

**ARTS CLUB THEATRE COMPANY
TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE
2011/2012 Season**



Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage
February 9 – March 10, 2012

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WELCOME

This guide was created for teachers and students. It contains an overview of the play's story and production, as well as an informative essay. The guide aims to provide background knowledge and critical ways of approaching the play that will yield fruitful discussion and foster an understanding and appreciation of the theatre arts.

If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 ext. 253, or by e-mail at groups@artsclub.com.

The guide was written by Daniel Ralston, 2011 Marketing Intern.

ABOUT THE COMPANY

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors. It became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage in a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 48th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates three theatres, the Granville Island Stage, the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, and the Revue Stage. Its popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics.

SYNOPSIS

Act I

Esther sits at her sewing machine in a New York boarding house, hands flitting over a camisole trimmed with lace. A party is on, and her landlady, Mrs. Dickson, tries to coax her downstairs before the newlyweds leave. Esther declines the invitation, saying that no man would dance with her anyway, reminding Mrs. Dickson that she turned 35 last Thursday. Her landlady is genuinely regretful that she forgot it, and says that Esther's time will come—if only she wouldn't be so particular about a potential husband. As Mrs. Dickson goes back downstairs she remembers that a letter came for Esther, and gives it to her. George, a sturdy and handsome Barbadian man, stands in a pool of light and recites the letter aloud in an exotic Caribbean lilt. He asks if he may write her, and invites her to reply.

Esther is in Mrs. Van Buren's bedroom. Behind a screen, Mrs. Van Buren, a wealthy white socialite, changes into one of Esther's creations: a low-cut corset. She opines that it's a bit skimpy, but when Esther tells her it's meant that way, like the one she made for a black client, Mrs. Van Buren warms to its naughty allure, hoping to get her philandering husband's attention. She confesses to Esther that she has begun to think she can't have children. Having been taken so deep into her confidence, Esther tells her that she harboured little hope of getting married, until George's letters began to arrive. She then reveals that she can't read or write, and Mrs. Van Buren offers to write a reply for her. As they begin to write, the lights fade and highlight George, who bemoans the hard toil and little reward that Panama offers black men.

The fabric merchant Mr. Marks, a Romanian Orthodox Jew, shows Esther a selection of his new and most interesting pieces, revelling, as she does, in the story behind each bolt of cloth. The two share an appreciation for textiles, and they enjoy each other's company. When Esther reaches out to shake his hand as she leaves, he retracts it quickly, explaining that his religion prohibits him from touching any woman but his wife. Esther asks after her, and he says they



Singer sewing machine, early 1900s.

have never met: the marriage was arranged years ago, but she has yet to come to the United States.

Esther is in another bedroom. A beautiful black woman, her friend and client Mayme, plays the piano while complaining about her latest client: “for a dollar they think they own you.” Esther shows her a blue corset like Mrs. Van Buren’s, and tells her that she made one just like it for a lady from Fifth Avenue. Mayme, touched, says it is too fine, but Esther insists, saying that “what she got, you want, what you want, she got.” Later, as Esther gets animated talking about her visit to Mr. Marks, Mayme teases her. When Esther doesn’t respond, she softens and listens as Esther explains that she is being courted by letter. Mayme asks why she bothers with such an unlikely courtship, but concedes that everyone has dreams and then fleshes out her own: she would be a concert pianist in Europe. Esther confides that she is saving up money in an old quilt to start up a beauty parlour for coloured ladies, but has never told anyone before. She then produces a letter from George which asks what she looks like, and Mayme writes a reply. George’s letter in response is affectionate, even verging on suggestive.

Mrs. Dickson is suspicious of George’s frequent letters, and tells Esther to be wary of his intentions and to stop wasting time on something so immaterial, especially as she isn’t getting any younger. Esther becomes angry with Mrs. Dickson, who tears up the most recent letter.

