

STUDY GUIDE



# TOPDOG | UNDERDOG

BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

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**GAMMEDUCATION** 

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# ACT I

# WELCOME

Dear Educator,

Thank you for your commitment and effort to bring live theatre to your classes and curriculum this school year!

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to prepare you and your students for our production of *Topdog/Underdog*, written by Suzan-Lori Parks and directed by Cliff Odle. In this guide, you will find background information about the play and playwright, an inside conversation about our production, context for the play, as well as activities and questions for your classroom. We recommend using this study guide before your visit to The Gamm, as well as after, to process the theatrical experience with your students.

We offer a pre-show visit with your classroom/school before your visit to help prepare your students for the play. This will stoke students' interest in the performance and encourage them to connect with the play. This visit will last about a half an hour and is offered to your classroom free of charge. Additionally, most student matinees are followed by talkbacks, which offer students opportunities to ask questions of the actors, director, designers or playwright. Talkbacks range in length and content, but we encourage you to stay and participate in these dynamic discussions.

Participation in our Student Matinee program addresses Core Standards in Theatre Arts through Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication; as well as many of the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. We have included a list of standards that align with attending a performance and using our study guide.

Prior to attending, please discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. **In particular, please note that the approximate running time of our production of *Topdog/Underdog* is 2 hours and 30 minutes, including 1 intermission. Staged violence, weapons, profanity, and sexual content are part of this play.** Overall, it can help students prepare for live theatre to facilitate a brainstorm on how live performance is different from film, television and sporting events. We've included language you can use directly in our "A note on Live Theatre Audience Etiquette" section below.

We would love to hear about your experiences with our programming. It is a great help to us as we build our education program from year to year, striving to understand and meet the needs of our school communities.

We look forward to seeing you at The Gamm!

**Sarah Matczak Ploskina**

Director of Education, [sarah@gammtheatre.org](mailto:sarah@gammtheatre.org)

# 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 a part of a living, collective, group experience. You are expected to pay close attention throughout the performance

You, the audience, are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors; therefore, you play an active role in the experience of both actors and audience. The actors can see, hear, and sense all distracting behavior such as talking, texting, listening to headphones, unwrapping candy; and the ringing, buzzing, or illumination of phone screens. This can affect the actor's concentration, the audience's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members.

**Teachers, because we care deeply about both our audiences and actors, we insist that you and your students refrain from using phones, talking, texting, or making noise during a performance. We ask that you please address these behaviors swiftly, should they arise. Thank you in advance!**

## TIP:

*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.*

## STANDARDS GUIDE. . . . .

Here is a list of College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards that align to the information and activities in our guide:

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2] **See examples throughout our study guide.**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3] **See our Before and After the Show**

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4] **See our Before and After the Show**

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7] **See examples throughout our study guide.**

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9] **See our Extension Resources**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3] **See Digging Deeper and Extension Resources**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1] **See After the Show Discussion Questions**

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2] **See Extension Activities and Resources /Videos**



# ACT II

## PLAY & PLAYWRIGHT

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### ABOUT *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*

Lincoln and Booth are brothers, named by their father as a joke. Lincoln sits in an arcade all day, dressed as his presidential namesake and is “assassinated” over and over. His brother, Booth, stays in their run down apartment, practicing to be a great Three-Card Monte hustler, as Lincoln was in his youth. This Pulitzer Prize-winning drama is a jagged, poetic look at the endgame between two black brothers in America.



### ABOUT SUZAN-LORI PARKS

Named among Time magazine’s “100 Innovators for the Next Wave,” Suzan-Lori Parks is one of the most acclaimed playwrights in American drama today. She is the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, is a MacArthur “Genius” Award recipient, and in 2015 was awarded the prestigious Gish Prize for Excellence in the Arts. She is also the recipient of numerous other grants and awards such as those from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is an alum of New Dramatists and of Mount Holyoke College.

Parks’ project *365 Days/365 Plays* (where she wrote a play a day for an entire year) was produced in over 700 theaters worldwide, creating one of the largest grassroots collaborations in theater history.

Her other plays include: *Topdog/Underdog* (2002 Pulitzer Prize winner); *The Book of Grace*; *Unchain My Heart: The Ray Charles Musical*; *In the Blood* (2000 Pulitzer Prize finalist); *Venus* (1996 OBIE Award); *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*; *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1990 OBIE Award, Best New American Play); *The America Play* and *Fucking A*. Her adaptation of *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess* won the 2012 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. Her newest play, *Father Comes Home From The Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3)* – set during the Civil War – was awarded the Horton Foote Prize and the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama as well as being a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist.



