him?
7. Who does Margie ask to watch her daughter? Is this a favor?
8. What does Dottie consider her "real" work?
9. Why does Jean think that Dottie is a lousy babysitter?
10. Who does Jean suggest Margie ask for a job? What does he do now and how did they all know him originally?
11. What is Margie's relationship to Gobie? Where is he now?
12. What does Mike do for a living? Is Margie impressed?
13. Does Mike have a job to offer Margie?
14. What do we learn about Joyce through Margie and Mike's conversation?
15. Where does Mike live with his family? Do you think he's wealthy?
16. What are Mike's reasons for not visiting "Southie"?
17. How does Margie get herself invited to Mike's birthday party?
18. What game do Margie, Jean, and Dottie play?
19. What happened to Cookie McDermott? Why does Margie feel responsible?

20. Jean implies that Margie and Mike were more than friends. What does she think happened between them?
21. What “scam” do Margie’s friends suggest she try on Mike?
22. Who is Stevie dating?
23. Why did Franny lose her job and how might this affect Margie’s living arrangement?
24. Why is Mike’s birthday party cancelled?

ACT TWO

25. Describe Mike and Kate’s relationship. Are they happy?
26. Why is Kate confused about who Margie is when she shows up at the house?
27. Kate has also been mistaken for being someone else. Describe the circumstances in which people have confused who she is.
28. What secret does Mike want Margie to keep?
29. How did Kate and Mike meet?
30. What gift does Margie bring to Mike?
31. How has Mike described his childhood to Kate? Why does Margie disagree with his stories?
32. What shocking story does Margie share with Kate?
33. After putting on her “thinking cap” what job does Kate offer Margie? What is Mike’s response?
34. Why does Mike ask Margie to leave? What does she say that’s made him angry?
35. Mike says that Margie’s life has turned out the way it has due to choices she has made. How does she explain the “choices” that she’s made?
36. What does Margie say about Joyce that is deeply troubling for Mike and Kate? Is this statement true?
37. Why does Kate believe Margie’s story about Joyce is untrue?

38. What arrived in Margie's mail? Who does she believe it is from?

39. What does Stevie reveal about the origin of the check? What job help does he offer to Margie?

MEDIA ASSESSMENT

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

STAGE COMBAT

All fight scenes in a theatrical production must be carefully choreographed so that the actors can simulate a physical confrontation without suffering any bodily harm. Mastering this choreography can take hours of physically demanding practice, which continues until the very day of the performance. Just before the curtain rises on each performance, a fight captain (usually a stage manager) runs a rehearsal, called a “fight call,” to remind the actors of the necessary muscle movements. Unless an actor goes through this training, s/he is not prepared to perform stage combat at full speed. Even an object thrown across the stage, such as when Mike throws the flowerpot, requires extra practice. Can you think of any other moments in *Good People* that would require stage combat training? Consider the following questions about a scene that requires stage combat rehearsal: (a) How do you create the illusion of physicality? (b) How do you remain in character while also communicating safety issues with your partner?

VISUAL ARTS

Dottie says that her “real” job is making rabbit flowerpots. Based on the description of them in the play, attempt to re-create this craft project. Do you think you could sell yours for \$5?

CHARACTERIZATION

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

THE DESIGN PROCESS

Designing the costumes, props, and sets depend largely on the setting of the play. After determining the when and where of the play, choose one element of the production to design. You can either make a list of props, or sketch a set design for church BINGO, or Mike’s Chestnut Hill living room. Discuss costuming and hair design for the characters. Write a brief paragraph defending your choices for this production and share your ideas with your peers.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. South Boston's most notorious native is James "Whitey" Bulger, who was arrested in Santa Monica, CA, in 2011 after many years of being a fugitive. Conduct some research on this man who occupied a spot on the FBI's most wanted list until he was eventually captured. Why was he running from the law? Who helped him escape? What other people went to jail as a result of his crimes?
2. Free-write for five minutes on morality. Consider the following questions as you write: What does it mean to be moral? Who defines morality? Do you have to be actively good to be considered moral, or is it enough to refrain from harming others? Is morality a learned behavior? And finally, are Margie and Mike moral people?
3. Why is the term, "lace-curtain Irish" an offensive one? What is the origin of this expression, what is meant when it is used, and how might its meaning have changed over time? Could this phrase ever be used as a compliment?
4. During this election year, you may hear people using the term "class warfare." What does *class warfare* mean? And who is asserting this idea – Democrats, Republicans, Independents? How might this phenomenon show weaknesses within our democratic system, if at all? Do you see themes in *Good People* that might speak to individuals concerned with this topic?

VOCABULARY

Passive-aggressive
Reproduction
Endocrinologist
Bemused
Djembe
Pungent
Lactose Intolerant
Consolation
Foyer
Basin
Duvet
Compulsive
Humboldt Fog
Epoisses
Wensleydale
Adamant
Puppeteers
Prominent
Reminisce
Minimum Wage
Ornate

***Teachers' Note:**

Please be aware that *Good People* contains strong language (including *nigger* and *cunt*) and other language not suitable for all students. You will receive a copy of the script. If you wish to discuss the language of the play, please contact Donna Glick, Director of Education at 617-273-1548 or djglick@huntingtontheatre.bu.edu

LESSON PLANS

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

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

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

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

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

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

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

DAY TWO – The Production

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.

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

DAY THREE – Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class.

DAY FOUR – Test

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

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

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

DAY ONE – Introducing the play

Same as Day One above.

Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout due on Day Four.

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

DAY TWO – Act One

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

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

DAY THREE – Act Two

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

Homework: Choose a Design Process idea from the **Media Assessment**, or create your own.

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR– Play Analysis

Students may choose to complete one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks as an in-class assignment.

Optional: Vocabulary Handout due!

DAY FIVE– Attend Performance

DAY SIX – Review/Preparation

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

DAY SEVEN– Test

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

RELATED WORKS

You might explore these films with similar themes and issues:

- *The Departed* (2006)
- *The Boondock Saints* (1999)
- *Good Will Hunting* (1997)
- *Gone Baby Gone* (2007)
- *Mystic River* (2003)
- *Southie* (1999)