She visits Mr. Marks to buy some more fabric. Again, the encounter is fraught with romantic tension. As he turns away and bends, struggling with a bolt of cloth, Esther delicately touches the back of his collar, only for a moment, and so lightly that he doesn’t seem to notice. Later, in Mrs. Van Buren’s room, Esther fits a new piece on her employer. As she adjusts the corset Mrs. Van Buren tells her that she feels very at ease with her, and that her visits are one of the few things she looks forward to. After the piece has been fitted, they write another letter. George recites another letter. He declares that he loves Esther, and asks her to marry him.

At Mayme’s, Esther recounts the proposal and her acceptance of it; George is to arrive next month. They have a celebratory drink and Mayme plays the piano for her. She stops at Mr. Marks’s store to buy material for her wedding dress. Though she only looks at inexpensive cloth, when he discovers the dress is for her, he makes a gift of the finest fabric he has.

In a faded scene, George arrives in New York and Esther emerges in her gorgeous wedding dress. They stand slightly apart, facing outwards, and after the flash of a camera, the lights fade into a sepia tone and a caption appears above them: “Unidentified Negro Couple, ca. 1905.”

Act II

George and Esther stand on opposite sides of their bed. The musical lilt of his voice is gone, his accent heavier. He is eager to consummate their marriage, but Esther is hesitant, and steps away to fetch a silk smoking jacket she made for him. She tells him about her childhood: her father never spoke; his tongue was cut out after a fight. When she came to

New York an old woman in the rooming house taught her how to sew. George says he was the son of a slave, and that his family had been slaves as long as anyone remembered. The lights slowly fade as they go to the bed.

Sometime later, George asks Esther for two dollars. He says that finding work is much harder than expected, and shows her a letter from a white supervisor. She fakes being able to read it, and he doesn't notice her deception. Menial jobs are the only thing available to black workers he complains, but a friend has told him about an opportunity to buy twelve horses from a man for cheap. Esther warns him that it's only talk, and doesn't give him the two dollars. Frustrated, he leaves for a beer.

At Mr. Marks's shop, she buys fabric for a suit for George. Mr. Marks has saved her some very beautiful Valenciennes lace, which she initially declines. She tells him that she can no longer come to visit, saying "I think you know why." As he wraps the wool she requests that he wrap the lace as well.

At Mrs. Van Buren's, Esther learns that her employer's husband has left for Europe for several months. She tells Mrs. Van Buren about her husband's unwillingness to take a job he doesn't like, though they need the money. She asks for her pay, which is two months behind, and quietly declares that her love may belong somewhere else. Mrs. Van Buren pulls her close and kisses her; Esther succumbs to it for a moment, but then pulls away abruptly, ashamed. Mrs. Van Buren apologizes quickly, saying she didn't mean to do it, and that she just wants them to continue being friends. When Esther tells her they can't be, Mrs. Van Buren screams at her, calling her a coward, then apologizes again before tossing her money on the bed. Esther takes it and leaves.

When Esther arrives at Mayme's room, Mayme is in very good cheer. She describes her new and regular client, who complains about his wife in a lyrical accent. He comes three times a week, always right on time. She shows Esther a gift he brought for her—the Japanese silk smoking jacket Esther made for George. Esther doesn't react, but asks, as she leaves, if she ever wonders how his faithful wife might feel, alone and waiting for her husband to return.

George stands in his new wool suit, about to head out. Esther stops him and says she has a surprise for him. He covers his eyes; she slips out of her clothes to pose awkwardly in a sexy corset. He opens his eyes, and clearly disappointed, only chuckles to himself and asks her what she's doing. Esther timidly suggests that a man has obligations, but he pushes her away, saying that he won't let her tell him what to do if she won't let him do what he wants. He eyes the quilt with the money sewn inside. She tells him no. He begins to describe what life could be like if she would let him put the money to good use, and seductively runs his hands along her, kissing her. She gives in, wanting to believe it all, and cuts open the quilt; money tumbles onto the floor. George is transfixed, and begins to gather it up, paying her no attention. She asks him if he loves her, but he doesn't respond. Infuriated, she tells him she had no part in writing the letters, that she kept them all but doesn't know what they say, because she can't read. She interrogates him, asking who wrote his letters. He hesitates, then tells her it was an

old man in Panama, who he paid ten cents per letter, plus ten cents more for fancy writing. He leaves, saying he'll come back with the horses.