### FROM CLIFF ODLE, DIRECTOR:

“It’s a play about family. It’s a play about two Black brothers who love each other. Yet that love is not enough to guide them through the conflicts they face, the toughest being each other.

The symbols stem from this conflict and are illusions in one way or another. From the absurdity of Lincoln’s job as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator to Booth’s claims of sexual prowess, they speak to an American dream that was never actually meant to include them. It’s all a con. The only real thing is the con itself and the consequences.”

# FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

## **Suzan-Lori Parks: Make Space for the Difficult Things**

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

With 3 world premieres and a Broadway revival of her hit play *Topdog/Underdog*, the prolific writer keeps singing her song in a variety of keys.

**RWK: Let's talk for a moment about *Topdog/Underdog*. That was a breakthrough play for you in many ways, your first to go to Broadway, and now it's back. When you look back on it now, does it feel at all like a different writer, a different person, wrote that? Does it still sound like you?**

SLP: Does it sound like me? F\*\*\* yeah, it still sounds like me! It sounds like me, declaring to the world, "This is who I am." But, I mean, every play is like that for me. A lot of people who had fallen in love with *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, and were like, "Oh, we get you now," then they saw *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, which was me saying, "Well, actually, do you get me now?" And then I'm doing *The America Play: Do you get me now?* There's always panic, like I'm going through some kind of—my son is 11 now, so puberty is a subject I've got on my mind—some kind of development. People are like, "We loved you years ago, now what are you doing?" And I'm like: I'm growing.

**So we were talking about *Topdog*. I don't know what else to say about it, except to add that I didn't see it on Broadway, but in L.A., with Larry Gilliard Jr. and Harold Perrineau. They killed it.**

Well, like I told Yahya, Corey, and Kenny on Day One of rehearsal: It's written for brothers to shine. That was my intent. It wasn't necessarily, "You know, I'm gonna write a play today" to do that—no, no, no. But every time I look at it, and every time I see it onstage, and every time I think about it, I think: Oh, that was what it was for. I mean, I'm singing the song. That's what I do. I sit in rehearsal, and I'll shout at the stage when they're onstage. I'll be like, Sing the song, brother, sing the song! Because they're singing a song of the spirit, the song of the soul, for all of us to enjoy that communion, but specifically for Black men to sing this song. So I'm thrilled to hear—like, I was in L.A., and some brother who worked in some department store, fancy, he was running across the plaza in Culver City, wherever it was, and I'm like, "Lord, have mercy, where's this man going?" And he's, "Miss Parks, Miss Parks—I was in *Topdog*!" So yeah, the transmission is happening.

**That play has been produced a lot. When you go back to a play, do you take another look at it and change things? I know someone who worked at the Signature said you did a bunch of stuff with the new staging of *The Death of the Last Black Man* when it was part of your season there.**

It's interesting how institutions think of "a bunch of stuff." I mean, I'm doing a lot of rewriting and working on *Sally & Tom* right now that I would call a bunch of stuff. With *Topdog*, 10 years ago, when I did the revival at Two River, there were some lines here and there, and on Broadway we finally cut a piece of text that wasn't ever working. A producer might call that "a bunch of stuff." It's all perspective. I tweak some stuff.

**So have you done some tweaking on the new *Topdog*?**

Things like noticing: "Oh, gee, Lincoln wakes up in his costume, and then it happens again? We only need to do that once." At the first rehearsal, we see the set, and I'm like, "Kenny, what's that over there?" He's like, "It's a sink." And I go, "Kenny..." And he goes, "I know—I know in the text it says, 'We don't got no running water, you don't got no sink.'" And I'm like, "Kenny, do you want a sink?" He's like, "Yeah, 'cause I got an idea." So I just cut a line. So now it goes, "We don't got no running water." But they have a sink and the sink is used brilliantly. So now, ever after, the play can have a sink if the production so desires. You know, we're flexible like that.

**But apart from the TV projects you mentioned, you haven't really written about showbiz, what goes on behind the curtain, before.**

You're right. Though you could say that *Topdog/Underdog* is about what goes on behind the curtain. They're aware of a certain performative aspect of their lives. "Every day, I leave my shit at the door, and this shit is hard." But they're not aware that they're aware of it.

