



HIGH SCHOOL MATINEE
STUDY GUIDE

The Secret Mask

BY RICK CHAFE

November 16 – December 4, 2011

A world premiere

Director: Robert Metcalfe

Set & Costume Designer: Brian Perchaluk

Lighting Designer: Larry Isacoff

Original Music and Sound Design by Don Benedictson

Stage Manager: Karyn Kumhyr

Apprentice Stage Manager: Heather Lee Brereton

Featuring:

Sharon Bajer	Mae
Skye Brandon	George
John B. Lowe	Ernie

THERE WILL BE ONE INTERMISSION.

High School Matinee Series supported by



Prairie Theatre Exchange is a not-for-profit theatre and an active member of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), and engages, under the terms of the Canadian Theatre Agreement, professional artists who are members of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association.

Prairie Theatre Exchange gratefully acknowledges the generous support of:
The Manitoba Arts Council, The Canada Council, The City of Winnipeg, The Winnipeg Foundation, The Prairie Theatre Exchange Foundation Trust.

CHARACTERS

George, a man in his 40s

Ernie, George's father whom he hasn't seen since he was two years old

Mae, a speech pathologist working with Ernie

SETTING

Several locations in Vancouver, BC

PLAY SYNOPSIS

George has lived his whole life in Winnipeg never knowing anything about his father except that he ran out on him when George was two, and that the man was a complete jerk with no redeeming qualities. Now George is a father himself to a teenage boy, finding that relationship a challenge, and is also under stress from his job and his marriage.

Then he gets a phone call from a hospital in Vancouver. His father Ernie, the man he's never known, has had a stroke and George's name is in his address book. Unsure of what to expect, unsure perhaps of what he even do when he finally meets his father, George flies to Vancouver.

He discovers that the stroke has left Ernie struggling with aphasia – a loss of both language and memory. Ernie doesn't know who George is, has limited memory of his own life, and the aphasia causes him to substitute words for other words, so communication is difficult and extremely frustrating – especially for Ernie himself. The only chance George has to find out the truth about his father is by staying on to help with Ernie's medical rehabilitation and find Ernie a care home.

To George's surprise, he's drawn further and further into his father's life, discovering that even with Ernie's challenges (and contrary to George's life-long belief), Ernie is actually a pretty charming and not-bad guy. And he learns that when he starts to understand his own father, he begins to understand himself and his relationship to his own son.

Themes: Family and relationships, communication, illness-induced physical and emotional challenges

Warnings: Strong language and some profanity

Some of the Issues Raised in This Play:

- The effect of family-ties, even when the family is estranged
- How understanding one's parents is a key part of understanding oneself
- The residual effects sometimes left by a stroke (or other health issues), and how that can cause isolation and emotional challenges
- How integral our verbal language is to communication, and yet how much non-verbal communication can compensate when words are lost
- How much our memories inform our personalities

Play Etiquette

When young people attend a live theatrical performance for the first time, they often come into the theatre without the understanding how different it is from watching TV or a movie – that as well as the audience can hear the performers, the performers can hear the audience!

Please remind your students that:

- They must be on time for the play start. Once it has started, latecomers will not be admitted.
- The actors would appreciate a quiet audience – that means no talking, eating or drinking, which is distracting not only for the actors, but also for the rest of the audience members in a small theatre like PTE.
- Cell phones must be turned off – even if the ringer is silent, the light from phone screens during texting and other functions is really disruptive and distracting. Imagine waving a flashlight around in a darkened room!
- They need to remain in their seats once the play has started – movement is very distracting for everyone else in the theatre. There will be an intermission when they can use the washroom.
- Students should not leave the lobby during intermission. If they miss the start of the second act, they will not be admitted. If someone leaves during the show, they will not be able to get back into the theatre.

Active Viewing

To make the most out of watching this live performance, please encourage your students to not only watch the play for the story, but to also pay attention to the set, costumes, music and lighting. These aspects are an important part of a live performance and will enhance later discussions about the play and the students' experience watching it.

After the Show

The actors invite the student audience to remain seated – they will come back onto the stage to answer questions about the play, and about acting in general.