The next evening, Esther goes to Mayme's, where she finds her alone, wrapped in the smoking jacket. Mayme is surprised, and tells her to come back later, for she has someone coming soon. Esther tells her that George is gone, that he has another woman. Finally, she asks if Mayme knows where he is. Mayme doesn't know how she could know. Esther replies, "because you're wearing the jacket I gave him on our wedding night." Stunned, Mayme recounts that he showed up last night with lots of money and gambled it all away. A knock comes at the door, then George begins to shake it, but Esther tells Mayme not to open it, saying that neither of them will get him, only chase him forever.

Esther returns to Mr. Marks's store and gives him the smoking jacket, only staying long enough to turn down his collar and smooth the fabric before leaving without a word. Back at Mrs. Dickson's rooming house, Esther moves into her old quarters. Though Mrs. Dickson is brimming with questions, at Esther's request she asks nothing. Once alone, Esther pauses, lightly touches her belly, and begins to sew together a patchwork quilt.

CHARACTERS

Esther

A plain 35-year-old black seamstress, devoted to her work and clients. She has lived eighteen years in a boardinghouse, witnessing many weddings—but never her own. George’s letters provide her with a romantic interest, and though she can neither read nor write, she has friends reply to them. Naïve and unsuspecting, she is quietly destroyed when George shows little interest in her apart from her money. After she leaves him, she tries to begin anew.

Mrs. Dickson

Esther’s ebullient and well-kempt landlady. Maternally, she tries to watch out for Esther, encouraging her to find a man and marry—to settle—like she once did.

Mrs. Van Buren

A wealthy Fifth Avenue socialite, Mrs. Van Buren endures the wanderings of her husband, refusing to leave him for fear of the social repercussions. She feels unwanted and alone, and though she frequently attends balls and dances with New York high society, she finds solace with her sympathetic seamstress, Esther. She craves her husband’s attention, and has Esther make her scandalous undergarments similar to Mayme’s to win him over.

Mr. Marks

A Romanian Orthodox Jew and fabric merchant. He is austere and devoted to his faith, yet he and Esther share a love of fine fabrics that could almost certainly be something more, if either of them would allow it. He is engaged to a woman in Romania he has never met; constricted by religion and arranged marriage, he is unable to express the feelings that he harbours for Esther.

Mayme

A gifted piano player working as a prostitute, she is one of Esther’s clients and friends. Esther encourages her to pursue her music, but the beautiful Mayme seems to have tried and failed in the past, and grows complacent and dispirited.

George Armstrong

The Barbadian man who courts Esther by letter, eventually coming to New York from Panama (where he worked on the canal) to marry her. Lyrical and refined in his letters, he is coarse and pride-filled in person. He takes advantage of Esther’s goodwill and lust for him, using her life’s savings to gamble, drink, and womanize before she realizes and leaves him.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