**There's a whole generation of writers you helped pave the way for, particularly young playwrights like Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Jackie Sibblies Drury, and Aleshea Harris, who challenged received notions about what a "Black play" can be.**

Right, I wrote an essay about that. It's funny, we were laughing about that very question in rehearsal, and someone looked up, "What is the Black play?" online, and of course, it goes to an essay by Suzan-Lori Parks, and I'm like, "Oh, shit, maybe we should just read that." Because yeah, I spent some time thinking about that. In music they say, you play who you are. They don't say, "Be confined to address specific themes in a certain way." We need to continue to be expansive in our understanding. **[Digging Deeper - read an excerpt from Parks' essay on the next page]**

**One of my favorite features in *American Theatre* ever was your interview with August Wilson. It wasn't a passing of the torch, exactly, but it felt like a lovely cross-generational exchange, and I just wonder if you feel the same toward succeeding generations of writers.**

I'm thrilled; I'm so proud and excited about all the new writers. They're doing *Vietgone* here at the Guthrie, and some of the actors are hanging out with us during breaks, and going on and on about how much they love the work of Suzan-Lori Parks, and those aren't Black folks. It's the influence I have on everybody. I don't see myself as passing the torch—you know me, I'm funny about language. I'm sharing the fire. I'm here; I still got shit to do. Just like Kenny Leon in rehearsal is sharing the fire, just like August, or certainly James Baldwin, when he was my creative writing teacher, shared the fire. I didn't feel like he was "passing the torch." Also, there's another phrase, "I'm standing on your shoulders, queen!" Don't stand on my shoulders. Walk in my company. I love when people walk in my company, walk the road that I helped pave, or the path that I helped clear, along with August and Ntozake and Amiri Baraka and Alice Childress and Lorraine, all these people. We're still clearing the path.

***Rob Weinert-Kendt (he/him) is the editor-in-chief of *American Theatre*. [rwkendt@tcg.org](mailto:rwkendt@tcg.org)***





# FROM “NEW BLACK MATH”

## BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS



10 years after writing the essay “the equation for black people on stage” I’m standing at the same crossroads asking the same questions. No sweat. Sometimes you can walk a hundred miles and end up in the same spot. The world ain’t round for nothing, right? What is a black play? The definition is housed in the reality of two things that occurred recently and almost simultaneously: 26 August 05, playwright scholar poet-king August Wilson announces he is dying of cancer, and hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast. It feels like judgment day. What I’m talking about today is the same and different. I was tidy back then. And now I’m tidier. Tidier today like a tidal wave.

What is a black play?

A black play is angry.

A black play is fierce.

A black play is double voiced but rarely confused.

A black play got style.

A black play is of the people by the people and for the people.

A black play is smooth but not slick, heavy but not thick, cant be tamed, often does not comb its hair, wipes its mouth with the back of its black hand or with a linen napkin whichever is more readily available.

A black play is late.

A black play is RIGHT ON and RIGHT ON TIME.

A black play is deep.

A black play is armed / to the teeth.

A black play bows to god then rows the boat ashore.

A black play makes do if it got to / fights / screams / sings / dreams / WORKS IT / talks in code and tells it like it is ALL UP IN YA FACE.

A black play gives you five.



# ACT III

# OUR PRODUCTION

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
**Tony Estrella**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
**Jason Cabral**

## TOPDOG | UNDERDOG

by **SUZAN-LORI PARKS**  
directed by **CLIFF ODLE\***

SET DESIGN  
**Michael McGarty**

COSTUME DESIGN  
**Liza Alexis**

LIGHTING DESIGN  
**Jeff Adelberg<sup>a</sup>**

SOUND DESIGN  
**Hunter Spoede**

DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION  
**Jessica Hill Kidd**

STAGE MANAGEMENT  
**James Kane\***

### SETTING

Yesterday & Today

### THE COMPANY

Lincoln **Anthony T. Goss\***  
Booth **Marc Pierre\***

### CREATIVE TEAM

Weapons Coordinator **Normand Beauregard**  
Cards Consultant **Hal Meyers**  
Assistant to the Director of Production **Nola Fox**  
Technical Director **Max Ramirez**  
Assistant Technical Director **Alex Eizenberg**  
Production Assistant **Emma Lemire**  
Lighting Supervisor **Alex Foley**  
Electricians **Haley Ahlborg, Alex Macbeth**  
Carpenters/Painters **D.C. Odle-Perkins, Clifford Odle-Perkins**