THE HISTORY OF THIS WORLD PREMIERE

Winnipeg playwright Rick Chafe wrote a 10-minute play in 2004 for PTE's first Carol Shields Festival of New Works. Based on his experience with his father after his father had suffered a stroke, the Short Shot was strong enough that PTE Artistic Director Robert Metcalfe commissioned Rick to write a full-length play. *The Secret Mask* is the result of seven years of work.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT – Rick Chafe

After completing a degree in journalism at Carleton University, Rick turned down a job offer from the Vancouver Sun and instead, accepted a commission from PTE to write his first play, *Talk to Me! Talk to Me!*, co-written with Bruce McManus and Norm Dugas. His plays have been produced in theatres in Winnipeg and across Canada and include *Beowulf* (Two Planks and a Passion), *Shakespeare's Dog* (Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre/National Arts Centre, Alberta Theatre Projects), *The Odyssey* (Shakespeare in the Ruins, Two Planks and a Passion), and *Strike!* co-written with Danny Schur (Persephone Theatre). He has been nominated for the prestigious Siminovitch Award, and is the recent recipient of the Manitoba Arts Council, Major Arts award. Rick lives in Winnipeg with his wife, daughter, and two and a half cats.

Playwright's Notes:

This is a semi-autobiographical play and is based on a stroke my father had in 2002. Many of the moments in the play, as well as a good portion of the dialogue, come directly from my family's experience in assisting my dad with his rehab and relocation. After several years of writing sprawling, multi-cast adaptations, it has been a surprising and emotional challenge to write such an intimate and personal play. I am indebted to my father for being such a good sport.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES – Robert Metcalfe

This is a story about fathers and sons. It's about learning who you are. It's about becoming an adult. In our discussions of the play as it was being developed, Rick and I kept coming back to the idea that a man doesn't really know himself until he knows his father, and he never really forgives himself, until he forgives his father. In that context, Ernie's aphasia serves as both a real and metaphorical barrier to these two men who are trying to find ways to connect in a meaningful way. They must, quite literally, both learn a new language in order to find what they need from each other. I liked the way that Ernie's stroke, and the resulting affliction, served as a catalyst to move our story forward, and never really considered *The Secret Mask* as a play about a man who had a stroke.

Then, during the first week of rehearsals, those of us working on the play were invited to sit in on a group session with several people who had aphasia as a result of suffering a stroke. We found endless bravery, pain and love in that room. The biggest loss they have to deal with isn't just the words, but the loss of participation in the community. Friends stop calling, or cross the street to avoid them, strangers assume that they must be intellectually impaired. The medical system abandons them. Just as our world seems to be becoming harder at its edges, it was good to be reminded that compassion, community and empathy are the keys to a successful society.

Maybe theatre helps promote these things. I hope so.

APHASIA

Aphasia (ə'feɪzə or ə'feɪziə) is an impairment of language ability. This class of language disorder ranges from having difficulty remembering words to being completely unable to speak, read, or write.

Aphasia disorders usually develop quickly as a result of head injury or stroke, but can develop slowly from a brain tumor, infection, or dementia, or can be a learning disability such as dysnomia, a difficulty retrieving the correct words, names, or numbers from memory.

The area and extent of brain damage determine the type of aphasia and its symptoms. Aphasia types include Broca's aphasia, non-fluent aphasia, motor aphasia, expressive aphasia, receptive aphasia, global aphasia and many others.

Medical evaluations for the disorder range from clinical screenings by a neurologist to extensive tests by a language pathologist.

Most aphasia patients can recover some or most skills by working with a speech and language therapist. This rehabilitation can take two or more years and is most effective when begun quickly. Only a small minority will recover without therapy, such as those suffering a mini-stroke. Patients with a learning-disorder aphasia such as dysnomia can learn coping skills, but cannot recover abilities that are congenitally limited.

Improvement varies widely, depending on the aphasia's cause, type, and severity. Recovery also depends on the patient's age, health, motivation, handedness, and educational level.

People with aphasia may experience any of the following behaviors due to an acquired brain injury, although some of these symptoms may be due to related or concomitant problems such as dysarthria (a motor speech disorder resulting from an injury to that part of the brain) or apraxia (the loss of the ability to carry out learned, purposeful movements) and not primarily due to aphasia.