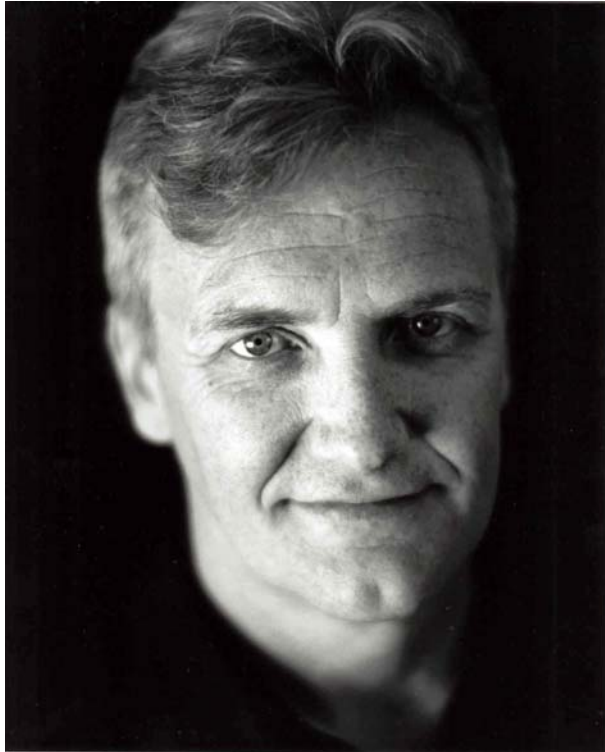


Lynn Nottage is a celebrated contemporary playwright from Brooklyn, New York. Growing up, she attended New York’s High School of Music and Art, where she penned her first dramatic works. She went on to attend Brown University, studying English, and later earned her MFA at the Yale School of Drama. After a stint at Amnesty International, she turned to writing full-time in 1993. Her plays include *Intimate Apparel*; *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*; *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*; *Las Meninas*; *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; and *Ruined*.

In addition to the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama (which she was awarded for *Ruined*), Nottage has won the 2010 Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award, the Dramatists Guild Hull-Warriner Award, the inaugural Horton Foote Prize for Outstanding New American Play (for *Ruined*), and the Lee Reynolds Award. Her other honours include the 2007 MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Award, the National Black Theatre Festival’s August Wilson Playwriting Award, the 2005 Guggenheim Grant for Playwriting, the 2004 PEN/Laura Pels Award for Drama, and fellowships from the Lucille Lortel Foundation, Manhattan Theatre Club, New Dramatists, and New York Foundation for the Arts. She was recently conferred an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts by Brown University.

Nottage’s oeuvre, while diverse, often focuses on the transcendence of ethnic and societal barriers. Her characters eke out intimacy despite their differences, creating small, but inclusive, communities.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



John Cooper has directed over 130 productions at theatres across Canada, most recently the Vancouver Playhouse's production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. He is a three-time Jessie Richardson Theatre Award winner for Outstanding Direction; his most recent win was for the Arts Club's production of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. His production of Audrei Kairen's *Big Mama: The Willie Mae Thornton Story* won the Betty Mitchell Award for Best Production of a Musical in 2000. University of British Columbia (UBC) directing projects include Bryan Wade's adaptation of *Lady from the Sea* and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. John is a graduate of UBC's MFA directing program and teaches stage directing as an adjunct professor for UBC's Department of Theatre and Film. John is a freelance director and is based in Vancouver.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

Excerpted from John Istel's interview with Lynn Nottage for Roundabout Theatre Company
<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/fc/spring04/nottage.htm>

You've said that the idea for *Intimate Apparel* was floating around in your mind for a while before you had the occasion—a co-commission by two regional theatres—to write it. Can you describe that initial impulse?

There were several seeds. One was the notion of exploring the moment when a woman of 35 becomes resigned to the fact that she's never going to find love. I was very interested in how she embraces the notion, lives through the moment, and thus gets on with her life.

Another seed was my fascination with period lingerie. I had a great-grandmother who made "intimate apparel" at the turn of the century. That always intrigued me. She came to New York in 1912 and made intimate apparel for African-American and white women. I was always curious about how she felt entering the various boudoirs and worlds of women very different from herself. What did she see? How did it shape her sensibilities? How did she feel about the corset? How did she change the way women saw themselves?

So your curiosity about a character spurred on this play. Is that how you usually begin the playwriting process?

Most absolutely. I have to be very curious about my characters at the beginning of the process, because I know that I'm going to spend the next two or three years in the world of that play. So it must be a world that continues to offer up surprises. I'm someone who loves the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, and that's every single room in the building. My research goal when writing a new play is to get to all the rooms—the photography room, the early New York room, the main reading room. It's a wonderfully seductive place and I never tire of exploring it. I've found many of my characters in that building.

Can you talk about your research for *Intimate Apparel*?

I spent a lot of time looking at lingerie books of the period. I have a love-hate relationship with the corset. I also did a lot of research on the Panama Canal and African-Americans in early New York. I found that one of the best resources was the newspapers of the period, in particular the classified ads and announcements. Those items gave me a sense of ordinary life: what people were wearing, what people were paying for the items that they wore, where they were going, what people desired, and what things were important to them. All those details helped me shape the play, the small details that the eye might brush over upon first glance. The fact is that very little information has been preserved about the lives of ordinary African-Americans in early New York. So I had to go to unusual lengths to find my characters.

