



ARTSCLUB
THEATRE
COMPANY

Teacher Resource Guide 2004/2005 Season



UNLESS

By Carol Shields and Sara Cassidy
Adapted from the novel by Carol Shields
A co-production with Canadian Stage Company (Toronto)

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The Stanley Theatre

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CHARACTER LIST

Reta Winters - a successful writer and translator; the mother of three daughters

Tom Winters - Reta's common-law husband; a doctor with a passion for trilobites

Norah - Reta and Tom's eldest daughter, aged 19

Christine and Natalie - Reta and Tom's two younger daughters

Lois - Tom's mother, who lives next door to the family and comes for dinner every night

Pet - the family's dog

Arthur Springer - Rita's hotshot new editor, who is pretentious and self-absorbed

Lynne Kelly - coffee friend of Reta's; a lawyer

Annette - a coffee friend of Reta's who first discovers that Norah is living on the street

Sally - coffee friend; a drama teacher and new mother

Minor Characters

Colin Glass - an old friend of Tom's; a physicist

Sylvia - cosmetician and self-proclaimed psychic

Interviewer - self-absorbed and confrontational

Various characters who offer opinions on how to "rescue" Norah

Fictional Characters

Alicia and Roman - the heroine and hero of Reta's first novel and of the sequel she's currently writing

Linda Macbeth - Alicia's best friend

Michael Hammish - Roman's best friend

SYNOPSIS

Reta Winters, a successful writer and translator, is 44 and lives comfortably in a small town outside of Toronto with her partner, Tom, and their three daughters: Norah, Christine, and Natalie. Reta is upper middle class, well educated, and philosophically inclined. She is going through a difficult period, grieving for the death of Danielle Westerman, a writer whose work Reta both translated and revered, and for the loss of her eldest daughter, Norah, who has uprooted herself from her life as a university student and now lives on the street in downtown Toronto. Norah sits on a busy corner all day wearing a sign around her neck that reads “goodness,” begging for change and sleeping at a shelter.

Everyone is mystified by the sudden transformation in Norah. There are various theories as to the reason: her father, Tom, for example, thinks it must be post-traumatic stress. Reta is not so certain; she thinks Norah has tapped into something deeper about the female condition—that, as a woman, Norah can aspire to “goodness” but never to “greatness.”

Meanwhile, Reta is busy working on a sequel to her popular romantic novel *My Thyme is Up*. Norah’s predicament makes it increasingly difficult for Reta to write a light fiction in which a woman surrenders her independence in relation to a strong man. Reta must also contend with the challenges of a pompous and demanding new editor, Arthur Springer, who clearly does not understand Reta’s work at all. Solace for Reta comes in the form of family and her “coffee friends,” a group of women Reta meets with on a regular basis.

One weekend just after New Year’s Day, Arthur Springer comes to visit from New York City, but shortly after his arrival, Reta gets a call from Tom saying he’s found Norah in a Toronto hospital, where she’s suffering from pneumonia. With the help of the hospital workers, the family pieces together the story of Norah’s sudden disappearance from her old life the previous spring. Norah had been at the street corner when a Muslim woman committed suicide by setting herself on fire. Norah had attempted, unsuccessfully, to extinguish the flames and save the woman’s life, but the experience left her deeply traumatized.

Following her hospitalization, Norah comes home to live with her family again. Reta completes her novel.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Carol Shields

Carol Shields was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and attended Hanover College in Indiana, earning her bachelor's degree in 1957. Shortly thereafter, she married a Canadian civil engineer named Donald Hugh Shields; they settled in Winnipeg and had five children together. In 1976, just one year after receiving a master's degree in literature at the University of Ottawa, Shields published her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*. She went on to write numerous works of fiction, plays, short story collections, and poetry.

Her 1993 novel, *The Stone Diaries*, won the Governor General's Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and was nominated for the Booker Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her next novel, *Larry's Party*, won the Orange Prize in 1998 and has been adapted for the stage. *Unless*, her last novel, was also nominated for several awards, including the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award, the Booker Award, and the Orange Prize. One of her most popular books in recent years was a biography of Jane Austen published in the Penguin Lives series.

Like Austen, Shields is an author whose work focuses on the domestic and on the day-to-day details of women's lives. Many of her fictional protagonists are women who successfully combine career with family.

Shields was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1998 and a Companion of the Order of Canada in 2002. She died of complications due to breast cancer on July 16, 2003. She was 68.

Sara Cassidy

Sara Cassidy has written articles for the *Globe and Mail*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* and has been a contributor to CBC Radio. Her poetry and prose have been published in *Geist*, *Grain*, *The Malahat Review*, and *CV2*, and she has published a chapbook entitled *Ultrasound for the Heart*.