- inability to comprehend language
- inability to pronounce, not due to muscle paralysis or weakness
- inability to speak spontaneously
- inability to form words
- inability to name objects
- poor enunciation
- excessive creation and use of personal neologism, or newly-created words
- inability to repeat a phrase
- persistent repetition of phrases
- paraphasia (substituting letters, syllables or words)
- agrammatism (inability to speak in a grammatically correct fashion)
- dysprosody (alterations in inflexion, stress, and rhythm)
- uncompleted sentences
- inability to read
- inability to write
- limited verbal output
- difficulty in naming

BEHIND THE SCENES

A Conversation with "Ernie"

Actor John B. Lowe plays Ernie, the character who struggles with aphasia. In addition to being the PTE School Director, John has been involved with *The Secret Mask* from the first time the full-length script was developed. He read the part of Ernie the second time the play was read at the Carol Shields Festival of New Works (the first time it was full-length), and then again at two development workshops – the latest in September of this year.

John was asked about the challenges in portraying a character for whom language is doesn't mean the same thing as for the other characters.

It's not as complicated as you think. The conversation with (playwright Rick Chafe) was that it's called fluid aphasia. It's not that he's struggling for the words, he's not always aware that he's using the wrong words. In fact, throughout the play, he's quite confident that he is using the right words. At the beginning of the play, he's struggling with language and memory, and he's frustrated with his circumstances.

Every character in a well written scene has clear objectives and obstacles. Sometimes you really have to analyze the scene to find the obstacles. In this case, the language and memory are clearly delineated by the playwright. So I'm not trying to replicate a physical disability, the language is does it for me. His lack of memory make it simpler for the actor.

With aphasia, there's no normal. Everybody's different. Ernie doesn't have the halting thing. Ernie is more fluid. As the play progresses, he becomes aware that he's using the wrong words.

One of the challenges for me is without memory, he has no history. You use history to build the character so much. It's trying to build a character without knowing the back story. It's resisting the temptation to make arbitrary choices without knowing the script better. In this case, because the character has almost been reborn before the story starts.

It's also on a personal level, I'm having trouble explaining why I feel a really strong connection with this character and this play. And I'm cautious to make sure I'm not precious about it.

More "Behind the Scenes"

You'll find a variety of Behind the Scenes features, including a scene excerpt, on PTE's website: www.pte.mb.ca. The features include:

- Robert Metcalfe, PTE's Artistic Director, talks about what drew him to commissioning the full-length play
- Playwright Rick Chafe talks about the genesis of the play
- Interviews with all three actors about their characters and what they love about the play
- A scene excerpt (online after November 20)

ACTIVITIES

Although the play is not about aphasia, the playwright uses aphasia as a tool to tell the real story of the relationship between George and his estranged father. In director Robert Metcalfe's words, "Ernie's aphasia serves as both a real and metaphorical barrier to these two men who are trying to find ways to connect in a meaningful way. They must, quite literally, both learn a new language in order to find what they need from each other."

In our society, we rely heavily on language for communication, often to the point that non-verbal communication cues are overlooked. Following are some exercises to both better understand the concept of aphasia, and to explore alternate methods of communicating.

Before the Play

Exercise 1

Without showing the students the following story (or create your own), go around the class and have each student supply a word to fill in a blank. You can prompt them for a noun, verb or adjective, or even "a place", "a thing". Once all the blanks are filled in, read back the story. Did the students understand what was being said, even when the words were clearly wrong?

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful _____ who lived in a _____
_____. She had long, blonde _____, _____ of the bluest
_____ and a voice like a _____. One day, she went to the
_____ for a walk and saw a _____. The princess
thought it was the most _____ thing she had ever seen. She wanted to stroke
its soft _____ to hear it _____, but the _____
wouldn't let her come close. So the _____ princess decided to trick the
_____ into letting her pick it up. She set out a _____ of
cream, and hid behind a _____ to wait. Sure enough, the little
_____ came out of hiding to _____ the cream. The princess
_____ out of her hiding place and grabbed up the _____. But all
she ended up with was a _____ for her trouble. The princess went home to the
_____ and told her _____ that she had learned her
_____. Even a _____ princess can't have everything her
_____ desires.

Exercise 2

Break the group into pairs. Each pair works together to plan a 5 to 10 minute role-play scene. It could be a couple on a date, an employee and a boss, two team-mates discussing a game, or any other situation the students can come up with. Each team performs their scene for the group, using nonsense syllables, or “gibberish” to carry on a dialogue that has no verbal meaning for the audience. The story, intentions and feelings must be conveyed through voice pitch, body language, movement and facial expression. After each scene, ask the “audience” to describe the story they were able to glean without having had verbal clues. Discuss what other clues or indicators they saw that helped them understand what was happening without words.

