

EDUCATION DEPARTEMENT

# Circle Mirror Transformation

by Annie Baker  
directed by Rachel Walshe

2010 Obie Award Winner  
Best New American Play



sandra feinstein-

**GAM**  
theatre

## STUDY GUIDE

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# Table of Contents

**Prologue:**

Note from Education Director, Steve Kidd  
Using This Study Guide in Your Classroom  
Benefits of Core Prep visits

**Act I:**

Theatre Audience Etiquette

**Act II:**

Annie Baker and Circle Mirror Transformation

**Act III:**

Our Production  
*From the Director*  
Rachel Walshe  
*Dramaturgical Notes*  
Jennifer Madden

**Act IV:**

Questions for Discussion  
Drama Games for the Classroom

**Epilogue:**

Thank you!  
How to learn more through The Gamm

*This study guide was prepared by  
Susie Schutt and Steve Kidd*

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# PROLOGUE

Dear Educator,

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to share with your students designed to prepare them for our production of *Circle Mirror Transformation* by Annie Baker.

This Study Guide is broken into four acts. In the first act, you will find a few more reminders for you and your students about the nature of performance and what is expected of all audience members attending the theatre. In the second act, we delve into the world of Annie Baker and *Circle Mirror Transformation*. In this act, you will find a biography of Baker and the production history of the play. In act three, Director Rachel Walshe articulates her vision and ideas behind our production and then a dramaturgical look at the play from our resident dramaturge, Jennifer Madden. Finally, we will close our Study Guide with act four, some questions for consideration and discussion and information on how to learn more about The Gamm's Educational offerings.

As part of our Core Prep program, I would like to offer a workshop with your classroom/school before your visit and help prepare your students for the play. In these workshops, I will not only discuss the play and our production concept(s), but we will also get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the themes, motifs and the language of the play. This type of kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and the sort of text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Much of this work was discovered, developed and inspired by the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. I had the good fortune to work with "ArtsLit" and the strategies and models for learning developed by the organization continue to serve as a foundational pedagogical tool for all Gamm Education programming.

Some benefits of ArtsLiteracy learning include:

- **Community Building in Your Classroom** (Applied Learning New Standards: A1; A2; A5)
- **Inspiration and Background on the Artist** (English Language Arts New Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; Applied Learning New Standards: A2; A3; A5)
- **Entering and Comprehending Text** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)

- **Creating Text for Performance** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Performing in Your Class** (Applied Learning Standards: A1; A2; A3; A4; A5)
- **Reflecting on Your Performance** (E2; E3; A1; A2; A5)

Moreover, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) has developed GSE's (Grade Span Expectations) and GLE's (Grade Level Expectations) to help "capture the "big ideas" of reading that can be assessed."

We believe that all of our Literacy through Performance work helps to develop the following literacy skills.

### **WRITING**

- W-2: Writing in Response to Literary Text (showing understanding of ideas in a text). A "text" covers not only books and plays, but film and other kinds of media.
- W-3: Making Analytical judgments about text (how good was it? What stuck out?)
- W-4: Creating a Storyline
- W-5: Applying Narrative Strategies (how did they tell the story?)
- W-14: Reflective Essay

### **ORAL COMMUNICATION**

- OC-1: Interactive Listening (how well students listen; how much information they pick up hearing something once – asking a student to write a comprehensive account of a play certainly works)
- OC-2: Making Presentations (each senior in Rhode Island will be asked to put on a senior exhibition, capstone project or portfolio that includes a public demonstration on a particular subject. Learning about public performance is an obvious tie-in).

### **READING**

- R-4: Initial Understanding of Literary Texts (where is the climax in a story? How would you set this play in contemporary society?)
- R-5: Analysis and Interpretation of Literary Text/Citing Evidence
- R-11: Reading Fluency and Accuracy (part of the benefits of reading a script out over and over in rehearsal is an increase in reading fluency and accuracy)

Please see more exercise and strategies for ArtsLiteracy learning at [www.artslit.org](http://www.artslit.org). We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year.

Steve Kidd  
Resident Actor/Education Director  
The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre

# Act I: Theatre Audience Etiquette

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as the Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors. Thus, you the audience, play an active role in the experience. The actors can see and hear you and any distracting behavior (talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc) can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. Thank you!

## **The Nature of Performance**

Controversial British playwright Sarah Kane once observed: "There's always going to be a relationship between the material and that audience that you don't really get with a film... People can walk out or change channels or whatever, it doesn't make any difference to the performance... It's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience."

The performance you see will never be precisely the same, for it will never have the same audience; every performance is unique. Theatre scholar Robert Cohen observed the essential paradox of live performance:

- It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.
- It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.
- It is participatory, yet it is presented.
- It is real, yet it is simulated.
- The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.
- The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

"Theatre is not just another genre, one among many. It is the only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings... It is a place for human encounter, a space for authentic human existence..."

-Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic and Playwright  
(From Robert Cohen's *Theatre: Brief Version*)

Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.

## Act II: Annie Baker and Circle Mirror Transformation



Annie Baker was born in Amherst Massachusetts, in 1981. She studied Dramatic Writing at New York University and received a Masters of Fine Arts in Playwriting from Brooklyn College. She lives in New York City.

Ms. Baker describes Anton Chekhov, the Russian playwright, as her biggest influence and hero. Sometimes called the Father of the Modern Play, Chekhov wrote about the everyday trials and financial struggles of the poor and middle class. Lucky for her, *The New York Times* wrote, "There is something distinctly Chekhovian in the way [Annie Baker's] writing accrues weight and meaning simply through compassionate, truthful observation." Like Chekhov, Ms. Baker writes about everyday people in fairly ordinary situations, while touching on themes of love, death, change and time. She is known for her interest and success in writing silence, stillness, and repetition, which set the tone for all her work.

Ms. Baker's work is also largely influenced by growing up in New England. She says, "I think growing up in a small town, the kind of people I met in my small town, they still haunt me. I find myself writing about them over and over again." Four of her plays, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, *Nocturama*, *The Aliens*, and *Body Awareness*, are set in the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont. In 2010 three of Ms. Baker's works (*Circle Mirror Transformation*, *The Aliens*, and *Body Awareness*) were performed simultaneously at the Boston Center for the Arts as a festival titled *The Shirley, Vermont Plays* and in November 2011, four of Ms. Baker's plays will be published in a book titled [The Vermont Plays: Four Plays by Annie Baker](#).

Ms. Baker has received critical acclaim and a number of awards including a New York Drama Critics Circle Special Citation, a Susan Smith Blackburn Prize

nomination, and a Time Warner Storytelling Fellowship. The New York Times described Baker as "one of the most promising new stage talents to emerge in the past decade" and called *Circle Mirror Transformation*, "absorbing, unblinking, and sharply funny!" *Circle Mirror Transformation* premiered Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in October 2009. It received the 2010 Obie Awards for Best New American Play and was nominated for the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

## Act III: Our Production



### From the Director:

"[T]he purpose of playing ... is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue, her feature; scorn, her own image; and the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure." –*Hamlet*

Annie Baker's play, like the title suggests, holds a mirror to life. That mirror is unadorned, unblinking. Life in this play is, well, like life. Not jazzed up with clever retorts and poetic exchanges, but distilled in such a way as to offer up true depictions of fear, loneliness, joy, grief, and love. These are big, sweeping emotions captured in a momentary exchange, a sideways glance, an electric silence worth a thousand words.

Haven't we all been there? Yearning for something new and different, exciting and thrilling that will kick the chocks out from under the wheels and get us *moving* again. Haven't we all felt hopelessly *stuck*? And why not something like a drama class at the local community center to help kick-start things, to get out of a rut, and meet new people? Learn new skills? Get out of your shell? Of course, once you're actually in the class, facing a bunch of strangers and being asked to expose your darkest secrets, that shell seems like a pretty attractive place.

There are few plays that cut right to the quick of life's universal experiences—even fewer that do so with exquisite simplicity. *Circle Mirror Transformation* is one of those few. In it, four students sign up for a Creative Drama class at the local community center. This seems simple enough. Yet over the course of a six-week class, love affairs are born, blossom and die, marriages are tested, childhoods resurrected, futures charted, secrets exposed, stereotypes exploded, and much, much more.

*Circle Mirror Transformation* is a simple and stunning portrait of five people cracking their protective shells. That process is at once painful and joyous, terrifying and exhilarating. Baker invites us to witness this experience and, hopefully, to be transformed by it. I hope you find moments in this play that mirror moments from your own life. I know I do. I also hope you are, in some small way, transformed for having spent some time with Marty, James, Theresa, Schulz, and Lauren. They may not be the typical heroes of high drama. But they are, in my book, heroes nonetheless.

Welcome to class.

-Rachel Walshe

## **Dramaturgical Notes:**

### **In Praise of Adult Education**

By Jennifer Madden

*But we will succeed always if we try and become flowers. - Circle Mirror Transformation*

*Growth as an actor and as a human being are synonymous. - Stella Adler*

New York Times critic Charles Isherwood refers to the “subtle magic” of Annie Baker’s plays. *Circle Mirror Transformation* sneaks up on you, its power not immediately evident; much is left unsaid and subtext is all. Small, seemingly insignificant actions eventually lead to surprising yet seemingly inevitable revelation.

Baker's play offers a deceptively simple premise. Indefatigable Marty leads an adult “creative drama” class at a local community center in Shirley, Vermont. Unfortunately only three students enroll: Schultz, a shy, recently divorced carpenter, Theresa a charismatic former actress, and Lauren, an occasionally surly teenager with theatrical aspirations. To pad her dismally enrolled class, Marty recruits her recalcitrant husband, James a professor at the local college. The group of five, who, Baker notes, only “wanted to add a little meaning to their lives” make discoveries



(not all of them pleasant) about themselves and each other. Relationships form while others are shattered. Marty's theatre games might seem silly, self-indulgent, and without purpose but they provide her students with essential skills: to listen, to be present, to transcend debilitating self-consciousness, and most importantly to be empathetic.

What motivates someone to take an adult education class? Perhaps it's the desire to try something new, connect with new people, to keep the mind sharp, or stave off boredom. Being a student allows one the freedom to play, to fail, to have flights of the imagination, to be someone else... activities most of us must abandon once we enter the "real world." Gamm resident actor, education director, and acting teacher Steve Kidd puts it this way:

Throughout seven weeks we see this complete snapshot, this full spectrum of society who have decided to take time out of their lives to pursue a new art form, a new form of expression that might be fulfilling for them. Something that will push them in new ways... it is a challenge in different ways to each and every member of the class and as such, it becomes an incredibly supportive environment as everyone roots for the other members of class because they directly relate to how difficult it can be to fully open oneself to this type of artistic and deeply personal endeavor.

As an audience member at showcase performances of The Gamm Studio adult acting classes, I am always impressed by the students, people from all walks of life, masters and mistresses of their professions, publicly attempting something new, confronting their limitations, and exploring their creativity. It is a great act of humility and courage that continually moves me. *Circle Mirror Transformation* will move you in the same way.

## **Act IV: Questions for Discussion & Games for the Classroom**

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. There are a lot of silences in this play. What sort of mood do the silences set? What meaning does silence have in your own life?
2. What do we learn about Marty, James, Schultz, Theresa, and Lauren in *Circle Mirror Transformation*? How do we learn it? How do you get to know people?
3. This play takes place over six weeks and then ten years later. What changes do you see in Lauren and Schultz?

4. At the end of the play Lauren asks “Do you ever wonder how many times your life is gonna end?” What does she mean?
5. *Circle Mirror Transformation* is the name of one of the games played in the class. What other meanings might it have in the context of the play?

### **Games for the Classroom:**

Circle Mirror Transformation takes place in an “Adult Creative Drama” class in the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont. During the course of the six week class we learn about the five characters: Marty, the instructor, James, her husband, Schultz, a recently divorced carpenter, Theresa, a new-to-Shirley former actress, and Lauren, a sixteen year old high school student, through the games they play. Below are the rules of some of the featured games. We encourage you to try them with your students before attending our production.

The Games of *Circle Mirror Transformation*:  
(<http://www.studiotheatre.org/>)

**Counting Game:** Actors stand or lie in a circle with eyes closed counting to ten, with only one actor saying a number at a time. The game starts over if two actors say a number at the same time. This exercise strengthens concentration and intuition.

**Space Awareness:** Actors walk freely around the room, maintaining their own space. Actors change pace based on direction of instructor. This exercise strengthens both spacial and body awareness.

**One Word at a Time:** Actors sit in a circle and sequentially go around the circle, each actor saying only one word at a time, building off the other actors’ words to tell a story as a group. This exercise strengthens spontaneity, intuition, and concentration.

**Story Telling:** Actor tells a personal story or observation they’ve witnessed, on the spot, in front of group of fellow classmates. He or she should include as much vivid detail as possible. This exercise strengthens spontaneity and communication skills. [The story is later told by another member of the group as if it is their own story.]

**Explosion Tag:** Played like a regular game of tag, except the person who is ‘it’ must physicalize and verbalize explosions while chasing other participants. This exercise is good for cracking actors’ ‘protective armor’ and strengthens self-expression and spontaneity.

**Picture Frame:** An actor comes up with a story he or she wants to depict from either personal memory or from published stories. Actor places other participants in poses to create a still-life image, or picture frame, of this story. This exercise strengthens actors’ communication skills and self awareness.

**Gibberish:** Two actors are given two different gibberish phrases. Using only the gibberish given, the two must try to have a comprehensible conversation. This exercise strengthens actors’ communication skills and intuition.

**Circle Mirror Transformation:** Actors stand in circle. One actor makes a movement and an accompanying sound, everyone in the circle mirrors the sound and movement until the next actor transforms it into another movement and sound. This exercise strengthens spontaneity and is useful for breaking down personal barriers.

**When I go to India:** Actors say “When I go to India, I’m going to bring...” The first actor lists one thing they will bring, the next actor repeats the phrase, lists what the actor(s) in front of him bring, and adds his own item. This exercise strengthens concentration and spontaneity.

## Epilogue

Thank you for joining us for *Circle Mirror Transformation* and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm. Our education program also provides classes for students in junior high and high school and our GSI Pawtucket is the thing to do for summer time theatre fun. To learn more, find us on the web at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or reach Steve Kidd at 401 723 4266 ext. 17.