Sara received a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of King's College in Halifax. She currently resides in Victoria, where she works as a freelance journalist, is a full-time mother, and is involved in a variety of artistic and social causes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY CAROL SHIELDS

Novels

Small Ceremonies (1976)
The Box Garden (1977)
Happenstance (1980)
A Fairly Conventional Woman (1982)
Swann (1987)
A Celibate Season (with Blanche Howard) (1991)
The Republic of Love (1992)
The Stone Diaries (1993)
Larry's Party (1997)
Unless (2002)

Short Stories

Various Miracles (1985)
The Orange Fish (1989)
Dressing Up for the Carnival (2000)
The Collected Stories (2004)

Nonfiction

Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision (1977)
Jane Austen (2001)
Dropped Threads (edited with Marjorie Anderson) (2001)
Dropped Threads 2 (edited with Marjorie Anderson) (2003)

Plays

Departures and Arrivals (1988)
Fashion, Power, Guilt and the Charity of Families (with Catherine Shields) (1993)
Thirteen Hands (1993)
Anniversary (with Dave Williams) (1998)

Poetry

Others (1972)
Intersect (1974)
Coming to Canada (1992)

VOCABULARY

chignon - a hairstyle in which one's hair is gathered at the back of the head

pur laine - purebred, "dyed-in-the-wool"; in Quebec, this signifies someone whose ancestry is 100 percent French

trilobite - fossil of an invertebrate marine creature from the Paleozoic era, characterized by a three-lobed body

post-traumatic stress - psychological problems resulting from having experienced or witnessed a major disaster, extreme violence, or other deeply disturbing experiences

deconstruct - to question or challenge the apparent meaning of a text or work of art by rigorously analyzing the work and its many contexts and assumptions; this is a key post-modernist approach to criticism

pilgrimage - a journey to a sacred place, undertaken with a religious or spiritual purpose

HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

Go to any of Canada's larger cities and you'll find squatters camps. In greenbelts and abandoned buildings, under bridges and overpasses, they are homes for the homeless. Many of the camps are illegal, though landowners and politicians often turn a blind eye, allowing them to exist away from the public gaze. In other cases, the settlements take centre stage in high-profile disputes over land use rights.

The following is a look at some of the squats that have captured the headlines in Canada in the recent past.

Montreal

In January 2002, Montreal's new mayor, Gérald Tremblay, came under criticism after city firefighters used sledgehammers to smash up a collection of shelters under an overpass in Old Montreal. The structures, home to six men, were deemed to be fire hazards. Mayor Tremblay said he was not informed of the decision to remove the shelters.

In July 2001, a group of young squatters took over an abandoned, privately owned heritage home in downtown Montreal. Then-mayor Pierre Bourque allowed the squatters to resettle in a city-owned former drug-rehabilitation centre. He was later criticized for rewarding the squatters with a shelter while 8,000 low-income earners waited for subsidized housing. Relations between the squatters and the city quickly soured. A police riot squad evicted them in October 2001 after the city accused them of vandalism and creating fire hazards.

Ottawa

In June 2002, anti-G8 protesters set up a squat in Ottawa to protest the housing situation in that city. They named it the Seven Year Squat, after the length of the waiting list for subsidized housing in Ottawa. Days later, after the G-8 meetings ended, Ottawa police in riot gear cleared the squat, using pepper spray to subdue and arrest the protesters.

Toronto

Toronto's Tent City began to take shape in 1998, when a group of squatters erected lean-tos and makeshift huts on the former site of an iron foundry in Toronto's port lands. The "city" started with only a handful of squatters but grew to a community of more than a hundred people before being shut down.

In November 2000, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment ordered Home Depot, which owns the land, to evict the squatters, saying the site was contaminated with heavy metals left over by the foundry.

Early the next month advocates for the homeless defied the order and brought Tent City's first prefabricated structure to the site. Soon, unsigned notes appeared on the doors of the squatters' homes stating that Home Depot had to "secure" the site and requesting occupants to leave. On December 20, 2000, Home Depot placed concrete barriers at the entrances to the site, saying they wouldn't allow any more shelters to be brought there. One day later the company relented and allowed two portable homes into Tent City. The city reassured Home Depot that it was busy scouting for a new, safer shelter location in the port lands.

Within a year Toronto city councillors approved a plan to establish a community of

prefabricated houses near the Tent City site. The federal port authority objected to the location because it might one day be needed to unload heavy cargo from freighters in the dock.

On August 29, 2002, the *Toronto Star* reported that Home Depot was attempting to set up manufactured shelters on the Tent City site before winter. The company had joined with Homes First, a non-profit housing agency, to get the housing on the site, but a company spokesperson said those efforts were blocked by city hall. City officials told the spokesperson that the land could not be registered as an emergency shelter and that Home Depot would have to go through a rezoning process that could take up to two years to put housing on the land. One month later, security officers hired by Home Depot forced the squatters off the Tent City site and a new fence was erected to prevent the site from being squatted again.