Exercise 3

Break the group into pairs. One person describes an experience that generates an emotion, but while describing it uses facial expressions, vocal tones, body language and gestures that are opposite to the feelings he or she is expressing. For example, the story could be about how excited that person is about a trip they are going on for the weekend, but tells the story while frowning, slumping, using a monotone voice or even slurring the words. Then as a group, share the experience of verbal and nonverbal incongruence. What clues did they find most powerful and important?

After the Play

In the play, Ernie experiences incredible frustration when those around him don't understand what he's saying. This exercise will allow students to get a sense of what that might be like.

Break the group into pairs, which are to carry on a conversation. One partner initiates the conversation with a question (eg: “What did you do this weekend?”). The other partner answers, substituting some words with words that have no context or meaning in the sentence (eg: “I went with Horseman to the square place to watch the flashing.”). The first partner repeats back what they understood the second partner to actually mean (eg: “You went with a friend to the movie theatre to watch a movie?”) The second person either confirms the understanding and expands (“Yes. We ate puffies and saw lobster hats.”) or, if the understanding was not correct, tries again to get the first partner to fully understand (“No. It was my other one and we went to see the people, you know that ones that move.”)

Let the conversations continue in this manner – one person trying to make him/herself understood without clear language, and the other repeating back what they think their partner is saying – for about 5 minutes. Afterward, have the verbally-hobbled partners talk about how they felt during the conversation, when they had trouble making the simplest statements understandable without full use of language, and how the listening partner felt about not being able to understand or move the conversation forward.

An alternative to substituting actual out-of-context words could be having the “aphasia” student simply leave words out, instead saying something like, ‘ you know’, “the thing” , “whatsis” or “thingamabob”, or by using non-specific descriptors like, “the one with the red stuff”.

DISCUSSIONS

Before the Play

1. Discuss the idea of family connections. In today's society, there are many people who grow up without one (or sometimes both) of their parents. People who were adopted as infants still feel as if they're missing something, even if their adoptive parents are great. Why do people often still feel a connection to absentee family members – especially parents?
2. Is there a statute of limitations on family transgressions? If one family member hurts another and many years pass, should everything be automatically forgiven for the sake of the family? For the sake of love? What's the cost of not forgiving?

It's sometimes argued that a person should be forgiven a transgression "because they've suffered enough." Should justice be applied equally at all times, or should punishments be lesser or excused when forgiveness is the more important need?

3. As teenagers, it's easy to see your parents as having always been exactly the same as they are now. Think about what they might have been at your age, and why they might react to things now because of what they experienced as teenagers. How might your experiences now affect how you'll be as a parent in the future?
4. The play is about two men who are, initially, unable to communicate with each other. That's only partially due to the stroke that's affected one character's language. It's also partly due to the seeming difficulty so many men have in communicating with each other on a deeper level – especially about emotional issues. What might be some of the reasons this difficulty exists?

DISCUSSIONS

After the Play

1. George is having a hard time figuring out how to deal with his own teenage son. How much do you think that's due to his own upbringing without a father figure?
2. George finds his father to be a lot different from what he expected. Talk about expectations and assumptions we all might have about other people. Ask for examples of when students might have had their assumptions about someone shown to be inaccurate. At what point do you think that George began to change his opinion about Ernie?
3. When George arrives at the hospital, it's very unclear what he wants from his father. What do you think he's doing here? Why did he come to Vancouver? What do you think he expected to do? Why do you think he decides to stay?
4. If a person has a stroke or brain trauma that results in completely different behavior, is there a point where you could say this is a completely different person?
5. In the play, one actor, Sharon Bajer, plays a number of roles – essentially all the women in Ernie's current life who "look after" him. Why do you think the choice was made to have all those characters played by one person, and to not try to make each character seem too distinct from the others? Did that work for you as an audience member? What would you have done differently?
6. All the music in the play is original composition, written specially for this production. How did the music and other sounds contribute to the way the story was told onstage? How did the set and lights contribute? Why do you think the set was designed in the way it was?