\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

## TIP:

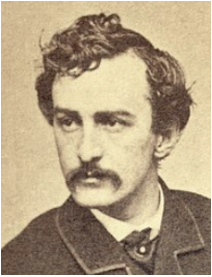
*Before coming to the theater, discuss with your students the various professions in the theater. It takes more than just actors! When they arrive, ask them to notice evidence of those professions at work.*



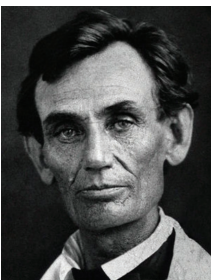
# ACT IV

# HISTORY TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

## THE HISTORY OF LINCOLN & BOOTH



**John Wilkes Booth** (May 10, 1838 – April 26, 1865) was a famous American stage actor who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, in Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1865. Booth was a member of the prominent 19th century Booth theatrical family from Maryland and was a well-known actor. He was also a Confederate sympathizer vehement in his denunciation of the Lincoln Administration and outraged by the South's defeat in the American Civil War. Booth and a group of co-conspirators originally plotted to kidnap Lincoln, but later planned to kill him, Vice President Johnson, and Secretary of State Seward in a bid to help the Confederacy's cause. Of the conspirators, only Booth was completely successful in carrying out his respective part of the plot. After Booth shot him once in the back of the head, Lincoln died the next morning.



**Abraham Lincoln** (February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865) was the 16th President of the United States, serving from March 1861 until his assassination in April 1865. Lincoln successfully led his country through its greatest constitutional, military and moral crisis – the American Civil War – preserving the Union while ending slavery, and promoting economic and financial modernization. Lincoln was mostly self-educated, and became a lawyer, a Whig Party leader, Illinois state legislator, and a one-term member of the US House of Representatives. After a series of well-publicized debates in 1858, Lincoln lost a Senate race to his arch-rival, Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln secured the Republican Party nomination and with almost no support in the South, Lincoln was elected president in 1860. His election was the signal for seven southern slave states to declare their secession from the Union

and form the Confederacy.

### The Characters of Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog*

**Booth** is Lincoln's younger brother. He is a hustler and a petty thief whose goal is to become a big time card operator like his brother once was. He mocks Link for having a job and is constantly trying to convince his brother to team up with him on a three-card monte hustle.

**Lincoln** is Booth's older brother. He is trying to make it with a legitimate job as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator at a tourist attraction local arcade, where he pretends to watch a play and customers pay money to "assassinate" him with a cap gun. Lincoln used to play three-card monte but gave it up when his partner got shot.



# “TEN GETS YOU TWENTY”

## THE TRUTH ABOUT THREE-CARD MONTE

“WATCH HIM CLOSE, WATCH HIM CLOSE NOW.”



The con we're familiar with traces back to card games from the 15th century, which were adaptations of a shell game found in ancient Greece. In the United States, three-card monte became popular in the 1830s on riverboats and railroads. Never established as much in cities, which favored casino games and poker, three-card is ideal for playing on the road, since it requires only cards and a flat surface to play on and is easy to pack up when the cops arrive.

To play, the dealer places three cards face down on a flat surface, usually a table of cardboard balanced on milk crates or an old box. The three cards are shown: two cards are the same -- for example, two black queens -- and the third card is different, a red queen. The dealer flips them face down and rearranges them quickly, trying to confuse the player, or “mark”, about which card is which. The mark places a cash bet, which the dealer matches. The mark is given the opportunity to pick out the one card that is different from the other two. If he chooses correctly, he wins. If he loses, the dealer takes the money.