Estimates of the number of homeless in Toronto range from 60,000 to 70,000. But advocates for the homeless say those numbers are low because they are based on shelter use and don't take into account those who live in parks or encampments, such as Tent City. A planned census of Toronto's homeless was put on hold after advocates said street people were afraid the count would reveal their hiding places and make them vulnerable to eviction.

Vancouver

Protesting a lack of affordable housing in Vancouver, hundreds of homeless established tent cities in city parks, leading a city councillor to remark in October 2003 that many citizens worried the parks were being taken over. "Where will it stop?" asked councillor Jim Green. "In many ways it's reflecting negatively on the homeless," he said.

On September 14, 2002, a group of homeless people and activists occupied the Woodward's building on Hastings Street in Vancouver's downtown east side. The former department store had been vacant for nine years. A week after the occupation began, police made a series of arrests at the site, but the squatters returned days later, demanding that the building be converted to low-cost housing, and occupied the building for 92 days. Members of the "Woodward's Squat" then moved to Victory Square, two blocks from the original site.

They split into two factions, one of which moved to False Creek and set up a new tent city that was dismantled by police in September 2003. The Anti-Poverty Committee has called for a formal, sanctioned Tent City—a call which has been rejected by Vancouver City Council. The City of Vancouver's Social Planning Department estimates that anywhere from 500 to 1,200 people sleep out of doors on any given night. This is roughly double the number reported in 1998. These numbers are based on walkabouts that may miss those who are sleeping in the rough in well-hidden locations. There is other evidence from the late 1990s that homelessness has increased. For example, the number of patients at St. Paul's Hospital with no fixed address increased by nearly 300% from 1994 to 1999.

Sources: CBC News Online, Vancouver Indymedia, GVRD Homelessness Resource site

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Read the novel *Unless* and compare it to the stage adaptation. What has been added to bring the work to life onstage? What has been subtracted? Do you feel like you get to know the characters better in the play or in the novel? Do you consider the adaptation faithful to the book?

Choose a short story by Carol Shields (from *Various Miracles*, *The Orange Fish*, or *The Collected Stories*) and adapt it into a short play or screenplay. What are the challenges? Do your characters make the transition from page to stage easily? How much do you have to invent or omit in order to make your piece dramatic?

Some of Carol Shields's other novels have been adapted for film, for example, *Swann* and *Larry's Party*. Compare one of the books to its film adaptation. Is the adaptation successful? What works and what doesn't? Do you prefer the book or the film?

In *Unless*, Reta observes that the canon (the generally accepted list of "great" works in literature, arts, music, etc.) excludes women, and that this historical fact diminishes women's opportunities. Do you think this is true? Research various lists of "great works," and evaluate them for gender or racial bias. Are there any art forms in which women are on a more equal footing with men?

What is the connection between Alicia and Roman, the characters Reta has created, and the world of the play? How do they interact with or comment on the events of Reta's own life?

Colin tries to explain the theory of relativity using a napkin, a coffee cup, and a cherry as props. What are some other props you could use to explain this theory?

Homelessness is an issue in most major North American cities. Do you feel that this play presents a realistic picture of homelessness and its impact on other family members? Research examples of cities that have come up with creative and effective solutions to the problem of homelessness.

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please impart some general theatre etiquette to students. They should keep in mind that this is not a movie theatre and different audience etiquette applies to a live theatre environment.

- The use of cameras or any type of recording equipment (including cellular phones) is strictly prohibited.
- It is important to turn off wristwatch alarms, cellular phones, and beepers for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and we will alert you if a call comes through.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre or lobby.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- We request that you refrain from eating or unwrapping candy in the theatre, as it is a distraction for others.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- Seating at The Stanley Theatre and the Granville Island Stage is assigned. Please sit in your assigned seat and respect the fact that other seats have been reserved for other patrons.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you will not be seated again until the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance. Even whispers carry!
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. We will be happy to address concerns on your behalf.

FURTHER RESOURCES

General Theatre Texts

- Bond, Daniel. *Stage Management*. New York, NY: A & C Black; Theatre Arts Books/Routledge, 1991.
- Cole, Toby & Helen Krich Chinoy. *Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theatre*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.
- Covey, Liz & Rosemary Ingham. *The Costume Designer's Handbook: A Complete Guide for Amateur and Professional Costume Designers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.
- Dukore, Bernard F. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.
- Parker, W. Oren & R. Craig Wolf. *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990.

Web Resources*

- <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/homelessness/>
- <http://vancouver.indymedia.org>
- <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/%7Evoice/>
- <http://www.bchousing.org/>

*Web links were active when preparing this guide.