Some playwrights claim they see the play in their mind; others hear voices and dialogue. Do you fall into either camp?

For me it varies. This play really arose from a feeling . . . a feeling of resignation epitomized by Esther, a 35-year-old woman with limited options. That was my starting point. I wanted to capture that feeling of resignation. And Esther simply began to explain her story to me.

But the process is different with each play. It really depends on the things I'm exploring: whether it's a drama or a comedy; whether it's plot heavy or character driven. With *Intimate Apparel*, I wrote the first and last scene with great ease, so I knew the entire arc of the play. The joy for me was filling in the colors and listening to the slow beautiful aria that Esther was singing to me.

Esther goes through tremendous changes in the play. We see Esther resign herself to living alone, without love, but then witness her reawakening through her long-distance love affair with a stranger in Panama . . .

Well, that's the journey she takes. I don't want to give away the ending because I want people to see it—so don't read this part if you want a complete surprise. But for me the big journey of the play is that it begins with this woman sitting at a sewing machine. For her, it's a symbol of imprisonment. By the end of the play, she's taken a journey in which, when she sits down to sew, the same machine has become a symbol of her liberation. She has a completely different relationship to her work. So it ends exactly where it begins but everything has changed in tiny little ways . . . and in big ways. Part of the reason I wrote this play is that I was interested in the poetry of everyday moments in ordinary life, in the simple gestures that define us and the way that unspoken things keep us from moving forward.

A lot of that is really clear in Esther's scenes with Mr. Marks, the orthodox Jewish businessman who sells her the fancy fabrics she needs to make her lingerie. In those scenes there's clearly so much going on between them that is unspoken.

One of the things that particularly fascinated me about the turn of the century is that it was an era before psychoanalysis. It was before people really understood the nature of their feelings and desires. They just felt—and had a limited vocabulary to share those feelings. You find people with complicated emotions, but they can't express themselves because the language simply didn't exist yet. So they have to find an alternative means of expression.

Esther and Mr. Marks do it through touch and the exploration of the fabric. That's how they express their forbidden love. The two are interesting because they're so close and yet so far apart; or maybe it's the other way around. They're obviously from different worlds, but they've found a common ground and a remarkable level of intimacy.

The play also has this very interesting socio-political dimension because the two women Esther makes lingerie for are so different. One's white and rich; the other is a black singer and a prostitute. But both of whom want to be in each other's skin. What were you trying to communicate with that?

I was more interested in the language and the things that connected these women, more so than the things that separated them. There are issues of class and race that come into play, and definitely an economic divide, but I think these women—Esther and Mrs. Van Buren—are drawn together by their humanity. It's society that has forced them to live separate lives. Society has placed labels on them—it has defined who they are. They can occupy the same space only when one is serving the other but they can't have a friendship that exists outside or beyond there.

I was thinking about Esther's two customers, Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme. The two women obliquely know of each other but never meet. But they really want everything the other one . . .

Mrs. Van Buren covets the freedom and sexual liberation of Mayme, while Mayme covets the legitimacy and the wealth and the place in society that Mrs. Van Buren enjoys.

Is there anything else that's autobiographical in the play beside the character of Esther?

Yes, there is. My great-grandmother met my great-grandfather through correspondence. Like George Armstrong, who Esther corresponds with, he was working on the Panama Canal. My great-grandmother came to New York and needed to find a husband and they started corresponding and he came over and they married. That much is autobiographical.

The play has been produced at a number of theatres, including the two that commissioned it. When you saw it onstage, did the way the script played surprise or shock you?

I was surprised by the difficulty some actors had playing the unspoken moments. I think it's easier in some ways for actors to just grab each other and kiss than to stand onstage very closely, look each other in the eyes, and figure out a way to say I love you without physically touching. When I set out to write this play I was specifically interested in the space between the lines and the way in which a silence can be filled.

You were looking for a stillness . . .

I was definitely looking for stillness. I think that is the single most difficult thing to achieve in theatre.

THE CORSET AS METAPHOR

The mention of corsets calls to mind the oppressive, patriarchal society that prescribed them as fashion necessities, and the ornate, transformative, yet constrictive garments themselves. Nottage weaves these metaphors throughout *Intimate Apparel*, building a play that conveys both the oppression of women and also how those women identified their own roles in society. Her detailed historical research and sensitive writing evoke the restraint and decorum that typified social contact in the early twentieth century, vividly rendering the time and its restrictions.

Corsets, or the vestments they descended from, are conjectured to have originated among early sixteenth-century court courtiers. These garments, often stiffened with whalebone or horn, pushed in on the torso, flattening the stomach and pushing the wearer's breasts upward, rather than nipping in at the waist. The first tightly-bound, waist-pinching corsets



Bianca Lyons in an S-shaped corset, 1902.
Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

were products of the Victorian era.

Extensively boned, or sometimes metal-ribbed, corsets of the mid-1800s were designed to squeeze and lengthen the torso, while tightening the waist to fit women into the narrow, flat-fronted dresses fashionable at the time. In the early twentieth century women's fashion embraced low-cut dresses that emphasized the breasts. The rigid corsets of the Victorian age were replaced by longer ones that smoothed the hips and shaped the torso into an S-shape; though slightly less constricting, these corsets still bound women into unnatural postures. As women began to labour during the First World War, dress conventions became less stringent, and corsets much less commonplace.

In *Intimate Apparel*, corsets are representative of strictly observed social and gender codes. Mrs. Van Buren, forced to exchange mannered pleasantries at society affairs, and expected to produce offspring, feels trapped. She longs to be able to live a bohemian lifestyle, free of her husband, but cannot. Mayme, though restricted in a different way, is similarly stuck within an assigned societal role. Though she dreamed of becoming a concert pianist, she was unable to, because

she is black, and for want of money and connections. Both women are bound into roles that a male-dominated society has imposed on them.

Nottage complicates what could be a simplistic critique of patriarchy by assigning the corset other, more personal significances. Esther's beautiful corsets for Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren, while similar in appearance, hold very different meanings for each woman. For Mayme, the corset is a garment of glamour, something associated with the liberty and ease of the Fifth Avenue moneyed set. Mrs. Van Buren covets Mayme's corset as representative of her perceived personal and sexual freedom—far from the obligations and niceties of high society.

In asserting a plurality of possible meanings, Nottage emphasizes the agency of her female characters. Although males wielded considerable social power at the turn of the twentieth century, the corset was not merely a symbol of their influence; to its wearers, intimate apparel had changeable and varied meanings.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How could the metaphor of the corset as restrictive, yet liberating, be related to Esther's role in the play?
2. Do you think that Nottage's personal connection to the period changed the way she wrote the play? How?
3. The racial divide between Esther and Mrs. Van Buren is pronounced. How else does Nottage raise this issue throughout the play?

SOURCES AND WEBSITES TO EXPLORE

Books

Maurer, Noel and Carlos Yu. *The Big Ditch*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
A quantitative analysis of the costs and benefits of the Panama Canal that addresses the immigrant, and largely Barbadian, labour force.

Verney, Keven. *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881–1925*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

An account of the rise of Booker T. Washington's ideas and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. It is most useful for its summary of African-American history between 1865 and 1925.

Websites

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/lynn_nottage/index.html
A *New York Times* profile of Nottage.

<http://www.lynnnottage.net/>

The playwright's own website. Incorporates biographical details with complete lists of her productions and media interviews.

<http://www.fathom.com/course/21701726/session1.html>

This five-part seminar on corsets and crinoline, created by the Victoria and Albert Museum, has plentiful information on the development of the corset. The seminars include summaries of the changes in fashion that drove the evolution of corsets.

ATTENDING THE SHOW

Arriving at the Theatre

Please arrive at the theatre 30 minutes before the show to pick up and distribute tickets. Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. They will have to find alternate parking for the duration of the show.

Theatre Etiquette

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please share these general theatre etiquette guidelines with students.

- Please turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices 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 they will alert you.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance you will be seated again at the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance.
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. They will be happy to address your concerns.