The better dealers have style and flair, a rat-a-tat cadence, physical ease and charm, all of which distract the mark from the actual game of getting as much of the mark's money as possible before the cops show up. Dealers have shills planted among the crowd, confidants that keep an eye out for police as well as entice the mark in and demonstrate how easy it is to win. But here's the catch: it's impossible to win. The dealer has sleight of hand skills that make it look like he's throwing down one card when he's actually throwing another. Most of the time the mark will lay his money down on the wrong card and lose. If the mark happens to lay his money on the correct card, one of the dealer's shills will lay a bigger bet on the wrong card (shills know the dealer's tricks or are given a sign pointing to the correct card) and the dealer will go for the larger bet, knowing that he'll split the money with his partners at the end of the day. **You can't win if you're the mark. You can't lose if you're the dealer.**



# FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

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## FROM “NEW BLACK MATH” (Pg. 7)

- Although Parks calls this an “essay”, try reading it aloud, like a poem. What changes when you read it out loud?
- Which lines stand out to you? Which are the most exciting? The most confusing?
- What do you expect from this play, after reading the interview with Suzan-Lori Parks and her essay?
- After seeing the show: How does Parks’ depiction of “a black play” in this essay connect with your experience of *Topdog/Underdog* at the Gamm?

## THE TRUTH ABOUT THREE-CARD MONTE (Pg. 10)

- How does Suzan-Lori Parks use the Three Card Monte game as a metaphor?
- What ideas do you think she is trying to reinforce with the use of this con in the play?
- After seeing the show: Who do you think is the better con-man: Lincoln, or Booth?

## THE HISTORY OF LINCOLN & BOOTH (Pg. 11)

- How do the characters of Lincoln and Booth reflect their historical counterparts?
- How is their relationship in the play connected to that history?
- Teachers: take a poll! Who is the “Topdog”? Who is the “Underdog”? How does this shift throughout the play? Try this after reading the play and again after seeing the play!



# AFTER THE SHOW: EXTENSION ACTIVITY & RESOURCES

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

### CREATE YOUR OWN TOPDOG AND UNDERDOG

1. Choose another pair of historical figures with a backstory that could be used as a metaphor. Name your title characters after these historical figures, for example, Suzan-Lori Parks' new play *Sally and Tom*, about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson.

2. Use this template to plan a simple plot for your own play in the model of *Topdog/Underdog*:

This play is about \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
Who try to \_\_\_\_\_  
But because \_\_\_\_\_  
They end up \_\_\_\_\_

3. Write a series of 3-line scenes between your two characters. Cast your classmates to read them out loud.

4. Take it further - expand your three line scenes into a one-act play.

## RESOURCES

### “The Light in August Wilson: A Career, a Century, a Lifetime” by Suzan Lori Parks

An African spiritual strength born of adversity undergirds his masterful 10-play circle.

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2005/11/01/the-light-in-august-wilson-a-career-a-century-a-lifetime/>

### “Suzan-Lori Parks: Make Space for the Difficult Things” By Rob Weinert-Kendt

With 3 world premieres and a Broadway revival of her hit play ‘Topdog/Underdog,’ the prolific writer keeps singing her song in a variety of keys. (This resource contains profanity)

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/10/18/suzan-lori-parks-lets-make-space-for-the-difficult-things/>

### PODCAST: AMERICAN MASTERS: CREATIVE SPARK

The Playwright: Suzan-Lori Parks

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/podcast/playwright-suzan-lori-parks/>

### Suzan-Lori Parks’ Watch Me Work: A Playwriting Masterclass

Watch Me Work is a performance piece, a meditation on the artistic process, and an actual work session, featuring Suzan-Lori Parks working on writing projects. Traditionally hosted on the mezzanine of The Public Theater Lobby, this latest version was broadcast this past year and is available in the Howlround archive: In the videos, the audience is invited to come and watch Suzan-Lori Parks work, share the space, and get some of their own writing work done. During the last 40 minutes of the performance, Parks answers any questions the online Zoom audiences and online social audiences have regarding their own work and their own creative process.

<https://howlround.com/happenings/suzan-lori-parks-watch-me-work-69>

# ACT VI

# EPILOGUE

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## THANK YOU!

Thank you for joining us for *Topdog/Underdog* and for working with this Study Guide to expand your theatrical and educational experiences. Please be in touch if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *Topdog/Underdog*.

Our Education Department provides classes and camps for students and adults. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm!

To book a matinee, contact Brittany at [brittany@gammtheatre.org](mailto:brittany@gammtheatre.org) 401-723-4266 ext. 112. To learn more about Gamm Education, find us on the web at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or reach Sarah Ploskina at 401-723-4266 ext. 111.



**OPENING NOV 2**



# **HANGMEN**

**BY MARTIN MCDONAGH**

**Academy Award winning writer/director of  
THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI  
& THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN**